

America

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THE JESUIT REVIEW OF FAITH AND CULTURE

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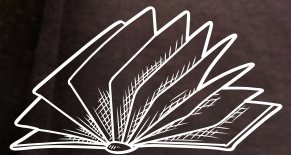
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A World Filled by Books

What's your favorite Bible verse? The answer for each of us probably varies over the course of our lives, and possibly also changes according to the circumstances.

I was once part of a group exercise where each person was asked to share a treasured line of Scripture. After many edifying and consoling moments (and some of "neither do I condemn you," natch), a clever fellow brought the house down with an unexpected fave: "Luke 7:34: The Son of Man has come eating and drinking; and you say, 'Behold, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'"

It wasn't me; I don't have that kind of comic timing. But a different verse was on my mind this summer for various reasons, and not just because we were working on this Fall Books issue. It is the last line from the Gospel of John:

But there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.

No one ever picks this banger of a closing line, perhaps because it is so obviously *a closing line*, and maybe also because it is so stylistically inellegant. But it offers a startling image nonetheless, like Jorge Luis Borges's microfiction story "On Exactitude in Science," about a map so gigantic it became the same size as the world it charted. John's coda is also a kind of implicit call to discipleship: *This story doesn't end here.*

Even in a postliterate age, we are immersed in a world of books to a far greater degree than the ancients. Scholars estimate that the Library of

Alexandria held around half a million scrolls at its peak, but last year in the United States alone, more than four million books were published. I know what you're thinking: *Self-published books don't count*. But even if that were true (it's not: *Leaves of Grass* was self-published; so was Andy Weir's *The Martian*), traditional publishers released over 640,000 books last year. As the literary editor of **America**, I get the seasonal lists from publishers large and small, and they do make one wonder if and when all those books will indeed fill the entire world.

Is anyone reading them? Rose Horowitz raised that question this summer in *The Atlantic* in "The End of Reading Is Here," and Jessica Hooten Wilson responds in the Last Take in these pages. Ms. Hooten Wilson notes that while Ms. Horowitz calls books an "essential source of knowledge, memory, wisdom, and morality" for everyone, the stakes are even higher for those literally called the People of the Book. When the evidence sometimes suggests that the church is vanishing (we have a book review about that, too), can we afford to stop reading when our sacred texts seem at times like the only thing we share?

In addition to Ms. Hooten Wilson's own bravura closing line—"As for me and my house, we will keep the books"—the contents of this issue might reveal where our sentiments lie: with the old-school writers and readers. Our book reviews in these pages have their own biblical resonances, including takes on a book of poems called *Erase Genesis* and a novel called *Brother Epistles*, and of course we also cover those things that are inevitable in life: popes and taxes. And our feature story from Stephanie Saldaña on following in the footsteps of St. Francis of Assisi begins at a familiar place

for a bookworm. Before Saldaña laces up the boots, she opens St. Francis' beautiful short book *Testament*.

I had my own chance to change the theme of this issue from books to travelogue this spring, when I flew to Norway to visit the home and haunts of Sigrid Undset. The prolific Norwegian author was the winner of the 1928 Nobel Prize in Literature and a favorite author of countless readers who possessed the *sitzfleisch*—a great German word that literally means "sitting meat"—to power through historical epics that can top 1,000 pages, including her justly famous medieval trilogy *Kristin Lavransdatter*. Our former editor in chief Drew Christiansen, S.J., put the trilogy "near the top of my all-time favorite list"; longtime **America** contributor Father Robert E. Lauder called it "the greatest Catholic novel ever written."

Undset lived for many years in Lillehammer in southeastern Norway, a town now full of people so impossibly fit and outdoorsy that I became convinced after a few days that the local Scripture was the R.E.I. catalog: *Behold, the Son of Man came hiking and kayaking, swaddled in dry-fit kit*. But once I entered Undset's study, I knew I had found a kindred spirit: This was a woman who *read*, and who never wasn't reading. Wall after wall of books, in Norwegian, Danish, English, Latin, German, French, Old Norse and Old Icelandic; she even had a complete set of the *Catholic Encyclopedia* in English, published from 1907 to 1912. One of its editors? **America's** first editor in chief, John J. Wynne, S.J.

Oh, and if you're wondering what books, *pace* Borges and St. John, would fill the entire world? Try lugging *Kristin Lavransdatter* all over Norway.

James T. Keane, senior editor



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A wooden cross and stone shrine dedicated to Our Lady of Fatima can be seen on Aug. 4, 2026, at the top of the foothills of Mount Cristo Rey in Sunland Park, N.M. The Trump administration's move to seize the pilgrimage site for border wall construction continues to be contested in court.

OSV News photo/Fernando Cenicerros

Cover: The Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi in Assisi, Italy

iStock/ValerioMei

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IN TIMES THAT TROUBLE

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Our readers on Archbishop Fulton Sheen

In our September issue, Rachel Lu examined the influence of Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, scheduled to be beatified on Sept. 24 in St. Louis, on Catholicism in the United States. Perhaps the unlikeliest star of 1950s television, Sheen demonstrated to both Catholics and non-Catholics that the church could “fit harmoniously into the American tradition” and that “freedom and faith were allies, not competitors.” But Ms. Lu concluded by wondering if Sheen’s optimistic message is getting lost in today’s culture wars and flirtations with illiberalism. Our readers shared memories of watching Sheen and also wondered what he would make of contemporary politics.

My parents (a culturally Jewish father and a Protestant mother) were regular viewers of Bishop Sheen. I was in elementary school and remember the show, but not many details. In 1967, when he was bishop of Rochester, N.Y., he came to the University of Rochester, where I was a student. I will never forget his piercing eyes; it felt like he was looking into my soul.
Lloyd William

As a small Protestant Canadian child I watched Bishop Sheen quite frequently. I was mesmerized by his manner and by what he said about Jesus. He was really my first contact with the Roman Catholic expression of the Christian faith and about 40 years later I was welcomed into the Catholic Church. I am so grateful!
Lynda Clayton

God bless Fulton Sheen, a brilliant orator and Thomistic thinker. He presented St. Thomas Aquinas’s thought to a popular audience extremely well. Thomism was everywhere in the era: outlines for sermons (not homilies), theology and philosophy in colleges and seminaries. But the bishops of the Vatican Council—in which he participated—urged us back to the sources: the Bible and the early thinkers of the church. He was not prepared to adapt to the old ways. I suspect that is why he withdrew late in his career.
Geoffrey Grubb

I watched Bishop Sheen in the ’50s. I also attended the University of Rochester (as an older student) in the late ’80s. The Newman Club was very vibrant and progressive back then. I think a lot of it had to do with the legacy of Bishop Sheen. He had a great heart and a great mind, an open one. I even remember a TV lecture positively presenting Teilhard de Chardin. If he were with us today, I can’t see him in any way condoning the U.S. support for genocide of the Palestinians and the endless military adventurism. Perhaps he would call us to a collective examination of conscience and re-evaluation of our actual history. The last 40 years have made me lose my faith in

America as an exceptional moral force and see it more as an old-fashioned imperial impulse now in decline.
Stanley Kopacz

To us Catholics, Sheen was a rock star who made being Catholic singular. No one lifted me up as much as Fulton during my teens. As I sit here with my aging realism, I can’t help but feel a glow about how this great person preached the Good News.
Bill Mazzella

Like several others here, I remember seeing the show when I was a child. But I have no memories of what he said. I was fascinated by his pacing around, swishing his long cape. Since TV was black-and-white then, the color of his cape didn’t show, and I thought he looked like Count Dracula.
Anne Chapman

Bishop Sheen spoke out against the totalitarian ideologies of communism and fascism. It would be interesting to read what Sheen, a Thomist, said about how ideology displaces the faith of those who subscribe to it—especially an ideology held by Catholic politicians holding the highest political offices that has little regard for human dignity and shows a willful ignorance of denying facts and reality itself.
Bill Dodd

Sheen was a great orator and evangelist. I observe him being used in the U.S. church today to support a traditionalist agenda that focuses on personal piety and a me-and-God spirituality. This spirituality is impoverished by largely ignoring the social doctrine of the church and the critical themes of engagement with the world given to us in the Second Vatican Council. I’ve always wondered about his absence from retrospective analysis of Vatican II. He appears to have been largely silent before, during and after the greatest ecclesial event of his century.

It is far too early to pursue his canonization. Give it 100 years.
Thomas Groot

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The Reason for Rubrics

The liturgy is at the center of Catholic culture wars for a reason: The stakes are high. As Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger wrote in 1997, “the Church stands and falls with the liturgy.... The true celebration of the sacred liturgy is the center of any renewal of the Church whatever.” It is therefore not unexpected that Catholics will have strong, and sometimes divergent, opinions about the *ars celebrandi*, especially in the wake of the Second Vatican Council’s reform of the liturgy.

But it need not, indeed should not, be this way. The Eucharist is the sacrament of unity of the faithful within the mystical body of Christ. That the Mass is often a site of contestation is a wound in the church’s communion and an obstacle to its mission of evangelization.

The strongest response in recent years to liturgical divisions came in 2021 with Pope Francis’ *motu proprio* “Traditiones Custodes,” which curtailed use of the pre-Vatican II missal and rolled back permissions Pope Benedict XVI had broadened for what is often called the traditional Latin Mass. But both Francis and Pope Leo XIV have also drawn attention to the need for greater visible unity and care in the celebration of the Roman rite according to the current missal.

In a series of catechetical instruction on Vatican II’s “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*), delivered at his weekly general audiences, Leo urged priests “to always uphold that respect for the texts and regulations of the liturgy which springs from an inner attitude of openness and trust in God, manifesting humility before His greatness and sincere fidelity to ecclesial communion.” He reiterated that call in a letter on June 29 to Cardinal Arthur

Roche, the head of the Vatican’s liturgy office, saying, “In order to promote the dignified celebration of the sacred mysteries, we must emphasize the need for fidelity to the approved texts and instructions.”

In this Leo echoes his predecessor. While Pope Francis was known for chastising “rigid priests,” he did not consider improvising the words of the Mass to be a remedy for rigidity. In “*Desiderio Desideravi*,” an apostolic letter in 2022 on liturgical formation, Francis wrote that “every aspect of the celebration [of the Mass] must be carefully tended to (space, time, gestures, words, objects, vestments, song, music...) and every rubric must be observed.”

It is true that the prevalence of liturgical abuse at the average post-Vatican II Mass has been cynically exaggerated by some, who use such aberrations to explain why a small but vocal minority of Catholics remain attached to the traditional Latin Mass. There is a veritable cottage industry dedicated to decrying “irreverent” liturgies, as if any departure from the rubrics, whether major or trivial, contributes to discrediting Vatican II’s liturgical reform itself. But even if Catholics do encounter a Mass distorted by disregard for the rubrics, finding a reverently celebrated Mass in the ordinary form is certainly easier and more practical than trying to ensure the pre-Vatican II Mass is available as a regular option for all Catholics everywhere.

While the worst cases are blessedly rare, many Catholics have experienced liturgies where the priest, often with good intentions, does not stick to the script. They may change the words of the eucharistic prayer in an attempt to honor pastoral needs; eliminate titles like Lord or Father as a

way to minimize gender exclusivity; or delegate to laypeople, in the name of inclusion, actions that are properly reserved for the priest. Or they may simply give an “opening address” as Mass begins, commenting on the readings, events of the day, the weather or last night’s football game in an attempt to make Mass “personal” and “relatable.”

Catholics should consider why both Popes Leo and Francis have called such deviations a problem. While neutralizing critics of the post-Vatican II Mass may be a welcome side effect of better liturgical discipline, the popes have a deeper reason to call for fidelity to the rubrics.

First, the celebration of the Eucharist is the fullest opportunity for Catholics to worship and encounter the living Christ. Pope Francis went so far as to say that deviating from the words and gestures provided by the church amounts to “robbing from the assembly what is owed to it; namely, the paschal mystery celebrated according to the ritual that the Church sets down.” When people in the pews know and receive what they expect, they are less likely to be distracted and better able to enter into the mystery that is at the heart of the Mass.

Second, however well-meaning the priest is in departing from the rubrics, the fact remains that it is a decision only he can make and that often draws attention to him. There is a word for that: *clericalism*. In departing from the universal norm that belongs to us all, such priests betray the humility that Pope Leo says is essential for our ecclesial communion. To prevent “the subjectivisms that are the fruit of individual tastes dominating,” Francis wrote in “*Desiderio Desideravi*,” priests must be open to and in harmony with the Holy Spirit acting in each

celebration.

Finally, there is Leo's chief concern: unity. "Liturgical services are not private functions," he writes, "but are celebrations of the Church, which is the 'sacrament of unity.'" Most Catholics have experienced the profound sense of awe and peace that comes from realizing that millions of people around the world are hearing and saying the same words, though in many different tongues, every Sunday. That unity also has a cosmic dimension: In his catechesis, Leo says that when the liturgy "is inhabited by the Holy Spirit, it introduces us into the life of Christ, it makes us His Body and, in all its dimensions, it represents a sign of the unity of the entire human race in Christ."

In cautioning against liturgical abuses "in certain sectors of the church" following the council, Pope Leo is not trying to correct something Vatican II got wrong but rather trying to lift up the council's authentic reform of the liturgy.

In his final catechesis in the series on "Sacrosanctum Concilium," Pope Leo quoted St. Paul VI's description of the liturgy as "the primary source of that divine exchange in which the life of God is communicated to us." It is that conviction, Leo said, that drove the council to recognize the need to make the liturgy "more accessible to all the faithful."

The Mass invites "full active participation of all God's holy people." The church expresses itself most fully when this happens. The rubrics of the Mass are not dead letters but the means by which the texts and rites "express more clearly the holy things which they signify." So let us "say the black, and do the red" and trust that when the priest and the holy people of God together pray the church's liturgy with fidelity to the church's norms, God pours out an "abundance of graces."

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Socialism is back in style. Is today's version compatible with Catholic social teaching?

Although it feels new to have a socialist mayor in America, it is not unprecedented. Milwaukee has had three different socialist mayors, and socialists won a smattering of city halls in the early 20th century, including in Midwestern cities like Minneapolis and Davenport, Iowa. But the election of Zohran Mamdani, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America, last year in New York City has raised the visibility of candidates who identify as socialist or endorse a socialist agenda.

Some, like the U.S. Senate nominees Abdul El-Sayed in Michigan and Angie Nixon in Florida, have notched Democratic primary victories, while Wisconsin's Francesca Hong fell a bit short in that state's gubernatorial primary. In general, socialism seems to be a growing force in American politics, with one poll finding that one-third of all Democrats now identify with the label.

But is socialism, or more precisely the democratic socialist label claimed by Mr. Mamdani, compatible with Catholicism? There are some lessons that Catholics can glean from the last time that socialism was influential in America. One comes from Servant of God Dorothy Day, who began her life as a radical socialist but through her conversion to Catholicism reimagined how she would serve the poor.

In the early part of the last century, *socialism* was not such a scary word. It represented a variety of opinions and goals united by a belief in vigorous government action on behalf of workers. After the 1940s, socialists began to drop out of the American scene, when the term had become associated with the totalitarian regimes in Soviet Russia and Communist China. But for a while the kindler, gentler version of socialism seemed to be an especially good fit for the American Midwest.

The economic inequality and unfair employment practices of the Gilded Age, covering roughly the last quarter of the 19th century, prompted the rise of worker and farmer movements including the American Federation of Labor (founded in Columbus, Ohio) and the National Grange. These worker movements often cooperated with Christian movements for social reform. Protestant preachers of the "social Gospel," along with reformers like Jane Addams, promoted care for the poor, the outcast and the immigrant in private and public life.

Among Catholics, the social reform movement drew inspiration from Pope Leo XIII's landmark encyclical on human labor and Catholic social teaching, "*Rerum Novarum*" (1891)—which the current pope, who took the name Leo XIV, has frequently echoed. The most famous member of the Catholic social reform movement may be Dorothy Day, who spent part of her childhood in Chicago. As a young woman, Day wrote for socialist papers like *The Liberator* and *The Call*. Then, after converting to Catholicism in 1927, she co-founded the still-influential Catholic Worker movement, but she moved away from the label of *socialist*.

This should not be surprising: The church had condemned the ideology in "*Rerum Novarum*," and Pope Pius XI's "*Quadragesimo Anno*," released in 1931, affirmed in no uncertain terms that "no one can be at the same time a good Catholic and a true socialist" (No. 120).

For Day, the move away from socialism was not simply a necessary act of obedience but a growth in her worldview and perception of things. "Our failure has been not to love enough," she wrote in *On Pilgrimage*. "This conviction brought me to a re-

jection of the radical movement after my early membership in the Socialist Party, the Industrial Workers of the World, and the Communist affiliates I worked with."

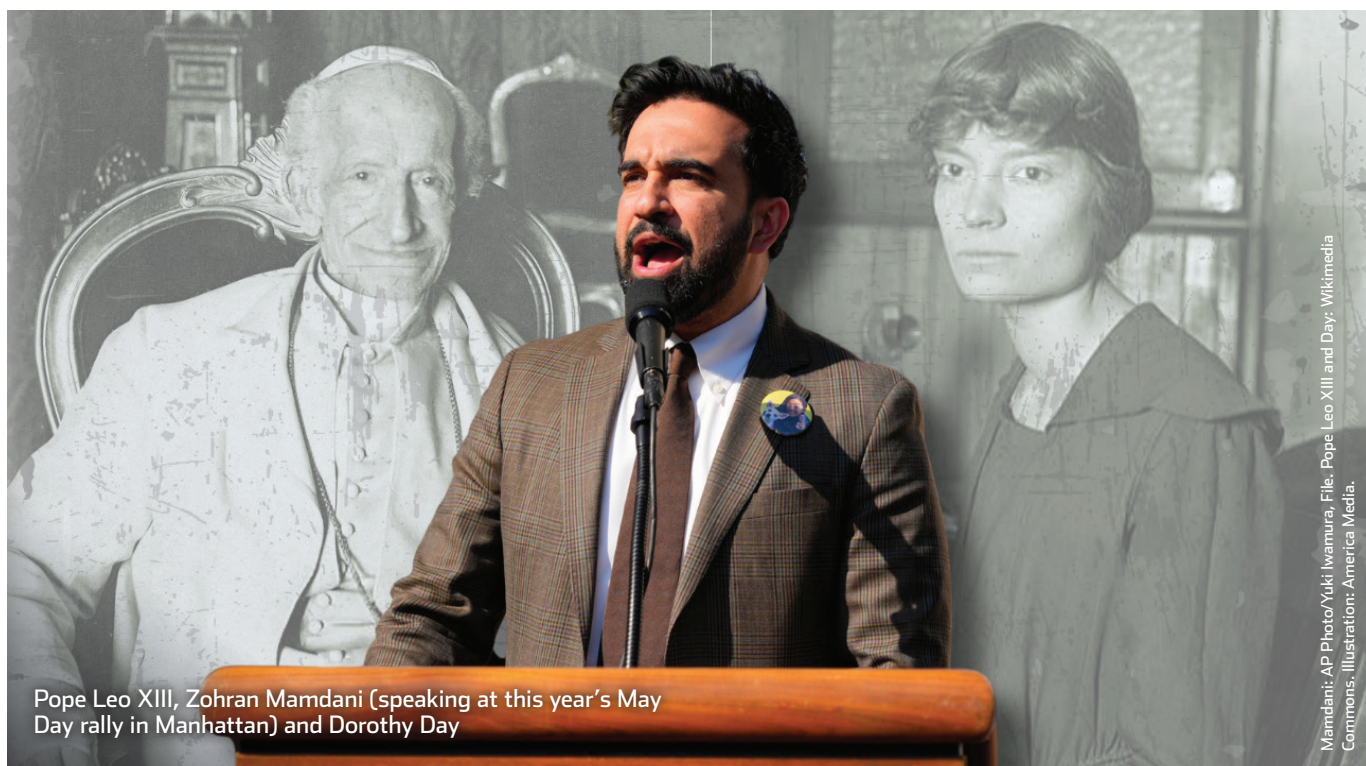
Staying Away From Hate

The problem for Day, and the Catholic Church, was that these movements made a place for hate—hatred of capitalists, hatred of bosses, etc. They focused on class conflict at the expense of the concrete love of the person in front of us. Thus, Pope Pius XI in "*Quadragesimo Anno*" worried about the "enmities and mutual hatred" that can accompany a "class struggle" (No. 114). Today, we see some strands of this in the expressions of support for the man who has pleaded guilty to stalking and murdering Brian Thompson, the chief executive of United-Healthcare.

At the same time, Pius XI wrote that "it cannot be denied that [socialism's] demands at times come very near those that Christian reformers of society justly insist upon." Namely, Christian reformers insist upon the rights of workers to good working conditions, fair pay and a decent standard of living. In pursuit of this, workers are called to join voluntary associations that will allow them to meet those in ownership on fair terms.

Socialism, as it was understood by Leo XIII and Pius XI, goes beyond these claims of social justice by proposing that the state expropriate private industry. (Its more radical form, communism, calls for the total abolition of private property, through violence if necessary.) While Pius XI affirms that a more moderate, non-violent form of socialism gets some things right, he still concluded that it is contrary to a Catholic worldview.

Pope John Paul II furthered this



Pope Leo XIII, Zohran Mamdani (speaking at this year's May Day rally in Manhattan) and Dorothy Day

Mamdani: AP Photo/Yuki Iwamura, File: Pope Leo XIII and Day: Wikimedia Commons, Illustration: America Media.

argument in his encyclical “Centesimus Annus,” writing that “State control of the means of production... would reduce every citizen to being a ‘cog’ in the State machine” (No. 15). Warning that a too-powerful state violates personal dignity and stifles creativity, he wrote, “Socialism considers the individual person simply as an element, a molecule within the social organism, so that the good of the individual is completely subordinated to the functioning of the socio-economic mechanism” (No. 13).

A powerful central state also violates the Catholic principle of subsidiarity, which holds that no higher level of organization should take over what can be done by lower and local levels, such that the state cannot and should not replace the family, civil society, or private projects and initiatives.

Because few have had a chance to govern, it is not yet clear how closely those who call themselves democratic socialists today fit the definition of socialism that so concerned Leo XIII, Pius XI and John Paul II. Figures like Mr. Mamdani have emphasized pol-

icies, such as state-subsidized child care, free public transit and a more progressive income tax, that do not clearly violate Catholic social teaching—though “tax the rich” policies that cross the line into wealth confiscation bring to mind Pius XI’s admonition in “Quadragesimo Anno” that “it is gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community” (No. 79).

In English, “Rerum Novarum” means “New Things.” We are now living in a time of new things and some old things (like Midwestern socialism) that seem new to us. Catholics desiring to be faithful to the social doctrine of their church are asked to examine these movements and candidates with a discerning eye, looking to understand what truly promotes the dignity and freedom of every human person, and what runs contrary to that dignity.

Called to defend the rights and worth of working people, Catholics are asked to do so in a manner that holds together the entire fabric of Christian

ethics, in fraternal affection and a desire for the good of all. This fraternal affection also means avoiding the temptation to scapegoat religious or ethnic minorities, as often happens in times of political anxiety.

The longstanding culture of concern for the common man is a credit to the Midwest. The idea of the farmer, the factory worker and the mechanic as noble and worthy people is one in keeping with a Christian culture. Catholics in the Midwest and elsewhere are called to work for what Pope Pius XI called “the worker’s human dignity.” This will be the work of each Catholic conscience, and of those consciences in community. As Catholics face new things, they have a treasury of wisdom from ages past upon which they can draw. The effort to adhere to this patrimony and to live it in practice is what made Dorothy Day not merely an activist but a saint.

Nathan Beacom writes from Des Moines, Iowa. His work has previously appeared in *Plough Quarterly*, *Comment Magazine* and elsewhere.



AP Photo/Ryan Murphy, File

Inside the U.S. bishops' plan for Hispanic ministry in an era of mass deportations

By J.D. Long García

Alba Ramiro, who coordinates the Young Adult Hispanic Migrant Ministry in the Diocese of Orange in Garden Grove, Calif., received what she called a “heart-wrenching” call in May. It was from a woman in the city of Orange who could not locate her husband. She had not heard from him in nearly a week.

“She was nursing a 1-month-old and has an 8-year-old daughter,” Ms. Ramiro told **America**. During the days that followed the call, Ms. Ramiro was able to locate the man in Covina, Calif., after calling the Mexican consulate on the woman’s behalf. But he was deported in less than a week.

Ms. Ramiro’s efforts, which stem from her work with the National Pastoral Migratoria Institute, are timely and needed. They are also part of a bigger plan. Immigrant accompaniment is one of the priorities the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops set for Hispanic ministry, which grew out of the multi-year V Encuentro consultative process, initiated by the bishops in 2017.

The priorities are “really the voice of the people that

was filtered through various processes, vetted multiple times through the parish, the diocese, the regional and then the national levels,” according to Bishop Oscar Cantú of the Diocese of San Jose, who is the chair of the U.S. bishops’ subcommittee on Hispanic affairs.

Migrant Accompaniment

Accompaniment is a priority because the immigration system is “exhausting, discouraging,” Bishop Cantú said. “We do the best we can and somehow believe the Holy Spirit is here.”

After President Donald Trump won the 2024 election promising to carry out a campaign of mass deportation in his second term, Ms. Ramiro’s team began offering “know your rights” sessions in 20 parishes over two months. These sessions taught people what to do if stopped by Immigration and Customs Enforcement or if they witnessed someone being detained. She estimated that they reached around 1,250 people.

Ms. Ramiro next organized free legal clinics to guide immigrant families in creating emergency guardianship plans. Those who attended received help filling out practical, albeit heartbreaking, paperwork that spells out who takes custody of their children if one or both parents are detained or deported. Immigration and family attorneys, along with a notary public, helped families with the forms, which also designated power of attorney over their property and assigned guardians to pick up their children from school.

“At the end of the day, the church is the most trusted place,” Ms. Ramiro said of the diocese’s responsibility to organize sessions. “People feel safe, and they feel that it’s legitimate information.”

The clinics relied on the support of young adult volunteers, creating leadership opportunities for these young parishioners. Ms. Ramiro also prepared a Día de los Muertos altar honoring those who died in immigration detention centers, as well as a Stations of the Cross walk for young adults reflecting on the plight of immigrants.

Next Gen Leaders

The deportation crisis creates “a huge opportunity” for young Hispanic people to step into leadership roles in the church, according to Annie Nieto Bailey, the president of the National Catholic Network de Pastoral Juvenil Hispana (known as LaRED) and parish family liaison for the Archdiocese of Seattle. She described young people as having a hunger to serve and to grow in their own formation.

“It’s not only that young people need to be taught, but young people can also teach us,” she said. It can be a challenge because, culturally, young Hispanics can be reluctant to come forward, Ms. Nieto Bailey said.

Sometimes older, experienced leaders are reluctant to give younger Catholics space to experiment, use modern music or offer workshops in Spanglish, a mix of Spanish and English. But, according to Ms. Nieto Bailey, “the young person is the best evangelizer of other young people.” They need to be given room to lead, from serving as a master of ceremonies to heading up praise and worship.

Being aware of generational and cultural differences can help the church reach young Latinos, Ms. Nieto Bailey said. Unfortunately, some well-intentioned programs miss the mark.

“I talked to my Hispanic leaders, and they said that [Theology on Tap] doesn’t work for us, because we have a lot of immigrants coming with a lot of trauma and also substance abuse,” Ms. Nieto Bailey said. “So putting them in a room where you’re giving people a bunch of beer, it’s

not going to be the best thing for their human, emotional, spiritual health.”

Finding the right cultural approach can encourage young Latinos to come forward, she said, “as people who can transform us and transform the church.” It starts with listening, Ms. Nieto Bailey said, but it includes being conscious of the different cultures present in a given diocese—from traditional Hispanic cities like Miami to emerging ones in Oklahoma. Hispanic ministry looks different in border states, she said, and one size does not fit all.

Intercultural competence can include something as simple as being present at multicultural Masses, according to Ignacio Rodriguez, the president of the National Catholic Association of Diocesan Directors for Hispanic Ministry and manager of Hispanic ministry in the Diocese of Phoenix. But it cannot stop there, he said, stressing that it includes recognizing the myriad cultures within the Latino community itself.

“How do we understand those who have recently immigrated to the United States and now make the United States their home with all the culture that they bring with them, as well as the others who’ve been here in the United States and maybe even can trace their lineage back four or five generations?” he asked, adding that in some parts of the country, like Arizona and New Mexico, being Hispanic has “just been part of the landscape.”

Generational differences often include differences in preferred language, Mr. Rodriguez said, noting that not every Hispanic speaks Spanish. Being sensitive to those differences is critical if the church is going to connect with families, he said, and church leaders have a model to follow in Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Guadalupe’s Message

“We need to be paying attention to what our mother is going to tell us in 2031,” Mr. Rodriguez said, referring to the 500th anniversary of the apparition. “I’m no visionary, and I’m no prophet, but I think we need to be attentive.”

It is said that in 1531, the Blessed Mother appeared to Juan Diego, an Indigenous farmer and laborer. She commissioned the future saint to ask the local bishop to build a church in her honor on Tepeyac, a hill in modern-day Mexico City. To convince the doubting bishop, Our Lady of Guadalupe sent roses, which were out of season, as well as her image imprinted on Juan Diego’s *tilma* (cloak). The image used Aztec symbols to communicate her divine message not only to the bishop but to the community.

The Blessed Mother’s appearance came at a time of great division between the Spanish conquistadors and the

ICE orchestrates national surge in arrests of undocumented immigrants

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement arrested nearly 50,000 people in July, the highest single monthly arrest total during the second Trump administration. The spike in immigration arrests shows that the administration has continued to advance its mass deportations agenda despite a shift in approach earlier this year from high-profile operations in large American cities, which sparked a public outcry, to arrests that have garnered less attention but have nonetheless been disruptive.

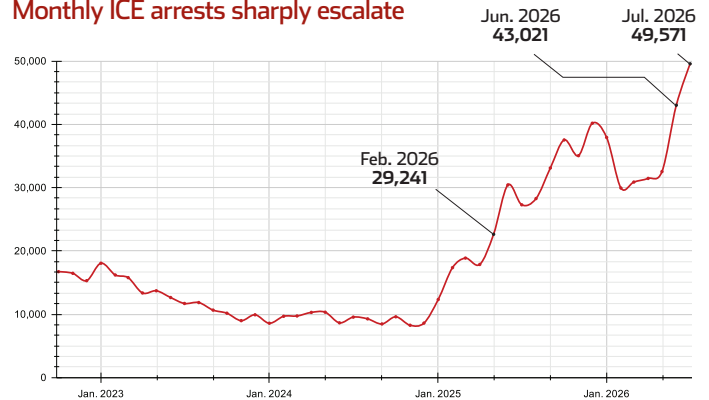
In the aftermath of two fatal shootings of protesters in Minnesota in January that sparked more demonstrations and an uproar from Democratic lawmakers, reported arrests began to fall in February. After remaining stagnant for months, the numbers surged in June and then again in July. The July arrest tally of 49,571 marks a 15 percent jump from 43,021 arrests a month earlier and a 70 percent increase from 29,241 in February.

The administration has often said its immigration enforcement operations target people who have committed

crimes in the United States, but the data shows that more than half of those arrested in July had not been convicted of any crimes and were not facing any criminal charges.

—The Associated Press

Monthly ICE arrests sharply escalate



Source: Government data provided by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement to the Deportation Data Project, based at the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of California, Los Angeles

native population, according to Myrna Phelps, the coordinator of Hispanic ministry in the Diocese of Orange. “And we can see the same now,” she said, “a lot of division.”

Ms. Phelps, herself an immigrant from Mexico, said immigrants bring many gifts to the United States. She believes Our Lady of Guadalupe can bring about reconciliation, as she did 500 years ago.

“She always comes and brings us together and never abandons us,” said Ms. Phelps. “She can bring about miracles. I know she brings all prayers to her son. The Lord always hears those who cry out to him. We cry out for unity, for understanding and for communion. And I know Our Lady is walking with us.”

A United States that is truly united, she said, will be a stronger nation by welcoming all cultures and the gifts that every human being brings to this country, “including their beautiful faith.”

“There’s a lot to plumb here for all of us,” Bishop Cantú said, explaining that devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe “is not just...for Hispanics.”

The image of Our Lady of Guadalupe honors and reflects the beliefs of the Indigenous community that received it. The four-petaled flower on the Blessed Mother’s stomach, he said, would have been a sign that the woman in the image was pregnant with a child who was “the center of the universe.” That message reached a suffering communi-

ty, including Juan Diego.

“He experienced oppression, and his brother and sister Indigenous were experiencing diminution of their dignity,” Bishop Cantú said. The Blessed Mother could have appeared to the bishop, which may have been more efficient. But she had something else in mind: lifting up Juan Diego.

“Mary didn’t begin with catechizing; she didn’t begin with castigating him as maybe the friars probably did,” he said. “She spoke to him with tenderness and raised him up not only physically up the hill but raising his dignity to where God had created him, and subsequently, all his fellow Indigenous. So, in a sense, it was about human dignity.”

That the message of Guadalupe came to the bishop through an Indigenous Catholic in itself communicated something, Bishop Cantú said. Yes, she recognized the authority of ecclesial leadership—the bishop needed to be included in the construction of the new church. But the bishop also needed to be converted.

“We are human, and we are flawed,” Bishop Cantú said. “We, too, need to be evangelized even by the lowly.”

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

Florida's attorney general and Catholic bishops clash over school vaccines

A showdown over vaccines between Catholic school officials in Florida and the state's attorney general has revived debate over the morality and efficacy of vaccinations—an at-times-bitter dispute that predates the Covid-19 pandemic but was supercharged by that crisis.

On July 31, James Uthmeier, the Republican attorney general of Florida, delivered a letter to the Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops demanding that the state's Catholic schools accept parental requests for religious exemptions to vaccine requirements. Mr. Uthmeier warned conference officials that failure to comply with Florida law regarding vaccine exemptions “could jeopardize eligibility for state educational scholarship programs.”

Rick Garnett, a professor of law at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, told OSV News that Mr. Uthmeier's letter “reflects a misunderstanding of Americans' fundamental right to religious freedom and is a glaring and dangerous government overreach.”

Michael B. Sheedy, executive director of the Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops, responded on Aug. 7 in a letter to Mr. Uthmeier. “We are prepared to protect our students, defend our rights, and preserve religious freedom,” he wrote. “While we are confident in our position, we remain willing to meet with you or your staff to see if there is a productive and amicable way to resolve our differences.”

Catholic schools across the nation may face challenges this fall as concerns about vaccinations and the threat of new viral outbreaks, particularly measles, appear to be accelerating simultaneously.

Daniel Daly, a moral theologian, is the executive director of the Catholic Health Association's Center for Theology and Ethics in Catholic Health and has advised Catholic schools and dioceses on health policy. Catholic schools have the obligation to protect the well-being of the children who are in their care, their teachers, staff and visitors, Mr. Daly said. They cannot force families to vaccinate their children, he added, but neither are they obliged to allow unvaccinated children onto school grounds, where they represent a threat to, among others, children who cannot be vaccinated for legitimate medical reasons and siblings of schoolchildren who are too young to be fully vaccinated.

Some parents who seek religious- or conscience-based exemptions for vaccinations argue that specific vaccines are illicit for Catholics because they were developed using human cell lines obtained from abortions in the 1960s and 1970s. Mr. Daly pointed out that vaccine resistance and hesitancy is often based on misunderstandings and mis-



Students at Cardinal Gibbons High School in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., receive Communion during a Mass for the opening of the school year.

information about vaccines, which “today are in no way dependent on ongoing direct, immoral, illicit abortions for their production.”

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, some vaccines “involve growing viruses in human cell cultures originally developed from two aborted fetuses in the 1960s.” Those cell lines are still being used, according to the academy, “so no new aborted fetuses are ever needed.”

The church has long been aware of potential moral hazards related to the historic connection between abortion and vaccine production but has urged parents all the same to seek vaccinations for themselves and their children. Church officials have explained that vaccines produced with fetal cell lines derived from abortion “for which no alternatives currently exist” are morally permissible “to ensure the health of individuals and the population as a whole.”

The church has wisdom to share about balancing individual rights and communal obligations, Mr. Daly said. “The Gospel always calls us to promote the well-being of others,” he said.

Refusing vaccines is not a decision that limits risk to the individual or to the individual's family. Infants yet to receive their vaccinations are vulnerable, Mr. Daly points out. “Pregnant women and the unborn are vulnerable. The elderly are vulnerable. Persons who have immunocompromised systems are vulnerable. Those who are undergoing treatments like chemotherapy are vulnerable,” he says.

Mr. Daly called the church's endorsement of vaccines, an effort to protect the most vulnerable from disease, “at its core, a pro-life position.”

Kevin Clarke is *America's* chief correspondent.



U.S. Haitian community grapples with uncertainty as T.P.S. ends

Temporary Protected Status for more than 330,000 Haitian residents across the country expired at the end of July. That means many thousands who have been living in the United States since as far back as 2010, when an earthquake devastated Haiti, are now subject to deportation.

Sandra Dieudonne is an immigration attorney for the Haitian Response Initiative of Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of New York. She described a community in tension, unsure what precautions to take as many wait to see how the Trump administration plans to proceed.

“We just really don’t know what’s going to happen, how the ICE agents are going to work, how they’re going to capture people,” she said.

Low-profile apprehensions have been continuing, she said, although she had not yet seen anything on the scale that cities like Chicago, Los Angeles and Minneapolis have experienced. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials “realized that doing that hurt them, P.R. wise,” she said.

Many Haitians have begun moving to other nations that may respect asylum claims, Ms. Dieudonne said. Others hope to remain in the United States but are now afraid to leave their homes. Many may choose to self-deport, as Trump administration officials urge, but they will have no homes to return to in Haiti in villages or neighborhoods that were not rebuilt after the earthquake or others that are now completely under siege by criminal gangs.

An ICE spokesperson, in an email to **America**, declined to explain how the agency planned to proceed in communities with large Haitian populations like New York, Miami and Springfield, Ohio, or if operations around

schools and churches would be prohibited.

“Temporary means temporary,” the spokesperson said. “TPS was never intended to be a de facto amnesty program, yet that’s how previous administrations have used it for decades.”

Even as Trump administration officials insist immigrants can be safely returned to Haiti, the State Department maintains a Level 4 “Do not travel” advisory for Haiti and confines State Department staff to embassy grounds. Conditions in Port-au-Prince are so insecure that U.S. carriers are prohibited from flying into the capital’s airport.

Many Haitian residents will endure this period of uncertainty newly unemployed as businesses began terminating workers who had previously been lawfully employed under T.P.S. The full impact of the loss of as many as 200,000 members of the U.S. workforce is only now becoming apparent.

“These people were legal, and [the Trump administration] made them illegal,” Ms. Dieudonne said. “That’s the crux of it.”

In Miami, which hosts the largest Haitian community in the country, Archbishop Thomas Wenski described Haitian residents of his archdiocese as “very tense, very nervous” as they await whatever comes next.

That tension extends far beyond the many thousands who have lost T.P.S. The archbishop explained that most Haitian families include a mixture of people with varying degrees of legal residency and citizenship, from people who just became “undocumented” because of the T.P.S. termination to naturalized citizens.

Other family members may have active asylum claims

OSV News photo/Shannon Stapleton, Reuters

At prayer during a Creole-language Mass at St. Jerome Catholic Church in the Little Haiti neighborhood of Brooklyn, N.Y., on July 28

or other forms of legal residency. Many families now include members who are first- or even second-generation Americans.

Many people wonder how ICE agents, “who are not that well trained, we’ve found out,” plan to differentiate members of the Haitian diaspora or their children.

“Are they going to start harassing people born in the United States that ‘look like they’re Haitians?’” Archbishop Wenski asked, because “that’s going to be something that will cause a lot of disruption in our communities and a lot of destruction.”

The archbishop urged the Trump administration to “rethink” its decision to end deportation protections for Haitians in the aftermath of a vicious gang attack near Haiti’s capital, Port-au-Prince, on Aug. 23. The massacre left at least 47 dead and 50 kidnapped. “This shows that the country is not safe, that Haiti is still a house on fire,” Archbishop Wenski said.

Archbishop Wenski perceives a multitude of problems emerging from the ending of T.P.S., including more suffering in Haiti itself. Many family members who stayed behind in what amounts to a failed state at America’s doorstep are completely reliant on remittances sent home from relatives working in the United States.

The decision to deport Haitians back to the chaos and uncertainty many left behind more than 20 years ago, who now have children, homes and good jobs in the United States, “doesn’t make sense for us, doesn’t make sense for Haiti,” the archbishop said.

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

Pope Leo XIV
in Assisi, Italy,
on Aug. 6



Pope Leo calls on priests to ‘respect’ the post-Vatican II liturgies

In a letter publicly released in August, Pope Leo XIV said that anyone involved in preparing liturgies, especially priests, must show “respect” for the liturgical rites of the Second Vatican Council.

The letter, addressed to Cardinal Arthur Roche, the head of the Vatican’s liturgy office, and dated June 29, is the latest in a series of strong signals Pope Leo has sent indicating he does not plan to reverse Pope Francis’ restrictions on the pre-Vatican II Latin Mass.

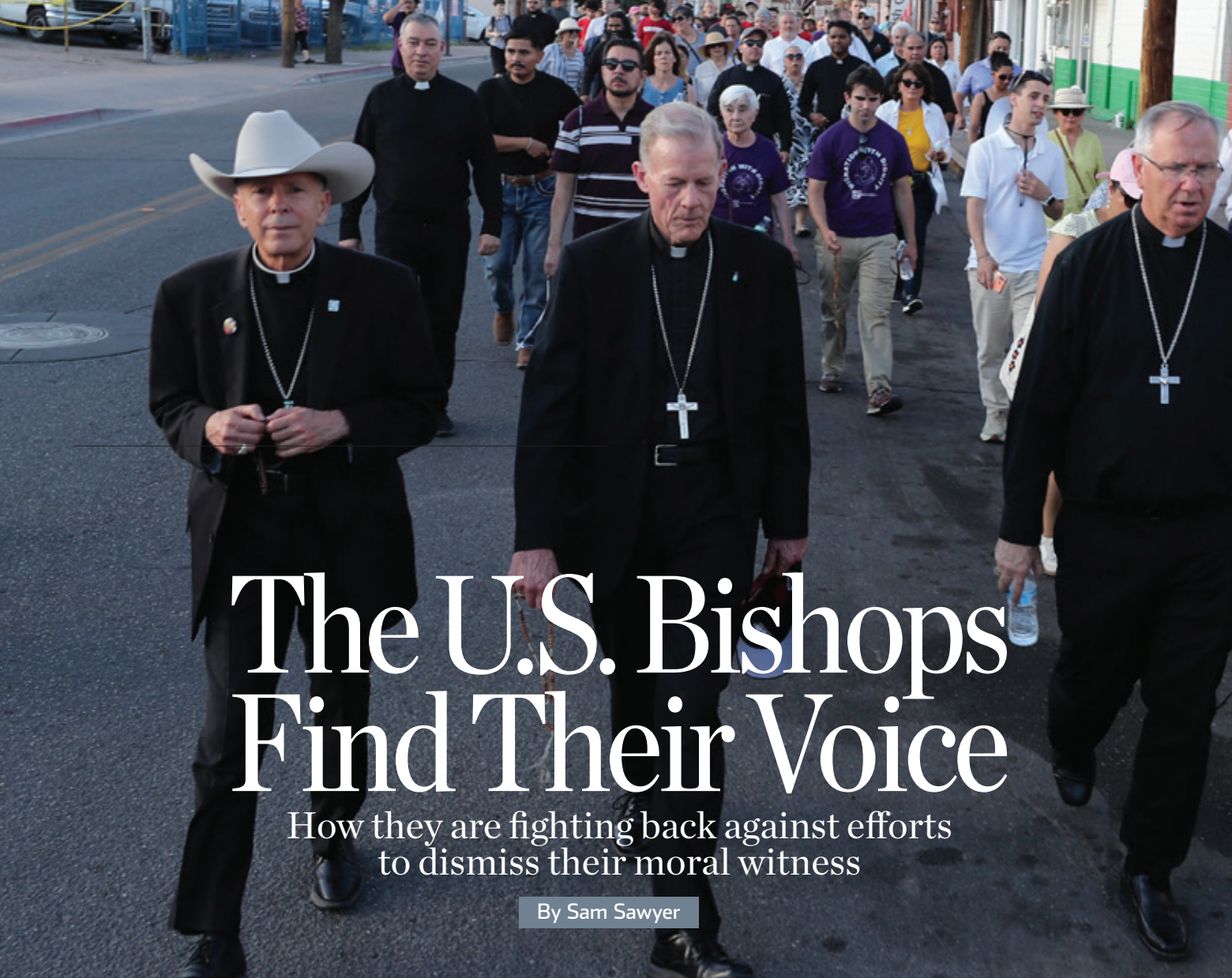
“In order to promote the dignified celebration of the sacred mysteries, we must emphasize the need for fidelity to the approved texts and instructions,” the pope wrote. He added that in his recent series of catecheses on Vatican II’s “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy,” “I have called attention to the respect that all those called to prepare the celebration of the divine mysteries, and priests in particular, must show toward the rites promulgated by Pope Saint Paul VI and Pope Saint John Paul II.”

In the letter, sent to Cardinal Roche on the occasion of a liturgical formation conference at Mount Angel Abbey in St. Benedict, Ore., Leo cited at length the 2022 letter “Desiderio Desideravi,” in which Francis wrote about liturgical unity and defended his restrictions on the pre-Vatican II Mass one year after imposing them.

Quoting Francis, Pope Leo wrote that liturgical formation is not only for experts but for “all the People of God,” and that priests are called to be “mystagogues, that is, to take the faithful by the hand and accompany them in their knowledge of the holy mysteries.”

Leo underscored the importance of lay participation in the Mass, a key focus of Vatican II’s liturgical reforms. He called it a primary way for people to be “formed both for the liturgy and by the liturgy” and particularly in the “*ars celebrandi*”—the art of celebrating the liturgy—that, he writes, “is expressed not only by the celebrant of the liturgy, but also by the entire assembly.”

Colleen Dulle is **America’s** Vatican correspondent.



The U.S. Bishops Find Their Voice

How they are fighting back against efforts to dismiss their moral witness

By Sam Sawyer

When the Catholic Church speaks up about politics, who is it who decides what to say?

One of the great gifts of being Catholic is a robust sense of the church as a corporate person, not only in the legal sense but also as the Body of Christ subsisting through history in the church's visible institution. It is that sense that lets Catholics say and mean "Mother Church" and to cultivate a deep and personal love for the church even when, as Flannery O'Connor wrote to a friend who had converted to Catholicism, it can seem that we "have to suffer as much from the church as for it."

Sentences that begin with "the church says" or "the church teaches" feel natural to Catholics, as if St. Peter's Basilica had a metaphorical tongue alongside the metaphorical arms of Bernini's colonnade stretched out to embrace the world. But we all know, on reflection, that what the church teaches is mediated by documents, catecheses,

homilies and a thousand other particular vehicles of communication.

When the church says something on a contentious political issue, however, we are often tempted to move directly to defending (or arguing with) whatever it was "the church said" without thinking through how it actually *got* said.

In the context of the church's involvement in American politics, what "the church says" most often means is that a bishop, usually the chair of the relevant committee or subcommittee of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, has written a letter addressed to some set of public officials that has then been posted to the website of the conference and shared with journalists through the mechanism of a press release.

And then the headlines say "the church says X," which may or may not be an accurate summary of what the bishop who signed the letter actually said, and the fragmented



Bishop Mark J. Seitz of El Paso, Texas, Archbishop John C. Wester of Santa Fe, N.M., Bishop John P. Dolan of Phoenix and Bishop James A. Misko of Tucson, Ariz., lead a procession following Border Mass 250, a binational gathering in recognition of the contributions of immigrants, at Sacred Heart Church in Nogales, Ariz., on June 26, 2026.

ranted. But in many cases, the position taken by the bishops' conference is quite solid, supported by deep staff expertise on policy topics and grounding in the church's moral and social teaching tradition. The U.S. church's positions on immigration and advocacy for the human dignity of migrants, to pick one current example, have been consistent, and further outside the comfort zone than either major political party is willing to go, for a very long time.

Often enough, the honest answer to "why haven't the bishops said" whatever someone thinks they should have said is that the bishops *have* said it—but they have not always gotten heard.

Meeting the Moment

Over the course of the last year and a half or so, prompted by the beginnings of both Leo XIV's papacy and the second presidential term of Donald J. Trump, the bishops are using their voice in a new way, and they are being heard differently, and on a wider variety of topics, than was previously the case. Some of that change has been thrust upon the church and the bishops by the political choices of the Trump administration, especially with regard to mass deportation and the war in Iran. But the bishops' ability to meet these moments effectively also reflects shifts in their approach that Pope Francis encouraged and Pope Leo is consolidating, alongside bolder tactical choices about how to get the church's message heard.

There are three key moments over this time period that demonstrate how much has changed about how the bishops speak within the American political context: first, Pope Francis' open letter to the U.S. bishops on mass deportation; second, the U.S. bishops' special message on migration issued during their plenary assembly; and third, President Trump's social media attack on Pope Leo.

In February 2025, within the first month of the second Trump administration, Francis sent an open letter to the U.S. bishops, saying, "I have followed closely the major crisis that is taking place in the United States with the initiation of a program of mass deportations."

While the pope's letter was sent to the U.S. bishops, it also addressed the Catholic faithful more broadly, with Francis exhorting "all the faithful of the Catholic Church, and all men and women of goodwill, not to give in to nar-

social media ecosystem of the 21st century goes to work encouraging us to be indignant or outraged or (if one's capacity for patience and discernment is sufficient) perhaps even consoled or challenged.

Recognition that a bishop, or the bishops as a conference, are the ones who have said something about politics on behalf of the church, when it does occur, often appears as frustration. Why haven't the bishops said something stronger? Or clearer? Or braver? Or about this other issue that they should have addressed instead?

In 11 years on the staff of **America**, I have seen many of these sorts of criticism; they are among the most frequent tropes in our comments and letters to the editor, and authors often submit pieces to us along these lines. In honesty, I should confess that I have written several pieces myself that could fairly be classified within the genre.

There are plenty of times when the criticism is war-



Bishop William A. Wack of Pensacola-Tallahassee, Fla., prays the Stations of the Cross in front of the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Ala., on March 19, 2026, part of a pilgrimage coordinated by the U.S. bishops' Subcommittee for the Promotion of Racial Justice and Reconciliation and by the Catholic Mobilizing Network.

OSV News photo/courtesy USCCB Subcommittee for the Promotion of Racial Justice and Reconciliation

ratives that discriminate against and cause unnecessary suffering to our migrant and refugee brothers and sisters.”

Because the letter was understood as responding to political events in the United States, it commanded enormous attention. In addition to addressing the mass deportation agenda to which the new Trump administration had committed itself, the letter also seemed to correct Vice President JD Vance, a Catholic convert. In an interview at the end of January, Mr. Vance had defended the administration’s policies as an expression of a “very Christian concept,” arguing that love for family and fellow citizens took priority over love for “the rest of the world.” In a social media interchange following the interview, he identified this concept as the “*ordo amoris*,” the proper ordering of love.

Pope Francis’ letter to the bishops, while not mentioning Mr. Vance explicitly, said that “the true *ordo amoris*” could be understood through the parable of the good Samaritan and “meditating on the love that builds a fraternity open to all, without exception.”

Archbishop Timothy Broglio, then president of the bishops’ conference, responded to Pope Francis on behalf of his brother bishops to thank him for his letter, and the tensions between the bishops and the administration over immigration enforcement continued to simmer.

As the letter was being prepared, then-Cardinal Robert Prevost was the head of the Dicastery for Bishops. While the Vatican has not described how the letter was drafted,

it is reasonable to expect that as head of the dicastery, he would have at a minimum been aware of the preparations to send a letter to the nation’s bishops, in addition to potentially being consulted as an American who would understand the American political scene.

Though only speculation is possible regarding his involvement in preparing the letter, there is clear evidence that Cardinal Prevost followed news of the letter’s reception in the United States. After he was elected pope in the conclave, journalists realized that he had a personal social media account on which he had posted links to several articles in the U.S. Catholic press about the letter, including, as I was surprised to find out, one that I had written.

While the bishops’ most visible response would not come until November, during the time between Pope Francis’ letter and then, many of them found concrete ways to call public attention to the dignity of our migrant brothers and sisters. Archbishop Thomas G. Wenski of Miami led a motorcycle rally of Knights of Columbus to pray at the “Alligator Alcatraz” immigration detention center in Florida. Bishop Michael Pham of San Diego, himself an immigrant from Vietnam, joined with other people of faith to accompany people during their appearances in immigration court. Bishop Mark J. Seitz of El Paso helped organize a march and vigil coinciding with the feast of St. Oscar Romero, in which a number of other bishops joined.



O5V News photo/Mihoko Owada, Catholic Standard

Bishop Jacques Fabre-Jeune of Charleston speaks at Our Lady of Sorrows Church in Takoma Park, Md., on July 28, 2026, during a Mass of Solidarity with the Haitian community and those impacted by changes to U.S. immigration policy and Temporary Protected Status.

Cardinals Joseph W. Tobin of Newark, N.J., Robert W. McElroy of Washington, and Blase J. Cupich of Chicago participate in a joint interview with CBS's Norah O'Donnell on "60 Minutes" on April 12, 2026.



O5V News screenshot/Facebook

addition to endorsing the message once it was issued, Leo had been moving to help the bishops recognize the need for action and unity.

Around two months before the bishops' message on immigration, Leo's first major interview as pope, with the journalist Elise Ann Allen, was released. Asked about the church's relationship with President Trump, Pope Leo indicated that he would be willing to engage with him, but he prefaced that openness by saying, "I think that it would be much more appropriate for the leadership in the church within the United States to engage him, quite seriously."

A few weeks later, a controversy arose over plans to give an award to Richard Durbin, a Democratic senator from Illinois, to recognize his advocacy for migrants, as some Catholics objected to his legislative record in support of abortion. Pope Leo commented on the matter by saying, "Someone who says 'I am against abortion, but I am in agreement with the inhuman treatment of immigrants in the United States,' I don't know if that's pro-life."

In early October, Pope Leo had received Bishop Seitz, who has often been at the forefront of the bishops' response to immigration issues and who chairs the U.S.C.C.B.'s migration committee, in an audience at the Vatican. During the meeting, he presented the pope with a bundle of letters written by migrants.

Pope Leo told Bishop Seitz, "You stand with me, and I stand with you," and said that "the church cannot remain silent" about the treatment of immigrants in the United States. Bishop Seitz told *America* in an interview following the audience that "Pope Leo said he would really like the [U.S.] bishops to speak together on this issue."

Just over a month later, they did.

Calls for Peace and an Attack on the Pope

The change in how U.S. bishops focus on making sure their interventions are heard has not been restricted solely to immigration issues. Earlier this year, the Trump administration's increasingly volatile and bellicose foreign policy was met with a significant and sustained critique not only from the Vatican, whose interventions to call for peace

A Special Message

The second key moment of this recent shift happened in November 2025, when the U.S. bishops issued a "special message" on immigration with a near-unanimous vote (216 in favor, five abstentions, and three opposed) at their biannual meeting. The last time the bishops had used this highly public form of communication was in 2013 during the conflict between the conference and the Obama administration over the federal mandate for insurance coverage of contraception in the Affordable Care Act.

The bishops did not stop at just adopting the message and letting it be communicated by press release. They also recorded a video of many individual bishops reading the message aloud, which was distributed widely in clips via social media. This may not seem terribly significant, but compared to the more ordinary way they had responded to Francis' letter and against the backdrop of the normal rhythm of how the bishops speak on political topics, both the highly visible formal mechanism for voting on the message and the subsequent efforts to make sure that it was heard are notable.

Speaking in one of his informal press encounters outside Castel Gandolfo a week later, Pope Leo called the special message a "very important statement" and encouraged "especially all Catholics, but people of good will, to listen carefully to what they said."

With the benefit of hindsight, it seems clear that in

A key moment of this recent shift happened when the U.S. bishops issued a ‘special message’ on immigration.

and dialogue are both expected and largely ignored in the American political sphere, but also from a number of U.S. bishops.

In January, following the U.S. raid to arrest Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela and President Trump’s repeated comments about seeking control of Greenland, Cardinals Blase Cupich of Chicago, Robert McElroy of Washington, D.C., and Joseph W. Tobin, C.Ss.R., of Newark, issued a joint statement citing Pope Leo’s warning about a “zeal for warmaking.” After Mr. Trump had refused to rule out the use of force to acquire control over Greenland, Archbishop Broglio of the archdiocese for the military, said in a radio interview that it would be “morally acceptable to disobey” a “morally questionable” order.

At the end of February, the United States and Israel attacked Iran. Several bishops spoke out clearly and quickly against the war, including Cardinals Cupich and McElroy, along with Archbishop Paul Coakley, who had been elected president of the bishops’ conference at the November meeting that adopted the special message on immigration.

This criticism was sustained as the war continued. In April, speaking on an episode of “Face the Nation” scheduled to air on Easter Sunday, Archbishop Broglio echoed Pope Leo’s concerns about the war and said that it likely could not be justified under Catholic teaching. A few days later, Archbishop Coakley responded on behalf of the bishops within hours to President Trump’s threat that a “whole civilization will die tonight” if Iran did not make a deal, saying that such a threat “cannot be morally justified,” and again aligned the bishops with Pope Leo’s critique of the war and call for peace.

Three days later, Pope Leo said, “God does not bless any conflict” and does not side with those who drop bombs. Two days after that, Cardinals Cupich, McElroy and Tobin spoke to “60 Minutes,” criticizing both the war in Iran and the administration’s mass deportation agenda.

A few hours after the interview aired, President Trump attacked Pope Leo in a social media post, igniting a controversy to which Leo responded in a press conference the next day as he began a papal trip to Africa, saying, “I have no fear, neither of the Trump administration nor speaking



Archbishop Paul S. Coakley of Oklahoma City, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, greets Pope Leo XIV at the Vatican on June 25, 2026.

out loudly of the message of the Gospel.”

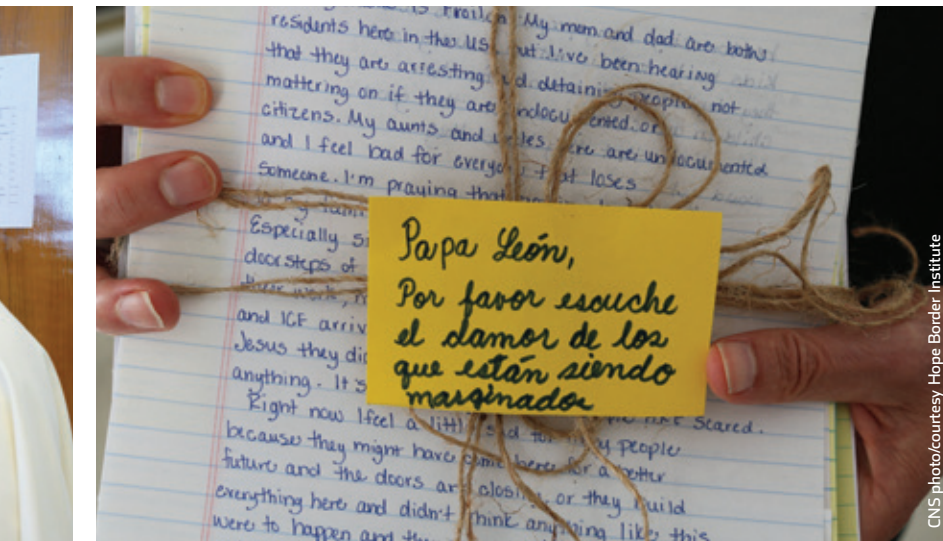
Shortly after that, Mr. Vance commented, in reference to Pope Leo’s opposition to the Iran war, that the pope needed to “be careful” in talking about theology, leading again to a near real-time response, as the chair of the bishops’ conference committee on doctrine issued a statement the next day defending Leo’s application of the church’s just war tradition.

What Happens Next?

Taken in isolation, any single instance of the various interventions by the bishops detailed above might be treated as business as usual. But as a sustained pattern, they mark a new willingness on the part of both individual bishops and bishops acting through the conference to take the megaphone and act to make sure the church’s teaching is heard clearly—and to respond directly to attempts from politicians to minimize or dismiss the church’s moral voice on the issues of immigration and war.

Before this recent shift, the public perception of the church’s political advocacy was that it was focused on abortion, which the bishops described in 2019, and again in 2023, as “our pre-eminent priority” in letters introducing their voting document, “Forming Conscience for Faithful Citizenship.”

To be sure, the church’s opposition to abortion has not changed, though the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* has scrambled how the issue shows up in electoral politics. Nor is the church’s advocacy on other issues a recent development. Even as they named abortion a pre-eminent priority, the bishops had also been speaking in those same introductory



Bishop Mark J. Seitz of El Paso, Texas, holds a bundle of letters to Pope Leo XIV from migrants in the United States before presenting them to the pope on Oct. 8, 2025. The note, in Spanish, says, "Pope Leo, please listen to the cry of those who are being marginalized."

ical issue or cause," and described the lives of the poor and vulnerable as "equally sacred" as the lives of the unborn.

At the end of his Africa trip, Pope Leo made a comment along similar lines, in response to a question about blessings for same-sex couples. He said, "We tend to think that when the church is talking about morality, that the only issue of morality is sexual. And in reality, I believe there

letters about many topics including immigration, racism, economic justice and working for peace. But those concerns generally did not make it into the headlines about what the bishops were saying, and the bishops generally did not have a working strategy to achieve wider recognition of their other political emphases.

The "Faithful Citizenship" document surfaces on the bishops' agenda in four-year cycles connected to presidential election years. It was first issued in 2007, saw a limited revision in 2015, and was reissued in 2019 and 2023 with updated introductory letters. Over the years, there have been calls from some bishops, as well as other commentators, for a wholesale rewrite of the document. At the bishops' June 2026 meeting, Archbishop Shelton Fabre of Louisville, Ky., who chairs the committee on domestic justice and human development, told the conference that after consultation about a potential revision, the plan was to continue using the present document "as an evergreen and foundational source document" while also focusing on new communications strategies.

One reading of this news could be that after a brief experiment with a different style of political engagement, the bishops are returning to the *status quo ante*. But I think that reading may be unnecessarily pessimistic. It is also premised on the failure to distinguish between what the bishops say, which has been and will continue to be consistent with the whole wide range of Catholic moral and social teaching, and what the bishops make a special effort to get heard above the noise.

The main action in the 2019 round of discussion about "Faithful Citizenship" was not about the text of the document, but about how the introductory letter should integrate Pope Francis' teaching, particularly a paragraph of his exhortation "Gaudete et Exsultate" that criticized the view that "the only thing that counts is one particular eth-

are much greater, more important issues, such as justice, equality, freedom of men and women, freedom of religion, that would all take priority before that particular issue." In a letter to the United States marking the 250th anniversary of American independence, the pope spoke about the protection of human life from conception to natural death, and then went on to say, "defending human life also includes welcoming, protecting and assisting immigrants."

The bishops will have their regular November meeting this year shortly after the midterm elections. In 2027, if the historical pattern holds, that meeting will include discussion about the introduction to "Faithful Citizenship" for the 2028 presidential election cycle. I would argue that the practical impact of the church's witness for the next election will have more to do with what issues the bishops work to call attention to, and the cues they take from Pope Leo's prioritization of issues, than with whether or not they revise the text of the document itself.

Over the last year and a half, and especially in response to the Trump administration's mass deportation agenda and the war with Iran, the bishops have shown both their willingness and their capacity to claim headlines for the full range of the church's moral witness. Their leadership during this time deserves the gratitude and support of all of us in the church—and it has lessons to teach not only for the faithful but also for the bishops themselves about how they can bring the message of the Gospel to bear on political issues.

Sam Sawyer, S.J., is the editor in chief of *America Media*. This essay is adapted from a presentation for the 2026 Catholic House Seminar series at the Chautauqua Institution.

In the Footsteps of Francis

How my travels through Italy brought me closer to a beloved saint

By Stephanie Saldaña

All of life was a pilgrimage for St. Francis of Assisi. It only made sense, 800 years after his death, that I would go on my own pilgrimage in search of him.

It was 7:30 a.m. in Assisi during the third week of March, and I was standing with hundreds of pilgrims waiting in lines. Beside me, a man named Francis was tracing his lineage out loud—a father, a grandfather and a great-grandfather all named Francis, after the saint. On my other side, a young Italian woman introduced herself as Chiara, or Clare in English, and told me that she lived in Gubbio, the town made famous as the place where legend claims St. Francis tamed a wolf. “We really do have wolves in Gubbio,” she insisted.

I had traveled from the Holy Land in wartime to be here, crossing the border into Egypt when my original flights were cancelled to catch a flight to Rome. I had rescheduled my travels repeatedly until I had no choice but to take the leap. For a single month, between Feb. 22 and March 22, the skeletal remains of St. Francis would be exposed for public viewing for the first time since 1230, the year in which they were placed in a crypt in the Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi. We were all here to meet a man who had died centuries ago, a saint who is still very much alive. School groups, a group of Hindu pilgrims in flowing maroon robes, French pilgrims singing—*Seigneur, fais de moi un instrument de votre paix*—as they filed inside. We likely would never have this chance again.

St. Francis has been called many things: a peacekeeper, an ecologist, a poet and troubadour, a lover of animals, a universal brother, the patron saint of Italy, a prophet for interreligious dialogue. A common nickname for him in Italy is *Il Poverello*, a little saint with and for the poor.

Yet as I stood waiting to see him, surrounded by pilgrims who had traveled from all over the world, it struck

me that I still had more questions than answers about Francis. It is as though we are still catching up to him, trying to discover the world as he saw it.

We walked quietly into the lower basilica, passing beneath the rose window and processing among low vaulted ceilings. The saint’s relics were in a glass case, and his body was laid out face up. I touched the glass, and I felt a shock of emotion as I met him.

It was an encounter.

Today, Assisi remains a medieval town in the heart of Umbria, perched on a hilltop and full of narrow alleys, stone houses and a sky punctuated by church steeples. The town looks over the village of Santa Maria degli Angeli below in the valley, where Francis and his first companions were based, and the mountains above lead to Eremo delle Carceri, where Francis retreated to pray. The Basilica of St. Francis stands at the very edge of Assisi. On my first day, I stood in the upper basilica and followed the frescoes by Giotto, one after another, serving both as guide and biography of the saint.

I thought about where I should begin his story. I could start with his early life of wealth and frivolity, when, according to his first biographer, Thomas of Celano, he “lived miserably wasting and passing his time.” Or tell of his journey to battle as a soldier, and his imprisonment and illness, which seemed to have brought about a spiritual crisis.





OSV News photo/courtesy Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi

Yet 800 years after his death, it felt natural to start at the end of his life, which in turn circles back to a beginning. Shortly before his death—known among Franciscans as his *transitus*—sick and nearly blind, St. Francis dictated his *Testament*, pointing us with his own words to where to start.

The Lord gave me, Brother Francis, thus to begin doing penance in this way: for when I was in sin, it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers. And the Lord Himself led me among them, and I showed mercy to them. And when I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body. And afterwards I delayed a little and left the world.

Francis begins his own story of religious life with his ability to see the leper. The first time I read his *Testament*, I noticed only this moment of compassion. The leper is not healed, but Francis is transformed by the encounter.

It took a conversation with Daniel Horan, a scholar of

St. Francis and director of the Center for the Study of Spirituality at St. Mary's College in Notre Dame, Ind., to point me to the words essential for understanding the conversion of St. Francis: "I delayed a little."

"Too often, we rush to this immediate conversion, and we skip over the fact that he remembers that [his conversion] took him time," Dr. Horan told me. "'I delayed a little.' He wasn't ready yet, but something had already begun in his heart."

It would take several years for Francis to fully understand his mission, and he spent the entirety of his life unfolding into it. Dr. Horan told me that this gradual conversion should give us hope. That's how God works in the lives of most of us. It takes time to experience conversion. The meeting with the leper happened in an instant, but Francis was still meditating on its meaning until the end.

For Ilia Delio, O.S.F., the founder of the World Institute for Science, Religion and Culture, it is important that we pay attention to the fact that Francis was changed through a meeting with a person. The belief that God is not to be

A copy of the crucifix in front of which St. Francis prayed hangs in the Church of San Damiano today.

This year, the skeletal remains of St. Francis were on display for the first time since 1230.

In Gubbio, a statue honors the story of St. Francis taming a wolf there.



All photos by Stephanie Saldana, except as noted



found outside of the world but in it still animates Francis-can spirituality today.

“He began to see the world not just as a place, but as a cathedral, where you can find God in everything,” she told me. “Everything bears witness to the living presence of God.”

I was discovering that a pilgrimage in the footsteps of St. Francis could not be just traveling to a place. To follow Francis is to seek a more open heart.

It begins with an encounter.

The Church of San Damiano

On my second day in Assisi, I followed a trail downhill, past groves of olive trees glistening silver in the sun, until I arrived at the Church of San Damiano. If there is a physical place associated with the early years of Francis’ conversion, it is this stone church, which had fallen into disrepair by the time Francis arrived in the 13th century.

What happened next is well known. It was still the early years of his conversion, after Francis had come back from battle. He was searching for God, still unsure of his path.

In the crumbling Church of San Damiano, Francis knelt in front of a crucifix and felt a wave of consolation. He heard Jesus speaking from the cross: “Go, Francis, and repair my church, which, as you see, is all in ruins.” He took the words literally. He set about gathering donations to rebuild that very church.

I walked through the humble courtyard, into the church complex composed of the same pale stone as the houses in Assisi. I reached the heart, where St. Francis prayed. A copy of the crucifix Francis heard speaking hung from the ceiling, with Jesus looking down. Jesus is peaceful on the cross, luminous and serene, his head crowned in a gold halo of glory.

Repair my church.

“It was the cross of San Damiano that was the entrance point into his vocation, his mission to rebuild the church, and he spent his entire life unfolding that mission,” said Sister Damien Marie Savino, a member of the Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist and a visiting professor of civil and environmental engineering and earth sciences at the University of Notre Dame. “He never departed from the centrality of the cross.”

To rebuild by listening to Jesus on the cross would inversely mean stripping away power, wealth and comfort in order to make room for God’s invitation. Francis and the friars who soon joined him would pattern their lives on the example of Jesus and the teachings of the Gospels: to sell all that they had and give the money to the poor, to take nothing for the journey and to take up the cross. This absolute poverty was not only giving up material goods. It was letting go of anything that got in the way of giving and receiving love.

St. Francis would return to San Damiano throughout his life. A young woman named Clare would leave her family against their wishes and join him, founding the community of the Poor Clares there, the first woman in the church to write a rule of life that received papal approval. Together, they would rebuild the church from within.

I prayed with the Jesus who spoke to Francis and is still speaking to us, in the very church that Francis rebuilt.

The Porziuncola

To follow Francis is to be on the move, in villages, in fields, among trees. I traveled just over two miles down into the valley below Assisi. In the village of Rivotorto, I saw reproductions of the small stone “hovels” where Francis lived in his first years of religious life. Others soon joined him, and



It would take several years for St. Francis to fully understand his mission.

spiritual “little portion” within us that we nurture and reserve for God. This space informs what we are drawn to in the created world, and in turn our vocation—the outer little portion that is ours to foster in the work of the kingdom.

The Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist have farms where they invite children to garden and assign them a “little portion” of earth that is theirs to cultivate. When I asked Sister Savino what “little moment” in the life of St. Francis spoke to her, her answer surprised me.

“It’s his picking up worms,” she said. “I just find it very compelling that Francis made it a practice to pick up worms from the road and put them in a safe place so that they wouldn’t be stepped on by others. He had a special identification with worms and loved them as creatures because they reflected back to him that Christ was portrayed in the Scriptures as a ‘worm and no man.’”

She said that often, when she gave talks about the dangers facing the environment, listeners became overwhelmed. “What can we possibly do?” they ask her.

“Sometimes I think,” she told me later, “we would do well to follow St. Francis in picking up worms, physically and spiritually—worm by worm.”

Eremo Delle Carceri

It was early morning when I set out to the Eremo delle Carceri, the Franciscan hermitage in the mountains where Francis and his companions retreated to pray. The path up the mountain begins just outside the city walls, climbing past olive groves, ascending into denser forests. Blue and yellow stripes on the side of the path mark the Franciscan Camino, hiking trails in the saint’s footsteps that run across Umbria. As I met other walkers, they called out, “*Buon camino!*”

I finally arrived at the sanctuary, built a steep 800 meters above sea level on St. Francis’ beloved Mount Subasio, an hour and a half later. The Eremo delle Carceri remains a true sanctuary, a series of stone edifices with terracotta roofs, windows that peer out at intervals and stone chimneys. Francis and his companions came here to pray in caves, and a small one now marks the place where he meditated in solitude. Yet it is the forests, the wind and the sound of birds, the sun filtering through the treetops that help us

together they lived in simplicity, working for their food. Thomas of Celano reports that Francis used to say, “It’s easier to get to heaven from a hovel than a palace.”

After they could no longer live in Rivotorto, Francis and his companions needed a new home. Again, he would rebuild a crumbling church. He acquired the ninth-century church known in Italian as the Porziuncola, named for the “little portion” of land it was on. Dedicated to the Virgin Mary, it was here that Francis would base his growing movement. Here St. Clare would join Francis after she escaped from her family. Here Francis would live with the brothers who came to join him—Brother Bernard, Brother Peter, Brother Giles, Brother Leo and others—until by the end of his life, thousands had joined the new order. Here Francis would meet Sister Bodily Death.

Today, the massive dome of the Papal Basilica of St. Mary of the Angels towers over the town square. When I walked through its monumental doors, I smiled when I was faced with the most St. Francis-like of sites: a tiny church inside. The Basilica of St. Mary of the Angels was built directly over the tiny Porziuncola restored by St. Francis, so that today visiting pilgrims find a church within a church. I couldn’t believe how small it was. Pilgrims waited patiently in line, as few could fit in the church at once. Inside, a fresco of the Annunciation by Ilario da Viterbo captures the angel kneeling before Mary. The humble stone walls remain. It is a visual testament both to the simplicity of the Franciscan charism and to the incarnation, God entering the world as an infant. This smallness would always be dear to St. Francis.

Today the tiny Porziuncola is a parable of hope. It reminds us that we all have a “little portion” to cultivate in the work of the kingdom. Sister Savino told me that in Franciscan spirituality, the Porziuncola is both a physical place and a spiritual path. Like Francis, each one of us has a



A note wishes pilgrims well as they travel the Franciscan Camino, hiking trails in the saint's footsteps that run across Umbria.



The Basilica of St. Mary of the Angels was built directly over the tiny Porziuncola restored by St. Francis, so that today visiting pilgrims find a church within a church.

connect most to Francis. Here is a cathedral built by God.

I followed the paths until I found a quiet space in the forest, and I waited.

Centuries after his death, St. Francis' love of the natural world still feels revelatory. The Franciscan sources radiate with his love of creation. He preaches to birds. He asks swallows to quiet down so he can finish a sermon. He speaks to a leveret (baby hare) caught in a trap and says: "Brother leveret, come to me. Why did you let yourself be caught?" He returns to the water fish that have been hooked and cautions them not to get caught again.

Today we are only just beginning to wake up to the deeper wisdom that St. Francis was preaching when he called the sun and moon "Brother" and "Sister." In 2015, Pope Francis released his landmark encyclical "Laudato Si'," a call to action to protect creation. Introducing the concept of integral ecology inspired by St. Francis, the pope wrote that "the cry of the land and the cry of the poor are one." For St. Francis, his meeting with the leper, his encounter with Jesus on the cross, and his love of Brother Sun, Sister Moon and Sister Mother Earth were intertwined. To be "brothers and sisters all" means to enter into a reciprocal relationship of love with the entire world, including creation.

S  verine Deneulin, an expert in development ethics and the acting director of the Laudato Si' Research Institute at the University of Oxford, told me that St. Francis was a prophet. "When he talks to animals, when he talks to the elements, to Brother Fire and Sister Moon, it emphasizes this web of life in which we are all connected," she said. "Francis, in his life in the 13th century, foresaw what scientists are saying now—that the moon affects the waves. Today we discover the insights that he already had in his

very limited knowledge of the time."

Now we are learning more about how plants and animals communicate, about our interdependency as species and about the havoc we wreak when we adopt theologies that encourage us to dominate.

"What harms human beings harms the water, harms animals, harms the forest," Dr. Deneulin said. "Whatever harms the animal world, whatever harms the water, the biome, the flourishing of rivers, it harms us humans. And now you see that everywhere."

Dr. Deneulin said that when we think of Catholic social teaching, we must now consider creation also to be among the poor. We are called to give nature a voice. "Nature talks to us," she said. "So how do we spend time listening to nature? Listening to the tree that is being cut, the bees dying because of drought, and then bringing these voices into public debate?"

I sat among the ancient holm oak trees, protected by Franciscan friars for generations on the mountain that St. Francis loved. I listened to Brother Wind.

Gubbio

The hardest thing about following Francis was not that I was being asked to explore the past. It's that I was being forced to confront the present. As I made my way across Umbria, the world was mired in a climate crisis and at war. Pope Leo XIV had warned in January that "war is back in vogue and a zeal for war is spreading."

On my last day in Assisi, I caught a bus to Gubbio, a medieval town about 30 miles away. Today, Gubbio is full of piazzas, palaces and winding streets. Yet in the popular imagination, it will always be associated with one story. According to legend, a wolf was terrorizing the people of Gub-



The Chapel of the Crèche in Greccio

bio, and they appealed to Francis for help. When he arrived, he met the wolf and called him Brother. He understood that the wolf was not evil, and that the real reason the wolf was acting violently was because he was hungry. Francis drew up a peace pact between the wolf and the people of Gubbio. From then on, they made sure that he was fed, and he lived among them, beloved until he died.

I walked past the town square and climbed until I arrived at the small church of San Francesco della Pace. Over the door, an inscription dedicates the church to God and St. Francis, bestower of peace. Today a small museum, the church marks the place where tradition says that the wolf lived the rest of his days in the heart of Gubbio. A stone sarcophagus on the ground identifies where locals say that wolf's bones were discovered.

By that time, I had spoken to scholars, Franciscan brothers and the faithful about the wolf of Gubbio, which does not appear in the saint's official biography. Some said that it was a legend. Others said that the "wolf" might have been a person nicknamed after the animal because he caused so much trouble. Still others saw no reason to believe that there was not an actual wolf in Gubbio. Yet everyone agreed that the story points to something true about St. Francis. He was always willing to take a risk, to see the good in every creature and to use compassion to find the root causes of violence. He believed in the possibility of change.

In 1219, Francis traveled to Damietta in Egypt, where the Crusaders were engaged in battle. There, he crossed over from the Christian camp to that of Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil on the opposing side. They met, speaking with one another. Today, scholarship has shown us that the sultan was also a remarkable man, one who offered hospitality to the saint and gave him an audience. Neither was converted. Yet this meeting would reverberate over centuries.

To follow St. Francis is to seek a more open heart.

Whatever they each had expected, in the end Francis and the sultan met one another as human beings. The historian André Vauchez wrote: "The encounter ended by challenging the received ideas each man had about the other and the other's religion." That alone was enough to change history.

I had unwittingly followed in Francis' footsteps when I was forced to travel from Egypt to Italy because of war. Now, as I sat in the Church of St. Francis della Pace, I tried to consider what that encounter teaches in a time of polarization. It's the risk of encounter that Francis took, of crossing the front lines in order to meet someone who was supposed to be his enemy, that still speaks to us now. He takes a step. Against the scale of a war, it seems to be inconsequential. But like so much in St. Francis' life, its impact is still unfolding.

In 1986, St. John Paul II, "moved by the spirit of Saint Francis and Saint Clare," convened the first World Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi, bringing together over 100 religious leaders from across Christian and various religious traditions to share their desire for peace. Claudio Betti, one of the founding members of the Community of Sant'Egidio, a Catholic lay movement known for its peacemaking, attended. The members of the Community of Sant'Egidio were so moved that they decided to hold an international meeting for peace each year to keep alive the "spirit of Assisi."

"For St. Francis, peace is not easy," Mr. Betti, who also serves as the director of Australian Catholic University's Rome campus, told me. "It requires an investment. Think about the visit to the sultan. He had to go where war was waging. He had to walk through the lines of Crusaders and go on the other side. But in all of the stories of St. Francis, one thing is constant. He always knows that there is another way besides violence."

In 2020, Pope Francis released his encyclical "Fratelli Tutti," inspired by Francis' teachings, inviting us to be "brothers and sisters all." Before I left Bethlehem, I had visited Father George Haddad, a Palestinian Franciscan priest from Jenin. He is the principal of the Terra Sancta School in Bethlehem, a Franciscan Catholic school that educates both Muslims and Christians.

"Saint Francis' message wasn't just for the Christian world, but for the entire world," he told me. "I always say to people: What is our vocation as Christians? It is to live our

St. Francis' love of the natural world still feels revelatory.

humanity. Humanity and Christianity must always exist together. And St. Francis always lived his humanity within his Christianity.”

Father Haddad reminded me that Francis greeted everyone with the phrase “Peace and all goodness!” It is a greeting Franciscans still use today.

“He didn’t just say this to specific people,” he reminded me. “That was the spirit that Francis carried to everyone. When he went to visit Sultan al-Kamil, he didn’t consider him to be an enemy. He considered him to be a brother.”

Greccio

A poet and troubadour, St. Francis loved to sing. Today he still inspires composers and gospel singers, iconographers and mystics. I wanted to visit a place that would help me to touch his sense of spiritual wonder. I had traveled from Bethlehem in the Holy Land to Assisi. Now I would take a pilgrimage to the Bethlehem Francis witnessed in Greccio.

I took a local train from Santa Maria degli Angeli, passing through the farmland and below the peaks of the Rieti Valley. When I disembarked in Greccio, I was the only person standing in a one-room, unmanned station. I checked a map, got my bearings and began to walk into the countryside.

I continued for over an hour, meeting no one. Then I looked up to see a stone sanctuary built into a cliffside.

St. Francis was spending time in Greccio in the year 1223 when Christmas approached. He desired to experience the real mystery of Bethlehem, to see the poverty and smallness of the infant Jesus being born. A villager named John helped him prepare a manger full of hay and brought an ox and ass on Christmas Eve. Villagers, shepherds and farmers arrived to celebrate the birth of Jesus, carrying torches and singing praises all night long. It was so vivid that whenever Francis said the word *Bethlehem* he licked his lips, as though to taste it.

I climbed the stairs up the mountainside to enter the sanctuary. The chapel of the creche was still there, carved into the rock, and painted with two images side by side: Francis kneeling in front of the baby Jesus in Greccio, next to Mary nursing an identical swaddled Jesus in Bethlehem.

I closed my eyes and brought together the Bethlehem in Greccio and the one I loved in the Holy Land, naming



my family, my church, my neighbors living through war out loud. For a moment, everything was connected.

I touched the oneness of Francis’ faith, of incarnation. Jesus is born in every place in the world.

That Christmas night St. Francis spent in Greccio would resonate throughout history in an unexpected way: in our nativity sets. Today, Christians all over make a Bethlehem in our homes on Christmas Eve, placing Mary and Joseph and the shepherds, singing when the infant Jesus is born.

Pope Francis would capture the mystery of Greccio perfectly in “Laudato Si’.” He wrote: “He comes not from above, but from within, he comes that we might find him in this world of ours.”

La Verna

The last years of Francis’ life were painful. Though the Franciscan Order had been officially approved by the papacy, there were disagreements among some of the friars in the order he founded. He was physically ill, weak and with an eye disease that left him nearly blind.

At the end of the summer of 1224, he retreated to La Verna, a wild and remote mountain in Tuscany. After a



The Sanctuary of Greccio is built into a cliff, and the town is believed to be where St. Francis created the first living nativity scene.



The Sasso Spicco, where St. Francis prayed in La Verna

period of deep prayer, he received the stigmata. He never wrote about it, and for the rest of his life he tried to keep it a secret, telling only a few close companions.

I would spend the last days of my pilgrimage in La Verna, a full day's journey from Greccio. It was remote and wild: ash trees, maples, beech trees, fir trees and old forest long protected by the friars. The mountain air was windy and cold, and yet the sky shone bright with March sun. The monastery complex stood sprawling across stone buildings, and over the entrance a sign in Latin was inscribed: *Non est in toto sanctior orbe mons*. "There is no holier mountain in the world."

Instead of meditating in the chapel of the stigmata, I found Francis most intimately in the natural world. I descended the stairs outside into the Sasso Spicco, a deep cleft in a rock formation, surrounded by green moss and beech trees, where tradition says that St. Francis meditated on the Passion. Here he could place himself inside the wounds.

He had started his vocation in front of the cross, and it had taken him to La Verna.

"Francis spends his entire journey—from the time of his encounter with the leper to his ongoing conversion,

seeking ever more intensely to conform himself to Christ, to live like Christ, to structure a community like Christ's model," Dr. Horan told me. "By the time he gets to La Verna at the end of his life, he has so internalized this that his body reflects that."

Sister Bodily Death

At the end of his life, Francis retreated to San Damiano. There, nearly blind and in pain, carrying the wounds of the stigmata, he composed the "Canticle of the Creatures." Sung in the Umbrian dialect, it is a song of praise to God through creation, an ode with Brother Sun, Sister Moon and Sister Water. All of creation sings God's praise by being ourselves. In praising we point to Christ, who permeates everything.

"He composed the Canticle when he was diseased, when he was suffering," said Andrea Ceccomori, an Italian composer who has set the Canticle to music. "For that reason I think that it's the maximum expression of his love for the Lord."

Rebuild my church. He was still obeying until the very end. The Canticle is a celebration of the transcendent mystery that unfolded in response: that in giving everything away, a space opens in which to receive God, and so to love everyone and everything in the cosmos.

Shortly before his death, Francis added a verse, praising Sister Bodily Death. He was on a pilgrimage and would meet her soon. He asked to be moved to the Porziuncola, his beloved little church. Today, the place where he died 800 years ago is called the Chapel of the Transitus. It is not an ending. It is a passage on a pilgrimage, from one life to the next.

"He went on a journey, a journey to joy," Father Stefano Tondelli, a Franciscan friar, told me as we stood together just outside the place where Francis died. "He asks us to go on a journey too."

Stephanie Saldaña is a writer based in Jerusalem.

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



OSV News photo/Simone Risoluti, Vatican Media

Facing Up to History

On ‘Magnifica Humanitas’ and Pope Leo XIV’s apology for the enslavement of African people

By Edward K. Braxton

Tucked well into the second half of the new papal encyclical “Magnifica Humanitas” (“Magnificent Humanity”) is one paragraph rather different from the rest. In Paragraph 176 of a document largely about artificial intelligence, Pope Leo XIV asks forgiveness for the Catholic Church’s approval of the enslavement of African people.

Those who only skim papal documents might overlook this paragraph, unaware of its landmark significance. In the midst of his timely, extensive reflections on artificial intelligence and its potential for the good of humanity (or to bring about new forms of slavery), the pontiff formally asks forgiveness for the institutional church’s official sanction of human slavery. In the American context, this involved transporting as many as 12 million West African human

beings in the Middle Passage across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas in subhuman conditions.

Many served as “beasts of burden” in chattel slavery on the plantations of the American South, part of a system that created great wealth for plantation owners and disenfranchised a whole community of people. The negative consequences of that era continue to affect people of color in the United States today. It is regrettable that some Americans of European descent argue incorrectly that all of these negative consequences have been overcome and that those who think contemporary “white privilege” is real and linked to slavery are clinging to obsolete grievances. They would do well to read Edward E. Baptist’s important book on the subject, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and*



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The retreat houses in this guide are a great place to start. Their experienced staff can help you find a retreat that fits your needs and goals and, if desired, connect you with a spiritual director.



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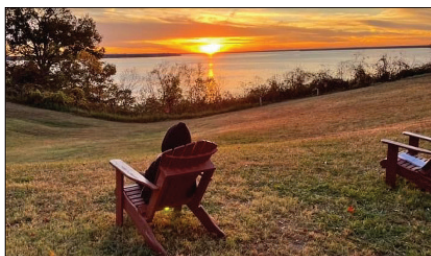
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www.tinyurl.com/SSCMOHOS • tculver@sscm-usa.org

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www.tinyurl.com/SSCMNazareth • nazareth_sscm@sbcglobal.net

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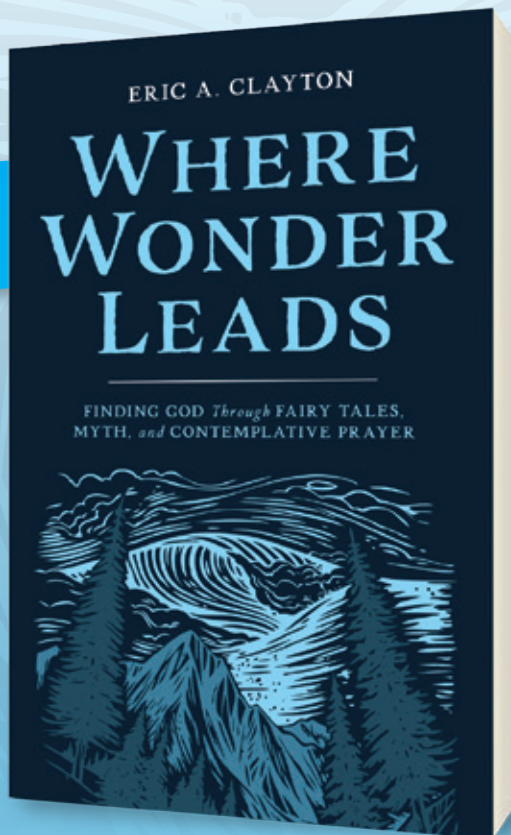
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Pope Leo's formal apology and plea for forgiveness is long overdue. It is important not only for African Americans but also for all Americans and the people of Africa, the continent where the Catholic faith is growing faster than anywhere else in the world. Hopefully, it is not too late for the pope's words to have a significant positive impact on the church and the people of the United States.

"In the development of her doctrine, the Church has gradually come to a deeper awareness of the gravity of these issues," Leo writes in Paragraph 176. "It is true that past events cannot be judged anachronistically, as though the moral criteria that matured over time had always been available. Yet neither can we deny or diminish the delay with which both society and the Church came to denounce the scourge of slavery."

The Holy Father continues:

In antiquity and the Middle Ages many individuals and even ecclesiastical institutions had slaves. Already in the early modern period, the Apostolic See of Rome, responding to requests from Sovereigns, intervened several times in order to regulate and legitimize forms of subjugation, and, in certain cases, the enslavement of "infidels." It was only in the nineteenth century that a formal, absolute and universal condemnation of slavery was clearly articulated, notably under Pope Leo XIII.

Many Africans, African Americans and other Catholics may feel compelled to ask: Why is this extremely important statement inserted in a lengthy examination of the challenges posed by the brave new world of artificial intelligence? Does putting it there run the risk of it going unnoticed? Why does this critical paragraph speak of "slavery" as if it existed in a vacuum, with no mention of Africa or African Americans?

Slavery in the United States

Archbishop John Carroll, the first bishop of Baltimore, owned enslaved people on his plantation in Maryland during the years he served. When he established Georgetown University, he approved using enslaved people to erect campus buildings. Carroll informed the Holy See about the large number of enslaved people in his diocese. But the Vatican did not condemn the practice—which, at the time, was common among land-owning Catholics in the United States.

The Jesuits of the Maryland Province, which included Georgetown University, owned enslaved people until 1838. Georgetown might not have survived without the



Unfortunately, the Vatican did not condemn the Dred Scott decision.

money earned by their plantations and the eventual sale of 272 enslaved people to a plantation in Louisiana, one of the largest mass sales of human beings in American history. This history was all but forgotten until 2004, when the Georgetown Memory Project and the Jesuits began to identify more than 10,000 descendants of those who had been enslaved. In 2019, the GU272 Descendants Association and the Jesuit Conference of Canada and the United States committed to work together to establish and begin to fund the Descendants Truth & Reconciliation Foundation in order to help heal the wounds of this moral atrocity.

In 1857, Roger B. Taney, the chief justice of the Supreme Court and a devout Catholic who owned enslaved human beings, wrote the infamous majority opinion in *Dred Scott v. Sandford*. He ruled that since enslaved and free Africans were not citizens of the United States, they could not sue in federal court, and that Congress had no constitutional authority to prohibit slavery in federal territories, since Africans in America were "beings of an inferior order" with "no rights which the White man was bound to respect." Therefore, Dred Scott and his wife, Harriet, were declared to be someone else's property even though they lived in the free state of Illinois.

The chief justice may have thought the *Dred Scott* ruling would end the national debate concerning slavery. But in fact, it polarized the nation and led many Americans to question the credibility of the Supreme Court. The backlash strengthened the fledgling anti-slavery Republican Party, paving the way for Abraham Lincoln's election in 1860. Some historians argue this gravely immoral, anti-Christian decision was the catalyst for the Civil War.

Unfortunately, the Vatican did not condemn the *Dred Scott* decision. At that time, the Holy See and the bishops of the United States did not oppose the institution of human slavery. Some church leaders even argued that earlier papal decrees gave church approval to certain forms of the practice. Nor did the church definitively condemn human slavery until Pope Leo XIII's encyclical "In Plurimis" in 1888.

In 1999, when St. John Paul II visited the Archdiocese of St. Louis (where the *Dred Scott* case originated), he unambiguously condemned the ruling as a profound moral failure. In 2018, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, in



the pastoral letter “Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love,” condemned the Dred Scott decision as a flaw at the foundation of the country’s relationship to people of color, a shameful judicial milestone and a tragic example of denying the dignity and value of every human person.

In “Magnifica Humanitas,” the bishop of Rome concludes Paragraph 176 with the following:

[T]here has been a continuous affirmation throughout history of the dignity of every human being, created in the image of God, even if it took eighteen centuries for its full incompatibility with slavery to be explicitly recognized. This constitutes a wound in Christian memory, one from which we cannot consider ourselves detached. It is impossible not to feel deep sorrow when contemplating the immense suffering and humiliation endured by so many in stark contrast to their immeasurable dignity as persons infinitely loved by the Lord. For this, in the name of the Church, I sincerely ask for pardon.

The Holy Father’s own words might spur the reader to ask further questions: If the church has actually affirmed through the centuries the dignity of every human being created in the image of God, how it is possible that it took 1,800 years for the church to recognize the obvious fact that the enslavement of African people was incompatible with this perennial truth? How is it possible that Roger Taney, a devout Catholic, could describe Africans as “beings of an inferior order”? What was lacking in his Catholic formation and that of his contemporaries?

Different Outcomes

“Magnifica Humanitas” was signed on May 15, 2026, the 135th anniversary of “Rerum Novarum,” Pope Leo XIII’s consequential encyclical establishing modern Catholic social teaching in the midst of the Industrial Revolution. But what if Pope Leo XIII’s 1888 encyclical “In Plurimis” had done more than condemn slavery as a violation of the Christian doctrine of the equality of all people? What if in 1878, at the beginning of his long pontificate, Leo XIII had forcefully condemned human slavery, decreed that any Catholic involved with the sin and heresy of slavery would be excommunicated and, in the name of the church, sincerely asked for forgiveness for the institutional church’s legitimization of slavery?

Of course, we must acknowledge that Leo XIII was a man of his time and his vision allowed him to see only so far. However, what a difference it would have made for the descendants of enslaved people and for the church in the

We ask why there are so few African American Catholics. The real question is: How can there be so many?

United States if he could have seen much further. What if Leo XIII had stressed the sinfulness of slavery and racism throughout his pontificate and made it clear to the bishops of the United States that as leaders of the Catholic Church, they were morally obliged to make these Catholic moral teachings as forcefully clear to Catholic clergy, religious and laity as the bishops and priests today forcefully teach the grave immorality of abortion?

If Leo XIII had done that, perhaps Roger Taney would have recanted his repulsive 1857 Dred Scott decision. Perhaps the majority of Catholics would have vigorously opposed post-Civil War Jim Crow laws, discrimination in employment, racially segregated neighborhoods, segregated Catholic parishes and schools, segregated orders of religious sisters, and the exclusion of African Americans from diocesan seminaries and from the priesthood and the episcopacy. Perhaps they would have rejected unions led by Catholics that excluded people of color. Perhaps they would refuse to support segregated sports teams.

If the moral truth that racial prejudice is a sin and a heresy had been consistently taught in Catholic schools and preached effectively from the pulpits of Catholic churches, Catholic people might not have participated so readily in “white flight” as soon as an African American family moved into their neighborhoods. Perhaps Catholic legislators and judges would not have supported laws that prevented African Americans from exercising their right as citizens to vote.

(This right has been undermined anew by recent Supreme Court decisions. On June 25, 2013, Chief Justice John Roberts, a Catholic, wrote the majority opinion in *Shelby County v. Holder*, which struck down Section 4(b) of the Voting Rights Act as unconstitutional. On April 29, 2026, the chief justice voted with the majority in the Supreme Court’s 6-to-3 ruling in *Louisiana v. Callais*, disregarding decades of precedent by all but eliminating Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act, which provides limited protection against discriminatory redistricting.)

If all that had happened, many African American people would have felt welcome in the Catholic Church

rather than seeking their spiritual homes in Baptist churches and establishing the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Because of this painful history, when we ask why there are so few African American Catholics, it must be acknowledged that the real question is this: How can there be so many?

By engaging the world of Silicon Valley and the whole human family in a serious conversation about artificial intelligence, the most astounding technological development in our time, the first American pope's encyclical is a bold effort to continue the mandate of the Second Vatican Council's "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" ("Gaudium et Spes"). We hope and pray that those with eyes to see will see what the pontiff has written in Paragraph 176 and grasp its far-reaching implications.

On Wednesday, July 29, 2026, after a Global Concert for Peace at Borgo Laudato Si' in the gardens of the papal summer residence in Castel Gandolfo, Pope Leo XIV made his first public comments about his ancestry in response to a question from NBC News anchor Tom Llamas. "I come from a family of immigrants," he said. "On my mother's side, we have people who were both slaves and slaveowners."

The fact that enslaved African people were a part of his background was first brought to light by the research of the New Orleans genealogist Jari Honora and Henry Louis Gates Jr. of Harvard University. According to this research, the pope's maternal grandparents, Joseph Martinez and Louise Baquié, were identified in historical records as Black and lived in New Orleans's Seventh Ward, one of the oldest communities of Creole and Black Catholic people in the United States. These records show that 17 of his ancestors were described as Black, Creole, mixed-race or free people of color.

This history gives Paragraph 176 of "Magnifica Humanitas" an added significance—not because of any implications concerning the pope's personal racial identity, but because it suggests a familial link between him and the African and African American peoples about whom he writes in the paragraph. There is now a profound personal dimension to his remarks about the Catholic Church's sad pro-slavery record as "a wound in Christian memory." Now that he has spoken about his family's connection to human slavery, there is a new poignancy to his words when he apologizes and asks the world to forgive the church for centuries of moral blindness.

There is a paradox in all of this: It is happening at a time when voices in the U.S. federal government are expressing a desire to diminish the acknowledgment of the country's painful racial history of enslaving free human beings. Would Paragraph 176 have a greater impact if it had been

issued as a more fully developed, stand-alone document or expanded as a part of the Holy Father's July 4, 2026, letter to the American people marking the 250th anniversary of the founding of the United States?

Edward K. Braxton is bishop emeritus of the Diocese of Belleville, Ill., and a past contributor to *America*.

THE HIGHEST BOUGHS

By James Matthew Wilson

I've tried, then started trying once again,
To see each thing just as it gives itself:
The gleams of rain that pool in withered leaves;
The blackened lump of stone amid the ashes.

To listen, also, I have tried, as frogs
Make their deep rolling churr beneath the call
Of blackbirds, shrill and spiraling; to bear
Unmoved the heavy, searching drone of bees.

The muskrat lodges rest within dark waters,
I tell myself, and on the northern shore,
Dull grey Petoskies lie in tumbled heaps
That hide their intricate geometries.

But who can do this always or for long?
Restless, the mind so steeped in its impressions.
Restless and orderly, to find that green
Returns both here and to the highest boughs.

James Matthew Wilson's *most recent book of poems* is *Saint Thomas and the Forbidden Birds*.



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Priests Are Wearing Cassocks Again

Should you care?

By Joe Hoover

Let's not kid ourselves, they look just so very fantastic, long black cassocks on today's vital young priest. The Roman cassock, 33 buttons all black and slimming, the semi-Jesuit cassock and the complicated way you fasten it. A Catholic clergyman in a cassock walking through the sanctuary or on the city streets: *There is a priest*. The Year Rounder, the Southport, mandarin collars with a one-inch opening, a man unafraid to be seen, to be visible, to be clergy!

In a world so denuded of signs and symbols of the sacred, the cassock is back. Has been for several years now, but more and more these days *the thing*. The timeless priestly garment, draping to the ankles, young men wearing them all over the place. Seminarians strolling the convention hall at the Eucharistic Congress in Indianapolis or giving out ashes in a New York parish hall; priests attending a Communion and Liberation gathering or presenting at the SEEK youth summit or leaving a West Omaha church.

And not just in ecclesial spaces. There they are, shopping at a Boston grocery store or waiting in an airport security line and bringing a robust sign of God to the quiet hell of modern American air travel. At the annual Serra Night baseball game in St. Louis last fall, a handful of the priests wore cassocks. At a baseball game! The crack of the bat, the roar of the crowd, the dark pigment of the cotton-poly sacerdotal garb.

Father Ian VanHeusen works in campus ministry at East Carolina University and wears a simple Roman cassock everywhere he goes. "Even when I'm in New York City," he said. Walking down the street, "I make eye contact with people and I smile. A lot is how you present yourself to the world. If you're smiling and polite, it's going to open a lot of doors."

The church unafraid to be what it is! Old school but new school. So deeply old school it is completely new school. Cassock as Sign and Signal and Cultural Marker. John Wick and "The Matrix" and Luke Skywalker and Val Kilmer in "Tombstone" and the Classic Vision of Priest, and who doesn't need the Classic Vision of Priest these days when Priest is going the way of the nine-inning start? Father Benedict Radich of St. Mary's Catholic Church in Landover Hills, Md., said that when he was invited to visit

a nondenominational church in Dallas, the pastor asked him to wear his cassock and show to the congregation that he is "clearly a priest and not afraid of it."

Father Joe Kelley, the 70-year-old pastor at St. Monica Parish in Philadelphia, said he wears his cassock in public, on buses and on trains. He said, "If I have to wear clerics, it seems the easiest thing to wear. It strikes up good conversations."

The black fabric of the numinous, the bolts of cloth to manifest Something Bigger, witness to *final things*, to holy death; a cassock ducking into a confessional or walking down the street as sort of a sartorial shock troop to break open what is pedestrian and dull and small. To the unreligious, Flannery O'Connor might have said, you have to wear long and startling cassocks.

The theater of it, the sweep, the way you feel walking around in a cassock, the way you feel! I have an old Roman cassock I found years ago in the attic at a Jesuit community on an Indian reservation in South Dakota. I never wear it; I hold on to it mainly for history's sake, nostalgia. I decided to put it on one day for a walk around my neighborhood. (Cassocks aren't just for priests; brothers can wear them, too.) It was 3 p.m. on a warm, post-rain, early March day; not many second looks from people. A man in a long gown, as it were. Not unusual here. I passed the Nonbinarian Bookstore up the block. Not unusual at all.

I live near a Lubavitch Jewish community, and I passed an elder in his own long black garb. We caught each other's eyes and kept walking. A religious person in a long black garment presents no kind of problem here.

I felt different, in my cassock, walking down President Street. I immediately noticed a slouch. I stood up straighter! (I am still standing up straighter! What is happening here?)

We could say this about any kind of religious habit, frankly—they have been worn more and more for the past several years by younger members of orders. Young Dominicans in the hooded white habit, Holy Cross seminarians in the hooded black habits roaming the Notre Dame campus, Franciscan Friars of the Renewal in chalky gray-blue habits.

But there is something about the diocesan priest in the black cassock. A woman seeing Father VanHeusen



The cassock has been called a ‘classless’ garment.

walking down the street in his church’s neighborhood near the college once told him, “I like seeing you wear that thing. It reminds me Jesus is in our midst.”

...

The cassock has been called a “classless” garment. It is a sort of grand leveler that fixes the priest outside of any social status. It removes the priest from being seen as a member of some kind of Catholic upper class, which a fine clerical suit might indicate. Father Joseph Okonski, the pastor of St. Athanasius Parish in Philadelphia, said he wears a cassock “as a uniform.” The priest, who in 2024 received a Liberty Bell Award, the highest honor the city bestows for service to the community, said that a cassock is “my idea of dress up and it’s my idea of dress down.”

Before the Second Vatican Council, American priests wore black cassocks in church settings as a matter of course. Spencer Tracy and all that. Bing Crosby as Father O’Malley. Priests wore them hearing confessions or teaching catechism to sixth graders or beneath their liturgical vestments at Mass. The Third Plenary Council of Baltimore in 1884 decreed that priests shall “observe the law of the Church, and that at home or in the church they shall always wear the cassock, which is proper to the clergy.” It went on to say that “when they go out for duty or relaxation or on a journey, they may use a shorter dress, which is to be black in color, and which reaches to the knees, so as to distinguish it from the dress of the laity.”

The “shorter dress to the knees” basically turned into black slacks, clerical shirt and white tab collar. Priests at that time rarely wore cassocks outside of ministerial spaces. (Until Vatican II, priests and brothers in religious orders pretty much wore their habits everywhere, in church and out. Jesuits wore cassocks all the time.)

After Vatican II, in the mid-1960s, as Joseph Weiss, S.J., a professor of liturgy at Boston College, put it, the cassocks “fell out of favor to help priests identify more with people, as integrated into their real lives.” Priests started to wear clerical shirts instead of the cassock in church settings, or they began donning flannels and oxfords and Izods in church and out. *We’re all in this together.* The Jesuits dropped the requirement for the cassock universally.

istock/Tomasz Szmigla

...

The word *cassock* comes from the French word *casoque*, which means a long coat or overcoat. Priestly cassocks became the norm in the church in Europe as early as the sixth century, an ecclesial adaptation of the *tunica*, which was standard Roman wear at the time. Over the years, cassocks became more and more the accepted priestly garb in the church. In fact, the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 decreed that priests must wear garments closed in the front.

The Code of Canon Law now requires that clergy “wear suitable ecclesiastical garb in accord with the norms issued by the conference of bishops and in accord with legitimate local custom.” In the United States in 1998, the bishops’ conference approved this use of black suits and Roman collars for priests when outside the church. It added, “The use of the cassock is at the discretion of the cleric.”

Thirty years later, this discretion might lead a cleric to Renzetti-Magnarelli, a religious apparel shop nestled in a sort of “funeral home district” of South Philadelphia. It first opened its doors in 1945, now employs four full-time tailors and makes the finest cassocks on earth. Priests fly in from around the country to the shop to get fitted for their cassocks, where everything is done by hand. When Robert Magnarelli, the owner, hires a new tailor, the first thing he teaches them is to learn to handle a needle and thread. “*We don’t work with machines*,” he said (*italics mine, on behalf of everyone*).

Robert, who is 58, took over the shop from his father, Luccio, now 88, who himself had a reputation as such a superb tailor that in 1965 he was recruited from Italy to come to the United States and make garments for the shop. Robert has been at this since 1990, and it took him until 1995 before he began, as he put it, making cassocks proficiently. He said there has been an “uptick” in cassock sales the past couple of years. When I interviewed him in early February, he already had cassocks scheduled to be made through September.

The most popular styles, Mr. Magnarelli said, are the Roman style and the semi-Jesuit. The Roman is a simple black cassock with, traditionally, 33 buttons straight up front—33 signifying, of course, the jersey number of Larry Bird. A semi-Jesuit cassock is known by the way the inner flap goes across the body and underneath the cassock, with the upper flap starting from the neck and coming in from an angle...you’ll have to ask Mr. Magnarelli, he can explain it better. (The Jesuit cassock has a simple clasp at the top and no buttons, fully enclosed. They are difficult to find these days.)

When he sees seminarians or priests in cassocks, he said, it is not unlike a cop in uniform or a nurse in scrubs “who is there to save people.” In the same way, “A young priest or [any] priest wearing that cassock is a sign they are there to protect and save your soul for the coming of Christ.”

...

A Jesuit priest is visited at his ministry by a Totally Famous Leftist congresswoman, and on this day the priest wears a cassock. And she, does she have a problem with his wearing of the cassock? Does she post on social media the next day that *I as the Premier Leftist Socialist Congresswoman, was with this priest in his cassock and while sure, he does some nice work with the poor, it was really just pretty annoying and disturbing and hyper-reactionary of him that he was wearing this cassock?*

No, she did not post that. She just visited his work and loved what he did.

Father Okonski said his parishioners have never had an issue with his wearing of a cassock. “I’m not dealing with people who are post-Vatican II or pre-Vatican II or that whole religious political mindset of how you dress.” He said there have been instances when people come up to him at the parish food bank when he helps distribute food, or on the street, and ask for a blessing, ask for a prayer. “I’ve had a number of experiences like that.”

Brother Claire M. Simon was a Jesuit at Red Cloud Indian School (now called Mahpiya Lúta), who for years until his death in 2006 strolled the campus in a long black cassock long after it fell away from Jesuit expected wear. He smoked, he grumbled, he was (delightfully?) cranky. He worked with young Native artists and started the Red Cloud Indian Art Show, now in its 58th year. And the cassock. Why did he wear a smoky black cassock when priests around him were wearing simple clerics or flannels and Levis? Because, as Brother Simon put it, when Chief Red Cloud asked for Jesuits to come to the reservation to educate Lakota people, “he asked for the Black Robes, not the Blue Jeans.” (It may also have been because he was contrarian by nature.)

...

Nevertheless, you see a Catholic priest in 2026 walking around in a cassock and it would appear to some he is publicly telegraphing to the world: “I am *boldly Catholic*, I am *‘taking the church back’* from its diminishers and water-downers; taking it back and out into the streets, marching under the banner of the Cross into the secular world thirsty for us.” And so no matter the witness value, and how gently smiling and “class free” the priest in the black cassock actually is, the impression can’t be helped!



There is something about the diocesan priest in the black cassock.

It's just the way it is! "Behold, here is Priest! *Ecce Me!* Father has entered the vestibule of the church or the Trader Joe's and will gladly receive your somewhat reserved awe. Gladly."

The priest in the Bing Crosby cassock is broadcasting to the Catholic world: "Come, come, and enter the winged doors of the battered silver DeLorean that I have prepared for you since the foundation of my ordination: The flux capacitor is fueled up, the gigawatts are primed, let us get this thing cranked up to 88 m.p.h., so we can make a proper pilgrimage back to the Catholic Church of 1955...and stay there."

But here is the next question: Who is noticing this? Who is feeling telegraphed to? Who is clocking the evidently triumphant young priest, the "Ecce Me!" of the modern-day cleric? Who is highly sensitive to any priest coming off as "smug" or self-elevating or backward time-traveling?

Father Radich told me the only people who have ever made "a thing" of his wearing the cassock were other priests. One pastor told me that some of his brother priests "go bonkers" over younger priests wearing cassocks. Father Okonski speculated that older priests may get agitated over the return of the cassock because, by the time Vatican II came around, "they were just tired of it. They had to live in it for the most part." A priest friend of mine was told by another priest he looked "ridiculous" wearing a cassock. When I brought the topic up in an email, one priest responded to me with an enthusiastic and delighted smackdown of the very idea of young priests walking around in the old school cassock.

(Such a young priest's pre-eminent apostolic ambition is to unilaterally install altar rails, disband social justice committees, with Teutonic emotional sterility preach against birth control and, with all the warmth of a hockey rink, preface the distribution of communion with, "Those who are in good standing with the Church..." Or so goes the impression.)

(And don't get me wrong, I have heard stories that approach this reality. Nevertheless....)

And who else has their suspect eyes on the cassock wearers? You? Or people you know? Or this author? Or...?

Who is letting other people's clothing choice get so deeply under their skin?

Anyway, so there's that.

Pause.

At this point I had intended to wrap this all up with a robust summary analysis of the socio-ecclesial matrix of modern evangelization as refracted through the inter-sacerdotal, textile-centered tensions arising out of the reclaiming of *ars celebrandi* as framed by Pope Benedict XVI in the midst of a reckoning with hyper-casual social norms as sifted through the experiential factotums of how long it takes a young priest to purify a chalice versus how long it takes a chalice to purify a young priest....

But to be honest? I don't think it's worth it.

I don't think it's worth it in the best way that kind of thing isn't worth it. Namely, the native problem of analysis: of trying to figure out, to dissect, to draw conclusions about people, to answer the why. Rather than just...let it be. Just notice a cassock and wonder about a cassock and then let it go. Because analyzing and figuring out and summing up and drawing conclusions about people and what they do and what garments they put on their body can be just another way to try and control them. And control life. Which is pretty much counter to the very idea of evangelization in the first place: to share the Word, and then let the Word do what it will.

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



istock/PKM/America illustration

A Good Call

How one Little League umpire cultivates faith on the field

By Brendan DeVenney

That's so bad!

How is he supposed to hit that!?

Wait, that's not right!

I get these and many other comments yelled at me weekly while serving as an umpire for a youth baseball league. It can be unnerving, but I am rarely the only person on the field who is stressed out. Plenty of umpires, coaches and parents, who participate for the love of the game, also struggle with the strenuous, pressure-packed culture of competition in youth sports. Parents sign up their children for leagues that cost thousands of dollars; they buy them equipment that replicates that of the major leagues. Many pressure their sons and daughters to play at the same level as elite athletes.

This was not the culture of youth sports that I remember playing. My father coached many of my teams, and I was always in leagues in which my fellow teammates were of all different skill sets. That was what made playing youth sports so exciting and fun. The encouragement, development and spirit of the game was the same for all involved.

Now, as a youth baseball umpire, I see my service as a spiritual opportunity. I try to grow in my personal faith through the efforts and teamwork I witness on the field, but also to use this vocation as a way to show the light of Christ to others. I was reminded of this when reading *Pray Like a Champion Today*, by Nate Wills, C.S.C., the chaplain of the Notre Dame football team, when he recounted praying with football referees, who he says are the ones “no one talks to” before the games. Given that, he makes an effort to

introduce himself to the refs and strike up conversations, which he mentions sometimes provide “an unexpected moment to encounter his faith on the field and to celebrate our brotherhood in Christ.” He strives to “integrate my own faith in a way that shines more brightly through the things I do and say.” In my time as a baseball umpire, I have found this to be true.

With that in mind, I would like to share some lessons from my time on the diamond, lessons that parallel our life in the church and in our relationship with Jesus Christ.

Umpiring has opened my eyes to a new understanding of justice. Practicing equality and justice on the field means having the same strike zone for both teams. It means enforcing the same rules for both sides, even when you might feel badly for an inferior team. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us, “Justice is the moral virtue that consists in the constant and firm will to give their due to God and neighbor” (No. 1807). Justice allows everyone a chance to win.

During one game I umpired this year, a pitcher was having what seemed to be the best game of his young life. He got the first 12 batters out in the first four innings of this Little League six-inning game, meaning he was six outs away from a perfect game. The realization dawned on me, and the tension in my body built as I thought, *Do not screw this up for him.*

But of course, the other team was still trying to perform at their best and win as well. I was not just umpiring for this young player trying to achieve an amazing feat. I had to be neutral in my calls and give both teams a fair shot. Four pitches into the fifth inning and the young pitcher walked his first batter of the game. There would be no perfect game that night. Much as it would be enticing to call a perfect game, I was not going to call a bad pitch a strike. And I doubt that player would have wanted that either.

Umpiring allows me to practice discipline. Any coach or parent has the right to stand up for their player if they believe an umpire has made a bad call. (And, believe me, I have gotten many calls wrong.) But too often, I have seen this go too far. We have all witnessed, perhaps at live games or in viral videos, parents yelling at umpires and referees, often to the point of distracting their children from enjoying the game.

I have been on the receiving end of those yells only a handful of times. When a coach or parent, and sometimes even a player, yells at me and screams in my face, the temptation to yell and scream back is one of my first instincts. Sports can become emotional, especially in hard-fought, close games with a great deal at stake. However, we are not playing in the major-league World Series. That's why I remind myself of Mark 8:36: “For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?”



Justice allows everyone a chance to win.

There is a famous saying, often attributed to St. Teresa of Calcutta: “People are often unreasonable, illogical and self-centered. Forgive them anyway.” It is one of the greatest lessons to be learned from the lives of the saints. We are called to give the best that we have, even when it hurts, even when others try to bring us down, because our spiritual conscience compels us to follow God’s rule, not those of any sport or society.

The biggest question one can ask when we are faced with temptation is, “Are we strong enough to walk away?” Often, the best response to our being met with anger, humiliation or self-centeredness is no response at all. When people yell and get frustrated with you, practice forgiving them anyway. Because everyone deserves the same dignity and respect as children of God.

Umpiring has taught me to be humble. As I said, I don’t get every call right. And most of the time, I know immediately when I got it wrong. Admitting that error can be humbling. But when we acknowledge our mistakes and admit that we are wrong, we are actually living as Christ would call us to live. We are choosing to do the hard thing, even when we wish we could do otherwise. If we practice humility, we imitate and serve Christ, living our faith in front of others.

One night when I was umpiring a fairly competitive game, I was becoming quite exhausted from the heat and the quick pace of the game. I could tell that one team’s coach was not happy with some of my calls, and then one play that I missed pushed him over the edge. He became pretty vocal about my blunder. Between innings, he and I discussed the issue, and I simply acknowledged, “Coach, I will admit that I missed that play at first base.” He responded by saying, “You know what, that’s a great umpire right there. You earned all my respect tonight just by admitting that.”

Umpiring has taught me to cultivate joy. This is perhaps the most important lesson I have learned from umpiring. All eyes are going to be on an umpire during a game. You are the only one wearing a uniform that looks different. In most cases, you’re on a team of one, in your own silo. So, in an effort to combat this, one of the first things I find myself doing is acknowledging everyone around me. I’ve seen too many umpires who just show up at the field, seclude themselves behind home plate and let the game start. As a way of showing both teams’ coaches, players and fans that I am engaged and interested in being there, I offer simple pleasantries like, “Beautiful night for a ballgame!” or “Don’t go easy on me tonight!” All of these express a joyful approach to umpiring, which cultivates an environment in which everyone can go into the game with a joyful attitude.

In “*Evangelii Gaudium*,” Pope Francis reminds us what evangelization is: “Proclaiming Christ means showing that

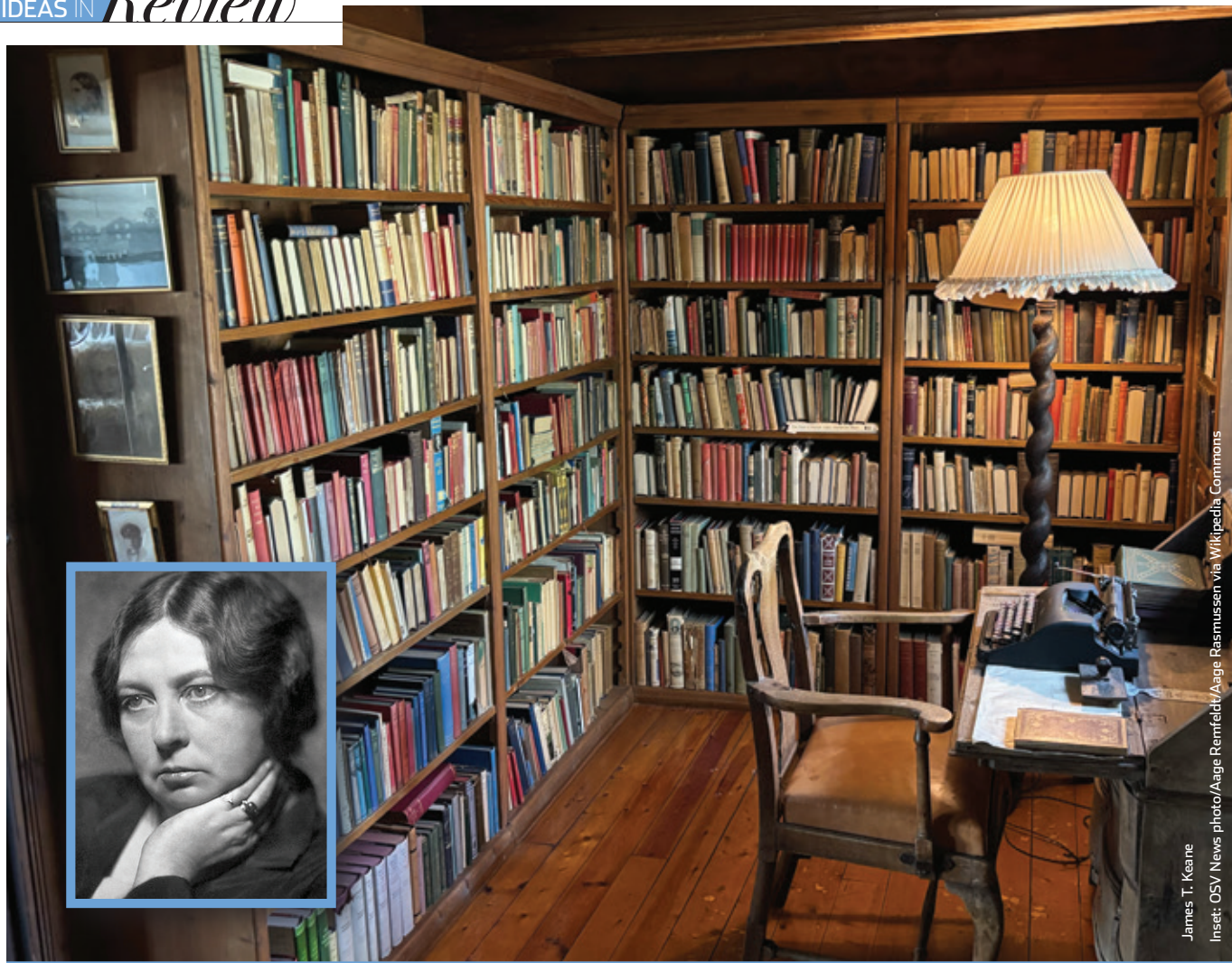
to believe in and to follow him is not only something right and true, but also something beautiful, capable of filling life with new splendour and profound joy, even in the midst of difficulties” (No. 167). Read that again: “Profound joy, even in the midst of difficulties.” Cultivating joy and happiness in the most difficult or uncomfortable spaces is never easy, but it can be among the most important things we do in our spiritual lives.

Joy, peace and happiness are what sports can bring to people every day. In the last line of his letter on the value of sport, titled “*Life in Abundance*,” Pope Leo XIV, a well-known fan of baseball himself, reminds us that “sport can truly become a school of life, where all can learn that abundance does not come from victory at any cost, but from sharing, from respecting others and from the joy of walking together.”

I look at every game I umpire as a journey from the first pitch to the last out, walking together with each player through all of the emotions that come with growing in their love of the sport and learning the complexities that come with it. Our faith, too, is complex and must be formed through accompaniment during our failures and challenges, our sins and losses, not just through the accomplishments God makes possible for us by way of our gifts and talents.

When we are in the midst of striving for greatness and winning, trying to be perfect in everything we do, we must not forget the love that is at the heart of what we are doing in the first place. Because, whether on the baseball field or in everyday life, humility, justice, charity and joy lead us to new ways to live our faith and encounter Christ in the most unexpected places.

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James T. Keane
Inset: OSV News photo/Aage Remfeldt/Aage Rasmussen via Wikipedia Commons

Sigrund Undset: Scholar, Storyteller and...Saint?

By James T. Keane

Sigrund Undset had an ugly house.

Not really, but when one approaches the facade of Bjerkebaek, her home in the town of Lillehammer in her native Norway, it is hard to find it charming. Truth be told, it looks like a military bunker.

What is visible is a modern accretion, part of the Bjerkebaek Visitors Center added in recent decades to the home (really two adjacent houses) that Undset built out of 14th-century predecessors. Once inside, one encounters a different world, a warren of rooms full of books, pictures, Catholic devotional items, religious artifacts and more. “Locals say the house is like Sigrund Undset herself,” my guide told me on a May 2026 visit. “A bit cold and unwelcoming on the outside, but warm and full of life inside.”

Anyone seeing a picture of the author could believe it: She had a somewhat fierce mien, and even images of her receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature in Oslo in 1928

show an unsmiling woman. Her nonfiction can feel equally no-nonsense and curt. But those who knew her—and the millions who have read her fiction over the past century—encountered an author who was indeed warm and full of life, one whose life and work are points of pride in a country where Undset, a rare Catholic, is an unlikely national hero.

Much of Undset’s fiction—including her famous trilogy, *Kristin Lavransdatter*—is set in 14th-century Scandinavia. The novels tend to run long, with the aforementioned trilogy topping out at over 1,100 pages. And while *Kristin* was translated into English by 1927, another seven decades would pass before other translations appeared to compete with an original whose language can feel frankly archaic and stilted to the American ear.

Despite these obstacles, Undset has retained a significant audience of American readers, including many Catholics, who have found her books valuable spiritual

reading. Over the years in **America** and elsewhere, surveys that asked for readers' favorite novel elicited *Kristin Lavrandsdatter* a surprising amount of the time. Is *Kristin* like its chronological twin *Ulysses*, a book that discerning men and women of taste are required to pretend to have read even if they never got past plump Buck Mulligan? Or is there something more to this woman, whose novels were admired by everyone from Willa Cather to Dorothy Day to William T. Vollmann, whose life is being studied by the Vatican's Dicastery for the Causes of Saints?

Journey to Lillehammer

Born in 1882 in Kalundborg, Denmark, Undset moved with her family to the Norwegian capital of Kristiania, now called Oslo, when she was 2. Her father died when she was 11, and Undset went to work as a secretary in Kristiania while she was still a teenager. Bored with the work, she began to write novels, failing in her first several attempts until 1907, when *Marta Oulie* was published. Much of the diary-style novel is about adultery—Undset's first published line was "I have been unfaithful to my husband"—and caused something of a stir in Norwegian literary circles.

Several years later in Rome, she met a Norwegian painter, Anders Castus Svarstad; he was married with three children and 13 years older than she was. After he divorced his wife, the couple married in 1912 and had a child a year later. A second child was born mentally handicapped. In 1919, Undset, now pregnant with their third child, moved to Lillehammer while her husband stayed behind in Rome. The couple soon divorced, and Undset decided to put down roots in Lillehammer, using the ruins of traditional Norwegian homes in the area to build Bjerkebaek.

Norway is geologically part of the same mountain range that makes up the Appalachians, though the latter have been worn down by millions of years of erosion; Norway's landscape, on the other hand, has been profoundly affected by the ice sheets and glaciers that preserved its mountains but carved deep valleys across the terrain as they advanced and retreated from age to age. Lillehammer exists along the hillside of one such valley, perched over Lake Mjosa, the largest lake in Norway. Its steep slopes make the town ideal for skiing and other alpine sports, and in 1994, Lillehammer hosted the Winter Olympics.

Today, Lillehammer is a town of around 30,000 with a thriving tourism industry, but it still has the feel of a small village. Everywhere one sees hiking residents and tourists, and the beauty of the natural landscape overwhelms any sense that modernity has encroached on the valley. A large outdoor museum at one end of town, Maihaugen, offers the

chance to explore what medieval Norway was like, complete with the hulking wooden "stave churches" unique to Norway. Maihaugen itself predates Undset's arrival to Lillehammer, and it is not hard to imagine its restored medieval homes, barns and churches having a profound influence on her imagination as she composed her historical epics.

Writing the Trilogy

After her divorce and the birth of her third child, Undset began writing *Kristin Lavrandsdatter*, publishing its three volumes (*The Wreath*, *The Wife* and *The Cross*) between 1920 and 1922. The trilogy tells the story of a woman born in the Gudbrandsdalen Valley (of which Lillehammer is a part) in Norway in the 14th century. Engaged to a trustworthy neighbor of her pious parents, the titular character has an affair with a freewheeling and adulterous knight, Erlend Nikulaussøn; after she is discovered to be pregnant, she marries Nikulaussøn and moves to his estate. The couple raise a large family, but Nikulaussøn proves both to be a poor husband and a political provocateur. After Nikulaussøn is arrested for treason, Kristin is left to raise her children and defend her family's properties against all comers, including a suitor or two. Her husband eventually returns to his family and tries to reconcile with Kristin.

After Kristin is accused by locals of adultery and the murder of her own son in various intrigues, her ne'er-do-well husband defends her honor and innocence, dying in the process. Kristin gives up the family property and moves to Trondheim to live in an abbey, becoming much more devoted to her Catholic faith (a thematic advantage of setting the books in the 14th century is that the Reformation is not even a consideration; there are no Lutherans yet). While caring for patients in Trondheim during an outbreak of bubonic plague, Kristin saves the life of a local child who has been blamed for the pestilence. She contracts plague herself, as do two of her sons, and...well, you'll have to read it yourself.

Though the trilogy is packed with action and intrigue, it is not salacious or prurient in the least, and Kristin's salutary sacrifices made the novels recommended reading in religious settings as well as in secular Norwegian society. Among its biggest fans in the United States was Dorothy Day, who encouraged women in the Catholic Worker movement for years to read the trilogy.

Embrace of Faith

Even before she began her trilogy, Undset had begun taking a much more intense interest in Catholic Christianity, reading widely in spirituality and history, including the



Undset's novels were admired by everyone from Willa Cather to Dorothy Day to William T. Vollmann.

works of the English writers G. K. Chesterton, Hilaire Belloc and Msgr. Robert Hugh Benson. The shelves of her home in Lillehammer are chock-full of the books of all three, and a picture of Msgr. Benson graces one wall; she named her third son Hans Benedict Hugh partly to honor him.

Undset entered the Catholic Church on All Saints' Day in 1924. She had been baptized a Lutheran as a child but raised agnostic, and was critical of the Norwegian state church before and after her conversion to Catholicism. In 1928, she became a lay Dominican. To be Catholic in Norway at the time was a somewhat lonely destiny: Catholicism was illegal from the Reformation until 1845, and monastic orders remained banned until 1897. Jesuits were not allowed into the country until 1956, seven years after Undset's death. Lillehammer had no Catholic church until 1970. To many Norwegians at the time, her embrace of Rome was an embarrassment, leading to the sneering nickname for her: "The Catholic Lady."

Undset's faith clearly influenced everything that came from her pen in the years to come. Her first three novels had appeared one after another in her late 20s: *Marta Oulie* in 1907, *The Happy Age* a year later and *Gunnar's Daughter* the year after that. Next came a book that from its title sounds like it should be from 1996, not 1911: *Jenny*. It was followed by *Spring* in 1914.

After the *Lavrandsdatter* trilogy came the tetralogy *The Master of Hestviken*, published between 1925 and 1927. Eight more novels would appear between 1931 and 1939, including two ambitious books that abandoned historical settings for 20th-century Norway, *The Wild Orchid* and *The Burning Bush*.

Biographies, essay collections and other nonfiction writings rounded out Undset's oeuvre; she also published frequently in journals and other venues.

War and Peace

Undset's receipt of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1928—she is one of four Norwegians to be so honored, the most recent being Jon Fosse in 2023—made her a household

name in Norway even for those who had not read her work. It also made her political positions the source of public commentary, including her sharp criticisms of Adolf Hitler and Nazism as Europe headed toward World War II in the late 1930s.

After Germany invaded Norway on April 9, 1940 (Undset had met Dorothy Day in Oslo just two days before), Undset moved to neighboring Sweden. Her son Anders was killed in Norway soon after by the Nazis, who also commandeered her home for officer's quarters. Undset traveled to the United States the long way—across Finland, the Soviet Union and the Pacific Ocean—and spent the rest of the war in New York.

In January 1941, Undset again met Dorothy Day at a dinner at the New York home of the noted stained-glass artist Viggo Rambusch Sr. Another guest was **America's** future editor in chief John LaFarge, S.J., who was involved for many years in St. Ansgar's Scandinavian Catholic League, a society that provided fellowship for Scandinavian Catholics and numbered over 1,000 members at its peak in the 1960s.

Day described Undset and the dinner in her diary. "She is a tall, deep-chested, long-limbed woman with a look of great health and vigor. She has a broad forehead, large, exceptionally beautiful and clear eyes, set flat in the head."

"So many of our own women in the [Catholic Worker] movement, as well as so many of our readers have been strengthened and enlightened by Madame Undset's books that I cannot forbear giving this personal little glimpse of her," Day continued.

Undset spoke and wrote in various venues during the war years against the Nazi regime and on other topics of political interest, including five essays for **America**. One was a transcribed talk on "truth and fiction" in which she offered the following advice:

We Catholics have the wellspring of Truth to draw from, and we are the heirs to the accumulated truths of pre-Christian ages. To us, it should not be fiction versus facts, but fiction should relate facts to truths, through knowledge, imagination, intuition and conscientious work. It should really be our rule, never to tell lies, and to tell the truths that must be told—the truths we need not tell should always be implicit behind our work.

After the liberation of Norway in 1945, Undset returned to Lillehammer, but no more novels were to come. She suffered from poor health for several years and died of kidney disease in 1949. She is buried in a nearby village and is honored in Lillehammer by the museum at her home and a prominent statue in the middle of town.



Sigrid Undset's home in Lillehammer. She used materials from traditional Norwegian timber log houses to construct the home in the 1920s.

St. Sigrid?

On July 8 of this year, Bishop Fredrik Hansen of Oslo announced that he had initiated a canonization cause for Undset, putting her on the path toward sainthood. “She showed a constant and practical concern for the poor. She gave of herself in caring for her daughter, in her commitment to life and to the sanctity of life,” Bishop Hansen said in a homily. So too, though, were her writings part of the story: “Through her many books she has shaped countless believers, inspired them to live in Christ, and borne witness to our medieval saints.”

The canonization process is a long one, and as a laywoman without the backing of a religious order or a widely recognized local cult of adoration (Norway is home to around 200,000 officially registered Catholics in a country of 5.6 million), Undset might not seem like the most likely candidate to be raised to the altars. But the initiation of the process demonstrates the impact she has had in Norway and elsewhere. “She is far more than an author and Nobel Prize laureate,” said Bishop Hansen. “For us, she is a model of Christian faith, of a life lived in virtue, and of the pursuit of holiness.”

Sigrid Undset has always had an appeal for American readers that seems to transcend—at least in the Catholic Church—many of our tribal boundaries. There are as many articles over the years pleading with readers to give her a try in traditionalist Catholic journals as there are in the pages of *America* or *Commonweal*. Some of that might be part of the obsession in some Catholic circles with anything medieval, to be sure. At the same time, Undset's ability to reach Catholics across the aisle (and in different ages and places) offers a lesson about literature.

No one doubts the literary quality of *Kristin Lavransdatter* or many of Undset's other works; she is regarded

more or less universally as an illuminating and rare talent. Nor does one have to know her politics or religion, necessarily, to appreciate her work. The present-day novelist William T. Vollmann—who describes himself as religiously “agnostic plus”—has praised Undset as one of his favorite authors. “One need not be Catholic (I am not) to be utterly caught up in Undset's imagined medieval Norway,” he said in 2006. Nor need one be a particular kind of Catholic, if my own experience rings true. Among those who have called *Kristin Lavransdatter* “the greatest Catholic novel ever written” or remembered reading it as a cherished memory are some of the most religiously and politically progressive people I know; so too are some of her greatest promoters in contemporary American Catholicism people who would surely describe themselves as staunchly traditional and religiously conservative.

What do these novels have that the rest of us need? It is a cliché to suggest that literature can save us. But the life and work of Sigrid Undset suggest that literature can indeed transcend the particular history in which it was born to offer something more, something we can share and appreciate across the ages. Sigrid Undset would call it—without a second thought—Truth. Whether we agree with that or not, we seem all to agree that she was closer to what it is than most of us.

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

The Careful Realism of Molly McNett's Historical Fiction

By Brigid McCabe

When the voice of an 18th-century French Jesuit missionary came into Molly McNett's head, she didn't know exactly what to do with him. How would he fit into the novel she was beginning to weave, a piece of fiction inspired by historical captivity narratives set in the colonial Americas? But the more she researched and wrote, the more this Catholic priest began to feel like one of the most integral parts of the story she wanted to tell.

The voice would become Simon Floquart, S.J., a central character in McNett's 2025 novel *Child of These Tears*. Father Floquart's perspective is featured alongside narration from the young voice of Constance Baker, an English girl abducted by members of the Mohawk tribe, as well as several other figures who shape her world, including Constance's English parents and the Mohawk tribe members who take her in.

Real people with stories like that of Constance Baker and her mother, Sarah, first sparked McNett's interest in writing a book like *Child of These Tears*. While in school, she had read primary-source captivity narratives like that of Mary Rowlandson, an English colonial woman who had recorded the story of her capture in 1676 by Native Americans in *The Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*. The intensity of these stories, and their unique literary format, stayed with McNett for years. Eventually, she began to think about how to adapt this genre in her own writing.

McNett delved into research, determined to develop a meaningful understanding of a historical era in which she was not an expert. One major resource was the 1994 historical nonfiction book *The Unredeemed Captive*, written by the historian John Demos. The book offers a detailed account of the raid by Mohawks on the English colony of Deerfield, Mass., in 1704. In a video-call interview with **America**, McNett described *The Unredeemed Captive* as a "point of departure" for the story that would become *Child of These Tears*.

The Unredeemed Captive focuses on the plight of a girl named Eunice Williams who was captured by Native Americans along with members of her family and community. Williams assimilated into Mohawk culture with guidance



from a French Catholic priest. When given the opportunity to return to her surviving biological family members and her English community, Williams—who by that time was known by the name Marguerite Kanenstenhawi—decided to stay with her Mohawk community.

Like the historical Marguerite Kanenstenhawi, Constance's identity becomes complicated throughout the novel as her name and language habits evolve with time. She adopts the name Skentsiese and then also Marie-Ange, titles given to her by the Mohawks who adopt her and the Catholic priest who ministers to her, respectively.

As her stay with the Mohawks in French Canada lengthens, so too does her receptivity to Father Floquart's Catholic teachings grow. Toward the end of the book, the young girl is caught between the desires of the Puritan community, which wants to take her back to their colony, and those of her own heart, which urge her to stay with the Mohawk people who have become her family. As she struggles with feeling lost, torn between cultures and identities, the young girl experiences a distressing dream in which she struggles to "find her way home." It is the presence of Father Floquart in her dream, holding a golden monstrance,

that brings her comfort and allows her to realize she need not worry because she is "already home."

Missionary Records

In comparison with the voice of Constance, which McNett described as "the hardest part of the book for me to write," she said Father Floquart came to her most easily. "Sometimes when you're writing, you feel like something's just given to you," she said. "You don't have to struggle for it. It just comes."

But McNett also consulted sources that helped ensure that Father Floquart would be a realistic representation of the Jesuit priests of his time. She described reading and enjoying much of the *Jesuit Relations*, a published compilation of French Jesuit missionary reports from the 17th- and 18th-century colonial world.

It wasn't necessarily the holiness of these missionaries that struck her, she said, but rather their profound humanness. "[There are] a lot of requests for comfort and things that might make life there more palatable," in the correspondence, she said. "So you have these men who are very devout and who've given their lives over to these missions. And yet at the same time, they're not completely comfortable in [their] setting. And they're wrestling with that."

Similarly, she said, the missionaries often expressed their irritation with the Native people they were sent to minister to. "[The priests] aren't afraid to show their humanness, their minor irritations," she said. "I might have thought, before I read them, that these letters would be written to make [the priests] look good, to say 'I did this, and I converted this many people.' And they did say that, but they were also very frank about their human feelings."

In particular, she cited the writing of the real Jesuit named Joseph-François Lafitau, who published a work called *Customs of the American Savages, Compared With the Customs of Ancient Times* in 1724. The account is based on Lafitau's own experience working as a missionary in French Canada in the early 18th century. McNett said reading Lafitau's work offered a "feeling of security" about the accuracy of Father Floquart's character, since *Child of These Tears* is set "right near the time period that he wrote about" and because "he did write about the Mohawk."

Holy Suffering

One of the most frequently recurring themes in Father Floquart's narrations is his fixation on the notion of holy suffering. "I think the priest really wants suffering, desires it," McNett said. She explained:

He has these examples of...martyrs who have suffered these terrible things and they're famous by this time. So there's stories of [people] having their tongues cut out and still praying and so on. These things are sort of a burden for him. Can he live up to this kind of sacrifice and suffering? He feels that perhaps his faith isn't true until it's been tested in this kind of way. So there's this sort of craving for it. At the same time, he loves comfort, so he's not sure that he would be worthy of it...but he desires it.

Father Floquart is not the only character in *Child of These Tears* who views suffering through a spiritual lens. Sarah Baker, Constance's mother, suffers perhaps more than any other central character in the book, enduring her own capture, the loss of her children and concerns over her husband, John, who is emotionally and mentally drained by the destruction of his family. Sarah's descriptions of her traumatic experiences, McNett explained, are highly colored by her Puritan attitude. "She certainly sees everything that happens as God's will. This is her interpretation of everything: What does God want from me in this situation?"

As McNett pointed out, there are moments when this unquestioning piety seems unbelievable, and perhaps in those moments "there might be some distance between what she's saying and what she's feeling," such as when her child dies and she thanks God for "taking the child back into the fold." But McNett said that this language came straight from real letters and Puritan writings. "It was common for children to die in childhood," she said, speaking about the challenge of living as a Puritan colonist, "and this was very common, to talk about it in that way, to immediately give thanks for the death of the child because the child would now be taken back to the fold"—in other words, to heaven.

Readers also get some glimpses of the Puritan faith and culture through the voice of John Baker, Constance's father. The chapters told from his perspective mostly take the form of a "commonplace book"—a collection of thoughts, notes, advice and excerpts from other published texts. For John Baker, these often include ideas from famous philosophers, sermons from Puritan preachers and quotes from Scripture. In the final entry in his commonplace book, written after his daughter refuses to leave the Mohawks and return to the English colony, he cites a famous story about St. Monica and her son, St. Augustine of Hippo. At the time of the story, Augustine had not yet turned toward the faith, and was living "under the sway of the Manicheans."

As John explains, Monica went crying to a bishop, beg-

ging him to “win her son’s soul for the Lord.” The bishop told Monica that she had no reason to worry. John’s entry includes the famous exchange between the bishop and Monica: “*Go your way*, said he. It is impossible that the child of these tears should perish.”

The title of McNett’s novel is lifted from this quotation. When asked about it, McNett connected this story with the plights of the characters in the book, pointing to the fact that when her story ends, Sarah and John Baker are grappling with the loss of their daughter. Although she is still alive, she continues to remain apart from them; so too is their hope for her “salvation” diminished, as she has accepted Mohawk ways and Catholic influence and, in the process, abandoned her Puritan catechism.

Using this quote as the title was McNett’s “way of saying that no matter how it’s interpreted by Sarah or the other characters in the book, we can be assured that this child is safe.” She felt it represented John Baker choosing to accept this idea and attempting to release his worry and sorrow. “The problem is going to be solved on another plane,” she said, speaking of John’s reckoning with the situation. “That’s kind of what he comes to.... It’s not for

him to figure out how [her safety] is possible, but for him to know that it is.”

These questions of spiritual questioning and reckoning are central to McNett’s interest in characters like those featured in *Child of These Tears*. “I’m drawn to people of faith,” she said, “I’m drawn to people who are struggling with their faith, trying to define it for themselves, trying to live it in spite of their circumstances.”

This is true in spite of her own lack of distinct religious identity. “You know, I’m not Catholic. I was raised Protestant, and my nuclear family is Jewish. But I love these Christian writings.... Why that is, I don’t know exactly, but I find I’m less and less interested in things that *aren’t* wrestling with [these themes].”

Writing about these things, she said, offers a depth of meaning that she feels “secular ideas” often lack. “I think that this is my way of exploring faith too.”

Brigid McCabe is *America’s* assistant editor for digital strategy.

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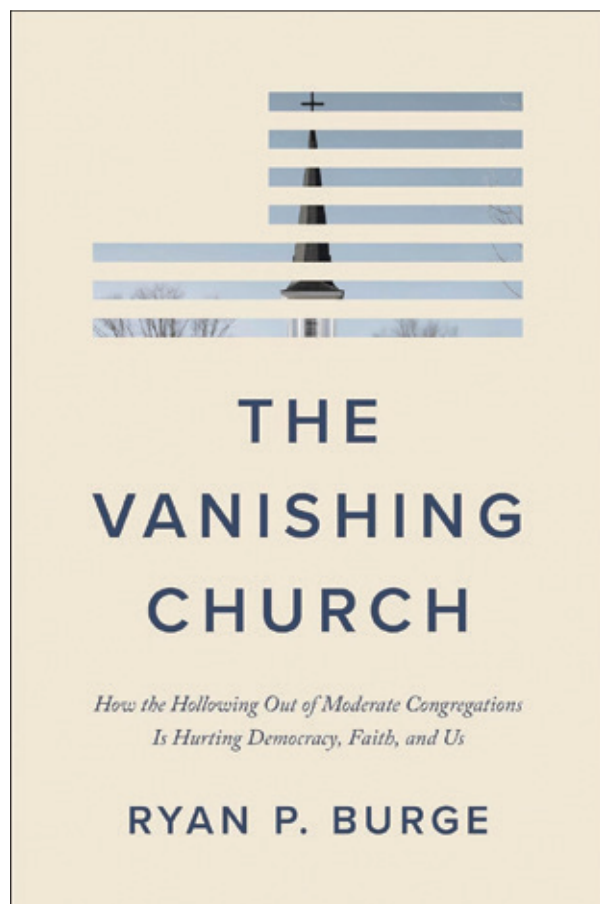


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Brazos Press / 232p \$27

Ryan P. Burge opens his new book, *The Vanishing Church: How the Hollowing Out of Moderate Congregations Is Hurting Democracy, Faith, and Us*, with a story that may feel all too familiar: The small Baptist congregation where he was serving as pastor was aging rapidly, and he began to ask himself when they were going to have to close. More hauntingly, he began to ask where he would go when they did—or if he would even return to church.

Burge grew up an evangelical Protestant but found his way into mainline Protestant churches after he decided the evangelical church did not have as much room for his doubts and questions. The problem for him, however, is that churches like his are rapidly dying out. He didn't know if he would be able to find another church like his.

In *The Vanishing Church*, Burge presents a data-driven picture of how the American religious and political landscapes have transformed together over the past 50 years. While Christian congregations in the United States used to have Democrats and Republicans together in the same pew, Burge's data illustrates how this is becoming more rare, as Christians have overall become more politically conserva-

tive and political liberals have overall become more hostile to religion.

While his book is backed by data taken from surveys like the General Social Survey and the Cooperative Election Study, Burge roots these numbers in his own personal journey as someone whose faith and community are at stake. Refreshingly blunt, Burge calls it like it is, and says that given the rate at which more moderate Christian congregations are declining—and not being replaced with young people—it is unlikely that there will be a resurgence any time soon.

While Christianity has moved to the political right, the “nones”—people who claim no religious affiliation—have become more homogeneously politically liberal and practice the same sort of gatekeeping as their conservative counterparts. Perhaps most troubling in this polarization is the data that suggests that in the majority of American lives, as Burge describes it, “politics impacts religion much more than religion impacts politics.” Liberals feel that they will not find a house of worship suitable for their political views, so “many find the most sensible option when it comes to religion is to leave it behind.” On the flip side, evangelicalism has become for many no more than a label that indicates their conservative political beliefs.

Burge offers some explanations for what happened to bring the United States to the polarization he has outlined. Perhaps most troubling for Catholics who are committed to a preferential option for the poor and vulnerable, Burge explains how churches are becoming less socioeconomically diverse and instead look like gatherings of people who have done things “right”—college educated, middle class and married with children.

As Burge argues, this means that less advantaged and less educated people are being left out of the community support and social capital that religious congregations often provide. It also reinforces political polarization, because people who are critical of social safety nets rarely come into contact with those who most benefit from them.

Burge places the sources of much of the change in the 1990s, including factors like the emergence of the internet, televangelists, the 24-hour news cycle and the rise of the religious right, as well as the decoupling of atheism from communism in the public imagination and the decline of the social stigma that used to come with not believing in God. He also describes how “dirty politics” became more prominent in the 1990s, with politicians being more willing to ruin each other's reputations in order to win.

I am skeptical of claims that politics in our country have never been this bad before—politicians have been ruining each other's reputations since the inception of the

United States—but the data that Burge presents is compelling, and his thesis is thought-provoking.

Burge's argument about why this polarization is a problem for democracy is essentially this: Religious congregations ought to be places where people of diverse backgrounds come together to work toward a common cause and, in doing so, understand each other's humanity. When this diversity declines, there are fewer and fewer opportunities for discussion across differences. This makes it increasingly difficult for Americans and the politicians who represent them to come to any compromises or agreements, which are essential for a functioning democracy.

In his chapter on Catholicism, Burge notes that the Catholic Church is unique in the landscape of American Christianity for its unity and multiculturalism. Catholic churches in rural Pennsylvania and Seattle follow the same order of Mass, and the Catholic Church includes both aging white members and younger, more recently arrived members from around the globe. Still, the data demonstrates that the Catholic Church has not been immune to the polarization that has seeped into the culture of the United States in the past 50 years.

Like white evangelical Protestants, white Catholics have become more politically conservative. Around the 2016 election of Donald Trump, the percentage of white Catholics identifying as Republicans surpassed the percentage identifying as Democrats for the first time in the modern era. The majority of non-white Catholics still vote Democratic, but there has been a slight uptick in Republican non-white Catholics in recent years. Other data shows that the priesthood has shifted even farther to the political right than the remainder of Catholics have, and priests have also become more traditional theologically than Catholics overall.

As more progressive Catholics die out and new, more politically conservative priests become more prominent, "The once-great meeting place of the Catholic Mass will look similarly to what is found in American evangelicalism—a place where like-minded people talk about like-minded topics with no input from thoughtful people on the other end of the political spectrum," Burge writes.

In the final portion of the book, titled "A Way Forward," Burge complicates the picture of polarization and offers a few suggestions for what to do next, including avoiding dehumanizing language and learning to spot fringe beliefs; he also notes that the failure to find the perfect congregation does not need to get in the way of finding a good one. When looking at the data about individual Americans, he posits that the majority of them do not line up entirely with the beliefs of their religion or political party but actually tend to be "fairly moderate, nuanced, and pragmatic in how they

view some of the most talked about and divisive issues in modern society." They just don't speak up about their doubts.

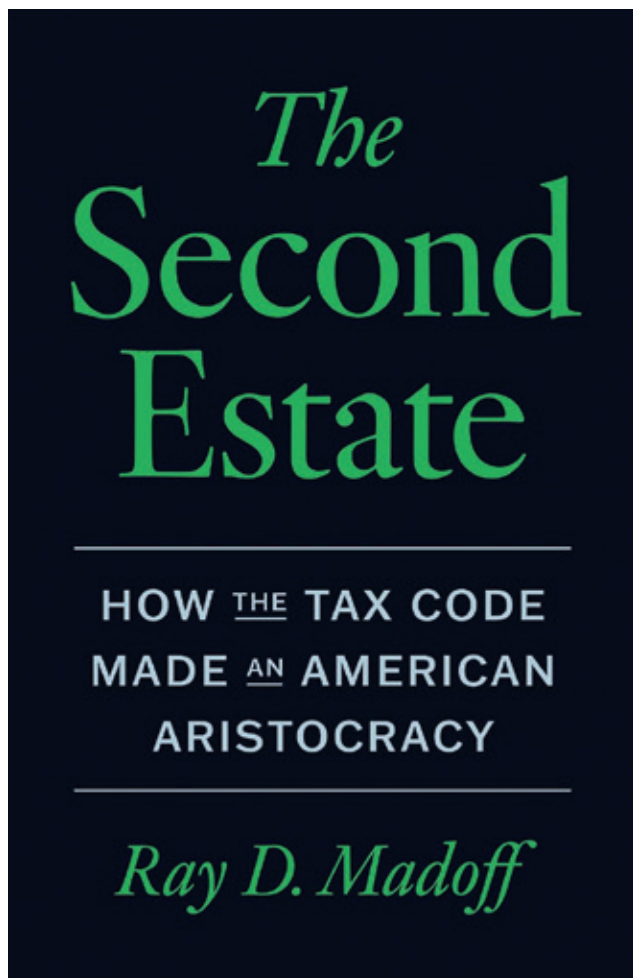
According to Burge, Americans still overwhelmingly believe in God. In 2022, there were seven Americans who believed in God for every one who did not. At the same time, many Americans are not necessarily claiming a religious affiliation or a local church to belong to. These are the "tens of millions of theological and political moderates," Burge writes, many of whom are left "with no place to find community and spiritual edification, or to work collectively to solve societal problems" when their congregations shut down.

This final part of the book left me with many questions, including a curiosity about how Burge's thesis relates to this current moment in American politics. Have politicians like James Talarico and Zohran Mamdani, who often talk about their religious beliefs in relation to their progressive politics, created a landing space for more progressive but still religious people in the United States? And if so, will a similar safe space return in local congregations? How do people actually go about creating that, given the force of the trends in the opposite direction? Or will a new social space emerge outside of the traditional congregation to fill that purpose?

Burge's book also provokes a set of more inward-facing inquiries—an examen of sorts, which any readers of the book could partake in. How have my own political and religious beliefs evolved over the past decade? Did my religious beliefs or my politics come first? How willing am I to engage with people who disagree with me? What will I do if my aging parish declines too much for it to continue?

For anyone who has ever felt politically or religiously homeless—too religious for a progressive friend group or filled with too much doubt for a zealous parish—Burge's book offers a compelling explanation for why the American political and religious landscape has come to this, and even some reassurance that they are not alone. Still, there is much room to expand further upon the way forward for people who find themselves in this chasm.

Kelly Sankowski is a campus minister and freelance writer based in Toledo, Ohio. She holds a B.A. in English and religious studies from the University of Virginia and an M.A. in theology and ministry from Boston College.



University of Chicago Press / 192p \$19

At some time in the past year, you surely heard, saw, ignored or rolled your eyes at the chant “Tax the Rich!” I find “Tax the Rich,” like almost all political slogans, not particularly helpful. (Who’s rich? What kind of taxes?) I prefer unified, cogent policy platforms over slogans, but I acknowledge slogans help start conversations, which is why “Tax the Untaxed Wealth” seems a better starting place.

Wage-earning millionaires are paying a good deal in taxes. I am not so sure the same is true about the ultra-wealthy (jet owners as opposed to first-class fliers, island owners as opposed to two-house owners), whose avoidance of income has birthed an American “second estate.”

In her new book *The Second Estate*, Ray D. Madoff, a law professor at Boston College, connects the pre-Revolutionary French Second Estate to the new class of ultra-wealthy Americans who avoid income taxes almost entirely, amplifying their influence and power. The idea of an emergent American aristocracy, antithetical to both the Catholic faith and American democracy, propels the book’s necessary arguments about inequality and prompts

the question: How do taxation and democracy rely on and mutually support each other?

Income and payroll taxes, and the avoidance of them, take center stage in this book along with the weakened estate tax system and the potential abuse of charitable tax deductions, particularly through donor-advised funds. Madoff balances her opinions of the tax system with a commitment to ensuring that facts, not just public relations successes or failures, guide her book. *The Second Estate* is more a primer for understanding the federal revenue system than a rigorous analysis of all tax questions, and at that it achieves its goal.

Madoff notes three ways that members of the second estate avoid income and payroll taxes. First, they tend to avoid wage income, earning profits through sales of capital assets, which serves as a helpful reminder that raising income tax rates will not necessarily recoup income from everyone equally.

Second, they use the “buy, borrow, die” strategy, in which a person receives a loan (which does not count as income) and offers stock or another investment property as collateral. This system relies on the “stepped up basis” tax provision at death, a uniquely generous and American tax treatment. As a simple illustrative example: If I buy stock for \$1 and sell the stock two years later for \$1,000,000, I would pay taxes on the gain of \$999,999. However, if I die at the two-year mark and pass the stock on to anyone, I will not have paid any taxes on the increase in value—and neither will they. Goodbye, taxes.

Third, they may inherit wealth, which often counts as untaxed federal income for the recipient.

This naturally leads into a discussion about what is called the estate, inheritance or death tax, depending on who you ask. Madoff briefly explores the history of this levy from the founding of our country to the present day. Skepticism toward wealth and power being a family birthright served as a motivating principle in the founding of the United States, and this skepticism turned into tax action in the late 1800s and early 1900s, as the Gilded Age minted social, economic and political power not because of merit but because of birth. The industrialist-turned-philanthropist Andrew Carnegie boosted the idea of charitable giving by individuals and heavy estate taxes imposed by the state.

While the estate tax was modified throughout the 1900s, its end began with President Bill Clinton (underscoring that inefficient tax policy is bipartisan) and accelerated in the 2000s because of changes to the tax code that exempted many estates. In 2000, there were 121,171 estate tax returns filed. In 2021, that number was 6,158.

At its core, *The Second Estate* uses precise yet comprehensible prose to express tax issues as both technical and



Madoff connects the pre-revolutionary Second Estate in France to the new class of ultra-wealthy Americans.

moral in nature. The gift of this book is its embrace of tax questions as not exclusively economic. While written by a law professor, the book is valuable for everyone, whatever one's familiarity with the tax code.

Addressing every aspect of the broad tax code in one book would be impossible, but a brief exploration of taxes beyond federal income taxes would have helped round out the book. The book too briefly explores the history of the 16th Amendment, which gives Congress the authority to impose a federal income tax and could offer insight into contemporary discussions about the constitutionality of a wealth tax. There is more to say about the exempt organization sector that would have fit nicely into this book. For example, donations that grease the wheels of admission to higher education are still tax-deductible. At the same time, the way some philanthropists, such as Craig Newmark or MacKenzie Scott (who donated \$7 billion in 2025 alone), operate deserves more recognition.

Madoff does not mention artificial intelligence, or the mention is so brief that I missed it. Yet society must address the question of the taxation of artificial intelligence, considering the massive, and mostly untaxed, wealth A.I. has generated for entrepreneurs and shareholders.

Finally, *The Second Estate* does not explore the issues that affected tax administration last year, but readers in 2026 will find themselves questioning how the Trump administration's policies have and will further undermine the tax system—and who exactly benefits from this.

The Second Estate, like any book, can also be read through the lenses of the Gospel and of Catholic social teaching. Just as in the times of the Gospel, people discuss wealth inequality because it is an issue, and not the other way around. Jesus challenged these structures of inequality and unethical behavior, inviting tax collectors to be part of the kingdom he preached, and Catholic social teaching can lead us to imagine a just tax system.

Tax policy shows both the virtues and the vanities of the human experience, equal opportunities for grace and sin. *The Second Estate* forces us to grapple with legality and

morality and how tax evasion, even if completely legal, is, like all sin, a separation from God, others and self.

Government functions because of rights and responsibilities. Yes, we have a right to minimize our taxes, but we also have a responsibility to be honest about income. Yes, we have a right to criticize taxes, but we have a responsibility to pay them. Yes, there is a right to prosecute tax evasion, but there is a responsibility for justice to be impartial and rehabilitative.

Taxes build democracy and underscore the idea that universal contribution shows collective values. Paying a tax that supports something I hold as immoral, like the death penalty or certain immigration enforcement actions, inspires my engagement in the democratic process. A system that allows certain people to opt out of paying taxes is not a system that shows a universal call to participation and is less like a democracy and more like a collection of fiefdoms.

Finally, the preferential option for the poor and vulnerable certainly calls us to focus on how much revenue is being raised and what is ultimately done with this revenue. Charitable donations are great, and should be widely embraced, whether in the form of money, goods or time. At the same time, charitable donations are not the same thing as taxes. Care for the poor is both an individual and a societal moral responsibility, one to which we must all contribute.

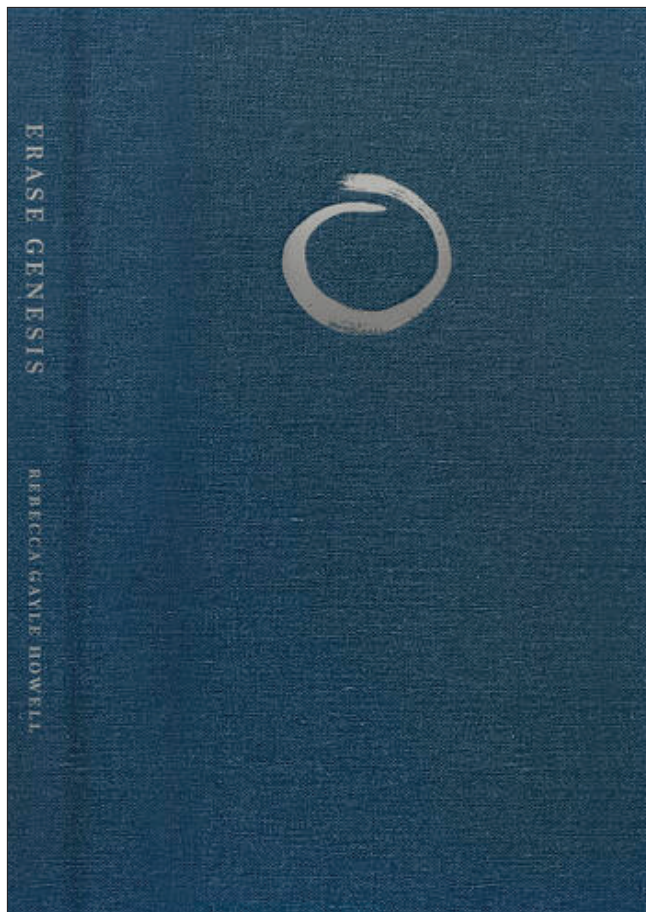
Crafting a tax code involves balancing tradeoffs: spending versus saving, individual risk versus society-wide stability, equality versus inequality. Everyone should have opinions on tax, guided by data, both quantitative and qualitative.

As new facts are presented, as economic conditions shift, as nations develop, as certain industries grow and certain industries die, the best tax policy will shift. However, certain bedrock principles, such as taxation being a responsibility of everyone, including the ultra-wealthy, always undergird effective tax systems. The most disturbing question provoked by *The Second Estate* is how much further America may be from this tax system than we thought. The most hopeful answer is that policy can address, and has addressed, questions of inequality and taxation.

Don't think of the current state of taxes as only a technocratic problem. It's also a moral one.

Robert McCarthy earned both his J.D. and LL.M. degrees in tax at the New York University School of Law. He has served as a tax policy fellow in the Office of Tax Legislative Counsel at the U.S. Department of the Treasury.

IN THE BEGINNING



Bridwell Press / 160p \$50

As a Catholic, I have long “erased” the Book of Genesis—especially the King James Version. I’m not proud of my omission. In *Pen of Iron*, Robert Alter’s consideration of the fourth centennial of the 1611 translation, Alter lamented that the “decline of the role of the King James Version in American culture has taken place more or less simultaneously with a general erosion of a sense of literary language,” although he cautioned that he was “not suggesting a causal link.” For Alter, that grand translation helped form the prose and performance of Abraham Lincoln, Herman Melville, William Faulkner and other monumental stylists.

I appreciate the literary merit of those claims, but my interest in Genesis has always been more academic than spiritual. The King James Version has always felt staid to my ear and eye, and has never come close to stirring my soul. I often skim the text of Genesis, even in more conventionally Catholic translations, on my way to the more stirring books of Isaiah and the Psalms.

For those reasons, I was intrigued to discover *Erase Genesis*, a new book of poems by Rebecca Gayle Howell. A Kentucky-born-and-raised poet, Howell grew up in Elizabethtown, a half hour from Thomas Merton’s monastery,

the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani. Although their lifetimes did not overlap, Howell speaks of being drawn to the monk. “He once wrote that Kentucky is the center of the world,” she said in an interview. “I feel like I know what he meant by that.”

Howell’s book contains hand-painted reproductions of the text of Genesis with some passages obliterated, and the remaining, spare words cascading down the page to form poems. (It feels, and looks, more like an art book than a traditional volume of poetry.) “Loss has always been a part of biblical translation,” Howell has said, “be it by scribes who were behaving editorially or by insects or dust. I see all of them as collaborators.”

Erase Genesis begins, somewhat surprisingly, with a full reprint of the first three chapters of Genesis. The decision feels like an affirmation that the text has a certain efficacy; it is like a gesture of respect. I read those chapters in my car while my daughters were at soccer practice in our forested corner of New Jersey. For the first time, the isolated text bore fruit for me: the anaphoric “and” capturing the litany of creation as I was surrounded by green, with craggy hills in the distance.

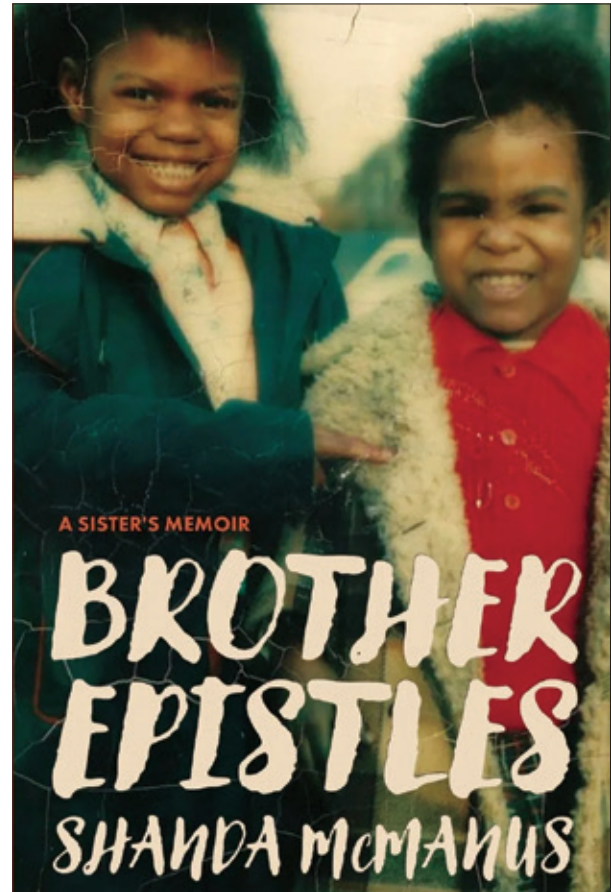
I was struck by how steeped Genesis is in the recursive language of cataloging and body form and flesh. I was reminded of how the words that announce the season of Lent—“for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return”—came from Genesis 3:19.

In his homily for the Easter Vigil Mass in 2026, Pope Leo XIV discussed how the account of creation in Genesis reveals how God brought “the cosmos out of chaos, harmony out of disorder and entrusting to us—made in his image and likeness—the task of being its stewards.” Before him, Pope Francis imagined such stewardship in an ecological vein, as well as through art and literature. I see Howell engaged in such practice.

The paradox of any erasure is that the old text haunts what remains, especially a text as linguistically fundamental to the American imagination as the King James translation. For this reason, Howell’s project seems to exist in the tradition of *midrash*—the shaping of Scripture in light of contemporary concerns and creative interpretation.

Through Howell’s erasure, repetition is laid bare, as in her recasting of Genesis 1:22-29: “the earth/ the earth// the earth// said// Behold, I have given you/ the earth.” Linguistically, the earth—as divinely created space—speaks to us with a much needed reminder, a plea, for stewardship. Howell renders Genesis 3:11-24 with similar animation: “the tree// did// bring/ forth// the voice// saying// Behold.” God is not absent from these revisions. Rather, Howell’s renderings give sound and immediacy to the physical world, so that creation feels absolutely present.

AMERICAN FAMILY



Split/Lip Press / 148p \$18

Howell's work might be better understood as excavation rather than erasure, since Howell is neither adding nor truly removing words. She has described her process as a "natural element" of erasure through watercolor: "[E]ach page in the book is its own primitive painting. I ended up making and remaking the poems by hand, over and over, as I sought the right version of each painting." The result is textured pages that seem not to hide Genesis, but to honor it through isolation of certain words.

Perhaps this is not surprising. Howell has lived with the Bible for much of her life. When she "was eleven or twelve years old," she writes, her "mind turned on, and reading flipped the switch. I wasn't reading novels; I was reading poetry and the Bible." Her parents were not readers; neither were they churchgoers. They worked "split sixteen-hour shifts, seven days a week, 363 days a year" at the family diner. Reading, then, was a sacred education for her; a genesis for a poet.

In her postscript to these erasures, Howell considers the Episcopal theologian Ellen F. Davis's critique of the King James translation of Genesis 1:26-28, especially the word *dominion*. For Davis, "mastery" is closer to the source text. Howell's meditation is as theologic as it is poetic: "The change upsets the iambic pulse of the KJV," she acknowledges. "As any English-language poet will tell you, the dactyl of 'mastery' evokes a growing feeling of weakness—not exactly what those translators were going for. The word 'dominion'—with its voiced plosive 'd' start, paired with its climactic stress pattern—offers the reader liturgical change, both metric and metaphoric."

Even more complicated for both Davis and Howell is the preposition *over*, as in "dominion over." Davis revises the lines to: "exercise mastery among the fish of the sea, and among the fowl of the air, and among every living thing that moveth upon the earth," and Howell feels that *mastery* strikes her more as to "exercise *knowing*," Howell writes: "Be as the shepherd is toward sheep. To pursue knowing, among."

Erase Genesis is a welcome opportunity for readers like me to revisit Genesis with a new vision, one delivered by a serious poet with a spiritual vision. Howell ends her postscript with a pleasant truth: "The Book of Genesis can never be erased."

Nick Ripatrzone has written for *Rolling Stone*, *The Atlantic*, *The Paris Review* and *Esquire*. His books include *Ember Days*, a collection of stories, and *Longing for an Absent God: Faith and Doubt in Great American Fiction*.

We think of letters as a two-way form of communication: They go to and fro in the world, from one writer to the reader, who becomes the writer of the next letter. But sometimes we write letters that are not returned in a traditional way. In *Brother Epistles: A Sister's Memoir*, Shanda McManus does just this, constructing a memoir composed of letters to her deceased brother.

These letters serve more for the writer than for the recipient, a young Black man who has passed away when they were written. They are a way of creating narrative for the living to make sense of life's chaos and tragedy. And while we do not find all the answers in this heart-rending book, we do find much incisive, poignant reflection that opens us up to deep empathy and kinship with the author's grief and growth.

McManus was the memory-keeper for her brother Monir when they were alive; now she is also his memory-keeper in death. Telling his story both creates one for herself and shares her revelations with others, so that they might understand how the grief and racism that has coursed through her life might echo in theirs. In this way, it is a correspondence, an unconventional form of call and response in which the reader's reflection is the call back, and the letters speak to one another of guilt, responsibility,

identity, relationships, faith and so much more.

The author's path diverged from that of her brother; by the time he had returned from the military, including a tour in Iraq, and was selling drugs, she was in medical school, on her way to securing a permanent way out of the poverty that surrounded them in childhood.

Nothing could have prepared her for his murder at the age of 20 in a drive-by shooting that is still unsolved (though she is convinced someone on the street knows who did it). While the police never asked her about it, the detective called her father for years every Christmas telling him not to give up hope—if only because the killer would likely be jailed for something else. This form of justice does not comfort her, however, because it won't bring Monir back.

Monir turned to drug dealing to feed his family after serving in the army, and McManus was conscious that some might blame him for his own murder. To avoid this, she spread a story that protected him, saying perhaps it was a case of mistaken identity. What's interesting is that she wants to protect Monir from being blamed for his murder, but at the same time she also blames herself for letting him down. Neither is the responsible party for the murder, nor could either control how his life would unfold.

As a child, Monir was bitten by a dog that appeared friendly. McManus introduces this story to remind us that "what we assume is safe can rip us open and leave us wounded or worse." And for Monir, staying in the neighborhood he grew up in is what ripped him apart.

McManus asks her brother, "How could we have not seen the future?" Yet she did. A year before he was shot, she dreamed it in vivid detail, a scene that opens the book. This is not a memoir of surprises, but a memoir of discoveries and revelations. "Dreams make me believe we are more than what we can see and touch. In sleep, I experience another reality. I hope you're a believer because now we only meet in dreams," she writes, invoking the biblical history of dreams as prophecies and messages from God.

As much as this book memorializes Monir, it is McManus's story, too, of survival and recovery. Neither happens in a straight line, but through a series of ups and downs, transitions and new experiences. She has just finished her exams in her first semester of medical school when she gets the call that her little brother has been shot.

When he dies, she sees everything "through a film of gray." And yet her decision to stick with God is pivotal. "I had to decide if I was going to have faith in hope. I had to choose to keep believing in God. God who could be good even with the unexplainable, unreasonable and unfair." McManus describes her choice to believe she will see her brother again in heaven as the only option besides a bottomless hole of grief. Her faith emerges as constant throughout the narrative, and the act of writing letters is

also an act of faith.

Drawing on her deep hope of seeing Monir again, she reveals to him a secret kept all this time: She invites her brother to look up her unborn child in heaven, whom she finally names in a letter to him 30 years after her abortion. As a teenager, she did not tell him about this, afraid of what he would do to the father.

Later, she elopes with a white man, something she imagines her brother would not predict. "Some things are unbelievable until they happen," she explains to him. She now lives in a world that is a far cry from their Philadelphia upbringing. People ask if her light-skinned baby is hers when they go out alone. In suburban New Jersey, 20 people in her town of 5,000 are Black, and her husband tells service people in advance that his wife is Black so she has authority to speak with them. Answering a call on a plane for an emergency doctor, she is asked for identification to prove who she is.

It's a world her brother never experienced, but she wonders what his time in the military was like, especially given what he once told her: "If you ain't white, the army ain't right." We get a tiny glimpse into his army days from an addendum of his letters to her in which their affection and closeness shine.

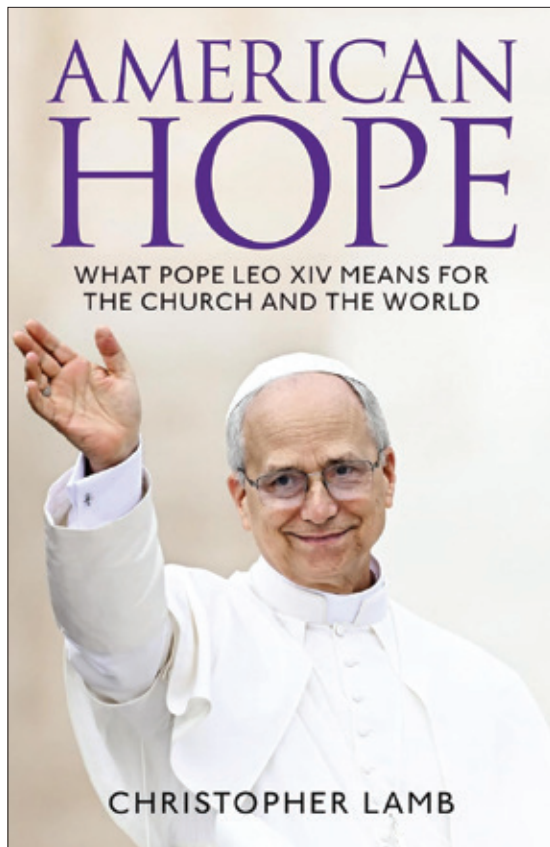
McManus directly addresses racism's link to her brother's murder in one letter, writing: "If you had been white, the chance of you being shot down on the street where you lived would have been small. You'd be alive. Being black whittled down your life expectancy in America. You had a few narrow paths for staying alive, but many wide ways to die." She poses the question of how to love America as a Black person, given that in school the only times she saw Black people in the curriculum were in lessons on slavery and civil rights.

This legacy is part of the American legacy, even in times when the history of the Black experience in the nation is being erased from national parks. The letters invite both author and reader to reflect on racism and poverty. These forces may have affected us differently. But we cannot deny our identities have been impacted by our relationship to them.

Yet perhaps it is the interpersonal relationships we have that are the most powerful of all, hued as they are by systematic injustices. A legacy of grief haunts McManus through her career as she experiences success and builds a family of her own. But as McManus tells Monir, "I stayed alive and became somebody, just like you said I would. You meant becoming a doctor. But I was already somebody before—your big sister."

Cynthia-Marie Marmo O'Brien, a writer, editor and educator, is a graduate of the M.F.A. program at Columbia University. Her work was selected as notable in *Best American Essays* and has appeared in *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Killing the Buddha* and *The Rumpus*, among others.

POPE LEO AFTER ONE YEAR



Headline / 304p \$32

The 16 months since the election of Cardinal Robert Prevost to the papacy have included a new encyclical on artificial intelligence, a media-tempest-inducing interaction with the U.S. president and a series of firsts (trips, consistories and more) for the first U.S.-born pontiff. A quiet man and a relative newcomer to Rome, Leo XIV was elected pope in a bit of a surprise. Vaticanistas and scholars scrambled to demystify the Chicago-born Augustinian's background in the early days of May 2025.

Two veteran Vatican journalists have now published substantive biographies of Prevost to help Catholics get to know the man once known as Padre Roberto. Christopher Lamb's *American Hope: What Pope Leo XIV Means for the Church and the World* lays out the basics of the new pope's biography and some early clues about his governing style. Meanwhile, Elise Allen provides a substantive, in-depth and well-sourced biography in *Pope Leo XIV: The Biography*, originally published in Spanish and translated into English by Stephen R. Di Trollo.

In five easy-to-read chapters, Lamb introduces us to Prevost's early influences, his education at home and abroad and his closeness to Pope Francis. As the title implies, this biography is aimed at Catholics in the United States, offering its best insights about where Leo's church leadership

and our country's political leadership diverge in substance and style. Leo's emphasis on unity and transparency provide what Lamb calls a "spiritual counterweight" to the political polarization of the contemporary United States.

In the past year, Americans have witnessed several media skirmishes between Washington and Rome. Though not unexpected, given both the bombastic personality of the current U.S. president and the novelty of a Chicagoan pope, these confrontations illuminate important differences between ecclesial and secular government. In an era of technocrats and A.I. "bros" who encourage business to "move fast and break things," Lamb sketches a portrait of a pope formed by the Augustinian charism of focused listening, community building and shared discernment.

As echoes of an "America First" ethos still reverberate in contemporary U.S. politics, Lamb emphasizes Prevost's extensive international experience. And as many countries experience a rise in authoritarian rule, Lamb assures us that Leo remains committed to implementing synodal governance at all levels of the church—which, rather than surrendering the authority of the papacy, in fact enhances that authority.

Throughout *American Hope's* portrait of the pope, Lamb gives emphasis to issues that could potentially matter to U.S. Catholics. Questions of unity and diversity in the church, the role of women, fidelity to the vision of Pope Francis and even the rise of artificial intelligence guide the narrative, which is punctuated with quotes from Americans as diverse as Margaret O'Brien Steinfels and will.i.am. What emerges is a portrait of a quiet but determined Prevost, whose intention in choosing the name Leo is rooted in his conviction that technology has once again thrust humanity into an uncharted and potentially death-dealing labor landscape.

Lamb also emphasizes Prevost's experience as a seminarian at Catholic Theological Union, where, unlike many other bishops who were trained in all-male seminaries, the current pope studied alongside and was mentored by women scholars. While we cannot know the fullness of the effects of this coeducational milieu, Lamb notes that Leo "does not look down on women, which, unfortunately, isn't always true of those in the highest positions of the church." It's a start.

Elise Allen provides a deeper dive into the pope's life (before and now) in *Pope Leo XIV: The Biography*. With a culminating chapter that is essentially an extended interview with Pope Leo at Castel Gandolfo conducted by Allen in July 2025, this biography delves deep into Prevost's background in Chicago, in Peru and in the Augustinian order. Allen describes in detail the crucibles that forged the man who would become Leo XIV, from his bout with typhoid early during his time in Chiclayo in Peru through his battles with Opus Dei as a Peruvian bishop to his abrupt arrival and

swift integration into the Roman Curia.

Allen's firsthand reporting features interviews with Prevost's family members, his superiors in the Augustinian order and his local community in Peru as well as his collaborators in Rome, along with her extended dialogue with the pope himself. We get insider accounts of how Prevost governed his diocese (with processes that match what we would now call synodal discernment, heavy on lay participation) and his religious order (with focused listening and deep conversation followed by definitive decision making and respect for proper procedures). Allen delves into the intricacies of Prevost's time in Peru, including conflicts with other pastors and bishops, which he navigated in a collegial and respectful way.

We learn how Padre Roberto empowered laypeople, especially women who were already doing a bulk of parish work, and put many into leadership roles that remain today. We also get a glimpse of the complexities of being a U.S.-born missionary at a time of political upheaval in Peru.

What emerges from both these texts is an image of a pope who, like his predecessor, is a product of the Second Vatican Council. Pope Leo is clearly committed to the vision of a church where laypeople and clergy are co-responsible for both the interior life of the church and the church's social action in the world. As a theologian, I am heartened to see a pope who understands both how the patriarchal entrenchment of the Curia works and also how to work through and past that entrenchment through listening and action when needed.

Allen and Lamb both emphasize that Leo is likely to be a pope who institutionalizes the vision of Pope Francis, who was himself a dreamer more than someone who knew how to operate the levers of power. But Leo differs from Francis. He has served as the head of an international religious order as well as a bishop of an economically disadvantaged diocese in Latin America; he has also been the head of a vital dicastery who worked closely with the pope.

What some fear are echoes of Pope Paul VI's introverted, quiet style of leadership are described by Allen as characteristics of a leader who has experience at every level of church governance and is familiar with how to build and use power. What all these characteristics mean is that the papacy of Leo XIV has the potential to be profoundly consequential. In Leo we have a leader who is comfortable with broad consultation and definitive action, who will listen to a wide range of stakeholders and work within Rome's mechanisms to effect real change.

As an ecclesiologist, I found hope in reading both these biographies. If Leo XIV's first encyclical is any indicator, these authors have correctly seen the pope as a possibly transformative figure at a time of global upheaval. Rather

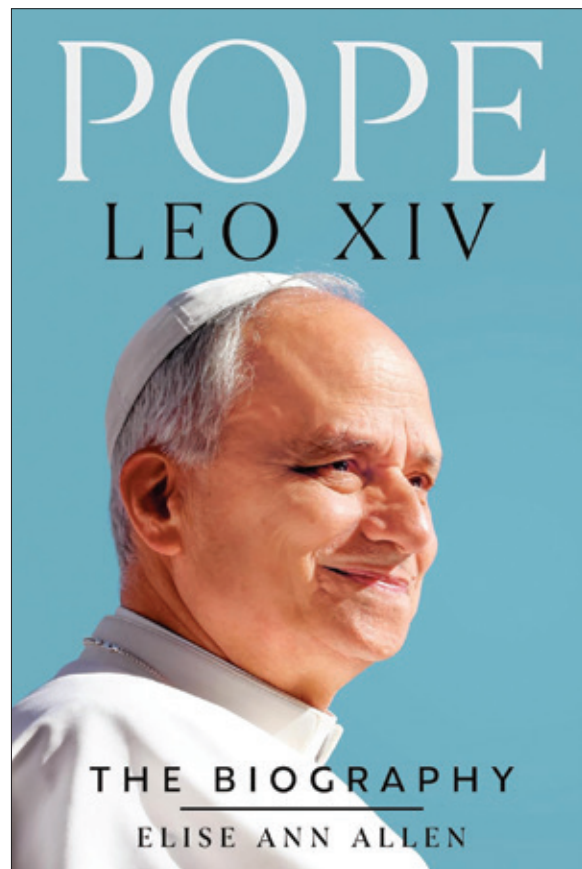


Image Books / 336p \$28

than being an extroverted, off-the-cuff, candid interviewee on planes (as Francis was), Leo is poised, measured and institutional at heart. The synodal process that Francis brought to the global institutional church was already operative in parts of Latin America, including in Peru when Prevost was there. His habit of including and empowering laypeople, especially women, but also anyone who is qualified and willing to do the church's work, bodes well for a church still seeking to embody the vision of full and active participation of all members, and still working to become and remain a sacrament of the reign of God on earth.

Far from being an Americanist pope, Leo's multiculturalism affords him a level of authenticity when he critiques global politics that are very much influenced by U.S. foreign policy. His educational background and fascination with systems, engineering and finance are assets to a church that has largely been run on handshakes and interpersonal understandings.

Plus, both authors stress how much Prevost loves to drive. It doesn't get more American than that.

Natalia Imperatori-Lee is an associate professor of systematic theology at Fordham University. She is the author of *Women and the Church* and *Cuéntame: Narrative in the Ecclesial Present*.

Provocations of Parables and Pharisees

October reminds us of harvest time, and the readings of the first Sunday this month fittingly offer lessons about both the yield of a vineyard and the character of those who harvest the grapes. Such images and a parable issue both caution and an invitation to all who work in God's vineyard while bringing about the abundance of the kingdom of God. The readings for the second week converge around a common image, that of a celebratory wedding feast made possible by such bountiful vineyard harvests. In particular, the Gospel features the familiar parable of the king who gave an extravagant wedding feast for his son to which those invited declined to come. We learn that when receiving an invitation, it is not enough simply to attend these festivities; it is also required that one wear the garment of good works in order to be seated at the table.

In the readings for the final two weeks of the month,

Jesus is challenged by the Pharisees, who seek to discredit his growing authority as a teacher. In answer to their first inquiry, Jesus reminds them and us to “repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God” (Mt 22:21). Here we are asked to consider what in our lives belongs to each of these domains or whether, in fact, all in our lives belongs to God. In the final week's readings, the Pharisees question Jesus again, asking him to identify the greatest commandment. As usual, Jesus delivers more than they ask for. Instead of identifying one commandment, he sets forth two—one requiring love of God and the other requiring love of neighbor—that together, he teaches, are the foundation of all law. Hence, we are invited to see not only how these two dynamisms of love are actually integrated as one in Jesus' life but also invited to bring them together in our own.

TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A), OCT. 4, 2026

God's vineyard

TWENTY-EIGHTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A), OCT. 11, 2026

An invitation: proper dress required

TWENTY-NINTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A), OCT. 18, 2026

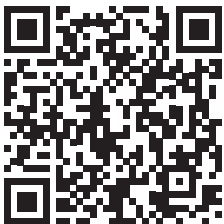
An answer requiring a decision

THIRTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A), OCT. 25, 2026

Love: a command performance



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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IN TIMES THAT TROUBLE

By Mary Cecelia Bowman

The rain's eluded us for seven years,
The sky no longer swells with clouds. The bees
Retreated to the north. Mesquite trees dropped
No pods, and lizards left their rocky homes.
The mountains, though, stood firm. And so did I.

Though wind might pound the dust against the roof,
Though Palo Verde limbs might crash through walls,
Though riverbeds might buckle, breaching wide,
I will not murmur. No, I will hold true.

Though searing sun might harden cotton bolls,
Though corn silk shrivel and the kernel scorch,
Though grapes in clusters parch to stone, and I
Hear talk of upheaval and war, I will
be still and know that He has set the bounds.

Mary Cecelia Bowman is a retired high school English teacher who lives in the Sonoran Desert area of Arizona and teaches college freshman composition.



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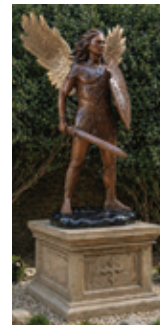


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As Hunger Rises, African Dioceses Turn to US Catholics for Vitafood Meals

“I was feeling weak,” said Reuben, a boy in a remote Malawian village. “And when I went to the hospital, I learned I had a low blood count. I couldn’t play with friends, couldn’t play soccer.”

Reuben, like many of his peers, was malnourished — a growing problem on the African continent, where the World Health Organization says hunger is rising.

In 2025, 309 million Africans — nearly 1 in 5 people — experienced hunger, according to WHO’s report, “The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World.”

But today, Reuben is no longer among the hungry. That’s because a Florida-based charity called Cross Catholic Outreach partnered with Malawian Catholics in the Diocese of Karonga to meet the widespread need.

The ministry intervened with a simple but effective plan: shipping Vitafood.

Vitafood is a fortified rice-or potato-based product specifically designed to fight the effects of child malnutrition, and it can be packed in large shipping containers and cost-effectively sent to Catholic schools, orphanages and other international partners serving the poorest of the poor. A single container can keep crucial feeding programs running or provide immediate relief when disasters strike.

For Reuben, these meals mean a new lease on life.

“I could see my body change. I had more energy. I put on weight, and I got sick less often,” Reuben said.

During its 2025 fiscal year, Cross Catholic Outreach shipped nearly 4.1 million Vitafood meals to African partners in the countries of Malawi, Zambia, Liberia, Eswatini and Burkina Faso. It anticipates sending millions more during the current fiscal year, so long as donors respond to the need.

“The generosity of our Catholic brothers and sisters in supporting this critical feeding program is such a beautiful testimony to God’s love for the poor and vulnerable,” said Cross Catholic Outreach president Michele Sagarino. “Vitafood meals give hope to struggling families, and in some cases, even save lives.”

According to Sagarino, Vitafood is an extremely flexible resource. It comes in several different varieties and can be prepared with additional spices and



Monica, who lives in a rural Malawian village, receives Vitafood. Cross Catholic Outreach and its U.S. benefactors play a critical role in making this and other feeding programs around the world possible by shipping millions of meals.

ingredients to suit local tastes. Vitafood provides the optimal balance of vitamins, minerals, protein, fiber and carbohydrates that a child’s hungry body needs. These meals are also important to the health and physical well-being of children and adults who are healthy but at risk of becoming malnourished.

What’s more, because Vitafood meals are donated by respected faith-based organizations, Cross Catholic Outreach only needs to cover the cost to ship the meals to hungry families. For every dollar donated, 14 nutritious meals can be sent to a community in need.

“When you send Vitafood, a child’s

whole world can begin to change,” Sagarino said. “She gets sick less often, she thrives in school, and she has the strength to pursue her dreams.”

Readers interested in supporting Cross Catholic Outreach food programs and other outreaches to the poor can contribute through the ministry brochure inserted in this issue or send tax-deductible gifts to: Cross Catholic Outreach, Dept. AC06200, P.O. Box 97168, Washington, DC 20090-7168. The ministry has a special need for partners willing to make gifts on a monthly basis. Use the inserted brochure to become a Mission Partner.

Catholics in the Dominican Republic Fight Poverty and Hunger Among Haitian Immigrants

While Haiti's civil unrest has displaced 1.5 million people, Catholics in the neighboring Dominican Republic are answering God's call to serve Haitian communities.

In this mission, the Dominican Church is joined by Cross Catholic Outreach, which is seeking the help of U.S. donors to send hundreds of thousands of meals.

"Many people only know the Dominican Republic as a tourist destination," said Cross Catholic Outreach president Michele Sagarino. "What they are often completely unaware of is the heartbreaking rural poverty, especially in immigrant communities."

Cross Catholic Outreach is a Florida-based, Vatican-endorsed nonprofit whose board of directors includes three U.S. bishops and five archbishops. Its Dominican partners include, among others, the Diocese of San Juan de la Maguana, the New Joy Foundation and the Hundredfold Foundation.

"Rather than impose our own programs from afar, we believe in empowering the local Church and local aid workers to serve their neighbors and communities in the way they know best," Sagarino said. "We're doing the Corporal Works of Mercy in a way that honors the Catholic principle of subsidiarity."

How this strategy plays out on the ground depends on the partner.

In the rural town of Villa Altagracia outside Santo Domingo, Cross Catholic Outreach's support enabled the Hundredfold Foundation to build new roofs for families living in deteriorating homes. One beneficiary, Adalena, told the ministry's director, Father Abraham Apolinario, that a number of local Haitian families desperately needed food.

Since then, Fr. Abraham has been distributing Vitafood meals to 10 Villa Altagracia households, including that of a Haitian woman named Juana.

Abandoned by her husband long ago, the elderly Juana lives with her sister, who has mental and physical disabilities, and one adult daughter.

Juana's face lights up as she sings the praises of her daughter, who sacrificed better job opportunities to stay in Villa Altagracia and take care of her mother and aunt. Juana says her daughter's income as a housekeeper is very little, but God gives them the strength to endure life's challenges. When the daughter isn't at work, she spends her free time doing what she enjoys — growing



Boxes of Vitafood from Cross Catholic Outreach are distributed to families in one of the Dominican Republic's impoverished batey communities. These prepackaged meals can be supplemented with meat and vegetables from local sources.

sweet potatoes, bananas, beans and yuca in the family's garden to further supplement their diet.

"It's such an inspiration to see the peace on the faces of these beautiful women, who have so little yet feel blessed beyond measure," Sagarino said.

Cross Catholic Outreach has also been responding to the needs in the *bateyes*, isolated and deeply impoverished settlements of Haitian migrant workers and their descendants.

Built to supply cheap labor to the sugar cane farms, the bateyes often lack basic amenities such as latrines, clean water and electricity.

"My heart aches for the precious little boys and girls growing up in these harsh environments, with seemingly no hope of escaping the cycle of poverty," Sagarino

said. "But then you see what our partners can accomplish when U.S. Catholics answer the call to love the marginalized as Christ loves them.

"You've got the Vitafood meals that relieve their hunger pangs. But that's just the start. We're bringing doctors and medicine into these communities. We're repairing homes damaged by a hurricane. We're giving youth the chance to dream and achieve a better life beyond the bateyes."

Sagarino believes even more can be done if Catholics in the United States remain committed to the cause and generously support the Church's efforts.

"We have access right now to meals and medicine ready to bless lives in the Dominican Republic and other nations around the world," she said. "We just need donors' help to send them."

How To Help

To fund Cross Catholic Outreach's effort to help the poor worldwide, use the postage-paid brochure inserted in this newspaper or mail your gift to Cross Catholic Outreach, Dept. AC06200, PO Box 97168, Washington, DC 20090-7168. The brochure also includes instructions for becoming a Mission Partner and making a regular monthly donation to this cause.

If you identify an aid project, 100% of the donation will be restricted to be used for that specific project. However, if more is raised for the project than needed, funds will be redirected to other urgent needs in the ministry.



The End of Reading?

What we would lose as Christians

By Jessica Hooten Wilson



Several public thought leaders are protesting the decline of intelligence, the replacement of art by entertainment and the dumbing down of education by pointing to the loss of reading in our culture.

In “The End of Reading Is Here,” a recent article in *The Atlantic*, Rose Horowitch describes how podcasts have replaced books and streaming has replaced literature. The question is what happens to the church when the people of the book no longer choose to read.

I have been teaching in college for two decades, and I can no longer assume my incoming students have read a single book before arriving in my classroom. Lost to the next generation are the wonders of the *Odyssey*, *Frankenstein* or *A Tale of Two Cities*. Students have some vague awareness of “Romeo and Juliet” from comedic cartoon versions of the plot. But in classroom discussions, they ask if Gilgamesh is linked with Nelson Mandela and whether *Jane Eyre* was written after Cromwell. The story about who they are, how the world got here and in what way they can contribute their lives to the future is a hurricane of nonsense to most of these young people.

When I encourage Christians to read books, I am not pushing for the church to produce the talented tenth or for an elitist stronghold for the sake of the kingdom. There are enough warnings in Scripture against worldly knowledge for the sake of power and privilege. Take Jeremiah 8:8-9, for one example: “Your know-it-alls will be unmasked, caught and shown for

what they are.”

But the purpose of reading for Christians should accord with the vocation of the church, which is greater love of God and neighbor. In part, this love begins with an intimate knowledge of the story that God has written before our time, is writing now and will continue to write when we return to him.

There were days when the majority of the Western world was illiterate and learned much about God through stained glass, statues and preaching. But we should not desire to lean backward on the substitutes or additions to the Gospel while we still can read the Gospel. How are we to love the Lord better? By meditating on his word day and night. How are we to love each other? By seeing one another for who we are, not what the world reduces us to.

These are merely a couple of answers that should reaffirm reading as important for the life of Christians. We serve a God who created the world through words, who called himself the Word, whose Spirit breathes into words that they may have life in us.

In Ms. Horowitch’s article, she uplifts books as an “essential source of knowledge, memory, wisdom, and morality.” For Christians, this is even more true. Our central book, the Bible, emphasizes knowing the Lord, remembering what the Lord has done, seeing Christ as the fount of wisdom and walking humbly with our God. Reading has been a spiritual practice for Christians for thousands of years.

Even before the incarnation of the Messiah, God highlighted for his people the centrality of reading Scripture.

As we see in Deuteronomy 17:14-20, he outlined that the king must be one who can read and write, seemingly unnecessary skills for a king in the ancient world but necessary from God’s perspective. Then, when the baton is handed on from the Jews to those of the Way, the practice of reading remains as significant as fasting, praying or gathering together.

Years ago, I was being chauffeured to a speaking engagement by a Christian woman who told me that she preferred reading self-help books to reading the Bible because they were easier to understand. It is a temptation to choose what is easy over what is challenging, but the saints do not commend that we remain milk drinkers forever. They upbraid us for not being ready for the meat. If reading is difficult, perhaps that is the very practice we need to climb toward the light.

While I am not one who enjoys fearmongering, and I stay as far from culture wars as I can manage, I do think the lament over the loss of reading is worth the attention it is receiving. But I believe our God is bigger than all our deficits, and the church will survive despite all the ways that the world lures it toward devastation. The kingdom of God will continue even if people lose the ability to read about it.

As for me and my house, we will keep the books.

Jessica Hooten Wilson is the Fletcher Jones Chair of Great Books at Pepperdine University. Her most recent book is Flannery O’Connor’s ‘Why Do the Heathen Rage?’: A Behind-the-Scenes Look at a Work in Progress.

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OCTOBER EVENTS

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ANNUAL TEILHARD DE CHARDIN S.J. LECTURE FEATURING DR. CHRISTIANA ZENNER

OCTOBER 21, 2026 | 7:00PM- 8:30PM | LAKESHORE CAMPUS

The Hank Center welcomes Dr. Christiana Zenner as its 2026 Teilhard de Chardin, S.J. visiting Fellow in Catholic Studies. Professor Zenner, who specializes in the areas of fresh water values as they intersect with ecological theory, *Laudato si'*, and the ecological turn in Catholic social teaching, will offer this year's Teilhard Lecture. All are welcome as we contemplate and discuss, in a Teilhardian spirit, a future characterized by hope and active participation in the ongoing creative process grounded in a threefold faith: faith in God, faith in the world, and faith in God in and through the world. **To receive the post event video, please Register Online.**



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ANNUAL JESUIT LECTURE FEATURING FR. MICHAEL ROZIER, S.J., PH.D

OCTOBER 27, 2026 | 7:00PM- 8:30PM | LAKESHORE CAMPUS

In his new book, *Growing Our Moral Imagination: Approaching Health Care with a New Faith-Based Vision*, Fr. Michael Rozier, SJ, PhD, turns to the Gospels to explore how foundational stories of healing might guide our response to today's most pressing health challenges. Fr. Rozier's will unpack these themes in this year's Jesuit Lecture—challenging us to see beyond policies and procedures of highly systematized health care to the stories and values that shape how we care for one another. With theological insight and public health expertise, Fr. Rozier helps us see that health care is not merely an industry but a reflection of our deepest values and collective responsibility. All are welcome. **To receive the post event video, please Register Online.**



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