America

JUNE 2026

JESUIT REVIEW OF FAITH AND CULTURE

UN NUEVO DÍA

Toward a Hispanic ministry for all generations

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Who Rules When We Give Up on Laws?

On April 29, the U.S. Supreme Court decided that the Voting Rights Act did not authorize Louisiana's creation of a second majority-minority congressional district, ruling that the state's map was therefore an unconstitutional racial gerrymander. Two days later, on May 1, President Donald Trump notified congressional leaders that hostilities in Iran had "terminated," even as the Strait of Hormuz remained largely impassable, the U.S. military continued to blockade Iranian ports, and no peace deal had been reached. The timing of the notification was keyed to the 60-day limit under the War Powers Resolution, after which the president must seek legislative authorization to continue the use of military force.

Aside from their proximity in time, these two events might not seem closely related. What they have in common, however, is that they are the products of erosion of previously established legal reforms.

The Voting Rights Act was originally passed in 1965 and has been amended and reauthorized five times since, most recently in 2006. A series of Supreme Court decisions, culminating in the one handed down at the end of April, have gradually hollowed out the law, leaving it on the books but largely unenforceable.

The War Powers Resolution was enacted in 1973, in response to news that then-President Richard Nixon was conducting secret bombings in Cambodia during the Vietnam War without notifying Congress. It was adopted after the House and Senate, by two-thirds majorities, overrode Mr. Nixon's initial veto. Since then, presidents have generally abided by the form of the resolution regarding notifications to Congress, even while maintaining that it was an unconstitutional infringement on the powers of the commander in chief.

Mr. Trump's recent farcical claim that hostilities in Iran had ended, replacing the even more absurd contention by several of his cabinet officials that the 60-day deadline had been "paused" during the temporary ceasefire with Iran, can be seen as following in that line of thinking. The law would have been better honored, of course, by Mr. Trump actually seeking authorization for the war, but presumably he did not want to risk a vote that could easily have gone against him.

Neither of these laws are uncomplicated, and there are reasonable arguments on both sides of these debates. While I generally support both the Voting Rights Act and the War Powers Resolution, I am not setting out, in this column, to defend their constitutionality. Rather, I want to reflect on what happens when we abandon or ignore previous legislative settlements without actually going through the exercise of agreeing on and enacting new laws.

In the case of the Voting Rights Act, the practical effect of the Supreme Court's decisions is that partisan gerrymanders are unreviewable by courts, even if they are identical in results to racial gerrymanders, as long as no one says out loud that race has been used as a factor in drawing the maps. While gerrymandering causes many other problems beyond disadvantaging minority voters, the V.R.A. was one of the last significant obstacles to political parties seeking to extract maximum advantage in redistricting. Already, in the wake of the most recent court decision, several states are trying to redraw maps even as primary races are already underway.

In the case of the War Powers Resolution, Congress's inability—or simple refusal—to assert its own constitutional responsibility for deciding on declarations of war leaves us with the president able to exercise the full might of the U.S. armed forces on not much more than his own whim. Even if Congress had not been able to deny Mr. Trump the ability to go to war with Iran, some degree of back-and-forth engagement between the legislature and the executive might have helped reveal how little the administration understood or had planned for the geopolitical consequences of the conflict.

When we give up on the solutions that we have reached in the past without establishing new agreements to replace them, what we get are power grabs. A political party draws district maps to choose its voters rather than risking voters having a real choice, and then the other political party responds in kind in another state lest it risk seats by standing on principle. The president takes us into a war defined neither by a just cause nor by a coherent rationale about American interests, but by a confused set of goals and repeated declarations of success even as the reality on the ground becomes more dangerous and less stable.

In his famous pamphlet "Common Sense," Thomas Paine argued that "in America, the rule of law is king," drawing a contrast with "absolute governments [in which] the king is law." The law, to be sure, is no perfect king—but it is a better ruler of a free people than politicians seeking their own advantage at all costs. As we approach the 250th anniversary of American independence, it seems we need to be reminded of how we ought to be ruled.

Sam Sawyer, S.J.

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People wait for Pope Leo XIV to celebrate Mass at Malabo Stadium in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea, on April 23.
CNS photo/Lola Gomez

Cover: Children arrive in procession for a Spanish-language Mass celebrated in honor of Our Lady of Suyapa, patroness of Honduras, at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York on Feb. 5, 2023.
OSV News photo/Gregory A. Shemitz

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THOMAS G. WENSKI
A folly in Miami

JUNE 2026 VOL. 234 NO. 6 WHOLE NO. 5321

Is the Catholic Church ready for a new wave of converts?

"A remarkable thing has been happening in the Catholic Church in the United States over the past few years: growth," Rachel Lu wrote in her feature in **America**'s May 2026 issue. In her piece covering the increase in adults entering the Catholic faith, Ms. Lu explored varying perspectives on the possible religious revival and urged Catholics to greet new members of the church with love and grace. Ms. Lu argued that "converts bring unique gifts" and wrote, "All together we can produce a bright and vibrant future of our faith in this country." Our readers had much to say in response.

What a wonderful, thoughtful piece. The resurgence isn't just in the United States. I've worked a good bit in Paris. St. Sulpice, my usual parish there, has had a primarily elderly congregation for years, but when I recently returned, the pews were packed with people of all ages. I was shocked. They weren't new immigrants either. They were the same ethnic French famous for their over a century of irreligion. I don't think they were necessarily politically conservative. These are young people who came of age under Pope Francis. Like so many of us, they find something powerful in our 2,000-year tradition, something that transcends politics and resists simple categorizations.
John Watkins

Perhaps the parable of the sower (Mk 4; Mt 13; Lk 8) can provide some insight into the long-term commitment of these recent neophytes. We in the Catholic communities of our individual parishes will share responsibility to make sure that their seed is planted in fertile ground through our kindness, inclusiveness and non-judgmental behavior. Hopefully, by God's grace, the hyper-dogmatic elements of the church will not trample these seeds.
Tadeusz Kleindienst

A big challenge will be maintaining the involvement of new Catholics. I've been in churches where new members and participants were quite enthusiastic when they first started coming, but for whatever reason "fizzled out" after a few months or a year or two. If these converts are impressed by Pope Leo XIV and his leadership, they just might stay for the long haul.
Hal Reed

My concern is what direction they lean. I'm aware no one can determine that at this point. I fear a conservative swing here, contrary to Pope Leo XIV. I hope I'm wrong.
Janet Stephens

Some may object to the new wave of converts as politically right wing by pointing to figures like JD Vance and Steve Bannon. But what if you were the person who helped them see what they didn't understand and were a force for change in their lives the way Christ changed those he encountered? Our faith presupposes capacity for change to conform to God and that no one is beyond that possibility and that all are loved by God, as I understand it.
Mary Jean Cunningham

I find this new trend a hopeful sign and appreciate **America**'s coverage of it, and I don't expect one article can cover every angle. Hopefully the trend continues and there are plenty more excuses to write about it in the future and surface perspectives on some of these questions.

Given the conversion trend is largely seen among younger millennials and zoomers, I wonder if the clergy abuse crisis lands differently for a generation that grew up with this scandal as a known quantity. Indeed, it was one among many American institutional scandals for these younger generations, whereas American Catholics who lived through the revelations had to grapple with a new reality of the church harshly confronting them.
Aaron Sinner

Many words have been written and spoken on this topic in recent days. Ultimately, we'll see. My fundamental concern with the current trend of youthful exuberance is that it is driven more by social desires like seeking human connection, which is not itself bad, with little emphasis on the nitty-gritty complicated realities of being a disciple. I have a sense of young people flocking to Mass and devotional practices as a means of escaping society's moral morass of immigration, war, inequity, etc., as opposed to being engaged with a church as it pursues a Gospel-imbued response.
Tom Lindner

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What has science really discovered about the origins of the universe—and what does it mean?

Three developments in cosmology, physics, and biology that are reshaping how some scientists think about life, existence, and the possibility of God.

PROBLEM I

The universe had a beginning

For centuries, materialists assumed the universe was eternal, meaning it required no cause and no creator. Then came the Big Bang. Einstein's relativity, Hubble's observations, and the discovery of cosmic background radiation converged on an unsettling conclusion that time, space, and matter all had a definite starting point. But, **if nothing comes from nothing, the question of what — or who — preceded everything becomes unavoidable.** Nobel laureate Robert Wilson, who discovered cosmic background radiation, puts it plainly: "If the universe had a beginning, then we cannot avoid the question of creation."

"What's documented in this splendid book is that science leads us to God — faith and reason are allied."

— Cardinal Timothy Dolan

PROBLEM II

The universe is improbably fine-tuned for life

If we alter the gravitational constant by one part in ten to the sixtieth power, no stars form. Shift the cosmological constant even slightly, and the universe either collapses or expands too fast for matter to coalesce. Physicists have catalogued **dozens of fundamental constants that are each calibrated to extraordinary precision to make atoms, chemistry, and life possible.** The probability of this arising by chance staggers even skeptical scientists. Voltaire once said he couldn't imagine a clock without a clockmaker. Today's scientists are opening the case of a far more intricate timepiece.

PROBLEM III

Life cannot explain its own origin

Darwin accounted for how life diversifies, but he did not account for how it begins. The simplest living cell contains DNA — a molecule that encodes more functional information than any human-engineered system — along with ribosomes, proteins, and metabolic machinery that must all be present simultaneously to work. No materialist theory has successfully explained how inert chemistry spontaneously crossed into self-replicating, information-processing life. **The leap to life remains, in the words of biologists who study it, one of the deepest unsolved problems in science** — and one that raises questions about a guiding intelligence.

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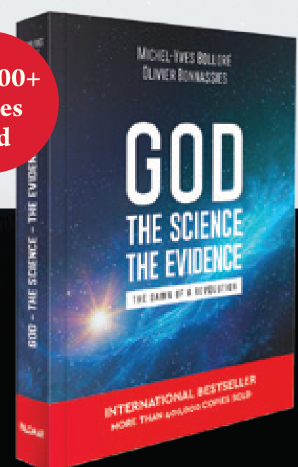

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Good Health Is Not a Lifestyle Choice

Just two miles north of the U.S.-Mexico border, the 25-bed Holy Cross Hospital in Nogales, Ariz., serves as a primary safety net for residents in the County of Santa Cruz. The staff serves a population that is more than 80 percent Hispanic, according to the U.S. Census, and has a median household income of about $43,000.

The Catholic hospital, part of the Carondelet Health Network, cares for a city with a 20 percent poverty rate. In a typical year, this mission-driven hospital provides millions in uncompensated care for the uninsured or those whose treatments are not covered by Medicaid. For many families in the county, Holy Cross is the only option, which is why it is designated as a Critical Access Hospital. The next closest hospital is St. Mary's in Tucson, about 70 miles away.

Holy Cross is one of an estimated 380 independent rural hospitals that are at serious risk of closing in 2026 because of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, passed by Congress last July. These hospitals, often the sole sanctuary in vast health care deserts, are expected to lose 56 percent of their funding because of the bill. The measure requires able-bodied adults between the ages of 19 and 64 to perform and document at least 80 hours of work, community service or job training per month to be eligible for Medicaid coverage.

The Congressional Budget Office estimates that the change could lead to millions losing insured care because of the complex paperwork it entails—as many as 10.5 million by 2034. The legislation also placed caps on supplemental funds that states had previously used to support hospitals that served underprivileged communities.

The Trump administration is turning away from this social responsibility, instead taking a more consumerist, individualist approach. "By prioritizing recovery, nutrition, physical fitness and personal empowerment, providers across this state are driving a shift from a reactive sick-care system to a true health care system that delivers better outcomes for the American people," Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. of the Department of Health and Human Services said while visiting Arizona in April.

Some of the values and concerns expressed by the Make America Healthy Again movement resonate with Catholic social teaching, including infrastructure that supports sustainable agriculture and healthy living in communities through improved access to nutritious foods and facilities for recreation and exercise. Toxins in food and agricultural run-off endanger all Americans, including those on what Pope Francis called the "peripheries." Environmental degradation, Pope Francis wrote in "Laudato Si'," most immediately harms the poor (No. 20).

Yet the near exclusive emphasis on factors like nutrition and physical fitness can also demonstrate an ignorance of the lives of those on the margins, whether in rural or urban areas. Too often, those living in poverty also inhabit food deserts, lacking access to supermarkets and affordable nutritious food. These areas often also lack public parks or other facilities conducive to healthy exercise, indoors or out.

Of further concern is Mr. Kennedy's vaccine skepticism, which downplays how they have benefited people around the world. As secretary of the department he has, for example, described the choice to vaccinate children a "personal one," revised the immunization schedule and promoted Vitamin A to defend against illness in place of vaccines. Last year, a measles outbreak infected more than 1,000 South Carolina residents, over 90 percent of whom were unvaccinated children. Rather than representing a solely "personal" choice, the loss of herd immunity to measles presents life-threatening risk to others, especially to those who cannot make the choice to be vaccinated, like children under 6 months old.

"Health cannot be a luxury for the few," Pope Leo XIV said during a conference at the Vatican in March. He described health care as "an essential condition for social peace," adding that universal health coverage is essential when forming just societies.

The most vulnerable among us will receive the care they need only when proper attention is paid to the structures that administer health care. It is senseless for policymakers to insist on ridding home pantries of toxins while at the same time cutting the safety nets that serve the poor among us.

Catholic social teaching is built on the common good and the dignity of the human person. The recognition of this dignity is the basis of the church's teaching against abortion, contraception, sterilization, in vitro fertilization and euthanasia. It also leads the church to recognize that access to adequate health care is a human right.

The church has also recognized the preferential option for the poor, giving a modern name to God's special care for marginalized people—the widow, the orphan, the stranger in the land—testified to throughout Scripture. As the Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez explained, this preferential option is grounded in God's gratuitous love for humanity, a love that we have not and cannot earn. Those who live in unjust circumstances are especially beloved by God because of their need,

not because they have documented 80 hours of work.

The moral necessity to care for the poor and marginalized can be found not only in Catholic teaching but also in the history of the United States. Almshouses, like a Philadelphia charity hospital founded in 1732, cared for those who could not be cared for at home. The founders of the United States also made the health of the vulnerable a priority in measures like the Act for Relief of Sick and Disabled Seamen, which President John Adams signed into law in 1798. The act established a federal network of hospitals that cared for those who served a key role in the economy of the budding nation. More than 100 years later, after a civil war and the arrival of immigrants at Ellis Island, the act evolved into the U.S. Public Health Service.

The founders understood what many Americans seem to have forgotten: A nation is only as healthy as its most vulnerable. In 2026, as in 1798, the most vulnerable certainly include the elderly and those with special needs. But they also include those who have become the nation's essential laborers: farm laborers working in the borderlands and the heartland who provide the nutrition that sustains the nation.

Removing the safety nets for the most vulnerable contradicts the American spirit that our nation celebrates in its 250th year. Rather, the American spirit of ambition and personal responsibility is both supported and deepened by the recognition that we should care for one another.

It also goes against the Gospel and against common sense to pretend that we are in complete control of our health or that bad health outcomes are simply the result of bad personal choices. Prioritizing health care for the most vulnerable among us recognizes not only that we were all created equal but also that we were created to care for each other, from sea to shining sea, from urban hospitals to rural ones.

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The good Samaritan's lessons for Catholic health care

Illness is part of being human. How we deal with it is human, too. So Pope John Paul II established the Vatican World Day of the Sick in 1993 on the feast day of Our Lady of Lourdes, Feb. 11, to provide prayer and compassionate care for people at their most vulnerable time.

The Vatican's theme for this year's World Day of the Sick was the parable of the good Samaritan in the Gospel of Luke. Consider that man left to die on the road to Jericho. When help finally comes, it is from a person who does not ask who the beaten man is or whether he "deserves" help. Instead, the good Samaritan's actions are tangible. He doesn't cross the road; he stops and responds with immediate, practical and sustainable care. He does what it takes to bring about the beaten man's recovery.

As a nurse and as a member of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, a critical part of my call is to not cross the road but to stop and see the presence of God in each person. The good Samaritan's example teaches more than compassion; we are taught that every one of us has the ability and the obligation to help those suffering injury and illness. When Catholics ask, "What more can be done to alleviate suffering?", one answer is found in the millions who suffer and die, not because they are untreatable, but because the world has abandoned them and has deemed their health care not worthy of investment.

Given that the Catholic Church is the largest unified provider of health care in the world, running a quarter of health care facilities worldwide, perhaps nowhere else is our obligation—and opportunity—to improve lives clearer. Faith-run health care facilities provide care in some of the most marginalized and resource-starved places in the world. They do so under extreme conditions, where women give birth without something as basic as water; healthy newborns die from preventable infections; health care workers struggle just to wash their hands; and infections spread due to the lack of sanitation. No one should ever suffer preventable disease and death for lack of safe water and a toilet. Nothing is more foundational to safe and dignified health care.

The most recent data paints a grim picture. In the 60 countries designated by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development as "fragile context states," 37 percent of health care facilities do not have basic water services, and 81 percent do not have basic sanitation services. Catholic-run facilities have not been exceptions when it comes to these dangerous conditions. But now the Vatican is not simply walking past the health care facilities lacking safe water, sanitation and hygiene (collectively referred to as WASH). It is stopping and offering assistance.

As Cardinal Michael Czerny, S.J., has said, "No one needs lofty theological concepts to justify proper WASH. Without it, health care cannot be healthy." He is prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development and represented Pope Leo XIV at the World Day of the Sick, in Chiclayo, Peru, where Leo was bishop until 2023. The same dicastery led the launch of a pilot Vatican initiative in 2020 to get WASH into 150 Catholic-run health care facilities across 23 low-income countries. Now Pope Leo has weighed in during a multifaith Rome WASH summit in which he expressed his "spiritual closeness to members of the health agencies and networks attending the gathering on improving water, sanitation and hygiene in health care facilities."

Jesus ends his parable of the good Samaritan with a simple call to action: "Go and do likewise."

Catholic leaders and laypeople are not crossing the road. Nor are other faiths. Anglican and Methodist denominations are also piloting initiatives to assess and address WASH conditions in health care facilities they administer. Muslim leadership is stepping forward. A global movement is emerging.

This refusal to "walk past" human suffering will help ensure that no one is left to die along the road because their health care lacks something so integral and basic as WASH.

Thirty-four years ago, Pope John Paul II offered the inaugural message for the World Day of the Sick. He specifically referred to health care facilities and said special attention should be reserved "first of all, for developing countries—in Latin America, Africa and Asia—which are marked by serious deficiencies in health care. With the celebration of the World Day of the Sick, the church is promoting a renewed commitment to those populations, seeking to wipe out the injustice existing today by devoting greater human, spiritual, and material resources to their needs."

May the global church continue to prioritize WASH and grow this work into a global movement. The world will never be free from illness and disease, of course. But the ability to dramatically reduce preventable suffering and even death is in our hands. The good Samaritan reminds us to stop as we walk the Jericho road.

Theresa Sullivan, D.C., *is the executive director of Daughters of Charity International Project Services. She is based in Southfield, Mich.*

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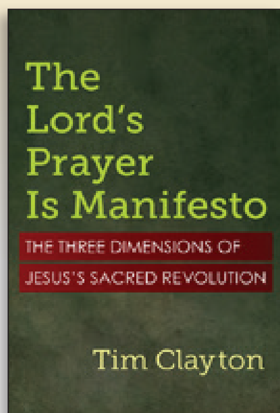

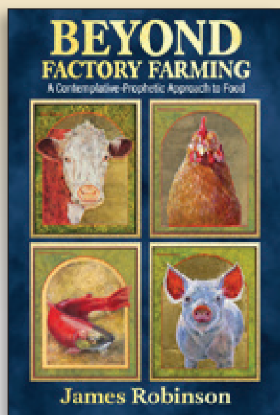

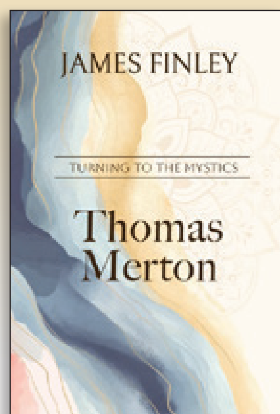

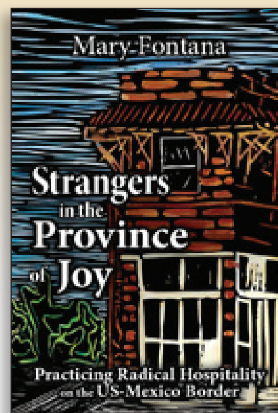

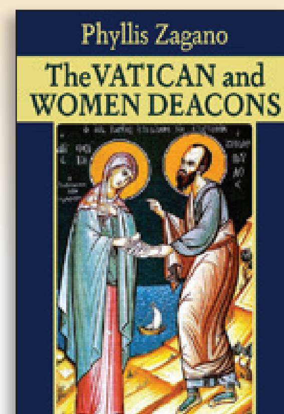

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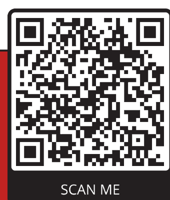

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Humanitarian actors hope for a recovery after 2025's deep cuts in global health aid

By Kevin Clarke

Representatives from international Catholic and other faith-based humanitarian and health care agencies joined providers from clinics in the developing world in Rome in April. They convened for a two-day meeting sponsored by the Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development to work out strategies to respond to a glaring global deficit—one almost impossible to imagine in the affluent precincts of the planet, where scenes of medical teams vigorously scrubbing up before gushing faucets can be taken for granted. In fact, for many health care staff workers in the developing world, such dependable access to abundant and clean water remains far out of reach.

Mary Haddad, R.S.M., the president and chief executive of the Catholic Health Association, in an address to the conference, noted that nearly one-third of all people worldwide "receive care in facilities without reliable water, sanitation or hygiene," what specialists refer to collectively as WASH. That deficit undermines "patient safety, infection prevention and quality outcomes, with devastating and often invisible consequences for marginalized communities."

Faith-based providers, Sister Haddad said, have a particular responsibility to address the problem. The Catholic Church is the "largest unified provider" of health care in the developing world, she noted, where it sponsors as much as 40 percent of all health care facilities.

"For us, WASH is not merely a technical shortcoming but a moral one," she said. "Our faith impels us to ensure the inherent dignity of every person. A facility without clean water or adequate sanitation falls short of that call to care for all."

Water Works

At some health care sites, pregnant women about to deliver their babies are required to bring 20 gallons of water with them. At others, the day begins only after long treks to streams, rivers or other surface water sites for the staff or patients' family members to collect water. Under such circumstances, it is not hard to appreciate how basic requirements for sterility—and staff and patient hygiene that can prevent infection and save lives—become hard, if not impossible, to meet.

Spending as little as $12 million to shore up WASH

A child gets tested for malnutrition at a World Food Program camp at el-Fasher in Darfur, Sudan, in March 2025.

systems at 151 Catholic health sites in 23 low-income nations might have been an easy ask not too long ago. But after a historic collapse of humanitarian and development assistance in 2025, finding new money to address such persistent problems may be more challenging.

An analysis from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development reports that "official development assistance" fell more than 23 percent in 2025, a reduction of more than $174 billion, "the largest annual contraction on record and a second consecutive year of decline."

With the now-infamous dismantling of the 60-year-old U.S. Agency for International Development in January 2025, the United States led the way. According to O.E.C.D. researchers, the Trump administration was responsible for three-quarters of the overall decline in development aid, its humanitarian and development assistance falling by 57 percent from 2024, "the largest reduction in volume by any provider in any year on record."

Erica Smith is the executive director of Hospital Sisters Mission Outreach and a co-chair of the Global Health Council for the Catholic Health Association. She allows that some reform of global health assistance and the delivery of humanitarian aid may be well-intentioned. "There's a lot of talk about sustainability, focusing on development instead of continual aid, and I think that those are things that we all could get behind."

But, Ms. Smith says, "there was really nothing about U.S.A.I.D. that warranted that kind of destruction," noting that the forces behind the program's abrupt termination did not appear to consider its impact on "human dignity or human health."

"And the truth is that people will die," she says. "People *are* dying, and as always, it's the poorest and the most vulnerable among us who are suffering the effects of what really was a poor, hasty decision."

Preventable Deaths

Emily Doogue, the technical director for health for Catholic Relief Services, can find benefits and detriments in whatever means of humanitarian aid delivery the Trump administration eventually settles on. But "at the end of the day, my concern is that there's just less funding overall."

She keeps one prominent marker of global health in mind: progress on reducing the mortality of children under 5 years of age. A sharp reduction in childhood mortality since 2000 has been a significant accomplishment for humanitarian actors, but progress has slowed in recent years. Now she worries it is on the verge of reversing altogether.

She notes an analysis published in the venerable U.K. medical journal The Lancet, forecasting that in a "severe defunding scenario," 5.4 million more children under 5 will perish by 2030. The grim projection foresees an unraveling of progress against a gamut of communicable diseases, including H.I.V./AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria. The New York Times reported on April 25 that in Zambia, H.I.V./AIDS is already showing signs of a fierce return.

To move the needle on infectious disease control, Ms. Doogue says, "we really need to have a package of multiple interventions, but we're not able to do that with the same geographic coverage because of funding constraints." People in the field "are faced with impossible decisions": which children to administer antimalarial medications to, which families to provide with mosquito netting, which communities to cut off altogether.

In some particularly troubled or impoverished countries, C.R.S. and other humanitarian providers do not merely supplement government health services; they may represent the country or region's only reliable health programs. When these care sites shut down, there is nowhere else for people to turn, she says.

"Our programming in Sudan has been in flux, and we're trying our best to maintain operations," Ms. Doogue says. But funding remains "unstable," and it is unclear if the work C.R.S. is doing in Sudan to confront perhaps the world's worst humanitarian crisis can continue.

In a bipartisan rejection of White House proposals for deep cuts in global health spending, Congress appropriated $9.4 billion for fiscal 2026—more than twice the $3.7 billion requested by the administration. But how much of that allocation will be used to restore health services remains difficult to gauge. According to the terms of the U.S. State Department's new "America First Global Health Strategy," the actual disbursement of aid will depend on reaching individual agreements with receiving nations.

For fiscal 2027, the Trump administration returns to the cutting block, seeking a 46 percent reduction in global health spending. The new parsimony is impossible to ignore, Bruce Compton, C.H.A's senior director of global health, says. In the coming years, there will be little room for error or hazy strategy. "We have to be smarter now."

If there is a bright side to the 2025 meltdown, Mr. Compton suggests, it could be that it is "forcing us to have conversations that we've needed to have for a long time. How do we come together and leverage this together and get out of these [institutional] silos?"

He sees an opportunity for funders and service providers in the high-income world "to think about what's our appropriate role" and to ask: "How did we get to the point where one donor [nation] could create this kind of havoc?"

WASH out?

Catholic and other faith-based humanitarian groups and health care providers in low- and middle-income nations are collaborating this year to establish basic water, sanitation and hygiene infrastructure at church-sponsored hospitals and health clinics around the world. The WASH improvements are expected to have a significant impact in reducing patient infection and mortality. As many international donor nations, including the United States, reduce foreign aid budgets or add new conditions to aid disbursement, faith-based groups are seeking new donor sources and new strategies to achieve more with less.

151 is the number of Catholic health clinics and facilities in **23 countries** targeted by the Dicastery For Promoting Integral Human Development for improvements in water, sanitation and hygiene.

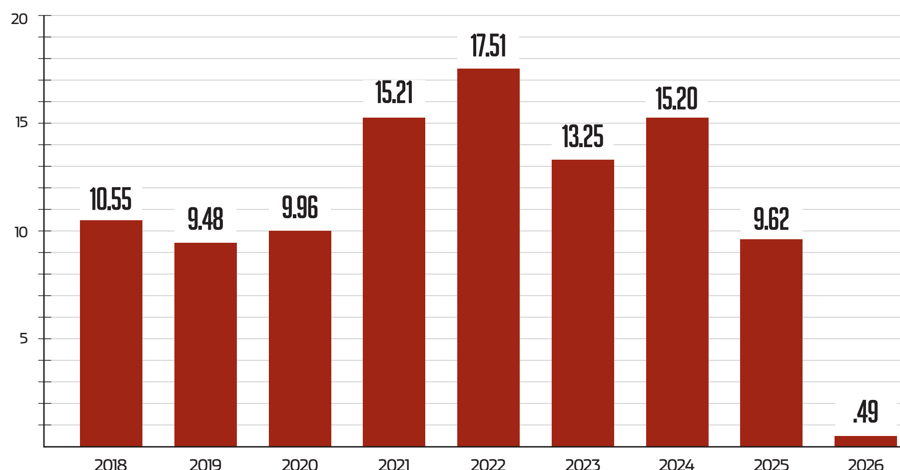
63% of those facilities lack basic water services, affecting **25.7 million people** in their service areas.

53% lack basic hygiene services, affecting **22.8 million people**.

It will cost an estimated **$12 million** to pay the WASH improvements at all **151** facilities.

90% lack basic sanitation, affecting **27.6 million people**.

22 facilities where pregnant mothers are expected to bring their own water with them experience the delivery of **1** baby each day.



Quid Pro Quo?

Under its new funding regime, the Trump administration has been negotiating memoranda of understanding with individual governments before reauthorizing aid delivery. It is Mr. Compton's hope that funding for improvements in water, sanitation and hygiene will be part of those agreements, but the new process has created new worries.

Mr. Compton cites a lack of transparency and unusual quid pro quo arrangements that place conditions on aid delivery. In exchange for continuing its support of H.I.V./AIDS intervention in Zambia, for example, the administration is seeking expanded access to Zambia's mineral resources.

Ms. Doogue sees in her work with C.R.S. a practical application of Catholic social teaching—responding to the preferential option for the poor and protecting the dignity of all people. "I find that teaching to be very motivating and central to the work that we are trying to move forward." American Catholics, she suggests, are called to embrace "a global family" and promote integral human development.

But if that moral call remains insufficient motivation, there are practical benefits that result from the modest humanitarian outlays that have fallen into such disrepute in Washington. U.S.A.I.D. typically represented less than 1 percent of the federal budget, but its efforts helped stabilize nations, mitigated migration crises and interrupted the cross-border spread of dangerous diseases.

Mr. Compton points out that the world's wealthy nations benefit in other ways from shoring up health services outside their borders.

Aid sent overseas helps train many thousands of health care workers, a good percentage of whom eventually make their way into medical professions in the affluent world, where the need for health care staff remains acute. "We're benefiting from what these other countries are doing, the education that they're providing to their people," Mr. Compton says.

"Global health is a two-way street, and we've never really taken that into account."

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

In Brazil, the Sateré-Mawé Indigenous community endures in faith and hope

Cristina de Souza and Bernardo Alves

Cristina de Souza and Bernardo Alves

In the creation narrative of the Sateré-Mawé, an Indigenous people of Brazil, before the earth existed there were only extraordinary beings who created everything through their words alone. One of these extraordinary beings imagined a new planet where life could be spoken into existence, beginning the process of earth's creation.

"It is from these stories that our ancestors teach us how to think before acting, speaking or responding," Bernardo Alves told **America**. "They teach respect for nature and the universe. Sharing this story is rare, but we believe that communicating with the wider world can strengthen relationships among peoples."

Mr. Alves is a *tuxaua*, or Indigenous leader, and the coordinator of the Sateré-Mawé Health and General Monitoring Base in the Andirá-Marau Indigenous Territory. He explained that many abuses of Indigenous rights remain invisible to elected officials, police and media, forcing Indigenous communities to defend themselves. The monitoring station was established as a grassroots effort to protect the territory and its people.

The Brazilian Constitution recognizes Indigenous territories as sovereign, but enforcement of territorial integrity in Brazil's Amazon region is weak. Ongoing threats to Indigenous sovereignty and security derive from illegal invasions by commercial businesses and extractive industries, including wildcat logging and mining, prostitution and drug trafficking.

Cristina de Souza, Mr. Alves's wife, is an Indigenous teacher and respected lay leader. "We once were autonomous, guided by traditional wisdom," she said. "Today our land suffers constant invasions by miners, loggers and traffickers. The territory is part of our humanity, yet there are constant attempts to dominate and devalue it."

The Andirá-Marau territory includes more than 3,000 square miles. The vastness of the land makes full protection impossible, but monthly councils of Sateré-Mawé leaders attempt to coordinate collective governance.

According to Ms. de Souza, modern encroachment of Sateré-Mawé territory escalated in the 1980s with the arrival of a French oil company. Given a green light from the Brazilian federal government, the company began exploring for oil in Indigenous territory. Indigenous leaders were not consulted or offered compensation. The intrusion accelerated the loss of the Sateré-Mawé's traditional culture, one based on agriculture and animal husbandry and centered on communal life.

Mining companies continued to promise Indigenous people jobs that would provide a living but ended up exploiting their labor, holding them indentured against their will. Some lost their lives under grueling labor conditions, exhausted by the struggle to meet the inhuman mining quotas set for them.

In recent months, the Brazilian federal government has authorized renewed oil exploration at the mouth of the Amazon River. Ms. de Souza said that in order for the Sateré-Mawé to protect themselves from this latest threat and restore communal autonomy, ancestral knowledge must be esteemed on equal footing with contemporary scientific and academic knowledge.

Sateré-Mawé people are primarily Catholic, and in an Indigenous climate where government and police are mistrusted, men and women religious and lay leaders have earned the people's respect. In spite of an often exploitative relationship with modernity, Indigenous leaders, Mr. Alves said, are not opposed to engagement with the outside culture and its technology.

He and Ms. de Souza agree that they simply want the freedom to choose from the modern without suppressing the traditional. They seek to preserve their mother tongue but still hope for an education for their young people comparable to what other Brazilian families can expect.

Portuguese dominates liturgical life, and the Roman Missal has yet to be fully translated into many Indigenous languages, limiting the church's capacity to fully incarnate the Gospel within the cultures it seeks to serve. In 2019, the Synod of Bishops for the Amazon also proposed research into the development of a unique inculturated Amazon Rite for the sacraments.

Decision makers in business and mining, Ms. de Souza warned, are not much interested in what the church and Indigenous wisdom has to say about human dignity and environmental stewardship.

But the Sateré-Mawé are not a commercial "resource," Mr. Alves said. "We are...a people, a culture that must be preserved, must be defended."

"All civilizations have a right to remain alive, to be treated with dignity, not [to be] used up, not destroyed," he said.

Kyle Desrosiers-Levine *and* Hannah Lima Farbiar *first traveled to Sateré-Mawé territory in 2024 as part of a delegation with Boston College's Clough School of Theology and Ministry, the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro and the Jesuits of the Amazon region.*

AP Photo/Ramon Espinosa

As new limits on refugees proliferate, Cubans lose their special status

Five cans of condensed milk: That's the only sustenance Felipe Fortun and his five companions carried with them in 1994 as they plunged into the Gulf of Mexico on a flimsy raft off the coast of Cuba.

With his native country roiled by an oil blockade and reports of aggressive American intervention in the offing, Mr. Fortun in March recounted his perilous journey to the United States. After days adrift, the dehydrated men were spotted by a plane sponsored by Brothers to the Rescue, a Miami-based nonprofit founded by Cuban exiles that was leading search-and-rescue efforts to aid Cubans making their way to the United States. A ship soon arrived to rescue them, and in Key West the group was warmly welcomed by Floridians.

Had they arrived in the last year, things would have looked different.

On the first day of his second term, President Donald Trump signed an executive order that suspended the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program indefinitely. This year, the administration has set the refugee cap at a record low 7,500, and most recipients have been white South Africans.

Despite these developments, the need for individuals to seek refuge in the United States has not abated. In many cases, it has only become more critical.

Cuba is just one example. The Trump administration has heightened economic pressure on Cuba with a near-total oil blockade. Cuba had relied on discounted oil from Venezuela to power its energy grid. As conditions deteriorate and blackouts become common, riots and protests have broken out.

Joanne Morales is a senior programs director with Catholic Charities Community Services in Phoenix. "Even as the numbers and populations have been reduced due to travel bans and low ceilings, it doesn't change countries' conditions and circumstances overseas," Ms. Morales said. "And it doesn't change the fact that there are still millions of people in refugee camps worldwide."

Her office helped Mr. Fortun find a job and a place to live when he chose to settle in Arizona. Catholic Charities has been welcoming and resettling refugees in Arizona since 1979. Much of that changed last year after deep federal cuts.

Reemberto Rodríguez was 9 years old in 1966, the year he came to the United States from Cuba. Mr. Rodríguez, now an architect, urban planner and historian, is a professor at the University of Maryland.

"I will never ever be an apologist for the Cuban government," Mr. Rodríguez said. "But I refuse to carry the hate."

There is a word in Spanish that helps explain how average Cubans have endured government oppression and failing infrastructure, he said: *resolver*. The Cuban people make do with what they have, Mr. Rodríguez said. It takes a certain genius to make it work out.

"Cuba is alive and well in the hearts and spirits of the

Cubans mark the 65th anniversary of the Declaration of the Socialist Character of the Cuban Revolution, in Havana on April 16.

people," he said.

Mr. Rodríguez said the church's influence over the decades has remained essential. The government, he explained, relies on the Catholic Church and other faiths to serve as a social safety net, especially in the care of children and the elderly.

"Since the revolution, Cuba has consistently evolved. They are not static," Mr. Rodríguez said. "Yes, they have maintained a centralized system, owned by an oligarchy. They are taking more money out of the country than they are investing in it. But you know what? There is a life and culture there, not unlike any other place throughout the world that has an autocratic system. You still have life."

That life endures despite Cuba's dysfunctional system, he said. But he does not believe Cubans want aggressive U.S. involvement.

Trump administration officials "aren't talking about diplomacy," Mr. Rodríguez said. "They're talking about colonialism and control. And I'm not interested in Cuba changing to be a pawn of the United States. Too many people have fought hard for some kind of sovereignty in Cuba for [us] now to say we're going to be a [U.S.] state."

Yet Mr. Fortun, who left Cuba nearly 30 years after Mr. Rodríguez, sees it more plainly. He feels the Cuban experiment proves communism does not work and that change is overdue.

People in Cuba would hear from relatives in the United States regularly, Mr. Fortun said. They knew how much better life could be. When he got on that raft in 1994, he felt his chances of survival were 50/50. He was 23, but he believed the risk was worth it.

J. D. Long García *is a senior editor at* ***America.***

OSV News photo/Bob Roller

Bishop Andrew H. Cozzens of Crookston, Minn., leads adoration at the 10th National Eucharistic Congress in Indianapolis in 2024.

U.S. bishops to consecrate the nation to the Sacred Heart of Jesus for 250th celebration

Last November, Bishop Kevin C. Rhoades of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Ind., chair of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee for Religious Liberty, said U.S.C.C.B. staff were assembling resources for dioceses, parishes and other groups to engage Catholics during the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776.

In preparation for the national celebration, a diocese might "invite the faithful to participate in 250 hours of adoration, or 250 works of mercy," Bishop Rhoades suggested, speaking during the conference's fall assembly.

As part of the celebration, U.S. bishops will consecrate the nation to the Sacred Heart of Jesus during the U.S.C.C.B. spring assembly in Baltimore. Bishop Rhoades called it "an opportunity to promote the beautiful devotion to the Sacred Heart among our people—and also to remind everyone of our task to serve our nation by perfecting the temporal order with the spirit of the Gospel, as taught by the Second Vatican Council."

He described the tradition behind, and the aim of, such a consecration: "One hundred years ago, in 1925, in his encyclical instituting the feast of Christ the King, Pope Pius XI—drawing on the teaching of Pope Leo XIII—referred to the pious custom of consecrating oneself, families and even nations to the Sacred Heart of Jesus as a way to recognize the kingship of Christ."

Through his final encyclical, "Dilexit Nos" ("He Loved Us"), Pope Francis "brought devotion to the Sacred Heart to the forefront of Catholic life as the ultimate symbol of both human and divine love, calling it a wellspring of peace and unity," Bishop Rhoades said.

Pope Leo XIV, writing in his first apostolic exhortation, "Dilexi Te" ("I Have Loved You"), carried forward his predecessor's teaching, inviting the faithful "to contemplate Christ's love, the love that moves us to mission in our suffering world today."

Editors' note: *Read Bishop David J. Bonnar on turning to the Sacred Heart for the nation's 250th at americamagazine.org.*

Gina Christian *is a multimedia reporter for OSV News.*

PROPHETS OF THE MOUNTAINS

The Catholic Committee of Appalachia's half-century mission to heal a wounded land

By Jeffrey Webb

Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low; and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain.

—Isaiah 40:4

In Appalachia, Isaiah's words take on a different meaning. Here, explosives and huge machines work in tandem to blow the tops off mountains to get at the coal buried deep below. Slurry ponds are filled up with toxic waste from these processes, and dams are just waiting to burst like they did in the 1972 Buffalo Creek flood that killed 125 people, injured over 1,000 and destroyed hundreds of homes in West Virginia. Or like the Martin County coal slurry spill in 2000 in Kentucky, which contaminated over 100 miles of waterways, as well as the local drinking supply. Coal barons like Don Blankenship escape with minimal jail time after being convicted of conspiring to commit mine safety violations and are then handed golden parachutes while the very people they employ are burdened with lung disease, cancers and workplace fatalities.

For more than five decades, the Catholic Committee of Appalachia has listened to the people affected by these forces of destruction and shared their stories in a series of pastoral letters. Along with stories of environmental destruction, those letters also shared stories of poverty, imprisonment, addiction and more. In addition to the letters, through the years members of the C.C.A. have fought for justice for Appalachians through protests and activism, taking on the likes of King Coal, state legislatures and even a Catholic bishop. Like Isaiah and other Old Testament prophets, they have long been unafraid to speak truth to power.

The Catholic Committee of Appalachia was formed in 1970, born out of another group known as the Commission on Religion in Appalachia. As it describes itself on its website, the C.C.A. "is a grassroots, faith-based network." Anybody is able to join, with much of its membership consisting of Catholic laypeople and clergy, though its membership also includes nonbelievers. Its first big splash came in 1975 with the publication of its first pastoral letter, signed by a group of 25 Catholic bishops from Appalachia's 13 states, stretching from New York down to Georgia. That letter, titled "This Land Is Home to Me," starts off by saying, "Many of our Catholic people, especially church workers, have asked us to respond to the cries of powerlessness from the region called Appalachia. We have listened to these cries and now we lend our own voice."

At that time, the eco-social philosopher Joe Holland was working as a research associate at the Center of Concern in Washington D.C., which was a think tank co-founded by Pedro Arrupe, S.J., then-superior general of the Society of Jesus, and then-Bishop Joseph Bernardin, general

A photo from 2019 shows a mountaintop removal coal mine in the Appalachian Mountains in Virginia.

secretary at the time of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (now the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops). Because of his background with Latin American liberation theology, Mr. Holland was asked to ghostwrite the letter. "It connected me to a vibrant Catholic community of prophetic figures who continue to inspire me," Mr. Holland told me recently by email.

In 2020, marking the C.C.A.'s 50th anniversary, Father Les Schmidt, who worked in Appalachia with the Glenmary Home Missioners, spoke in a video about how he brought Mr. Holland on board for the letter. Father Schmidt recalled how he told Mr. Holland that the letter needed to capture the voices of the Appalachian people, that "it's got to be the music" of the people.

Father Schmidt made every effort to know where people were coming from. Along with Sister Beth Davies of the Congregation of Notre Dame, another Appalachian activist, he had conducted numerous listening sessions with individuals throughout Appalachia to better learn about their hopes and their struggles. Sister Davies and Father Schmidt "literally spent every day of October 1973 on the road listening to justice-seeking folks in 11 of the 13 Appalachian states," Sister Davies remembered in a speech in 1995.

That first pastoral letter by the C.C.A. had a profound impact, much of it detailed in a master's thesis by the educator Alyssa Pasternak Post in 2011. "'This Land Is Home to Me' remains a landmark document on justice and life in the U.S. Catholic context," Ms. Pasternak Post wrote. After the publication of the C.C.A. letter, U.S. Senator Robert C. Byrd wrote a letter to Bishop Joseph Hodges of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston in West Virginia praising the work. In 1976, inspired by the message of the pastoral letter, two religious sisters established the Big Laurel Learning Center in Kermit, W. Va. In 1977, also inspired by the pastoral letter, Marie Cirillo founded the Woodland Community Land Trust in Tennessee in response to the desolation brought on by absentee land ownership that is prevalent throughout Appalachia. In the years following its publication, 200,000 copies of the letter were distributed.

In 1995, 20 years after the publication of "This Land Is Home to Me," Mr. Holland would find himself writing the C.C.A.'s follow-up letter, "At Home in the Web of Life." This second pastoral letter addressed many of the themes of the first one while honing in even more on creating a sense of community in Appalachia's industrial wastelands. "In this letter," it reads, "we wish to explore the new tasks which lie before us, particularly the task of creating or defending what are called 'sustainable communities.' These are communities where people and the rest of nature can live together in harmony and not rob future generations." This second pastoral letter created an impact similar to that of the first.

That first pastoral letter by the C.C.A. had a profound impact.

A Unifying Cause

A short documentary created in 2015 highlighted some of the organization's influence, explaining that "for almost half a century, each C.C.A. member has been a living pastoral, echoing and rising to the cry of Appalachia and her people." This documentary was produced by the Kentucky filmmaker David Harl, who first became involved with the C.C.A. about two decades ago. Mr. Harl recruited the actor Martin Sheen to narrate. Mr. Harl knew Mr. Sheen was a supporter of the Catholic Worker Movement and managed to obtain the actor's home address, noting that Mr. Sheen does not use email.

"I thought it was worth a try, so I wrote him a letter and told him what I was doing and [asked] if he would consider lending his voice," Mr. Harl told me by email. "I was surprised when he gave me a call on the phone and we chatted for a bit and he agreed to voice the film."

Mr. Harl flew out to Los Angeles to meet Mr. Sheen in person and record the narration. During that time, the two were able to talk even more about the C.C.A., forging a close friendship that lasts to this day.

"Martin and his wife, Janet, are incredible people," Mr. Harl added. "He approaches his acting career like a professional and is unmatched in his talent. However, his true heart is in the Catholic Church and the social teachings.... He thinks like a C.C.A. member, although I'm not sure he knows that."

Over the years, the C.C.A. has attracted Catholics and non-Catholics alike to the cause. Darick Biondi, a United Methodist pastor, is one who has been drawn to its work. He attended Wheeling Jesuit University from 2003 to 2007, where, in his own words, he was "a bit of a nerd." For some classes, he was required to attend certain events on campus, but "if anything was free, I was going to show up," he said. One of those free events turned out to be a panel that featured members of the C.C.A.

Mr. Biondi recalled it was the first time he heard a panel like that discussing injustices in the coalfields, debating things like whether collateral damage brought about by mountaintop removal was really an "act of God," as companies claimed, or whether it was a result of human negligence. "It shifted my entire mindset," he said.

After the panel, Mr. Biondi came across a table where copies of "This Land Is Home to Me" and "At Home in the Web of Life" were displayed. At first, he thought the copies were free for the taking, only to find out that they were a few dollars each. Even a few dollars can be hard to come by for a college freshman. Fortunately, the university's president was standing nearby and generously purchased the copies for the student. "That act of generosity transformed my life," Mr. Biondi said.

Still, it was a few years before Mr. Biondi got around to actually reading the letters in full. Throughout college, he envisioned himself ministering in a large city. "Pittsburgh was the smallest city I could see myself in," he said. But at a silent retreat in 2007, he read through the letters and his thinking changed: "It made me realize there is a fight here in Appalachia that is begging to happen and needs to happen, and I believe God was calling me to stay." As a result, for over a decade now Mr. Biondi has been ministering in and around Charleston, W. Va., a city with a population of 47,000 people.

Seeking to Listen

Throughout its history, the C.C.A. and its members have stood up for a number of issues. For instance, in 1999 the organization called for people to take part in weekly "power-down days." On these days, people were encouraged to abstain from electronic consumption as a way "to reflect upon our society's level of power consumption, which renders assaults on the environment 'necessary'," and to think "about the masses of people in the world for whom access to such electrical power is limited and inconsistent."

In 2007, the C.C.A. co-sponsored a tour of mountaintop removal sites in eastern Kentucky for various religious leaders, showing them the devastating effects strip mining had on the land. More than anything, though, the C.C.A. has sought to listen. As 2015 approached, its members knew they wanted to produce yet another pastoral letter for the 20th anniversary of "At Home in the Web of Life," which was written 20 years after "This Land Is Home to Me." Bishop John Stowe of the diocese of Lexington, Ky., wrote a cover letter for the document. But the C.C.A. decided not to seek wider episcopal input or approval for the text. Ms. Kirkhope told the Appalachian Chronicle: "People have their own authority in the church. We didn't feel it necessary to get [the bishops'] endorsement." The letter would instead be a true people's pastoral, telling stories drawn from Appalachia's most vulnerable populations. To prepare, the C.C.A. conducted over 1,000 listening sessions with people from the region.

C.C.A. member Donna Becher volunteered to type up the listening sessions. For Ms. Becher, assisting with the people's pastoral and being involved with the C.C.A. in

OSV News photo/Union Energy

Leaders from across Appalachia gathered on Oct. 25, 2025, at the Diocese of Pittsburgh Pastoral Center for a daylong "faith and labor" dialogue designed to grapple with a range of issues affecting the region.

general filled "a spiritual need to be involved in the care for creation." She explained that the listening sessions began by asking people two questions: "What is it like to be you, and what is it like to be in this place?"

"The pastoral was based on stories," Ms. Becher said. "Stories of crucified people and crucified places."

The people's pastoral, "The Telling Takes Us Home: Taking Our Place in the Stories that Shape Us," was published in December 2015. Among the voices included in the document were those of women, coal miners, the unhoused and the imprisoned.

People of color were also represented in the pastoral, including that of an Indigenous prison chaplain who recounted how he had "been the victim of harassment, detainment, and searches by law enforcement officials while traveling and attending events in Native attire." And L.G.B.T.Q. individuals were included: "Gay and lesbian Catholics gathering for a retreat in Virginia shared experiences of being treated like lepers in society and in the church. Instead of a place of welcome and safety, the church is often a 'hell of pain,' a place where they are 'discussed and accused but rarely appreciated.'"

"People find liberation in telling stories of struggle, because these stories show us that things are not as they should be," the pastoral states. "And people find liberation, too, in telling stories of creativity, community, and justice, because in them we catch glimpses of a new world."

The foreword to "The Telling Takes Us Home" invokes Pope Francis, referring to his call "to become a 'messy' church that is not afraid to take risks." Ms. Becher recalled that, following the pastoral's publication, a copy was sent to the Vatican. In return, the C.C.A. received a thank-you note. She could not remember if Pope Francis himself signed the note, but she did remember it was worded in such a way that implied he had read it. Either way, Ms. Becher said, "we're on the radar."

'The Spirit of a Prophet'

A key individual in putting the C.C.A. on the radar was Michael Iafrate, who served as the lead author for the people's pastoral. Andrea Herrick, a C.C.A. member who was raised Methodist, attributes her own involvement with the organization to Mr. Iafrate's influence. She had crossed paths with him through the local music scene in Wheeling, W. Va., and had found him to have an "inspiring, refreshing vision for what Catholicism could be in Appalachia."

"He listened to and cared for people the church had hurt," Ms. Herrick added. But those qualities set Mr. Iafrate—and the C.C.A.—on a collision course with Bishop Michael Bransfield, who served as bishop of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston from 2005 to 2018.

Beginning in 2019, The Washington Post published stories documenting many troubling allegations regarding Bishop Bransfield. A 60-page report delivered to Archbishop William Lori, who served as apostolic administrator of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston following Bishop Bransfield's resignation in 2018, provided additional details into the alleged wrongdoing, including the findings that the bishop sexually harassed seminarians and priests, abused alcohol and prescription drugs, mismanaged dioc-

esan money, and lived a lavish lifestyle "that was in stark contrast to the faithful he served and was for his own benefit." While many in the diocese were struggling to get food on the table, Bishop Bransfield was flying in a private jet.

At the time this news broke, Mr. Iafrate was serving as co-coordinator of the C.C.A. alongside Jeannie Kirkhope. As fellow West Virginians living and worshiping in the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston, Mr. Iafrate and Ms. Kirkhope kept the pressure on Bishop Bransfield and church leadership. They wrote op-eds and gave interviews, calling for restitutions and reforms. "When we don't speak up, we are complicit in the abuse and its cover-up through our silence," they wrote in one such op-ed, adding, "Let us work to provide justice for lambs we have lost, return dignity to those surviving, and bestow merciful, tough love on our clerics. Indeed, let us go, in peace, to love and serve the Lord."

In an interview with Weelunk, an online magazine in Wheeling, Mr. Iafrate succinctly explained his reasons for taking on Bishop Bransfield and those he viewed as the bishop's enablers: "I can't be a Catholic and not fight for a better church. I can't be a Catholic with my back to the people who Catholicism hurts."

Ultimately, Bishop Bransfield paid $400,000 in restitution to the diocese and issued an apology. In an interview with Our Sunday Visitor, Bishop Mark Brennan, who succeeded Bishop Bransfield as bishop of Wheeling-Charleston, described his predecessor's words as a "non-apology in the form of an apology." Mr. Iafrate called the outcome "disappointing," given that Bishop Bransfield allegedly misspent millions of dollars.

In 2021, Mr. Iafrate passed away from cancer at age 44. His obituary stated that although he was born in Valparaiso, Ind., his "fire was ignited in Appalachia. He remained infatuated with and tethered to these mountains. By chance, the last smell from this earth he enjoyed was a honeysuckle vine, snuck into his hospital room."

"I miss him so much," C.C.A. member Moira Reilly, a hospital chaplain, said. "He had the spirit of a prophet."

Joan Wages holds a banner at a prayer vigil for the environment in Roanoke, Va., in the summer of 2019.

Bishop John Stowe of Lexington, Ky., celebrates an outdoor Mass at Bethlehem Farm in Alderson, W. Va., during the annual gathering of the Catholic Committee of Appalachia in September 2025.

In Search of Healing

The Bransfield scandal caused some friction between the C.C.A. and the Catholic hierarchy. For instance, in 2019 the C.C.A. protested at a chrism Mass led by Archbishop Lori, calling for a dialogue with the archbishop "to give an honest account of the failures of the Church so that all may grow together in holiness." Archbishop Lori responded by issuing a reprimand, saying, "The Mass should never be used as a moment for demonstration or the expression of individual opinion, especially during Holy Week, and I ask you, as the concerned Catholics you are, to avoid such actions in the future."

In the years since, however, there has been a sort of detente between the C.C.A. and some members of the episcopate. The year 2025 marked the 50th anniversary of the publication of "This Land Is Home to Me." To commemorate the occasion, the C.C.A. co-hosted, along with three Catholic bishops, a gathering in Pittsburgh that brought together clergy, laity and labor activists. Around 150 people were present.

Bishop Brennan spoke at the event, and even called for boycotts to address the problem of economic disparity. In an interview with **America**, Bishop Brennan explained that the relationship between the C.C.A. and the diocese

People find liberation in telling stories of struggle, because these stories show us that things are not as they should be.

has been slowly healing since the fallout of the Bishop Bransfield scandal. Early in his tenure, Bishop Brennan attended the C.C.A.'s annual gathering, making an effort to listen and learn.

"It's a good organization that can help keep alive the issues people are dealing with," Bishop Brennan said of the C.C.A., citing issues like poverty and the extraction of minerals. "The committee can be helpful to keep alive Appalachian culture, too. That's a service."

Today, the C.C.A. has active chapters in West Virginia, Kentucky and North Carolina. Molly Linehan Belcher, the C.C.A.'s current board chair, said that they have over 280 official members, including many laypeople and non-Catholics. But that number, according to Ms. Linehan Belcher, does not reflect the vast number of individuals who work adjacently with the C.C.A. without being on their membership rolls. Until mid-2024, the C.C.A. had paid staff positions. Now, all positions are volunteer. Despite these changes, the basic principles of the C.C.A. have remained consistent over time.

"We are rooted in Appalachia," Ms. Linehan Belcher said. "We seek to be a listening presence for the people on the peripheries."

Ms. Linehan Belcher explained that C.C.A. is currently hosting listening sessions throughout the region, centered on small groups reading passages from the pastoral letters and asking how they have been affected by the issues discussed. These gatherings may happen in church basements, coffee shops or people's homes.

"We seek to listen to the most vulnerable," she said. "We take seriously our Catholic standing and ask, 'How do we make sure the little voices are still heard?'"

This September, the C.C.A. will be hosting its 56th annual gathering. As its website states, it will be "a celebration of faith and social justice and a way to reconnect with our friends and community."

Echoing Bishop Brennan's comments, Ms. Linehan Belcher said the C.C.A. is trying to mend its relationship with the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston and Catholic clerics, as evidenced by the C.C.A.'s collaboration with the Catholic bishops in hosting the Pittsburgh gathering. Ms. Linehan Belcher also acknowledged there are still some differences, particularly in the views of the roles of women and also the L.G.B.T.Q. community in the church.

Over the years, the C.C.A. has issued several statements and resolutions, many of which align with the liberal side of the American political spectrum. A 1999 resolution called for universal health care. A statement in 2016 mourned the victims of the Pulse nightclub shooting, and that same year the C.C.A. issued a statement opposing a bill known as the West Virginia Religious Freedom Restoration Act, which it believed was a "license to discriminate" against L.G.B.T.Q. individuals. In 2021, a statement condemned the events of January 6.

Ms. Linehan Belcher urged people to listen to one another more carefully, especially to those with whom they may disagree. It is important to believe, she said, that others are also working for the common good, saying, "We need more people who believe in that."

But Donna Becher asked what many may be wondering: What is the future of the C.C.A.?

Ms. Linehan Belcher explained that the C.C.A. plans to focus on issues like the construction of data centers in Virginia and West Virginia, Tennessee companies building components of nuclear weapons, and the global rise of A.I. "Land ownership, immigration and voting rights, especially for people of color, continue to be serious issues across our region," Ms. Linehan Belcher added.

"The word prophetic is in our mission statement," Ms. Becher said. "We are bringing the Gospel to Appalachia—well, not really bringing it. The Gospel message is already here and we are here."

Her words echo those of the Book of Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord has anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound."

Jeffrey Webb *is an educator and writer from West Virginia. He writes frequently about the culture, history and people of Appalachia.*

A New Day for Hispanic Ministry

How can the church better accompany Hispanics from all generations?

By Juan Miguel Alvarez

My father's hands are rough, thickly calloused and cracked from decades of work. They bear witness to the daily sacrifices he made to support his family and build up this country. Rain, snow or shine, my father made concrete slabs for a living—the kinds used for highways and stadiums.

"You're all going to have office jobs one day," my father used to tell my siblings and me, *trabajos de oficina*. It was his way of saying we would make it. We would be sheltered from the elements while we worked, unlike him.

As a first-generation immigrant from Mexico, my father's aspiration for us was that through education, we would contribute to the good of the United States and attain the American dream: to break the cycle of generational poverty and live peaceful lives dedicated to serving God and our families.

Most of my siblings would go on to become engineers. I began university studies with a declared major in architecture, and I know it gave my father great pride and fulfillment to know that we, a family of former migrant field workers, went from laboring in the California sun picking cucumbers to designing satellites and city blocks. We would rely on our minds more than our hands. Our professions would be safe, comfortable and respected.

Even as a lifelong faithful Catholic, he found it difficult to understand why several years later I left architecture in favor of theology. He eventually understood that I felt called by God to pursue a vocation of lay ecclesial ministry, primarily through teaching and the accompaniment of young people. It gave me peace to know I had his support, but it was difficult to shake the unspoken pressure that is all too familiar

CNS photo/Lola Gomez

Young people pray during
a regional *encuentro* in Herndon, Va.

to so many second-generation U.S. Latinos: Our parents' dreams are riding on us.

They left their home country and their family for our sake, and as first-generation university students, it is on us to bring forth the fruits of that sacrifice. Perhaps originating within ourselves more than from our parents, there can exist an inherent guilt that comes from pursuing a career that will not be seen, at least through the eyes of the world, as lucrative or as respectable as our parents might have hoped. My parents would not be able to say I was an architect, a lawyer or a doctor. God surprised them with something that perhaps they never imagined when they migrated: a son who chose ministry as a way of life.

This is perhaps the first in a long line of obstacles for many young Latino Catholics today, who might otherwise devote themselves more fully to ministry, with or without a degree. The questions, verbalized or not, make us doubt. Will I be able to financially support a family doing this? Will my family support me? Will they understand? Should I pursue something better paid and do this in my free time? What will I even do with a theological degree? On top of this internal conflict, those in positions of church leadership—clergy and lay—may unintentionally limit or discourage young Latinos from ecclesial leadership.

Years ago I served as director of formation for a large, predominantly Hispanic parish in Chicago. The pastor and I made it a top priority not only to engage the young people in the parish but to invite them into active ministry. Both the first Communion and the confirmation program bustled with budding catechists aged 18 to 25. We paired them with catechists with decades of experience, hoping that both groups could learn from one another while together offering an enriched catechetical experience to those preparing to receive their sacraments.

By the grace of the Spirit and the dedication of our team, this arrangement was effective. It was not, however, without its challenges. Some young people often found their roles reduced to logistical tasks—setting up chairs, passing out materials and speaking to the group in minor roles—while never being invited to cast a vision or take a more direct lead. Others brought forth ideas or proposed

It was difficult to shake the unspoken pressure all too familiar to U.S. Latinos: Our parents' dreams are riding on us.

changes to their more experienced counterparts only to be met with skepticism or an assurance that "this is the way we have always done it."

Since my time in the parish, I have heard countless stories from young people who felt limited by those who could have instead fanned their ministerial zeal and stretched their capacities to new dimensions. This phenomenon is not exclusive to Hispanic communities, yet it seems heightened among Latinos.

In other cases, the problem is not limitation but rather discouragement. A first-generation immigrant Catholic may hear a second- or third-generation young person beginning their ministry speak imperfect Spanish, resorting to English so often that they begin to approach full-on Spanglish, and may respond with a chastisement or a disapproving comment about such mixing of this young person's two languages.

This reaction misses that the mixing of languages is an accurate representation of the young person's own identity—two cultures, backgrounds and sets of experiences ever blending and intertwining in one. It risks alienating young people who might not come back (either to the parish or to ministry) because in their moment of vulnerability, they were shamed or belittled instead of encouraged. Still other times, the discouragement can come from an over-emphasis on vocations to the priesthood and vowed religious life, so that young men and women begin to perceive these as the only feasible paths to ministry. The idea that one serves God and others mainly as a priest or as a consecrated person, deeply ingrained in the Hispanic Catholic imagination, can become yet another barrier for young people discerning how to serve and lead in the church.

For the young Latinos and Latinas who do discern this call and step into it, they are often the youngest person in the room, operating from a distinct life experience and a different understanding of what it means to be church than those who have been leading for years. They profess the same faith but have come to live it and understand it differently because of the generational and cultural divides, and these young ministers-in-the-making can feel discouraged when their fresh energy, zeal and ideas are met with hesitation or resistance in favor of the way things have always been done.

No Longer an Immigrant Church

Hispanic ministry in the United States has long been tailored to the needs and experiences of first-generation immigrants, and rightly so. Foreign-born Latinos and Latinas were the main source of growth in the U.S. Hispanic population for much of the 20th century, and the church accompanied them by creating Spanish-speaking ministries and resources. This was a great gift then and it continues to be a gift today. Catechesis, family ministry, Bible studies and lay movements in Spanish are an essential component of the Catholic Church in the United States, which is about 40 percent Hispanic today (and that proportion is climbing by the year).

Yet Hispanic population growth (which itself accounts for over half of the total U.S. population growth in the last 15 years) is now driven significantly more by those born in the United States than by first-generation immigrants. This has been the case since the early 2000s. Today 94 percent of Hispanics under the age of 18 are U.S.-born.

They speak mainly English and Spanish to varying degrees; most are bilingual. Many of them have grown up feeling caught between two worlds, accustomed to pressure from both ends and sensing the danger in straying too far in either direction at the wrong moment. Dress a certain way or play the wrong playlist around their cousins and suddenly they're "whitewashed."

If they accidentally drop some Spanish words into an English sentence, they are simply trying too hard to be Latino. Slip up in their Spanish and they're a "*no sabo* kid," a pejorative term for children of immigrants who are less fluent in the language. Conversely, some young Hispanics are tempted to tone down or check their *Latinidad* at the door in white-dominated contexts, such as their classroom, their university dorm or their corporate job. Hispanics are expected to be proud of their culture but also to express it in precisely the right way to precisely the right degree, lest they suffer the judgment of their extended family, coworkers or peers.

Young Latinos feel the tension between the traditional Catholic faith of their Hispanic parents and the secularized, modern culture that has largely suffocated the role of religious practice or become antagonistic against it. They are disaffiliating from the Catholic Church in increasing numbers, often citing a gradual drift from Catholicism—a slow arrival at the conclusion that the religious practices they had received are now irrelevant to their lives.

Most who disaffiliate from the Catholic Church do so

OSV News photo/Jim Hale, courtesy Arlington Catholic Herald

Altar servers process during the Mass With Admission to Candidacy for Holy Orders for candidates of the Diocese of Arlington's new diaconate program at the Cathedral of St. Thomas More in Arlington, Va., on Feb. 1, 2026.

in their teen years. Especially among young people, we are well past the time when one could safely assume Hispanics were Catholics. The 2024 Religious Landscape Study by the Pew Research Center found that 42 percent of all U.S. Hispanics were Catholic; in 2023, Pew reported that among those aged 18 to 29, only 31 percent were Catholic, compared with 49 percent who self-identified as unaffiliated. Combined with the ongoing Hispanic population growth, this has created a dynamic in which the U.S. Catholic Church grows more Hispanic while Hispanic young people are becoming less Catholic.

Not every Catholic pastoral leader serving young Catholics in the United States seems to be fully aware of these facts. The conversation about the formation of young Catholics has yet to account adequately for the seismic demographic shift embodied by Hispanic Catholics, who will soon be the majority within the U.S. Catholic population and already constitute the majority among Catholics under 18.

The U.S. young Catholic experience and *Latinidad* are deeply intertwined. The theologian Hosffman Ospino of Boston College reminds us that "to speak of Hispanic ministry in the United States practically means to speak of youth and young adult ministry." But many ministerial efforts in our church limit "Hispanic ministry" simply to ministry in Spanish.

The Hispanic Catholic population is still too often painted with one broad brush, as people fail to recognize important differences between the experiences of Hispanics who are immigrants and those who are U.S.-born or U.S.-reared (to say nothing of the rich diversity of the many cultures present within the Hispanic population). As a result, the church provides gravely impoverished ministerial offerings that leave out talented young leaders it might otherwise develop. If we hope to foster the many gifts young people offer their communities and the larger church, we must first better understand who our young Hispanic Catholics are and respond creatively to the new era they are ushering in.

As director of Haciendo Caminos, I heard the stories of young adult Hispanic Catholics from all over the country. Co-led by Boston College and the University of Notre Dame, Haciendo Caminos is a collaborative effort on behalf of 18 Catholic universities, all dedicated to identifying and supporting the next generation of Catholic ecclesial leaders working in Hispanic communities.

During the summer of 2025, I had the privilege of accompanying 30 Haciendo Caminos fellows, master's-level graduate students currently receiving formation in theology and ministry. All were U.S.-born or U.S.-reared Hispanics. We gathered in San Antonio with a team of some of the leading Hispanic theologians and ministers in the United States, and our days were filled with lively discussion, fellowship and prayer.

Their stories inspired me and reminded me that young Hispanic Catholics are resilient, dedicated and hardworking. More important, the students edified one another and found community in their shared experiences. Many echoed the pressures of being children of immigrants.

OSV News photo/Gregory A. Shemitz

A woman holds a statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe during a Spanish-language Mass on the eve of the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church in Staten Island, N.Y.

They were master code switchers, fluent in both Hispanic and American cultures, and disciples of Jesus committed to serving God and his church. Their joy was contagious, despite the countless struggles they were facing individually and communally.

Fellows at the symposium were asked what topics they would like to discuss, and their responses were telling. The six small topic groups that emerged from their requests focused on: diversity, how to minister to peers, power dynamics, pathways for lay ministers, mental health and L.G.B.T.Q. accompaniment. Mental health and L.G.B.T.Q. accompaniment were far and away the most important concerns, according to the symposium participants.

This simple exercise demonstrates much of the ongoing struggle for the church to understand our young Latino Catholics. If this same question were posed to the vast majority of ecclesial leaders now engaged in Hispanic ministry, the results would differ greatly, given the fact that most work with Hispanic immigrants.

Different Questions From Youth

If we hope to engage young people, we must ask: Are we trying to provide answers to questions they are not asking, or are we listening to them? The reconfiguration of Hispanic ministry that is demanded by the present moment is not one of either/or. It is both/and. We must continue to accompany and serve first-generation Hispanics while recognizing that U.S.-born youth and young adult Hispanics have different questions, desires and drives.

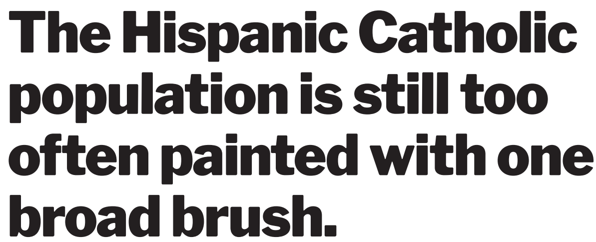
Pope Francis hailed the presence of our *jóvenes* in the exhortation "Christus Vivit": "Youth is a blessed time for the young and a grace for the church and for the world. It is joy, a song of hope and a blessing." Within the United States, the transformation our young Latino Catholics are leading is particular cause for hope.

Those in Hispanic ministry often talk about the U.S. Hispanic community as *gente puente*, or bridge people. The younger generations of Latinos embody this more than anyone. They bridge their Latino and American cultures; the work ethic and grit of their immigrant parents to holistic self-care that prevents burnout; the pre-internet world to modern social media and artificial intelligence; tradition and respect for authority to innovation and synodality; theology to its concrete implications in a justice-starved world.

Compelled by their faith, rooted in reverence and gratitude for the spirituality and traditions they have received as a gifts from past generations, they are not only confronting issues that for too long have been avoided, like mental health, abuse and traumas in Hispanic families; they are precisely the ones leading these conversations.

What can we as a community of faith do to better accompany and see their young Latinos and Latinas reach their leadership potential? The answers will need to vary according to local context; there is no one Hispanic American experience. Nonetheless, certain central themes inevitably arise when speaking to *jóvenes* about their experiences in the church, and these can guide concrete next steps.

Young Hispanic Catholics need to be given agency



The Hispanic Catholic population is still too often painted with one broad brush.

within their own formation journey, including the language in which they receive religious education. As one catechist recently lamented to me, "I frequently have teens in my confirmation class who definitely should not be in a Spanish-language group, but being underage, their parents were the ones who made that decision. They want their kids to learn to pray in Spanish, though the practical result is a frustrating, checked-out catechesis experience for them."

Parents' efforts to make sure their children know Spanish are commendable, but spiritual formation is the wrong arena in which to prioritize this. What is at stake in our youth's formation is nothing less than the life that Christ extends through the hearing and accepting of the kerygma. Our job is to remove obstacles to reaching that end, not add more.

Agency must extend beyond language. Young people ought to be given the freedom to name the topics that matter to them. The breakneck pace of technological advancement necessarily means our teens' and young adults' experiences are markedly different from those who came even a few years before them. One teenager in my family pointed out to me that in an effort to seem relatable, catechists and pastoral leaders sometimes assume they already know what the struggles are in the lives of young people. This backfires either from simple inaccuracy or because it lacks the essential listening and relationship-building components of ministry.

Instead, the teen I spoke with wishes young people could more often name for themselves the particular pain points of their life within a trusted, comfortable environment. Beyond formal catechesis, parish or campus outreach events should also allow young people to answer the basic question: What is going on in your world at the moment that most concerns or interests you?

Communities would do well to audit their ministries to consider where young people are present and where they are not. Young people often feel limited to certain ministerial and ecclesial roles. Can parishes instead encourage the inclusion of young people in every one of their ministries, both liturgical and nonliturgical?

Even among those heavily involved in ministry, *jóvenes* often report an experience of coasting within their roles. Instead of being stretched and trusted with new leadership roles, they are kept where they are safe. Countless future leaders sit in the pews, falsely believing they are not needed right now, and others are fulfilling the same secondary roles they have practiced for years because no pastoral leader has entrusted them with leadership. Some have a call to formal theological and ministerial formation that has remained dormant for lack of direct encouragement.

In Hispanic communities especially, we must resist a tendency to not only neglect care for mental health, but even to demonize it. Despite skyrocketing rates of anxiety and depression among the youngest generations, many Hispanic Americans struggle to name their mental health battles within their families or faith communities because it is a taboo subject. Others have become tired of those older than them responding to their traumas, wounds, depression and anxiety by instructing them to simply pray it away instead of seeking therapy, counseling or other professional help. If our *jóvenes* are to embrace and one day lead the Catholic Church, we must encourage spiritual well-being as one component of their human flourishing, not treat it as the only one.

Above all, we must listen to our young people. Teaching is an essential role of the church, but teens and young adults have experienced the ineffectiveness of those who teach and minister with haste rather than first listening attentively, genuinely and patiently. Humility and curiosity break down walls previously erected by judgment or neglect. A little goes a long way, especially for second- and third-generation Latinos, who are rarely invited to speak openly about their experiences.

Catholic ministry is not limited to religious education in parishes and schools, and it is our young people who are seeing the need to expand ministerial horizons, including and especially where it may be uncomfortable and pressing to do so. With our support, they will blaze new ministerial trails to address care for creation, global and national migration movements, engagement in public life, engagement in the digital world, accompaniment of the sick and imprisoned, defense of human life from conception to natural death, development of synodal structures, new forms of catechesis, marriage and family ministry, and mental health grounded in Catholic spirituality and beyond. In doing so, they will glorify God and bring forth eternal fruits for his kingdom. I can think of no more worthy an end to our parents' journeys and sacrifices.

Juan Miguel Alvarez *is the program director of New Horizons at the University of Notre Dame. He previously served as director of Haciendo Caminos partnership at the university and ministered in the Archdiocese of Chicago, with an emphasis on youth ministry, faith formation and Hispanic ministry.*

FAITH & REASON

War, Peace and the Catholic Tradition

Correcting three major distortions of church teaching

By Robert W. McElroy

In recent weeks there has been a vibrant and robust debate within the United States about the morality of launching and sustaining war against Iran.

Catholic moral teaching has been at the center of this national dialogue, and the statements of Pope Leo XIV on the war with Iran have been welcomed by many Catholics, recast by some and totally rejected by others. Because the war is a highly volatile issue in our polarized society, it is particularly important that Catholic teaching be clear and well understood as we seek to move forward to peace. For this reason, it is essential to identify and reject three major distortions of Catholic teaching on war and peace that have crept into our national dialogue.

First Distortion

The first distortion is the assertion that the just war tradition is the foundational stance toward war in Catholic teaching.

In reality, the fundamental stance of the church toward war is that it must be avoided. Pope John XXIII proclaimed in "Pacem in Terris" that "it is hardly possible to imagine that in an atomic era war could be used as an instrument of justice." Pope Paul VI journeyed to the United Nations to plead with the world: "Never again war, never again war!"

Pope John Paul II taught that war is never an appropriate way to settle disputes among peoples: "It has never been and it will never be."

Upon his election, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger chose the name Benedict XVI to tie his entire pontificate to that of Pope Benedict XV, who tried to end all war. And Pope Francis wrote in "Fratelli Tutti" that "we can no longer think of war as a solution, because its risks will probably always be greater than its supposed benefits. In view of this, it is very difficult nowadays to invoke the rational criteria elaborated in earlier centuries to speak of a just war. Never again war."

It is in this light that we must view Pope Leo's statements that "God does not bless any conflict. Anyone who is a disciple of Christ, the Prince of Peace, is never on the side of those who once wielded the sword and today drop bombs."

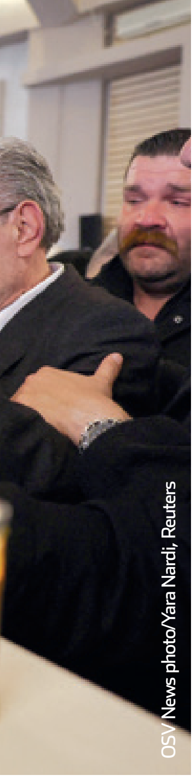
Pope Leo's strenuous opposition to war in every form is not a product of his particular papacy or his personal viewpoint but rather reflects the constant refrain of the popes for the last 60 years. It is a refrain that is rooted in the fundamental command for disciples to be peacemakers and to act on the conviction that war is always antithetical to the Gospel. And it is a refrain that has been accelerated by the enormous destructive power of modern weapons that have the capacity to destroy whole civilizations and, indeed, humanity itself.

Second Distortion

A second claim distorting the dialogue about Catholic teaching and the Iran war is the assertion that just war principles are merely a heuristic—that is, a mental shortcut or rule of thumb—rather than an objective set of stringent criteria for determining whether a war is morally legitimate in extreme circumstances.

The just war teaching of the church is secondary to the teaching that war is antithetical to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It proceeds from the recognition that in extraordinary and rare instances military force may be necessary to repel overwhelming evil in the world. But Catholic teaching insists that legitimate recourse to war even in these circumstances is restricted by precise and substantive conditions for engaging in military conflict.

The teaching in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* makes this clear: "The strict conditions for legitimate defense by military force require rigorous consideration. The gravity of such a decision makes it subject to rigorous conditions of moral legitimacy" (No. 2309). Specifically,



Mourners gather during the funeral of Pierre Moawad, an official of the Christian Lebanese Forces Party, and his wife, Flavia, at St. Simon Church in Yahchouch, Lebanon, on April 7. The couple was killed in an Israeli strike on April 5.

the damage inflicted by the aggressor must be lasting, grave and certain; all other means have been shown to be fruitless; there must be serious prospects of success; there must be the right intention to solely restore peace and justice; and the resort to war must not produce evils graver than the evil which will be eliminated by war. All of these requirements must be met simultaneously for recourse to war to be legitimate. The *Catechism* notes that the immense destructiveness of modern warfare must be fully recognized in assessing the evils that war will unleash.

These are not the words of a heuristic. They are strict moral conditions which must be objectively fulfilled for any recourse to war to be morally legitimate. Presenting these strict conditions as having the elasticity of a heuristic is to evacuate the moral substance and rigor of the norms through which the church seeks to limit war. Of course, these strict conditions need to be applied to a particular wartime situation in a manner that requires sound prudential judgment. But such sound judgment seeks to maximize fidelity to the norm, rather than inventing elasticity that departs from the norm.

Third Distortion

A third claim about Catholic moral teaching distorting our current national dialogue is the assertion that while posing the central moral questions about a war rightfully belongs to the church, the application of those norms and the determination of moral legitimacy to go to war belong solely to the leaders of government.

This assertion first arose concerning the American decision to invade Iraq in 2003. Pope John Paul II was clear in his insistence that the war was not morally legitimate. Before the war, he sent Archbishop Pio Laghi to personally communicate to President George W. Bush the pope's conviction that the contemplated invasion would be a moral disaster. And the pope authorized Cardinal Ratzinger to specifically assert that the invasion did not meet the requirements of Catholic just war teaching.

It was in this context that the American Enterprise Institute scholar Michael Novak wrote an article in 2003 challenging the legitimacy of church leaders in making conclusive statements regarding the morality of particular wars.

Mr. Novak advanced two central assertions in his article.

The first is that since St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas proposed that the moral evaluation of war does not "begin with a presumption against violence," neither should Catholic teaching. But as we have seen, all of the modern popes have approached war with the belief that as disciples of Jesus Christ who calls us to be peacemakers in an age of violence and massive destructiveness, we absolutely must approach every war with the presumption against violence. Any ethical analysis that does not do so cannot be seen as faithful to current Catholic magisterial statements.

The second argument of Mr. Novak in his debate with Pope John Paul II asserts that leaders of government have an exclusive legitimacy in determining whether the moral requirements of just war teaching are met in a given situation. In support of this position, he quoted a line in the *Catechism* which states that "the evaluation of these conditions for moral legitimacy belongs to the prudential judgment of those who have responsibility for the common good." Mr. Novak supported his conclusion by stating that the head of government has access to secret information that others do not and he also has the primary responsibility for protecting his people.

There are several problems with this conclusion. The first is that those who have responsibility for the common good in matters of war extend far beyond the president. They include Congress directly; and also religious and cultural leaders, media, civic, labor and veterans' groups.

Entering into war is a momentous step that often brings unexpected consequences that burden the whole of society. For this reason, the evaluation of the morality of a given war must extend to the wider array of leaders who in Catholic teaching are charged with evaluating the common good of society.

Even more importantly, those who lead us toward war are often the least able to objectively evaluate whether the criteria of just war have in fact been met because they are already committed to a position for political or strategic reasons that will override any ethical concern.

The exclusion of the church from any substantive role in evaluating the moral legitimacy of decisions to go to war, as well as the exclusion of other sources of wisdom and insight in our society, is a pathway to amoral decisions on war, not moral ones. Pope John Paul II recognized this when Michael Novak first proposed it in 2003, and we should recognize it now.

Cardinal Robert W. McElroy *is the archbishop of Washington, D.C.*

A Theology of Work

Catholic social teaching says all work can be good for us—paid and unpaid

By Kate Ward

Catholic social teaching, the tradition of reflection on social and economic life from modern popes, is optimistic about human life in a way that is usually quite inspiring. So I paid attention during a recent discussion when a friend pronounced C.S.T.'s definition of work "depressing."

We were talking about Catholic social teaching's understanding that work is any creative human activity, meaning that most of the unpaid activities we do for pleasure are considered work along with those we do for pay. But my friend pushed back. "Going for a hike or doing cross-stitch is work? No, thanks. Those things are my down time. I do them for me."

It's true that Catholic social teaching would consider most relaxing, downtime activities to be work, but my friend was right, too: The good life absolutely includes more than work. I believe C.S.T.'s inclusive definition of work holds the key to building not just better work but also better lives. But it is also true that this is very different from how we tend to understand work in the United States.

A search through Google Images gives a quick and stark view of how U.S. culture defines work. People at work use laptops, inhabit offices and wear business attire; work is professional, done for pay, outside the home. Many seem to be overwhelmed, slumped on their desks or yelling; work is exhausting, turning us into the worst versions of ourselves. The writer Derek Thompson says that "workism" is a new U.S. religion: Work is all-important, ordering the value of everything else in life. We rank people by the status of their paid job, while those not currently working for pay come in last. Work is what we do for pay; it is bad and overwhelming; and it outweighs everything else in importance.

The Catholic social teaching tradition sees work quite differently. For C.S.T., work is any activity through which humans transform the world using our uniquely human abilities to create, reason and learn. The tradition does not deny that work is often harmful; at its worst, work can even alienate or separate us from our human nature, a serious problem for workers, employers and societies to address. But C.S.T. maintains that in its essence and at its best, work can be good for us, an insight social science confirms. Numerous popes in the last century and a half have taught that work is important for how it changes the world, but more so for how it changes the worker.

As humans, we are constantly growing and changing in good and bad ways, and our work, paid or unpaid, is a major way we shape and change ourselves. This self-transformative aspect of work is more important than the goods, profits or other tangible outcomes the work produces. Finally, while work is important—both for what it produces and how it shapes the person who works—intentional time away from work is crucial for our human nature. Work is not just what we do for pay; it can and should be good for us; and it is important, but not all-encompassing. Catholic social teaching's inclusive definition of work is deeply countercultural to the common U.S. understanding.

The Importance of Unpaid Labor

When U.S. culture defines work as done for pay, unpaid labor is treated as simply a part of life—so much so that a parent putting in 16-hour days to care for their children is viewed by economists, and may be dismissed by peers, as

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According to the Catholic tradition, work is a major way we shape and change ourselves.

"not working." But Catholic social teaching has always recognized unpaid work as work, equal in dignity and importance to what we do for pay. The first document of modern C.S.T., Leo XIII's "Rerum Novarum," talked about women's work in the home in 1891. Ninety years later, John Paul II included caring for children and the home in a list of work activities that can be difficult toil, even though very important.

The popes often describe work as transforming creation, or the material of the world around us; in work, we shape God's creation to make it more useful to humans. Transforming creation could look like farming or manufacturing; it is obvious how those activities shape the material of the world. But humans are God's creation too—so nurses, teachers and therapists transform creation as they act upon their students or patients. We transform ourselves, and we work, when we learn or exercise. Finally, when we apply our creative agency to bring things into being, whether literature and art, tax returns and spreadsheets, policies and laws, or our own social media presence, we are working.

Catholic social teaching is strongly optimistic about the many ways work (paid and unpaid), at its best, can be good for us. John Paul II suggests that through work we "achieve fulfillment as a human being," participate in God's ongoing act of creation and imitate Christ. "When [humans] work," the Second Vatican Council stated in "Gaudium et Spes," "not only do they transform matter and society, they also perfect themselves. They learn, develop their faculties, emerging from and transcending themselves." Work is good for us not only when it allows us to provide for ourselves and our families, but also when it allows us to develop our skills into the person we are called to become.

Again, when the framers of Catholic social teaching say work can be good for us, they mean work in the inclusive definition—not only paid labor, but any activity in which

Work is not just what we do for pay; it can and should be good for us.

humans transform the world and ourselves. Parenting, community organizing, playing sports or an instrument, writing or making art, and improving our skills at cooking or repair are all instances of work in which we perfect ourselves as we develop our skills. Just like paid work, unpaid work helps us gain the skills we are capable of, to become fully ourselves and show up in the world as God intends us to do. And as the C.S.T. framers know, families and societies could not function at all without unpaid labor.

Most adults spend many hours in unpaid activities that are deeply important to our communities but do not usually get much respect or resources because of their unpaid status. As a primary example, caring for our own children also helps adults in our communities who will one day need to rely on the generations who succeed them. Volunteers are also vitally important to communities, sometimes doing exactly the same work that is done for pay elsewhere—like rural volunteer first responders—and meeting many needs there is no money to pay for. And art enriches communities in ways we would not want to live without, even as artists devote many unpaid hours to their creative activity.

There is something disrespectful about insisting that these socially crucial, unpaid activities are not work equal in importance to what is done for pay. Even harder to swallow, for me, is the way identifying work with pay lumps all unpaid activities under "leisure time," as if caring for children or shoveling your driveway were as freely chosen and restorative as relaxing with a book. C.S.T. has it right: Even those adults without a paid job spend the majority of their waking hours working. That is the most accurate way to describe caring for family members, our homes and ourselves; studying or exercising; handling the logistics of daily life; and all the other activities that those who work for pay must squeeze into the hours around a paid job.

Work Flow and Workflow

"In spite of all this toil...work is a good thing" for the human person, John Paul II insists in "Laborem Exercens." The social sciences provide further insight into ways work can be good for us. The Hungarian-American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes an experience called *flow*, when we become so immersed in a task—which happens when its challenge meets our level of skill—that time passes pleasantly, without us being aware of it. We may be lucky enough to access the enjoyable experience of flow in our paid work, but it is also available in our unpaid work in the home.

Deb Perelman, a cookbook author, points to the flow available in home cooking when she writes: "I didn't want a book whose goal was to rush you out of the kitchen the second you began to unwind...to operate from the assumption that cooking is drudgery, when for so many of us, it's a much-needed escape." The opportunity to experience flow on a regular basis is a real way that our unpaid work can be good for us. This makes it especially important for members of a family or household to divide unpaid labor fairly, not just to avoid burnout and resentment on the part of the one who shoulders the most, but also to afford all household members the opportunity to access the flow and pride that can come with unpaid in-home labor.

Experts on workplace flourishing know that burnout can occur when our bodies do not "complete the stress cycle," remaining too long in the fight-or-flight response that stressful jobs can impose. Reliable ways to complete the stress cycle include exercise or creative activity, both of which Catholic social teaching would also consider work. Here, again, work can be good for us when unpaid work helps us complete the stress cycle and restore equilibrium.

I think these positive effects work can have on our bodies and minds—helping us enjoy flow and move past the physiological stress response—may be part of what John Paul II has in mind when he says that work helps us become "more a human being." Work (paid or unpaid), at its best, brings our body, mind, spirit and will into alignment, moving harmoniously toward a valuable goal. When unpaid work helps restore our well-being, it is a visible example of how work can make us more fully human.

Catholic social teaching's inclusive definition of work, with its insistence that work can be a good thing for us and that almost everything we do is work, could seem to contribute to misguided workism. But it really cues us to expect better from our work lives. C.S.T. should inspire us to seek out work that allows us to develop our skills, abilities and relationships, to enjoy flow, and to complete the stress cycle, whether at a paid job or in our free time.

If our current downtime activities don't develop our skills or offer flow—hello, passive screentime—Catholic social teaching reminds us that unpaid work can still be restorative. It's also important that C.S.T.'s inclusive definition of work insists that cooking, child care and household chores, although good, valuable and necessary, are not, in fact, leisure activities. They are work, yes, that engages and shapes us, but which we also need rest from them. The fact

that an activity is not paid labor does not make it restful—something U.S. culture ignores when it calls only paid activities work.

Taking Time Out

Do our lives reflect Catholic social teaching's inclusive definition of work? What might we change—on our own or with the help of our communities—so that it would?

The theologian Christine Firer Hinze of Fordham University urges us to consider our need for two kinds of rest: rest-amid and rest-apart. The former describes the refreshment we might find while working, perhaps in an experience of flow or completing the stress cycle. The restorative downtime my friend Jane experiences doing cross-stitch is rest-amid, an example of the way work (unpaid work in this case) can be good for us.

Rest-apart, on the other hand, happens when we intentionally take time away from paid and unpaid work. Many Catholic thinkers note that we need this second category of rest to remember that we are not God. Despite the great potential God gives us to shape and change the world through our work, we are first and ultimately creatures, who receive the world as God's gift. When we stop our work, we have the chance to accept and celebrate the world for the gift that it is. Although rest-amid is restorative, rest-apart is equally necessary, and is a right that too many workers struggling to survive in the U.S. economy cannot enjoy.

Paid and unpaid activity is work, through which we change the world and ourselves. At least some of our work should be good for us, helping us develop into who God intends us to be. While work is important, we also need times of rest-apart to remember that we are not the Creator, and that we receive our lives as a gift.

Kate Ward *is an associate professor of theological ethics at Marquette University and the author of* Making a Life: Catholic Social Teaching and the Meaning of Work.

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Bioethics Under the Bombs

Loyola Chicago and Ukrainian Catholic University collaborate during wartime

By Michael McCarthy and Emily Anderson, with Yaryna Pikulytska

In late March of this year, we traveled to Lviv, Ukraine, to meet with students, alumni and collaborators at Ukrainian Catholic University. The collaboration between bioethics programs at our Jesuit Catholic institution, Loyola University Chicago, and U.C.U. began in 2016. Rooted in a shared mission for ethics education and for establishing a culture of responsible conduct in research, our partnership has now flourished for over a decade, despite unexpected obstacles. (More on that later.)

U.C.U. is the only Catholic university, and one of the very few private educational institutions, in Ukraine. Established by the head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, it aims to "form leaders to serve with professional excellence in Ukraine and internationally for the glory of God, the common good and the dignity of the human person." Though the Soviets closed what was founded as the Greek Catholic Theological Academy in 1944, its alumni formed the backbone of the underground Ukrainian Catholic Church during the subsequent decades of persecutions. In 1994, the academy revived its activities as Lviv Theological Academy, aiming to become a meeting point and to promote dialogue between the Ukrainian Church and society. In 2002, the Lviv Theological Society became U.C.U.

A Global Health Partnership

The partnership between Loyola and U.C.U. began somewhat quaintly. Father Ihor Boyko, then the director of U.C.U.'s School of Bioethics, mailed a letter to Loyola's Neiswanger Institute for Bioethics. A few months later, Emily Anderson made her first visit to Lviv. Father Boyko, now the director of the Charitable Foundation Sheptytsky Hospital in Lviv (one of only two Catholic hospitals in Ukraine), describes the partnership as successful because it is "built upon shared values and enduring personal relationships," as well as a "belief in the potential of Ukrainian professionals."

After several subsequent visits to Lviv, Emily and

Lviv is about 750 miles from the Russian border but has still suffered damage from Russian drones.

Father Boyko received a five-year grant from the Fogarty International Center at the National Institutes of Health in March 2020. This provided the possibility for more substantive collaboration and engagement of physicians and scientists from across the country.

The Fogarty Center supports collaboration to develop global health scientific expertise in low and middle-income countries. Bioethics expertise is essential to promote the generation of high-quality scientific evidence. The war in Ukraine has created an urgent demand for such expertise, as research is critically needed to identify new solutions to health problems.

For example, new types of weapons lead to different types of injuries; for infectious and chronic diseases, the conditions of war may mean the usual ways of treating patients do not work as well. In the case of mental health, demand for services has increased exponentially. Additionally, international researchers increasingly want to conduct research in Ukraine.

Ethical considerations are always a critical part of research planning, implementation and dissemination, but war creates unique vulnerabilities for participants, such as long-term displacement. Not only is it important that research conducted in crisis settings adhere to the basic tenets of ethical research—that people or their data are not used without their permission, that potential benefits outweigh potential harms, and that participants are selected fairly—but it is also ethically imperative that the research conducted is responsive to the needs of the Ukrainian people.

The Fogarty grant initially funded 10 Ukrainian physicians and scientists to enroll in Loyola's doctorate in bioethics program, which can be completed online. Despite the eight-hour time difference, this model meets the needs of working health care professionals and has worked well for these students, who are committed to living and working in Ukraine.

Mark Kuczewski, director of the Neiswanger Institute, said: "We went online in 2002 in an effort to build a supportive learning community in which experienced health care professionals could contribute to each other's knowledge and accompany one another in bringing their bioethics education to bear in their clinical work environment. With the onset of the Russian invasion, the accompaniment aspect of our program took on an urgency that one seldom encounters in graduate education."

Father Boyko describes this accompaniment as "a bond rooted in daily solidarity." The Ukrainian students learn alongside U.S. health care professionals; and while they are pursuing a specific concentration in research ethics, their coursework also includes clinical bioethics and broader bioethics questions rooted in Neiswanger's commitment to social justice. Students have found this focus particularly useful as they face new challenges due to the Russian invasion, such as an increasing number of soldiers returning to the community with significant physical and mental health needs, and the resulting resource constraints.

Catalyst and Connecter

While coursework is done through Loyola, U.C.U. serves as both catalyst and connector to advance bioethics in Ukraine. Selected students are already positioned as leaders within their own institutions. Vladyslava Kachkovska, M.D., is an associate professor of internal and family medicine at Sumy State University Medical Institute, located near the front lines not far from the border with Russia. As one of the first Ukrainian students to enroll and graduate with a doctorate in bioethics, Dr. Kachkovska was drawn to the program because "Ukraine faces significant gaps in the field of bioethics with the lack of programs and experts. The Loyola program emerged as an invaluable opportunity for

Ukrainian students learn alongside U.S. health care professionals.

deepening our knowledge and skills in this essential area."

Faith draws many physicians, nurses and other health care providers to bioethics. Liubov Hasiuk, M.D., a recent graduate and now medical director at Sheptytsky Hospital, says: "Studying bioethics strongly resonates with my Christian beliefs and allows me to take even better care of our patients. Faith is essential for medical staff. In the light of faith, our activities acquire deep meaning. In a Catholic clinic, the management team faces many challenges, and by perceiving work as a form of Christian service can one maintain inner strength."

At the start of the invasion in February 2022, seven Ukrainian students were enrolled in the program, working toward their degrees. During the first days and weeks, we kept checking in to make sure they were safe. Everyone at Loyola was asking about them, but we weren't really thinking about their coursework, assignments or grades. Our expectation was that most of the students would need to pause their education to focus on the needs of their patients, families and friends.

But after less than a week, the bioethics faculty members started seeing the Ukrainian students participating again on discussion boards. They were even turning in assignments and showing up for Zoom meetings. Our first instinct was to tell them not to worry about classes. But then we decided we would just follow their lead.

"With the outbreak of the war, the bioethics training platform became a space for sharing, mutual support, an opportunity to look at this crisis from a broader perspective, to be heard and to find solutions to existing problems together," said Dr. Hasiuk. "The war highlighted and intensified ethical challenges that had already existed in the field of health care. I truly appreciate that complex issues were not silenced during the training, but on the contrary, were openly discussed and addressed through collective problem-solving." In the very early days of the full-scale invasion, Dr. Hasiuk led efforts to establish hospice care at home for those previously being cared for in her hospital, in order to free up beds that might be needed to treat patients with acute war-related injuries.

Yaryna Pikulytska, M.D., a U.C.U. School of Bioethics project manager, transitioned from providing support for the program to being a student and started her first semester of bioethics classes in January 2022, days after the birth of her second child and just weeks before Russia's invasion. Having completed her bioethics doctorate, Dr. Pikulytska now has a leadership role at U.C.U. as founder and chair of the ethics committee that reviews behavioral and social sciences research. Such achievements are a testament to the fact that life goes on during wartime.

Even when formal studies were disrupted, students stayed engaged. Elizabeth Dotsenko, M.D., who had previously worked with internally displaced people in Iraq and was living in Kyiv in February 2022, said: "I took a break [from classes], because I was displaced myself. I also started a humanitarian N.G.O. The course I took in the bioethics program on Ignatian spirituality helped me to go through very tough moments in the beginning of the full-scale invasion. One of our humanitarian convoys was shelled by Russians near Chernihiv; many were injured, and one person died."

Fielding questions from the students and learning more about their challenges has inspired new scholarship and even a new course on bioethical issues in war available to all Loyola bioethics students that explores concepts such as just war theory, the roles and responsibilities of humanitarian organizations, and strategic military attacks on health care workers and facilities. Collaborative publications between Loyola faculty and Ukrainian students highlight the disruption of clinical trials for thousands of Ukrainian patients and the responsibilities of global pharmaceutical companies to ensure patient safety in the event of trial closure. Ukrainian students have also been supported to share their stories with the global medical and bioethics communities.

As the war continues, we also continue to identify new candidates. Olesya Vynnyk, M.D., started her bioethics education in January 2023. She remembers "sitting at a desk in the headquarters of the Lviv Medical Volunteer Battalion, putting together my application as both a sign of hope and a quiet expression of despair.... As the time passed and events continued to unfold, the course discussion board became one of the few stable elements in the midst of constant changes." At the outbreak of the war, Dr. Vynnyk began working with medics caring for soldiers wounded on the frontlines, and she has traveled around the world and given presentations virtually on new challenges facing Ukrainian medicine.

Under Fire

After accompanying our Ukrainian bioethics students virtually through many personal and academic successes as well as challenges such as family members joining the military, local drone strikes and long periods without elec-

Stefan Dmytryshyn

Dr. Elizabeth Dotsenko leads a small group discussion on ethical research at Ukrainian Catholic University on March 27.

tricity, Loyola faculty members decided it was time to show up for our students in Ukraine.

The primary purpose of our recent visit to Lviv was a three-day conference to connect with researchers working in infectious disease and mental health, and also with veterans and soldiers; to learn about the ethical and responsible conduct of research; and to share the successes and scholarship of the students in the bioethics program with the broader U.C.U. community. We were joined by faculty members from Brown University and SUNY Downstate Medical Center who direct Fogarty-funded training programs in epidemiology research, as well as their Ukrainian students and collaborators.

The meeting, however, got off to an unexpected start.

Although it had been calm in Lviv for several months, on the afternoon of March 24, the day before intensive programming began, air raid alerts sounded. Russian drones struck apartment buildings near a 16th-century Bernardine monastery, and the Church of St. Mary Magdalene in Lviv city center suffered damage. Luckily our group of Americans was at Sheptytsky Hospital with Father Boyko and Dr. Hasiuk. By that time, we had all downloaded the alert app on our phones, and we had sheltered the night before in our dormitory on campus. We understood that we were supposed to immediately seek shelter in the basement, and we were lucky to be in the hospital when this happened. At the time, we felt very safe. We didn't learn the extent of the damage from the drone strike until we saw the video and later walked by the site. Luckily, the rest of the week was calm, allowing bioethics and epidemiology students from the different programs to meet, learn, plan and even share some meals.

After years of coursework, March's meeting was special not only because everyone was together in Lviv but because so many Ukrainian bioethicists were now at the front of the room—teaching or sharing how they have applied their knowledge.

We were also celebrating. In July 2025, we received notice of another five years of funding for 10 more Ukrainian physicians and scientists in Loyola's online bioethics doctoral program. Two new bioethics students traveled from Kyiv to meet us and the other students in person for the first time. Who knows what the future will bring, but we are already planning to meet in Lviv again in 2027.

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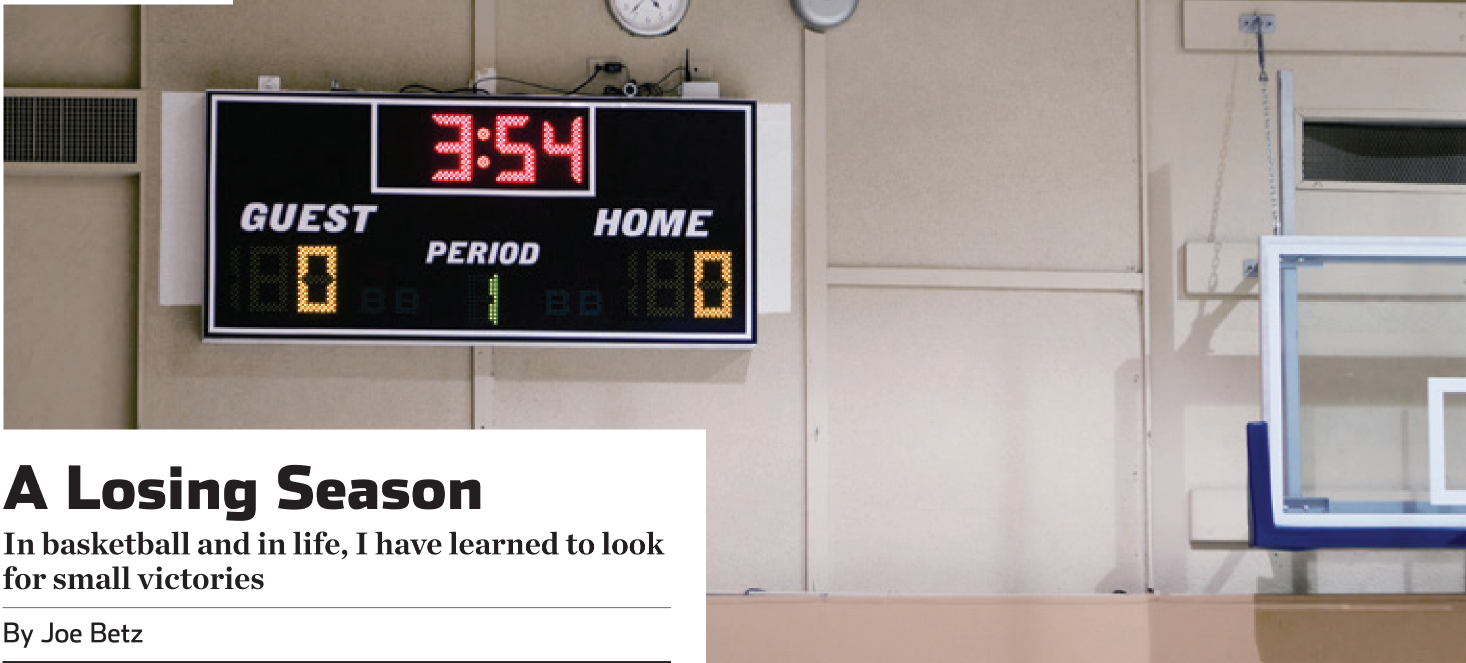
Emily E. Anderson *is a professor at the Neiswanger Institute and director of the Loyola University Chicago-Ukrainian Catholic University International Bioethics Research Training Program.*

Yaryna Pikulytska *is a pediatrician and director of the Institutional Review Board at Ukrainian Catholic University.*



A Losing Season

In basketball and in life, I have learned to look for small victories

By Joe Betz

This, then, is our desert: To love facing despair, but not to consent. To trample it down under hope in the Cross.
—Thomas Merton, from *Thoughts in Solitude*

I coach C.Y.O. basketball. Or rather, I coached. Our season is over, and it was a losing one. The details of it need not complicate the reality of our record.

We had a great group of fifth-grade boys: intelligent, diverse, caring. Some were playing organized sports for the first time. Some battled with low confidence. Some simply needed time to settle in with skills and repetition. We practiced hard when everyone showed up. We played well in stretches. We lost some games because we were outmatched and others because of the mental game.

But we never forfeited. We never failed to show up. We shook hands after every game. When we were short players, we found guest subs. We always got back to practice even after a tough loss. We finished a difficult season together.

Still, it was a losing season.

We adults did not dwell on wins and losses with fifth graders. Our team ended the season with joy watching a high school game together, eating snacks and laughing. No playoffs. But we endured. We learned. We experienced moments that felt like grace.

Ultimately, coaching that season while walking through a tough year has forced me to reflect on much more than basketball.

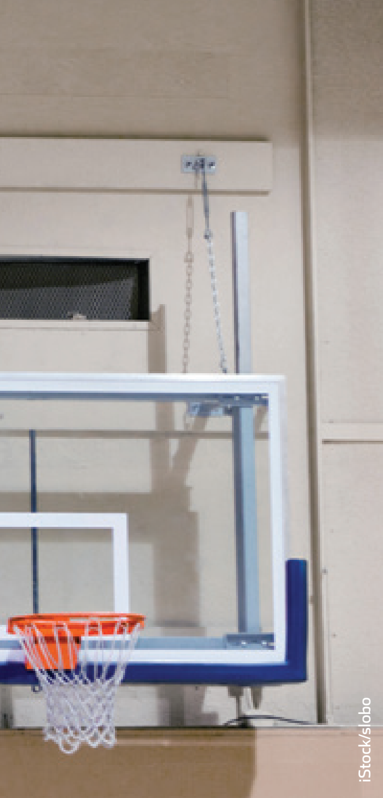
A Tough Opponent

On a personal level, this last year has also been a losing season. In fact, it has been the hardest season of my life. I am the only child of a single parent. It has always been just the two of us. I have not dwelled on that fact or ever used it as a crutch; it is just how things went. However, I have long sensed that this day was coming, and it is now here. My mom turned 84 last year and her health rapidly declined. A diagnosis of early onset dementia a few years back was just the beginning.

Last year she fell down our basement stairs. The wounds were severe—tunneling, infection, long months of care. Major scars. I often joked that I could apply those months of home care for Mom toward a future nursing degree. Then came a second fall. Two fractures in her back. Hospitalizations. Skilled nursing care. Lots of pain. The quiet realization that she would likely never return to the only home she ever owned. She faced despair.

There were and continue to be graced moments in this desert, though. After weeks of physical therapy in a Catholic-rooted nursing home, she walked—slowly, with her walker—out the front doors after being cleared by her physical and occupational therapists. The staff gathered to watch her come home. The nursing director later told me he wanted his team to see her leave because most of their patients do not. It felt like an unexpected win against a formidable opponent.

She moved in with us after leaving the nursing home a year ago. Our household grew into an intergenerational family of six. Another graced moment. Life slowed: walkers in the hallway, medication schedules, short-term memory lapses, assistance with stairs, bathroom and showers. My wife, three kids and I learned to live in a new and beautiful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way. I cannot thank my wife, Kristin, enough for all the ways she has cared for her mother-in-law.

Then came the diagnosis: Stage 3 colorectal cancer. The surgeon said it could not be removed by surgery. My mother faced chemotherapy and daily radiation for five weeks.

A moment when a team that is already down loses starting players late in the season is humbling and absolutely crushing. How would we add chemo and radiation to a walker, wounds, broken back and early onset of dementia? And yet, we kept playing.

At first, the impact of her treatment was not obvious. By week two or three, everything changed. Getting dressed in the morning required help. Walking slowed to a contemplative shuffle. There were accidents, exhaustion, humiliation, as well as many small human malfunctions. Our defense was gone. We kept showing up.

I came to understand that our efforts would result in a losing season, but it could teach me something about faith, family and the cross. I do not wrestle with theodicy, or why a good God permits suffering. Instead, I find myself asking: Where is God in this suffering? And how do we compassionately accompany those who are suffering?

I do feel God's providence. Our friends and family have been blessings. They call, text and took her to some appointments. People stopped with snacks and stayed for conversation. The nurses and doctors were incredibly supportive. Like the mother of Jesus, people have shown up to be present and guide us forward.

Psalm 23:3 says, "He guides me along the right paths."

I wrote a note to Mom early in this journey saying, "Whatever we have to face we will face together." She kept it on her dresser.

Isaiah 43:5 calls us to "Fear not," and my hope in writing that note was that Mom (and I) would not fear all of this. I am learning to become OK with uncertainty in all aspects of life, and it has helped me fear less. The groaning within (and externally) has been very real, though. Calling for renewal in this season of life is not going to produce wins for which we might naturally hope. Our renewal includes the cross and awaiting the Lord.

After many struggles, I am no longer sure that the final record is the most essential thing.

Learning Self-Care

I have learned that self-care for caregivers is also essential. I have begun more intentional daily morning meditation. I awake early to help focus my day. I sometimes listen to mindfulness meditations on my commute to work instead of the news or my favorite tunes. I exercise on the bike and with weights often, and I have continued playing the drums. Mom would not want me to stop playing music. I even had a few sessions with a therapist. I am learning it is OK to not be OK. I continue to attend and support my children's events. My wife and employer have been wonderful support systems.

However, the proximity to suffering has affected our children. My oldest, Ezra, got my mom water a few months ago and then asked her, "Ma, will you remember me when you get to heaven?" When I heard that question, I thought to myself: He gets it. In the same week, I lost an old childhood friend, also to colorectal cancer.

In all of this, Jesuit spiritual training has assisted me well. I have found more and more interior freedom even as my outside world has crumbled. Inordinate attachments have been forced to melt away or be managed in order to better serve Mom and my other family members. I am aware of the Two Standards and the temptation to serve the enemy versus serving Christ. Noticing is a strength, and once I name my anxieties, they tend to hold less power over me. Magnanimity is the proper disposition to serve, and I sense when it is present or absent these days.

I have learned to carefully discern, to say no to some good things in order to serve other goods. I am desperately listening for the call of the King, and trying to respond whenever I hear it. Little signs from interactions with my children, co-workers or even strangers at church have helped me heed the command to keep going.

I also experience the Anima Christi prayer differently now, "Within your wounds hide me.... Do not permit me to be separated from you." We are deep within the wounds these days. We have decided to stay.

My mother passed away this past March. Mary is my guiding prayer partner. In my prayer, Mary is still young;

The author (left) with his mother, Kathy Betz (center), his wife, Kristin Betz, and his children

Courtesy of Joe Betz

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she is grounded and approachable, quiet and focused. It's a version of Mary I am intrigued by and want to be near. She was mercifully there for her son. I have found a role model.

Theologically, wisdom abounds on this topic. Karl Rahner, S.J., suggested that suffering is unavoidable, mysterious and potentially transformative. Still, it is incomprehensible. The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J., wrote, "And for all this, nature is never spent." If God does not walk away from suffering and destruction, why should we?

The eschatological hope in the resurrection is real. It does not ever make perfect sense, and yet the horizon of the resurrection is always before us. Suffering permits us a chance to search for grace and even better conform ourselves to Christ.

Johann Baptist Metz challenges us even further and demands that we face human suffering and the memories it produces. The *memoria passionis,* as he calls it, is a disruptive reality that demands that we no longer permit indifference. When suffering moves into your home or your city or work, it reshapes you. You cannot unknow it. This is a disruptive memory. Will I be indifferent when proximate to it? Will you?

A losing season exposes what matters.

Human dignity does not disappear because a body weakens. If St. Irenaeus of Lyons is right—that the glory of God is a human being fully alive—then perhaps being fully alive in this world includes how we love those who suffer at the end.

This season has ended. All seasons do. By certain metrics, it has been a loss. But I am no longer sure that the final record is the most essential thing. We have not forfeited. We have not abandoned the game. We are learning that accompaniment is its own form of victory. Compassion, to suffer with, is training for eternity. There is hope in the cross.

And through grace, I am learning that losing seasons, lived with Christ, may be the very places where resurrection quietly takes root.

Joe Betz *is the chair of the theology department at St. Ignatius High School in Cleveland, Ohio.*

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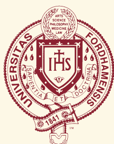

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‘A Glimpse of the Abyss’

What Cardinal Ratzinger, a deconstructing friend and a woman religious taught me about doubt

By Elizabeth Hansen

A woman I know has been wrestling with her relationship with the Catholic Church for years. We met over 20 years ago at our Catholic university, where we both studied theology, threw ourselves into ministry opportunities and formed tight-knit relationships based on our common faith.

But when we reconnected a few years ago, I learned that one of the main threads in her life was that she was seriously questioning the church’s claims of authority. The breadth of the sexual abuse crisis in the church was a large factor. Her personal experience with smaller, yet still devastating, church scandals was another, along with watching her most familiar Catholic circles embrace Trump-era, right-wing politics. She began having panic attacks at Mass.

Shortly after we got back in touch, she stopped going to Mass at all. She had a child in Catholic school, she still believed in the Eucharist; but for now, being at Mass was too much, and she felt at a loss when it came to other church teachings. She needed to step away, she said. In her words, she needed to “deconstruct.”

Religious deconstruction is nothing new, but the prevalence of the term as podcast fodder or Substack topics is fairly recent. In 2016, a former evangelical coined the description *exvangelical*, and according to Google Trends, search interest in that term and terms like “deconstructing faith” has been on the rise, especially since 2020.

For some, religious deconstruction means a wholesale rejection of faith; for others, it is a cautious stepping away. Some treat deconstruction as an investigative phase to grapple with every claim of their faith tradition—no assumptions taken for granted. Another image is that of untangling: a pursuit of core truths to hold on to, while shedding subjective (and possibly damaging) interpretations that have become intertwined with them over the centuries.

These varying experiences, though, have one thing in common: Deconstruction hits the very foundation of a person’s faith and identity as a Christian. Whether the doubter upends and abandons their faith or takes stock of the exposed foundation in order to make loving repairs, it is brutal, exhausting and sometimes even terrifying work.

The first time I read the opening of then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger’s *Introduction to Christianity,* I was surprised at how matter-of-factly he describes the existential stakes that intense doubt raises in a believer’s life. Referring to the faith and doubt of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, he writes:

> Someone here suddenly catches a glimpse of the abyss lurking—even for her—under the firm structure of the supporting conventions. In a situation like this, what is in question is not the sort of thing that one perhaps quarrels about otherwise—the dogma of the Assumption, the proper use of confession—all this becomes absolutely secondary. What is at stake is the whole structure; it is a ques-

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> tion of all or nothing. That is the only remaining alternative; nowhere does there seem anything to cling to in this sudden fall. Wherever one looks, only the bottomless abyss of nothingness can be seen.

This account strikes me as much more honest than the tendency to see doubt as a phase that can be entertained, but only when done the right way. *(The church welcomes questions! But be careful to stay within these bounds.)* When doubt is viewed as something merely to be experienced the "right way," there is an implication that the antidote to doubt is catechesis, and that with time and docility, things will fall into place. There is also a temptation to quickly move the doubter along to restored faith, as if all she has to do is avert her gaze from the abyss and look to Jesus. Both examples treat doubt as a symptom antithetical to health. And if it seems to be a warning sign of contagion, some feel justified in cutting it—and the doubter—off.

When the woman I know confessed her doubts to her oldest Catholic friends, they responded with caution. When she admitted she was not attending Mass, they pulled away. They would pray for her, they said, but they stopped including her when it came to sharing their own lives. When they did check in, it was to ask if she was back at Mass.

The message was clear: She was too damaged, too dangerous, to hold close.

But Ratzinger isn't fazed by doubt—not even when it stares into the "bottomless abyss." In fact, he goes further, connecting uncertainty to mature belief: The serious, "sufficiently self-critical" Christian who strives to live as a faithful witness "will clearly recognize not only the difficulty of the task...but also the insecurity of his own faith, the oppressive power of unbelief in the midst of his own will to believe."

The abyss will always be there. Doubt acknowledges its presence—not as a warning sign to turn back without confronting it, but as a marker assuring travelers they are still on the right path, even as it takes them to the very edge.

On the Cusp of Falling Away

When I read these passages, I was finally crawling out of the spiral of my own spiritual crisis, one that looked very similar to my friend's. I kept going to Mass but would escape to the back, overwhelmed with the sense that everything I thought I believed was crashing around me. Ratzinger's image of the believer dangling above the abyss of unbelief was very familiar, and I was terrified that admitting it would send me plummeting.

At one of my lowest points, I was on the phone with a friend who is a religious sister, recounting wounds and confessing thoughts like, "I am teetering on the edge of believing I can trust Jesus" through a snot-tinged, cracking voice.

In the silence that followed, I waited for a loving, yet wary reminder to come back to safe footing. But she did something different.

First, she affirmed that the harm I had experienced in the church was a real cause of suffering, and that my response—to be scandalized, to push back, even to wonder despairingly whether anything I thought I had believed was true—was reasonable, not overreactive.

Then she went on. It was edifying, she said, to hear my unfiltered thoughts and doubts. She felt privileged to see the messy process by which God was leading me to him and to deeper faith.

This took me aback. Was she not alarmed at what I'd just said? I was on the cusp of falling away from faith. How could she see this as a path to God? And yet the deep, aching compassion in her voice told me something else: This was what hope looked like. This was an echo of the Good Shepherd, who did not fear chasms, but only sought to place the lost lamb across his shoulders.

I recognized that echo again in the future Pope Benedict's writing. Hearing him gently categorize the experience of shattering doubt not as an abnormality but as a feature of an engaged life of faith was like finding a doctor who took my symptoms seriously while reassuring me I would be OK.

Tenderly, he describes the moment when a questioning faith finds meaning not just in an idea, but a person: "I can entrust myself to it like the child who knows that everything he may be wondering about is safe in the 'you' of his mother."

I do not know the experience of every doubting or deconstructing Christian. But I know the balm that Ratzinger's words were to me, and the love I felt in a religious sister's embodiment of them. In my despair, they told me that God was not afraid of my fear. That even when I felt suspended over the void, I was still in the arms of love.

And that, even if I were to fall to the bottom, love would find me there.

Elizabeth Hansen *is a writer and editor in Michigan, where she lives with her husband and four children.*

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De-Monetize Your Life

There are so many things we really can afford to give away

By Simcha Fisher

I still cringe when I remember this one conversation from years ago. A friend was showing me photos of some of the incredible cakes she had made—gorgeous cakes with exuberant, witty designs, skillfully executed. She made them for family and friends, and she loved the work and loved making them happy.

You know, you could sell those, I said. *You could sell them and also make a book about it and sell that, too!* She was polite and listened to all my ideas. But as far as I know, she is still giving her cakes away.

I wasn't wrong, of course. But my friend did not pursue my ideas because she was already doing what she wanted to do and wasn't looking for advice about how to monetize her talent.

At the time, the idea of simply creating things for pleasure didn't even occur to me. Instead, figuring out how to monetize skills was a constant habit. This was necessary because my family was broke and even a little bit more cash made a big difference.

I would constantly scrutinize my personal strengths, trying to turn them into paying gigs. I have some experience teaching, so I tried to launch a business as a tutor. I can draw and paint a little, so I tried my hand at illustrating books. I know how to deliver a speech so people will listen, and I spent several years traveling around doing just that. I can even, presumably, write, and I've managed to worm my way into a professional writing career. The ideas continue: I have thoughts about movies? Make it into a podcast! I know how to feed a large family on a small budget? Strike a deal with Aldi and become their local spokesperson!

Most of these things didn't pan out, for various reasons. But some did, and the money did help, and it was also tremendously satisfying to realize that I can do things that are good enough that people are willing to pay for them. A budget boost and a confidence boost. Very nice.

But one spring, as I filled in the last spots in my garden with seedlings and vegetable starts, I realized I had lots of them left over. This doesn't usually happen! But I had gotten myself through the last difficult month of winter by starting vegetables inside, and also outside in little milk jug greenhouses; and before that, I had gotten myself through the autumn by collecting and drying and storing away as many seeds as I could. I went a little overboard, it turns out, trying to survive; and I had more than enough.

So I started giving the seeds and starts away, some to friends, some to neighbors and some to strangers on social media. We met at the library or I drove to their houses. We recognized each other's vehicles, shyly said hello. Then I handed over the goods, they thanked me, I wished them luck, and away they went. Very, very nice.

Nicer, even, than being paid.

In the past, I really needed the boost that came from realizing that I have actual skills and talents, and that people recognize what I can do. Receiving money for something you've made or done is a very effective way of proving to yourself that you really do have something to offer.

But once you are secure in that knowledge, it is even nicer to start doing and making things that people want and

then give them away.

There is a whole other discussion we can have about good work going undervalued—including creative work and especially "women's work." [Editors' note: See Kate Ward's article in this issue.] Go to social media, and you'll see how the world still somehow thinks that artists and craftspeople ought to be offering their handmade work at Temu prices. They definitely still think that caring for children, cooking, cleaning, teaching, singing and so on—the things we imagine should come naturally to women—are not real jobs and therefore do not deserve compensation.

This flawed thinking is also especially true when the work has anything to do with the faith. People believe anything associated with religion should be given away for free, conveniently forgetting that even Catholics need to pay for groceries. And a terrible number of men in the church rely heavily on the constant but often invisible volunteer labor of women (and then go on to lament how "feminized" the church has become).

But that is a conversation for another day. A conversation about recognizing the value of our own work and insisting that other people recognize it, too.

For now, if you have the privilege of self-confidence and stability, maybe challenge yourself to find things you can give away. Not just material things, either, like a pair of boots you can donate rather than sell on eBay, but things like time, energy, patience and experience.

I no longer have half a dozen children hanging off me at Mass, so that means I can offer to help a younger mom who does. I'm not perpetually drowning in work and behind on everything, so now I can drop by a neighbor's house for a chat, and it's OK if she's feeling very chatty and won't let me go. I no longer have to account for every piece of change in my possession, so I can offer an Aldi cart to a stranger and wave away their offered quarter. Just little things. But very nice for someone who needs it.

There are so many things we really can afford to give away. I have friends who are wonderful listeners and steadfast encouragers. They give it away every day, every time someone shows up shaky and discouraged and in need of assurance. I have friends who are willing to pray for you any time you request it, no questions asked. They are constantly giving these very valuable supports away because this is what they are good at. And they recognize that someone else needs that good.

You have heard that grace builds on nature. This is one of the ways that happens: Generosity builds on talent. Once you are secure that the things you can do are really worth something, you further realize that you can afford to give them away. That generosity turns out to be, in turn, a tremendous gift.

Money is a necessary evil. De-monetizing the world and our talents and our relationships, whenever we can, is a great way of making the world less evil. And not simply less evil: More kind. God knows we need that.

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

Sagrada Familia Makes Room for Us All

By Anthony R. Lusvardi

Photos by Anthony R. Lusvardi

Antoni Gaudí's still-unfinished basilica is usually described with superlatives.

For a moment I have the Sagrada Familia to myself.

Not the whole basilica, mind you—its 16,000 daily visitors hum on the other side of a curtain that reserves this corner of the apse for prayer. It isn't silent, but it seems like it is. Numberless languages melt into one another, like the colors streaming through gothic windows above. From the pillars framing the windows, bemused cherubs look down, bathed in red-orange light: childlike faces, lips slightly parted, as if they had just recognized me.

Antoni Gaudí's still-unfinished basilica is usually described with superlatives: astonishing, overwhelming, jaw-dropping. All entirely apt. But what sets the Sagrada Familia apart from other marvels of modern architecture that show off the daring things one can do with steel and reinforced concrete is that it makes room for me. The Sagrada Familia, to be sure, is not a humble building. The four-armed cross placed atop its central tower earlier this year gives it the tallest church spire (at 566 feet) in the world. But it is not an inhuman building, either. It is a space where one can feel loved.

A month or so before I visited the Sagrada Familia, I was asked to consult on plans for a new church to be built in Rome. The architect's portfolio was all angles and emptiness. There were, I am sure, aesthetic and theological points he was trying to make, but it seemed more the idea of a church than a church. The same critique applies to much modern art. Nail a urinal to a wall and ask, "Is this art?"—I can appreciate the question, but I think the viewer has the right to answer, "No." It is, at most, philosophy of art.

Antoni Gaudí (1852-1926) was a quintessentially modern architect—innovative and provocative, he is the best exemplar of the Catalan version of art nouveau known as Modernisme. After Gaudí's death, Salvador Dalí claimed him for surrealism. But compared with even his closest peers, Gaudí walked his own path. The astonishing technical innovations of the past century—developments in engineering, materials and computer modeling—have made mind-bending architectural effects possible: Taipei 101 evokes an enormous bamboo shoot; the Burj Al Arab unfurls like a sail of glass and steel; the deck of Singapore's Sands Hotel perches like a boogie board atop three towers bent like half-shuffled playing cards.

These buildings overwhelm with chutzpah and skill; all produce a wow. But that's it. They create their effect. We are impressed. Gaudí does something more.

Officially named the Temple Expiatori de la Sagrada Família, the church was commissioned in 1881 by the Association of Devotees of St. Joseph, a lay association founded in 1866 to counteract the 19th century's secularizing revolutions. Gaudí took over the project from the Archdiocese of Barcelona's official architect shortly after—before even its crypt had been completed—and in the century since his death

other artists and architects have labored to complete it. But the Sagrada Familia's message remains unmistakably Gaudí's.

The building certainly produces a wow—cascading wows. Just counting the honeycomb towers spiraling skyward makes one dizzy. Once inside, it feels as if one's neck is replaced by a hinge because it is impossible not to stare upward. Its columns are like a redwood forest, its walls of light like the vision of a prophet. But the work of art that the Sagrada Familia brings to my mind dates from the 13th century: the Tree of Life mosaic in Rome's Basilica of San Clemente. Tendrils curl across the half dome of San Clemente's gilded apse, rising from the foot of the cross; scattered among the swirling vines are images of shepherds, noblemen, farmers, fishermen, scribes, monks, musicians—the sundry denizens of medieval society. There is a place for everyone, even birds and fish and animals.

The Sagrada Familia is Modernisme at its apex, but it is equally gothic and baroque. The layout of the church expands on the traditional gothic concept of its first architect, Francisco de Villar (1828-1901); the only part of the church completed within Gaudí's lifetime, its Nativity facade, is exuberantly baroque. Gothic was Gaudí's favorite style, though he faulted the great medieval cathedral-builders for their reliance on flying buttresses, which he thought weighed down structures with extra stonework and cast shadows across their windows.

The Sagrada Familia's uniquely shaped columns, which branch out at the top like trees, more evenly distribute the weight of its roof and towers so that it does not press outward on the walls. With no buttresses casting shadows, light streams unimpeded through stained glass, dancing through the columns like sunshine through a forest. But Gaudí did not see himself as overcoming the gothic. He was not leaving an artistic patrimony behind but bringing it to fulfillment.

The Sagrada Familia breathes freshness, but it would be misleading to call the building revolutionary. The church, after all, was built as an act of reparation for violence committed against the Catholic Church by socialist and anarchist revolutionaries, and Gaudí's religious fervor only grew as he devoted himself to the project. Once, stopped by the authorities and asked if he was armed, he replied, rather recklessly, "Of course I am!" He reached into his pockets to pull out a fistful of rosaries, thundering, "These are my arms!"

In addition to being a fervent Catholic, Gaudí was also a convinced Catalonian nationalist, who once spent a night in jail for refusing to speak Spanish to a policeman. He saw his work as preserving a cultural and religious heritage rather than overthrowing it. "Originality," he liked to say, "means returning to the origin."

The names of other pilgrimage sites from across the world—from Jerusalem and Lourdes to Guadalupe and Kibeho—are written on the basilica's windows because it is a part of a larger narrative. And *narrative* seems the right word. Modern architecture often aims to create an effect, to make a point or to establish a principle. Gaudí's buildings tell a story—sometimes a lot of stories, like a cross between a Dickens novel and *Where's Waldo?* You discover something new each time you visit: Longinus's piercing spear, a tortoise holding up a pillar, onlookers with hands raised in astonishment at the preaching of the boy Jesus.

Cast in a different light by the changing seasons, long-familiar stories become new each time they are told. And somehow, amid all those intersecting narratives and the quirky ornamentation, we feel as if our story is a part of it as well. The scale of the basilica is such that even though its towers soar toward heaven, they do not feel distant. The Sagrada Familia makes room for us, then points us higher.

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June 10, 2026, will mark the 100th anniversary of Antoni Gaudí's death, which Pope Leo XIV plans to commemorate with a visit to the Sagrada Familia. By the time he died at age 73, the architect's life had taken on an almost hermetic quality. He had moved onto the building site at the Sagrada Familia, ate frugally and paid so little attention to his clothing and appearance that when he was hit by a tram while on his way to confession—Gaudí was in the habit of confessing daily—he was mistaken for a beggar and sent to a hospital for the indigent. He died three days later.

Gaudí, no doubt, had a curmudgeonly side. He was stubborn, not overly concerned with social niceties—nor, as the years progressed, with following Barcelona's zoning regulations—but to be otherwise would probably have rendered him a lesser visionary. He inspired fierce loyalty among his workers, finding jobs for them even when they grew elderly and putting up a school for their children on the Sagrada Familia grounds.

When he was hired to take over the Sagrada Familia project in 1883, Gaudí was an untested and practically unknown 31-year-old. At the time, Barcelona was experiencing an architectural moment much like what the Italian Renaissance was for art in Florence: an economic boom with patrons hungry to attach their names to prestigious buildings combined with a near-miraculous overflow of talent. As Gaudí made his name on better-paying private commissions, the Sagrada Familia, reliant entirely on donations, remained in the background.

Gaudí's prestige reached its apex in 1906 with the construction of a house for Josep Batlló, a wealthy textile manufacturer. The building shows off Gaudí's eclecticism and penchant for melding narratives; it is a trip to the Mediterranean and a retelling of the legend of St. George, Barcelona's

patron. Colorful plates and fragmented tiles give its facade an aqua tint, a crustacean surface and hints of fish scales or bubbles ascending. Inside, its corridors undulate like waves.

The building's oceanic motif merges dreamlike into a tiled rooftop that curves like the scaly back of a dragon; this dragon's back is pierced by a slender tower and cross representing St. George's spear. The saintly knight and his fire-breathing foe were already a theme in the ornamentation of other buildings on the same block—all designed by Gaudí's architectural rivals. Gaudí one-upped them by fusing the narrative into his building's structure.

The ivory-colored balconies of Casa Batlló have a skeletal quality, like the jaws of an eel or the bones of the dragon's victims. Some critics have found Gaudì's eclecticism busy or disconcerting. He abhorred a straight line. But his creations mirror the restless energy of life itself. Gaudí saw God as the greatest architect—he loved nature, especially the Catalonian countryside—and wanted his work to imitate the order of creation. Skeletons especially fascinated him because these are the body's load-bearing columns. Inside Casa Batlló, passing through the churning arches of the attic, one feels like Jonah in the belly of the whale.

As he was finishing Casa Batlló, Gaudí began work on an apartment building down the street, Casa Milà, popularly known as La Pedrera (the quarry) because of its heavy (though strangely wavy) stone facade. On this commission, Gaudí ran into problems—disagreements with the building's owner, cost overruns, conflicts with city planners. If one looks closely at the curving cornices atop the building, one sees the word *Ave* emerging from the stone. Gaudí's plans called for rooftop statues of Mary and the Christ child surrounded by angels, but in 1909 Barcelona underwent a paroxysm of anti-Catholic violence. Churches and convents were torched; the corpses of nuns were disinterred and paraded through the streets; priests were killed. Pere Milà, Gaudì's patron, did not want his building to become another target of anarchist violence and nixed the religious imagery.

The incident increased the urgency Gaudí felt to complete the great expiatory temple slowly rising a few blocks

Clockwise from top left: Sagrada Familia's Passion facade; Jesus presenting Joseph with a wounded dove; a tortoise at the base of the Nativity facade

away. Gaudí's Catholic faith had grown over the years, fed by the social teachings of Pope Leo XIII and the liturgical writings of Dom Prosper Guéranger and steeled by family tragedy; he had lost his mother and four siblings by the age of 27 and spent years caring for an elderly father and an alcoholic niece. La Pedrera would be Gaudí's last secular commission. He could no longer separate his religious and his artistic vision. The rest of his life was dedicated to the Sagrada Familia.

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Antoni Gaudí left behind almost no writings, and many of the stories about him were tinged with legend even in his lifetime. His message is in the buildings. But what is Gaudí's message?

Six centuries before Christ, the prophet Ezekiel preached of a cosmic temple to the remnant of Israel exiled in Babylon. Ezekiel's message was endurance in the face of defeat and hope for a future whose glories would surpass what had been destroyed. Some of that same hope suffuses Gaudí's expiatory temple. When anarchists took over Bar-

With no exterior buttresses casting shadows, the interior of Sagrada Familia is flooded with light. At right: St. Joseph, patron saint of the basilica's builders, watches over the Nativity transept.

celona during the Spanish Civil War, the Sagrada Familia was desecrated and barely escaped dynamiting; a dozen of Gaudí's collaborators on the project were murdered. The theology of atonement and expiation is woven into the basilica's DNA. But expiation is only a beginning.

In the Book of Revelation, John sees a city of light with no need for sun or moon. The new Jerusalem is light itself, radiant like crystal, as if made from precious stones. It has no temple, either, just as it has no sun, because worship has suffused its every stone. I suspect that Antoni Gaudí wanted us to see something of the "new heaven and new earth" that John prophesied in his basilica—especially the new earth.

In his lifetime, Gaudí witnessed the dehumanizing side effects of industrialization, just as today we feel the dehumanizing pressures of the digital revolution. He responded with a reaffirmation of the natural and the human. Both Ezekiel and John foresaw multitudes thronging to a new temple, and perhaps that is why the crowds in the Sagrada Familia, bathed in the blood-red light of the western sun, with their babble of languages from every continent, do not disturb my moment of prayer in the apse. They—we—are part of the design.

Beneath his own curmudgeonly facade, Gaudí was a man of deep loves, loves for which he was willing to sacrifice. He loved his church and its worship; he loved the Christian doctrine of redemption through suffering; he loved Catalonia, his homeland, its people, its language and its stories; he loved its trees, flowers, snakes, birds, hills and waters; he loved those who labored with him on his great project; and he loved the work itself. Gaudí's vision is rooted in the incarnation of Jesus, the Word made flesh. One enters the Sagrada Familia through doors telling the story of the Nativity and the Passion; inside one finds a new reality.

The theologian Romano Guardini wrote that liturgy transforms us, but not through a program of moral improvement; instead, it "simply creates an entire world in which the soul can live." His words seem an apt description of the Sagrada Familia. Inside, when one looks up, one finds oneself not among stars and distant planets, but instead in a forest. It is a forest unlike any other, a forest of sandstone, granite, basalt and porphyry. There is something vaguely skeletal about this forest, but nothing morbid. One is no longer in the darkness of the whale's belly but within—and part of—a new body, radiant through and through.

Gaudí's biographer, Gijs Van Hensbergen, calls the Sagrada Familia an "Eden in stone." Our first parents once lost their way amid the trees of Eden. Gaudí does not see the death-stained world they left behind consumed in a revolutionary blaze, but neither does he accept that world as it is. Instead, he shows us life raised up into a world of new light.

Anthony R. Lusvardi, S.J., *teaches sacramental theology at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. He is the author of* Baptism of Desire and Christian Salvation *(Catholic University of America Press, 2024)*

MYSTIC MEDIEVALS

Spiegel & Grau / 368p $30

Anyone who grew up reading about the saints is conditioned to expect a dash of drama in accounts of holy people's lives: plucked-out eyes, levitation, demise in the form of ravening Colosseum lions. Normally, each saint's life features one primary showstopper, such as a supernatural ability, a quirky practice of self-discipline or a gory demise.

In *Canticle*, a page-turner of a debut novel by Janet Rich Edwards, the life of the teenage protagonist, Aleys, instead offers a saintly variety show. There will be religious visions, miraculous healings, a cloistering, a burning at the stake and that old classic, an escape from a lecherous suitor. Perhaps more than one lecherous suitor. *Canticle* offers the Catholic equivalent of a monster truck rally: Just when you think the story has settled into one track, it delivers a fresh surprise.

In her acknowledgments, Edwards thanks some mystic greats—St. Clare of Assisi, St. Teresa of Ávila, St. Catherine of Genoa and Meister Eckhart—for providing inspiration for Aleys's words, visions and twists of fate. A reader steeped in hagiographies could almost play bingo by clocking plot developments reminiscent of biographical details of favorite saints. That's not to say *Canticle* is flippant with its allusions, only that they are abundant. With a story constructed out of historical research that is as in-depth as it is lightly worn, Edwards makes this material feel classic, not clichéd.

The story begins in 1295 in Damme, a West Flanders town near Brugge, where Aleys is growing up as the oldest daughter in a wool-producing family. She's a good girl, loves her mama, loves Jesus and stories from her mother's psalter too. "Bees love her like she's a tulip. They don't sting her. She doesn't know why," Edwards writes in her first hint at Aleys's blessed nature.

Aleys is a pious and prayerful child, and loves listening to her mother tell the lives of saints from the psalter she inherited from an aunt who was the abbess of a convent. As is typical for the time period, none of them can read, but Aleys's mother has memorized the stories and recounts them vividly. Aleys's siblings enjoy the drama and gore of the stories, but Aleys admires the piety of the saints.

"So sure, so full of passion. Everyone loves them, despite how strange they are," she thinks, and tries to "get God's attention" through fasting and making her own hairshirt. Aleys's characterization is relatable for all who went through a childhood I-want-to-be-a-saint phase. The key to *Canticle* is that Aleys never grows out of it.

Aleys yearns for a spiritual life, but secular twists of fate interfere. Her mother dies in childbirth; the loss of her steady household management, bartering and accounting skills causes the family's business to falter. Her father hires a tutor so the children can keep records in Dutch, and Aleys meets a boy studying to become a manuscript-copying monk who agrees to help her learn Latin, which few men know, let alone women. Aleys prays fervently, learning to read the psalter, and eventually experiences her first mystical vision, of an angel who tells her to "Seek."

The Franciscan order is less than 100 years old at this time, and when the family's parish priest gets sick, a Franciscan, Friar Lukas, takes over. "Everyone is impressed by the wandering friars who strive to live like Christ's apostles," Edwards writes. In this era, priests and bishops (including Friar Lukas's brother) grew wealthy selling wine from their vineyards and the indulgences parishioners buy for forgiveness of sins. Wealthy families pay the church to install their sons in powerful positions in the clergy. Franciscans—with their vow of poverty and simple brown robes—seem purer to Aleys, who aspires to join them, just as St. Clare joined St. Francis of Assisi.

But worldly matters again intervene: Moths attack the family's wool, leaving the family teetering on the edge of starvation. Aleys's father sees no choice but to accept a wealthy guild president's offer to marry off 16-year-old Aleys in exchange for the family receiving a stall at the Lakenhalle, the center of commerce for cloth and wool in bustling medieval Brugge. Aleys rebels against the marriage, certain any union would "break the promise she made to God." She runs to Friar Lukas to join the Franciscans. Friar Lukas accepts her, thinking a woman in the order will win converts.

However, he cannot house a woman alongside the male friars, so he turns to the beguines, "good women who seek a Godly life, though they lack either the dowry or the desire to become nuns. They live without men, but the town gossips about the begijnhof like it's a brothel." Aleys worries the rumors about the beguines might be true, that they are "wanton," but has no choice but to live with them. Her longed-for life of contemplation and prayer must wait, as the beguines are a lay religious group committed to working vigorously in the community, helping the poor and sick.

Canticle proceeds at a galloping pace—all the plot developments outlined above occur in just the first 15 percent of the book, setting Aleys up for an eventful life of prayer, service and community—all of which give way to clamor and political machinations when people begin to spread rumors that she can perform miraculous healings and that she might be a saint.

Medieval-tinged symbols, fashion and iconography have enjoyed a cultural moment in the United States over the past few years, with "castlecore" trending in interior design, dragons and knights clashing in popular fantasy novels and fashionable young people accessorizing with princess hats. It is a part of the trend that the medieval literature scholar Megan L. Cook has called "dirtbag medievalism" for the way it draws on and mashes up details from any point in the 1,000-year span of the Middle Ages and dehistoricizes them in a pleasing way for modern audiences.

Canticle, on the other hand, illuminates one specific time and place through its vibrant story, and demonstrates how fascinating life in the late 1200s could be in this bustling mercantile city, without even bringing dragons into it. The story of the beguines alone is worth the price of admission for this novel. This group of women carved out a place for themselves and contributed to their community in a way that did not fit into the traditional roles of wife, mother or nun. During their time in the beguinage, they adhered to its rules, religion and rigor, but they took no vow and were free to come and go. It is little wonder that the pope was not sure what to do with them. Edwards shows a variety of reasons why a woman might end up in such a community, including the desire to escape an abusive husband.

Another highlight of *Canticle* is Edwards's depiction of Aleys's prayer and mystical visitations. She illuminates their erotic intensity and unexpected revelations as deftly as Ron Hansen did in his 1991 novel *Mariette in Ecstasy*, giving readers who have never experienced a divine vision some idea of what one might feel like.

Canticle is a diverting, richly imagined romp of a novel, and even those of us who have read enough histories of saints to know how they generally end will enjoy learning how Edwards realizes Aleys's ambitions.

Jenny Shank's story collection Mixed Company *won the Colorado Book Award and the George Garrett Prize, and her first novel,* The Ringer, *won the High Plains Book Award. Her work has appeared in The Atlantic, The Guardian, The Washington Post and Image. She teaches at the Lighthouse Writers Workshop in Denver.*

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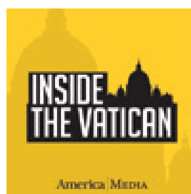

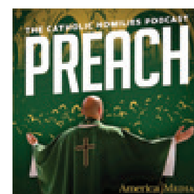

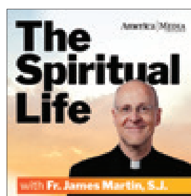

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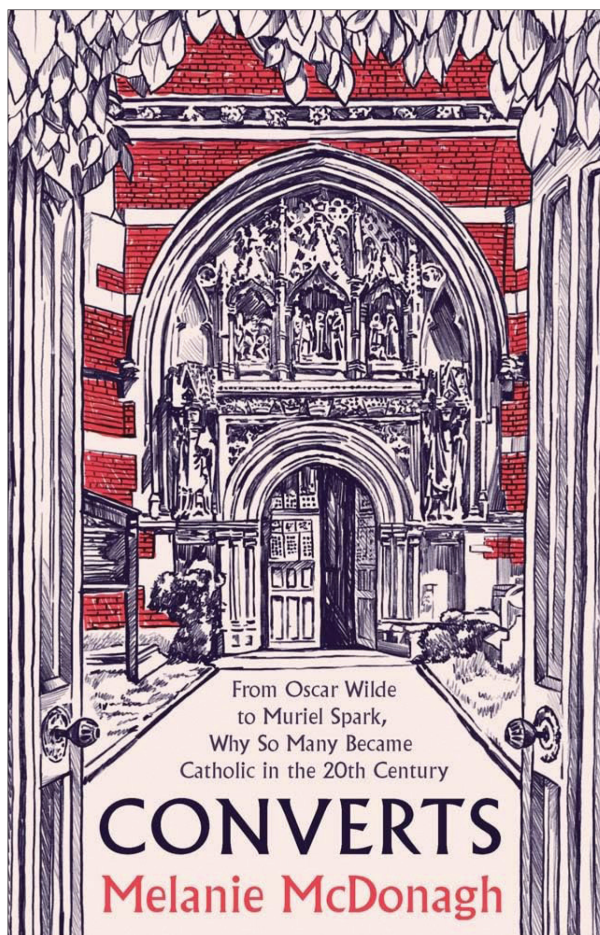


Yale University Press / 354p $38

It is still a little hard to believe.

Over a period of 70 years, in the final decades of the British empire, a group of highly talented artists and writers decided to become, of all things, Roman Catholic. These were, in the words of Melanie McDonagh in her new book *Converts: From Oscar Wilde to Muriel Spark, Why So Many Became Catholic in the 20th Century*, people of "blazing individuality," the sort of folks you would love to have a drink with but maybe wouldn't expect to find in church. But that's where they wound up, and boy is it fun to spend some time with them.

McDonagh gives us a rollicking account of these men and women as they make their way across the Tiber. Some of these individuals are well known (Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene, Muriel Spark), others less so (the writer Maurice Baring, the artist David Jones). McDonagh's overarching question is simple: Why did they choose to do this? Fortunately for us, there is plenty of raw material in the form of letters and essays describing their spiritual journeys.

(Editors' note: In casual usage, the term "convert" is still used for baptized individuals who leave one Christian church to become Catholic. The more theologically precise terminology, since the Second Vatican Council, is that they have been "received into the full communion of the Catholic Church.")

McDonagh holds a doctorate in history and writes for The Catholic Herald. She knows both how to do research and how to grab a reader's attention. Each chapter of *Converts* is full of colorful quotes and sharp analysis. She tells each story with style, while holding onto the threads that tie these accounts together. It is these strands that may be of most interest to today's reader. At a time when the church is experiencing a wave of conversions in Europe and the United States, what can we learn from this fertile period of Christian life? A few of McDonagh's observations stand out.

Timing matters. To put it another way, conversions produce conversions. The people McDonagh profiles may have been individuals of unique talents, but they were not immune to the world they lived in. Or, as McDonagh puts it: They "all made individual choices of conscience," but they were "going with the flow of a strong current." In the unusual cases of Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas, Douglas followed his former lover into the church 11 years after he died. Lord Alfred's mother and sister became Catholic too, as did Lionel Johnson, the poet who introduced Douglas to Wilde.

Ideas matter. For many British converts, the logic of leaving had already been worked out by the most famous Tiber-crosser of the time: John Henry Newman. Cardinal Newman died in 1890, just as McDonagh's account begins, and as she points out, he had "done the intellectual spadework" for future converts. Muriel Spark was a particular fan. She edited a collection of Newman's letters with the British writer Derek Stanford, who sought to explain the connection between the novelist and the theologian: "Newman's aloneness in his life (both as Anglican and a Catholic) made her, I believe, feel some kind of identity with him."

Boundaries matter. The priest and novelist R. H. Benson, the son of the archbishop of Canterbury and therefore a most prominent convert, captured the sentiments of many who "went over to Rome" when he wrote: "There is a liberty which is a more intolerable slavery than the heaviest of chains." For him, the Anglican Communion permitted too much freedom, allowing for—for example—diverse views on the nature of the Eucharist. For Evelyn Waugh, the church offered structure and discipline that allowed him to flourish. As one friend commented, "Evelyn saw himself as a man who had joined a regiment with tradition and rules he never questioned."

Liturgy matters. Maurice Baring once described the low Mass "like looking into a telescope backwards, into the catacombs." It may have been an idealized rendering of a liturgical experience, but there is no denying that the Tridentine rite held a special attraction for writers like Baring. It may have been their artistic temperament. In 1964, as Catholics were being encouraged to participate more actively in the liturgy, Waugh longed for the quiet of the old Mass. "By all means let the rowdy have their 'dialogues,'" he wrote in a letter to The Catholic Herald, "but let those who value silence not be completely forgotten."

Beauty matters—sometimes. These men and women knew beauty when they saw it. Many of them grew up with the Anglican liturgy, which is known for its attention to aesthetics. But beauty was not, primarily, what drew them to the Catholic Church. On the contrary, "Catholic churches tended in fact to be repositories of hideous taste in religious trappings," McDonagh notes. It was instead something more mysterious and harder to pin down. The translator Charles Scott Moncrief, writing about the Easter Mass at which he experienced his call to conversion, attributed it to nothing so much as "that ragged old man in his frayed chasuble."

Mercy matters. Many of these artists led unorthodox lives. As such, they sometimes lived on the margins of the church, and were thus acutely aware of the need for its mercy. Such was the case for Graham Greene, who converted to Catholicism in his 20s and struggled to reconcile himself to the church for much of the rest of his adult life. But he kept going to confession, and a priest was with him when he died.

In her final chapter, McDonagh offers a strong critique of the liturgical changes implemented by the Catholic Church after the Second Vatican Council. "The numinous vanished from people's religious lives," she writes, "or as one woman who lived through the changes put it, 'the sense of the sacred went.'" Here she is amplifying criticisms leveled by her subjects, many of whom died in a church they no longer recognized.

She makes a compelling case. But a group of writers who thought their way into the church because they saw it as the most authentic manifestation of the Christian faith would have had a hard time with *any* changes. The Church of England changed, not the Church of Rome—until, of course, it did.

I wonder what McDonagh—or Greene or Spark for that matter—would make of Lamorna Ash, a British author who was recently interviewed in The (London) Tablet. In 2025 she published *Don't Forget We're Here Forever: A New Generation's Search for Religion*, which grew out of a series of articles she wrote for The Guardian about young people searching for faith. Those articles lead to an unexpected turn: "It was as she watched the young men at prayer, rather than hearing them explain their theology, that she encountered an expression of faith that felt unsettlingly real, and this drew her into an unexpected journey of her own" (The Tablet Interview, April 11).

Ash may be on the road to the Catholic Church, but the stirrings she describes strike a familiar note. Listen up.

Maurice Timothy Reidy *is deputy editor in chief of* ***America.***

SAGRADA FAMILIA: THE CHAINS

By Rachel Lott

To build the Sagrada Familia, the architect Antoni Gaudí created an upside-down model of the cathedral in his workshop using hanging chains.

My life in chains is all I see
within this prison.
And here we hang, with clang on clang,
though God is risen,

and all that dangles of remains
of hopes and dreams
sways gently with the darkling chains
from darker beams.

For God has other hopes and dreams,
and from the ceiling
he strings the odd inspired links,
all eyes deceiving,

until the resurrection comes
and on its head
he turns the leaping chainwork up
to spires instead.

Rachel Lott*'s poems and translations have appeared in First Things, Christian Century and Classical Outlook. Her book of translations,* The Sorcerers' Stone: Alchemical Poems by Angelus Silesius*, was published in 2022.*

ONE NATION UNDER A GUITAR

Farrar, Straus and Giroux / 256p $28

What is a nation? This is not a question for polite company. It sounds like the title of a German pamphlet from around 1935. When "nation" appears in public discourse, it's usually nestled within an even scarier word: nationalism, ethnonationalism, white nationalism, Christian nationalism—ideas that lead to trouble.

But there is also a bright side to nationality. People call it "patriotism." This summer, the United States will co-host the World Cup, and the country will be flooded with fans from every corner of the globe, each waving their national flag; few will be alarmed by the spike in nationalist fervor. Nor is soccer fandom the only example of (relatively) harmless nationalism. Who faults an Olympian athlete for wearing a flag? Who faults a poet for writing wistfully about home? Who faults Bad Bunny for singing, "Don't let go of the flag" on his latest album?

The ambiguity of nationalism—of the fact that nations are born out of both love and hate, and that national pride can both nurture or destroy a people—is an abiding theme in the novels of the late, great Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa. His final work, *I Give You My Silence*, published now for the first time in English, approaches the question of nationhood not in the abstract terms of a sociologist or philosopher, but obliquely, through a kind of literary ventriloquism, in a hybrid form combining the novel and essay.

The main character in this comedy is Toño Azpilcueta, a scholar of Peruvian music, a frustrated academic-turned-freelance-journalist who develops what he thinks is a comprehensive theory of Peruvian identity, one that not only captures the essence of Peru but that could, he believes, cure Peru of injustice and inequality. His encounter with a mysterious guitarist, Lalo Molfino (loosely based on the Peruvian composer Felipe Pinglo Alva), inspires Toño to write a book developing his theory—one that will become a bestseller and make Toño famous. The comedy of the novel rests largely on the fate of Toño's theory, which in turns seems both plausible and ridiculous.

Every other chapter in Vargas Llosa's book (translated from the Spanish by Adrian Nathan West) is a section from Toño's book; they discuss various aspects of Peruvian identity from its Inca roots to its Spanish tongue, its majority Catholic faith, bullfighting, soccer and, most important for Toño, *la música criolla*. The traditional folk music of Peru that emerged in the 19th century, *la música criolla*, is a type of music that developed when the Viennese waltz arrived on Peruvian shores and mixed with Spanish, African and Andean influences. It is a rhythmic and guitar-driven genre, with poetic lyrics about love, death and passion.

Toño only ever hears Lalo Molfino play guitar once, but it changes his life:

> It wasn't just his skill as his fingers danced over the frets, playing notes that sounded as though they'd been invented on the spot. It was something more: wisdom, concentration, and discipline, talent, sure, but also something miraculous.... Tears bathed Toño's face, his soul opened wide with longing, and he longed to embrace his countrymen, his brothers and sisters, who had witnessed this marvel.

Lalo Molfino dies soon thereafter, either by suicide or from tuberculosis, and Toño never hears his music again (no recordings exist). But Molfino's performance was so moving that it convinces Toño that *criollo* music holds the key to understanding Peru. As he puts it in his book:

> The vals [waltz] took root in our country, spreading first among the down-and-out, then climbing to the middle class and the aristocracy, and it has retained its position, touching every Peruvian family without exception. I remember an article by Ruperto Castillo in *Folklore Nacional* in which he tells of his surprise upon visiting a lost village in

the middle of the Amazon where, he had supposed, civilization had not yet arrived. While there, he heard a Peruvian vals sung by the indigenous people in their own language. With its arrival in the deepest heart of the jungle, who can deny that it is truly a national music?

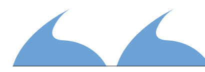
It is a romantic idea: that a nation is held together by a musical genre, rather than by an ethnic or racial identity. Vargas Llosa wrestles with the latter, identitarian view of nationalism in his early novels set in Peru—classics like *The Time of the Hero* (1963) or *Conversation in the Cathedral* (1969) as well as later historical novels like *The Dream of the Celt*. But the identitarian view is barely mentioned in *I Give You My Silence*. Toño is more interested in proposing a new idea of Peru than in arguing against what he believes is a false one.

Peruvian-ness, for Toño, is founded neither on a specific ethnicity nor on race. The Peruvian people are not one race or ethnicity but are the product of *mestizaje*, a term that does not really exist in English and denotes the mixing of ethnicities in Latin America after colonial rule. In Peru, the *mestizo* working class are called *cholos*, a term that can be used in a derogatory way. But for Toño, racial or ethnic purity is a dream for bigots; like *la musica criolla*, each Peruvian is, to a greater or lesser degree, a "mixture" of Inca, Spanish and African sources, along with later arrivals like the Japanese and Chinese, and no one type of "mixture" should be considered superior—or more Peruvian—than another.

Mestizaje exists throughout Latin America, so by itself it cannot define Peru. Instead, Toño suggests that Peru is defined by the *criollo* music that its *mestizo* people have produced, along with the unique sensibility that that music embodies: *huachafería*. "Any definition of *huachafería*… will allow essential elements of this diffuse, hard-to-define concept to slip through its innumerable gaps."

Huachafería is a combination of tackiness, pretention and boldness. "The emblematic act of *huachafería* is that of the boxer with a battered face calling out for his mother, who is watching him on TV and praying for his victory, or maybe of the failed suicide who opens his eyes and asks for a priest to take his confession." Lalo Molfino, the supreme *criollo* music guitarist, was *huachafo*.

Toño inflates *huachafería* into a quasi-existentialist way of life, a truly Peruvian way of being. It is hard to distinguish here between Toño's views and those of Vargas Llosa, given that the chapter about *huachafería* in the novel was originally published by Vargas Llosa under his own name as a newspaper column in 1983.

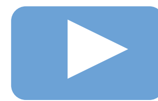


Vargas Llosa approaches the question of nationhood through a kind of literary ventriloquism.

Toño's theory raises a few issues: *Mestizaje*, while a noble idea, has been deployed elsewhere in Latin America to oppress indigenous peoples; *huachafería* is an interesting aesthetic concept but too thin to work as a worldview. It is unclear how much of Toño's theorizing we are meant to take seriously. Vargas Llosa, the ventriloquist, doesn't say.

Regardless, *I Give You My Silence* is a beautiful work—relevant for everyone, not only Peruvians, because it provokes a deeper look into that universal, unavoidable question: "What is a nation?" It is a welcome reminder that fiction can be a more nimble vehicle for the exploration of ideas than the thinkpiece or the academic tract.

Santiago Ramos *is an editor at Plough quarterly and a contributing writer for Commonweal.*



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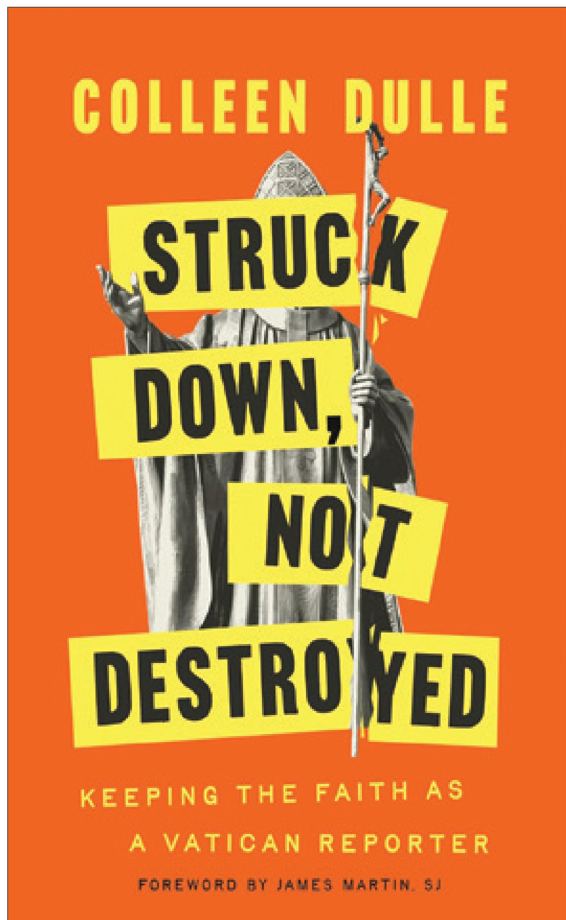


Image / 176p $23

"Why do you stay Catholic when there's so much in the church you disagree with?"

It's a question I've fielded my whole adult life. "How can you remain part of a religion when you disagree with so much of it?" my secular friends ask. "How can you stay in an institution that doesn't let women participate fully? A church that has covered for child abusers?"

I usually come back to the same answer: I love Jesus and want to follow him, and the best way for me to do so is to remain in the church that raised me, flawed as it is. In *Struck Down, Not Destroyed,* **America**'s Vatican correspondent Colleen Dulle offers a powerful testament to her own commitment to the church—a commitment where scrutiny and critique go hand in hand with reverence.

"It's impossible to be a Catholic these days without experiencing some cognitive dissonance," Dulle states. Recalling the Genesis story of Jacob wrestling with God, she goes on: "We wrestle with the teachings and the institutional problems, think them through and rethink them, and pray for some grace to see God working somewhere in all this. Those of us who take up that wrestling willingly are aspiring to what I call a mature faith."

In this incisive, passionate account of her work as a fulltime Vatican reporter, Dulle reflects on the most harrowing issues that she has covered thus far: the widespread phenomenon of sexual abuse within the church and its concealment; the position of women in leadership; the political divide in the U.S.-based church; the scandal of honored Catholic heroes who have fallen from grace; and the corruption within the process of canonizing saints.

While she expresses much grief and anger for the church's failures in these areas, she finds hope for redemption in her coverage of the Synod on Synodality from 2021 to 2024, called by Pope Francis, which helped her and those around her to make the transition "from isolation and loneliness...to encounter, transformation, and community."

Dulle begins by sharing her own vocational journey. A cradle Catholic, she describes mystical experiences in her adolescence that eventually gave way to a more rational, intellectual approach to her faith. After studying at Loyola University in New Orleans, she began her career with a Joseph A. O'Hare Media Fellowship at America Media. After being hired full-time, she eventually transitioned into her current position as a Vatican correspondent. "My search for God and for the truth were always one and the same," she affirms, describing her faith as "hard-won" after many experiences of seeing the church at its worst.

Dulle began her career amid the 2018 "summer of shame," when the Pennsylvania Grand Jury Report documented 70 years of sexual abuse and cover-ups in the church. She also witnessed the fall from grace of Theodore McCarrick, once a beloved U.S. cardinal, who was laicized in 2019 for abusing adults and children. This horror was followed by new divisions in the church, with Carlos Viganò, the former papal nuncio to the United States, accusing Pope Francis of covering for McCarrick and others.

The barrage of horrible news led Dulle to feel no emotion whatsoever the first time she traveled to Rome and saw St. Peter's Square. But she did not give up on her commitment to discovering the truth; remaining grounded in prayer was a key source of strength. "The horrifying truths about clerical sexual abuse were going to keep coming out, and it was important that they do," she states. "It was important that I not shy away from them, but keep reporting on them, keep trying to reveal the truth."

Perhaps this baptism by fire at the start of Dulle's career is what gave her the fortitude to face other difficult issues in the church, such as the roles of women in leadership. In addition to the debates about ordination of women to the priesthood and diaconate, Dulle's narrative highlights the vulnerability of nuns working in Vatican City—particularly nuns from the Global South— who have faced labor injustice.

Dulle notes that since church officials tend to extol humility and look suspiciously on anyone seeking power, women advocating for greater leadership roles are often dismissed. But she urges the church to look to the example of Mary Magdalene, first witness to the Resurrection, who was commanded by Jesus to preach the Gospel and then not believed by his apostles. While Dulle does not take a firm stand on questions of women's ordination, she exhorts us all to urge the church to do right by the many women who see themselves in Mary Magdalene's story.

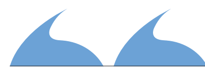
In a chapter on the cultural-political divide in the U.S. Catholic Church, Dulle relates the internal conflict between her love of the traditional Latin Mass and the politically and religiously conservative politics she encountered among many of its adherents. In a vulnerable narrative, she relates her close friend's death by suicide, which led her to gravitate more toward progressive Catholicism. However, she says she has never abandoned her love for the beauty of the Latin Mass.

Returning to a traditionalist parish after a long hiatus, she notes that the Communion she received "was the same one they were receiving at my hippie Mass in New Orleans...and in the Catholic Worker soup kitchen, where they used the meal prep table as an altar. There we all were, the body of Christ, even when some parts of the body thought other parts would be better off amputated."

A particularly poignant moment in the book comes when she recounts the fall from grace of Jean Vanier, founder of L'Arche, a worldwide network of supportive communities where people with disabilities and people without disabilities live together. Dulle describes a deep admiration for Vanier that was destroyed when his sexual abuse of spiritual directees was made known. This crushing revelation made Dulle wary of placing anyone on a pedestal. At the same time, the fact that Vanier's misdeeds did not destroy the L'Arche movement made her realize that "ordinary, sinful hands can do good."

Among Dulle's final chapters is one criticizing the Dicastery for the Causes of the Saints. This chapter shed light on something I have always wondered about: why so few canonized saints are laypeople, and even fewer come from the Global South. Dulle explains why most of the saints' causes that have advanced in recent times have required large sums of money to do so. Servant of God Dorothy Day's case, if it succeeds, is projected to cost a million dollars. Dulle's analysis of corruption in the process forces readers to remember that sainthood is something we are all called to, whether or not it is granted by a Vatican office.

Dulle concludes her narrative with a reflection on her coverage of Pope Francis' Synod on Synodality, which she sees as a first step for the church to heal from the abuse crisis and regain trust and credibility at a global level. She cites the synod's efforts to listen to people on the margins as a move from "I" to "we." After discussing the many harrowing situations in the church, this discussion of the synod allows her to land in a place of hope. She calls for clergy to work alongside laypeople, inviting them into active leadership and responsibility.



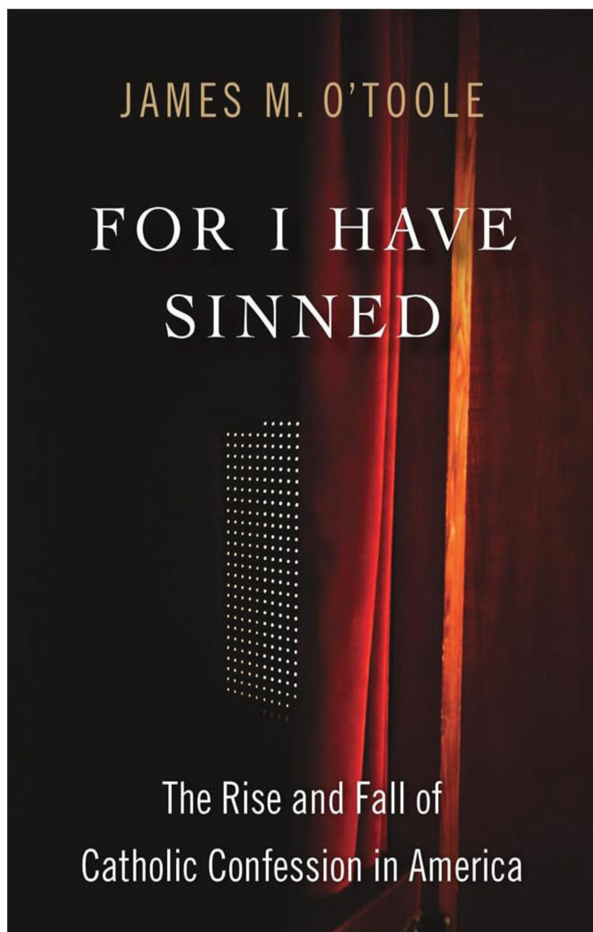
As a young Catholic journalist, Dulle offers a truly promising vision for the future of the church.

As a young Catholic journalist, Dulle offers a truly promising vision for the future of the church. I admire her efforts to bridge divides, particularly between so-called traditionalist and progressive Catholics, to heal from wounds and to keep God at the center. She offers a vision of the church behind the institution—the one that St. Lawrence presented to the Roman authorities when, commanded to bring out the treasure of the church, he brought forward the poor and vulnerable. Scrutinizing the center of Catholicism's earthly power, Dulle urges us all to remember that as Christians we follow in the footsteps of Jesus, who defied worldly authority and always stood up for those on the margins.

As a professor at a small Benedictine college, I encounter many of the issues that Dulle discusses in her narrative. My college was affected by the abuse crisis; we experience the political divide among our own faculty and students; we have struggled with our own fallen idols. I look at my students—both Catholic and not—and witness their weariness and at times sheer exhaustion, as they grow up in a world fraught with conflict and violence.

I would thoroughly recommend Dulle's book to my students and indeed to any Catholics, young and old, who are seeking their place in the church and the world. She mentions that it is rare for reporters to share so much of their own personal journey, but her story is one that Catholics of many ages and backgrounds will relate to. She has given us a true gift in sharing her journey, and she proves to be a powerful example of someone wrestling with God to reach a faith that is steadfast precisely because it is hard-won.

Jeannine Marie Pitas *is a poet, writer, Spanish-English literary translator and editor and associate professor of English at Saint Vincent College in Latrobe, Pa.*



Harvard University Press / 336p $35

One of the most haunting literary depictions of a confession appears toward the end of Brian Moore's extraordinary novel *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne*. Worn down by loneliness, misfortune, religious doubt and bouts of drunkenness, Miss Hearne seeks desperate relief in the sacrament of confession. Trembling, she inserts herself in line during a shift reserved for children. When she enters the confessional, the priest chides her for her boldness in coming during the children's time. Miss Hearne responds by pleading for him to hear a general confession, and she begins to pour out her existential struggle with faith and her daily struggles with depression and drink.

In the midst of her raw disclosures, she catches a glimpse of the confessor through the grill of the confessional and goes silent: "She had seen his face. A weary face, his cheek resting on the palm of his hand, his eyes shut. He's not listening, her mind cried. Not listening!"

The realization is crushing. The sacramental exchange then goes on without her. Prompted by Miss Hearne's sudden silence, the priest offers a formulaic rebuke, indicates a penance and speaks the formula of absolution. In the end, Moore writes, "she was alone in the darkness. Shriven, her sins were washed away," while the priest moved on to the young penitent waiting on the other side of the confessional.

What hurt Judith Hearne most was that her confessor had been so disinterested in her. "God's anointed, with God's guidance, he should have known it was important, perhaps the most important confession of my life. But he didn't see that. And if he didn't see, why didn't You tell him, O Sacred Heart, why didn't you guide him, help him to help me? Why?" The inattentive confessor and the botched exchange lead to a crisis of faith in which Judith Hearne understands the Sacred Heart of Jesus to be cruel, unresponsive, maybe even made up.

In the conclusion of his artful account of American participation in the sacrament of confession, *For I Have Sinned: The Rise and Fall of Catholic Confession in America*, James O'Toole offers a succinct explanation of the sacrament's collapse after the Second Vatican Council (1963-65): "Catholics did not enjoy confessing, and they often struggled to achieve the relief and reassurance it was supposed to offer."

So many contingencies, so many variables enter into the process of the sacrament as O'Toole describes it: contrition (with its detailed examination of conscience); the dramatic, evanescent confessional exchange itself; and the penance imposed to complete the sacrament. A variety of contingencies—emphases within an examination of conscience, the context and physical components of the confession, the mood and competence of the confessor—all converge in a delicate moment that could be one of relief or one of intensified burden for the penitent.

These many contingent elements of the sacrament seem to work against its efficacy. So many things can go wrong: haphazard preparation, a misunderstood word, a misinterpreted tone, a confessor's inexperience, as well as the penitent's ignorance of a prescribed element within this "oral transaction," could so easily alienate a penitent or confuse a confessor. No wonder, as O'Toole writes, aspects of confession can become "odious" or "distasteful."

Even without these contingencies, even with a penitent's habitual use of the sacrament, even with a kind, attentive and competent confessor, O'Toole posits a basic theme right from the beginning:

> For many Catholics, almost nothing about their religion was harder than going to confession.... That they submitted themselves to it as a matter of course confirmed the sense that theirs was a demanding but ultimately redeeming faith.

Some basic facts can help situate O'Toole's study. First, for Catholics in the United States from the early 1800s through the 1970s, "[p]arishioners and pastors encountered one an-

other, however anonymously, most often in the confessional." O'Toole cites diary entries and tally sheets that tell of the sheer numbers of people going to confession. For example, over 12 months in 1896-97, Jesuit priests at St. Francis Xavier Parish in New York City heard 173,394 confessions. Nearly 75 years later, just at the beginning of the collapse in number of confessions, the Franciscans at St. Francis of Assisi Parish near Penn Station in New York installed automatic counters in the kneelers of their busy confessionals. In 1970, the parish recorded more than 275,000 confessions.

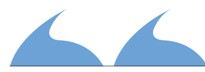
Some more facts: Thoughtful preparation was a crucial part of the process of the sacrament. Laypeople were trained how to weigh the gravity of their sins: "[Ordinary laypeople] knew how to identify what they had done wrong. They knew how to describe their failings in a few words, and they knew both why these offenses were wrong and why they should ask for forgiveness for them," O'Toole writes. "Those understandings shaped the mental universe of American Catholics in profound ways."

This mental universe was inscribed into Catholics when they were students and it persisted through adulthood. O'Toole summarizes the consequence of this intricate moral vision and its taxonomies wonderfully:

> That framework was complicated and expansive, filled with categories and distinctions: original and actual sins; mortal and venial sins, sins of omission and sins of commission; grievous matter, sufficient reflection, and full consent; proximate and remote occasions of sin; necessary and unnecessary occasions. Detailed though it was, this method of mental analysis was, the church believed, capable of being mastered by ordinary parishioners and even by children. The Church had given Catholics the tools, the words, to judge the moral and ethical dimensions of their lives, to know right and wrong.

O'Toole is most insightful in delineating many of the causes of collapse: the speed with which confession was administered, seemingly minimizing the experience; priestly behavior, from overbearing to indifferent to actually hurtful; the reality of gender—female penitents were (and are) always disclosing their sins to a man; the confessor's trivializing of sins or the confessor's fixation on the trivial; and the reality of the Second Vatican Council. O'Toole articulates well the impact of this massively consequential event in the life of the church and its effect on participation in confession:

> [Laymen and women] still considered themselves to be Catholics, still participated (occasionally or even regularly) in the church's rituals, still sent their children to Catholic schools, from kindergarten to college. But they were now doing all that on renegotiated terms. In some cases, they explicitly rejected specific church teachings—on clerical celibacy, on the ordination of women, on homosexuality—but they nonetheless considered themselves to be Catholic. And in particular, these "defecting" Catholics were deciding that they would no longer go to confession.



O'Toole offers a succinct explanation of the sacrament's collapse.

In the end, the vast majority of Catholics decided not to go to confession anymore. As so many elements of ecclesial life seemed up for renegotiation in light of the council, Catholics decided that the distasteful aspects and the contingencies of the experience of confession did not justify the risk or the effort of entering the confessional in order to be shriven.

O'Toole's account of the sacrament concludes where it began, in a parish church in Leominster, Mass., and a visitor's decision to observe the parish's confessional routine but not participate in the sacrament itself.

A missed opportunity. The confessional has, for this reviewer, been a place of tremendous grace, both as a confessor and as a penitent. When I turn myself in at the Franciscan parish in New York City noted above, I always mark the fact that my confessor never knows who might walk in the door to his busy weekday confessional. A Jesuit priest, a church historian, someone suffering a crisis like Judith Hearne. Yet, somehow grace always surrounds the exchange. The sacrament is, after all, effected and made effective by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Perhaps the collapse in participation has helped confessors and penitents alike recognize anew the gravity and grace of the confessional exchange, making it not just more palatable but also a vital, life-giving and necessary part of the life of a Catholic. Perhaps, in collapse, the confessional process itself has been shriven of some of its distasteful contingencies.

Kevin Spinale, S.J., *is a teacher and administrator at Regis High School in New York City.*

HOW TO WIN THE FOLEY POETRY CONTEST: DON'T TRY TO WIN

By Joe Hoover

To the poets who did not win: Do not be discouraged. It's not you, it's us!

For this year's annual Foley Poetry Contest, my colleague Brigid McCabe and I scoured through nearly 700 poems, whittling them down to 25 and finally putting our heads together and choosing the winner and two runners-up.

If you submitted your poetry and you didn't make it as a finalist, please be assured, it doesn't necessarily have to do with the quality of the work. You could have written a sterling poem that might be accepted as a prize-winner in any given literary journal but didn't quite fit a general-interest magazine. (And a religious magazine at that—though Foley poems don't have to be overtly about religion or spirituality.) Or you could have submitted a marvelous poem that might win the prize in a general-interest religious magazine like **America**...just with a different pair of judges. They might be judges who found that the poem resonated with them in a way it didn't with us, or who were more naturally drawn to the rhythms and material and wordsmithing and cleverness or lack of cleverness, or whatever it is that we were not drawn to.

Not to say it is all completely subjective, that the judging of literature is purely based on whim of circumstance, taste, personal history. Sometimes a work of literature is so obviously fantastic that any judge in any given year would take it. There is a reason they keep doing outdoor Shakespeare before sold-out audiences in pavilions and theaters all around the country year after year. The writing is just that good. Everyone loves it.

But outside of Shakespeare and his ilk, a lot of it is up for grabs. Publication is a numbers game. Read a ton, write a ton, revise a ton, solicit honest (but encouraging!) feedback, then send your work to as many places as you can. (Caveat: Make that places that you think could be a good fit for your work; it always surprises me when we receive any number of, uhhhh, "dirty" poems here at our genteel—yes? maybe?—religious magazine.)

If you want it enough and keep doing it enough, eventually you'll get published.

(I offer this advice more for getting published in general than for winning contests. Writing poetry to win prizes or to get on someone's top 10 list can be a maddening fool's errand. You might end up trying to write poetry that sounds like the kind of poetry that wins prizes and gets on top 10 lists. And lose your own voice in the process. Write in your voice, and let the chips fall where they may.)

The winner of this year's contest, whose singular voice captured our hearts, is "They tell us border nets, 10,000 feet high," by Emily Davis-Fletcher of Roanoke, Va. The two runners-up, to be published in the July-August issue, are "At the end of my suffering there was a door," by Jane Wageman of Roseville, Minn., and "The Novena That Carried Me," by Asha Mirriam of Kampala, Uganda. (We typically choose three runners-up, but this year settled on only two.)

Thank you to all who took the risk of baring their hearts for us to read. Even if you did not get your poem published, please let us not be the only ones who hear these echoes of your soul. Read it out loud! To a willing listener, to your hedgehog. Read it into the rolling fog. The world wants your voice. No, really it does.

Joe Hoover S.J., *is* ***America****'s poetry editor and producer of the new film "The Allegory."*

2026 FOLEY POETRY WINNER

By Emily Davis-Fletcher

THEY TELL US BORDER NETS, 10,000 FEET HIGH,

keep us safe from the ecstatic
arrows of sandhill cranes twirling for
a mate. Stop the small but mighty threat
of hummingbirds in their armor, laughter's
color, leaning into hydrangeas and sipping
our breath. What good
are great blue herons reflecting our quiet
thoughts or mourning
doves feathering our lonely
hearts? What peace without lead-
footed geese honking at slow-moving clouds.
Our downcast eyes. How clear
the sky, freed of billions of birds
that steal our seeds, take advantage of our trees'
open arms. We're told we won't miss
their singing, as if we could forget—
song is another migrant
that seeks the light it brings.

Emily Davis-Fletcher *has had poetry published in Tinderbox, Crannóg Magazine, the Irish Examiner and The High Window.*

The Craft of Discipleship

The June readings begin with the feast of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ, inspiring a prolonged reflection upon the sacrament of the Eucharist. Throughout his life, Jesus teaches his disciples and us that feeding the hungry is a frequent component of his ministry, one motivated by love. We learn that Eucharist, his gift at the Last Supper, focuses not only on food, but on food that will sustain eternal life. This holy Communion is about embodied presence, about oneness, about solidarity with Jesus and his mission. Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, also takes up the matter of food, serving as a catechesis regarding this gift of Eucharist. In the weeks to come, his letter to the Romans will provide passages for the second reading, reflecting on other dimensions of these new Christians' relationship to Jesus.

Fittingly, discipleship, supported by Eucharist, becomes the focus of the next three Sundays' Gospels. Each week we hear Jesus delivering one part of his missionary discourse to his apostles. Aware that the crowds gathered before him are "troubled and abandoned" (Mt 10:36), he commissions his 12 followers to share in his ministry. The centrality of compassion, as prelude to ministerial action, offers one theme for our meditation on this discipleship. Aware of the negative consequences of following him, Jesus also takes up the management of anxiety and fear that this discipleship entails. Subsequently, he offers a reflection on love of Christ as the foundation of all relationships. Privileging a loving relationship with Jesus works to chasten believers and gives rise to truly loving and abiding relations with all others, a necessary component for discipleship. Characteristic of his attention to those who are easy to look past, Jesus closes his discourse with a focus upon individuals who support his apostles in their work and promises that these less visible but essential followers of Christ also will receive a reward.

SOLEMNITY OF THE MOST HOLY BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST (A), JUNE 7, 2026
An embodied presence

ELEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A), JUNE 14, 2026
The primacy of compassion

TWELFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A), JUNE 21, 2026
Fearless discipleship

THIRTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A), JUNE 28, 2026
The foundation of unconditional love

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

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A Folly in Miami

Ending a 60-year partnership with Catholic Charities

By Thomas G. Wenski

The U.S. government has abruptly decided to end more than 60 years of relationship with Catholic Charities in the Archdiocese of Miami. This partnership began with Operation "Pedro Pan," which, under the direction of a then-young Irish priest, Monsignor Bryant O. Walsh, helped resettle some 14,000 Cuban children sent alone to this country by desperate parents seeking to protect them from communist indoctrination.

Catholic Charities has offered services for unaccompanied migrant children ever since. People have continued to flee political turmoil and persecution across Latin America, a region that reliably experiences political and economic instability. Today, a facility in Palmetto Bay, named the Msgr. Bryan O. Walsh Children's Village, can house up to 81 minors. The program assists in placing children in foster care, reuniting them with family members and providing supportive services.

The Archdiocese of Miami's services for these unaccompanied minors have been recognized for their excellence and have served as a model for other agencies throughout the country, but the program was recently stripped of federal funding and will be forced to shut down by July.

While it is true that the number of unaccompanied minors entering the United States has decreased so that some programs should reasonably be scaled back or even eliminated, it is still baffling that the U.S. government would shut down a program that it would be hard-pressed to replicate. The level of competence and excellence that Catholic Charities has achieved will be hard to match if and when a future wave of unaccompanied minors reaches our shores.

As U.S. House members Maria Elvira Salazar and Carlos A. Gimenez, both Republicans from Miami, wrote to the Office of Refugee Resettlement in April: "Reducing capacity in the very region most likely to receive these arrivals is not cost-effective, it is a strategic mistake. Catholic Charities provides what cannot be quickly replaced: trained staff, proven infrastructure and decades of expertise."

Today these young people—boys and girls, infants to teenagers—are not much different from those Cuban children of more than 60 years ago. The desperation that has led the parents of today's unaccompanied minors to send their children away is not unlike the desperation that motivated Cuban parents at that time.

And, yes, many of these children do have loving parents. These are mostly kids who were raised in homes where parents taught them to pray and took them to Mass.

The announcement of the ending of federal funding came at the same time the news cycle was filled with the dust-up between Pope Leo XIV and President Trump. But the disagreements between Washington and the Holy See on issues of peace and justice should have nothing to do with the defunding of the Catholic Charities unaccompanied minors program. Some have suggested that the decision to cut support for this program represents political retribution—hopefully, this is not true, although there have been recent other tensions between Catholic Charities efforts and some members of our current political leadership.

Before the last national election, some hard-right politicians in Texas and Florida falsely accused Catholic Charities of colluding with Mexican and Central American drug cartels in the trafficking of children. But in fact these children upon arrival to the United States became wards of the U.S. government. It is only then that Catholic Charities has been asked by the government through the Office of Refugee Resettlement to care for these unaccompanied minors.

That agency, part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, includes in its mission the promotion of the health, well-being and stability of unaccompanied alien children. This commitment alone should require a thorough review of the decision to shut down this legacy and signature program in Miami.

We pray that review takes place and that the decision to defund Catholic Charities in the Archdiocese of Miami is reversed. Whether it be for another month or for many years to come, the Catholic Charities program serving unaccompanied children from our regional neighbors will rely on its decades of expertise to deliver excellent care for these little ones.

Editors' note: This piece is adapted from a previously released statement by Archbishop Wenski.

Thomas G. Wenski *is the archbishop of Miami.*

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The Body as a Mirror of the Soul:

Toward a Medicine of the Person

By MARIO J. PAREDES

Contemporary medicine has reached a crossroads where technical efficacy seems to have eclipsed the depth of the healing act. Often, the brilliance of technological advances and the precision of new drugs dazzle us to the point that we see the patient not as a fellow human being, but a set of biological processes that work mechanically. If something fails, we look for the damaged part to repair or replace, forgetting that the human being is not a machine, but an indissoluble unity of body and spirit. This technical vision, although necessary for progress, has fractured our medical culture, where the body is subjected to physical laws, relegating the spiritual, psychic, and emotional to a secondary, almost optional plane. We must recover a vision that overcomes this utilitarianism and returns the doctor to their role as a true healer, someone who can look beyond the symptoms and understand that illness is, many times, a language we must learn to decipher to reach the core of a person.

To understand this essential unity, we must remember that pain is never a purely physical event, occurring in a vacuum. Since the origins of healing, we have understood that words and presence have a real weight in the biology of those who suffer. The doctor's voice and gestures serve as fundamental tools that directly influence the patient's response. Today, we know that the impact of the inner world on our physiology is so powerful that extreme psychological factors or life crises can trigger real and measurable physical collapses. Belief, fear, and hope are not abstractions, but biological forces that can shift the rhythm of the heart or the response of our defenses. This gives health professionals a responsibility that surpasses the simple prescription of chemical substances: it requires them to be people of solid human principles who recognize that their intervention is carried out upon a mystery that cannot be fully captured by a laboratory diagnosis.

This interdependence teaches us that the physical dimension and the inner dimension are so closely linked that they constitute a single identity. Clutter in either of these areas often leads to the alteration of the other. Inner peace and emotional balance generate a harmony that directly benefits the body, while silenced suffering or ignored conflict inevitably results in making the flesh sick. Health, therefore, is not simply the absence of a pathology in any given organ, but a state of integral harmony where the body acts as the mirror of what happens deeper within a being. Therefore, those who seek to heal a bodily ailment must also look at its internal source, and the doctor must have the necessary wisdom to guide that process, applying science not as a cold recipe, but as an art that adapts to the unique reality of each life.

Amidst today's fragmentation, we need health professionals who cultivate the ability to see man holistically. We cannot continue to practice from distant vantage points, protected by the coldness of protocols, but we must immerse ourselves in the patient's most real humanity, knowing their environment, culture, and daily history. A person's character and how they face life largely determine how their body expresses discomfort. Medical training, therefore, cannot be limited to accumulating technical data, but must be based on a vision that understands that the body externally manifests its inner life, animating it and giving it meaning. Each individual has a unique mission and an absolute value to protect, and humanizing care means, precisely, recognizing that transcendent dignity in each clinical encounter.

We can clearly see this unity in pathologies that today affect a large part of the population, such as chronic digestive disorders and immune system diseases, whose causes cannot be determined by current tests or by the technical methods used to treat the body. In many of these cases, the discomfort is nothing more than the body's response to what we could call a "vital knot." This knot represents a deep conflict, a wound in the patient's biography or an old suffering, unresolved, that manifests itself through inflammatory processes or functional alterations. Treating these conditions with drugs alone silences the voice of the body without listening to its message, an incomplete approach leaving the patient exposed to the return of the symptom, because the crisis that gave rise to it is still active and silent inside. Healing requires, then, the courage to untie that knot, integrating physical attention with listening to the spirit. Let us always remember that, unlike other species, the human being does not have a history, but a biography: a collection of experiences that speak of the person as a being in relationship, open to the world and to others; and that their healing goes hand in hand with knowing and accompanying in that biography, that life.

In short, medicine must be imbued with a vision that recognizes the human being in their entirety, whose life is invaluable from its beginning. Authentic healing consists of restoring harmony with the person's own truth so that they can recover their life project. If we limit ourselves to being operators who solve technical problems, we will be failing in our deepest vocation. Today, when efforts seem to focus exclusively on the material and the technological, there is a lack of attention that considers people in their integrity. We need a practice that does not settle for treating diseases but also seeks to heal people, fulfilling the promise made by accepting the Hippocratic oath. Only through this human and sincere encounter, where science is placed at the service of the mystery of life, will we be able to restore to medicine its true greatness and its ability to transform the existence of those who suffer.

Mario J. Paredes
CEO, SOMOS Community Care

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