

America

SEPTEMBER 2026

THE JESUIT REVIEW OF FAITH AND CULTURE

EDUCATION ISSUE

CATHOLIC EDUCATION FOR ALL

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September Events

As we begin our celebration of the Hank Center's 20th anniversary, please join us for the first three gatherings of this momentous year. The events are free and all are welcome.



Divine Pop and Techno Slop: Theological Discourses on Social Media

September 10, 2026, 1:30–9pm | Lake Shore Campus

One “dry run” for the “Age of AI” in which we now find ourselves is found in our experiences with social media—particularly as a venue for debating the high ideas of politics, religion, and culture. The results of these debates on this new medium are mixed, trending decidedly toward the negative side of the ledger. This focused colloquium will reflect on the state of “God talk” on social media and features authors of the recent book, *Theological Discourses on Social Media*. All are welcome to join in this day-long, bricks and mortar event—and the heavy hors d'oeuvres reception that precedes the evening keynote.

Participation, Dignity & Democracy: A Virtual Catholic Theological Conference

Wed September 16, 6pm–8:30pm CDT & Thurs September 17
6pm–8:30pm CDT | Zoom Only. [Learn More & Register Online](#)

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Let All Who Are Thirsty, Come: Examining the Appeal of Catholicism and Rise in Conversions Among Young Adults

September 19, 2026, 8am–6pm | Lake Shore Campus

A conference cosponsored by the Hank Center and Mission Integration exploring the increase of inquirers and conversions to the Catholic Church. Panels of practitioners, students, and scholars will discuss enchantment/re-enchantment of the life of faith; media influence; class, gender, and culture in this revival; whether or not this is a revival; and what this means for young people and the Church in 2026.



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Whose Reading Do You Trust?

I am writing this column a few days before heading off to vacation, or “villa,” as Jesuit lingo has it. I plan to spend a large chunk of that time enjoying one of the finest pleasures August has to offer, reading on the beach.

While “beach read” often connotes less-than-serious material, I have taken all kinds of books to the beach, from literary novels to science fiction to books of essays. Last summer I read most of Czech priest Tomas Halik’s *The Afternoon of Christianity* while on the Jersey Shore. Once it was Marilynne Robinson’s *The Death of Adam*.

The beauty of reading on vacation, whether the material is pulp or poetry, whether the site is the beach or the porch or sometimes even an airplane, is that the reading is uninterrupted, an oasis of real attention in a desert of what is otherwise just “content.”

The cover story of the August issue of *The Atlantic* was Rose Horowitz’s “The End of Reading Is Here,” documenting the transition into what some are calling a postliterate age. You should (ahem) read the whole article, but one way of summarizing it might be to say that the skill of literacy may survive even if the deeper practice of reading atrophies. Reading, at least in a form sustained beyond a few paragraphs, may come to seem elite and archaic, a prose equivalent of churning butter at home: practiced by some for enjoyment or as an affectation, and arguably yielding a superior end result, but not *required* in any real sense.

America’s James T. Keane, who among other distinctions manages our book review section, responded to the *Atlantic* piece with an exploration of how the practice of reading has shaped Catholic faith. He argues that reading is “not *essential*, mind you—let us not pretend we are more faithful or

faith-filled than our illiterate ancestors—but *central*, at least in our time.” The interiority that develops in a deep encounter with the written word becomes holy ground for the encounter with God.

That article ran online with the title “No one reads anymore. But you should if you want to be a good Catholic.” And you should. You can consider this column an invitation to do so.

In fact, if you Google “reading and *America* magazine,” you’ll see that *America*’s editors have long been concerned with sustaining the practice of reading. Of course, part of that motive may simply be the self-interest of writers needing readers, but it also reflects the fact that any good writer begins as a passionate reader and remains grateful for the reading that sustains one’s own writing.

Even while the majority of what *America* produces is in textual form, we have established a beachhead in postliterate media as well, especially in our podcasts, which are now also distributed in video form on YouTube. Increasingly, we are offering subscribers online panel discussions (a wordy description, but far less ugly than the neologism “webinar”) exploring major topics from our coverage in a conversational format. When I meet people while traveling, my rough estimate is that slightly more than half of those who talk to me about *America* refer to a podcast episode. There is something about the immediacy of the human voice that invites response in a way that even the best prose may not achieve.

But I sometimes wonder if those listening to the conversations—and even we editors, who are the ones engaged in them—realize just how much reading lies behind them. We are lucky to spend many of our wak-

ing hours reading, just to do our jobs, and without those hours, we would not be worth listening to on podcasts or on panels.

It is tempting to say that we do all that reading so that you don’t have to, but that would get it exactly backward. We do all that reading so that you can read *better*, as one might rely on a marked trail for hiking.

Who has marked out those trails for your own reading? Whose reading *do you trust*?

I have come to recognize, while experimenting with artificial intelligence, that it is that question, about whose reading is trustworthy, that leaves me uneasy about the answers we can get from large language models. I do not know how to measure my trust in their “reading,” even though they have “read” far more than I or any other human ever will.

I hope that skepticism does not imply an outright Luddite rejection of A.I., which I would not endorse. Rather, it is a concern about sawing off the branch that we and the L.L.M.s are both standing on—all that reading done by all the readers who have marked out the trails for us.

Let me end, though, on a more hopeful note. One of the joys of reading well is precisely that act of trust required to step into a world of words and thought that we did not create for ourselves. While such trust should not be offered blindly, the practice of offering it at all may be a good spiritual practice to counter the endless scroll of text that all too often replaces reading these days. And perhaps, just perhaps, it may help us learn to inhabit *this* world that we did not create for ourselves with greater trust in God.

Sam Sawyer, S.J.



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Archbishop Richard G. Henning leads adoration on June 28 on the town common in Lexington, Mass., part of the National Eucharistic Pilgrimage's passage through the Boston area.

OSV News photo/Gregory L. Tracy, The Pilot

Cover: Niko Ross, a middle school student, paints during art class at the Notre Dame School of Dallas, in Texas.

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Our readers on the Supreme Court's immigration rulings

In an online editorial published on June 26, the editors of **America** condemned two recent rulings by the U.S. Supreme Court as “a profound moral failure in the American understanding of our national heritage.” In one case, the court allowed the Trump administration to terminate Temporary Protected Status for Haitians and Syrians in the United States who had fled life-threatening conditions in their home countries, making them subject to deportation. In the second case, the court allowed the administration to effectively close the door to the United States for all asylum seekers. **America**’s editors objected both to the expansion of the executive branch’s powers and to the “betrayal” of the American tradition of welcoming migrants. Our readers offered a variety of responses.

Clearly, the majority of the current Supreme Court has put blinders on with respect to giving humane principles any weight when interpreting the written law. I believe the editors have got it exactly right, and I applaud them for the essay. Keep it up, **America**. We see you have risen to the challenge that we all face under the present regime.

Ronald Baron

The editors frame recent Supreme Court immigration rulings as a “moral failure,” yet they concede these decisions are “legally defensible.” The Supreme Court’s job is to interpret the law as written, not rewrite statutes based on empathy.

The only lasting path forward is statutory reform. Energy must be redirected toward electing representatives who will explicitly rewrite the statutes [on immigration]. Until the law changes, the law remains the law.

Mary J. Goodman

Thank you for this necessary and morally compelling editorial. The court may have decided what executive power permits under current law, but legality cannot relieve the nation of responsibility for the human consequences. Returning hundreds of thousands of people to mortal danger or preventing asylum seekers from even presenting their claims is not meaningful immigration reform.

Pope Leo XIV reminds us in “Magnifica Humanitas”: “There are rights that apply to everyone simply by virtue of being human, and no human power can legitimately deny or arbitrarily limit them.” As Catholics—and descendants of immigrants—we should remember that human dignity does not depend upon birthplace or immigration status.

A nation may control its borders while still respecting truth, due process and the biblical command to welcome the stranger. When the law permits cruelty while shielding those who impose it from meaningful review, should we defend the outcome or reform the law?

Robert Stewart

Our Republican governor has already spoken against this decision. We have Haitians in this situation in several cities, and most of them are productive workers paying taxes.

David Bruning

As long as we allow xenophobia and racial animus to be used to convince citizens to fear other human beings, we have no right to call ourselves a “Christian nation” (setting aside how substantially inaccurate that moniker has always been). Any pretense that anyone supporting or pushing these policies is trying to build a Christian nation is belied by the simple, unmistakable words of the Gospel.

On what side in the judgment of the nations (Mt 25:31-46) do you think we fall when we not only refuse to give welcome to the stranger but instead falsely accuse them of eating pets and then forcibly send them to places where they are likely to be killed? We are all, as individuals and as a nation, morally obligated to do better—much, much better. May God have mercy on us for our persistent failures and for giving in to those who manipulate with fear and animus.

Dennis Ehling

America is a country built on immigrants from all over the world, just as my grandparents immigrated to America in the 20th century seeking an opportunity for a better life for themselves and their children. However, it was done legally!

Frank Belsito

➔ Yes, it was done legally, and during the 2024 campaign Republicans and Democrats came close to submitting a bipartisan bill that would have marked the beginning of immigration reform. But candidate Donald Trump told the G.O.P. to kill the bill. He wanted to use the broken immigration system as a tool in his campaign against the Democrats.

Bambi Vargo



Catholicism, Hispanic Heritage —and— American Identity

By MARIO J. PAREDES



here's a contemporary myth, fueled by superficial historical readings or fragmented sociological perspectives, that attempts to present Hispanic identity, the Catholic faith, and being American as elements in constant tension or conflict. We have been led to believe that to fully embrace the American spirit, we must dilute our Hispanic heritage, or that the universal openness of Catholicism clashes with a region's cultural modernity and particularities. This notion is deeply wrong. A rigorous look at history and the essence of these three concepts reveals the contrary: not only are they not in opposition, but they interact and support one another in a perfect and vital synthesis, forming a unique identity framework that enriches the continent's broader global landscape.

When Political Leaders Have Too Much Experience

Ronald Reagan was 73 years old when he ran for re-election in 1984. In a debate against his Democratic opponent, Walter Mondale, Mr. Reagan appeared visibly tired and confused, leading to speculation that he was too old to be an effective president. When queried about that possibility at a second debate two weeks later, a famous quip silenced his critics and effectively ended Mr. Mondale's chances for an upset.

"I will not make age an issue of this campaign," Mr. Reagan said in the second debate. "I am not going to exploit, for political purposes, my opponent's youth and inexperience."

Even Mr. Mondale laughed. A fortnight later, Mr. Reagan was re-elected in a landslide. But we forget now that his age *was* an issue, and his mental competence continued to be a topic of speculation throughout his second term. He announced five years after he left office that he had been recently diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease.

His predecessor and three of his first four successors were elected before their 55th birthday. Two of them took office in their 40s. It is only in the last decade that we have lost our preference for a younger chief executive. President Donald Trump was 78 years old when he was inaugurated in 2025; a close second was his predecessor Joe Biden, who was a slightly younger 78 on Inauguration Day in 2021.

How old is too old? Mr. Biden was the subject of frequent speculation about his mental acuity, and a disastrous debate performance in 2024 led him to end his run for a second term. Mr. Trump's erratic behavior and rhetoric in recent months have led to calls for him to be removed from power under the terms of the 25th Amendment.

In Congress, politicians on both sides of the aisle have been missing

for extended periods. Most recently, the attention has been on 84-year-old Kentucky senator Mitch McConnell, whose last public appearance was in early June. He issued a statement that he had been hospitalized after a fall, as well as a photo of him during his recovery, but has not responded to calls from the governor of Kentucky to address his constituents more directly.

In the first half of 2023, Senator Dianne Feinstein of California, then 89, was absent for roughly three months because of complications from shingles. After returning to Capitol Hill that May, she passed away, still in office, in September at age 90. During her final term in office, Representative Kay Granger of Texas was absent for almost six months of 2024. She was revealed to be living in a memory care facility in Texas during that time. After retiring from the House, she died in 2026 at age 83.

More members of Congress are over the age of 70, including a third of current senators, than ever before in our history. Senator Chuck Grassley of Iowa is 92, one of 24 members of Congress over the age of 80. As of March, 13 of them were running for reelection.

A July 2026 CNN survey showed that fully 70 percent of those polled would be "uneasy" or "upset" if their political party nominated someone over the age of 70 for office. Despite public sentiment, however, the link between seniority and influence in Congress and the advantages incumbents enjoy in elections tend to keep older legislators running and winning. The problem is as much one of incentives as it is of age and requires a structural solution.

A perhaps unlikely comparison here is valuable: the Catholic Church.

An institution not often known for its nimble response to changing social realities has nevertheless addressed head-on the reality that people are living longer and longer thanks to modern medicine—and, in many cases, beyond the limits of their physical and mental prowess. In 1965, the bishops at the Second Vatican Council "earnestly requested" elderly bishops who had become less able to serve to tender their resignations. A year later, Pope Paul VI made that request a mandate. Bishops now submit their resignations on their 75th birthday; it is up to the pope when to accept them. Paul VI later restricted voting in a conclave to cardinals under 80.

While no such rule exists for popes, an 85-year-old Pope Benedict XVI overturned centuries of papal precedent by announcing in 2013 that he would resign the papacy after he had "come to the certainty that my strengths, due to an advanced age, are no longer suited to an adequate exercise of the Petrine ministry." It is likely that his decision was informed by seeing the effects on the church of John Paul II's reduced capacity as he publicly suffered from the infirmities of age during the last years of his papacy. Five years before, Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., 79, had overturned five centuries of Jesuit tradition by becoming the order's first superior general to resign. His successor, Adolfo Nicolás, did the same in 2016 at age 80, citing advanced age.

The United States is not opposed to setting constitutional age limits for its elected officials—but they are only directed toward the young. One must be over 25 years of age to be elected to the House of Representatives, over 30 to join the Senate, and at least 35 to be elected president.

Any proposal to put an upper bound on the age of office holders may be attacked as ageism, which should be rejected as strongly as any other bigotry. But an age limit, whether a minimum or a maximum, is not equivalent to ageism. It is a structural boundary for the good of the body politic. Indeed, like term limits for the presidency, age limits could help provide the electorate with better options by preventing some from clinging to power beyond the point where their holding it serves the common good.

The simplest and most robust solution for the tendency of elected officials to hold on to office beyond their capacity to serve is a mirror image of the age limits we already have: a constitutional amendment restricting eligibility for our nation's higher offices to those under 75.

Any amendment proposal, of course, faces a steep uphill path and advocacy for it would be the work of years or even decades. That is all the more reason to begin discussion of it, since our elected officials have demonstrated that they do not reliably step down from office when they need to do so for reasons of age. As we are learning on many fronts, democracy is fragile when politicians cling to power at all costs. Limits that regularize handing governance over to the next officeholders, and the next generation, can help remind us all that public service is a privilege and an obligation, not a personal entitlement.

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Beyond numbers: Rethinking the future of Catholicism in Africa

What is the future of the church in Africa?

Pope Leo XIV's first apostolic journey to Africa in April provided a timely occasion to reflect on Africa's contribution to global Catholicism and on the continent's place in the future of the church. The choice of Algeria, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea and Angola as countries to visit was particularly significant. Taken together, these four countries offered a symbolic journey through the major historical stages of Catholicism in Africa. Algeria evoked the land of St. Augustine and one of the great centers of early African Christianity. Angola represented the medieval and early modern encounter between Africa and Catholicism. Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea, meanwhile, embodied the contemporary African church, characterized by rapid growth, vibrant local communities and the challenges of evangelization in an increasingly pluralistic and globalized world.

Shortly after the papal trip, the former **America** editor in chief and political scientist Thomas J. Reese, S.J., published a provocative essay in the *National Catholic Reporter* questioning the widespread assumption that Africa represents the inevitable future of the Catholic Church and cautioning against overly optimistic projections.

We can extend this debate by examining some of the parameters that can contribute to our understanding of the future of Catholicism in Africa. My reflections here are based on an exploratory qualitative study conducted in a number of African countries that explored the participants' lived experience of Catholicism. Although not intended to produce definitive conclusions, the research seeks to identify emerging trends and to lay the groundwork for more extensive investigations.

Demographic indicators support the view that Africa is currently the most dynamic region of Catholic growth. Catholic membership continues to expand rapidly, with Africa now accounting for more than 20 percent of the global Catholic population and experiencing sustained growth in the number of priests, seminarians and bishops.

Catholicism in Africa continues to reproduce itself primarily through family transmission rather than adult conversion. Nearly three-quarters of respondents reported becoming Catholic because they were born and raised in Catholic families. This finding highlights the central role of infant baptism and parental influence in transmitting Catholic identity. Catholic belonging in Africa is deeply embedded in kinship networks, family traditions and collective memories.

The data also provide important insights into what African Catholics value most about their church. More than 50 percent highlighted organization, authority, discipline and liturgical order, while others stressed the sacraments, prayers for the dead, devotional practices and lay movements. These findings suggest that the attraction of Catholicism in Africa lies in a combination of mediated spirituality and institutional stability.

Significantly, many of the features most appreciated by respondents—hierarchy, sacramental life, liturgical discipline and organizational coherence—are precisely those that distinguish Catholicism from many Protestant and independent churches. This suggests that changes that are perceived as weakening these specifically Catholic characteristics could prove counterproductive, since they constitute important sources of identity, continuity and attraction. The

challenge for the future may therefore be less about reducing these features than about renewing them in ways that remain meaningful to younger generations.

Areas Needing Attention

If the remarkable growth of Catholicism in Africa is to remain sustainable in the coming decades, the following areas will require careful attention.

While the family remains the primary channel through which Catholic identity is transmitted in Africa, both nuclear and extended family systems are undergoing profound transformations as African societies negotiate forms of modernity that place greater emphasis on individual autonomy than on communal belonging. One visible consequence is the growing number of divorces among young couples, including those married in the Catholic Church. If the Catholic Church loses the battle for stable families in Africa, it may also lose the battle for the sustainable transmission of faith across generations.

Catholic schools will also continue to play an important evangelizing role, but probably less than during past missionary times. For much of the 20th century, Catholic educational institutions enjoyed a privileged position in much of Africa because they often provided the best available education. Today, however, states, private actors and international educational networks increasingly offer viable alternatives. Catholic schools will need to articulate more clearly what distinguishes them beyond academic excellence.

The parish can also no longer be taken for granted as the main framework for Catholic life. The rise of digital media, urban mobility and changing youth cultures requires

the church to experiment with more creative forms of ministry. Future evangelization will depend not only on maintaining parish structures but also on developing hybrid models that combine physical communities with digital forms of accompaniment capable of engaging younger generations where they are. In the area of digital evangelization and the use of new media, Pentecostal and charismatic churches currently enjoy a significant advantage over the Catholic Church.

Life crises represent another major challenge for the church, because experiences such as illness, infertility, unemployment, family breakdown or perceived spiritual attacks can drive Catholics toward Pentecostal churches or back to African traditional religious resources that seem able to offer immediate resources for such crises. The future vitality of African Catholicism will depend in part on its ability to provide convincing pastoral, spiritual and therapeutic responses to these existential challenges.

For the church to continue to thrive, the role of women will be decisive. In many parts of Africa, female leadership is increasingly evident in the ranks of catechists and the leadership of small Christian communities. The contribution of women is visible in worship, parish leadership, lay associations and religious life throughout the church in Africa. The future of Catholicism on the continent will depend significantly on how much the church invests in the formation, empowerment and recognition of women as key agents in the transmission of faith.

The church's stance toward governance and social justice in Africa will also be a critical factor in its future. In African societies marked by corruption, inequality and widespread poverty, clergy perceived as being too



Pope Leo XIV greets a family during his visit to Equatorial Guinea on April 23.

OSV News photo/Matteo Pernasclci, Vatican Media

closely aligned with political elites risk losing moral credibility and alienating the faithful. A church that consistently defends the common good, speaks truth to power and stands in solidarity with the poor is more likely to retain its prophetic relevance and attract future generations of Catholics.

The church in Africa will also need to break free from models of dependency in order to continue to grow. For much of the 20th century, the expansion of Catholicism in Africa was supported by significant financial assistance from European and North American churches, missionary congregations and development agencies. However, African church leaders are increasingly aware that this model of dependency is becoming unsustainable. The challenge for African Catholicism is therefore to move gradually toward genuine self-sufficiency.

In addition, while many African Catholics value the church's hierarchy, order and discipline as sources of stability, nearly 30 percent of respondents to the study mentioned above criticize what they perceive as clerical authoritarianism, misconduct and materialism. This does not necessarily suggest a desire for less hierarchy, but rather for greater accountability and a more pastoral exercise of authority.

Home-grown theological insti-

tutes will also be important for the church in Africa in the future. If African Catholicism is to contribute to global Catholicism in ways that go beyond demographics and the provision of clergy to Western churches, seminaries and theological faculties in Africa must develop into centers of theological creativity and intellectual leadership.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that current official church statistics, based largely on baptisms and registered membership, reveal little about the relationship between affiliation, participation and long-term commitment of Catholics in Africa. As the experience of Western Christianity has shown, demographic growth does not automatically translate into sustained religious practice across generations.

Ultimately, the future of African Catholicism will depend not just on numerical growth but also on the quality of its contribution to the universal church.

Ludovic Lado, S.J., is from Cameroon and specializes in the anthropology of religion in Africa. During the 2025-26 academic year, he was the Yang Visiting Scholar in World Christianity at Harvard Divinity School.



OSV News photo/Termiade Adelaia, Reuters

Andy Burnham becomes Britain's first Catholic prime minister in five centuries

By Paul Valley

No Roman Catholic has occupied the role of chief minister to the English crown since the 1550s, when Queen Mary I attempted to reverse the English Reformation, which had begun during the reign of her father, Henry VIII. But with the elevation of Andy Burnham on July 20, Britain got its first Catholic prime minister in modern times.

In the centuries that followed Mary's death, English Catholics had their freedom of worship and general civil rights heavily restricted. There is still on the statute books a law declaring that those who "professe the Popish Religion" are not allowed "to inherit, possess or enjoy the Crown and Government of this Realm." England remains specifically defined as a Protestant nation, even though public officeholders are no longer required to take an oath rejecting the doctrine of transubstantiation.

Previous prime ministers have therefore, unsurprisingly, exercised caution regarding Catholicism. Tony Blair

regularly attended Mass with his Catholic wife and children but waited until he left Downing Street before being received into the church.

By contrast, Mr. Burnham—who took over from Keir Starmer, an avowed nonbeliever—was born and raised a Catholic and has sent his three children to the same Manchester-area Catholic secondary school. As a member of the House of Commons, however, he has not always voted in line with church teaching on issues such as same-sex marriage and abortion. Indeed, he has repeatedly criticized the church's "austere and judgmental" record on gay rights and in 2015 urged Pope Francis to "bring the church into the 21st century" on same-sex marriage.

But his politics are nuanced. Though he has voted against tightening abortion laws, he irritated progressives in 2008 by voting (unsuccessfully) to preserve the legal requirement that in vitro fertilization clinics consider the

“need for a father,” which had made it more difficult for lesbian couples to access in vitro fertilization services. And he questioned the Assisted Dying Bill brought before the Commons last year, though not explicitly on pro-life principles. Instead, he said he could not support it while hospices were so underfunded.

At the same time, Mr. Burnham is certainly not a cradle Catholic who has left his faith behind, as some have suggested. When he took his oath as he re-entered Parliament, he chose to swear on the Jerusalem Bible, the widely used translation popular among Catholic members of that chamber.

He is said to be an occasional Mass-goer and has described himself as “not particularly religious.” His family are Catholics but, he says, borrowing a Scouse phrase of his mother’s, “we don’t lick the altar steps.”

Scouse is the colloquial term for the culture of Liverpool, the English city to which millions of Irish Catholics emigrated in the 19th and 20th centuries, settling here or on their way to the United States, Canada or Australia. Today some 75 percent of the city’s population have some Irish ancestry, and Liverpool remains culturally entwined with the Catholic faith. Most significantly, Britain’s new prime minister insisted in 2015, “Catholic social teaching underpins my politics.”

Mr. Burnham was schooled in this teaching from early on. Among his duties as an altar boy had been to supervise the playing of the homilies of the archbishop of Liverpool, Derek Worlock, which were recorded on tape and sent out to local parishes on particular Sundays.

This was the era in which Margaret Thatcher’s economic revolution was taking a devastating toll on working-class communities as heavy industry was closed down across the north of England. She locked horns with the National Union of Mineworkers in the most bitter dispute in U.K. industrial history. Archbishop Worlock, who had been present at all the sessions of the Second Vatican Council, was an advocate of the social gospel. “I can pray for [my neighbor’s] soul,” he once said, “but I cannot turn my back on how he is to live: his well-being, his freedom, his prosperity or poverty, his house, his job and so on.”

Archbishop Worlock made a massive impression on the young Andy Burnham. The vast majority of the teachers at Mr. Burnham’s Catholic school saw the political embodiment of his social gospel in Britain’s Labour Party. “There was, and still is,” said Mr. Burnham, “a direct read-across between what I was learning at school and church and Labour values.”

A passionate soccer fan, Mr. Burnham supports Everton F.C., which has existed under the perennial shadow of the city’s more successful team, Liverpool. One of the pol-

itician’s favorite tropes has been to say that three institutions had shaped him: Everton Football Club, the Labour Party and the Catholic Church. “In that order,” he has joked. More seriously, he once added: “I’ve always felt that there’s a connection between the three in terms of identity, and that’s about the underdog, a sense of solidarity and values.”

The political commentator most plugged into Mr. Burnham’s circle, Patrick Maguire of *The Times* of London, says that the papal encyclical that best speaks to Mr. Burnham’s relationship with his faith is Pope Leo XIII’s “*Rerum Novarum*,” which in 1891 established the basis of Catholic social teaching with its insistence on balancing the rights of workers and the rights and responsibilities of an increasingly overweening capitalist class. But Mr. Burnham’s politics, Mr. Maguire says, grow from experience and not theological abstraction.

Last month his first keynote speech as prime minister-in-waiting was filled with echoes of Catholic social teaching, particularly respect for human dignity and the importance of applying solidarity and subsidiarity in pursuit of the common good.

Mr. Burnham set out a program of economic regeneration and re-industrialization, with a major “rebalancing of power” shifting a key part of the Downing Street operation from London to Manchester, the northern city of which he was until recently mayor—and where economic growth has been double that of the rest of the United Kingdom under his watch. Manchester is to become the new political node for the spread of economic revitalisation to other neglected regions.

His proposal for a huge transfer of power away from Westminster is not simply a managerial reform. It restores agency to the politically marginalized in line with the Catholic insistence that every person, being made in the image of God, has inherent dignity. It embodies the insight of the “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World” of the Second Vatican Council (also known as “*Gaudium et Spes*”) with its insistence that political institutions exist for people, not vice versa. As with Pope John Paul II’s “*Centesimus Annus*,” it specifically links human dignity with participation in social and political life. And it reiterates Pope Francis’ insistence in “*Fratelli Tutti*” that no people or region should be treated as disposable or be “left behind” by economic or political systems.

Mr. Burnham’s pledge to build more houses for the poor than at any time in the last 50 years acknowledges another basic requirement of human dignity. So does his plan to reduce the government welfare bill “in a way that is fair and lasting”—in contrast to the botched attempts of

the Starmer government. His determination that vocational education should enjoy equal esteem with the academic resonates strongly with “Laborem Exercens,” in which John Paul II declared that the dignity of work derives from the dignity of the individual working man or woman, rather than from their social status or economic productivity.

Moving key government decision-making out of London is classic subsidiarity, the antidote to the temptation for the state to take over tasks that can be done just as well at a lower level—a temptation Pope Pius XI condemned in “Quadragesimo Anno” as “a grave evil.” Mr. Burnham’s assertion that “growth cannot be ordered from the top down [but] only be nurtured from the bottom up” is a secular expression of this.

The other great pillar of Catholic social teaching alongside subsidiarity is solidarity. This, asserted John Paul II in “Sollicitudo Rei Socialis,” is “not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes” of others but “on the contrary...a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to...the common good”—another key concept in Catholic social teaching. This undergirds Mr. Burnham’s desire for economic “growth in every postcode and hope in every heart” and for a less adversarial politics.

And his promise of “greater public control of essential services”—water, energy, housing and transport—echoes one of the most consistent papal themes. Leo XIII, Pius XI, John XXIII, John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis all endorsed the free market, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, but all insisted, to use a quote from 1931’s “Quadragesimo Anno,” that “the right ordering of economic life cannot be left to a free competition of forces” (88) and that government should intervene when justice requires it. The current pope, Leo XIV, has declared that “the economy and enterprise can and must be engines of inclusion, and of justice.”

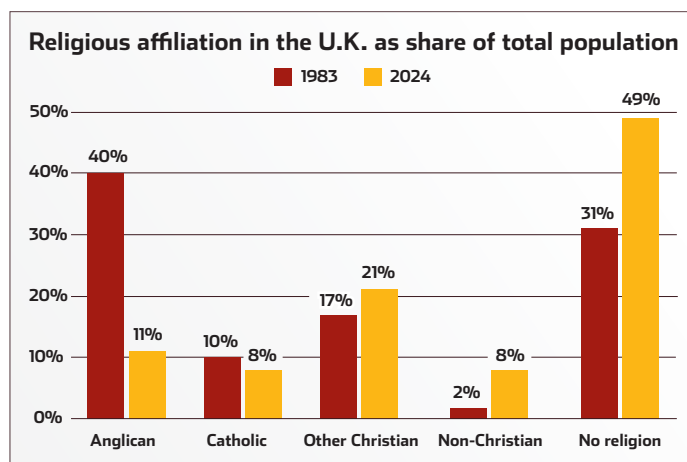
Andy Burnham is a far more charismatic politician than the outgoing British prime minister. He speaks the language of the living room. He will eschew theological language much as he does ideological. His vocabulary is moral, framing politics in terms of fairness, dignity and belonging. But its roots are clear.

Paul Vallely is the editor of *The New Politics: Catholic Social Teaching for the 21st Century* and a contributor to *The Tablet*.

How Catholic Is Britain?

Prime Minister Andy Burnham’s Catholic ancestors left Ireland to find work on the Liverpool docks in the late 19th century, helping transform it into the most Catholic city in the United Kingdom. For almost two centuries, Liverpool has been a stopoff for Irish Catholics hoping to escape poverty. It serves the same role today, but this time for Catholic and other immigrants from Nigeria, Ukraine and other nations around the world. Catholic immigration into the United Kingdom was not limited to the Irish. Poles began arriving during World War II and sharply increased after Poland joined the European Union in 2004, when Poles were joined by Catholics from Central and Eastern Europe.

—Nora Malone



1861—Irish immigrants make up **3.4%** of the U.K. population. Most live in London, where they comprise about **4%** of the city’s population, and in Liverpool, where they represent just under **19%**.

1921—After years of declining numbers, Irish immigrants account for just over **1%** of the U.K. population.

1939-45—A new Catholic immigrant wave arrives as Polish soldiers are barracked in the United Kingdom during the war and at its conclusion do not return to Soviet-controlled Poland.

1947—Polish Resettlement Act passes, offering citizenship to thousands of displaced Polish troops and their family members.

1993—Despite a decline in immigration, native-born Catholics have led a consistent increase in the Catholic population over the previous 80 years, from a little under 2 million to about **4.5 million people**.

2004—The expansion of the European Union leads to immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe, mostly Poles, Lithuanians, Slovaks and Slovenes.

2011—**9.1%** identify as Catholic in the United Kingdom, or **5.7 million people**.

2021—For the first time less than half of the population of England and Wales—**46.2%**—describe themselves as Christian. This is a sharp decline from 2011, when **59.3%** so identified.

2024—**8%** identify as Catholic in the United Kingdom, or **5.5 million people**.

Sources: the British Social Attitudes Survey, the Office for National Statistics, the Latin Mass Society of England and Wales, the National Records of Scotland, and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency

What World Cup soccer teaches about faith, belonging and solidarity

At Philadelphia's Lincoln Financial Field, the Brazil-Haiti World Cup match felt like a gathering of the world itself to Guilherme Lopes, who attended the game on June 19 and watched Brazil secure a 3-to-0 victory. Nearly 70,000 fans packed the stadium, many arriving from Brazilian and Haitian diaspora communities along the U.S. East Coast.

For Mr. Lopes, the director of campus ministry at Neumann University, a Catholic university in Aston, Pa., the most memorable part of the night was not the final score. It was seeing how Brazilian and Haitian fans supported one another, "how much the Haitians love Brazilian culture, to share foods and to share ideas and music and thoughts. It was really moving."

Mr. Lopes, who was born in Brazil and emigrated with his family to the United States as a child, has always seen soccer as more than a sport. It has been a connection to home—a way of preserving family memories, culture and identity.

"Catholicism and soccer are two of the major religions in Brazil," he joked.

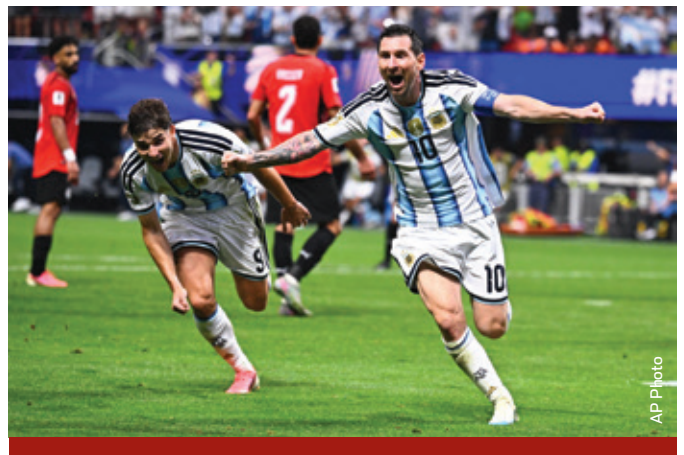
But beyond the camaraderie and national pride provoked by the World Cup, the event raised harder questions. Mr. Lopes said he noticed that celebrations outside the stadium on June 19 were quieter than he expected. He attributed this to fears of Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids among many soccer fans.

"The U.S. is hosting the world's game," he said, "but we're not necessarily welcoming the world."

For Mr. Lopes, that tension was worth exploring. He worked with undergraduate students involved in campus ministry at Neumann University to create a reflection project, "Madonnas of the World Cup," that connected the World Cup with Catholic spirituality and themes from the church's social teaching. The project helped students explore the Catholic faith through the Marian devotions of participating nations.

"The World Cup, as a gathering of the world coming together on the world stage, already reveals things like inequality or political tension or conflict," Mr. Lopes said. "Catholic social teaching comes in and gives us language to think more deeply about what we're seeing."

Ashley Moushegian, a clinical therapist in the Boston area, said that many of the immigrant children she works with come from countries where soccer is central to family and cultural life. For children learning a new language or navigating a new culture, soccer offers a place where they are recognized for the talents they already have, she said. At a time when many of the families she serves are worried



Argentina's Lionel Messi celebrates after scoring against Egypt in Atlanta on July 7.

about ICE showing up in their communities, places of worship and children's schools, soccer provides an escape and a source of joy.

Maddie Davin, a Catholic high school teacher, has experienced similar moments with migrant families in Florida. Soccer games offered opportunities for friendship across cultures, but during the last year, concerns about immigration enforcement sometimes created uncertainty about whether those gatherings could safely continue.

Ms. Davin regretted that an opportunity for joy and recreation in its deepest meaning, a sport "designed for connection," could be diminished by the anxiety and fear now attending gatherings of immigrants in the United States, whether at a church or on a soccer field.

Luis Melgar, the director of campus ministry at Assumption University in Worcester, Mass., has seen how soccer often functions as a place where evangelization can occur and community can be built. In many parishes, soccer leagues, family gatherings and shared meals become extensions of church life.

"We do some form of sports ministry with our teams in that we bless the teams before travel, the start of a season, and we even bless the equipment," he said.

The strong friendship between "rival" teams like Haiti and Brazil, or the solidarity many showed with Venezuelans as the national team played right after its devastating earthquakes, offered a glimpse of what belonging across nations and peoples can look like.

"The question is," Mr. Lopes said, "Is it better for fraternity? Are we learning from one another? Are we integrating spirituality into our daily lives? By interacting with a Haitian or with somebody from Morocco, what gifts am I offering and what am I allowing myself to learn from them?"

More simply, he asked, "What is this game allowing us to create?"

Kyle Desrosiers-Levine contributes from New York.



Following devastating twin earthquakes, the hard work of recovery begins in Venezuela

On July 5, Venezuelan Independence Day, local residents in the city of La Guaira were worn down by deep sadness during conversations crowded with questions about the well-being of relatives and acquaintances. Almost 200 buildings in this state capital had collapsed after twin earthquakes struck on June 24. The capital city of Caracas and the state of La Guaira bore the brunt of the damage.

An apartment building in Caraballeda, a city in central La Guaira State, where Alexis Omaña lived, had completely collapsed. But in a stroke of luck, he and his family had gone to a family party in Caracas on the day of the earthquakes, a decision that saved their lives.

Mr. Omaña spoke warmly about the fast response the city received from international rescuers and about the courage of fellow volunteers from his community. A popular saying in Venezuela is: *El pueblo salva al pueblo* (“The people save the people”).

But like many others in this country, Mr. Omaña could not speak as kindly about the performance of Venezuelan government officials. “They did nothing,” he said bitterly.

Mr. Omaña has survived other disasters in La Guaira, including deadly mudslides in 1999 at the beginning of the Hugo Chávez presidency. But “this is the worst we have experienced,” he said.

Despite that history and with desolation all around him, Mr. Omaña had no intention of abandoning his community. “I love La Guaira,” he said. “I was raised here.... We have to start over again.”

The earthquakes rumbled across a country already grappling with a years-long humanitarian crisis. Venezue-

lans have struggled through years of economic turmoil and decline. The nation’s health care system is in shambles.

With a government response absent in many communities, average Venezuelans around the country stepped up to fill the humanitarian void. National solidarity has been evident in the line of private cars and trucks filled with donations moving along the Caracas–La Guaira highway.

Handwritten signs on car and truck windows offer *ayuda humanitaria* (“humanitarian aid”) or “free wi-fi.” Hundreds of other fundraising and aid delivery initiatives have been created online.

This solidarity also infuses Catholic efforts to respond to the disaster in Venezuela. *Fe y Alegría* (“Faith and Joy”) is a Jesuit-sponsored education and social movement founded by José María Vélaz, S.J., in a working-class neighborhood in Caracas in 1955. The now-global movement is the largest Jesuit-run educational network in the world, serving more than 700,000 students across 22 countries and three continents.

Nineteen *Fe y Alegría* schools in Venezuela suffered significant damage in the twin earthquakes. In the immediate aftermath, some students and staff were unaccounted for, and many others lost their homes. The *Fe y Alegría* Simón Bolívar school, in Caraballeda, has become an emergency shelter for the surrounding community.

Fe y Alegría was already struggling through some of Venezuela’s pre-existing conditions, trying to address low salaries and the continuing loss of teachers to emigration. Many Venezuelans rely on remittances from abroad or “gray market” income. As much as 80 percent of the pop-

Father Rafael Troconis and the San Sebastián community celebrate Mass on July 5 at their badly damaged church.

ulation has been reduced to poverty.

In the aftermath of the disaster, José Gregorio Terán, S.J., the general director of Fe y Alegría in Venezuela, hopes to see education and health services elevated to first-level priorities in any plan for Venezuela's long-term recovery.

"The Venezuelan government must think really [critically] about where to place its interests," he told **America**. "Oil and energy investment can provide immediate returns, but if education does not get the same priority level, [social] costs will be much higher in the future. It is not just a moral issue, but a strategic one."

The Xavier Network connects Jesuit relief and economic development efforts and mission offices across North America, Europe and Australia. It has launched a global emergency appeal for the Society of Jesus' efforts in Venezuela, including Fe y Alegría, Jesuit Refugee Service-Venezuela and others, in coordination with the local province.

Keeping schools open and functioning is especially important after disasters like the twin earthquakes, according to Nate Radomski, the executive director for American Jesuits International. "They provide psychological support for children," he said. "They provide protection, and they provide support for parents."

"We can be tempted to think this was an act of wrath," says Father Terán. "But God does not send any earthquakes. He is the one who brings us closer to life."

Estefanía Salazar contributes from Caracas.



A pilgrimage to the Statue of Liberty honors immigrants past and present

Under the shadow of the Statue of Liberty, 60 pilgrims gathered around a 70-foot flagpole. Rosaries swaying, they prayed to honor the immigrants who make up the United States of America—those who came in centuries past and those making the journey today.

Father Bruce Nieli, C.S.P., who helped organize the "America 250 Pilgrimage in Support of Immigrants" on July 1, said that as individuals and as a nation, "so much of our soul is rooted in immigrants."

Beginning with a bilingual Mass at Our Lady of Victory Parish near Wall Street, the pilgrims, including staff from America Media, made their way toward the Liberty Island ferries, praying the rosary at culturally significant sites along the route, including the National Museum of the American Indian, the Shrine of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton and "The Immigrants" statue at Battery Park, before boarding the ferry to the island.

Immigrants have been under attack by the Trump administration and by some U.S. politicians, Father Nieli said. "We wanted to do something that's an alternative to really highlight the debt we owe to our forebears, to those who have gone before us, both as individuals and as a nation."

Michael Cuschieri, who volunteered to help lead the pilgrimage, said that after five years in New York, this was his first time visiting the Statue of Liberty. "It's really such a symbol, not just of liberty, but also of how beautiful our country is, in terms of how diverse we are, and that's something that should be absolutely celebrated," he said.

After a final decade of the rosary on Liberty Island, Father René Constanza, the president of the Paulist Fathers and an immigrant from Belize himself, offered a final reflection drawing on the imagery of the statue, arguing that "the moral greatness" of a nation lies in its capacity to protect the most fragile.

"We walk with those most vulnerable among us and recommit ourselves to protecting the life and dignity of every human person," he said. "The torch that we see is worth carrying. The chains are worth naming as well. So we pray that as a nation, at 250, we have the courage to hold both."

Chloe Hanford and Nora Malone are summer interns at America Media.

Catholic Education for All

Meet the schools working to serve students with special needs

By J.D. Long García

The fluorescent lights in Room 110 at Brother Rice Catholic High School in Chicago are dimmed by fabric imprinted with images of the sky. The white-and-blue design softens the light, making it more comfortable for the students who study there. Chairs have elastic bands stretched across their front legs so students can push against them to relieve tension.

The room is home to Mount Sion, the all-boys-school's special education inclusion program, which is entering its third year this fall. Brother Rice is among a small but growing number of Catholic schools across the country working to serve students with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

A 2026 survey by the National Catholic Partnership on Disability found that roughly 18 percent of the school principals said that their school has served at least one student with an intellectual disability. Disability advocates, however, point out that the figure may not capture the national reality, since only 224 institutions responded to the survey, far short of the approximately 5,800 Catholic schools in the United States. Data like this can be hard to interpret in part because schools define the work differently.

"Sometimes schools are serving many students [with learning disabilities] but they haven't named it, they haven't labeled it," according to Laura MacDonald, vice president of content and program development at the National Catholic Educational Association. "Schools just do it. Many of us believe that whoever comes into your school, you're there to serve them."

In 2014, 3.5 percent of students in N.C.E.A. schools were reported as having been diagnosed with a disability. Today that figure is 9.8 percent. Ms. MacDonald said N.C.E.A. has established a task force that is developing a directory of schools with promising programs.

Some schools lean toward a more segregated model, in which special needs students remain mostly in their own classrooms, while others adopt a more integrated approach. Then there are the rare U.S. Catholic schools that serve only students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The students' abilities span





All photos by J.D. Long García

Parker Baudo (center), a student in the Mount Sion program at Brother Rice High School in Chicago, interacts with peer mentors.



Juliana Ackley works with her aide at St. Madeline Sophie Catholic School in Bellevue, Wash.

a wide spectrum.

“We see good things happening in pockets,” according to Michael Boyle, executive director of the Herrmann Center for Innovative Catholic Education at St. Louis University. “And I think that’s part of the problem. As a universal church, we should be seeing something much more comprehensive and extensive.”

Still, a number of schools and dioceses are making an effort, Mr. Boyle said, noting the autism program at the St. Nicholas of Tolentine elementary school in Chicago as well as efforts in Arlington, Va., Milwaukee and Miami. N.C.E.A. is partnering with Getting Real Access to Catholic Education, which promotes inclusion at Catholic schools, and St. Louis University hosted what it called the first-ever national convening on disability and Catholic education in May 2025.

Nevertheless, most families who search for a Catholic education for a child with a disability will have a hard time finding it. And when a Catholic school rejects a student’s application, Mr. Boyle said, the family may also feel rejected by their faith community.

“As Catholic educators, as all Catholics, we are charged to reach to the margins and serve those that are marginalized,” he said. “We sometimes have forgotten that. We need to think about who we are as Catholic educators.”

At Brother Rice, the rediscovery began after one family spoke up and stood its ground.

‘The Essence of Who We Are’

On Chicago’s South Side, Catholics tend to identify themselves by their home parish. For the Baudo family, that parish is St. Barnabas. Carrie and Rich Baudo’s firstborn son, Nolan, attended the parish school. Nolan’s younger brother Parker did as well, though this was a little more complicated.

Parker has Down syndrome. After he attended a supportive preschool, the family wanted him to go to St. Barnabas, where not only his brother but also his cousins, his friends and most of the other kids in the neighborhood went. Everyone, from the principal to the pastor, pitched in to make it happen.

“We kind of co-created a program leveraging as many resources as we could to give him a real community experience,” Mr. Baudo said. “We were building the plane while flying it.”

He added, “the kids embraced him from the outset. And that’s where we really saw his impact on them as much as they impacted him.”

As Parker grew up, the family started looking for Catholic high school options. The only school that could accommodate their son’s needs was Notre Dame High School in Niles, a 90-minute drive north. The public schools in their area also fell short, as they segregated the special needs students from the general student population, and Parker was not used to that.



‘We need to think about who we are as Catholic educators.’

The Baudos got a few flyers from Brother Rice in the mail, but as far as they could determine, it would not be an option for Parker. They asked to be removed from the mailing list. They didn’t want to get Parker’s hopes up. Nevertheless, a week or so later, Parker found a flyer from Brother Rice addressed to him in the mailbox.

“I got upset and wrote an email,” Rich said. “I just said, ‘I get that you guys can’t accommodate him, but take him off the list, because I can’t have his name on a Brother Rice [flyer] and then have him start asking questions I can’t answer.’”

After the flyer mishap, Greg Nye, the director of admissions, and Matt Prunckle, dean of student life, invited the family to talk. Administrators had been considering starting a program to accommodate students with special needs, they said, but it wasn’t fully formed.

“We spent the last nine years pushing the boulder up the hill,” Mr. Baudo recalls telling the school. “We can’t do that for high school. There has to be more structure, a more established program—because those high school years are so critical.” The school agreed.

Five months later, the school’s board approved the Mount Sion program.

“Any inclusive school that’s opted in [to serving students with special needs] will always say it’s the best thing they’ve done,” Mr. Prunckle said. “It’s much more about what opening your doors does to the school than what we do for those few more students. Can we be a Catholic school without being inclusive? It should be the essence of who we are.”

Inclusive and Integrated

After the morning bell, Ginny Morrissey of the admissions office waited for stragglers arriving at St. Madeline Sophie in Bellevue, Wash. “It’s usually the same kids,” she told me when I visited last May.

As the students came in, Ms. Morrissey filled out their tardy slips without even asking their names. She knows just about all of the 150 students, she said. After a wave of students arrived, she asked one, “Where’s your other brother?” The student pointed to him in front of the counter, just out of Ms. Morrissey’s line of sight. She smiled.

St. Madeline Sophie first opened its doors to students on Sept. 6, 2005. Ever since that day, children with special needs have been welcomed into their integrated classrooms. It is a tradition that Jessica Patterson, the school’s principal, embraced when she arrived at the school as an inclusion specialist 15 years ago.

“When it comes to the idea of inclusion, it can’t live siloed in one place,” Ms. Patterson said. “It can definitely be inspired in one place by a single person, but if it’s going to

live on and sustain itself, it has to really live everywhere.”

In a way, that mindset informs how families are chosen for the school. Like other parochial schools, St. Madeline prioritizes parish families, and they try to accept as many children from each family as they can. But Ms. Patterson interviews each family to assess whether parents will be good partners in education, and how the family will fit with the school’s culture.

That cultural fit is much more important than the ability to pay full tuition or become a donor, she said. The culture they have works because the parents not only support the teachers and students but also support one another.

“Everybody says they’re for inclusion when it’s very convenient, but are you going to say you’re for inclusion when it’s inconvenient for you or your child?” Ms. Patterson said.

Two of Ms. Patterson’s sons are at the school. Before coming to St. Madeline Sophie, she spent time teaching on the White Mountain Apache Reservation in Arizona. Before college, she was in foster care, and she said her teachers helped her through difficult moments. It inspired her to pursue her career in education.

“I didn’t have much, and I’m never going to be able to just go work at a typical school, doing a typical job, with kids that are just typical,” she said. “I need to be fighting for something, for someone.”

Ms. Patterson took me on a tour of the school, including a number of modular buildings that were meant to be temporary. Some of the students sat next to their aides, and in one classroom one of the students was pacing while the teacher lectured. The school does not have a gym, and services related to special needs—like occupational, physical and feeding therapy—come through third-party providers.

About 70 percent of St. Madeline Sophie students are neurotypical, according to Nicole Miller, the lead specialist at the school. All students in each grade share a common homeroom, and those with special needs are integrated as much as possible, according to Ms. Miller, who has been at the school for 11 years and brings expertise in both elementary and special education.

“Every kid has a seat in the classroom, a job in the classroom. You are 100 percent in this class,” she said.

“It’s not just beneficial for the students that are being



The parents not only support the teachers and students but also support one another.

included,” Ms. Miller said of this approach. “It’s beneficial for the students who are learning how to be kind and patient and see different types of people and different ways brains work.”

“But if and when kids need to go to other places for their learning, then they go and do that,” she added. Some children go to a different grade level for certain subjects, or go to an adaptive programming classroom. That includes students who need help with speech, but also those who are gifted and working on, for example, accelerated mathematics.

On the morning of May 20, families gathered for the final all-school Mass of the year. Afterward, they applauded the teachers as Ms. Patterson read words of praise she had collected about each educator. Before heading to work, parents took photos with their children.

Mary Nockles, an immigrant from the United Kingdom, has three children at the school. She often logs parent service hours while monitoring the students at recess. “I like to call it spying, because I am kind of spying on my kids and seeing what they’re doing, seeing how they’re socially interacting,” she said. Her eldest daughter, Matilda, has autism and Ms. Nockles said that, at times, her daughter can be “somewhat off in her own world.”

On one of her spying days, Ms. Nockles noticed that a student with Down syndrome was upset. “All my friends are going to leave and I’m not going to have any friends next year,” he told his aide, referring to classmates who were graduating out of the school. One of those classmates overheard the boy and went to gather others.

“And he brought them over to say, ‘We love you, we’re always going to be friends,’” Ms. Nockles said, emotionally. “These are 12- and 13-year-old kids just doing it of their own accord. And I just stood there watching it from afar, just going, ‘This is an amazing school.’ Because that happens all the time and it can go unnoticed.”

Ms. Nockles’ husband, Dan, says Matilda is “the best thing that ever happened” to him and inspired Mary and Dan to look for the best possible place for all their children. The best school, in this case, requires a 45-minute commute.

“Knowing that they’re not going to thrive in any soil, you find the right soil,” she said. “I feel like every kid should have a St. Madeline Sophie.”

But most children with special needs don’t, according to Elizabeth Potts, associate director of diocesan relations with the National Catholic Partnership on Disability. Effective ministry for those who have a disability is rare at parishes, she said, but the outreach is even more rare at schools.

“Some of these parents who were turned away decades ago, you still hear that wound when they talk about it. It is deep,” Ms. Potts said. “And there are people for whom it

dramatically changes their relationship with the church. People leave the church because of it.”

In her work surveying Catholic schools across the country, she noted that many dioceses offer professional development related to learners with disabilities. But for more than half of the dioceses who responded to their study, the training was optional.

“Our Catholic teaching, and comments from the bishops, all emphasize that access to Catholic education is vital,” she said. “There are no asterisks on those comments that say, ‘except for learners with disabilities.’”

‘Reverse Inclusion’

In Dallas, Notre Dame School serves only students with developmental disabilities, from ages 6 to 22. Students come to the school, which is built in the heart of the city and shares grounds with St. Peter the Apostle Catholic Church, from 87 zip codes. The School Sisters of Notre Dame established the school to provide a specialized environment to educate students with intellectual disabilities in 1963, before any law required schools to care for this population. They began with 19 students, and today the enrollment is about 150.

The sisters have a history of inclusion. “The School Sisters were educating Black students during segregation,” according to Carmen Fernández, the school’s principal. “They had crosses burning in front of their convent. It wasn’t about ‘Can you afford this?’ or ‘Are you Catholic?’ Those were not questions they were asked, and we don’t ask them either. We’re here to serve a person’s educational needs.”

Ms. Fernández has been at Notre Dame for 37 years. Both her mother and her aunt were a part of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, and she would babysit a younger cousin with severe disabilities growing up. She has lived this charism her whole life.

What happens at Notre Dame is “reverse inclusion,” Ms. Fernández said, explaining that they welcome community members and students from other schools as visitors to their school. She walked me down the hallways and into classrooms. She knew all the students, and stopped to chal-



Allison Zentz, a teacher at the Notre Dame School of Dallas, and Oscar Figueroa, a student at the school, share a moment in the classroom.

lenge some of them on goals they had been working on.

In the cafeteria, as students socialized with their peers, some were accompanied by aides. Lunch is also part of their education, Ms. Fernández said, whether it means using napkins, heating food with microwaves, clearing trays, or using utensils and chewing properly. Students don't always get this kind of attention at other schools, she said, including those that have inclusive programs.

"We had a young man who would never eat his lunch. He just sat there like this," Ms. Fernández said, staring blankly forward. She later discovered the young man had been traumatized at another school whose inclusion time happened during the lunch period. Some of the other students would take his food, "so it took a while to get to the point where he'd eat his lunch here."

Notre Dame has washers and dryers, a closet with hangers, and a Murphy bed so students can practice practical skills and become as independent as possible. The school also has partnerships with 37 businesses in the Dallas community, where older students gain job experience.

"They're the most vulnerable in society, so the more they do for themselves, the safer they are," Ms. Fernández said. "It's a very important part of our mission."

Students also fully participate in the weekly celebration of Mass, including serving as altar servers. There is a teacher queuing them to bring up the gifts and going through the 27 steps of being an altar server. (Ms. Fernández, drawing on her experience as a vocational and music teacher, broke down the tasks and wrote a list.) The school also offers sacramental preparation, an area where Ms.

grade, Ms. Kile started to see the gap between Grace and her classmates widen.

"It was a small neighborhood school and everybody knew everybody," she said, noting that Grace was always invited to birthday parties and playdates at people's houses. At one of those gatherings, something became clear.

"I watched as all the little girls were sitting in a circle on the floor, giggling and having fun," she said. "And I watched Grace, and I can still see it to this day. Her head bounced from one side to the other trying to keep up with the conversation. It was evident she was lost, she couldn't keep up anymore. And I watched as she slowly dropped her head and kind of scooted back out of the circle."

As Ms. Kile put it: "My daughter is like these girls, but she's also not like these girls."

As she grew, finding a classroom that was a good fit remained challenging. In seventh grade, Grace was in a self-contained room with four other students, two of whom did not speak.

"My daughter Grace, [on the other hand], could talk the side off a barn door," Ms. Kile said. When her teachers were busy, Grace would sneak upstairs to sit in with her twin brother's class instead.

"She wanted to be a part of a community," Ms. Kile said. "That wasn't her community."

That experience points to a broader tension. Teachers in a typical classroom are often not trained to help students with Down syndrome or autism. It can be disruptive. Yet a fully separate classroom can leave a student isolated, never fully integrated into the school community.

It's different at Notre Dame, she said. It was the only place Grace has found a community. Ms. Kile, a member of the Church of Christ, has a master's degree in special education and taught at small private schools for children with learning disabilities. A few years after Grace made the move to Notre Dame, she did too.

"I think we're held to a higher standard because of the cross on our wall, because of who we are answering to," according to Ms. Kile.

Still, like the other schools, Notre Dame has its limitations. The school cannot accommodate students who exhibit extreme aggression, nor those who are prone to leaving a classroom or building without supervision.

"We can't really serve students with complex medical needs because we don't have a nurse," Ms. Kile said. "There are still a lot of kiddos in the world whose needs go unmet. And that's really rotten."

Some students may not get into a Catholic school because they have needs that exceed the school's capacity, but most will not get in because a nearby school simply does not serve the special needs population at all.

Colleen McCoy-Cejka, owner and managing partner of Inclusion Solutions and co-founder of the Matthew 19:14 Project, described the Notre Dame model as unique but not easy to replicate.

"Separating kids with disabilities from their neurotypical peers is actually not beneficial—to them or to their neurodivergent peers," Ms. McCoy-Cejka said, citing research that supports a more integrated approach. "The more we can educate kids in a neurodiverse community, [the more] everybody actually benefits."

Ms. McCoy-Cejka's first child, Quinn, was diagnosed with a nonverbal learning disability when he was 3. When he was around 9, he received his autism diagnosis.

"The biggest [challenge] is having schools reach out and say, 'Hey, we'd like to do this. Will somebody help us?' Because most schools won't do that," she said. "The first thing we always tell them is: You already have students on your campus who have special needs. Start by identifying who they are and thinking about how to meet their needs intentionally."

Over the last 10 years, Ms. McCoy-Cejka has seen progress, though she described it as "really slow and sporadic and not systemwide." Often, a school that offers inclusive education ends up with a disproportionate number of students with disabilities because other schools will not accept them.

"It's not the wealthy schools that are doing it best. It is not about financial wealth," Ms. McCoy-Cejka said. She said some of the most under-resourced schools are the ones that are excelling.

School leaders are afraid, she said, because they are not trained to serve students with special needs. But schools like Brother Rice demonstrate that educators can in fact learn how to serve students with disabilities and can find the resources they need.

'Telling the Whole Story'

On the morning of May 6, Mount Sion students and their peer mentors participated in what may be best described as an icebreaker. The students all had the names of characters written on sticky notes stuck on their backs. Each character had a partner character: Buzz and Woody from "Toy Story," for example, or Han Solo and Chewbacca from "Star Wars." A couple of the students had peanut butter and jelly written on their sticky notes.

Students had to ask each other questions to guess their characters, an exercise that may seem simple enough for neurotypical students. But it teaches the Mount Sion kids both social skills and deductive reasoning.

The students did not always figure out their character, though, including with the peer mentors. One young man, a senior, could not figure out the name on his sticky note: "What's the name of Shaggy's sidekick? What is Shaggy's dog's name?" He had never watched "Scooby-Doo."

Mary Erdmann, the director of Mount Sion, kept a close eye out and was quick to assist. Ms. Erdmann built and now runs the day-to-day program. Education was a career change for her after spending decades in finance.

"The limitations we have are the reasons people say, 'We can't do this.' But those limitations become our strongest assets," she said.

Administrators have implemented the program in stages, adding a new freshman class of about four students each year. This year's incoming juniors have been at the school since Mount Sion began. The school is adding a second special education teacher this year, and administrators also rely on one-on-one peer mentors during each period, drawn from the student population.

They also rely on outside help from St. Xavier University, also in Chicago, which sends four clinicians and a supervisor to the school on Wednesdays to work on speech. Lewis University, in the suburb of Romeoville, provides a dual-credit course for its students, called "The Exceptional Learner" class, and sends student teachers to Brother Rice.

Brendan Donohue, a Mount Sion student, sat next to his peer mentor, Timothy Reidy. Mr. Donohue gave short answers to my questions. He started at Brother Rice with Parker Baudo. He said he preferred the school to his previous one because it was all boys. And he likes having mentors. He had a very hard time last year saying goodbye to

‘Those limitations become our strongest asset.’

the graduating seniors.

Students can only be mentors during their free periods, Mr. Reidy explained. Technically, this was his study hall period. As I spoke with Mr. Reidy, Mr. Donohue began to sing to himself. “I have about five songs in my head right now. Actually seven,” Mr. Donohue said. “Do you know the song, ‘I get knocked down, but I get up again, you ain’t never going to get me down’?”

Part of the Mount Sion program includes giving students free time. During one of the periods, peer mentors facilitated a game of hacky sack. Meanwhile, one student watched videos of trains on YouTube. Another student did some work on an animated YouTube show, though he was protective of the details since, as he explained, the characters are not yet copyrighted. In the afternoon, students took turns placing decorations into their new aquarium, home of a fish named Thor.

At the end of the day, the students filed out the door. From the hallway, Parker looked back at Ms. Erdmann and wagged his eyebrows. She looked back at him sternly.

“Parker, we’ve talked about this,” she said after she called him back into the classroom. He probably learned the flirtatious gesture from another student who thought it was funny.

Jennifer Buss, a professor of elementary and special education at Lewis University, worked with administrators at Brother Rice to help form their programs. She had already worked with Parker at St. Barnabas, and has helped schools in the Chicagoland area start programs.

“By telling the whole story—the good, the bad and the ugly—we make it sustainable,” she said of establishing a program for students with special needs. “If we shove the hard parts under the rug, that’s not the full picture.”

Last year, she said, one of the peer mentors approached one of the Mount Sion students who is a gifted artist. “I don’t know how to draw,” the mentor confessed. “Will you teach me?”

“And [the student] literally became the teacher,” Ms. Buss said. “That relationship was just beautiful. I don’t know how many times I had to leave the room [because I was becoming emotional]. I was like, ‘I can’t.’ That natural relationship building, it just blows me away.”

It’s personal for Ms. Buss. She has a specific learning



Middle schoolers line up at Notre Dame School in Dallas.

disability in reading and math that was severe enough that she was removed from her Catholic school in second grade.

“They just told my parents, ‘We can’t work with her. She needs to go to public school. We don’t know what to do,’” she said.

“If you were to ask me when I was in second grade, sure, I was mad. And so it’s just wild that here I was a kid that was excluded and now—God has a plan—I’m providing opportunities not only here but in other schools.”

J.D. Long García is a senior editor at America. Reporting for this article was funded in part by a grant from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The Great American Evangelist

How Fulton Sheen can help the United States embrace its mission to the world

By Rachel Lu

At the height of then-Bishop Fulton J. Sheen's media career in the 1950s, he was probably the most famous, most mainstream, most beloved public Catholic the United States had ever known. Every week, tens of millions of Americans watched his award-winning television show, "Life Is Worth Living," or listened to its radio version. It was a ratings success that remains to this day the most successful religious television program in history.

In a nation of 160 million, it was truly an astonishing achievement. As many as one in five Americans (not just Catholics) tuned in on a regular basis to watch Sheen, serene and winsome in his clerical collar and cape, explain principles of Thomistic philosophy and theology in easy-to-digest ways. Up to this point in American history, many Catholics had a tendency to view the American mainstream as a threat and source of contagion. Sheen charged right into it, sending his message of hope over the airwaves and directly into American living rooms.

He wore his superstar status lightly, however. In 1953, when he beat out television legends like Lucille Ball and Edward R. Murrow at the Emmys for "Most Outstanding Television Personality," he humorously thanked "my four writers: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John." He converted celebrities like Clare Boothe Luce and Henry Ford II, hobnobbed with politicians and media barons, and raised millions for foreign missions as head of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith. Sheen wrote the book on what it meant to be a "professional Catholic." Or, if one existed, he threw it out and wrote a better one.

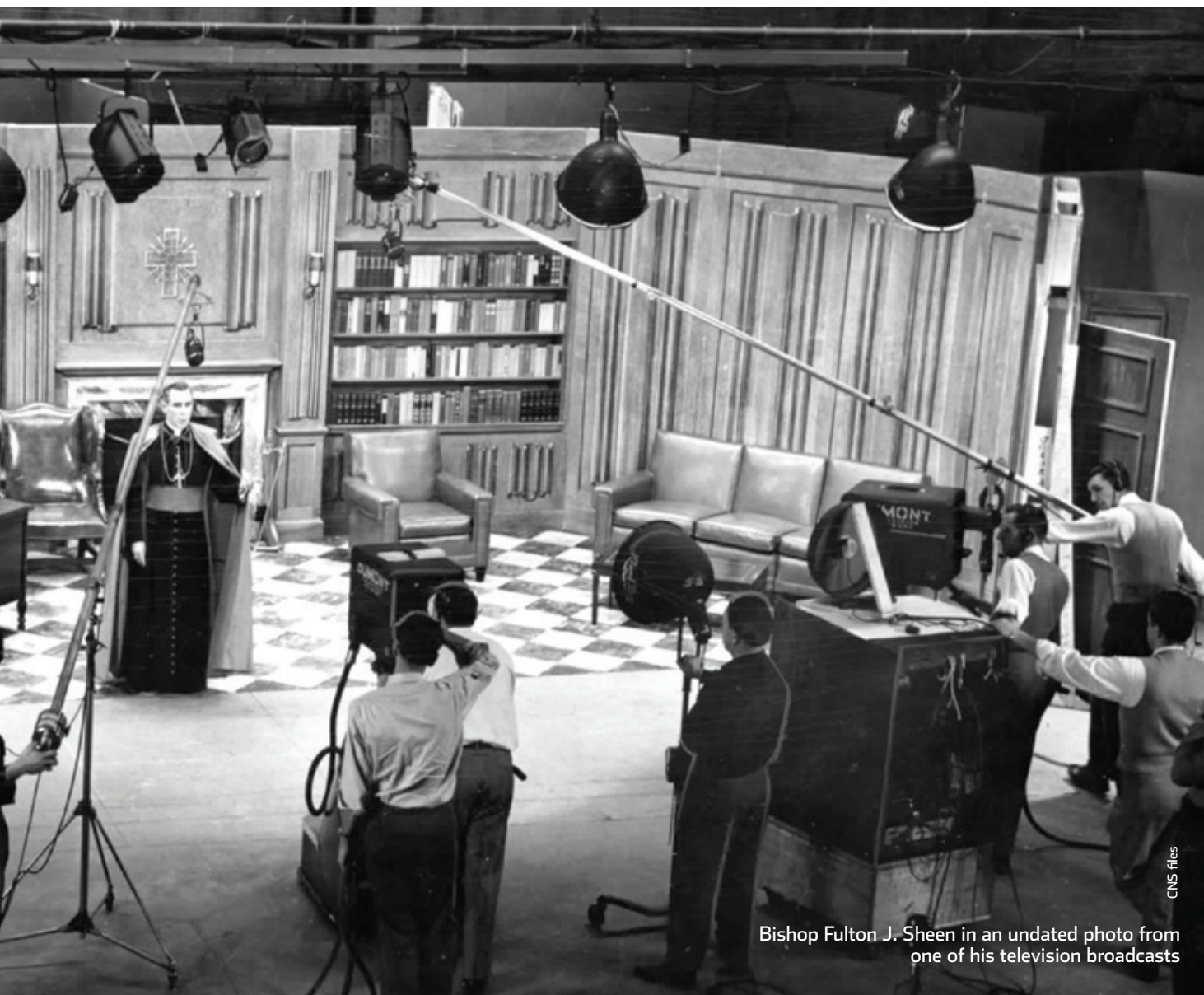
Eventually, though, his star faded. Perhaps more accurately, it was dimmed by internal church politics and grudges. (More on this later.) Sheen finished his life in exile, both from the limelight and from the ecclesiastical



hierarchy—first as the bishop of Rochester, N.Y., then in a strangely hermit-like existence in an apartment on Manhattan's Park Avenue.

This was hardly the Lifetime Achievement finish that every influencer craves. But it was fitting in a way, and Sheen recognized that fact. From the start, he had emphasized that the cross stood at the center of Christian faith. He embraced his own as a spiritual purification, a chance to strip away the vanity of celebrity life and give his soul unstintingly back to God. His autobiography, *Treasure in Clay*, reflects very beautifully on this theme. "Generally," he wrote, "the more we accept popular estimates, the less time we spend on our knees examining conscience. The outer world becomes so full of limelight as to make us forget the light within."

No doubt the change in visibility and influence was



Bishop Fulton J. Sheen in an undated photo from one of his television broadcasts

CNS files

more bearable given that he *did* in fact log plenty of hours in prayer, even throughout the glory years. As a seminarian, Sheen made it a personal rule to devote one hour each day to prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. At his ordination, he took a vow to continue this practice, which he kept across his earthly rise and fall, all the way to his death. On Dec. 9, 1979, he collapsed in the small private chapel of his home, where he was eventually found peacefully resting in the presence of the Eucharist that had sustained him across all those decades. Television audiences may be fickle, but God is not.

All-American Catholic

As the church gathers to celebrate his beatification on Sept. 26 in St. Louis, Fulton Sheen should be remembered for many things: his incisive mind, his zeal for evange-

lism, his deep fidelity to the church. But he should also be remembered for his holiness. Given the distractions and temptations of celebrity life, we cannot doubt that it was hard-won. In fact, the witness of his life was his final and most important lecture for the nation he had once held spellbound on Tuesday nights. Sheen wanted American Catholics to deepen their faith, infusing more soul into the remarkable infrastructure they had built. If they could do that, he believed, the American Catholic Church could have a transformative impact on both the nation and the global church.

It could still happen. We are living in a pivotal moment for American Catholicism. We have the opportunity today to embrace the vision that Sheen saw, in company with men like Archbishop John Ireland and John Courtney Murray, S.J. These men lived in eras when many Catholics, even or



In a matter of weeks Sheen was drawing millions of viewers.

perhaps especially in the church's hierarchy, saw America's Protestant roots and democratic political structure as an obstacle to forging a healthy Catholic culture. They took a different view.

Though the United States has never been a majority-Catholic country, men like Ireland, Murray and Sheen believed that its history and political traditions had created fertile soil for growing an authentically Catholic culture. Catholicism, they argued, *did* fit harmoniously into the American tradition, and as prejudices against it faded, they felt Catholics would be better positioned to help an already great nation realize its full potential. At the same time, America could provide a model for the rest of the world of a thriving Christian culture *not* built on an Old World, crown-and-altar foundation. The United States could show people that a modern, free, nation was not in opposition to Christian values.

It was a hard sell for Ireland to make in the 1890s, and later for Murray to make in the 1950s. It took the church some time to come to grips with the idea that free societies might actually be *good* for the faith. Today that view is widely accepted within the global church, and despite the tensions of our current political climate, many still look to the United States for global leadership. But in a strange irony, some American Catholics have now rejected their own nation's nonsectarian, pluralist political tradition, even as the wider church has come to welcome it. Roiling with culture war angst, some Catholic Americans are beginning to doubt the value of our constitutional political tradition and a culture that celebrates freedom.

It is easy enough to understand how this happened. Our political sphere is unlovely at the present moment. Our culture seems to be floundering, not confident and creative but dissipated and decadent. Witnessing the behavior of our political leaders, we may at times feel deep humiliation, especially given their outsized global influence. This feels like a nation in decline, not a rising power set to lead and evangelize the world.

For Catholics in particular, the disappointment and shame of these recent experiences may tempt us to fall back on a more pessimistic view of our own history and political traditions. We still have, embedded in our cultural memory, resources to draw on in taking a more aggressively rejectionist view of liberal modernity. Young Catholics are refamiliarizing themselves with *Unam Sanctam*, the *Syllabus of Errors*, and the work of integralist thinkers like Charles Maurras. Some now seem convinced that the European critics of yesteryear saw the matter rightly and that liberalism has failed. Maybe it is not such a blessing to live in the land of the free if that freedom leaves us lost in a grey, meaningless secular world.

Sheen's perspective gives us hope. From childhood, he was always proud to be an American. Growing up in a devout family in El Paso, Ill., and then Peoria, he was viewed by his Catholic community as a likely priest. In 1917 he entered St. Paul Seminary in St. Paul, Minn., just 23 years after Archbishop Ireland first founded it, and imbibed Ireland's optimistic vision of America together with extensive instruction in Thomism.

Sheen had a sharp, philosophical mind and a wide-ranging curiosity about the world. That served him well as he moved to the University of Louvain in Belgium, becoming in 1923 the first American to win the prestigious Cardinal Mercier Prize for philosophy. But his time in Europe also gave him a firsthand look at the political ideologies that were beginning to tear the Old World apart. Modernity's destructive philosophies—Marxism, fascism, nihilism—were rapidly gaining strength in Europe, feeding dangerous nationalistic currents and raising the grim prospect of another catastrophic war. Sheen returned to his own country with a keen appreciation for what Europe had to offer but also a clearer sense of the many ways in which Americans were richly blessed.

Radio Star

As Sheen's scholarly reputation grew, his bishop in Peoria became worried that the attention might turn the young priest into a megalomaniac. Recalled to the Midwest, he cheerfully laid aside his scholarly work and ministered to the poor for several months, until the bishop finally relented and allowed the Catholic University of America to have him as a faculty member. He taught philosophy and theology but also won a reputation as a spectacular public speaker and homilist.

In 1930, NBC and the National Council of Catholic Men together launched a radio program, "The Catholic Hour," meant to deepen listeners' understanding of the Catholic faith. Sheen was invited to host it. He would spend the next two decades still working as a professor at the Catholic University of America, while also starring on his radio show as his ratings steadily climbed.

Sheen was not the only famous American radio priest through the 1930s, as fascism reached full strength and the world prepared for war. "The Catholic Hour" was originally



Bishop Sheen, in an undated photo, stands in front of a piece of equipment used for his radio show "The Catholic Hour."

started in part to counter the impact of the antisemitic Father Charles Coughlin, host of the dubiously titled "Golden Hour," which drew in millions with his furious indictments of "predatory capitalism" and a state controlled by nefarious elites who refused to enact "social justice." Coughlin openly sympathized with European fascists, recommending a corporatist state similar to that of Benito Mussolini in Italy. When he became openly paranoid about what he described as "World Jewry" and its supposed grip on the global economy, he was eventually forced off the air. He represented a dark foil for Sheen as the two developed their competing visions for American life.

Sheen understood that communism and fascism were not just political theories but also political religions. The aggressive modern state was properly viewed not as the church's assistant, nor its ally, but as its competitor. Writing in **America** in 1941, he noted that for all of the dismissals of religion by Marx, Lenin and their successors, the Soviet Union had not succeeded in marginalizing the faith; rather, it remained the greatest competitor to the communist movement:

If religion were only a conglomeration of external rites of Byzantine origin, supported by the imperial government, or if it were an opium of the capitalistic regime, then, certainly, twenty-four years after the government was suppressed and capitalism exiled, there should be no religion. That there is, on the admission of the atheists themselves, proves that man is incurably reli-

gious, and that as a king in exile, he is wandering, or stumbling, searching or driving back again to this Paradise lost.

Anticipating the work of Eric Voegelin, he told his listeners that statism was the defining heresy of the 20th century. By contrast, he saw in the American tradition a framework for opposing that evil more successfully than European Catholics had done.

Like Murray, he was attentive to the way that the Declaration of Independence celebrated our establishment under God, "endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable Rights." He understood at the same time that a free society faced grave dangers of its own, particularly if liberty were permitted to devolve into license, an empty insistence that every person should be permitted to do as he or she pleased. True freedom, he insisted, involves the embrace of the Cross. Only by submitting to God can we tame our worst impulses and rediscover ourselves.

"The conflict of the future," Sheen wrote in *Communism and the Conscience of the West*, "is between the absolute who is the God-man and the absolute which is the man-god; between the God who became man and the man who makes himself God; between brothers in Christ and comrades in anti-Christ."

At its height, "The Catholic Hour" had an estimated four million listeners, with Sheen receiving thousands of letters every week. He continued to preach on the evils of communism even in the early 1940s, when the Roosevelt administration, his radio sponsors and Catholic University colleagues were all pressing him to stop. With the Soviet Union as an ally in World War II, many Americans felt it was inappropriate to treat communism and fascism as "twin evils." He largely refused to compromise, presenting totalitarianism as a grave spiritual threat that transcended the strategic calculations of the moment.

Reality TV

In 1950, Pope Pius XII sent Sheen to New York City to run the Society for the Propagation of the Faith. He was made an auxiliary bishop of New York, somewhat to the discomfiture of the city's dominant ecclesial figure, Cardinal Francis Spellman. Already a national celebrity, Sheen was soon approached by television executives, and just two years after his arrival in the city, "Life is Worth Living" first aired. Its launch was a bit wobbly, with guffaws echoing loudly across the entertainment industry. The cash-strapped DuMont Television Network put him on Tuesdays at 8 p.m., competing against the wildly popular Milton Berle on NBC and Frank Sinatra on CBS. Failure was the expected outcome. DuMont could not afford anyone with a realistic

Sheen showed Americans how the Catholic faith could provide answers to their deepest questions.

hope of competing with those top-notch programs, so they opted instead for a prayer.

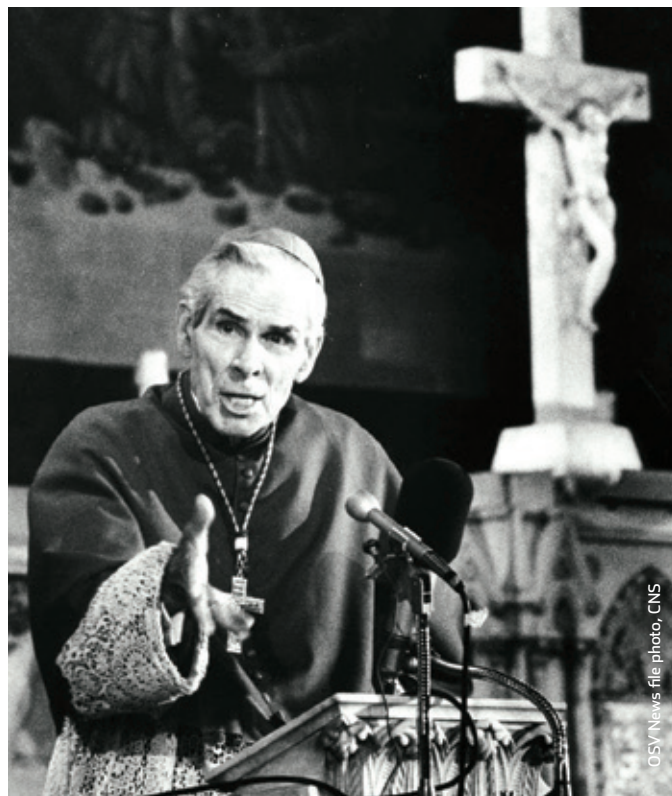
It was the age of variety shows, but Sheen made no attempt to sing, dance or juggle. There were no special effects or famous guests. His set, designed by a Sheen convert, Jo Mielziner, was extremely simple, resembling the classroom of a Catholic school. There was a chalkboard, a desk, a few chairs, and a statue of the Virgin and Child. Sheen would show up in episcopal regalia, stride to the center of the room and deliver a philosophy lecture. He spoke for 27 minutes and 20 seconds, with no notes or teleprompter, and always concluded on time.

In a matter of weeks he was drawing millions of viewers, startling television insiders with its size and leading Berle to joke good-naturedly, “At least I’m losing my ratings to God!”

It is hard to imagine a more resounding confirmation of Sheen’s optimistic vision. His program was no garden-variety televangelism, but serious theological instruction. Sheen was endearing, of course. He told jokes, offered relatable examples and always concluded with his signature phrase “God love you.” He made the Gospel relatable to ordinary people. In so doing, though, he powerfully demonstrated that Thomism, communicated in the right way, was in fact the perfect language for expressing the American spirit. The language of the church was entirely suitable for addressing and impressing the American people.

Impeccably orthodox and deeply faithful, Sheen showed Americans how the Catholic faith could provide answers to their deepest questions. He knew that modern people were hungry for meaning, a void the political religions had filled in horrific and dehumanizing ways. In place of that horror, he offered a much better solution: a voluntary embrace of the teachings, moral discipline and graces of the church. Properly understood, freedom and faith were allies, not competitors.

It is bitterly ironic, but in a way oddly appropriate, that Sheen was never rejected by his American audiences, nor by the Hollywood elite. It was the institutional church



Bishop Sheen preaches from a pulpit in an undated photo.

that canceled him. He ended up drawing the ire of Cardinal Spellman, his ecclesial superior, in a tussle over money. Spellman wanted Sheen to divert funds from his Society for the Propagation of the Faith for diocesan uses. Sheen thought this was inappropriate and ended up taking the dispute all the way to the Vatican. He won his case, and Spellman never forgave him. Sheen was effectively exiled to the Diocese of Rochester, N.Y., in the 1960s; this was a death sentence for his media career.

Ill-suited to administration, he resigned in just a few years, and spent the rest of his life in a kind of personal exile, living quietly in a New York apartment and devoting himself largely to prayer.

His Greatest Lessons

Though he loved the American church deeply, Sheen always insisted that its greatest weaknesses were spiritual. American Catholics had shown striking fortitude in building up a rich network of parishes, schools, hospitals and other institutions without the help of the state. Sheen loved that. But where were the prophets, mystics and saints? Was there enough *spirit* within this remarkable body?

He understood that his was a young country; perhaps in time those figures would emerge in greater numbers. But he also recognized the danger that they might not. Although Sheen certainly broached political topics, he was ever eager to encourage his viewers and listeners to allow

the faith to transform their lives: cultivate moral disciplines, drink in the beauty of liturgy and iconography, embrace the suffering of the Cross.

As they contemplate the road ahead, American Catholics should seriously revisit this critique. Clearly, we have excelled as institution builders. Hospitals and schools are certainly important, but they alone will not sustain us if our faith has no depth. As America's culture wars become heated, and we Catholics again face the prospect of ridicule and marginalization, the temptation to despair becomes palpable, and apocalyptic theories rise out of the grass. Right now, a new generation of anti-modern critics has emerged, arguing that the American experiment is fatally flawed and that freedom is inimical to the faith.

That certainly was not Sheen's view. It is also a deeply pessimistic view. How could a crown-and-altar style Catholicism be peacefully instantiated in a nation that has never had a king or a Catholic majority? What will it mean for our descendants, our compatriots and ultimately the church as a whole if we accept that freedom is an enemy of Catholicism and give up on our own tradition and legacy?

Sheen, through his public ministry, pushed the ideas of Ireland and Murray into the mainstream, arguing eloquently that a free and Christian society was the primary alternative to totalitarianism. Nothing that has happened in the intervening decades has made that view any less reasonable. If free societies are not fertile ground for nourishing the faith, what other options do we have?

There is, however, an alternative to rejecting the American tradition that Sheen so skillfully expounded. We could learn to see the defects of our politics and culture, and the anxieties and humiliations that attend them, as our chastening. This could be our spiritual purification. By humbling ourselves, and accepting a measure of suffering and self-sacrifice, it may be possible to season our nation's immense gifts with the graces and devotions of our Catholic faith. If we could do that, we might be allowed the honor of serving our compatriots, and the global church, in the spirit of this great American evangelizer.

Rachel Lu is a senior editor at *Law & Liberty* and a contributor to *National Review* and *America*.

Fulton Sheen and the civil rights movement

As a Black American growing up in segregated Mobile, Ala., 11-year-old Jerome Gary Cooper likely never imagined that he would meet a future Catholic saint. He certainly never thought that a famous radio personality—then-Monsignor Fulton J. Sheen—would travel under police escort down the humble dirt road to Cooper's house. But that brief visit in 1948 changed the trajectory of Cooper's life. It also powerfully illustrates the human impact of the Venerable Archbishop Fulton Sheen's civil rights legacy, and how he lived his belief that every human being possesses equal, God-given dignity.

Sheen argued that discriminating against a large segment of the population undermined the greatest commandment: love of God, from which love of neighbor flows. He preached eloquently that racism and other attacks on civil rights were direct attacks on all human beings and, ultimately, God himself. And he wasn't content to simply preach or urge legislation on these issues. He lived his beliefs—traveling to raise money for low-income communities and encouraging young Black Americans to dream big.

His encounter with young Jerome Cooper is proof. Sheen's visit to the Cooper family centered around his plans to help Jerome's father build a maternity hospital for Black women. During that visit, Sheen asked the boy if he had ever heard of the University of Notre Dame. Cooper had not. He also didn't know that Notre Dame had begun admitting Black Americans only four years before. In 1954, Sheen's recommendation helped Cooper secure an academic scholarship and enroll as a Notre Dame student.

Sheen's help was the first step to Cooper eventually becoming a Marine general, the first Black American ambassador to Jamaica, and the first Black American to lead a Marine infantry company in combat.

The kindness shown to the Cooper family and to the Mobile community offers just a small glimpse into Sheen's civil-rights efforts. When he became the bishop of Rochester, N.Y., in the 1960s, he spent his years there serving the poor, improving race relations and supporting efforts to end segregation. He created the Sheen Ecumenical Housing Foundation in 1967 to fight housing discrimination. He also advocated for workers in minority groups and challenged Kodak, one of the largest employers in New York State, for having discriminatory hiring practices.

Sheen's beatification is a timely opportunity to revisit his patriotic and theological writings—especially his belief that God is the source of all human rights, that the law must honor this fundamental truth and that a genuine loving witness is often the best vehicle for truly changing hearts and minds.

Monsignor Jason Gray is executive director of the Fulton J. Sheen Foundation and a canon lawyer who led the investigation of Sheen's approved miracle for beatification.

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Catholic schools continue to play an essential role in education through strong academic programs, a deep commitment to community and the nurturing of students' faith. They strive to shape young people who are openhearted, humble and courageous enough to embrace new beginnings. At their best, Catholic schools inspire students to recognize and respond to the real needs of the world, guiding them along a path of truth and light and calling them to "make justice our aim."

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Confidence in Truth

What Catholic social teaching can offer the contemporary university

By Richard A. Greenwald

Something has gone badly wrong in the American university. The stories are numerous, but two examples give a sense of where we find ourselves. First, a lecturer at the University of California’s Berkeley campus finds himself suspended for discussing politics after class ends. And at Cornell University, when a law professor complains that a colleague’s course on Gaza is antisemitic, the interim president publicly criticizes the course—prompting the local chapter of the American Association of University Professors to condemn “an egregious threat to academic freedom.”

Meanwhile, six states ban diversity offices at public universities, Florida’s governor stacks college boards with ideological allies, and Texas prohibits faculty from teaching concepts such as “allyship” and “antiracism.” The battle over academic freedom now rages from both sides, with progressives enforcing conformity through institutional or disciplinary requirements and conservatives wielding state

power and politically appointed boards to ban offices and dictate curricula.

What unites these assaults is a seemingly shared conviction that universities now exist to produce correct opinions rather than pursue truth. Academic freedom—the scholar’s right to follow inquiry wherever it leads—becomes, in this environment, an obstacle to overcome. In this moment of crisis, I have found myself returning to Catholic social teaching for guidance. Its resources may surprise us, cutting across the political divide and exposing the shared error that is poisoning academia from left and right alike.

The Unity of Truth

At the heart of the Catholic intellectual tradition lies a conviction that mandates, rather than restricts, academic freedom: Pope John Paul II’s apostolic constitution “*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*” guarantees the “institutional autonomy nec-



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essary to perform its functions effectively and guarantees its members academic freedom, so long as the rights of the individual person and of the community are preserved within the confines of the truth and the common good.” Pursuing truth for the common good and the recognition of all human dignity are at the core of academic freedom. This flows not from accommodation to modern sensibilities but from deep theological conviction. If all truth ultimately derives from God, then truths discovered through science, history, philosophy, and theology cannot ultimately be contradictory.

This liberates the scholar. As St. John Henry Newman argues in *The Idea of a University*, knowledge forms an interconnected whole. No genuine inquiry can be forbidden without impoverishing the entire enterprise. The Catholic university, therefore, embraces all branches of knowledge, confident that patient inquiry will reveal coherence.

Contrast this with today’s university, where disciplines sometimes drift toward ideological pre-commitment on contested questions—conclusions established before inquiry rather than arising from it. This is not orthodoxy

in its proper Catholic sense, the fruit of centuries of faithful discernment and communal reflection on revealed truth. It is something else entirely: a manufactured consensus that forecloses debate as a condition of professional belonging.

A sociologist studying criminal justice who privileges class analysis over race-based frameworks may face resistance in tenure review. A climate scientist in a red state may self-censor findings about global warming. A historian whose research complicates narratives of American exceptionalism—whether by emphasizing persistent racial injustice or by highlighting genuine moral development—risks having courses targeted by legislators, depending on which complexity offends local politics.

The result is not truth’s unity but its fragmentation—a university where departments inhabit different epistemic universes, each enforcing its own pre-commitments. A recent Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression

survey found that 35 percent of all faculty members admit to self-censoring their written work—nearly four times the rate found in 1958, near the end of the McCarthy era.

Human Dignity and Intellectual Freedom

Catholic social teaching grounds freedom in human dignity. While Vatican II’s “*Dignitatis Humanae*” addresses religious freedom, its logic extends naturally to intellectual freedom. If human beings possess inherent dignity as rational creatures made in God’s image, that dignity encompasses their obligation to seek truth through God-given reason.

Pope Benedict XVI developed this insight in the address he planned to give at the Sapienza University of Rome in 2008, writing that universities must maintain “freedom from political and ecclesiastical authorities.” The university serves society precisely through its independence. When universities become instruments of political agendas or ecclesiastical control, they cease fulfilling their purpose.

I write this as a dean of a Catholic, Jesuit liberal arts college. The tension is real and daily: How do we cultivate genuine diversity and inclusion—values central to our mission—without creating the ideological conformity that undermines the very intellectual diversity we seek? How do we defend our institutional autonomy against state interference while remaining accountable to our educational mission and the communities we serve?

The principle of subsidiarity holds that decisions should be made at the lowest competent level. Universities constitute genuine communities with proper autonomy. As “*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*” acknowledges, “A Catholic University possesses the autonomy necessary to develop its distinctive identity and pursue its proper mission.”

Today’s assault on university autonomy violates subsidiarity from multiple directions. Federal agencies have long investigated universities for discrimination. But what seems unique here is that the investigation seems to be a pretext to pressure institutions to limit broader political speech. The Trump administration has also withheld research funding from institutions it deemed oppositional to its policies. State legislatures dictate curricula down to specific prohibited terms. University administrators are forced to cave to this political pressure, sacrificing faculty autonomy. All of these represent failures to respect the self-governance of the academic community.

Subsidiarity suggests that curricular decisions belong to faculty and departments, not to administrators responding to outside pressure or legislators responding to constituent outrage. This does not mean universities are unaccount-



able—but accountability should flow through appropriate channels: accreditation, professional standards, peer review and governance structures that respect academic expertise.

Honest Inquiry

Perhaps Catholic tradition's most distinctive contribution is its confidence that faith has nothing to fear from honest inquiry. This rests on the Thomistic conviction that truth cannot contradict Truth. Since reason and revelation both derive from God, any apparent conflict must result from faulty reasoning or misunderstanding.

Benedict XVI expressed this in his Regensburg address in 2006: "The scientific ethos is the will to be obedient to the truth, and, as such, it embodies an attitude which belongs to the essential decisions of the Christian spirit."

This confidence offers a model for all academics, regardless of faith commitment. Scholars genuinely committed to truth should be able to engage with challenging ideas without panic. If our conclusions are correct, they will withstand scrutiny; if wrong, we should want to know. This is how knowledge moves forward. The defensiveness characterizing contemporary discourse—the rush to silence dissent, cancel speakers, punish nonconformity—suggests a greater danger of stifling knowledge creation and the pursuit of truth. It forces scholars to assume the risks regardless of uncertainty about whether their positions can withstand debate. The Catholic tradition's serene confidence in the knowability of truth is precisely what the fearful university needs to recover.

Catholic teaching also emphasizes that rights come paired with responsibilities. "Ex Corde Ecclesiae" states: "Freedom in research and teaching is recognized and respected...so long as the rights of the individual and of the community are preserved within the confines of the truth and the common good."

Academic freedom is not unlimited license but freedom exercised within obligations to truth, students, colleagues and society. Newman was clear: The church "fears no knowledge, but she purifies all...her principle is one and the same throughout: not to prohibit truth of any kind, but to see that no doctrines pass under the name of Truth but those which claim it rightfully."

This speaks to contemporary challenges on all sides. When universities abandon rigorous standards in favor of ideological conformity—whether progressive or conservative—they betray their mission. Academic freedom protects the pursuit of controversial conclusions, but it does not exempt scholars from pursuing them through rigorous methods and honest engagement with evidence. A scholar who reaches conclusions offensive to the political right

The Catholic intellectual tradition mandates, rather than restricts, academic freedom.

through careful research deserves protection. So does a scholar whose findings trouble progressive assumptions. Both are doing what universities exist to enable.

The Case for Prudential Neutrality

One response to politicization has been renewed interest in institutional neutrality—the principle that universities should not take positions on contested political questions. Since 2024's campus protests, more than 25 institutions have adopted neutrality policies based on the University of Chicago's 1967 "Report on the University's Role in Political and Social Action," known colloquially as the Kalven Report, stating that "the university is the home and sponsor of critics; it is not itself the critic."

Prudential neutrality resonates with Catholic principles—not as a substantive judgment that truth is unknowable or that the university lacks convictions, but as a practical judgment about institutional posture. The university refrains from official pronouncements on contested political questions not because it doubts that truth exists but because it recognizes that its mission is best served by protecting the conditions under which truth can be freely pursued. This is a matter of discernment, not indifference.

When universities take official positions on contested questions, they inevitably pressure dissenters into silence. The Kalven insight—that neutrality arises "not from lack of courage...but rather out of respect for free inquiry"—echoes Catholic teaching that truth has nothing to fear from honest debate.

Yet prudential neutrality is not simple, particularly for Catholic institutions whose mission is never reducible to mere procedural fairness. Catholic universities do not simply host inquiry—they are animated by a positive vision of the human person and of truth's ultimate coherence. The challenge lies in distinguishing threats to the university's core mission from contested political questions where the institution should remain silent.

When external actors threaten academic freedom itself—through funding cuts, legislative interference or donor pressure—institutional silence may constitute abdication rather than neutrality. Threading this needle requires not



Graduates pose for a photo at the conclusion of Villanova University's commencement ceremony in Pennsylvania on May 19.

just principle but wisdom, the very kind of practical discernment the Ignatian tradition commends.

A Way Forward

What would taking this vision seriously mean for today's university? It would mean resisting instrumentalization from all sides—defending academic communities against intrusion by legislatures, agencies, donors and our own administrative overreach. It would mean cultivating genuine viewpoint diversity rather than enforcing any kind of uniformity. It would mean protecting scholars who reach unpopular conclusions through rigorous methods, even when those conclusions offend powerful constituencies.

Here, the very word *catholic*—in the sense of universal—offers a resource often overlooked. A university animated by the Catholic tradition claims no corner of human knowledge as foreign territory. Its catholicity demands intellectual breadth: an embrace of diverse perspectives, methods and traditions of inquiry not as concessions to pluralism but as expressions of the church's universal vision. If truth is one, then every discipline, every culture, every honest mode of inquiry has something to contribute to its discovery. The intellectual parochialism that now afflicts universities of every stripe—where scholars in one department cannot speak the language of the next, and where entire fields are rendered off-limits by political fashion—is a failure of catholicity before it is a failure of policy.

Most fundamentally, this vision would mean recovering the conviction that truth is unified, that patient inquiry will reveal coherence and that genuine knowledge has nothing to fear from open debate. These are not partisan principles. A professor fired for questioning the ideological pre-commitments of a D.E.I. agenda and a professor fired for criticizing Israeli policy are both victims of the same instrumentalist logic—both treated as threats because uni-

versities have forgotten they exist for truth rather than for political outcomes.

As “*Gaudium et Spes*” reminds us, the Catholic tradition understands human beings as created for truth and understands the pursuit of truth as a sacred calling requiring freedom. In defending academic freedom, the church affirms something central to its understanding of human dignity.

In our time, when universities face unprecedented pressures to conform, when scholars across the political spectrum self-censor for fear of consequences, when the very possibility of objective truth is questioned by some and weaponized by others, the Catholic tradition's voice deserves a hearing. It reminds us that academic freedom is not a luxury but a necessity—not merely for the flourishing of universities but for the flourishing of human beings.

Benedict XVI warned that when “reason becomes deaf to the great message that comes to it from Christian faith and wisdom, then it withers like a tree whose roots can no longer reach the waters that give it life.” But equally, when faith suppresses reason or ideology silences inquiry, the human spirit is diminished.

The Catholic intellectual tradition points toward a better way: the fearless, disciplined, communal pursuit of truth in all its forms, confident that this pursuit ultimately leads to God, who is himself Truth. In an age when both the political left and right seek to capture the university for their agendas, this ancient wisdom offers not a middle way but a higher way—one that takes truth more seriously than either side currently does.

For those of us working in Catholic and Jesuit higher education, this is not abstract philosophy but daily practice. We encounter these tensions in faculty meetings, hiring decisions, curriculum debates and responses to external pressure.

The Catholic intellectual tradition and Catholic social teaching do not provide easy answers, but they do provide the right questions and the confidence that pursuing them honestly serves both the academy and the faith—and, through both, the common good. That confidence, more than any policy, procedure or stance, is what the contemporary university most desperately needs.

Richard A. Greenwald is a professor of history and dean of the Charles Meditz College of Arts and Sciences at Fairfield University. His essays have appeared in *The Baffler*, *The Daily Beast*, *UnHerd*, *The New Atlantis* and *The Hedgehog Review*.

Complicated Texts

What ‘Magnifica Humanitas’ misses about Babel and Nehemiah

By Cathleen Chopra-McGowan

“Magnifica Humanitas,” Pope Leo XIV’s new encyclical on artificial intelligence, turns to two biblical stories in its opening lines: one about the Tower of Babel, the other about the rebuilding of Jerusalem under Nehemiah. The Babel story becomes a warning against technological arrogance; the Nehemiah story is a model of ethical reconstruction and human solidarity. Yet the biblical texts themselves are more complicated than what the encyclical presents.

Before turning to the encyclical’s use of the Bible, however, it is worth pointing out that “Magnifica Humanitas” is not a work of biblical scholarship. Like a sermon, it draws selectively from Scripture, highlighting particular themes rather than cataloging every historical interpretation or scholarly debate. No encyclical could do justice to all the complexities of Genesis 11 or the Book of Nehemiah. The question is not whether Pope Leo’s readings are exhaustive—they are not meant to be—but whether the dimensions of these stories that he chooses to emphasize are the ones most relevant to the political and moral challenges posed by artificial intelligence.

The problem begins with Babel.

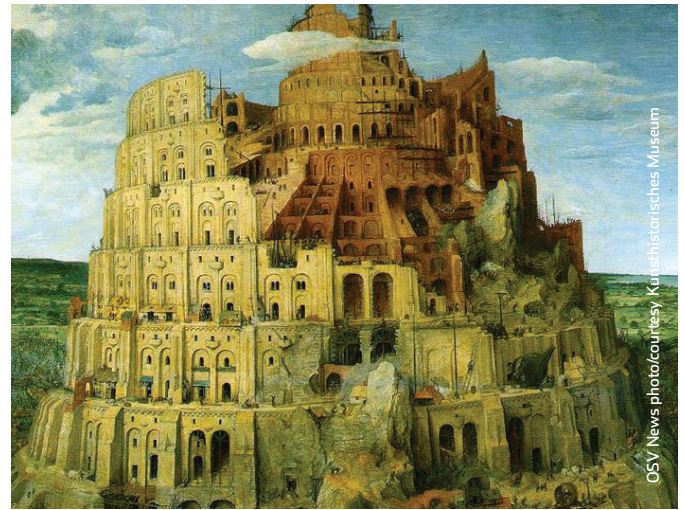
The encyclical treats Genesis 11 as a story about humanity forgetting the true source of its power. But in the biblical text, the danger is not that human beings mistakenly think they are powerful. The danger is that they actually are.

“This is one people, with one language for all of them,” God says in Genesis 11:6, “and this is only the beginning of what they will do. Nothing that they propose will now be impossible for them.”

Within the larger arc of Genesis, the story belongs to a recurring pattern in which human capacities are progressively diminished. Just as immortality in Genesis 3 (the story of Adam and Eve) is reserved for the divine realm, so too unified language in Genesis 11 appears as a form of power God does not wish humanity to possess. God scatters humanity and confuses its language not simply to punish pride, but to prevent humans from consolidating too much power.

That insight may be even more relevant to artificial intelligence than the encyclical suggests.

The real danger of uniformity is not merely that communication breaks down. It is that communication becomes totalizing. A world reduced to one language is not simply unified; it is governable. Human beings become



easier to coordinate, monitor, predict, manipulate and control when all information flows through the same systems and structures. In this sense, Babel reads less like a warning about the breakdown of communication—what Leo describes as a world in which “languages are confused and people no longer understand each other”—and more of a warning against the concentration of human power into a single technological order. This is indeed the more insidious promise of A.I. that the encyclical rightly recognizes: “the pretense that a single language—even a digital one—can translate everything, including the mystery of the person, into data and performance.”

The encyclical’s second biblical paradigm, the story of Nehemiah, raises a different but equally difficult set of questions. Leo presents Nehemiah as a figure of communal rebuilding and moral leadership: “He did not impose solutions from above. He convened the families, assigned each of them a section of the wall to rebuild, listened to their concerns, coordinated their efforts and addressed any opposition.” Certainly, the biblical text portrays Nehemiah as a rebuilders of Jerusalem after a catastrophe. Yet the Book of Nehemiah also presents a vision of restoration inseparable from concerns about boundaries, purity and social control.

In Nehemiah 13, Nehemiah boasts of violently confronting Judeans who had married non-Judeans: “I beat some of them and pulled out their hair.” His reforms are inseparable from projects of exclusion and purity politics. Despite the encyclical’s characterization of Nehemiah as a prophet of solidarity, the biblical text presents him as an administrator who manages imperial resources, organizes labor, enforces compliance and consolidates authority.

These features do not invalidate Pope Leo’s use of Nehemiah. They do, however, complicate it. In an age when many worry that artificial intelligence will intensify systems of surveillance, bureaucratic management and

Pieter Bruegel the Elder's 1563 painting of the "Tower of Babel." In "Magnifica Humanitas," Pope Leo XIV writes that humanity "is today facing a pivotal choice: either to construct a new Tower of Babel or to build the city in which God and humanity dwell together."

centralized control, the neglected dimensions of Nehemiah's story may be as important as the ones the encyclical highlights.

The imagery of rebuilding Jerusalem's walls, for example, carries political dangers the encyclical does not fully confront. Leo interprets those walls metaphorically as moral safeguards and ethical limits on technological power. But walls divide as well as protect. The same structure that secures a community also determines who belongs outside it. In contemporary political life, images of walls are already saturated with the language of exclusion, securitization and defensive nationalism.

This is no less true of Nehemiah's story in the Bible. The book's vision of restoration is inseparable from its emphasis on enforcing borders. Choosing Nehemiah as an uncomplicated paradigm to look to unintentionally evokes the very kind of centralized control the encyclical otherwise warns against. This choice sits uneasily with the vision of shared human flourishing that Leo's encyclical wishes to promote.

The deeper issue is that the encyclical presents Babel and Nehemiah as moral opposites: arrogant technological unity versus virtuous communal restoration. Leo concludes by calling on Christians to be "builders of communion, rather than architects of Babel." Yet the biblical traditions themselves resist such neat binaries. Babel is also a story about extraordinary human cooperation and the dangers of concentrated power. Nehemiah is a story of rebuilding, but also of boundary-making, coercion and administrative control.

Recognizing these tensions does not undermine Leo's concerns about artificial intelligence. On the contrary, it may deepen them. Indeed, the most relevant warning of Babel may not be against pride, but against the fantasy of concentration of human power into a single system. If we seek biblical models for governing new technologies, we should be cautious about celebrating figures whose visions of order depend upon exclusion and centralized authority.

Scripture offers politically and ethically rich, if often ambivalent, resources for thinking about A.I. Recovering those neglected dimensions may help us confront not only the moral dangers of artificial intelligence but also the political forms of power it makes possible.

Cathleen Chopra-McGowan is an assistant professor of Hebrew Bible at Santa Clara University.

TOMATO TRIONFALE

By Kelli Logan Rush

Buon giorno,
my Jupiters,
my little pagan luminants,
pale moons of the summer dawn,
auras glowing white-not-white-but-green,
my ghostlings,
floating.

Fruits, you were flowers first,
then pampered phosphorescent spheres
a shade so sheer
a flashlight might beam through you.

Do you, ripening,
distill each orange ray of June,
extract carnelian from the clay?
How *do* you reap the red?
And how expand
into your bright ballooniness?
How do you hang so heftily—
yet want to rise?

O, bulbous ones, O, foolery!
Twenty-two clown noses
levitate out my back door.
O, fun galore! You are the party
on the patio, bobbing
to the swelter of the eve,

swollen in the sweetness of,
splitting in the brimful of,
the sprawl of,
all of,
August
on the brink of the fall.

Kelli Logan Rush's poems have appeared in *Southern Poetry Review*, the *Connecticut River Review* and *Plainsongs*, among other journals.



Forged by Fire

An F.D.N.Y. chaplain looks back on 9/11

By Edward Desciak

On Sept. 15, 2001, thousands of people gathered to mourn Mychal Judge, O.F.M., the beloved chaplain to the Fire Department of the City of New York. The Church of St. Francis of Assisi on West 31st Street in Manhattan could not hold the massive crowd. So while the funeral Mass was being celebrated, Chris Keenan, O.F.M.—the man who would become Father Judge’s successor—was standing across the street, arm in arm with his neighbors, the firefighters of Ladder 24.

Days before, Father Keenan had been at the friary of St. Francis of Assisi on 31st Street, where he lived with his friend Father Judge. On Sept. 11, when the planes hit the World Trade Center, Father Judge rushed downtown to pray for those trapped inside the North Tower. When the South Tower collapsed, a blast of debris tore through the lobby and killed him. The number on his death certificate would read 0-0-0-1: the tragic day’s first recorded casualty. The photograph of rescue workers carrying his body through the wreckage would become one of the defining images of the attacks, one many called a modern-day Pietà.

Chris Keenan, O.F.M., with members of the F.D.N.Y. in New York

Father Keenan, who retired from the chaplain role in 2022, remembers the hours that followed: watching the medical personnel who filled the streets, waiting with stretchers for people who never came; learning that his friend was dead; sitting with Father Judge’s body back at the firehouse.

And yet, despite being formed by that tragedy—despite the seven months he would spend helping search for remains at Ground Zero, and the dozen-plus medical conditions and cancers the toxins there later caused in him—Father Keenan remains a man of effusive joy.

Being the Bridge

Mychal Judge was an institution. People still carry his words written on paper folded in their wallets, pulling out a short prayer he wrote when Father Keenan mentions his name. Babies, boats and buildings have been named after him. “There’s not a day that goes by that he isn’t remembered,” Father Keenan said.

To follow Judge in his role as F.D.N.Y. chaplain, particularly in the wake of an unprecedented disaster, was no easy



Octavio Duran

task. As Michael Daly, the longtime columnist in New York who chronicled the legendary chaplain's life in *The Book of Mychal*, put it in an interview with **America**: "Imagine Joe DiMaggio gets killed in a terrorist attack, and I tell you, 'OK, you're up next.'"

On paper, Father Keenan may not have been an obvious choice. "I didn't even know the difference between an engine and a ladder," Father Keenan told **America** in June while seated in the friary on 31st Street where he lived while he was the F.D.N.Y. chaplain. But he was not an obvious pick to join the Franciscans either.

While he grew up in a Franciscan-run parish in the borough of Wood-Ridge, N.J., the future friar now says he "never intended to be a Franciscan." He was working a teamster job in his early 20s when his vocation was first suggested to him by none other than Father Judge. "I said, 'Well, I think you're kind of crazy because, number one, I don't go to church,'" Father Keenan recounted. "Number two, I cheated my way through high school, so I could never do the studies. And number three, how do you spell *chastity*?"

"And he said to me: 'If I could do it, you could do it.'"

Judge turned out to be right. And Judge's instincts would be right again almost a half century later. Months after Father Keenan became chaplain, a firefighter told him that Judge, when asked who might replace him, had named Father Keenan without hesitation.

The two men had a good deal in common. Both were Franciscans; both inherited the sort of natural charisma that came from being the sons of blue-collar Irish immigrants in New York; both had gotten sober after struggling with alcoholism, and both accompanied patients dying of AIDS when others would not go near them.

But succeeding Judge was never a matter of replacement. "Nobody was ever going to be Mychal Judge," said the Rev. Ann Kansfield, an F.D.N.Y. chaplain and the director of the department's counseling services unit. "But Chris does ministry in a style that's very reminiscent of Mychal.... A sort of Elijah-Elisha mantle passed between [them]. It was a miraculous blessing for the fire department: [Chris's] ability to just be present with people, to love people."

Mr. Daly resists the framing of Judge as a "towering" figure: "Mychal Judge did not think that the impressive or sacred distance was up or high. He thought it was across.



That community of first responders sustained him through tragedy.

What he loved more than anything was walking across the Brooklyn Bridge. His whole idea was that a great figure is not a towering figure—a great figure is a bridging figure."

Father Keenan, Mr. Daly said, embodied that philosophy but in his own way. He never tried to be "Mychal Judge 2.0." Instead, "he served the same function that Mychal Judge did, which is the bridge from himself to other people.... And to Chris's eternal credit, I've never seen him try to be anybody but himself. He never tried to be anybody but who God wanted him to be."

His versatility would serve him in his role as chaplain. "Give me your most wild and wacky situation," Rev. Kansfield said, "like if some guy was an atheist or Wiccan or died naked in a hooker's bed...we could call Chris. Nothing is gonna surprise him."

Digging in the Pit

"[Judge] was all about moments," Mr. Daly said. "There were these things that happened that you would always remember. After 9/11, there was so much. It wasn't about the moments, it was about the enormity of all the moments."

By Father Keenan's count, there were over 500 funerals and memorial services over the course of his first two years on the job. As remains from 9/11 victims were recovered, grief would come to the surface again and again. Most of those remains would be miniscule. "Everyone was essentially vaporized, pulverized and cremated in the collapse of the two buildings," Father Keenan said. He participated in the recovery efforts, digging side-by-side with firefighters in the pit at Ground Zero for seven months after the attacks. They would search through dirt and debris in sections roughly the size of a basketball court and rake back and forth three times over, searching for remains. "You could hardly find a piece of glass," he said.

Even there, while he was carrying the remains of fallen firefighters to ambulances, Father Keenan was able to find God. "I was wondering, what sense do I bring to this? What's the meaning of this?" he said. But one night, "I had an inspiration from the spirit." He described a dream where he was driving down into the pit to dig, "and I came to understand that I was descending into hell, but I'm seeing the face of God on all the people that are down here [to offer help]."



Father Keenan ‘never tried to be anybody but who God wanted him to be.’

That community of first responders sustained him through tragedy. He recalled a conversation he had with firefighters soon after he became chaplain: “They said, ‘We know that you’ve given your life for us as our chaplain, but what you need to know is that all 11,000 of us are yours... Don’t you ever forget that all 11,000 of us are yours.’”

“That’s beautiful,” Father Keenan said, smiling widely. “Who is ever told that? People ask me, ‘How did you move through all of this?’ That was how.”

In the Firehouse

Now in his retirement, those relationships continue to provide consolation, and not just for Father Keenan. Ted Trestik was a probationary firefighter on Ladder 24, across the street from the friary, when he first met the chaplain in the station kitchen about 12 years ago.

“He’s been a great source of counsel for me before I even knew that’s what it was,” Mr. Trestik said. Father Keenan’s demeanor was so approachable that he didn’t realize at the time that he was getting advice. What made it possible, he said, was that “you can’t offend the guy. He’s heard it all, and he’s seen it all. It’s a nice feeling to know that you’re never going to be scolded or shamed.”

Mr. Trestik recalls Father Keenan telling him about feeling inadequate when he took on the role of chaplain after Father Judge. But despite his not feeling ready, “God, or whatever higher power you believe in, said, ‘Nope, it’s your time, whether you’re ready or not,’” Mr. Trestik said. “[Father Keenan] showed a lot of guys that if you just try to do the next right thing, you’ll be OK, even if you’re not ready or are unsure. He showed guys that it is OK to be a little broken.” Father Keenan’s vulnerability, Mr. Trestik explained, made him a trusted voice in the fraternity of the fire department.

“I’d do anything for Father Chris,” Mr. Trestik added.

Michael Zofchak, a now-retired F.D.N.Y. lieutenant, got to know Father Keenan when he and his wife, who is Jewish, were having trouble finding a priest to preside at their wedding in 2003. “I said, ‘You know what? We have a fire department calendar with all the chaplains on the back of the calendar. Let’s pick the Jewish one and the Catholic one.’”



Chris Keenan, O.F.M., stands outside of the Church of St. Francis of Assisi on 31st Street in Manhattan in 2003.

Since then, Father Keenan became a fixture in their family, coming to everything from funerals to Jewish baby naming ceremonies. “He really gets in the weeds with you and your family,” Mr. Zofchak said. The “source of comfort” that Father Keenan provided was all the more important in a department where, as Mr. Zofchak said, “the way we do therapy is we push [feelings] down and pour booze on top of it.”

“He’s a special person,” Mr. Zofchak said of Father Keenan. “It started on that day in September of 2001, but it has never ended—and it never will.”

Finding God in the Aftermath

A total of 343 firefighters died on Sept. 11, 2001. Since then, over 400 more have died for reasons that can be attributed to the fallout of that day. After the towers fell, fires raged underground for weeks, sending plumes of toxic smoke laced with over 30 known carcinogens into the air. “We eventually got proper masks,” Father Keenan said, recounting his time in the pit at Ground Zero, “but we’d drop the masks” while digging or talking because they were uncomfortable.

Now 85 years of age, Father Keenan has dealt with 14 different conditions traced to his time in the pit, including cancers, post traumatic stress disorder and a sleep disorder. At the time of our interview, he was undergoing treatment for a recently diagnosed cancer in both of his kidneys.

Still, Father Keenan approaches life with a good sense of humor. “Look at me, don’t I look great?” he said. He said his doctors are currently monitoring seven conditions. Father Keenan believes he will eventually succumb to them,



Chris Keenan, O.F.M., stands with the firefighters of Ladder 24, across the street from the friary of the Church of St. Francis of Assisi on 31st Street, in Manhattan.

but even with that in mind, his outlook remains bright. When that day comes, he says, he will just “kiss my butt goodbye and I’ll say, ‘Jesus, I’m on my way.’”

Father Keenan has not gone through his medical issues alone. “Every guy who was there is just kind of waiting for the other shoe to drop,” Mr. Zofchak, who was among the firefighters at Ground Zero, said. “We don’t talk about if we’re going to get sick. We talk about when.” Having a chaplain who is navigating the same dread helps him feel “like it’s going to be OK.”

“Listen, it’s probably going to be bad, but in the end, it’s going to be OK because you have your faith. Chris is gonna walk with you. Jesus will walk with you. It’s gonna be all right in the end.”

Mr. Daly said that the firefighters, a significant portion of whom are Catholic, have a special connection to their chaplain—and to God. “They’re a bunch of seemingly ordinary guys sitting around the firehouse,” he continued, “and then an alarm comes in...and all of a sudden, a kind of grace descends on them at that moment. They have no idea what awaits them, but they’re completely willing to risk their lives for people they don’t even know.”

“Just as the devil is to be found in evil, God is to be found in good,” he said, crediting the idea to Judge. “By that theology, they just have more God in them.”

25 Years Later

Most of the firefighters in the F.D.N.Y. today were not on the job in 2001. “The young guys look at us with respect, but

they can’t really understand what happened,” Mr. Zofchak said, reflecting on the quarter-century that has passed since the terrorist attacks. Though Father Keenan is retired from his official role as chaplain, the guys at Ladder 24 are still happy to see him when he shows up.

On a June afternoon, as he gave a tour of the firehouse’s memorabilia from Sept. 11, and mementos of the Franciscan chaplains that came before him, younger firefighters listened intently to the gregarious man in a religious habit that, one firefighter’s daughter had decided, made him look like a Jedi. In retirement, as on the job, Father Keenan still has a knack for making people feel like they have known him for a lifetime after just a few minutes.

Those firefighters, like many today, might not remember what Father Keenan described as the “incredible unity” that briefly followed the terrorist attacks. But he believes that the country and the church need to find their way back to it, and it is not too late. “Us coming together as one is not an impossible dream,” he said. “Not only was it possible, it was real.”

Mr. Daly believes that Father Judge would be proud of what his successor made of the role. “Mychal would recognize Chris as the person we all should be,” he said. If Judge was “Joe DiMaggio,” then Father Keenan is “Mickey Mantle.... They’re both champions. They’re both people you want to admire and want to emulate and want to thank God for.”

Edward Desciak, a former O’Hare fellow at America Media, is a J.D. candidate at Harvard Law School.

Riding the Wave

A season of roller coasters, rapids and bliss

By Anna Keating

Great thinkers have disagreed on how to find happiness. Some find it in work, others in leisure. Some say we receive it. Others say we create it. These days, many suggest that artificial intelligence technology promises an easier, and therefore happier, life. But when using A.I. or, really, any addictive app, users often feel disembodied. In these pseudo-places, it is difficult to get one's bearings, to feel real: *Is this my opinion, or am I being manipulated to extremes by the algorithm? Is this image real, or is it A.I.? Do I like this or am I just scrolling to numb out?* These questions came to the fore recently when I visited, of all places, an amusement park.

This summer, I took my children to Elitch Gardens, a theme park and water park in Denver, Colo. My children, ages 8, 11 and 14, had ridden water slides but never roller coasters. My youngest learned about roller coasters from a teacher who used them as an analogy for emotions in his second-grade class.

I picked him up from school that winter day and all he could talk about was roller coasters. "Have you seen a roller coaster? Are they real? Can we ride one? Can we go today?"

"In summer, when the park reopens," I promised. For his birthday in spring, we got tickets to Elitch's, as it is known locally, for June.

I had not been to the park since I was a kid. In my memory, the park was huge, the teenagers were cool, and the best ride was the big wooden roller coaster that moved and swayed at the back of the park. I planned the day for everyone, researching when to get there and where to park. I measured my youngest to make sure he was tall enough to ride the scariest rides. He was, just barely. I thought about what everyone would need: sunscreen, water bottles, snacks. Never once did I think about what the day would be like for me. This was my first mistake.

Elitch's was smaller than I remembered, and the cool teenagers now looked like little kids. I hurried everyone to the back of the park to ride the old wooden roller coaster. It was closed.

My husband, Geoffrey, came up with a backup plan. His eyes fell on a yellow, metal roller coaster called the Boomerang, the tallest ride in the park. It had several vertical loops and almost no waiting line. Geoffrey caught my eye. He could see that I did not want to ride it. He looked at me and, with his eyes, said, *Don't act scared or you'll spook him.*

"Let's just rip the Band-Aid off," he said. It's an expression he often uses when we're about to do something terri-



ble that must be done. My youngest squeezed my hand and said, "I want to ride next to Mama." So I got in line.

A teenager pushed a metal bar covered in foam down over my shoulders and the car began to lurch with an ominous clicking sound. My son screamed, "Am I going to die?" I was strapped down and unable to look at him, but I squeezed his leg and said, "You're not going to die." By which I meant, not right now.

And then we were hurtling through space. I'd imagined us screaming and laughing, sharing a moment, but I couldn't even open my eyes, let alone my mouth. It felt like being in a blender. I could not produce a single thought. The machine had us now; there was nothing to do but hold on until it was over.

We got through the loops and the sideways turns, and I started to feel relief, only to realize that we were now going to do the same nauseating series backwards. Finally, we were deposited back on the platform, pale and motion sick. I got out and took my son's small hand. "You were so brave," I managed. "That was terrible," he said, and we all laughed.

I rode a few more rides. The Sea Dragon swung us high and low in an ersatz Viking ship. My stomach rose and fell. I thought I might pass out. After we got off, I found myself bargaining in my head with no one. *I would rather rock climb without ropes*, I thought. *I would rather give birth. Give me something else. Anything.*

The 8-year-old remained brave as the day wore on. He did not like the first two rides, but he liked the Turn of the Century one, where you spun around on swings. He liked the log ride, where you came off soaking wet. The older rides were better, I thought. Designed to be fun, not to be photographed.

The whole day I told myself, "You never have to do this again." It wasn't just the motion sickness; it was the sense of helplessness. Unlike giving birth or doing a sketchy rock climb, riding these roller coasters left me with no sense of accomplishment. My body felt lifeless, like an object being manipulated. The machine did all the work. Each ride of-



Rafting creates the conditions for being neighborly.

ferred both too much stimulus and not enough challenge.

It is very easy to describe unhappiness: I was nauseated, hot, bored and overstimulated. Even the kids *liked* Elitch's but didn't *love* it.

It's harder to describe bliss.

The day after we went to Elitch's, we went rafting. We don't usually do two big outings in a row, but we are in the midst of a drought in Colorado, and this was the last good weather window before the water levels on the Arkansas River would be too low. So we put some peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and sparkling waters in a cooler and drove to Cañon City to raft the very next morning.

If the day at the amusement park felt like nervous system overload, the day on the river felt like a cleanse. It was one of the happiest days of my life.

Everything about river life is magical. You put your phone in a dry bag and can't access it for most of the day. You are present. On the river, we are humans; we are able to act on our environment even as it acts on us. You push your arm against a rock and the boat slides back into the flow. On the river, physics is interesting. It makes sense.

We met up with the family we raft with: Luke and his kids.

When we got to the drop-in spot, everyone started helping without being asked: putting on life vests, spraying sunscreen, taking turns pumping up the raft. We had purpose, a mission. The raft had a small leak. Geoffrey, Luke and my oldest set about patching it while the other kids waded in the water and skipped stones. It was a problem, but a problem we could solve. We had the pleasure of feeling competent.

On the river, we are not just bodies, flesh and bones; we're people. Someone says: "Forward right. Left back. Lean in." And we do. We're not isolated individuals; we're a tribe. Working together, laughing, sitting in comfortable silence. Making jokes about the teenage geese. We tell stories. We paddle. We swim.

At one point we stopped on a sandy bank to eat. Luke's daughter, who is 11, asked me if I wanted to play mermaids. To my surprise, I did. We made up a game of swimming against the current. It was hard and fun, and I couldn't stop grinning. The day was hot; the water was cold. I didn't want to get out.

Rafting creates the conditions for being neighborly. When one of Luke's girls fell in, I had to grab her by the life vest and yank her back into the boat. She fell on top of me in the process, wet and smiling. It felt good to be useful. At another point, I was swimming and rapids were approaching and someone had to pull me in. It felt good to be helped.

The two days were so different. On the first, I got credit simply for participation. I checked something—roller coasters—off a list. On the second, there were real prob-

lems to solve. At one point we got stuck on rocks, and two of us had to get out into the rapids and push, but the problems were ours to puzzle over.

It was also healing and restorative to be in nature, surrounded by family and friends, instead of in concrete and steel, surrounded by loud music and strangers. We saw wildlife while on the Arkansas: a herd of bighorn sheep, two egrets, hawks, fish. We cliff jumped. We chose to hurl our bodies off rocks. High, medium or low. Everyone chose differently.

Roller coasters are truly impressive feats of engineering. Yet they remind me of using technology like ChatGPT. They can do incredible things, but they leave many users feeling like they have learned nothing and accomplished little. Amusement parks feel to me like another strange pseudo-space where I begin to ask what is real.

Rafting the same stretch of river year after year might sound boring by comparison, but it returns me to myself. It gives my family a sense of place, of what T. S. Eliot called "significant soil." Here is where we cliff jump. This is our favorite rapid. Here is the bridge where the swallows make their nests out of mud. Look up, but with your mouth closed.

On the river, we were present and experienced beauty. I watched my daughter hurl herself off the highest cliff into the icy river. Later, she was steering the boat. "Okay, we're going into the grass; that happens sometimes," she said, laughing at how hard it was. Only when there is the possibility of failure is there the possibility of success.

The apps and A.I. assistants being foisted on us rob us of the possibility of looking stupid or getting it wrong. A.I. can summarize the book. It can write the paper. It can catch the stupid grammatical mistake. But maybe happiness is also found in the pleasure of puzzling it out, of coming to understand it, of feeling our power increase, of steering the damn boat.

Anna Keating writes and podcasts on Substack as "Inner Emigre," and she is the co-owner of Keating Woodworks.

From the Bronx to the Lecture Hall

What my Jesuit education taught me about voice and vocation

By Etienne C. Toussaint

The candles were everywhere. That is the first thing I remember—their light flickering on Wheeler Avenue, a few blocks from where I grew up in the South Bronx. I was 14, holding a dry-cleaning ticket for my mother's dress.

Amadou Diallo, a 23-year-old immigrant from Guinea, had been fired at 41 times by New York City police officers in the vestibule of his apartment building. He had reached for his wallet. They thought it was a gun.

People were saying his name, saying they could not believe he was gone, wondering whether this time would be different. Others answered their own questions: It always ends this way, the cops always get a pass, this is how the system works. And some said nothing at all—just stood staring, or walked past trying to look unbothered, as if violence had become weather in the neighborhood, ordinary as air.

I stood there in that light and felt something shift. I was about to graduate from elementary school as my class valedictorian. I was on my way somewhere. My teachers had told me so. My mother had told me so. I was doing every-

thing right. But that night I understood, without yet having the language, that success did not guarantee safety. The world I was entering had rules not written with me in mind. There were walls I had not built but would still have to face.

I did not yet know that those walls would become the architecture of my vocation. Diallo's death did more than teach me that policing can be brutal. It taught me that the world was more dangerous for people who looked like me. And somewhere on Wheeler Avenue, without choosing it, I stopped being a child.

My grandmother, whenever she asked about school, had a way of leaning forward, veins rising in her neck and forehead, eager to hear my grades even though she could barely read. She knew an A meant I was going somewhere further than she could go. But when news like this came, she would simply say “bondye” in Creole, speak a silent prayer, then turn to me: “Etienne, don't go by there. You have to be careful, you know. Stay home. Do your homework.” She said it as if the words could hold the world in



Courtesy of Regis High School

place a little longer. Yet even as she spoke, I could see in her face a silent knowing—that homework and staying home were not enough.

Later that night, after I gave my mother her dress—the one she would wear to my graduation—I crumpled the dry-cleaning ticket and let it fall into the trash. But even after it had left my grasp, I still felt the weight of Wheeler Avenue in my hands. And a few months later, even after I had walked through the doors of Regis High School in Manhattan, I still did not understand the tradition I was entering.

It was a tradition, I would soon learn, that would not shield me from the world. Instead, it would ask me to live faithfully in it. What the Jesuits and my teachers gave me in those four years did not determine where I would go, but it kept pressing one question: *What is your education for?*

What Belonging Costs

Walking into my new school on Manhattan's Upper East Side, I felt the distance between where I had come from and where I had arrived. I was a Black kid from the South Bronx, the son of immigrants from the island of Dominica in the West Indies who had crossed their own walls to get here. When I stepped off the subway and entered a school where many had grown up in a different New York than mine, I felt myself on the outside of something. Still, I learned quickly how to behave as if I were not.

Belonging is not the same as being admitted. It's not that anyone was unkind, but you can be let into a home and still feel like a guest. The wall of belonging is quiet. It shows up in silences, in references you do not catch, in the way a room quietly shows who was meant to stay and who is only passing through.

In my freshman year, I joined the speech and debate team, where my coach handed me a closing argument from the trial of Henry Sweet. In 1925, Dr. Ossian Sweet, a Black physician, moved with his family into a white neighborhood in Detroit. A mob gathered. Shots were fired. A white man was killed, and several people living in the home were charged. In a subsequent trial, Sweet's brother Henry was prosecuted for murder. Clarence Darrow stood before an all-white jury and argued that Henry Sweet's first and last defense was the protection of his home and life, and that the case rested on racial prejudice and nothing else.

I practiced that speech until I stopped reciting and began to inhabit it. I understood that Darrow was insisting on something fundamental: A Black man's right to stand, to defend his home, to belong, was a claim worth fighting for. I did not have the language for it then, but in a way, I too was Henry Sweet—a Black teenager in a space that did not always feel built for me, speaking words that insisted I had

a right to be there.

Speech and debate gave me a language to resolve that tension. It taught me that words could do more than persuade. They could expose, unsettle and insist. And in learning to speak, I began to understand that voice is not merely expression but the refusal to disappear. I also learned how easily a voice can feign belonging while the body does not feel it.

That was the first lesson I learned in high school. The wall of belonging is real, but you do not scale it by denying it. You scale it by finding your voice.

And yet, there was a cost. Every room carried evaluation, a standard I could feel even when I could not name it. Somewhere in all that striving, I lost the possibility of rest—the freedom to exist in the halls of academe without being treated like an experiment, without wondering whether my laughter was genuine enough, whether I had truly earned my seat at the Black kids' table in the lunchroom, whether the room was measuring me even when it pretended not to be.

There is a passage in the Gospel of Matthew: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” That understanding is still unfolding.

The Plank

Every structure begins with a single plank—the first piece laid down before you discover what the bridge will become. That is how I think about what came after high school.

After high school, I went to M.I.T. to study engineering, not because I loved physics, but because I could not shake a question: Why are some lives so precarious, and what can be built to protect them?

I believed infrastructure might be the answer. It was easier to believe in systems than in people, easier to imagine structure than to encounter suffering without distance. That belief took me to graduate school at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore, followed by South Africa, where I advised Engineers Without Borders students working on irrigation systems for subsistence farmers.

When I returned to Baltimore—to the same streets I once believed education might carry me beyond—that illusion fell away. The proximity to poverty and injustice demanded not analysis from afar, but presence. It required me to ask not what I could build, but who I was willing to stand beside, and what it would cost me to do so honestly. I understood that what I had carried since Wheeler Avenue was not just grief. It was a calling: What is your education for?

I would not have called it prayer then, but the question returned to me—across cities, across seasons—until I realized it was not just shaping me, but slowly healing something within me. It led me to law school, where I told myself that law and policy could redesign the world. I did

not yet understand, however, how deeply law has been used throughout American history to constrain the very communities I hoped to serve.

The Current

I enrolled at Harvard Law School intending to become a public interest lawyer. Instead, by graduation, I had joined a corporate law firm in Washington, D.C. The current inside elite institutions is strong, and I told myself I had been carried to unexpected shores, like so many others. But the truth is that I learned how to stop resisting the current. Resistance would have required me to give up the version of myself that already looked successful.

Six months before my start date, Trayvon Martin was killed in Sanford, Fla. He was 17, walking home from a convenience store with Skittles and iced tea. The protests that followed his killer's acquittal would become the foundation of the Black Lives Matter movement. I watched their bold placards from a law firm conference room and felt a distance open inside me—not only between the world and me, but between what I said I believed and what I was now able to observe without disturbing my comfort.

It was not just physical distance. It was the dissonance between the privileged world I inhabited and the fragile one crumbling outside those walls, and how easily I was

beginning to live inside that separation.

That was the part that frightened me most. Not that I had made a compromise, but that I could learn to live comfortably inside it—that I could build a life that looked successful from the outside while quietly abandoning the question that had once felt unavoidable: *What is your education for?*

Sitting there, I realized I had answered that question with a lie. I told myself I would give back later and, in the meantime, accept what was offered. After two years, I left. I took a job in fair housing advocacy and, after more circling, eventually found my way into a law school classroom.

What It Is For

Today, I am a law professor. I teach and write about the intersection of law, race, culture and imagination. I sit across from students who remind me of that boy on Wheeler Avenue. I tell them what I wish someone had told me: that the question they are carrying—what is this for?—is not a distraction but the very point of their education. It is, in fact, the most important thing a Jesuit education can give: the formation to ask that question and the courage to live by its honest reply.

I no longer hear that question as something I am meant to answer once and for all. I hear it as something



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At my new school, I felt the distance between where I had come from and where I had arrived.

that changes shape as you move through it—first survival, then ambition, then compromise and now responsibility. It is not a question I solve. It is a question I try not to betray.

When I look back at the arc of my life, a single thread runs through it all. I went to M.I.T. to build physical bridges. What I have built instead are bridges between communities and the systems that govern them, between the law as it is and the law as it might be.

I think sometimes about Amadou Diallo's mother. She was, like my own grandmother, an immigrant—someone who crossed her own walls to get here. I think about what she would make of the life I have built in the years since her son was killed while holding a wallet in front of his home. I do not think she would measure it by the institutions I have attended. I think she would ask what my grandmother would ask: Are you using what you were given? Are you doing it for others? Is your faith larger than your fear?

I hope the answer is yes. I am trying to make it so—for her son, for Trayvon Martin, for Henry Sweet, for all the people who have sat in a room that was not built for them and wondered whether they had the right to stay. A Jesuit education is a gift, but it is not meant to be kept. It insists that the purpose of life is not wealth or status, but the full development of every person, in service to a world that needs it.

Building Bridges Across Walls

That boy on Wheeler Avenue did not know what was being planted in him that night. The grief he felt, the anger he could not name, the question he had no words for yet—all of it was the beginning of a vocation. The beginning of a calling.

Twenty-five years later, I am still angry. I am angry that too few young Black boys will have what I had at Regis. I am angry that they are more likely to be stopped by police than to sit in a classroom like the one I now teach in. I am angry that the work of building a more just world, however imperfect, is being dismantled by those who treat that obligation as negotiable. I will not give up, but I will not

pretend, either.

She is still alive somewhere—Amadou Diallo's mother—still carrying what cannot be carried neatly. I am sitting here turning words into prose, attempting to twist law into a tool that might change the future for people like her son, for her grandchildren, for her.

Faithfulness is not a feeling. It does not arrive fully formed, nor does it settle the questions that produce it. It is a practice, chosen again and again without certainty. It asks you to remain present when the outcome is unclear, to trust that meaning can live in the refusal to turn away.

The walls are not the end of the story. They are the beginning, where the work begins, where, if you listen closely, you can hear what you are being asked to build. I do not know if we will finish building the bridges we need. But I know what I have been called to do with the time I have left.

That is not peace, exactly. It is something harder. It is faithfulness.

And for now, that is enough.

Etienne C. Toussaint is an associate professor of law at the University of South Carolina, whose research focuses on the normative foundations of private law. This essay is adapted from a speech delivered in March on career day at Regis High School in Manhattan.

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Andre Dubus's Theology of Ordinary People

By Patrick Samway

Editors' note: This essay is an excerpt from Andre Dubus: A Literary Life, by Patrick Samway, S.J., which was published by University Press of Mississippi in August 2026.

Andre Dubus, a native of Louisiana who taught literature for 18 years at Bradford College in Haverhill, Mass., has long been recognized by his peers as a master of the short story and novella.

All his works have been published by David R. Godine in an impressive three-volume collection. Among Dubus's honors are two Guggenheim grants, a PEN/Malamud Award, a Rea Award for the Short Story and a MacArthur Foundation "genius grant." In addition, "In the Bedroom," a film based on Dubus's story "Killings" and starring Sissy Spacek, Nick Stahl, Marisa Tomei and Tom Wilkinson, not only premiered at the Sundance Film Festival but went on to earn five Academy Award nominations, including Best Adapted Screenplay for writers Todd Field and Robert Festinger.

Part of Dubus's brilliance is his willingness to tackle complex theological issues through the voices of ordinary people, as he wonderfully demonstrates in "A Father's Story," first published in the *Black Warrior Review* in 1983 and collected in *The Times Are Never So Bad* the same year.

A lifelong Catholic, Dubus constantly wrote about the truths of the human heart that most make credible sense, due in large measure to the ordinary characters he created and the convincing—albeit often bizarre—situations they find themselves in. As he once told me, he often withdrew as best he could from the daily preoccupations of his life

and entered the unyielding, mundane experiences of the characters he was in the act of creating. He believed that art is inherently intimate.

For Dubus, writing became a question of deciphering what was happening in the lives of his characters and translating that for others to see and understand. At the same time, he tried to remain outwardly estranged from himself in order to gradually broach the deepest recesses of his own psyche. While he might sense the direction a particular story was taking, inspired perhaps by a conversation overheard in a restaurant involving a marital



Marion Ettlinger/Getty Images

dilemma with multiple dimensions, he usually had no precise roadmap to offer his characters. Word by word, phrase by phrase, page by page, he followed the leads given to him.

As a former Marine, all Dubus needed was the discipline to report for duty every day and to achieve the depth of concentration that would allow a character to become the flesh of Andre Dubus, who no longer remembered he had a name. Through the power of his imagination, Dubus had the uncanny ability to synthesize and reconcile disparate elements in his characters and stories—which sometimes have no resolution. In short, he had to open up his heart and put aside all his personal preoccupations, prejudices and preconceptions. His imagination touched the depths of our humanity, probed the here and now, the ordinary and extraordinary, to depict situations in which human beings, created in the image of God, have the freedom to choose among the good, the lesser good and even, alas, evil.

Father and Daughter

In “A Father’s Story,” one of Dubus’s best, Luke Ripley is a divorced stable owner and father in his mid-50s. Jennifer, his 20-year-old daughter, accidentally runs down a stranger, Patrick Mitchell, while returning to her father’s house after having a night out with two friends. After the daughter informs him of the accident, Luke drives to the scene of the crime and finds Mitchell’s body; he is unable, however, to determine whether Mitchell is alive or dead. In order to protect Jennifer from possible arrest, Luke subsequently drives her car to the local Catholic church and crashes it into a tree near the rectory, thereby destroying any potentially damaging evidence.

Though the ruddy-faced, 64-year-old parish priest, Father Paul LeBoeuf, has regularly heard Luke’s confession over the years, he never learns the motive behind Luke’s destruction of his daughter’s car, either in the privacy of the confessional or during one of their Wednesday evening dinners. Father Paul continues to go to Luke’s house for dinner and to hear his confession (including concerning two sexual liaisons). Nor does Luke stop being a communicant at daily Mass, a ritual that has been important to him since childhood. Luke has a friend in Father Paul who clearly knows and respects the boundaries of their relationship.

Luke’s instinct is to offer his daughter an opportunity to lead a presumably normal life after he has covered up her involvement in the tragic accident, one in which he himself could be accused of being a co-conspirator for not informing the proper authorities at a time when Mitchell might still have been alive. “It is a world of secrets,” Luke reflects

to himself, “and now I have one from my best, in truth my only, friend”—that is, God:

When I received the Eucharist while Jennifer’s car sat twice-damaged, so redeemed, in the rain, I felt neither loneliness nor shame, but as though He were watching me, even from my tongue, intestines, blood, as I have watched my sons at times in their young lives when I was able to judge but without anger, and so keep silent while they, in the agony of their youth, decided how they must act; or found reasons, after their actions, for what they had done. Their reasons were never as good or as bad as their actions, but they needed to find them, to believe they were living by them, instead of the awful solitude of the heart.

Luke’s love for Jennifer reaches a level that provides a spiritual trap for Dubus’s readers about how and in what ways God loves human beings. By the end of the story, the reader can only guess how Father Paul might have reacted had he known what Luke had done to protect his daughter. Luke changes tremendously (the emphasis of the story), but not so Father LeBoeuf, whom we presume carries on with his life as a faithful parish priest.

Dubus told interviewer Kay Bonetti in 1984 that he was “interested in the question of hit-and-run. I know what the civil laws say, but what is the moral responsibility? If, in fact, the person is dead, there is not much you can do except turn yourself in. That was the premise. That was not an answer. That was a question. I start most stories with a question, with an ‘if.’ And then I go after that ‘if.’” Dubus initially wrote the first scene as the actual accident but soon realized it was a “stupid” thing to do.

Dubus first considered having the driver of the car in the story be a young man, but then he decided it should be a daughter because the father would treat her differently: “But I didn’t know how to make that part of his conflict.” He wanted to write about a man of faith, and then one day decided to make the man of faith the father of a guilty child. “And that excited me.”

The Father and the Son

After reading William James’s *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (important in Dubus’s story because of the narrator’s short discourse with God the Father) and teaching Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling* at Bradford College, Dubus took to heart unsettling words in St. Paul’s Letter to the Philippians: “Therefore, my dear friends, as you have



His imagination touched the depths of our humanity, probed ordinary and extraordinary.

always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation *with fear and trembling*, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose” [emphasis mine].

Once the action in the story started, Dubus just hung on for dear life as his characters asserted their own voices. As Dubus reflected on the story, Luke told him “what was wrong, not to confront the family. He told me all sorts of things about the pope. I loved spending time with him.”

Overall, the story gestated for four years, but the actual writing took only about six weeks. In the Bonetti interview, Dubus remembered that he had written that Luke thought about subordinating ritual to feeling, but he changed his mind:

The precise thing that deepens the story is the fact that there is a subtext...what is now going to happen to this girl. What type of human being is he sending her out in the world to be.... He was able to restore his bond with his daughter, but what remains at the end of the story is “At what price has he done that?”

The story’s resolution exists in Luke’s final, poignant, 29-line dialogue with God. Because of his act to save his daughter, Luke understandably does not feel at peace with God, the earth or anyone on it, including himself. When his daughter woke him to tell him what she had done on the night of the accident, he reacted not as one might expect of a law-abiding citizen, let alone of a faithful receiver of the Eucharist, but as a father of a girl responsible for the death of another human being. Thus, his subsequent prayer took on a new dimension:

And He says: I am a Father too.

Yes, I say, as You are a Son Whom this morning I will receive; unless You kill me on the way to church, then I trust You will receive me. And as a

Son You made Your plea.

Yes, He says, but I would not lift the cup.

Three things are worth noting. First, God, depicted here as both Father and Son (that is, as two of the three persons of the divine Trinity), seemingly has an independence of his own and is not some projection of Luke’s thoughts. Second, God and Luke speak to one another forthrightly, as equals in conversation but not, as Luke acknowledges, as equals in the order of creation or salvation, as signaled by the narrator’s use of uppercase letters to begin words referring to the deity. Third, each allows the other to speak and respond freely, without either usurping control of the conversation or lecturing the other.

Initially, God and Luke establish a common ground: Both are fathers. Sensing that God’s fatherhood might have a theological advantage, however, Luke addresses God—Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, someone whose presence he will receive in Eucharistic form that morning unless Jesus kills him on his way to church—in which case, he hopes that God would receive him right away into his kingdom.

While acknowledging his spiritual bond to his savior in the Eucharist, Luke, by using the word “kill,” suddenly and unexpectedly casts Jesus in the role of a potential murderer. Through faith, Luke believes that the death of an individual, including his own, is known to God and is part of God’s mysterious plan for all his creatures. Yet, he momentarily places Jesus in the position of someone who could kill another—exactly what Jennifer actually did.

At some point, God will summon Luke to come to him to be judged about how he lived his life on earth. No Christian would consider this summons a form of murder. God knows when his creatures will die and allows their deaths to take place, but he does not cause the demise of their human existence.

How would God the Father feel, one might ask, if he knew that his Son had purposely terminated the life of one of his creatures? Could and would the Father, hypostatically united with the Son, ever lessen, even by the smallest bit, his love for his Son? He certainly would not want the Son to be condemned to death for murdering someone else.

Even when Jesus was about to be tried and put to death, he asked that the Father bring to completion what the Father willed (Mk 14:35-37; Mt 26:39-40; Lk 22:41-44). He initially asked his Father to spare him from having to drink the cup of suffering and death, but he finally acquiesced, once assured by an angel that in doing so he was following the Father’s will. In “A Father’s Story,” Jesus says he “would not lift the cup,” meaning that if it was not possible for the cup to be taken away from him without his drinking from it,

he would willingly accept the consequences of death for the redemption of all humanity.

Neither does Luke want God to take away the bitter cup he must live with. Had one of Luke's three sons become involved in a similar incident, he would have called the police and told them to rush a team of medics to the scene. God further questions Luke on this point: "Why? Do you love them less?" "No," Luke answers, but because he "could bear the pain of watching and knowing my sons' pain."

Luke's final parry carries with it a barb deliberately meant to wound God: "But You never had a daughter and, if You had, You could not have borne her passion." If it is true that a father is more protective of daughters than of sons, then Luke not-so-subtly tells God that he cannot understand Luke's intense love for Jennifer.

What, God blindsided by a human father's love for his daughter? "So," a seemingly offended God retorts in this story, "you love her more than you love Me." To which Luke replies, "I love her more than I love truth." "Then you love in weakness," God says. Luke ends the conversation by saying in a condescending way, "As You love me...."

Luke does not believe he loves Jennifer out of weakness, but if he did, then his love, wherever it lies on the human-divine spectrum of love, not only mirrors but participates in God's love for him. From an a priori theological perspective, God's love cannot be anything less than infinite, something God would be bound to admit had the conversation continued.

This brilliant series of rejoinders at the story's end, each an assertion by a bold ego, transpires so quickly that the reader has difficulty absorbing either the interior logic or the implied theology. The seemingly familiar yet atonal nature of the story's conclusion has gone beyond the boundaries of a typical Dubus story. In God's implied silence, however, Luke has his answer in what literary critic Thomas Kennedy calls "a private peace with God" and thus the loving justification of his action to protect his daughter.

Though a devout Catholic, Dubus had no intention of writing uplifting fiction that might teach inspirational catechetical lessons. He left that for others to do, if they wished to do so.

The question could well be asked: Can one be at peace with the Triune God who seems alienated from his subject? The choices Luke made as father, husband and lover have, at times, been less than exemplary, yet he takes comfort in one of Father LeBoeuf's dicta: "Belief is believing in God; faith is believing that God believes in you." Platitudes, especially in this case spiritual ones, need not be the sole engine that drives one's life.

Dubus perceived that more is at stake in this story if

Luke is to continue to grow. Knowing that Luke will not give up his daily prayers or his participation in the Eucharistic banquet, we nevertheless sense that he will continue to wrestle with his conscience in that arena where the human encounters the divine, where even mystics have collapsed in tearful exhaustion. As God became incarnate in Jesus—whom the Gospel according to St. John declares to be the Messiah and the Son of God, as well as depicting him not only as the Word made flesh—so too can the human imagination probe the finite, the particular and even evil deeds as a way of probing the mysteries of the infinite God.

Thus, theologically speaking, Dubus embraces the world even during moments of great despair as a participation in God's mysterious plan for his people as they travel among specific, unsettling events in their lives toward the horizon of the eternal moment.

Patrick Samway, S.J., professor emeritus of English at Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia, is the author of *Andre Dubus: A Literary Life*. He is also a former literary editor of *America*.



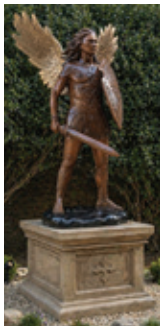


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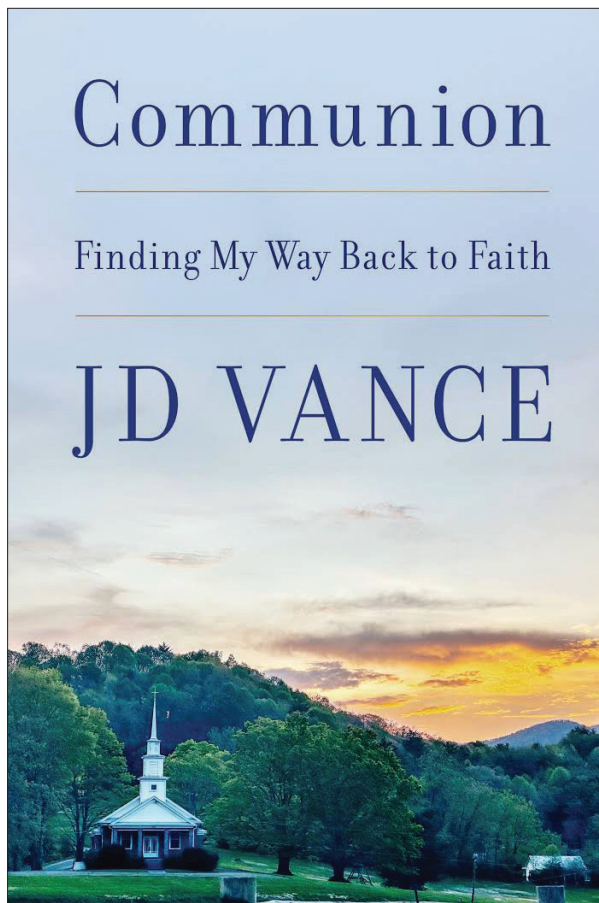





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A COMMUNION OF ONE



Harper / 304p \$35

In April 2025, JD Vance went to Rome. By his own account in *Communion: Finding My Way Back to Faith*, his new memoir, the visit disappointed him. Vance, the most senior Catholic in the United States government, met with officials of the Roman Curia and pressed them on the question then dividing his administration from his church: immigration. What he heard on immigration struck him as platitudinous and clichéd, moral counsel that never advanced past the injunction to treat migrants humanely. The next morning, he was received briefly by Pope Francis, who was too sick for much conversation. Francis died the following day.

It is a remarkable scene to place near the center of a conversion memoir, and Vance appears not to notice the import of what he has written. A dying pope spent some of his last hours receiving an emissary of the government then assembling the machinery of mass deportation, and the emissary's recorded emotion is irritation.

Vance offers the scene as evidence of Vatican evasion. His telling of this episode reads instead as the confession of a man who came to Rome to be agreed with, and who mis-

took the refusal for emptiness. That Pope Francis, as sick and weak as he was in the final hours of his life, took the time to meet with him seems completely lost on Vance. It is a scene that in many ways encapsulates *Communion*.

At the same time, Vance's book deserves a more serious hearing as a religious testimony than it has generally received. The secular press has treated the book as little more than a campaign document with incense—in large part because the book arrived five months before the midterms from a man widely expected to seek the presidency in 2028—and the reviews have been mostly brutal. But a book that offers a convert's testimony deserves the courtesy of being read as testimony first.

Read that way, the book divides less between memoir and politics than between two theologies: a theology of the soul—which Vance has genuinely absorbed—and a theology of the corporate body of the church, which he has not.

One oddity of this memoir is how little Vance uses the term *Catholic* in the story of his conversion. He instead deploys the more generic term *Christian*. It reads at times like a political device to attract evangelical Christian votes. Vance describes the erratic Baptist and Pentecostal church-going of his Ohio boyhood, in congregations where Republican politics had fused with the faith: sermons on abortion and homosexuality, alarms about Bill Clinton's morals, family values preached in the abstract while divorce and addiction wrecked the actual families in the pews.

The Terri Schiavo spectacle stands out for Vance and seemed to help move him away from those expressions of faith. Schiavo was a 26-year-old who in 1990 fell into a vegetative state after a heart attack. Her husband Michael wanted to “pull the plug,” claiming his wife would not want to live this way. Her parents fought him in court. A long, drawn-out court fight and much discussion by religious groups followed. Watching his church pour its moral energy into a single tragic case in Florida, he concluded that even if Schiavo's situation was indeed a tragedy, his pastors had little to say about the tragedies visible from his grandmother's porch.

A Marine deployment to Iraq cut the last threads. By the time he reached Yale Law School, he called himself an atheist, and a comfortable one.

The memoir suggests that Vance's childhood instability pushed him, as it does many who grew up poor, to succeed. Those sections where he discusses the guilt he felt for getting out and the responsibility he felt for his sister and mother are the most powerful—and most reminiscent of many notable Catholic memoirs. He writes, “at some point in my university career, my desire for stability morphed into a craving for conquest. I didn't just want a nice

car, a house, and a decent vacation. I wanted to win for the sake of winning's sake." This drive was all-consuming and, he writes, unfulfilling and endless. He writes about the emptiness he felt even as he succeeded beyond his wildest dreams. He was, in his own telling, searching for meaning.

What unsettled Vance's atheism was not an argument but a person: Peter Thiel, of all people. Thiel, then lecturing at Yale, struck Vance as the smartest man he had ever met and an open Christian; Thiel "defied the simple social template I had constructed," the template holding that intelligent people do not believe in God. The undoing completed itself in 2018 in a French cathedral, where Vance, standing with his wife Usha and their son Ewan, thinking about the sheer endurance of the institution around him, felt "a distinct sense of belonging and presence." Private instruction with Dominican priests followed, then baptism in 2019.

The strongest pages in the book concern what Catholicism gave him. The sociology of trauma, the literature of inescapable childhood experiences that made his first book a must-read for policy audiences, had also imprisoned him. They told him he was a statistical outcome, and he felt, in his own words, "debilitated" by the telling. Catholic teaching on sin and grace offered what the regression tables could not: an account in which the forces beyond the individual are real, and the individual remains a soul with agency.

That is a genuine theological insight, honestly arrived at. It is the same question that animated *Hillbilly Elegy*: How much of a life is fate? It is worth noting, as Slate first reported, that a portion of this material dates to 2020, adapted nearly verbatim from the conversion essay Vance published in *The Lamp* before he successfully ran for a U.S. Senate seat. The observation explains the quality of these chapters without impugning them. They were written by a man who was not yet running for anything. Had he never run, they might have earned a modest place on the long American shelf of conversion literature.

But conversion is not only a turning toward God. It is enrollment in a body or community of believers, and the body Vance describes joining is curiously depopulated. What drew him, on his own telling, was structure after chaos, order after instability, intellect over emotion, an institution old enough to have outlasted every fashion and human tragedy that ever was. His Catholic intellectual references run to St. Augustine, to C. S. Lewis (an Anglican, as it happens) and to the Girardian Christianity of Thiel's Silicon Valley. He announces early that he is not a sectarian person and has not written a sectarian book, and he means it generously; the Protestant churches of his youth get real credit as part of the foundation of his return.

What is nearly absent is the church's social tradition and its social teaching—and the centrality of the relationship between the believer and the community of believers. Yes, every believer has an individual relationship to God, but Catholic doctrine also stresses the responsibility believers have, both individually and as a community, to the world. This central aspect of Catholic social teaching is hard to find in Vance's memoir.

The absence is not incidental. It is the book's glaring omission. The man who wrote the most widely read account of deindustrialized America in a generation is writing here about joining the church of "Rerum Novarum," the church that confronted the factory system in 1891 and has spent 13 decades building a body of teaching on wages, work, migration and the poor. It is a church whose pontiff took the name Leo precisely to invoke that tradition, and who has framed the dignity of workers facing a new industrial revolution, this one algorithmic, as a defining concern of his pontificate. And yet that tradition cannot be found in *Communion*.

A Catholicism assembled from liturgy, hierarchy, antiquity and metaphysics, with the rest unconsidered, is a strange inheritance for the elegist of Middletown, Ohio. The people *Hillbilly Elegy* mourned are the exact people with whom the Catholic social teaching tradition concerns itself. This church has been talking about them since before the mills closed. Vance never recognizes it.

Then there is the ecclesiology. Vance mentions that "half the time these days, we attend Mass at home." Security explains some of this, no doubt; no one begrudges a vice president his protective detail. But the detail is emblematic. The sacrament that gives the book its title is not a private consolation. It is the act by which the church becomes one body, taken shoulder to shoulder with people you did not choose and would not have chosen.

A communion celebrated apart from the congregation, like a magisterium consulted only when it agrees, is no kind of belonging. It is a Catholicism with the burdens removed. Vance's telling suggests he has taken from the church its beauty, its authority, its pedigree and its account of his own wounded soul, but the pews and the people in them he has largely left behind.

The pattern sharpens whenever Catholic teaching touches or intrudes on his politics, and the record is consistent: In *Communion*, the politician outranks the church every time. In early 2025, Vance defended the administration's immigration crackdown by invoking the "*ordo amoris*," the ordered hierarchy of loves delineated by St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Augustine many centuries ago, which Vance reads as the justification for favoring family over



Vance writes about the emptiness he felt even as he succeeded beyond his wildest dreams.

neighbor, neighbor over stranger. Pope Francis answered within weeks, in a letter to the American bishops early in President Trump's second term that needed no name to identify its target.

The true order of love, Francis wrote, is learned by meditating on the parable of the good Samaritan, whose love leaps every boundary of kin and nation. A Catholic of six years had offered the church a theology lesson, and the pope corrected the homework.

This book shows no sign the correction landed. The Rome scene of April 2025 is its sequel: Vance criticizes what he sees as platitudes, clichés and a church unwilling to say anything about migrants beyond the injunction to treat them humanely—which is to say, unwilling to say what Vance's government needed said. When the American bishops issued their special pastoral message on immigration in November 2025, the response Vance records in *Communion* is a small masterpiece of condescension.

He calls the message “admirably measured. Or almost too measured,” praising his critics for the gentleness of their criticism while omitting, as OSV News observed, the message's explicit condemnation of indiscriminate mass deportation. During a talk at the University of Georgia in April, he publicly advised Pope Leo XIV to “be careful when he talks about matters of theology.” Again, we have here a new Catholic instructing the successor of Peter on theological prudence.

A much-noticed apology in the book runs on the same grammar. Vance walks back his remark describing the Democrats as the party of “childless cat ladies,” and the retraction deserves exact quotation: The comment, he writes, was “intentionally (and successfully) provocative rather than illuminating.” Mark the parenthesis. The apology carries its own boast inside it, a stone packed in the snowball. It is the book's method in miniature: the forms of piety, filled with the content of politics.

None of this convicts Vance of insincerity, and readers should resist that verdict, common in the coverage, that the conversion was a career move. The evidence in the early chapters is that the faith is real; people do not fake the relief

he describes at being told his childhood was not a sentence to which he was condemned. The problem is more American. Vance has converted to a Catholicism with an overtly individualistic inflection, as if it were a church whose teaching authority extends exactly to the boundary of his politics and stops there. Where the magisterium confirms him, it is ancient wisdom. Where it checks him, it is empty platitude.

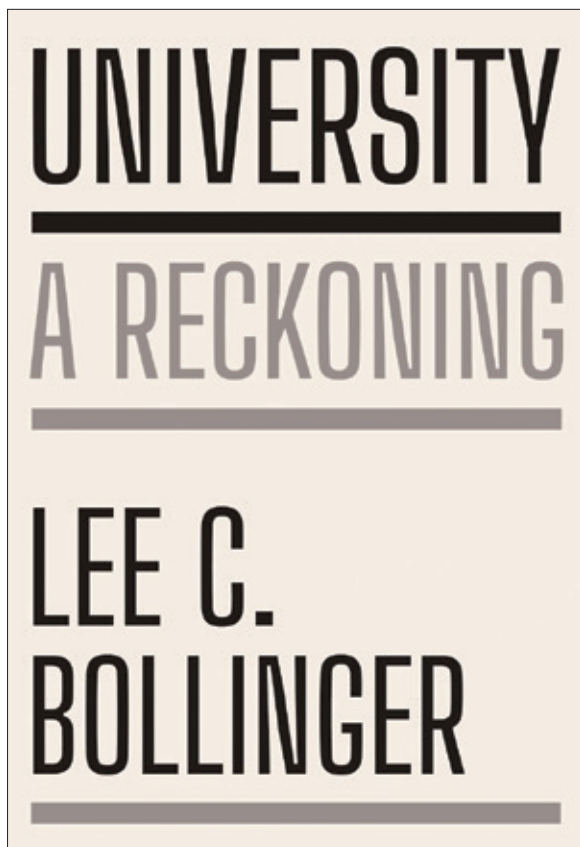
He did not invent the maneuver. Catholic politicians of the political left have performed the same amputation on abortion for half a century, and Vance would be within his rights to say so. But a precedent of this kind is an indictment, not a defense. And he has extended the amputation to the one region of teaching, the defense of the worker and the stranger, that his own biography should have made impossible to cut.

The title, in the end, is the review: *Communion* names the one thing the book cannot imagine. The Eucharist does not signify finally feeling at home. It binds the believer into a body he or she does not get to curate. The migrant in the detention cell is in that body. The bishops are in it. The pope is in it. The childless woman (with or without a cat) in the back pew is in it. To receive the sacrament is to be connected to all of them, which is why the church keeps insisting, against every national and tribal instinct, that its teaching on the stranger is not a platitude. It is the corporate body examining its own wounds.

At the same time, Vance found his way back to faith. Faith is not something final; it is evolutionary. So it is important for us to imagine Vance continuing his faith journey. The book is a credible record of that journey, and readers should receive it with more charity than the general press has managed. He has found something meaningful in the Catholic Church that was missing in his life. What he has not *yet* found, on this evidence, is the way into the communion his title invokes.

That journey is harder. It is meant to be harder, and it cannot be made alone. It cannot be made on camera, and it runs directly through the people his politics requires him to hold at the border. Whether he arrives at this fuller communion is worth a prayer. He is, after all, a man with a history of conversions.

Richard A. Greenwald is a professor of history and dean of the Charles Meditz College of Arts and Sciences at Fairfield University. His essays have appeared in *The Baffler*, *The Daily Beast*, *UnHerd*, *the New Atlantis* and *The Hedgehog Review*.



W. W. Norton / 176p \$27

In 2003, Lee Bollinger served as the respondent in two U.S. Supreme Court cases that challenged the legality of the University of Michigan's race-based affirmative action admissions practices: *Grutter v. Bollinger* and *Gratz v. Bollinger*. Though the court ruled that racial quotas and point systems were unconstitutional, they granted that schools could take race into account in college admissions decisions—because there was a compelling state interest in promoting diversity on campuses.

Twenty years later, that decision was overturned by a 6-to-3 majority in the cases *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* and *Students for Fair Admissions v. University of North Carolina*. Coincidentally, Lee Bollinger retired as the president of Columbia University (after a 21-year tenure) the very same week.

I was in my second year of undergraduate studies at Columbia when Bollinger retired. In the years following, I have seen my school community struggle with ideological divisions, heated debates, protests, national publicity and threats from the federal government. Whether or not the university always lived them out, Bollinger's tenure at Columbia emphasized the same values as his defense of affirmative action: a commitment to diversity (of both identity and thought), civil discourse and tolerance on college campuses. In his absence, these priorities seemed to be put on the back burner.

In his new book *University: A Reckoning*, Bollinger grapples with the reality that Columbia and universities across the country are facing—one characterized by challenges to their independence from what Bollinger labels “authoritarian” attacks.

Bollinger criticizes the Trump administration's public threat to withdraw science and biomedical funding from Columbia University over claims that Columbia had violated Title IV of the Civil Rights Act by failing to, as Bollinger recounts, “protect Jewish students against antisemitism in the period of the protests following the massacre in Israel by Hamas on October 7, 2023.” Though Columbia is an extremely personal example for Bollinger, it is not the only school he mentions: He notes that other institutions that have “favored programs and policies of racial and other diversity” are facing similar challenges, including the University of Pennsylvania and Harvard University.

Bollinger explains that the Trump administration's so-called remedies are far more drastic than any measures the government has ever taken in response to Title IV concerns. And there is no easy way out once such threats have been issued. He writes:

Because federal funds constitute such a significant proportion of every university's annual budget, universities have rightly claimed that they are facing an existential threat, one that could only be alleviated by essentially allowing the federal government to run their institutions and curtail academic freedom.

Bollinger argues that we should all be concerned about these actions, regardless of whether we have connections to the specific schools under fire. By “using the leverage of funding” to interfere with university governance, hiring and classroom practices, the Trump administration is challenging longstanding societal norms that hold the university as a key democratic institution, one in which debate and the open exchange of ideas, free from political intervention or retaliation, are not only permitted but essential.

In order to explain why the threat to universities is one we should all care about, Bollinger offers a detailed explanation of what the university is, how it operates and what makes it special—examining it alongside other avenues of public debate and expression, like the press. Key to his argument is the idea that our understanding of the university has developed in tandem with our understanding of the First Amendment and its influence on American life. He claims:

These two institutions—the constitutional principles of freedom of speech and press and the network of universities—are deeply interconnected,



Bollinger argues that the university should be heralded as the fifth branch of our democratic government.

interrelated, and mutually reinforcing.... They are essential elements of a democracy in which citizens are free to pursue the most important ends of their life, including understanding our existence and the natural world.

According to Bollinger, one can understand the role of the university only by understanding what the First Amendment does and how its influence looms in American society. At the same time, he argues that the university is not merely the result of the constitutional principle but also a key arena for its formation, evolution and protection. His explanation of this framework culminates in the third chapter, where he argues that the university should be heralded as the fifth branch of our democratic government (the press/media often being considered the fourth branch).

A discussion about the university as the fifth branch of government is the crux of *University: A Reckoning*, and Bollinger spares no effort in providing a very thorough and fundamental description of how these institutions function.

The first chapter, titled “The University,” offers a piece-by-piece breakdown of all the personnel groups of the typical university, a description he feels is needed because “most people in the United States, even many of us inside the university, do not fully understand how universities operate and, most important, why they have been successful.” Subsections focus on the role of the professor, the student, the administration and even the boards and alumni networks.

I found this chapter to be one of the most interesting parts of the book. Having experienced Columbia at a time when university leadership was frequently clashing with professors and students, I found it interesting to see the school’s former leader describe how these relationships are intended to fit together. It makes for a compelling reflection on how Bollinger might have handled unrest on Columbia’s campus differently from his successors.

Just as detailed is Bollinger’s explanation of the evolution of the First Amendment in the second chapter. Though not a comprehensive analysis of the constitutional principles at play, *University: A Reckoning* features select

Supreme Court cases that Bollinger—a First Amendment legal scholar—identifies as being the most pivotal in developing not only “the limits of official censorship but also a cultural norm” about diversity of ideas and freedom of expression. For those not familiar with First Amendment jurisprudence, this section could be both confusing and dense; it necessitates at least a basic understanding of how case law is developed.

Early in the book, Bollinger describes his book as a “deeply personal” project, explaining that he has “thought about everything I explore in these pages for more or less all of my life.” This raises a question that I pondered several times while reading this book: Beyond Bollinger himself (and perhaps university administrators), who is this book for?

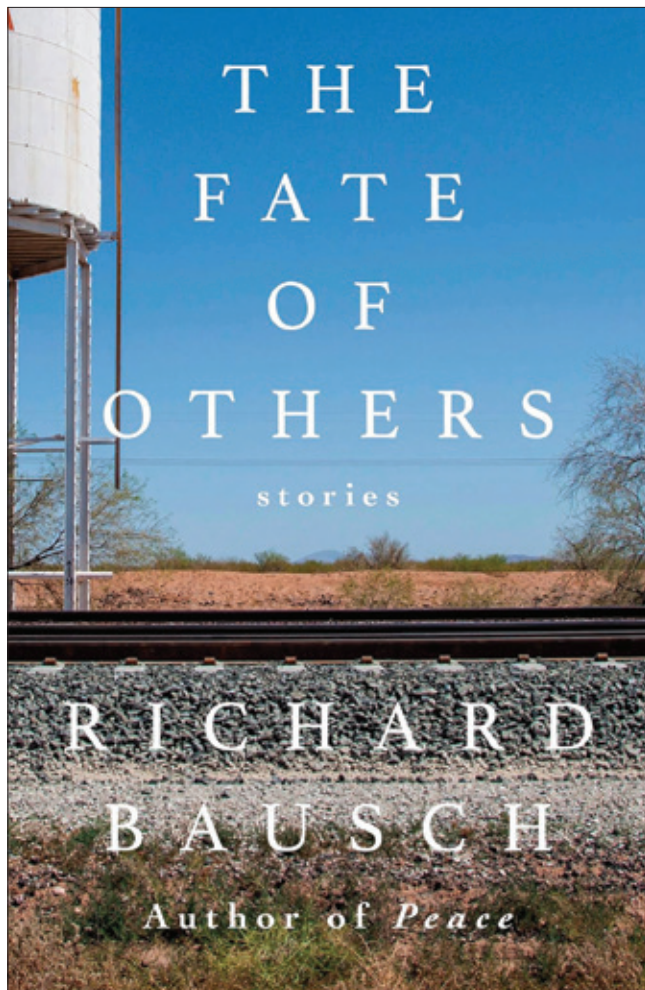
Bollinger’s argument depends on certain starting beliefs: that the First Amendment is worth protecting, first of all; and that the ideal university system that he presents has not yet become flawed or corrupted beyond saving. While the book contains a clearly structured and accessible argument, it is ideally suited for someone who already believes wholeheartedly in both the university and the First Amendment and is searching for a deeper understanding of how each works on its own or how they come together. Those who have more negative or ambivalent feelings about the university system may not be convinced by this project.

But for those who are approaching the book with an optimistic perspective on what higher education institutions can offer us, *University: A Reckoning* does present a compelling case for why the institutions are in danger and ought to be protected. And though some of Bollinger’s argument about how and why the university can be defended through legal measures and Supreme Court cases feels somewhat removed from the average reader’s own actions, he also pursues a parallel goal of fostering wider understanding and appreciation for the university’s commitment to the pursuit of truth and knowledge.

Bollinger also offers a warning: The Trump administration’s threats to universities are not isolated attacks. Rather, he explains, in all societies that have “fallen to, or embraced” a recent form of authoritarianism, “the state goes after the press first and then closes in on universities next” because of their shared capacity to challenge abuses of power. But though these arenas of expression may be at the front lines of the attack, the charge will not stop with them. If we care about our ability to participate in the democratic process, we should be paying attention.

Brigid McCabe is assistant editor for digital strategy at America and a former O’Hare fellow at America Media.

TOADS IN THE GARDEN



Knopf / 352p \$29

The prolific Richard Bausch has written 13 novels and 10 story collections. His latest collection, *The Fate of Others*, includes a novella, a short memoir and 10 stories that affirm Bausch's reputation as one of America's greatest storytellers.

Many of these stories originally appeared in Narrative magazine, Ploughshares, The Missouri Review, River Teeth and other literary magazines.

Bausch is a realist (though he dislikes the term). He writes stories of despair, grief and hope, and of memory, fear and surviving life's ordinary and extraordinary troubles. Or, as he said in one interview, paraphrasing Marianne Moore, he is "making up imaginary gardens with real toads in them." Artistic types like poets, music composers and fiction writers populate many of his stories, with Ernest Hemingway even making an appearance. Other stories involve ordinary characters: a police detective, a school superintendent, a community of altar boys and a rich, shady Italian businessman.

One of the best stories in this collection, "In That

Time," is a coming-of-age story originally published in Narrative and included in the 2020 edition of the Pushcart Prize's annual anthology. The title refers to Hemingway's first short story collection, *In Our Time*. Clark, the narrator, reminisces about the time he, at 12 years old in 1949, had breakfast with Hemingway in Cuba.

It is mid-June when Clark accompanies his stepmother and his father, an old Navy man he calls "the Captain," to Cuba. The Captain was supposed to start a charter fishing business with his friend Cookie, but the deal was a scam that cost him a "lot of money." Eventually, the Captain joins Clark and Hemingway for breakfast and they speculate about the apparent suicide of former Secretary of Defense James Forrestal. As he listens to the men talk about the suspicious death, Clark is certain he knows how Hemingway's life will end.

The novella *Broken House* is another fine bildungsroman. Retired history professor Vance Bourdin recalls his days as an altar boy in 1959 at St. Agnes of Rome Catholic Church and School in Point Royal, Va. Bausch masterfully recreates a frightening time when nearly every American feared communism, the atomic bomb and the end of the world. It is even worse if you're a teenager like Vance and his friend Phillip Chorros, torn between the physical and the spiritual world. For a time, Vance even considers "the idea of renouncing the life of the world... perhaps becoming a monk."

In those days, corporal punishment was commonplace, and Vance's nemesis, Father Burns, is a strict disciplinarian. One of Father Burns's rarely used punishments, "the Beltline," a form of flogging, influences Vance's decision whether to remain an altar boy. Much later, Vance, the historian, meets his old friend Chorros, who divulges horrible secrets about himself and the priests during his altar boy days.

In "Donnaiolo" (Italian for womanizer), 29-year-old Angela Halliford returns home from Italy to live with her parents after being divorced. Bausch depicts Angela's plight with relentless precision. She is morose, stays in her old room, never cleans up after herself and doesn't seem to care about anything. After several weeks, Angela's mother goes from worry to anger when Angela's ex-husband returns to the United States with the idea of getting back together and staying at the Halliford house. Angela's mother becomes so angry that she charges them rent in advance at hotel room rates. Angela pays her with the money her ex's father has given her, with promises to leave in a week. One week becomes many, but Angela forks out the cash at the start of each week.

As if that isn't enough, Bausch adds more family heartache when Angela's former father-in-law announces he

wants his son, that womanizer and “toad in the garden,” extradited to face statutory rape charges in Italy.

In the Bausch garden, the supernatural isn’t unheard of, but it is rare. In his extraordinary short story “The Widow’s Tale,” Bausch treads around the supernatural. Stoical Susan Bridge’s younger sister Moira, 37, tries to convince her older sister that Susan’s dead husband wants to talk to her. “There’s a red dial phone,” Moira says, “and he hands me the receiver looking sad but there’s interference in the line. And I think the interference is your refusal to take this seriously.” Moira’s 84-year-old husband Owen suggests holding a séance conducted by their new friend, a medium, another odd creature in the garden. Susan reluctantly agrees but then breaks up the séance. It is as if Bausch transports Susan back to the harsh natural world; soon afterward, she begins to accept “the full, actual force of her sorrow” at the death of her husband.

In “The Fate of Others,” the distinguished poet Thomas Fearing drives down from Phoenix to visit with his daughter and son-in-law Billy Jordan. Fearing is on a 32-city tour, reading from his latest poetry collection. Fearing is a complex character who could be portrayed as a stereotype by a lesser writer, instead of the multifaceted fellow that Bausch creates. Humor lightens a serious tale that only a writer of Bausch’s caliber could execute. During a night of Fearing’s drinking and carousing, Jordan discovers that the “highly honored and distinguished father was not a very nice man.” Fearing is indulgent, savage and outrageous. He loves to point out the failings and deficiencies of his contemporaries, colleagues and friends. And if that isn’t bad enough, he urinates in an outdoor fountain—twice.

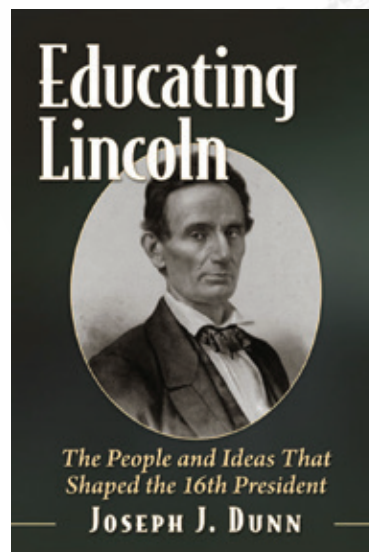
The previous two stories bear dedications, as does “A Memory, and Sorrow (an Interval),” a brief memoir dedicated to the author’s late twin brother “Bobbie” (Robert Bausch). Originally published in the nonfiction literary journal *River Teeth*, the memoir tells the story of two brothers who enlist in the Air Force to avoid being drafted into the infantry. Rumors travel among the airmen about a possible suicide and death during basic training. It’s a phenomenon that leads Bausch’s story to a beautiful arc of mourning the death of his brother.

Elijah Casado, the detective in “Forensics,” has been beaten down with the horrors of police work and, at 48, wants to go into a new line of work. He has a B.A. in English and he and his wife Mae figure it wouldn’t take much work to get a teaching certificate and teach at the local high school. When Mae’s old friend Evelyn Draper, who’s married to the new superintendent of schools, calls out of the blue after 14 years, Mae invites the Drapers over for dinner, figuring he might help Elijah get a teaching job. But Draper

wants to consult Casado on a police novel that he’s writing and he lets down Casado when he says doesn’t have much to do with hiring teachers.

This diverse story collection arrives about two years after Bausch’s novel, the wondrous tragicomedy *Playhouse*. After *The Stories of Richard Bausch* appeared in 2003, he published other short fiction collections that also deserve reading: *Wives & Lovers* (2004), *Something Is Out There* (2010) and *Living in the Weather of the World* (2017). Bausch is amassing a collection of fiction that proves him to be one of the great modern masters of the novel and the short story. His latest stories, whether they occur in a nursing home or during the Covid-19 pandemic, become, in his hands, exciting and resonant; they form imprints on the reader’s memory that are akin to the memory imprints his characters experience.

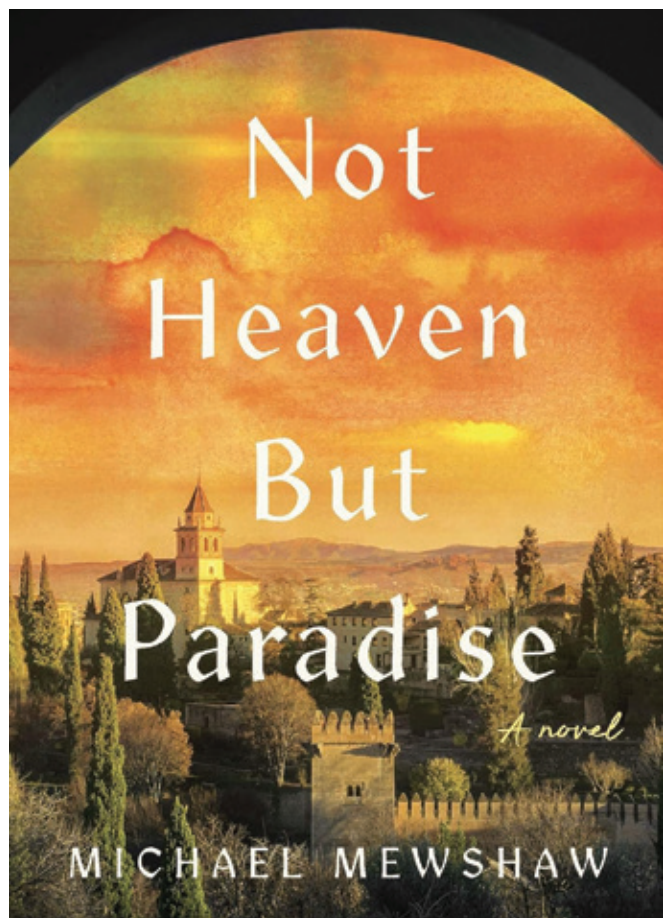
Joseph Peschel is a freelance writer and critic in South Dakota. His previous published work can be found at josephpeschel.com.



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In his most recent novel—at age 82 he says he believes he has one more in him—Michael Mewshaw has written a literary thriller with religious overtones in the tradition of his friend and mentor Graham Greene.

Though Mewshaw may have the “sliver of ice” in his heart that Greene famously said all writers have, in *Not Heaven but Paradise* he seems to have written a novel without the bitterness and cynicism that was part of Greene’s vision. Mewshaw’s vision has more compassion and natural grace; though Catholic, he is not as morbidly Catholic as Greene was. And his world has a modicum of realistic hope that Greene seems to have desired but never found.

This is not to say Greene’s is a less compelling vision, nor that Mewshaw is as great a writer as Greene, only that I came away from this novel feeling that I had both been through the hell of our contemporary world and also seen the only way out of the darkness.

However, darkness itself is not the problem. In fact, *Not Heaven but Paradise* reinforces the reality that figurative language does no favors to people of color. Witness what I would call, if I were writing a screenplay of this novel, the inciting incident of the story, the moment that sets the ac-

tion going. This is when the protagonist, Paul Stewart, who runs an art colony in an old family *carmen*—a *carmen* being a walled house with a garden in Granada, Spain, in an Arabic- and Moorish-influenced Albaicín neighborhood—meets and gives alms to a very dark-skinned North African from the Sahara (we are never told his country of origin) named Blessed.

Mewshaw writes:

All of Europe teemed with migrants like Blessed. They spread blankets on the sidewalks of Granada and sold mass-produced trinkets and cheap knock-offs of designer goods. Keeping an eye open for cops as they haggled over prices, they were ready in an instant to roll up their goods and flee with them piled on their heads.

By contrast, Blessed seemed relaxed, standing outside an Italian *gelateria* shaking a paper cup, and singing, “Change, change.” Rather than begging, he might have been cheerfully commenting on Granada. The city was changing. Everywhere you looked, Islam was invading.

That last line might make the progressive reader flinch. But Mewshaw is giving us Paul’s point of view without attaching any moral value to it.

After giving Blessed alms a few times, Paul asks him to help out at the *carmen* doing odd jobs and assisting Patsy, a crotchety Cape Verdean maid who has known Paul since he was a child and who recalls the horrors of the Spanish Civil War and Franco’s regime. Paul pays Blessed under the table in cash more than the usual amount to salve his conscience for playing it safe. He thus can cut ties with Blessed any time he wants.

We learn Blessed’s back story in depth in a chapter from his point of view, something disconcerting at first to this reader, but Mewshaw pulls it off. The risk is worth it, for he makes the reader live through the terror that many migrants endure to get to our world.

Blessed’s journey to Spain is not an easy one. Singled out as special in his village because of his intelligence and the caul that covered his infant head, Blessed clambers onto a dump truck that heads west. The party goes through numerous ordeals, including the women being raped while the men are restrained, hunger, thirst, infection and numerous incidents of bribery before they cross the Strait of Gibraltar in a rubber dinghy. It is a crossing only Blessed and a few others survive.

After Blessed is ensconced in a supply closet in his new home, an artist from New York City, Simone Pierce, arrives to stay at the art colony. Pierce paints the genitalia of men and women and is a champion of transgressive art. Her

works both fascinate and repulse Blessed, a devout Muslim, and he soon refuses to have anything to do with her. Paul is mystified as to Pierce's reasons for spending money to stay at his colony, but is happy to have a beautiful woman to show around the Albaicín.

"In principle," Mewshaw writes, "[Paul] drew the line at sleeping with residents. In practice, it happened. And each time it did, Paul, like any man who hated his father, promised not to become him."

Then comes plot point one, where the action of the story turns in a different direction. Enter William Spann, who works for the American embassy. The complete opposite of a privileged, politically correct limousine liberal, Spann is a rude and overweight smoker who doesn't care if he's working for Trump or Obama. Either way, he is going to take the hard line or worse if he needs to. He is ruthless, but not without a certain shambling élan and sardonic sense of humor.

Spann offers Paul a deal he thinks the latter can't refuse: If Paul will shelter a political refugee from Algeria, Tahar, who was tortured severely while in prison, the American Embassy will pay the art colony 10,000 euros a month. The catch? Paul must get rid of Blessed, about whom Spann can't find any information. Of course, if Paul doesn't agree, Spann can make things difficult for him, since the bookkeeping at the art colony leaves something to be desired.

When Paul does indeed kick Blessed out, again salving his conscience with cash, the reader will find it hard not to think a great injustice has been done. Paul, of course, knows it, but doesn't want to think about it. Now he has more money and a new lover. Unknown to him, however, life will not get easier. Blessed, living on the street but able to access the internet in cafes, looks up ways to make suicide vests for a quick ticket to heaven. And the Algerian professor turns out to be neither an easy guest for Paul nor a cooperating source for Spann.

To reveal any more plot points would spoil the great pleasure of reading the novel. All I can say is Simone and Tahar both have tragic secrets, and Blessed's religion is treated fairly; that is, Islam is shown to be a faith that includes love and compassion, not only jihad.

Mewshaw writes economically and with a light touch, bringing his characters to life with deft strokes. His novel becomes a microcosm of our fallen world, and the only way out is through: hard choices and love willing to sacrifice privilege.

At the novel's end, Paul and Blessed go to the Alhambra, the medieval fortress and palace originally Muslim then Christianized, and Paul begins to learn something we in the West could profit from. "Following in Blessed's footsteps, Paul let go, no longer resisting the chaos, entering it, borne along toward the Court of the Lions."

Franklin Freeman, a frequent contributor to *America*, lives in Maine.

LITURGY IN THE GLOW

By David Anson Lee

I try to pray with a screen between my hands.

The notification chime interrupts,
a digital bell
in this tiny cathedral of my kitchen.

God, I scroll.

Past cats in sunbeams,
memes about bread and fish,
arguments about whether love
is a verb or a chemical reaction.

The phone vibrates again.

A stranger asks for help
in pixels and hashtags.
I hesitate. I type Amen.
The battery fades to ten percent
like an evening candle guttering in wax.

I imagine the algorithms
as monks in long habits,
praying at impossible speed,
their chants garbled into clicks and swipes.
I long for the bell of a real chapel,
for incense that smells of patience
and velvet evening air.

Yet in the glow of the screen,

I see the world:
a mother holding her child,
a refugee gripping a paper document
like a small psalm,
a friend laughing through a text
as if heaven might exist
in the curvature of a smile emoji.

I close the app.

The phone sighs,
and in that exhale, I hear
the faint, infinite,
unexpected hymn of ordinary grace.

David Anson Lee is a poet and physician who was born on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation and currently lives in Texas. His poetry has appeared in *Right Hand Pointing*, *Unbroken Journal*, *The Scarred Tree* and other journals.

Catholicism, Hispanic Heritage and American Identity (cont.)

To understand this relationship, we begin with etymology and theology. The Word, Catholic, comes from the Greek *katholikos*, meaning *universal*. By definition, Catholicism cannot be a closed identity, an exclusive sect, or the private property of a single nation.

To be Catholic means to be in a relationship with a living God who reveals himself to us and invites us to love our neighbor in a special way. It implies belonging to a mystical body, the Church, whose very nature is to break down boundaries and embrace the totality of human experience. Historically, Catholicism has demonstrated a unique capacity for inculturation, the process by which the Gospel is incarnated in a culture not by destroying its legitimate values, but rather by elevating them. The Christian mystery of the Incarnation validates the importance of local cultures, so that a member of the Church does not renounce their earthly roots by embracing the faith, but finds in that faith the tools to love more deeply their own reality and that of their brothers and sisters.

If Catholicism means universal openness, Hispanic culture is among its richest and most passionate historical and cultural manifestations. We cannot understand Hispanic identity if it is divorced from its Catholic substratum, because, dating from the consolidation of the Iberian kingdoms, the culture, language, art, literature, and social structure of the Hispanic world have been forged in the heat of liturgy, theology, and mysticism. When this heritage crossed the ocean, its arrival in the Americas did not result in a mere replica of medieval Europe, but rather a deeply spiritual cultural blending. These major popular devotions, the architecture of the missions scattered across the continent, and the community structures all grew out of this shared cultural root. To be Hispanic is, therefore, to inherit a worldview where the sacred and the everyday walk hand in hand, and where concepts such as family, solidarity, honor, the dignity of the person, and, above all, the spirit of the community are intimately linked to a Christian anthropology, bringing to Catholicism an indispensable warmth and community mysticism.

Finally, we must redefine what it means to be an American, even more so today, when we celebrated this great nation's 250th anniversary. Too often, attempts have been made to reduce American identity to a rigid, homogeneous cultural mold, with strictly Anglo-Saxon, puritanical, and individualistic roots, assuming any other influence is alien or secondary. However, the true nature of the United States is its multicultural character, its history built on the basis of encounters, migrations, and fusions, where diversity is not a threat to the nation, but the engine that drives progress.

The United States was born and grew as the land of opportunity and welcome. Therefore, preserving ancestral traditions, practicing the family faith grounded in unity, and speaking one's native language are in no way at odds with being patriotic or with being an exemplary citizen of the United States. On the contrary, the dynamism of this country is nourished by that melting pot of cultures, and contributions to the development, history, and deep identity of the United States have historically come, very significantly, and long before its founding as a republic, from Hispanic and Catholic hands that shaped the nation's South and West. Being an American does not require a cultural vacuum or blind assimilation that erases the past, but a willingness to bring one's cultural richness to the good of ordinary society.

When we put these three vectors together in the context of the United States, we discover a dynamic interaction that produces an exceptionally robust and balanced citizenry. Catholicism elevates Hispanic culture and American culture by offering a universal moral compass and a dimension of transcendence that balances the pragmatic materialism or extreme individualism sometimes present in American culture.

In turn, Hispanic culture gives a more human and lived expression to Catholicism in the United States, contributing the warmth of its language, the central role of family, a strong community life, and a profound concern for society's most vulnerable members, revitalizing parishes and schools across the nation. Finally, the institutional and cultural

framework of the United States expands and challenges Catholicism and Hispanic culture, providing an environment of religious freedom, pluralism, resources, and an entrepreneurial push toward the future that allows faith and culture to bear fruit in a democratic, competitive, and missionary environment.

For all the above, we must firmly and intelligently attack the exclusionary notion that there are unbridgeable chasms between being Hispanic, being Catholic, and being a citizen of the United States. Those attempting to divide these elements or present the Hispanic-Catholic heritage as something "foreign" usually do so from biased perspectives that seek to weaken the social fabric, falsely pretending that to be a good American, you must assimilate to a single cultural standard and forget the faith of your parents.

There is no contradiction at all. All of us who proudly assume our Catholic faith, or honor Hispanic cultural heritage, and serve the United States with loyalty and commitment, do not do so by dividing our hearts, nor by living a fragmented identity. On the contrary, we are embodying the true spirit of the national motto, **E Pluribus Unum** (*Out of many, one*), demonstrating the possibility of being deeply Hispanic, fully Catholic, and proudly American, thus contributing to the richest, most harmonious, and strongest version of what this great nation is called to be in the world.



Mario J. Paredes

President of the Dr. Ramon Tallaj Foundation, Non-profit organization that provides scholarships in the Dominican Republic and the United States to low-income students pursuing healthcare careers.

The Large-Heartedness of Our God

This month the readings remind us of the large-heartedness of our God. They begin with a two-week reflection on Chapter 18 in Matthew, often referred to as the discourse on the life of the church. Aware of the shortcomings, vulnerabilities and frailties of communal existence, Jesus invites the disciples and us to exercise a compassionate approach toward anyone of the community who offends or commits wrongdoing. Building enduring relationships grounded in love presumes a deep commitment to ongoing reconciliation. Jesus makes clear to Peter, who seems to think forgiving an offender seven times might be enough, that forgiveness must be an option always and for all persons.

Further, Jesus addresses those of us who might be worried about our own need for forgiveness and the size of that debt before God. He tells a parable that makes God's forgiveness of us a certainty when we repent, and explains how this divine reconciliation becomes the motivation for our forgiveness of one another. For Isaiah, this kind of divine mercy witnesses to the extravagance and magnificence of our God. Moreover, Jesus reveals further the depths of the divine heart for humanity in the parable of the vineyard

owner who hires workers throughout the day while paying them all the same day's wage. This is the portrait of a God who provides humanity with what it needs rather than what most people think it deserves. Once again, Jesus discloses the large-heartedness of our God manifested in expenditures in excess—of mercy, kindness and compassion that secure well-being and justice for all.

The readings from Paul invite us to participate in this dynamism of the divine life that grounds itself in an abundant love for humanity. And in the final Gospel passage for September, Jesus instructs us to be humble before one another. He addresses the chief priest and elders, who appear threatened in their own authority by Jesus and his teaching. He tells them a story that invites them, and us, to an honest regard for the role of humility when it comes to our relationship with one another. This virtue frees us from the burden of pretense, unfounded claims of self-importance and the need to always be right. As Jesus himself showed us, humility liberates in ways that enable us to be there for one another and for the enduring friendships that make up community.

TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A), SEPT. 6, 2026

Reconciliation: a limitless overture

TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A), SEPT. 13, 2026

Forgiveness: a share in God's vitality

TWENTIETH-FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A), SEPT. 20, 2026

An invitation to extravagance

TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A), SEPT. 27, 2026

A school of humility



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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Catholic Higher Education Meets A.I.

We can't let new technology override moral wisdom By Robert A. Dowd



In “Magnifica Humanitas,” Pope Leo XIV invites us to see that in a world with artificial intelligence, we need not only technical expertise but also moral wisdom. The pope does not condemn A.I. Instead, he promotes an appreciation of A.I. as a tool that, like any tool, can be used for good or for ill. We can use this tool in ways that help us to think more creatively and critically, or less so; to solve problems, or make them worse; to unite us, or divide us; to enhance life, or destroy it.

Pope Leo urges us to ensure that moral wisdom guides humankind’s decision-making about A.I., and he calls us to accept our shared responsibility in this regard: “Fidelity to the truth requires integrating the possibilities offered by technology within a framework marked by wisdom, which is capable of safeguarding both the dignity of each person and the future of our common home” (No. 220).

In a world with A.I., the humanities, which have always been at the core of Catholic higher education, have never been more important. All academic disciplines, from finance to biology to chemical engineering, develop important capacities for analysis and understanding, and they play critical roles in advancing human knowledge. At the same time, it is essential to study the humanities—philosophy, theology, literature, history and the arts—for the rich wisdom they offer on the most fundamental questions: what it means to be human, why there is suffering in the world and how to pursue truth.

In the words of St. John Henry Newman, “It will not satisfy me...to

have two independent systems, intellectual and religious, going at once side by side, by a sort of division of labour, and only accidentally brought together.... I want the same roof to contain both the intellectual and moral discipline.” (These words are from the sermon “Intellect, the Instrument of Religious Training,” delivered at the University Church in Dublin in 1856.)

There are now financial and political pressures to cut funding for the humanities, but those of us who lead Catholic colleges and universities must redouble our efforts to encourage students, regardless of academic major, to grow in their understanding of what it means to be truly human. We must encourage them to cultivate curiosity, creativity, critical thinking, moral courage and compassion through their study of the humanities. These qualities cannot be replaced by artificial intelligence, and they are precisely the competencies our future leaders will need in order to navigate a world that grows ever more complex.

Whereas A.I. is very good at quickly processing information and offering recommendations, it lacks the discernment, intuition and interpersonal knowledge that are often crucial to making good decisions amid complexity. A.I. is not capable of weighing competing values and moral trade-offs—skills so often necessary when making difficult choices, whether about the future of a business or the policies that impact the social, economic and political well-being of a country. Perhaps most important, A.I. is not capable of recognizing injustice and exerting the moral courage

needed to address it.

Interdisciplinary research will become increasingly important as our use of A.I. grows, and Catholic higher education, whose very purpose is to integrate faith and reason, has long understood the necessity of engineers and scientists working with philosophers and economists. Through our research and scholarship, we must envision how A.I. can help us to address the most urgent problems facing our world. We must also remain vigilant and speak plainly about the negative consequences of A.I., especially those that diminish respect for human dignity and impact the most vulnerable.

Catholic colleges and universities have never been ivory towers, and the need for our engagement has never been more evident or more urgent. We must be in dialogue not only with our fellow scholars and researchers but also with industry, government and communities both near and far. We must do all that we can to shape the development of new technologies in accord with moral wisdom, as Pope Leo has called us to do. “Magnifica Humanitas” is a great gift to the church and the wider world, and it serves to remind those of us who serve at Catholic colleges and universities of our special responsibility. Let us take up the challenge and opportunity of our times with faith, courage and hope.

Robert A. Dowd, C.S.C., is the 18th president of the University of Notre Dame, in Indiana.




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Barone Campus Center | Dogwood Room

The 26th Annual Anne Drummey O'Callaghan Lecture on Women in the Church

"Labor has brought forth" (Micah 5:3): Natal Christology and the Practice of Democracy

Nichole Flores, PhD | University of Virginia



TUESDAY, OCTOBER 20 | 7:30 P.M. LECTURE

Regina A. Quick Center for the Arts | Kelley Theatre

Mission & Ministry at Fairfield University presents:

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Robert Cardinal McElroy | Archbishop of Washington



WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 11 | 7 P.M. LECTURE

Kelley Center Presentation Room

The 33rd Annual Christopher F. Mooney, S.J. Lecture in Theology, Religion and Society

The Triumph of Normal

Sohrab Ahmari, JD | Editor @UnHerd

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