America

DECEMBER 2026

THE JESUIT REVIEW OF FAITH AND CULTURE



The Parish That Shaped Prevost
p18

Meghan Sullivan on A.I. Consciousness
p36

Confessions of a Hallmark Movie Writer
p40

THE GRACE OF GUADALUPE

Our Lady's evangelizing power

Timothy Matovina
p32

THE RETURN OF

Hark!

The stories behind our favorite Christmas carols

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What Some Bishops Learned in the Oval Office

On Oct. 22, a group of 12 U.S. Catholic bishops who had been meeting with the White House Faith Office was ushered into the Oval Office, where they briefly met and prayed with President Donald J. Trump. Most of what followed—the video being posted by a White House staffer, the storm of online criticism and countercriticism, and a White House spokesperson boasting "there has never been a greater president for Catholic Americans"—was entirely predictable.

It could have been scripted, given that the blessing took place less than two weeks before a highly polarized midterm election: a cycle of justifiable anger overlapping with partisan outrage, responded to with both defensive and combative explanations. Both because it was predictable and because most of it was designed to appeal to those who were already ideologically aligned with the various players, it also did not do much, I would argue, to change anyone's mind about Mr. Trump or the candidates he endorses.

Rather, those who already supported him likely felt affirmed, while those who opposed him were given a reason to be scandalized by the appearance of bishops endorsing him. (Given the recent polls showing a significant drop in approval for Mr. Trump among Catholics, publicizing the moment likely adds up to a tactical error for the White House, as the negative reaction has been more pronounced, unless they were primarily aiming to shore up support among those Catholics still firmly in Mr. Trump's base.)

Archbishop James Golka of Denver, who led the prayer, defended his participation in both the meeting and the prayer, but he expressed regret "that there are people intentionally using this moment to sow disunity" and said Christians are "called to look beyond the headlines, which are often crafted to provoke."

This reminded me of a moment in 2020, when Cardinal Timothy Dolan participated in a call about Catholic education with Mr. Trump and praised him shortly thereafter in a TV interview. After the predictable negative reactions began, he responded in an interview with **America** that engaging with political leaders "risk[s] criticism on both sides."

At the time, I wrote that while the cardinal's commitment to engagement and dialogue was important, he made the pastoral error of responding as if people had criticized him simply for *engaging* a political leader they disliked, rather than understanding that they were hurt and frustrated by his apparent willingness to *praise* that leader in order to get on his good side. Very few Catholics, after all, are opposed to their bishops speaking respectfully with political leaders; many are rightly offended, however, by their bishops allowing themselves to be manipulated into appearing to endorse those politicians.

What was less predictable this time, and more hopeful, was that some of the bishops who were involved in the White House meeting responded with full and forthright apologies.

Bishop William Joensen of Des Moines acknowledged that "there are many things tied to this present administration that are blatantly at odds with our Catholic faith" and said that he wished he "had been more shrewd and less simple, like those who exploited our meeting for partisan political purposes." Archbishop Jeffrey Grob of Milwaukee posted a lengthy statement headlined "A Public Apology," in which he explained that the video of the prayer had been publicized without the bishops' consent and concluded, "Please know that I have heard these concerns, understand how I caused them, and I apologize for any damage my actions have done."

I wrote in the October issue of **America** about the U.S. bishops finding their voice and speaking out in a new and forceful way, especially in response to the mass deportation policies of the administration and in opposition to the Iran war. I argued that there was a new pattern of bishops being willing to claim the megaphone to make sure the church's teaching is heard clearly, and to push back strongly against attempts to minimize or dismiss the church's moral voice.

These apologies are a different kind of example of pushing back—in this case, against an attempt to misuse the church and its leaders for partisan advantage. Even more important, they are an example of church teachers listening to their flock and responding quickly, clearly and with humility to the real hurt that they have caused by allowing themselves to be put in a position where they could be misused.

Both Bishop Joensen and Archbishop Grob acknowledged that they wished they had made better judgments. Indeed, prudence about the possibility of manipulation should be part of any bishop's efforts to engage in dialogue with political leaders. But we should not dwell only on what, in hindsight, clearly went wrong. We should spend as much or more attention on the freedom some bishops have shown in naming their failure and resolving to learn from it.

We should also pray that more political leaders might learn the same lesson and embrace the same freedom.

Sam Sawyer, S.J.



THE ISSUE

GIVE AND TAKE

6
YOUR TAKE
Livestreaming a public execution

8
OUR TAKE
God and the machine

10
SHORT TAKE
The Bible shows us how to teach history: with truth
Jessica Dickinson Goodman

DISPATCHES

12
ARCHBISHOP GUDZIAK: UKRAINE WILL SOLDIER ON DESPITE TRUMP REVERSAL

Lula's miraculous victory in Brazil

A Peruvian devotion that is surely close to Pope Leo's heart

In Canada, mental illness ruled out as justification for medical assistance in dying

FEATURES

18
PREVOST'S PARISH MINISTRY
The Chicagoland church that helped form Pope Leo XIV
Scott Detrow and Daniel Burke

24
'ART IS NOT A LUXURY'
Across the country, Catholic artists and art collectives are sustaining the life of the church
Brigid McCabe



The 24th Youth Pilgrimage, part of Círio de Nazaré 2026, brought approximately 60,000 young people to the streets of Belém, Brazil, on Oct. 17.
Oswaldo Forte/Fotoarena/Sipa via AP

Cover: A painting of Our Lady of Guadalupe on North Hazard Avenue at Hammel Street in Los Angeles.
Reprinted with permission from *Our Lady of the Angels: The Virgin of Guadalupe on the Walls of Los Angeles*, by Sam Quinones (Angel City Press at Los Angeles Public Library)

FAITH & REASON

32
HISTORY, HOPE AND EVANGELIZATION
Our Lady of Guadalupe still has much to teach us
Timothy Matovina

36
Dispatch from the A.I. consciousness wars
Meghan Sullivan

POETRY

39
XMAS IN HELL
Joe Hoover

FAITH IN FOCUS

40
LIGHTS, CAMERA, ADVENT
What writing scripts for Hallmark movies taught me about faith
John Eliot Jordan

44
The Catholic history of our favorite Christmas cookies
Molly Wysocki

IDEAS

46
HOW DID HE DO IT?
Harry Houdini, 100 years later
Christopher Sandford

BOOKS

52
Suicidal Empathy; Here It Snows in June; Hollywood, Ending; Beyond Factory Farming; Brawler

THE WORD

64
Reflections for December
Gina Hens-Piazza

LAST TAKE

66
JODI HUNT
A civil way to talk about abortion

Our readers react to the idea of a livestreamed execution

On Oct. 15, President Trump canceled a proposed livestream of the execution by firing squad of Nidal Malik Hasan, the former Army officer convicted of the mass shooting at Fort Hood in 2009, following a week of intense criticism of Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth's announcement that the execution (still scheduled for Dec. 3) would be made publicly viewable. **America**'s editor in chief, Sam Sawyer, S.J., had responded to Mr. Hegseth's idea in a column titled "The Death of the American Conscience Will Be Livestreamed." Father Sawyer warned that "putting [the execution] on public display threatens to reshape our conscience to celebrate the state's capacity for violence" and argued that the mere consideration of a public execution is cause for condemnation. Here is what our readers had to say in response.

Our country is losing its soul. We are descending into a darkness I hope we can recover from. Jesus himself was a victim of a public execution. At this moment in time, I am ashamed of this country and what we are becoming.
Cathleen Prout

The complete and utter moral depravity of this president is beyond my comprehension. This country can no longer say, "This is not who we are." We have lost the moral high ground, and it truly pains me to say that the people of this country have proven time and again, by their continued support of the cruelty and depravity that has been on display, this is exactly who we are.
David Bowditch

To execute a man by firing squad and livestream it for the world to watch is beyond the pale. Unconscionable. Not America. Absolutely demonstrates a culture of death.
Mark J. Williams

Objectification is the root of all evil. Just as Mr. Hasan objectified his victims for a political purpose, so Mr. Hegseth is doing. It's a slippery slope toward becoming the thing you despise. In this we should all remain vigilant.
D-R Martin

This is a descent into raw barbarism like that depicted in *Lord of the Flies*. Lord, help us; they do not know what they are doing.
Peter Arnez

Justice holds the guilty accountable; vengeance turns their suffering into a spectacle. Justice protects society; vengeance feeds the appetite to punish.
Michael Thaibinh

I hope and pray that the despicable nature of this proposed action will be shouted from every pulpit of every house of worship throughout the land.
Tim Rawbinger

Livestreaming an execution is so disgusting that it is hard to find words for it. The people proposing and carrying out this depraved act also defy civilized descriptions.
Lisa Weber

Bloodthirsty barbarism.
Mary Bunker

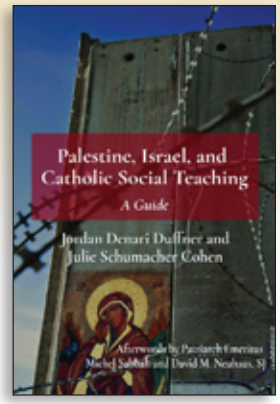
Just another despicable act by an administration that pushed the Constitution aside in favor of self-gratification, with everything from collaboration with our enemies for profit to trampling human rights.
Samuel Esposito

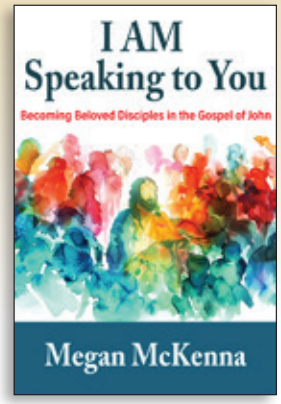
Thanks to Sam Sawyer for this article. We watch in horror from here in Australia at the utter depravity, corruption and cruelty of the Trump administration. This violence is not of Christ.
Fiona Dyball

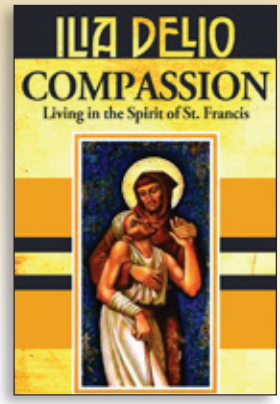
What Mr. Hasan did was undeniably evil, but he should have the rest of his God-given life to beg forgiveness and repent. This planned execution is pure evil. It has nothing to do with Christ or his teachings, and everything to do with revenge and bloodlust. It is sick and the antithesis of Christianity. It's more akin to *The Hunger Games*, where people die to entertain others.
Gwen Murtha-Eudy

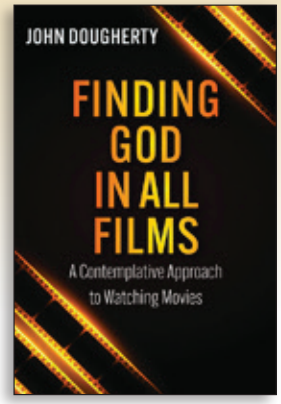
Jesus weeps.
Jane O'Donnell

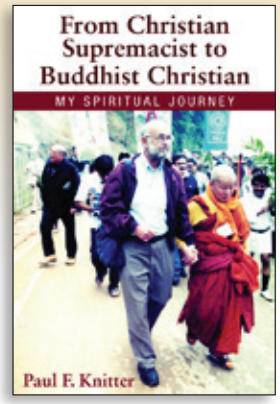
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God and the Machine

"And the Lord God formed a man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living soul." This description of the creation of humanity in Genesis 2:7 offers a striking account of human nature, with a different emphasis than that of Genesis 1, where humanity is made in the image of God and immediately given dominion over the earth. In this second account, we owe our existence to two things: the breath of God and the mud.

We are reminded of this dual origin in Genesis 3:19, in a phrase Catholics hear every Ash Wednesday: "Remember that you are dust; and to dust you shall return." Some of Pope Benedict XVI's last words as pope were on this very question: "We come from the good earth through the work of the good Creator," he said in 2013. "In addition there is another fundamental reality: *All* human beings are dust, over and above the distinctions made by culture and by history, over and above every social difference; we are one humanity modeled with God's one earth."

The paradox of remembering that we are dust in order to recognize that we are the work of God in the image of God helps anchor us at a moment when the development of artificial intelligence threatens to alter human life in ways contrary to biblical notions of justice, human dignity and right relationship with the earth and one another. The account of our own creation reframes our struggle to understand and govern what we have created in turn.

So too does the revelation of the Incarnation, as we journey through Advent in these coming weeks. On Christmas morning, God, too, chose to be born of humble estate, not just being laid in the manger but in the very nature of incarnation itself—the kenotic act of the Word becoming flesh so that we might all be made partakers of God's divine nature. Yes, Jesus Christ is fully divine, but he is truly human, too, born of dust. And yes, we are dust, but on that Christmas morning we also became magnificent, in all the senses of that word.

It is a proud claim, one that can sound incongruous in an age when our humanity is often belittled and frequently imperiled in so many ways, and yet we still make it. Pope Leo XIV's first encyclical, "Magnifica Humanitas," repeats this bold assertion both in its title and in its opening line, which reminds us that humanity was "created by God in all its grandeur." Further, "in Jesus Christ, this humanity in its grandeur becomes the Way, the Truth and the Life, opening the path for each of us to grow toward fullness."

Even beyond the risks of artificial intelligence escaping human control, we face the temptation of using its new capabilities in ways that exploit, rather than ennoble, our fellow human beings. As in the Industrial Revolution, whose encroachments upon everything from family life to the safety and dignity of workers spurred Pope Leo XIII to write "Rerum Novarum," so too does artificial intelligence threaten the building blocks of a rightly ordered society in ways that can reduce humans themselves to little more than machines—tools that can be exploited, broken, cast away.

Before A.I.'s threat to human dignity is fully understood and appreciated, some of the leading practitioners in the field are asking whether A.I. models may deserve to be recognized as conscious and thus possessed of moral dignity themselves. Leo XIV reminds us, however, that our dignity is far richer than our intelligence: "So-called artificial intelligences do not undergo experiences, do not possess a body, do not feel joy or pain, do not mature through relationships and do not know from within what love, work, friendship or responsibility mean."

In an essay on consciousness and A.I. in this issue, Meghan Sullivan of the University of Notre Dame notes the danger of replacing the concept of human dignity with the notion of consciousness as a basis for ethical consideration. Humans are more than thinkers, she writes: "We are capable of emotions, like love. Our minds not only process information, they grasp truth, goodness and beauty, which are objective features of reality."

For Pope Leo, one of the operative images in this struggle to preserve human dignity is that of the Tower of Babel, and he notes in "Magnifica Humanitas" that when we attempt to replace humanity with something created in our own image, we are also attempting to replace God.

"The risk of dehumanization—of building a future that excludes God and reduces the other to a means—is an ancient and ever-new temptation that today takes on a technical guise," he writes. Instead, he calls on us to work together to use these new technologies in a way that respects and enhances human flourishing.

The irony of arguing that machines or models "think" and are therefore entitled to rights is this: We often do *not even extend these rights to each other*. We find ourselves at times in the absurd situation where someone can argue that Claude or ChatGPT has rights while at the same time ignoring the needs of a neighbor.

What makes us human? The dust

of the earth from which we came and to which we will return, to be sure. As the theologian Elizabeth Johnson, C.S.J., has noted, that dust is shared with all creation; each of us (and everything around us) is stardust, as was Jesus Christ from the moment of the Incarnation. But what else forms us? It is the breath of God, breathed into our nostrils at creation and poured out on us at Pentecost and blowing where it will throughout our lives. It is the action of God that gives life and the promise of divinity to our humanity, that gives us an origin and a destination that no machine or model shares.

So many of the world's ills, particularly with regard to our care of creation and one another, can be traced to humanity's outsized appreciation for itself. And yet perhaps the signs of the times in this particular age remind us: Sometimes it is important to hold up what it is in us that is magnificent. Not by our own merit, but by gift:

> And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.

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The Biblical Argument Against Trump's Attack on the Smithsonian

On July 4, the White House released "Saving America's Story," a report charging the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History with treating "the American story" as "a political instrument to divide, dispirit and discourage our citizens," specifically claiming there is an "anti-Christian, and anti-freedom narrative of America that NMAH and the Smithsonian seek to tell."

I beg to differ. The staff at the National Museum of American History has followed the same approach used by respected historians across their field. And far from being "anti-Christian," they are using the same tools to explore U.S. history that millions of Christians use to understand Scripture.

In "Saving America's Story," the Trump administration demands that our museums tell "a coherent national narrative" which is "inspiring" and "unifying." The report was in the same vein as an executive order in March 2025 that called for the National Park Service to take down signs that "inappropriately disparage Americans past or living." But as a Christian and a historian, I believe the cracks are where the light gets in. The Bible tells of people's flaws and their graces, and it would be unrecognizable if edited down to a single, celebratory story. The White House claims to be taking action against an "anti-Christian, and anti-freedom narrative of America," but it fails to recognize the Christian practice of listening to the full choir of history, a shared song sung in many voices, or our faith-driven interest in learning the whole story about those whose lives we study, whether religious figures or political leaders like Thomas Jefferson and Cesar Chavez.

Reading critical work about imperfect—that is, human—individuals is familiar to many Christians. The Bible demonstrates how to study and teach human history without hiding the difficult, painful parts. Its many voices and tones, its joys and violences, triumphs and cruelties, are all laid out on the page. For example, Genesis gives us the story of Noah and his ark, with the animals coming up the ramp two by two. This is a story I can tell even my young son, though he has questions about why God would flood the world in the first place. Later in Genesis, Noah gets drunk on his first grape harvest. This narrative is meaningful: It shows a good man making a mistake. Does Genesis "disparage" Noah by including this negative detail at the end of a mostly positive story?

Abraham and Isaac's story is even more difficult. As a mother, I find the image of Isaac tied up on the altar profoundly disturbing. But as with Noah, the Bible shows the full picture. We hear of Abraham's joys in his children and of his willingness to kill his child to obey God. Does the Bible "disparage" Abraham by including both?

I grew up thinking of the Bible as a history of a people, so it is a model whenever I study or write about any kind of history. I am currently writing about a relative who died in an explosion while leading an American fireboat attack in Tripoli, in what popular histories call the First Barbary War in 1804, and whose body still lies in a cemetery in Libya. I hope to learn how he died: by suicide, to prevent his cargo of gunpowder from falling into the hands of Ottoman sailors; by accidental spark; or by enemy fire? It is possible I will learn details that could upset my family or cast the United States in a bad light, but I would rather know the complicated truth than a surface-level tale meant only to "inspire."

When writing this essay, I asked my Episcopalian priest's wife (herself a chaplain) if I was missing something in thinking of the Bible as being full of flawed people—for example, whether Noah's drunkenness is supposed to be read as grace, not error. She laughed and reminded me that what many people find comforting in the Bible is how broken so many of the people are, adding that there's meant to be only one perfect person in the book.

I also checked with my mother, a jail chaplain in Silicon Valley who teaches a popular Christian theology class to inmates. She reminded me that when figures in the New Testament tell embarrassing stories about themselves—doubting, fearing, running from, misunderstanding or disbelieving Jesus—they are showing their humility and opening a doorway for other people to see themselves in the story.

This constitutive Christian practice of reading biblical stories prepares me for reading troubling news, like the recent revelation that DNA evidence appears to confirm that Thomas Jefferson impregnated an enslaved Sally Hemings. A lifetime of encountering both pain and joy in the texts of my faith gives me tools to evaluate findings like these and better understand Jefferson as a person.

Ambiguities, Not Absolutes

After releasing "Saving America's Story," the Trump administration ordered the Department of the Interior to erect signs outside of the museum claiming it includes "inaccurate information." This kind of White House overreach has never happened before and should not be happening now. The Smithsonian has been an independent institution since its founding in 1846



Citizen Historians for the Smithsonian holds a rally in support of the institution outside the National Museum of American History on July 27.

and needs to maintain that independence to remain a world-class source of historical and scientific truth, and not a political mouthpiece.

The Smithsonian has not taken down signs or rewritten wall texts (except for briefly removing references to his two impeachments in the text accompanying President Trump's portrait). It has stood strong not only because of curators and leaders like Lonnie G. Bunch III, soon to retire as secretary of the Smithsonian, but also because it is not an executive agency. It is "an independent federal trust instrumentality," with much of its budget coming from Congress, but its board is a mix of citizens, members of Congress from each party, the vice president and the chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court. That structure has protected it from political influence for over a century, though this administration seems determined to find ways to erode that independence.

Citizen Historians for the Smithsonian, the group I co-founded a little over a year ago with the Georgetown University professors Chandra Manning and Jim Millward, works with 2,700 volunteers to support the Smithsonian against pressures it faces from the White House. We've documented every public display in the 21 Smithsonian museums, the National Zoo and the Holocaust Museum, capturing nearly 75,000 photos and videos in our first year. The archive will serve as a backup in case this material is ever removed from public view.

Two of our volunteers also reviewed "Saving America's Story" and discovered that the White House report flagged only 14 objects (out of 1.7 million objects on display) in support of its thesis that the Smithsonian was disparaging American history and values. One of the objects was a T-shirt from the 1970s with a single word, *VOTE*, and an image of a butterfly. The report claimed that the butterfly was "a well-known symbol in the illegal alien activist community, symbolizing illegal aliens crossing the border from Mexico into the U.S." But I have found no evidence that the T-shirt had anything to do with immigration reform. Sometimes a butterfly is just a butterfly.

The report also includes unsubstantiated accusations about respected people like Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison (described as "an anti-white activist and author"), and it accuses Anthea Hartig, the director of the National Museum of American History, of harboring "anti-white and anti-Christian sentiment." This simplistic "anti-this and anti-that" talk forgoes the "nuanced, complex, mid-wifery properties" of language that Christians bring to the study of biblical figures and saints, to borrow a phrase from Morrison's 1993 Nobel Prize speech. It also obscures the reality that Dr. Hartig revealed in her testimony before Congress this summer: "Telling our history fully is not anti-American. It is a form of respect for the American people and a commitment to constantly be in pursuit of 'a more perfect union.'"

The Bible does not deal only in absolutes but also in ambiguities. It gives us space to see ourselves in others' faults and come closer to the only truly faultless person in the story. A museum that pretended the Founders—or anyone—were free from flaws would be idolizing them in the very way Exodus 32:1-8 warns against. Telling the full story of a person, with what history has left us as evidence, shows both their value and a respect for their humanity. That is not disparagement. That is history.

Jessica Dickinson Goodman *is a co-founder of Citizen Historians for the Smithsonian. She is a graduate student in both the Foreign Service and the Global, International and Comparative History programs at Georgetown University.*



Archbishop Gudziak: Ukraine's only option is to fight on after Trump's appeasement of Putin

By Kevin Clarke

October proved to be a month of "great bewilderment and dismay" for the people of Ukraine, as the embattled nation's relationship with the Trump administration appeared to unravel before their eyes, according to Metropolitan Archbishop Borys Gudziak of Philadelphia, the leader of the Ukrainian Catholic Church in the United States.

This summer, Archbishop Gudziak made his 58th visit to Ukraine since the current Russian aggression began with the seizure of the Crimean peninsula in 2014. He has met with Ukrainian politicians, members of government and with "mothers and widows, orphans, disabled veterans, soldiers on the front, schoolteachers, university students, mayors and run-of-the-mill citizens."

In all of those conversations, "I did not meet people that spoke of giving up," he said.

On Oct. 9, the relationship between the two allied states began sharply deteriorating when U.S. President Donald J. Trump announced a deal to buy diesel fuel from the Russian Federation. But the president did not stop there, first demanding that President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine cease strategic strikes on Russian oil refineries and fuel storage sites, then suggesting that the Ukrainian president should "step aside" or call for new elections.

Mr. Trump waived trade and economic sanctions authorized under the Graham Sanctioning Russia Act, a law he had just signed in September after it passed Congress with strong bipartisan support. On Oct. 19, the same day a Russian drone strike on a crowded park in the Kharkiv region killed six people, including three children, Mr. Trump said that "Russia, frankly, has been fine on Ukraine," adding, "They haven't been doing much."

The president's conciliatory remarks about Russia and its president, Vladimir Putin, came just days after United Nations officials reported a surge in civilian casualties in Ukraine in September 2026—85 percent higher than the same period last year. At least 328 Ukrainian civilians were killed in September and more than 2,100 wounded, according to the report.



AP Photo/Efrem Lukatsky

A firefighter responds after a Russian missile attack on Kyiv on Oct. 22.

"Casualties were recorded across 22 regions and the city of Kyiv, where civilians were killed or injured on 22 of the month's 30 days, more often than in any month since the start of the Russian Federation's full-scale invasion," U.N. officials said.

By Oct. 21, the collapse of the relationship between Ukraine and the Trump administration appeared complete, with the U.S. president touting as a diplomatic coup the release of an American citizen living in Ukraine who had been illegally detained by Russian forces in 2022 and abused in captivity. His special envoy, the real estate developer Steve Witkoff, offered a gushing description of Mr. Putin as a "humanitarian" in the same category as Mr. Trump.

If support from the United States is truly lost, Archbishop Gudziak said, it will indeed be difficult for Ukraine to survive a conflict brought upon its people by its powerful neighbor, but he knows Ukrainians are determined to carry on with or without help from the Trump administration. "People are tired," he said in an interview with **America** on Oct. 19. "People are exhausted, but they in unison say we have to keep strong and resist."

They have no other choice, he explained, "because Russian occupation means genocide."

"The message from Moscow is annihilation," Archbishop Gudziak said, "and were there any doubt, one needs only to listen to Putin, who constantly repeats, 'There is no such thing as the Ukrainian nation,' 'There is no real Ukrainian language,' [and] 'The Ukrainian Orthodox Church is part of the Russian Orthodox Church.'"

"It's a language of negation, of canceling, and the fact that it is reiterated, repeatedly, convinces Ukrainians that they need to resist," he said. As do the Russian state's continuing acts of drone and missile terror, he said, noting that more than 100 civilians are being killed or wounded "in their homes, on their streets" each week by "wanton bombing of civilian infrastructure."

"Everywhere there is Russian occupation, there are war crimes," he said. Ukrainian soldiers have discovered mass graves after liberating Bucha, Izium, Borodyanka and other communities. That brutality has been a consistent reality during various eras of Russian occupation of Ukrainian territory since the 18th century, he said, continuing through the many calamities and crimes against humanity experienced in the 20th century by Ukrainians, when as many as 15 million of them perished.

In territory controlled by Russia, he said, the Ukrainian Catholic Church is driven underground, its priests arrested and expelled. Thousands of Ukrainian children have been abducted and taken to Russia, where they face indoctrination and cultural obliteration. In occupied Ukrainian territory, according to Archbishop Gudziak, the men are conscripted into the Russian army and forced to participate in the dismemberment of their own country.

Putin Has Lost; Ukraine Has Not Yet Won

Given these outcomes, and with Mr. Putin's unwavering ambition to absorb Ukraine and restore the imperial map of the former Soviet Union, Ukraine will fight on, Archbishop Gudziak said. He wondered how Mr. Trump could possibly believe that the Russian leader would be content to take control of only the contested Ukraine regions.

At this critical moment, as the Russian leader attempts to secure territorial claims through discussions with the Trump administration that he has been unable to achieve on the battlefield, Archbishop Gudziak said, "there needs to be clarity...on what is happening on the ground in terms of the war."

"The fact of the matter is that in the last months, losing 1,000 soldiers a day, having what purports to be the second-strongest army in the world, which has made virtually no progress, [Mr. Putin] has failed on all of his war goals."

"He has failed to topple the [Ukrainian] government; he has failed to capture Kyiv, has failed to capture the Donbas; he has failed to weaken NATO—[the North Atlantic Treaty Organization] has two additional members extending the NATO frontier directly bordering with the Russian Federation—and he has forced virtually every European country to amplify its military spending."

"So Russia has lost," Archbishop Gudziak said. But "Ukraine has not yet won."

President Trump's reversal and consistent diplomatic outreach without demands to Russia have not come entirely as a shock, Archbishop Gudziak said. They are just more evidence of the yearslong failure of Western political leaders and members of the public "outside of Ukraine" to understand Ukraine's suffering and what remains at stake if Mr. Putin's ambitions are not thwarted.

After previous Russian aggression in 2014 and then its full-scale invasion in 2022, many Western leaders seemed to agree with Mr. Putin that Ukraine could not stand against the might of the Russian army. The policy of the West has been "guided by fear, and fear is not the best of advisers," Archbishop Gudziak said.

Mr. Trump has frequently noted that Mr. Zelensky "doesn't have the cards," presuming an eventual win by the Russian Federation. Ukraine has consistently defied that assessment.

What is at stake for the Western alliance, previously

The death toll rises while battle lines remain mostly frozen

While Russian President Vladimir Putin made important diplomatic and economic gains in the Oval Office in October, Russian forces far from Washington were losing ground, and soldiers along a battle line that has been more or less frozen since a Ukraine counter-offensive reclaimed large tracts of territory in April 2022. Ukraine's first successes in pushing back the Russian military came just a few months after Russia launched what it believed would be a decapitation strike on Kyiv in February 2022. Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine will begin its fifth year in just a few weeks. This map offers a snapshot of the battle lines as of Nov. 2, with the regions in red controlled by Russia and areas in light green reclaimed from Russian forces by Ukraine. Striped red areas reflect territory controlled by Russian forces before the current conflict.



Source: Institute for the Study of War

anchored by the power and resolve of the United States, is deeper than the fate of Ukraine in its struggle to resist a genocidal absorption by Russia. Ukraine is a test case for other smaller states coming up against stronger neighbors who believe their power defines borders and spheres of influence. Archbishop Gudziak noted that Taiwan stands in similar peril against mainland China.

"It's very important to remind ourselves of the fact that Ukraine gave up its nuclear weapons in December 1994 at a time when the number of warheads that Ukraine had was greater than that of the arsenals of France, the United Kingdom and China combined," he said.

Ukraine wanted peace, to escape totalitarianism, to establish a liberal democracy and grow closer to the free societies of Europe, according to Archbishop Gudziak. "It not only unilaterally disarmed, it believed in the security guarantees articulated by the U.S., Great Britain and Russia [under then-President Boris Yeltsin], which promised to guarantee Ukrainian territorial integrity, independence and to refrain from any economic pressure on Ukraine as an independent country."

The Trump administration appears ready to abandon commitments made in 1994 under the Budapest Memorandum. If it does, Archbishop Gudziak believes other small nations will have little choice but to conclude that the only security guarantee they can rely on will be development and possession of nuclear weapons themselves—a calamity for the geopolitical order.

While that threat looms and Ukraine's sovereignty and self-determination appear again in profound peril, Archbishop Gudziak said American Catholics can play a positive role. He urged, foremost, prayer for peace and the preservation of Ukraine and its people; he also urged constituent pressure on American politicians to live up to commitments made to protect Ukraine's territorial integrity and reverse the Trump administration's "art of the deal" appeasement of Mr. Putin.

Finally, he suggested that those who wish to do more should consider providing material support through donations to Catholic organizations that have played a prominent role in humanitarian assistance as the war drags on, among them the U.S. Ukrainian Church's Healing of Wounds of the War in Ukraine Fund, the Catholic Near East Welfare Association, Aid to the Church in Need, Catholic Relief Services and Caritas-Ukraine.

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

Lula wins a historic fourth term, but Brazil's voters are the real story



Luiz Lula celebrates his win and his 81st birthday at Alvorada Palace in Brasília on Oct. 27.

For the first time since Brazil's return to democracy in 1985, the candidate who came in second in a presidential election's first round won the runoff election. On Oct. 25, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva received 52 percent of the vote to 48 percent for Senator Flávio Bolsonaro, the oldest son of former President Jair Bolsonaro. The elder Bolsonaro, who governed between 2019 and 2023, is currently serving a 27-year sentence under house arrest for his role in an attempted coup following his election loss in 2022.

After his first-round victory, the possibility of seeing Flávio Bolsonaro in power aroused fear, uncertainty and outrage among many Brazilians. "What happened was the rejection of Bolsonarism," the political commentator Maria Cristina Fernandes said on CBN radio.

Moderate voters from a broad swath of the political spectrum came together to prevent the return of the Bolsonaro family to the presidency. Many feared that if returned to power, these icons of the Latin American far right would find ways to govern indefinitely—taking control of the National Congress, the Supreme Court, the office of the prosecutor general, the federal police and the armed forces.

The 2026 elections were marked by the powerful impact of social media, according to Felipe Rodrigues, a professor of political communication and electoral marketing at the Brazilian Institute of Education, Development and Research.

"Social media had been a territory where the right [dominated] engagement for several elections, but in this race, the left competed...with something it does better than the right, which is organizing activists," he told **America**.

"In 2018, the distribution of content through WhatsApp was fundamental to electing Bolsonaro. In 2026, the centralized operation [of the Workers' Party] elected Lula."

Mr. Lula is not a churchgoer but has described himself as Catholic. In this campaign, he made a concerted effort to win over the evangelical Protestant vote.

Tabata Tesser, a sociologist of religion from the University of São Paulo, told **America** that while Mr. Bolsonaro sought to publicly affirm an evangelical identity, Mr. Lula sought to engage with evangelicals by promoting the theme of "family prosperity" as a goal of his administration without turning the race into a direct religious confrontation.

Among Catholic voters, support for Lula was associated with issues like national sovereignty, defense of the Amazon and social policies, she said. "This does not mean that the Catholic Church endorsed a candidate or party—it did not—but that there is a convergence between aspects of Lula's program and principles of the social doctrine of the church."

During the election campaign, the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil released messages of encouragement to voters, reaffirming democratic principles without pointing to a preferred candidate.

After the election result, the leadership of the bishops' conference set out its priorities: "Brazil continues to face challenges that demand shared responsibility: overcoming poverty and hunger, reducing inequality, promoting decent work, access to health care, education and housing, the protection of families, public security, care for our Common Home and the unconditional defense of life and human dignity, from conception to its natural end."

A group of 64 bishops, however, signed a separate declaration defending Catholic priests and religious who took visible anti-Bolsonaro positions during the election.

"In the final days of the campaign, a significant group of priests, bishops, men and women, religious and lay people began to declare their vote for Lula, many citing national sovereignty and the defense of the Amazon," Ms. Tesser said, describing those endorsements as unprecedented.

She believes Mr. Lula's victory brings more hope for those who defend the Catholic Church's focus on care of creation, environmental justice and social equity. Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical, "Laudato Si'," she said, "links the ecological question to social justice, proposing an integral ecology that does not separate environmental degradation from the living conditions of the poorest."

Mr. Lula's victory is not necessarily a political win for Brazil's Catholic Church, which remains deeply divided in its aftermath. Many conservative Catholics are Bolsonaro supporters.

Still, "the result shows that the Catholic vote cannot be reduced to [personal] moral issues and [social] customs," Ms. Tesser said. "Issues such as poverty, work, the environment, democracy and national sovereignty are also central to the Catholic political conscience."

"In this sense, the election reinforces the importance of a reading of the faith that considers its social dimension and not only its [personal] one."

Filipe Domingues *contributes from Rome.*



OSV News photo/Angela Ponce, Reuters

A Peruvian devotion to 'Our Lord of the Miracles' is surely close to Pope Leo's heart

As Pope Leo XIV was guided through his visit to the Cathedral of Notre-Dame in Paris in September, he came upon an image of the crucified Christ. "Wow," he appeared to say, pausing before the image for a few moments.

The image that stopped Leo at Notre-Dame is known throughout Peru as *El Señor de los Milagros* ("Our Lord of the Miracles"). According to tradition, the image was painted on a wall in Lima sometime in the early 1650s by an enslaved man who had been brought to Peru from Angola. In 1655, an earthquake leveled the neighborhood, leaving little but the mural standing. A devotion began.

Authorities, it is said, tried painting over or erasing the image three times but were mysteriously unable to do so. In 1687 and 1746, earthquakes again rocked the neighborhood, but the wall remained standing. The devotion grew, and today El Señor de los Milagros is celebrated by Peruvians across the world.

Imelda Richárd, the coordinator for prison ministry in the Archdiocese of Atlanta, regularly takes part in a local celebration at the Mission of Our Lady of the Americas in Lilburn, Ga. The procession through the neighborhood follows a morning Mass, and the Peruvian consul participates and helps carry the image. Those who carry the image, which is mounted on a large *anda*, or float, wear robes that are purple or violet, a color used during times of penance in Catholic liturgies.

"I think that we all, at some point in our lives, need a *milagro*," Ms. Richárd said. "We all need to believe that that miracle is going to happen. And it seems to me that El Señor de los Milagros delivers."

Pope Leo surely came to know the devotion when, as a young Augustinian priest in 1985, he was assigned to a mission in Chulucanas, a town in northern Peru. Each October, replicas of the mural are carried in procession down the streets of Lima and throughout towns in Peru. In Lima, hundreds of thousands of pilgrims join in venerating the image.

Ms. Richárd goes to Peru every year and visits the church where the original image of El Señor de los Milagros is kept, the Monastery of Las Nazarenas. Before her trips, Ms. Richárd tells the incarcerated men she visits as part of her ministry that "they're welcome to pass their intentions onto my heart, and I will present them to El Señor de los Milagros."

The connection to Pope Leo is also personal for her. Ms. Richárd said her late uncle, a priest who served as vicar general in Trujillo, knew Father Robert Prevost from his years there. She quoted a line from a T-shirt she and a

The procession of El Señor de los Milagros, held in Lima in October 2025

friend wear: *Peruana, como la papa y el papa* ("Peruvian, like the potato and the pope").

El Señor de los Milagros, she said, is part of the Peruvian identity in a way similar to what Our Lady of Guadalupe is to the Mexican people. Part of that identity is believing in miracles and in God's power to answer prayers.

Pope Leo is a Peruvian citizen and has described himself as "Peruvian at heart." As cardinal and as pope, he has presided over El Señor de los Milagros celebrations at the Vatican. On Oct. 11, he greeted Rome's Hermandad del Señor de los Milagros, the local brotherhood, after the Sunday Angelus, thanking them for their prayers before his pastoral visit to Peru this November.

Carlos Zafra is president of the El Señor de los Milagros brotherhood at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles. The election of Pope Leo has brought joy and gratitude to the hearts of Peruvians, Mr. Zafra said.

Those in his brotherhood, Mr. Zafra explained, are Peruvian by birth, but "we chose to be Americans because we love this land." He added, "We feel a deep connection to hard work, to bettering ourselves and an infinite gratitude because this country gives us the chance to do what we might not have been able to do in Peru."

Mr. Zafra became a U.S. citizen, and he said he understands why Pope Leo became a citizen of Peru. "He loves the land and the people," he said. "He saw the people grow there, and he was a part of it. He guided them and was a pastor of the people."

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



OSV News photo/Art Babych

A rally against assisted suicide on Parliament Hill in Ottawa in 2016

In Canada, a halt to the expansion of medical assistance in dying

A provision in Canadian law that would have made Peter Oliver eligible for medical assistance in dying never took effect, and he is working to keep it that way.

"I struggle with mental health and have done so for the course of most of my life. In some respects, I would be a candidate for assisted suicide if that legislation had gone through," Mr. Oliver said. "I found that to be disturbing."

Mr. Oliver is the executive director of the Catholic Health Association of Saskatchewan, a provincial agency supporting Catholic hospitals and long-term care facilities.

Canada had been on track to extend medical assistance in dying, known as MAID, to people whose sole condition is mental illness ever since the idea was proposed by then-Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in 2021. But on Oct. 7, the federal government said it would halt that expansion indefinitely.

"What I require as a person with a mental health condition is to be surrounded by people that are absolutely convinced that my condition is treatable, that wellness is a possibility for me," Mr. Oliver said.

The government introduced legislation in late October that would indefinitely exclude people whose sole condition is mental illness from MAID. A court challenge already underway could revive the issue.

Mr. Oliver sees the decision as a small victory, but it has been overshadowed by a part of the bill that would legalize "advance requests" for assistance in dying.

Advance requests allow people suffering from illnesses of progressive cognitive decline like Alzheimer's disease to request medical assistance in dying before they lose capacity to consent to the process. While such requests are already accepted in Quebec, doctors have expressed apprehension because of the absence of federal legal protection for advance directives. The federal government's move to add advance requests to Canada's approved MAID protocol would allow each province to decide whether or not to permit them.

"That is actually more concerning than the mental health issue," Mr. Oliver said.

Will Martino *is an O'Hare fellow at America Media.*

Prevost's Parish Ministry

The Chicagoland church that helped form Pope Leo XIV

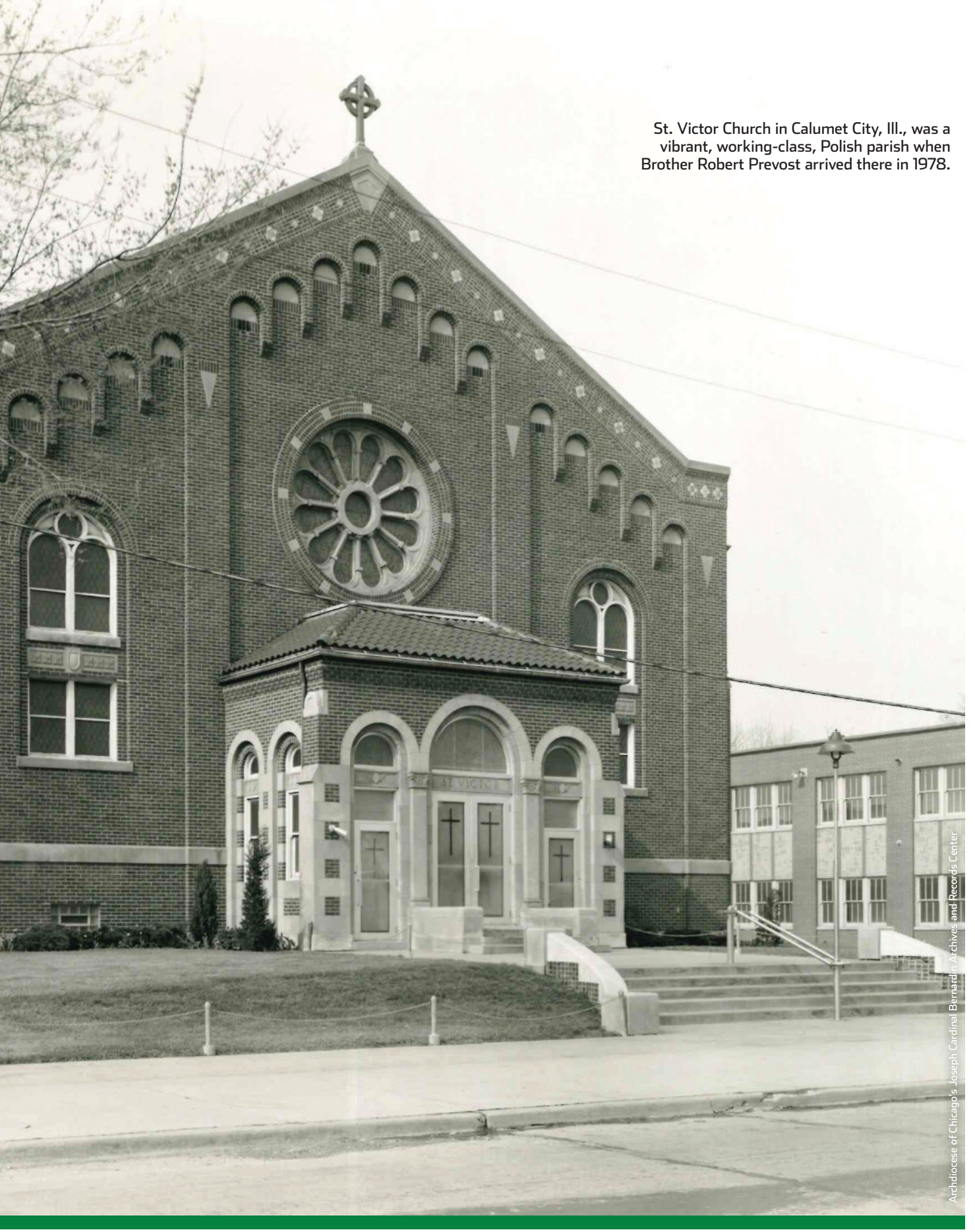
By Scott Detrow and Daniel Burke



Steeled and centered by a year of prayer and retreat from the world, Brother Robert Prevost prepared to move back to his hometown of Chicago. His next goal on the path to full priesthood was earning a master of divinity degree in his father's childhood neighborhood, Hyde Park.

Catholic Theological Union was a hotbed of post-Vatican II experimentation when Prevost arrived in the fall of 1978. Among many other changes, the Second Vatican Council had modernized the way priests were trained and educated. The theological model of the church previously had been memorization, not innovation. But now there was a chance to shift and decentralize that process, leaving the details up to individual orders and dioceses, emphasizing the importance of real-world ministry training.

Sensing an opportunity, American leaders of three religious orders—the Passionists, the Servites and the Franciscans—decided to act, pooling their resources to create a new theological school of their own in the heart of an urban community. They settled on Hyde Park, a Chicago neighborhood near the University of Chicago's Divinity School and a handful of other thriving Protestant seminaries. They purchased an old hotel a few blocks from Lake Michigan, called the Aragon, to house the school and began the process of closing down and selling off their old individual seminaries. The doors of Catholic Theological Union opened in the turbulent year of 1968. (One of the first faculty planning meetings was held the morning after Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination.) As the



St. Victor Church in Calumet City, Ill., was a vibrant, working-class, Polish parish when Brother Robert Prevost arrived there in 1978.

Archdiocese of Chicago's Joseph Cardinal Bernardin Archives and Records Center

> St. Victor would offer the church as a community hub.

school grew, more religious orders, including the Augustinians, began sending their seminarians there.

A decade later, the 229 students enrolled at the school—including Prevost and Robert Dodaro, a fellow Augustinian and friend of Prevost since their high-school-seminary days, and the other newly professed Augustinians from their novice class—were the picture of progressive Catholicism. The student body was made up not only of priests-in-training but laypeople as well; it was a mix of men and women, Americans and international students. Everyone, faculty members included, called each other by their first names. No one wore Roman collars or habits on campus.

Each day, they would crowd into classrooms, or down the street in spaces rented from a synagogue, and amid clouds of cigarette smoke—one student with allergies wrote about having to sit on the floor to avoid the plumes—dig into their coursework. They studied the New and Old Testaments, feminist theology and a relatively new school of thinking coming out of South America called liberation theology, which emphasized Jesus' commitment to the poor. They learned how to preach and delivered weekly homilies to their classmates that would be recorded, analyzed and critiqued.

But it wasn't enough, according to C.T.U. thinking, to learn about theology in textbooks and in classrooms. Students had to learn how to put that learning into practice. Every new scholar was required to spend a set number of hours each week working in parishes, schools or hospitals. That work was just as important, if not more so, than whatever they would learn from books.

Father John Szura, the Augustinian friar who headed C.T.U.'s master of divinity program, was particularly committed to that part of the school's mission. In the fall of 1978 he was looking to place some of his charges—Prevost among them—in ministry fieldwork locations for the coming school year. He had heard good things from a young Augustinian about a new program started by a nun in his home parish who might need more assistance. One day, Szura reached out. With her permission, he explained, he wanted to send two first-year students her way that fall.

Rebirth at St. Victor

If there was one parish that best exemplified the open, experimental and passionate American church in the first decade after Vatican II, it was St. Victor, a working-class Polish parish in Calumet City, Ill., near the Indiana border. For years, the congregation had been dying a slow death. But the 1975 arrival of Father Leo Mahon, a stocky and animated Irish American priest who had spent the previous decade helping run a Chicago Archdiocese mission in Panama, had revived and re-energized the community. After one of his first Masses, Mahon organized a meet-and-greet coffee for parishioners. He delivered a brief speech about his intentions: "A lot of things have happened in the church over the last several years," he said, "that we all agree have not taken place here at St. Victor. So, there are some things we are going to immediately implement."

For instance, starting then and there, both men and women would be allowed to serve as lectors (reading the Scriptures and prayers) and help distribute Holy Communion as Eucharistic ministers. Knowing the latter decision, especially, might make some of the older, more traditionalist parishioners bristle, Mahon picked two longtime members of the church, one male and one female, as his first two Eucharistic ministers. The gambit worked: An older conservative woman, one who had vowed never, ever to receive Communion from someone who wasn't a priest, soon found herself in the church aisle, approaching her longtime friend and peer, a woman named Fanny. She paused, took a deep breath, said to herself, "Oh, what the hell," and walked up to receive the body of Christ.

"You know what?" she told a priest after the Mass. "I feel young again."

In short order, Mahon also banished the type of scolding and judgment that priests like those at Prevost's childhood parish, St. Mary's, had once directed at parishioners. If the flock was to grow and thrive, the church had to be accepting. "Yes, I agree that once again we 'regulars' will be tempted to complain about the 'Christmas Catholics,' to resent losing our seats to people we rarely see otherwise," he wrote one holiday season in a parish dispatch. "I beg you, however, in the name of the Lord to be hospitable to all our brothers and sisters for that is what they are. Instead of complaining, let us rejoice they have come 'home.'"

The adjustments made an impact. Before long, St. Victor was humming again with members and daily activities. Two different church choirs, one traditional, one folk. Cub Scout meetings. Cheerleading practice. A ceramics club. To expand access, Mahon turned the parish's convent into a retreat center and began hosting regular meetings for all sorts of support groups: Overeaters Anonymous, events

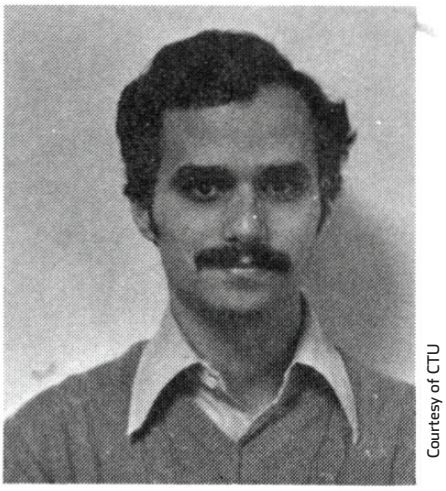


Concerned about someone with a drinking or pill problem? If not, you might well be. St. Victor's offers you the availability of a team able and willing to help individuals with an addiction problem. Feel free to call any member.

Sr. Therese Del Genio	862-3916
Bro. Bob Dodaro	684-6510
Pat Fisher	891-4942
Jim Gauthier	(219) 923-6303
Mike & Sue Higgins	862-5280
Phil Jarosz	891-5904
Ralph & Jo Knoerzer	891-3036
Ed & Mary Ellen Lyczak	868-6356
Bro. Bob Prevost	684-6510
Maureen Reiff	891-4243
Joyce Skiba	862-7701
Fr. Bill Stenzel	862-3200

Archdiocese of Chicago's Joseph Cardinal Bernardin Archives and Records Center

A bulletin from December 1978 lists Robert Prevost, O.S.A., among the volunteers at St. Victor.



Courtesy of CTU

Robert Prevost, O.S.A.(9/14)
1165 E. 54th Pl., 60615
Tel. 684-6510

A photo of then-student Robert Prevost from the 1978-79 student directory of the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago

called "divorce rap sessions," gatherings of families struggling with children with drug or behavior problems. He also launched what he called a college of ministry, where parishioners could take weekly courses on theology.

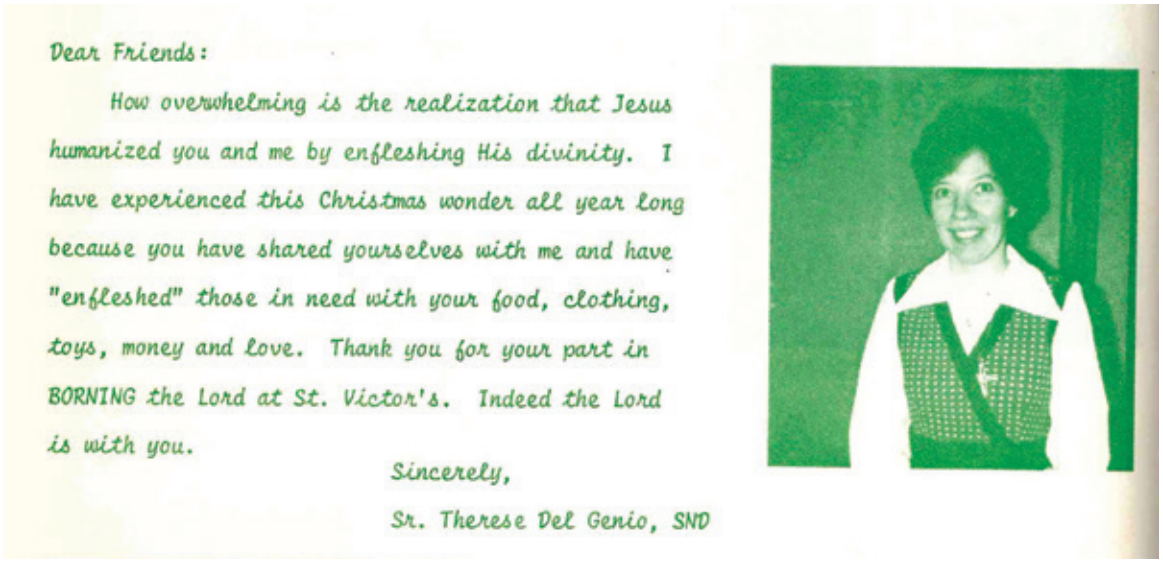
The overall goal, said Father Bill Stenzel, a freshly ordained priest who served as Mahon's right-hand man, was to get away from the idea of the church as "Catholic Marshall Field's" (a reference to the now-defunct Chicago department store), where you strolled around and selected necessary sacraments. "Fall in love? Go to the marriage department," he explained in the analogy. "Have a baby? Go to the baptism department. Have a kid in school? Go to the Communion department. That kind of thing, without anything that wove it together." Instead, St. Victor would offer the church as a community hub and space for people to gravitate toward in all moments of life, not just the religious ones.

Helping Families Confront Alcoholism

One piece of this growth was of special importance to Mahon: the parish's alcoholism outreach team. Drinking had always been a problem in the community, where each ethnic enclave boasted corner bars filled with men coming off long, grueling shifts at the nearby steel mills and other industrial jobs. Lately, those same mills had begun to lay people off, making the problem worse. The priest knew the struggles these men and their families faced—his own brother had recently died after a painful struggle with alcoholism.

Hoping to formalize a program to help, he called Sister Thérèse DelGenio, a sister of Notre Dame de Namur who had taught at the parish school and had overseen a homeless shelter and addiction program in Indiana. Like Mahon, DelGenio knew alcoholism firsthand: she had dedicated her life to working with addicts after growing up with a mother who suffered from the disease. Determined to help the growing numbers of people struggling with substance abuse in and around St. Victor, she and Stenzel got to work recruiting a team of about a dozen parishioners. (As it turned out, Stenzel was adept at identifying promising candidates: A few years later, when he was assigned to another parish, he would work closely with a young organizer named Barack Obama.) Together, they immersed themselves in the latest literature about addiction treatment. They found themselves drawn to an emerging approach: intervening with alcoholics and their families before they hit absolute rock bottom, so they could enter treatment before causing even more damage to themselves and their families.

Getting the program off the ground called for delicate but intense action. First, they placed every member of the outreach team's phone numbers in the parish bulletin, hoping that those looking for help would find them. Before they knew it, they were fielding frequent calls from wives or children of addicts, often at the end of their emotional rope. Two members of the team would meet with the caller and then their whole family, minus the addict, to talk about


Dear Friends:

How overwhelming is the realization that Jesus humanized you and me by enfleshing His divinity. I have experienced this Christmas wonder all year long because you have shared yourselves with me and have "enfleshed" those in need with your food, clothing, toys, money and love. Thank you for your part in BORNING the Lord at St. Victor's. Indeed the Lord is with you.

Sincerely,

Sr. Therese Del Genio, SND

Sister Thérèse DelGenio, pictured here in a parish bulletin from December 1978, founded a program at St. Victor that helped families stage interventions for loved ones struggling with alcoholism.

Archdiocese of Chicago's Joseph Cardinal Bernardin Archives and Records Center

what recovery and rehabilitation would look like. They would begin to plan an intervention—an emotional and uncomfortable meeting where each family member, one by one, would tell their loved one just how much his or her addiction was harming them. If all went as planned, they would take the addict to a rehabilitation program to begin treatment, directly from the meeting.

In the fall of 1978, about a year into the effort, DelGenio got the call from Szura looking to place two of his new C.T.U. students in her program. She agreed. Not long after, she found herself outside the convent, now branded Jubilee House, waiting to greet the two newly professed Augustinian brothers Szura had sent her way. As they approached, she took them in. One was short and seemingly intense, with dark curly hair and a newly grown mustache. The other young man had an animated smile, a long face and thick, wavy hair.

"I'm Bob," said Prevost.

"I'm Bob," Dodaro added.

The two Bobs seemed proud of their little schtick. DelGenio wasn't impressed.

"Be more creative. Really," she replied.

At first, Prevost and Dodaro watched and learned. Once a week, on Wednesday evenings, the team would gather on the first floor for training sessions and debriefs about prior outreaches and interventions. Each meeting would begin with a prayer and end with a meal or a snack. Sometimes their serious conversations about the best way to help suffering families would be interrupted by laughter trickling down from another group meeting on the floor above them.

Once they had a handle on the process, the Bobs began observing family meetings and intervention planning sessions and then attending the interventions themselves, taking more of an active role over time. During those early stages, Prevost made an impression on DelGenio. "He had a great way of just kind of getting in the middle," she later recalled, "and making both sides come together and build bridges." A good observer and a good listener, she noted—both helpful traits in this line of work.

The Bobs spent Wednesdays and Thursdays with DelGenio and her team. She became their guide through the world of addiction and their mentor in ministry. "I dragged them all over the city of Chicago," she remembered. "They had to learn all the symptoms of the progression of the disease of alcoholism and drug addiction. They had to know how all of that impacted the family—the hurt it caused."

She took them to the hospitals and rehab programs where the team sought to place addicts and taught them to ask detailed but careful questions about how the disease had affected people's lives. An innocent-sounding question like "How are you sleeping?" she warned, could be quite triggering to a worried family member: "They're either oversleeping because they don't want to get up and face this, or they're not sleeping at all because they're looking out the window waiting for the car to come home to see what kind of shape [their family member] is in," she'd explain. They had to anticipate the cause and effect of each stage of the process—of every word they said—with compassion, honesty and, above everything else, a careful, deliberate thoughtfulness.

A Time for Understanding

An understanding of personalities, behavior and interpersonal dynamics was also critical. The person who would seek out a meeting was always eager to confront their family member's addiction right away, but the team would

‘He had a great way of just kind of getting in the middle.’

slow things down. More often than not, that person was the member of the family who took the lead on every other crisis or issue; the counselors didn’t want to give them too much power, or create conditions where their family ignored their suggestion. Months would often go by between that initial conversation and any intervention, and details about rehab or more significant steps were often purposely held back until a second (or third, or fourth) session, when the full group was better prepared to deal with the realities and consequences of the decision.

The outreach team also insisted that all family members begin attending Al-Anon, the support group for family members of addicts, before any firm steps could be taken. Multiple dress rehearsals took place before interventions, during which family members would write out their statements and read them over and over again. Stenzel would often ask them about the addict’s religious views to determine whether or not he would dress in his clerical garb (“use his collar power,” as he put it) during the real thing.

Once an intervention was set, there was a strict format to follow: Each testimony would begin with an “honest and caring statement,” but not a sugarcoated one. The family members would express their love, but also their serious concerns and strains. Then they would tell the addict, in detail, what happened when they drank and how it affected them. The more specific, the team advised, the better. Statements like “Last Tuesday, you...” were encouraged over more general framing like “You always....” As this all played out, one facilitator would lead the conversation, while another would scan the moods and body language of everyone in the room, in order to adapt next steps as needed. If all went well, the night would end with a drive to a hospital or rehab center, where the addict would immediately enter treatment.

What was perhaps most interesting about the whole process was what was not included in the interventions. While the St. Victor staff talked about faith and prayed with each other, they never did so during the interventions themselves.

“They don’t need to hear about God,” DelGenio explained. “They’re very mad at God. Very, very mad at God. Especially the person who’s the addict. I mean, they prayed foxhole prayers to stop, and they didn’t get any help—so who the heck are you, God?”

“This is not the time to talk about God,” she reiterated. “This is the time to act like God. To be loving and understanding.”

It was intense and exhausting work, and the team would unwind after interventions with a trip to the 24-hour Greek diner across the street from St. Victor and talk through what had happened, what had worked, what hadn’t and how they felt. This, Prevost learned that year, was just as much what being a priest was about as saying Mass and administering Communion. Helping the desperate and down-and-out in the middle of the night. Facing head-on, and trying as best as he could to confront the darker and messier aspects of the human condition.


OSV News photo/Remo Casilli, Reuters

Pope Leo XIV at his weekly general audience in St. Peter’s Square on June 11, 2025

Scott Detrow and Daniel Burke *are journalists at NPR, where Detrow co-hosts “*All Things Considered*” and Burke works as a senior editor for religion and spirituality. They covered the conclave that elected Pope Leo from Rome.*

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‘Art Is Not a Luxury’

Across the country, Catholic artists and art collectives are sustaining the life of the church

By Brigid McCabe

I greeted the grave of Walker Percy with a glass of whiskey in my hand. My drink had been cold when I first began my walk across the grounds of St. Joseph Abbey, but the plastic cup had lost its cool touch in the sunshine. It was a warm May afternoon in southeast Louisiana.

A group of nearly 40 people circled Percy’s tombstone. The stone itself was small and unremarkable, lying flat in the ground alongside a sea of nearly identical markers. There was no obvious indication that the man it honored was a celebrated American writer, winner of the 1962 U.S. National Book Award for Fiction. But my group knew; we had come with bourbons and books in hand to pay respect to a great Catholic artist.

One of our hosts, Daniel Fitzpatrick, moved to the front of the group, opening his copy of Percy’s 1971 novel *Love in the Ruins* to a marked page. He cleared his throat.

“I believe in God and the whole business,” he read aloud, “but I love women best, music and science next, whiskey next, God fourth, and my fellowman hardly at all.” The group laughed and raised their drinks in a salutatory toast.

Mr. Fitzpatrick is the editor of a publication called Joie de Vivre, which describes itself as a “quarterly Catholic journal of art, culture, and letters for south Louisiana.” The journal is affiliated with the St.

An artist at work at St. Gregory's Hall in Chicago

Louis IX Art Society, a Catholic nonprofit based in the region that seeks to "transform the heart and lift the soul to God through transcendent beauty."

The society, co-founded and led by Jordan Haddad, a theology professor at Notre Dame Seminary in New Orleans, hosts events that celebrate the arts and uplift creative Catholics. These include chamber concerts, poetry readings and lectures on the intersection of Catholicism and the arts.

A pilgrimage to the grave of Walker Percy has become an annual tradition for the society. It serves as an integral piece of one of their most dynamic programs, the Louisiana Arts & Culture Festival, which was held at St. Joseph Abbey, a Benedictine monastery in Covington, La., for the second consecutive year this past May.

During the two-day event, dozens of attendees celebrated Mass with the Benedictine monks who live there, attended talks and breakout sessions, ate lunch with artists and, yes, sipped bourbon while strolling across the beautiful and expansive abbey grounds. The talks covered a wide range of Catholic cultural topics, from discussions of architecture to literature to iconography. There were so many breakout options that one could not attend even a third of what was offered.

The St. Louis IX Art Society and Joie de Vivre celebrate Catholic art with a focus on the specific cultural history and traditions of New Orleans and South Louisiana. The organizations' names speak to the French history of the area, and their content often features regional artistic inheritances—like their celebration of Percy, who spent much of his life and career in Covington.

But while the St. Louis IX Art Society is distinct in its regional focus, its mission—to inspire profound encounters with Christ through engagement with artistic beauty—is a goal shared by other, similar Catholic apostolates that have recently emerged in cities around the United States.

In my conversations with a diverse group of Catholic artists, the same themes kept emerging. A love for beauty so strong that it drives people to seriously and intentionally pursue the arts as a vocation. A need for community, both for accomplished artists and for all Catholics who are seeking to deepen their appreciation of how God speaks through creative expression. And a belief that art—by harnessing and celebrating beauty—can help bring people into the Catholic faith and can be a tool of spiritual inspiration and even evangelization.

Generations of faithful Catholics have crafted beautiful stained-glass windows, built massive cathedrals and composed orchestral masterpieces. As the artists I spoke to in Covington and around the country would say again and again, philosophers and theologians have always told us that God is truth, goodness and *beauty*. To be Catholic is to inherit one of the most impressive and influential artistic traditions in the history of the world.

But encountering God through art is not only a fundamental part of the church's past. It is also an essential part of our present, living faith and, as these artists would tell you, a key part of how our church and our world will continue to find hope in times to come.

The Need for Community

A few weeks before my trip to Louisiana, I found myself in a back pew of the Church of St. Joseph in Greenwich Village. The Dominican friars who run the parish had partnered with a group called Arthouse2B—an arts collective grounded in the Catholic faith—to host what they called a Mass for Artists. The event offered an opportunity to celebrate and reflect on the spirituality of artists, and served as the opening of Arthouse2B's new art exhibition, "Feast," which would debut in McGuire Hall (the basement of St. Joseph's) following the Mass.

The church was full of young couples, older men and women, vowed religious in habits, and families with children. After Mass, the crowd made their way downstairs, talking enthusiastically with one another. Paintings, drawings and photography pieces lined the walls. At the door, someone handed me a beautifully made "gallery guide," which revealed that most of the pieces were available for purchase. Prices ranged from around $50 to several thousand dollars.

An extensive selection of hors d'oeuvres, sweets and drinks was displayed on a large table in the back of the room. Children laughed and ran around; a member of the Sisters of Life offered a young boy some cheese. Erin Scarfone took to the center of the room, microphone in hand. As the co-founder and driving force behind Arthouse2B, she welcomed all artists and guests and introduced the theme of the

Damien Chlanda



Courtesy of the St. Louis IX Art Society

Daniel Fitzpatrick, editor of Joie de Vivre, reads from a Walker Percy novel at a pilgrimage to Percy's grave.



Courtesy of the St. Louis IX Art Society

A painting by Blair Gordy-Piras, a native of Louisiana, at the Louisiana Arts & Culture Festival

show. Discussing the decision to title the show "Feast," she said, "We [as Catholics] know the end, and we know it's not death... It's a banquet, a feast. But we know we are not there yet. So we are left with a hunger."

All the artwork in the room was meant to capture that hunger, she explained.

Following Ms. Scarfone's address came a series of performances: poetry readings, monologue recitations, a piano performance. Malachy Napier, C.F.R., long-bearded, habited and barefoot, performed an original song on ukulele called "Ode to a Mango." As artist after artist performed, the crowd listened attentively, roared with laughter, erupted with applause. There were nowhere near enough chairs; people sat on the floor without complaint.

Weeks after the Mass for Artists, I visited Ms. Scarfone at her apartment, the place where the idea for Arthouse2B originated (and the inspiration for its name: apartment unit 2B).

Ms. Scarfone described Arthouse2B as an artist collective and a Catholic apostolate. She said the group grew from a question she had begun asking herself as a young artist and devout Catholic: "What does it mean to be an artist equally serious about my faith and my craft?"

Ms. Scarfone was living in New York City during the Covid-19 pandemic, which she described as a "desolate time." Before the lockdown, she had befriended other artists of faith in the city. After months of isolation, she hosted an intimate event for some of these friends at her apartment: a movie and discussion night about Flannery O'Connor. Being with other Catholic creatives passionate about their faith and unwavering in their care for her felt like a "necessary quenching of thirst."

Along with her friend and co-founder Claire Kretzschmar, Ms. Scarfone began looking for ways to create a community centered around both faith and the arts. They held their first Mass for Artists in August 2020. After the event, Ms. Scarfone told me, "I turned [to Claire] and said, 'This needs to happen more.'"

Since then, Ms. Scarfone and Ms. Kretzschmar, along with a few other key partners, have built an extensive ministry that includes more Masses, art shows and exhibitions, musical performances, book talks, original theatrical performances, film screenings, an annual benefit and a series of artist retreats. In addition to giving artists a platform to present their work, these events allow a space for artists to explore questions of "how to pursue excellence while pursuing spiritual fulfillment."

Encouraging artists to think deeply about their calling is not only important for those individuals themselves. Ms. Scarfone emphasized that Arthouse2B seeks to "restore the hearts of artists to restore the larger culture." She believes that by grounding, nourishing and encouraging artists through faith, they will be capable of making works of beauty that also inspire reflection in anyone who encounters them—artist or not, Catholic or not.

The Need for Support

Ms. Scarfone told me that she has established Arthouse2B as a legal nonprofit organization and hopes to acquire an







Erin Scarfone, holding the microphone, is co-founder of Arthouse2B, which recently staged a new art exhibition, "Feast," at the Church of St. Joseph in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of New York City.

office and creative space at some point. In the meantime, they have "relied on the generosity of parishes and priests who are very much on board with the mission," bouncing between churches and communities in New York City.

The importance of support from parishes, priests and Catholic communities is something that I heard from artists across the country.

The day after my pilgrimage to Walker Percy's grave, I made another pilgrimage, to Baton Rouge, La., where a couple named Andrew and Ashley Coleman live with their two young children. Mr. Coleman is a professional woodworker, specializing in "liturgical furnishings." We spoke in the shed behind his house, which has been converted into an extensive professional workshop.

He showed me one of his projects, a cabinet-like case for a monstrance. It was dedicated to Our Lady of Knock, intended for an Irish-American parish. He demonstrated the tools he used to carve complicated patterns from the Book of Kells into the panels.

Mr. Coleman told me that his path to professional woodworking was an unexpected one. After entering and then leaving the seminary as a young man, he floundered until a man he knew from daily Mass offered him a sales job at a septic services company.

He had been developing his woodworking skills as a hobby during that time. Knowing that, the man from Mass also asked Andrew if he would help with a personal project. He wanted Andrew to make him some furniture and Catholic artwork for a prayer room he was building in his house.

Mr. Coleman completed the project, and shortly after, a local priest asked him to make altar rail extensions. With Ashley's support, Andrew started taking on commissioned projects regularly while maintaining his sales job.

But then he was contacted by a priest from Russellville, Ala., who wanted him to furnish a new church being built there. The priest asked him to make altar chairs, an ambo, a high altar—to make "all but the pews" for the new church, as Mr. Coleman put it. To take on this project and do it well, Mr. Coleman would need to quit his job and focus on woodworking full time. Together, Ashley and Andrew agreed to try to make it work.

Those patrons had trusted a young man who worked out of his shed to make pieces of art that people worship on and with. Sometimes the gravity of that opportunity amazes Mr. Coleman. "It's humbling," he told me, "to kneel on a kneeler that I made." He told me that sometimes he looks at his own work and thinks, "Did I do that with these hands?"

After creating pieces for churches himself, he said, it feels different "to see that stained-glass window, see that pew, and see the names attached as the artists or benefactors." Now, he said, "I know how much money, time and work they must have taken."

Mr. Coleman emphasized that the Catholic artistic tradition has always required partnership between those who are generous with their talent and those generous with their material means. He relies on priests and individuals to commission unique, hand-crafted pieces from him in



James Rosenbloom is a professional musician who serves as the music minister at St. Philip Neri Parish in Metairie, La.

order to keep his business alive and feed his family. Investment in art is a virtuous pursuit for Catholics, he argues, and not a new one.

He pointed to the historical example of Lorenzo de' Medici, a 15th-century Italian statesman whose patronage was responsible for a tremendous amount of Renaissance artwork in Florence.

"[Lorenzo de' Medici] found artists and told them, 'I'll give you a place to work, resources, tools,'...and that's why people still go to Florence today," Mr. Coleman told me. "Not just because the talent was there, but also because the support was there."

Another Louisiana-based artist, James Rosenbloom, also spoke to me about the importance of clergy who see how investing in art can nourish a Catholic community.

Mr. Rosenbloom is a professional musician who serves as the music minister at St. Philip Neri Parish in Metairie, La. He told me that musical performance, when grounded in spiritual depth, can form a profound relationship between the person performing and the person listening—one that mimics the example of Christ.

The musicians make themselves vulnerable by giving of themselves, offering up their abilities and their creations,

Art is a key part of how our church and our world will continue to find hope.

he explained. This follows the giving example of Jesus, who made himself "the most vulnerable someone could be," as Mr. Rosenbloom put it, to give us himself so completely.

In return, the audience member "receives" the music, allowing it to transform them—the way we all aspire to receive Christ's sacrifice in the sacraments and the Mass.

Giving and receiving music with an open heart can create spiritual encounter and emotional transcendence for a parish community, which is why Mr. Rosenbloom urges parishes to invest the time and effort to enhance their music ministries. Over the last few years, he has been supported by a local pastor with a "like-minded mentality of how music should be implemented in the liturgy" and prioritized in the community.

"Musicians can be difficult," Mr. Rosenbloom told me, laughing, especially when they are striving to offer Massgoers an experience as profound as what he describes. "What I needed," he told me, "was a deep collaboration—an honest and nurturing relationship with a pastor" willing to invest in music ministry. Mr. Rosenbloom told me his pastor's trust and support is paying off, noting the flocks of young people who he believes are coming to church "in search of beauty."

Models of Possibility

Louisiana is not the only place where clergy are stepping up to support artistic renewal in their parish communities. In Chicago, I visited St. Gregory's Hall, a self-described "home for Catholic culture" based at St. Gregory the Great Church on Chicago's North Side. I was given a tour of the church by Joe Malham, a local artist who played an instrumental role in fostering cultural richness at that church while serving as the parish's artist-in-residence for 20 years, from 2001 to 2021.

Mr. Malham's life was changed by Father Bart Winters, described by Mr. Malham as "my Obi-Wan Kenobi." When Father Winters became pastor of St. Gregory the Great Church in the early 2000s, he had a "new vision" for the parish based on "evangelization through the arts."

Father Winters was not thinking about his efforts as something original or unique, Mr. Malham explained.



Courtesy of Andrew Coleman


Courtesy of Andrew Coleman

Andrew Coleman created the altar, high altar, altar rails and ambo at Good Shepherd Catholic Parish in Russellville, Ala., and created a wooden monstrance for Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Baton Rouge, La.

Rather, he spoke about "reconnecting [the parish] with one of the oldest traditions in the Catholic Church, supporting artists in pursuing their vocation."

Mr. Malham had studied art in Rome, through Loyola University Chicago's Rome Center, where he learned to write icons. After Mr. Malham returned to Chicago, Father Winters recruited him first to help restore faded existing art at St. Gregory the Great. Then he asked Mr. Malham to serve as the church's artist-in-residence.

This opportunity offered Mr. Malham a space to work and complete commissions for St. Gregory and other Catholic parishes and groups—a studio room in the previously underutilized rectory next to the church. In exchange for use of this space, Mr. Malham restored the church's historic artwork and completed original works for the parish.

Mr. Malham took me to an upstairs chapel with windows that peered into the nave of the church. On the back wall was a beautiful mural of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. Another wall was divided into panels depicting the five joyful mysteries of the rosary in vibrant color. On the ceiling was a sea of blue, decorated with shiny white stars.

The space is known as the Chapel of Our Lady of Consolation. It was commissioned by a parish family whose daughter had died shortly after she was born and is dedicated to families who have experienced similar losses. Mr. Malham collaborated with another local artist, Meltem Aktas, to decorate the space so that it might be used by families in the parish who had experienced loss, but also by any parish family and generations to come.

Opportunities to create spaces like this are what made the artist-in-residence program truly special for Mr. Malham. They allowed him to serve the church and his local community by giving them beautiful places to worship. "The community was as big a blessing as the studio space or commissions," he told me.

Around 2020, St. Gregory the Great Church merged with two other local churches, St. Ita and St. Thomas of Canterbury, to form Mary Mother of God Parish. As the parish underwent a transition, it was important to parishioners like Mark Franzen that the artistic renewal started by Father Winters, who has since been assigned to another area ministry, would continue to grow.

"[I asked myself,] 'How do we take that legacy and use it as a tool for faith formation and evangelization?'" Mr. Franzen told me. What emerged from that question was a formalized structure for supporting art at the parish: St. Gregory's Hall, with Mr. Franzen as director. Mr. Malham stepped down from his artist-in-residence position in 2021, and St. Gregory's Hall continued the artist-in-residence program, appointing a painter, Sarah Crow, as Mr. Malham's successor. Ms. Crow has continued to use rectory studio space for artistic programming, including guided art lessons that allow parishioners and the broader community to explore their own creativity.

St. Gregory's Hall has also expanded beyond the visual arts. It now has a composer-in-residence, who is responsible for a robust sacred music ministry, and several scholars-in-residence who lead community conversations about literature, culture and theology.

Mr. Franzen believes that this celebration of Catholic culture is something that could be happening in parishes around the country. "Most parishes probably have a room, if not a building, that could be put to use," he said. "Many places have a physical capacity." The need, he told me, is









At top left: Joe Malham served as the artist-in-residence at St. Gregory the Great Church in Chicago from 2001 to 2021. He learned to write icons, like this one of Pope Francis (bottom left) while studying in Rome. Above and at right: At St. Gregory's Hall, Sarah Crow offers artistic programming, including guided art lessons that allow parishioners and the broader community to explore their own creativity. Ms. Crow is at the center of the photo at right.

for "mission-driven individuals" to be "more imaginative in what could be done."

One important step for such individuals, he explained, is to stop seeing the arts as add-ons that are separate from the heart of Catholic life and worship. "The idea of a Catholic culture that we're promoting is not just something that we consume in our leisure time," Mr. Franzen told me. "Beauty is how we come to our faith, how we come to God."

In another Chicago neighborhood, I encountered another model of Catholics utilizing existing space to nurture the arts. Margaret Ryland met me outside a charming brick building adorned with a large, glowing red sign, reminiscent of an Art Deco marquee. It read: *Athenaeum*. In the charming but residential Lakeview neighborhood, it was more than a little eye-catching.

Ms. Ryland serves as the general manager of the Athenaeum Center for Thought and Culture, a space for performance and celebration of the arts. The building where the center is based has a long and rich history. It was opened in 1911 by the Redemptorists to serve as a community enrichment center for the parishioners of St. Alphonsus Church, the direct neighbor of the center. Over the years, however, the building became difficult for the parish to maintain. In order to cover costs and sustain the parish, the center was rented to secular nonprofits with little connection to the church.

This changed in 2016, when a couple named Katie Joy and Lawrence Daufenbach began to think about how to bring faith back to the historic space. Ms. Daufenbach was a parishioner at St. Alphonsus and witnessed the distance between the Athenaeum and the Catholic community it was connected to. She began reflecting on the space with Mr. Daufenbach, who had recently experienced a reversion to the faith. He told me he remembers asking himself, "How, Lord, do you want me to be involved in the arts and in beauty?"

In 2021, the Daufenbachs left their jobs to devote themselves to running the Athenaeum. With hard work and substantial financial support from independent donors, the couple has infused the Athenaeum with new life. They still rent out the performance space to non-Catholic performers to help cover expenses, but the heart of their work is what they call their Athenaeum Center for Thought and Culture Presents programming. Notable examples of this include "Dante 360," described by the Athenaeum as "an immersive, multi-dimensional experience" that adapts Dante's "Divine Comedy" into theatrical performance, with corresponding visual art and music components. Another notable program was "Bernadette: The Musical," which told the story of St. Bernadette of Lourdes.

The Daufenbachs are committed to maintaining a cultural space that is firmly rooted in beauty and spiritual richness and aligned with the Catholic Church. But they keep their doors open to all. They say they want to invite people on every type of faith journey to experience the Athenaeum and let their "souls be touched."

They have seen why this openness is important. Mr. Daufenbach told me a story about a man who came to see





At right: A production of "Dante 360," an adaptation of Dante's "Divine Comedy," at the Athenaeum

"Dante 360." Sitting in the back of the theater, the man could not stop crying during and after the performance. "This is the closest I've come to the pews in 40 years," the man said.

Ms. Ryland is not an artist herself, but she believes her work as general manager at the Athenaeum is deeply meaningful. She has seen the Athenaeum grow through communal dedication and shared belief in its capacity to enrich the Catholic and non-Catholic communities of Chicago. "There are things we can't do as individuals that we can do in community with others," she said, in praise of how the leadership team behind the Athenaeum have worked together.

It is a special thing, she told me, "to work in a place where beauty matters."

A Vocation Worth Supporting

Arthouse2B, the St. Louis IX Art Society, the Athenaeum and St. Gregory's Hall have all emerged in the last decade. The leaders of these groups would say they do not exist *in spite* of difficult circumstances for artists but *because of* them. For many of these artists, following their vocation requires balancing spiritual work with paid opportunities that are less fulfilling. For others, it requires humble dependence on those who are willing and able to patronize the creation of original Catholic art.

It can be difficult to ask for this type of support and patronage. Original artwork takes time and money. As Mr. Coleman emphasized to me, it has never been easier to buy affordable, mass-produced artwork and furniture from online vendors. And tools like generative artificial intelligence now make it possible to create images for parish spaces and church events without paying an artist to create something unique and specific.

But in a world that too often devalues patience, creativity, vulnerability and imperfection, art serves as a reminder that these attributes are still at the heart of what it means to be human, and to be children of God. As Ms. Scarfone put it, "Art reminds us how to *be*." These groups provide everyone, artists and non-artists alike, "a space to belong, and to give that belonging back."

Witnessing these groups and organizations seems to prove her right. People are sitting on the floor of a church basement on a Friday night to watch a priest play a ukulele. They are spending their weekend at the grave of a Catholic author on the grounds of a Benedictine monastery. They are attending art lessons in a church rectory and spending their money to watch a musical about St. Bernadette. As these artists would explain, continuing to keep art alive is not merely a nice idea, but a necessary task.

"Art is not a luxury," Mr. Malham had told me at St. Gregory the Great. "It is a need. Artists are the sustaining life of the church."

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

History, Hope and Evangelization

Our Lady of Guadalupe still has much to teach us

By Timothy Matovina



Catalina Mónica Xuárez de Moisen was a native of Cuautitlán, traditionally considered the hometown of St. Juan Diego. She was reportedly 100 years old in 1666 when church officials from Mexico City interviewed her as part of an inquiry to seek papal recognition and promulgation of a liturgical feast for a popular local religious celebration. Testifying through Nahuatl-Spanish interpreters, she imparted various facets of Native devotion, revealing distinct Indigenous contributions to the local tradition.

That tradition was the veneration of Our Lady of Guadalupe, and the history of the apparition, devotion and eventual widespread popularity of Our Lady of Guadalupe is now inextricably bound up with that of Mexico, North America and indeed the global church.

Xuárez de Moisen recounted that from a young age her parents and aunt had initiated her into the family practice of visiting the Guadalupe chapel at Tepeyac (in present-day Mexico City). This modest chapel was near the site of Our Lady of Guadalupe's reported appearances to Juan Diego, whom she sent to request that Bishop Juan de Zumárraga build a church where she could bestow her love on her children.

Like other witnesses from Cuautitlán, Xuárez de Moisen related her family memory of Indigenous devotees who "asked Juan Diego to intercede for them with [her, who is] the Queen of Heaven and the Mother of God." While members of the clergy had previously proposed Juan Diego as a model of holiness for their Indigenous charges, Cuautitlán witnesses like Xuárez de Moisen were the first to approach Juan Diego as an intercessory figure, one whose connection with Guadalupe made his prayer intentions particularly efficacious.

Xuárez de Moisen spoke of a local devotion that gradually grew among Natives and Spaniards, and subsequently among their mixed-race and *criollo* (a person of Spanish background born in the New World) descendants. By the 1550s, Spanish devotees had developed the practice of Sunday



A man standing in front of a painting of Our Lady of Guadalupe on McKinley Avenue and Gage Avenue in Los Angeles

afternoon visits to the Guadalupe chapel on the outskirts of New Spain's capital of Mexico City (the metropolis has since grown past and around the shrine). One devotee noted that the stream of women and men, the healthy and the infirm, who went to pray, attend Mass and hear sermons at the shrine was so continuous it induced young children to "agitate [their elders] to take them there."

Local Devotion

Residents of the small settlement around the Guadalupe shrine on the hill of Tepeyac some three miles north of the city center were all Indigenous save for the resident chaplain, though devotees of all backgrounds attested to cures and other miracles received through Our Lady of Guadalupe's intercession. Consequently, they propagated the Guadalupe cult through their patronage of new facilities and construction projects at Tepeyac. By the early 17th century, Guadalupe's faithful conducted separate fiesta seasons over successive weeks at Tepeyac, with Native celebrations one week and those of Spaniards, *criollos* and *castas* (those of mixed race) the other.

Significantly, however, during the 16th century, the Guadalupe devotion was a decidedly local one within the environs of Mexico City, a place of numerous shrines and miraculous images that emerged in colonial New Spain. For nearly a century after the traditional date of the Guadalupe apparitions (1531), the central place of worship at the Guadalupe shrine at Tepeyac was an occasionally enhanced but still relatively modest chapel. Moreover, there were no other known churches, altars, convents, schools or institutions named for Our Lady of Guadalupe in nearby Mexico City or beyond.

It was not until the era of Mexican independence, some 300 years after the apparitions, that the veneration of Our Lady of Guadalupe permeated the former territories of New Spain. In broad strokes, the Guadalupe tradition was established locally in Mexico City and the environs during the 16th century and grew to regional prominence in the 17th century. Our Lady of Guadalupe became the patroness of the entire viceroyalty of New Spain in the 18th century, was acclaimed as the national symbol of the newly formed Mexican nation in the 19th century and evolved into the object of international devotion in the 20th and 21st centuries.

Projecting Into the Past

Most devotees and more than a few scholars continue to project the Guadalupe devotion's national and international acclaim back into the 16th century, an anachronism that conflicts with the fact that Guadalupan devotion was then confined to the area around Mexico City. This tempting anachronism distorts our understanding of the Guadalupe tradition.

At stake is not merely the accuracy of the historical record. Examining the theological, ecclesiastical, devotional, political, social and other factors that shaped the rise of Guadalupan devotion from local to global prominence provides an essential roadmap for assessing the meanings of Guadalupe in particular communities and across time and place.

One example of the tendency to project Guadalupe's present impact back into the past can be found in claims about Native conversions to Christianity in the early years of the devotion. The writings of Fray Toribio de Benavente, or Motolinía, one of the original Franciscan "Twelve Apostles" in New Spain, provide the most frequently cited example.

Writing in 1536, just five years after the date for the Guadalupe apparitions, Motolinía estimated that Franciscans had already baptized at least nine million Natives. However, Motolinía's figure is an approximation based on two sets of data: the number of locales where collective baptisms had occurred and the number of Franciscan priests engaged in administering the sacrament of baptism—estimating some 100,000 baptisms per priest. Moreover, the estimate is for the 15-year period from 1521 to 1536, with no clear delineation of how many baptisms occurred after the 1531 date for the Guadalupe apparitions.

Most important, while Motolinía noted that voluntary Native practice of Christianity had recently increased in a time frame that coincided with the 1531 date, particularly in their rejection of polygamy and embrace of Christian marriage, he did not mention Our Lady of Guadalupe as a key factor in Native conversion. Indeed, in his lengthy historical treatise, Motolinía did not mention the Guadalupe apparitions, a chapel dedicated to her at Tepeyac or even Guadalupan devotion.

Historical Record

If the devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe inspired millions of conversions, including entire towns, it is difficult to explain why there is no record of a single

Our Lady of Guadalupe's call to evangelize is scarcely beginning to dawn.

church, altar or reproduction of her image outside of Tepeyac in the rest of the 16th century, nor any recorded recollections of her role in conversions from known sources, especially from Motolinía and other priests who administered the baptisms.

Moreover, the claims of a miraculous concentration of baptisms occlude the fundamental dynamic of Native life in the wake of conquest, which was not mass conversions but instead demographic collapse. While there were certainly impressive numbers of baptisms, sometimes during epidemics when Natives were in grave danger of death, European diseases simultaneously devastated Indigenous populations.

In the case of central Mexico, the most drastic contagion following the arrival of Europeans was an epidemic in 1545-48 that wiped out at least 60 percent of Native residents. A subsequent epidemic in 1576-80 diminished the Nahua population to scarcely 10 percent of their number on the eve of the conquest. For Native peoples, addressing such rampant death was surely one of the core elements of whatever religious faith or rituals they practiced in the aftermath of the Spanish takeover of their civilization.

The Birth of Native Christianity

Our Lady of Guadalupe was undoubtedly a paradoxical figure for Indigenous peoples in colonial society. Even as Native population demographics gradually rebounded beginning in the 17th century, the Guadalupe devotion was a tool with which Spaniards and *criollos* engaged to enhance Native peoples' acceptance of colonial rule and missionary efforts, a protagonist in the Catholic efforts to displace Indigenous ways.

At the same time, Our Lady of Guadalupe was a mother and intercessor invoked by Natives such as Xuárez de Moisen, a brown-skinned woman like them who provided continuity with an ancient Native worship site. She worked miracles that to some extent alleviated the suffering of supplicants amid the devastating effects of conquest and European diseases. From community to community—and even from person to person—Natives adapted Spanish Catholic practices and the symbolic world they mediated in accordance with their own life situations.

Thus, over time, Our Lady of Guadalupe became a central figure in the efforts of Native Catholics to respond with faith to the crisis of their everyday lives. The 16th century is best characterized as an epoch not of majestic Native conversion but instead of the painful birth of Nahua Christianity. Intentionally or not, glamorized portrayals of mass conversions can erase from the Guadalupe tradition the legacy of Native people's faith amid indescribable suffering.



An outdoor mural in South Central Los Angeles

In no way does such a historical analysis of the earliest Guadalupan sources nullify or diminish Guadalupe's importance. On the contrary, recognizing that the devotion began in local communities among those on the peripheries of colonial society underscores the marvelous ways that God's saving love is revealed. Like Jesus' resurrection appearances—his personal encounters with disciples whose proclamation of the Gospel initiated a nascent movement that catalyzed faith across the globe—the foundational Guadalupan encounters with Juan Diego and other early devotees set in motion a living tradition of faith that in time inspired millions.

No Cheap Grace

The strength of the early church was in the radical conversion of the first believers in Christ, many to the point of martyrdom, not in an overwhelming number of conversions. Similarly, Our Lady of Guadalupe transformed the lives of Juan Diego and other devotees. Far from minimizing Guadalupe's impact, understanding her relations with devotees such as Catalina Mónica Xuárez de Moisen illuminates the beauty of her evangelizing presence, both then and now. From those humble origins, Our Lady of Guadalupe kindled the faith of an entire nation. Over time, she did the same beyond Mexico—in the entire hemisphere and the global church.

Yet even a casual observer can see that Our Lady of Guadalupe's hope and her call to evangelize are scarcely beginning to dawn. Some might wonder if in fact we have





Photos for this essay are reprinted from *Our Lady of the Angels: The Virgin of Guadalupe on the Walls of Los Angeles*, by Sam Quinones (Angel City Press at Los Angeles Public Library).

gone backward in the American hemisphere since the Guadalupe tradition began nearly 500 years ago, or even since the death and resurrection of Christ nearly 2,000 years ago. We live in a time of venomous polarization, both in the church and in our nation, and we are facing wars, the ongoing impact of clerical sex abuse, the often-disastrous influences of social media, abortion, capital punishment, poverty, climate change, displaced peoples and a host of other challenges, both collective and personal. This is not a time to offer cheap grace or happily-ever-after piety.

Our Lady of Guadalupe is not a fairy tale of a bygone era of evangelical and ecclesiastical triumph. She is our mother and, in the words of the English translation of the "Salve Regina," "our life, our sweetness, and our hope," just as she was for those first Native devotees in the 16th century.

Guadalupe's hope impels us to evangelizing action. As Pope Francis proclaimed in his 2016 homily at Tepeyac, "On that morning, at that meeting, God awakened the hope of his son Juan, and the hope of a people." Like Juan Diego in his moments of doubt, however, we face "many situations which leave us powerless, which make us feel that there is no room for hope, for change, for transformation." Yet our response must be bold, the pope continued, as he commissioned his hearers to be the Juan Diego harbingers of hope today: "Today, she sends us out anew; as she did Juancito."

Speaking in the name of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Pope Francis urged all her faithful to "Go and build my shrine, help me to lift up the lives of my sons and daughters, who are your brothers and sisters."

Our Lady of Guadalupe simultaneously gives devotees a reason for hope and is a poignant reminder that, as a popular saying goes, *la vida es la lucha* ("life is struggle"). She is hope that we are never abandoned. The drama of Juan Diego and Bishop Juan de Zumárraga reveals a divine plan in which the humanity and dignity of the lowly are restored, injustice is set aright, strangers become friends, enemies are reconciled, evangelization flourishes within local cultures, and the love of a common mother incites mutual respect and harmony.

Yet the countless appeals and cries to her for intercessory help remind us that the final resolution of this drama still needs to be realized in our personal lives, families and communities. Like our Catholic faith itself, Our Lady of Guadalupe is not a magical remedy for all of life's ills. But her maternal love reminds us that we never have to face our travails alone, and that our desolations in this world must always be understood within the horizon of eternity. She enables us to confront the sinfulness of the world as it is with prophetic action and confident hope in the world as it will be in God's saving plan.

A Feast and a Future

Devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe and the celebration of her feast are graced occasions to deepen our faith and our response to the call to conversion and Christian discipleship. As the bishops of Mexico stated in their objective for the nine-year Novena Intercontinental Guadalupana they are leading to prepare for the Guadalupan quincentenary in 2031, we are called to encounter God anew through Holy Mary of Guadalupe and to forge "new pathways in the reconstruction of the social and ecclesial fabric of our peoples and communities."

The objectives of ecclesial renewal, social action and spiritual encounter through Our Lady of Guadalupe are also proclaimed in the recent pastoral plan from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, "One Tilma, One Heart: Walking With Our Lady of Guadalupe in the Footsteps of Saint Juan Diego."

Guadalupan preaching and evangelization do not need to make hyperbolic claims that romanticize Our Lady of Guadalupe and detach her from the messiness of our lives and our world. We will be more faithful to her message if we focus on her encounters with her sons and daughters, beginning with Juan Diego, that transformed them—and transform us—into missionary disciples.

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Putting Consciousness in Its Place

A dispatch from the A.I. wars

By Meghan Sullivan



Just when we thought the news out of Silicon Valley could not get weirder, over the past few months one of the biggest news stories has concerned whether the artificial intelligence products we now run on our computers and smartphones could themselves be conscious.

We can blame Anthropic, which also happens to be one of the most intellectually adventurous and conscientious companies out there. Whereas most major companies release bland and pablum-filled ethical codes written by lawyers and public relations officers, Anthropic has become known for wading deeply into the philosophical questions about what A.I. is and what a good world filled with A.I. might look like. The company has hired teams of philosophers to advise full time on such questions, and it escalated matters dramatically in January when it published the "Claude Constitution"—a thesis-length manifesto about what moral goodness in its signature product, Claude, might look like and how we might achieve it.

One of the most surprising elements of Anthropic's approach is how open-minded the company is on the question of A.I. consciousness. This includes speculating openly about whether A.I. might ever be able to experience emotion or develop its own agency, plans and sense of self.

Christmas came early for those of us who love to think about and debate deep ethical questions. But I suspect all of this public philosophy is a nightmare for folks who are hoping for a smooth and drama-free public stock listing for the company.

Indeed, Anthropic's competitors have been quick to pounce on these philosophical proposals to attempt to counterposition their own products. Mustafa Suleyman, the chief executive of Microsoft AI, published an essay in September arguing that A.I. will never be conscious and that it is dangerous to even entertain this idea. Mr. Suleyman writes: "Consciousness is the foundation of our ethical, legal, and political systems." And if we seriously believed the mental lights might be on in the machine, we would need to radically reorganize our society.

Mr. Suleyman argues that there is no way we would want to reorganize our conceptions of human rights, justice and the order of society to accommodate superintelligent A.I. agents. Therefore we should dial down the rhetoric and speculation about whether they *are* conscious. Mr. Suleyman also expresses a supreme degree of confidence that consciousness is solely biological, apparently solving with ease one of the most significant philosophical puzzles since the Enlightenment: the so-called hard problem of consciousness.

It is called "the hard problem" for a reason. We genuinely do not have a good account of how our minds arise from our bodies. On the one hand, there is some causal connection. When I miss a night of sleep, my mind gets foggy. When my doctor sedates my brain, I lose consciousness. On the other hand, my inner life can survive injuries to my brain. Patients with hydrocephalus, who are missing large portions of their cortex, still report full, coherent inner lives. Split-brain patients, whose hemispheres have been surgically disconnected, raise deep questions about whether we should count them as having one stream of consciousness or two. Dementia patients who have lost decades of memory can still, in a lucid moment, evince a vivid and undeniable sense of self.

If consciousness were just certain biological processes, full stop, cases like these should be far more tidy than they are. But they aren't. That is what makes the problem hard: We have plenty of correlations between brains and minds, but no explanation of why or how physical processes give rise to subjective experience. Philosophers call this "the explanatory gap." The advent of A.I. has not solved these major philosophical questions; it has just brought much more attention to them.

Is consciousness the bedrock of the rest of ethics, as Mr. Suleyman suggests? As a philosopher in the Catholic tradition, I would argue the concept of a person's dignity is far more important. Dignity is a much more expansive foundation for our society than consciousness. In the Catholic tradition, our dignity consists in the fact that we are creatures who have bodies but are more than just hunks of meat. We are capable of emotions, like love. Our minds not only process information, they grasp truth, goodness and beauty, which are objective features of reality.



Kenneth Cheung/iStock

We have consciences in addition to consciousness. We have both freedom and moral responsibility. These features of our lives all depend on the "lights being on," so to speak (i.e., consciousness), but they are so much more than that. And when we think about why A.I. is and must always be treated as a tool and not as a person, it might help to frame the debate in terms of what has dignity rather than just what has neural structure.

This has important implications for how we think about the foundations of ethics in this brave new world. It has been widely noted that many in Silicon Valley are involved in a movement called effective altruism. Effective altruism attempts to systematize all of ethical reasoning around a few very basic assumptions. Ethics, for example, is seen simply as a matter of reducing suffering and promoting happiness. To tell whether something can suffer or experience happiness, you really just need to know whether it is conscious. And all of ethics boils down to attempting to maximize the good experiences of conscious creatures, now and in the future.

The movement is controversial for many reasons. It puts monetary values on lives, for one, and it insists that we should prioritize the many over the few, in particular by prioritizing future generations of people over present ones.

But I would argue the biggest problem with this movement is the way it flattens and reduces human persons to *just* instances of consciousness, not acknowledging that there is so much more to our dignity. When we consider what makes human beings "magnificent" (to quote Pope Leo XIV), it is our embodied lives, our capacity to love, our ability to appreciate the transcendent and our moral consciences that are far more interesting. Indeed, this insight has been at the core of our work with the DELTA Network at the University of Notre Dame.

Many people approach the dawn of the A.I. era with equal parts dread and dizziness. But I now sense a rare opportunity, especially for those of us who like to ask the hard questions about what makes the life of a person so precious. One of the most significant ways we Christians can influence these debates in coming months is to be loud, annoying advocates for the idea that ethics is rooted in the full-blown dignity of humans, not just the dimensions of our neurology that can be compared to software. One of Pope Leo's greatest achievements with "Magnifica Humanitas" is putting the church at the center of these critical ethical discussions.

Many Christians approach the A.I. era with dread. I sense a rare opportunity.

A.I. companies and regulators—not to mention the broader society—need us in the mix now more than ever. It has been "do it yourself" philosophy season for a little bit too long in the frontier A.I. labs. We have let them set the terms of the debate. When many of us say we are unsettled by claims of A.I. consciousness, I don't think we are using the term the same way the companies are.

For most of us, saying something is conscious entails it has an inner life. It has dignity. Not that it is just a system that a biological organism uses to organize stimuli and survive (as Mr. Suleyman identifies it in his essay). None of us looks at a newborn child in our arms and thinks, "Behold, nature has once again spawned an organism with the ability to efficiently organize and respond to stimuli!" For most of us, I would venture, consciousness only matters because we associate it with the much deeper and richer notion of dignity.

This technology is very powerful, very disruptive and—as we have seen in recent months—potentially very dangerous. We need much more sophisticated ethical thinking in and around the A.I. labs.

We have an opportunity to get our ethical priorities in order. We could spend a lot more time in the coming year focusing on the A.I. products, what their new capabilities are, how cool or disruptive they are. Or we can choose instead to prioritize the ways A.I. products alter the dignity of those who use them and live in a society with them. This means thinking about how we uphold the dignity of our work, our educational institutions and our civic life going forward. It means telling more stories about how the poor and vulnerable are living with A.I. and fewer stories perhaps about flashy new applications of the products.

One of the primary meanings of *consciousness*, after all, is awareness. And awareness means having the wisdom to know where to look and how to be affected.

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"However, we must go out to meet them, and with our faith we must create a 'culture of encounter,' a culture of friendship, a culture in which we find brothers and sisters, in which we can also speak with those who think differently, as well as those who hold other beliefs, who do not have the same faith." **Pope Francis, 2013**



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XMAS IN HELL

By Joe Hoover

Would your crèche burn?
Shepherds flee
hay ash
a cow inferno
A bit of a downer-type Xmas
Or like Shadrach would you
still see them there
kid drumming and
cattle lowing
(what is to low?)
Anyway
flames catching nothing
Mary like:
Weird, hell!
But I can do this
And you have too, right?
been in hell join the club
and Xmas still happened
whether you felt it or not
or it seemed like a joke
because they're still
roaming the streets like wolves, right,
sweeping up prey
But he gets born anyway
and eventually
it will get through to you, Xmas
because O Holy Night
is Such a Ridiculous Song
The way it rises and falls and
rises again
Plays even in hell
And in spite of yourself
you love it who doesn't
And reminds us hell
has not the last word
no really has not
because just being born Christ
has won the victory
the wolves will all scatter
he will never
so fall on your knees

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

Andrey Shadrin / buradaki

Lights, Camera, Advent

What writing scripts for Hallmark movies taught me about faith

By John Eliot Jordan



"So, what do you do?"

The no-nonsense nurse asked my wife, Carlie, and me while we waited in the hospital for labor to be induced. We told her we were writers. She nodded. "Anything I've actually seen?" Feeling like I had been transported back to a Los Angeles networking event, I led with a critically acclaimed sitcom I had written on. "Never heard of it," she said, with the tone of a busy studio exec rather than a Massachusetts medical caregiver.

Then Carlie chimed in. "We also write Hallmark movies!" I tensed up. My lifelong need for external validation had already been tested once. Surely a delivery nurse, of all people, knew how fragile first-time fathers could be. I held my breath as the nurse's eyes widened. "You write *Christmas* movies?" Her stern face broke into a grin. "Oh my gosh. I'm the biggest Hallmark fan there is!"

Word spread fast in the delivery ward. Within minutes, two more staff members came in to tell us how much they loved Hallmark. Over the next two days, as we waited for our son's arrival, nurses, midwives, even food delivery staff kept stopping by to share what the movies meant to them. The women were direct about it. "It's how I recharge after a long shift," one nurse told us. The men tended to confess it in a whisper. "My wife loves Hallmark. But, uh, yeah, once in a while I'll watch." One of these guys casually asked for our titles, then recited the plot of one of our most obscure movies in remarkable detail.

You may wonder how hard that could really be. *Aren't Hallmark movies kind of all the same? Two hours of escapism bordering on anesthesia? A story about as deep as the Christmas ice-skating rink where the protagonists share their first kiss?* Over the years I have been asked polite versions of these questions by fellow writers, old classmates at my high school reunion and, most pointedly, by myself as I wrote my first TV romance.

It was nearly a decade ago and I was working at Loyola Productions, the Jesuit production company, by day and writing my own scripts at night. My boss, Eddie Siebert, S.J., graciously vouched for me with a producer who needed a writer for a TV movie on one of Hallmark's smaller competitors. It was not a Christmas movie, but I dove into that first script with sheer Christmas-morning excitement. That excitement, however, quickly transformed into a determination to reinvent the romance formula, certain that audiences would be grateful for my gravitas, wisdom and wit. I proudly turned in an ending more evocative of French existential cinema than happily ever after. The producer was not impressed. "People watch these movies to get away from all the depressing and hopeless crap out there. Don't let them down."

I had moved to Los Angeles believing God had called me to write screenplays that would have a lasting impact. Naturally, I assumed that meant writing an HBO dramedy with equal parts laughter and darkness, not a romance about a reality TV star finding love in Amish country. But I had (just enough) humility to remember how lucky I was to have a screenwriting job at all. So I rewrote the ending, making it happy with a capital H.

Shortly before the movie aired, I visited my college mentor, John Spencer, S.J., and the Jesuits he lived with in Boston. Over Rob Roys, they asked about the movie. I feigned uncertainty about the airdate, certain the sophisticated sons of Ignatius would deny ever knowing me if they saw my Amish romance.

After dinner, John took me aside and asked why I had been evading their questions. Annoyed that I hadn't fooled anyone, I quoted back to this wise Jesuit all the Ignatian


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lessons about vocation I had learned at Boston College, arguing there was no way this movie was the lasting impact God had in mind when he called me to be a writer. John listened with what I now see was angelic patience.

"How long is your script?" he asked.

"A hundred and five pages," I said.

"A hundred and five pages," he repeated. "And you're sure God couldn't find his way into a single one?"

Despite all my gravitas, wisdom and wit, I had remarkably little to say in response.

Not long after it aired, I was in an Uber in Los Angeles and had a driver who treated me more like family than a transaction, showering me with bottled water and mints. She had a couple of family photos of her husband and sons taped to the glove compartment and started telling me about her life. She mentioned how in her spare time she had recently taken to watching romance movies. "My sons tease me about it, but those movies make me feel good," she said.

I told her I had written one, and to my surprise, she had seen it. She caught my eye in the rearview mirror. "Thank you," she said. "Your story made me feel like love was actually possible again."

I double-checked that she was indeed talking about my

> **I have met so many people who turn to these movies when life gets hard.**

Amish romance. She insisted good love stories are universal. Then she told me she was a widow. I don't remember what I said back, just the lump in my very humbled throat. I had been so sure what I had written would not matter to anyone. I had been waiting so intently for God's plan for me to begin that I had nearly missed the fact that it already had.

After that Uber ride, I found myself thanking God for not allowing my French existential ending to get approved. I still dreamed of writing that HBO dramedy someday, but here I was with an actual writing credit in a genre I had never considered. I had a choice to make, and I said yes to the path God had put in front of me. That meant setting my sights on the North Pole of TV movies: Hallmark.

A little over a year and many pitches later, Hallmark hired me to write my first Christmas movie. This time I brought curiosity and humility instead of hubris. I got a crash course in the nine-act Hallmark story structure, learning which beats viewers expect and where you can experiment with something new. What people call the Hallmark formula was far harder to master than I expected.

Nine acts means eight commercial breaks, and each one needs a cliffhanger strong enough to keep the viewer from changing the channel. On another network, an act might end with a gunshot, the discovery of an affair or the protagonist jumping into bed with someone. Hallmark writers don't get those shortcuts. My job was to build eight equally compelling cliffhangers out of a Christmas Eve wedding whose planner had just quit. Making it slightly more challenging was the fact that viewers already knew how the movie would end.

But I came to realize that the guaranteed happy ending I once looked down on is actually the whole point. Viewers are not wondering whether the heroine will find love, only how. She can't get there, though, without an "all is lost" moment of darkness (admittedly, Hallmark's version never gets *too* dark). It might be a bakery facing closure, an ex-fiancé coming back to town or a carefully planned Christmas celebration falling apart. Whatever it is, having finally opened her heart, she wonders for a moment whether love will win after all. But the audience does not panic. From the couch, they can see what she cannot, and they settle in,



A scene from the Hallmark Christmas film "Following Yonder Star," co-written by John Eliot Jordan and Carlie Mantilla-Jordan



A scene from the Hallmark Christmas film "Meet Me at Christmas," written by John Eliot Jordan

trusting that the darkness will not overcome the light.

I have met so many people who turn to these movies when life gets hard. Some are grieving, some are yearning for love, and some just need a break and enjoy predicting the plot with friends over a bottle of wine. The trust they place in a happy ending is one of the things I love most about writing them, and it has been on my mind as we enter Advent. In my own life, I have been more like those Hallmark heroines than the audience watching them. When a dark night comes, my first instinct is to assume it is permanent. Advent reminds me to wait in the dark like that trusting audience, for a light I know is coming.

The summer our son was born, I needed that reminder long before December.

Which brings me back to the hospital. Carlie's labor went extremely well, and not just because she was treated like she was Lacey Chabert. When our son Julian was born, we both felt a kind of joy we never knew was possible. But a week after his birth, we were at the pediatrician's office when Carlie, who had not been feeling well, started shivering, though it was the middle of summer. The doctor took one look at her suddenly blue lips and called an ambulance. Back at the hospital, we learned she had sepsis. She was separated from our newborn while the doctors treated the infection.

Days passed, and Carlie barely improved. I rushed between her bedside and our newborn at home and felt I was failing on both counts. One evening, as Carlie slept, I went to the hospital chapel and admitted to God that I feared this dark night would be permanent. I did not know how our story would end, and the writer in me had already drafted about 19 terrible versions of its conclusion. So I asked God for the grace to lay down my pen and just wait. Could I trust God to write the ending instead of me?

Light broke after six days, when Carlie was finally well enough to come home. Our own Advent ended the way every Advent does, with a mother and her newborn. As I watched Carlie hold Julian in her arms, whatever was left of the young writer so set on unhappy endings disappeared. I felt a profound gratitude to get to write the other kind, the ones that remind people love always has the last word.

A week later, we went back to the pediatrician's office to thank them for rushing Carlie to the hospital. "So, what do you do?" a nurse asked. This time, I didn't lead with the critically acclaimed sitcom. I smiled and told her, "We write Hallmark movies."

John Eliot Jordan *is a writer and director whose projects have appeared on Netflix, Hallmark and Amazon. He is the co-author, with his wife, Carlie Mantilla-Jordan, of the forthcoming book* Journey to Forever.



Yuliya Shavyra

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Blessed Baking

The Catholic history of our favorite Christmas cookies

By Molly Wysocki



I am a Christmas cookie lover. My family is a family of Christmas cookie lovers. Ask me about our annual Cookie Baking Day, and I will happily offer the details of our extensive (and intensive) exchange: one day, about 10 hours. The Decorating Team (my cousins, my sister and me) and the Baking Team (my mom and my aunt). German *mandelhörnchen*, Aunt Sue's pecan crescents, gluten-free chocolate peppermint brownies, shortbread, gingerbread, buckeyes and about 150 cutout sugar cookies, baked, decorated, packed, distributed and shared widely with all my relatives. It's quite the day.

As a cookie aficionado, a Catholic and a journalist, I couldn't think of any better way to enter the Christmas season than to explore the religious history of a sampling of Christmas cookies, specifically the *pizzella, lebkuchen* and *speculoos*. I specify these now in case you'd like to accompany your reading with a sweet snack. (As for us at **America**, we will have a taste test of each at our office Christmas party.)

Let's start at the beginning. The oldest cookie recipe still made today is thought to be the Italian *pizzella* (pluralized as *pizzelle*). Originally created by monks in Cocullo in the Abruzzo region of Italy, the crisp Abruzzese cookie is traditionally tied to St. Dominic of Sora, who is the inspiration for the Festa dei Serpari ("Festival of the Snake Catchers"), celebrated annually on May 1.

Legend has it that the town of Cocullo was overrun by snakes, but Dominic, an Italian Benedictine monk, saved the day and miraculously rendered them harmless, so villagers baked these cookies to celebrate. (Dominic of Sora is now the patron saint of snake bites, rabies and toothaches. What a combo!) The cookie is made of simple ingredients—just flour, milk, oil, eggs, sugar and flavoring, which is classically anise, but vanilla, almond, lemon and chocolate have become popular over the years—and is traditionally baked in an intricately designed waffle press. The result is a light, thin, subtly flavored cookie, perfect to be enjoyed by itself or paired with an espresso.

So what distinguishes the pizzella as a Christmas cookie? The cookie's snowflake-like shape and the light dusting of powdered sugar that typically covers the top bring to mind cozy winter scenes and childhood snow days, lending itself well to accompany Christmas festivities. The pizzella has also historically functioned as an edible ornament—the cookies are strung on trees en masse in Abruzzo to celebrate the feast day of Blessed Roberto da Salle, which occurs in July, but hey, Christmas in July should also count!

The German *lebkuchen* has a more meandering origin story. The first honey-spiced, lebkuchen-like cakes originated in Dinant, Belgium, in the Middle Ages, but the modern lebkuchen traces its roots back to monasteries in the Franconia region of Germany. The monasteries were situated along active spice trade routes, giving the monks easy access to the cookie's central ingredients: cinnamon, allspice, nutmeg, citron and lots of honey.

In the early stages of their recipe testing, the monks quickly ran into a problem: The flourless dough consistently stuck to the baking trays and burned. Of course, this didn't deter them. They devised the genius idea to press unconsecrated communion wafers, called *oblaten*, into the bottom of the cookies, giving them a nonstick yet edible base. This technique not only prevented the cookies from charring but also served as a source of spiritual symbolism: Their faith, the foundation of their lives as monks, was also the foundation of their Christmas treats. The innovative, crunchy base ultimately lent itself to the cookie's naming. *Lebkuchen* originates from the Latin *libum*, a flat, bread-like cake, offered sacrificially in ancient Rome.

Many of the same warm spices used to make lebkuchen in Germany were also used in the production of the first *speculaas* (as they were originally known) of the 17th century. The spices were much more expensive to purchase in Belgium, though, so Belgian bakers later created *speculoos*—the suffix *loos* meaning "without." The new recipe



The pizzella is a popular Christmas cookie thanks to its snowflake-like shape and the light dusting of powdered sugar.



The modern lebkuchen traces its roots back to monasteries in the Franconia region of Germany.

iStock/A_Lein

altered the original to center the rich flavor of caramelized sugar, a cheaper alternative to nutmeg, ginger or cardamom.

The Biscoff cookie butter craze of 2015 may have launched *speculoos* into the spotlight, but the national biscuit of Belgium has ancient ties to Christianity. Traditionally shaped into the figure of *Sinterklaas*, speculoos are typically enjoyed on the feast day of St. Nicholas, the Greek Christian bishop attendee at the First Council of Nicaea, who is said to have generously tipped three sacks of gold into the stockings of the daughters of a poor man in the fourth century, thus providing the young women with dowries and inspiring the character we know as Santa Claus. Unfortunately, gold isn't the easiest thing to come by these days, so speculoos cookies and clementines stand in to preserve the sweet surprise of a visit from St. Nicholas.

Derived from the Latin *speculum*, meaning "mirror," the crispy speculoos cookie historically displayed the intricate design of St. Nicholas etched into the molds they were pressed in. But those days are mostly in the rearview mirror. Nowadays, most of the speculoos cookies in the aisles of grocery stores bear the Lotus logo, the brand behind the cookie's worldwide popularity, in place of an image of St. Nick (though a few bakeries still preserve the original look). The public's understanding of the cookie's ties to St. Nicholas may also be undermined by its popularity as an airline treat eaten at all hours by hungry customers. (Delta Air Lines brought the cookie aboard as its signature snack in 1984.) The next time you mindlessly snack on one of these treats in the skies, remind yourself of the cookie's storied history.



iStock/eyewave

Traditionally shaped into the figure of Sinterklaas, speculoos are often enjoyed on the Feast Day of St. Nicholas.

Pizzelle, lebkuchen and speculoos—looks like we have ourselves a nice plate of Christmas cookies. Maybe these cookies are part of your yearly exchange, or maybe you learned about some of them for the first time today. Hopefully, you have some inspiration for your next cookie exchange, plus a few fun facts to share with those at your table. Happy baking!

Molly Wysocki *is an O'Hare fellow at America Media.*



How Did He Do It?

By Christopher Sandford

Harry Houdini made his final escape on Halloween 1926. There was no encore.

Looking back 100 years after he died on Oct. 31 of that year, what should we make of him and his signature escape routines today?

Considerable ink has been spilled—much of it fruitlessly—portraying Houdini's escape act as somehow symbolizing the peculiar desire of the common man from around the turn of the 20th century to slip the yoke of his servitude to society's ruling caste. According to this reading, the magician's feats of self-liberation from the restraints of handcuffs, chains and prison cells resonated powerfully with working-class immigrants to the United States (like himself) who felt trapped by economic and social barriers in their daily lives. His escapes thus stand as potent symbols of self-determination, hope and, above all, resistance to authority—from policemen to wealthy elites.

Like his near-contemporary Charlie Chaplin in his Tramp persona, Houdini was—in this reading—a universal "little man" with whom ordinary people around the world could identify. Implicit in both individuals' performance is the proposition that life may be hard, but one must never surrender or despair, thus anticipating the self-empowerment ethos of our own age.


The Protected Art Archive/Alamy

What Houdini offered was pure entertainment: a beleaguered but indomitable spirit at work.

I have to say I remain unconvinced.

It's almost always a mistake to try to retrofit a particular historical figure, or to assemble random historical facts, into a neatly unified pattern that few people would have recognized at the time. Such judgments are generally possible only with the benefit of hindsight. Few people confronted with the individual pieces of the jigsaw puzzle can picture the completed image. So we can surely treat with skepticism the idea that many potential audience members of the years 1900-26 elected to leave their homes and board the trolley car for their local opera house or civic auditorium in order to watch Houdini in action because of his supposed allegorical insights into their culture.

Playing to the Crowd

What Houdini offered, of course, was pure entertainment: a beleaguered but indomitable spirit at work, along with an innate sense of stagecraft. Like every truly successful public performer, Houdini was well versed in the props of his profession, which, in his case, included a thudding, "Jaws"-like accompanying musical repertoire (in which he often personally participated) to signal the unfolding drama of the occasion.

But the instrument he really played best was his audience. Scantily clad female or garishly uniformed male assistants abounded on stage as the actual escape acts progressed, darting hither and thither like shoals of tropical fish. Anyone familiar with the numbing combination of blinding lights and amplified music redolent of today's typical rock concert need only think of that same experience, but with the added spectacle of actual life-threatening peril, to get some of the flavor.

Nor was Houdini ever a martyr to false modesty or backward when it came to separating the public from its money. When the prolonged shock of World War I turned popular taste away from escapology and toward the occult promise of reuniting the bereaved with their lost loved ones, he again shrewdly read the runes and incorporated a spiritualist component into his program—first in the form of a straightforward demonstration of the supernatural, and then in debunking those he saw as its obvious charlatans. He had known too many of the latter in their former guises as fellow vaudeville performers to take their purported newfound psychic powers seriously.

In time, there were also excursions into the world of books and the cinema. When, in 1919, Houdini mass-produced his autograph for sale on a publicity still that apparently showed him clinging for dear life to the wing of a biplane as part of a barnstorming film called "The Grim Game," he added the inscription: "About 4000 feet in the air." This was a slight exaggeration, as the photo in question had been taken on the ground.

In fact, Houdini played an often overlooked but significant part in the early development of the motion picture business as a whole. This was an era when magicians were driving cinema innovation with their cheerful little "trick flicks" screened as part of a live act: films that made use of then-novel editing techniques such as multiple exposures, cuts and dissolves, which made images appear to vanish or suddenly to be transformed into something or someone else. Houdini always had an eye trained on his future opportunities as a performer. Apart from "The Grim Game," he was the leading man in an adventure serial called "The Master Mystery" (1918-19) and a number of sensational melodrama features: "Terror Island" (1920), "The Man From Beyond" (1922) and "Haldane of the Secret Service" (1923).

The man of talent who longs to be acclaimed for something else is a recurring and often quite endearing figure in the arts. I think it a fair bet that, had he been granted a longer life, Houdini would have increasingly devoted himself to a career both as an actor and as an author as his physical energies inevitably waned.

Both in his film career and in his latter-day debunking of mediums and clairvoyants, Houdini saw an opportunity to extend a public career that might otherwise have come to a natural end—and indeed did end—in middle age. But he also came to give prominence to something else: a declaration of his Jewish faith. At a time when many of his audiences chose the more secular path epitomized by the clairvoyants, psychics and other seers claiming to master

> The instrument Houdini really played best was his audience.

the powers of the occult, Houdini's core proposition took the opposite trajectory.

In many ways, he was an archetype not only of the hardworking immigrant characteristic of his day, but also of the Jewish American experience as a whole. Perhaps it's not descending too far into the briar-patch of psychology to suggest that he would become the ultimate symbol of strength to the Jewish community and yet never entirely escape the shackles of antisemitism. Many of Houdini's contemporary critics resorted to the crudest form of bigotry, and even in death, he could be said to have encountered a strain of religious prejudice. When Houdini's beloved wife, Bess, followed him to the grave in 1943, her family refused to allow her to be interred with her husband in his tomb at Machpelah Cemetery, the Jewish cemetery in Queens, N.Y., as she had asked, because she was raised a Roman Catholic.

True Life

For the record, Harry Houdini was not in fact born in Appleton, Wis., on April 6, 1874. The date and place were almost universally accepted during his lifetime, and perhaps form an appropriately false trail for a career dedicated to the art of illusion. He certainly never went out of his way to correct the misconception, which arose from a combination of clerical error and his own reluctance to dwell on his immigrant past. On the day he fell fatally ill in October 1926, he signed a sketch of himself with the inscription "b April 6 '74, Appleton, Wisc," and those details duly appear on his death certificate, filed just over a week later.

Houdini wasn't his real name, of course. He was born Erik Weisz on March 24, 1874, in the family home in the Rákosárok district of Budapest, to the fitfully employed Mayer Weisz and his wife, Cecilia. In 1876, the 47-year-old Mayer took the train from Budapest to Hamburg and from there sailed to a new life in America. Cecilia, their four young sons and a 14-year-old son, Herman, from a previous marriage, would join him there in July 1878, eventually settling in the mill town of Appleton, 100 miles north of Milwaukee.

Mayer, engaged as the town's first and then only practicing rabbi, was no more materially successful in his new life than his old one. In 1882, the Weisz family became American citizens, prompting Mayer to write back to friends in Budapest noting proudly that he had learned "to sit up, then to crawl, and finally to walk unassisted" in the New World.

The assessment was premature. Within six months, he had lost his job, apparently too old at 53 to fulfill the needs of the town's small Jewish community. In December 1882, Mayer took Cecilia and their now seven children to live in Milwaukee, where he conducted a few impromptu services but failed to excite any interest among the city's five established synagogues. The records show that the family was soon forced to appeal to the Milwaukee Hebrew Relief Society for coal to see them through the winter.

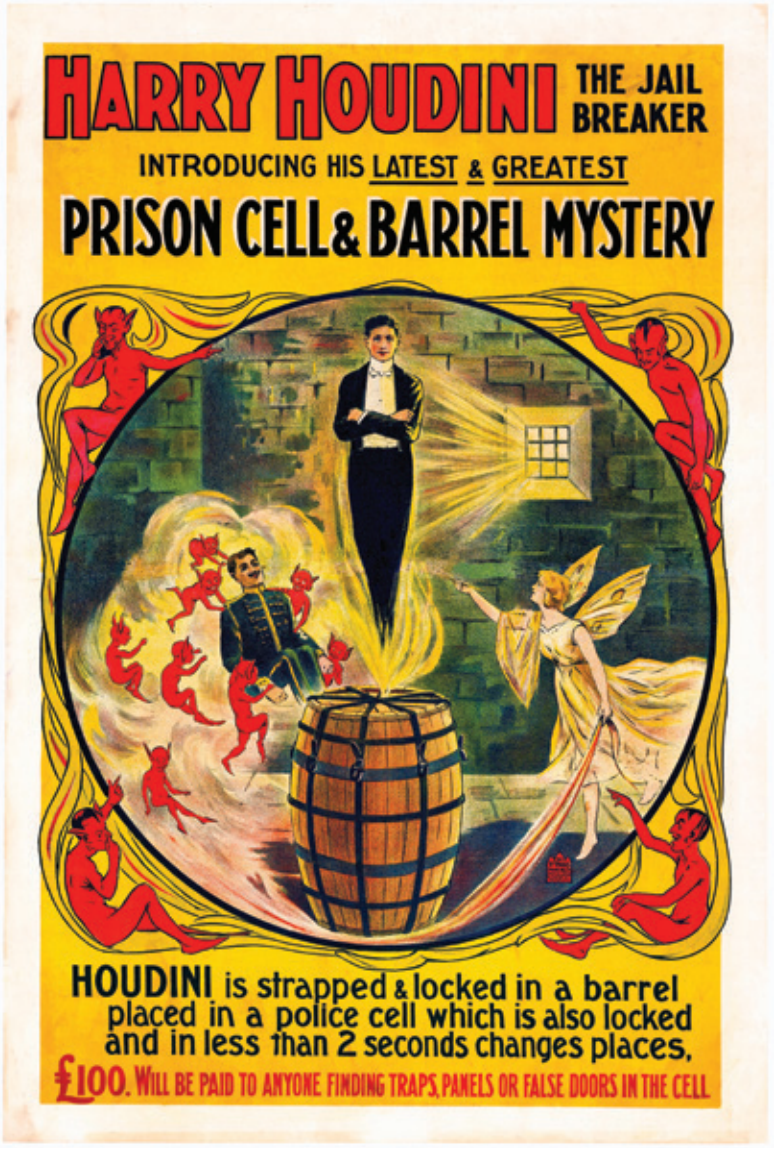
A Star Is Born

Legend insists that Houdini opened his first lock at the age of 6 while in pursuit of a piece of pie secured in his mother's kitchen cupboard. One afternoon in October 1883, when he was 9, he earned 35 cents by making his debut as a trapeze artist called the Prince of the Air in a Milwaukee circus. He went on to appropriate the name of the pioneering French magician Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin.

When Mayer Weisz died in October 1892 after cancer surgery, the 18-year-old Harry took his mother aside and tearfully promised her that one day he would shower her in gold, "even if it takes 10 years or more." Actually, it took only five. In March 1897, Houdini presented himself at a police station in suburban Boston and challenged the amused desk sergeant to slap his best pair of handcuffs on him. The reports of what happened next vary, but all parties agree on the essential fact that Houdini retired to a corner and returned between one and five minutes later, a free man. Having had the foresight to invite the press, he could not have asked for better coverage than that which appeared in the following morning's Boston Daily Advertiser, which called him the King of Handcuffs.

How did he do it? As is related in several biographies of Houdini, a locksmith named Charles Cortney remarked that it was largely a matter of "diligent homework." Houdini, with whom he had worked, "had a remarkable knowledge of locks and other devices." In other words, he knew just where and how to apply the steel pick he generally secreted in his hair, between his toes or elsewhere on his body. Sometimes he equipped himself with an artificial sixth finger attached to one hand, which also acted as a discreet hiding place. Nor was he above offering the occasional bribe to a policeman or other confidant. ("Superintendent Hoy again to hand," he wrote of one Scotland Yard officer, while on a tour of Britain. "Very touching man. Touched me for Five Quid.")

As several newspapers remarked when praising his good manners, Houdini invariably paused before attempt-



Phil Cardamone/Alamy

ing an escape to shake the hands of the assembled witnesses, which, as well as being sporting on his part, would have allowed an accomplice to palm him a key. Some of the milk cans, crates and other containers in which he was confined were later found to be gimmicked with false panels or some other means of egress. When Houdini called for volunteers to come on stage and tie him up, The London Times wrote, "He took care to first expand his chest, [which] he could do to an abnormal degree, without ever seeming to alert the audience." When the volunteers retired, he would shrink back to normal size and wriggle free from the now-slack restraints.

Alongside practice, dexterity and brute physical force, there were also elements of the performance that to this day defy any rational explanation. No less a judge than Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes, never quite knew what to make of Houdini's act after he first witnessed it on the London stage in April 1920. Three months later, the creator of the world's most famously rational detective publicly announced that this "God-given performer" possessed a "dematerialising and reconstructing force [that] could separate the molecules" of any solid object toward which it was directed. "My dear chap," he later wrote to Houdini in a letter that is now in Conan Doyle's archives at Cambridge University, "Why go around the world seeking a demonstration of the occult when you are giving one all the time? Mrs. Guppy [a Victorian mesmerist] could dematerialise, and so could many people in Holy Writ, and I do honestly believe that you can also."

"Such a gift is not given to one man in a hundred million," he concluded, "that he should amuse the multitude or amass a fortune."

Competitors and Antagonists

Time and again, Houdini's own diaries speak of his revulsion at the "so-called miracle workers, augurs and diviners" whom he believed to be a lower class of humanity than that of the highway robber—"at least the latter had the grace to prey upon his victims in broad daylight," he remarked. Over time, his mission to expose such charlatans strained his friendship with Conan Doyle to its breaking point.

In June 1922, the two men attended a séance in the Ambassador Hotel in Atlantic City at which Doyle's second wife, Jean—a medium who claimed to be adept at the art of automatic writing—scribbled out a 15-page message supposedly from Houdini's beloved mother Cecilia, who had died nine years earlier. As a report from the afterlife, it was only partly convincing. Although Houdini held his tongue at the time, he privately concluded that Jean was not a true medium. His Jewish mother would never have drawn the sign of the cross atop each page of a message to her son; nor did it strike him as likely she would have chosen to communicate in fluent English, a language she had never spoken.

Somehow inevitably, in time Houdini's crusade brought with it an antisemitic backlash. Unappreciative comments were made about him on the floor of the U.S. Senate. These paled in comparison to some of the abuse apparently channeled from departed spirits at séances, many of whom, perhaps taking advantage of the anonymity afforded them, abandoned the pretense of civility and depicted Houdini in the most ribald terms.

It has even been said that the spirit of mutual hostility

Nothing in Houdini's life became him like the leaving of it.

with the psychic community ultimately led to Houdini's death, which was supposedly brought about when a series of muscular young men in the pay of the spiritualist camp followed him about while he undertook a theatrical engagement in Montreal. One of their number, a local postgraduate student by the name of Jocelyn Whitehead, quoting the magician's own boast that he could withstand any blow without pain, suddenly struck him with sufficient force to rupture his already inflamed appendix, which induced a fatal case of peritonitis.

Despite some continuing internet-based speculation, there is no evidence that Whitehead was in fact acting as part of a larger conspiracy, nor that he was anything more than the unwitting agent of Houdini's death, as both the Montreal police and the New York Life insurance company concluded at the time. The victim in this case was 52, in poor overall health, and the treatment for his condition in those pre-penicillin days was both crude and generally ineffective.

Reckoning

Whatever the precise cause, it seems fair to say that nothing in Houdini's life became him like the leaving of it. Eventually confined at Grace Hospital in Detroit, he suffered grievously during his final week. Despite this, he roused himself sufficiently to fire off a series of encouraging cables to friends and admirers around the world, including one that remarked evenly: "I am not feeling at my best just now" but insisting, "I will get over this waviness in no time."

As his condition worsened, however, he gave his wife elaborate instructions as to how to attempt to contact him in the afterlife and finally looked up to quietly tell his younger brother Theo, "I guess I'm all through fighting." They were his last words. Houdini died later that day of what the doctors called "Diffuse peritonitis [with] complications," much the same condition that had carried away another immigrant entertainer who had spectacularly made his name in America, Rudolph Valentino, just 10 weeks earlier.

Seeming to fulfill at least one part of a recent prediction made about him from the stage of a well-publicized spiritualist rally at New York's Madison Square Garden, Houdini's own time of death was recorded as 1:26 p.m. on Sunday, Oct. 31, 1926—Halloween. Exactly a decade later, Bess finally abandoned her attempts to reach her husband from beyond the grave. "Ten years is long enough to wait for any man," she remarked.

Which returns us to the question: Who, in fact, was the self-invented character known as Harry Houdini? A powerful human symbol of the working man's eternal desire to slip the bonds of his servitude to society's elite? Possibly. An ambitious and resourceful immigrant child who quickly absorbed the lessons he learned of what it took to separate the American public from their money? Almost certainly. A peerless showman prepared to subject himself to extreme physical discomfort, and on occasion mortal peril, in order to entertain his audience? Definitely.

Houdini was, at different times and to varying degrees, all of these things and more. I continue to think of him as the ultimate "spiritualist," in the sense both of his perpetual search for the true meaning of life and of the quiet dignity with which he left it 100 years ago this Halloween. Now that all the drama and clatter and musical crescendos that punctuated his most famous performances have died down, there is only a faint rhythmical sound ruffling the horizon in his wake. It is the sound of Houdini's numerous successors and imitators counting the returns at their respective box offices around the world.

Christopher Sandford *is the author of* Masters of Mystery: The Strange Friendship of Arthur Conan Doyle and Harry Houdini.

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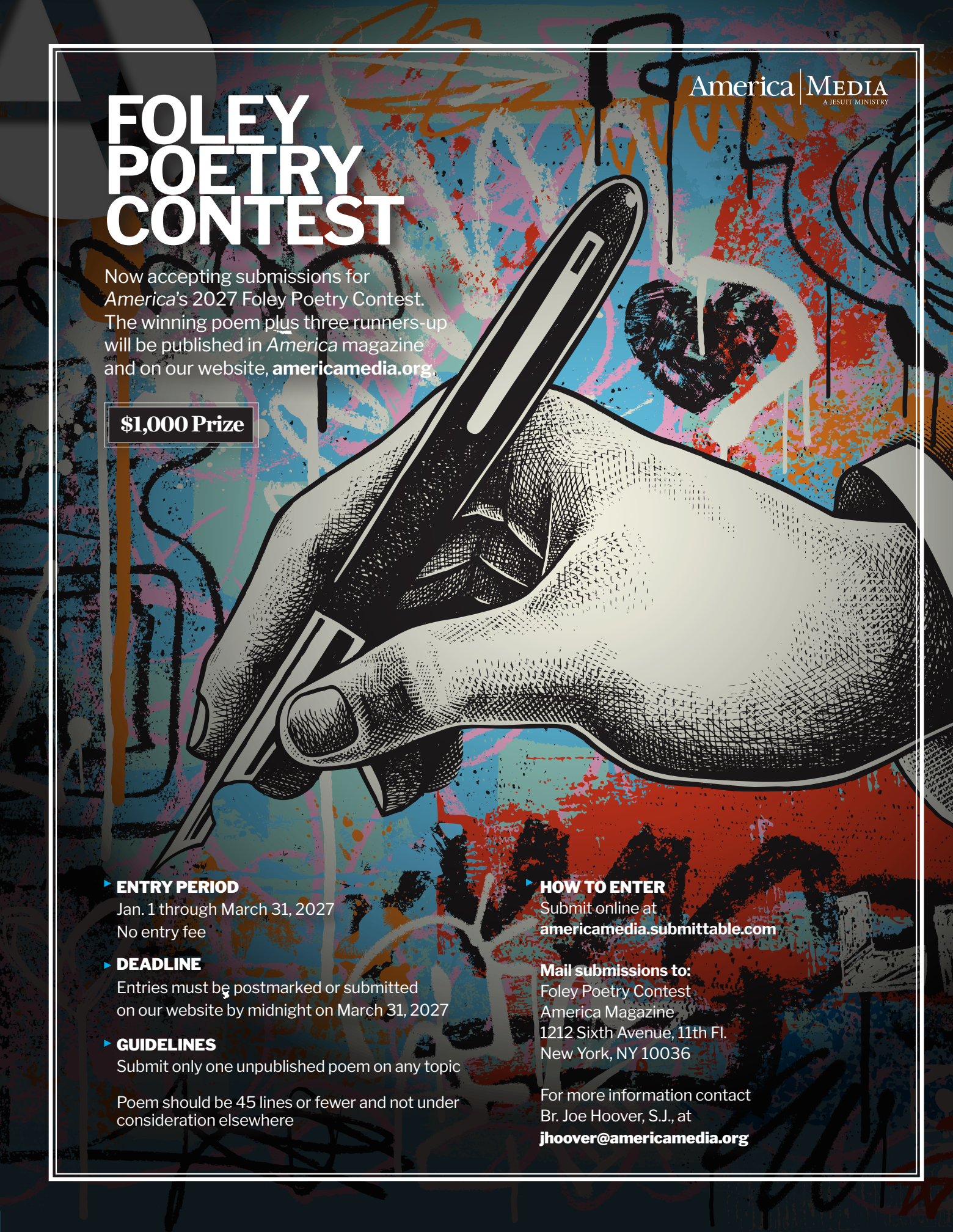
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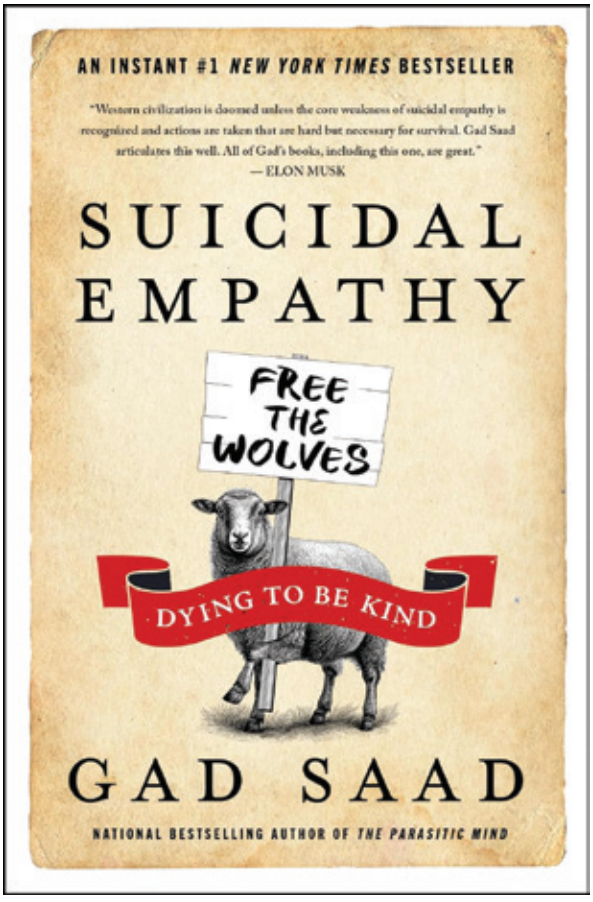
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The term *empathy* is a relatively new addition to our moral lexicon. There is no interdisciplinary consensus about what it means, but it is often characterized as coming in two forms: emotional (knowing how another person is feeling) and cognitive (understanding how another person is thinking). Some writers prefer the concept of empathy as a replacement for older, more religiously loaded terms like *love*, *charity*, *mercy* and *compassion*.

Frequent appeals to empathy by well-meaning progressive public figures like Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama have occasioned a political backlash from both the secular and the Christian right. Allie Beth Stuckey, the Calvinist Christian author, popularized the phrase "toxic empathy," and our Catholic vice president, JD Vance, urges us to focus our empathy on loved ones and neighbors.

It is in this milieu that Gad Saad's new book, *Suicidal Empathy: Dying to Be Kind*, has become a bestseller.

Saad was trained as an evolutionary behavioral scientist and works as a professor of marketing at the University of Mississippi. The civil war in Lebanon in the 1970s forced his Jewish family to flee their homeland. They found safety in Montreal, where Saad received his undergraduate degree before attending Cornell University for his doctorate. His special area of research focuses on how hormones influence, and are influenced by, consumer behavior.

The book is largely a jeremiad against what its author perceives to be the destruction of Western civilization at the hands of naïve do-gooders who regard empathy as the paramount moral value. Saad is not against empathy across the board. He acknowledges that it allows us to develop relatively stable pair bonds, maintain wider cooperative affiliations within communities and, within that context, engage in mutually beneficial forms of reciprocal altruism. While depicting empathy as a "noble and evolutionarily selected virtue, a central feature of our humanity given that we are a deeply social species," he thinks we have gotten far too carried away.

Saad's book offers a secular analogue to prophetic indictment: "I hope that this book...will awaken people from their stupor." The first seven chapters of the book offer his diagnosis of empathy as the "disease" that is destroying Western civilization; his final chapter offers his proposed (and rather underwhelming) "cure": We should cultivate disciplined and properly directed empathy and base policy on a rational analysis of outcomes rather than on how people feel.

Saad blames misplaced empathy for the homelessness crisis, irresponsible journalism, the suppression of free speech on college campuses, the "feminization of the West," rampant cultural relativism, family dissolution, communism, the welfare state, weakening the military, escalating "parasitic taxation" and apparently every other item in his catalog of social evils.

His prime example of suicidal empathy is the West's willingness to accept refugees and immigrants from predominantly Muslim cultures that do not accept the basic tenets of rights-based Western liberal democracies. Saad's perspective is shaped by the fact that his parents went through a harrowing ordeal when they were abducted by Islamic militants in Lebanon. He is deeply convinced that Islam at its core (and not just Islamic extremism) is incompatible with Western values.

Rather than assimilate, he holds, Muslim immigrants seek not only to dwell in their own self-enclosed communities but also to undermine the bedrock moral and political principles of the very Western democracies that welcome them. In support of this claim, he cherry-picks stories of violent crimes by immigrants, while ignoring the fact that the vast majority of Muslims both in the United States and in Europe live peacefully.

While not entirely opposed to empathy, Saad wants to

rein it in. Rather than make policy decisions from pro-social emotional impulse, we should be rationally weighing long-term costs and benefits of various courses of action. But rather than promoting a utilitarian concern for the greatest good of the greatest number of people, he wants every individual to pursue his or her self-interest. He describes himself as a "classical liberal" informed by evolutionary science, but Saad's promotion of free markets and his disdain for the welfare state might remind readers of a light version of the libertarian Robert Nozick. His rejection of out-group empathy as running against the grain of human nature might evoke memories of Ayn Rand.

Some of *Suicidal Empathy* is just common sense. Yes, distorted empathy is sometimes used to justify misguided diversity, equity and inclusion policies, the coddling of teenagers, and the valorization of victimhood. But distortions do not gainsay the value of empathy, properly understood. As my Jesuit high school Latin teacher never tired of reminding us, *abusus non tollit usum*: The abuse of something does not prohibit its proper use.

The limitations of empathy as a source of moral guidance are well known. It tends to be subject to familiarity bias, shallow in scope, situation-specific and mood-dependent; empathic burnout can be a cause of compassion fatigue. It is naturally extended to friends and others with whom we share social bonds but ill-suited as a response to huge numbers of destitute or desperate strangers.

St. Thomas Aquinas would note that the proper formation of our capacities for empathy must be accompanied by the cultivation of a host of other virtues like courage, temperance, justice and practical wisdom. He understood that helping others must be done judiciously and in ways that do not neglect our primary moral obligations to our "nearest and dearest." He would agree with Saad's claim that "empathy should be applied in the right measure, to the right people, at the right time." Ethical responsibilities are disciplined by our finitude: "in a world of fixed monetary resources, empathy must be deployed in a strategically discriminating manner."

Misreading Christian Compassion

The key issue, though, concerns the moral standards we ought to employ when making assessments about how to allocate resources. In theory, we can miss the mark either by caring too much or by not caring enough about people in situations of dire need and persistent deprivation. The parable of Lazarus and the rich man (Lk 16:19-31), however, suggests indifference toward the poor is a much bigger problem than is promiscuous empathy. The Gospels offer plenty of warnings about greed, exploitation and tribalism but not one about runaway compassion.



Saad describes himself as a 'classical liberal' informed by evolutionary science.

Suicidal Empathy suffers from other significant defects. One has to do with Saad's utter lack of interest in providing clear, well-informed definitions for concepts like social justice, the welfare state and virtue. He claims, for example, that suicidal empathy is "driven by misplaced existential guilt" but neither explains what he means by this phrase nor distinguishes it from more familiar concepts, like moral guilt and shame. Strangely for someone who claims to be informed by science, he offers no empirical evidence for his claim that a single dominant factor—misplaced empathy—lies behind virtually all our social ills. Even the title of the book is muddled and confusing, calculated to jolt more than to inform readers of its content. Vastly complex, large-scale processes that contribute to cultural and social deterioration have nothing in common with suicide, the deliberate taking of one's own life.

Second, Saad's polemical agenda tends to be focused on knocking down straw men. For example, he writes: "The inability to recognize that all immigrants are not equally likely to be a net benefit to a host society defies the realm of human imbecility." But who would deny that? Saad's exaggerations are aggravated by his tendency to trade in false dichotomies, as when he proclaims: "Academia should not be about the celebration, elevation, and care of the 'marginalized' voices. It should always be about the pursuit of truth." It does not seem to have occurred to him that paying attention to people who have been oppressed and silenced is itself a way of pursuing truths that had long been neglected or even actively suppressed by powerful beneficiaries of the status quo.

Christian readers will also be sensitive to a deeper and more fundamental set of problems. Compassion grounded in the love of neighbor often but not always includes affective empathy. The consistent feature of Christian compassion is benevolence, or willing the good of another, in a way that generates concretely helpful acts. "What is compassion," St. Augustine asks in *The City of God*, "but a kind of

fellow-feeling in our hearts for the misery of another which compels us to help him [or her] if we can?"

Christian ethics can appreciate the importance of knowing how others are feeling—but the focus is on providing concrete help. The Gospel of Luke describes the good Samaritan as "moved in his guts" (*splagchnizomai*, Lk 10:33) by the sight of the man lying beaten and broken on the side of the road. Moved by the sight of a suffering, endangered human being, he *feels for* him (which we might call "sympathy") and so *acts* in concretely helpful ways.

Catholic moral theology draws a helpful distinction between affective and effective compassion. Some people act compassionately because they are emotionally moved by someone's suffering (affective compassion), but others do so because they act according to moral principle, fulfill professional responsibilities or, like Dorothy Day and Mother Teresa, habitually exercise the virtue of mercy in concrete, practical ways (effective compassion). If your house is on fire, you don't care whether firefighters recognize your emotional state—you just want them to get your dog out of there.

From a Catholic perspective, *Suicidal Empathy* grossly exaggerates the role empathy is said to play in justifying moral and social policies intended to address widespread human suffering, particularly when that suffering is rooted in systemic injustice. Catholic social teaching regards justice, not empathy, as the moral standard most directly relevant to large-scale social problems. Secular moral theories, too, justify egalitarian social policies on the grounds of fairness rather than because they best comport with empathic attunement.

Catholic social teaching urges us to assess social policies in light of a cluster of justice-related moral norms that include fairness, equity, the common good, the preferential option for the poor, subsidiarity, solidarity and human rights (including both immunity from undue government interference and positive entitlements to goods like decent education, housing and health care). The church continuously reminds us that humane immigration policies, international development assistance and emergency humanitarian aid should be both motivated by compassion and demanded by justice. "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required" (Lk 12:48).

So while Saad worries that we have become too empathetic, too indiscriminate in our sense of responsibility for others, too promiscuous in our concern for outsiders, bedrock Christian convictions alert us to the more pressing, opposite problem: sinful self-absorption, proximity bias, cold-heartedness, tribalism, xenophobia, racism and what Pope Francis called the "globalization of indifference."

Suicidal Empathy does not provide much, if any, substantive justification for its sweeping generalizations. This is due in part to its refusal to consider arguments that thoughtful and informed opponents use to defend their positions. Saad's harsh polemic against Islam, for example, never seriously considers the work of progressive Muslim political theorists. In a similar vein, he dismisses feminism without ever considering the arguments of distinguished feminist philosophers who might challenge his characterization of their ethical commitments.

Unfortunately, Saad's habit of writing off those who disagree with him as stupid, duped or malicious—or all three—serves only to raise rather than lower the temperature of the firestorm of polarization currently engulfing our society. Instead of a serious and thoughtful argument, *Suicidal Empathy* thus reads as a long, angry op-ed intended to reinforce its ideological allies rather than persuade its intellectual opponents.

Given our current political culture, we should be especially concerned about the political uses of this book. The restriction of empathy to one's own in-group provides cover for the current administration's decisions to cut off life-saving aid to H.I.V.-positive pregnant Ugandans, turn away desperate asylum seekers from Afghanistan, strip Haitians of their temporary protected status and send deportees who have never been convicted of a crime to a brutal, maximum-security prison in El Salvador. The fact that tens of millions of American Christians support such policies is, at least from a Catholic perspective, profoundly scandalous.

My point is not to criticize Saad for not being a Christian. I do, however, call attention to the fact that his deeply individualistic, highly reductive view of the human person and his insistence that we dampen our concern for the "least of our brothers and sisters" are profoundly at odds with the fundamentals of the Gospel message.

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MEANING TO BE FOUND



Wiseblood Books / 156p $16

Eric Cyr's debut collection of short stories, *Here It Snows in June*, provides portraits of struggling men resembling those who have populated recent headlines; they muddle through, seeking connection, confidence and clarity. But instead of depicting them dissecting data or analyzing their problems, Cyr shows his characters' pain and uncertainty as he takes us inside their intimate daily lives. (Full disclosure: I attended the same M.F.A. program as the author.)

The collection's title is a reference to the wild weather patterns of the American Midwest (specifically Minnesota, where most of the stories take place), but it also serves as a metaphor for the characters' collective pessimism. Many of them find life to be disappointing—a grievance, an annoyance, a frustration. As they face failing marriages, hunting accidents, loneliness, difficult fathers, school bullies and unrequited love, it is easy to imagine them thinking, *Can you believe this?*

This is not a question of incredulous awe, but of utter dismay. Life has not panned out as they planned, much like a June day ruined by unseasonable snow.

Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that a major theme throughout the collection is the certainty and reality of death. The very first story is narrated by a young boy with a serious medical condition, introducing death's presence immediately. The story's final lines present us with a literal *memento mori*, as the narrator holds a deer skull and places "his fingers in the two hollow sockets and imagine[s] those empty spaces refilled."

This image—and the narrator's attitude—set the tone for Cyr's male characters. He exposes the "empty spaces" that each of them experiences acutely—the places where they sense death, whether in the challenges of old age, or in relationships, or vocations, or in a brutal and unexpected attack (which I won't spoil)—and holds them up for readers to examine. Ultimately, though, the characters face death as a mirror and a reminder of those "empty spaces" longing to be filled. The stories prod us to think: *How have we filled our own lives? When death comes, what will it show about how we have lived?*

In the story "Stealthy as the Night," for example, a curmudgeonly middle-aged man named Bob picks a passive-aggressive (and at times simply aggressive) fight with his next-door neighbor, whose trees encroach onto Bob's yard. Bob's anger is an external manifestation of the war going on inside him, as he struggles with a strained relationship with his son and the fact that they might not reconcile before Bob's own demise. The story concludes with Bob meditating on a "single worm, writhing as if under some great, invisible pain."

Bob and many of Cyr's characters (and perhaps his readers as well) could be described the same way—writhing and going through life with invisible pain. The mirror of death, then, shows Bob to be like this worm.

My favorite stories in *Here It Snows in June* are those about a character named Kyle. There are four stories in the collection that focus on this same character at various ages and stages of life. We read about Kyle in "The Key," "Sacrifice Hit," "Castor and Pollux" and the titular story. Cyr seems to know this character best; Kyle has the potential to be a semi-autobiographical representation of the author himself.

Kyle's story is told out of order, depicting scenes from his life as a teenager, as a seminarian and then as a settled adult. He exemplifies the struggles of the other men in Cyr's stories as he deals with desire, dejection, despair and discernment. He tries to nurture a faith that is more than words, as psalms and words from the Mass come back to him at specific moments and he hopes that they mean something deeper. Death shows up for Kyle, too, through loss and through his own close calls. For Kyle, these episodes often reveal his physical and spiritual weakness—

Many of Cyr's characters could be described the same way—writhing and going through life with invisible pain.

and his need for God.

Another favorite of mine is the final story of the collection, "Bell Lap," which is also about death. In the running world—Cyr and I are both long-distance runners—the "bell lap" refers to the last lap a runner makes around the track in a race. This story features both a high school student, Daniel, and an elderly man whose lives (and literal running and walking paths) coincide.

Cyr brings together the same themes that appear in the first story in the collection, where a young boy longs for the empty spaces in a skull to be refilled. However, in "Bell Lap" these themes deepen and take on more significant meaning for Daniel and the elderly neighbor, who is clearly making his own "bell lap" in life. Instead of stopping at the longing for something to fill the holes of death and loss, though, "Bell Lap" offers the solution: love, in all its messiness and pain and human frailty. The elderly man's wife embodies this, and the young teenager Daniel learns it through witnessing her ordinary love for her husband, shown in her desperate attempts to find him after he has gotten lost.

Another story, "Primogeniture," begins with an epigraph from St. Augustine's *Confessions*:

> If all these things tug at our will with equal force, and all together at the same time, will not these divergent inclinations put a great strain on the human heart, as we deliberate which to select? All are good, but they compete among themselves until one is chosen, to which the will, hitherto distracted between many options, may move as a united whole.

The quotation articulates the state of many of Cyr's stories and their characters, as well as their real-life counterparts. The "paradox of choice" faces us all; until we set out resolutely to follow one way, we are spun around in chaos, in all directions, undecided and unanchored. Crises of identity, like those the news headlines point to, stem from this paradox. Should I get married? What should I study in college? What if I want something different for my life than what my parents expect? Where should I live? What should I do with my life? What is my purpose?

These questions plague Cyr's characters just as they plague modern life. Part of what is challenging in 2026 is that there are so many options, and so one becomes paralyzed and stays stuck.

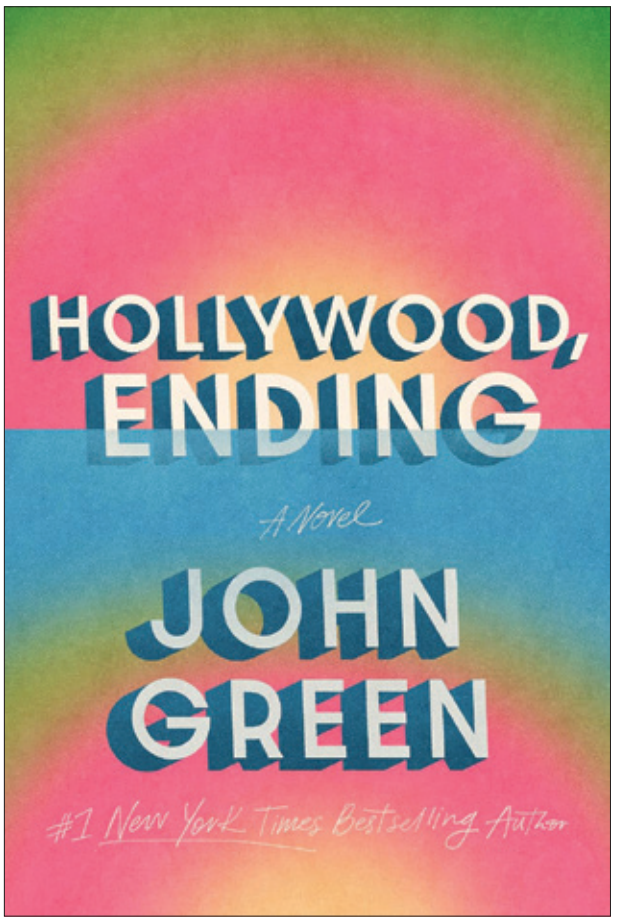
Like a good Midwesterner, Cyr's storytelling is understated, never in the reader's face. He lets the stories speak for themselves in their quiet, everyday way. The characters are familiar—either ourselves or people we know—and their struggles are like our own.

Cyr's collection diagnoses much of what is wrong with American male culture. With this examination, he shows what is missing and also what might help to refill those empty spaces.

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A DYNAMIC DUO



Dutton Books / 304p $32

Hollywood, Ending, John Green's first novel in almost 10 years and his first for adults, has much in common with his young adult novels. It features two incredibly articulate, insightful and self-aware young people trying to figure out their place in the world while also possibly falling in love.

The fact that both of these people are also coping, to varying degrees of success, with severe childhood trauma also tracks with Green's earlier work. The protagonist of his previous novel, *Turtles All the Way Down*, has severe obsessive-compulsive disorder; and his blockbuster *The Fault in Our Stars* is a love story about two young people with cancer. The last book he wrote, the nonfiction best-seller *Everything Is Tuberculosis*, was a social history of that disease. Green is one of our great writers about illness.

In other ways, though, *Hollywood, Ending* charts a new path for Green, because it also offers a sharper social critique than his Y.A. work. The sickness he focuses on here is fame.

The main characters in *Hollywood, Ending* are two actors in their early 20s, Juniper and Kai, who are making a biopic about the last year of Andy Warhol's life. An A-list Hollywood actor named Matthew Malone plays Warhol, while Kai plays one of Warhol's assistants and Juniper plays a reporter writing a Warhol profile. Juniper is a former child star who spent six seasons on a children's TV show and has worked in previous movies, but this is Kai's first time in a major production. The novel moves back and forth between their points of view, contrasting Juniper's more experienced perspective with Kai's innocence.

Hollywood, Ending takes us through the entire process of making and promoting the movie, but the actual filming is described only in the first quarter of the book. The rest focuses on the publicity tour, press junkets and flashy premieres the actors need to go through in order to promote it. Green shows us how, in our media-saturated age, any artistic production is only partially about making the art. Promoting and selling it, and competing for a share of the public's attention, are at least as important as the artwork itself. Green, who has had three movies and one TV show adapted from his novels, is deeply familiar with the Hollywood machine, and *Hollywood, Ending* demonstrates how hellacious this whole process can be.

Kai, who has no experience with any of this, narrates the middle two sections of the novel, in which a studio publicist is tasked with preparing him to handle the press and sell the movie. Her main advice is to say nothing of interest and stick to rehearsed talking points. At the same time, all sorts of studio machinations take place behind the scenes, including an attempt to sell the public on Kai and Juniper's possible romantic relationship in order to create drama and get people talking about what might otherwise be a largely overlooked biopic. Eventually, both Kai and Juniper are asked to share and process their childhood trauma publicly as part of the film's promotion.

At one point, Kai sits down with a reporter who asks him, off the record, what the junket experience is actually like. He replies:

> "It's like you're a medieval soldier stabbing at me with a sword, and I'm deflecting the sword with my shield. As long as my shield holds, I'll be okay. But it does take some concentration to keep the shield up."
>
> "But if the shield goes down, all you tell me is the truth.... What's so bad about that?"
>
> "The truth belongs to me. That's my life you're talking about. My most personal, intimate feelings. My...whatever. My worst memories. My best memories."
>
> "Yes, but we've made a deal. You exchange pieces of yourself for celebrity. Celebrity keeps you working, keeps you paid. Keeps me paid, too."
>
> "Except once I've traded those little pieces of

myself, I can't get them back. They're not mine anymore."

That all of this promotion is taking place for a movie about Andy Warhol is, of course, entirely deliberate. Green is a master of intertextuality. Most of his previous novels include at least one other work of art that plays a significant role in both plot and theme: Raymond Pettibon's spiral paintings in *Turtles All the Way Down*; Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" in *Paper Towns*; and, most significantly, the fictional novel *An Imperial Affliction* in *The Fault in Our Stars*, which Green has said was largely inspired by his own youthful obsession with David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*.

Having Warhol as an intertextual reference point makes sense. Warhol cared about the things this book is about—fame and what it does to people, film and what it signifies, icons and their meaning—but what he actually believed about any of these things is impossible to pin down.

The novel's biopic focuses on the last year of his life, when he was making a series of prints based on Leonardo da Vinci's "Last Supper." Juniper notes in the novel that "Warhol was a Catholic, like me I guess, even though I don't go to Mass. The paintings weren't jokes, but they didn't feel especially sacred either. Again I found myself wondering whether it was all just skin-deep with him."

This question—if there is something actually sacred in art itself, whether in a painting or a film or a novel—is a key one in *Hollywood, Ending*. Equally important, though, is whether the creators of these works of art need to manufacture a flattened, fake version of themselves that they can sell to the public in order to protect something true, authentic and private. Green, like Warhol, is content to raise these questions without feeling the need to provide definitive answers.

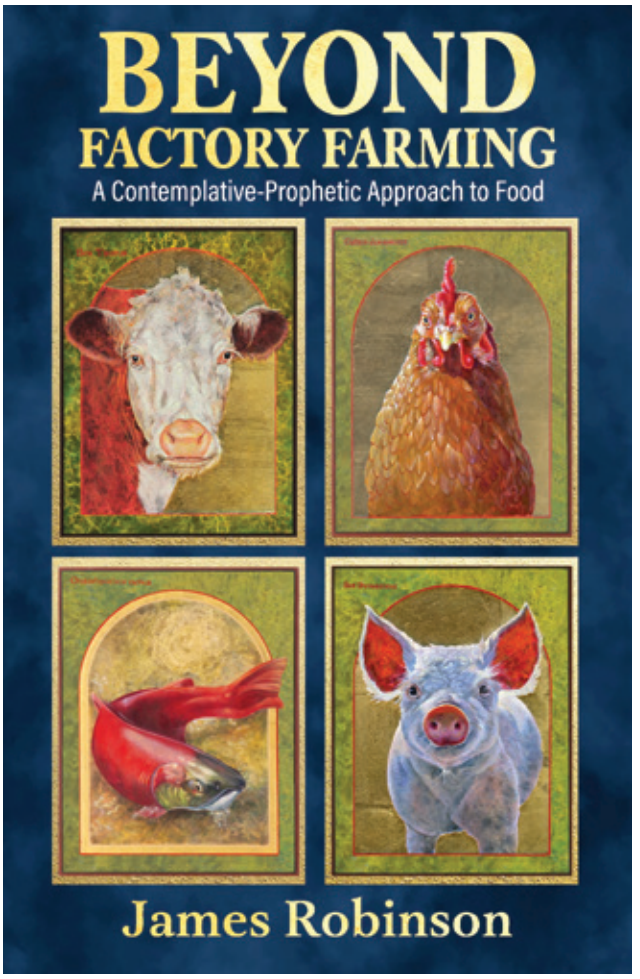
Perhaps unsurprisingly, the novel ultimately demonstrates that even pretty bad art *does* matter—a series of schlocky films plays a key role in the final movement of the book—and that making (and selling) good art is hard but worthwhile. It also illustrates how important real relationships are for the actual people making the art.

"Part 4: The Comedown," narrated by Juniper, reminded me of something that Thomas Merton wrote to the peace activist Jim Forest: "In the end...it is the reality of personal relationships that saves everything." The only way that Kai and Juniper make it through their ordeal is by having at their side someone who sees, knows and trusts them. Without that, the machine would eat them alive. On his podcast and YouTube channel, John Green is constantly in conversation with his brother, Hank, and it is clear that having that creative partnership has helped make it possible for him to thrive in the kind of media environment he inhabits.

Hollywood, Ending is both a captivating story about the making and selling of art, and a good reminder to any of us who might want to pursue the creative life that we, too, need to nurture and rely on supportive personal relationships in order to persevere.

Michael O'Connell *is the inaugural fellow at the Jesuit Media Lab, author of* Startling Figures: Encounters With American Catholic Fiction *and editor of* Conversations With George Saunders*. He publishes the Substack "Nothing Gold."*





Orbis Books / 192p $24

I was already well-disposed to the themes prominent in *Beyond Factory Farming* when I picked it up for the first time. I've been a vegetarian for more than 50 years, and I increasingly tend to a vegan diet.

I changed my diet in solidarity with my students in Kathmandu in 1973, wanting to become more like the people among whom I was serving. It was a small step, a personal one that did not address systemic issues, but it was against the grain of much of American life half a century ago, and it certainly changed me. Over the years, I came to appreciate the healthiness of a vegetarian diet and, more importantly, I learned to respect animals as living beings kindred to ourselves.

James Robinson, the author of *Beyond Factory Farming*, is the director of the Kathleen Deignan, C.N.D., Institute for Earth and Spirit at Iona University in New York. The institute is inspired and energized by environmental insights and reverence for life proposed by such leading prophetic figures as Teilhard de Chardin, Thomas Merton and Thomas Berry, and the ongoing work of John Grim and Mary Evelyn Tucker at Yale University.

Robinson is very much at home in a network of communities—like the Agape Community in Massachusetts, the Benincasa Community in Connecticut and the Maryhouse Catholic Worker in New York—that expose the core violence in the food habits of our American society. Such communities see the larger picture and work slowly, compassionately and nonviolently toward a worldview that respects life at every level.

This book, Robinson's first, is a powerful, integral contribution to the current conversation on food justice, grounded in dialogue with the growing literature on the topic, books ranging from Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation Now* (2023) to the Jesuit author Christopher Steck's *A Heaven for Animals* (2025).

In reading Robinson's book, I was grateful that I had to deal with the hard theme at the center of it: the enormous cruelty essential to the meat market in our modern industrial societies. Consumers pay a cost for the meat they consume, but animals pay a much higher one. It is ever imperative to remind readers of the horrors behind the mass production of the meat that shows up in sanitized packaging in our supermarkets and on our restaurant menus—the mechanization of birth and death, an abuse of animals that entirely disrespects the fact that they are alive, sentient and often very intelligent.

Robinson gives well-known, horrifying statistics about factory farming and descriptive details too: the fate of animals trapped their whole lives in tiny cages that forbid even minimal movement; animals that are maybe—or maybe not—unconscious as they are hung upside down and shuttled toward the sharp knives of their doom; calves taken from their mothers at birth and fed a diet intended to make them anemic and pale but fattened to an enormous weight before their early deaths—all for the sake of a nice wiener schnitzel or veal marsala?

And on and on. Such mundane horrors need to be pointed out, lest we blithely forget the real cost of the meat we take for granted.

Robinson is well positioned to face up to the title's problem, but also to run with the ideals of the subtitle: toward a contemplative-prophetic reconsideration of how we live, how we eat, how we relate to the earth and all living beings. He is mindful particularly of the people who do the daily, dirty, dehumanizing work in slaughterhouses, suffering the cries and breathing in the stench of death. Care for animals, he argues, is inseparable from other challenges to systemic justice, including racism and the oppression of marginalized workers.

Robinson's vision, inspired by Merton, Berry and others, stands solidly in the "Laudato Si'" tradition. As Pope

Robinson is mindful of the people who do the dirty, dehumanizing work in slaughterhouses.

Francis put it in that encyclical (No. 92):

> [O]ur indifference or cruelty towards fellow creatures of this world sooner or later affects the treatment we mete out to other human beings. We have only one heart, and the same wretchedness which leads us to mistreat an animal will not be long in showing itself in our relationships with other people. Every act of cruelty towards any creature is "contrary to human dignity."

Robinson does not follow the traditional path that starts with biblical texts, nor does he search for premodern Christian sources, theological, monastic or otherwise, to show that his views are not new. Since he is not arguing for universal vegetarianism, or what he calls "ontological veganism" (as imperative for everyone, everywhere, all the time), he does not need to claim that Jesus was a vegetarian, nor explain why he was not.

Yet many people still find the Bible warrants the killing and eating of animals—and if that warrant requires factory farming, so be it. After all, God tells Noah after the flood, "The fear and dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth, and on every bird of the air, on everything that creeps on the ground, and on all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered" (Gn 9:2). That "fear and dread" seem to have darkened life even in the beginning. Perhaps more needs to be said for the sake of informing religious people—let's say, many Jews, Christians and Muslims—who cannot see the problems Robinson so clearly addresses.

Robinson's argument is very much a Catholic one. He appeals only occasionally to the lived wisdom of religious traditions of the East, which have long reimagined the relation of humans and other life forms. The Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh is evoked a few times, as is Rachana Rao Umashankar, a professor at Iona and a specialist in Sufi Islam in South Asia. Late in the book, the "engaged Buddhism" proponent Sulak Sivaraksa is introduced, in conversation with Rosemary Radford Ruether on the stultifying force of global capitalism. These are powerful testimonies.

Broadening our view of nonviolence would have strengthened Robinson's overall argument. He might, for instance, have looked into the Hindu ideal of nonviolence, promoted in ancient yoga texts and embraced as a way of life by Mahatma Gandhi for personal and political reasons. Jain tradition, too, is famed for its fundamental promotion of nonviolence. Animals do not adhere to specific religious traditions; care for them invites shared compassion and action among good people everywhere on earth.

The final part of the book highlights the educative process, in which individuals and our societies change over time what we eat, how we live, what we care for. In a fine practical move, Robinson points to the menus in Catholic school cafeterias. Start with the children, and make sure they have lunch options not reliant on the slaughterhouses of factory farming. This offers a constructive ending to a powerful book: If we educate our children and grandchildren to eat differently in a more compassionate world, surely their witness will affect us as well.

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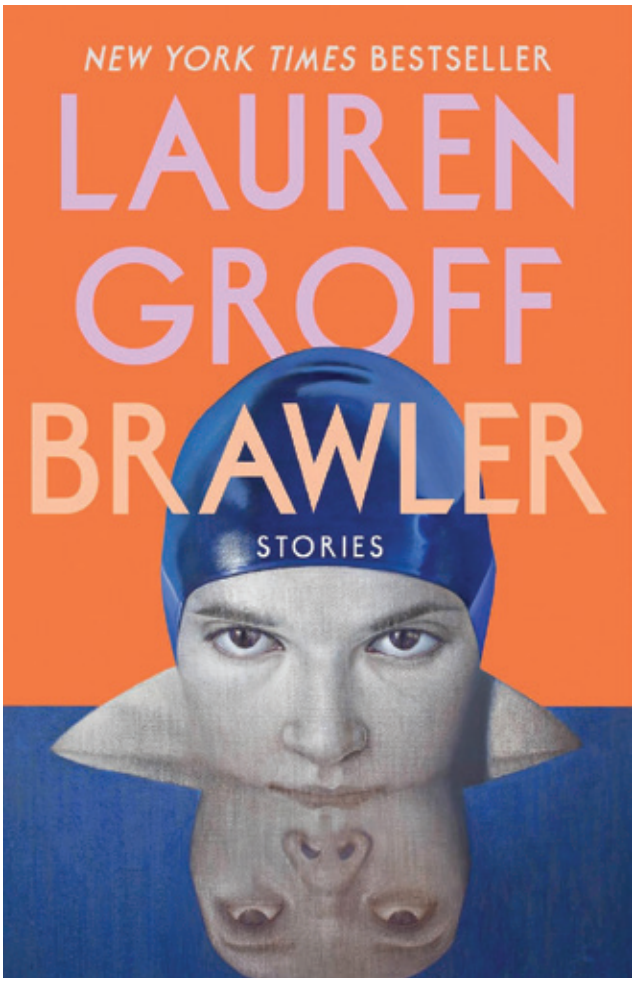
Follow the Catholic Movie Club

Reflections on faith and film from moderator John Dougherty

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America | Media
A Jesuit Ministry



Riverhead Books / 288p $29

In "Annunciation," a story in Lauren Groff's eighth book of fiction, the cash-strapped narrator seeks an affordable place to live in Mountain View, Calif. She finds one in a cottage on the property of an eccentric German woman named Griselda, who offers her a break in rent in exchange for cleaning up after an enormous Great Dane. "The place sang to me in a register straight out of the fairy tales I'd loved as a child," the narrator reports. "It seemed a place built for Titania and Puck and little volatile men who grant three wishes."

Groff's confident storytelling voice similarly operates in a fairy-tale register in many of these stories, with settings that at first seem enchanted, stark moral choices at the center of the plots, and characters who begin as archetypes, as in one story in which the main characters are described only as "the mother" and "the daughter." However, unlike in fairy tales, no magic intervenes in these characters' lives, and the distinction between good and bad characters is difficult to parse. Groff's characters become more particular with each choice they make, and dark fates unspool in even the most idyllic settings.

If fairy tales influenced Groff in some style elements, her source is clearly not Disney but Grimm. A "fairy tale ending" these days signifies a resolution in which everything turns out for the best; but in many older, wilder fairy tales, that is not the case. Fairy tales end with the grandmother irrevocably eaten by the wolf, or the little mermaid rejected by the prince and disintegrating into sea foam. Groff's stories end with the surviving characters haunted by what has unfolded—deaths, illnesses, startling failures of moral courage.

The masterful opening story, "The Wind," begins with a chilling sentence: "Pretend, the mother had said when she crept to her daughter's room in the night, that tomorrow is just an ordinary day." Of course, the next day is instead extraordinary.

A battered mother attempts to spirit her children away from her abusive husband without being detected. The beating the mother endured the night before the story begins causes the youngest son to ask his sister, "Is she dead?" The kids pack their clothes in their school backpacks and the mother puts them on the bus as usual—but asks the bus driver to drop them off a few stops down the road, rather than at school. The bus driver sees the sister's black eye and the mom's swollen face and understands, promises not to mark the kids missing so their absence from school won't prompt a call to the house until second period, enough time to travel farther down the road.

As more townspeople offer the family small kindnesses—an advance on a paycheck, a vow to keep mum—the suspense and terror over just what kind of monster the abuser is grows. How can the townspeople all acknowledge that the abuser is beastly and in constant pursuit but do nothing to punish or restrain him?

Studies suggest police officers more frequently abuse their partners than do people in other professions, but because they can use the tools of their jobs to control and surveil, their partners have fewer avenues for escape. Out of this stark fact, Groff has conjured a riveting story that captures the emotional impact on all the characters and shows how a history of abuse reverberates through successive generations.

We learn the narrator is the child of the daughter in the story, who at the end reflects: "She tried her best, but she couldn't help filling me with this same wind.... I look around and can see it in so many other women, passed down from a time beyond history, this wind that is dark and ceaseless and raging within."

Although the villain in "The Wind" is as terrifying as any wolf or witch, in the rest of the stories in *Brawler*, the malevolence that stokes the plot arises from the shadow

Groff's characters become more particular with each choice they make.

side of ordinary people whom no one would label as evil. Their fateful decisions, often stemming from a casual slip of the tongue or merely not speaking up when they should, are usually unintentional, or if there is any intent to harm, that motivation lies buried deep within a character's psyche so that they are not even aware of it themselves.

In an author's note, Groff mentions she lives a mile away from a state residential facility for the developmentally disabled in Gainesville, Fla., that is a progressive place now but in the past was a site of mistreatment called Sunland. Groff imagines the life of a family forced to leave a relative there. Filtered through the sensory-focused perspective of Buddy, a developmentally disabled 20-year-old, "To Sunland" shows how a run of bad luck ends with Buddy's admission to the hospital. Buddy and his younger sister Joanie were raised by a single mother who has recently died. Their aunt refuses to care for Buddy for more than a few days, and Joanie has no means to help. Instead, Joanie has accepted a scholarship to a women's college in Maine and promises Buddy she'll come back for him when she can.

Groff makes the reader feel the difficulty, love and loss at the heart of Joanie's choice, and we understand her justification for it—she needs an education to support herself, let alone Buddy—but we also see her hunger to escape the town, her family and its burdens. The "selfish" choice can sometimes be the best one available. Groff's precise, witty rendering of the Florida characters, their dialogue and their psychological motivations will remind readers of Flannery O'Connor.

The aforementioned final story, "Annunciation," with the narrator saving on rent by scooping up the considerable droppings of a Great Dane, expresses ideas that serve as a key to the collection. The narrator's coworker lives in a Volkswagen Vanagon with her daughter, in hiding presumably from an abusive partner, ready to flee at the first sign of danger. One day, the narrator's casual lunchtime gossip sets off a chain of events that causes the Vanagon family to disappear.

"There are moments in our lives when our sense of our own goodness is so shaky that we build elaborate defenses against the possibility that we may be far worse than we fear," she reflects. "I have come to think that I had a secret intention, held at the very center of my actions, so small and dark that I pretended not to see it then; I could not see it even a decade later. It is only now, when I know myself to be good and bad in equal measure, that I can glimpse it, if barely."

This recognition is central to *Brawler*, an acknowledgment that each of us contains the wolf, the coward and the hero inside us, and that each of us may express the first two elements more often than we'd like. Or, as Griselda puts it, "In every human there is both an animal and a god wrestling unto death."

The narrator reflects on how this idea comes through in the sculptures of the Virgin Mary found in churches throughout California: "There are a thousand Madonnas here, with a thousand different faces. Each Madonna wears the face of a particular mortal woman whom the artist loved. Each woman is one in whom the animal was briefly overcome by the god that lived within her."

In *Brawler*, Lauren Groff has crafted a taut, diverting collection of short stories that feel as timeless as fairy tales and turn on moral conundrums that leave readers with plenty to ponder.

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

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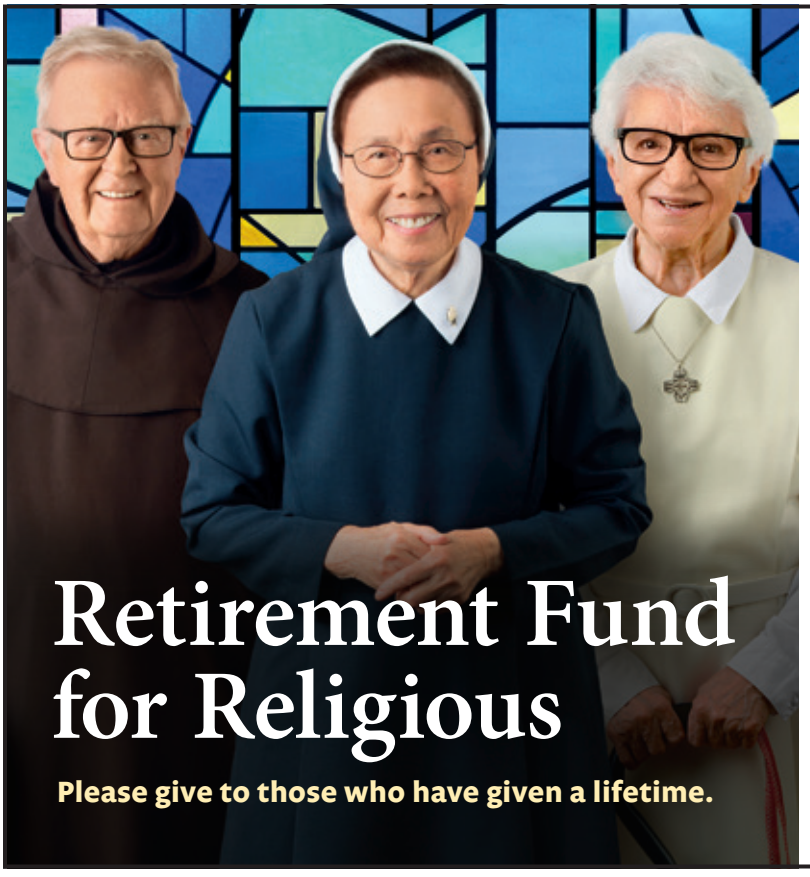
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Witness the Unfathomable Union

The readings of the first two Sundays of December focus our reflection upon the mystery of this Christmas feast: a time when two realms, the divine and the human, incarnate an unfathomable union in the most explicit and discernible manifestation—an infant born in Bethlehem. Both the prophet Isaiah and John the Baptist invite the people to come out to the desert wilderness for a renewal.

In this deserted quiet space, one is offered a baptism of repentance, a forgiveness of sins and a fresh start, no questions asked. This new beginning also becomes an occasion for us to "prepare the way of the Lord," and the Baptist models exactly how to do that. Though challenged by religious officials regarding his identity and importance, John can only point away from himself toward the future, toward God's plan, toward the coming anointed one. Thus, the profile of this man in the wilderness is that of a witness. We are also called to be witnesses to this mystery of the Incarnation that can begin to heal the divisions and brokenness of our world.

On the final Sunday of Advent, we hear of another witness from Nazareth, Mary, and the announcement made to her. The courageous "yes" of this young virgin was the holy prelude to the incarnate union of the human and the divine. Focusing upon Mary's virginity, the readings give us pause to reflect upon our own *point vierge* (French for "virgin point"), a place deep within each of us, utterly untainted, consisting solely of the pure glory of God, the very ground of our being.

Further, our pondering of this *point vierge* may prompt in us a poverty of spirit, like Mary's, as manifested at the Annunciation. Such a disposition challenges us to adopt a radical dependence upon God. Finally, the last Sunday of the month celebrates the feast of the Holy Family. The readings invite us to reflect not only upon the challenges of this new family but also upon the blessings occasioned by family life where sacramental living can flourish.

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT (B), DEC. 6, 2026
A spiritual wilderness space

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT (B), DEC. 13, 2026
Called to witness

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT (B), DEC. 20, 2026
Point vierge

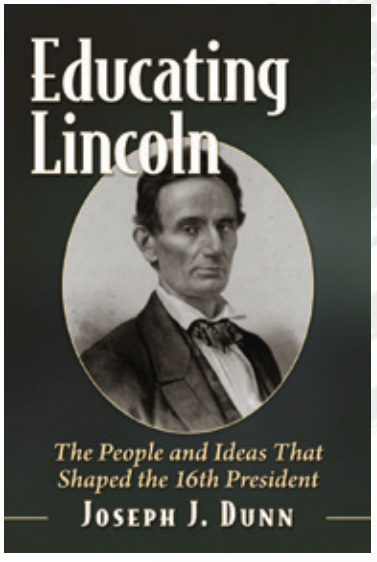
FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY (B), DEC. 27, 2026
Challenges and blessings



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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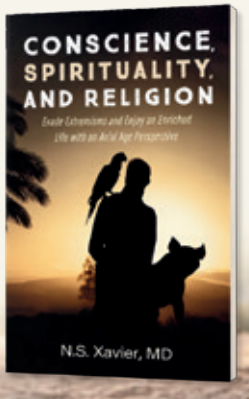


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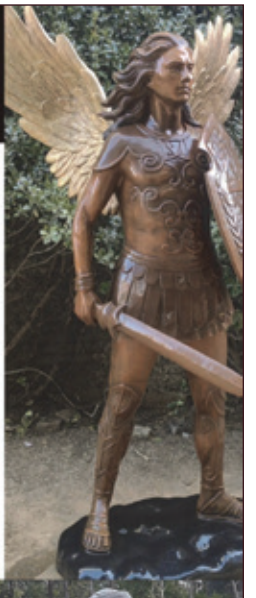
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Civil Debate Is Still Possible

A calm exchange on abortion goes viral

By Jodi Hunt



In October, I walked into a town hall hosted by CNN and Jubilee Media featuring James Talarico, the Democratic nominee for the U.S. Senate from Texas, prepared to talk about abortion from the perspective of a Catholic voter. I walked away newly convinced that if Catholics hope to persuade others to join us in protecting human life, from conception to natural death, we must find new ways to engage those who disagree with us. We must engage in the kind of civil discourse that does not demand that we pro-life voters abandon our convictions but invites us to work together, where possible, to discover how best to protect human life and dignity.

I am a professor at the University of Dallas, and about two weeks before the town hall, I received an email inviting my students and me to apply to be part of the audience. People of all political backgrounds were encouraged to fill out an application about what was important to us as voters and what policies or beliefs we disagreed with Mr. Talarico on. A CNN producer then contacted me to see if I would be interested in holding a four-minute conversation on the topic of abortion—the topic that, in her words, "you have very strong opinions about."

It never occurred to me how big an impact my time with Mr. Talarico would have. I saw this as a great opportunity to share a view that I know many Catholics like me hold. I was certainly surprised to learn later that my quick exchange had gone viral. People across the country, Christian or not, who agreed with me and who didn't were excited: Someone had finally shown the debate on abortion could be civil.

When I sat across from Mr. Talarico, I wanted to ask the questions I have often used to discern whether a political candidate is someone I can trust to do what is right: "Why should I vote for someone who supports abortion rights? How can I trust a candidate to protect all Texans when we disagree about protecting the most vulnerable among us?" I did not expect a few minutes of conversation to resolve our differences. Mr. Talarico, a former Presbyterian seminarian, and I approach abortion from different moral and theological perspectives. Even so, our exchange served as a good reminder that all Christians need more opportunities for conversations like this one, especially between people who disagree. It is often in these encounters that we confront our assumptions and begin to see possibilities for moving toward a shared goal.

I appreciated that Mr. Talarico, who described Pope Leo XIV as one of his "spiritual heroes," engaged my questions and explained his beliefs, even when I felt he sometimes moved away from the heart of what I was asking. And he graciously offered me the opportunity to explain my beliefs as well. Although we did not reach agreement—I do not accept his claim that the Bible is "silent" on the issue of abortion—I left with a clearer sense of his perspective and a renewed appreciation for what becomes possible when we allow one another to speak.

How often do we deny ourselves that opportunity? We hear a political label, assume we understand everything about the person behind it and stop listening. We allow disagreement to replace encounter. Our public conversations become contests in which the objective is to win rather than to understand, persuade or seek the common good.

Abortion is not an abstract political question. But while the church teaches that abortion is gravely wrong, that teaching does not relieve us of the responsibility to understand the circumstances that lead women to consider abortion. We can still ask how to strengthen families, improve access to material assistance and ensure that women are not abandoned when they choose to carry a pregnancy to term. Common ground does not mean pretending our differences are insignificant, but it can mean identifying opportunities for cooperation.

I remain convinced that protecting unborn life is a fundamental moral responsibility. But my conversation with Mr. Talarico reminded me that conviction and dialogue are not enemies.

We may not arrive at the same answers. But if we remain at the table, listen carefully and pursue truth together, we may discover opportunities to protect life, support families and serve the common good that we would otherwise miss. That is not a substitute for conviction. It is what conviction, lived with humility and love, makes possible.

Jodi Hunt *is the executive director of the Neuhoff Institute for Ministry and Evangelization at the University of Dallas.*

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