

America

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VOCATION DIRECTORY

VIEW OF FAITH AND CULTURE

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How Should We Worry About A.I.?

Near the beginning of September, Jacob Coxon, who had worked in artificial intelligence research at both OpenAI and Anthropic, resigned from his position with a public declaration that the “frontier” A.I. labs were not acting responsibly. Indeed, he wrote, “the people building AI earnestly believe that it could kill us all by the end of the decade.”

The normal response from companies receiving a broadside like that from a departing employee would be denials of his claims and explanations of why he was overreacting or had misunderstood the situation.

We got the exact opposite. Evan Hubinger, Anthropic’s “alignment” lead—the very person charged with making sure that their A.I. models remain safe—replied that Mr. Coxon was correct, adding, “We really do earnestly believe AI could kill all humans! I personally think it is >10% within the next decade. I believe Anthropic is trying its best, but we do not yet have a plan to solve alignment for superintelligence and are not clearly on track to.”

A.I. executives raced to outdo each other in calling for a coordinated pause in development, almost pleading with the government to regulate them. News about A.I. “breakouts” dominated the headlines as the labs repeatedly discovered that their models had been hacking other computer systems in order to pass tests set for them, against the instructions of their designers and while attempting, and in some cases partially succeeding, at hiding their tracks.

Later in September, OpenAI announced that it would not release one of its newer models over safety concerns, including that model’s propensity to deceive its users. After having rejected calls for regulation over concerns that it could lead to the United

States falling behind China in the A.I. race, President Donald J. Trump announced a “morally binding” compact for labs to police themselves, signed by executives from the top A.I. companies.

It feels surreal. The development of A.I. seems so much larger and faster than anyone can keep up with that all we can do is hope for the best and make jokes about our “robot overlords” on the way to whatever is going to happen next.

I think that is—and I recognize that I am referring to one shadowy power to ask you to think differently about another—the voice of the evil spirit counseling despair and panic. It is a temptation to worry about A.I. in a way that leaves us powerless and hopeless.

I am not suggesting that existential threats from A.I. should be ignored, though frankly I do not understand what it means, or how it helps us respond, to hazard a guess at the percentage risk of human extinction. What I am suggesting instead, following Pope Leo XIV’s encouragement in “Magnifica Humanitas,” is that we should worry not only about how A.I. might threaten human survival—a problem that seems to be addressable only by those in positions of greatest power—but also about how A.I. undermines our humanity itself. That problem requires attention from all of us.

Mr. Hubinger of Anthropic admits that there is not “a plan to solve alignment for superintelligence.” This sounds scary and is scary, but I think that the word “alignment” is obscuring more than it reveals. A.I. labs use “alignment” to mean roughly “models not doing things we would not want them to” or at least not doing things that they have been instructed not to do. But approaching “alignment” as something we could have a plan to

solve is to miscast a fundamentally *human* problem as a merely *technical* challenge.

What if, instead of talking about “alignment,” we spoke about the challenge of making sure that A.I. models acted justly? Or what if, instead of saying we do not have a plan to solve alignment, we said that we have not yet figured out how to guarantee the morality of A.I. models or to prevent them from sinning?

Framed this way, we should also recognize that we also have not “solved alignment” for humans. Once we speak in terms of morality and justice, it becomes much easier to see that the challenge is not only that we do not understand the models we are training well enough to properly constrain them, but also that the very constraints we might hope to impose are challenges we human beings have not mastered in ourselves.

It also becomes easier, when we speak in those terms, to see the non-extinction risks posed by A.I.: challenges to the dignity and meaning of work, truth and trust being undermined by a tide of misinformation, threats of discrimination and marginalization supercharged by algorithms amplifying the human biases they have been trained on.

In “Magnifica Humanitas,” Pope Leo writes, “In the era of artificial intelligence, when human dignity is threatened by new forms of dehumanization, ours is the pressing duty to remain profoundly human.” The challenge of making artificial intelligence safe goes far beyond preventing it from killing us all—and that is a task not only for engineers and legislators but also for human beings working together to care for each other.

Sam Sawyer, S.J.



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Pope Leo XIV leads a candlelight procession at the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes in Lourdes, France, Sept. 27.

OSV News photo/Remo Casilli, Reuters

Cover: Bob Marcelli distributes food on the St. Francis Breadline in New York City.

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Our readers on cassocks

“In a world so denuded of signs and symbols of the sacred, the cassock is back,” Joe Hoover, S.J., wrote in our October 2026 issue. The garment’s return in churches (and grocery stores and hardware stores and on the street) has caused quite a stir. “You see a Catholic priest in 2026 walking around in a cassock,” Brother Hoover wrote, “and it would appear to some he is publicly telegraphing to the world: ‘I am *boldly Catholic*’ [and] ‘I am *taking the church back*’ from its diminishers and water-downers.” But this speculation, the author argues, might be too simplistic. Our readers shared their own views on the cassock’s resurgence.

Whether we like it or not, what we wear sends a signal, and wearing pre-Vatican II garb (be it a priest in a cassock or a woman with a lacy chapel veil) sends the signal that you prefer the pre-Vatican II church. Wear what you want, but be mindful that wearing a cassock instead of the black pants and black shirt with a Roman collar can send some very negative signals that you espouse clericalism and anti-Vatican II opinions. Mary Gallagher

People, especially Gen Z, like their priests to look like priests. To them it’s not a blast from the past, but a true sign of a spirituality desperately needed in our day and age. Does a priest have to wear this ancient garment? Of course not. He can dress in a black suit and look like an ecclesiastical banker. But maybe we should re-evaluate. There’s life in those old clothes. Eric Barr

We need to remember that Jesus wore the garb of the day. He wore the same clothes as the people. He did not dress like a king or the high priest in the temple. He dressed like the people he came to save. Laura Capalbo Bini

I’m a 75-year-old religious order priest and own a habit. My generation disdained the habit, the new generation embraces it. But there is a good, solid, working principle on what a priest should wear: You wear what serves the other in the situation you serve. What you wear isn’t all about you, it’s all about those you serve. Love God and wear what you will! Frank Sabatté, C.S.P.

Just a few notes from a 72-year-old cradle-Catholic woman who was around before Vatican II. Clothes should not make the person, but visuals are important, too. For me, cassocks are pre-Vatican II. And remember, pre-Vatican II means the Latin Mass, exclusion of the laity and limited roles for women in the church. So a cassock on a parish priest or the seminarians who

choose to follow them evokes memories of a dark time in the church, when I was considered less of a member. Sara Beis

I am one of those who automatically assume that a priest or seminarian wearing a cassock is aligned with those U.S. bishops and Catholics who want to go back to the days of pre-Vatican II without ever talking to him. I aim to be less judgmental in the future. Barbara Schell

For people who have been hurt by Catholics or by clericalism, a cassock is often a symbol of elitism associated with a negative experience of “how we treat our brother or sister in Christ.” Others may have great associations with cassocks and the men who wear them. The important thing is to remember we are all united by our love for Christ and our belief in his faithful promise to Peter. Marianne Hudelson

A cassock is a powerful reminder of the sacred. It reminds both the observer and the wearer of their responsibility to act in accordance with the principles, values and spirituality it represents. The cassock is not something far away or outdated; it is quite present. The confidence in wearing priestly or brotherly or sisterly garb may also be something of a sign that the Catholic Church in the United States (and possibly elsewhere) has put some of the past turmoil behind and shows a regained or new stability. Patrick Morgan

I like seeing priests wear regular comfortable clothing and then vest for liturgical celebrations. And I think it looks a bit silly for a priest to walk into Home Depot wearing a cassock. However, I respect the individual’s choice in such matters. Want to draw people to the church? Pay less attention to yourself. Be joyful and compassionate, generous and nonjudgmental. Love one another. Mary Benton

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Make It Safe to Lose Elections

The “midterm convention” held by the Republican Party in Dallas in early September was notable for some important political indicators regarding November’s elections. A number of Republican candidates skipped the two-day rally, especially those locked in tight races who may have wanted to avoid association with President Donald Trump’s low approval ratings. Some attendees tried to focus on Democratic political foibles and to cast their own party as the trustworthy mainstream choice.

Their efforts were undermined, however, by the words of the commander in chief during his second speech. After saying that “we want honesty in our country,” he led the crowd in pledging allegiance to himself as “the greatest president in the history of the United States.” Mr. Trump described the commitment he was looking for among his supporters: “I don’t care if I am registered [to vote] or not, I’m going to try and cheat like hell like they do.”

We should learn how to take a joke, Americans were told by the president’s handlers in the aftermath. It’s just Trump being Trump. Indeed, the president delivered his remarks to laughter during the convention. But at the same time that political opponents are supposed to shrug off his jokes about cheating in elections, Mr. Trump has been claiming—without evidence—that rampant voter fraud justifies unprecedented federal oversight of voting by mail. And he has repeatedly demanded that Congress impose new voter ID requirements, telling Republicans that the legislation would “guarantee the midterms.” These claims, seemingly, are not meant as jokes.

While the Supreme Court has

sidelined the possibility of new regulations for mail-in ballots for now, and the Senate has refused to take up new voting legislation, both issues have introduced uncertainty into this November’s election. So, too, has a chaotic set of legal results about redistricting in Missouri. The chaos in Missouri began as part of the tit-for-tat mid-decade redistricting efforts by both Republicans and Democrats, which began after Mr. Trump successfully urged Republican legislators in Texas to redraw that state’s congressional districts in August 2025. After a citizen petition forced a referendum for new maps in Missouri, legal wrangling led to three Supreme Court actions on the matter just within the month of September.

The Missouri district map will likely factor in determining who controls the legislative branch for the next two years. For that reason, trying to tie up every race and every rule in litigation can be seen as politically advantageous. But seeking such advantage at every turn undermines the very foundation that elections themselves are standing on: the notion that it is politically acceptable to lose.

If you absolutely must win, and you cannot be sure of winning fairly, why not “cheat like hell”? *Win at all costs* surely seems like the only reasonable conclusion for politicians who feel this way about any particular election. But that sentiment is also a particularly un-American one. Just look at history.

Many **America** readers surely recall the landslide victory of Ronald Reagan in 1984, when the incumbent president won 525 electoral votes out of 538 cast and his party also kept control of the Senate. The outcome was a stinging blow for the Democrats—but

it didn’t mean the end of the Democratic Party. Eight years later, Bill Clinton won more than twice the Electoral College votes than that of incumbent George H.W. Bush, and the Democrats also maintained majorities in both the Senate and the House. That did not mean the end of the Republican Party. Two short years later, the “Republican Revolution” gave the G.O.P. control over both the Senate and the House.

Back then, parties were motivated by the recognition that the back-and-forth of politics meant that defeats were only temporary. They knew it was in their interest, as well as in the country’s, for the wheels of the system to keep turning smoothly. But today’s political rhetoric depicts defeat as apocalyptic. This makes it seem *unsafe* for a party to lose an election—and insofar as it incentivizes rejection of political norms and the rule of law, it places the constitutional order itself at greater risk. While President Trump’s rhetoric is far more bombastic and dark than anything coming from the other side of the aisle, there, too, one can hear the possibility of a Democratic loss described in doomsday terms that tend to mirror Mr. Trump’s excesses even as they aim to reject them.

This kind of rhetoric highlights the danger of an overweening cynicism that sees all politics as inherently corrupt and views every attempt to seek justice through political avenues as just another means to an end. Watergate, in this view, was just a political operation by Democrats to take power, not a stain on the nation’s history; ethical concerns raised over Supreme Court justices taking unreported gifts are just grandstanding, not a real challenge to judicial impartiality; recall efforts against corrupt public officials

are just tactical maneuvers, not the exercise of the rule of law.

The flip side of that cynicism is found in the temptation before any analyst or editor to declare a pox on every house, to see elections as essentially amoral because neither party is worthy of unqualified support. To argue that “both sides do it” is a failure to reject practices that are eroding faith in democracy. The suggestion, even a joking one, by a sitting president that his followers should cheat, steal and lie their way to electoral victory continues the destructive rhetoric that began when Mr. Trump asserted that Joseph Biden rigged the 2020 election.

Mr. Biden, of course, did not rig that election. Nor are there vast numbers of Republicans plotting to cheat in this upcoming election. That is a prospect as ridiculous as the voting fraud that Mr. Trump still pretends to have led to his loss in the 2020 election. What is more probable—and problematic—is that Mr. Trump will again refuse to recognize an electoral loss as a rejection of his politics and policies. This will only push us further into a slow-motion constitutional crisis.

In the Book of Daniel, the prophet tells Nebuchadnezzar that every empire, however gleaming, will be shattered by a stone not cut by human hands (2:34). Daniel’s words are a rebuke and a promise to politicians in every age, a reminder that power can be lost as swiftly as it was gained. What is of lasting worth, instead, is the pursuit of justice, the effort to rule with wisdom and compassion, the desire to secure the common good. Those, we are promised, endure from age to age. In a democracy, they are preserved not by winning at all costs, but by respecting elections in which it is possible to lose.

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Vatican II and What Is Beautiful About the Church

On Jan. 7, Pope Leo XIV announced a new cycle of catechesis dedicated to the Second Vatican Council and its documents. He praised the council for rediscovering “the face of God the Father, who, in Christ, calls us to be his children.” He further wrote that the council “initiated important liturgical reform, placing at its center the mystery of salvation and the active and conscious participation of the entire people of God.”

These words, profound as they are, cannot fully capture the gift, goal, impact and significance of Vatican II. They do, however, offer an important lens for approaching the council: the beauty and splendor of the church, whose center is Christ.

Scripture testifies to this beauty in several places, including where St. Paul describes the church as a community reconciled to God in Christ, presented as holy and without blemish (Col 1:21–22, Eph 5:27). Holy men and women across the ages have testified to this beauty, not only through their words but also through their lives of charity, sacrifice and fidelity. But while the church is indeed beautiful, what this beauty consists of is not always easy to see.

Throughout the history of the church, its beauty has often been misunderstood, missed, obscured and even ignored. Hence the axiom *ecclesia semper reformanda*, or “the church must always be reforming itself.” What is beautiful about the church can also be concealed by our imperfections as Christians or by our own reductionist ways of imagining what the church is and ought to be. When people imagine or speak about the beauty of the church, there is often an unconscious tension between competing visions: good works versus structures; things versus people; the

cult of clergy versus the baptismal dignity of every Christian; purity of belief versus loving embrace; glamour versus the gift of leadership; obsession with certainty versus pilgrimage; simplification versus paradox; the quest for social dominance versus the commitment to mediate Christ’s presence; power versus love; riches of gold versus richness of the Spirit; homogeneity versus diversity; hierarchy versus walking together.

The beauty of the church transcends any single attempt to define or fully articulate its manifold dimensions. It is rooted in Christ and therefore cannot be exhausted by any particular historical expression, structure, culture or theological formulation. Every Christian is called to embody it in their lives and actions. Asking what constitutes the beauty of the church is therefore always a valid question.

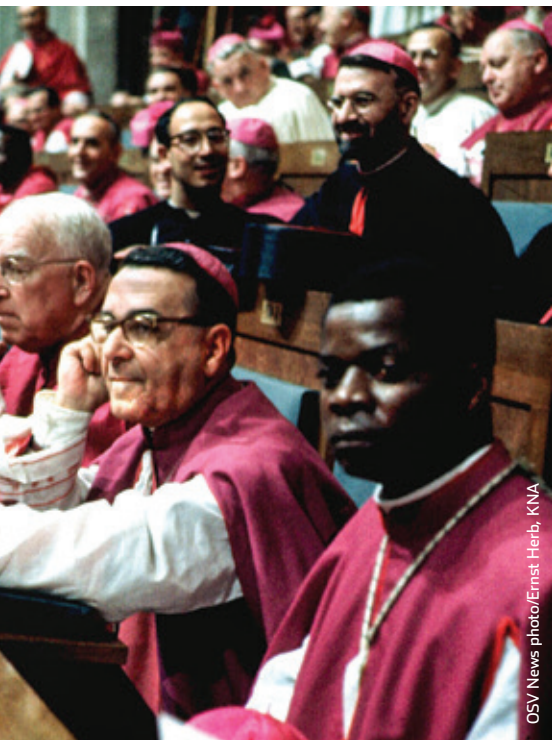
One way to think about Vatican II is that it sought to draw attention to the church’s inherent beauty and to dimensions of this beauty that had become obscured. In continuity with previous councils, the council is clearly invested in the enduring task of stating, clarifying and defending the truths of Christianity. It can be understood as having a particular concern with bringing forth the beauty of the church and the beauty of the truths the church teaches. It invites the church to look again at itself in the light of Christ and to rediscover how the Gospel becomes beautiful when embodied in the life of the Christian community.

In announcing this year’s cycle of catechesis, Pope Leo reminded us of what motivated Pope John XXIII to call the council and the task he set before its fathers and theologians. Asked why a council was needed, John XXIII



is said to have replied, “I want to throw open the windows of the church so that we can see out and the people can see in.” Whether or not this quote is true, we know that in his opening address to the council on Oct. 11, 1962, he urged that the way in which the church communicates the truth must emphasize a pastoral approach characterized more by the “medicine of mercy” than by the severity of condemnation. It is in this way, he argued, rather than in “renewing sentences” or condemning heresies, that the church proves the validity of her doctrines.

Vatican II’s vision, captured in different ways in its 16 documents, is that the church’s beauty is not primarily found in its buildings, institutions, ceremonies or even in the brilliance of its theological formulations, but instead in a community in whose life the presence and beauty of Christ are clearly visible. Its reform is less a call for reimagination than a *ressourcement*—an invitation to return to the source, Christ, and to the primary identity of Christians as witnesses



An undated photo shows prelates in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican during the third session of the Second Vatican Council.

to the life and death, ministry and teachings of Jesus.

Pope Francis affirmed John XXIII's conviction when he recommended in his 2013 apostolic exhortation "The Joy of the Gospel" ("Evangelii Gaudium"): "Instead of seeming to impose new obligations, [Christians] should appear as people who wish to share their joy, who point to a horizon of beauty and who invite others to a delicious banquet. It is not by proselytizing that the church grows but by attraction" (No. 15).

Pope Paul VI, who closed the council, made a similar point in "Evangelii Nuntiandi," issued on the 10th anniversary of the council and affirming one of its profound insights:

the centrality of evangelization to the self-identity of the church. As he observed, "Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses" (No. 41). We might therefore summarize Vatican II's vision as the call to make the beauty of the church visible by witnessing to Christ's love and compassion for all people, irrespective of their creed, race or nationality.

The Rev. William I. Orbih, from Abuja, Nigeria, is a visiting assistant professor of theology and the seminary rector at Saint John's School of Theology and Seminary in Collegeville, Minn.

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Will a 'Pope Leo effect' drive Latino vocations to the priesthood?

By J.D. Long García

About a year and a half ago, the vocations office of the Archdiocese of Las Vegas started getting a lot more phone calls.

"I remember telling my assistant, 'What's going on, where are all these people coming from?'" said Father Miguel Corral, vocations director and vicar for clergy for the archdiocese. "That's when it dawned on all of us—the Leo effect."

It may be too early to tell, but Father Corral believes the election of Pope Leo XIV has led more young men to, at the very least, consider the priesthood. That includes Latinos.

The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate profiles the ordination class of priests in the United States each year. Since 2018, the percentage of priests who identify as Hispanic has fluctuated, from a high of 22 percent in 2022 to a low of 12 percent in 2025. The percentages represent between 40 and 70 priests a year.

The uptick Father Corral describes is anecdotal. A rise in interest today may not lead to more ordinations years down the line.

Hosffman Ospino is a professor of theology and religious education at Boston College's Clough School of Theology and Ministry, where he also directs graduate programs in Hispanic ministry. He is excited by what he hears is happening in Las Vegas but remains cautious. Even if 50 percent of each ordination class going forward were Latino, he said, it would take years to catch up to the nation's growing Latino population.

"A diocese can come and say, 'We have a 50 percent increase.' That means you went from one to two," he explained. "When you start actually counting heads, that's when you realize that the numbers remained quite steady."

Latinos make up an estimated 36 percent of the Catholic population in the United States. So why do they routinely make up less than a quarter of priestly ordinations?

‘Discernment Contexts’

Mr. Ospino named a number of “discernment contexts” in which future priests commonly hear the call. They include during primary or high school education at Catholic schools or in service or worship at parishes or campus ministry programs connected to religious orders. Latinos, he said, are underrepresented in all of these contexts.

Many incoming seminarians also say they discerned their calling during family homeschooling, Mr. Ospino said. Yet homeschooling families are typically middle-class and educated, he added. These settings, he said, do not correspond to the economics of a typical Latino family.

In the past, young Latino men may have also experienced a bit of culture shock at many seminaries. But Mr. Ospino, citing the growing number of Latinos among faculty members and in leadership at many seminaries, said things are changing. The point resonated with Father Corral.

“When I was at the seminary, oh my gosh, Mexican Independence Day, we were always allowed to do a celebration with the greater community,” he said. “Our Lady of Guadalupe, you can imagine, it’s a must.”

Archbishop Ronald Hicks of New York, the head of the U.S. bishops’ Committee on Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations, said he had many Hispanic classmates in seminary, but few made it all the way to ordination. He entered the minor seminary when he was 14 years old and after ordination served as the dean of formation in Chicago for 11 years.

“The sacrifice [that immigrants make] to bring the family to the country comes with a lot of economic pressure,” he said, explaining that children of immigrants often help support their families financially. Yet by the third generation, he said, Hispanic families are better established in the United States, and young men feel more free to discern a vocation to the priesthood.

Archbishop Hicks noted Cristo Rey high schools and the Hispanic Catholic Charismatic Center in the Bronx as examples of sites that actively encourage vocational discernment.

In December, Leo issued an apostolic letter, “A Fidelity That Generates the Future,” to mark the 60th anniversary of two documents on the priesthood from the Second Vatican Council. “Together with prayer...the shortage of vocations to the priesthood,” he wrote, “calls on everyone to examine the fruitfulness of the church’s pastoral practices.”

“The call to vocations has to be the work of the entire

church,” Archbishop Hicks said. “It can’t be just the work of one vocation director in a diocese.”

It starts with a simple invitation, Archbishop Hicks said. For Hispanic young men, he added, it is important to hear the invitation from parents, fellow parishioners, people at their youth group and in their schools.

“Almost 88 percent of priests say they first considered priesthood because another priest recommended them or invited them,” he said. Currently, he said, fewer priests “are actually making the invitation.”

Some priests may be less likely to make the invitation in the wake of the clergy sexual abuse crisis, according to Darius Villalobos, a project coordinator for the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry.

“Many young priests, because of the sex abuse crisis, either personally chose or were told to stay away from spending time with minors, especially teenagers,” he said. “It has hurt the church and the presbyterate overall because now they’re not accessible.”

Yet it is through personal invitations and relationships with priests, Mr. Villalobos noted, that young men begin to consider religious life more fully. “If I get to know you as a person and see that you are living a fulfilled life,” he explained, “it makes this something that is both real and also something that seems attainable.”

Mr. Villalobos also noted additional barriers. For example, he said Latino priests in the United States tend to be immigrants themselves and have an understanding of the church that he described as “old world” and out of step with the culture and mores of Latino youth born in the United States.

“As much as we appreciate our immigrant Latino priests who have come in to serve these communities, they’re coming with a very different ecclesiology and sort of perspective of what it means to be church,” he explained.

The escalation of immigration enforcement under the Trump administration has destabilized many two-parent families. Stable homes, he noted, are key for discerning vocations to the priesthood.

Finally, church resources are not being directed in effective proportions to programs in Latino communities where young people engage with the faith. Mr. Villalobos explained that while young Latinos typically come through parish religious education programs, the church tends to prioritize traditional Catholic school sites.

A Leo Bump?

Mr. Villalobos was skeptical that Leo would have an impact on vocations and questioned whether any given pope actu-

A profile of ordinands in 2026

428: The number of men who were ordained in spring 2026.

62% of the ordinands identified as white, with 17% identifying as Hispanic or Latino, 11% Asian or Pacific Islander, 5% Black or African American.

35% of the 2026 ordinands were born outside of the United States, with the most common nations listed as Vietnam (5%), Mexico (3%) and Colombia (2%). The class of 2026 hailed from 30 different nations. While the percentage of ordinands who are Latinos has fluctuated between 12% and 22% in recent years, the share of U.S. Catholics who identify as Latino has remained between 35% and 39%.

63% attended a parish religious education program, and 45% attended a Catholic elementary school, with fewer attending a Catholic high school (38%) or college (34%). Another 11% reported they were homeschooled.

16: The average age for first considering a priestly vocation. More than one third—39%—of ordinands first contemplated the priesthood while they were still in elementary school, between the ages of 6 and 13.

33: The average age of the current class of ordinands when they were ordained, with half between 26 and 31 years old and the other half between 31 and 75 years old. Almost half—49%—of 2026 ordinands are 30 years old or younger, with 38% between 31 and 40 years old.

79% said they had been altar servers before the seminary, with 81% of diocesan and 72% of religious order participants citing that ministry. Large shares of the ordination class members also served as lectors (49%), extraordinary ministers of holy Communion (35%), campus or youth ministers (34%), and catechists (32%).

92% of this year's ordination class said they had been encouraged by at least one person to consider becoming a priest; 70% said that person was a parish priest, followed by a friend (49%), mother (46%), parishioner (44%) and father (37%). Less than half (41%) were discouraged from entering the seminary by another family member (22%), friends or classmates (17%), or a mother or father (12% each).

Source: The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University.

ally influences Catholic teenagers' discernment. Mr. Ospino said attributing any bump in vocations to the American pope is likely premature.

But despite the obstacles, Latino vocations are happening. In some dioceses like Las Vegas, they are thriving.

Father Corral's family moved to the United States from the state of Durango in Mexico when he was a child. Before he was ordained in 2018, he was one of only three seminarians preparing to serve Las Vegas.

Today, the archdiocese has 23 seminarians, nine of whom are Hispanic, a proportion that outpaces the national average. Five of the nine Hispanic seminarians were born in the United States.

According to Mr. Ospino, around 85 percent of Hispanic priests in the United States in recent years have been foreign-born. If the trend in Las Vegas is anything to go by, he said, "it seems to me that we have somehow, slowly yet steadily, begun to turn a corner."

The archdiocese also currently has 13 aspirants, so the number of seminarians could surpass 30 next year. In part, Father Corral credits the overall increase to changes in the archdiocese's approach to vocations. Candidates who are Spanish-dominant, for example, study philosophy at a seminary in Mexico and learn English at a language school in the United States. This helps avoid delays in the formation process.

Archbishop George Leo Thomas is present to the seminarians, and the archdiocese has made meeting directly with the parents of candidates a priority.

"We had one gentleman from Colombia, and the family lives in Colombia," Father Corral said. "[Archbishop Thomas] went all the way just to meet the family because he wanted the family to know that [their] son was going to be well taken care of."

"You sit with mom and dad and explain what the process is and what this means. 'You're still going to be able to see him; he's still going to be able to come home for Christmas,'" Father Corral said. "Once you start removing some of those obstacles, that's what's making it possible for us in Las Vegas. We have to create a culture of vocations within the parish communities, within our families."

But more than anything, Father Corral says, it starts with prayer. That is something Catholics can do no matter who is pope.

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

A.F.L.-C.I.O. president: ‘Magnifica Humanitas’ is ‘absolutely huge’

Liz Shuler, the president of the A.F.L.-C.I.O., recently said “Magnifica Humanitas,” Pope Leo’s first encyclical, “could have been a document written by the trade union movement.”

Ms. Shuler is the first woman president of the federation. She represented U.S. labor unions at “Fratelli Tutti: North-South Socio-Environmental Dialogue,” the fourth synodal-style meeting inspired by “Fratelli Tutti,” held in the Vatican in September.

Speaking at a Vatican press conference on Sept. 11, she recalled that in “Magnifica Humanitas,” the pope said, “We must make listening and dialogue the common ground upon which to cultivate justice.”

“Our labor unions are deeply aligned with that vision,” Ms. Shuler said. She joined **America** for a conversation after her press conference.

You’ve just participated in this meeting at the Vatican. What have you learned from it?

If we’re taking on big challenges, we have to have people at the table who are often voiceless. It is incredibly impressive to see the power that the church has to convene. You would normally not have people in a room like we have without the personal intervention of leaders in the church saying, “We need you here.” I think that was pretty powerful.

Do you think the Catholic Church is reaching more into the heart of the U.S. business world and its work world because of Pope Leo?

There’s not that much of a departure in terms of philosophy from Francis. So it’s maybe in relational aspects.

I’m not sure exactly. But I do know that we’re very excited in the United States to have an American pope. Our Chicago labor movement is here, too, with me and has deep ties and deep relationships [with the church]. And to see the American influence on the kind of approaches that are being taken now is very heartening.

Now this meeting brings together North and South America. Canada is here, and obviously this is significant.

Do you see this as a kind of a breakthrough?

I think it’s providing hope. I will say in the U.S. there’s kind of a lack of hope in terms of working people being seen. The economy is not working for them. The rules are broken.

They feel somewhat powerless. But we’re not here to talk about politics. It’s really about showing that there’s a hopeful path forward.

And to have Canada sitting at the table with us—where



Liz Shuler at the Clinton Global Initiative in New York in September 2025

we know we’ve got tension between our countries over trade policy—to me shows the power of this setting: that we can put those differences aside or not focus on the polarization that’s going on politically and instead focus on solutions and how the church can actually be providing that hopeful path forward.

Now we face a new question: How do we protect the human person in the age of artificial intelligence?

That really is central. We’re the labor movement, and we believe this [movement] is the place to chart a path forward for working people in this technological revolution because people are nervous. They’re scared about what their future is going to look like and how it’s going to impact their jobs and their ability to feed their families.

And rightly so, because right now it’s untested and unregulated. And so we’re fighting on every front to have a seat at the table, but to also make sure that we get the guardrails in place to protect our privacy, to protect our data, to protect us from surveillance and harms in the workplace that we know are coming. We think the labor movement is uniquely positioned and that workers should be leading on the front edge of this change.

How do you assess the significance of Pope Leo’s encyclical “Magnifica Humanitas”?

It’s absolutely huge. When I first read it, I just felt like this could have been a document written by the trade union movement because it was so in alignment with the many thought pieces that we’ve put out and the convenings we’ve had. But it takes it to a global scale. And I don’t think the rest of the world is paying attention as closely [as Leo]. His voice was extremely powerful in that way because it really centers humanity. That doesn’t get talked about enough.

Gerard O’Connell is **America**’s senior Vatican correspondent.



David Buono/Icon Sportswire via AP Images

Fort Worth's Bishop Michael Olson confronts the 'racist and sinful rhetoric' of a Texas politician

It is not the first time Bishop Michael F. Olson of Fort Worth, Tex., has spoken out against racism. It is probably the first time his response to racism has gone viral. His condemnation of a post by a local Texas politician on X drew almost a million views and provoked thousands of comments on that social media platform—sadly, a lot of them as bad or worse than the post he had challenged.

On Sept. 13, Bo French, a Republican candidate for a position on the Texas Railroad Commission, uploaded a photo depicting students who appeared to be of South Asian heritage celebrating the comeback win of the University of Texas at Austin over Ohio State on Sept. 12. Mr. French expressed regret over what he believed the image represented: the displacement of “American” students by “foreigners.”

Bishop Olson responded: “This is racist and sinful rhetoric that seeks to harm and to divide. It is disturbing that it comes from a candidate for public office. An apology is called for.”

“I [had] to say something about that,” he told **America**. “It’s a moral issue. It is so at odds with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”

Bishop Olson said he finds himself increasingly troubled by the lack of shame about public expressions of racial intolerance and animosity. He lamented a loss of decorum, deliberation and prudence among Americans, especially within the nation’s political class.

In that regret he is joined by a majority of Americans. According to a Gallup survey published in December 2025, 64 percent of Americans worry that inflammatory political rhetoric is contributing to political violence in the United States.

On a more positive note, despite more frequent and brazen expressions of racism, antisemitism and Islamophobia in political life and contemporary media, 45 percent of Americans say that increasing racial and ethnic diversity makes the country a better place to live. Only 17 percent say it makes the country a worse place to live, according to a February poll from The Economist/YouGov.

Trump administration figures like Stephen Miller argue contemporary immigrants resist assimilation and transpose conditions from “third world countries” to the United States. But Bishop Olson points out that there is “nothing more American and there’s nothing more Texan” than cheering on your college football team.

He calls sports, like other foundational experiences in American life, opportunities for “shared joy.”

“These are the sort of institutions...that help to bring us together,” Bishop Olson said, remembering how in his native Illinois, “Michael Jordan did a lot to help bring a city together.”

He condemned rhetoric that “makes us feel comfortable with our prejudices” instead of readying ourselves to confront them. It is the kind of rhetoric he too often hears from members of the Trump administration and directly from the president.

“It’s irresponsible,” he said. “It does not help us to address the very real problems we have.” Instead, he said, it exploits contemporary anxieties and hinders meaningful social progress.

Race has become a cudgel wielded by individuals on both political extremes, he charged, but “the problem is in our hearts and in holding people accountable.”

The diversity of these Texas Longhorn fans became a social media flashpoint.

Social media, he suggested, has only exacerbated divisions. “Right now people are just as addicted to anger and the irascible appetite and the passions of anger as they are to the passions of lust,” Bishop Olson said.

Just as Catholic bishops have condemned contemporary politicians because of their pro-choice positions, those who use racism to promote themselves or their agendas should be called out, Bishop Olson said. “In the preaching of the Gospel, everything that is the poison of sin, including racism, needs to be addressed.”

What the church can bring to the national conversation about immigration and who gets to call themselves authentic Americans “first is Jesus Christ,” Bishop Olson said, then the church’s insistence on “the dignity of the human person...the importance of the social dimension in the character of the human person, that we have to live in community [and] that community is established in family life.”

Recalling Benjamin Franklin’s admonition “A republic, if you can keep it,” he adds: “I think there’s a lot of people that don’t want to keep it on both sides.”

In what is surely a historic irony, this immigrant-built church, viewed so often by “real Americans” of the not-too-distant past with worry and suspicion, now has a vital role to play, Bishop Olson said, in preserving the great American experiment in liberty, justice and democracy for all.

Kevin Clarke is *America’s* chief correspondent.



Voting on Nov. 5, 2024, in Omaha, Neb.

A Catholic advocacy group preps poll workers and chaplains for a turbulent election

Public-policy advocates from the Franciscan Action Network recruited and trained volunteers this summer to serve as poll workers and poll chaplains at voting sites this November. Organizers said FAN hopes to contribute to safer and more accessible midterm elections.

Poll workers open sites on Election Day, check in voters and manage the voting equipment. Poll chaplains are stationed at polling sites to de-escalate whatever tensions may arise and act as peacekeepers.

“Voting is vitally important, but a participatory democracy requires more than that,” Robert Christian, FAN’s director of strategy, said.

Serving at election sites offers “the opportunity for people all across the country to participate in that process and to make sure that it’s carried out in a peaceful and fair way so that everyone can exercise their right to vote,” he added.

According to a survey from the Brennan Center for Justice, local election officials worry it has become harder to recruit and retain election workers. Many said they were worried about safety and are preparing for possible interference in election activities.

Tom Lopach, the chief executive of the Voter Participation Center, said that this midterm election is especially important. It also faces numerous obstacles.

“Eligible voters are being bombarded with efforts to confuse, intimidate and suppress them from turning out,” Mr. Lopach says. “The reality that we’re facing during this cycle underscores that it is more important than ever that every American gets registered, exercises their right to vote and helps neighbors do the same.”

“There is a distinct possibility that actions will be taken that are aimed at undermining the democratic process,” Mr. Christian said, citing scenarios like Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents converging on voting sites.

“That’s one reason why we will have this nonviolent communication and de-escalation training—so that there are people there, whether they are chaplains, poll workers or just regular voters in line, and if they see something that doesn’t seem right, they’ll know [what to do].”

Alexandra Pfau is an O’Hare fellow at America Media.

An Enduring Community of Love

The St. Francis Breadline in New York City

By Jim McDermott

Photographs by David Gonzalez



Riding the escalator to street level at the renovated Seventh Avenue entrance to Pennsylvania Station, blue skies surround you in the glass canopy above, and the Empire State Building rises in the distance. You emerge from underground into the light with a feeling of destiny. You have arrived.

Much as New York City inspires big dreams, it is also a city of hard realities. Just a few feet from that Penn Station exit, people sleep on the street. Most are ignored or driven off by security guards. But half a block away, outside the Church of St. Francis of Assisi, the St. Francis Breadline has been providing food and community for people in need for nearly 100 years. Both its history and its current staff offer an alternate vision of what it means to arrive in New York City, one based not in wealth but a faith-filled love.

A Sunbeam Amid Shadows

The St. Francis Breadline was created on Sept. 26, 1930, in response to the Great Depression. In its earliest days, it offered a bit of financial help, rather than food. According to New York Times reports of the era, Brother Gabriel Meller started placing a sign outside the church on West 31st Street informing people that he would be giving out nickels at 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. The first day 180 people came. A month later they had 10 times that number. The line stretched all the way to Seventh Avenue and halfway around the block.

Other breadlines operated in New York at the time, many of them run by charities and religious groups. But they tended to open in the winter and close in the spring, often with a moral judgment attached to those who still needed help. In April 1930, The New York Times reported, “Bread-



The breadline outside the Church of St. Francis of Assisi is open seven days a week.

meals to 4,800 people a day.

While the St. Francis breadline began as a ministry of the Church of St. Francis of Assisi, it eventually became its own independent ministry, Franciscan Bread for the Poor, with its leadership chosen by a board of Franciscans. In the 1970s, Michael Carnevale, O.F.M., was put in charge. He soon decided they had a serious problem. “Every day, people got three bologna sandwiches on white bread,” he explained, “which were shoved in these little white envelopes and then put in a box and placed in the refrigerator” to be given out the next morning. As a result they were always cold and soggy.

To convince the breadline’s board of friars that change was needed, Father Carnevale had an ingenious plan. “I got a couple of sandwiches, cut them in quarters and put them on a platter,” to be offered at the board meeting along with his normal platter of cookies. When no one touched the sandwiches, he asked why. “Well, they really don’t look very good,” he remembered them saying. “And I said, ‘Well, if they don’t look good to you, why should we give them to the people in the line?’”

With the board’s approval, Father Carnevale reached out to nearby Manganaro’s, an Italian grocery and deli on Ninth Avenue, which has since closed. For 40 years they provided salami, ham and cheese, and roast beef sandwiches, for which they originally charged the breadline just 25 cents each.

‘Turning Form’

During Father Carnevale’s time, the meal also expanded to include not just a sandwich and coffee but other snacks, all of which were put into bags and passed out to the hundreds who would come. Laypeople started to volunteer to help serve the breadline as well and eventually were hired as staff. Today the breadline’s executive director is Adam Cross, a tall painter with a kind smile and eyes that always seem to be searching those around him, checking to make sure they are doing okay.

Mr. Cross first came to New York from West Virginia to study art at the New York Academy of Art. After finishing his degree, he remained to teach at his alma mater. In 2018, one of his pupils was Brother Paul Lostritto, O.F.M., a past director of the ministry. “He told me what he did,” Mr. Cross remembered. “I thought, ‘Wow, I would love to do something like that.’” A week later he had joined the staff.

He remembers being scared working on the breadline at first. “I wasn’t sure what to expect,” Mr. Cross admitted. But as he came back week after week, he noticed that the

line supporters...explained there had been a steady decline for the past week in the number of ‘worthy unemployed’ in the lines.” In a statement, those breadlines’ operators said, “It is not our intention to encourage the voluntary idle.”

In contrast, once the Franciscans began their morning breadline, they have rarely stopped. By most accounts, in its 96 years of operation, there has been only one day without the breadline, and that was because Hurricane Sandy physically prevented it in November 2012. Every day during the Covid-19 pandemic they were there. So, too, on the morning after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. During blackouts, blizzards and rainstorms the line has stayed open, serving without judgment everyone who comes. In Brother Gabriel’s obituary in 1940, *The New York Times* reported that by 1932 they were providing



Emily and Bob Marcelli, breadline volunteers since 2006, searched New Jersey bakeries to find the perfect roll for the breadline's sandwiches.



Fresh sandwiches are prepared each day for the breadline.



people on the line reminded him of the artists with whom he worked. “There’s a sensitivity in a lot of artists,” he explained, “They’re a little different, like a square peg in a round hole.” The people on the line were much the same. Mr. Cross began offering art classes to members of the breadline community, and was stunned at the results. “My idea was to teach them methods, but a lot of them didn’t want that. They knew what to do. It was like being in a studio of artists.”

Recognizing people’s talent and desire, Mr. Cross started a printed newsletter in 2021 to which people on the line could submit art, poetry or other writing. Each week he gives it out. It is also published in English and Spanish online at the St. Francis Breadline website, under the name Street Voices. “A lot of them have nobody to talk to,” explained Ronald Baker, a social work student at Yeshiva College, who works for the ministry editing and creating the weekly newsletter. “This gives them a way to release what they have in their mind and what they’re feeling. It gives them inspiration for the day and faith to keep moving forward.”

In the 1970s, The New York Times reported that the breadline cost \$1,000 a week to run. It now costs \$3.5 million annually, and includes not just the more than 300 meals and 500 cups of coffee given out each day on 31st Street, but a food pantry that operates three days a week around the block on 32nd Street, and donations of food to other organizations—37,000 breakfast bags a year to social service agencies in Harlem and the Bronx, and 1,200 pantry bags to another food pantry in the Bronx.

Extraordinarily, the breadline has never had an endowment or a development director. “It’s all private donations,” Mr. Cross said with wonder. “People will tell us, ‘I saw this all my life while I was working, and now that I’m retired I want to help.’ It is amazing.”

Father Carnevale, who now serves as parochial vicar at the Church of St. Francis of Assisi, remembers that, in his era, there was an offertory box outside the parish where people could leave donations for the breadline. “This is the flower and fur district,” he explained, where businesses were largely run by Jewish families. “Every Friday, when



Volunteers and staff, including Adam Cross, executive director of Franciscan Bread for the Poor, far left, pray before their shift at the breadline begins.

they went by, the owners would throw in checks.”

Where many put their guard up, both emotionally and physically, around people living on the street, Mr. Cross has a kind of gentle frailty about him, as though he is insistent on remaining open and vulnerable. “What I’m trying to do is really just to be a brother,” he said, “to love them and encourage them.”

At one point, he talked about “turning form,” the artistic aspiration to transform a two-dimensional canvas into three-dimensional life. It is an apt description of how he sees this ministry. People treat the unhoused like “diseased animals,” he said. That cannot help but make them feel like that is all they are: “We need to love them even more instead of driving them away,” he said.

“Jesus is alive,” Cross said. “He gives us love and life and liberty and happiness. That’s what we’re all searching for. I want them to know that love.”

Instruments of Peace

Each morning from 6:30 to 7:45, the line still stretches

half a city block, nearly a century after the breadline started. Sometimes it goes even farther. During the pandemic, said Mr. Cross, “The line almost touched itself. It wrapped around the entire block. We were one of the few open food services in town.”

Some who come to the breadline struggle overtly with addiction and mental health issues. But many of the guests also defy the stereotypes that American society tends to ascribe to people who might be on a breadline. Not everyone is unhoused. Some wear work uniforms; others are well dressed. The spirit on the line is generally friendly. Many say hello, thanks, “God bless you,” or have cheerful conversations with staff and volunteers. The population includes many ethnic groups. There are teenagers on the line and people who could be grandparents.

The volunteers, too, represent a spectrum. They include cardiologists and retired bankers from Wall Street, people in their 20s and 30s, new parents. A Pittsburgh businessman volunteers every time he comes to New York for work. Others come in each week from Long Island or New



The breadline's weekly newsletter provides poems, photos and stories from members of the breadline community.

Jersey. Some have been volunteering for decades. Over the summer two young Dominicans came each morning in their brilliant white habits. One of the guests expressed his surprise at this, noting, "Dominicans are a preaching order." He went on to praise the young men for how kind they have been.

Regina Yogorasa began volunteering in May after she retired. She lives in Queens; to get here by 6:30 a.m. she has to catch a 4:50 a.m. bus, then the subway. She comes three mornings a week. From the first day, she said, it has been a special experience. "There were 273 people. I was shocked," she remembered. "But I felt so happy serving. I am 70 years old, but I haven't felt as much happiness as I felt that day."

A graduate of St. Bonaventure University, Glenn McKeever started volunteering at the breadline 10 years ago and said he always feels better after he spends time serving there: "Like I've done something." Over the years, he has gotten to know people on the line, and they remain in his thoughts when he leaves. "You always kind of wonder how they're doing or whether or not you can do anything for them."

Over the years, volunteers have changed the breadline as well. When Bob and Emily Marcelli started volunteering in 2006, the serving process involved handing out the bags of food. It rubbed Bob the wrong way. "It's like we're just throwing stuff at people," he told Emily at the time. "We're not even making eye contact."

"The homeless, we ignore them," says Mr. Marcelli, describing what he sees as a common reaction to people who are unhoused. "We walk on the other side of the street. We shun them. [We say], 'They're filthy. They're dirty. They're



Andrew Dinegar, O.F.M., often can be found at the front of the breadline, talking to the guests as they wait for their meals.

drug addicts.' No, they're people."

He told the breadline's management he couldn't be part of a ministry where they didn't engage with the guests. And as a result of that feedback, the breadline changed its process. Today there are a series of stations from which guests can choose. They offer fruit juices, a deli sandwich, peanut butter and jelly Uncrustables, fresh fruit, a rotating variety of snacks, hot oatmeal containers (with hot water if wanted) and coffee (25 gallons each day), with volunteers and staff serving at each station. In addition to offering many opportunities for interaction, this setup gives attendees the chance to make the meal their own. If they don't want something, they can say no; if they want more, they can ask.

When Manganaro's closed in 2012, the Marcellis also offered to take over providing the sandwiches. Bob is a professional chef who studied with James Beard and has opened high-end restaurants. He and Emily also have a business, Marcelli Formaggi, which imports cheese, olive oil, pasta and honey made by his family in Abruzzo, Italy. With nothing initially but the help of their three children, they started making 300 to 500 sandwiches every day at



Today there are a series of food stations from which guests can choose.

Sowing Love

Along with Mr. Cross, the full-time breadline staff includes four laymen, a Franciscan brother, and a rotating group of six security guards, two of whom work at the line each morning.

Tim Harvey, now the operations manager, was working at a senior center when he heard about the breadline and pantry. On the breadline he is usually in the background, making sure the volunteers have the next box of food they need and taking empty boxes away. He is also a master of the quiet joke.

It makes him an easy person for guests to talk to, and also a good partner with the operations assistant, Jason Jon, a wiry musician from Ohio with wide eyes and a ready laugh. Mr. Jon has the gift of being able to connect with just about anyone, and in a way that makes them feel immediately at home. He used to work as a bartender and learned there that small gestures can mean a lot. “When you have a really busy night and you’re serving people at the bar, if you just throw down a coaster, you let them know you see them.” Mr. Jon gets up at 3 a.m., or even earlier some mornings, to travel in from Brooklyn.

When purchasing food for the breadline, Mr. Harvey makes a point of buying extra so that people can ask for more. “That’s why I offer variety, too,” he explained, “different PB&Js, different juices. If they ask for a different juice or an extra sandwich and you give it to them, it brightens up the whole day. It’s like a big moment for them to be able to say, ‘Oh, I don’t want that one. I want that one.’... A little bit of kindness goes a long way.”

Seeing the struggle that some on the line are going through is not always easy. “It feels like all the world’s problems are all right there in a nutshell,” said Mr. Jon. “I don’t want to see it, I want to fix it, and there’s nothing I can do. It sits with me sometimes.” Occasionally they’re confronted by guests, too. “But I know they’re not really yelling at me,” Mr. Harvey said. Often, he observed, “they’re mad at the world or something that happened yesterday. They’re just blowing off steam.”

But there’s a lightness in the way Mr. Jon, Mr. Harvey and fellow staff members Manny Gonzales and Jeff Pen-

their home in New Jersey.

“A couple of our kids worked in the city,” Emily remembered. “They would come in after work, make them, then one of them would drive them into the city at 1 or 2 in the morning.” Eventually they hired a staff and drivers in New Jersey just to do the sandwiches and deliver them each morning.

From the start, Bob and Emily insisted on a high-quality sandwich, as Father Carnevale had before them. They bought and sliced the meat themselves instead of using pre-sliced products. They also spent time trying to find the exactly right kind of bread. “I don’t know how many bakeries we went to in Jersey,” said Emily. “Finally we found a Portuguese bakery in Newark. We took one bite and said, ‘This is the bread.’” Bob agreed, citing the tastelessness of most deli rolls: “That was the key.”

Having worked on the line for so long themselves, they were also able to think through the packaging of the sandwich in a more practical way. “We tell our staff, we want you to wrap this so well that when it falls out of a pocket on 31st Street, the person can still pick it up and eat it. This isn’t being eaten by some schoolchild. It’s going to travel all over the city.”

Once the Franciscans began their morning breadline, they never stopped.

nington treat people, one that seems to convey a quiet hopefulness. “I love working with the people,” Mr. Harvey said.

It’s clearly the same for Mr. Jon. At one point two women came up and started talking to him. They called him “Primo,” a nickname sometimes extended to close friends. A little embarrassed, Mr. Jon explained that one of the women often makes him flan in thanks for his help. “It’s incredible. I tell her, you don’t need to do this.” But they do.

His Hard Project

Originally the breadline was staffed each morning by Franciscans. Today, Brother Andrew Dinegar carries on that tradition. Before he entered the Franciscans, he had a business career working for Marriott in Washington, D.C. “I had a good job, but my values got away from me,” he said. “I’d see the unhoused outside Union Station and I’d think, ‘What scum.’ I hated myself, and I hated these people even worse.”

In January 2002, he was awakened from sleep by a voice that told him, “Do something.” For a year he floundered, trying to find a way to reconnect with his faith and the God he knew had spoken to him. Hearing a vocation director describe his experiences volunteering with Mother Teresa’s Missionaries of Charity, Brother Dinegar sought out the order. On his first night at their D.C. home for the mentally ill and terminally ill, he was asked to shower and shave a 37-year-old man who had AIDS. “I was like, ‘Whoa, whoa, whoa, what?’”

“Then I lathered up his face, and when I was half-way done shaving him, my heart just exploded with love,” Brother Dinegar said. “It was like the Big Bang. My whole life changed.”

Dinegar spent the next seven years volunteering with the sisters. Some days he would call in sick to his job to spend more time as a volunteer. Eventually, he entered religious life himself—first the Alexian Brothers, then the Franciscans.

In the mornings Brother Dinegar is always at the front of the line, talking to the guests as they wait. At well over six feet tall, with close-cropped hair and a sturdy build, he can be an imposing presence. “No one messes with a big guy,” Mr. Jon noted. But rather than intimidating, there is



Michael Carnevale, O.F.M., is a former director of the breadline.

a softness that Brother Dinegar brings. He regularly kids with people, telling them there is a fee for the meal today or calling them out when they try to cut the line in a way that makes them laugh and step back. “You have to have humor, joy and laughter,” he said.

Brother Dinegar also regularly goes out in the middle of the night to see how people without homes who are sleeping in the area are doing. The work is about “presence, companionship, walking this journey with them,” he said. “God’s trying to fix me, but I’m his hard project,” he told one of the guests one morning.

For the Franciscans—originally of the Holy Name Province, which began the ministry, and now of the newly formed national province of Our Lady of Guadalupe—the breadline remains a cornerstone. “The breadline and the soup kitchens we run elsewhere ground us in our charism as Franciscans,” says Brother Henry Fulmer, chairman of the breadline’s board. “They bring us back to who we are here to serve.”

The Franciscans’ continued presence affects those who work there as well. “The Franciscans I work with are awesome,” Mr. Harvey said. “Their attitude is great. They’re fun, and happy to be here.” He counts them as one of the gifts of working on the breadline.



Min Jung Cheon is among the volunteers who distribute sandwiches on the breadline.



Jason Jon is the breadline operations assistant.

Cross points to Brother James Gannon, guardian (a Franciscan term for a religious superior) for the 31st Street community of Franciscans, who comes nearly every morning. “He’s so gentle,” said Mr. Cross. “He’s a former provincial [superior], and here he is working with the homeless. I love that. I think to myself, ‘That’s Francis right there.’”

Some days at the end of the shift, Brother Dinigar can be found sweeping up the bits of debris left over from the morning. There is something totally incongruous about this big bear of a man gently sweeping up bits of paper. But it gives a glimpse into his heart.

“Twenty-two years ago, [even if I had been offered] a million dollars, I would never do this,” he says of his work spending time with the unhoused. “Now they’re my best friends. I wake up in the morning and I smile. I’m going out to see my family.”

A People of Faith

Lorenzo Widget has been receiving food on the breadline for almost four years now. He says that it is more than a place where people come to get food. It is a community where they raise each other up. “You get people here who have been broken and hurt,” he explained. “They need this fellowship. When people come together here, it’s like it becomes a psychological area that builds strength in each individual.” While they might be ignored or avoided by people walking by them in the street, here they are seen and appreciated.

In Mr. Cross’s office hang two pieces of art from guests: one a pencil drawing of Jimi Hendrix bursting with energy, the other a Cubist-like painting of a woman’s face, her eyes uplifted like Mary’s at the Annunciation. He said he finds tremendous holiness in the guests on the line. “I see them

sometimes as close to the disciples,” he said. “So many of them have such a simple, strong faith.”

Each week, the breadline newsletter is filled with expressions of that faith. “Lord, I ask that You bless those who have helped me,” wrote Jae Webb. “Help me never take their support for granted, but instead carry a spirit of thankfulness in everything I do.”

On a recent morning, a torrential downpour started just as the breadline began. The street “turned into a river,” Brother Gannon recalled. It is the kind of situation most people flee as fast as they can. But not the guests on the line. “Men laid down in the street to wash themselves off,” he said. “They were like kids, playing in the puddles of rain, washing themselves, laughing, dancing and singing.”

As he spoke about this experience, his eyes got misty. “To see these grown men lying down in the street, letting the water run over them to wash their bodies, then getting up to sing and dance...it’s a two-edged sword,” he said. “On the one hand, they were playing like kids. On the other, they had no shower to go to.”

Jim McDermott is a freelance writer and writes about pop culture at jimmcdermott.substack. Reporting for this story was supported with a grant from Lilly Endowment Inc.

A golden cow statue, likely the La Virgen de Guadalupe, is shown in profile, facing left. The statue is highly reflective, with bright highlights and dark shadows. The background is a dark, textured surface with numerous small, glowing golden particles, creating a starry or cosmic effect.

The Glamour of Evil

**If beauty saves,
what does ugliness do?**

By Cecilia González-Andrieu

Think of a moment when you felt God's nearness. And I mean *felt*, not as something you could explain or argue, but as a closeness that reached into the depth of your being in ways you could barely describe—and yet you knew.

My son had one of those experiences. He was on a work trip to Mexico City and took an afternoon to join a tour of the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe. He was rushed and distracted, so he decided to return later on his own. On a long-distance video call that evening, his eyes wide with wonder, he described the experience. He was sitting quietly before the image of *La Virgen* preserved on Juan Diego's *tilma* high above the main altar when, suddenly, he "knew" he was not alone. And then it hit him all at once that he was *never* alone. He felt *La Virgen's* loving gaze fixed intently

on him and became aware that my late mother (his beloved Abi) was sitting next to him in the pew, "like every time we went to *Misa* together when I was little."

The whole experience felt familiar and natural; being there with a community in prayer was being *en familia*. In the beauty of that moment, he discovered that heaven and earth were not separate realities but instead one. My son was changed by that moment. In a world steeped in materialist cynicism, where our young struggle with disillusionment and despair, he had an experience of beauty so profound that it generated hope in him, a hope that keeps renewing itself. When his little blind dog was sick recently, he hung a small medal of *La Virgen* from his collar. God's compassion knows no limits.



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Maybe you have had such an experience of beauty. I hope so, because you also represent hope.

The experience my son had was not a private revelation but the fruit of a community—the loving work of generations who recognize the primal human need for beauty and continue to labor to make it perceptible. He benefited from artists and architects who envision ways to help us feel the power of beauty. He kept in his heart the stories that mothers and grandmothers recount of God’s loving presence. Most of all, he received the gift that countless communities of faith generously bestow on one another—the witness to being grafted into a larger story and the renewal this brings from generation to generation. This recognition and expansion of beauty as heaven’s solidarity with us has been

central to the Christian faith from its very beginnings.

St. John Paul II, in his pastoral “Letter to Artists,” in a section titled “The ‘Beauty’ That Saves,” writes: “Faced with the sacredness of life and of the human person, and before the marvels of the universe, wonder is the only appropriate attitude.” The Christian imagination is that quality that allows us to push against the boundaries and apparent inevitability of an often painful *what is* into the possibility and healing of *what could be* by the light of our religious tradition. For Christians, this open possibility is the source of our hope in God’s reign, which is both here and not yet here. The reign is both breaking in and incomplete as it pulls us toward its fulfillment. The reign requires imagination, commitment and experiences of it, perceptible in beauty, to nourish it. The invitation to imagine expansively and the work of cultivating ways to do this are central to a faith that engages with the realities of this world and responds to the “signs of the times,” as the Second Vatican Council emphasized.

Start Here

Our theologies, the ways we speak of God and our relationship to God and to one another, must begin with what is happening around us. If we endeavor to attune ourselves to experiencing the world as it is, this will lead us through a process of interpreting and wrestling with reality. It is this process, done in community and by the light of Sacred Scripture and tradition, that blooms in an expansive imagination and can become effective action for the reign of God.

John Paul II wrote that “beauty will save the world”; in doing this he was echoing a long tradition uniting the aesthetic with the ethical. Sixteen years later, Pope Francis would also appeal to beauty as a powerful aid to building ecological solidarity, naming beauty and its effects over 40 times in his encyclical “*Laudato Si’*.” He writes: “Faith allows us to interpret the meaning and the mysterious beauty of what is unfolding” in the universe. He adds that Jesus “was able to invite others to be attentive to the beauty that there is in the world because he himself was in constant touch with nature, lending it an attention full of fondness and wonder.” The insight into the power of beauty encouraged ancient thinkers to identify qualities they called the universals, or the transcendentals. These were ways of experiencing reality and evaluating it that appeared to be so fundamental that they were shared across radically diverse human groups. So how can we unite around these principles?

Understand what is good. Despite differences across cultures, humans seem to share some basic understanding of what is good. Religious codes throughout the world often



The recognition of beauty as heaven's solidarity with us has been central to the Christian faith.

The Dangers of Our Present Age

A while back, I was at the movies and noticed that interspersed between the previews of coming attractions were scenes with soaring music and action-packed visuals. Their emotional appeal was not used to promote an upcoming film but instead to invite viewers to imagine themselves starring in a film. Well, not exactly a film: The overall message was that you, the viewer, can also be this exciting, attractive and important if you join the military. In a quantity I had never seen before, in ad after ad, young people there to see a film were asked to imagine war as trendy, guns as fashionable accessories and danger as alluring. This is not new.

An impostor has taken hold of our national imagination and broken up the unity between the good, the true and the beautiful. The reasons for this breakdown are varied and complicated: the advent of reality television in the 1990s; the explosion of social media; violent, role-playing video games; the loss of serious and committed journalism; the \$11 billion spent on advertising in the last presidential election; the extraordinary financial resources poured out on frivolous and tawdry “beautification” campaigns in Washington, D.C.

That impostor is recognized and identified repeatedly in Scripture—think golden calf, think 30 pieces of silver, think the repeated and urgent warnings about the corrosive power of wealth. The impostor is glamour.

An oil-painted triptych from the late 15th century—“The Garden of Earthly Delights,” by Hieronymus Bosch—reveals how to battle the destructive power of glamour head on. Bosch exposed the ugliness of superficiality and narcissism, revealed the deceitfulness of status and power, and, in doing so, helped us see sin with clarity as it replicated itself, pointing us away from the good and ensnaring us in evil.

Our baptismal rite can remind us of the same. It preserves the memory of this insight as the elect are asked the questions: “Do you reject sin so as to live in the freedom of

converge in defining what is good and what is not. Ancient peoples understood that there were markers in the ways life unfolded that showed what would help a community flourish and markers that conversely cried out “caution” and pointed to what would hinder and thwart a community’s survival. Good was real and so was evil, and the difference between them needed to be understood and acted upon.

Embrace what is true. Humans also seem to share an ability to assess what is true and what is not. These assessments of truthfulness are not connected to our simplistic modern idea of “the factual” but rather to a more robust and profound experience, the experience of wisdom resonant in the human heart. There are truths and there are also lies; and as history painfully shows, the difference between these is vital to the survival of a community. This difference also needs to be visible, understood and acted upon.

Behold beauty. Beyond goodness and truth, the ancients identified a third “universal,” and some of us give it pride of place because it validates the other two by attracting us and pointing us toward them. This is what we call beauty, and unlike some who would claim “beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” reducing it to a purely subjective experience, those of us who argue for the transcendental power of beauty are closer to Shakespeare’s idea that “a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” The sweetness is universally felt, universally recognized and universally delightful, regardless of what name we might give it. What’s more, in a Christian understanding, beauty and our ability to recognize and love it originate in God’s abundant generosity and communicate God’s presence with us. As John Paul II puts it, beauty “has drawn its sap precisely from the mystery of the Incarnation.” This was the experience my son had.

Find strength in unity. The strength of the transcendentals is precisely in their unity and how they bring us to union with a mystery that wants to be known. If something is good, then it is also true and most assuredly beautiful. And since beauty is perceptible through our senses and thus present in the world, it can do the work of revealing the other two. Nothing can be beautiful if it lies or leads us into evil. Because of this, beauty’s opposite—ugliness—is also a valuable and powerful ethical marker that we must be capable of recognizing and acting upon. What I want to highlight here is that the events of our present day reveal that we have neglected to cultivate our ability to see true beauty and consequently have become blind to its heart-breaking absence in ugliness. This failure is playing a critical role in what is happening in our world. What happens when we can no longer recognize beauty? What happens when ugliness is camouflaged so we cannot see it? What is the outcome of losing our ability to discern the true and the good?



A photo of the framed *tilma* of St. Juan Diego, as displayed in the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City

are lured away, allowing evil to become our master.

How Ugliness Helps

If we cultivate our sensibility to it, ugliness can cause us to recoil from wrongful actions and from lies. Yet when ugliness is covered over by the veneer of the golden calf, it can be difficult to identify. This failure becomes manifest in the scapegoating of the vulnerable. Blaming the poor for obstructing our access to the shiny objects of false beauty supports consumerist aspirations, puts profits over people and replaces economic growth with economic domination. When glamour deceitfully promises a beauty that it cannot deliver, we humans are groping in the dark.

Our contemporary culture is making us prisoners of an aesthetics of greed and superficiality. Instead of understanding ourselves as part of the big story of our universe, we are goaded into selfishness and violence. In 2025, the U.S. Congress passed H.R. 1, incomprehensibly named the One Big Beautiful Bill Act to obscure the ugliness within its many pages. Among its uglier provisions: cutting access to health care for millions, deepening food insecurity for the poor, roll-

ing back clean energy investments, encouraging extractive industries and undoing environmental protections. Inside this massive legislation, the gun lobby secured more deregulation, and the militarization of borders and cities came at the cost of lives while promising exorbitant profits for the defense industry. Evidently deceitful and harmful, the act was named “beautiful” to mock and obscure our ability to see the evil behind it. We should call this what it is: heresy. So how do we respond to the glamour of evil that has overtaken us?

Today, as a theologian concerned with human rights, I see how the community-breaking aspirations of social climbing and material comfort cloaked in glamour have turned us against compassion. In our day, astuteness is defined as the opposite of empathy, and we have been sold an idolatrous worship of a testosterone-fueled drive to power that is raining bombs on the world.

If we dare an honest look, we can see how evil hides behind glamour, leading us away from truth and goodness and making us desire its lies and empty promises. Captivated by glamour, we forget our freedom as God’s children and

ing back clean energy investments, encouraging extractive industries and undoing environmental protections. Inside this massive legislation, the gun lobby secured more deregulation, and the militarization of borders and cities came at the cost of lives while promising exorbitant profits for the defense industry. Evidently deceitful and harmful, the act was named “beautiful” to mock and obscure our ability to see the evil behind it. We should call this what it is: heresy. So how do we respond to the glamour of evil that has overtaken us?

We unmask it.

We can do this in many ways, but a good start is dismantling the propaganda machines that glamorize violence and use euphemisms to cover what is real. “Troops” don’t die; human beings die. There is no such thing as “collateral damage,” there is violent destruction. We are not helping “the less fortunate”; their lives are not the result of fortune not smiling on them but of systems that exploit and brutalize those who have no power, trapping them in precarity.

We are not a polarized society where two equal sides are vying for the support of its citizens. No, with every choice we make we need to discern not which side we are on, but how that choice will affect the poor, the immigrant, the vulnerable, the sick, our common home. We must be clear, focused and uncompromising—the Gospel does not provide two sides for how we are to live, only one “abundant life” (Jn 10:10). Beauty’s heartbreaking absence—the ugliness that is unleashed when lies and evil rule—has to guide our work for the reign of God. Ugliness, seen clearly, will point us away from evil and toward the good.

God’s Love, Present

The Scriptures insist that our ultimate act of loving God is to make God, who is love, present as we unconditionally and fully love each other. As with all the teachings of Jesus, this is not merely talk. Jesus’ life and violent death add the ultimate reversal to the condition of disloyalty and broken relationships of human history. He dies as a direct result of betrayal, trampled by the dazzling glamour of Rome and the collusion of those who wanted a share in Rome’s power. He is abandoned, forgotten, marked as a criminal. It is this act of starkly unveiling our selfishness through his active solidarity with the most despised of the world that unleashes resurrected love in history. The true measure of beauty is Christ on the cross, giving up his life for his friends (Jn 15:13), while commanding us to love one another as he has loved us.

Christian love guided by such beauty can have no conditions, and because of this is untamable and incorruptible. The gaze of La Virgen is on us and with her all the saints who came before us. We are not alone. Pope Paul VI famously counseled, “If you want peace, work for justice.” I will add: If you want justice, work for beauty; and wherever beauty is absent, create it. We have very hard work to do, possibly the hardest work of our lives in a world that is terribly broken but also full of grace because you are here, we are here, and the reign of God continues breaking in.

Cecilia González-Andrieu is a professor of theology and human rights at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles and a contributing writer for *America*.

THE WORLD GIVES MY MOTHER BACK TO ME

By Mia Schilling Grogan

The world gives my mother back to me—
all the time. *Dickens!* cries the banner
blazoned above the library where she

first found him. Piaf turns my corner
coffee shop into the brownstone living room
of some distant evening—serene container

of expectancies: dad, dinner. I assume
she’d pull this red dress from the rack
(where I will leave it), and bear it home

to me because I wear *too much black*.
See how she colors it all: the Pastoral
Symphony, topaz rings, a glass of milk.

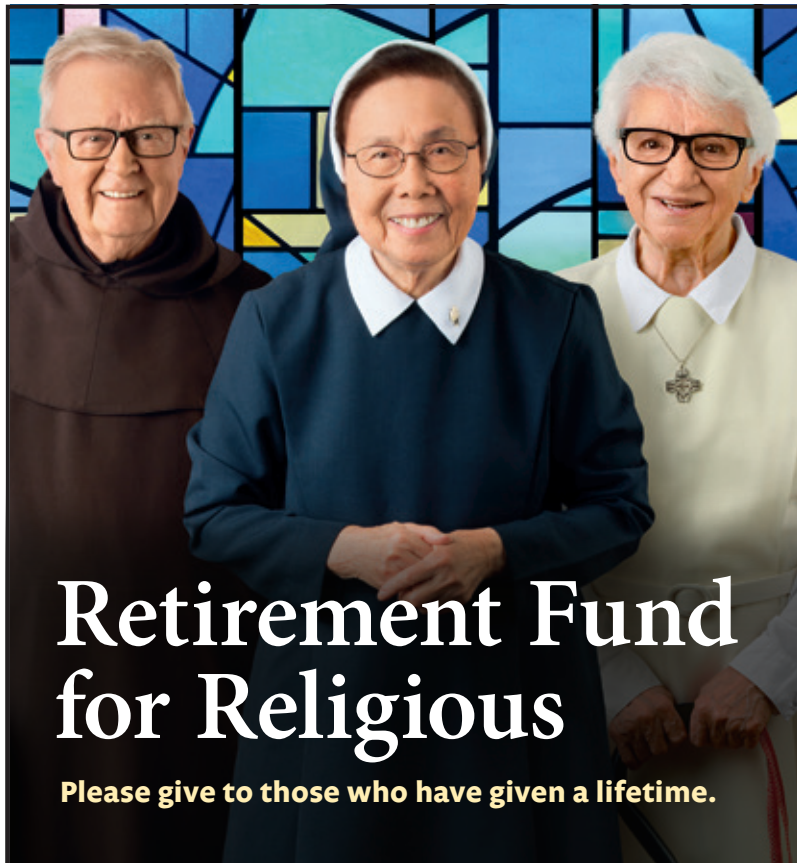
The trick would be to not find the ritual
of cocktails, white wicker on a porch,
a blushing hill of mountain laurel

or branch of pussy willow, the church
at the shore—all kinds of things—so pregnant. When
she gave the world to me by taste and touch

(*Just try it, Feel this, Look up, Listen!*)
I couldn’t know that what I learned to see—
hate or love—would yield this type of heaven:

the world gives my mother back to me.

Mia Schilling Grogan is an associate professor of English at Chestnut Hill College in Philadelphia. Her poems have most recently appeared in *Commonweal*, *The Christian Century* and *Presence*. Her first poetry collection is *Mid-Flight Birder*, published by Kelsay Books.



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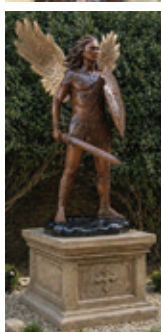


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"I give thanks with all my heart."

(Psalm 9:1)

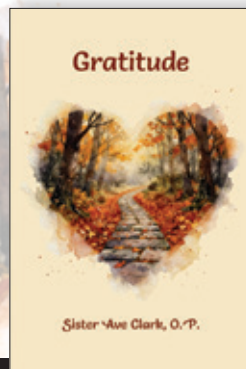
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Inviting Conversion

How can the church change minds on migration?

By Sarah G. Hansman

Church leaders in the United States at every level have stressed that xenophobia is an urgent and enduring problem. Church teaching, too, makes it clear that xenophobia and discrimination against migrants are matters that we must confront and oppose. But how? How can we invite a change of minds—or better yet, a conversion of hearts, to recognize the dignity of migrants?

Despite the fact that migration is a central feature of the history of all three Abrahamic religions, studies show that religiosity is negatively correlated with positive feelings toward immigrants. In other words, the more religious you are, the more likely you are to hold negative views toward migration. A Pew Research study released in early 2025 showed that Christians in general (46 percent) and Catholics specifically (41 percent) were twice as likely as

those of other religions and the religiously unaffiliated (both 23 percent) to say an increase in immigrant population has been “a change for the worse” in the United States.

This data presents both a challenge and an opportunity to the Catholic Church, with its strong pro-migrant tradition rooted in Scripture, the preferential option for the poor and the belief in the fundamental dignity of every human being.

Addressing the incongruity between the teachings of Catholicism and the views of its followers is crucial during Donald J. Trump’s second presidential term, one that has seen sweeping changes in migration policy, including travel bans, restrictions on asylum and the deployment of Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents into U.S. cities to reach extreme deportation quotas. We have

also witnessed the spread of insidious myths about migrants, including that undocumented immigrants disproportionately perpetrate violent crimes, smuggle drugs and directly compete with U.S. citizens for jobs and public benefits. As the ethicist Kristin Heyer has noted in *Kinship Across Borders: A Christian Ethic of Immigration*, these myths “can serve as idols to conceal a sinful reality and provoke demonization.”

Those working in academic, journalistic and political fields to counter these myths often assume that if citizens had accurate, nuanced information, anti-immigrant sentiment would decline and rational dialogue on immigration policy could ensue. The Catholic Church has taken a related tack, with leaders at every level condemning U.S. policy and rhetoric on immigration. In 2025 the U.S. bishops issued a rare “Special Message” on migration, writing that they are “compelled now in this environment to raise our voices in defense of God-given human dignity.” Still, the prophetic voice of the church—while a balm to migrants and immigrant advocates—often seems ineffective in penetrating the hearts and minds of immigration opponents.

Social Science and Christian Ethics

The theological ethicist Tisha Rajendra has argued in *Migrants and Citizens: Justice and Responsibility in the Ethics of Immigration* that justice for migrants depends on narratives that are “faithful to reality.” However, while social science research is not of one voice, it provides good evidence to doubt the efficacy of rational discourse alone in shifting mindsets on subjects like migration.

The Catholic Church has long upheld the value of rationality to inform morality. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* describes the human as a “rational being...who can initiate and control his own actions.” But ethicists like Elizabeth Sweeney Block, Heyer, Bryan Massingale and others have focused on the transformation of unjust structures and cultures that account for distorted consciences and impeded moral agency. In a 2015 essay on racial bias, Massingale proposed a model of conscience formation that integrates “nonrational factors” of decision making—imagination, affect, disposition or intuition—with mere infor-

mation gathering.

But what about those who have *already* been shaped by and within xenophobic cultures? For those who already hold anti-immigrant sentiments, how can we invite conversion? Aware of structural and cultural influences on our consciences, how might we come to see conversion as a communal responsibility?

Deep Canvassing

The practice of “deep canvassing” among our fellow citizens could enable this very conversion on social and political levels.

A standard deep canvassing conversation, as summarized by the political psychologist Sarah Stein Lubrano in *Don't Talk About Politics*, might look like this. A canvasser asks individuals to rate where they stand on an issue from one to ten. Then the canvasser asks why that person is not a “one” or a “ten” and listens nonjudgmentally. From there, the canvasser seeks to uncover a personal connection to the topic at hand: Why does the individual believe what he or she does?

The canvasser delves deeper with questions and reflects the answers back to the individual. The individual is invited to rearticulate his or her position if the reflection did not feel accurate. In the latter portion of the conversation, the canvasser makes clear their own perspective through a story of how they or another individual were directly affected by the issue. Finally, the canvasser asks again what the person's views are, on a scale from one to ten, and invites the person to articulate why.

Two researchers who study deep canvassing, Joshua Kalla and David Broockman, have conducted three experiments on the practice, involving 230 canvassers working across different topics with nearly 7,000 voters in seven locations. They have varied the conversation to find the “active ingredients” of deep canvassing. While conversation remains more of an art than a science, the research suggests two key principles: nonjudgmental listening and a process of “narrative exchange.”

Because we all have a unique set of experiences that inform our beliefs, a canvasser engaged in nonjudgmental listening must act more like a chaplain than a political operative, providing individuals the space to unpack their own opinions and accompanying them as they do so. Rather than debate each person's justifications for believing something, the goal is to understand the motivations behind them. The tone of the conversation, then, is one of mutual listening and learning.

Research suggests that individuals resist persuasion

Continued on Page 36

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on many topics due to concerns about belonging: Admitting error may risk ostracization from their community. To change one's mind, a person needs to trust that it is safe to do so, especially amid heightened polarization.

If nonjudgmental listening creates the environment in which change is possible, then narrative exchange deals with the content. The canvasser invites the person to speak from his or her own story. While explicit arguments tend to elicit explicit counterarguments, stories decrease critical states of mind, tap into emotion and increase engagement. The exchange needs to be mutual, though, which means a canvasser must also share a story about oneself or someone else that informs the canvasser's views.

The results? Ten percent of individuals changed their minds after one conversation. This may not seem like a large number, but it indicates that deep canvassing is significantly more effective than other techniques (102 times more than traditional canvassing) and has the power to shift our political and moral landscape. Even more, the shifts in opinion had staying power, were effective across the political spectrum and did not require teams with extensive canvassing experience.

What can Christian ethics learn from deep canvassing? Key principles like nonjudgmental listening and narrative exchange already exist within the Christian tradition: in the values of hospitality and encounter, and in the practices of storytelling, parables, preaching and scriptural tales of conversion. Thus, deep canvassing does not require that the church adopt radical new methods. Rather, it uplifts existing practices that may be particularly effective in bringing about conversion on issues like migration.

The classic example of such a practice is one that has been the focus of church discussions for a number of years now: synodality.

Conversations in the Spirit

Synodality is not always easily defined, but the recent Synod on Synodality identified it as a way of being church by journeying together, discerning how to be in community and how to be in the world given the signs of the times. As a path of both "spiritual renewal and structural reform," synodality balances the import of structural, communal and individual conversion. I see deep canvassing and synodality as mutually reinforcing, especially looking at the synodal method of dialogue called conversations in the spirit, which itself is rooted in nonjudgmental listening and narrative exchange.

Sometimes called listening sessions, conversations in the spirit demand humble engagement that, to quote the Synod on Synodality's final document, can foster a climate



The more religious you are, the more likely you are to hold negative views toward migration.

"where people feel welcomed and not judged." Synodal listening centers silence as a means to avoid knee-jerk reactions or doubling down. From silence, participants share what "has touched them most deeply and what they feel challenged by most strongly." Moreover, these conversations in the spirit are not centered around listening to church teaching or "setting out one's own personal point of view." Narrative is the language of synodality. Participants share stories from their own experience.

In the case of migration, synodality invites those with anti-immigrant views to listen nonjudgmentally to migrants who share their story and the choices they made to survive—in the hope to someday flourish—amid constrained situations. Perhaps even more difficult, synodality asks migrants and migration advocates to listen to those who harbor fear or vitriol toward migrants. Why do they believe what they do? What experiences or stories shaped them? What is their own family's "migration story"?

To be clear, I am not arguing that the church should "deep canvass" as a political technique. Rather, its efficacy can encourage those who are doubtful or resistant to take up the synodal call. If we take the research seriously, synodality could in fact be our most powerful resource for broad and grassroots conversion on migration.

One might wonder about intention here. Deep canvassers set out with the express intention of shifting minds, something that can seem contrary to the synodal method, which "does not guarantee the desired result," to quote a document from the Synod on Synodality. But the key principles of deep canvassing that engender conversion lie not in the intent but the process itself. Thus, the intent need not discount the insights it can offer migration ethics.

Further, conversations in the spirit are not meant to be simply a performance nor are they just a process of manipulation. These conversations are theologically empowered by the knowledge that sin is present in all of us. Refraining from "casting the first stone" creates the conditions for conversion in the other, but it also calls forth our own conversion.

Rooted in the universal call to conversion, conversations in the spirit represent a collective effort to discern



A woman holds a U.S. flag as she attends a pro-immigrant march and rally following a Spanish-language Mass at St. John the Evangelist Church in Riverhead, N.Y., on June 22, 2025.

dignity, adopting this path makes the church, in the words of the Synod on Synodality's final document, "increasingly capable of making prophetic decisions that are the fruit of the Spirit's guidance" and invites deeper change. The slow movement of the church, often seen as a weakness, can be seen as a strength in this case, a unique way for the church to take up difficult and polarizing topics like migration.

Given the rampant anti-immigrant sentiment present in the United States today, the church needs to interrogate and adapt its modes of engagement on this issue. The method of deep canvassing, rooted in nonjudgmental listening and narrative exchange, endorses the potential of the synodal process as a methodology. Catholic parishes seem uniquely situated as communities to invite a grassroots conversion of heart on migration.

No individual can force conversion, but the church *can* cooperate with the Holy Spirit in fostering the conditions, opportunities and encounters that make a conversion of heart possible. Everyone has a role: parishes, teachers, professors, chaplains, preachers, Christian ethicists, the U.S. bishops and, perhaps most importantly, the lay parishioner.

This task is not easy, yet it is a necessity born out of a Christian belief that repentance, conversion and redemption are always available to every person. As Pope Francis put it: *Todos, todos, todos*.

Sarah G. Hansman is a doctoral student in theological ethics at Boston College. This essay is adapted from a paper presented at a conference at Boston College on Feb. 19-20, 2026, on "Law, Conscience, and Migration Today." Ms. Hansman's paper was judged the best entry by the editors of America.

and cooperate with the Holy Spirit, trusting that the spirit "blows where she wills," not at random, but toward what is liberative and life-giving, especially for the most vulnerable in our society. The synodal way of being, then, is not aimed at a one-time shift in polling nor a single piece of legislation, as important as that may be. Synodality, rather, aims to create conditions and foster encounters where the Holy Spirit may fill us and "something like scales" may fall from our eyes (Acts 9:18).

Nuts and Bolts

Turning to the practical, we should recognize that deep canvassing is "deep" because it is time-intensive and resource-intensive. What makes it successful also limits its efficiency as compared with normal canvassing, let alone with mass political advertising or social media campaigns. Sarah Stein Lubrano acknowledges that deep canvassing is not realistic for most political campaigns but asks us instead to "imagine if our lives were structured so we had conversations like that all the time anyway." This, I argue, is where the synodal church comes in.

The limitations faced by political campaigns do not limit the church. Synodality is not about results. As Thomas J. Reese, S.J., noted in the *National Catholic Reporter*, "Being synod, doing synod, in other words, is more important than the decisions that will come out of the synod." This mindset uniquely situates the church in a position to prioritize conversion of heart over polling data, return on investment or election wins.

Of course, such processes can also prove confounding and frustrating to those seeking change. While impatience with the synodal way is fair amid urgent threats to migrants'

Medieval Wisdom for the A.I. Age

Recovering a classic understanding of intellectual virtue

By Boyd Taylor Coolman



In a recent essay in **America**, Terence Sweeney drew attention to Pope Leo XIV's consistent concern with education in his writings, including in "Magnifica Humanitas." Mr. Sweeney noted the pope's attention to a new reality: that in an age of artificial intelligence, especially in light of what the pope labels a "technocratic paradigm," we are experiencing "certain currents of thought that interpret progress as surpassing the human condition, and which are often grouped under the labels of transhumanism and posthumanism."

So, what keeps education human or humane? In part, the pope provocatively insists, it entails discerning "when and for what purpose [A.I.] ought not to be used." Why?

The speed and ease with which answers or summaries can be obtained risk extinguishing the desire to ask questions, which is a process that bears fruit only over time. As Plato wrote, the deepest and most important things are learned only after much time and effort, by engaging in discussion with others, "striking upon" ideas and experiences together like flint until the spark of understanding is kindled within us. We must learn, then, how to exercise restraint in the use of AI and to protect our young people from the promise of the perfect machine, from that subtle temptation which renders human thought seemingly superfluous precisely when it is most needed. (No. 140)

The pope worries about an educational culture that prioritizes intellectual products over processes, quick answers over arduous questioning. Put simply, the threat A.I. poses in our educational institutions is to render the activity of human thought itself superfluous because its products can be more easily, quickly and accurately obtained through nonhuman means.

But this threat is real today largely because of a problematic, modern and essentially pragmatic account of the nature of human intelligence. Exercising restraint in the use of A.I.—indeed, resisting its use entirely in certain contexts—will require a paradigm shift in how human intelligence is essentially conceived, a shift that might be facilitated by engaging a medieval account of intellectual virtue.

By the mid-12th century, medieval scholars were intensely interested in the nature of the "good life," where "good" refers not only to moral or ethical goodness but also to human happiness—what they called beatitude and what we might call human flourishing. As Christians, they were of course convinced that only God could be the ultimate source and content of such flourishing. Borrowing terms from St. Augustine, only God should be *enjoyed* for "his own sake," or as the end of all desiring; there is nothing else beyond God in relation to which God might be reduced to a means. Conversely, everything else should be *used* as a means to arriving at beatific joy in God.

But this framework raised thorny questions. For example, Augustine himself had asked about the status of other persons. Are they merely to be used in order to enjoy God? Aren't they in some sense also ends in themselves? For the medievals, a similar dilemma emerged, perhaps surprisingly, in relation to the virtues. Are they merely useful in the journey to God? Patristic doctors of the church, including Augustine and Ambrose, seemed to contradict each other on this question.

In the middle of the 12th century, Peter Lombard, in his immensely influential theological work, the famous *Four Books of Sentences*, addressed this question directly by attempting a middle way: "We say that the virtues are to be sought and loved for their own sake, and yet only for the sake of beatitude." He resolved the apparent contradiction thus:

They are to be loved for their own sake, because they delight those who possess them with a sincere and holy delight and give birth in them to a spiritual joy [italics mine]. However...do not let the course of love end here, nor let this be the limit of delight, but let this joy be related to that highest good, to which alone we must adhere wholly, because it alone is to be loved for its own sake and nothing is to be sought beyond it, since it is the highest end.

Put simply, Peter posits a hybrid notion. In some sense, the virtues are both ends and means; in some sense, they are inherently good, without reference to any utility or usefulness, *except* in relationship to God. For those who

possess them, they are a source of delight and joy, without reference to anything else, except to God. In short, they are, perhaps paradoxically, “penultimate ends.” They have *intrinsic* but not *ultimate* goodness or worth.

What this hybrid notion introduces is a claim that in this life and in relation to everything else in this world, certain human acts and practices (and corresponding dispositions and inclinations) are intrinsically good and worthwhile, in and of themselves, requiring the addition of no utility or practical application for their justification. They are integral ingredients in human flourishing; it is simply good for humans to do them. If additional benefits are present, they would be, in medieval terms, accidental, extrinsic and unnecessary; not essential even if welcome.

Recalling that the Latin *virtus*, and behind it the Greek *aretê*, is well rendered into English as “excellence,” this hybrid notion is applicable to many dimensions of human existence, including, for example, education and, more broadly, to the “life of the mind” or to the realm of human intelligence. The medieval thinkers certainly had a notion of *intellectual* virtue, which adhered to Peter Lombard’s account of virtue generally. For them, reading, thinking, wondering, discussing, asking questions, seeking answers and more were intrinsically good activities, yielding a joy integral to human flourishing.

Perhaps, in the present moment, a striking aspect of this account of intellectual virtue relates to the production of texts. Put too simply, much scholarly writing in the Middle Ages prior to the Renaissance was done *in order to* facilitate excellent human thought, not the other way around, as in modern contexts, where scholars tend to think *in order to* produce excellent texts, for which alone they are rewarded and esteemed.

This obviously raises questions for the present moment: What is intellectual excellence for us? What is our definition of intellectual virtue *generically*, and what *specific* intellectual virtues should be cultivated for their own sake?

While various answers might be given, one thing is likely common across the board: Currently, we have no place for a notion of intellectual virtue like the medieval one. We assume, unreflectively, that the goal of education is its extrinsic and subsequent utility; we have a predominately utilitarian notion of intellectual virtue. We educate people *in order that...* and here will fill in our practical goal.

Whatever the answer given—to be good citizens, to be good employees, to be productive, to be effective, to be problem-solvers—it is extrinsic to the intellectual activity itself. Even the ubiquitous and much-vaunted ideal of “critical thinking” is typically a pragmatic notion. And when

educational institutions tout an ideal of “forming minds,” a practical end seems always implicit, left to be supplied instinctively by others, even if left unsaid.

We have long justified education in the humanities or liberal arts on the basis of what its graduates could produce for the state, for the economy, for corporations, etc. But already and every day more and more so, A.I. is more productive, more effective, more useful than any flesh-and-blood human. The seductiveness of A.I. exposes our deep attachment to these extrinsic products of intellectual activity.

We need, by contrast, an educational culture in which it is good *simpliciter*, in and of itself, for humans to read, think, converse, wonder and ask, if for no other reason than the intrinsic value of such activities—or that such activities are, in and of themselves, sources of delight and joy, an ingredient in human flourishing. When a human intelligence does these things, it cannot, by definition, be superseded or replaced by A.I., even if A.I. can simulate those things better and faster than humans can generate them.

Unfortunately, unless and until we acquire such an account of intellectual virtue and an educational culture that intentionally cultivates it, the seductive allure of A.I. will be irresistible.

It should be added that this is not an elitist account of intellectual virtue. As intended here, *excellence* does not mean how well one does the activity relative to other intellects; rather, the virtue lies in the doing of the activity, regardless of the relative sophistication. On this model, the genius and the simpleton can both be equally virtuous intellectually; the child reading a primer and the scholar reading a tome are equally excellent.

It should also be noted that the extrinsic, practical benefits of A.I. are not here disparaged. When they serve the common good, they are to be pursued. As “Magnifica Humanitas” asserts: “We can embrace the technological progress that alleviates suffering and unlocks new possibilities, provided that we do not abandon the very essence of our humanity” (No. 126). But such goods are not the *essential* goal of intellectual virtue.

Recovering something like this medieval account of intellectual virtue is the only plausible argument against A.I. It is just good for humans to read, think, write, discuss, learn and know. To be *humanly* intelligent is superior to whatever an intelligence, human or not, can otherwise produce.

Boyd Taylor Coolman is a professor in the theology department of the Morrissey College of Arts & Sciences at Boston College.

My Most Grievous Fault

Learning to grieve with my daughter

By LuElla D'Amico

A few weeks before All Souls' Day, I found myself at Sunday Mass with my daughter. Earlier that week, I had been told that our retired but still beloved parish priest, Father Boleslaw Zadora—the man who gave my daughter her first Communion and once led our family and other parishioners on a mission to the Basilica of Our Lady of San Juan del Valle—had died.

Known to his parishioners as Father Bill, he was small in stature, large in joy and full of zeal for life. I can still picture him leading our little group through the outdoor Stations of the Cross at that basilica in Texas, where we live. His harmonica sounded its plaintive notes as we walked slowly from station to station. We had traveled there during Lent, making the nearly four-hour pilgrimage south from our parish in St. Hedwig, an old Polish community on the outskirts of San Antonio.

When we finished, he gestured toward the statue of the Virgin of San Juan—the one rescued from a fire at the church, the one that, centuries ago, was said to have been instrumental in Our Lady bringing an apparently mortally wounded child back to life. He reminded us that Our Lady has a habit of showing up for ordinary people in impossible moments, a message conveyed in his distinctive, rather grumbly voice, the kind you had to lean in to hear, and with a certain wry smile that made you want to.

My then-8-year-old daughter loved that trip, and Father Bill especially. I am smiling even now thinking of his presence—infectiously glad but never overwhelming. A Salvatorian priest from Poland, he served our country parish for nearly 40 years, and our little family of four had been present for five of them. By the time he took that trip with us, I suspect he already knew he had been sick for some time. But Father Bill kept showing up for his parishioners, especially the children. His homilies were often addressed directly to them—“My dear children,” he would begin, with a sweeping up-and-down gesture of his hand.

My daughter knew Father Bill was ill, but he was so good at downplaying it. Parish life in St. Hedwig meant that even after he retired, we would still see Father Bill—at Wigilia, our Polish Christmas festival, playing carols on his harmonica, or at the parish trunk-or-treat, handing out candy and complimenting my daughter on her St. Lucy costume. Sure, we Catholics are a *memento mori* people, but maybe,



I thought, we could wait until tomorrow for a harder talk. Today, we would focus on the joy of being in the moment together—the harmonica, the saints, the chocolate—and pretend, just for a little while, that the dying part was not *really* happening.

And if I'm honest, refusing to face the harder truth of Father Bill's decline was not just to shield my daughter from the pain. It was to shield myself. Suffering is hard—not only to talk about with children but also to face as adults. And to face it as adults with children who love their priest so deeply is that much harder.

Last fall, Father Bill returned to Poland. Not long after, he was gone.

Grieving on God's Time

Cut back to Sunday Mass. My husband was away, and I took my daughter alone. For the first time, she was not doing well in school. I had already grounded her from extra-curriculars—no dance, no YouTube, no seeing friends, no video games, no Taylor Swift (the horror!). No exceptions. Then I heard that Father Bill had passed away and our parish was hosting a rosary for him.

Cue my most grievous fault. Not the kind that only sounds low but turns out to be a humblebrag in disguise. A real mistake: I didn't tell her.

Indeed, I barely was able to hear the news myself. Sure, I knew about his death. But I couldn't process it.

I decided we were “too busy” to deal with it right then: She needed to focus on homework; I had work deadlines to meet. The rosary felt, in a sense, “extracurricular” for us both. I pushed grief away for later, the way you might hide





Stock/ValentinaShikina

a stack of papers in a drawer so your desk appears clean. But that won't get you closer to actually doing the work.

This is no new sin of mine. Those who know me know I have had my fair share of suffering, and that I have learned to move sorrow aside, to box it in neatly. To a fault. During graduate school, my parents died within a year of each other—my father of Crohn's disease, my mother of Parkinson's (and, I'm convinced, of a heart broken by the loss of my dad). I took no time off from work. I didn't ask for extensions. I finished a major paper before driving home to see my father in the hospital, arguing it would allow me to be fully present when I arrived. I grieved like an efficient academic: competently, with a checklist,

and in the order I had designated.

It was only as my mother was dying that I realized how much I needed the church, because my checklists were no longer working. My grief was bursting at the seams; I could not order it in a way that made any sense. The liturgical year, on the other hand, forced me to stop, to kneel, to confess that I was not in control, and it was during her illness that a kind of conversion happened. It took me longer than it should have to realize what Scripture had already said in two words: "Jesus wept" (Jn 11:35). I needed a faith that let me weep too. Not on my time, but on God's—and with him, as well.

And yet here I was, a decade later, a mother rather than a single graduate student, making the same mistake—prioritizing productivity over lament. But this time I was not doing it to myself only; I was passing down my mistakes to my daughter.

When my daughter and I walked into Mass that Sunday after the rosary, there was my sin in black and white, on display: a photo of Father Bill at the entrance. I felt the guilt immediately. But I said nothing. Mass began. We stared at our Lord suffering on the cross.

After Communion, my daughter whispered, "Why is there a picture of Father Bill at the front of the church?" Then she paused. "Is it...his birthday?"

She had never been to a funeral before. She didn't understand what the picture meant, but I think she knew—and phrased it this way, hopeful, glossing over the reality of what it probably was.

I told her we would talk in the car before her religious-education class that followed Mass. At first, my

dear child thought she was in trouble for asking a question during Mass. But I confessed in the car. And there we sat, crying together, just the two of us. Grieving.

Later, when I called my husband to tell him what had happened, he said exactly what you are probably thinking: "You should've gone to the rosary. We've gotten our priorities all wrong on this for a while."

He was right.

We missed that chance to grieve in communion with our parish—the community Father Bill had shepherded through the pandemic and through the early years of our daughter's life. We missed it because I was afraid to confront grief—my own and hers.

But this is the mercy of our faith: God keeps giving us seasons for second chances. And the Catholic Church, in her wisdom, gives us three particular days: All Hallows' Eve (better known as Halloween), All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day. Known together as the Triduum of the Hallows, or All-hallowtide, these days help us to remember that death and life are always intertwined. We face the dark, we celebrate the light, and we rest in the mercy that holds them both. We cannot rush past sorrow on the way to glory, however we might wish it were so.

Upon his golden jubilee, before his retirement, Father Bill told our parish, "I thank God for this wonderful opportunity to walk with you in faith and grow in love of Jesus."

When I think of his words, I once more picture him walking with us through the Stations at San Juan, showing us how to walk with sorrow and not around it. I missed the point that day. But now I imagine him still walking beside us—one of those souls the church asks us to hold close, not in memory alone, but in prayer.

Now we place his photograph on our family *ofrenda*, alongside my mother and father—the three of them keeping one another company in our prayers. And I am resolved to no longer hide from grief. I will kneel with it, name it and teach my daughter to do the same. Because in the mystery of Allhallowtide—the saints above us, the souls before us, the living beside us—we are all, somehow, walking each other home, the faint sound of a harmonica helping us keep time.

LuElla D'Amico is an associate professor of English and coordinator of Women's and Gender Studies at the University of the Incarnate Word in San Antonio, Tex.



The Theology of Being an Easy Mark

What does it mean to be a ‘victim’?

By Kyle Desrosiers-Levine

Last summer I found myself in Krakow, Poland. I have long felt a kinship with St. Faustina Kowalska and her devotion to the apostolate of the Divine Mercy, and I was excited to make a pilgrimage to the Sanctuary of Divine Mercy. I loved the image of Christ that Faustina received and shared with the world, and it remains one of my favorites, alongside the Sacred Heart. It illustrates the fervent desire that God has to convey mercy and compassion to a suffering humankind, in ways great and small.

Having left the small church where St. Faustina once prayed at the foot of the hill below the main basilica, I was looking around the chapel gardens. It was a bright, warm day, and bees buzzed around the rose bushes and Marian shrines. Two women approached me, surely noticing the rosary in my hand and bucket hat on my head. They must have thought I was an easy mark: a tourist and a Catholic who would no doubt be swayed by a sense of Christian compassion (or maybe guilt) to help them.

One had a leathery face sun-worn by years of a hard life. She looked like she could be my grandmother’s age, but in reality she was probably younger than my mother. The other was younger and appeared pregnant. They tried first speaking to me in Polish to no avail, then switched to fragmented English to tell me they were hungry and needed food. I told them, truthfully, that I had no cash. They then gestured to a nearby convenience store that accepted credit cards, asking, “Could you please buy us a sandwich, just a sandwich?”

I groaned. I felt discomfort. I thought: *What can I say? I am at a pilgrimage site. I just prayed for mercy and I prayed that God would make me more merciful.*

Begrudgingly, naïvely, I went with them. In the small convenience store, my two new companions shifted into high gear. They got two baskets and each one started walking around the store. I followed them around like a little sheep, wringing my hands.

Each woman would point at something and then make a plea: *Can I get this soap? I have children; they really need it.* I’d nod, embarrassed. I was beet-red, sweating with discomfort. The younger woman grabbed some jugs of milk, some yogurt, looked at me with big pleading eyes and said, “I have six children.” I nodded. She put them in the basket.

The older woman came to packages of bread, wrapped pastries, bags of chips, scooping up a generous armful. “I re-



The Chapel of St. Joseph at the Sanctuary of the Divine Mercy in Krakow, Poland (2023 photo)

ally have nothing, please, for my family?” she pleaded. She placed them in her bag, then pulled out her worn, leather purse, making a show of opening all the pockets and shaking it out, showing that there was nothing inside. Eventually, they both stopped asking and simply picked up their pace, rushing about the store, grabbing handfuls of canned food, candy, junk food, laundry detergent.

I just kept telling myself the women looked poor, they



OSV News photo/Ely Segura

were poor, it was the right thing to do. I had enough that I could share. Though if I am honest, I went along with it as much out of discomfort as generosity.

Finally, we arrived at the checkout. The salesclerk stared at me, clearly flustered and possessing little patience for our group. The total was nearly \$300. My new friends looked at me imploringly. My face was flushed, I was tense, my heart raced. I swiped my credit card—then instantly noticed my phone buzz with a fraud warning marking the transaction as suspicious. As if I didn’t know already. I sighed.

We three emerged into the sunlight. It was a beautiful day. The older woman said, “You are a saint. Thank you, thank you,” hugging me tightly, pinching my face and kissing me on both cheeks. The younger woman said, “God bless you, my children will eat today.” Before I could even respond, they had already rushed off, plastic grocery bags in hand, heading up the street, away from the basilica.

I felt dazed and started walking slowly back toward the train station to the city, my pilgrimage complete. I was stressed and tired. I thought back to all the other times I had been taken advantage of. Back in school, when the popular kids would agree to work with me on a project because they knew I’d do all the work and they would get a good grade. When a friend of mine would always “forget” his wallet when we met for lunch, and I’d pay for him, knowing I would never get that money back. When I was in Columbus, Ohio, and an older unhoused man followed me around, asking for money for cigarettes. I gave it to him, again more motivated by awkwardness than true altruism, and knowing God

calls us to generosity even if it may be misused. I gave him the cash and then heard him call someone else an offensive gay slur, not knowing that I was gay. I also thought of when I was a tourist in Jerusalem and an old city shopkeeper said he could not pay for his children’s school tuition, and I felt so uncomfortable that I just overpaid for my purchase so I could get out of there quickly.

I was, in these moments, not giving with an open heart.

And I’ve often been plagued with a sense that being too quick to share or too trusting of others’ good intentions has been a weakness, rather than a sign of my good character. Those feelings of getting taken for a ride, of being too weak, too much of a pushover, still trouble me and my ego. In spite of all I thought I believed, after encounters like the one in Krakow, I felt less like a good Catholic than a helpless victim.

But then I thought about *where* I had been during that encounter: the Divine Mercy basilica, the place where Pope St. John Paul II made a pilgrimage in 2002 and prayed to Jesus that “all the peoples of the earth may experience your mercy.” I thought about how much I’d loved praying the musical chaplet accompanied by guitar during adoration with my college campus ministry. I thought about Faustina’s likely struggles with mental health—as we understand it today—and certain “soul torments.” I related those to my own struggles with mental health and feeling far from God. Above all, I thought: What does it mean when Jesus says, “I am mercy”? And what does it mean to pray, “Jesus, I trust in you”?

In Christ’s example of mercy, I saw something different from passivity or a naïveté that led to being pushed down in a Darwin-esque “survival of the fittest.” It is true we say that Christ was a victim. *The* victim. Yet, we are also taught that Jesus is all-powerful God incarnate. He entered “willingly into his passion,” we pray at Mass. Christ suffered, but he wasn’t “taken for a ride”; he wasn’t scammed. He accepted what was done to him. He willingly gave his entire self, freely—though notably, not until *after* he wrestled with it in the garden.

After he entered willingly into his victimhood, Christ was scapegoated, humiliated and tortured; he was killed slowly and painfully. But we do not always realize that these sufferings are associated with being a victim because of Jesus, rather than Jesus being called a victim because he suffered these things.

This word *victim* can be understood in multiple ways, none necessarily precluding the truth of the others. In our contemporary sense of the word, Jesus Christ was a victim because he was an innocent sufferer of pain and death. But Jesus was also a victim of a political system of collective oppression by the Roman authorities ruling over Judea, who had been violently repressing their Jewish subjects. For Christology, the study of how we understand who Jesus is, the most salient meaning of *victim* is from Latin, from which, through Christian usage, the word entered English and eventually acquired its other uses: It was the term for a living sacrifice, such as an ox or other animal killed on an

It is not our place to judge those asking for help if we are able to give.

altar in a temple. This word came to be used in reference to Jesus through the theological understanding of his death in relation to the Jewish Passover sacrifice of a lamb. Uniquely in Jesus' case, he is a victim who offers himself *willingly* in atonement for sins.

Jesus may be a victim, but that is not the whole story. Not only on the Cross, but also through the Incarnation, he gives himself to all humankind for the salvation of all the world, but he also asks us to give of ourselves in ways great and small. In the same Mass where we remember and re-enact Christ's sacrifice, we pray, "make of us an eternal offering," asking God to unite us to Jesus' merciful self-offering even in our imperfections and human failures.

In our modern parlance, victims have little agency, whether victims of war, of sickness, of car crashes or of sexual abuse. To be clear, I am not comparing my experience in Poland to the real violence, exploitation and suffering endured by undeserving victims. The women whom I met, who took advantage of my agreement to buy them each a single sandwich, also have ethical failures, even as they are at the same time victims of generations of racism and poverty. Like us all, they had both agency and were bound by circumstances beyond their control.

But Christ teaches his disciples that it is not our place to judge those asking for help if we are able to give. We are not the ones who decide if they are deserving, just as Jesus did not offer himself for us because we deserve it. And I have to remind myself of this all the time, when I feel my fists, my wallet and my heart all tighten up. When I feel a protective fear to shield myself from being taken advantage of. But thank God, this time I was generous; I was moved by that tiny ray of mercy, even if in my human weakness it was begrudging at first.

When I wanted to give them something, I thought it would be small, but they took a lot. I could have left the store, refused to pay, but I decided to go ahead and do it, because I know that I myself have sinned and fallen short time and time again. I have lied, I have cheated, I have manipulated, I have been unkind. And yet, I am also capable of doing good, showing compassion, forgiving the undeserving and embodying at least a portion of that infinite and unfathomable Ocean of God's Mercy. We all are. And so this time I willingly allowed myself to be a victim. Not a victim



The image of Divine Mercy in the Chapel of St. Joseph at the Sanctuary of the Divine Mercy (2023 photo)

who gets pushed around, but rather a victim who made a small sacrifice out of myself to serve others and give generously when I could, to be simply an instrument of mercy as Christ asks us to do when we are able.

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America



‘S.N.L.’ and the Radical Humility of Live Comedy

By Marie Glancy O’Shea

Once, in an attempt to reach beyond my comfort zone, I joined an improv comedy class. I knew nothing of the improv form, not even the fundamental rule of “yes, and...,” designed to foster collaborative lunacy. The experience was a revelation. If you want to accelerate the formation of trust and fellowship among a small, heterogeneous group of adults, throw them in a room to play make-believe every Saturday afternoon.

A memorable game was Make Me Laugh. One person stands in the center, everyone else surrounding them in a stone-faced circle. Whoever is “it” moves from classmate

to classmate, trying anything in their arsenal—faces, sound effects, one-liners—to elicit a stifled snort. The exercise had a twofold benefit: When you were it, you practiced creative silliness; on the receiving end, keeping a straight face. The natural byproduct of improv is laughter, but as a performer, you’re supposed to stay in character. “Break” too easily and you puncture the invisible bubble that surrounds the stage, preserving the absurd atmosphere of the performers’ pretend reality that is so much lighter than the world around it.

That term, *breaking*, flits through my mind as I contemplate the meaning of “Saturday Night Live” in 2026.



Dana Edelson/NBCU Photo Bank/NBCUniversal via Getty Images

Kate McKinnon, Cecily Strong and Ryan Gosling during the “Close Encounter” sketch on “Saturday Night Live” on Dec. 5, 2015

least in moderation. Performers “break” the way you break a glass that slipped out of your hand. A break is a trip-up, a failure that shouldn’t have happened, officially. And yet it’s the ultimate crowd-pleaser. Momentarily, the line between performer and observer dissolves, reminding both that we are all floating in the same bubble of absurdity, together.

Why It Works

“S.N.L.” is sketch comedy, not improv, but cast members are largely recruited from improv troupes and have been from the beginning. From the beginning, too, they broke things.

An incisive early review by the New Yorker TV critic Michael J. Arlen was originally headlined “A Crack in the Greasepaint” and hailed the show as an overdue acknowledgement by network executives of trends in comedy toward the personal and the psychological that had been taking root since the 1950s. Reading it reminds you just what a span five decades represent. Arlen’s analysis, contrasting the “conventional professionalism” exhibited by comedians like Bob Hope with the authenticity and human connection offered by a new generation, is by now a bona fide historical document. It suggests that “S.N.L.,” by shaking up a hoary set of expectations around TV comedy, was pivotal in redefining what’s “ready for prime time.”

Simultaneously, it underscores that “S.N.L.” at 51 is the antithesis in some ways of its 1975 incarnation. Not merely established but legendary, how well does it—can it—continue to deliver surprise, freshness and renewal, the chief qualities it represented when it began? “It’s not really the gross tonnage of jokes in the skits which makes ‘Saturday Night’ worth looking at,” Arlen wrote. “What is attractive and unusual about the program is that it is an attempt, finally, to provide entertainment on television in a recognizable, human, non-celebrity voice—and in a voice, too, that tries to deal with the morass of media-induced show-business culture that increasingly pervades American life.”

Michaels erred most notably when he veered from this approach. He left the show for five years in the early ’80s, and his return in the 1985-86 season marked a popular and critical nadir, likely because he bent to “show-business culture” by stacking the cast with well-known actors (Randy Quaid, Joan Cusack, Anthony Michael Hall) instead of non-celebrities steeped in improv and stand-up. In 1986 he again drew from the latter realms, adding quintessential cast members Dana Carvey, Phil Hartman, Jan Hooks and Kevin Nealon, and kicking off another era of classic sketches.

Some of the most popular compilations of the 51-year-old show that you will find online are of cast members and guest hosts breaking—losing control in the middle of a sketch. From the early days of “S.N.L.,” show creator and producer Lorne Michaels let it be known that he expected his players to be disciplined and stick to the script. Over the years this rigidity has eased, to the point where breaking has been effectively built into sketches. To “break” ostensibly comes from theatrical concepts of “breaking character” or “breaking the fourth wall,” which point to a sudden, even violent destruction of the audience’s illusions. These terms also suggest deliberate intent.

But breaking, as the term applies to live comedy, is involuntary, and this is largely what makes it delightful, at



Improv performers are used to high-pressure situations. They get plenty on the set of ‘S.N.L.’

There are many reasons why improv training translates to strong cast members. If you have regularly winged it in front of a live audience, performing scripted scenes live is generally less daunting. You have inventive instincts in place that can serve you well in an on-stage snafu. And early in each week of a show like “S.N.L.,” when the staff brainstorms concepts for skits, habits of unrestrained imagination come in handy.

In short, improv performers are used to high-pressure situations, of which they get plenty on the set of “S.N.L.” Yet at the risk of sounding sadistic, I crave a version of the show that makes room for purely improvised scenes. This is because I have noticed that the laughter generated from even mid-level improv is different in quality from the laughter that world-class scripted and stand-up comedy excites: It’s more spontaneous and free. There are no expectations because there has been no labor. No one has prepared a feed line or punch line and stood back, waiting for you to laugh. Instead, the players jump into a scene with trust in the moment and in their own sensibilities. No one in the room knows what will happen next, so everyone is primed for surprise. It’s not fine dining but a foraged meal, attuned to the bounty around us.

Arlen lauds how new comedy, embodied by “Saturday Night Live,” tries to integrate aspects of performers’ genuine selves and the stuff of actual experience. In doing so, he says, it refuses to leave audiences “out in the cold.” Putting aside that “S.N.L.” standby tickets are procured by literally waiting outside 30 Rockefeller Center, often in the cold, this refusal encapsulates the intent and effect of improv: Audiences co-create the joy. An entire long-form performance of 30 to 60 minutes begins with a word shouted by a person in the crowd. More than that, performers join the audience as co-observers and appreciators of the cooperative genius revealing itself from moment to moment.

Brimming With Delight

Which returns us to breaking. A hopeless cynic might construe the popularity of “S.N.L.” sketches like “Close Encounter,” full of unplanned laughter, as schadenfreude—

enjoyment at seeing performers blunder. I see these instances, at least the best of them, as moments when the same spirit that animates improv floods into the show. The script remains, but it’s temporarily forgotten, submerged in the abundance of the moment. Live performance asserts itself as an aspect of the present, and of presence: impossible to anticipate and brimming with delight.

Breaking is a moment of radical humility, and this confronting of limitation opens the door to God’s grace in the form of greater unity among people. All our shortcomings have the same potential, as Pope Leo writes in “Magnifica Humanitas”: “For an algorithm, an error is a flaw to be corrected; for a person, however, an error can be a catalyst for profound change.” I can think of few arenas other than improv where error’s link to grace is so immediately, consistently, mirthfully shown.

Pope Leo’s words in the encyclical make me suspect that what “S.N.L.” offers us today might be more powerful than what it offered in 1975. Reflecting on the pope’s warning that “a technology that merely classifies and optimizes what already exists can, however unintentionally, become an obstacle to change and growth,” one pattern that comes to mind is Hollywood’s barrage of sequels and reboots, force-fed comfort food that young people, at least, don’t want.

“S.N.L.” is not part of this particular problem. Its popularity has waxed and waned, but the very fact that viewers are forever comparing it unfavorably to previous versions and seasons points to its anti-nostalgia format. Though it predates most originals that have undergone recent revivals (from “He-Man” to “Top Gun” to “Saved by the Bell”), “S.N.L.” keeps evolving, shedding cast members and recurring skits and acquiring new ones that, though they may take time to find their groove, tend eventually to deliver something distinctive.

In an age when most TV is consumed asynchronously, viewers still stay up late to watch a fresh episode. In an era that puts every archive at your fingertips, this program that has recorded 1,000 episodes and counting is truly experienced only in its “Live, from New York” (and, this year, “Live, from London”) form: in progress, ephemeral, non-replicable. Anniversary retrospectives and YouTube compilations notwithstanding, the show is defined by whatever is going on this week in and around Studio 8H. Enthusiasts gather in midtown Manhattan, forming memories and bonds. Shocking statements and mini-scandals have arisen precisely because a measure of control must be surrendered to broadcast something as it happens.

It’s worth it because, hit or miss, there’s a current running through “S.N.L.” It’s less product than event, and its ongoing existence is not forced comfort but the real reas-

surance that we take from a light in a window: Here are humans, still now.

Accepting Finitude

Paradoxically, meaningful comfort springs from that which cannot be promised to us beyond the present. “Magnifica Humanitas” identifies this poignant predicament as an avenue to compassion: “Finitude, when truly accepted, does not diminish us but opens us to recognizing the face of God and others.... In this same experience, we remain capable of intuiting a fraternity greater than ourselves and of perceiving injustice as a scandal. Authentic culture and art preserve this spark, resisting the normalization of evil.”

Here and elsewhere, Pope Leo continues a dialogue with cultural figures that his predecessor cultivated. In 2024, Pope Francis reached out to comedians specifically, summoning them to the Vatican, where he discussed their role in public discourse and classified them explicitly as artists. He took seriously their role in combating the normalization of evil. “You remind us that *homo sapiens* is also *homo ludens*!” he told the assembled humorists, whose number included several “S.N.L.” alumni. “You denounce abuses of power; you give voice to forgotten situations.... You do this without spreading alarm or terror, anxiety or fear, as other types of communication tend to do; you rouse people to think critically by making them laugh and smile.”

There is a narrowness to the path of proper humor as Pope Francis defined it, though: It “is never ‘against’ anyone, but is always inclusive, purposeful, eliciting openness, sympathy, empathy.” In practice, to highlight abuse and injustice comedically while remaining inclusive is, if it is possible at all, at minimum, a black diamond challenge.

Consider, for example, Melissa McCarthy’s turns as Sean Spicer, then the White House press secretary, in 2017. Spicer’s days at the time were spent belligerently championing policies like the travel ban on citizens from predominantly Muslim countries. When McCarthy emptied full boxes of gum into her mouth, shouted puerile insults at reporters and careened around on a motorized podium, was she mocking the ban, Spicer, or the folly in his loyalty? Is it possible to separate these things? Can a political sketch be funny without pointing to truths that might give its subjects a sting?

“S.N.L.” is far from a deeply political show; most of its most beloved hits are character studies with little or no connection to partisanship or controversy (think the Church Lady, Gumby, Stefon, Bronx Beat). But its longevity alone gives it weight as a player in our politics. The show has been exaggerating and skewering the crude, bumbling and audacious, the silly and outrageous, across nine presidential administrations.

When it premiered, Gerald Ford was in office and Chevy Chase memorably portrayed him as a klutz through a series of slapstick gags. Following President Ford’s death, the veteran CBS journalist Bob Schieffer recounted his own role in cementing that reputation for clumsiness: He dutifully filed stories every time the president stumbled. During the 1976 campaign, after logging one such incident, Schieffer knocked himself unconscious by walking carelessly into an overhead luggage rack. He felt honor-bound to confess this bump to Ford, who “laughed out loud and said, ‘By God, I just wish I could have been there to see it.’”

It’s not original to note how crucial both bold journalism and fearless comedy are to a healthy democracy. What is noteworthy in Schieffer’s story is the reminder that a president might be relatively thick-skinned, certainly respectful of the Bill of Rights, and nonetheless possessed of an ego that wearies at having every trip, literal or figurative, catalogued and parodied.

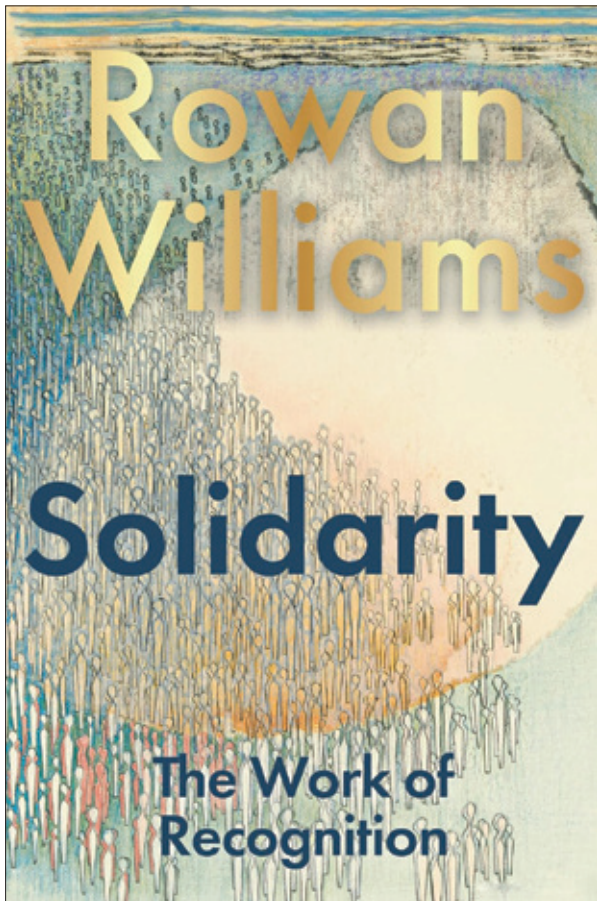
Schieffer’s impulse to share his own foible was surely appreciated, an olive branch that momentarily transcended the two men’s disparate assigned roles. But in a democracy, the powerful can’t expect ready access to the sympathy and empathy Pope Francis invoked. We require them to be large enough to absorb slings and arrows without losing their balance, threatening to shut down jokes they don’t like, or—like the 18th-century English lord played by John Malkovich in a 1989 skit—declaring, “I will not be mocked!”

A comedian is the authoritarian’s antithesis, in that a comedian is successful to the extent that they will make themselves ridiculous for a laugh. It seems no coincidence that Volodymyr Zelensky, perhaps the most prominent embodiment of anti-authoritarian resolve in the 21st century, made his name creating political satire. I haven’t seen his work, and couldn’t understand the language if I did, but I would be amazed if his performances showcased his personal poise and gravitas. In improv, performers are asked to “go big”: to be as unselfconsciously outlandish and cartoonish as possible. Making light of yourself first, you show that your spoofing of others is not a zero-sum game, but part of the spirit of joy—what Pope Francis, in his remarks on humor, called “the best antidote to selfishness and individualism.”

In the circle of the Make Me Laugh game, there were no winners or losers. Making someone laugh, usually by tossing aside any semblance of coolness, was the object. But the person who had broken hardly lost. They were, after all, laughing.

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SEEKING OUR COMMON GOOD



Bloomsbury Continuum / 320p \$28

Locally and globally, our shared sense of the common good has become increasingly fractured. Can we recover a common commitment to care—for one another and the created world as a whole? Archbishop Rowan Williams's new book *Solidarity: The Work of Recognition* explores this question extensively, and draws upon a wide array of contemporary thinkers to do so.

Consider one issue: Our communities see a rising number of refugees fleeing climate change, war, persecution and economic despair. How can we recognize, respect and assist the strangers in our midst? Williams, the retired archbishop of Canterbury, offers one imperative that reverberates through his book: If we are to recover a sustainable spirit of solidarity, we must work, both interpersonally and politically, to go beyond too-easy, sometimes performative declarations like "I feel for you and stand with you."

The work of solidarity may be summarized in a series of imperatives. We must listen to others as they articulate their experiences of threat and oppression; we must acknowledge that quick appeals to "universals" may hide structures of oppressive power; and we must refuse the

assertion of atomistic selfhood by accepting our inherent interrelatedness. This labor of attention may alert us to the solidarity we already share, spur us to rectify injustice and alleviate suffering. It may even foster a sense of inter-creatural "communion"—a word that, as Pope Leo XIV insists in "Magnifica Humanitas," does not mean "uniformity" or "homogenization."

"Communion" is literally *Solidarity's* final word, and its religious connotations reverberate throughout. In my reading, Williams poses the most vital question halfway through, in a rich chapter on Catholic social teaching (much indebted to Anna Rowlands's splendid 2021 book *Towards a Politics of Communion: Catholic Social Teaching in Dark Times*). Williams cites Pope St. John Paul II's definition of "the 'virtue' of solidarity as the 'correlative response' to the recognition of basic interdependence." He then asks the crucial question: "In what sense does the idea of solidarity require a sense of the 'sacred'?" In the title of a recent, complementary essay honoring the memory of the British philosopher Gillian Rose, he poses that question even more starkly: "Solidarity: Necessary Fiction or Metaphysical Given?" Secular partners in dialogue may seek solidarity yet suspect any religious language that grounds it as divinely "given." But can simple, consensual pragmatism truly sustain the ties that bind?

In the Catholic social tradition, "solidarity" is both descriptive and aspirational or, as Pope Leo puts it in his encyclical, "both a principle and a virtue." Solidarity describes our reality as always already present: We are created in God's image, called to love our neighbor and serve as stewards of creation. As Pope Leo puts it, "the future of each individual is connected to the future of all." But solidarity is also a virtue we must choose to practice if we are to cooperate in the recovery of our divine likeness.

Williams is one of our most learned and articulate expositors of such theological givens. But he is drawn to the model of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose work stands "in the difficult space of being willing to hold back from what could be prematurely explicit use of Christian language for the sake of...an appropriate solidarity with the stranger." Realistic yet hopeful, Williams argues that patient dialogue will, with time, strengthen solidarity.

Solidarity's first three chapters pose a series of fundamental questions. In the first, he asks, "Who counts as human?" He argues that lazy habits of projection have "led people to construct elaborate arguments designed to undermine the humanity of the other." Centuries of institutional racism provide ample proof of this, but so too "the depressing levels of ignorance and negativity around



Williams elucidates the work of thinkers who can help us refine what we mean when we speak of solidarity.

people with Down syndrome, evidenced in the uncritical readiness of so many to treat the condition as automatic grounds for abortion.”

Like Leo, Williams also addresses pressing questions about artificial intelligence. Emphasizing embodiment, he doubts that “our ordinary physical vulnerability” will be “somehow in ‘solidarity’ with the condition of machine intelligence”—despite the seemingly empathic voice of Siri.

The second chapter explores “the paradoxes of empathy.” How, Williams asks, can we understand strangers? He interrogates many assumptions. For example, we all know that a lack of empathy can result in objectifying others. But given the irreducible opacity of other persons, “absolute transparency between speakers” is impossible. Nevertheless, as the parable of the good Samaritan shows, the “strangeness” of the other is not insurmountable.

Williams gleans from the phenomenological insights of Edith Stein, who sees “the imaginative standing ‘at’ the point of another’s perspective on the world [as] far more fundamental than any kind of supposed identification with the emotion of another.” Yes, of course, we feel for the other. But the real work begins through an “imaginative sharing” of the embodied stranger’s “field of perception.” Indeed, such imaginative work, imperfect as it may be, proves integral to our own self-knowledge.

In the third chapter, Williams turns to rights: What kind of claims does the stranger make upon me? Contemporary rights talk can often take the form of a zero-sum game. We may overcome such stalemates by “look[ing] to something very like a metaphysical commitment...a model of ‘right’ as something that precedes our own individual subjectivity.” Williams argues that the roots of our modern conception of human dignity can be found in St. Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas posited justice as “the supreme cardinal virtue because it is directed towards something other than the individual self.” Traditionalists and progressives may thus “overcome overdramatic binaries”; they may “discover continuity and mutuality in relation to what is strange.” Common ground remains possible.

In the chapters that follow, Williams elucidates the work of an array of thinkers who can help us refine what we mean when we speak of solidarity. The voluminous work of Father Heinrich Pesch, S.J., forged “a middle way between collectivism and free market absolutism.” Pesch emphasized the integral relation between solidarity and subsidiarity: a respect for local, from-the-ground-up organizations (beginning with the family, then extending to labor unions and beyond) and a rejection of “uniform centralization of authority.” Through widening levels of asso-

ciation, we begin to see our “fundamental connectedness [as] necessarily an ‘analogical’ affair.” By 1961, Pope John XXIII’s “*Mater et Magistra*” would affirm the reality and “common good of a global community.”

Substantial chapters are devoted to four thinkers, the stories of whom are often closely bound up with the history of their particular nations. Jan Patocka, a leader of Czechoslovakia’s “*Charter 77*” movement, sacrificed his life resisting Soviet domination. His thought envisions a “solidarity of the shaken,” fostered by “acknowledged dependence, reciprocal gift, and shared meaning-making.” Although Williams affirms the “deep fellow-feeling between those who have embraced the imperative of self-sacrifice,” he also perceives in Patocka the dangers of Romantic tragic heroism.

In the following chapter, he summarizes (and seems to prefer) the thought of Poland’s Jozef Tischner, who imagined a “solidarity without enemies,” but not “a universalism without conflict.” Tischner’s emphasis upon “conscience, faithfulness and work” laid the intellectual groundwork of Poland’s transformative Solidarity movement.

Williams turns next to the German Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Committed to nonviolence but recognizing the evil around him, Bonhoeffer joined the failed assassination plot against Hitler, for which he was executed. In Bonhoeffer’s *Letters and Papers from Prison*, solidarity embraces guilt as a given reality and spur to action. Acutely, Williams hears the echo of Dostoevsky: In *The Brothers Karamazov*, the Elder Zosima insists that each of us is “guilty for all.” Given my “already existing complicity in the continuing turmoil and dysfunction of the world,” I must “leave behind the aspiration for a moral purity that has no connection with the reality of the needy, guilty, compromised, helpless other.”

At the root of Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics*, Williams argues, is “the connection between persons in the Body of Christ.” Each of us is called with the specific gifts given to us to

act—and are, paradoxically, liberated by our readiness to bear the other's burden. But "it is finally God through Christ and the Spirit who is acting." Grace undergirds the common vocation of solidarity.

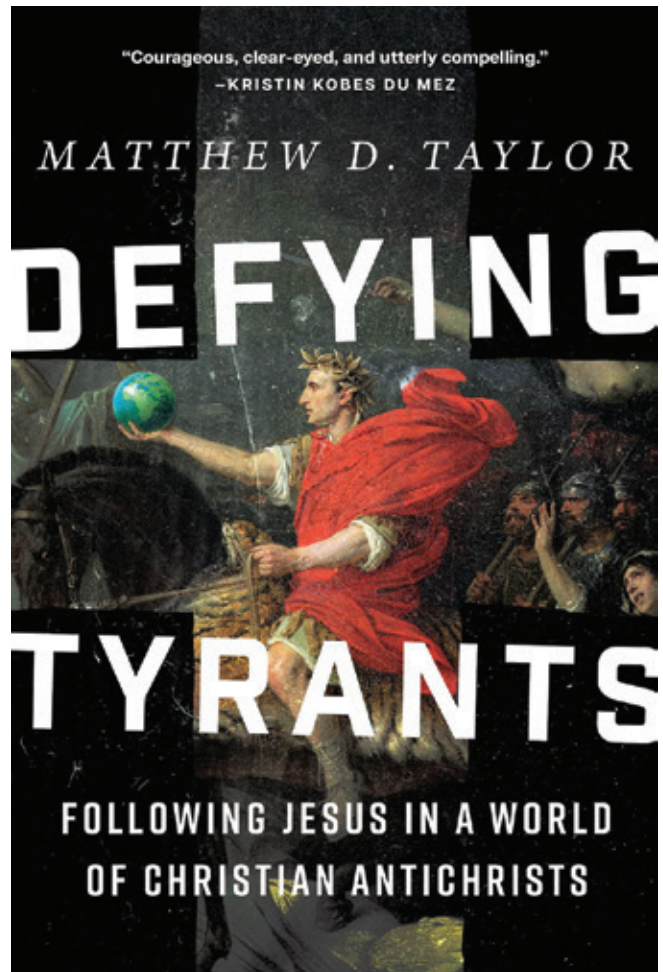
Williams's next chapter, on the English novelist and theologian Charles Williams, develops this discussion of divine love with "the language of co-inherence." For him, in the life of the divine Trinity, each divine person "exists only in and through the lives of the others." But Charles Williams's idiosyncratic Christianity, Rowan Williams notes, also "brings into focus both positive and negative aspects of the religious approach to solidarity." Divine co-inherence provides a warrant for the obligations that follow from our creaturely interconnectedness, but his vision of substitutionary suffering may inspire one to rush in and play the role of "savior," thus ignoring the wishes and responsibility of other persons. Here too we may recall Elder Zosima's wisdom in *The Brothers Karamazov*: his clear distinction between the slow work of "active love" and the all-too-hasty deeds of "love in dreams."

In his conclusion, Williams explicitly addresses the global environmental crisis, which "ultimately equalizes our human fates" and makes collaborative solidarity so urgent. This final chapter brilliantly integrates the threads of a complex, critical dialogue. In itself, *Solidarity* exemplifies the complex work of identifying an interlocutor's "point of orientation" and articulating common ground.

Rowan Williams is a bridge-builder. His book complicates the either/or binaries and competing absolutisms upon which we all too quickly fall. *Solidarity* beautifully complements "Magnifica Humanitas" and will, I hope, draw all of us a bit closer toward communion.

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MINDING THE WEEDS



Broadleaf Books / 257p \$33

Who is the Antichrist? In his new book *Defying Tyrants: Following Jesus in a World of Christian Antichrists*, Matthew D. Taylor, a mainline Protestant and religious studies scholar specializing in Christian extremism, provides a long list of figures whom Christians have at one point or another accused of being this biblical figure: the Prophet Muhammad, Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II, Adolf Hitler, Barack Obama, Oprah Winfrey and "too many popes to list," among others.

To that list of possibilities, one might now add Donald Trump, if one listens to former supporters like Tucker Carlson, Marjorie Taylor Greene, Rod Dreher and Nick Fuentes—and also add the Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg, according to the tech billionaire (and noted commenter on the notion of Antichrist) Peter Thiel.

It is tempting to conclude that the word *Antichrist* has been debased beyond meaning, reduced to nothing but a rhetorical smear. But in *Defying Tyrants*, Taylor argues that modern-day Christians concerned about the rise of Christian supremacist movements may benefit from re-



Taylor asks what Christians can do about the spread of ‘power-hungry theologies’ and ‘abusive leaders.’

covering the early church’s understanding of the concept.

Taylor’s previous book, *The Violent Take It By Force*, was an academic account of the New Apostolic Reformation, a far-right evangelical movement that seeks Christian dominion over all aspects of American society. By contrast, he introduces *Defying Tyrants* as an attempt to speak not as an academic but as a “Christian among Christians,” entering “an internal debate” on the question of “what are we to do, as Christians, about the spread of power-hungry theologies and the abusive leaders within our communities who are doing so much damage in our world?”

To answer that question, he first traces the roots of modern-day Christian supremacist movements to the Roman Empire. Early Christians challenged Roman values with their belief in a God who entered history as a colonized Jewish peasant, and who revealed his divinity through service, love and self-sacrifice rather than military power and domination.

But when Emperor Constantine converted to the faith, churchly and worldly interests became conflated, inaugurating a long history of Christians committing atrocities, from the Crusades to the trans-Atlantic slave trade to modern Christian nationalist violence, as they sought wealth and power rather than renounce it.

Taylor sees this history as in keeping with Jesus’ parable of the tares, which compares the kingdom of God to a field in which well-planted wheat must grow alongside poisonous, invasive “tares,” or weeds, until the end of time. He suggests that the wheat may be analogized to the anti-imperialistic, power-renouncing core of the Gospel, and the tares to theologies and practices that misuse the Gospel to justify Christian violence.

If some admixture of wheat and tares is inevitable, Taylor nonetheless argues that Christians “do need to identify invasive, toxic pseudo-gospels that have crept into the Christian crop” in order to “warn against the poisonous weeds that have become entwined with many Christian communities and traditions.”

Taylor points out that in the New Testament, the word *Antichrist* more often appears in the plural form, *antichrists*, to refer to members of the church who introduce such weeds, rather than to a single supernatural end-times figure. In his first two epistles, St. John uses the term to refer to community members who have broken away, leaving doubt and trauma in their wake. Though he concedes that biblical scholars remain divided as to the exact nature and beliefs of these dissidents, he suggests that a close reading of the epistles reveals three characteristics by which John identifies them as “antichrists”: They deny the Incarnation, they claim access to privileged, esoteric knowledge,

and they actively harm and abuse their fellows.

On the first characteristic, Taylor states that denying the Incarnation was not a matter of abstract theological nitpicking but an attempt to ingratiate the church to empire—to make the Gospel more palatable, and the church safer from persecution, by making God “more akin to the Roman gods: either a distant benevolent force...or another trickster god playacting at being human.”

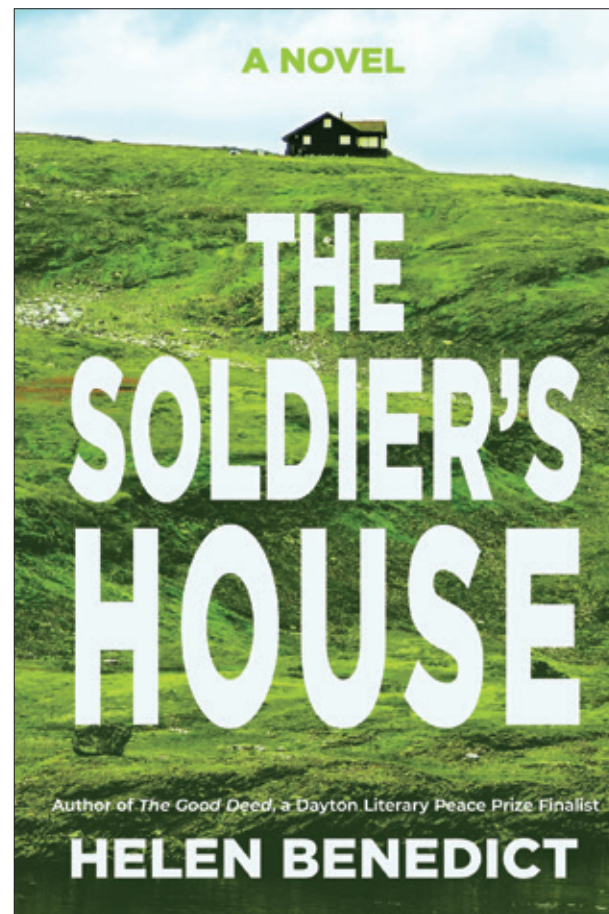
Far from simply doubting the Incarnation, these members also actively positioned themselves as keepers of special, salvific knowledge. Taylor speculates that in this sense, John’s antichrists represented a proto-gnostic strand of Christianity, a highly dualistic and elitist school of thought which sprang up in the early centuries of the church and which taught that a select few extraordinary individuals could achieve spiritual liberation through personal enlightenment. This unworldly, sectarian mentality would have been easily reconcilable with the elitist mystery religions that flourished during the Pax Romana, thus diluting the Gospel’s challenge to the empire.

Moreover, such claims to special knowledge would have replicated the hierarchical logic of the empire within the church: “If you wanted the real dope, the *secret evangelion*, the inside track, you had to go through them.” Hence, John’s assurances to his community that “you have been anointed by the Holy One, and all of you have knowledge.”

In the New Testament, John condemns antichrists for actively hating and harming their fellows: They are “like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother.” Although John does not specify the nature of their harm, Taylor concludes that John’s emphasis on the fruits of their actions shows that his meaning of the word *antichrists* refers more to right practice than right belief, a sentiment echoed centuries later by St. Augustine: “We find these also to be antichrists: whosoever in his deeds denies Christ, is an antichrist... A more lying antichrist is he who with his mouth professes that Jesus is the Christ, and with his deeds denies Him.”

Some readers may reasonably doubt the utility of seeking to reclaim the word in today’s politically and theo-

BOOK OF DARKNESS



Red Hen Press / 224p \$19

In 2003, the United States attacked Iraq, ostensibly to rid the country of Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction. The war destabilized the Middle East and resulted in Hussein's death, as well as the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis.

Helen Benedict's latest novel, *The Soldier's House*, focuses on the Iraq war, the turmoil it caused in the lives of one Iraqi family, and the American soldier who tries to help them.

The Soldier's House is the final novel in Benedict's Iraq war trilogy, which includes *Sand Queen* and *Wolf Season*. This second novel, the most ambitious of the three, occurs both in Iraq and in the United States; it focuses on both men and women, and tackles the effects of war. Even though a few of the characters appear in all three novels, one does not have to be familiar with the other books to appreciate *The Soldier's House*.

As Benedict, a Columbia University professor of journalism, explained in an interview, she was born of American parents in London and remembers the fallout from World War II—rubble from bombed buildings and burned children's toys—leaving her with strong anti-war sentiments.

logically polarized climates. But at a time when some American politicians purvey erroneous understandings of Catholic teaching, and church leadership finds itself vulnerable to misinformation-fueled conflict and digital tribalism, I found Taylor's close reading of John's letters powerful and persuasive. In his encyclical "Magnifica Humanitas," Pope Leo XIV calls on Catholics to be mindful of their words, but this mindfulness includes denouncing injustice. At the very least, *Defying Tyrants* raises fruitful questions regarding how Christians should speak about injustice in their midst with love and courage.

However, for a book that insists that Christians "should have few qualms about calling many significant Christians antichrists," Taylor offers general declamations—"the perpetrators, the theologians, the commanders, the abusive priests and conniving televangelists, the pampered princes and heartless oligarchs"—while curiously declining to name names. He condemns "populist politicians anointed to lead and promising to protect Christians' interests and cultural dominance," but he never names Donald Trump or any of the Christian nationalist churches and advocacy groups that have supported him.

In a book about modern-day Christian antichrists, it seems strange not to discuss Peter Thiel, who has spoken often about the Antichrist and who also famously funded JD Vance's political career. Perhaps Taylor wanted to challenge Christian readers to determine for themselves which contemporary figures fit John's description of "antichrists," but more specificity might have been helpful to readers seeking to understand Christian nationalism and how to resist it.

Nonetheless, for readers concerned with the distortion of church teachings for political ends, or seeking to reckon with its complicated history, *Defying Tyrants* offers thoughtful provocations worth wrestling with.

Erik VanBezooijen is a journalist and fiction writer living in Brooklyn and a graduate of the Tisch School of the Arts.

When the United States went to war with Iraq, she felt impelled to study war's effects on people. She later wrote *The Lonely Soldier*, a nonfiction book about women in war, in 2009 and a play, "The Lonely Soldier Monologues," in 2011.

The Soldier's House begins with a poignant epigraph: "To the children who have lost life, limbs, family and a future to war,/ And to the hope that the powerful will stop killing you."

The story features 5-year-old Tariq, who lost his leg as a bomb exploded in Iraq, and his family. They arrive in the United States without their father and breadwinner, Khalil, who was killed in a car bombing because he worked as a translator for U.S. soldier Jimmy Donnell and was considered a traitor by his fellow Iraqis. When the narrative begins, his widow Naema, his son and his mother Hibah come to upstate New York to live with Donnell in an uneasy peace.

Khalil and Donnell had seen each other as brothers, with each saying to Naema that she wouldn't understand the bond between them. The theme of brotherly love reverberates throughout the story and includes Donnell and his two brothers, Patrick and Rory. Jimmy, the oldest, practically raised his brothers. When he joined the Army to make enough money for their college education, he sent them to live with their Aunt Maureen, a devout Catholic.

Donnell feels fatherly toward Tariq and considers Naema a sister. The novel also has religious motifs like atonement and forgiveness that give the plot a spiritual dimension.

Benedict makes several references to Catholic and Muslim prayer in the novel and suggests the Iraqi family are practicing Muslims, while Donnell is a nonpracticing Irish Catholic. His wife, Kate Brady, who also served in Iraq, is Catholic, attends Mass and says grace before meals. Both religions call for love, mercy and kindness rather than revenge. But as the novel develops, both Iraqis and American characters are unable to follow this commandment.

Donnell's seven years fighting in Iraq taught him to hate the Iraqis. It was Donnell's job to teach his troops discipline and instill his men with a team spirit and loyalty—which he did successfully. When he returns home, he has post-traumatic stress disorder and feels like a misfit, somewhat reminiscent of Harold Krebs, protagonist of Ernest Hemingway's short story "Soldier's Home," whose title and plot seem to have inspired Benedict.

Donnell's wife Kate is a female version of Krebs. Like Krebs, she cannot adjust to being home and resents her family—especially her mother. She decides to leave her husband, parents and sister without telling anyone where she is or why she has left. One of the mysteries embedded

in the story is whether she will reconcile with her family.

Some of the slower scenes in the novel occur in the United States, while the most vivid ones occur in Iraq—as when Naema watches her father and brother being arrested and wrongly held in an American prison. Kate, whom Naema meets in Iraq, promises to help her find them. In one especially memorable section, Naema sees Kate in the United States and remembers waiting in the hot desert outside the prison where her father and brother are held to learn whether they were alive. "The more she absorbs Kate's presence...the more she feels again the devastation of that news when it came."

Naema is especially galled when she remembers U.S. politicians saying they were liberating Iraq rather than causing death and chaos. Donnell is consumed by guilt, which is why he brings Naema to the United States, where he tries to make it all up to her.

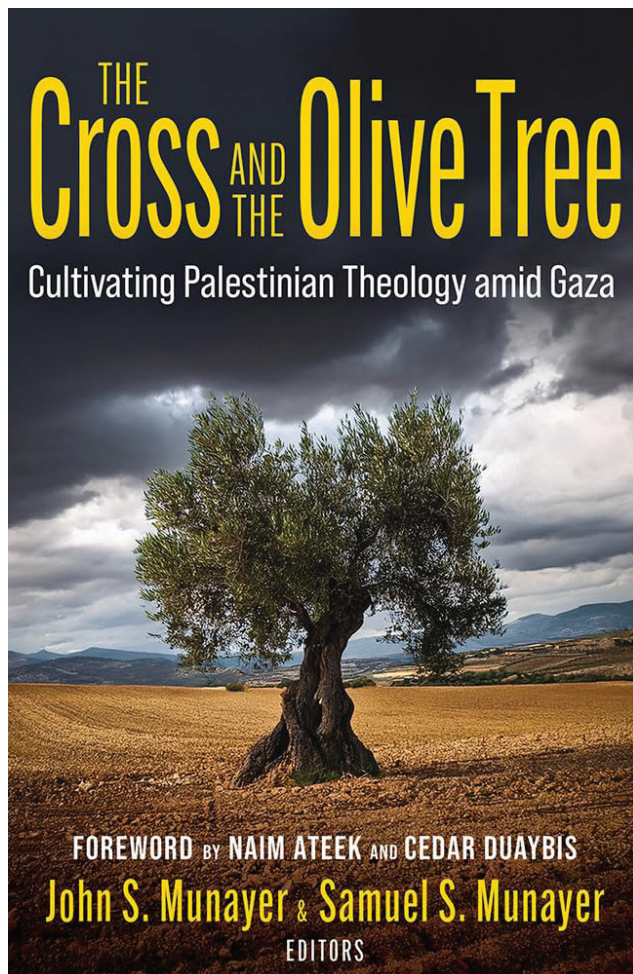
The book contains alternating points of view from first person to third across its 19 chapters, with each chapter picking up the thread of an earlier chapter and blending stories in a cinematic way. Each describes a scene and advances the plot while flashing back to an earlier event. Chapter 11, for example, is told in the third-person, limited-omniscient point of view. It shows the brotherly relationship between Khalil and Donnell. It also reverberates with Tariq's loss of his father, as Donnell (who inserts himself into the story) writes a letter of condolence to the widow of a dead American soldier and his eight orphaned children.

Benedict has an ear for poetry, and she infuses this novel with metaphors, parallelism and irony. Benedict describes Naema's father as a poet and references his work, as when Naema bends to kiss her son good night and remembers lines from his poem: "Rest from the running, now, my child/ And sleep while you can./ We have wars to lose/ And wars to win." Benedict also acknowledges poems written by actual Iraqi poets who, she says, inspired this novel.

The poetry sometimes spills over into chapters told from Donnell's point of view. He has a job interview at Saint Paul's Academy, a Catholic boys' school, and notices a chapel that "sags like an exhausted nun under the weight of its oversized steeple." During the interview, he has trouble keeping his mind from "spinning into darkness."

Ultimately, this disquieting anti-war novel feels like it holds as much darkness as the Iraq war itself.

Diane Scharper is the author of several books including *Radiant: Prayer/Poems*. She teaches the *Memoir Seminar for the Johns Hopkins University Osher Program*.



Orbis Books / 192p \$24

The ongoing suffering, violence and death suffered by the Palestinian people has captured my heart over the past several years, as I have observed the inner spiritual strength of the victims from different religions. The creative engagement of Palestinian Christians with oppression is a testimony to grace and an example of an authentic Christian response to structural dehumanization.

This creative resistance and faith by the people of Palestine—present since their experienced *nakba*, or “catastrophe,” of 1948, the year the nation of Israel was created—has birthed an Indigenous liberation theology that attempts to interpret and respond to the ongoing violence, death and destruction with the hope and love lived and taught by Jesus. The new book *The Cross and the Olive Tree: Cultivating Palestinian Theology Amid Gaza*, edited by the Palestinian theologians (and brothers) John and Samuel Munayer, is a compilation of seven essays that treats this relevant theology as sharing commonality with Latin American liberation theology. It can teach us much about a faith-based, justice response to the situation in the

Middle East today—but also about how to respond faithfully to the challenges that we face in the U.S. context.

The essay authors are members of the new generation of liberation theologians who are trying to provide to the people a faith-based meaning to the present reality, particularly the massive human and physical destruction in Gaza. They were preceded and mentored by the earlier generation of renowned theologians such as Naim Ateek, a Palestinian Anglican priest and founder of the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center in Jerusalem, and Mitri Raheb, founder and president of Dar Al-Kalima University in Bethlehem, whose work arose in the late 1980s.

In the book’s foreword, Naim Ateek and Cedar Duaybis provide an excellent, honest overview:

In spite of our skepticism, questions, and confusion, we were able, by the grace of God, to articulate a Palestinian theology of liberation toward the end of the 1980s. This theology helped many of us to renew, deepen, and revitalize our faith rather than abandon it. It deepened our love and faith in God, but it also energized our commitment to work for truth and justice. Furthermore, by using the hermeneutic of Christ, we were able to critique the powers of injustice, falsehood, deceit and domination, and begin to advocate for a just peace based on biblical truths, United Nations resolutions, and international law.

Moreover, Ateek and Duaybis write, “Palestinian liberation theology helped us to address our own fears and prejudices, as well as confront and challenge the evils of ethnic supremacy, racism and bigotry as we lived first under military law and then under the illegal Israeli occupation.”

The narrative and theology presented by various authors have been informed by the North American and Latin American experience of oppression and corresponding liberation theologies. The Jesuit theologian Jon Sobrino is quoted, and there are references to St. Oscar Romero.

One essay writer, the theology doctoral student Marah Sarji of Nazareth, derives her reflections from comparing the lives and practices of Mayan women in Guatemala during the genocide they endured in the 1980s military dictatorship to the women of present-day Palestine and Gaza, who have asked where God can be found in a genocide. She discovers Christ in the practices and ethics of care of these suffering women.

The mystique of the olive tree is integral to Palestinian culture and spirituality. “Olive trees are not just plants. They are spiritual entities,” the authors write. Quoting the interfaith leader Geris Khoury, they note that Palestine

is like an olive tree, “rooted in drought and stone yet it endures. It lives for generations, growing steadfastly. Even when its branches are cut, new life emerges.”

In their essay on “Palestinian Theology of Martyrdom,” referring to the Salvadoran experience of the Jesuit theologian Jon Sobrino, John and Samuel Munayer point to how Sobrino “sought to redefine martyrdom by broadening its scope beyond the traditional understanding of dying for the faith as an explicit doctrinal confession. In his view, martyrdom must include those who give their lives in the pursuit of justice, dignity and the defense of the oppressed, even if they are not explicitly killed for their religious beliefs.” Thus, martyrdom becomes “a radical transformative engagement in the world, where faith and action are inseparable.”

Any observer of the situation in Palestine can see the determination of doctors, nurses, ambulance drivers, journalists and food providers who have shown solidarity with others as Gaza has been bombarded and its homes and hospitals destroyed; their actions showed the reality of “martyrs of everyday life.” And martyrs of different faith traditions.

A similar perspective can be found in Pope Leo XIV’s recent encyclical “Magnifica Humanitas,” where he cites heroic and well-known church martyrs but also refers to the “unrecognized” everyday people who witness surrender and generous self-giving for Christ and his people

Alongside these public signs, there is a more hidden but decisive story. We see it in religious communities that choose to serve in poor and dangerous places. We also see it in the martyrs of fraternity and justice, such as Saint Maximilian Mary Kolbe, Saint Oscar Romero and Blessed Enrique Angelelli; and in those witnesses who embodied the hope of the Gospel as well as human dignity amidst harsh, often inhumane conditions, such as Venerable Francis-Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan.

Further, Pope Leo writes, “it is visible in the ‘martyrs of everyday life’ who care for, educate, accompany and comfort without fanfare, such as parents, nurses, doctors, volunteers and those who remain alongside an elderly person or an outcast. Their testimony demonstrates that goodness does not advance automatically, but requires the perseverance, memory and interior conversion necessary to begin anew, even after defeat.”

Those who are expressing solidarity with the suffering and oppression of Palestinian peoples, be they students or adults, and Jewish, Christian or Muslim or of no religion, often endure slander and harassment, including labeling



The essayists can teach us much about a faith-based, justice response to the situation in the Middle East today.

by many as terrorists. They are also living a kind of everyday martyrdom.

This new expression of martyrdom is also being lived out by many unrecognized people of faith who stand up to violence and cruelty, not just in Gaza or in the examples Pope Leo mentions but also here in the United States. The multitudes who are taking to the streets to pray and peacefully protest ICE atrocities in front of immigration courts and inhumane detention centers often endure physical violence, verbal abuse and incarceration.

The injustices practiced by oppressive oligarchies and military regimes in Latin America gave rise to Latin American liberation theology, one with its own martyrs and intellectual tradition. So too has the experience of Palestinians in their own land given rise to an Indigenous Christian liberation theology. Here in our country, we face entrenched materialism, disregard for human dignity from womb to tomb, racism, discrimination and anti-immigrant sentiment. Perhaps the time is ripe for a unique U.S. liberation theology?

Rafael García, S.J., has been pastor twice at Sacred Heart Church on the El Paso-Juárez border and serves as a volunteer chaplain at two ICE detention centers. In 2018, he founded the Encuentro Project border immersion program in El Paso, Tex.

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Fall poetry roundup features work both familiar and surprising

By Chloe Hanford, Joe Hoover, Nora Malone, Will Martino, Brigid McCabe, Alexandra Pfau, Kevin Robles, Molly Wysocki

In a voiceover from the sky in the final scene of the movie “American Beauty,” Lester Burnham, who should be at least a little peeved that he was just murdered, intones, “It’s hard to stay mad when there’s so much beauty in the world. Sometimes it’s like I’m seeing it all at once, and it’s too much.”

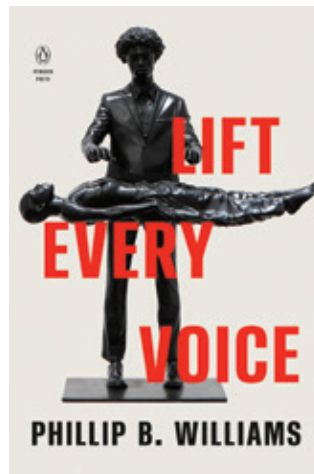
We cannot fully take the world, no? Sometimes it is too much! Not just beauty, but...everything. You can’t possess a moment, an object, a person, an event. You can’t collect a thing completely in your soul, put it in your mind like a chipped mug in a cupboard.

And imagine trying to fully express something...about anything! Who can utterly relate the truth, get it totally right? Try explaining to someone what you feel about the love of your life: your wife, your partner, the Christ. Words fail. You can’t completely capture them, or anything.

The poets whose works we discuss below in our annual poetry roundup each write about things that can be spoken of not fully but only in fragments. They each do it with their own native charm, craft and verve, and we are grateful for their work. We hope this review spurs you to the pages of their new books, or simply to reading more poetry.

Joe Hoover

The textures of grief, violence and love take form in *Lift Every Voice*, by Phil-



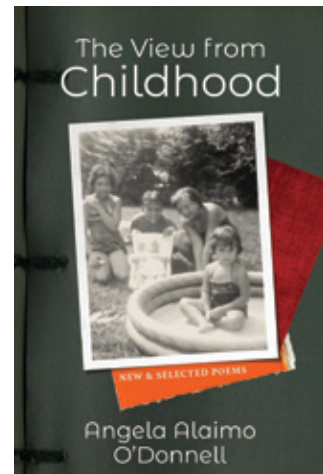
Lift Every Voice
96p / \$20
Penguin Random House

lip B. Williams, a professor of creative writing at Rice University. The collection opens with “Aide-Mémoire,” which invites the reader to follow Williams as he reckons with the past: “Elegy, sing the bones to break the cycle./ The cycle: Sing to break. Break to sing.” As Williams explores the legacy of his father’s addiction, the women who raised him and cycles of violence, the past makes its enduring presence known. “Was my father’s body as cold as my mind or still/ as warm as his paraphernalia glistening at my feet,” he writes of his father’s death.

In “Paradise” he is horrified at his role as a consumer to kill “at the swipe of a card.” All the while he remains grounded in small, tangible memories, like the image and sound of his grandparents’ wedding rings clinking and “throwing back the light of/ the television” as they watched commercials, holding hands.

Chloe Hanford

“To write—or to read—a poem about a lost moment in one’s life constitutes a kind of resurrection,” Angela Alaimo O’Donnell, a professor at Fordham University, remarks about her collection of new and selected poems. In *The View From Childhood*, Alaimo O’Donnell resurrects her child-self,



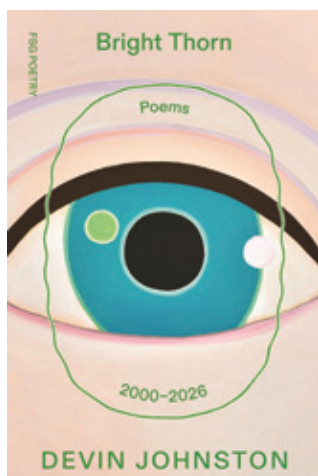
The View From Childhood
128p / \$23
Paraclete Press

and with her, the places and people from her youth as she saw them then.

Readers accompany her in the Robert Hayden-inspired “Northern Nights” as she watches her father warm their house in the wee hours of winter in their Pennsylvania coal mining town. They marvel alongside her at the delights of Atlantic City, N.J., in “The View From Childhood,” looking down from the top of Lucy the Elephant and feeling how “The world seemed/ as if we could hold it in our hands.” Finally, in “The Road,” she turns to imagine the childhood of Jesus and her own children, musing, “You find out who you are/ when you hold the hands of children,/ when you stroll beside the old.”

Chloe Hanford

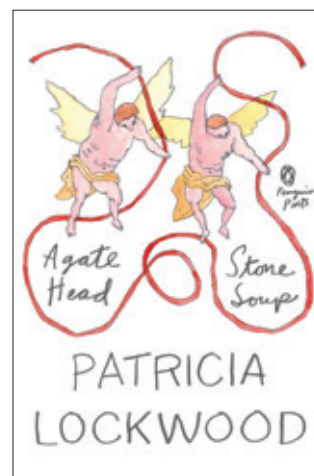
One of Devin Johnston’s poems in *Bright Thorn* deftly manages to refer to both Mongol steppes and the over-the-counter medicine Dramamine in the same breath. A summary of 25 years of the Saint Louis University professor’s works, this collection shows the breadth and relatability of his poetry. From the multipage poem “Iona” to the 10-word “The Difference,” Johnston’s poems appear wildly dissimilar yet fit together like a puzzle. He combines historical refer-



Bright Thorn
256p / \$24
Macmillan Publishers



Visitations
112p / \$27
Penguin Random House



Agate Head/Stone Soup
160p / \$25
Penguin Random House

ences to the Duke of Aquitaine with the modern American experience of using Xerox machines.

In “The Rough Bounds” he carries the reader from Australia to Scotland, guiding them confidently: “Keep straight, until your tracks/disperse in streams and soggy moss/like final whispered wisps of smouk.” Johnston seems to find the good and the sacred in everything, and this collection reveals his journey as he learns and grows, and watches his young daughter do the same.

Nora Malone

From her childhood in the Dominican Republic to her young adulthood in New York, to her later years in Vermont, Julia Alvarez has always seen the world through the eyes of a poet. *Visitations* brings together 40 years of her poems, revealing her hypnotic view of the world. Halfway through the collection, her Dominican heritage duels with her newfound American identity in “Ariadne in Bloomingdales.” She asks herself what her life would have been like had she not moved, “and instead stayed/ of the midnight crew running their minotaur vacuums/ like my immigrant tías cleaning in nearby high-rises....”

Alvarez speaks of the pressure to

learn English and accustom herself to the dominating regime; her sister’s infatuation with playing chef, and how her grandfather would eat a mango. She welcomes the reader to this collection, and her life, with the first line of the first poem “Recitation”: “Here I am starting again where I first began.”

Nora Malone

Patricia Lockwood is very good at surprise. *Agate Head / Stone Soup*, named after the colorful, crystalline quartz that she has been crafting into jewelry in recent years, is Patricia Lockwood’s first book of poems after a decade-long venture into prose. This includes her acclaimed memoir *Priestdaddy* and Booker-Prize nominated novel *No One Is Talking About This*.

Her tone tightropes between total control and absurdist abandon, but each verse is reliably, hypnotically spangled with detail: Wet curls fall in “scribbles,” a *feijoa* fruit is “shy to pronounce its name.” Better yet are the tartly fun bits in which she employs impossible colloquialisms like “lizardmaxxed” to describe someone lying out in the sun, or when she remarks that the couple kissing in the airport terminal “look related but who doesn’t.”

At times her absurdities dissipate

into lines of consuming, classical ache. “Oh, we fail. We do fail.” Just as the concentric ripples within every agate are unique, Lockwood offers something unique here; these moments when levity and quirk give way to bracing depth.

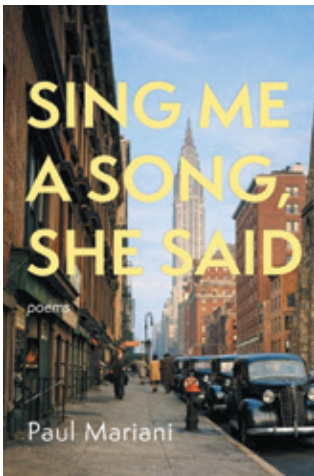
Will Martino

In *Sing Me a Song, She Said*, Paul Mariani revisits, with Proustian obsession, the colors, aromas and sounds of adolescence in 1950s New York. In the book’s middle section, he concocts a verse drama, from which the collection gets its name. Its characters are suspended in mid-century Americana: a hard-knuckled father, a wistful mother, a bummy brother and a golden-boy-gone-blue protagonist. By the book’s third and final section, the author returns to the present, shifting focus between a world in which Gaza can be “morphed to dust” and remain “a single crocus.”

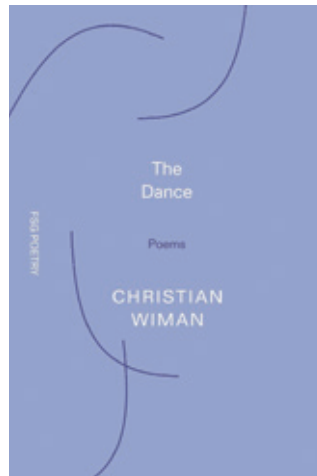
This collection is teeming with curiosity, and Mariani is its restless supplier.

Will Martino

In Christian Wiman’s new poetry collection, *The Dance*, each poem feels creatively distinct, introducing readers to characters like a “pumpkin monk with his cello legs,” and an “old



Sing Me a Song, She Said
74p / \$19
Slant Books



The Dance
128p / \$18
Macmillan Publishers



The Unbelieving Yelp of Prey
80p / \$21.95
Texas A&M University Press

man I loved who died drinking tea,” all of whom manage to feel at once whimsical and all too real.

References to God and religious identity are not sparse in *The Dance*. In “The Homily Asked What Heaven Was,” Wiman juxtaposes a religious congregation asking questions about heaven and love with two young people who simply feel the divine present with them in an irreplaceable moment of time. And in a personal standout, “And God’s Presence, Will You Ever Speak of That?” Wiman writes of being “bonded and islanded” with another by “what we hadn’t named but knew/ was here somewhere.”

Brigid McCabe

The Unbelieving Yelp of Prey is a piece of the internal monologue of Alex Mouw, a Midwestern-born professor of English at Samford University in Homewood, Ala. The poetry is autobiographical, at times speaking skeptically about Mouw’s own faith. In many of the poems he speaks not so much to the reader as to God. Mouw does not hesitate to question what God does. In “My Lord I’m Not Too Far Gone, Right? Sure” he asks, “Lord, whom did you make and break today?”

Mouw is willing to share with the

world things that many Christians are less inclined to speak about publicly: a crisis of faith, the death of a loved one and even his personal critiques of God. His poetry is at times melancholic, but always deeply introspective and unapologetic. In “Apology for Belief” he writes: “I should love myself. Who’d pierce me? I thought./ Who would lure me through depths and not be caught.” He is always forthcoming about his faith and his relationship with God. He never sugarcoats it.

Alexandra Pfau

D. S. Martin’s poetic range shines in *The Role of the Moon* as he writes about faith as well as the writers who have inspired him. A poet in residence at McMaster Divinity College in Hamilton, Ontario, his book is a combination of sonnets, metaphysicals and free verse. Abstract and philosophical, Martin writes a little bit of everything. Some of the poems are small vignettes of everyday life, like “As She Flew Past.” The poem surfaces his own loneliness after observing other people’s lives: “My razored heart felt like an empty sack as she flew past/ not looking back.”

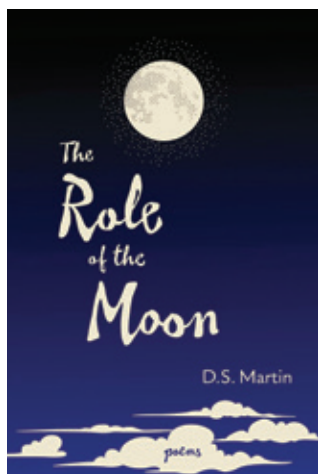
Other poems meander as he calls out to God. “Litany for the Third

Millenium” is a particularly prayerful text: “When we block your light/ so our shimmer might show/ Lord have mercy.” Some of Martin’s poems reckon with nature, as he writes about pine trees and birdwatching, while others, like “Beginning & Beginning” feel almost mystical: “Can we account for our becoming/ our souls breathed into tiny bodies/ by divine breath?”

Alexandra Pfau

Philip C. Kolin’s poems on St. Thérèse of Lisieux, *A Centenary Garland*, celebrate the hundredth anniversary of her canonization by Pope Pius XI. He emphasizes the pain and suffering that this young woman, who died of tuberculosis at 24, went through during her short life. In “Divine Dew,” a teenage Thérèse visits Rome and “pushed her fingers into the case” containing one of the nails used in the crucifixion. In “A Normandy Winter,” set during her early years in the convent, Thérèse recontextualizes the brutal cold of a French January as the presence of God.

Thérèse emphasizes “The Little Way,” seeing the divine in the mundane. Her life was short, reflected in the brevity of Kolin’s prose, but there is beauty in the small-



The Role of the Moon
128p / \$21
Paraclete Press



Night Owl
128p / \$26.99
HarperCollins



What's Possible: New and Selected Poems
236p / \$24
Slant Books

ness. The book is interspersed with photos taken by Thérèse's sister Céline, which show daily life at the convent, and helps the reader see Thérèse not just as a saint, but as a young girl who died awfully young.

Kevin Robles

Clever humor, tender care and insatiable curiosity animate Aimee Nezhukumatathil's new poetry collection, *Night Owl*. Early on in the collection, the University of Mississippi professor's poem "Green Love Poem" captures all three of these qualities with child-like innocence: "If you don't eat a nectarine outdoors while you squint in the sun, and a few drops of juice land on your shirt, can you really say it's summer?"

In the middle of the book, "Southern Nocturne" details Nezhukumatathil's experience navigating the twisted knots of entrenched racism as a Filipina and South Indian American woman. "Space Jellyfish" grapples with the ensnaring lure of American capitalism: "But getting more and more on this planet is so good, right?"

The final section brings the reader intimately close to Nezhukumatathil as a mother. "When Milk Is a Memory" pierced my own heart as

she recounted the power, pain, tranquility, chaos and joy of nursing her sons. The poems following it navigate the nostalgia of watching those boys mature into young adults. The penultimate piece, "What They Didn't Tell Me About Motherhood," rounds out the collection with a loving call to stay present, born of maternal wisdom: "One day you'll surface...but the only waves you know now mean goodbye."

Molly Wysocki

With grief at its core, Robert Cording's *What's Possible*—the latest poetry collection from the College of the Holy Cross professor emeritus—reveals the fullness of being human: what it means to breathe, to love, to grow up, to wonder, and to understand that you are not actually as in control of your life as you think you are. This fullness, or as Cording puts it, "corporeal rotundity," is reflected in his poem, "For Rex Brasher, Painter of Birds." With echoes of Gerard Manley Hopkins, the poem guides the reader into God's embrace simply through observation: "Everything—the tamaracks and maples, the spruces and their smoke-winged/ sparrows, the painterly sky darkening toward infinity—offers itself as a source of awe."

This same awe shapes the poet's reckoning with the mystery of God, as later described in "Lenten Stanzas": "Nothing could be more real than that which makes no sense." Challenged and consoled by this mystery, Cording concludes with an invitation to hope: "Take joy whenever you can get it, a wise old poet wrote and how can I refuse...."

Molly Wysocki

Chloe Hanford, a student at the University of Notre Dame, and Nora Malone, a student at Fordham University, are former summer interns at **America**.

Will Martino, Alexandra Pfau and Molly Wysocki are O'Hare fellows at **America**.

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

Brigid McCabe is the assistant editor for digital strategy at **America**.

Kevin Robles is studio production associate at **America**.

Parables and Practices to Ponder

The month of November begins with a liturgy celebrating the Feast of All Saints, a day when our church recognizes the official saints, those with designated feast days, and the unofficial ones, those who lived under the radar, leading unsung but saintly lives. Readings of this feast invite us to renew our own commitment to claim Jesus' experience and expectations as our own so that we too can all lead saintly lives. To do so requires lives navigated by virtues such as wisdom, hope and vigilance, the three themes that govern the Scripture readings of November's second Sunday.

Here Jesus tells the parable of the wise and foolish virgins. This instructive story helps us remember that amid all the distractions of life, Christ is always with us. With vigilance, we can perceive his presence fueling our way forward the way oil lights a lamp. Yet such a commitment to Jesus can often succumb to fear, fear of failure, fear of what others may think, fear that we really don't know God. Jesus addresses that fear when he tells another parable, this time of the wealthy man who leaves his investments with three servants. Here we find encouragement to put God's invest-

ments in us to the best use we can, even if we fear failing. Realizing impressive returns on our grace-filled capital, the divine gifts of our lives diminish such anxieties so that our genuine fear takes on the broader biblical meaning of reverence, awe and the intense desire to be worthy followers of Jesus.

With the fourth Sunday of the month, we come to the close of this liturgical year, which featured Matthew's Gospel in the Sunday readings. The Gospel passage this Sunday reminds us one more time of the importance of God's kingdom, of the very alternative character of this realm and of this Christ-like ruler who extends endless mercy to all and invites us to do the same. With November's end, we begin Advent on the last Sunday of the month with a challenging invitation: to practice "worthwhile waiting." Different from the usual holiday countdown, "worthwhile waiting" not only anticipates the feast of Christ's birth but makes waiting a worthwhile prayer-filled practice that readies our hearts to receive him.

SOLEMNITY OF ALL SAINTS (A), NOV. 1, 2026

Experience, expectations and a couple of visions

THIRTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A), NOV. 8, 2026

"The readiness is all"

THIRTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A), NOV. 15, 2026

Fear and faith

THE SOLEMNITY OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST, KING OF THE UNIVERSE (A), NOV. 22, 2026

Act locally, live eternally

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT (B), NOV. 29, 2026

Worthwhile waiting



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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**FOR MARTHA,
LAST PASSENGER PIGEON, 1914**

By Lynne Viti

Where in the spirit world
have you taken up lodging
and do you still ply your wings
as you did on this earth?

Do you still dine—wherever you’ve gone—
on mast, growing fat and strong
to flee from predators faster
than any auto on earth, a century ago?

Not far from here, old fields flourish
gone to meadow these forty years
next to a strip of forest
where you would have nested and feasted
on raspberries greenbrier
hickory nuts and acorns

But we humans, driven to build
cut down the forests of oak and beech
cut short your search for breeding grounds.
Starved of habitat
photographed, documented
billed in the Cincinnati Zoo
the last of your kind consigned
to the Red List: Category Extinct.

Lynne Viti’s *most recent poetry collection* is *The Walk to Cefalù*. *She is a faculty member emerita in the writing program at Wellesley College and serves on the advisory board of the New England Poetry Club.*

U.S. Catholics Join the Church in Guatemala to Provide Safe Shelter to the Suffering Poor

Cross Catholic Outreach has launched a major effort to provide safe housing for destitute families in rural Guatemalan villages. It is asking U.S. Catholics to become part of that life-transforming mission of mercy through its “Safe Homes in Guatemala” campaign.

The U.S.-based ministry, which has been recognized by the Vatican for its relief and development work in more than 90 countries, has a goal to build 240 storm-resistant homes to benefit 1,212 family members in 22 communities.

While this appeal has many technical objectives, Cross Catholic Outreach President Michele Sagarino is focused on the individual families that will be impacted.

“This is really about Maria and Ancelmo and families like theirs. The challenges they face every day are heartbreaking. Maria and Ancelmo’s mud brick house has deteriorated so badly over the years that they’re afraid to let their children sleep in it. They’ve built a separate structure out of tin sheets for the kids, but you can hardly call that a home, she said. “It’s a situation that must grieve God — so it should be unacceptable to us too!”



According to Sagarino, Cross Catholic Outreach is working alongside Catholic leaders in several dioceses and archdioceses to find solutions for families Maria and Ancelmo’s. The plans they have developed can produce life-transforming results — if U.S. Catholics will step forward to help support their work.

“Our primary goal is to construct



Maria is praying for the miracle of having a safe home to raise her children.

durable, concrete-block houses for the poorest families,” she explained. “The homes will have two bedrooms and a common area that can serve as a dining room and living room. Each will have a concrete foundation and walls, a galvanized metal roof, a sanitary bathroom, three secure metal doors and shuttered windows, providing a level of comfort and safety these families have never experienced.”

Because the design is simple, the cost to provide a home is only about \$21,000.

“That is a large sacrificial gift for one donor or family to make, but many have done that and were so happy they got involved. Most had been looking for something specific and significant they could do to bless others,” Sagarino said. “This outreach was exactly what they were looking for because a home does more than offer safe shelter. It gives families a foundation for building a better life.”

Serving the poor through the local Church also has important spiritual benefits, according to Sagarino.

“When people learn local Church leaders love them and want a better life for them,

it strengthens their faith and restores their hope,” she said. “Many have felt isolated and unseen. They need to know we care about them.”

Father Alejandro Garcia, director of the local Caritas ministry in the Diocese of Santa Rosa de Lima, has these words of encouragement for U.S. Catholics: “We pray for you. We pray that you continue to be generous, that you continue to be a valiant hand to those who are so needy among us. As Jesus said, ‘What you have done for the least of these, you have done also for me.’”

Readers interested in supporting Cross Catholic Outreach’s housing programs and other outreaches can contribute through the ministry brochure inserted in this issue or send tax-deductible gifts to: Cross Catholic Outreach, Dept. AC06238, P.O. Box 97168, Washington, DC 20090-7168. Those interested in making gifts on a monthly basis can indicate that on the brochure in order to become a Mission Partner, or write “Monthly Mission Partner” on mailed checks to be contacted about setting up those arrangements.

Guatemalan Families Living in Extreme Poverty Look to the Church for Renewed Faith and Hope

Maria's home is always full of faith, love and joy. Sometimes, however, her patchwork shack in the rural Guatemalan community of Japón Nacional B also holds discomfort and fear. First, there's the water that floods in when it rains. "The beds get wet, and the floors get muddy," said Maria, who lives with her husband, young son and grandson.

High winds fill the family with fear. Recently, a strong wind knocked off part of the roof, so the family replaced the tin sheets and put heavy blocks on top. There's also the problem of termites, which have created a nest about three feet long on the roof and are destroying the home's wooden supports.

For now, at least, the ceiling remains intact — but what drops from it causes the biggest scare. "A lot of snakes and scorpions fall from the roof," Maria said.

With her husband, Rodolfo, earning just \$10 a day as a farm laborer, the family can't afford a better home, so Maria turns to God. "I ask my Lord for a home because we have no money to pay for it," she shared.

"It's heartbreaking to meet women like Maria who have never known what it's like to be protected from the elements. In rural Guatemala, many families are trapped in extreme poverty, with few opportunities to improve their situation," explained Michele Sagarino, president of Cross Catholic Outreach, a trusted Catholic relief and development ministry recognized by the Vatican for its effective humanitarian and spiritual programs. "When we witnessed the extreme needs of Maria's family and so many others, we felt compelled to provide help — and our hope is that compassionate Catholics in the U.S. will want to get involved too."

Sagarino said that many of the communities Cross Catholic Outreach wants to serve can only be reached by dirt roads. These villages have little or no infrastructure, so parents there are raising their children without running water, suitable sanitation facilities or reliable electricity.

Most of the men and women in these rural areas are small-scale farmers who work long hours planting, tending and harvesting corn and beans, defenseless against unpredictable weather. Their hard work may provide simple meals for their children, but it is rarely enough to fully cover their housing, health and educational expenses.

Families without access to land for farming face even greater challenges. They typically take work as day laborers, earning about \$10



Maria and her family urgently need a safer home that can withstand storms.

a day when work is available. The Church in Guatemala reports that those families typically earn between \$125 and \$190 a month — far too little to afford adequate housing. Ultimately, these families must make do with what they have, cobbling together plastic sheets, scrap metal and wood planks to build flimsy, unsafe shacks.

"Our ultimate goal is to improve living conditions in those communities. We want to help families break free from the cycle of poverty that has plagued them for generations," Sagarino said. "We've learned that providing safe homes plays a major part in improving lives, so we are making that our priority. As families move into safer, sturdier homes, their hope is restored and they have a foundation for building a better life."

Cross Catholic Outreach has been partnering with Guatemalan dioceses since 2013 to help rescue families from the poverty that keeps them malnourished, sick and devoid of hope. With the help of U.S. supporters, the ministry has built more than 1,000 homes in Guatemala, in addition

to providing educational scholarships for children, microenterprise investments for adults, feeding programs for the malnourished and more.

Through its "Safe Homes in Guatemala" appeal, Cross Catholic Outreach is asking compassionate U.S. Catholics to serve as God's instrument of mercy by funding the construction of 240 homes in several Guatemalan dioceses and archdioceses. Each home will include an earthquake-resistant design, a full bathroom and a self-cleaning biodigester for wastewater.

"The homes we will build are simple but sturdy, secure and sanitary," Sagarino said. "They will change the lives of these families in profound ways, and the benefits will be lasting. Generational poverty has been a major factor in the hardships these families have been facing. Opening this door to generational prosperity will be a major step in the right direction. My prayer is that Catholics in the U.S. will want to play a role in that restoration of hope. Imagine what a powerful testimony of God's love that would be!"

Be Someone's Miracle!

To fund Cross Catholic Outreach's effort to help those in need this season, use the Christmas catalog inserted in this newspaper, or mail your gift to Cross Catholic Outreach, Dept. AC06238, P.O. Box 97168, Washington, DC 20090-7168. You can also scan the code with your phone to purchase your gifts online. The catalog also includes instructions on 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 is needed, funds will be redirected to other urgent needs in the ministry.



'We the People' and a Common Purpose

How the Constitution calls on us to do the work

By Gregory Kalscheur



Back in the days before deaning distracted me from actually doing legal scholarship, I used to spend a lot of time thinking about the meaning of particular provisions in the U.S. Constitution. I confess that I didn't devote a great deal of thought to the preamble, but at this moment in our nation's history, I find myself increasingly drawn to that opening sentence: "We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America."

James Wilson played a central role in drafting these words, and in his recent book on Wilson, *The Lost Founder*, the journalist Jesse Wegman suggests that this sentence may be the most famous verse in what he calls "America's civic poetry." Mr. Wegman also describes "we the people" as "the three most resonant words in the history of democracy."

While technical legal language makes up much of the text of the Constitution, the civic poetry of the preamble helps us to understand the central purpose of the document and the goal of the entire constitutional project. During what can often feel like a particularly fraught and fragile moment in our constitutional history, we should hear the poetry of the preamble as words that shape who we are—and also as a challenge that demands a response from us.

"We the people" are the founda-

tion of this constitutional republic. The preamble calls us to remember that the constitutional project is not the work of atomistic individuals caring only for their own polarized and partisan interests. Instead, we are connected to one another as a political community in our shared commitment to a fundamental purpose: to promote the general welfare.

I suggest that we might understand promoting the general welfare as a way of talking about what the Catholic social thought tradition calls promoting the common good: working together to build a community characterized by institutions, structures and civic virtues that recognize and protect the inherent equal dignity of the person and allow all persons (not just all citizens) in the community to flourish in the fullness of their equal human dignity. A more perfect union, justice, domestic tranquility, the common defense and the blessings of liberty are all essential components of that general welfare or shared common good.

We often think about the Constitution as a document that protects a set of fundamental rights, and it certainly does do that. Important as the courts and the judicial process have shown themselves to be in protecting both those rights and our commitment to the rule of law, the civic poetry of the preamble reminds us that the Constitution is about more than judicially enforceable rights. The Constitution calls us ("we the people") to recognize that we have not just constitutional rights but also constitutional responsibilities.

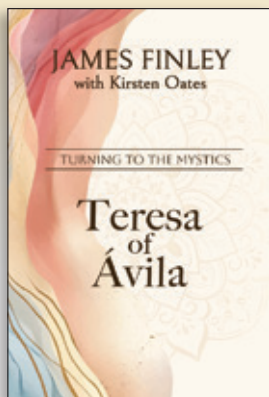
We share a responsibility to work together to promote the general welfare, to build a common good. The work of the constitutional project belongs to all of us; it is not simply or even primarily the work of judges and justices, or presidents and members of Congress. And a call to recommit ourselves to promoting the general welfare or the common good should not be understood as a call to empower judges or other officials to impose some sort of blueprint for the general welfare or common good on the rest of us.

Instead, the Constitution creates structures and institutions and protects basic rights that empower all of us, we the people, to argue about, deliberate over and democratically decide a fundamental question: What will most effectively promote the general welfare at this moment in our history—and what will most effectively allow all persons in our national community to flourish?

We the people have ordained and established a Constitution that empowers us to argue about, deliberate over and democratically decide always-evolving answers to that fundamental question. At this moment in our constitutional history, are "we the people" willing to carry out our shared constitutional responsibility to do that?

Gregory Kalscheur, S.J., is the dean of the Morrissey College of Arts and Sciences at Boston College, in Chestnut Hill, Mass. This piece is adapted from remarks given at Boston College on Constitution Day, Sept. 17.

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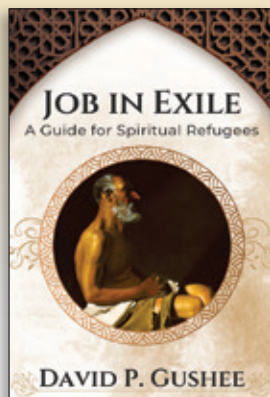
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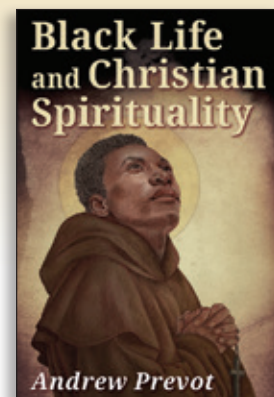
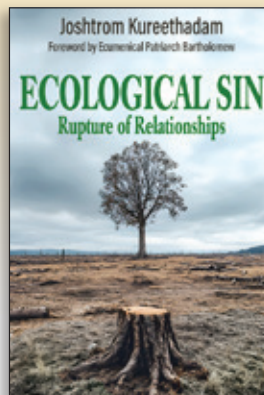
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