

America

DECEMBER 2020

THE JESUIT REVIEW OF FAITH AND CULTURE

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‘A Republic, if You Can Keep It’

Almost as soon as we knew for certain that Joseph R. Biden Jr. had been elected the 46th president of the United States, the 44th president came roaring back into our newsfeeds. Barack Obama is on *le grand tour des mémoires*, hawking the first of two volumes chronicling his life and presidency. In the published excerpts, one passage in particular caught my attention: “What I can say for certain is that I’m not yet ready to abandon the possibility of America—not just for the sake of future generations of Americans but for all of humankind.”

I agree with every word, though perhaps for different reasons than Mr. Obama. I do not know for certain, but I suspect that the former president is referring in some way to the oft-repeated description of the United States as “the last, best hope of earth.” That phrase is usually yanked out of the context in which Abraham Lincoln used it and then employed to justify some form of American exceptionalism, about which every Christian conscience should have reasonable suspicions. The United States is not the last, best hope of Earth because that role is already taken by the one whose incarnation we remember this month.

I’ll give you this though: America is the best thing to come along so far. The United States is a unique achievement in a fallen world. That last part is important. We do not live in any old world, but in a specific kind of world, one forged in the crucible of sin and redemption. We live in the hope that “the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice,” as Martin Luther King Jr. once said; but there is precious little in human history to suggest that it inevitably does. For nothing created is perfect,

which is why, as the eucharistic prayer recounts, the Creator sent his only Son to bring “to perfection his work in the world.” The American founders never heard that prayer, but they understood the gist of it, and in the light of its truth they saw government as a means of creating a more just—not perfectly just—political community.

You might be wondering why any of that matters. Many people wrote to me over the last several months asking why **America** (the magazine, that is) seemed preoccupied with the U.S. Constitution, rather than with matters more overtly spiritual or obviously moral. Some even suggested that our concerns about the Constitution were just a thin cover for our partisan allegiances. Not true. For starters, America the country is what made possible **America** the magazine. More important, we believe in the constitutional order not in spite of, but because of what our faith teaches us about the reality of sin and redemption.

In the absence of law, we know what follows from the reality that we live in a fallen world: Cain kills Abel. John Courtney Murray, S.J., was wrong about some things, but he was not wrong about the fact that the American constitutional order is fundamentally an attempt to prevent Cain from killing Abel. This journal’s century-long championing of the American experiment stems not from naïve, idealistic or wishful thinking, but from a belief that more than 200 years ago, through an unlikely amalgam of events, this country stumbled onto a form of government that is better than anything previously devised or imagined since.

Yes, I know, the Constitution also

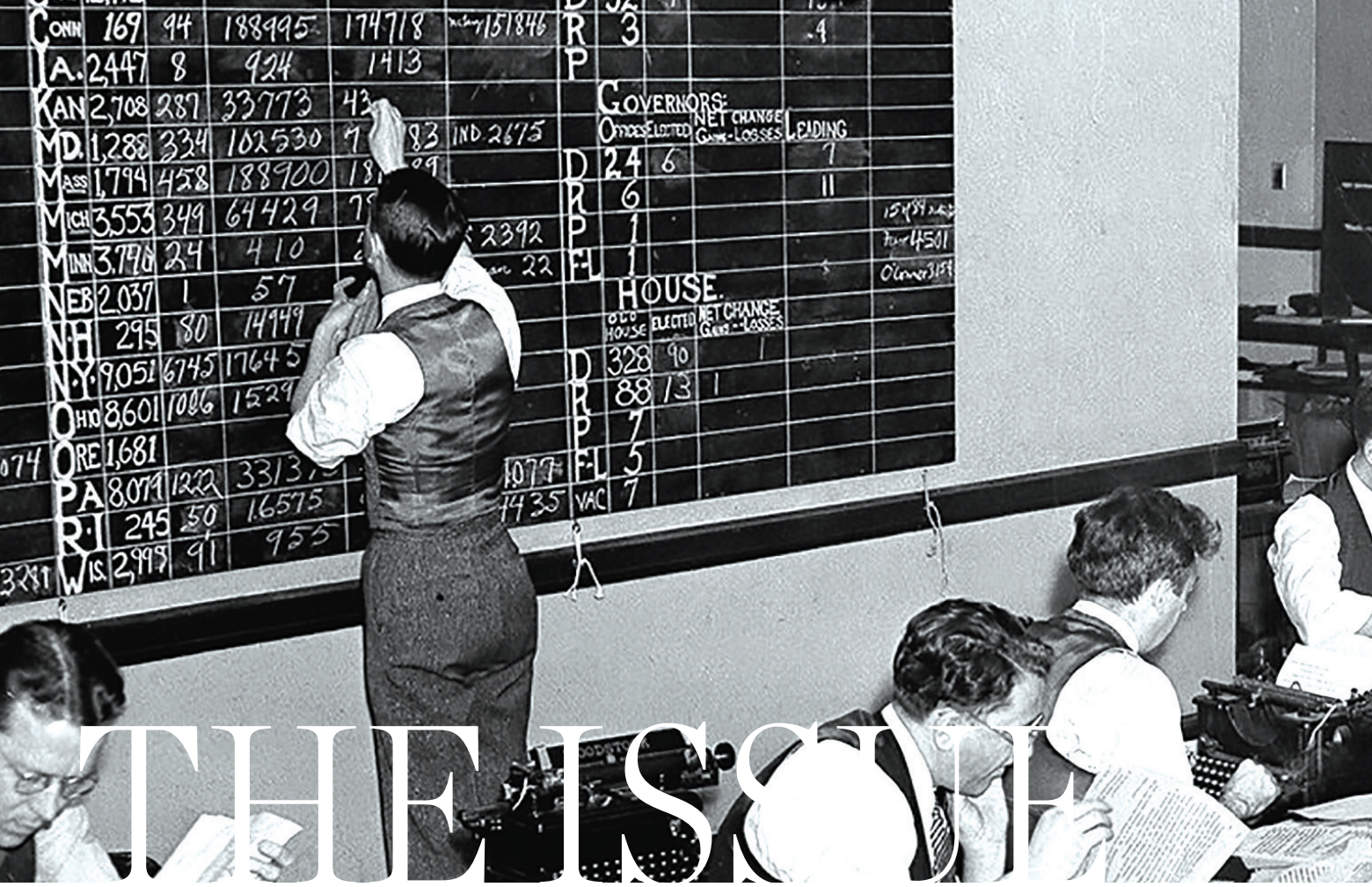
involves egregious moral compromises. Like the two centuries of American history that followed its passage, the Constitution involves much of which we are rightly ashamed. It also involves much of which we are rightly proud. Some liberals think there is nothing redemptive about American history. Some conservatives think that only U.S. history is redemptive. Neither are right. The American experiment is not what has redeemed human nature, but neither does it require a revolution in human nature. It merely sets the necessary conditions for a reasonable evolution in human understanding.

In the end, Christmas reminds us that there is only one redeemer. And whether the specific moment of history in which we are now living will mark an evolution or a devolution in human understanding will be determined by the extent to which we are willing to allow that redemptive power to both break us down and build us up. That revolution, inspired by grace, is the reality upon which the success of the American revolution ultimately relies. In fact, it is the only revolution truly worthy of the name.

•••

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Matt Malone, S.J.
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AP photo

Journalists work on election night in Washington, D.C., Nov. 8, 1938.

Cover: The Rev. Emil Joseph Kapaun, a U.S. Army chaplain who died in a North Korean prisoner of war camp, is pictured celebrating Mass in South Korea in October 1950.

CNS photo/courtesy U.S. Army medic Raymond Skeehan

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Readers react to the 2020 election

From the beginning of his campaign, former Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. framed his quest for the White House as “a battle for the soul of the nation.” Mr. Biden and his supporters won that battle, with voters electing him the nation’s 46th president, according to projections from the Associated Press and other media outlets. Mr. Biden will be just the second Catholic to hold the presidency at a time when the Catholic Church in the United States, like the nation more broadly, remains bitterly divided. The following is a curated selection of online reader comments from our coverage of the election results.

I have noticed that the world seems a much calmer place since Trump lost the presidency. The media is no longer rushing to cover his every droning utterance and belligerent tweet. He is slowly fading away from the spotlight that he so craves. Of course, he will not leave quietly and will stridently seek the attention that his ego demands. He has no cause for worry. He will never be forgotten because the damage he has done to our body politic will remain as his legacy long after he has left office.

L. Kenney

Joe Biden is such an inspiration! He has endured unfathomable tragedy, yet he is unbowed and unbroken. He survived with his faith unshaken and his compassion unscathed. We will soon have a president who attends Mass regularly and who always carries a rosary.

Meggie Graham

I did not vote for Donald Trump in 2016 or this year. As a Catholic, I could not do so in good conscience. As a Catholic, I also could not, in good conscience, vote for Joe Biden this year. Unborn human life is the most dehumanized life in the United States today. It is time for the euphemisms about what abortion is, and what it does to unborn human lives, to stop. If Joe Biden cared nearly as much for the voiceless as he claims, then he would be speaking up for the most voiceless—unborn humans.

Christopher Lake

On Biden’s mandate: In 2016, Trump campaigned against the Democrats, against the media, against big business and against his own party—and won. In the subsequent four years, Trump has been accused of every possible misconduct and crime. Nothing stuck! Normal people would have been crushed multiple times in similar

circumstances. Trump increased his popularity. I do not see victory here. I see half the population would rather have someone like Trump than anyone the Democrats (or the Republicans) could offer, even after four years of vicious media campaign. Unless the real problems get addressed, things will only get worse.

Anthony P.

But we disagree about what the “real” problems are. And what we disagree about most of all is the distinction between political and moral problems. We often try to solve moral problems by offering political solutions and political problems by offering moral solutions. We resort to politics and the potential for the power of the state, when we can’t face the disgrace of our total failure with moral persuasion.

Charles Erlinger

We need to move forward with the goal of reducing the animosity toward those with whom we do not agree politically. One factor that was left out is that a large number of Americans believe news sources that are simply not factual. We cannot work together as a nation if we have propaganda sources swaying the beliefs of half of our nation.

Lisa Weber

To me the first step in healing is a return to the pre-eminence of truth and facts. We can rightfully have different and valid ideas of how problems should be addressed; we face complex issues that have multiple solutions and competing priorities. But we cannot exist in different realities in different worlds of our own beliefs, many based on lies, and build a bridge over that divide. The path to a moderate, respectful, civil political dialogue starts with facts and truth.

Charles Monsen



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A Time to Heal

Joseph R. Biden Jr. has been elected the 46th president of the United States. The result is a personal triumph for the former vice president and U.S. senator, who overcame setbacks and family tragedy to gain the prize he had long sought. Mr. Biden is only the second Roman Catholic to win the White House. The fact that Mr. Biden's faith was a matter of contention mainly among Catholics and was not an impediment to his election is itself a victory for the American experiment and owes much to the pioneering efforts of the previous Catholic candidates, especially Al Smith and John F. Kennedy.

But the ultimate winner of the 2020 presidential election is the American people, who have countered a unique threat to the constitutional order and rid themselves of someone singularly ill-suited for the office of president. This is a victory for the entire country, and the men and women who won office must now govern for the entire country. The national Democratic sweep that many predicted has not materialized. Democrats will have fewer seats in the new House of Representatives, while the outcome in the Senate remains uncertain. Yet a clear majority of American voters have given Mr. Biden a mandate: to repair the nation's social fabric, to bind up the nation's wounds and to bring us together as one nation. It is not a mandate to legislate a radical new order, pack the U.S. Supreme Court or pursue an extreme pro-choice agenda. Many Republicans and independents have voted for country over party. Mr. Biden and his Democratic colleagues must govern with that in mind.

The last four years have damaged the American system. We are a

wounded people, struggling to meet the twin threats of the pandemic and the ensuing economic crisis. No doubt urgent and creative measures are required. But Americans should also step back and take stock. Scripture tells us that "for everything there is a season, a time for every activity under heaven." President-elect Biden referred to this very Scripture in the final days of his campaign. "The Bible tells us that there is a time to break down and a time to build up—and a time to heal," he told his supporters in Warm Springs, Ga. "This is that time. God and history have called us to this moment and to this mission."

It is a time to heal.

In healing the wounds of the body politic, every citizen must play his or her part. In the aftermath of this bitterly contested election, Americans should reach out to their neighbors, not to gloat or commiserate but to recall their common humanity and shared citizenship; remembering, as the late Robert F. Kennedy said, "that those who live with us are our brothers, that they share with us the same short moment of life.... Surely we can learn, at least, to look at those around us as fellow men and surely we can begin to work a little harder to bind up the wounds among us and to become in our hearts brothers and countrymen once again."

The work of healing is also the work of social justice. Now is the time to heed the command of Isaiah "to undo the heavy burdens and let the oppressed go free"; to reach out to the poor, the elderly, the indigent, the stranger, to all those on the peripheries of our national life. The country's reckoning with its history of racist oppression must also continue. Yet these efforts must be genuine encounters,

however difficult or painful, rather than brute confrontations. Only the former can lead to healing. "Authentic social dialogue," Pope Francis wrote in "Fratelli Tutti," "involves the ability to respect the other's point of view and to admit that it may include legitimate convictions and concerns."

The nation's political leaders must meet the challenge, too. While Democrats cannot and should not seize the moment to pursue a radical legislative agenda, Republicans should not resort to their previous strategy of legislative obstruction, opposing everything a Democratic president proposes simply because he proposes it.

The American people deserve leaders as open-minded and willing to work together as they are. "The challenges facing us today," Pope Francis said in his address to the U.S. Congress in 2015, "call for a renewal of that spirit of cooperation, which has accomplished so much good throughout the history of the United States. The complexity, the gravity and the urgency of these challenges demand that we pool our resources and talents, and resolve to support one another, with respect for our differences and our convictions of conscience."

Much will depend on the judgment of the president-elect. Mr. Biden: The country needs you to lead. America has spent four years with a leader who governed for only 46 percent of the country. You will oppose some Republicans, surely, but you should appoint some, too. For you must make good on your promise to "be a president for all Americans" and govern, in the words of Abraham Lincoln, "with malice toward none; with charity for all."

It is a time to heal.

It is a time for greatness.

The McCarrick Report Needed a Lay Board

The release by the Vatican Secretary of State of the “McCarrick Report” on Nov. 10 was a signal moment for the Catholic Church, an unprecedented reckoning with corporate and personal failings on an issue where honesty and transparency have too often taken a back seat to self-preservation. The U.S. church—from bishops and cardinals all the way to the folks in the pews—waited two long years for this account of who knew what and when; some of Mr. McCarrick’s victims have waited decades longer. It is important to recognize their suffering and the courage they have shown in persevering in the quest for truth and justice.

While it conducted an extensive internal investigation, the Vatican never followed through on the U.S. bishops’ request for a lay board in 2018. As a result, areas of the report that seem opaque or defensive can cause readers (and certainly reporters) to wonder if every conclusion in the report’s 400-plus pages is offering a full disclosure of what Vatican officials knew.

If and when the church has to undergo a terrible process like this again, those in charge of the reporting should not be those with the most at stake in the reputation of the institution. There are, after all, more than a billion lay Catholics who care deeply about the protection of children and vulnerable adults.

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The ‘secret death penalty’ of life imprisonment is against Catholic teaching

Over 200,000 inmates in U.S. prisons can expect to die there, but only 2,620 of them are on death row. The rest are sentenced either to life in prison—over 50,000 of them without the possibility of parole—or to terms long enough to be “virtual” life sentences, according to the advocacy group The Sentencing Project.

Life imprisonment is a “secret death penalty,” as Pope Francis wrote in his recent encyclical “Fratelli Tutti” (No. 268). While there has been much media coverage of the pope’s emphasis that the death penalty is incompatible with Catholic teaching, we should not overlook his writing on life imprisonment. “Fratelli Tutti” offers a holistic view of legal punishment, calling it “part of a process of healing and reintegration into society” (No. 266). The overuse of the life sentence—a permanent exclusion from society—should gravely concern U.S. Catholics.

There are several reasons for the dramatic rise in the number of prisoners in the United States with life sentences. Tough-on-crime laws from the late 20th century have led to an increased prison population today. Habitual offender laws, like California’s “three strikes” law, have imposed more life sentences for comparatively minor crimes. And “truth-in-sentencing” laws keep more prisoners behind bars for what are effectively life terms by reducing or eliminating parole and early release.

In criminology and criminal law, sentencing is largely thought to have four purposes: retribution, rehabilitation, deterrence and incapacitation. A retributive punishment can be justified as a kind of moral vengeance, but that is exactly what Pope Francis warns against. In “Fratelli Tutti,”

he quotes St. Augustine, who told a judge sentencing the murderers of two priests, “Do not let the atrocity of their sins feed a desire for vengeance, but desire instead to heal the wounds which those deeds have inflicted on their souls” (No. 265).

As for rehabilitation, punishment should equip an offender to re-enter society and not offend again. But, again, a life sentence does not admit the possibility of rehabilitation, for the offender is never to re-enter society.

Deterrence is the extent to which the sentence might make the offender and others think twice about committing crimes in the future. A life sentence fits the logic that the harshest penalties should be the most effective in preventing crime. But a study from the National Academy of Sciences suggests that this is not the case, noting, “From 1972 to 2012, the U.S. incarceration rate quadrupled as America’s courts began handing out longer sentences.” The study’s authors write that the certainty and speed of imposing punishment matter much more in deterring crime than does the severity of sentences.

Of course, life sentences could remain necessary in the most heinous cases to incapacitate offenders deemed otherwise likely to cause further harm in the community. This does not have to be lifelong incapacitation, though, especially given the aging prison population in the United States and the attendant health care costs. Recidivism among elderly prisoners released from custody is astonishingly low—3 percent, according to one study by the Justice Policy Institute. And many life-sentenced prisoners in the United States were not locked

away for crimes that make them a continued danger to the community. For example, on Oct. 15, Fair Wayne Bryant was released from a Louisiana prison where he was serving a life sentence for the theft of hedge clippers in 1997. (Mr. Bryant had four previous felony convictions, but his only violent crime, attempted armed robbery, had occurred 18 years before he was sentenced to life imprisonment.)

In remarks to Italian prison guards last year, Pope Francis suggested that all prisoners deserve the “right to hope” and said, “If you close hope in a cell, there is no future for society.” The revocation of hope not only harms those we incarcerate; it is also a sign of a morally deficient society. When we see our fellow citizens as irrevocably damned by their crimes, we close off the possibility that they might be drawn to penitence and rehabilitation. The salvific death and resurrection of Jesus Christ at the center of our faith call us to be eternally hopeful that all of us might be saved. When we see others as beyond hope, we reject the universality of what we believe.

“Fratelli Tutti” is dedicated, in the pope’s words, to “fraternity and social friendship.” When we permanently sever the bonds of social friendship by imprisoning people for the rest of their lives, we demean our own hope in repentance and salvation. “Fratelli Tutti” is a clarion call for Catholics to work toward ending the widespread use of this secret death penalty.

Nicholas Goldrosen is a graduate student at the Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge, England.

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O littler town of Bethlehem?

A Palestinian Christian enclave's 'slow strangulation' on the West Bank

By Judith Sudilovsky

At the tail end of the summer harvest season, Nakleh Abu Eid, 80, walked through what remained of his fruit orchard in the Al Makhroun area of the largely Palestinian Christian village of Beit Jala, filling a basket with figs and green grapes.

From the porch of the small stone cottage used during harvests, Mr. Abu Eid, a member of the Greek Orthodox Church, can look out in front of him and see the Israeli settlement of Har Gilo—considered by Israel a neighborhood of Jerusalem. Out back, construction work on the tunnel road that will connect Jerusalem and settlements in the Bethlehem area continues, and beyond that are more settlements in the Southern Hebron area.

Before much of the land around him was confiscated for settlement construction and the tunnel road, Mr. Abu Eid had almost four acres of agricultural land in the valley. Now he has only one.

Located on the outer edge of the Christian village of Beit Jala and about four miles northeast of the Old City of Bethlehem, Al Makhroun is one of the few remaining green

spaces left in the Bethlehem core area for agriculture and outdoor recreational activities.

U.S.-backed normalization agreements, which include a suspension of Israeli annexation of parts of the West Bank, were signed in mid-September between Israel and the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain. But the threat of more settlement expansion along the northern, southern and eastern borders of the Bethlehem core area remains a constant worry for local residents.

According to the Oslo Accords, Israel retains control over security and land management in Area C, which constitutes about 60 percent of West Bank territory, where Mr. Abu Eid's orchard is located. He feels his land is under constant threat of confiscation by Israel.

"We live in a situation of chronic alertness, of worrying about what will happen next," Mr. Abu Eid said. "You can't build anything here. You can only come to take your fruit."

While the U.A.E.-Bahrain agreements were being touted as political breakthroughs, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel and his political rival Benny Gantz



Photo by Judith Sudilovsky

Palestinian farmer Nakleh Abu Eid

were jousting for political support from Israeli settlers, each holding out the promise of thousands more housing units for West Bank settlers.

Some of those new units will be constructed not far from Mr. Abu Eid's fruit orchard just out of sight in the south, over another hill in the encroaching Israeli settlement of Efrat, which is part of the Gush Etzion settlement block.

After a 20-year legal battle, Efrat was given the go-ahead in May by the Israeli Civil Administration to expand with 7,000 more units in a new, noncontiguous "neighborhood," known as Givat Eitam, on about 300 acres of land on a barren hill where Palestinian farmers have been farming for generations.

If implemented, this construction plan would cut off 14 southern West Bank villages from their natural connection with Bethlehem and also cut Bethlehem off from the main highway to the southern West Bank. It would

also prevent the city's growth in the only direction not yet blocked by Israeli settlements or highways.

The Bethlehem core area is already hemmed in to the north by the Gilo, Har Gilo and Har Homa semicircle of settlements. The Israeli civil rights group Ir Amim reported in May that the Jerusalem District Committee gave final approval for the construction of 2,000 units in Har Homa-E. That construction would create a contiguous Israeli settlement block that would completely cut off the traditional contact between the Bethlehem area's northern border and East Jerusalem.

"In the Bethlehem area, Israeli settlements serve the key objective of severing the geographic contiguity between Bethlehem and Jerusalem," said Dalia Qumsieh, the founder and director of the Balasan Initiative for Human Rights.

The most endangered areas in the Bethlehem core are the Cremisan and Al Makhroul valleys, said Ms. Qumsieh. Referred to as the green lungs of the Bethlehem core area, both valleys are surrounded by Israeli settlements and the annexation wall, she said. They have been earmarked by

President Donald Trump's "Deal of the Century" for annexation by Israel, she added.

"Their annexation by Israel would serve a significant blow to the Palestinian Christian presence in its homeland," said Ms. Qumsieh. "What we know from experience is that loss of land is not only loss of livelihood, but also a loss of hope for the future and is normally a key factor of the decision in favor of emigration."

In addition, along the eastern border, Bethlehem is blocked by the Israeli settlements of Tekoa and Nokdim, which also wall the area off from Jerusalem. From the west the separation fence and the Tunnel Highway connecting Gush Etzion settlements to Jerusalem encircles Bethlehem, leaving the southern area including Al Makhroul the only open border and the only place Bethlehem can develop.

That worries Mayor Anton Salman Anton of Bethlehem. Looking down the road four or five years from now, he sees no place where his city will be able to expand to account for the natural growth of its population. There will be no green area for the residents, who will be blocked in from all sides, to enjoy, he said.

He fears more Palestinian emigration will result. People leave, he said, because of a combination of economic, social and professional difficulties. But, he adds, many leave because they want freedom of movement, to live where they do not have to run through a gauntlet of settlements, checkpoints, roadblocks and permit requirements just to move from one city to another.

Israel has been intent on encircling Bethlehem with strategically located settlements since the Six-Day War in 1967, said Jad Isaac, general director of the Applied Research Institute-Jerusalem, based in Bethlehem. Now it is aiming to connect the west and east Gush Etzion settlements, preventing any possibility for the natural expansion of Bethlehem, leaving the area "one big prison."

"There has been a slow strangulation of Bethlehem, but it has increased over the past few years since Trump came into power," Dr. Isaac said. "They are just filling in the gaps."

Judith Sudilovsky, a correspondent for Catholic News Service, contributes from Jerusalem.
Twitter: @jsudireports.

Pandemic Accounting

Need is up, charitable giving is down as Covid-19 crisis continues

At the same time that the Covid-19 crisis has driven up the need for direct services from charities, it has depressed the dollar amounts in donations they are likely to receive. That pandemic inversion was described by Deacon Steve Schumer, president and C.E.O. of Buffalo Catholic Charities, in an interview with The Buffalo News last May. His agency’s local fundraising ran substantially below 2019 figures last spring, he said, but “when the rest of the economy takes a nosedive, that’s the time when entities like Catholic Charities have to step forward.”

In 2019, Americans donated almost \$450 billion to charity—the second highest annual amount in U.S. history. But just a few months later, as the pandemic wreaked havoc on families and the economy, the impact of Covid-19 was becoming clear. Gallup found that a 21st-century low of 73 percent of U.S. adults said they were donating to religious and other charities in 2020, beating the polling organization’s previous low of 79 percent during the Great Recession in 2009.

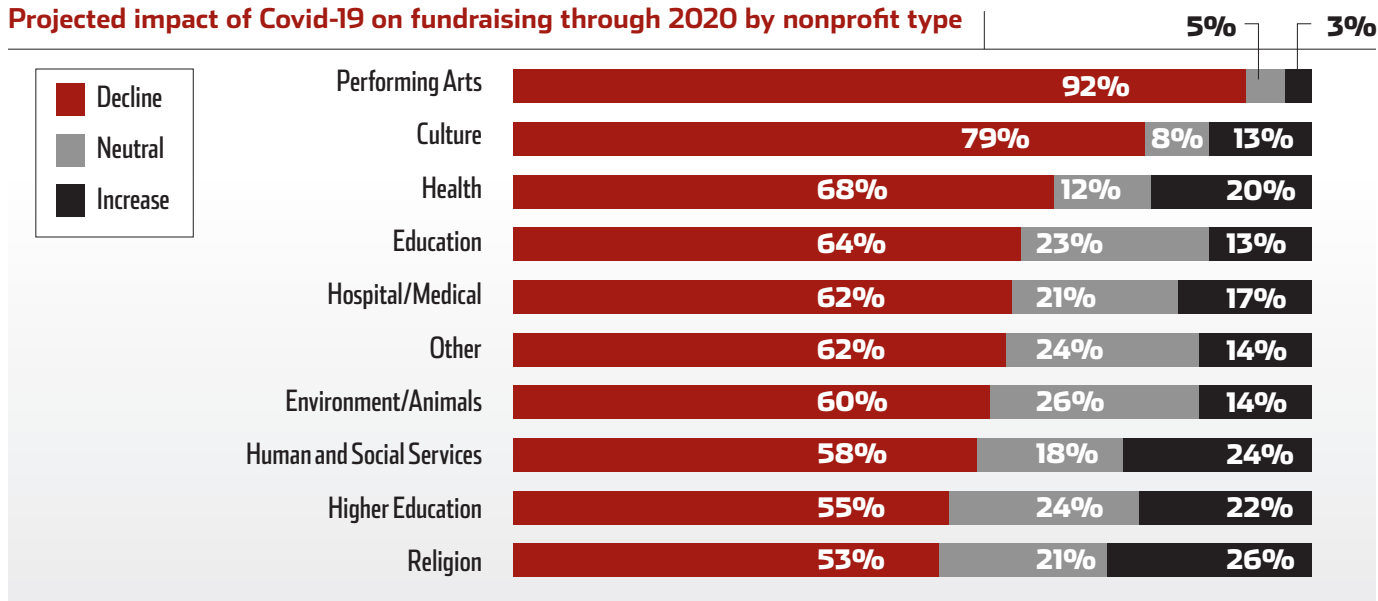
According to Gallup, 30 percent of Americans in April

reported direct financial harm because of the crisis, throwing into doubt their ability to keep giving this year. Performing arts, culture and health care industries have reported the greatest declines in donor support, while human and social services have been more likely to report increases in giving. In more positive news, Gallup also found that those arguably in the best position to donate to charities, households in upper-income brackets, planned to give more in 2020. And an online survey of donors to faith-based nonprofits who had given \$1,000 or more in 2018 or 2019 found that 85 percent plan to give as much or more this year.

As has been the case in past years, religiously affiliated households are more likely to engage in charitable giving, but parish fundraising, hampered by closed churches and tele-Mass celebrations, has taken a hit. By November, 64 percent of U.S. parishes had reported that they received a federal Paycheck Protection Program loan to respond to payroll shortfalls caused by a drop in giving.

Molly Cahill, *O’Hare media fellow*. Twitter: @MollyKCahill.

Projected impact of Covid-19 on fundraising through 2020 by nonprofit type



► **Sixty-two percent of religious households** give to charities of any kind, according to a 2017 study, compared with 46 percent of households with no religious affiliation.

► **Impact of Covid-19 on fundraising waning?** In May, 63% of nonprofits reported that donations were decreasing and 14% reported increases. By June, 53% were reporting donation declines and 28% reported increases.

► By Aug. 26, **giving to charities responding to the Covid-19 crisis was almost \$12 billion.**

► **Going mobile?** Giving by mobile devices has increased from 9% in 2014 to 26% in 2019.

► **85% of major donors** said they plan to maintain or increase support of faith-based charities this year; only 8% planned to shift donations to other causes or nonprofits because of the pandemic.



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2 years old

3 years old

4 years old

5 years old

7 years old

In Warsaw, Poland, Pawel Szamburski joins a protest against violence that targeted the L.G.B.T. community.

Pope Francis throws a lifeline to L.G.B.T. Catholics around the world

Janine Scott-dos Santos has prayed over the possibility of legalizing her relationship with her longtime partner. South Africa, where Ms. Scott-dos Santos lives with her partner and their 8-year-old son, legalized same-sex marriage in 2006. But it is only recently that public attitudes have begun to shift there toward the acceptance of L.G.B.T. people.

Ms. Scott-dos Santos said her decision to make a civil commitment was exactly for the reasons cited by the pope—“to have our legal rights as a family protected.” Ms. Scott-dos Santos was referring to clips from “Francesco,” a documentary released in October, that show Pope Francis urging families to accept their L.G.B.T. members and endorsing the idea of civil protections for same-sex couples—though the pope was careful not to endorse same-sex marriage.

“I’m not naïve enough to believe that because the pope has said this, that it’s going to change the minds of Catholics,” she said. “But I do think that this is a step in the right direction.”

The Rev. Bryan Massingale, a theologian at Fordham University, described the pope’s comments as “huge for a global church where homosexuality is still outlawed in over 70 countries and punishable by death in five.”

“It definitely will save lives, especially in countries where there is active persecution of L.G.B.T.Q. people,” added Father Massingale. He said the pope’s recently publicized comments were consistent with his pastoral approach, “putting the focus on gay and lesbian persons, not seeing them as ‘walking sex acts.’”

About half the population in Poland believe homosexuality should not be accepted by society, according to the Pew Research Center, and Catholic leaders there have been vocal against L.G.B.T. civil rights. The L.G.B.T. activist Grzegorz Okrent said in an email to **America** that he did not anticipate much improvement in “the thinking and actions of the Catholic Church and the episcopate.” But, he add-

ed, as a gay man he is “grateful to Pope Francis for these words, as I believe are the majority of L.G.B.T.Q. people in Poland.”

L.G.B.T. Catholics in sub-Saharan Africa, home to a large and growing population of Catholics, say the pope’s words could help when it comes to societal acceptance. Brian Okollan, the head of Rainbow Catholics Kenya and a former board member of the Global Network of Rainbow Catholics, told **America** that L.G.B.T. people rank among “the most discriminated communities in the church.”

And while he welcomes the pope’s words, he wonders if church leaders in Kenya will be receptive to the softer tone on L.G.B.T. issues. The pope’s message is good, he said, “but if a message falls on infertile ground, nothing will grow.”

Ssenfuka Joanita Warry called the pope’s message a “bombshell.” Ms. Warry, who leads Faithful Catholic Souls Uganda, a group of L.G.B.T. Catholics, said a focus on acceptance was more important than debates about changing the church’s teaching on same-sex relationships.

“Remember, the most important issue there is love,” she said. L.G.B.T. people “hold the blood of that family, so they belong.... If you think they are sinners, it’s not your duty to judge the sinners.”

Ms. Warry said the pope’s words have already made an impact on her. He has identified Catholic culture with “acceptance and inclusion of everyone, regardless of their sexual orientation and gender identity,” she said. “I think he’s given me a reason for not changing my religion or going to any other church. It gives me courage.”

Michael J. O’Loughlin, *national correspondent*.
Twitter: @MikeOLoughlin.

Ricardo da Silva, S.J., *associate editor*.
Twitter: @ricdssj.



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Above, from left: Sister Alice Garcia, SSCJ, 91; Brother Martin Gonzales, OCSO, 95; Sister Theresa McGrath, CCVI, 86; Sister Anne Cecile Muldoon, OSU, 93; Abbot Emeritus Peter Eberle, OSB, 79.
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Pro-life supporters pray during a protest outside the local congress in Oaxaca, Mexico, in 2019.

The Catholic Church in Latin America is losing control of the pro-life movement

Can it win it back?

Jesusito de mi vida...
¡Dile a mi mamá que
quiero nacer!
¡a mi no me oye!
y ¡yo la quiero tanto!



Photo: Jorge Luis Plata / Reuters

Feminist social movements have been mobilizing to decriminalize abortion in Latin American nations in recent years, provoking clashes with pro-life movements and the Catholic Church. Now new social actors, especially evangelical Protestant groups and emerging right-wing movements in the region, have joined the debate on the contentious issue.

The Catholic Church has surrendered the leading role it once had in the cultural dialogue over abortion, according to Franciso Borba Ribeiro Neto, the director of the Pontifical Catholic University's Center of Faith and Culture in São Paulo, Brazil. "Catholics in general have adopted a stern condemnation of abortion over the past 40 years," he said.

But the church's position did not allow for nuance, allowing left-wing movements some success in advocating for liberalization of abortion laws. As the cultural influence of Catholic groups that defended life diminished, new pro-life organizations, not connected to the church, emerged.

The Peruvian group *Con Mis Hijos No Se Metas* ("Don't Mess With My Children") and the Ecuadorian umbrella movement *Consejo de Resistencia Fe, Vida y Familia* ("Council of Resistance Faith, Life and Family"), among others, have been active in campaigns against abortion, same-sex marriage and "gender ideology" in schools.

Church officials and cultural commentators say these new protagonists in the debate have goals that are focused as much on right-wing political success as they are on pro-life principles.

"Now there's a big orchestration of Christian churches taking part in the debate on sexual and women's reproductive rights, sometimes leading to openly political movements," said Aura Cuasapud, legal advisor of the Colombian branch of Catholics for the Right to Choose, an organization inspired by Catholics for Choice in the United States but that operates autonomously in Latin America. "Many of those groups are equipped with arguments that come from the United States."

In the Dominican Republic, the Most Rev. Victor Masalles, bishop of Baní, agrees that the civic discussion of abortion has been transformed by such movements, and he worries that some in the church could unwittingly be drawn into political entanglements. "There's certainly a pro-Trump movement of fundamentalist nature, so the left wing has been accusing us of being far-right-wingers," he lamented.

Evangelical Protestant organizations have been trying to "take advantage" of the Catholic Church, said Bishop Masalles. "We have a [tactical] unity with them during pro-life campaigns, but they want to gain ground on us," he told *America*.

In Ecuador, rather than perceiving new voices on the issue as a threat, the Catholic Church has aligned itself with a broader pro-life coalition that includes evangelicals. "We have exclusively Catholic initiatives that have led programs in defense of life and family for years. But at times we open space for movements of our evangelical brothers. We know that each one of us has a unique way of defending life," Archbishop Luis Herrera of Guayaquil said.

The church in Latin America missed an opportunity early on to promote a civic discussion of women's rights and protection, but that remains one possible way to resume a lead role in the pro-life struggle, said Mr. Ribeiro Neto.

"The church must show solidarity with pregnant women in crisis," he said. "There are movements throughout Latin America to support women and avoid abortion, with programs that include adoption, foster care and all kinds of help."

By stressing such concrete actions in support of pregnant women, he said, the church could avoid the U.S.-style politicization of abortion that now haunts the pro-life movement in Latin America, allowing the church to propose its own views on how to deal with unplanned pregnancies.

Eduardo Campos Lima contributes from São Paulo, Brazil.



Protest against police brutality grows into broad show of discontent in Nigeria

AP Photo/Sunday Alamba
Police officers stop and search a bus carrying passengers around Lekki toll gate in Lagos on Oct. 23.

At the Lekki toll gate in Lagos on Oct. 20, thousands of peaceful demonstrators stood their ground, demanding police reform, singing the national anthem and hoisting Nigeria's green-white flag. But, as soldiers warned protesters that day, the national flag is not bulletproof.

"One nation bound in freedom, peace and unity," the protesters sang before the soldiers opened fire, killing more than 10 demonstrators, according to multiple eyewitness accounts.

The protests began on Oct. 7 after the extrajudicial killing of a Nigerian youth at the hands of the detested Special Anti-Robbery Squad was caught on video and quickly went viral. The SARS police unit has become notorious for illegal arrests, torture, extortion, sexual violence and the killing of young Nigerians. The unit is alleged to operate secret torture camps and detention facilities.

Protestors using #EndSARS as a social media hashtag took to the streets, demanding that SARS be disbanded and calling for other police reforms, the prosecution of officers who have killed unarmed Nigerians and compensation for the families of victims. But the demands of the demonstrators have quickly expanded into a broad critique of government corruption, incompetence and impunity as human rights abuses and economic malaise continue in Nigeria.

The Archdiocese of Lagos said in a statement released on Oct. 17 that the problems confronting the nation are clearly more fundamental "than the replacement of one police unit." It called for police reforms and dialogue instead of a continued crackdown on the demonstrators. "We believe that a sincere and transparent response to the demands of the young people would go a long way in resolving the present impasse."

Since the demonstrations began, mostly peaceful protestors have endured live fire, tear gas and water cannons deployed by security forces. According to Amnesty International, more than 56 people have been killed by securi-

ty forces so far. The government acknowledged on Oct. 23 that 69 people, mainly civilians but also police officers and soldiers, have died.

The North-West Africa Province of the Society of Jesus called on the government to "institute sincere reforms in the criminal justice system to guarantee accountability, protection of citizens' rights, fairness, and access to justice for all on the basis of equality." The province said it condemns "the use of force and intimidation by security personnel," adding that "peaceful protest is a fundamental right of every Nigerian."

Aniedi Okure, O.P., the executive director of the African Faith and Justice Network, a Catholic nonprofit organization based in Washington, said the protest against police brutality has triggered attention to other issues that affect Nigerians daily. Their lives have been made miserable by the failure of Nigeria's leaders, he said, who have "mortgaged the future of young Nigerians."

In local parishes, priests and bishops have used their homilies to talk about the protest and support an end to police brutality. Mass was held on the protest ground, and sisters and seminarians helped distribute holy communion to protesters.

"The church realizes that this is more than just a protest," Father Okure said. "The church recognizes that the government has failed to protect the citizens and to provide the basic infrastructure to enable citizens and make the society a better place to live."

Father Okure said security officials responsible for killing peaceful protesters should be arrested and prosecuted. "Human life is sacred as God's creation," he said. "The church is against the violation of human rights or taking life because it is only God who gives life."

Patrick Egwu writes from Johannesburg, South Africa.
Twitter: @PatrickEgwu6.



The 'McCarrick Report' and Pope John Paul II: Confronting a saint's complex legacy

The release of the “McCarrick Report” by the Vatican on Nov. 10 provided significant information about Theodore McCarrick’s abuse of minors and seminarians, as well as a long and shameful history of church leaders ignoring complaints and concerns about Mr. McCarrick. It also raised inevitable questions of who knew what and when, including three popes: John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Pope Francis. John Paul II was canonized by Pope Francis in 2014, less than 10 years after his death.

The Vatican report largely avoids blaming Pope Francis and Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI for the lack of oversight and restrictions on Mr. McCarrick, noting that both assumed that their predecessor, John Paul II, had determined that Mr. McCarrick was not guilty of any crimes. In the case of John Paul II, the report argues that he was naturally suspicious of accusations of sexual misconduct against bishops because he had seen similar tactics used in his native Poland under Soviet rule.

According to the report, despite numerous attempts to determine the nature of Mr. McCarrick’s crimes, no investigation ever resulted in any significant action. In 1999, when John Paul II was considering making Mr. McCarrick the archbishop of Washington, Cardinal John O’Connor of New York wrote to express his misgivings, saying he felt “a grave obligation” to caution against appointing Mr. McCarrick because of an anonymous accusation that Mr. McCarrick

had abused a minor, rumors of adult affairs with other priests and an allegation that Mr. McCarrick behaved inappropriately around seminarians.

But because the allegation of sexual abuse of a minor was made anonymously, it was ignored; similarly, the complaint about inappropriate behavior with adults was dismissed because the priest making the allegation was himself a convicted sexual abuser.

Following the report’s publication, George Weigel, the author of the best-selling biography of St. John Paul II titled *Witness to Hope*, spoke with Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York on the archbishop’s SiriusXM radio show. Mr. Weigel rejected the conclusion that St. John Paul II deserved blame for Mr. McCarrick’s rise.

“Theodore McCarrick fooled a lot of people,” Mr. Weigel said. “He fooled a lot of laypeople. He fooled the media for years. He fooled his brother bishops, and he deceived John Paul II in a way that is laid out in almost biblical fashion in this report.”

For many Catholics, however, an important question remains: How did this behavior go unchecked for so many years? How did Mr. McCarrick rise so far despite persistent rumors of misconduct? And what does his rise say about the oversight exercised by John Paul II? Is it enough simply to say “the pope didn’t believe the rumors”?

Most historians acknowledge that John Paul II was not



CNS photo/Vincenzo Pinto, Reuters

Theodore McCarrick greets Pope John Paul II after receiving his red cardinal's biretta during a consistory ceremony in St. Peter's Square on Feb. 21, 2001.

strong on efforts to weed out sexual abusers from the ranks of the clergy. And the financial largesse of Mr. McCarrick creates the unfortunate appearance that the Vatican had an ulterior motive for ignoring rumors swirling around him. After being named archbishop of Washington, for example, he gave more than \$600,000 to Vatican officials and fellow bishops. The Vatican report strongly denies any influence, but among the recipients of Mr. McCarrick's generosity were Popes John Paul II (\$90,000) and Benedict XVI (\$291,000). Those donations appear to have been redirected to papal charities.

The Catholic Church, of course, does not teach that the saints were perfect in life. Some took serious detours on the path to sainthood. St. Ignatius Loyola killed a man in a duel; millions of American Catholics hope for the canonization of Dorothy Day, a person revered for her Christian witness, who had had an abortion. At the same time, the "McCarrick Report" and the horrific damage done to innocents described in detail in its 461 pages have become a stain on the legacy of the pope who only six years ago was named a saint.

James T. Keane, senior editor.
Twitter: @jamestkeane.



CNS photo/Vatican Media

Pope Francis meets Father Maccalli, right, and members of his delegation at the Vatican on Nov. 9.

GOODNEWS: Pope meets missionary priest freed after two-year captivity

"It was a very, very beautiful meeting. I was very emotional, especially when telling the pope what I had lived through," Pierluigi Maccalli, S.M.A., told Vatican News on Nov. 9, describing his encounter that day with Pope Francis, a month after his release from more than two years of captivity that followed his kidnapping in Niger.

Father Maccalli said he thanked the pope for his prayers. "And he answered, 'We supported you, but you supported the church.' I was speechless in front of those words. I, a little missionary, and he told me that."

Father Maccalli was serving in a parish in Bomoanga, Niger, when Islamic extremists kidnapped him in September 2018.

His fate was unknown for nearly two years, until a 23-second video was released by the terrorist group in April. Father Maccalli and three other prisoners were released on Oct. 8 as part of a prisoner swap mediated by the Mali government.

Recalling his abduction and two-year captivity, Father Maccalli said that during that time, "tears were my bread for many days and were my prayer when I didn't know what to say."

Father Maccalli said that he was moved not only by the pope's words but also by one of the pope's gestures. "When we greeted each other, I shook his hand, and he kissed my hands. I didn't expect that."

Meeting the pope, he said, felt like the "embrace of a father, this father who I carry with me in prayer every day."

"I never would have thought that a missionary who goes to the peripheries of the world would one day find himself in front of the pope who sustains the universal church," Father Maccalli said.

Junno Arocho Esteves, Catholic News Service.

INSIDE AMERICA

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EDITORS' PICKS

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Matt Malone, S.J.

What being one of the first black Tiny Tims taught me about the Incarnation

Eric T. Styles

Yes, Hallmark Christmas movies are cheesy. Here's why we still love them.

Colleen Dulle

This Christmas, unwrap a tamale

Vivian Cabrera

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The adoration of the Child Jesus is depicted in this 17th-century painting by the Dutch artist Gerard van Honthorst.

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3. "Frida," dir. by Julie Taymor and starring Selma Hayek
4. "Diane," dir. by Kent Jones and starring Mary Kay Place
5. "Amazing Grace," dir. by Michael Apted and starring Ioan Gruffudd and Romola Garai

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Zach Presutti, S.J., and a Thrive for Life participant in prayer prior to Covid-19.

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MAKING A SAINT

**A Kansas priest and his campaign
to canonize a local hero**

By Joe Drape

It took a 3-by-3-by-3-foot wooden crate crammed with 8,268 pages of documents to launch this pilgrimage from Wichita, Kan., to Rome, Italy, and—with patience—hopefully, the Gates of Heaven. Inside was the life's work of two priests separated by 57 years. The Rev. John Hotze signed the FedEx bill, then watched as the 300-pound crate was scooted onto a dolly.

He then watched the results of his scholarly work roll out the door.

It was July 2, 2011, and inside that crate was the remarkable life of the Rev. Emil Kapaun. In the previous dozen years, Father Hotze had unearthed every letter the military chaplain and war hero had written to his family and friends back in Kansas. He had unearthed copies of the sermons Father Kapaun had given from pulpits in farm parishes as well as theaters of war. Father Hotze had the notebooks Father Kapaun had filled while studying to become a Catholic priest in the 1930s. Then there was the testimony of more than 100 witnesses, from Korea to Kansas, recounting the heroics Father Kapaun had performed on the battlefield and in a prisoner-of-war camp.


But Father Hotze asked himself for the gazillionth time, “Was it enough?”

Father Hotze, 51, was a homegrown and beefy Kansan who was more comfortable in dungarees and a work shirt than the priestly uniform of black that he was sweating through on this June morning, a day that had transformed south central Kansas into a broiler. On his drive in to the office of the Diocese of Wichita that morning, he had seen the combines vibrating in the heat as the farmers hustled

The Rev. Emil Kapaun (right) helps to bring an exhausted U.S. soldier to safety during the Korean War.



Photo courtesy of the Father Kapaun Guild.



DID THIS SIMPLE KANSAS PRIEST WHO DIED A HORRIBLE DEATH IN A NORTH KOREAN PRISON CAMP AT THE AGE OF 35 REALLY BELONG AMONG THE SAINTS?

to bring the wheat in before a sudden thunderstorm could render a year's work, and hundreds of thousands of dollars of investment, into drowned stalks barely worth the pennies on the insurance claim they would have to file.

Like the farmers, Father Hotze was worried about the fruits of his own harvest—the materials sown and reaped into those boxes were off to the Vatican where the contents would be measured by the most divine of standards. The life and times of Father Emil Kapaun were about to be reviewed and challenged, picked apart and prayed over by layers of canon lawyers, Catholic cardinals and, ultimately, the pope himself.

Father Kapaun's arc from a farm boy educated in a one-room schoolhouse during the Depression to the most decorated chaplain in military history was compelling. His battlefield exploits were the stuff of adventure novels. He dodged the bullets of Chinese soldiers to rescue wounded Americans. He put them on his shoulders and carried them for days over frozen snow in subzero temperatures. In a North Korean prisoner-of-war camp, Father Kapaun kept hundreds of his fellow soldiers alive, and instilled the will to live in thousands more, by stealing food for their shriveled bodies and saying Mass and ministering to their crushed souls. When his captors decided they had had enough of the defiant priest, they removed him from the group. As he was carried away by stretcher—starved, sick and unable to stand—to die alone in a fetid death house, his fellow prisoners wept. They were Catholics and Christians, Jews and Muslims—all touched deeply by this remarkable priest. Father Kapaun astonished

them once more when he forgave his tormentors before them and asked them to forgive him.

What hung in the balance was a question far beyond this earth: Did this simple Kansas priest who died a horrible death in a North Korean prison camp at the age of 35 really belong among the saints?

Two Kansas Priests

Both priests had been forged by indecision and doubt.

Growing up in Kansas, John Hotze was a fine student and decent athlete but one who was forever adrift. He earned a business degree from Wichita State, and had done well enough to be accepted into the university's business school to pursue a master's degree. He cruised through his first year of studies but struggled in his second year to find motivation. Hotze detested sitting in a classroom and, after three straight semesters of enrolling in classes that he subsequently dropped after a few weeks, set out to find himself. Where? At first it did not matter. His brother Bill was an army sergeant stationed in Germany, which was reason enough for Hotze to spend some time there and traveling through Europe.

When his money ran out and his curiosity needed recharging, Hotze returned to Wichita to work for his sister Mary, who had a successful business creating retail and holiday displays. It earned him plenty of walking-around money, but Hotze had this nagging feeling that God had something more planned for him.

The Hotzes were practicing Catholics, but were by no means fanatics. They went to Mass as a family on Sundays and abstained from meat on Ash Wednesday and Fridays during the Lenten season, but otherwise offered no display of public devoutness. All John Hotze knew about religious vocations was what he had heard one Sunday each year when a diocesan priest took the pulpit at his parish to recruit more clergy.

Did Hotze feel a calling from God? Did he possess a vocation? He had no idea. But he was 28 and lost. Entering Mount Saint Mary's Seminary in Emmitsburg, Md., did not seem like the dumbest idea in the world. He figured either it would last only a few weeks before he tired of yet another school or God would tell him what to do.

Five years later, in 1993, John Hotze was ordained. His first assignment was at All Saints Parish in Wichita, the same church he grew up in and where the Hotze family spent their Sundays. He was at home for two years before being reassigned to St. John Nepomucene in Pilsen, Kan., where Father Kapaun had not only grown up but had also once been the pastor. Father Hotze had heard the stories

of Father Kapaun's virtue and valor—most people in these parts of Kansas had. Father Hotze's mother had kept a prayer card tucked in a corner of the bathroom mirror depicting Father Kapaun, and the family asked often for his help when a crisis was upon them.

Father Hotze had prayed to Father Kapaun often while in university and seminary, asking him to intercede when he grew bored and restless and wanted to drop out. Father Hotze had not only finally finished what he started, but now he also had a flock who looked to him for guidance. His superiors in the chancery—the home office—soon recognized that Father Hotze might have more to offer the diocese. He was a bright guy with a burning curiosity as well as a nice touch with ordinary people. Father Hotze, then 35, also had maturity and worldliness by virtue of being a seeker who was late to his calling. Bishop Eugene Gerber advised Father Hotze to go to the Catholic University of America in Washington, where he could pursue a degree in canon law, which is the highly specialized, some say Byzantine, legal system that creates and enforces the laws of the Roman Catholic Church. Byzantine or not, canon law is part of the business of diocesan and parish affairs: Someone in the Wichita area needed to know how to interpret and apply its rules.

Father Hotze was not sure why a priest perfectly happy serving farm communities needed an advanced degree, but he tucked the frayed Father Kapaun prayer card of his mother's into his black suit coat and headed to Washington.

Over the next two years, both Father Kapaun and that prayer card got a workout, never more so than on the days leading to his final test. Father Hotze needed to pass a Spanish exam. He had already taken the translation test twice before; he had flamed out. So Father Hotze prayed hard to Father Kapaun, as did his classmates who knew of his devotion to the Kansas chaplain.

Father Hotze did his best and turned in his test to the instructor. His academic fate was now in God's hands. He headed out to join his classmates for a beer at happy hour in their favorite saloon to celebrate their shared academic achievement. Father Hotze did not get far. Monsignor Green, the head of the language department, caught him on the steps of the building and asked for a word.

"Are you going on for a Ph.D.?" the professor asked. "No," said Father Hotze, "This is it for me." The professor narrowed his eyes.

"Good," the monsignor said. "You got maybe two translations right, but I'm going to pass you. Don't ever let me see you back here again."



U.S. Army chaplain Rev. Emil Kapaun, who died on May 23, 1951, serving prisoners of war during the Korean War, in an undated portrait.


Servant of God

Father Hotze was awarded his degree and returned to Kansas. He was sent to Newton, a town of no more than 19,000, north of Wichita, to become the pastor at Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish. For four years, no one ever asked him a single question about canon law.

In the fall of 2001, however, Father Hotze was summoned to the chancery by Bishop Thomas Olmsted, who had just been elevated to the rank of bishop and was overseeing a diocese for the first time. Bishop Olmsted asked Father Hotze what he knew about Father Kapaun.

Father Hotze told him about his deep devotion to the priest, and they shared a laugh at how Father Kapaun had interceded in his Spanish test. Bishop Olmsted was contemplating a campaign to have the hero of the Kansas plains presented to the Vatican's Congregation for the Causes of Saints to be considered for sainthood. He had a job for Father Hotze in the cause of Father Kapaun, one with a fancy title: Episcopal Delegate.

Bishop Olmsted was not the first to champion Father



THE AVERAGE COST OF A CAUSE FOR SAINTHOOD WAS HALF A MILLION DOLLARS. THE BILLABLE HOURS OF MR. AMBROSI WOULD EAT UP MUCH OF THAT.

Kapaun. The Archdiocese for the Military Services had first taken up his cause, and, in 1993, Father Kapaun cleared the first step on the road to sainthood when Pope John Paul II declared him a servant of God. But a campaign for sainthood demands money and manpower. Both had been in short supply, so the cause of Father Kapaun had stalled.

Bishop Olmsted told Father Hotze that it was a long, costly process but that he was willing to invest hundreds of thousands of the diocese's money into the effort. He also assured Hotze that neither one of them would be alive when—or if—Father Kapaun was ever canonized. The plan was to launch the campaign and leave it in the best shape possible for whichever bishop, priest and postulator came after them.

The numbers made that a very good bet. Since 1588, when the Vatican started keeping records on the process, the average time between the death of an eventual saint and canonization was 181 years. Even more daunting was the dearth of American-born saints: There were only two, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton and St. Katharine Drexel. Sister Seton founded the first American order of nuns, the Sisters of Charity, as well as the nation's first Catholic elementary school, which (as luck would have it) was adjacent to Mount Saint Mary's Seminary, where Father Hotze earned his divinity degree. Sister Drexel was an heiress and philanthropist who founded the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. She was canonized in the year 2000, after 34 years of consideration.

The Lawyer

Now they were handing off his cause to an Italian canon lawyer by the name of Andrea Ambrosi. Mr. Ambrosi was

charged with crafting Hotze's finding into a narrative (in Italian, of course) and becoming the chief spokesman and lobbyist for Father Kapaun in Vatican City. The diocese felt fortunate to have Mr. Ambrosi. For generations, his family had been part of the Vatican machinery, and he was considered a go-to postulator in Rome.

Mr. Ambrosi had come to Wichita for the Mass and ceremony for Father Kapaun, looking immaculate, old-world, and elegant in a bespoke suit. He was all those things—as well as expensive. The average cost of a cause for sainthood was half a million dollars, and the billable hours of Mr. Ambrosi would eat up much of that. At the foot of the altar, amber and rouge light reflected through the stained glass and spotlighted the wood crate. After the box was sealed with red wax, Mr. Ambrosi tied a red ribbon around it.

Afterward, Mr. Ambrosi was upbeat about the chance Father Kapaun had for measuring up to the near-impossible standards of the Congregation of Saints. "I'm not worried," he said in Italian. He ticked off a highlight reel of the sacrifices and the derring-do Father Kapaun had performed on the battlefield. He nodded to the detail and testaments from fellow soldiers whom Father Hotze had chased down and brought to life.

The Miracles

Two miracles would have to be attributed to Father Kapaun to get him over the finish line, and Mr. Ambrosi believed that he might have two already in his pocket from right here in Kansas.

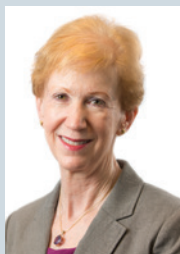
In 2006, a girl named Avery Gerleman, then 12, spent 87 days in the hospital; and doctors told her parents that they had exhausted all medical options. Her parents remained devoted to Father Kapaun, praying to him day and night and enlisting their friends in their parish to do the same. Avery was on a ventilator and her kidneys were failing. Finally, doctors decided to induce a coma. Her organs were ravaged. If Avery was to live at all, doctors believed, it would be in a vegetative state. Little by little, Avery appeared to heal herself. Six months later, she was back on the soccer field.

Two years later, Chase Kear, a college track athlete, fractured his skull from ear to ear in a pole vaulting accident. Doctors told his family that his chances to survive surgery bordered between slim and none. The Kear family and friends petitioned Father Kapaun to intercede. The young man survived the surgery and was out of the hospital eight weeks later. Doctors in both cases said there was no medical explanation for either of their recoveries: They



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CNS photo/Cindy Wooden

Bishop Carl A. Kemme of Wichita, Kan., left, presents to Cardinal Angelo Amato of the Congregation for Saints' Causes a report on the life and heroic Christian virtues of the Rev. Emil J. Kapaun.

had witnessed miracles.

After decades of promoting the causes of priests and nuns, Mr. Ambrosi especially relished the task of arguing for a hero like Father Kapaun, who had impacted so many lives far beyond the borders of their parishes.

“He saved so many people’s lives, lived his final days in a prison camp, died so young,” Mr. Ambrosi said of Father Kapaun. “Already by itself, it all says something great about him that you don’t need to read. You know it. He showed that there was not just a devil working on the battlefields of the war, but something else.”

Father Hotze could not help but think back to a letter Father Kapaun had written to a family friend on the eve of his ordination. “I feel like the dickens,” Father Kapaun wrote. “Maybe you do not realize fully what it means to be a priest, but I tell you—after I have studied all these years, I am more convinced that a man must be a living saint in order to take that step. And that is where my worries come

in. Gee whiz, I have a feeling that I am far, far from being a saint.”

Father Hotze, on the other hand, believed with every cell in his body that Father Kapaun was a saint. He bowed his head and prayed that he had done enough to make the case to Rome, to the pope and to the world that this priest did indeed deserve sainthood. And he fervently hoped that those 8,268 pages of documents would convince them.

Joe Drape is an award-winning reporter for The New York Times and the author of The Saint Makers, from which this excerpt is drawn.



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A man with a beard, wearing a purple sweater, is sitting in a dark leather chair by a window. He is reading a book. The window has light-colored curtains with thin vertical stripes. The scene is dimly lit, with light coming from the window. The overall mood is quiet and contemplative.

ORDINARY TIME

By Nick Ripatrzone

**Finding creativity and
communion through solitude**

As a seventh grader at St. Catherine School in New Haven, Ky., during the 1960s, Fenton Johnson was proud of a poster he made for class depicting what he described as the “three church-designated callings”: religious life, marriage and being single. At 12 years of age, Johnson recognized that the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* taught, in his words, “that being single was a legitimate vocation.” Yet when a priest visited his classroom and asked each student about the paths they hoped to choose for their lives, every other student answered that they wanted to marry or become a priest or nun. Only Mr. Johnson felt he had been called to the single life.

Today Fenton Johnson is a professor and author, but he continues to think deeply about what that calling means. “Popular culture,” Mr. Johnson writes in his new book *At the Center of All Beauty: Solitude and the Creative Life*, “tells us that, even in our post-modern age,” the single life is for partying and then a “way-station until marriage, or between marriages, or a dumping-ground designation for those who are unable to attract a mate.” He writes that this view is pernicious and akin to the way our culture often describes celibacy: “[N]ot in terms of what it is, but of what it is not—not sex, not fun, not hip, not done.”

Mr. Johnson laments that our language itself is unable to encapsulate the experience of solitary life, having “few words to describe and express solitude, restraint, obliquity.” He wonders what it might mean for our culture, and the Catholic faith that permeated his childhood, if the solitary vocation was more broadly lauded as a meaningful path—a way to live, create and believe?

Yet a life of solitude does not mean Mr. Johnson is alone on this path. Although he no longer identifies as Catholic, he continues to draw inspiration from the church’s long history of finding the sacredness in this way of life. For many writers and artists, drawing on this tradition has proved fruitful, even as their individual experiences of faith and their lifestyles vary widely. For some, solitude means being physically away from other people—a life of literal distance. Others manage to live in solitude in bustling cities, where they work and interact as part of communities but



The ancient contemplative tradition of solitude has relevance to our chaotic present.

cherish their solitude at home. Each of them lives alone for differing reasons, but each benefits from the contemplation and creativity afforded by solitude—and seeks to protect that element of their lives. Their stories suggest that the ancient contemplative tradition of solitude has relevance to our chaotic present. A life alone is not a life of absence; for those who embrace solitude, living alone offers a sense of clarity, purpose and transcendence.

A Monastic Sense

In a letter in 1964, the Trappist monk Thomas Merton wrote that besides his identity as a writer drawn to solitude, the “rest is confusion and uncertainty.” A member of the Abbey of Gethsemani, he considered himself as living in solitude *secundum quid*—“in some way.” He described his solitary existence as “the only thing that helps me to keep sane,” and he was “grateful for this gift from God, with all the paradoxes that it entails and its peculiar interior difficulties, as well as its hidden and dry joys.”

Solitude was a central element of Merton’s worldview and faith, most fully expressed in his essay “Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude.” He invokes the solitary, creative lives of those “most remote from cloistered life,” like Henry David Thoreau and Emily Dickinson, but his true focus is on the spiritual elements of solitude. “The true solitary,” he writes, “is not one who simply withdraws from society,” but one who is able to “transcend it.” The solitary life is not cruel and cold and distant from others; instead, the person choosing this life “is deeply united to them—all the more deeply because he is no longer entranced by marginal concerns.” In senses both metaphorical and physical, the solitary life is lived in communion with others.

Merton often comes to mind when we discuss the contemporary monastic tradition, but he is especially relevant in relation to Mr. Johnson’s work. Monks from Merton’s own Abbey of Gethsemani were among his “first role mod-

els.” After all, the monks “regularly found their way over the hills to my parents’ house, always arriving just before supper,” he said.

“I am grateful for a lifetime to the Roman church,” Mr. Johnson explains in his book, “because it instilled in me a sense of mystery and of manners.” He rightly associates the phrase “mystery and manners” with the fiction writer Flannery O’Connor, who also considered herself a sort of solitary, and who adapted the phrase from yet another one: Henry James.

Mr. Johnson’s work has a strong Catholic sensibility built in; and in a similar way, a monastic sense is endemic to his identity. “Monastic practice remains one of the precious traditions of the church, and growing up with it as an ordinary feature of my childhood was an incomparable privilege,” he told me by email. “I was raised in the presence of people who conceived an ideal and were trying to live it out. That some failed is to be expected. But they gave me to understand that one might have a dream of a community, a sisterhood and brotherhood, and imagine one’s life as a discipline in search of beauty.”

Because he grew up with monks around, he “came to know them not as elevated icons but as human beings, ordinary people—and so they were another means to my perception that the sacred dwells not in puffy golden clouds amid harp-playing angels but in the ordinary, here and now.” Such a vision “has become central to my work and my life: the sacred becomes flesh, the abstract ideal becomes the word in print. The kingdom of heaven is quite literally at hand.” Mr. Johnson offers a lyric paean to the solitary life—one grounded in a Catholic, incarnational sense. Perhaps we do not need a new language for solitude. The church, in its own imperfect way, has already given us one.

Solitude and Spiritual Discipline

“The most challenging aspect of my life of solitude is to not become distracted by the sights or sounds inside or outside my own head,” Brother Rex Anthony Norris, S.S.F., told me by email. He clarified: “I do not mean ignoring the sights and sounds of my neighbor’s sufferings. Every disciple of Jesus is called to love and serve the Lord by loving and serving one’s neighbor.” Rather, the challenge “is to not get distracted by something other than my relationship with God.”

Brother Rex has been living an eremitic life as a Franciscan hermit in the Diocese of Portland, Me., for nearly 20 years. A former Air Force firefighter who was raised Protestant, Brother Rex became a Catholic in 2000, shortly after turning 40, and took his simple vows the next year. He took

his final vows in 2007 and lives the life of a hermit at the Little Portion Hermitage.

My own conception of the eremitic life comes from the Desert Fathers, whose existence brought a visceral element to isolation. Brother Rex explained that his challenges, while perhaps more prosaic, are real; and he channels the words of Blaise Pascal, “All of my problems stem from my inability to sit quietly in my room alone.” I asked if those challenges are part of the process, or perhaps even the point, of such an eremitic existence. “The challenge of not becoming distracted by ‘the world, the flesh and the devil,’ to use an old phrase, is part of the process, yes. But it is not the point of eremitic life. The point of the eremitic life as I see it is the same as any other Christian vocation. Namely, union with God.”

Brother Rex sees that union occurring through his “primary vocation...[which] as a contemplative man, is prayer.” I am intrigued by Brother Rex’s swift movement from conversion to contemplation. In other interviews, he has spoken of a “longing” throughout his Protestant life for a deeper relationship with God. His introduction to Catholicism was through the lens of religious life; a conversation with his Methodist minister about this desire for a fuller sense of his faith led Brother Rex to contact various Catholic religious orders, since their lives seemed structured to achieve this.

I asked Brother Rex if he sees any connections between his conversion and the eremitic life. “In a sense, yes,” he says—and his explanation is rather revealing about his understanding of the solitary vocation. Brother Rex says he gave up a secular career in order to “say ‘yes’ to God’s call to journey into the silence of solitude in a hermitage. Yet a person gains far more from saying yes to whatever God is asking of him or her than the person leaves behind.” In the same way, by becoming a Catholic, Brother Rex says he and others “say ‘no’ to much that is very good, even holy in the non-Catholic tradition they are called to leave.”

This reminds me of the inevitable duality that Mr. Johnson sees when we talk about the solitary life, or even the celibate life. “Counter to the avalanche of messages from popular culture, I practice celibacy not as negation,” he writes in his book, “but as a joyous turning inward.” Celibacy, for Mr. Johnson, “can be a powerful incarnation of solitude. Actively inhabited celibacy represents a decision to commit oneself for whatever length of time to a discipline—to forge one delight...for a different, longer-term undertaking, the deepening of the self.” His words channel the salvific sense of the solitary life as experienced by those who live it.

Not all Catholics who value solitude live as hermits, of course, but Brother Rex’s life is instructive. He typically wakes around 4 a.m., and prays morning prayer from the Liturgy of the Hours from 5 a.m. to 6 a.m. before attending Mass at 7 a.m. Then comes breakfast, *lectio divina* and offering spiritual direction to others. Prayer at noon is followed by lunch, which is followed by responding to email, which often includes prayer requests. At 5 p.m., he prays evening prayer, eats dinner and then prays again before going to bed around 8 p.m.


He says his daily schedule is a form of spiritual discipline; an “essential discipline,” because “without it, following the whims of my own ego, I could never hope to be present if/when the Lord should choose to make His Presence known to me.” Brother Rex says that he subscribes to Thomas Merton’s philosophy that the vocation of the hermit is to become ordinary. Curiously enough, Brother Rex has become both ordinary and extraordinary. He lives a pared down, but not simple life. His solitude has enabled him to focus on the spiritual essentials, but has also meant he receives and offers up prayer requests from around the world—a virtual communion of sorts.

The Deep Dive

“Although distance teaching has taken over my life,” the poet and novelist Donna Masini told me by email, “something odd is also happening.” It is March 24. Pandemic-induced social distancing is in full swing. New York City is ground zero, with Covid-19 cases surging to new highs each day. Ms. Masini, a professor of English at Hunter College, has shifted her classes to remote learning. Surprisingly, she has found herself more connected than ever. Ms. Masini says friends are calling on the phone more, as might be expected, “but now it seems anyone can just FaceTime or Skype on demand. It’s like somebody ringing your doorbell and walking in unannounced!” “In a way,” she says, “I am less alone than ever. But now, at the same time, I am always alone.”

Ms. Masini separated from her husband in 1994 and has been living alone ever since. “Though I’d moved out of my parents’ house at 20,” she says, “I lived in an apartment with my best friend until I moved in with my ex-husband. I loved living with him—but also loved that he kept his apartment a few blocks away as an office. It gave me time alone, not just to write, but to be. To exist unobserved.” She published her first book of poems the year they separated; several more collections of poems and a few novels have followed.

She still lives in the studio apartment that she moved



The most challenging aspect of my life of solitude is to not become distracted by the sights or sounds inside or outside my own head.

into shortly after they separated, imagining that they might live there together one day if they reconciled. Her solitary life began as something temporary, but became part of her identity. “Even if I were to ‘move in’ with someone (or even marry!) I cannot imagine not having this apartment and living alone most of the week,” she says.

For Ms. Masini, living alone is connected to creating alone. “I need to be alone to work. I used to always write in cafes years ago when I started writing poems. It made me feel safer to write with silverware clinking and glasses banging and low murmuring.” But now in order for the “deep dive” to happen, that almost monastic entry into the true interiority that leads to writing, she needs to feel alone—temporally and spatially. That has become more difficult since the pandemic began: “To get to a really interior place, I need to feel safe. I think that’s why, even being alone in this social distancing time, I cannot go there.”

Ms. Masini’s work is suffused with Catholic culture and iconography, so I asked Masini if she felt her Catholic upbringing affected her approach to being alone. At first, she says it might be “more a class thing. Being Italian (and Catholic), until I was 9 I shared a bedroom with my three siblings in an apartment in Brooklyn.” The oldest child, her time alone decreased with each new sibling. She jokes: “Though given that my mother was all but laminated onto me, you could say that I was never alone.”

But then, she told me, she thinks of Matthew 6:6, as rendered in the King James version of the Bible, which orders “when thou prayest, enter into thy closet.” She describes the enjoyment she found during her days in Catholic school in being asked “to put our heads on our desk and ‘meditate.’ The idea of an all-seeing, all-knowing God—omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent—kind of meant you were never unobserved.”

These connections have been with her as a writer for years. Her “early love” of the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J., sent her, as a sophomore in high school, to the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola, which she says she “would often try to practice for my writing over the years.” She appreciated how the exercises were intended to be undertaken while on retreat, and was particularly drawn to “The Great Silence”: “the hour in which you spoke to no one.” Ms. Masini’s most recent book of poems, the elegiac *4:30 Movie*, captures the monastic-like experience of weekday afternoons at the cinema. Our silent communion in the dark, and then how afterward “we walk out of ourselves, blinking into the light,/ pulling our sweaters tighter, unprotected, regressed from our/ time// in the dark, the crowd snaking through the lobby, eager to/ enter what we have left.” Eager, perhaps, to be alone together.

Finding the Sacred in the Ordinary

“Like getting married or professing a vocation to religion,” Mr. Johnson writes, “living alone results from complicated, interlocking factors and decisions, made or avoided.” His one-time partner, whom he describes as “the great love of my life,” died of AIDS in 1990. In *At the Center of All Beauty*, he describes how “I expected I would meet someone else and form another relationship, whether short-lived or lifelong,” but the years passed without that happening. He valued his solitude and realized that “the thing about living alone is that—exactly like living as a couple—after a long time it becomes either a habit or a practice. A habit is a way of living that you follow because it’s what you did yesterday and the day before and the day before that. A practice is a way of living that you create and renew every day.”

In his essay “Catholic in the South: Confessions of a Convert’s Son,” Mr. Johnson concludes, “In thinking of the [Roman Catholic] Church, in thinking of the South, I have come to understand that this is what they share: an uncompromising demand that they be accepted on their own terms. It is because they demand our love so wholly and unconditionally that we find them so hard to leave behind, that they draw us back in spite of ourselves. In this age of relativism, few places can, few people do.”

“To ignore or abandon” those “formative, deeply imprinted emotional and spiritual landscapes,” Mr. Johnson says, “is to risk ending up soulless.”

Catholicism does not have an exclusive hold on the concept of the life of solitude, but the church has a history of imbuing it with the sacred. As Mr. Johnson notes in his book, the Catholic Church, “arguably the largest and most enduring of human institutions,” an institution “that pro-

American Catholics Are Blessing the Poor in Developing Countries by Addressing Their Urgent Need for Safe Water



Before embarking on his long walk to school, 9-year-old Jahzeel Vega has a critical chore to undertake. He must take an old bucket to his family's hand-dug well and carefully lower it on a rope, hoping to collect enough water there for his family's daily needs. During the rainy season, he should be able to draw out three buckets full — enough for drinking and bathing that day — but during dry spells, he may not be that lucky. If the well is empty, another water source will need to be found, possibly much farther away.

As Jahzeel's mother, Francisca, watches the boy, she probably feels a sense of dread. That's because she knows something the boy does not. While the water he is drawing up is critical to the family, it is also unsafe. Unseen bacteria and parasites taint virtually all the water sources in this area, but the families living in Chinandega, Nicaragua, must drink what they can collect — *because they have no other choice*.

"Many of these Nicaraguan villages only have access to contaminated water. It makes them sick, but they drink it anyway because there is no alternative yet," explained Jim Cavnar, president of Cross Catholic Outreach, a respected Catholic ministry known for its programs to help the poor in developing countries. "You can imagine how that makes a mother like Francisca feel. Water is essential to her family's survival — but each time they drink, they risk getting sick."

In this case, Cavnar has learned, the shallow well may be particularly dangerous because it is located near filthy latrines. These pit latrines leak pollutants into the water table. Animal waste, pesticides and even saltwater seeping in from the coast may also be a part of the problem. To learn how it might help,



Cross Catholic Outreach's staff spoke to local families and local ministry leaders. It concluded the unsafe water is having a dire impact on youngest children, including Jahzeel Vega's 3-year-old sister, Emelyn.

"Emelyn has often been sick from drinking that water. She gets sick with vomiting, diarrhea and parasites," Francisca Vega told them. She added that her neighbors in the village of La Danta Aserradores share her hardships and desperately want to find a solution to the water problem.

"We as parents have dreams for our children: to see that they have a better condition than ours," she said. "We want

them to have better health, to enjoy a decent and dignified life."

Francisca's husband, Jairo, also suffers from a serious health problem — kidney failure — but his condition is caused by having too little water to drink. He and other field laborers can easily fall prey to dehydration while toiling under the scorching Nicaraguan sun.

"To alleviate his kidney problems, Jairo would need to drink more of the contaminated water, and that's obviously not a viable solution," Cavnar said. "No, the solution to all of these terrible hardships must involve outside intervention. The Church needs to get involved, and safe water needs to be made available to the poor. We and our U.S. donors are prepared to support that effort. If we all come together to solve this problem, Francisca's village can get the water system it needs to supply families with safe, abundant water. We need to ensure that happens."

To achieve a solution like this, Cross Catholic Outreach typically works with Catholic leaders already serving in the area. It is a cost-effective approach that allows more of a donor's gift to be used on the project itself, according to Cavnar.

"In this kind of partnership, the local mission's staff becomes our ground support team," he explained. "They organize local families to join in the work too, so we can usually keep the expenses on the project very low. Our intent is to use this approach to build a new water system for Francisca's village. If we can get the help of Catholic donors in the U.S. to fund this effort, it will finally change the lives of the people in this Nicaraguan community. Jahzeel Vega will be able to draw water from a convenient tap, his mother won't need to fear for her family's health, and his father will be able to recover from his illness because they will have an abundant source of water."

According to Cavnar, safe water is underground and ready to be tapped.

"This is our opportunity to bless the poor with a gift that will transform lives and have a lasting impact," he said.

How to Help

To fund Cross Catholic Outreach's effort to help the poor worldwide, use the postage-paid brochure inserted in this newspaper or mail your gift to Cross Catholic Outreach, Dept. AC01576, PO Box 97168, Washington DC 20090-7168. The brochure also includes instructions on becoming a Mission Partner and making a regular monthly donation to this cause.

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For some people living alone is connected to creating alone.



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fesses its dedication to the family...most often chooses solitaires to canonize as saints.”

A willingness to recognize the holiness of the ordinary, then, might be the highest ideal of the solitary life. Yet this does not mean a life that is mundane or isolated. “Instead of comfort and distraction,” Mr. Johnson writes in his book, “I use solitude as the seeker uses a fast—to hone and sharpen, to engage the self and in doing so to break through the illusion of aloneness and emerge with my compassion and engagement with the world deepened and enriched. Through solitude, in contradiction to every message from our security-obsessed, wall-building society, I seek to open my heart.”

Mr. Johnson ends his book with a concept that makes the solitary vocation not just an acceptable option, but a necessary one: “I imagine and propose solitaires as models for the choice of reverence over irony.” I asked him what he meant by those terms. “Irony presumes a separation from the world—I have to set myself apart from something in order to critique or satirize it,” he says, while “reverence assumes organic, integrated participation—it assumes, in fact, incarnation, the presence of the sacred in the ordinary, no separation between you and me and the apple.”

Ms. Masini, Brother Rex and Mr. Johnson live distinct forms of solitude, but their lives share certain traits. All of them create: through words, prayerful devotion or both. Each has taken a winding route toward their solitary life.

Each is in communion with the larger society and the world in meaningful ways. And they all find some important element of their solitude to be inherently Catholic.

“From early on,” Mr. Johnson says, “I understood every aspect of the world as a manifestation of the sacred. Catholicism gave me the principle of incarnation and the ritual to give it voice. My studies in Buddhism enabled me to incorporate the idea as a practice, an aspect of my daily life.” He shared his daily practice with me:

I rise early, feed (and talk to) the wild birds, light a candle at my altar to the ancestors, sit in meditation, walk, eat breakfast and write. With luck I remember to blow out the candle. In the evenings I reach out to other people, to friends and to strangers; I collect leftover bread from a local bakery and deliver it to a food pantry. On Saturdays I sit with the Buddhists; on Sundays I attend Episcopal services. Rendered so succinctly, it sounds like a pretty good life.

Indeed, it does.

Nick Ripatrzone has written for *Rolling Stone*, *The Atlantic*, *The Paris Review* and *Esquire*. His most recent book is *Longing for an Absent God: Faith and Doubt in Great American Fiction*.



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When Abraham Lincoln Read the Book of Job

What role does religion have to play for a leader facing his darkest hours?

By Sergio Lopez

In 1863 the Confederate Army was “flushed with victory.” Throughout the summer of that year, the Union had been taking brutal losses. The cost in human lives was high. “Sometimes it looked,” Elizabeth Keckley later recalled, “as if the proud flag of the Union, the glorious old Stars and Stripes, must yield half its nationality to the tri-barred flag that floated grandly over long columns of gray.” These were our nation’s darkest days.

For the man leading the Union, they were just as dark. The previous year, he had lost his beloved son to illness. Now, the potential unraveling of the Union under his administration, with hundreds of thousands of lives already lost, weighed heavily on President Abraham Lincoln, inducing an exhaustion that he could feel in his bones. His eyes were hollowed out, wrinkles lining his face. “These were sad, anxious days to Mr. Lincoln,” Ms. Keckley wrote, “and those who saw the man in privacy only could tell how much he suffered.”

What role does religion have to play for a leader facing his darkest hours? In the midst of civil war, in the valley of despair, Mr. Lincoln grappled with this question. He had grown up reading the King James Bible from an early age, but already the war had forced him to reconsider some of his most deeply held beliefs. His reading of the Book of

Job—the unusual story of a man from whom God takes everything, who confronts his Creator defiantly, and then appears to submit—illustrates many of these beliefs. Above all a realist, Lincoln struggled mightily to reconcile his experience of the world around him and the flawed nature of humanity with a passionate, if unorthodox, relationship with his religion.

For someone who has had most every scrap of his writing preserved, personal reflection at length from Lincoln can be hard to come by. Most of what we have are speeches, as well as recollections from his contemporaries. But these are not always reliable; many were recorded only years after the fact by individuals with varying personal and political agendas.

‘It Is Dark, Dark Everywhere.’

One of the most revealing insights into Lincoln’s private thoughts—and in particular, his private thoughts on religion, in an unusually unguarded moment—comes from Elizabeth Keckley and her memoirs. She was a remarkable woman who had been born a slave, bought her freedom and, after moving to the nation’s capital, became a handmaid and close confidante of the first lady, as well as a civic leader in her own community.

One day, Ms. Keckley recalled, she was measuring



CNS photo/Gregory A. Shernitz

Visitors at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington on Dec. 15, 2019.

a dress on Mary Lincoln. The president walked into the room. He looked exhausted and worn out, “his step...slow and heavy, and his face sad.” “Like a tired child,” Mr. Lincoln threw his huge frame onto a sofa in the room, his long legs stretched out, covering his eyes with his hands. He “was a complete picture of dejection,” she recalled.

“Where have you been, father?” Mary Lincoln asked him.

“To the War Department.”

“Any news?” she asked.

“Yes, plenty of news, but no good news. It is dark, dark everywhere.”

“Everywhere” was right—he could have been referring at once to the war effort, his administration in the nation’s capital and his own state of mind. Mr. Lincoln, still lying on the sofa, “reached forth one of his long arms,” taking a small Bible from a stand by the head of the sofa. He opened up the book and, Ms. Keckley recalled, “soon was absorbed in reading.”

Ms. Keckley went back to her work dressing the first lady, both women leaving the president to his reading. After a quarter of an hour had gone by, Ms. Keckley glanced back at the president, lying on the sofa with his Bible. “The

face of the President,” she thought, “seemed more cheerful. The dejected look was gone, and the countenance was lighted up with new resolution and hope. The change was so marked that I could not but wonder at it, and wonder led to the desire to know what book of the Bible afforded so much comfort to the reader.”

Finding Comfort in an Unlikely Place

Her curiosity got the best of her. Making an excuse that she was searching for a missing article of clothing, Ms. Keckley discretely walked across the room. Passing by the head of the sofa, she glanced up to see what Mr. Lincoln was reading. It was the Book of Job—the story of a man Ms. Keckley referred to as “the divine comforter.” “He read with Christian eagerness,” she thought, “and the courage and hope that he derived from the inspired pages made him a new man.”

Ms. Keckley’s description of the Book of Job reflected a fairly orthodox and mainstream understanding of the biblical work. “Early Christian sources immortalized the patient Job of the prologue, seeing in him...a prefiguration of Jesus, who, though innocent, suffered greatly and ultimately became a paragon of righteousness and model of divine blessing,” writes the biblical scholar Edward Greenstein. “This traditional view of the patient Job, as it is stated in

the New Testament...is familiar to nearly everyone," writes Marvin H. Pope.

Yet Mr. Lincoln's views on religion were anything but orthodox or traditional. In fact, Ms. Keckley's description of the president reading "with Christian eagerness" is deeply ironic; for earlier in his life, his nascent political career had nearly ended before it began because of a question over his religious beliefs—and, in particular, his alleged lack of faith in Christ.

Lincoln was a deeply calculating, political and ambitious man. William Herndon, Mr. Lincoln's sometime law partner and close associate, once wrote, "His ambition was a little engine that knew no rest." He was someone who "was always calculating, and always planning ahead."

But from a young age, Mr. Lincoln's burning ambition was suffused with a sense of calling, of some higher purpose. According to his friend O. H. Browning, "Mr. Lincoln believed that there was a predestined work for him in the world.... While I think he was a man of very strong ambition, I think it had its origin in this sentiment, that he was destined for something nobler than he was for the time engaged in." He believed that God had a role for him to play.

Moments of Doubt

That role was put in question when the controversy over those religious beliefs was raised in 1846, in a race for the House of Representatives. His opponent was Peter Cartwright, a famed Methodist preacher. He raised questions about a rumor that had plagued Mr. Lincoln—of the existence of a "little black book" that contained scandalously heretical beliefs. According to a contemporary, Mr. Lincoln had "prepared an extensive essay, called by many a book, in which he made an argument against Christianity, striving to prove that the Bible was not inspired, and therefore not God's revelation, and that Jesus Christ was not the Son of God."

But the book was promptly destroyed by his friends, and with that, "Lincoln's political future was secured"—until Mr. Cartwright resurfaced the rumors years later.

Fascinatingly, in a development that has been little appreciated or analyzed by historians, Mr. Lincoln then pulled a classic politician's trick in response to Mr. Cartwright's attacks. He put forth his own response—then proceeded to dodge and weave, defending himself without actually denying the truth of the claims, yet all the while giving casual readers the impression of doing just that. In fact, Mr. Herndon, his close associate, later recalled that Mr. Lincoln "never denied the charge," and claimed that he "would die first." Eight days after winning the election,

Mr. Lincoln further circulated his defense for publication, along with yet another explanatory letter—perhaps seeking to inoculate himself against future attacks in what he hoped would be a long and fruitful political career.

While whispers of the allegations would occasionally turn up, Mr. Lincoln's efforts to put the affair behind him were for the most part successful—except among some members of the clergy. According to Mr. Herndon, during Mr. Lincoln's first presidential campaign, all but one of his town's clergymen opposed his candidacy. At that time, Mr. Lincoln "commented bitterly on the attitude of the preachers and many of their followers, who, pretending to be believers in the Bible and God-fearing Christians, yet by their votes demonstrated that they cared not whether slavery was voted up or down." He then made a remarkable statement: "God cares and humanity cares, and if they do not they surely have not read their Bible aright." He hated above all those hypocrites who claimed to know God's will, yet took no side in the great moral battle against slavery.

A Sense of Mission

Mr. Lincoln's view of God, then, was not based in the "Christian" framework within which most of his contemporaries would have read Job. Rather, his view fit squarely within the paradigm of the Old Testament God who confronts Job. Mr. Lincoln in fact never professed allegiance to a particular church or creed, making the Book of Job, with its unorthodox view of God, a fitting choice for him to reflect on. And as demonstrated by the episode with Mr. Cartwright earlier in his career, there is no indication anywhere in Lincoln's own extensive writings that he was ever a Christian.

The Book of Job has puzzled biblical scholars for years; Robert Alter called it "in several ways the most mysterious book of the Hebrew Bible." If Elizabeth Keckley was correct and Mr. Lincoln was indeed comforted by it, he found that comfort in what is to most readers a deeply discomfiting book, raising difficult questions about humanity's relationship to God. By the end, Job has a newfound resolution that is, paradoxically, born out of resignation and submission before the awful and awe-inspiring power and glory of God. Job regains a sense of his own agency only when he sees that he has none; no matter what he does, he is subordinate to God's will.

By the beginning of the war, Mr. Lincoln's sense of mission—that idea that he had a role to play within God's plan—had deepened, as had his faith that it was impossible for any mortal to truly know just what that plan was. He was deeply aware of the bitter irony of waging a war for the soul of the nation, shedding blood and turning brother against brother

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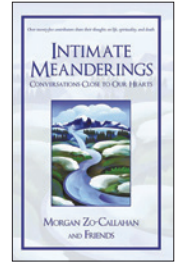


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to preserve the Union, with both combatants all the while claiming to have God on their side. In Mr. Lincoln's "Meditation on the Divine Will," a private note preserved for posterity by his secretary, he wrote:

The will of God prevails. In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both may be, and one must be, wrong.... In the present civil war it is quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party—and yet the human instrumentalities, working just as they do, are of the best adaptation to effect His purpose. I am almost ready to say that this is probably true—that God wills this contest, and wills that it shall not end yet. By his mere great power, on the minds of the now contestants, He could have either saved or destroyed the Union without a human contest. Yet the contest began. And, having begun He could give the final victory to either side any day. Yet the contest proceeds.

In this latter part of his life, religion did not make Mr. Lincoln feel that he had all the answers. This did not mean that he lacked agency; rather, the realization that God had a plan for him that was beyond his knowledge freed him up to act decisively during a critical moment for the war effort. This subtle evolution in his religious beliefs was one of the most important aspects of his growth as a commander in chief. He was, as Ms. Keckley put it, made "a new man" during this period, and would soon go on to win a decisive series of battles.

Biblical Cadences

There is more indirect evidence beyond the episode Ms. Keckley recounts that Mr. Lincoln took the Book of Job to heart. Consider this passage from his Second Inaugural Address—one of his greatest speeches, given in March of 1865, toward the end of his life. Of the two sides in the war, Lincoln said, "one of them would make war rather than let the nation survive, and the other would accept war rather than let it perish, and the war came." In his lament before God, Job says, "neither had I rest, neither was I quiet: Yet trouble came." The two sentences have remarkably similar structure and phrasing; the Second Inaugural rings out with the rich cadence of the King James Bible.

Yet Mr. Lincoln's sentence—"and the war came"—is, unlike Job's, no indictment of God. Job's statement is a complaint, railing against an injustice after he has had everything taken from him. But Job's statement would be equally true by the end of the book: "Yet trouble came." What changes over the course of the book is Job's perspective. He accepts his powerlessness in the face of the awesomeness of God's power. It is this latter perspective of Job's that Mr. Lincoln represents in his Second Inaugural. His statement—"and the war came"—carries an air of resignation. Yet this resignation brings with it a sense of peace.

In the midst of his lament, Job dreams of a place where "the weary be at rest." But this wish is misguided because he wants God simply to offer relief from his troubles. But relief does not, cannot come that easily. Job fundamentally does not understand at the beginning that doing good works is no guarantee of being free from trouble. By the end, however, he learns that missteps and trouble can come to anyone, even the most faithful. So be it.

In the end, submitting before the will of God, in all its power and mystery, Job is at peace. For Lincoln, that wisdom was hard-earned, coming in the midst of one of the most difficult periods of his life and the nation's history. But in one brief moment of respite in 1863, President Abraham Lincoln too found peace.

Sergio Lopez is an author, historian and civic leader. He is pursuing a master's degree at Duke Divinity School.

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A photograph of a plate of Hildegard cookies and peaches on a black metal mesh table. The cookies are round, golden-brown, and appear to be made with spelt flour. There are three peaches, one of which is in the foreground, slightly out of focus. The background is a black metal mesh table.

Recipe for Joy

St. Hildegard's ingredients for an abundant life

By Sonja Livingston

I am sitting on my back porch with a plate of Hildegard cookies. Simple and spiced, the cookies are perfect with coffee, though St. Hildegard would have recommended wine infused with violets and honey or a simple lavender tisane. If one insisted on coffee, the saint might acquiesce—but only if it was brewed from roasted spelt.

Hildegard of Bingen loved spelt. Actually, St. Hildegard adored many things—the Blessed Mother, beer, mid-day naps—but in her encyclopedic treatise on the medici-

nal properties of the natural world, *Physica*, she expresses a special love for spelt, proclaiming it “the best of grains” and recommending it for “a happy mind and joyful outlook.” She similarly praised nutmeg and cloves for their warmth while lauding cinnamon’s ability to chase a bad mood away. Because Hildegard cookies are made with spelt flour and the aforementioned spices, they are the equivalent of a medieval happiness bomb.

Hildegardplätzchen, as they are called in German, are



Hildegardplätzchen, as they are called in German, or cookies of joy in English, are traditionally eaten on Sept. 17 in honor of the saint's feast day.

traditionally eaten on Sept. 17 in honor of the saint's feast day. Cookies of joy some call them in English, because according to the 12th-century Benedictine abbess, the cookies remove hate from the heart and calm the nerves. As a lifelong cookie aficionado, I must confess that I find this true of most cookies. Still, Hildegard's recipe provides a direct connection to the holy woman who recorded it nearly 900 years ago, and as I sit nibbling cookies while watching a cardinal dart in and out of a buckthorn tree, I feel a surge of joy.

I was not nearly so joyful when I had my first Hildegard cookies earlier this year. I had planned to visit the Monastery Immaculate Conception in Ferdinand, Ind., where the cookies are made by a dynamic group of Benedictine sisters. I had arranged a retreat, along with an interview and a bakery tour. Then Covid-19 struck. My university classes went online. The conferences and readings scheduled to promote my new book were canceled. Church doors were closed, as was the monastery in Indiana.

When my father-in-law died in May, there was no way for the family to get together to mark his passing, and I thought things could not get more difficult. But then George Floyd was murdered in Minneapolis, and ongoing divisions in the United States became an open wound. Meanwhile, the election season ramped up and the rhetoric launched from both sides of the political aisle left me feeling more isolated than the strictures surrounding the pandemic.


I did what I could. We found ways to memorialize my father-in-law. I started my own rituals, took walks and let book events go out the window. I even adjusted my expectations around St. Hildegard. While I could not visit the bakery where her namesake cookies are made, I could immerse myself in her life. I read biographies and cookbooks and translations of her works. I listened to Emma Kirkby's voice soar in Hildegard's sacred compositions, marveled over the lyrics and baked my own cookies of joy. Little by little, out of the darkness, a seedling began to emerge. Even as the culture continued to divide itself into rigid categories of black and white, Hildegard offered the life-giving greenness she referred to as *veriditas*.

Which is how, in a season of profound loss and fear, an ancient mystic offered the cure, though not in a plate of cookies or even through her dazzling works. Instead, Hildegard von Bingen's life itself provided the recipe for joy.

First Ingredient: Solitude

Hildegard was born in 1098 in an area of vineyards and forests in present-day Germany, not far from its borders with Luxembourg and France. The 10th child from a noble family, the girl was pledged to the church and entrusted to the anchoress Jutta at the Benedictine monastery at Disibodenberg at the age of 8. It is unclear whether Hildegard was cloistered at that time or a few years later.

Either way, Hildegard would likely have struggled with the sudden disconnection from family and the loss of her former life—not unlike our own struggle this past year.



St. Hildegard was both wild and obedient, frail and unstoppable, a simple nun and a human dynamo, the likes of which the world had rarely seen. ●●

Once she was enclosed, her movements would have been greatly restricted and the rhythms of her life vastly simplified—like many of our own lives of late. But, more than anything else, Covid-19 taught me that isolation and solitude are not the same thing; one is like being locked behind a stone wall, while the other is like drinking from a holy well. Often they go hand in hand, and we must abide loneliness to cultivate solitude and arrive at the well.

I have weathered these past months by starting each day with a few minutes of contemplative prayer followed by coffee and quiet on my back porch. My mind is forever wandering and my porch is rickety and small—the size of Hildegard’s cell, perhaps—but despite these limitations, the simple routine has become the most nourishing part of my day.

Hildegard also took to solitude. Monastic life allowed her to sink her roots deep. Even when, in the second half of her life, she began to turn her gaze outward and to travel beyond the monastery walls, she remained immersed in the Benedictine way of life. It is easy to imagine her as a young woman at Disibodenberg—and later in her communities near the Rhine—the grounds lush with gardens and vineyards, the air filled with the fragrance of linden and

the sound of monastics singing their daily prayers. Such an early experience of solitude anchored Hildegard as she grew into the saint she became. And whether you pray or knit or sit with a purring cat in your lap, solitude is the first ingredient in the recipe for joy, transforming us into golden bowls waiting to be filled.

Second Ingredient: Faith

Hildegard may have been composing songs and treatises in her head for years, but her writing did not begin until midlife. In the introduction to the *Scivias*, she describes the vision that began her writing life: “When I was forty-two and seven months old, the heavens were opened and a blinding light of exceptional brilliance flowed through my entire brain.”

“I am the Living Light,” a voice in the vision said. “Proclaim and write thus.” Though she did not feel entirely up to it, Hildegard listened to the voice and began to write. She complied with the voice and started to make use of her own—and once she did, Hildegard never stopped.

“Become a flowering orchard,” Hildegard later instructed, and clearly she took her own advice. Known as a mystic and seer, Hildegard was, in fact, a medieval powerhouse. Her published work includes three volumes of visionary theology, several hagiographies, commentaries on the Gospels, books on the natural world and healing, and she composed some of the best-known liturgical music surviving to this day. She composed a musical morality play, invented her own alphabet and wrote hundreds of letters in which she provided counsel to the most powerful rulers of her time, including the pope. Hildegard also undertook several preaching tours and spoke in cathedrals and public squares.

Once Pope Eugenius III read a portion of Hildegard’s work and declared it divinely inspired, the nun’s reputation began to grow. In 1150, she moved her flourishing community to Rupertsburg, near Bingen on the Rhine, and in 1165 founded a second community across the river at Ebingen, where she lived the remainder of her years, dying at age 81 in 1179. Hildegard was long-celebrated as a saint and was beatified in 1326; but she was not officially canonized until 2012, when Pope Benedict XVI also named her a doctor of the church—one of only four women to be so honored.

Like many of us today, Hildegard lived in a time of turbulence and uncertainty. She must have felt at times unmoored, frightened and overwhelmed. She had no clue

where she was headed when she first heard God's voice, for instance; but despite her insecurities and the very real challenges of the larger world, this 12th-century woman stayed true to her call. She continued to push forward in faith and became not a single tree but an entire orchard in bloom.

Third Ingredient: Greenness

I have a St. Francis birdbath in my backyard. This is not unusual. St. Francis birdbaths populate thousands of lawns. But as I sit here on my porch, I wonder why I have never seen a St. Hildegard birdbath. It is true that Francis preached to the birds, but a century before he sang his praises to Brother Sun and Sister Moon in Assisi, a little nun was studying the healing properties of bay leaves and delighting in the creatures of the field 700 miles to the north.

"All of creation is a symphony of joy and jubilation," Hildegard wrote. "Every creature is a glittering, glistening mirror of Divinity."

Known for her concept of *veriditas* or "greenness," which Hildegard viewed as life-giving and inseparable from divinity, she did not simply make a study of rivers and trees for her volumes on healing. All of her compositions drip with flowers and stems, honeycombs and gemstones, streams and fountains and rivers.

"O hail, greenest branch," Hildegard writes in her song for the Virgin. In another sequence, she praises St. Rupert as "sweet sap of the apple, harvest without pith." Hildegard understood the healing power of nature, and her connection with the living greenness fed her deeply. She

After the Diamond Sutra

By John Samuel Tieman

like a stone in a robin's nest
a streetlamp that burns all day
a hall or a chalkboard or a tintype

like a cigarette or a coffee cup
a rain squall off Cozumel
the way a widow closes her blind

like a name tag or a soap bubble
like a lost poem or the smell of rust
there is only one way to pray

•••

when God comes or goes
this is not God

when God sits or lies down
this is not God

because God means the one
who comes from nothing

and goes nowhere
this is why God is called God

•••

and when you pray
pray for nothing that God
may reward you with nothing

and when your darkness arrives
ask God for the breath to sing
the only known psalm of the darkness

John Samuel Tieman's *chapbook*, *A Concise Biography of Original Sin*, is published by BkMk Press. His poetry has appeared in *The Americas Review*, *The Caribbean Quarterly*, *The Iowa Review*, *Rattle* and other publications.

viewed humanity as both a magnificent expression of and a necessary steward for nature, writing: “Gaze at the beauty of Earth’s greenings. What delight God gives to humankind with all these things. All nature is at the disposal of humankind. We are to work with it. For without it we cannot survive.”

It is easy to forget the splendor of nature when we are worried about our loved ones and our futures. Even before the coronavirus pandemic, I spent so much energy just trying to get through the day that I hardly had time for the outside world. Once everything shuttered, I spent more time at home than ever before. Ours is a modest house with a tiny yard, but rather than seeing this as a limitation, I have learned to embrace it. I bring my laptop outside to work and take the daylilies as my colleagues. I look up into the treetops in the neighbor’s yard and find myself in a light-filled dome. I pay more attention to our tiny garden, celebrating the sage as it rises in purple stalks, delighting in the autumn clematis as it winds its tendrils around the trellis and even the mint as it sprawls willy-nilly into the pink prairie mallow.

There may not be a St. Hildegard birdbath in our yard, but with her example, I have learned to sustain myself in the sweet greenness that can be found in even the smallest pockets of the Earth.

Fourth Ingredient: Commitment

When I first returned to church several years ago after two decades of lapse, I met with a priest. He asked me about prayer, and I mentioned that writing can sometimes be like prayer. He nodded but cocked an eyebrow, saying, “That’s fine—as long as your writing glorifies God.”

I did not know how to respond. I was just getting reacquainted with the word “God,” and “glorifying” felt a little beyond my reach. But his words stayed with me. “Glorifying God” was a lofty charge; but what would I write, I began to wonder, if I did not worry about what others thought?

Hildegard was clear from the beginning. Her work belonged to God. In fact, her understanding was that the writing itself was commanded by God. As Sabina Flanagan writes in her translation of Hildegard’s works, in her writing the abbess adopted the role of “God’s mouthpiece—a prophet for her times.”

Like any good prophet, Hildegard defied convention and pushed the limits of what anyone could have imagined for the scrawny child who arrived at Disibodenberg at the

beginning of the 12th century. She was critical of corruption in Rome, for instance, and later she became embroiled in a skirmish over an unsanctioned burial on convent grounds. But for all her life, Hildegard remained wholly devoted to the church. This may seem a paradox. She was both wild and obedient, frail and unstoppable, a simple nun and a human dynamo, the likes of which the world had rarely seen.

The inability to fit Hildegard into any one category can be frustrating but reflects the complex reality of our humanity and inspires me as I continue to navigate my way through the choppy waters of American culture and my own life. You can love something with your whole heart, Hildegard shows, and still want to improve it. Our collective and personal wounds must be tended, Hildegard says with the actions of her life, but neither should they keep us from our joys and commitments—what she called “the festive service of God.”

Fifth Ingredient: A Measuring Cup

It is difficult for Catholics to know what to make of Hildegard. Unlike for other saints, statues and prayer cards do not abound. Part of the problem is that she is so much at once: folk-healer, mystic, composer, visionary, poet, doctor of the church. Do a Google search and you will find Hildegard claimed by alternative medicine practitioners, eco-poets, musical scholars and others.

Of course, she belongs to these groups, but to view her through any single lens misses the wondrous fact that Hildegard’s wide-ranging works were integrated expressions of a dynamic life. Her great genius was her ability to bear such fruit and transform the variety into a singular vocation. Whether she was recording the healing properties of gentian, composing an antiphon to St. Ursula or responding to a letter from a troubled bishop, she made use of her extraordinary gifts while staying anchored in the Spirit. Hildegard clearly loved this life and found evidence of the divine almost everywhere she looked.

How to Live Abundantly is the one book Hildegard did not write. Instead, the recipe is found in the very pattern and movement of her life and in the way that everything—working, eating, prayer—was done in balance. Just as Hildegard tended and interlaced each aspect of her life with the others, I have found that each of the “ingredients” of my own life must be nurtured and balanced to sustain the larger calling. Any one thing to the exclusion of the others does not work.

I have been fortunate to visit many beautiful places. I love nothing more than launching journeys that connect me with people and traditions that help guide me along the spiritual path. I thought I would be writing this article about a trip to the dynamic community of Benedictine sisters in Indiana and learning about St. Hildegard through their devotion and good works. I see now that it took these days of forced grounding to truly open myself to Hildegard, which, in turn, has made one of the most difficult years the most fruitful of all.

I cannot know what the next season will bring. Nor can I dramatically change what happens in the politics and health of the larger world. But through Hildegard's example, I have learned to make a sanctuary wherever I find myself and will continue to look to her for the recipe to sweetness, gratitude and joy.

Sonja Livingston's *latest book is The Virgin of Prince Street. She is an associate professor in the English department at Virginia Commonwealth University.*

The Lamb and Where It Went

By Joe Hoover

The lamb was missing from the crèche.
Thin porcelain, hollow, creamy, with folds
to make it look like a lamb, and gone.

Where did he go? Was it our fault? Careless with the box
and he tumbled into some squalid recess of the basement,
or the hoary undergrowth of couch cushions?
Was he a black sheep we paid too little mind?
Little lamb, little lamb, who cast out thee?

Christ bursts into the manger, quickened into cows,
but doesn't blanket the stable with a fog of righteousness,
cast out our bedrock flaws so we'll never
casually throw little sheep away,
nor endow us with perfect courage
to venture into the waste and get them back.

(This is getting unpleasant, no? Is this really
a Christmas story? Where's the falling snow?)

So hilarious and chill, my college dormmate Gene.
Vital, jumpy, a faux edgy thrasher, black boots
in August type of thing, slam dancing to Pearl Jam.
Twenty years later, your opinions show up on a screen
and suddenly I'm rehearsing a case why arming
kindergarten teachers with Glocks, O Gene,
may not be the finest idea humanity has ever conceived.

Where did we lose you, dear Gene? Did you fall away
down near the boiler, lost in the endless rages of the day
that spin the mind into tufts of cotton? Or was it something
more basic, the stripe that Adam lashed on us all?

Nevertheless.

The slim wagger's that because Christ appeared,
if any lamb 'round the manger gets lost in the dark,
at least one of the deficient unholy astrologers
or goats or drumming punks, or, god knows, shepherds
will leave for the moment their ninety-nine sins,
do the one needful thing, trek out and try to bring him back.
Back to the crib, the cave where he belongs, needs the shelter,
no, really does, because boys it is vicious out there, unforgiving,
the white ice falling and fast.

Joe Hoover is *America's poetry editor.*



AP Photo/ iStock

The Age of Spiritualism

By Christopher Sandford

In the early 1920s the spiritualist message gripped the imagination of the American public. Arthur Conan Doyle, top, and Harry Houdini occupied opposite camps on the question.



On Sept. 7, 1919, the 60-year-old Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, doctor, lecturer, seafarer, sportsman, indefatigable social campaigner—and globally renowned author of the Sherlock Holmes tales—shared the platform of a spiritualist rally at a hotel in the naval town of Portsmouth, England, with a 38-year-old spiritual medium named Evan Powell. World War I had ended just 10 months earlier, and it had taken a fearful toll on Conan Doyle’s family. He lost no fewer than 11 relatives either to combat or disease, among them his 25-year-old son Kingsley, who had been invalided out of the front line in France but then succumbed to the Spanish Flu epidemic. It was a blow from which many felt his father never quite recovered.

After several departed souls had apparently materialized on the stage of the Portsmouth hotel, Conan Doyle, his wife Jean and five colleagues repaired to a private upstairs room where they searched Powell, tied him semi-naked to a chair and turned off the lights.

“We had strong phenomena from the start,” Doyle later wrote to his friend the physicist Oliver Lodge. “The medium was always groaning, muttering, or talking, so that there was never a doubt where he was. Suddenly I heard a voice.

“Jean, it is I.’

“My wife cried, ‘It is Kingsley.’

“I said, ‘Is that you boy?’

“He said in a very intense whisper and a tone all his own, ‘Father!’ and then, after a pause, ‘Forgive me!’”

Conan Doyle, who assumed Kingsley was referring to his earthly doubts about the paranormal, concluded his account by saying that he had then felt a strong hand pressing down on him, followed by a kiss on his forehead. “I am so happy,” his late son assured him.

Whatever the legitimacy of this encounter, it was to have a profound effect on Conan Doyle, hitherto best known as the creator of English litera-

ture’s most formidably rational human calculating machine. Soon the author turned away from detective stories and toward a steady stream of papers and speeches on the subject of what he called collectively the “new revelation.” It was now clear to him, he wrote, that this insight into the ultimate meaning of life was not for his benefit alone, “but that God has placed me in a very special position for conveying it to that world which needs it so badly.”

Conan Doyle wasn’t the first celebrity, or even the first literary giant, to apparently commune with the dead. In 1849, Charles Dickens had begun to attempt “mesmeric cures” of his young sister-in-law, who was said to be suffering from “intestinal evil.” The great novelist reported that his performances of “animal magnetism,” as hypnotism was then called, afforded him clairvoyant power. Personalities as diverse as Queen Victoria, the poet William Butler Yeats and the Norwegian Symbolist painter Edvard Munch all later engaged in spiritualistic efforts to reach a departed loved one. There was a dramatic surge of interest in the paranormal both during and in the immediate aftermath of the American Civil War, with its 620,000 military casualties and undetermined number of civilian deaths. In the White House, Abraham Lincoln and his wife, Mary, held a series of candlelit séances following the loss of their 11-year-old son, William, to typhoid fever—by no means the last time a U.S. president would dabble in the occult.

But it was not until the early 1920s that the spiritualist message really gripped the imagination of the American public. It did so as a consequence both of the Great War and of the period of unrivalled national prosperity that followed. It sometimes seemed that the concept lying deepest at the heart of American life as the country embarked on its extended period of

20th-century world dominance was that of illusion. The nation had bread, but it wanted circuses—and now it got them, in an explosion of music halls and other places of entertainment offering a rich variety of fare whose most common artistic theme was the idea of mystification, legerdemain or some other form of deception.

‘The Times Hungered’

In 1909, there were 427 officially licensed “Mentalists, visual deluders, and [other such] artistes” active in the seven core eastern seaboard states; a decade later, the figure had jumped to 6,390, quite apart from the profusion of “street fakirs, jongleurs, bunco merchants, miracle workers, healers and seers” one New York City newspaper found at work in the city.

“The times hungered for something,” remarked Harry Houdini, a skeptic who knew something about escapism, in every sense of the term. “A war memorial had appeared in every town, and many people naturally sought some divine solace for their grief.” Unfettered by an established church, the United States was particularly rich in alternatives, among them such sects as the Holy Rollers, the Holy Jumpers and the estimated three million followers of the evangelist Frank Buchman, whose core gospel of “inclusiveness” eventually led him to try to convert Adolf Hitler.

But none of those groups, however well-patronized or devoted to their various causes, compared in size or intensity to the worldwide spiritualist crusade with Conan Doyle at its head. By early 1923, there were reported to be some 14 million “occasionally or frequently” practicing occultists, served by a network of 6,200 individual churches or lodges, in North America alone. Barely a week passed without some sensational paranormal claim appearing in the newspapers or over

the radio. “‘MY FRIENDLY CONTACT WITH DEPARTED SOULS: MESSAGE RECEIVED FROM MURDERED CZAR,’ by Grand Duke Alexander of Russia” ran one such headline in *The New York Times*. A few weeks later, Doyle explored this same historical turf when he and some friends sat down in a darkened room of a London home and apparently made contact with the recently deceased Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin. The revolutionary hero left the sitters with the cryptic advice: “Artists must rouse selfish nations.”

There were several reasons other than the shock of war—and the extended economic boom that followed—for this loss of momentum in the traditional religious dynamic. For one thing, science. Who needed the church, the theory went, when the answers to day-to-day life could be found in the laboratory? Presented at every turn with new labor-saving devices that owed their existence to breakthroughs in automation (this was the era of the vacuum cleaner, the washing machine and the refrigerator), the American man—and, increasingly, woman—in the street was ready to believe that technology could accomplish almost anything. On the loftier philosophical level, people were now reading daily about scientific developments that seemed to lend respectability to psychic beliefs. Among the newly evolving doctrines that purported to question man’s role in the universe was quantum field theory—on one hand, a structure designed to analyze the creation and annihilation of minute particles, and on another, a contemplation on the “non-observable” material world.

It was one of several such “seismic jolts” (as the lapsed Catholic Conan Doyle called them) of an era that also saw the belated confirmation of Einstein’s general theory of relativity, as

well as the invention and rapid availability of the household radio, which Oliver Lodge, one of its pioneering figures, insisted was itself a medium that allowed the spirit world to communicate with the living. Many people shed their traditional religious beliefs in the face of rational scrutiny, while, to others, science diluted religion to a watery sort of social work.

By the spring of 1922, the spiritualism debate was sufficiently ingrained in all walks of American life for it to be the theme of several prominent Easter Day church services. In fact, opposition to the occultist message seems to have united the ordained ministry of New York, in particular, to a degree not seen since their similarly stout defense of prohibition in 1919-20. At the city’s Seventh Day Adventist Temple, for instance, an overflow audience of 672 heard the Reverend Carlyle Haynes speak on the topic of “Can the Dead Come Back? An Answer to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.” The minister of the Community Church of New York was compelled to move proceedings hurriedly to the nearby 800-seat Lyric Theater in order to accommodate a congregation reportedly “seething” for his own views on the subject. Rabbi Lewis Newman, preaching at Temple Israel on Central Park West, roundly mocked the idea that “the departed ever bring tidings from the grave,” a notion that “could surely only be visualized by a writer of fiction.”

Meanwhile, what might be called the more enlightened, or charitable, Roman Catholic attitude was expressed by the British Jesuit priest Herbert Thurston, when he wrote:

If Spiritualism has the merit of upholding the belief that man is not purely material and that a future life awaits him, the conditions of which are in some measure dependent upon his



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conduct here on earth, it must be confessed that there is very little else to set to its credit. Catholic teaching recognizes one divine revelation which it is the appointed office of the Church, in dependence upon the living voice of the Supreme Pontiff, to maintain inviolate. For this, Spiritualism substitutes as many revelations as there are mediums...all these communications being open to suspicion and, as the briefest examination shows, abounding in contradictions about matters most vital.

Many contemporaneous Roman Catholic views on the spirit world were not as benign as that. The Catholic author J. Godfrey Raupert, a psychic investigator who abandoned his initial sympathy on the subject, wrote in the 1920 edition of his book *The Dangers of Spiritualism*:

The root of Spiritism... is the diseased moral condition of the age.... Too powerfully dominated by intellectual pride to submit to the law of Christ, men seek another world capable of demonstrative proofs.... That they should build a system upon phenomena which elude rational examination, that they should stake their hopes for time and eternity upon manifestations which have so much in common with the juggleries of the magician, while at the same time they shut their eyes to the proofs of supernatural life and supernatural power which living Christianity offer them, is a melancholy example of that fatuous

superstition which is so often the punishment of unbelief.

Even this was mild compared to the likes of the Rev. Arnold Pinchard, who in July 1920 wrote to enlighten Arthur Conan Doyle about his views on the “deplorable tendency” of spiritualists to put curiosity-seeking before the cardinal requirement of seeking God. “You probably do not realise that I speak as a Catholic,” he wrote, “and that Catholics have certain knowledge upon such matters which others like yourself...lack.” Some of Conan Doyle’s critics took a more robust tone even than that. The author was to remark of a telephone conversation with one Lord Dunraven, a self-appointed “Catholic authority” on a wide range of spiritual matters, that “he was so furious that I felt it best to hold the instrument away from my ear.”

A Theatrical Showdown

Perhaps the greatest, and certainly most theatrical, showdown between the two foremost public performers of their day, respectively representing the pro- and anti-spiritualist camp, came when Conan Doyle and Houdini met in the author’s suite at the Ambassador Hotel in Atlantic City one sunny afternoon in June 1922. Even the occult can have produced no stranger sight than that of the birthright Catholic, then a stout, mustachioed 63-year-old figure of military gait, seated alongside his equally substantial wife and the “little chap,” as Doyle affectionately called their guest, the latter dressed in an ill-fitting white tropical suit, with their heads bowed over a table in their candlelit room.

They were there in an attempt to bring Houdini news from his sainted mother, Cecilia, who had died nine years earlier. In time the three sitters joined hands, and said a prayer. For

some moments after that, Lady Doyle, who had recently begun to show a gift for channeling the spirits, sat motionless, poised over the blank writing pad before her. Then, with a jolt, the pencil in her hand began to move.

“It was a singular scene,” Conan Doyle later wrote, “my wife with her hand flying wildly, beating the table while she scribbled at a furious rate, I sitting opposite and tearing sheet after sheet from the block as it was filled up, and tossing each across to Houdini, while he sat silent, looking grimmer and paler every moment.”

Lady Doyle was eventually to produce 15 sheets seemingly full of the late Mrs. Houdini’s expressions of love for her son, including the statements “I am so happy in this life” and “It is so different over here, so much larger and bigger and more beautiful,” and concluding, “God bless you, Sir Arthur, for what you are doing.” It was “profoundly moving” for all parties, Doyle himself later wrote, and a “striking affirmation of the soul’s immortality.”

When they met in New York two days later, Houdini gave Conan Doyle the impression that he believed “my mother really ‘came through’...I have been walking on air ever since.” Over the next few weeks, Doyle spoke effusively of the event in public meetings and in a full-length book he called *Our American Adventure*, while the “little chap” apparently did nothing to contradict him.

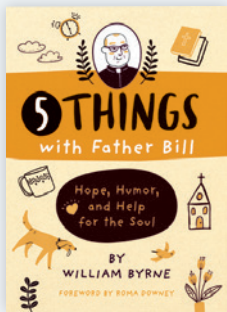
But perhaps it was all another case of artifice by a master of the craft, because Houdini later marked a newspaper report of the event “Ha! Ha! Ha!” while coming to wonder why it was that his dear mother should have chosen to communicate with him in fluent English, a language she had never spoken.

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

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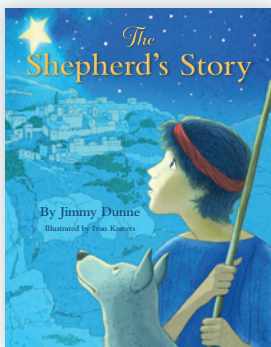


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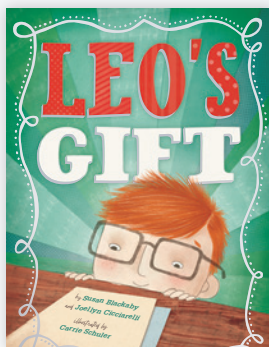


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When it was originally composed in French under the title “Minuit, chrétiens,” “O Holy Night” was criticized as facile and banal.

A brief history of ‘O Holy Night’

By Benjamin Ivry

Twenty-six years ago, George W. Hunt, S.J., then editor in chief of **America**, wrote that “O Holy Night” was one of his favorites among Yuletide songs, modestly adding: “I’ve sung it countless times in choir (the dull second tenor part).”

Our fond memories of “O Holy Night” are closely associated with the familiar English words translated from the original French by the Unitarian minister John Sullivan Dwight. Former director of the school at the 19th-century Brook Farm commune in Massachusetts, Dwight witnessed the conversion to Catholicism of a number of his fellow commune members, including Isaac Hecker—later a Roman Catholic priest and founder of the Paulist Fathers, the first religious community of priests created in North America.

Whether this religious aura influenced Dwight’s 1855 translation is debatable. Undocumented legends have persistently surrounded “O Holy Night,” including that trench-fighting during the Franco-Prussian War

of 1870 (or alternately, World War I) temporarily ceased while French troops sang the song to their opponents on Christmas Eve.

A better documented, if generally overlooked, instance of the nurturing power of “O Holy Night” was reported in *The Marine Corps Times* in December 2004. In Fallujah, Iraq, to convey a message of love from home, the Rev. Ron Camarda, a Catholic priest and Marine Reserve major, sang “O Holy Night” at the bedside of a dying American Marine, wounded on a military mission.

Dwight’s healing, pious and inspiring words tell us, as Father Hunt reflected, about the light brought by the birth of Jesus. By 1885, Dwight’s lyrics had become so accepted that Hart Pease Danks, a choir leader and songwriter best remembered for the tear-jerking ballad “Silver Threads Among the Gold,” produced his own adaptation of them in a version entitled “O Night Divine.” In all fairness, the result could not be called an improvement.

Yet the competing adaptations

by John Sullivan Dwight and Danks shared the quality of being unilaterally upbeat, much unlike the original French song, “Minuit, Chrétiens” (“Midnight, Christians”), sometimes called “Cantique de Noël.”

“Minuit, Chrétiens” began as a French poem by Placide Cappeau, a wine merchant and leftist from Roquemaure, a small town in the Gard department of southern France. Educated by Jesuit instructors at the Collège Royal in Avignon, Cappeau penned the complex text in 1843 on the occasion of the restoration of stained glass at the local church in Roquemaure.

His poem begins didactically, as if lecturing a crowd: “Midnight, Christians, is the solemn hour when the Human God descended to us, to erase original sin and cease the wrath of his Father.” Cappeau addresses the “powerful” of his day, “proud with [their] grandeur,” ordering them to humble themselves before God. Nothing of this discourse survives in the dulcet verses of the “O Holy Night” we sing today.

Having ordered listeners to kneel, “Minuit, Chrétiens” then instructs them to rise, in a way similar to the later left-wing anthem “L’Internationale” (1871), which begins, “Arise ye damned of the earth.” Telling oppressed people to rise up is common in anthems, but “L’Internationale,” written by Eugène Pottier, may have partially reflected Placide Cappeau’s poem from a generation earlier.

Adolphe Adam, a composer of secular operas, set “Minuit, Chrétiens” to music in 1843 or 1847, according to two differing contemporary accounts. But many elements in “Minuit, Chrétiens” did not sit well with church authorities. Soon after it was written, the 1848 Revolution broke out in France, and Adam worried some observers by calling “O Holy Night” a “religious Mar-seillaise,” referring to the 1792 song adopted as the Gallic national anthem.

Official publications on Catholic music began to fret about the popularity of “Minuit, Chrétiens,” calling its lyricist a socialist drunk. An unfounded rumor also circulated that Adolphe Adam was Jewish, a falsehood that is repeated to this day in some English-language writings. In 1930, Vincent d’Indy, a noted Catholic royalist composer, wrote a text praising Richard Wagner and accusing “Jewish composers,” erroneously including Adam’s name on the list, of being interested only in financial gain.

As early as 1864, the *Revue de Musique Sacrée*, a distinguished journal focusing on Catholic liturgical music, opined:

Adolphe Adam’s [“Minuit, Chrétiens”] has been performed at many churches during Midnight Masses.... it might be a good thing to

discard this piece whose popularity is becoming unhealthy. It is sung in the streets, social gatherings, and at bars with live entertainment. It becomes debased and degenerated. The best would be to let it go its own way, far from houses of religion, which can do very well without it.

Further church criticism of the song itself focused on its militant tone and dubious theology. Some priests inquired what the lyric “*Et de son Père arrêter le courroux*” (“to cease the wrath of his Father”) referred to. Did “Minuit, Chrétiens” describe a vengeful Old Testament-style deity in contrast to Jesus? Perhaps because of these controversies, “Minuit, Chrétiens” was rarely included in Catholic hymnals.

French Catholic criticism continued after the Second World War, when the liturgical composer and musicologist Auguste Sérieyx chided choirs and organists who “make our churches resound with such hare-brained inspirations” as “Minuit, Chrétiens,” also chastising priests who “tolerate or encourage them.”

Le Dictionnaire du Foyer Catholique (published in Paris in 1956) declared that the song “has been expunged from many dioceses due to the emphatic aspect of its lyrics as much as the music itself, and the contrast they provide with the holiday liturgy, so lovely and grand in its simplicity.”

Yet despite these and other objections decrying the music of “Minuit, Chrétiens” as facile and banal, its international renown continued to grow.

Ecclesiastical concern about the popularity and content of “Minuit, Chrétiens” was reproduced when it was imported to Canada in 1858 by Ernest Gagnon, a folklorist, compos-

er and organist. Gagnon had attended a Midnight Mass the previous year at the Church of Saint-Roch in Paris, where a treble voice sang “Minuit, Chrétiens.” After Gagnon popularized the song in Canada, a tradition arose that parishes would select a soloist for the Midnight Mass performance of “Minuit, Chrétiens” from among local noteworthies as a special honor.

The song, originally written by Adam to be performed by a retired provincial soprano who had premiered one of his less successful operas in Paris, would likewise first be performed in Canada by a soprano singer. Only later did the song become the province of tenors and baritones. But Adam, as a composer of virtuoso operas, included some exposed high notes that challenge even professional singers, let alone well-meaning amateurs. As a result, congregations in Canada would customarily wait with trepidation for the climactic phrases of the song to see whether notes would be sung sharp or flat.

There is no sign that Adolphe Adam expected he would be remembered principally for “Minuit, Chrétiens,” alongside the ballet “Giselle.” His 1857 memoirs do not even mention it. Yet for generations of “O Holy Night” listeners on Christmas Eve and beyond, he remains indelibly the composer of that one immortal and inspiring song.

Benjamin Ivry has written biographies of Francis Poulenc, Maurice Ravel and Arthur Rimbaud and has translated many books from French.

 For a list of noteworthy recordings of “O Holy Night,” visit americamagazine.org/music.

The Art of Book Reviewing

By Nick Ripatrazone

In the age of social media, the negative review is a conversation starter.

The negative book review is a play in three acts.

First, the review arrives: spicy, jocular, maybe a little mean.

Then comes the backlash on social media: sometimes self-righteous, other times reasonable and necessary—especially if the reviewer gets needlessly personal.

The third act, though, is the most interesting. *Maybe the reviewer was right*, the whispers start. *I was thinking the same thing*.

If taste is subjective and judgments can be provocative (backlash, quiet backlash against the backlash), then critics occupy a curious role in culture. They are not quite powerless and they are never exactly powerful. They are curious, present and sometimes influential.

“The world of reviewing is small,” says the sociologist Phillipa K. Chong, author of *Inside the Critics’ Circle: Book Reviewing in Uncertain Times*, and there is an unintended double

meaning here. A critic has to write with some confidence and posture, but there is always the worry: Who cares?

The online world cares, apparently. A click-getter. When Camilla Long dissected Rachel Cusk’s memoir, *Aftermath*, for *The Sunday Times*, first came shock. Long calls the book “bizarre” in her opening sentence. After some summary, she concludes Cusk’s memoir “is crammed with mad, flowery metaphors and hifalutin creative-writing experiments.” Long was praised on social media as “deliciously savage” and “hilariously rude.”

Others who have wielded the critical hammer, like William Logan, are less lauded. Joyce Carol Oates has called Logan “the Rush Limbaugh of poetry reviewers.” Logan’s merciless review of Leonard Cohen’s posthumous collection of poems in *The New York Times* prompted one letter-writer to question, “Did Leonard Cohen steal William Logan’s girlfriend?”

Most reviews are not as sharp-

tongued, but Chong’s book reveals that even critics whose reviews play it safe still worry about retribution. Chong’s exploration of the reviewer’s vulnerability feels especially appropriate today, when book reviewers might be concerned with sensitive—and sometimes hypersensitive—reactions to aesthetic criticism.

Chong spoke with 40 fiction reviewers and concluded that they are not “powerful tastemakers issuing edicts”; they are real, vulnerable writers working within a shaky market and writing for a skeptical audience.

She focuses on journalistic reviewers who “traditionally write reviews for daily or weekly publications,” as opposed to those who write for literary magazines or scholarly publications. But even if one writes for the local paper instead of *The Paris Review*, Chong does not think that the reviewer’s work is simple. She examines the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s idea of “reviewers as cultural conse-

Inside the Critics' Circle
Book Reviewing in Uncertain Times
By Phillipa K. Chong
Princeton University Press
192p \$29.95

crators, whose reviews effectively demarcate which books are worth knowing about—and which are not.”

Chong feels this religious metaphor is appropriate, considering that critical judgment “seems a rather mysterious process, involving the generation and maintenance of belief systems, as opposed to simply measuring objective underlying quality differences.”

Such a mysterious process can be challenging. I spoke with Vinson Cunningham, a staff writer for *The New Yorker*, who told me, “Sure, I feel vulnerable when I’m writing criticism, but not more vulnerable than anybody feels just walking around, living.” Cunningham is a theater critic for the magazine and has written on just about every other permutation of culture for the publication. He says that “part of what it means to be a critic is to say some awkward things—I’m not so sure we were ever all that popular.”

“Writing without risk is dead,” he says. “All I want to be is fair.”

I found that sentiment reflected in conversations with other critics. Anthony Domestico, who reviews books for *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Boston Globe*, *Commonweal* and others, says he feels “a responsibility to the text I’m engaging with—a responsibility to read it as intelligently and sympathetically as I can. That’s hard enough to do without worrying over how others might respond to my writing.”

The fact is, Domestico tells me, “critics will always be, have always been, criticized. That’s to the good.” He acknowledges that social media “has made this criticism louder; it’s

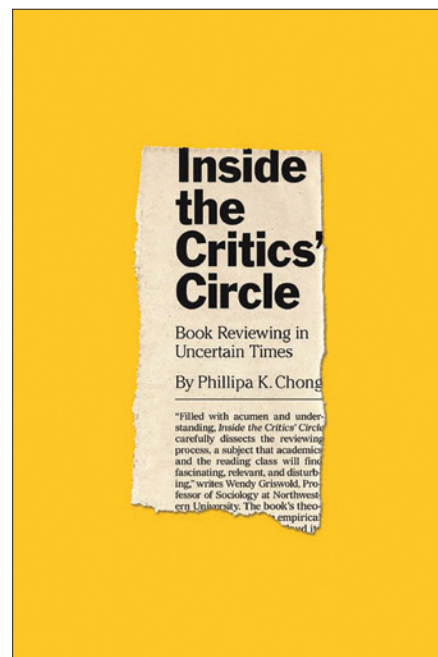
at times flattened out important, and complicated, discussions that writers and readers should be having.”

This concern is reflected in Chong’s findings. She notes that critics have “expressed an acute awareness that the evaluative tenor of their reviews can have implications not only for the books they review but also for themselves as working writers.”

The perception—and reality—is that book pages are dwindling, along with funds to pay the remaining writers. Uncertainty about book reviewing is not merely a theoretical crisis. If sustained, engaged criticism dies, what remains? Outrage and flippancy over someone’s book is no substitute for careful consideration of its merits. Our culture suffers when our critical sense disappears. Critics are a check, in a way, against bad art. They outwardly articulate our instincts and help people see how art works—and when art doesn’t work.

As Chong describes, this concern is particularly acute in the world of fiction reviewing, where what she calls a “switch-role reward structure” occurs: “Authors are invited by the editors of book review pages to temporarily switch from their roles as *producers of books* to perform the role of *reviewer of books*—and then switch back again.” Editors often feel that novelists bring “an intimate understanding of the creative process of writing and an aesthetic sensitivity to the craft of fiction exclusive to people who have created fiction themselves.”

For Cunningham, that sense of critical honesty tempered by empathy feels in line with Cornel West’s idea of



bringing a “Socratic energy” to how we engage with people: “at once loving and critical.” Cunningham says he lets that idea guide how he responds to art and then tries to “not think too much about what might come back my way.”

Cunningham’s view seems in line with what I feel is a charitable vein that can be followed within criticism: Critics should focus more on describing and understanding than on simply judging—less thumbs up or thumbs down, but instead trying to meet the work on its own terms, seeking to understand its components and aims: communion with a work instead of confrontation.

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

History and memory in the City of Angels

By Michael Eng

D. J. Waldie holds up a magnifying glass to what Los Angeles has been and what it is becoming.

Angelenos have long suffered condescending comments from their visitors. William Faulkner, Thomas Mann, Evelyn Waugh, Dorothy Parker, F. Scott Fitzgerald and H. L. Mencken, among others, have dismissed Los Angeles and its inhabitants: “It’s like paradise with a lobotomy,” said Neil Simon in 1976’s “California Suite.” The city’s weather, architecture, freeway system and suburban culture have all attracted dismissive assessment. Cinematic critiques have been equally devastating, as seen in the film noir treatment of movies like “Chinatown” (1974), “Blade Runner” (1982) and “L.A. Confidential” (1997).

D. J. Waldie offers another interpretation in *Becoming Los Angeles: Myth, Memory, and a Sense of Place*. A native son of Lakewood, a city southeast of Los Angeles, Waldie is a confirmed pedestrian, a walker who does not drive, and as such is an observer of what he sees up close and a thinker who reflects on what he gazes upon. Fortunately for Angelenos and thoughtful urban residents, he strips away the

carefully constructed myths that obscure and distort the significant but disturbing actions of the past. Throughout this volume he asks: “Can awareness of the city’s past be of any worth to us except as nostalgia or irony?”

Known best for *Holy Land: A Suburban Memoir* (1996), Waldie can best be termed a public intellectual. He writes with grace and clarity in his comments on urban affairs that include saving the Los Angeles River, Spanish Revival architecture, freeway routing through poor neighborhoods, historic preservation and finding evidence of nature in the city. He not only laments the paucity of parkland in Los Angeles, for example, but he explains the dire consequences of too few places to mingle with people “different from ourselves.” Without these shared spaces, he wonders, how can we restore ourselves to “our shared nature”? Without preserved heritage sites, how can we know our “garbled inauthenticity”?

Waldie deconstructs the Los Angeles of boosters and developers. Their romanticized history begins

with a Spanish fantasy past with Zorro and Ramona, sleepy *mestizos*, kindly Franciscan padres and the simple life of pastoral California. Such misreadings have flattened “the city’s history of class antagonisms and racial conflicts” and have “wrung differences and complexity out of the city’s story.” These myths have distorted “who we have been and fed us false hopes” of perpetual reinvention in a city of second chances. For Waldie, as for the late California historian Kevin Starr, writing and reading history are sources of the moral imagination so necessary for society to understand itself.

Attentive to past and present, Waldie also ruminates on what Angelenos will become. He has read widely in urban affairs, sociology, history, architecture, journalism and philosophy. To create a Los Angeles that is livable and inclusive, he believes, “will require an intense effort of attention which is, the French philosopher Simone Weil wrote, ‘the same thing as prayer.’” As she noted, authenticity in prayer “presupposes faith and love.”

Becoming Los Angeles
Myth, Memory, and a Sense of Place
By D. J. Waldie
Angel City Press
224p \$30

Waldie concludes this book with an afterword that aptly expresses his regard for Los Angeles: “Falling in Love.”

Waldie recognizes that his affection for Los Angeles rests on his deep awareness of the city as inhabited place. Through numerous vignettes and biographical sketches, he demonstrates how his multidimensional sense of place has integrated itself “into the very heart of [his] personal identity.” No starry-eyed enthusiast, Waldie possesses a sensitive yet critical eye for all he sees. Who else but a careful observer would notice how a skim of pooled rainwater revealed children’s names faintly etched in concrete? Such commonplace evidence of past human activity leads him to recognize his resentment of those who dismiss ordinariness with contempt.

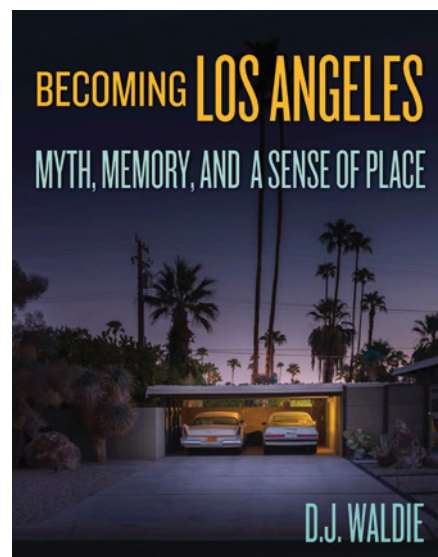
Repeatedly, Waldie points out those who have been written out of the city’s history. The Native American Tongva people, socialists and radicals, immigrants, people of color and the homeless require inclusion as people of Los Angeles, as fellow Angelenos. He cites examples of the contentious encounters between Anglos and people of color, workers and exploitative employers, socialists and the anti-union business establishment. Past acts of violence require our examination if we are to handle current racial and economic tensions more successfully than earlier residents of the city did. As he concludes, sometimes “our experience of Los Angeles resonates with unexpected immediacy, and the image fabricated to enable forgetting falls away.”

Remembering and reconciling are tasks that Angelenos face today. Waldie suggests that Our Lady of Gua-

dalupe, *La Virgen*, possesses the requisite qualities of silence, modesty and blended identities to address powerfully the uncertainties of the future. He observes that most everything we consider to be truly Los Angeles actually came from somewhere else, “and most of that was undocumented.” *La Virgen* represents the mixture of ethnicities in the city, a mother for all who are hopeful and fearful, and she has become the still point of Los Angeles.

Waldie’s Catholicism is an urban faith, one he ponders while walking to Sunday Mass at St. Cyprian Catholic Church in Long Beach. His religious beliefs provide the lens for recognizing the incarnational nature of human experience, one that provides him hope amid urban turmoil with its uncertain future. Throughout his book, Waldie expresses faith, hope and love while describing the human foibles and abject failures across the centuries since Los Angeles was founded in 1781. With contradictions in the very heart of the city, Waldie still recognizes its moments of beauty.

Waldie’s poetic sensibility, graced by faith, finds expression in his elegant prose. Waldie is at his strongest when analyzing history or describing individuals from L.A.’s past. His keen eye for detail, revealed in such instances as his reflections about the table on which the Treaty of Cahuenga was signed in 1847, capture in miniature the contradictions in the city’s history. Less moving for this reviewer were extended observations of nature’s seasons in the suburb where he resides. Neighborhood observations do not always hold the attention of people unfamiliar with those streets. But per-

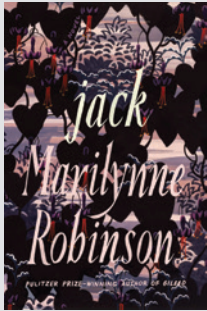


haps my eyes have not lingered long enough to appreciate the nuances he described.

Taking Los Angeles on its own terms, Waldie assesses its successes and failures. Another Los Angeles is now being invented, and Waldie’s book holds up a magnifying glass to what the city has been, is now and is becoming. The implications of these changes warrant our attention, whether the reader already dismisses this city for not being New York or is open to discussions of the evolution of cities through Covid-19, Black Lives Matter and local economic suffering.

Becoming Los Angeles presents diverse essays, written between 2008 and 2018 and revised in 2019, that provide an apologia for a battered but beloved city. Waldie cries out for residents and leaders to take the city and its history seriously enough to help it realize its potential as a metropolis that is more inclusive, just and authentic, inhabited by the children of Our Lady, its patroness and namesake.

Michael Engh, S.J., is chancellor of Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles.



Jack

By Marilynne Robinson
Farrar, Straus
and Giroux
320p \$27

A return to Gilead

There are risks in writing a doctoral dissertation on a living writer. The first is trying to assess an evolving canon; another is getting bored with the writer's latest work.

Marilynne Robinson's fourth installment of the Gilead series, *Jack*, is a meditative continuation of the parable of Jack Boughton, wayward son and godson of two pastors in small-town Iowa. The plot of *Jack* fleshes out what is adverted to (but never developed) in the other novels, which cover overlapping but not identical ground.

The novel begins in Bellefontaine, an antebellum cemetery north of St. Louis. We amble slowly with Jack and his would-be wife, Della, under cover of darkness. This start was not easy reading, and this devoté feared Ms. Robinson had lost her touch. At one point Jack muses, "A night can seem endless." (So can a novel, I grumbled.)

Soon, however, it became clear that Robinson was deliberately slowing down our pace. At daybreak, the pair emerges from the cemetery like Adam and Eve, sloughing off the anonymizing bliss that night afforded. They must now face the dulling shame reserved for couples in interracial romances in 1950s America, a motif that has played quietly in

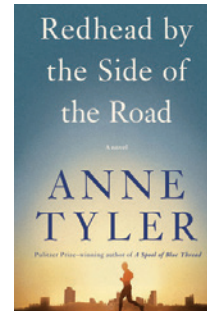
the background of the Gilead series until now. We meet the solicitous ministers and family members who want the best for Della and Jack, up to but excluding their free consent for the couple to be married.

Robinson showers us with allusions to consider: *Hamlet* and the Prodigal Son, *Paradise Lost* and the Garden of Eden, *Crime and Punishment* and the Prince of Darkness. As Jack walks past thriving Black churches and St. Louis neighborhoods later destroyed by eminent domain laws, Robinson's point is subtle but clear.

Jack's accumulated missteps and bad habits are periodically countered by renewed hope in his love for Della. One morning Jack cleans himself up and "walked out into a world oddly untransformed. Miracles leave no trace.... [T]hey happened once as a sort of commentary on the blandness and inadequacy of the reality they break in on, and then vanish, leaving a world behind that refutes the very idea that such a thing could have happened."

Those familiar with the Gilead story will find here another beautiful meditation on grace operative in spite of habits of despair and the social sins that feed them. Like its author, *Jack* is many things, but boring is not one of them.

Joseph Simmons, S.J., is currently writing his doctoral dissertation on Marilynne Robinson and Virginia Woolf at the University of Oxford.



Redhead by the Side of the Road

By Anne Tyler
Knopf
192p \$26.95

A life of tiny, boring moments

Every day is the same. You wake up at the same time, maybe go for a run. You make a cup of coffee, do a little reading. Life is monotonous, nothing ever changes and you kind of don't want it to—but maybe just a little bit.

This is the life of Micah Mortimer, the protagonist of Anne Tyler's latest novel, *Redhead by the Side of the Road*. It is a book about nothing in particular—but at the same time it is a reflection of our lives today.

Micah is a self-employed tech expert and building supervisor for an apartment complex in Baltimore. He is in his early 40s and lives alone. The routines we find exhausting are the ones he finds comfort in: wiping the counter, mopping the floor, washing the dishes. Everything is perfect, tidy and has a proper place. But one day, a young man shows up on his doorstep and claims that Micah is his real father. (He's not.) This visit kicks off a series of inconveniences that Micah is unprepared for, and he begins to question the life he has built for himself.

We follow Micah over the course of several days in which the steady life he has led slowly begins to turn upside down. He endures a

confusing breakup with his partner and a visit with his family, where he is overwhelmed by the chaos, confusion and disorder that often accompany family gatherings.

Even amid the turbulence of an erroneous paternity claim, everything about Micah's life screams mediocrity. Its monotony can be unsettling to read about because it brings up the thought: Is anyone's life extraordinary?

There is a moment in the novel when Micah rushes home from a job, desperate to do something—anything. “He opened the fridge and stared into it for a moment, but then he shut it again. It was too early for a beer. Too late for another coffee. He didn't even want anything; he just wished he wanted something.” I cannot count the number of times I have lazily opened the fridge, wanting to want something—anything—yet leaving disappointed. Maybe I am Micah?

Redhead by the Side of the Road can help us realize that life often is not spectacular or about jumping from one big event to the next. Rather, the novel reminds us, it is about being present to the tiny, boring moments presented to us every day. All we have during these uncertain times is our routine. We could all take a page from Micah's book: Enjoy the life you have. Now.

Vivian Cabrera is an assistant editor for digital media at *America*.



Transcendent Kingdom
By Yaa Gyasi
Knopf
288p \$27.95

The jumble of it all

Yaa Gyasi's second novel, *Transcendent Kingdom*, presses hard against your chest, a literary confluence of loss and the undying miracle of human resilience. The protagonist, Gifty, is given a life lacerated and shaped by addiction and depression—but not her own. A brother's fatal devotion to opioids and the “deep, dark tunnel” anchoring her mother to a mattress spur Gifty toward a life in the lab, a life digging for neuroscientific answers to some of the brain's most painful questions.

Gyasi creates characters that are fully human: real people with real pain, schoolgirl journals filled with years of entries addressed to God, smell-induced memories that haunt. Gyasi writes about life as it is lived, in the details: the painkillers hidden inside a light fixture, the cutting dialogue between mother and child, the scent of cooking oil.

These details also shape a disturbing portrait of racism as experienced by Gifty's Ghanaian immigrant family in their new home of Huntsville, Ala. Their evangelical church community serves as a reminder that Christianity is not a racism-free zone.

The book traces Gifty's shifting relationship with her childhood faith

tradition and the God found therein. It is not hard to see why Gifty ultimately makes a habit of entering church and simply looking upon Christ's face—no prayer, simply trying “to make order, make sense, make meaning of the jumble of it all.”

Through Gyasi's fantastic interplay of scientific study and life-spanning narrative, she crafts a character who, like so many who have taken a step back from their faith, does not simply or stubbornly “fell the long-growing tree of her belief” without a struggle.

The book is as much a tale of devastation and growing-up-too-fast resolve as it is the shadow sibling of a psalm. Bone-deep, involving metaphors that strike poetry's best chords, Gyasi's prose aims with raw precision. To pick this book up is to suffer with its inhabitants, to step intimately towards the compassion that Gifty feels throughout.

Come to Gyasi, all you who are weary and burdened, and she will give you heartbreak, the reminder that people are not alone in their ache and grief—that a transcendent kingdom of unfathomable connection is alive and well among us. She may prove to be one of the most important writers of our time, one who can stitch the spiritual and the sociological together in storytelling that just might deepen our kinship as one humanity that calls us forth, like the Lazarus she ponders, from the deep, dark tunnel of our estrangement.

Erika Rasmussen is a Joseph A. O'Hare, S.J., fellow at *America Media*.

Prophetic Voices

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT (B), DECEMBER 6, 2020

READINGS: IS 40:1-11; PS 85; 2 PT 3:8-14; MK 1:1-8

The readings for the Second Sunday of Advent highlight prophets as people who can guide us on our journey closer to God.

In the first reading from Isaiah, we hear a prophecy addressing the people of Judah, as many were living away from their homeland in exile. During this time, God offers comfort and assurance that they would be able to return home with God accompanying and protecting them along the way. Jerusalem is personified as heralding the good news of the return home after the Babylonian exile.

The Gospel from Mark picks up on the language of preparing the way by connecting it with John the Baptist and his role as herald for the arrival of the Messiah. With echoes from Isaiah, in the opening of Mark, people are invited from throughout Jerusalem and the Judean countryside to visit the prophet and be baptized.

Unlike Matthew's and Luke's Gospels, which begin with infancy narratives, and John's Gospel, which begins with a prologue about Jesus' divine origins, Mark starts his Gospel with the prophet John the Baptist's proclamation in the wilderness. Mark's prologue focuses on the birth of Jesus' ministry, and John's prophetic announcement frames how we are to understand Jesus.

The opening of Mark includes several keys for unlocking the rest of the Gospel, which is important as Mark will be the main Gospel featured in the Year B readings. The first statement that Mark makes is to connect Jesus to the Hebrew Scriptures, shedding a new light on passages of old. Mark reinterprets and reframes exilic and post-exilic prophecies from Isaiah and Malachi in light of Christ. Likewise, Mark depicts John as a prophet, wearing clothes and eating food often associated with the prophet Elijah, an important hint that his audience should recognize parallels between these two figures.

John's first statement is also telling: "One mightier than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop and loosen the thongs of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." John clarifies his status and role compared to Jesus. He intimates that he is a prophet (in his biblical quotations and attire), but he is not the Messiah. When we encounter Jesus soon after, John has already established Jesus as the one about whom he speaks. Moreover, John distinguishes himself from Jesus by saying that through Jesus people will receive the Holy Spirit.

Today's readings remind us to be attuned to the prophetic voices in our

*The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together.
(Is 40:5)*

Praying With Scripture

Who speaks prophetically today?

How can you be inspired by the biblical prophets?

What can you do during Advent to grow spiritually?

midst. The prophet Isaiah spoke in his time about the power of God to overcome the exile, reunite separated peoples and begin anew. The prophet John the Baptist spoke in his time, building on traditions to elucidate Jesus' significance. Rather than predicting the future, biblical prophets were most concerned about their present, often critiquing and helping people to understand the world in order to enrich their relationships with God and one another. The biblical prophets reveal that God speaks through the words and actions of people, and we should look for modern-day prophetic voices in our midst.

During Advent and always, we are called to listen to the prophets of our day and be inspired to live prophetic lives, always mindful of pressing issues and working tirelessly to understand and improve the world.

The Joy of God's Love

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT (B), DECEMBER 13, 2020

READINGS: IS 61:1-11; LK 1; 1 THES 5:16-24; JN 1:6-28

Today's Gospel from John shares several similarities to the Gospel from Mark last Sunday. Both highlight John the Baptist as the herald for the Messiah. Advent is a great time to

reflect on people who, like John, shed light on what is important and what enables us to draw nearer to God.

In the evangelist John's prologue, John the Baptist is said to be sent from

God as a witness to testify so that "all might believe through him." Through his proclamations and actions, John the Baptist helps people to understand Jesus' significance as the Mes-

siah. Like Mark last week, John insists that John the Baptist is not the Messiah himself; rather, he prepares the way for him. This insistence suggests that there was uncertainty and debate in antiquity over how John should be regarded. During Advent, we frequently hear about John the Baptist and his role as herald on behalf of Christ. We should be inspired to model ourselves after him, considering ways in which we too can proclaim our Christian witness.

In addition, the third Sunday of Advent is Gaudete (Rejoice) Sunday, and the first and second readings aptly emphasize the importance of joy at this point in the season. In the first reading from Isaiah, we hear a prophecy that delivers good news to people who are recovering after the Babylonian exile. The speaker, perhaps a member of the post-exilic community or a prophet, rejoices in God's saving power and quest for justice. God

is depicted as savior, comforter and advocate, delivering good news to the most vulnerable and marginalized: the poor, brokenhearted, captives and prisoners. The reading reminds us to rejoice in knowing that God's salvific power is active in the world and in our lives. Even and perhaps especially when moments are challenging, today we are reminded to "rejoice heartily in the Lord" who makes "justice and praise spring up."

The second reading from 1 Thessalonians reminds early Christians to rejoice, pray and give thanks, actions that should be emulated today. Paul also emphasizes prophetic voices as essential to communities, for they often condemn injustice in society. Paul reminds the Thessalonians to test prophetic words, retaining good elements and refraining from evil. Obviously, the point is not solely to pick and choose what is most agreeable. Instead, Paul affirms the importance

Do not despise prophetic utterances. (1 Thes 5:20)

Praying With Scripture

How do you live out your Christian faith?

What can you do to promote the common good?

Who or what brings you joy?

of critical thinking and discernment to determine what actions promote the common good.

As we journey through Advent, we should carefully consider today's readings and how they prepare us to encounter Christ on Christmas and always. At this halfway point in Advent, we are called to be Christian witnesses like John the Baptist, heed prophetic voices and rejoice in God's saving power and love.

Favored

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT (B), DECEMBER 20, 2020
READINGS: 2 SM 7:1-16; PS 89; ROM 16:25-27; LK 1:26-38

In the first reading and the Gospel, we hear of two people who became important pillars of salvation history. Both David and Mary are biblical examples of divine selection, and they can help us to reflect on our own calling from God.

David and Mary are polar opposites. David's rise to power was paved with many questionable and corrupt actions, such as war, murder, politically motivated marriages and adultery. Mary, full of grace and selected to be the mother of God, is held in later tradition to be without sin. Both of them

receive favor from God.

Certainly, David is not a model for how to campaign, lead or marry. Yet the first reading is packed with a royal theology and rationale for the Davidic dynasty. Through the prophet Nathan, God conveys intent to establish a dynasty through David. The reading describes God's covenant with David and his descendants. David is promised greatness, protection from enemies and an everlasting throne. The Davidic dynasty ended with the Babylonian exile, and this inexplicable defeat and vacancy were jarring. In the New Tes-

'You have found favor with God.' (Lk 1:30)

Praying With Scripture

What can you do to bless others?

What is your vocation?

How can you empower people in your community?

tament, the covenant with David is invoked and fulfilled through Mary and the birth of Jesus.

The biblical tradition does not

provide much background on Mary's life. In today's Gospel, we hear her response to her calling to be Jesus' mother. Through the angel Gabriel, Mary is told that she has been favored by God to conceive and bear a son who will be "Son of the Most High" and who will be given "the throne of David his father...and of his kingdom there will be no end." Luke interprets Jesus' birth as the fulfillment of the Davidic promise from the first reading, re-framing the covenant to be a promise for salvation, not only an assurance of

a king seated in Jerusalem.

The divine favor given to David and Mary is facilitated by and shared with others. Nathan confirms that the favor given to David will result in his son Solomon building the temple, and future generations will hold the throne. Likewise, Gabriel informs Mary that her favor with God enables Christ to enter the world. Divine selection is seldom about one person; instead, God forms special relationships with select people in order to affect and bless many people.

On this Fourth Sunday of Advent, we hear about David and Mary because Jesus is their connection, coming from the line of David and born of the virgin Mary. The Lectionary places these readings just before Christmas to help us think about Jesus' heritage, significance and important people in his family. The readings also give us an opportunity to reflect on our own life and vocation. They should remind us to think about how we can positively influence the world and be a blessing for others.

Family and Community

HOLY FAMILY, DECEMBER 27, 2020
READINGS: SIR 3:2-14/GN 15:1-21:3; PS 128/105; COL 3:12-21/HEB 11:8-19; LK 2:22-40

Today is the feast of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. The themes of family and community are prominent in the multiple reading options offered in the Lectionary.

The first reading can be taken from either Sirach or Genesis. The reading from Sirach provides wisdom on how parents and children should interact with one another. Parents are given guidance and authority over child-rearing, and children are instructed to honor and care for their parents, especially as they age. The reading from Genesis is a combination of Chapters 15 and 21, in which God promises Abraham descendants that will be innumerable. The second part of the reading is the fulfillment that comes through Sarah with the birth of Isaac. The omitted parts include Abraham and Hagar's relationship, which produces their son Ishmael. The first readings note the importance of parent-child dynamics and affirm chil-

dren as blessings from God, even at times defying biological constraints, as in the case of Abraham and Sarah.

The second reading comes from either Colossians or Hebrews. If Colossians is selected, the shorter option should be preferred to eliminate the harmful language of women's subordination, as was discussed in last year's column for this feast (12/28/19). The shorter reading emphasizes ways in which a community should emulate God and treat one another as family, offering love, compassion, patience and forgiveness. The reading from Hebrews will likely be proclaimed if Genesis is selected as the first reading. Hebrews reflects on Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac, interpreting Genesis 22 as a sign of Abraham's faith in God's power and promise.

The Gospel will come from Luke, and the Lectionary offers a long and a short option. The short option misses most of the narrative, so the long op-

She gave thanks and spoke about the child to all awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem. (Lk 2:38)

Praying With Scripture

How can you strengthen your relationship with your family?

Do you treat your neighbors and community as family?

What can you do to support families?

tion should be preferred. In it, Mary and Joseph take the newborn Jesus to be presented in the Temple. They offer a sacrifice and receive prophetic words from two members of the community, Simeon and Anna. This presentation is the first public action undertaken by the Holy Family in Luke's Gospel. The act unites the family as they fulfill religious duties prescribed in the Torah. Moreover, the communi-

ty, represented by the prophets Simeon and Anna, accepts and recognizes the family and Jesus' significance as the Messiah. The public affirmation and witness make this text apropos on the feast of the Holy Family, as the community-family supports the Holy Family. The Gospel calls to mind the African proverb "It takes a village to raise a child," which highlights the role of the community in providing love and guidance for children to survive and thrive.

Today's readings are reminders that the family is a foundational rela-

tionship that must be nurtured, and the community is an extension of the family. The readings should inspire us to strengthen connections with our own families and communities.

Jaime L. Waters teaches Scripture at DePaul University in Chicago. She is an associate professor of Catholic studies.



Santa Clara University seeks a dynamic, collaborative, and strategic leader to serve as its first Vice President for Mission and Ministry. Reporting to the President, Kevin O'Brien, S.J., and serving on the President's Cabinet, this executive position will strengthen and promote the Jesuit, Catholic identity of the University in ways that are pastoral, inclusive, and reflective of the rich diversity of the University community. The Vice President for Mission and Ministry will be responsible for the clear articulation and broad communication of Santa Clara University's

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Biden and the Bishops

They can work together to advance social justice

By Kevin Appleby



President-elect Joseph R. Biden Jr. will be only the second Catholic leader of the United States, after John F. Kennedy some 60 years ago. His presidency will bring new opportunities for the government and the church to work together on issues important to Catholic social teaching, including immigration reform, protection for refugees, anti-poverty measures, racial justice, climate change, international development and global peace.

The issue of abortion could inhibit collaboration in these other areas. During his long career in the U.S. Senate, Mr. Biden was more moderate on abortion than many other Democrats. But as a presidential nominee, he took a more inflexible position, and he will likely remain on the opposite side of the U.S. bishops on this issue. The bishop need not pull their political punches on this score. They should be careful, however, not to alienate Mr. Biden to the point of jeopardizing cooperation on other issues of importance to the church.

It should go without saying that using the sacrament of Communion as a political weapon should be strongly discouraged, if not prohibited, by the bishops. It is counterproductive and puts the clergy on a slippery moral slope. If Mr. Biden is denied Communion, should the same happen to the millions of Catholics who voted for him? Publicly questioning Mr. Biden's

moral standing in the church would be shortsighted and inconsistent with the example of Jesus, who preached and gave reconciliation.

Mr. Biden also must do his part to work constructively with the U.S. bishops. As president, he must respect and consider the opinions of all U.S. citizens, including fellow Catholics. And as a Catholic, he must respect the views of the church hierarchy and not simply dismiss them, as some politicians do. He should work to find common ground with them and, in some cases, be willing to take a political risk on their behalf.

As president, Mr. Biden should work with the bishops to protect the rights of faith organizations and to assist Catholic education, especially struggling inner-city schools. A product of Catholic schools himself, Mr. Biden should understand the value of a Catholic education and how it can change the lives of children from poor families.

There are also grounds for collaboration with the church in safety net programs and tax policy, including incentives for adoption, funding for child care, the provision of care for pregnant women and expanded health insurance coverage for prenatal care and nutrition. Not coincidentally, this agenda could help to reduce the number of abortions in the United States.

Mr. Biden also must keep in mind that not all Catholics, or Catholic priests and bishops, are alike. As

he has no doubt already realized, he could be denied Communion by one priest or be publicly criticized by one bishop, but this does not mean that all priests and bishops are of the same mind. Far from it.

Finally, in order to facilitate collaboration and communication with the U.S. bishops, Mr. Biden should avoid pitting one part of the church against the other—for example, women religious against the bishops, a tactic used during the Obama administration in the fight to pass the Affordable Care Act. We all worship at Mass together.

I am proud that a fellow Catholic will soon occupy the Oval Office for only the second time in U.S. history. I am even more proud that the idea of a Catholic president is not controversial, as it was 60 years ago. As Catholics, we should try not to make it a controversial issue again—this time because of our own public disagreements.

Mr. Biden's presidency represents a historic opportunity for the U.S. bishops—and the Catholic community as a whole—to work with a Catholic president to advance social justice in this country. We should seize the moment. One is better heard whispering in an ear than shouting from afar.

Kevin Appleby is the former director of migration policy for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

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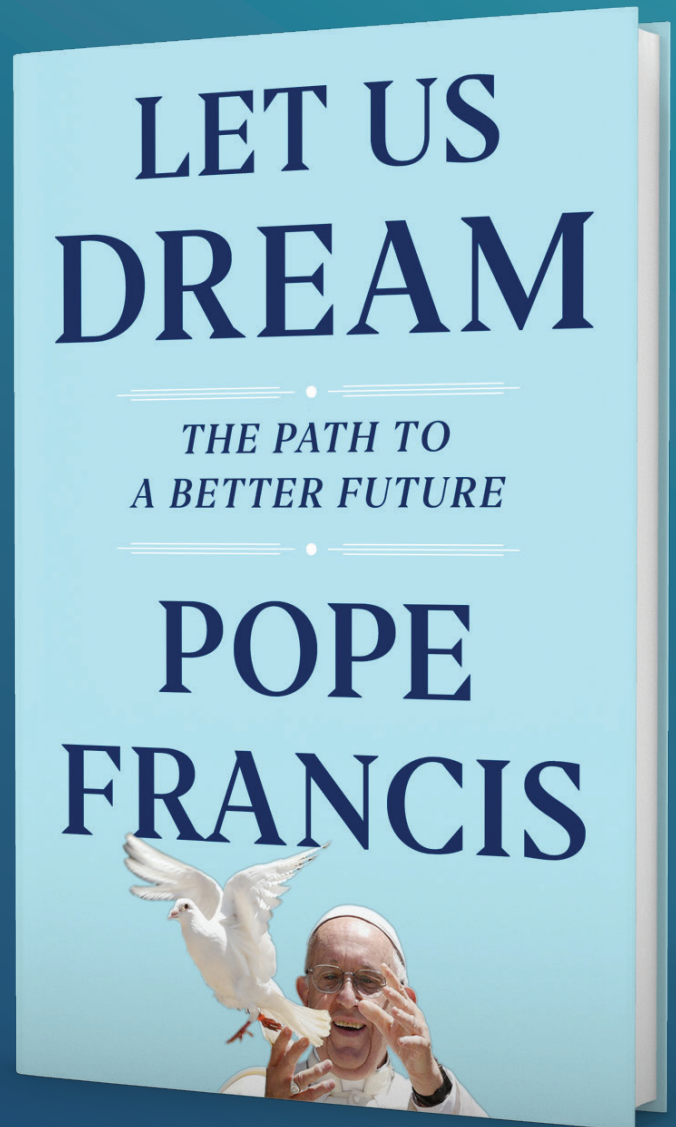
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