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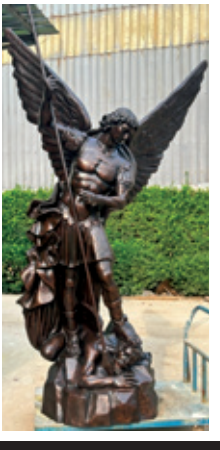

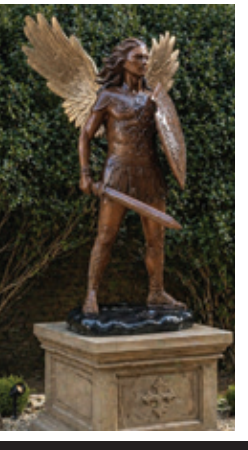

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A.I. Is the Headline, but Leo's First Encyclical Is Much More

Pope Leo XIV's first encyclical, "Magnifica Humanitas," has generated many headlines because of its focus on artificial intelligence. A reader coming to the document from those headlines would understandably be surprised to find that the first two chapters—out of five total—barely discuss A.I. at all.

However, I think that when "Magnifica Humanitas" is quoted and cited by theologians and future popes, as it certainly will be, those first two chapters will be referenced most often. Part of the reason is that discussions of A.I., as Leo notes himself, become "quickly outdated, given the remarkable pace at which these systems are developing."

An even more important reason is that the first two chapters are a masterclass in how the church develops its social teaching. They follow in a long tradition of social encyclicals commenting on and extending the tradition that leads up to them. In fact, there is a line of encyclicals that take their titles from marking the anniversary of "Rerum Novarum": "Quadragesimo Anno" at the 40th anniversary, "Octogesima Adveniens" at the 80th and "Centesimus Annus" at the 100th. (We should be grateful that Leo spared us the Latin for "135th anniversary," which the official signing date of his encyclical on May 15 commemorates.)

These first two chapters, I expect, will be assigned reading in any introductory class on Catholic social teaching. They are a gift both in being easy to read and impressive in their synthesis of the body of teaching they present. I was reminded of Leo's lucid outline of Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation "Evangelii Gaudium" in his first address to the college of cardinals only a few days after his election.

Leo's teaching is more than a summary of the history of social doctrine. Rather, he charts its *development*, "in order to demonstrate its dynamic character." Pointing repeatedly to the Second Vatican Council's "Gaudium et Spes," the "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World," Leo describes understanding history as a place where "the church allows herself to be taught by the Spirit about the humanizing power of the Gospel" and "learns to develop her own teaching at the service of the dignity of every person and the good of all peoples."

The image Leo gives us for the development of social teaching is not of the church applying timeless wisdom to the ever-changing signs of the times, but rather of the Holy Spirit acting through history to help the church enter more deeply into the Gospel. Development of doctrine, as the church has long known, is not a grudging accommodation of the tradition to present needs but an act of fidelity in which the church cooperates with God.

Leo crystallizes this insight into how teaching develops by demonstrating it, reaching back not only to "Rerum Novarum" but also to social doctrine's roots in the Gospel, and describing it as "not a handbook of principles and norms to be applied, but a process of shared discernment" and "a theology of communion in history, a history in which the Word made flesh continues to be present through dialogue, memory and prophecy."

If "shared discernment" sounds like language that we have also heard in reference to synodality, that is no accident. At the end of his second chapter on the principles of Catholic social teaching, Leo proposes an "examen" about how well the church itself lives out the principles of social justice that its teaching outlines, saying that for the church, "the common good takes the form of a synodal approach for mission at the service of the Kingdom."

"Magnifica Humanitas" not only summarizes the church's social teaching but also challenges the church to understand, explore and incarnate that teaching. Its framework envisions a church confident in its own tradition and the truth it has received from God that enters eagerly and generously into the project of developing that teaching through history.

The final three chapters of the encyclical put that approach into action. In addition to posing specific questions about the use of A.I., Leo also demonstrates a courageous willingness to advance the teaching of the church in other areas. He reflects on the church's long toleration of slavery before its universal condemnation in the 19th century, calling the former a "wound in Christian memory." He describes "just war" theory, "which has all too often been used to justify any kind of war," as "outdated."

Neither Leo's brief reflections on slavery and just war in this encyclical nor his more expansive treatment of artificial intelligence will be the last word of the church's engagement with these issues. Instead, they reflect, in Leo's words, "a harmonious, though not always linear, development that is marked by different emphases, progressive insights, and, at times, changes in perspective that do not break with what came before, but allow its implications to mature."

In "Magnifica Humanitas," Pope Leo offers us an example of how to participate in the "process of shared discernment" that is the church's social teaching. That challenge may well prove to be both more lasting and more rewarding than simply applying that teaching to the question of artificial intelligence.

Sam Sawyer, S.J.

THE ISSUE

GIVE AND TAKE

DISPATCHES

FEATURES

FAITH & REASON

Pope Leo XIV greets the faithful at the Cathedral of the Holy Cross and St. Eulalia during his apostolic journey in Barcelona, Spain, on June 9.
OSV News photo/Simone Risoluti, Vatican Media

Cover: A guest holds up the American flag, the Vatican City flag and a crucifix during the visit by Pope Francis to the White House in Washington, D.C., on Sept. 23, 2015.
White House Photo

'Performative piety': Why liturgy is not a space for self-expression

"The liturgy is about communion with Christ through your being part of the body of believers. It's not about your 'self-expression.'" In a Faith & Reason essay published online on May 8, Stephen Adubato chronicled how his understanding of external expressions of faith has shifted and how this shift informs his present irritation at behavior—often seen at Mass in how people receive the Eucharist—that he calls "performative piety." Our readers had much to say in response.

I really appreciate this. I struggle with judging those people, not so much the ones who kneel, but the ones who take Communion on their tongue. I want to say to them, "Jesus said, take and eat." He didn't go around at the Last Supper putting bread on each Apostle's tongue. Even as I write this, I am feeling self-righteous. I will try and remember this essay and focus on a great gift I am about to receive rather than what other people are doing.
Susan Lanning

As a new Catholic, I've erred to both extremes. My enthusiasm has me buying every book, a second rosary made by hand, an excessive number of prayer cards, a dainty gold crucifix. And then I also shied from standing up as a newcomer or drawing attention to myself for not receiving Communion. Sometimes, when you are new, you are quick to model others in a performative way until you figure it out for yourself.
Shannon Tierney

I must say the good points of this article cut both ways. It's performative when a whole parish won't use the word "Lord" because some think it has colonialist roots. It is performative when a priest says people can't kneel during the Eucharistic prayer. It is performative when a priest makes the congregation say the Pledge of Allegiance immediately following the dismissal, or invites the congregation to make a racial justice pledge that actually makes folks of color feel othered immediately before the dismissal. (I've seen all of these in different parishes.)

Respect each other and approach the Eucharist with reverence. The parish I go to for the Vigil every year has the option of receiving at the rail or on the hand. I get in line with the mantilla-wearers and kneel at the rail with my ear and septum piercings, my visible A.M.D.G. tattoo, my gay Latino body kneeling before God.
Jason Villarreal

Whichever side of the Communion on the tongue/hand issue we fall on, it's important to avoid adopting the attitude of the Pharisee in Luke 18, thanking God that we're not like the other.
Michael Moran

How about the other side of the coin that probably more of us who try to be reasonably pious fail at: judging those who lack piety at the Eucharist by what they wear, what they're chewing, who they're talking to, etc.? It goes both ways. Bottom line: Judge not and be not judged. In any case, we should be celebrating that people are at Mass.
Paul Gulig

I think sanctimoniousness is more apt than piety in this discussion. There is no way to externally judge the piety of a communicant receiving in the hand versus on the tongue.
Shayne LaBudda

Interesting! I can't say it's ever bothered me that some folks prefer to kneel and receive Communion by mouth. I think the option to receive in the hand while standing simply offered more choices but didn't negate the choices of those who preferred the more traditional way. It's a big tent, and it's not my business to tell someone else they're wrong if they don't choose my way. But before I pride myself on being open-minded, I will admit that when people say the prayers louder than all around me, I find myself getting prickly—and feeling that the person thinks their prayers are more important than mine. So I'm not as "live and let live" as I claim.
Diane McManus

Don't discount the volume of propaganda (of what it is to be truly Catholic) that Stephen would have had to work through upon reception to the church. Stephen's openness to his friend's counsel showed he was genuinely searching. Let's hope there are many more kind and caring people like Stephen's friend in our communities, or let us be that friend ourselves.
Steve Ronson

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America

The Unfinished Work That Remains for the United States of America

Americans like to tell themselves that the United States is the greatest country in the history of the world. As with the "God bless the United States of America" that ends so many political speeches, frequent repetition has hollowed out these words, leaving them mostly a shibboleth to register a speaker's patriotism.

U.S. history has far better examples of political rhetoric that serves the country and the common good. Rather than political expediency, those examples name both American aspirations and failures. As the United States marks its 250th anniversary, beset by a politics that grows ever more polarized, fueled by a rhetoric of division and exclusion, we need such honesty more than ever.

Some may find it hard to celebrate a nation that seems divided against itself or fear that doing so amounts to an endorsement of one set of partisan claims over another. Despite such tensions, July 4 still can and should serve as a time to honor the common past Americans share and to reflect on how to "form a more perfect Union" together.

In the summer of 1852, Frederick Douglass, an abolitionist and himself a person who had been enslaved, addressed the Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society of Rochester, N.Y., to commemorate the day that he described as "yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn."

For Douglass, July 4 was a day that revealed to the millions still enslaved "the gross injustice and cruelty to which [they are] the constant victim." He added, "The existence of slavery in this country brands your republicanism as a sham, your humanity as a base pretense, and your Christianity as a lie."

Douglass bluntly called out the hypocrisy of the nation for ongoing oppression, but he also held out hope that the Constitution, properly interpreted, would be recognized as a "glorious liberty document" and took consolation in the thought "that America is young."

It is the promise of what the nation aspires to be that Americans celebrate as the United States of America marks its 250th year. Americans should reject the false choice between an uncritical celebration that papers over the nation's sins and a despair that is cynically blind to the country's virtues.

America's founders envisioned a nation that would recognize the natural rights of individuals and would realize popular sovereignty through representative government. In Federalist 55, James Madison argued that this form of government presupposes an "esteem and confidence" in human nature, even as it guards against "a degree of depravity in mankind." The founders maintained that no human being has a natural right to rule another and, consequently, rejected the divine right of kings. They insisted upon the rule of law and safeguarded the freedom of the press and of religion.

This idealism coexisted with the glaring contradiction of the institution of slavery, and its commitment to freedom has been a work in progress ever since it began. The independence declared on July 4, 1776, marked the conception of a nation, not its final formation. The Constitution replaced the Articles of Confederation in 1789 and has been amended 27 times since.

While this imperfect union suffered through its bloodiest conflict, the Civil War, during which 750,000 Americans died, Douglass attended Lincoln's second inaugural address, which was delivered with the war still unfinished. Like Douglass, Lincoln forthrightly confronted the nation's sins but guarded a profound hope nonetheless.

The nation's 16th president described the "scourge of war" as a recompense for the sin of slavery and "the bondsman's 250 years of unrequited toil." Lincoln refused to equate God's providence with the goal of military victory—"the Almighty has his own purposes"—and called the nation to "strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves, and with all nations."

At its best, this nation has pressed forward toward the common good, not merely its own greatness. In 1920, the 19th Amendment finally recognized women's right to participate in self-governance. Through the Marshall Plan, the United States rebuilt shattered European nations, including enemies it had just defeated, after World War II. Two decades later, the nation passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, more steps in the long journey toward equality. As late as 1990, a bipartisan effort led to the passing of the Americans With Disabilities Act.

More recently, American generosity and decency helped contain the spread of H.I.V./AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa and responded to earthquakes, famines and floods overseas. That such commitments have been broken in the past two years betrays the values held by Americans at their best, but should not lead us to despair of those values themselves.

As the United States marks this milestone, the first American pope sits on the chair of Peter. Since his election, Leo XIV has time and again called for peace and for nations to work for the common good. "No nation, no society, and no international order can call itself just and humane if it measures its success solely by power or prosperity while neglecting those who live at the margins," Leo said in May.

Earlier this year, leaders from the National Constitution Center presented Pope Leo with the 2026 Liberty Medal at the Vatican, and the pope will offer a live video address to the center at an event on July 3 in Philadelphia. At the Vatican ceremony on April 30, he recalled the Declaration of Independence's recognition that human rights come from our creator, saying, "May those values continue to inspire us in the United States and throughout the world, and together, hopefully, we can all work that those freedoms will indeed be a part of the lives of all people everywhere."

That aspiration will never be fulfilled without tireless prophetic voices that name ongoing, structural injustices. Such voices inspire their fellow citizens to act. From the abolitionists to the suffragists, from the labor organizers to the marchers at Selma, from the pro-life advocates to the defenders of immigrants' rights, the arc of American history has bent toward justice only when ordinary people demanded it. In that spirit, Americans of goodwill must work together toward a more perfect union.

In 1926, as the nation marked its 150th anniversary, **America**'s editors called the American project "unfinished work." May this Fourth of July, both in its celebration and its contradictions, inspire all Americans to take up the still unfinished work of building a more just nation.

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The four demands of peacemaking

Editors' note: This essay was adapted from remarks by Cardinal Blase J. Cupich upon receiving the "Blessed are the Peacemakers Award" from the Catholic Theological Union on April 29.

Scripture scholars point out that the Greek word translated as "peacemakers" (*eirēnopoioi*) appears only once in the Bible, in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:9). It is exceptional both in its linguistic rarity and its provocative political context. In calling peacemakers "sons of God," Jesus subverts the Roman propaganda of the Pax Romana that calls Caesar the "peacemaker" and "son of God." For Jesus, the true children of God are not the generals who pacify through conquest, but those who enter a conflict for the sole purpose of restoring *shalom*, a Hebrew concept of wholeness and justice.

In a similar way Pope Leo XIV has been subverting the narrative that attempts to justify war to bring about peace by domination. On Palm Sunday, he spoke with disarming clarity: "Jesus, King of Peace, who rejects war, whom no one can use to justify war...does not listen to the prayers of those who wage war, but rejects them, saying: 'Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen: your hands are full of blood' (Is 1:15)."

The reaction, especially in the United States, has been revealing. Sadly, much of the response has not been to ask what the Gospel demands of us in a time of war, but to revisit, defend and refine the just war theory. Posts and debates have multiplied, carefully weighing conditions, thresholds and proportionalities.

There is, of course, a place for that tradition. The church has long sought to discipline political power with moral reasoning. But to spend this moment primarily trying to determine whether war can still be justified risks missing something more urgent. It begins to sound less like moral discernment and more like an anxious effort to prove that what is happening might still be just.

And that is the wrong starting point. The first question is not: Can this war be justified? The first question is the one Jesus addresses in the Beatitudes: What does the Gospel demand of us now? What does it mean, concretely, to be peacemakers?

The Catholic tradition gives an exacting answer. As the "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" ("Gaudium et Spes") teaches, "peace is not merely the absence of war...it is rightly and appropriately called an enterprise of justice," something that "must be built up ceaselessly" (No. 78). Peace, in other words, is a task.

This is why Pope Francis, in "Gaudete et Exsultate," calls peace-building a "craft," something that demands "serenity, creativity, sensitivity and skill" (No. 89). When read through the lens of the Gospel, those four demands describe not an ideal but a discipline.

Serenity comes first. Not because peace ignores conflict, but because it refuses to be ruled by it. The Gospel command in Luke, "If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also" (Lk 6:29), is often misunderstood as passive submission. It is nothing of the sort. This gesture does not legitimize violence; it unmasks it. To offer the other cheek is to refuse the role assigned by the aggressor; it denies violence the power to define the relationship. Instead of responding within the logic of domination and humiliation, the disciple steps outside that logic altogether.

In this way, the act becomes a form of freedom: it exposes injustice without reproducing it, and it interrupts the chain of retaliation at its source. It is, therefore, a radically active stance, not a passive one: "To act in this way presumes a heart set at peace by Christ, freed from the aggressiveness born of overweening egotism" ("Gaudete et Exsultate," No. 121). Without that interior stability, every call for peace collapses into anger, fear or revenge.

But serenity alone is not enough. Peace also demands **creativity**. Conflict cannot simply be absorbed; it must be transformed. The normal logic of conflict—insult answered with insult, force with force, grievance with grievance—reproduces itself endlessly. The Gospel interrupts that cycle: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you" (Lk 6:27). The command to love the enemy is not a feeling but a practice that disarms hostility by refusing to mirror it. It creates an unexpected space where the other is no longer treated as an enemy to defeat but as a person to be encountered anew.

In this sense, Jesus' teaching is profoundly creative; it breaks the closed circuit of violence by introducing a gratuitous act—good given where harm is expected—that cannot be predicted or controlled. Such acts expose the poverty of violence and open the possibility of a different future.

Creativity takes shape in the hard, patient work of dialogue and negotiation—not as tactics of compromise at any cost, but as moral processes ordered toward justice, where the vulnerable are protected and the innocent safeguarded. Such creativity refuses both the illusion that peace can be imposed by force and the temptation to abandon those most at risk. Instead, it seeks solutions that preserve human dignity, restrain violence and

open space for reconciliation. In this way, dialogue itself becomes an act of moral imagination: a deliberate effort to build a future in which the weak are not sacrificed and the innocent are not forgotten.

That, in turn, requires **sensitivity**, a word that risks sounding weak until one understands its depth. Sensitivity means attention to the person, especially the difficult person. It is easy to speak of human dignity in the abstract. It is much harder to recognize it in those who provoke, oppose or wound us. Yet this is precisely where the Gospel calls us to turn our attention: "Love your enemies...pray for those who mistreat you" (Lk 6:27-28). This demand stands in direct opposition to what Pope Francis called the "globalization of indifference," a cultural condition in which the suffering of others becomes distant, normalized and ultimately invisible.

Sensitivity is not optional; it is an act of resistance. And today that resistance is made even more difficult by the growing "gamification" of war, where conflicts are mediated through screens and human lives risk being perceived as data points rather than persons. The danger is not only that we tolerate violence, but that we cease to feel it, to the point of shamelessly turning the sufferings of others into entertainment. Against this, the Gospel insists on a different vision, one that restores the face of the other and calls us back to a form of attention that refuses to let suffering become anonymous.

This is not sentimentality. It is a moral discipline grounded in the conviction that every person bears a dignity that cannot be erased, even by injustice. Peace that excludes, dismisses or dehumanizes is not peace at all. It is simply a quieter form of conflict.

Pope Leo XIV at St. Joseph Cathedral in Bamenda, Cameroon, on April 16

CNS photo/Lola Gomez

Finally, peace demands **skill**. Peacemaking must be learned, practiced and refined. It requires habits: the discipline to restrain one's speech, the courage to tell the truth without hatred, the patience to build trust, the willingness to sacrifice one's own advantage for the sake of justice. It also requires the concrete skill of dialogue and negotiation: the ability to listen without defensiveness, to name grievances without inflaming them, to seek common ground without betraying the truth and to persevere in conversation even when agreement seems distant.

The late Cardinal Avery Dulles, S.J., once observed that dialogue is about giving those across the table from you permission to tell you why they think you are wrong. Such skills and attitudes do not come naturally; they are formed over time, day after day, through effort and discipline.

Taken together, these four demands reveal why the Gospel can feel so impractical in a time of war. It does not begin where we often want to begin. It does not start by asking whether violence can be justified. It starts by asking who we are becoming in the face of it.

This does not mean abandoning moral reasoning about war. It means placing it in its proper place. The just war tradition was never meant to be a comfort, and surely not, as some are proposing, a merely relativistic measure that exists only for those most inclined to go to war. It was meant to restrain, to warn, to limit. That is its place. But when it becomes the primary lens through which we view conflict, it risks narrowing our imagination to what can be permitted, rather than expanding it toward what is required.

And what is required is more demanding.

But peace has always been like this: not an idea to defend, but a craft—learned and practiced until it truly bears fruit in the concrete realities of history.

At the end of his visit to the African continent, speaking to journalists on his return to Rome, Pope Leo did not enter abstract debates about justified force. He called instead for a "culture of peace," urging leaders to return to dialogue rather than escalation and grounding his appeal not in theory but in human suffering, recalling the story of a child he had met who was later killed in war. Once again, like Jesus in proclaiming the Beatitudes, the Holy Father refused to argue at the level many expected. Leo, speaking as a pastor rather than a strategist, asked not only whether the war could be justified, but instead how peace could be sought. And so must we.

Cardinal Blase J. Cupich *is the archbishop of Chicago.*

OSV News photo/Elisabetta Trevisan, Vatican Media

Can Catholic ministry leaders harness A.I. without hurting human relationships?

By J.D. Long García

A parent approached Christina Lamas after a Spanish-language seminar on artificial intelligence in February at the Los Angeles Religious Education Congress. The mother was in tears. She felt her daughter had replaced her with A.I., spending hours in her room confiding in a chatbot.

"She said, 'I don't know how to compete with the chat,'" Ms. Lamas, the executive director of the National Federation of Catholic Youth Ministry, told **America**. "This bot that she said is now her go-to. It's her friend."

Instead of chatbots, Ms. Lamas said, this generation needs help navigating friendships, including misunderstandings, forgiveness and working through real conflict.

Pope Leo XIV's encyclical "Magnifica Humanitas" comes at the perfect time, she said. The encyclical stresses the dignity of the human person and the need to focus on the common good in the wake of A.I.

"Technology should not be considered, in itself, as a force antagonistic to humanity," the pope writes early in the document, adding later, "We must learn, then, how to exercise restraint in the use of AI and to protect our young people from the promise of the perfect machine, from that subtle temptation which renders human thought seemingly superfluous precisely when it is most needed" (No. 140).

In youth ministry, Ms. Lamas said, it is now common for volunteers to step into roles once filled by full-time, paid employees. At times, she said, youth ministry volunteers rely on A.I. to fill the gap. But A.I., she said, should be more of an editor, not a creator.

"The risk is that some folks are using it more as a creator to generate content and are not always spending the time to verify that the content is authentically Catholic and that it is grounded in church teaching and that the Scripture is correct," Ms. Lamas said.

Despite the pitfalls, Ms. Lamas believes A.I. has the potential to assist youth ministers. It can help adapt session outlines to specific age groups, like middle or high school, and can help tailor presentations for specific cultural communities. But humans must review, revise and verify before any material reaches a young person, she said, adding that authentic teaching about the Catholic faith is what young people expect from their elders.

Evangelizing the 'Digital Continent'

For many involved in ministry every day, the question of whether to engage with A.I. has already passed. The ques-

Pope Leo XIV encounters a "robot dog" following his general audience in St. Peter's Square on May 27, two days after the release of "Magnifica Humanitas."

tion that remains is how.

Deacon Charlie Echeverry was an early adopter of A.I. He started with Sudowrite, a platform designed to help people struggling with writer's block. It could also generate prose that matched the style of uploaded text. When ChatGPT launched in 2022, he engaged with it, too.

"Almost immediately, I recognized it was on the level of the internet, or perhaps bigger," he said of the advent of A.I. "It was seismic."

Deacon Echeverry is the host of the "Living the Call" podcast and is the chief executive officer of Black Brown, a communications and consulting firm. He recognizes similar patterns between the reaction to artificial intelligence today and the emergence of the internet decades ago. Deacon Echeverry also said that resistance to A.I. in ministerial settings is natural, predictable and, ultimately, not sustainable.

"Somebody who's just like, 'I just don't want to touch it,' to me, that can border on a sort of irresponsibility vis-à-vis ministry," Deacon Echeverry said. "Because at worst—at worst—[by using A.I.,] you will better understand what the people you're ministering to are doing."

Best-case scenarios include A.I. expanding the reach of ministry, he said.

"We're called as Christians to go out everywhere: to all nations, including the digital continent, and proclaim the Gospel," he said. "That presupposes an engagement with the world even though we're not of the world."

Limits of A.I.

Father Philip Larrey, a philosophy professor at Boston College, is more cautious when it comes to A.I. He looks at it through the lens of Catholic ethics.

"There's not a lot of space for A.I. in evangelization," Father Larrey told **America**. "Evangelization is usually a person-to-person encounter. When people go to a parish, they want to become part of a community. They want to meet other people, talk with other people, experience things with other people. A.I. is not really a part of that."

Some have tested the limits, he said, noting the example of a church in Switzerland that introduced A.I. to help parishioners prepare for confession, and Catholic Answers, an apologetics-centered outreach based in San Diego that rolled out an "A.I. priest." Neither effort lasted, and Father Larrey called them both disasters.

The gap between what A.I. can do and what ministry requires is wider than enthusiasts tend to acknowledge, he said.

But he concedes that A.I. has a role to play in ministry. Some may find A.I. helpful in homily preparation, for example. Father Larrey also noted Magisterium AI, a Catholic-aligned platform built by Matthew Sanders.

"But as a priest," he said, "I don't use A.I. a lot to communicate with people because I think people want to be communicated with by people."

Lessons From the Corporate World

Will Smith, the director of liturgy and music at Mount St. Peter Parish in New Kensington, Pa., did not need to mull over hypothetical A.I. scenarios in lecture halls. He watched them play out from inside a corporate marketing firm.

Mr. Smith worked in digital marketing for seven years and helped businesses build customer management and communications strategies. Then the A.I. revolution began, and the business changed overnight.

"I saw firsthand both the negative and the very few positive results of A.I. being implemented unchecked in businesses across the board," he said. "Needless to say, the dignity of the person, the employee, was not considered. Only the bottom line."

Businesses rushed into A.I. and implemented half-baked workarounds to get it to work properly, he said. It did not always save time, and it often created more problems, he said. Companies saw bumps in their stock price after mentioning that A.I. would enable them to lay off employees. But mistakes by A.I. tarnished reputations, and some companies hired people back after their stocks leveled off.

"If only leadership had been a bit more cautious and judicious about how they implemented A.I., there would be fewer hurt families," Mr. Smith said.

What he saw in the corporate world made it clear that the church needed to have a conversation about artificial intelligence. Mr. Smith designed a program, "Holy Work on Human Time: AI for Youth Ministry," to help fellow ministers use A.I. judiciously, being mindful of environmental concerns while safeguarding human connection.

"Instead of scrolling endlessly on Instagram, young people want to engage," he said. But he also recognized that young people are accustomed to digital media: "So they'll engage with an A.I. instead of engaging in a real relationship."

For Mr. Smith, fostering real relationships means accompanying grieving parishioners, sitting with teenagers in crisis and welcoming strangers as members of faith communities. A.I. can allow that work to take precedence over more mundane tasks like writing content for parish bulletins, maintaining social media accounts, preparing for meetings and doing other grunt work that falls on overtaxed ministers.

A timeline of artificial intelligence and the Vatican's response to it

1921: The play "R.U.R." (for "Rossum's Universal Robots"), by Karel Capek, premieres in Prague. It includes the first use of the word *robot,* derived from the Czech *robota,* for a serf or someone forced into labor.

1950: In Mind journal, Alan Turing speculates about the potential development of a machine that can "think" and outlines "the imitation game," now known as "the Turing Test," to assess that potential.

1955: Computer scientist John McCarthy co-authors a grant proposal to the Rockefeller Foundation seeking support for the Dartmouth Summer Research Project on Artificial Intelligence to be convened the following year.

1966-1974: One of several periods insiders characterize as "A.I. winters" begins—years when little progress is made as enthusiasm fades because of cost and unpromising research outcomes.

1977: The launches of the Apple II, the Tandy Radio Shack TRS-80 and the Commodore Business Machines Personal Electronic Transactor inaugurate the era of mass-market personal computers.

1993: At NASA's Vision-21 symposium, fiction writer and mathematician Vernor Vinge delivers a paper, "The Coming Technological Singularity." Its abstract: "Within thirty years, we will have the technological means to create superhuman intelligence. Shortly after, the human era will be ended. Is such progress avoidable? If not to be avoided, can events be guided so that we may survive?"

1997: IBM's Deep Blue becomes the first supercomputer to beat a human chess champion, the unfortunate Garry Kasparov.

2006-2012: Research in "deep learning," using neural networks to replicate processes similar to those in the human brain, inaugurates the current A.I. boom.

2010-2016: Virtual assistants like Siri, Alexa and Google Assistant begin to expand services on computer operating systems.

2011: IBM's Watson defeats two all-time champions of the television game show "Jeopardy!"

2014: The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops objects to the use of unmanned aerial vehicles as military attack drones in "targeted killings."

2014: Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, at a United Nations conference in Geneva, tells experts discussing lethal autonomous weapons systems: "Meaningful human involvement is absolutely essential in decisions affecting the life and death of human beings."

2015: Elon Musk, Sam Altman and others co-found OpenAI.

2016: The annual Minerva Dialogues in Rome begin, informal discussions among Pope Francis, Vatican officials and tech entrepreneurs and executives about the ethical implications of the emerging A.I. revolution.

2020: The Pontifical Academy for Life joins political and business leaders in promoting the joint statement known as the "Rome Call for AI Ethics."

2022: OpenAI releases ChatGPT, which uses "large language models" to generate text based on user prompts.

2024: In a historic address to a meeting of the G7 in Italy, Pope Francis urges a worldwide ban on autonomous weapons systems. "No machine should ever choose to take the life of a human being," he tells global leaders.

2025: On Jan. 28, the Vatican issues a note, "Antiqua et Nova," from Pope Francis, reflecting on "the relationship between Artificial Intelligence and Human Intelligence" and warning against "creating a substitute for God."

2026: Pope Leo XIV approves the creation of an Interdicasterial Commission on Artificial Intelligence on May 12. On May 25, he releases his first papal encyclical, "Magnifica Humanitas," addressing practical, spiritual and moral concerns related to A.I. advancement.

"A lot of youth ministers fall into one of two categories," Mr. Smith said. "They're either kind of dabbling in A.I., or they hate the stuff.... My goal is to bridge that gap."

A Balanced Approach

Bridging the gap is crucial for leaders who are already stretched thin. José Antonio Martínez-Navarrette, the director of marriage, family life and spirituality for the Diocese of Phoenix, serves 94 parishes. The calls and emails never stop.

People who work for the church, he said, often wear multiple hats, like managing marriage ceremonies, baptisms and funerals, as well as routine administration and communication.

"Either I do all that," he said, "or I dedicate time to accompanying people, listening to them, humanly, spiritually. Where am I going to invest my time?" Using A.I. as a tool can help free him up for things that machines simply cannot deliver.

Still, he noted that some communities are vulnerable to A.I.-generated misinformation, from fake videos of priests speaking against church teaching to A.I.-fueled outreach from churches claiming to be Catholic.

"It is a constant bombardment of information, and people don't know how to filter it," Mr. Martínez-Navarrette said. He has met with parents grappling with children lost to virtual worlds.

"We never paused long enough to ask what the true purpose of these tools should be or who would teach us how to use them wisely," he said. "Much of it was left to experimentation, trends and a lack of critical thinking."

The church must safeguard the pastoral encounter by finding the right balance, Mr. Martínez-Navarrette said. Those in ministry can lean on A.I. to offload and automate some administrative burdens and prioritize personal connections.

"The best screen," he said, "is still the human face. The best data processor is our brain, connected with our heart. And the best scanner is still the human eye, capable of seeing with compassion and understanding."

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

Spanish bishops denounce emotional manipulation in evangelization


At prayer at the shrine of the Virgen del Rocio in Almonte, Spain, in June 2025

iStock/Juan Miguel Cervera Merlo

Spain's bishops have warned that forms of evangelization that leverage high emotions to proclaim the Gospel risk distorting Catholic spirituality and can lead to forms of abuse.

The bishops highlighted those concerns in a doctrinal note from the Commission for the Doctrine of the Faith of the Spanish Episcopal Conference, published in March. The note warns that an "emotional bombardment" employed as part of some methods of initial evangelization can become a form of spiritual abuse or promote an "emotional reductionist" form of Christian spirituality, even when such techniques may be used with the best of intentions.

Rafael Vázquez Jiménez, the secretary of the commission, explained to **America** by email that the instruction was not intended to point to any specific group. It seeks "rather to open a personal and communal reflection on the methods of evangelization of the initial proclamation, and the proposal of faith that is being made especially to young people."

Paul Fahey, a licensed mental health counselor who has dedicated much of his practice to addressing spiritual abuse, told **America** that the Spanish bishops' note offers much needed words of caution for the U.S. church, too.

"Lights and music to help others enter into more embodied prayer are not abusive," he said. "The pomp and circumstance of the Easter Vigil can be emotional. But it becomes abusive when the intention is to use the crafted emotional experience as a means to an end."

The abuse that the Spanish bishops worried about can have a variety of manifestations, including "emotional peer pressure, which causes individuals to be forced to 'feel' the same as others so as not to marginalize themselves from the experience." On the most serious end of the spectrum of spiritual abuses, the bishops' document warns of using "false supernatural or mystical experiences...as a means of exercising dominion over consciences by annulling the autonomy of persons or of committing other types of abuses."

Many Catholics in Spain and other nations, including the United States, have experienced conferences and retreats directed toward young adults that involve dramatic settings and music. They often include speakers recounting personal stories of life-changing encounters with God and theatrical exercises. They typically culminate either in Mass or Eucharistic adoration.

Those evangelizing events can generate a palpable excitement among attendees and provoke strong emotional responses, including weeping. They are often sponsored and led by ecclesial movements with a charismatic spirituality. Emaús retreats have become very popular in Spain over the last decade, but even before the Spanish bishops' document was released, the way some groups were using the retreat method had been called into question as secretive and manipulative.

Father Carlos Hernández Prieto coordinates Emaús retreats in Astorga, a small town in northwest Spain. He believes that Emaús may have come under particular focus in Spain because the retreat movement burst into the church without being integrated into the wider life of Spanish Catholicism.

"The greatest fear of the bishops' is that [such events] don't help participants to sustain and preserve [their faith]," Father Hernández said. "I see this happen."

The Catholic Church in Spain, Father Hernández added, also has had a more limited experience with different forms of Christian expression, like the charismatic movement, that have become familiar aspects of church life in both North and South America.

According to Mr. Vázquez, a danger in some retreat settings is that organizers may set themselves up as the spiritual leader for the new converts, "exerting an excessive influence on people's conscience by restricting their freedom or isolating them from the ecclesial experience of faith, which would hinder the encounter with the authentic face of Christ."

Authentic evangelization teaches and proposes, but it does not coerce, Mr. Fahey said.

He added that spiritual leaders should not offer interpretations of a participant's emotional responses. "People must be given the space and freedom to bring these emotional experiences into dialogue with the Lord in the innermost sanctuary of their heart in order to discern God's will," Mr. Fahey said. "If those in authority suppress or bypass that freedom, then we move into the realm of spiritual imposition and abuse of conscience."

Bridget Ryder *contributes from Spain.*

Did U.S. humanitarian aid cuts contribute to Africa's Ebola outbreak?

An Ebola outbreak continued to claim lives and reach new victims in communities across provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo and neighboring Uganda in June. But the ultimate toll of the outbreak must also be measured by its economic and social impact, according to Father Edouard Makimba Milambo, the executive secretary of Caritas Congo.

"Beyond the medical cases themselves," he said, responding on June 3 to questions forwarded by **America**, "the crisis also generates significant effects on the daily lives of the population: disruption of economic activities, stigmatization of the sick and of survivors, and the fostering of fear and mistrust within communities."

The region's chronically weak health systems have, of course, made a terrible contribution to the accelerating crisis, he said. And misinformation and rumor-mongering are causing broad anxiety and provoking inappropriate responses that have contributed to the spread of Ebola.

"Fear is indeed prevalent within the communities—a reaction that is entirely understandable given the severity of Ebola virus disease," Father Makimba said.

People are wary of government health workers and suspicious of government edicts meant to contain the virus, he said. Some have turned to traditional treatments, distrustful of doctors and hospitals that have become associated with deaths of loved ones. Many persist with traditional burial practices that have helped spread the disease even more deeply into the community.

The Ebola virus is not airborne and is not transmitted by mosquito or contact with food or water. But the bodies of Ebola victims are highly infectious, with the virus remaining active in bodily fluids.

The World Health Organization first confirmed the outbreak with a declaration of a "public health emergency of international concern" on May 17. On May 26 the International Rescue Committee warned that the escalating outbreak threatened to become the deadliest Ebola crisis on record if the international community did not quickly step up its response.

The rare Bundibugyo strain of the virus currently circulating in D.R.C. and Uganda has neither a vaccine nor an established treatment regimen, Father Makimba said.

Much has already gone wrong during this outbreak, beginning with a long delay in recognizing that Ebola had been unleashed in sub-Saharan Africa. The affected communities are for the most part in the hands of rebel forces fighting the D.R.C. government, and the mining communities and outposts where Ebola is taking hold are crowded


OSV News photo/Reuters

Red Cross workers in Bunia, Congo, on May 26, bury Dr. Tibenderana Katho Blaise, who succumbed to Ebola after treating patients at the Centre Medical Evangelique.

with migrant workers, displaced people, truck drivers, sex workers and soldiers—people already on the move or ready to move. Many fear the true current count of the infected and the dead is well above the numbers so far confirmed or suspected by health officials.

Adding to the inadequate response has been a broad withdrawal of foreign assistance for medical care and civic development in places like the D.R.C. A historic collapse in such assistance began in January 2025 when President Donald Trump returned to Washington and began a wholesale demolition of the U.S. Agency for International Development.

"The abrupt cessation of international humanitarian aid—specifically the closure of certain U.S.A.I.D. services in 2025—has had a significant impact on the capacity to respond to the Ebola crisis," Father Makimba said.

"In practical terms, this has resulted in disruptions to the supply of essential medical equipment, a decline in prevention and community awareness activities, and a weakening of epidemiological surveillance mechanisms," he said. "Several local entities also lost indispensable technical support, which slowed down the rapid identification of cases and the implementation of coordinated response measures."

The State Department began funnelling resources into the region in May, including more than $162 million in direct assistance and an additional $50 million through the U.N. Central Emergency Response Fund to create six Ebola-response clinics and support 43 existing facilities.

The difficult terrain, dismal road systems and lack of security in the D.R.C. regions hardest hit by Ebola have also hampered the containment effort, according to Father Makimba. The D.R.C. has endured decades of conflict and disorder as scores of armed groups continue to battle over control of the mining of rare earth minerals essential in the production of computers, smartphones and other high-tech finished goods sold across the affluent world.

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

Irish parents are not ready to leave the church at the school gate


Schoolchildren attend Mass at St. Mary's Cathedral in Dublin on Nov. 14, 2025.

OSV News photo/courtesy Archdiocese of Dublin

In April the Irish government published the results of a national survey of 200,000 households that included children in denominational primary schools, asking parents what kind of education system they wanted. The results do not neatly fit a narrative of an unstoppable secularism in Ireland.

Headlines reported "large numbers" wanted a change, or what the Irish State calls divestment, a process that allows the transition of a local school to a different "patron" for its administration.

In fact 40 percent of Irish parents say they want to see divestment—a point emphasized by proponents of efforts to extract education from the Catholic Church's oversight. Less noted among Ireland's commentariat is the simple math that suggests a majority of parents want their children to continue to go to Catholic schools.

Why might a society that has so consistently sought to distance itself from Catholic influence at the polling booth remain hesitant about abandoning ecclesial patronage over the classroom?

Tom Carroll is a primary school teacher who serves as a teaching fellow in religious education at Mary Immaculate College in Limerick. For Dr. Carroll, the image of a defensive church hierarchy clinging to its hold over education is largely a myth.

Religious observance is generally declining, and immigration from other European nations, the Middle East and Africa is changing the Irish religious and demographic landscape. According to Dr. Carroll, as Ireland navigates an increasingly diverse population, Catholic leaders perceive that the common good would be best served by having a range of school patrons that more closely represents the society that is emerging.

Alan Hynes-Cendrzak is the chief executive of the Catholic Education Partnership, the umbrella body for Catholic education across Ireland. "We are aware now [that] we are in a situation where we've an increasing number of parents sending their children to Catholic schools, who actually wouldn't choose that education for the children [if they had a choice]," he explains. "We have no interest in having people feeling trapped within our schools."

While 69 percent of Irish people identified as Catholic in the most recent census, the church still controls almost 90 percent of the schools, an over-representation of Catholic school administration that is a side effect of how quickly Ireland has secularized. But it also reflects the fact that when communities are presented with the possibility of an ethos shift at their child's school, they often have reservations. Only 32 schools have shifted since the national education divestment program began in 2011.

While activists present divestment as a necessary step toward a more inclusive society, that tiny movement on school divestment suggests that many Irish parents do not agree. Mr. Hynes-Cendrzak notes that in school-change processes, "the parents who actively want change are often the most vocal and often the most engaged."

But as the process moves along, the perspectives of more parents have to be accounted for. Granting that there are "lots of different motivations for it," he thinks most people are simply comfortable with the status quo.

Dr. Carroll explains, "Academically, Irish schools are very strong. We have some of the highest figures in the world in terms of literacy and numeracy."

The results of the government's survey of parents suggest that different parts of Ireland hold different positions. In the wealthier suburbs of Dublin and Wicklow, support for multi-denominational schooling is high.

But along the rugged coastline in Donegal or in the farmland of Longford, support for a religious ethos in schools remains rock-solid, often exceeding 70 percent. In these communities, the Catholic school is not just a place to learn to read and write and do some sums; it is a hub for the community more important than the library, local pub or Gaelic Athletic Association club.

Still, the vision that motivates the church to pursue divestment is constructive. Leaving behind a situation where the church serves as the default provider of education for a population that is largely Catholic in name only opens up the possibility of parents being able to choose a Catholic education. As Dr. Carroll sees it, "you can have quality or quantity."

If the future of Irish education means fewer church schools, there is the hope that those that persist will be "even more intentionally Catholic."

Kevin Hargaden *contributes from Dublin.*

Jasmine Rose De Leon

In Taiwan, a tiny Catholic community seeks signs of sustainability

Each year, Catholics from all over Taiwan join the Madonna procession at the Wanjin Basilica of the Immaculate Conception in southern Pingtung County. Those joining the procession wave cheerfully at each other, gathering behind banners representing their home cities and counties in Taiwan—Taipei, Tainan and Kaohsiung among them. Conversations come to a halt when exploding firecrackers make talking impossible.

This veneration of Mary is one of the largest Catholic gatherings in Taiwan, held annually during the feast of the Immaculate Conception on Dec. 8. The large crowd belies the small number of the faithful in Taiwan, who make up about 1 percent of the population.

While most of the world is attentive to a kind of identity crisis that has bedeviled the relationship between mainland China and what Beijing considers its "breakaway province" of Taiwan, within Taiwan itself a small Catholic community struggles with its own identity challenges. Many Catholics here grimly assess the current state of the church in Taiwan as "perilous."

Lin Xuanhan, a Catholic from Tainan, took part in the procession for the first time in 2025. He said it shows how Catholicism is steeped in Taiwan's culture, as it incorporates the "Taiwanese style and Taiwanese emotional expressions of hospitality and welcome."

Some see in the procession parallels with the goddess Mazu, Taiwan's most prominent female deity. Believed to protect fishermen and bless families, she is honored in many folk ceremonies. During Mazu processions, locals crawl under the palanquin, the chair holding the Mazu statue, in the hope of receiving blessings.

"In Taiwan, many people practice a blend of Buddhism, Taoism and local folk traditions. They don't always identify strictly with one organized religion," Mr. Lin said. Some Taiwanese think Mother Mary is like Mazu, so followers of folk traditions respond to Marian processions with the same reverence.

In the past, some have crawled beneath the statue of Mary during the Wanjin procession in the hope of receiving a blessing from "Mazu."

"But that is forbidden now by the church authorities," Mr. Lin said.

There were about 13,000 Catholics in Taiwan when the country began receiving refugees fleeing civil war on the mainland in 1949. At the time, the Kuomintang-led government in Taipei cooperated with Catholic organizations like the Maryknoll Society to provide aid from the United States to the Taiwanese people, many of whom were deeply impoverished.

Twenty years later, after the arrival of more refugees from mainland China and a resurgence of foreign missionaries and aid groups who arrived to support the refugees, the number of Catholics in Taiwan had grown to 300,000.

Bishop John Baptist Huang Min-Cheng, O.F.M., of Tainan, who heads the youth committee of the Taiwanese bishops' conference, puts the current count of Taiwanese

The Madonna procession at the Wanjin Basilica of the Immaculate Conception in southern Taiwan

Catholics at about 230,000, making Catholics among the nation's smaller religious communities.

In a society that has rapidly changed since the late 1980s, when martial law ended and the country began democratization, a deep intergenerational divide has opened among Catholics in Taiwan. Fewer and fewer baptized young Catholics return to parish life after they finish school and reach adulthood, and even on many campuses, Catholic student groups have ceased activities.

"The church no longer speaks in a way that inspires the young," said Michael Chang, a Ph.D. student and teacher who has researched the Catholic Church for over 20 years. "A large number of young Catholics have left because they see too many contradictions. The church is deeply committed to works of charity, yet at the same time seems politically indifferent within Taiwan and often unwelcoming toward [L.G.B.T. people]."

Taiwan became the first country in Asia to legalize same-sex marriage in 2019. Many young people have reacted to the church's resistance to the law by accusing priests of intolerance.

Many missionaries and religious brothers and sisters believe young Taiwanese Catholics need greater accompaniment and community. Jean Dusanter, C.S.J., who served as the chaplain and director of the Tainan Youth Center for over seven years, said sponsoring such a youth and pastoral center is very important.

"I hear in the parishes [without pastoral centers] in Tainan, no one takes care of people who are new and talks to them and invites them to events," he said. "If you have this kind of center, it is a big strength."

Jasmine Rose De Leon *contributes from Taiwan.*

AP Photo/Alessandra Tarantino

"Magnifica Humanitas" is presented at the Vatican on May 25.

Jesuit Conference points Congress to Pope Leo on A.I. policy

The Jesuit Conference of Canada and the United States on June 2 addressed a letter to congressional leaders reviewing Pope Leo XIV's first encyclical, "Magnifica Humanitas," and its potential influence on the nation's policy on artificial intelligence.

Chris Kellerman, S.J., the secretary of the conference's Office of Justice and Ecology, told **America**: "We wanted to make a thorough but digestible guide for the policy measures that the pope was suggesting [in 'Magnifica Humanitas'] to give Congress a slightly easier way to access them than reading the whole thing."

Father Kellerman believes that there is a "real hunger" from lawmakers for the moral guidance that the church can provide on this issue. "A.I. develops at such a breakneck pace that things are constantly changing. These members of Congress, they're not experts on artificial intelligence." In short, he thinks, they are open to advice.

Unfortunately, much of the advice they hear now comes from A.I. entrepreneurs or heads of powerful corporations, Father Kellerman said. In this environment, the church's unique, unbiased voice is especially crucial.

"This encyclical comes at a great time, and we really believe at the conference that it could do a lot of good," Father Kellerman said.

His message to Congress includes calls for A.I. to "support the human person," "protect our common home," "protect children" and "help solve social inequality as opposed to exacerbating it." Father Kellerman said that "there are champions of these topics on both the right and the left, and we're trying to unite them and hopefully help change the legislative landscape such that some of these things are a no-brainer."

Father Kellerman noted that the conference will be looking to involve the Jesuit network in its advocacy efforts by setting up constituent-level meetings with Jesuit apostolates and sending out action alerts on legislative efforts aligned with the pope's principles.

"We really hope to get everyone involved," he said. "After all, Pope Leo wants this to be a collective building project—us rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem together."

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

ROMANISM&

The Catholic Church and the 13 colonies in 1776

By James T. Keane

What provoked the American Revolution?

Economic conflict, Enlightenment ideologies and historical trends aside, among the leading proximate causes were the Coercive Acts of 1774, a number of British parliamentary decrees that came to be known on this side of the pond as the "Intolerable Acts." The first four might fairly be considered revenge for the Boston Tea Party. First, the Boston Port Act authorized a blockade of Boston's harbor until the locals paid up for the losses incurred by the British East India Company; next, the Massachusetts Government Act and the Administration of Justice Act both severely curtailed the authority of local government in the colonies (including over trials); and then the Quartering Act required locals to pay for the lodging of British soldiers in the colonies.

A fifth act had little to do with Boston, at least as the British saw it: the Quebec Act of 1774. Concerned with the governance of New France after French territories in Canada were formally ceded to Great Britain in 1763, it established, among other concessions, the right of Catholics in British-occupied Canada to celebrate the sacraments and practice their faith freely.

This, in the eyes of the would-be revolutionaries to the south, was the most intolerable act of them all.

Looking to Canada

In October of that year—two years before the Declaration of Independence—the First Continental Congress en-

A U.S. flag outside Mary Immaculate Catholic Church in Dallas

OSV News photo/Carlo Allegri, Reuters

& REBELLION

dorsed what are known as the "Suffolk Resolves," one of which stated the case against the papists and their unlikely British enablers:

> That the late act of Parliament for establishing the Roman Catholic Religion and the French Laws in that extensive country now called Canada, is dangerous in an extreme degree to the Protestant religion and to the civil rights and liberties of all Americans; and, therefore, as men and Protestant Christians, we are indispensably obliged to take all proper measures for our security.

Those "proper measures" included an invasion of New France, which the colonials—led by Benedict Arnold, among others—attempted immediately.

The congressional delegates, meanwhile, expressed their dismay that the British should be so blind to the Romish enemy in their midst: "Nor can we suppress our astonishment that a British parliament should ever consent to establish in that country a religion that has deluged your island with blood, and dispersed impiety, bigotry, persecution, murder and rebellion through every part of the world," they declared in late 1774.

Though the would-be conquerors captured Montreal in late 1775, they were defeated at Quebec City soon after, and the arrival of British reinforcements in 1776 dashed any real hopes of a revolutionary military victory in Canada. In the spring of that year, Benjamin Franklin tried diplomacy instead, leading a delegation to Canada to coax the locals to join the American cause. He was joined by Charles Carroll, the prominent Maryland landowner and Catholic (the only

Catholics occupied a space in the American Protestant imagination far in excess of their physical presence.

one to sign the Declaration of Independence a few months later) and Samuel Chase. Franklin then invited Carroll's cousin, the Jesuit priest John Carroll, along as well.

John Carroll spoke French. More important, as a Jesuit (though the Society had been suppressed just three years before) and a prominent priest, he could appeal to Quebec's Catholic citizenry in a way that Franklin and his Protestant confreres obviously could not. Allies against the British were needed; suddenly the colonial concerns about a Romish faith known for its "impiety, bigotry, persecution, murder and rebellion" were no longer such an issue.

There is something quintessentially American about Franklin's embrace of *realpolitik* even as anti-Catholic sentiment still found a home among the revolutionary ranks. Is it just as American that as we celebrate the nation's semiquincentennial this summer, we barely remember the tumult noted above? A number of speakers at the "Rededicate 250" prayer service held on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., on May 17, for example, noted that a key principle of the revolutionary movement was freedom of religion.

No, it wasn't. Not for Catholics, anyway.

Comparisons and Contrasts

That forgotten history can feel all the more dissonant in the United States 250 years later because Catholicism has become so integral a part of our national life. Six of the nine Supreme Court justices in 2026 are Catholic; so too is the vice president, as was the previous president; the secretary of state is also a Catholic, as is around a third of President Donald Trump's cabinet. A former altar boy from Chicago's South Side is the pope. Catholics are the largest religious denomination in the United States, making up 22 percent of the population. (If counted as a denomination, the second-largest is former Catholics, at around 13 percent of the population.) It is a far different world from 1776.

According to the historian James T. Fisher, the population of the 13 colonies at the time of the Declaration of Independence was around 2.5 million, including half a million who were enslaved people. The vast majority of colonials were Protestant, though rather less churched than their descendants would prove to be; most historians estimate that around 15 to 17 percent of the population attended religious services regularly in the colonial era.

As for the Catholics, they were so few that they should have been all but invisible. Numbering around 25,000, they made up less than 1 percent of the population and were almost all in Pennsylvania and Maryland. Cities like Boston had almost no Catholics at all when battles like Bunker Hill were fought; the first public Mass was not celebrated there until 1788. The priest-historian Anthony Andreassi, C.O., noted recently in a series for OSV News that "the story of New England begins in a region that was, from the start, among the least welcoming places in early America for Catholics."

In the religious imagination of the 18th century, however, numbers could be trumped by reputation and rumor: Catholics occupied a space in the American Protestant imagination far in excess of their physical presence or access to avenues of authority. This was true in part because the original 13 colonies had neighbors on three sides where Catholics dominated the European-descended population, including Spanish Florida, the aforementioned Canada, French (then Spanish, then French) Louisiana and, more remotely, the Spanish Southwest. All had histories of Christian conquest and evangelization far more ancient than any tale of pilgrims building a city upon a hill; for example, Dominican friars were celebrating Mass in 1526 in a short-lived colony in what would become South Carolina—almost a century before the Mayflower landed at Plymouth Rock.

Even the American Indian populations bordering the colonies to the west and northwest were associated in the American Protestant imagination with Jesuit and Franciscan missionary efforts that began more than a century before. Jesuits like Jacques Marquette were traversing the Mississippi River in 1673, and Isaac Jogues died in what is now upstate New York in 1644.

Though the French Revolution—and all the tumult it brought to notions of government and right relationship with authority—was still more than a decade away at the time of the American Revolution, Catholics also already had the reputation of being hostile to Enlightenment notions of liberty current among the intelligentsia on both sides of the Atlantic. What use to the colonials were compatriots who, if successful in throwing off the yoke of a king, were probably plotting to bring the nation under the yoke of a pope?

This sentiment ran counter to the actual ideals of some well-known American Catholics, including the afore-

Soldiers in Revolutionary War uniforms participate in a military parade to commemorate the U.S. Army's 250th birthday in Washington, D.C., on June 14, 2025.

OSV News photo/Carlos Barria, Reuters

mentioned Charles Carroll, who favored the separation of church and state from an early hour. Decades after the war was over, he wrote the following to John Stanford, a prominent Baptist preacher:

> To obtain religious as well as civil liberty I entered jealously into the Revolution, and observing the Christian religion divided into many sects, I founded the hope that no one would be so predominant as to become the religion of the State. That hope was thus early entertained because all of them joined in the same cause, with few exceptions of individuals.

Even moments later celebrated as examples of religious harmony between Catholics and Protestants could include harsh notes of contempt. When John Adams joined George Washington in visiting some Catholic churches in Philadelphia in 1774, he found places like St. Mary's Church (which still has a plaque noting the occasion) beautiful—but the practices within appalling.

"The afternoon's entertainment was to me most awful and affecting; the poor Wretches fingering their beads, chanting Latin, not a Word of it they understood," Adams wrote to his wife, Abigail. The Mass included everything, he added, that "can charm and bewitch the simple and ignorant. I wonder how Luther ever broke the spell."

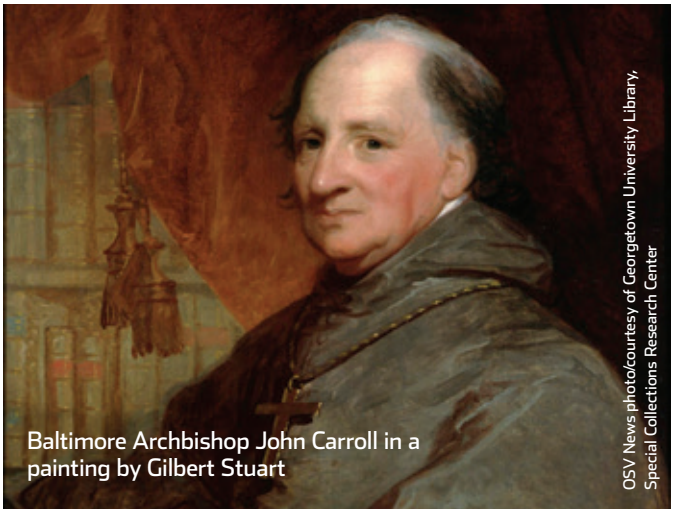
Adams was even more leery of the Jesuits, writing years later to Thomas Jefferson of his concerns after the Society of Jesus was officially restored. "Shall we not have swarms of them here, in as many shapes and disguises as ever a king of the gypsies," he wrote, "hiding in plain sight as printers, editors, writers and schoolmasters?"

"If ever any congregation of men could merit eternal perdition on earth and in hell," he added, "it is this company of Loyola."

Boots on the Ground

But what was the reality for Catholics themselves in the colonies in 1776? It varied from place to place, though most historians today would note that even in locales that cherish their long traditions of religious freedom—Pennsylvania, Maryland and Rhode Island chief among them—anti-Catholicism was an accepted part of the culture, part and parcel of what it meant to be an American. The great mid-century American Catholic historian Msgr. John Tracy Ellis noted that anti-Catholicism even served a unifying purpose among the Protestant denominations predominant in the colonies; nothing could unite an Anglican and a Puritan more. In his words, a "universal anti-Catholic bias was brought to Jamestown in 1607 and vigorously cultivated in all the thirteen colonies from Massachusetts to Georgia."

Catholics in Pennsylvania, where the religious toleration established by the Quaker William Penn in 1682 still had some traction into the 18th century, fared the best. In fact, the Jesuit church and parish established in 1733 near Independence Hall in Philadelphia, St. Joseph's, was for many years the only place in the English-speaking world where Mass could be celebrated publicly. The first Catholic



Baltimore Archbishop John Carroll in a painting by Gilbert Stuart

OSV News photo/courtesy of Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Research Center

OSV News photo/Union Energy

parochial school in the United States was also founded at nearby St. Mary's in 1782.

Maryland—founded by a Catholic, Cecil Calvert, who had been granted the territory by the king of England—was another early haven for Catholics, and also benefited somewhat from being the locus of activity for English-speaking Jesuits in North America during the 17th and 18th centuries. (The shameful history of the Jesuit treatment of enslaved people on their Maryland plantations was explored in depth in 2023 by Rachel Swarns in her book *The 272: The Families Who Were Enslaved and Sold to Build the American Catholic Church*.) The Maryland Toleration Act of 1649 even guaranteed religious freedom to "Trinitarian Christians" in the territory. As Father Andreassi has noted in OSV News, however, the English Civil War and the Glorious Revolution of 1689 in England hardened hearts against Catholics in British territories, and by the 18th century most Catholics were excluded from the colony's public life and restricted to worshiping in private.

Elsewhere in the colonies, Catholics were vastly outnumbered and usually politically marginalized. Laws in New England actually barred Catholics from settling in the colonies, and any priest in Massachusetts could technically be executed as "an enemy of the true Christian religion." In New York, where the massive influx of Catholic immigrants from Ireland, Germany and elsewhere that would remake New York City was still decades away, the public practice of the sacraments had been illegal for almost a century at the time of the Revolution. While these draconian restrictions were likely more honored in the breach in many places, their continued presence on the books is still notable.

Further south, Catholics in Virginia had experienced occasional moments of toleration in the 18th century, but there were few Catholic communities of note in 1776. Their numbers were even fewer in Georgia and the Carolinas—not more than several hundred—though the latter territories actually had a long history of Catholic presence far predating the establishment of the 13 colonies.

In addition to small numbers and political and economic marginalization, the Catholic Church throughout the colonies also suffered from a drastic shortage of clergy—and thus of access to the sacraments when they could be celebrated. When John Carroll was made bishop of the newly established Diocese of Baltimore (and thus of essentially the entire United States), he estimated in a letter to Rome that there were probably no more than 50 priests in the entire nation.

Lessons Learned

When we explore that history in the light of 250 years of history since, what reconsiderations might benefit our celebrations of 1776 throughout this year?

First, we might recognize that when we talk about American history being driven by the quest for religious freedom, we often are at best misremembering a nuanced past and at worst telling a lie. Freedom for me but not for thee, perhaps. While the Catholic Church gets a bum rap for refusing to accept religious freedom until the Second Vatican Council, its Protestant brethren—at least in the colonies—were no better, be they Puritan or Anglican or Presbyterian or otherwise. And one might ask: If Catholic colonists had been able to keep control of Maryland, would they have extended to their Protestant peers the religious freedom so cherished today? If anything, early American history is primarily marked by religious exclusion and intolerance in every corner of the colonies.

Second, while a number of Catholics played prominent roles in the Revolutionary War, including Charles, John and Daniel Carroll, Thomas Fitzsimons and Mary Waters of Philadelphia, and a number of important military commanders like Commodore John Barry and Stephen Moylan, it is also true that numerically, Catholics were a small

◄ The signature and portrait of Charles Carroll, in this circa-1876 montage of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. His image appears in the third column, second from the top.

part of the war effort. Some of the most comprehensive histories of the Catholic Church in the United States can tend toward a "Catholic contributions to the cause should not be underestimated" sentiment, but the names and places tend to repeat themselves. The postwar praises from figures like George Washington certainly do mention the valor and dedication of American Catholics, but they are also quick to note that the primary Catholic contribution to the war was, after all, the French Navy.

Third, the historical context of the war—and of those who waged it—deserves more consideration than we give it today. The revolutionary fervor of the colonials did not come out of nowhere; nor did it always survive past a generation. When the French Revolution began in 1789, it frightened the new American political class as much as it did their European peers—and perhaps more so the American Catholics, given that revolution's antipathy for the Catholic Church along with its other *bêtes noires*.

The historian Jay P. Dolan noted in *The American Catholic Experience* that after the French Revolution, Charles Carroll became "a classic example of a revolutionary gentleman who turned into a federalist aristocrat." The "anarchy and insurrection" of the French Revolution and its bloody aftermath also frightened his cousin John Carroll, the newly appointed first bishop of the United States. Federalism and respect for institutions became primary concerns for all of the new nation's powerbrokers, Catholics included, not necessarily the liberties held up in our celebrations and remembrances.

The Birth of the American Catholic

On the other hand, one element our celebrations probably have gotten correct is that the Revolutionary War did offer up a rationale for citizens of the new nation to find common cause with one another. The old adage that bonds are formed easier "shoulder to shoulder than face to face" fits American Catholicism in the post-Revolutionary period. The Catholic Church that emerged in the United States after the war was certainly far more independent of Europe than its pre-war version and more closely tied to American ideas of governance. Catholics largely accepted the American notion of separation of church and state (a concept condemned by popes for more than another century) and some congregationalist models of church governance like the election of bishops and priests' councils. Not all of that survived the next century, of course, but the church in the states after 1776 was certainly American as well as Catholic.

Catholics in the new nation gained notice across the Atlantic for being, well, too American.

So too did Catholics in the new nation gain notice across the Atlantic for being, well, too American: 19th-century prelates like Cardinal James Gibbons and Archbishop John Ireland were not afraid to assert their authority in struggles with Rome, and American intellectuals like Orestes Brownson and Isaac Hecker were so well known in Europe by the end of the 19th century that entire encyclicals were devoted to criticizing their thought under the rubric of "Americanism." (Not every nation has a heresy all its own!)

The participation of Catholics in the war effort also contributed to a sense that Catholics need not exist as a world apart from American society, and that it did not have to be the case that a secular democracy had to be opposed to the church. The experiment in, to quote Benjamin Franklin, "a republic, if you can keep it," would henceforth be both Protestant and Catholic. That would also prove important as the nation expanded rapidly in the 19th and 20th centuries and absorbed territories where Catholics outnumbered Protestants. As Archbishop William Lori of Baltimore once noted in **America** (January 2026), "faith can engage democracy—not by retreating from it, but by entering into it as leaven, conscience and companion."

Perhaps another prelate from Baltimore, the aforementioned John Carroll, should have the last word. The United States, he wrote after the war, had "banished intolerance from their systems of government" in part by giving everyone, regardless of creed, an equal right of participation in civic life. The war for independence played no small part in the creation of that shared ideal—if not always respected—of equal participation in the life of the nation. In Carroll's words: "Freedom and independence, acquired by the united efforts, and cemented with the mingled blood of protestant and catholic fellow-citizens, should be equally enjoyed by all."

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

MAJOR-LEAGUE MASS

When chaplains, players and staff gather for prayer, ballparks become cathedrals

By Jon Paul Morosi

Chicago's Wrigley Field, with its ivy-covered brick walls and lush green grass, is often described as a baseball cathedral. For 30 minutes each week, it becomes one.

When the Cubs play at home on a Sunday, Father Burke Masters celebrates Mass in Section 209, behind the home team dugout along the third base line. He stands before a simple altar—typically a folding table—and looks up into the stands at a congregation of 30 to 40 people, continuing a decades-long tradition of Masses in Major League Baseball stadiums.

Father Masters brings sacred liturgical vessels and linens from his home parish in Chicago's southwest suburbs: a simple crucifix, ciborium, chalice, corporal and missal, along with hosts and wine. As in many Catholic churches throughout the country, a printed worship aid guides the congregation through readings and prayers.

Mass begins about four hours before the first pitch is thrown. At that time, the only people with access to the ballpark are those working there: front office staff, team broadcasters, umpires, stadium vendors and the ballplayers themselves. When they attend Mass, they all sit together.

"It's beautiful, because in God's eyes, there's no difference," Father Masters says. "You see that we're all beloved children of God. The employees respect the players. They don't hound them for autographs."

With few exceptions, Major League teams make Sunday Mass available on home weekends during the season. A group called Catholic Athletes for Christ organizes the liturgies by communicating with clergy and laypeople in Major League cities.

During Cubs games, state-of-the-art scoreboards sizzle with sponsor messages and advanced statistics—familiar elements in the modern sports and entertainment experience. On Sunday mornings, sound systems remain quiet out of respect for a rite that predates the seventh-inning stretch by millennia.

"My favorite thing about going to Mass at the ballpark is that everyone is in their own uniform," says Mike Sweeney, the five-time Major League All-Star and current Kansas City Royals advisor. "The vendors have their uniforms on. You've got the umpires. You've got the Major

League players, the front office, the priest. We're all in our uniforms. The Holy Eucharist and the presence of a holy priest turn a baseball stadium into a cathedral every Sunday. And it's so unique to come into that cathedral and receive the Holy Eucharist alongside people you don't see on a daily basis—and people you might be playing against a few hours later."

Through Sweeney's description, we begin to understand the role of faith within a singular workplace in American culture.

'Hanging Out With Saints'

No professional sport in the United States requires more time on the clock than baseball during its regular season—162 games in 186 days. A Major League player could report to spring training in early February and have official work obligations every Saturday and Sunday through the end of the World Series in October. On the General Roman Calendar, the liturgical calendar of the Catholic Church, that can be every weekend from Ash Wednesday until All Saints' Day.

A typical Sunday game begins around 1 p.m. local time. A player's pregame routine—personalized workouts, team scouting meetings, batting practice—lasts several hours and begins while liturgies are underway elsewhere in town. Such is the spiritual life of the Catholic ballplayer: He cannot go to Mass, so Mass must come to him.

Sweeney lived that reality from his debut in 1995 until his final game in 2010. During his playing career and since, he has reflected on what it means to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.

To Sweeney, baseball is not an impediment to the practice of Catholicism. Rather, the game provides an opportunity to amplify his faith through the platform afforded to professional athletes.

"*Holy* means 'set apart,'" he explains. "As Major League Baseball players, we're called to set apart our time, to be different, to be filled with the Holy Spirit. On that Sunday, when we're fed with the Holy Eucharist, we become a walking tabernacle for Christ. In me, God chose a very imperfect vessel to carry his word forward."

Referring to 2 Corinthians, Sweeney says, "I want to spread the fragrant aroma of Christ when I walk into a ballpark."

Catholic Athletes for Christ was founded in 2006 in response to Pope John Paul II's establishment of the Vatican's Church and Sport Office (now part of the Dicastery for Culture and Education) two years earlier. While Masses at several ballparks predate C.A.C., the organization has standardized and supported the practice throughout the sport. By 2024, all 30 Major League clubs were regularly celebrating Catholic Masses at their home ballparks.

Yankee Stadium was among the first Major League stadiums to begin the tradition of Sunday Masses. The late Father Edward J. McMahon, a Jesuit for 66 years and a former U.S. Navy chaplain, served as the Yankees' celebrant for more than a decade.

Sweeney has fond memories of hearing two of baseball's most iconic voices serve as lectors at ballpark Masses: the Hall of Fame broadcaster Vin Scully at Dodger Stadium and the famed public address announcer Bob Sheppard at Yankee Stadium.

"It's not St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York, but I still feel like I'm in a different kind of cathedral," Sweeney explains. "At Yankee Stadium, I'd look around the room and see Joe Torre, Derek Jeter and Bernie Williams. It feels like I'm hanging out with saints."

In linking clergy with Major League clubs, Ray McKenna, the C.A.C. founder and president, prioritizes identifying priests who are familiar with baseball's every-

OSV News photo/Courtesy of the Chicago White Sox

A plaque dedicated to Pope Leo XIV was installed on a seat inside Rate Field, home of the Chicago White Sox. It marks where Pope Leo, then-Augustinian Father Robert Francis Prevost, sat when he watched the first game of the 2005 World Series.

day norms and nuances—including how players communicate with one another, in English and Spanish.

Oh, and there's another important consideration: efficiency. Because of a tightly scheduled pregame routine, Masses must fit into a 30-minute window.

That's right. Thirty minutes.

The sport that gave us the "pitch timer" has inspired the most succinct homilies you've ever heard.

"There's no music, unless we sing the psalm; that shortens things," Father Masters explains. "The homily is probably three minutes, versus maybe seven to 10 [at a typical Mass]. Communion for 40 people doesn't take too long. Everything else, we do. We recite the Gloria. We do all the readings. We recite the Creed, the intentions.

"For the Eucharistic prayer, I'll often do No. 2, which is the shortest one. You try to save a minute or two on everything, but it's tough. I love to preach, especially in that environment, but I have to bite my tongue sometimes and remember that they've got to get to work."

'A Tremendous Force'

Father Masters is the ideal celebrant for Masses at Wrigley. He grew up in Illinois before starring in baseball at Mississippi State University, where he hit the home run that clinched the Bulldogs' spot in the 1990 College World Series.

He had dreamed of being a professional baseball player or executive, but discerned a different path after he was not selected in the Major League Baseball draft. He entered the seminary in Mundelein, Ill., in 1997 and was ordained to the priesthood five years later for the Diocese of Joliet.

Because roughly one-third of all Major League players speak Spanish, Father Masters's bilingual capacity is more important than his knowledge of how to hit a curveball. He studied Spanish in high school and college, but did not become fluent until a parishioner from a majority-Spanish-speaking congregation tutored him. "I'm so grateful," he says. "It's opened up another world. You think of all the Spanish speakers in the world I can communicate with now and share the Gospel with. I see God's hand through all of that." He now serves as the pastor at St. Isaac Jogues in Hinsdale, Ill., about 30 miles from the iconic ballpark where he has celebrated Sunday Mass for 13 years.

"My first Mass there, it was me and one player—and he was a new convert, so he didn't know the prayers," Father Masters recalls with a laugh. "Little by little, word got out, but I'm amazed there are still people who are surprised that there's Mass there. When they find out, then they want to come."

When the Cubs and New York Mets agreed to a blockbuster trade on July 30, 2021, many fans and baseball analysts focused on the departure of the Cubs' All-Star shortstop Javier Báez. A different aspect of the deal was most relevant to the Wrigley Mass: The pitcher Trevor Williams, a devout communicant and trusted lector, also went to New York in the deal.

Dennis Baker, S.J., celebrates Mass for the Baltimore Orioles at Camden Yards in Baltimore, Md., in 2024.

Fortunately, Father Masters has some mainstays on his own Sunday roster. "One of the vendors, he sells adult beverages at the ballpark," Father Masters says, smiling. "He's our sacristan.... He'll be the Eucharistic minister for the cup, as well."

Attendance increases when the Cubs enjoy postseason success, illustrated by a memorable series of events in the autumn of 2016. With the team seeking its first World Series title in more than a century, Miguel Montero delivered a pinch-hit grand slam in Game 1 of the National League Championship Series on a Saturday night. Before the next day's game, Montero attended Mass outdoors; a large media throng was there early and took notice.

"I felt so bad for him, because normally there's no press there for Mass," Father Masters recalls. "But it was a huge game, and he had just hit a grand slam. When he came up for Communion, there were cameras all over. I apologized to him afterward, and he's like, 'No, I'm used to that.' But that made the media aware of Mass at the ballpark. We had an uptick after that experience for sure."

While the end of the Cubs' century-long championship drought with their 2016 championship inspired countless prayers to forbearance—and eventual gratitude—the first American pope is a supporter of their crosstown rivals.

Sunday Mass has been said at the Chicago White Sox home ballpark since long before Robert Francis Prevost—a lifelong fan of the team—became Pope Leo XIV. The tradition there dates back roughly a quarter-century, thanks to the late White Sox broadcaster Ed Farmer and Bobby Bertucci, co-owner of the Baseball Buffet, an in-stadium food service vendor.

Bertucci was a close friend of the late White Sox fan Ed Schmidt, who attended the 2005 World Series with Pope Leo, as documented in a widely viewed photograph. Bertucci still wonders if he talked baseball with the future pope during one of the Holy Father's visits to the ballpark during that era.

Catholic players take active roles in ensuring Masses are available across the Major Leagues. When the veteran pitcher Nick Martinez became aware that the Yankee Stadium Mass needed a priest to fill in several years ago, he reached out to Dennis M. Baker, a Jesuit priest whom Martinez had befriended while in college at Fordham University in the Bronx. The relief appearance, if you will, led to another opportunity: After Father Baker became president of Loyola Blakefield, a Jesuit college prep academy outside Baltimore, he accepted the invitation to celebrate Mass on a weekly basis at Oriole Park at Camden Yards.

"I've said Mass in lots of interesting places—on beaches, in people's homes, big cathedrals—but an auxiliary clubhouse in a big-league park is one of the more unique settings," Father Baker says. "The players come in, just wearing T-shirts and shorts and shower shoes. But there's something about the stillness of it all, before the busy day of a big-league game, that is cool."

During the prayers of the faithful, Father Baker is mindful to include an intention for those "who bring the game to us, especially behind the scenes."

The sport that gave us the 'pitch timer' has inspired the most succinct homilies you've ever heard.

"When [we] go to a game, we often don't think of all the people who have to haul the trash, or cook the food, or pick up all those peanuts and wipe all the seats down," Father Baker says. "You might see some workers, like the grounds crew or a cameraman or a cop. But it takes this tremendous force to bring the game to us. And it's important that we don't forget that."

'A Silent Strength'

The Arizona Diamondbacks strengthened their Sunday Mass tradition last year at the suggestion of Rolando Valles, a native of Venezuela who is in his fourth season on the team's coaching staff. Sunday Masses are celebrated across the hallway from the team's locker room, in an area reserved for manager Torey Lovullo's postgame news conferences.

Last year, the team's players and coaches made up the congregation. Beginning this season, the invitation has been extended to team operations and clubhouse staffs. "I think it's great, because it doesn't matter who you are," says the pitcher Brandon Pfaadt, who attended Bellarmine University in Louisville, Ky., before the Diamondbacks drafted him in 2020. "We're all human beings. We're all there for the same reason. It's great that we opened it up to everybody. More people are going to be able to come and enjoy it as one."

Early in his career, Sweeney went to Sunday services through Baseball Chapel, an interdenominational Christian organization and the most widely attended program among Major League players. Baseball Chapel was founded in 1973 and has a formal relationship with M.L.B. to operate in all 30 stadiums and across the minor leagues, as well.

Steve Sisco, the former Major League player and president of Baseball Chapel, believes that baseball's daily, communal nature creates an ideal environment for players to share their faith with one another.

"They do life together every single day," Sisco says. "They're playing. They're eating. They're on buses. They're on planes. They're in hotels, bullpens, dugouts, clubhouses.... When you are at a church in civilian life, we'll call it, they compartmentalize: I've got home life, church life, work life. In the game, especially during the season, it's just life.

A mural dedicated to Pope Leo XIV, alongside a "Pope Leo No. 14" Chicago White Sox jersey, is unveiled in Section 140 of Rate Field, the White Sox's ballpark, in Chicago, on May 19, 2025.

It's what they do. And so to integrate discipleship-minded walk, or ministry, just makes sense, because you're supposed to be doing life together."

The former Major League infielder Jamey Carroll attended Baseball Chapel throughout his professional career and says the services offered reminders to "slow our heartbeats down a little bit and look into the gratitude of the gifts and blessings we're sitting in front of. That is needed during the chaos of the season, the pressures of performing, and being away from family.... I look back on it now, after all these years, and realize what a great opportunity that was. Having that provided was a silent strength."

Sweeney's outreach to Catholic Athletes for Christ resulted from his desire to bring the sacramental experience of a Catholic Mass into the ballpark. Because of his current front office role with the Royals, Sweeney spends a lot of time with the team's current players. He's been present while All-Star shortstop Bobby Witt Jr., a recently confirmed Catholic, served as a lector. He's also heard former Royals pitcher Angel Zerpa read Scripture in Spanish.

Sweeney has a vivid recollection of attending Mass one Sunday at Boston's Fenway Park. Father Paul O'Brien served as the celebrant, as he has for a galaxy of Major League stars at Fenway since 2001. The Harvard-educated Father O'Brien is credited with helping to reinvigorate the Catholic community in Lawrence, Mass., where he has been pastor at St. Patrick Parish for a quarter-century. On this particular Sunday at the ballpark, however, only one other person attended along with Sweeney: then-Red Sox


OSV News photo/Courtesy of the Chicago White Sox


Courtesy of Father Burke Masters

Bishop James Wall of the Diocese of Gallup, left, celebrates Mass with Father Burke Masters of the Diocese of Joliet at Wrigley Field in Chicago on June 1, 2025. Father Masters is Catholic chaplain to the Chicago Cubs.

first baseman Sean Casey.

"We had Mass in a little closet, in this ballpark that was built in the early 1900s," Sweeney says. "I kept thinking, 'This is awesome. It feels like I'm in the Book of Acts and the early church.' These are things that have changed my life."

Today, Baseball Chapel and Catholic Athletes for Christ operate in parallel to meet the spiritual needs of players. A typical Baseball Chapel service is centered on Scripture reading and chaplain-led conversation for M.L.B. players and staff. Gatherings tend to be small, in part because the forum is designed for attendees to open up about their spiritual lives away from the field.

"You learn what people are going through," says Detroit Tigers power hitter Kerry Carpenter, who has attended Baseball Chapel since 2021. "There are times in my career and my life where it's like, 'I need to tell people what's going on, so people can pray for me or encourage me.' Then we can encourage them and pray for other people.

"You get to know under the hood what's going on, because you never know when you're out there. It looks like everyone's living the dream on the field, but sometimes you're not in a good place mentally, spiritually, which I've been there a lot."

In many instances, there are four Baseball Chapel services in every ballpark—separately for home and road teams, in English and Spanish. Ramón Urías, the St. Louis Cardinals infielder from Magdalena de Kino, Mexico, attends every week. "It's the most important thing in the world to me—God first, and then everything else," Urías says. "This keeps you grounded and helps you try to enjoy your life."

At Mass and Baseball Chapel alike, there's an effort to avoid praying for victory. Instead, Carpenter prays to be filled with the peace of Christ. He says that when he experiences that, he has the best chance to calm his mind and prepare to do something very difficult: hit a baseball squarely when it's zooming toward him at 100 miles per hour.

"It starts with my quiet time that I spend with Jesus in the morning," Carpenter says. "I have these affirmations I write down that are rooted in God's word. That's the way he frees me every day. He gives me peace every day. I wouldn't even be able to go out there [on the field] without him.

"I did it in my own power for a long time. Having the peace now, it's pretty special to go out there and play like that. I pray that he gets all the glory for that. It's an amazing feeling. That's what I want everybody else to feel: that peace."

Many American Catholics wonder if Pope Leo will one day celebrate Mass before tens of thousands in a Major League Baseball stadium. When considering that every M.L.B. stadium already is a place of Catholic worship, it's not difficult to imagine. We'll just have to advise M.L.B. teams to adjust their pregame schedules—otherwise, who will inform the Vatican of that 30-minute time limit?

Jon Paul Morosi *is a Michigan-based sports journalist and on-air personality for the MLB Network.*

On Good Soil

The crucial, quiet work of the Catholic Migrant Farmworker Network

By Helene Stapinski

In a large field in Michigan, spring has arrived. After a long, cold winter, the sweet cherry trees are beginning to bud, and the strawberries will soon ripen. Beneath a tall, bare silver maple sit five migrant farm workers, several members of the clergy and some laypeople who have come to visit this camp to eat together and talk.

The visitors are from the Sembrador Leadership Program, (which in Spanish means "seed planter"), a program started by Tom Florek, S.J., under the umbrella of the Catholic Migrant Farmworker Network. The 75-year-old Jesuit is the executive director of the C.M.F.N., a national nonprofit made up of 40 dioceses that minister to the thousands of people who grow our food, raise our farm animals and milk our cows.

On this warm Thursday night in March, Father Florek—a tall, white-haired man with glasses and an easy smile, dressed in jeans, sneakers and a light puffer coat—is sitting among the Mexican workers at an outdoor table with Father Mike McAndrew, 78, a Redemptorist priest from Kansas City. They have come to share not only chicken tacos, rice and beans, but also the stories of the workers gathered here tonight.

One man from Chiapas traveled to Michigan while his wife was pregnant, so that he could earn money to support his growing family. He has yet to meet his only child, a girl named Pearl. Another man speaks about traveling up from Florida to work here after the cabbage harvest there ended. "Here," he says, looking around at the orchard, "there is more work." Another man labored in construction back in Mexico, but the jobs were sporadic and eventually dried up, so he came north. He has just missed his daughter's quinceañera celebration in Mexico.

Whether or not they reside legally in the United States, the fear of being abducted by local police or Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents is palpable among the group gathered—so palpable that migrant workers rarely leave their modest tract housing, called camps. The Catholic Migrant Farmworker Network, with the help of dozens of lay volunteers called accompaniers, delivers food and clothing but also offers community, conversation and catechism. Isolation and loneliness have become the norm among migrant workers on American farms.

Adding to the isolation is an increase in the H-2A program, which offers legal, temporary visas to mostly male migrants for short, seasonal work. The abundance of these visas drives down the pay rate for year-round workers. Year-round work now pays around $14 per hour, down from a onetime high of $19 per hour for backbreaking labor in often harsh weather conditions. H-2A workers are usually in the United States without their families and toil from 7 a.m. to midnight. In the past, accompaniers from the C.M.F.N. often worked with whole families, visiting children while their parents worked in the fields. But accompaniers are seeing fewer and fewer farmworkers who live with their families.

Father Florek says that some farm owners offer the workers access to alcohol and women but make no effort to provide any true comfort. In one camp in Ohio, he says, the owners don't even let the workers play soccer on their days off for fear they will be injured and will not be able to fulfill their contracts.

"The workers use the word *dehumanization*. [They tell

All photos by Lisa Bauso

Father Tom Florek gathers with C.M.F.N. accompaniers, families and farm workers before an outdoor supper.

us:] 'They treat us less than human,'" says Father Florek. "Like animals. In some places it's difficult even to get in to visit them. The owners are suspicious, even of the Catholic Church. We're seeing more and more of that, especially with this administration."

After dinner, Veronica Rodriguez, the 48-year-old coordinator for the Ministry to Neighbor program in her Michigan diocese, passes out rosary beads, Bibles and prayer cards with the help of her sons, husband and mother. Ms. Rodriguez—whose reserved, quiet strength balances Father Florek's resounding voice and outgoing nature—helped create the Sembrador pilot program here four years ago. The project has now spread to Yuma, Ariz., and is sprouting in upstate New York; Raleigh, N.C.; Monterey, Calif.; and Richmond, Va.

As a rooster crows and the sun sinks farther on the horizon, the priests lead the group in a Hail Mary and bless them with holy water. The men humbly bow their heads. "It's a great thing," the former construction worker softly says, "to hear the word of God."

Father Florek, the grandson of an immigrant Polish farmer, has spent his life getting to know workers both in Mexico and on the U.S. side of the border. He grew up the youngest of four in Oshkosh, Wis., and attended Dominican College in Racine, Wis., traveling to Mexico through a summer program his senior year. He returned to Mexico as a Fulbright scholar in 1974, and when he got home, joined the Jesuits to serve the migrant community. "Mexico for me has been a university," he says, "for language, culture and for my personal development."

He has taught at the university level, was a conscientious objector during the Vietnam War and has spearheaded a lay formation institute serving Latino immigrants in the Midwest, called the Instituto Cultural de Liderazgo en el Medioeste (the Midwest Hispanic Leadership Institute). Most recently, Father Florek worked with *Centros de Investigación y Acción Social*, a Jesuit human rights group, for a year and a half in Mexico, helping to rebuild the social fabric in conflicted areas affected by drug cartels and gang violence. When he was recruited as executive director of the now-40-year-old Catholic Migrant Farmworker Network in 2020, he moved back to the Chicago area, settling in a home with five other Jesuits in Evanston.

Father Florek created the Sembrador program to facilitate the network's mission, calling on parishes to fill the pastoral and practical gaps that clergy cannot, and began a national conference in Chicago to confront the difficulties faced by migrant farm workers from coast to coast (and from the Canadian to the Mexican borders) and to share resources among lay leaders in the field. The conference, which will hold its third meeting this August, is called Vayan y Den Fruto—"Go and Bear Fruit"—after the biblical call to God's people that St. Ignatius often repeated.

'Know You're Not Alone'

Two years ago, Carmen Valenzuela, director of Hispanic ministry at Holy Family in Fond du Lac, Wis., was invited to attend the network's five-day annual conference at Loyola University Chicago. But Ms. Valenzuela did not want to go. "I looked for others to go instead of me," she says. She didn't feel worthy, or didn't feel that she belonged with the three dozen other leaders from around the nation who were meeting to share their information and inspiration. When she mentioned the trip to her father, Alfredo González, who is a farmer in Mexico, he encouraged her to go. "'You grew up in Mexico in the fields. It's in your blood,' he told me."

As a child, Ms. Valenzuela would sit on her father's lap as he drove the tractor for planting and harvesting corn in the farming town of Porte Suelo (in English, "Gate to Heaven"). So she packed her bags and went to Chicago. What she saw changed her life and the lives around her.

‘This community made me who I am.’


Tom Florek, S.J.


Veronica Rodriguez helped create the Sembrador pilot program in Michigan through the Catholic Migrant Farmworker Network.

“I saw the good work everyone was doing,” she says. “I saw what was possible.” Through the network, she learned not only to provide legal help but how to provide medical and dental care and prescriptions to the migrant laborers—mostly from dairy farms—in her region. One of the workers needed heart surgery but didn’t have insurance. “He already had thousands of dollars in bills,” she says. Through a local clinic and the contacts Ms. Valenzuela has made, he was able to schedule surgery. Since last year, Ms. Valenzuela has watched him and 50 others “get better right in front of my eyes,” she says.

At San Felipe de Jesus Church in Fennville, Mich., Father Florek is dressed in a simple white robe and purple stole, celebrating Mass with Alberto Rivera, a Puerto Rican deacon and psychiatrist. The church, with its small indoor shrine to Our Lady of Guadalupe, is located in a one-story, pre-fab steel structure that, from the outside, looks like an industrial building or a small airplane hangar.

Inside are two groups: the accompaniers, many of them dressed in red or white T-shirts that bear the name of their parishes, and migrant workers, all of them young men, dressed in jeans or sweatpants, hoodies and baseball caps. Though the majority of the accompaniers are Catholic, a few are from different denominations. Everyone is welcome.

Two young sisters from Colombia dressed in light brown habits play guitar and lead the group of 50 in singing “Juntos Como Hermanos” (“Together Like Brothers”). The first reading is from Isaiah 49, which speaks of God’s compassion for those in exile, protecting them from the sun and scorching winds, sating their hunger and thirst. The Gospel is from John, where Jesus says, “My father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working.”

In his sermon, Father Florek tears up as he thanks the workers for their labor in the fields. “You’re helping us as a nation,” he says in Spanish, his hand on his heart. “When you’re working alone, listen to God’s voice inside you and let him embrace you. Know you’re not alone.”

Before Mass is over, he invites everyone up to the altar to form a circle and join hands. Many of the accompaniers here—ranging in age from 15 years old to their 80s—are former farm workers who grew up in the fields themselves. Now they tend to 300 migrant camps throughout the area.

Their leader, Veronica Rodriguez, who grew up picking blueberries, strawberries, apples and grapes, came with her family from Texas at 14 with her single mother when her father died. She went to college and worked as an accountant before joining the migrant ministry in her Michigan church.

“This community made me who I am,” she says. “A mentor came to visit us when I was young and helped me study. So I’m trying to give a little bit back. I may not be rich money-wise, but I’m rich when it comes to my heart.” Her job is not only to work with the migrants but to gain the trust of the foremen and owners so they’ll allow her team to visit the workers regularly.

But Ms. Rodriguez says it’s most important to prepare accompaniers for what they will see when they visit the fields or camps, whether it is a worker with a broken leg or simply a broken spirit.

“We’re preparing them for the worst,” she says. “We need them to be a stable presence. You need to be their strength. If you want to cry when you get home, that’s OK. But when they’re crying to you, you want to be a comfort.”

Her associate, Angelica Valdes, says there were times when they visited camps where there was one bathroom for 20 workers, or the only showers were a mile away, or screens were missing from camp windows.

“It’s shocking sometimes,” adds Ms. Rodriguez, “the conditions they’re living under. But you have to be the eyes and ears of the workers. And you have to be emotionally strong to handle it.”

A Two-Way Street

One of the sisters, Leidy Johanna Zuñiga, says it’s the accompaniers’ job to minister to the needs of the workers, but

Tom Florek, S.J., celebrates Mass for farmworkers and volunteers in San Felipe de Jesus Church in Fennville, Mich.

often it's the workers who minister to them. "It's a two-way street," says Sister Zuñiga, of Colombia's Missionary Servants of the Divine Spirit. "When you go to a camp at the end of the day, people are very tired from a long day's work. But they receive us with open arms and hospitality. They will cook for us. They take care of us and attend to us. We get as much as we give."

Maria Elena Bucio, an accompanier from Chicago who has been volunteering in the church since she was 12 years old, has been working with her diocese in Michigan for the past decade. "Just to see the expression on people's faces when we knock on their door is a motivation for us," she says. "They love to welcome us and even prepare meals for us because food is a very important part of the visit and of our culture."

Father Florek, who likes to deflect any attention from his work to shine a light on those around him, says he was reluctant to take this job. "You reach a point in life, and you know what you have to do," he says. "I knew this job would involve a lot of time behind a desk. I didn't want to do it at first, but I said, 'I'm going to do it.'" One of his gifts is hiring the right people to help him with his ministry. Whenever he mentions another fellow traveler, he says, "She gets it." Or "he gets it."

Mariana Miller, a former nun from Argentina who works at Loyola as assistant dean for continuing education, has raised funding for the annual Catholic Migrant Farmworker Network conferences there in Chicago. She is one of the people—like Ms. Valenzuela, Ms. Rodriguez, Father McAndrew and Deacon Rivera—who "gets it," says Father Florek.

Ms. Miller, 58, has known Father Florek for four years and is the newest member of the network's 10-person board. She admires him for his energy and organizational skills, but also for his humility.

"He doesn't wear a collar," she says. "He's not starched. Everybody loves him and he absolutely loves all these communities. He believes in the work that he does empowering them not just in the growth of their faith, but in their citizenry, their dignity, their rights."

Last year, she says, Father Florek met with dairy farm owners, many of them politically conservative, on a trip to Mexico; they were there to visit the villages and the families of their workers. They climbed the mountains into these villages and were greeted by their workers with open arms, like family.

"These farm owners discovered these people's dignity," she says. "That's huge. That's transformational. The most important thing for us Catholics is that everyone has a God-given dignity."

Helene Stapinski *is a journalist and the author of four books, including her most recent,* The American Way: A True Story of Nazi Escape, Superman and Marilyn Monroe, *released by Simon & Schuster in 2023.*

A.I. and the Human Person

A theologian surveys Pope Leo XIV's 'Magnifica Humanitas'

By Thomas Massaro

The extensive coverage in the Catholic press of Pope Leo XIV's first encyclical was hardly surprising. Particularly impressive, however, was how much interest and coverage the document garnered in the *secular* media. Within hours, publications, websites and media outlets around the world posted, printed and broadcast substantial treatments of "Magnifica Humanitas."

The day after the encyclical dropped, The New York Times featured two separate articles on it. News analyses and op-eds from all over the religious and ideological spectrum followed in rapid succession. So much to read at such a pivotal time!

Whether or not one fully approves of the overall message and project of Leo, it is undeniable that the American pontiff took head-on the task suggested by the document's subtitle: "On the Safeguarding of the Human Person in the Time of Artificial Intelligence." To be a constructive force, A.I. requires a steady human hand to guide and direct it, providing guardrails so that it does not further concentrate economic and political power in fewer and fewer hands. Ever the deliberate moral leader, Leo draws measured judgments about the features, promises and risks associated with the advanced technology revolution that is rapidly reshaping the ways we communicate, work and govern.

Should anyone need a reminder that the use of technology involves moral questions beyond mere technical ones, Leo makes his argument in a firm and forthright way: Artificial intelligence must be made to serve humanity and its noble ways of working and loving; algorithms must not be allowed to foster exclusion, domination and armed conflict. In style, Leo splits the difference between the idealism of prophetic witness and the realism of prudent attention to the workings of established institutions, ever eager to respect the inherent tensions between these two poles of accustomed papal discourse.

Like Pope Francis before him (who in "Laudato Si'" warned of the serious shortcomings of a narrow technocratic rationality), Pope Leo is not anti-tech in any simple sense. Rather, he acknowledges numerous nuances of the contemporary challenge to hold scientific advances to standards of moral accountability. He affirms that "technology should not be considered, in itself, as a force antagonistic to humanity," but he cautions against warped priorities such as "the pursuit of greater profits [that] cannot justify choices that systematically sacrifice jobs."

Above all, Leo is keen to highlight the many ways in which even the most advanced artificial intelligence remains fundamentally different from humanity—lacking sentience and unable ever to substitute for such wonders as human creativity, care and love. "So-called artificial intelligences do not undergo experiences, do not possess a body, do not feel joy or pain, do not mature through relationships and do not know from within what love, work, friendship or responsibility mean," he writes.

Humanity is, well, magnificent—in ways that are unique. Our tools cannot hold a candle to our souls and our God-given dignity.

Making serious moral interventions by warning of new threats to human dignity has been part of the papal playbook for at least 135 years, ever since the previous Pope Leo (XIII, that is) laid out in 1891 a variety of moral concerns associated with the Industrial Revolution of his time: starvation wages, long and inflexible working hours, dangerous working conditions, and the inability for workers to benefit from collective bargaining with their greedy employers.

The new challenges wrought by rapid advances in artificial intelligence are even more dire, and even more urgently in need of moral guidance. Following the pattern of social encyclicals in general, Leo is not so much providing hard-and-fast conclusions regarding specific programs


CNS photo/Lola Gomez

Pope Leo XIV's first encyclical, "Magnifica Humanitas: On Safeguarding the Human Person in the Time of Artificial Intelligence," was released on May 25.

of robust regulation and safeguards as he is raising salient questions regarding the values that should inform our collective responses to the introduction of new technologies that radically change the shape of our world.

Leo's project is to help us form our consciences on how we will opt to relate to new technologies—in the workplace, in schools, in our choices in civic life and even entertainment. To invoke a paired set of verbs employed to good effect by St. John Paul II, Leo seeks to *propose* constructive approaches, not to *impose* pre-packaged solutions to new social challenges.

Whatever shortcomings surface in this document pertain to its ambition and sheer length; perhaps Pope Leo is simply trying to accomplish too much and at greater length (42,000 words, in 245 paragraphs, with 224 footnotes) than would be optimal. But that also might lead us to two further reflections on the nature of the document.

First, Leo spends about 60 paragraphs recounting the inheritance of previous Catholic social doctrine, surveying the tradition document by document and then going back over much of the same ground theme by theme. Popes certainly do love to demonstrate the continuity of their teachings with previous expressions, but Leo is not merely clearing his throat while rehearsing the contributions of his predecessors. His long review of where the church has been on "the social question" provides him with leverage to launch his critique of the potential deleterious effects of artificial intelligence if it is not contained by prudent guardrails. Along the way, he explains highly relevant principles such as subsidiarity, social solidarity, integral human development and the universal destination of created goods—each of which should play a key role in guiding our conscience in the project of restraining new technologies. It takes considerable space to develop these points of course, and we should all join Leo in hoping that his readers will muster the patience to stay with the long arc of his arguments.

Second, lengthy documents like "Magnifica Humanitas" exhibit a tendency to bury some of the best material in a prolonged flurry of words. Early commentators on the text have been astonished by two momentous messages that deserve particular attention. One is the pope's calling just war theory "outdated." This represents a significant development in how the church expresses its longstanding opposition to war, though still signaling in the text a continued recognition of the right to self-defense. The second startling message is a full-throated apology (and direct request for forgiveness) for the centuries-long role of the Catholic Church in enabling (and even promoting) the slave trade and the practice of chattel slavery.

Each represents a significant further development of previous papal positions, stated with more directness and conviction than ever before, and each surely deserves its own papal document. Both are indeed related to the main thrust of an encyclical on the moral challenges raised by technologies that bring the risk of an escalation of uncontrollably lethal warfare and threaten to introduce new types of modern-day slavery. But, as compelling as those linkages surely are, the placement of these historic statements in the latter sections of this very long text has the unfortunate effect of diminishing their impact.

But what of the encyclical's larger impact? Leo certainly recognizes that rapid technological advances have a way of unleashing disruptive forces upon all they touch. For human societies to adapt successfully and to minimize the resultant harm, robust regulation needs to be conceived and enacted. While no religious leader can singlehandedly design and mandate detailed policies regarding A.I., Leo came into the papacy well positioned to be the moral leader we sorely need at this pivotal moment. He is fortunate to have inherited two promising assets.

The first is an admirable seriousness of purpose and ethical orientation informed by his Augustinian spiritual roots. The second is a full decade of serious Vatican study and consideration of these very matters. The momentum toward full attention to moral alignment in tech policy that was kicked off by Pope Francis in the early years of his own papacy has continued with the publication of such recent Vatican documents as "Quo Vadis, Humanitas?" and "Antiqua et Nova."

The Holy See has already announced the creation of a commission of senior Catholic officials from several dicasteries to continue the study and conversation regarding the challenges posed by A.I. Perhaps future rounds of church deliberation on advanced information technologies will specify the meaning of Leo's provocative call in the encyclical to "disarm A.I." All this bodes well for further momentous social teachings in the course of Leo's papacy in the years ahead.

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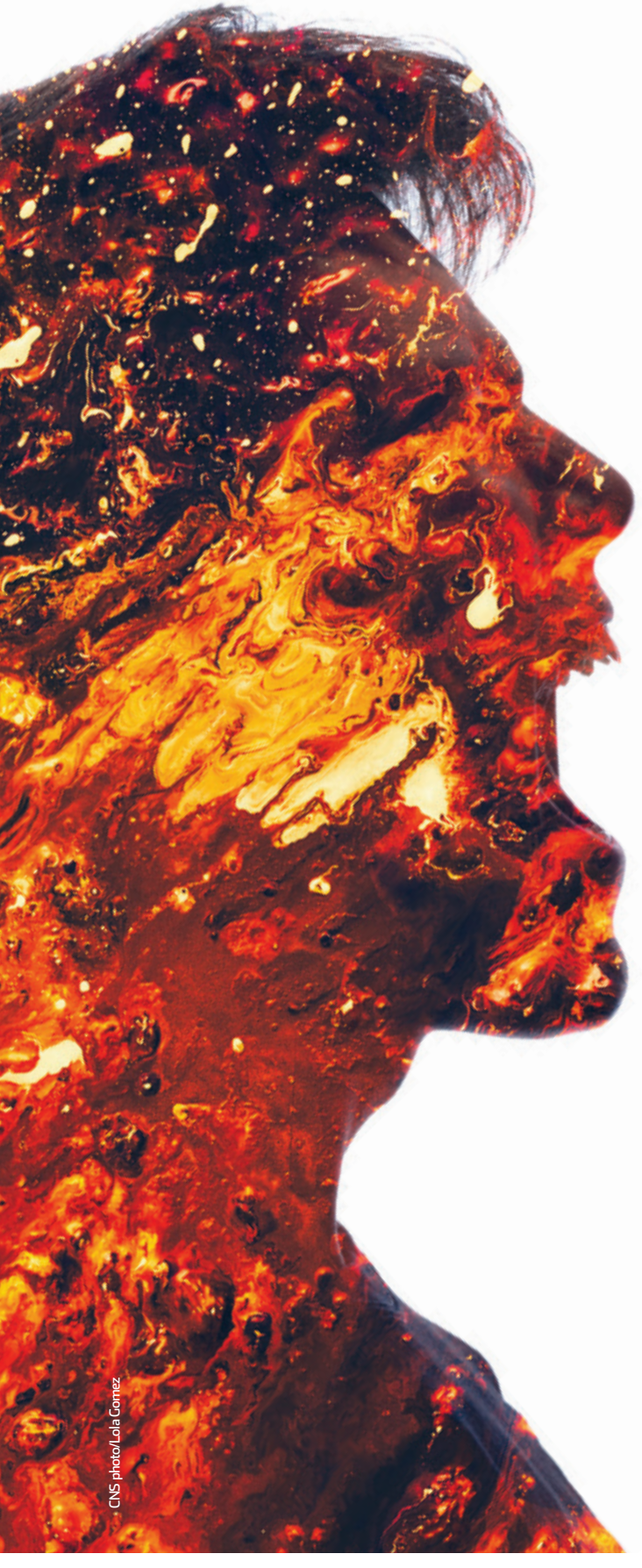

CNS photo/Lola Gomez

Faith, Morality and the Manosphere

A forum on male grievance and belonging

Introduction by Brent Howitt Otto

Over the past generation, surveys, studies and anecdotal evidence have all shown that the Catholic Church—and Christian churches more broadly—are experiencing a measurable decline in their influence over the moral formation of young men.

Church attendance among young adults is far lower than among older generations. The Pew Research Center reports that only about a quarter of Americans in their 20s attend religious services monthly, compared with over 40 percent of seniors. Among Catholics, more young adults have left the church than have entered it. And in many parishes, the sacrament of confirmation effectively functions as a ritual of graduation from church life rather than of deeper integration into it.

At the same time, young men are reporting rising levels of loneliness and social disconnection. The American Perspectives Survey found that 15 percent of men report having no close friends—up sharply from prior decades. Participation in civic and voluntary associations has declined. Many young men are less embedded in deeply interconnected, intergenerational communities than in previous generations.

But this does not necessarily mean they are less religious. Rather, religious identity and moral language are being relocated. They are increasingly mediated online and are often intertwined with political identity.

Over half of Americans now listen to podcasts monthly, with higher rates among men. YouTube is used daily by a large majority of teens. And into this digital environment has stepped a constellation of influential voices—Andrew Tate, Jordan Peterson, Joe Rogan, the late Charlie Kirk and others—whose audiences are disproportionately young and male.

These media figures differ significantly from one another. But many share overlapping audiences, and many blend discussions of masculinity, cultural decline, hierarchy and Christianity with explicitly right-wing political narratives. In some corners of this ecosystem, that alignment becomes overtly "Christian nationalist." We have seen influencers openly argue that the United States must become explicitly Christian in law and culture and that liberal democracy has failed. Some figures associated with this movement go so far as to describe democracy itself as incompatible with Christian order.

What we are witnessing, then, is not exactly secularization. It is a migration of moral authority—from parish, pastor and family (organic stable communities) to podcast hosts, algorithms and political entrepreneurs (elective and elusive communities without the bonds of mutual accountability).

Young men are still asking religious questions. They are drawn to biblical language, to order, to transcendence, to clarity. But the formation they are receiving in large doses is often detached from sacramental life and the long moral tradition of the church.

So the question before us is not whether young men care about faith or morality. Many clearly do.

The question is: If Christian language, identity and even nationalism are being reshaped in a largely unmoored digital marketplace that blends masculinity, grievance and politics, how should the Catholic Church respond? Four scholars—**Patrick Gilger, S.J., Margaret Felice**, **Susan Bigelow Reynolds** and **Peter Nguyen, S.J.**—offer their reflections below. These essays are adapted from a panel conversation organized by the McFarland Center for Religion, Ethics and Culture at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Mass., on Feb. 26, 2026.

Brent Howitt Otto, S.J., *is an assistant professor of South Asian history and global Catholicism at the McFarland Center for Religion, Ethics and Culture at the College of the Holy Cross.*

Providing a New Script

By Patrick Gilger

The first challenge in thinking about how the church might respond to the migration of moral authority from deeply interconnected communities to the digitally mediated manosphere is understanding what the manosphere is. Is there anything shared by this clashing and contradictory group of podcasters, proselytizers and provocateurs?

Certainly it is not the content they offer. The sports analyst and media figure Bill Simmons's bro-sphere, with its frat ethos and fandom-obsessive metaphysics, has almost nothing in common with the bitter rage-baiting of a Nick Fuentes or Tucker Carlson. But if it is not the similarity of content that makes the manosphere a "thing," then what does?

Perhaps it is that all of these would-be mentors are fighting over the same audience. In the different topics they take up, the inside jokes they develop and the kinds of relationships they model, they are all battling for the attention

How did our social scripts get so unsettled that masculinity itself became a question?

and allegiance of a huge group—a group that is asking what it means to be a good man in the modern world.

It is the restless hunger for an answer to that question, not the answers given by each influencer, that creates the enormous, amorphous crowd that we call the manosphere. What the manosphere is, in other words, is a cacophony of conflicting answers—some encouraging, some infuriating—to the shared question of what it means to be a man today.

Understanding this is the first and primary challenge because it shapes everything that follows. After all, if we take the manosphere to be nothing more than a buzzing hive of resentment and indignation, then we will respond with pesticides. But if we can look deeper, we have a chance not only of understanding more clearly but of offering better answers to the question that is being asked.

Important as it is, understanding what the manosphere is does not tell us what answer we should give to the question that generates it. But we can be helped in facing this second challenge by trying to understand how and why it became a question at all. How did our social scripts get so unsettled that masculinity itself became a question?

The short answer is that we tore them up.

The slightly longer answer is that we tore up our old social scripts because we wanted, even needed, to write new ones.

We wanted this because many people experienced the identities those social scripts offered—what they said about what it meant to be a wife or a citizen or a man—as inhibiting. Those scripts prevented people from becoming their most authentic selves. As the great philosopher Charles Taylor shows in his essay "Politics of Recognition," people often felt that those prefabricated social identities distorted their self-understanding by mirroring back to them "a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture" of themselves. In his understanding, the expressive revolutions of the 1960s were both a large-scale rejection of these off-the-shelf identities and a collective effort to build new ones.

In this way, the movements for civil rights or women's

liberation were more than just criticisms. They not only *tore up* the old social scripts, they did the hard work of *writing new ones*. But the same cannot be said for masculinity. For all their flaws—and there were many—the old scripts of masculinity provided a roadmap to manhood. The problem is not that we wanted to redraw that patriarchal map, but that we did not follow up its deconstruction by drawing new and better ones. We did the critical work, in other words, but not the constructive.

This is why there are so many young men who are more or less desperate to know what it means to be a good man today. Most of them find themselves in a vacuum of social meaning. This is a situation in which they all know what they are *not* supposed to be—chauvinistic, misogynistic, "toxic"—but they are given little help in imagining what they might be, what it might look like to be good and to be a man at the same time. Or, to put it more precisely, they are given little help from anywhere outside the manosphere.

The absence of collective scripts does not mean that good models do not exist. They do. I think of my dad, for example, who without complaint quit his job and spent years as a homemaker, raising my sisters and me so that my mom could pursue her dreams of being a journalist. Because of his example, the question of whether it was "masculine" to cook dinner or do the laundry or comfort someone never even crossed my mind when I was young. It never occurred to me to pose the question of what it meant to be a good man because there was one there to greet me when I got off the school bus.

But mine seems to be the rare case. And even if it were not, individual examples provide little remedy for social problems. This is because social problems, as Catholic social teaching insists, require social solutions—not just individual exemplars but collective action. This brings us in sight, it seems to me, of an answer to the question of how we, the church, might respond to the situation in which we find ourselves. We ought first to see the manosphere for what it is: a group of people who share not an answer but a question. Second, we ought to be in the business of helping to write new social scripts—scripts that make an inclusive masculinity visible and attractive and accomplishable.

I do not pretend to know precisely what such a social script would contain, but it seems to me it should include a vision of what we might call "relational generativity." I am gesturing here toward a vision of masculinity in which men generate more than they need, not so that they can accumulate for themselves or pretend to a false self-sufficiency, but so that there is an excess that can be given away. In this "excessiveness" we might glimpse a style of relationship that, like that of the Father and the Son, is always overflowing its borders.

Patrick Gilger, S.J., *is an assistant professor of sociology and director of the McNamara Center at Loyola University Chicago, and a consulting editor for culture at America Media.*

Community, Care, Narrative and Identity

By Margaret Felice

Educators and parents have fretted over negative influences on young people for ages, and the mid-21st-century iteration of these worries puts a new face on a perennial concern. It is illustrative to look at what is new or distinctive in the moral messengers of our moment as we consider what should guide a response.

First, much of the entertainment media that has grown in prevalence in recent years has been explicitly aimed at giving advice and instruction. While there have been pundits telling listeners and viewers what to think for decades, the prevalence of podcasts and their delivery through personal devices have put an influencer in every pocket. The ease of creating video content allows nearly anyone to create engaging visuals to bolster their messaging; this same ease increases competition for those seeking an audience.

The second distinction relates to that very competition. Content is algorithmically delivered in ways that reward extreme statements and push viewers toward more radical content. Third, interactive technology gives young people a chance to test out problematic language and ideas away from the people in their lives whose disapproval or censure might discourage such use. If people want a place to experiment with the misogynistic or racist tropes that they are picking up, there is surely an online forum where they can develop a regrettable comfort with that type of self-expression.

Additional characteristics of some of the most extreme voices in the manosphere are not new but are notable. Their content plays to the thrill of transgression, appealing to the rebellious streak that many adolescents have. They often promote a simplistic worldview: that life is hard for the listener because of the presence of "outsiders," be those scapegoats women, immigrants, Jews or some other group. These simplistic themes are often dressed in ornate conspiracies, but the basic arc of the argument is the same.

Just as we can see in hindsight that the comic-book craze that incited a moral panic a century ago reveals the


AP Photo/Julia Demaree Nikhinson

Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. speaks to Joe Rogan in the Oval Office of the White House on April 18, 2026.

power of images and narrative in attracting young people, we can also learn from contemporary influencers what draws people in today. Some of what attracts is not something that the church can or should attempt to offer, but being aware of it can help educators work against it. Just because people seek scapegoats does not mean we should provide them, but we can be attentive to educating in ways that allow for the complex reality of life's hardships so that simple, harmful blame is not seen as a viable explanation.

Similarly, the drive to dominate that is behind much of the manosphere's messaging is not something that the church should encourage, but we can lift up parts of the tradition that teach us that it is OK to fail, that we should admit when we are wrong, that the last shall be first and that we are most like Jesus when we are washing others' feet.

But some of what attracts is within the church's purview: community, care, narrative and identity. Young men want to be seen, to be cared for and to have someone advocate for them. They respond to stories that help them to understand the world, and they construct a vision of the world based on what they hear. If influencers are building a world in which men are attacked from all sides, where scapegoats are responsible for life's challenges, where only the strong survive and hateful aggression is the trait most advantageous for our age, then those of us who oppose that vision need to build worlds that promote an alternative.

Schools and parishes ought to consider what stories their communities are telling: Do they make the reign of God visible and believable? Put another way, do they make the vision of the viral hatemongers seem ridiculous by manifesting something better?

Young men want to be seen, to be cared for and to have someone advocate for them.

Perhaps world-building, with its implications of facades and even falsehoods, does not perfectly capture this formative task of our institutions. What we do is *reveal* the world that our tradition tells us God wants for us: a world of relationships and love where we do our best to cooperate with God's grace as it helps us grow in virtue and holiness. The sugar high of online hate does not hold up against the deep nourishment of love, and it is our job to let adolescents know that there is a healthier diet available to them.

There are plenty of reasons to fear being bold in this endeavor: We do not want to provoke conflict or controversy; our own failings inevitably make us hypocrites; or we simply do not want to seem uncool. But to miss an opportunity to reveal the reign of God, to cede ground to those who are shameless and avaricious, is a far scarier thing.

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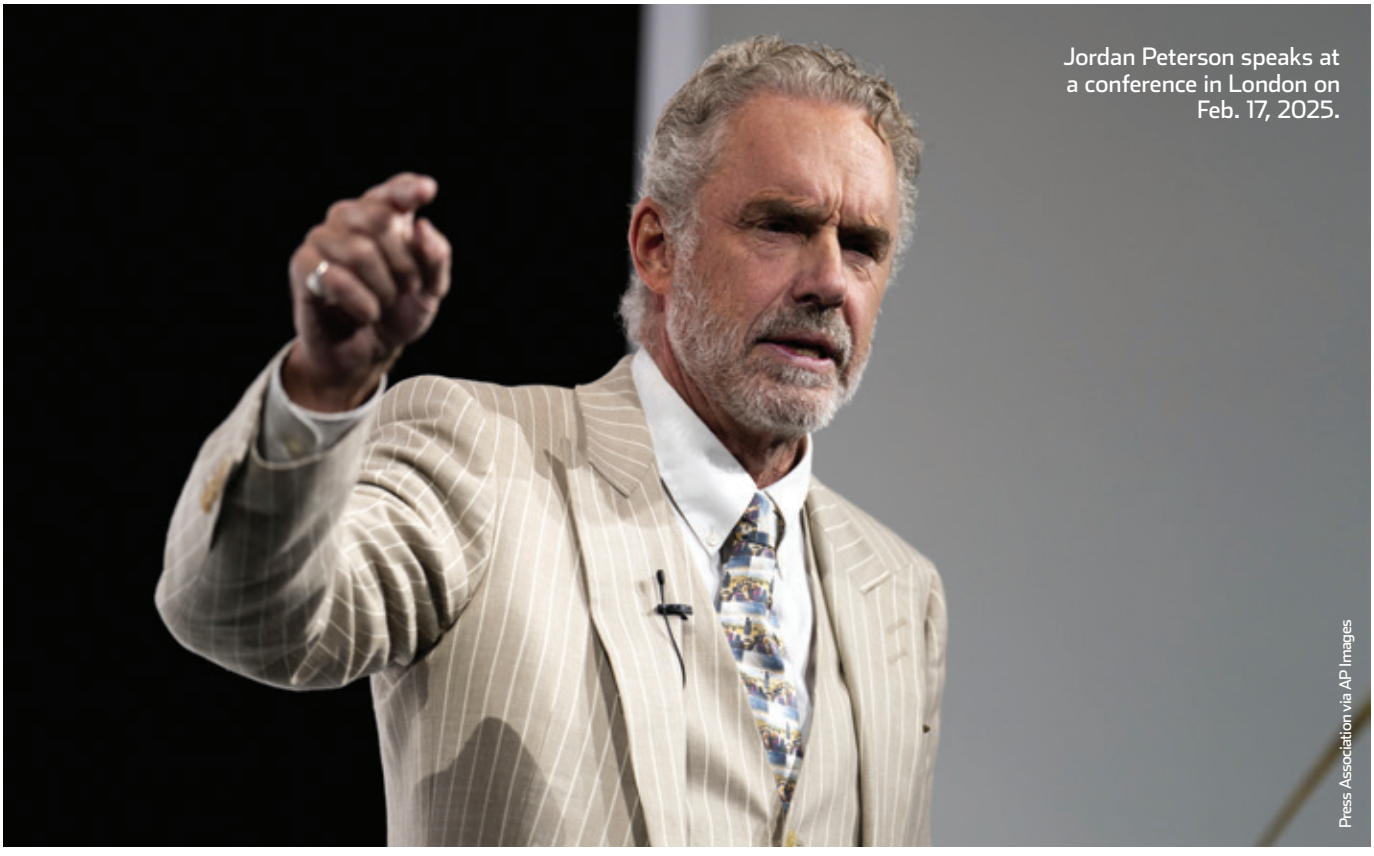
A Church Against Extremes

By Susan Bigelow Reynolds

On Jan. 6, 2021, as supporters of Donald Trump stormed the U.S. Capitol in an attempt to subvert the results of the 2020 presidential election, one image on the news caught my eye. Amid the mob's array of flags and paraphernalia, I spied a navy blue banner adorned with a familiar golden logo and, in a vaguely elven-looking typeface, the motto "God, Country, Notre Dame." It billowed from a thin, sloping pole underneath Blue Lives Matter banners and American flags. The image disturbed me, but it also fascinated me. Who brings a Notre Dame flag to an insurrection?

Conversations on Christian nationalism have largely focused on the role of evangelicalism in American public life. Works such as Kristin Kobes Du Mez's *Jesus and John Wayne* have traced the symbolic and literal alliances between evangelical Christianity, white male supremacy and far-right political ideology. Historically, Catholics have been ambivalent guests at the banquet of American religion, neither entirely welcome nor entirely comfortable.



Jordan Peterson speaks at a conference in London on Feb. 17, 2025.

Press Association via AP Images

Such histories often serve as a self-exoneration for Catholics seeking to distance ourselves from culpability for America's current political situation. As a result, however, Catholicism's role in the current national surge in reactionary masculinity has gone largely uninterrogated.

In Catholicism, the Christian nationalist movement has found a trove of riches: intellectual self-justification in postliberal and integralist political theologies; deep pockets in the conservative Napa Institute; and ritual legitimacy and aesthetic capital in Catholicism's liturgical and artistic traditions. Online, Catholicism has become a ready refuge for young men yearning for a disciplined lifestyle to beat back cultural and social alienation.

Social media has facilitated the production of a strange yet distinctively Catholic "bro culture." Ads tout rosaries with tactical-gear themes and American flag crucifixes. Podcasters and YouTubers lament the feminization of church and culture. Influencer priests post workout videos. Ninety-day asceticism challenges promise to make men "uncommonly free." Latin-pseudonymed posters on X rail against vernacular liturgy and accuse the pope of being woke.

The claims of these personalities, products and ideologies implicitly resonate with millennial and Gen Z Catholics raised in a post-"theology of the body" church obsessed with defining sexual difference. This digitally siloed refraction of the church appears primarily concerned with announcing itself as a provocative countercultural force uniquely capable of owning the libs.

One response ventured by certain church leaders to the emergence of the manosphere has been to try to forge alliances. The most influential example is that of Bishop Robert Barron, founder of Word on Fire Ministries and current head of the Diocese of Winona-Rochester, Minn. Before the emergence of MAGA, Bishop Barron was a mainstream voice within the American episcopate. Today, he sits on Donald Trump's Commission on Religious Liberty and uses social media to decry "wokeism" and "cultural Marxism" in a key almost indistinguishable from secular online culture warriors.

At Word on Fire, Bishop Barron has hosted "dialogues" with the conservative political controversialists Ben Shapiro and Tucker Carlson, the manosphere's resident psychologist-influencer Jordan Peterson and male celebrity Catholic converts like Shia LaBeouf and Russell Brand. (Footage of Brand's dialogue with Bishop Barron has been removed from the site, presumably because Brand was charged with multiple counts of rape and sexual assault in 2025, but a 2024 Word on Fire article still lauds Brand's baptism as part of a "golden age of conversions.")

There is something to be said for tactically inserting oneself into a cultural moment in order to understand it and more ably critique its excesses and idols. But in a social

media ecosystem that preys on ego, rewards provocation and encourages tribalism, holding the line is tricky business. One who sets out to use the master's tools to dismantle the master's house is likely to find that he or she has become a tool of the master. From the standpoint of integrity, Bishop Barron's rapprochement with the manosphere has been disastrous.

The Christian persecution narrative at the heart of the Catholic manosphere's brand of apologetics relies on a fantasy of defense—of the faith, of the church, of a narrowly defined vision of the true and good and beautiful. It is a worldview that is powerfully and insidiously consoling to young men emerging into adulthood in an economy that has left them behind, and with them the sense of identity that traditionally comes from starting a life. Many influencers in the Catholic manosphere console their followers by assuring them that such failures are not their fault, but are instead the result of postmodern social engineering aimed at upending traditional gender roles. Men, they insist, are owed something that they have been denied.

At a moment in which grievance is a particularly lucrative kind of political currency, it is not difficult to pinpoint the allure—or the already disastrous consequences—of this narrative. As we witness the rise of far-right movements worldwide, we should recall with necessary alarm the role of right-wing Catholicism in facilitating the rise of 20th-century fascism. The church must stop allowing itself to be used as a tool in the extremist resurgence in the United States today.

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The Formation of Moral Conscience

By Peter Nguyen

My entry point into what is often called the manosphere is not theoretical but embodied. I have trained in Brazilian jiu-jitsu for 25 years—long enough to see the art migrate from a marginal discipline into a cultural ecosystem that now overlaps significantly with online masculinity culture, including a distinctly Catholic variant. In some Catholic media spaces, the marks of "authentic" manhood are increasingly stylized: jiu-jitsu, cigars, whiskey and culture-war bravado. This convergence is not accidental. Combat sports offer discipline and resilience, while digital platforms quickly graft onto them grievance narratives, simplified moral binaries and a political identity.

Because of this, I occupy a privileged position. Younger men—millennials, Gen Z, even Gen X—approach me after training with questions shaped by podcasts and influencers. Sometimes the content is fascinating; sometimes it is openly toxic, praising vice as virtue and misogyny as moral clarity. These conversations reveal less about the influencers themselves than about the deep hunger of the men consuming that content.

> **Young men need stability and freedom at once. The church can offer both.**

What strikes me is not that young men are drawn to structure and hierarchy as well as struggle; the Christian tradition has always affirmed asceticism, discipline and sacrifice. The problem is that in the secular manosphere, these goods are severed from humility or empathy, as well as any sense of communion. Vices are inverted into virtues, and moral conscience is displaced by outrage. Identity becomes performative and reactive rather than formative. Even the Catholic manosphere, for all its comparative health, can fall prey to this dynamic when it centers masculinity over sanctity.

This became clear during a conversation I had after a jiu-jitsu class just before Lent. Several men asked about my Ash Wednesday homily, and I shared a line that startled them: Young men are sometimes drawn to the church because it appears anti-L.G.B.T.Q. and anti-women, but the Gospel ultimately asks whether they can be anti-themselves. That is, can they confront their own disordered desires rather than projecting moral failure outward? For some men, the church is imagined as a refuge where they can simply "be men." The idea that Christianity requires self-denial rather than validating grievances can be genuinely disorienting.

Here lies a central challenge for the church. Moral conscience is being reshaped in a digital marketplace that rewards resentment and simplified narratives. Online communities promise belonging without vulnerability and intellectual seriousness without genuine formation. They mimic depth but lack solidarity.

Drawing on Edith Stein's early reflections on individuality and community, we see the contrast clearly. Healthy communities are bound by horizontal ties of empathy and shared responsibility, not merely by allegiance to a vertical figure or influencer. Totalitarian movements—whether political or digital—erode these bonds, leaving only sur-

Andrew Tate, right, and his brother Tristan attend an Ultimate Fighting Championship event in Miami on April 11, 2026.

AP Photo/Julia Demaree Nikhinson, Pool

face-level and disembodied connections.

Some young men are drawn to online influencers not because of ideology per se, but because these figures appear to offer meaning and an account of suffering. They want to know why life is hard and how to endure it well. The tragedy is not their desire for ideas, but that the ideas offered to them are often pseudo-intellectual, shouted loudly or lacking critical engagement. The church, if it wishes to respond faithfully, must recover its confidence as a true intellectual, moral and spiritual community.

This means more than producing counter-content online. It means forming men in what could be called the Christian liberal arts: theology, philosophy, history and the moral imagination, all situated within lived community. Ideas must be incarnated. I have seen this tension firsthand while talking with a nondenominational pastor who also trains at my gym. We both recognize the difficulty of inviting young men away from an algorithmic understanding of church—one filtered through culture-war incentives—into actual parishes marked by ordinariness, financial strain and service to the poor.

When I invite training partners and students to a parish where I occasionally assist, I warn them that it will be "boring." There is no online outrage, no grand rhetoric—just a struggling community gathered around the sacraments, trying to feed the hungry and care for the sick. For men formed by digital drama, this ordinariness can feel like a letdown. Yet it is precisely here that Christian morality is lived rather than broadcast. The church must resist competing with the internet on its own terms and instead witness to a different measure of greatness.

Young men need stability and freedom at once: solid ground from which to do good and interior liberty from reactive anger. The church can offer both, but only if it presents holiness rather than masculinity as the telos. Saints—men and women—did hard things and embraced suffering—but did so for love, not dominance. If the church reclaims this vision and embodies it in real communities, the digital marketplace will lose some of its allure.

The church's response to the manosphere must be pastoral, intellectual and embodied: forming consciences capable of empathy, communities capable of solidarity and men capable not merely of strength, but also of self-gift.

Peter Nguyen, S.J., *is an associate professor of religious studies at the College of the Holy Cross. His research brings the theology and spirituality of Christian martyrdom into conversation with the dynamics of totalitarianism and its assault on the human person.*

Linwood's Last Hurrah

A beloved retreat house closes its doors

By Brigid McCabe

It was a Monday in November, and I was making s'mores with Sister Mary Dolan. Despite the group of teenage girls chatting and laughing around her, Sister Mary, as she was known to the students, looked as serene as always while standing in front of the firepit's glow. When she stepped back and turned toward me, the marshmallows she was roasting were perfectly golden.

"The trick is patience," she told me as we admired her handiwork. "You can't get impatient."

I recognized a familiar sentiment behind her advice: Do every little thing well, so the big things have strong foundations. This was how things were done at Notre Dame School of Manhattan, my high school alma mater, and the place where I first met Sister Mary and her fellow sisters of the Society of St. Ursula, the congregation that had founded the school.

But if my time at Notre Dame, an all-girls school in New York City, was defined by striving for quality and excellence in all things, it was also shaped by an appreciation for moments of joy and amusement. I recognized that side of Notre Dame in the increasingly playful behavior of the high school seniors who had come from my alma mater to go on retreat at Linwood Spiritual Center in Rhinebeck, N.Y., with the goal of learning to serve as retreat leaders for the younger classes.

As Sister Mary finished her marshmallows, the girls declared a game of manhunt. Upon someone's count, they took off running in every direction, shrieking and bumping into each other as they went. It was late, and the isolated nature of the land on which Linwood sat meant the sky had grown very dark.

For a place known for its peace and quiet, our time at Linwood was busy, with plenty of conversation and action. We had started our day by moving furniture and decorations for the sisters, who owned and managed Linwood.

A garden at Linwood Spiritual Center

The sisters were preparing to sell the property after spending over six decades there, and the secondary goal of the students' visit was to help with organizing all of the possessions inside the center. Kathy Donnelly, S.U., a member of the retreat team at Linwood, told me they had intentionally stayed open until the girls could come up one last time and give the retreat house the finale it deserved.

The weight of this responsibility was not lost on the students and chaperones. Notre Dame teacher and retreat leader Kevin McDonald had explained that this experience would feel different from any retreat the girls had done in the past. They were not merely nourishing their own spiritual lives by being here. They were also providing a service to the sisters who were leaving their home and their ministry behind.

In the words of Sister Mary, this group would be Linwood's "last hurrah." As a Notre Dame alum, I wanted to experience the retreat alongside them to say goodbye, and as a reporter, I wanted to tell the story of the beloved retreat house's final days.

A Place Where Time Passes Slowly

Linwood is situated on the east bank of the Hudson River, blessed with an awe-inspiring watershed view that is almost unbelievably picturesque. Inside the center, the sisters often left binoculars on coffee tables and windowsills because the landscape is vast and there are novel sights everywhere: beautiful birds in the trees, boats passing by, the silhouette of Esopus Meadows Lighthouse on the water, made small and blurry by distance.

The sisters have left most of the 55 acres of land undeveloped, and over the course of the students' brief stay, the girls made good use of the open space. Bundled in scarves and puffer jackets, they sat huddled in groups on benches facing the water, or walked with arms linked up and down the sloping hills. They often gravitated to a few of the property's more novel features, including two large wooden swings and a large playground roundabout—one of those dizzying metal disks that sends you flying right off when a dozen of your teenage classmates start spinning it as hard as they can.

During a free period in the evening, the girls left their phones and notebooks inside to go do cartwheels on the lawn and roll down the hill. Soon after, the teachers went outside and ushered the girls together for a group photo in front of the quickly setting sun.

Two of the girls, Anisa and Zoe, later told me they would remember the time spent wandering around the property as some of the most special moments of their retreat. They emphasized that being in such a peaceful place pushed them to engage more deeply in reflection and prayer.

"It helped that it was so distinctly different from normal life, especially coming from the city," Anisa said, commenting on the beauty of the property and its silence and solitude. "Being in a place that you're not used to, that's new, it can help open up thoughts and feelings that are new too."

Sister Kathy affirmed their observation of what she called the "timeless" nature of Linwood; its ability to make the days pass more slowly and make schedules feel immaterial. She told me it wasn't just retreatants who felt this way, but the sisters who called Linwood home as well: "For those of us who lived there, who worked there," she said, "you really had to make a conscious effort" to know what day of the week or month it was. Though there were often specific times for meals, prayer or gatherings, the time in between these markers "just moseyed around."

She told me that some guests struggled with how long the days felt at Linwood, feeling an urge to maximize their time there in a structured way. But Sister Kathy's advice to retreatants was to get lost in the day. "I used to say to people, you don't need to come and do a lot of work and read this and read that. Go sit and watch the river for a day or two, then come and we'll talk about it.... Let yourself be here first."

She described how the landscape surrounding Linwood enabled people to reflect without inhibition and disruption, to let their thoughts flow as wide as the river in front of them and the sky above them. Offering access to this type of spiritual and emotional freedom is how she understood the mission of Linwood, at its heart.

"So many of us lead very busy, complicated, hurried lives," she said. "We gave them the permission and the space to breathe slowly and to be in touch with God."

Finding a Way

The Sisters of the Society of St. Ursula was founded by Anne de Xainctonge in France in 1606, after she was inspired by the Jesuits to create educational opportunities for young women. (They are distinct from the Ursuline Sisters, a different order founded by St. Angela Merici in Brescia, Italy, in 1535.)

Students on retreat talk with Kevin McDonald, a retreat leader and teacher at Notre Dame School of Manhattan, at Linwood Spiritual Center.

The sisters came to New York in 1901, but the history of the land on which Linwood sits can be traced to the Dutch colonial period, when the royal governor of New York, Thomas Dongan, granted it to a group of early settlers. The first development of the property seems to have come at the hands of Dr. Thomas Tillotson, surgeon general in the Continental Army, who bought the land in 1779, built an estate for his family and called it Linwood.

Though the name has remained, the buildings and uses of the land have evolved over the decades. Following Tillotson's death in 1832, the property passed through different hands until it was picked up by the Ruppert family, founder of Ruppert Knickerbocker Brewing, a beer brewing company, in the 1860s.

Jacob Ruppert bought the property as a summer home in 1888 while maintaining his primary residence in Manhattan. Upon his death, the property was passed to his son, Jacob Ruppert Jr. The son served four terms in the United States House of Representatives from 1899 to 1907. He also owned the New York Yankees from 1915 until 1939. When he died, he left Linwood to his nephew, Jacob Ruppert Schalk.

During his time in Rhinebeck, Schalk developed a relationship with a local Catholic priest named Robert Saccoman. Father Saccoman had been a frequent visitor to Linwood as a guest of Mr. Schalk and encouraged him to give the property to the Sisters of St. Ursula, who were living in the city of Kingston, across the river from Rhinebeck.

When Mr. Schalk died in 1962, he left his land and home to the sisters. Over the years that followed, sisters began moving there from Kingston, attempting to repurpose the property's 22-room mansion—though it quickly became clear that the old mansion would not be suitable for their needs.

Instead, Sister Mary told us, the sisters made an arrangement with the Rhinebeck fire department to raze the mansion as part of a training exercise for their firefighters."It suited us both," she told us. A new building on the site was dedicated in 1968, with a guesthouse and pavilion added in 1976. They have remained standing since.

But change has come to Linwood yet again. The sisters announced in the spring of 2025 that they had made the decision to sell the property. Sister Kathy said the decision had "been coming for years." They had brainstormed and researched ways to keep the retreat house open, to sustain their ministry. But the aging group of sisters also had to ac-

count for their own needs and factor in what their future might hold.

"There just came a point when we said, 'I think the game is up,'" Sister Kathy told me. While it wasn't exactly a surprise, she said, it was the type of decision you can never really prepare yourself for. But Sister Kathy pointed to the generations of sisters before her as being admirable models of what it means to handle great changes with grace and courage.

To wit: enduring the French Revolution; emigrating to the United States; opening a school that moved and then moved again; being given the Linwood property and opening the retreat house there.

"The sisters came in October [1901], not speaking any English, and by September the next year, they opened a school," Sister Kathy told me, "How did they do that? Brave, brave ladies."

"Nothing has been forever," she remarked, regarding various ministries and homes the sisters have made for themselves. But she emphasized that the spirit of service and faith has continued from one place to another, stubbornly refusing to subside despite a world marked by impermanence: "We make it work."

Doing What Is Needed

When the girls first arrived at Linwood last November, on a cold but sunny morning, Sister Mary greeted them, ushered them into the main conference room and sat them down. She put herself at the head of the room, directly in front of an icon of Anne de Xainctonge that was familiar from the walls of Notre Dame School.

"We all know who that is," Sister Mary said, pointing to the picture of Anne. "We keep a picture of her here like we do at school to remind us that she is with us wherever we go. But now it is time to say goodbye to Linwood."

Sister Mary explained that everything inside the retreat center was being relocated. Some items were being sold, some were being taken to Notre Dame and some would go with the sisters wherever they ended up. As Sister Mary put it, there would be "pieces of Linwood everywhere." But much of it still needed to be physically moved and packed.

One of the most challenging areas to clean out was an awkward storage area in the back of the chapel, accessible only by a slanted entrance very low to the ground. The sisters, all older women, would struggle to comfortably venture into the closet to remove the dozens of vases and candles and artwork back there without hurting themselves. So they recruited their young guests for help.

A few girls positioned themselves in the closet and handed objects out to Mr. McDonald, who handed each item, one by one, to a line of more girls, who took turns carrying them to an open room just down the hall where the items could be sorted and stored.

> **For a place known for its peace and quiet, Linwood was busy with plenty of conversation and action.**

One girl was handed a set of tarnished gold altar bells, which chimed loudly every time she took a step. Another had a grimace on her face as she held a vase with a dead bug inside way out in front of her body. When picking up a sharp object, one girl nicked her finger. One of the sisters swooped in, taking her to get a Band-Aid. When the two of them returned, they were laughing together.

Despite preparing to sell their property and move out of their rooms in the retreat house, the Sisters of St. Ursula and the Linwood staff maintained their spirit of hospitality and care. They were hosting, feeding and caring warmly for the girls up until the end of the retreat. Zoe remarked on their hospitality during our conversation. "If I was preparing to move away from my home and all these people were there, I'm not sure I would be so nice," she confessed, "but they were so welcoming."

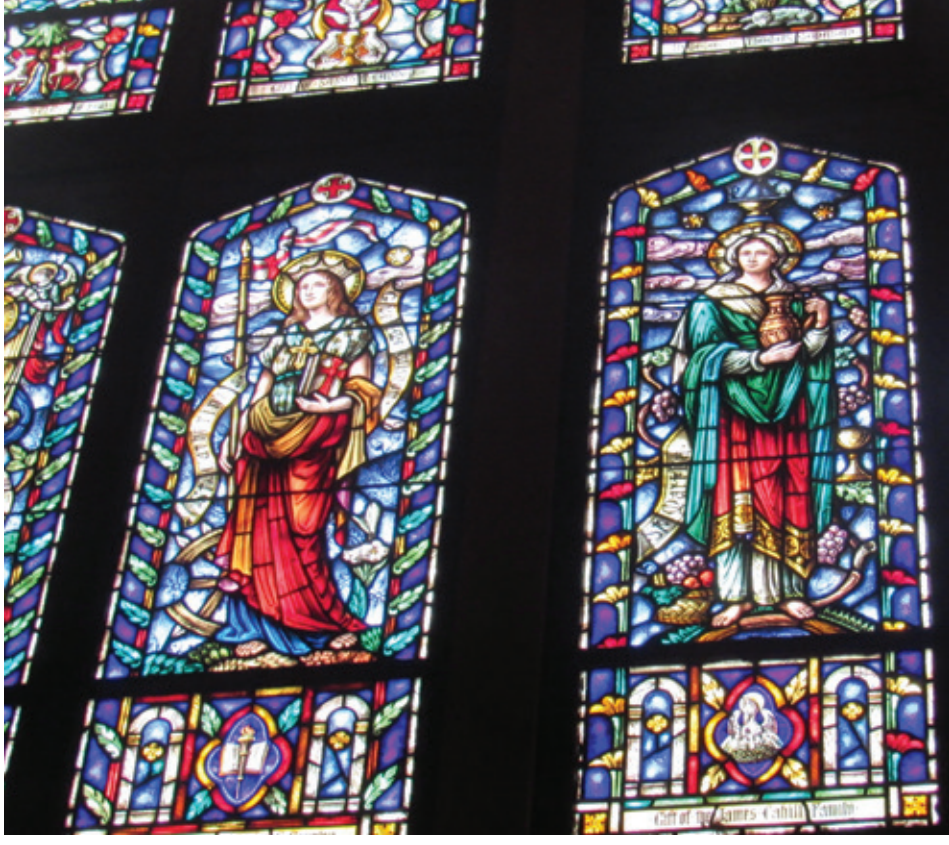
Sister Kathy spoke candidly about the reality of the situation she found herself in more broadly. "It's not something that I ever imagined myself doing," she said, laughing, when I asked her about what it was like to manage the sale of the property and the sisters' move. But there was a need, and she rose to meet it.

This reminded me of something Mr. McDonald had told the Notre Dame students during a moment of instruction. In March, this group of girls would lead a Kairos retreat for the junior class. When prompted with the question "Why do you want to be a retreat leader?" many of the girls expressed that they wanted to help their younger Notre Dame sisters have a meaningful and positive experience.

Mr. McDonald suggested that being a successful leader would require humility and flexibility, a willingness to "do what is needed" for the girls they were leading, even when it wasn't what they wanted or expected to do. In Sister Kathy and her fellow sisters, they were lucky enough to have strong examples of this type of undaunted selflessness in action.

Brigid McCabe

A birdhouse shaped like a chapel once hung from a tree at Linwood Spiritual Center.



Stained-glass windows in the chapel at Linwood Spiritual Center depict the virgin martyrs of the church.

Pieces of Linwood Everywhere

While the girls had carried items into now empty libraries and sitting rooms, the Notre Dame chaperones had stood near the altar in the chapel engaged in conversation, trying to decide what to take back to Notre Dame School with them.

They had already resolved to bring several paintings and pieces of artwork to the school and were focusing their attention on the dozens of chairs in the chapel. "We could put them in the library," Sister Mary suggested.

It was clearly a lot of work to get everything sold or distributed. Sister Kathy seemed to be constantly on the move—taking art off the walls, talking with visitors who had come to collect furniture, making arrangements with Sister Mary.

Mr. McDonald noticed a birdhouse painted to look like a church, which (with permission) he unscrewed from a tree to take home with him. Sister Mary wanted to take dishes and silverware from Linwood back to the school because "there were no more bowls in the faculty lounge." At one point she walked into the main conference room with a Frisbee and a pickleball set and asked if anyone wanted them. They were quickly claimed.

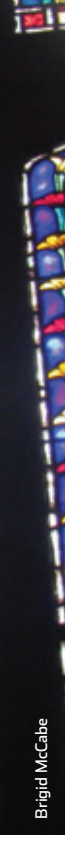
One set of objects maintained a particular importance: the stained-glass windows from the retreat house chapel. The Notre Dame chaperones discussed their plan to take the windows back to the school. They could try to fit them in the small school chapel, or use them for adornment in the school hallways, the library or another common space.

At that moment, the windows were still in their home at Linwood. I asked Sister Kathy about them, and despite all she was already doing, she took the time to explain a bit of their story. I learned that the windows featured the virgin martyrs of the Church and that Linwood was not their first home: They had been commissioned for Marygrove, the sisters' previous residence in Kingston. Like the sisters themselves, these windows had seen and endured change already, and would be capable of doing so again.

After my conversation with Sister Kathy, I was inspired to take another peek in the chapel. On my way into the room, I noticed a sign on the wall with a poem from the writer May Sarton. The second stanza was particularly striking:

No one comes here
who is not made aware
of this constant spiritual
weaving in the air.
No one comes here
who is not amazed
by the richness of the silence
who is not nourished
and amazed.

These words replayed in my head as I opened the door to the chapel, which was dim and silent. Across the hall, I could hear the girls gathered in the main meeting room,


Brigid McCabe


Courtesy of Linwood Spiritual Center

acting out skits and chatting enthusiastically.

In our conversation, Zoe had remarked on the similarity between the experiences of the sisters and of the girls on retreat. "I think it's good that we were all seniors," Zoe added, "because we're about to say goodbye to the school and each other. So we can understand a little bit about what they're going through by having to leave." That was the retreat at its core: two generations of women each helping prepare the other for what came next, different as they may be.

The girls across the hall would soon leave Linwood, ready to lead other retreats for other students in other places. In June, they would graduate and pass the baton to new leaders. Those leaders, and the leaders after them, would not know Linwood at all. But they would be part of a legacy of service to others that can be traced to the saints on its walls, and that has lived so beautifully in generations of brave sisters and finds new life in classes of Notre Dame students every year.

I imagined the windows hanging in the halls of Notre Dame School, carrying memories of Linwood and Marygrove before it. I imagined someone taking time to explain where the windows had come from and what they symbolized to new generations of young women, as Sister Kathy had done for me.

When I finally emerged from the chapel, the chatter had halted; the group had dispersed for more minutes of personal reflection. The girls were scattered in various rooms, some on the floor, some draped on couches and armchairs, all bent over notebooks or lost in thought.

For this group of people in particular, a return to daily life would mean facing uncertainty and unresolved issues. Most of the girls still did not know where they were going to college. Many of the sisters still needed to determine where they would land. And the questions of who would own Linwood and what would happen to the space were still unanswered.

These concerns had not disappeared. But for just a moment, the timelessness of Linwood worked its magic. The world seemed to slow almost to a standstill, granting all of us a precious opportunity to ready ourselves for whatever would come next. I prayed that all of us might trust God enough to take Sister Mary's advice and be patient while we waited for clarity and certainty to find us.

Through the big windows, a band of pink sunlight peeked through gray clouds over the Hudson. Our November sky wasn't warm exactly, but clear and calm. The richness of the silence covered all of us like a thick blanket on a cold morning. Nourished and amazed, indeed.

Brigid McCabe *is an O'Hare Fellow at America Media.*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Fear, Faith and Fishing

A Jesuit angler on why the sport has him hooked

By Richard G. Malloy

"This is pre-eminently the time to speak the truth, the whole truth, frankly and boldly. Nor need we shrink from honestly facing conditions in our country today." That's Franklin Delano Roosevelt in his first inaugural address in March 1933. The United States and the world were mired in a devastating depression. All seemed bleak. In the face of painful pessimism, the jovial, upbeat new president famously declared, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes...."

These days it is again easy to be paralyzed by terror at what is going on in the world and in our country. We feel overwhelmed, powerless, shocked at the behavior of our government and our neighbors. Indeed, we must continue to "speak the truth, the whole truth, frankly and boldly" in the face of the injustices in our communities, our country and the world. But we must also find places of peace, ways to center ourselves, those things that will sustain us for the journey.

With that in mind, I'd like to make a suggestion: Go fishing. Fishing will not solve our global crises, but the sport has some lessons to teach. And remember, Jesus hung out with fishermen. He never went golfing.

First, fishing teaches us that we are not in control. The world of water is not the solid, simple terrain of dry land. You can chart but not map currents. Every stream is different and new, every moment your wader-clad feet step into the riffles. You are always in new waters.

Fishing is unpredictable. You may catch something. You may not. The fish are in charge. They decide to bite—or not. The weather may or may not cooperate. When fishing, you are in nature's bounty and nature's hands. You are just along for the ride. Other powerful forces are driving.

Second, fishing can restore our faith. One casts and casts and casts, but unless one is as unlucky as Job, eventually a fish is caught. And even if not, a bad day of fishing beats any day dominated by addictive infotainment's doomscrolling. But usually the hope, the trust, the belief that fish are there is eventually rewarded. As Anne Lamott observes, it's all "Grace, eventually."

As you connect to the water, the air, the lengthening of the morning, the slow, quiet rhythms of casting, a calm arises in your consciousness. Your breath in the crisp fall air, or spring newness, feels clean and surprising. In summer, placid lakes fill your nostrils with, in the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J., "the dearest freshness deep down things" and comfortable humidity. All smells green. The issues of the day, and of life, settle. Slowly, perspective broadens. As you hear the birds' songs, or are attracted by a rare sighting of a delicate deer or goofy otter, your heart expands. You let go of the tensions endemic to a world of

constant catastrophe and daily pressure.

The strong flow of water pressing against wading calves and knees allows you to be grounded and connected with the planet and the cosmos. Concentrating on water and line, lure and hook, pushes the realities that produce pain and worry into the zone of the Serenity Prayer: Give me the graces of peace and serenity to live with and accept that which I cannot change, the courage to change what I can, and the discerning wisdom to know the difference.

Third, fishing slows you down. You relax. Then you can pray and appreciate the presence of God. Fishing gets us close to, and deep into, creation. When you get in touch with creation, you get in touch with reality. Contact with reality is contact with God. And when we are in contact with God, we and reality are transformed into something better and new, something more: more good, more true, more holy.

As you get out of the car and smell the musky forest bordering the babbling brook or rolling stream; as you see white-gray, cloudy mists rising above the water; as your chest releases stress and strain and your brain stops burning with endless doom loops; you find you can converse with God and await a response.

You stop. You look around and notice the sheer beauty of our world. My friend Butch Gibson said, "I love to fish for trout, because I love where trout live." The rhythmic action of casting fly line or spinning rod, over and over again, allows an almost hypnotic state to encapsulate your consciousness. And you wait. Wait. Wait for it. Concentrate on the fly floating. Staring at the tiny bit of feather and fur rivets thought. The feel of a lure—a rattle trap, Rapala or rooster tail—pulling through the water sends chills coursing through your arms and body as a pike slams the lure. Or maybe that feeling comes from the gentle tap and tug of a bass on a plastic worm.

When a fish takes the bait, your heartbeat increases with anticipation, not fear. It is an almost electric energy. It's ridiculous what a joyful rush it is to catch a fish. Soon, you thank the bass or trout for playing, as you release him or her back into its mysterious world of water.

And in that stillness after the catch, you give thanks. You know that God is God, and we are not. Better yet, we don't have to be God. Prayer helps us realize and relish that God exists, manifest in water and weather.

Little children love to fish. That in itself should teach us something. Fishing teaches us that at some level, if we are really intelligent and wise, we are all really childlike. Being in touch with our childlike selves is the way to wonder at ourselves, our world and our God.

An early Christian symbol was *ichthys,* in Greek both the word for *fish* and an acronym meaning Jesus Christ Son of God, Savior. Fish and our faith are closely connected. The little boy in John 6:9 has five barley loaves (the food of the poor) along with two fish. And the multiplication happens. Luke 5 tells us of the miraculous catch. In John 21, again there is a miraculous catch. Peter announces, "I am going fishing." This last time Jesus shows up after the resurrection, he appears to a bunch of guys on a fishing trip. The Lord appears and cooks breakfast. He tells Peter, "Feed my sheep." Jesus says these words to fishermen, and makes them shepherds.

There is so much great writing about fishing: *The Old Man and the Sea*; Norman Maclean, who notes in *A River Runs Through It,* "In our family there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing"; *The River Why,* by David James Duncan; and all the books by the titular *Trout Bum,* John Gierach.

Ishmael begins *Moby-Dick*: "Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth, whenever it is damp, drizzly November in my soul...then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can." Life on the water fends off despair.

Today we best serve people by proclaiming the Bible's most oft-repeated phrase: "Be not afraid!" We know that God is with us, the God of justice and truth. The God of forgiveness and compassion. The God who is love. The God of transformation working within and through sinful history to bring us a new heaven and a new earth in which justice dwells (2 Pt 3:13).

The poet Wendell Berry says it best:

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great
heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

Take a moment or a morning. Be free. Realize and relish and remember: God is with us.

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Our Lady of Bisila, Our Lady of Bridges

What one depiction of Mary can teach us about connection

By Marie Glancy O'Shea

Pope Leo's visit this year to Africa made the news for many reasons, but my social media blossomed with one image from his trip: the unfamiliar (to me) but magnetic image of Our Lady of Bisila, Mother and Patroness of Equatorial Guinea. A radiant statue of Our Lady with the Infant Jesus was depicted behind the pope as he joined the assembled crowd in Malabo to sing the Regina Caeli at his final Mass of the trip.

Reactions online abounded: "stunning," "striking," "uniquely beautiful." These words reflected both the excellence of the statue's craftsmanship and the fact that seeing a Madonna and Child with African features, and with the child carried on the mother's back, remains a rarity in many parts of the world.

But there was something else at work here that is more than the sum of these parts. The image exists at the intersection of Mary's cultural specificity and the very real humanity she and her infant exude. The image evoked love from those who gazed upon it—one commentator declared, "I'm utterly smitten"—which is exactly the reaction any image of the Virgin should inspire.

Inculturation and the Communion of Saints

The folding of Our Lady of Bisila into a papal Mass is an example of representation and inculturation. Centuries of European Christian art have made many Catholics accustomed to seeing light-skinned versions of biblical figures. However, this narrows our understanding of who these figures were and of what regions of the world are most associated with them. As the church's center has shifted toward the Global South, it is crucial for people everywhere to joyfully make space for a broader understanding of our communion of saints. Our God's church, as Pope Francis proclaimed and Pope Leo recently affirmed, is for "*Todos, Todos, Todos.*" Meaningful representation backs up that assertion.

So does inculturation. At its best, the Catholic Church understands that to "make disciples of all the nations" is to enter into dialogue with the established traditions that give different corners of the globe their distinctive identity. The story of Our Lady of Bisila speaks to this. Well before the advent of Christian missionaries in Africa, legend tells us, a plague struck the island of Bioko. One day a beautiful woman carrying an infant appeared to a young girl. Through the girl, the woman instructed medicine men on how to restore the local Bubi people to health. It worked, and from then on, the Bubi have felt the invisible nearness of this woman, whom they call "Bisila."

According to an analysis by the Kenyan priest John Kivosyo, the transformation of pagan legend into Marian devotion was both miraculous and inevitable. Though hard to translate directly, he writes, the meaning of the word *bisila* revolves around motherhood, compassion and nurturing. It suggests a "quiet presence woven into the lives of women, into childbirth, into the fragile breath of newborns," says Father Kivosyo, and Our Lady of Bisila "was invoked in moments of fear and hope; when a child fell ill, when a woman labored through the night, when life itself seemed uncertain."

When Europeans came to Africa and talked of the Blessed Virgin, "The people began to recognize something familiar in this new mother. The missionaries, too, began to understand that Bisila was not an obstacle, but a bridge... both memory and presence."

A bridge. That is Mary: a bridge between this embodied life and the one we are promised in Christ, between our earthly relationships and the hope of heavenly communion, between what it is to live in a specific time and place (memory) and what it is to be a child of the Eternal God (presence). That Marian apparitions have occurred across the world and Our Lady has appeared, in different instances, with the features and dress of diverse peoples, shows us again her role as a connector. She wears fabrics and colors rooted in each of these specific localities on the planet, while on her lips she carries the message of the Lord of the universe.

She stretches herself from the darkness of sin toward the light of her son. Human beings have the physicality of creatures but the breath of the divine inside us. In the mother-and-child gestalt—that love of complete belonging, in which each side loses itself in the other—we see human existence at both its most vulnerable and its most elevated.

Art concerning the Virgin and Child should take this truth as its starting point. The Christ Child and his mother are perfection beyond our greatest aspirations, yes. But bridges open a path from here to there. The most affecting depictions of our Blessed Mother manage to show us, in one way or another, pockets of human realness in which we can find a foothold.

The Mother of Us All

Realness, in the case of the Bisila statue, presents itself through the faces. The Virgin's expression is one of ethereal calm, but at the edge of her lips hovers the faint sug-

OSV News photo/Matteo Pernaselci, Vatican Media

Pope Leo XIV prays in front of a statue of Our Lady of Bisila as he celebrates the final Mass of his apostolic journey to Africa at Malabo Stadium in Equatorial Guinea on April 23.

gestion of a smile, perhaps tender amusement. Her almond eyes are fully attentive and fathomlessly patient. There is grace in the way her right arm is folded across her chest, two fingers touching the dimpled left hand of her baby, Jesus. That light touch is enough to reassure her son, wholly. As he rests his chubby face on her shoulder, eyes closed, he embodies the bliss of one whose every need has been fulfilled—that is, every infant surrendering to the pure joy of being in Mom's arms.

Each face casts me back: Mary's, into my earliest memories as a small child, delighted by the smile and embrace of my mother; Jesus', into the wondrous experience of witnessing my own children as infants finding comfort in me. Not everyone is a mother, not everyone has been raised by a loving mother themselves, but in the contemplation of these irresistible faces, anyone could be smitten. Realism is the entry point; contours that gesture at pure beauty move us toward the celestial.

In so many Marian images, the bridge is less clear. Through the ages, artists have tended to paint or sculpt a recognizably human form that is also the avatar of some key quality: tranquility, luminousness, generosity. Somehow, the small details in which we would recognize our Mother are lost.

I don't mean to downplay the power of Renaissance works, Orthodox icons or other representations of the Virgin that have endured and moved people for centuries. But I'm struck by how reliably an element of accessibility can unlock new dimensions of relationship between viewer and subject. The Blessed Mother is all intimacy; her ineffable closeness with the infant she carries is her closeness to every one of us, her nearness to those in suffering, her counsel in crisis, as immediate as an inner voice.

To know someone intimately is to know their particularities. As any good storyteller understands, the particular is the portal to the universal. Paradoxically, specific details help a wide audience connect with a narrative. Maybe this is because we know instinctively that God is revealed in the glorious individuality of God's handiwork. The theologian Ilia Delio, O.S.F., reflected on this while also reflecting on a line from the Trappist monk Thomas Merton: "'A tree is holy,' [Merton] wrote, 'simply by being a tree'; flowers are saints gazing up into the face of God. We humans are no less called to be ourselves and in being ourselves to radiate the glory of God. However, very few people grasp the holiness of their lives."

I wonder if more people would achieve that realization by seeing the Mother of Us All more often with her infant in a certain type of sling, her head at a particular angle of tilt, her eyes perceiving something they have not looked on before.

It will make this Virgin of Bisila no less unique if we see more like her.

Marie Glancy O'Shea *is a freelance writer and editor who has covered travel, culture and finance for publications in the United States and Europe, including the Columbia Journalism Review, CNN.com and The Sunday Times.*

Laboring for Beauty: The Tradition of Catholic Worker Art

By Renée D. Roden

High atop a peak in Los Angeles's Boyle Heights, the Los Angeles Catholic Worker house could easily be mistaken for a fantastical religious art gallery. The Ammon Hennacy House of Hospitality, named for a peace activist who joined the Catholic Worker movement in Milwaukee in the 1940s, is a colorfully painted Victorian manse.

Guests float in and out, and communal dinner is announced with a shout at 6 p.m. Every available wall has at least two art pieces hanging on it—colorful Corita Kent originals, portraits of Dorothy Day, quotations by Daniel Berrigan, S.J., and vibrant collages, icons and woodcuts tucked in every corner. I am greeted by a 20-year-long veteran of the house who is wearing a shirt stamped with the words "Love Your Enemies." It is an example of what one internet commenter described as the "wood block print Truth-telling" tradition of Catholic Worker art.

The artist behind that print, Sarah Fuller, arrives soon after me and serves as docent for the walls thick with art and as diplomat to the diverse community practicing what she calls "the art of hospitality."

Fuller, a printmaker and Catholic Worker artist, lived at the Los Angeles Catholic Worker for five years, from 2015 to 2020. She is one of a diverse school of artists birthed by the house's spirit of hospitality and prophetic acts of Christian nonviolence. She takes me on a tour of the archives of the Catholic Agitator, the community's newspaper, to which she began contributing editorial art in 2015. Making our way to the basement, where the papers are stored, we pass a golden toilet pushed askew against the wall. "I made that!" Fuller exclaims. No, not to protest any golden toilets in the White House or Mar-a-Lago, but rather advocating for the right to public access for bathrooms on Skid Row, a longtime cause for this community.

Fuller's golden bathroom accessory is a far cry from the art that she has slowly become known for, block prints that fill Catholic Worker houses and newspapers from New York to Cincinnati to Portland. And yet a spirit of both cheeky contrariness and a seriously principled point of view could describe much of Fuller's art as well as the wider tradition of Catholic Worker art.

All photos by Renée D. Roden

Becky McIntyre, a Catholic Worker artist, works on a mural at the Esperanza Health Center in the Kensington neighborhood of Philadelphia on May 2. McIntyre has designed nearly 20 murals at sites across the country.

Art and the Social Order

The Catholic Worker was founded as both a newspaper and a movement in 1933, when Dorothy Day began selling the publication for "a penny a copy" on May Day in New York's Union Square. "Is it not possible to be radical and not atheist?" Day asked in her inaugural editorial of the newspaper. "Is it not possible to protest, to expose, to complain, to point out abuses and demand reforms without desiring the overthrow of religion?" she added. For 93 years, the movement has been living the answer to her question.

Over time, the name Catholic Worker has evolved to evoke a specific set of images for readers: perhaps Bob Fitch's famous photograph of Dorothy Day being arrested alongside the striking United Farm Workers in 1973; or Fritz Eichenberg's ubiquitous woodcut of "The Christ of the Breadlines," which set a halo around a silhouette in a soup line among the homeless and down-and-out; or even the masthead of the movement's eponymous publication, where Christ embraces two workers, shaking hands in front of him. These images, Catholic Workers say, can express the heart of the mission of this anarchist Christian movement in one evocative stroke.

"Visual art attracts people's attention," Dimitri Kadiev, an artist affiliated with the Catholic Worker, said in a phone call. "They might attack, they might mock you, but they also might be interested in it. Write words on the sign of the posters—it only goes so far—but if you have an interesting image, then they actually study it."

Kadiev has painted murals at many different Catholic Worker communities: at the Hennacy House in Los Angeles, the Hippie Kitchen on Skid Row in Los Angeles, the Dingman House at the Des Moines Catholic Worker in Iowa (where he did an interpretation of Eichenberg's "Christ of the Breadlines"), and St. Joseph's House of Hospitality and Maryhouse in New York City. Our Lady of Guadalupe is a frequent subject of his murals, as is portraying the community at work.

"Visual artists have a unique role in passing down the Gospel from one generation to another," Kadiev said. "The visual language is one of the first languages of the human intellect," he added.

Visual language has always been an essential element of Catholic Worker houses of hospitality. Throughout its near century, roughly 300 houses have come and gone. More than 100 of those houses are still open, welcoming the stranger, feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless and reconstructing the social order into something less exploitative and violent and something more just.

"We are working for a Christian social order," wrote Dorothy Day in the "Aims and Purposes" of the Catholic Worker movement, published in the Catholic Worker in 1940. "This work of ours toward a new heaven and a new earth shows a correlation between the material and the spiritual, and, of course, recognizes the primacy of the spiritual." Artists, the laborers of beauty, have a privileged role in fostering this correlation between the spiritual and the material.

Since the first Catholic Worker artists filled the pages of the titular newspaper with woodblock prints of the saints performing manual labor or household tasks, art has been an important dimension of the organization's vision of the reconstruction of the social order. Jim Forest, a longtime Catholic Worker, credited Eichenberg's haunting art for prompting him to pick up the newspaper and read what it was all about.

Although wood blocks and truth-telling have a privileged place in Catholic Worker art, the art of the Catholic Worker movement includes a panoply of techniques, styles, subjects and philosophies. Murals, watercolors, printmak-

Visual language has always been an essential element of Catholic Worker houses of hospitality.

ing and quilting techniques abound.

Catholic Worker artists are of all ages and genders. Willa Bickham, 81, paints watercolors and prints silk screens in Viva House, the home she and her husband, Brendan Walsh, have run for 60 years in West Baltimore. Becky McIntyre creates murals in Philadelphia and art for the cover of the Catholic Agitator.

Further north, in Portland, Emma Coley Fitzgerald creates block print cards, classical iconography and whimsical paintings for her community. Visiting each of these houses, I was able to see how these artists embrace the movement's incarnational love of the human person and the human artistic and creative genius. The Catholic Worker tradition of philosophy in action inspires them to make art with a deeper pedagogical purpose.

Ade Bethune: Truth-Teller

The tradition of printmaking—woodcut, lithograph, linocut, block-printing—in the name of "truth-telling" originated with the original Catholic Worker artist, Ade (pronounced Ah-day) Bethune. Bethune immigrated with her family to New York from Belgium in 1928, when she was just 14 years old. She heard about the Catholic Worker newspaper from fellow art students at Cooper Union Art School, but she was disappointed in the initial scrubby drawings and the Renaissance paintings that appeared in the fall editions in 1933.

Bethune designed the second masthead for the Catholic Worker paper when she was a 21-year-old art student in 1935. Originally, the masthead of the paper featured two workers on opposite ends of the paper's title. Bethune was unimpressed by what looked like 1930s versions of clip art. "Had Dorothy obtained the two workers from odds and ends of leftover cuts in an old case at her printer's?" she wondered.

She set out to surprise Dorothy with a properly designed masthead. "The two workers at opposite ends of the page looked as though they were not on speaking terms, I thought. Somehow or other they must come together and shake hands in solidarity," Bethune said, planning to bring some unity to a disjointed image.

She brought the Black worker (suggested by Dr. Arthur Falls of the Chicago Catholic Worker) and the white worker together, shaking hands while embraced by Christ before a cross. Bethune hand-carved the distinct lettering for the paper's title. And thus the masthead remained until 50 years later, when Bethune replaced one of the male workers with a woman who was a "mother and agricultural worker," as Bethune explained in her editorial to announce the change for the May 1985 edition.

Bethune was deeply influenced by Peter Maurin's theology of work and wrote a short treatise called, simply, "Work." From her deeply sacramental vision of work, Bethune became a strong advocate for liturgical art and became part of the liturgical arts movement that mushroomed in the early 20th century. "The liturgical movement asked Catholics to take part in the Mass in a new way," Katherine Harmon wrote in an article on Bethune's contributions, "not only as individuals forming their lives in Christ, but as a socially oriented, worshipping body, becoming the Body of Christ."

Bethune has inspired many Catholic Worker artists, including Sarah Fuller in Los Angeles. Fuller and her partner have toyed with the idea of calling their house Ade Bethune House. Fuller studied Bethune's work and has, as a treasured image in her studio, Bethune's print of St. Joseph the Worker.

Fuller has designed logos for several Catholic Worker communities, most recently the new La Sagrada Familia Catholic Worker in New Hampshire. She is driven to create community among Catholic Worker artists, to connect one another, which led her and a fellow Los Angeles Catholic Worker alum, Becky McIntyre, to launch an online newsletter, The Illuminator, to highlight the work of other Catholic Worker artists and profile their work.

In her airy apartment in a low-slung apartment complex on a quiet street in Ventura, Fuller enters the guest room that doubles as her studio. She pulls out Rubbermaid bins of floppy linoleum stamps, carved into shapes of art that populate Catholic Worker houses and newspapers the globe over. The 93rd anniversary edition of The Catholic Worker was filled with prints from Fuller's "A Catholic Worker Alphabet" collection.

The blocks that Fuller uses to print look like childhood craft stamps. They are made of flexible pink or gray linoleum, into which Fuller carves her designs. Hence the name "linocuts," which describes many of Fuller's prints. Fuller begins her designs with an initial sketch or ink drawing, which she then renders on the linoleum block via transfer paper. She uses a carving tool to carve the design following the guidelines on the linoleum.

Fuller has also been inspired by the artist John August

The Simone Weil House in Portland, Ore., distributes free books and clothes as part of their Village Commons project.

Swanson, a friend of the Los Angeles Catholic Worker. Shortly before he died in 2021, Swanson called Fuller up. That day, Fuller was "on the house," meaning she was practicing the art of hospitality: answering the door, picking up the phone, running through a list of chores. Swanson had seen a series of her artwork in The Catholic Worker's May anniversary edition. He told her how much he liked her work, Fuller related, and gave her some advice that stuck: "Don't get too refined," Swanson said.

Fuller interpreted that as an embrace of the imperfect, the rough and raw. A self-described perfectionist, Fuller has embraced the art of letting a piece go, letting it be done, and living with the rough edges. Once the carving is done, it is done.

One Artist's Vocation

Catholic Worker art, for Fuller, is all about community. And community has affirmed her vocation to be an artist. As she began experimenting with her artistic practice at a Catholic Worker house, at first it felt too "decadent." The Los Angeles Catholic Worker's soup kitchen, the Hippie Kitchen, operates three days a week, and the Workers open the Ammon Hennacy House for community dinner and hospitality throughout the week. The house prioritizes and values hard work, Fuller said, and, at first, creating art did not seem like labor that had enough value or communal benefit. (She is not alone in her perception: the American Academy of Arts and Sciences found in their 2021 report, "Art Is Work," that only 22 percent of Americans believed that art contributed "a lot" to the good of society.)

But then the London Catholic Worker asked Fuller to create art for their house, including a Madonna and Child featuring Mary at a protest. She moved to London in 2012 and made art for the house that still hangs on the walls. "That's when I realized art could be a real service to Catholic Worker communities," Fuller said.

Community has a deeper meaning for how Fuller practices her craft as well. We took a walk through "Monuments," an exhibit at Los Angeles's Museum of Contemporary Art, near the Federal Building where Los Angeles Catholic Workers have been arrested protesting ICE enforcement in Los Angeles and the detainment of immigrants in the federal detention center downtown. The gallery featured a few of the nearly 200 Confederate monuments that were decommissioned between 2015 to 2020 in response to public outrage.

Many were oversized Victorian statues depicting Confederate military leaders or figureheads, baroque in scope and now grotesque in appearance, defaced or covered in graffiti. They were juxtaposed with pieces by Black artists, featuring contemporary pietàs of Black mothers and sons, art addressing the cost of slavery and police brutality, and art that celebrated Black American resilience in the form of a film celebrating Mother Emanuel A.M.E.'s choir in Charleston, S.C., which lost nine church members when a white supremacist opened fire on their congregation.

Fuller paused to contemplate bronze ingots that were all that remained of the statue of Robert E. Lee on horse-

Sending out artwork in the form of a holiday card is a longstanding Catholic Worker tradition.

back in Charlottesville, Va. She was struck, she says, by the Confederate statues' former appearance of permanence. "All that expensive art was used to oppress people," she said.

In contrast to the ideology of state oppression that fueled those monuments or even the rarified air of exclusivity that fills a fine art gallery, Fuller's art is designed to be accessible and popular. "Printmaking is something anyone can do," she said. It can bring whimsy and fun to a community, a reminder to play. Perhaps most important, it creates reproducible art that can be spread widely. Value is derived from widely sharing the image, not from exclusive ownership of the art.

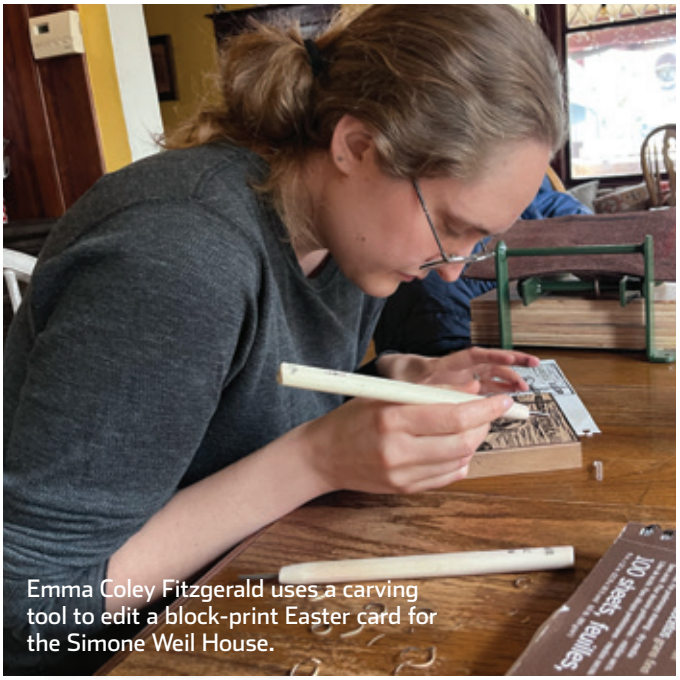
Although I have lived in and visited dozens of Catholic Worker houses, surrounded by Eichenbergs, Fullers and Bethunes, I find myself still hesitant to believe that art is something anyone can do. Creativity seems like something for only the trained. But Bethune would argue creating *things* is what we are all called to do, by virtue of our human dignity.

"Work is man's greatest school of life," she wrote in 1938. "It enriches mankind. It makes life fuller. It makes man more human. He is, in a way, a 'creator'; he is made in the image and likeness of God, the great Producer." Fuller's journey to claim her vocation as an artist, of the gift her personal creativity could be for the collective, resonates. It reminds me of Bethune, re-orienting the view of craft through the lens of the human dignity of being an image and likeness of God. Bethune depicted the saints doing manual labor about the house—because she believed that work was just as worthy as fine art of human time and attention.

Tellingly, the pieces of art Fuller found herself most drawn to was a gallery of curated prints by Hugh Mangum, a white photographer, which he had taken of ordinary people in the Jim Crow South. It was a series that depicted ordinary folks, capturing the dignity of the human spirit, the light in their eyes, in a popular, accessible medium.

Murals: a Marathon

On a bright, crisp Saturday in May, I step off from the Allegheny L train stop into the Kensington neighborhood of Philadelphia. Becky McIntyre is installing a mural in a health center just up the block from the train.



Emma Coley Fitzgerald uses a carving tool to edit a block-print Easter card for the Simone Weil House.

When I arrive, the mural is already up—a wallpaper hanger McIntyre met at a previous mural installation helped her do it. It took half the time, McIntyre said, impressed at the craft of the union worker.

A gaggle of McIntyre's artist friends show up to help—she is paying them, for the worker deserves her wages. She also treats them to Puerto Rican pastries and coffee, and pizza afterward.

McIntyre, 31, met Fuller through the Los Angeles Catholic Worker when McIntyre came to stay for a few months with the community. She was inspired by Fuller's printmaking to learn the craft herself.

A graduate of St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia, McIntyre moved back to the city in December 2020, after spending the pandemic summer of 2020 at the Los Angeles Catholic Worker. She created her first mural, with Kadiev, on the wall of the Hippie Kitchen on Skid Row.

McIntyre has designed nearly 20 murals and worked on teams to create a dozen more. On this sunny Saturday, she is hanging up two more murals in the gym and community center of Esperanza Health Center in Kensington. Children come in and out of the building for fitness classes and shooting hoops in the bright, welcoming gym. Words of encouragement are scattered over the artists' shoulders as the children admire McIntyre's work. "Looks real good!" "Keep it up!"

Slowly, McIntyre and her team paint over the seams in the wallpaper on which the mural is printed. This part is more like craft than fine art—there's a method and an application for someone to apprentice, a skill to learn. Today, I am the apprentice. This is not my discipline, I work with

Easter cards made by members of the Simone Weil House

words, but there is an "embodiment" to this sort of creativity, as McIntyre said, that is appealing.

Murals are an important part of Catholic Worker art tradition—Ade Bethune created various murals on the walls of Tivoli Farm in the Hudson River Valley and St. Joseph House in New York City, and other Catholic Worker artists have taken up the practice. To McIntyre, murals—and Catholic Worker art in general—can be an important record of the community. "It helps us to be seen, to see ourselves in the work—it captures us," she said.

Touching up the mural that Saturday was a corporate, collaborative process. The crew worked steadily for about three hours, carefully applying paint, cooperating and coordinating efforts while consulting McIntyre and the color guides she created for each mural. McIntyre came back a few days later to finalize it. She ended up spending 13 hours at the center on her final day of work. Once she ended her sprint, a two-year process had ended. "It feels great," McIntyre said with a laugh. "It feels like a weight has lifted," she said later in a phone call. But although the process took longer than she thought it would, she was grateful for it, she said, grateful that the community "trusted me to capture their community" in her art.

McIntyre created the faces in the murals from photographs of community members. The words running through the paintings were gathered from interviews and a communal discernment process. This was a process of capturing a community in color and shape. The two-year process caused McIntyre to reflect on the ephemerality and fluidity of community: "This is the community at one moment in time." Already, over the course of the mural's creation, the community has changed, transformed.

Community is also a form of art-sharing. Willa Bickham, of the Viva House Catholic Worker in Baltimore, sends out her work as a Christmas card. In Catholic Worker houses it is not uncommon to see a watercolor image by Bickham hanging in the odd corner. Before Bickham, the artist Rita Corbin—whose "Works of Mercy/Works of War" is an influential Catholic Worker image—also disseminated her art to fellow Catholic Worker houses through annual mailings of art.

To McIntyre, Catholic Worker art is not just about making a community visible to itself and others; it is about making the philosophy of the movement accessible, graspable. She highlighted Bethune's first encounter with Dorothy. "Ade's desire to accompany the words of the newspaper with art," she said, contains the work of all Catholic Worker artists, to "capture the work of the movement and the values of the movement visually," she said.

"Theoretically, Catholic Worker art lets people enter into the fluffy theological things and enter into it differently," McIntyre said, to access abstract ideas concretely. "It invites us into imagining together—to help us see the world we want to live and create," she added.

Community in Printmaking

On a Wednesday afternoon, before the weekly hospitality dinner, Emma Coley Fitzgerald has gathered her community at Simone Weil House in Portland, Ore., to recreate the yearly tradition of making Easter cards. Fitzgerald was one of the first Workers to join Simone Weil House, which her now-husband, Bert Fitzgerald, founded in 2019.

Sarah Fuller holds her print of St. Joseph the Worker at her home studio in Ventura, Calif.

Sending out artwork in the form of a holiday card is a longstanding Catholic Worker tradition. Willa Bickham, mentioned above, has sent out a Christmas card for most of the 60 years since she co-founded Viva House in Baltimore. Rita Corbin, another longtime Catholic Worker artist, sent out calendars each year at Christmas with her art imprinted on them.

Fitzgerald has updated the tradition to sending out Easter cards. This tradition began as a way to thank donors. She wanted to share something personal, tangible. "It's like sharing a piece of the house," she said of the cards. "It doesn't cost much, but it's a gift of time, attention and labor."

"Industrialism produces a lot of ugly things," Fitzgerald said, and to counter that, the mission of the Catholic Worker is to create beauty. Fitzgerald cites Dorothy's favorite line of Dostoevsky, "beauty will save the world," and also Simone Weil's belief that "the beauty of the world is the mouth of the labyrinth" into the love of God waiting at the center. Although there are no golden toilets, Simone Weil House captures Fuller's spirit of contrarian play in its "Second World" kiosk, the visual jokes propped around the house. The house also uses crafts and manual labor to raise money by selling card sets of Fitzgerald's woodblock prints, as Bethune did; the house has also sold beeswax candles they dip in the basement.

Fitzgerald began woodblock carving in high school. She read The Catholic Worker as a teenager and was taken by Bethune's art of the saints. When she was in high school, Fitzgerald would troll the Bethune digital archives at St. Catherine University in Minnesota and absorb Bethune's unique style. When she first joined Simone Weil House in Portland, she began creating geometric patterns and block prints of Dorothy Day quotes for cards. Fitzgerald educates me on certain aspects of woodblock or linocut drawings: "Make a shape," she says, "not a line," pointing to a nose or an eyebrow that's too much of a "line." The shape is more visually interesting, she points out. And: "Keep the chatter to a minimum." Fitzgerald edits out lines filling the background of her 2026 Easter card, an image of the risen Christ, carving out the "chatter" with a small chisel.

Tattooed on Fitzgerald's left arm is a quotation from *The Long Loneliness*, Dorothy Day's autobiography: "It all happened while we sat there talking," about the fecund creativity of community. Fitzgerald, 29, has muscular dystrophy, so she depends on community members at her Portland Worker house to run the press for each card: Community is not just a luxury but an essential element of the printmaking process. One of the house's long-term volunteers, Helia, steers the Woodzilla press, pushing down the lever in rhythmic repetition, carefully pressing the

Emma Coley Fitzgerald stands next to her portrait of Madonna and Child at the Simone Weil House.

cards onto the ink-covered stamp. Don, one of the house's longest residents, warns her that she is lining up one card on the stamp backward—but it's too late. "I thought you were teasing," Helia responds. "Can I do one?" Don asks. Even critics become creators at the Worker.

Threshold to the Divine

Fitzgerald, like Bethune, is a student of traditional iconography. Bethune's goddaughter gave Fitzgerald the gift of an icon of Our Lady of Perpetual Help that Bethune created in 1963 for her St. Leo League Shop, named for her patron, St. Leo the Great. Bethune, like Dorothy Day, was inspired by the East and was interested in the theology and technique of traditional iconography. In 2021, Fitzgerald began studying iconography, and it unlocked something important in her practice of art, she said.

Each Tuesday, Fitzgerald teaches classes at the Classical Iconography Institute at Pope Pius X Church in northwest Portland. Iconography, Fitzgerald said, is an act of "subcreation." The traditional elements of pigments, brushes and canvas combine the animal, vegetable and mineral elements of the world. "It's a microcosm of the macrocosm," Fitzgerald said. "We sanctify created things by our labor."

Fitzgerald was working on an icon of Maria Skobtsova, Mother Maria of Paris, for a gallery of icons of the saints opening at the nearby Benedictine community of Mount Angel Abbey, south of the city. The goal of the icon, Fitzgerald said, is to let the "saint shine through." The theology of iconography depicts the artist as a channel for the divine image, which is why Eastern Christians reverence the divine image. Fitzgerald describes it as almost a "mystical experience." After layer upon layer upon layer of paint—sometimes so translucent as to be almost invisible—the image comes alive. "When you work on icons, the icon works on you," Ania Kocurek Williams, the lead iconography instructor, said.

> **'When you work on icons, the icon works on you.'**

The icon represents the movement in a nutshell—it is offering a portal into reality rather than recreating it. The icon, as an instantiation of a divine presence, rather than a portrait of one, serves as a theological icon for a house of hospitality. It is a real, tangible presence, she said, sitting in the community's light-filled, wood-carved arts and crafts dining room, which held a small phalanx of printed cards that later would be swept aside to serve curry to two dozen dinner guests.

The icon is a threshold to a divine presence: an invitation to reverence the holy. And so, to the Catholic Worker, the house of hospitality is also an icon in which to encounter the incarnate God—so, too, is the very guest who sits across from them, sharing a dinner of rice and soup. Artists of hospitality, as Fuller might say, practice the reverence of the iconographer. It is an art that, as you work on it, it works on you.

Renée D. Roden is *a fellow at the Jesuit Media Lab and Georgetown's Initiative at Catholic Social Thought and Public Life. She is the editor of Roundtable, a newsletter covering the Catholic Worker movement, and lives at St. Martin de Porres House, a Catholic Worker community in Harrisburg, Pa.*

Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington

"The Alba Madonna," by Raphael, circa 1509-11

In 'Raphael: Sublime Poetry,' art points to a deeper reality

By Nick Leeper

Art is not about looks.

When we enter a museum like the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, we see ourselves as viewers, as if our primary task is to look. But "Raphael: Sublime Poetry" (on view through June 28) invites us to do something else. "Painting is mute poetry," Raphael claims, "and poetry is blind painting." We have to hear and read art, not just look at it.

The arts move us beyond the aesthetic, our physical senses, to get to the soul of the work. Raphael's "The Ecstasy of St. Cecilia" (Page 66) reveals his Neoplatonic theory of art. The patron saint of music is surrounded by a few other saints: Paul, John, Augustine and Mary Magdalene. Cecilia stands contrapposto while gazing heavenward at the angelic choir above with a childlike wonder. She holds a pipe organ in her hands that is falling apart and will soon join the pile of other broken instruments at her feet. She listens to the true music of heaven, while St. Paul looks at the earthly instruments with the same pensive expression as Rodin's "The Thinker" contemplating the world's sins.

Like the abandoned instruments at St. Cecilia's feet, music and all other art forms are limited on their own. Raphael would see the arts as insufficient, as only a means that points beyond to a deeper reality. The arts help us tran-

scend the sights and sounds to find goodness, beauty and truth. But to find transcendence means engaging with the arts with more than our senses. Raphael gives us not only 170 artworks to look at in this exhibition—the first major show on the artist in the United States, according to the Met—but also a spiritual way of seeing.

Active Imagination

Friedrich Nietzsche wrote frequently about Raphael. He contended that modern viewers engage with art in an Apollonian way. Apollonian art is primarily aesthetic and rational, like the god it is named after. We engage art in this way when we merely look, hear, watch and then move on, unaffected. Just as the disciples in Raphael's "The Transfiguration" look to Christ from below for salvation, Nietzsche claims modern people look to art, or "the reduction of illusion to mere illusion," to "make life bearable." Nietzsche's point is that art seen in this way cannot actually save us, but only help us pass the time while we grovel in the darkness and chaos, as the disciples do in the lower part of this painting. But he also offers a better solution, and it is surprisingly spiritual.

Nietzsche claimed that to find such salvation, we need to rediscover the religious root of art, the Dionysian, which requires active participation. The church certainly recognizes this truth in the liturgy, which invites all to full and active participation. But how can visitors participate in a museum? Nietzsche asserts that we need a combination of the Apollonian and the Dionysian. He says that if one were to convert a song into a painting in one's imagination, one would get closer to the Dionysian. Regarding the "The Transfiguration," it is one thing to stare at Christ's glory on the mount, but it is another to converse with Christ as Moses and Elijah do. It is by knowing Christ personally that we are saved, not just seeing him or witnessing miracles. True religion requires a relationship beyond the retina.

For art to give us a spiritual experience, it needs to activate our imaginations. Raphael's drawings are more accessible for this sort of experience. Often when we look at paintings, we slip into an Apollonian mode: We look, we see them as complete, we recognize what's going on, and then we move on. Drawings beckon us to complete them in our minds. Many drawings on display at the Met were tools to create paintings, such as those from "The Transfiguration," Raphael's last painting.

I was glad to see a drawing of St. Catherine of Alexandria, as I love the complete painting at the National Gallery in London. This drawing invited a different experience, one closer to what Nietzsche discusses. It invites us to be painters in our minds, to recreate this rough, energetic drawing into a more serene, softer painting like Raphael's. Many, including myself, bypass drawings in an exhibit like this because we want to see the final product, the complete thing. Drawings demand our participation. It is easier to look at what has been accomplished than to paint or draw in our minds. But the imagination is what allows the image to become a window into heaven.

For art to give us a spiritual experience, it needs to activate our imaginations.

Raphael's Innovation

Raphael employed his imagination by responding to and learning from others. He learned the most from his master, Perugino. Raphael takes Perugino's serene figures and landscapes to create a sense of peace and perfection in all of his works.

The "prince of painters" learned from two other greats during his time in Florence: Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo. Leonardo's influence is explicit in such works as "Leda and the Swan," but more subtly in a work like "The Small Cowper Madonna." The soft outlines, the sfumato executed in the hair and veil, and the emotional inwardness of Christ and his mother are signatures of Leonardo. It's hard to say what these two are thinking and feeling here, inviting us to enter into the hearts of these figures in our own meditation.

Michelangelo's stately influence is apparent in "The Alba Madonna" (Page 64). The Christ child is more of a warrior than an infant, planting his cross like a conquistador in the hands of his obsequious cousin John. Mary is more of a Roman heroine, giving a stern gaze to the makeshift cross while wearing a military-grade sandal that seems more suited to Diana than to a pious peasant woman.

Raphael was able to move fluidly among different styles, which led to his chief innovation: feeling and intimacy in sacred art. In "Madonna of the Rose," the dark background and Joseph give contrast to the bright, smiling mother and these two children playing tug-of-

war with John's banner, which reads "Ecce Agnus Dei." The Holy Family shares this playful, human moment, which brings the heavenly figures down to join us on earth.

We can miss much of Raphael's innovation today because we see most of this style mass-produced on prayer cards in religious shops. But Raphael was not a conventional artist by any means in his time. He was highly imaginative, bringing the holy and human together in a way others have never achieved so successfully. He shows us that these figures we pray with are not Greek gods or crusaders, but mothers and nephews. Raphael shows us that we are really part of God's loving family.


Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

Madonna of the Future

Raphael was a Madonnière, a specialized painter of the Virgin Mary. There are many good Madonnas in this exhibition, but I was disappointed that the "Madonna della Seggiola," known as the "Madonna of the Chair," was not on loan from Florence. It is my favorite Madonna and Child, so much so that I painted my own copy of it for my personal devotion.

This painting is also the focus of a short story by Henry James, "The Madonna of the Future." James writes about Theobald, an American artist in Florence in the 19th century seeking to create the perfect Madonna, like the "Madonna of the Chair." He has been there for 20-plus years working on his masterpiece. As the story goes on, the narrator begins to realize the true nature of this project: His patrons haven't seen any of his work, his model is no longer young and beautiful, and the *bambino* died in childhood. At the end of the story, the narrator finally enters the artist's studio, finding him paralyzed in his chair, staring at a worn, white canvas. Theobald dies shortly thereafter with only this blank canvas as his perfect Madonna.

The story raises the question of what makes an artwork. Theobald was an artist, even though he had only this blank canvas as a Madonna. His image of the perfect Madonna exists in his mind, perhaps too perfect to be represented. It would ruin what he saw in Serafina, his model. Raphael's Madonnas give us more to look at, but are they functioning as artworks if they don't lead us to imagine Mary and converse with her in our hearts?

Theobald was unable to communicate his vision to others, but Raphael could and did. His paintings show us his immense imaginative energy, giving us a glimpse of his own mother.

Raphael lost his mother at the age of 8, and his Madonnas carry a tenderness that feels experienced rather than contrived. Having lost my own mother to cancer at a young age, I understand the impulse to paint the motif repeatedly. To quote the pope star Madonna, who also lost her mother while young, "What fuels my ambition is the desire to be heard. And to find my mother, I suppose." Art is perhaps an exercise of encounter: of finding those who have been lost to us. It is an exercise in introducing us to those we do not know. Raphael has given the world a great gift by introducing us to his mother as well as to ours.

"Raphael: Sublime Poetry" is successful when we can see what Raphael saw, not just in an aesthetic sense but in an ethical sense as well. Depending on our upbringing and religious education, we might imagine Mary and Jesus as cold, distant or stern (as Michelangelo did), but Raphael invites

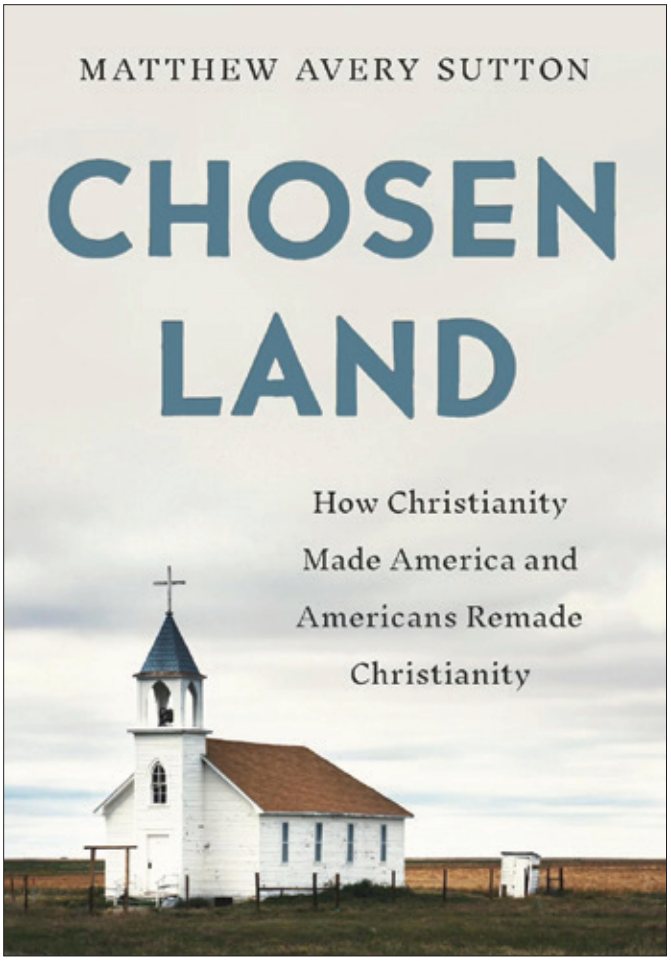
From left to right: "The Head and Hands of Two Apostles," circa 1519-20; "The Ecstasy of Saint Cecilia With Saints Paul, John the Evangelist, Augustine, and Mary Magdalene," circa 1515-16; and "Saint Catherine in Three-Quarter Length," circa 1507

us to reimagine them as fun, delightful and happy. To share this vision requires us to see beyond the canvas and to allow the artist to shape how we see.

Leonardo once claimed that art is never finished, only abandoned. This exhibition shows us that Raphael's work is still ongoing. Although the artist is no longer living, we now take his place. What hangs on the walls is only an underpainting. The rest is up to our imagination.

Nick Leeper, S.J., *is a Jesuit scholastic and a contemporary iconographer. He teaches art and theology at Xavier High School in New York City. His solo show, "Twilight of the Idols," was on display at the Church of St. Francis Xavier this past spring.*

MY COUNTRY, 'TIS OF THEE



Basic Books / 656p $40

Matthew Avery Sutton's lively new book, *Chosen Land: How Christianity Made America and Americans Remade Christianity*, is less a narrative than a counternarrative to how American religious history has been done for the past century and a half.

Beginning with the Spanish Catholic missions to Mexico and the American Southwest (the reader immediately gets where the first chapter is going by its title, "The Christian Invasion Begins"), Sutton takes the readers all the way up to the religions of Barack Obama and Joe Biden. And despite the fact that it is a very big book (570 pages of text plus 46 pages of endnotes), the narrative voice throughout remains pretty much the same. That voice is a rollicking combination of critical distance, prophetic indictment and a tone that at times comes close to anger about the way the story has been told—or mistold—in the past by white males (and a few women).

Sutton's book has been thoroughly researched using archival material from sources as diverse as Bob Jones University, the Martin Luther King Papers Project, Union Theological Seminary in New York and the Farmworker Documentation Project at the University of California, San Diego. The documentation is, in fact, quite impressive, and Sutton often descends into historical details that witness to his mastery of large amounts of data. Much of his narrative is compelling and makes the reader want to plough on.

Sutton's most basic thesis is offered at the very beginning of his text: American Christians took an ancient religion "and reconstructed it over and over again, tuning it to their times and places and to the demands of the public—even as they claimed to be doing nothing more than upholding the 'traditional' faith. They fashioned a version of Christianity that was thoroughly American—and made America, in turn, profoundly Christian."

He quite creatively divides the American Christian groups he focuses on into four basic streams: conservative, revivalist, liberal and liberationist, each of which carved its own path through the American religious terrain. The first stream emphasized tradition, creedal formulations of belief and the importance of the church as an institution. The revivalist strain emphasized individual autonomy, the pre-eminence of emotions and the importance of an individual relationship with God. The third (liberal) stream emphasized rationality in belief and worship and worked relentlessly to keep religion up to date with contemporary intellectual trends. The fourth stream saw the liberation of people and groups as central to the Christian message and emphasized a Jesus who was a liberator of the oppressed.

The research is thorough, and the narrative voice is vibrant. And the sheer range of the persons, movements and groups included in *Chosen Land* equals that in Sydney Ahlstrom's 1972 epochal work, *A Religious History of the American People*, which invited scholars working on American religion for the first time to address the luxurious pluralism of the U.S. religious past in a magisterial way. In a sense, Sutton has done that but in a way that often crosses the line into a perhaps-overdone editorial voice that grates on the reader. (At least it grated on this reader.)

For instance, in "Sanctifying the West," the chapter narrating the attempts by Spanish Franciscans to evangelize the Native peoples of California, the author reports how the friars vacillated between seeing the natives as ignorant and childlike and, on the other hand, as devilish and savage. The report is undoubtedly true, but Sutton then goes on to explain how they worried about Native superstition, "which they viewed as something entirely different from their own superstitious beliefs in bread and wine that transformed into Jesus's body and blood."

Sutton is not a theologian but a historian (evident at a number of points, where he gets the theology wrong). But the analogy he draws here, even as a historian, limps rather badly. One might reasonably critique the doctrine of transubstantiation (a word he never uses) in a number of *theological* ways: as a misreading of the Last Supper narratives in the New Testament, or as a misapplication of Greek philosophical concepts to Christian liturgy, or as the overreach of high medieval theology transforming a simple commemorative meal into something else entirely. One could reasonably apply those explanations—and many others—to what Catholics believe happens in the course of the Mass. But "superstition"? That is not a theological explanation but an anthropological one. How can Catholics read that line as anything other than insulting—almost intentionally insulting?

One cannot help but get the impression that Sutton wants to right the wrongs done by dead white men to "others" in the religious past by treating the white "winners" in the same way they treated enslaved people, Hispanic peoples and Native Americans. The result is, unfortunately, a text full of historical anachronisms that at times approaches the embarrassing (and the unintentionally humorous). To judge the actions and motives of historical actors by the standards of the 21st century is neither good theology nor good history. But this is precisely what the author does throughout his narrative.

Sutton describes, for instance, how the Franciscan friars "*likely* sold some children into slavery while justifying their sale by claiming to have made Christians of them. This was not the first time, and it would not be the last, that colonizers used Christianity as a rationale for subjugating non-Christian peoples." (The emphasis on "likely" is the author's own.) Or in narrating the founding of Plymouth: "the men and women on the Mayflower were religious extremists in an era of religious extremists."

The list of such quotes would be long and wearisome, and oftentimes the reader gets the impression that he or she is at a D.E.I. convention for the historically flatfooted.

For academics who teach American religious history, my advice is this: Don't buy this book, but rather check it out of the library and give certain pages to your students to identify and critique for historical anachronisms. This would not be an overly difficult exercise.

Mark Massa, S.J., *is the director of the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life at Boston College in Chestnut Hill, Mass. His latest book is* Catholic Fundamentalism in America.

AT THE END OF MY SUFFERING THERE WAS A DOOR

By Jane Wageman

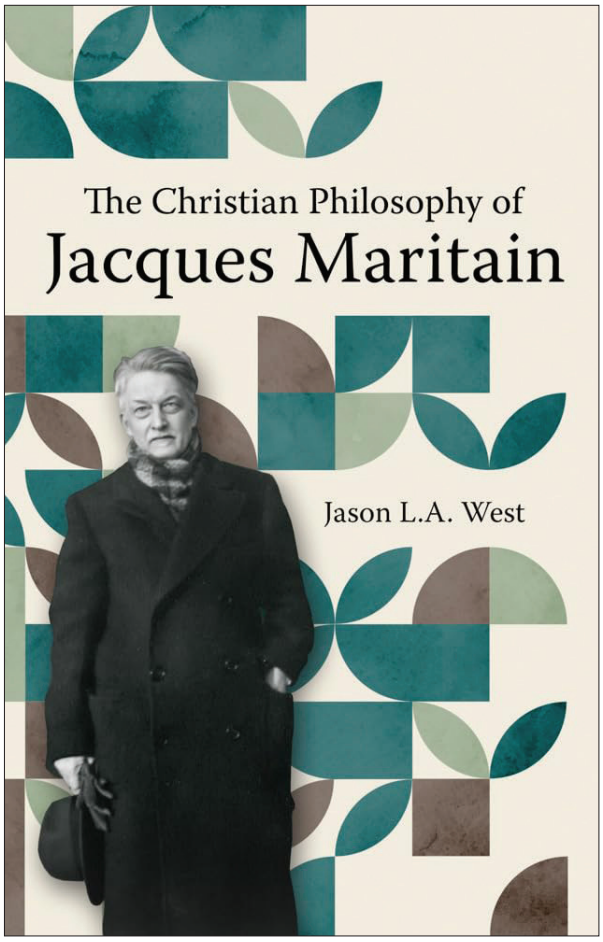
after *The Wild Iris*

There was Louise Glück telling me dirt
is soft and can be pushed through, there
was a window—a way of looking out.
Outside, snow lay over the lake
like ash; it covered the ground,
froze it over, and over and over
I read the poem where the iris
pops its head out from the dark,
looks about at the shifting pines,
and tells them, *That which you call death*
I remember.
I remember the life before
this one. Like a seed slipped into soil
remembers its wholeness, remembers
the hands that held it, dropped it down.

When the sun dropped down, I left.
Left to walk by the lake, left the door
unlocked. I am always forgetting
my keys, always losing track of them.
It is not just the way out but the way back in,
when you fail to find the end, so many doors
before the door, so many woods
to get lost in, wander back from.
In the midst of my suffering,
there was glass and words and white.
The stark black of a winter tree.
Objects that cut through to reach suffering
in suffering. I walked back.
I dreamt you came with a vase
of wild irises—flowers plucked out
from another time.

Jane Wageman *is a writer and teacher from Minnesota. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in Passages North, Lake Effect, Wigleaf, trampset and elsewhere. She writes at the Substack "Quick Bright Things." This poem is a runner-up in the 2026 Foley Poetry Contest.*

AN ARTFUL SCHOLASTICISM



Catholic University of America Press / 344p $25

"Maritain's turn to Aquinas is not a call to go back to the dark ages."

So writes Jason West in his new book, *The Christian Philosophy of Jacques Maritain*. For anyone just being introduced to the thought of Jacques Maritain, statements like the above require a lot of unpacking. Accordingly, West tries to do something novel: an English-language overview of the key aspects of Maritain's thought, rather than a historical biography or a more in-depth look at a specific area.

Maritain was one of the pre-eminent Thomistic philosophers of the 20th century, and his thought would influence both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights promulgated by the United Nations in 1948 and the documents of the Second Vatican Council. His writings continue to be widely read. Yet it can be hard to know where to start with his written corpus. He wrote over 60 books on a huge array of topics.

My own interest in Maritain comes from an interest in early 20th-century history, including a book on Argentine fascism that mentioned that local fascists once invited Maritain to speak at an event; by the time he had arrived in Argentina, they had heard about one of his new publications that opposed their point of view.

That intriguing tidbit made me want to read *The Things That Are Not Caesar's*, or perhaps Maritain's most well-known work, *Integral Humanism*. For the newcomer to Maritain, however, both can feel overwhelming as introductions. Such readers will find far easier going in *The Christian Philosophy of Jacques Maritain.*

Ten of the book's 12 chapters focus on different areas of Maritain's thought, such as epistemology, moral philosophy and aesthetics. While West cannot include every single sub-discipline that Maritain wrote about, he tries to give attention to a broad array, including those that have sometimes been neglected in other studies of Maritain. Tying the whole work together is an emphasis on the strong philosophical framework that underlined Maritain's approach to understanding the world.

While Maritain did not see himself as a theologian, he did write extensively on theological issues, so there are chapters on natural theology and on revealed theology. These two are illuminating not just because of what is to be learned about Maritain himself but also because they help the reader gain an understanding of what it means to be a Christian philosopher who approaches theological questions from a philosophical vantage point.

Especially illuminating is a section describing how Maritain grappled with the problem of evil existing in a world with a loving God. West also looks at the ways in which Maritain attempted to reconcile the holiness of the church with the multitude of sins committed in its name over the centuries. (Maritain's conclusion? That the church needs to be seen as a person separate from her members.)

Maritain saw no topic as outside of the bounds of philosophical questioning, including Einstein's theory of special relativity. His interpretation of evolution is confusing in West's treatment, but is also a fascinating look at the way a Catholic thinker attempted to square Darwin's theories with traditional teachings on the origin of humanity and the human relationship with the creator.

West is clear at the beginning that this is not strictly a work of history: There are already many books putting Maritain in his historical context. Yet he does offer some historical framing, including the important reminder that Maritain began writing during a time of incipient fascism in France and then continued to write from New York as an exile during World War II. The chapters on political philosophy and the philosophy of education in particular should be read in that light.

At the beginning of a subsection titled "Pluralism, Rights, and Democracy," West asks: "How do we achieve

practical political collaboration in a world that is divided between people and cultures that have radically different conceptions of the good, human nature, and society?" Maritain also pondered how teachers should best educate children in morality and how to prepare them to be adults in a pluralistic world; this interest was perhaps informed by his own experience as a member of a religious minority, as he grew up Protestant in a majority Catholic culture. (His wife Raïssa was a Jewish convert to Catholicism, and her family had fled Russia to France because of antisemitism.)

Though West strives to present Maritain as a thinker unto himself and not solely as a Thomist, his subject's neo-scholastic intellectual worldview is evident throughout. This background makes West's text a helpful primer for the reader, especially when answering questions that remain pressing in the present moment: How can Thomism be applied to the problems of the modern world? And what does it mean in our current context to have a sense of the common good?

Maritain was an academic, but he was not locked in an ivory tower. This, too, explains why his work had and continues to have such a wide-reaching and broad appeal. I appreciated how this book spurred me to consider issues of my own context; other readers interested in how scholastic thought can be applied to our current moment will also find this a useful text. "As he often puts it, the truth is eternal, and, consequently, it is always up-to-date," writes West.

West also looks at how Maritain's works compared with those of other thinkers and notes the criticism that Maritain received while he was alive. Sometimes the best way to understand a thinker is to understand who he or she was not. Maritain strongly disagreed with many modern philosophers and was in opposition to the thought of Descartes and Locke. West's contrast of those thinkers with Maritain's Thomistic philosophical outlook provides a useful glimpse into the broader differences between these two modes of philosophy.

Nor did Maritain's philosophical contemporaries always find themselves simpatico with the thinker. The philosopher Charles De Koninck at the University of Laval once wrote a sharp criticism of Maritain's personalist thought that did not name Maritain specifically but was generally understood to be about him. Cardinal Jean-Marie-Rodrigue Villeneuve, the archbishop of Quebec, also disparaged the "polycephalous [sic] monster of Pelagianism" he thought personalists were reviving. But, as West explains, it was Maritain's innovations in understanding the metaphysics of the human person that led to 20th-century Catholic defenses of human rights.

West is a professor at Newman Theological College in Edmonton, Alberta, and the reader may pick up on a tension in his writing: How can one be accessible in introducing Maritain while simultaneously engaging with dense and complex topics? However, I appreciated being able to get out of my intellectual comfort zone, even if that entailed moments when I did not fully grasp all of the technical material. Anyone seeking a clearer view of the shape of 20th-century Catholic thought will benefit from West's work.

West tries to do something novel: an English-language overview of the key aspects of Maritain's thought.

Greta Gaffin *is a freelance writer from Boston. She has a bachelor's degree in economics from the University of Massachusetts Amherst, as well as master's degrees in theological studies and sacred theology from Boston University.*

Dutton / 448p $32

I don't have a great memory for names or even specific events. My wife and I joke that she has to remember the things that happened in my life because her memory is a steel trap and mine is a bit of a sieve. But many of my earliest, clearest memories from childhood are tied to sports.

I am 5 years old; it is the mid-1980s, summer, and we're on the Cape visiting my grandparents. I am sitting with my grandfather on their screen porch as he listens to a Red Sox game on the radio. Out of nowhere, he starts angrily cursing out a player for an error. I wouldn't really start following the Red Sox until middle school, but my fandom would be shaped by how much my grandpa cared about a meaningless game in the middle of the season.

It is the following winter, and everyone in my New Hampshire kindergarten is excited to watch the Patriots in the upcoming Super Bowl. I have not yet watched a single minute of Patriots football, but I—along with all of my classmates—am convinced they will win, comfortably. I don't recall actually watching the Super Bowl (a humiliating defeat for the Pats), but that anticipatory feeling of being part of an excited (and irrational) group of fans lingers.

It is the spring of 1987, and my brother and I are sitting with our dad in the English department lounge at the college where he teaches, since it's the only place we know of that gets cable TV. We're watching Larry Bird, Kevin McHale and Robert Parish mix it up with the "Bad Boys" Detroit Pistons, and I have never hated anyone the way I hate Bill Laimbeer, who is all elbows and cheap shots. The Celtics will eventually defeat them but then go on to lose to Magic Johnson's Lakers in the finals. These Celtics had won the title in 1986, but I have no memory of that; I have plenty of memories of how it felt to be heartbroken when they lost.

Like most sports fans, I could keep doing this for days. I can pin so many years of my life to significant games: the Patriots and Celtics and Red Sox, but also Notre Dame bowl games and Liverpool championships and U.S. Women's National Team World Cup victories. All of them stand out from the general haze of my past.

There are any number of excellent books about sports that shine a spotlight on any one of these particular teams or seasons or even players, but the new book by Michael Schur and Joe Posnanski, *Big Fan: Two Friends, 82,490 Miles, and the Wild, Wonderful Sports We Love*, is the best book I've ever read about what it feels like to be a fan. Nick Hornby's *Fever Pitch* is the definitive account of what it feels like to follow a specific team (in his case, Arsenal Football Club), but *Big Fan* is the new standard for celebrating the multifaceted nature of fandom itself.

Early in the book, Schur and Posnanski (or Mike and Joe, as they refer to themselves throughout) give their basic thesis for why people become sports fans: "No. 1: Life is boring, and sports provide entertainment; No. 2: Life is chaotic, and sports provide order; No. 3: Life is lonely, and sports provide community." Over the course of the 400-plus pages of *Big Fan*, they bring their readers along on a series of adventures that show us all these elements—the entertainment, the order and the community—and we come to see that they are essential aspects of all kinds of fandoms, not simply for sports. Contemporary life can feel hard and chaotic; *Big Fan*, like fandom itself, introduces a bit of the countervailing joy we all need.

Of their three theses, the first and third initially struck me as almost self-evident. I like to watch sports in the evenings and on weekends when nothing else is going on, and throughout the week it's fun to take little breaks from other tasks to read about my teams, or to listen to podcasts that cover them while running errands. Fandom helps fill the time. And when I am out and about wearing my Red Sox hat, strangers come up and chat with me about how the season is going (very badly, at the moment!); and there is very little that feels better than going to a home game for any of my teams and being part of a huge crowd

celebrating together.

Big Fan has chapters that illustrate both of these points, like when Joe writes about watching Carlos Alcaraz play tennis and how that experience includes all the other tennis matches he's seen over the years, or when Mike goes to Anfield for the first time to watch Liverpool play in person and incorporates the entire history of his Liverpool fandom into the reflection. As a fellow Liverpool fan, this was my favorite part of the book, since I could overlay my own initial fandom and my memories of specific matches on top of his similar experiences.

But it is point number two, about the order that comes from following sports, that stuck with me most. Much of my daily life is intertwined with watching sports. I started reading the book during the semifinals of the World Baseball Classic, watching Team USA barely overcome the Dominican Republic. I finished it during the opening round of March Madness. It's almost embarrassing to admit it, but one of the most destabilizing parts of the early stages of the Covid pandemic was the complete absence of sports on TV. I had more time than ever, and the main way I usually filled and marked time was missing.

Before I picked this book up, I was already a fan of both Joe Posnanski, whom I consider the best sportswriter in America, and Mike Schur, who has made some of my favorite television shows, including "Parks and Recreation" and "The Good Place." Schur's first book, *How to Be Perfect*, is a supremely entertaining primer on moral philosophy and ethics. Posnanski writes the JoeBlogs sports newsletter and is the author of nine previous books. His *The Baseball 100* is the best book about baseball I've ever read, and his *Why We Love Baseball* and *Why We Love Football* are both wonderful encapsulations of his approach to sports. No one does a better job of writing about how fun and joyful these games can be. Mike and Joe also co-host "The PosCast: Sports and Nonsense," which is the best kind of "two friends talking about things they both enjoy" podcast.

But even if one is mostly unfamiliar with their other work, *Big Fan* will still be a supremely enjoyable reading experience. The book will land best with people who already understand fandom on some level, particularly (though not exclusively) sports fandom, but even people who look askance at the crazy passion of sports fans will be entertained by this deep dive into what fandom looks and feels like.

The structure of the book is unique: The table of contents runs to three full pages. Most chapters focus on attending specific sporting events, like the Olympic men's basketball semifinal between the United States and Serbia, or the Indigenous Stickball World Series or the World Darts Championship; but the book is not only about attending events, or even solely about sports fandom. Chapters alternate between writers (they are helpfully labeled at the start as either "Mike" or "Joe", depending on whose trip is being written about), but there are also chapters that move back and forth between the two.

Schur and Posnanski have written the new standard for celebrating the multifaceted nature of fandom itself.

Some chapters have the form of interviews (there is one between Mike and the screenwriter Cord Jefferson on Steely Dan fandom, and another between Joe and the writer Linda Holmes on Phillies fandom), and one that includes transcripts from a "Yankees Suck" group chat that includes Mike, Joe and the former major league baseball pitcher Brandon McCarthy. There is also a chapter co-written by Mike and Joe's daughters, in which they each talk about their Taylor Swift fandom, as well as five interstitial sections between chapters called "Fan Mail," where they invite friends to give paragraph-long reflections on things that they are fans of, like heist movies, table tennis, Bob Dylan and board games. All these different styles and approaches end up truly immersing the reader in the multifaceted nature of fandom.

They don't talk about toxic fandom or what can happen when you give too much of your personality, or even just time, to a team or an artist or a political figure, or what happens if that person or team turns out to be corrupt, predatory or outright criminal. But there are plenty of other books that cover that ground. This is not a sociological study; it is a paean.

The chapters that work best are the ones where they steer completely into this kind of celebration, like Mike's ode to watching Liverpool play or when Joe goes into detail about his love of magic and "the awe and astonishment of seeing someone do the impossible," or where Joe and Mike undergo a quest to meet (and hug) the baseball player Mookie Betts.

Not every chapter works so well. The one about going to watch the World Darts Championship reads like an outsider's perspective on other people's shared joy and ends up feeling a bit like the authors are standing back, saying, "Look at these weirdos!" which, in general, is the antithe-

sis of the kind of celebration they bring to their explorations.

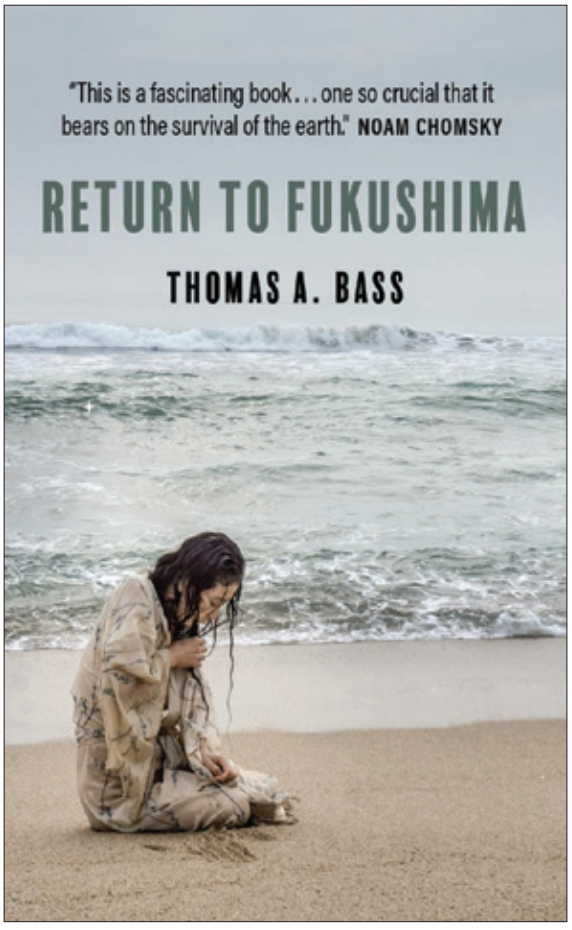
But in general, *Big Fan* succeeds because it examines the various aspects of fandom in a variety of funny and surprisingly moving ways. Joe spends time with a blind woman who is a NASCAR fan, which leads to a reflection on the joys of listening to sports on the radio. Joe and Mike attend the National Sports Collectors Convention, which they use as an opportunity to dive into their personal passions for collecting everything from baseball cards to first editions of books to fountain pens. They also try to become fans of something new—they embrace the new women's basketball league Unrivaled—and discuss the challenges of creating fandom out of whole cloth when a league has "no cities, no history, no rivalries, and no past."

They also have chapters where they task each other with trying to become fans of things they don't like. Joe has to spend a weekend immersing himself in pickleball, which, as an avid tennis player, he despises, and Mike has to go to Vegas for WrestleMania and a Dead & Co. concert at the Sphere. These chapters show that it is not necessarily easy to adopt others' fandom, but it can still be fun and rewarding to try it out and attempt to understand why others might take to it even if we ourselves do not.

And this, ultimately, is the great joy of reading *Big Fan*. Certainly, there will be many readers like myself, for whom their entire personal history is tied up with their life-long fandoms—for a team, or a band or Star Wars—but there are also plenty of people who won't identify with this kind of approach to life. Both kinds of readers can come to the book and, regardless of their personal relationship to fandom, still share in the joy of the "wonderful, impossible, incredible things" that Mike and Joe capture and reflect on throughout their 82,490 miles of fan-related traveling.

Michael O'Connell *is a writer, editor and teacher who lives in Ann Arbor, Mich. He is the author of* Startling Figures: Encounters With American Catholic Fiction, *editor of* Conversations With George Saunders *and co-editor of The Journal of David Foster Wallace Studies.*

POWER FAILURE

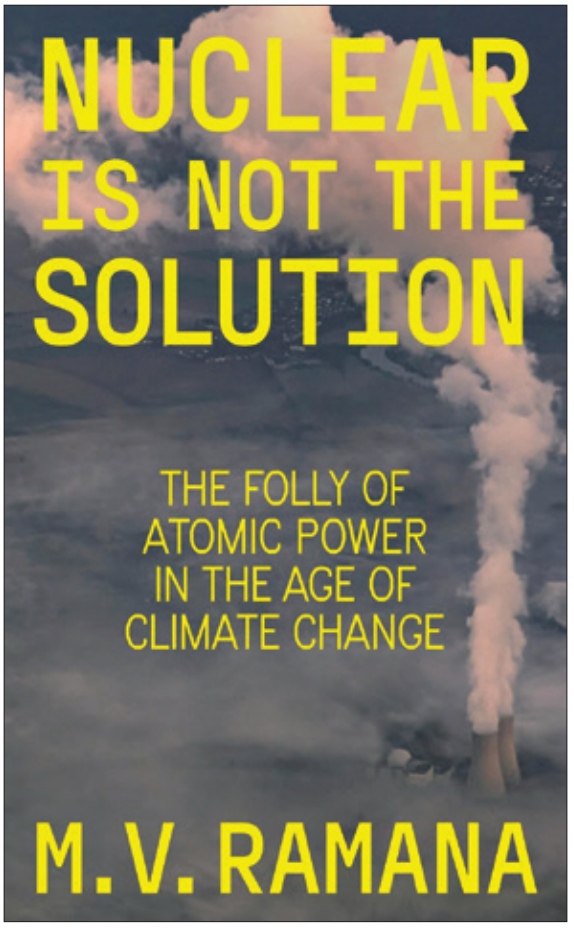


OR Books / 218p $20

Thomas Bass has written a timely and important book on what we should learn from the 2011 disaster at Japan's Fukushima nuclear energy plant. Bass, who teaches journalism at the State University of New York at Albany, has written extensively on the subject of nuclear power and has visited accident sites, including Chernobyl as well as Fukushima (twice). Although *Return to Fukushima* focuses on the world's worst nuclear accident after Chernobyl, its implications are far-reaching.

Besides providing a detailed account of the explosions of the nuclear reactors at Fukushima, Bass situates this accident in the larger context of nuclear accidents in other countries. The clear implication is that the nuclear option is far too perilous to use as a source of energy. Just the same, a nuclear "ideology of boundless energy has a hammerlock on government policy and propaganda."

Fukushima is one of 47 districts, called prefectures, into which Japan is divided. It contains two coastal nuclear energy plants, one at Daiichi and another at Daini. The Fukushima accident followed a powerful earthquake and an ensuing tsunami that shut down electricity and cooling



Verso / 272p $30

water pumps at Daiichi's nuclear reactors, setting off explosions and meltdowns in four of them. Two days after one reactor's explosion "began spreading radioactive material across the Pacific," another reactor exploded as television viewers watched on a split screen just as a government spokesman reassured them that "everything at Fukushima was under control."

The government followed up by prohibiting images of the explosion on TV and banning the use of the word *meltdown*. Observers, as Bass notes, "were also watching the myth of nuclear safety being blown sky-high." A day later, a third reactor exploded, prompting the Tokyo Electric Power Company (Tepco) to begin planning for an evacuation of its personnel. Prime Minister Naoto Kan stopped the evacuation plan and later wrote that "abandonment would mean the end of Japan."

The meltdown of three of the reactors posed immediate and still ongoing dangers; in each, hundreds of fuel rods still sit in pools, bristling with radioactivity; they can be contained only by being constantly cooled with water. If "one or more of its fuel pools, open to the sky and filled with exposed fuel rods," were to catch fire, it could spread radioactivity around the world. This danger, Bass emphasizes, will remain a possibility as long as the rods stay where they are. A full assessment of the reactors' condition is impossible to determine because the intense heat prevents anyone from making a close inspection; even robots sent in to inspect things "were fried in minutes." No solution is forthcoming.

Fukushima is only one instance among a number of nuclear power plants that have suffered serious accidents: Chernobyl and Three Mile Island are only the best known. Every nuclear plant is a disaster waiting to happen. Accidents can happen to any technology, but nuclear ones involve permanent consequences from the release of radioactive poison into the air, water, vegetation and more. Furthermore, not only do we have no solution for dealing with the leaking of radioactivity from Fukushima's reactors; no one has even figured out how to dispose of nuclear waste. Bass deals at length with the problem of the radioactive waste produced by all nuclear reactors and also accumulating from the cleanup after nuclear accidents.

The ocean has been a disposal site since shortly after World War II, when the United States used a ship to collect steel drums of radioactive waste and dump them into the sea. Other countries have followed the same practice. Nuclear generators produce 20 to 30 tons of radioactive waste a year, most of which, Bass writes, "lies scattered in cooling pools and thin-walled canisters stacked next to the reactors from which it came. The reactor buildings themselves have become radioactive waste that has to be disposed of."

Fukushima, meanwhile, has stored reactor cooling water in more than 1,000 tanks; treated but still radioactive water is being released into the Pacific. The Japanese government also "redefined recommended radiation exposure" upward—which meant avoiding much cleanup and the filling of thousands more vinyl bags with contaminated topsoil.

All of this sounds like madness, yet it has gone on in all directions. As a nuclear engineer and reactor inspector tells Bass, Tepco cut corners in construction, practically inviting an accident. The company neglected to address signs of structural weaknesses and corrosion, "with Tepco and the government hiding what was happening." Enabling much of this madness was the "nuclear village," the term for "the country's pro-nuclear lobbyists and officials," a mix of vested interests that succeeded in ringing "Japan's earthquake-prone shores with nuclear reactors."

The nuclear village is not a phenomenon confined to Japan. "Every country with atomic bombs or nuclear power plants has one of these villages," Bass writes. They promote nuclear energy even as cancer victims continue to

Bass and Ramana both deserve a wide readership to help dispel the misleading claims of the promoters of nuclear energy.

increase in accident-contaminated areas and as thousands of square miles of radioactive sites remain sealed off from habitation as "exclusion zones." Yet support for nuclear energy comes easily because we are "fatally attracted" to "the force that holds the atom together." Bass recalls Albert Einstein's warning: "The unleashed power of the atom has changed everything...and we thus drift towards unparalleled catastrophe."

Some might wrongly conclude that the Fukushima disaster was unique because of its specific causes. Bass, however, sees it as an example of one set of variable circumstances and says that each accident has its own set. In an appendix, he lists and comments on several earlier nuclear accidents, including one in 1952 in Canada and another in 2021 in China, where 500 nuclear reactors are currently in the planning stage. The meltdowns and attempted cover-ups in his list are convincing enough for many readers to conclude that nuclear energy is unsafe at any size.

This is also the conviction of the nuclear physicist M. V. Ramana's important 2024 study, *Nuclear Is Not the Solution: The Folly of Atomic Power in the Age of Climate Change*. Ramana ranges much more widely than Bass, though both are fully convinced that nuclear power reactors are too unsafe as well as exorbitantly expensive and too time-consuming to construct—15 to 20 years—to be feasible in the long run.

Bass points out that nuclear energy is not "green," while Ramana argues that neither is it economically sound, both rejecting what proponents claim. Ramana writes most engagingly, as for example when he compares the difficulty with disposing of both the ring in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and nuclear waste. For the ring, wrote Tolkien, "there are but two courses...to hide the Ring forever, or unmake it. Both are beyond our power." To which Ramana adds, "Likewise, we can neither unmake radioactive wastes once they are created nor bury them in a manner that we can be absolutely sure that they will never come back out." He gives examples of waste disposal accidents on top of all the reactor accidents he cites, including one at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant in New Mexico in 2014, where a waste-filled drum stored underground exploded and released plutonium to "make its way to the surface."

The disposal plant accident resulted from a cost-cutting, human failure, but Ramana cites nuclear energy reactor accidents set off by all sorts of other failures—design, maintenance and even climate change. He compares nuclear energy with solar and shows how the latter is far more practical, and far cheaper. The cost of solar power is decreasing while nuclear's construction and maintenance costs are steadily rising. And, unlike nuclear, solar has minimal maintenance costs.

Both of these books are filled with arresting details and deserve a wide readership to help dispel the misleading claims of the promoters of nuclear energy. Both have been released by small or marginal publishers, which unfortunately can work against their distribution and publicity.

Next to global warming, the danger from atomic technology is the greatest danger the earth faces, something we must all become aware of. Ramana concludes by recalling James Baldwin's admonition, "Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced."

Jerome Donnelly *is a former English professor, retired from the University of Central Florida.*

THE NOVENA THAT CARRIED ME

By Asha Mirriam

It was Joanitah who told me.
We were twelve, counting pennies
under the thin tin roof of our dormitory,
watching the bursar's list pinned outside
like a judgment we could not bribe.

My name was there.
Three months unpaid.

"Don't cry," she whispered,
as if the sky might overhear.

That evening, under mosquito nets
that drooped like tired clouds,
she pulled a card from her worn Bible.

A child in silk,
crown too large for His small head,
one hand raised in blessing,
the other clutching a tiny globe.

"Baby Jesus of Prague," she said.
"He listens to children first.
He carries their words Himself."

I almost laughed.
"What does He know about fees?"

She tapped the picture.
"He was a child once. Children understand being small."

So we began.

Nine nights.
Nine stubborn evenings.
"O Jesus, who has said, ask and you shall receive."

My voice stumbled over belief.
I asked for fees.
Nothing holy about it.
Just money.
Just enough to keep my mattress,
my place in class, my small pride.

By day three, I felt foolish.
By day five, desperate.
By day eight, silent.

On the ninth night, the headmistress called
my name.

I walked toward her office
with the weight of all the nights pressing my
shoulders.

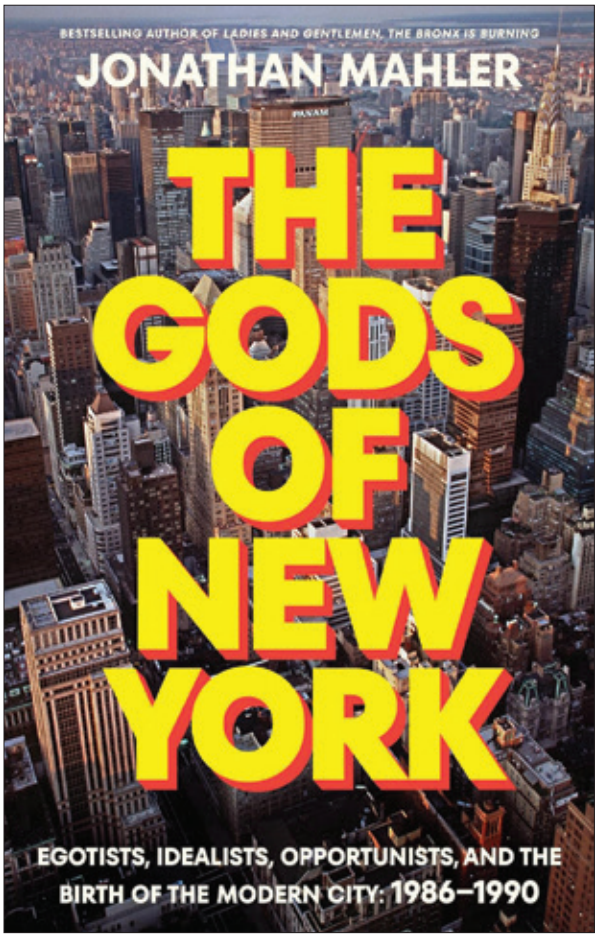
"A payment has been made," she said,
shuffling papers without looking at me.
"A relative."

The ceiling fan whirred, steady as breath.
No choir descended.
No lightning.

I knelt beneath the mosquito net,
fingers grazing the laminated card,
tracing the crown,
the globe,
the tiny hand raised in blessing.

And for the first time, I believed
that even a child's words, whispered in the dark,
could move the world.

Asha Mirriam *is a creative writer and emerging poet from Kampala, Uganda. This poem is a runner-up in the 2026 Foley Poetry Contest.*



Harvard University Press / 336p $35

Did the whole country just become late 1980s New York City? One is left with that impression after reading Jonathan Mahler's new book, *The Gods of New York: Egotists, Idealists, Opportunists, and the Birth of the Modern City: 1986-1990*.

The New York that Mahler describes is unstable, vulgar and dangerous. Substance abuse and homelessness are public health emergencies. Histrionics and tribalism have become the coin of the realm in politics. Mass media fans the flames engendered by political and cultural divisions. Any shared mythology or communal consensus has split off onto parallel tracks of race, class and nationality. The city's different communities seem to intersect only when they respond in aggressive fashion to high-profile and divisive criminal cases, such as the Bernie Goetz shootings, the Tawana Brawley case and the prosecution of the Central Park Five.

Down on Wall Street or up in the city's skyscrapers, investors and entrepreneurs make fortunes despite not actually making anything. The beneficiaries of this new economy regard themselves as visionaries and rely on eager media outlets across the political spectrum to keep the public informed of their insights. The much-hyped "rebirth" of the city creates an overnight housing crisis as upscale building projects replace a range of affordable options. The simultaneous divestments from many long-tenured civic institutions, including the city's mental health services, leave the city's streets filled with dangerous, disturbed people.

In fact, one of the defining figures of 1980s New York was also the defining political figure of the past 10 years. Mahler demonstrates the degree to which Donald J. Trump has been singing the same song since his days as a real estate hustler. For years, The New York Times heaped praise on Trump and his high-end building projects, often expressing admiration for his efforts to Make New York Great Again.

It's hard not to read *Gods of New York* as batting practice for the most recent decade of American life. Mahler says as much in the prologue: "The arrival of the global economy, the surge of immigrants, the nostalgia for a simpler time, the desire for order and authority—New York saw it all first." In addition, New York saw a coarsening of public life in the late 1980s that has been matched in the last decade by a coarsening of the nation's political culture.

But there is much more to *The Gods of New York* than these broad brushstrokes. This is the story of Ed Koch's difficult third term as mayor of New York (1986-89), told primarily through the lives of figures like Trump, Rudy Giuliani, Al Sharpton, Spike Lee and the AIDS activist Larry Kramer. For the most part, the men on this list are what Mahler calls "crisis opportunists," who pushed distinct agendas by cultivating bombastic public personas. The "Gods" were transformed into larger-than-life figures by the metropolitan area's four largest newspapers: The New York Times, the New York Post, the New York Daily News and Newsday.

The center could not hold in such polarized times. Koch was elected to a third term as mayor in 1985 with 78 percent of the vote. But after serving two terms as a force for stability in a city on the mend, he developed a reputation in his third term as an ineffectual leader. Many citizens considered his response to the surge in crime amid the crack epidemic to be insufficient, while racial minorities as well as members of the gay community came to see Koch as lacking empathy for their often-overlapping plights.

Political corruption, racial strife and wealth inequality were regarded by many residents as Koch hallmarks. But according to Mahler, there was not much the new mayor could do in the short term to change the course of the economic and cultural shifts that took place amid what was touted as an economic revival in late 1980s New York. In 1989, Koch lost the Democratic primary to David Dinkins, the city's first Black mayor. Dinkins would eke out a victory over Republican nominee Giuliani in a racially charged election that serves as the book's denouement.

By the time Dinkins was sworn in as mayor on Jan. 1, 1990, the forces that would remake the city were already firmly in place. The high-end housing that the likes of Trump helped develop in New York had displaced a range of more affordable units, inaugurating the city's transformation into a "luxury product" (in the words of Michael Bloomberg) that is served by a permanent underclass.

The Gods of New York is the perfect title for this book, which is male-focused from beginning to end. The women featured most prominently are Jennifer Levin, victim of the 1986 "Preppy Killer" Robert Chambers; Tawana Brawley, who concocted a rape hoax in 1987; and Linda Fairstein, who oversaw the prosecution of the Preppy Killer and the Central Park Five. While this clear gender imbalance is almost certainly reflective of the city's power dynamics at the time, the reader is left wondering what many of the 3.5 million women who resided in the city were doing during the home stretch of the 1980s. If you are looking for a comprehensive social history of New York in this era, this is not the book for you.

Nevertheless, Mahler captures the chaos of this historical moment in punchy narrative prose that resembles one of the great artifacts of late 1980s New York, Tom Wolfe's era-defining novel, *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. His affection for Koch is evident in a manner not dissimilar to Robert Caro's presentation of Lyndon Baines Johnson in his esteemed biographies. Coincidentally, the disaster of Ed Koch's third term resembles nothing so much as the back half of L.B.J.'s full term as president.

Toward the end of the book, the reeling realtor Trump purchases a full-page ad in all four of the city's major dailies calling for the death penalty for the eventually exonerated Central Park Five. Appropriately, the text of Trump's ad was presented largely in all caps and read just like one of his tweets: BRING BACK THE DEATH PENALTY! BRING BACK OUR POLICE!

Trump's response to the collapse of his real estate empire in the late 1980s and early 1990s, particularly his efforts to remake Atlantic City into an East Coast Las Vegas, was the beginning of his current persona. Slowly but surely, Trump transformed into a populist provocateur who trafficked in the same kind of shamelessness and self-aggrandizement he had as a real estate mogul.

Mahler is best known for his 2005 book *Ladies and Gentlemen, the Bronx Is Burning*, one of the finest works of cultural history ever written. In that book, he created an imaginative, thoughtful portrait of New York in 1977 that juxtaposed the "Bronx Zoo"-era Yankees, the terror and titillation of bankruptcy-era New York, and a mayoral contest that pitted Ed Koch against Mario Cuomo. While *Gods of New York* is a fascinating portrait as well, it doesn't quite capture the spirit of its times in the way that *Bronx Is Burning* did for 1977.

Mahler shows how Trump has been singing the same song since his days as a real estate hustler.

Perhaps Mahler attributes too much of the polarization of New York to the tabloids. Strikingly absent from the book is talk radio, which played a major role in reshaping the political culture of New York (and the nation) beginning at this very moment. The names of Don Imus and Howard Stern are not mentioned in the book despite their shared role in helping to create the kind of "locker room talk" populism that Trump brought to national politics.

Trump was, for many years, a regular guest on Stern's show, though Stern now recoils from him as thoroughly as anyone. Once Imus and Stern captured the New York airwaves with discussions ever more vulgar and racially charged, they developed national audiences through massive syndication deals in the 1990s. In 1994, Stern even briefly ran for governor of New York on a platform of bringing back the death penalty. Could it be that the Shock Jock had more to do with setting the stage for MAGA than Rush Limbaugh, who was preaching largely to the already politicized and converted?

There is one other notable omission in this book. Where is Andrew Dice Clay? The bard of Sheepshead Bay was arguably the most popular standup comedian of the late 1980s. He parlayed his outer-borough neighborhood bully act into capacity crowds at Madison Square Garden a mere month after Ed Koch left office. If populist resentment had a poster boy before Trump but after Archie Bunker, it was Clay, donning a leather jacket, lighting a cigarette, telling naughty nursery rhymes and depicting every woman's voice as Edith Bunker's.

Despite a few lapses like this, *The Gods of New York* is an engaging and eye-opening history that can be appreciated through a local or national lens.

Clayton Trutor *holds a doctorate in U.S. history from Boston College and teaches at Norwich University in Northfield, Vt.*

An Invitation to Behold the Divine

As we enter the month of July, the Old Testament reading from Zechariah crafts a portrait of a good king described as a just savior, meek and dedicated to bringing peace to the nations. As if to bookend the focus of this month's Gospel readings, the Old Testament selection for the final Sunday of the month features another good king. In the account from 2 Kings, Solomon in a dream does not ask the Lord for riches, or fame, or victory over enemies but for an understanding heart.

On the first Sunday of this month, the passage from Matthew's Gospel allows us to eavesdrop on Jesus' prayer to the Father, which discloses his awareness of God as also a divine ruler. Jesus calls the Father "Lord of heaven and the earth" and the one who reveals the mysteries of the kingdom. The psalm coincides with Jesus' prayer praising God's kingly rule as gracious, merciful and forgiving. In the Gospels for the next three Sundays, Jesus uses seven parables to teach his disciples about this kingdom, which he refers to as the kingdom of Heaven. For Matthew, however, this is not a place but a pious way amid his Jewish Christian community to refer to the presence of God and the way this presence manifests itself in their lives and in ours.

These parables not only invite us to continue pursuing more deeply God's presence in our midst; they also challenge us as to what we must do to behold that most holy manifestation here and now. On the last Sunday of the month, Jesus fittingly ends his teaching of these parables not with a conclusion but with a question: "Do you understand all these things?" (Mt. 13:51). His question, however, may well be less an inquiry than an invitation to an encounter he does not want us to miss. In his oneness with the Father, he so desires that we too experience our God as he himself does. Perhaps concluding his teaching with a question is his way of keeping us engaged until he is sure we do.

Getting Discipleship Right

On each of the Sundays of August, the Gospels, supported by the Old Testament readings, converge on the theme of getting it right when it comes to following Jesus. We begin with a story about food, the most basic means we have for supporting human life. The story of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes invites two ways to understand this miracle. It is a miracle story about Jesus providing food for 5,000 men, as well as some women and children. It is also a call through which Jesus summons us to do the same for one another.

Next, the figures of Elijah, Paul and Peter disclose that living a life fixed upon God not only involves trust but also sometimes doubt. A crisis of faith often arises when our experience of God is other than what we expect. Jesus responds by assuring us that our struggles to know the divine do not diminish his acceptance of us or his ongoing presence among us. Jesus' encounter with a Canaanite woman further teaches us not so much about our relationship with God but about our encounter with one another. He invites us not only to interact with those different from ourselves and build authentic relationships with them but also to accept graciously the inspiration or instruction that knowing them may afford. Like Peter, who is called to be the foundation of the church, each of us is called to a specific ministerial task in contributing to this work.

At times however, we will, like Peter, falter and come up short in fulfilling our responsibilities or being successful. Yet the confidence Jesus has in us is both humbling and astonishing. It may easily exceed the confidence we have in ourselves or that we have in one another. Jesus expresses this kind of confidence in his followers when he confides in his disciples that he will suffer and die. Peter's rejection of what Jesus has disclosed results, however, in a rebuke. Still, with his closing address on discipleship, Jesus invites Peter, the disciples and us to choose to follow him, to take up the crosses in our lives and to live according to the example of his own life. We, for our part, have only one decision: how to respond!

EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A), AUG. 2, 2026
Twelve wicker baskets full

NINETEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A), AUG. 9, 2026
Expect the unexpected

TWENTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A), AUG. 16, 2026
God of all peoples

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A), AUG. 23, 2026
A trust and confidence that astonishes

TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A), AUG. 30, 2026
Choosing, carrying and following

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

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The U.S. Constitution Shows Its Age

We must be willing to revise and reform

By Vincent D. Rougeau

A democratic government should serve its people through a commitment to justice, respect for the rule of law and the promotion of the common good. When developing the U.S. Constitution, the framers committed themselves to versions of these goals in the document's preamble. Yet one might be forgiven for thinking that we are now in danger of returning to a society in which "we the people" are simply subjects meant to pay and obey, while those who govern us act only in their own interest to accumulate power and profit. Despite its lofty intentions, our Constitution is not helping matters.

As we celebrate 250 years of nationhood, the United States has reached a level of political and cultural polarization that many have compared to the years preceding the Civil War. Democratically elected members of Congress do not necessarily see themselves as representing their constituents but instead operate primarily as agents of a political party or movement. This is most obvious in the Republican Party, which has given itself completely over to President Trump. With a Republican majority in Congress, the legislative branch no longer functions as an independent branch of government. This has allowed President Trump to assume authoritarian powers that were feared by the framers, as he routinely breaks the established laws, norms and traditions of democratic governance we developed over the past 250 years.

Recognizing that they needed to provide for evolution and change, the framers developed a system for amending the Constitution. But our democracy has become so sclerotic that even the processes for amendment and adaptation anticipated by its drafters seem impossible to contemplate or, at best, implausible as tools for meaningful change. The Constitution has not been amended in almost 35 years. After a burst of several significant amendments during the Progressive Era, including one giving women the right to vote, there have been only seven amendments in the past 100 years. Today the United States has reached a point of political polarization that makes it very difficult to imagine the kind of broad national consensus necessary to pass a constitutional amendment of any kind, particularly one that might redress current imbalances of political power and encourage broader participation among citizens in the life of our democracy.

The current debate about the Voting Rights Act of 1965 demonstrates how the Constitution has been interpreted to suit the preferred narrative of those currently in power. Racial discrimination still stains our commitment to democracy in the United States, and the Voting Rights Act is considered one of the crowning achievements of the Civil Rights Era. Its passage was the result of the rough and tumble legislative process of the (mostly) democratically elected Congress at the time; its core principles have been upheld by the courts for decades; and it has broadened political representation in this country to an extent not seen since Reconstruction.

But this achievement was recently undermined by the Supreme Court, which ruled that a majority-Black congressional district created under the V.R.A. was an unconstitutional racial gerrymander. Within days, several Southern states began the process of dismantling majority-Black congressional districts that had been created under the V.R.A. Going forward, the decision will make it very difficult to preserve voting districts in the South that give Black voters a meaningful opportunity to elect representatives of their choosing.

The Voting Rights Act was an imperfect tool designed for an imperfect country with a centuries-long history of race-based slavery and racial discrimination. As a means of including citizens whose views and voices had been excluded from democratic governance, it was a remarkable success, assuming we want a democracy that prioritizes membership and participation over entrenched power and privilege.

Can the Constitution in its current form continue to move us in that direction? If we are open to aggressive measures that are in good faith to revise, reform or rewrite it, then yes, I think the vision and principles of its preamble can endure and our democracy will thrive. But if we are unwilling to adapt it to support our evolving understandings of human dignity, democratic participation and the primacy of the rule of law, I don't think it will.

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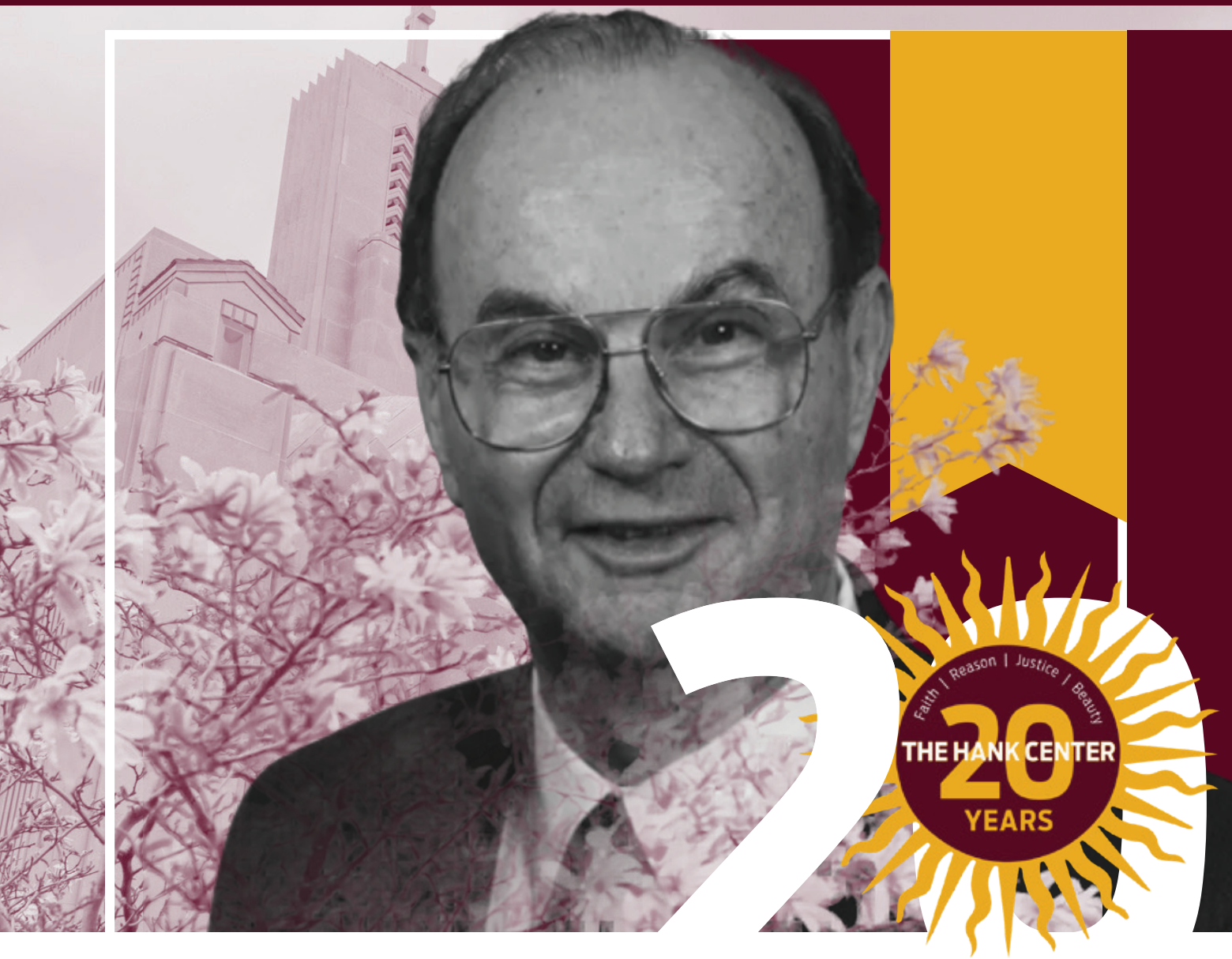

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