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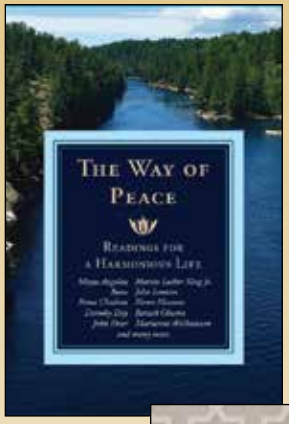

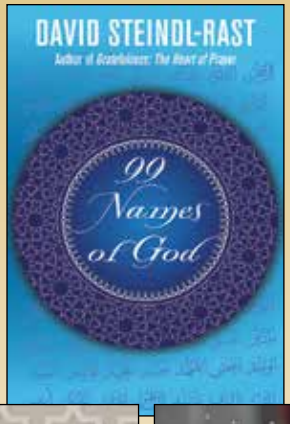

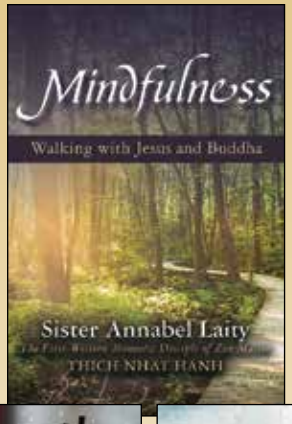

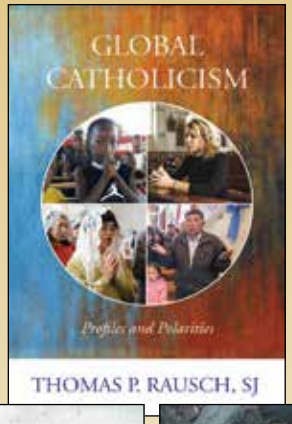

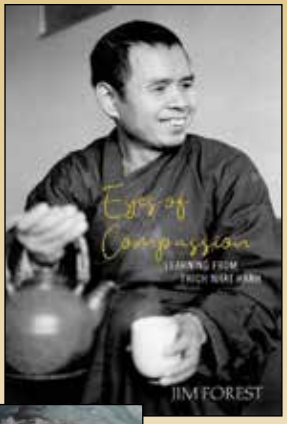

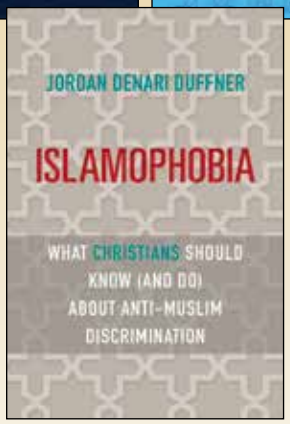

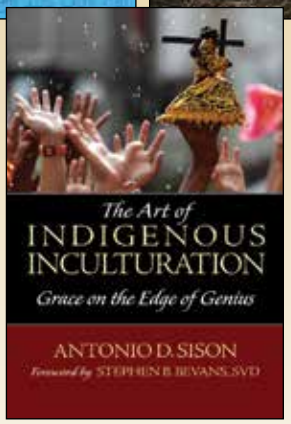

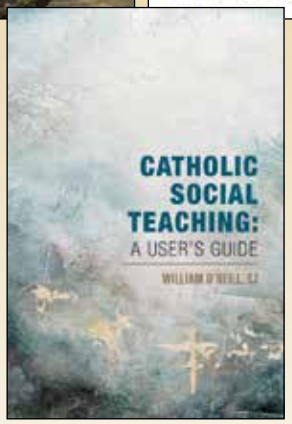

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A Few Questions

A significant minority of the Catholic Church in the United States are once again engaged in a vigorous debate about whether Catholic politicians should be admitted to holy Communion if they hold public policy positions at odds with fundamental Catholic values. Abortion is the issue that predominates. Some believe that a Catholic politician who votes for pro-choice policies should be barred from Communion. Several prominent Catholic commentators have weighed in, including Archbishop Samuel Aquila and Bishop Robert McElroy, who took different positions. And the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops is expected to consider this month a document about this and related questions of "eucharistic coherence."

If you are experiencing déjà vu, you're not alone. The question I have been most frequently asked during my visits to Rome is why American Catholics seem singularly obsessed with this issue—not with abortion per se, which is a grave matter of life and death that should concern us all, but with the question of who should and should not be admitted to holy Communion based on their politics. To my Roman questioners, the United States appears to be one of the few places where this debate takes place with such regularity, not to mention passion. Much of the rest of the Catholic Church, they point out, has made up its mind.

It is well known, for example, that St. John Paul II, while celebrating the Eucharist with the family of British Prime Minister Tony Blair in 2003, distributed Communion to Mr. Blair, who at the time was not only pro-choice but an Anglican. And I am aware of no evidence that would indicate that Pope Francis has ever publicly denied Communion to a Catholic who presented him- or herself for Communion. That's quite telling, especially when one considers that Francis spent a lot of his early priesthood ministering in an overwhelmingly Catholic country that was then ruled by a murderous dictatorship. Presumably, if ever there were a moment for Francis to publicly deny Communion to a politician, that would have been it, but there is no record that he did that.

Which brings me back to now. In the midst of this great debate about whether politicians should be excluded from Communion, has anyone bothered to ask whether this actually happens? I mean, we've all heard the odd story or two—some well documented—about a pro-choice politician who has been turned away from the altar, but if we took a poll of every pro-choice and Catholic member of Congress, what percentage of them would report that this has happened to them? I'd venture to guess very few. And if we conducted a poll of Catholic priests, deacons and eucharistic ministers and asked whether they would deny Communion to a pro-choice politician who presented him- or herself, what percentage would tell us that they would? My guess is very few. And, not to put too fine a point on it, what percentage of those ministers of Communion would answer the same way regardless of whether there was a diocesan policy about such matters?

I suspect that the data from this imagined survey would demonstrate that at least at a practical level, American Catholics have settled this question. And yet, the all-engrossing debate will rage on, mainly because (and this is the answer I give to my friends in Rome) the issue touches on what it means to be a Catholic and an American.

It is the question that has vexed Catholics from the moment we first stepped forth onto the shores of this culturally Protestant country. Which comes first: church or country? At the end of the day, that is what we are really talking about. It's what we are always talking about, whether we know it or not. Think about it: Do U.S. senators question whether an Episcopalian should serve on the U.S. Supreme Court, given that the Episcopal Church in the United States strongly opposes the death penalty? Did anyone ask Justice Elena Kagan during her confirmation hearings whether she could be impartial on the question of Roe v. Wade, considering that the Rabbinical Council of Conservative Judaism is pro-choice? Of course not. Yet questions like these are routinely asked of Roman Catholics. But here's the thing: They are asked of us because we ask them of ourselves. Amy Coney Barrett's Catholicism was a matter of public debate mainly because Catholics publicly debated it. Why? Such debates don't really happen elsewhere in the Catholic world.

My point is simply this: When it comes to Communion and pro-choice politicians, perhaps Bishop McElroy is right. Or maybe Archbishop Aquila is right. Or maybe they're somehow both right and both wrong. Or maybe, just maybe, they're asking the wrong question. And maybe that's why we seem unable to ever answer it.

Matt Malone, S.J.
Twittter: @americaeditor.

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CNS photo/Sarah Webb, CatholicPhilly.com

Students of Drexel Neumann Academy pray during Mass at St. Katharine Drexel Church in Chester, Pa., May 24.

Cover: America/iStock

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What book would you recommend to Pope Francis?

It is no secret that Pope Francis loves literature. He slips references to Greek and Roman classics into his interviews, includes excerpts from poetry in his encyclicals and during the pandemic referenced the 19th-century Italian plague novel *The Betrothed* countless times. In June on the "Inside the Vatican" podcast, cohost Colleen Dulle brought on the papal biographer Austen Iverigh to unpack three books needed to understand Pope Francis. And with the arrival of summer, **America** asked its readers to give Pope Francis a summer reading recommendation, "beach read" or otherwise. Below is a selection of responses sent in on social media and through our website's comment section.

Shuggie Bain, by Douglas Stuart. Shortly after accepting the cardinals' call to the papacy, Pope Francis called the church a field hospital. This novel would offer a powerful visit to one of the wards.
David Madsen

The Second Mountain, by David Brooks. It's a beautifully written book about his coming to faith, the faith in Jesus Christ. It is philosophical and poetic. He reminds me of St. Thomas Aquinas who said that after writing so much about faith, it was really a lot of fluff. Just feel it. David Brooks feels it. I think Pope Francis would appreciate that feeling.
Lucy Lowrey

Woman Redeemed, by a little-known Catholic author, Christine Blake, is about the women who followed Jesus in his ministry. [I would recommend it] because the woman's experience is vital for the church to understand.
Chris Thompson Blake

The Pillars of the Earth, by Ken Follett. The fascinating story of the construction of a medieval cathedral. And if he reads fast, he can read all four volumes of the *Pillars* series—but they're almost 1,000 pages apiece.
Joe Offer

If he hasn't read them already, the letters and prayers of St. Thérèse of Lisieux. All of her works maybe, she's so brilliant. For nonreligious fun reading, I highly recommend *The Last Unicorn* as a book that can be read allegorically and leaves one thinking.
Anna Eliina Pajunen

Learning to Pray, by his fellow Jesuit James Martin. Not that the pope needs a lesson on the subject, but Father Martin offers such good advice and compassionate instruction on that which can seem intimidating to many people of all faiths. The other recommendation is *The Way of Love,* by the presiding bishop and primate of the Episcopal Church, Michael Curry. It is basically a book that argues for love, that love—true unsentimental, empathic love—has the power to change the world. This love emulates the love Jesus showed here on earth. Bishop Curry has a warm, forthright style of writing that is persuasive and inspiring.
Susan L. Charle

The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society, by Annie Barrows and Mary Ann Shaffer. A purely delightful book set in the channel island during World War II. One book review called it "a comic version of the state of grace." I want to suggest a book that is read for the pure joy of reading and not as an assignment. Don't fret, there are life lessons and characters proclaiming the Gospels by their lives.
Mary Botsford

I've always loved emulating the lives of the saints in my daily activities. Learning about them through reading is also my hobby. Thus I would recommend *In Caelo et in Terra: 365 Days With the Saints,* by the Daughters of St. Paul.
Nicky Untum

Tortilla Flat, by John Steinbeck. It is a wonderful book, and I love the subtle part about St. Francis.
Jennifer Spowart Merritt

We Need Action, Not Indifference, for the People of Palestine

In December of last year, Patriarch Emeritus Michel Sabbah, the first native Palestinian in centuries to hold the office of archbishop and Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, asked the readers of **America**, the media and the global Catholic Church two simple questions: "Can you help both Israelis and Palestinians achieve a just, definitive peace? Or will you keep looking with indifference toward the Holy Land, a land in which one people continues to oppress another people, resulting in continued bloodshed and hatred?"

The questions were not answered. They need to be asked again. Despite being a major military supporter of Israel and a power broker in the region, the United States has dithered on establishing any policy to help bring an end to a conflict now in its eighth decade. Moreover, many Americans seem to take the news of increasing violence in the region with relative equanimity—or, to use the patriarch's word, indifference.

No one would deny that the situation is complicated beyond all measure, but some facts are clear. Israeli settlements in the West Bank have encroached for decades on land granted to the Palestinians by U.N. mandate. Severe Israeli restrictions on freedom of movement for Palestinians and a series of militarized walls and checkpoints have crippled their economy and carved their territory into a patchwork of occupied zones. Rocket attacks by Hamas and other Palestinian militants have been met with overwhelming force by the Israel Defense Forces, including attacks on civilians and nonmilitary installations.

In a new round of violence in May, rockets from Gaza—fired to protest the militarized evictions of Palestinian families in East Jerusalem and provocations at the Al Aqsa Mosque (and, not coincidentally, to assert a leadership claim in Gaza by Hamas)—fell across Israel. Israel's response included drone and fighter strikes that obliterated launch sites and demolished office towers and residential buildings across Gaza City. This pattern of provocation and response continued for almost two weeks until a cease-fire was reached on May 20.

This latest violence has produced again an uneven, disproportionate outcome in human suffering. While there are wounded and dead in Israel victimized by Hamas and Islamic Jihad, it is unfailingly in Gaza, one of the most densely populated places on earth, where noncombatant fatalities reach a shocking degree.

When the clearly disproportionate nature of both the capacity for death-dealing and the predictable outcomes are pointed out, military and political leadership in Israel grit their teeth and intone, "Israel has the right to defend itself," as if that reply were sufficient to overcome any ethical objection. U.S. politicians all the way to the top grimly corroborate that assessment as American-made missiles, mortars and tank shells fall on the streets and houses of the Palestinian people.

No one denies that Israel has a right to defend itself, but surely the manner and execution of that defense can be assessed and challenged. The common-sense demand of the Arab world is that the United States' political ally and military client in the Middle East calculate its response—and its treatment of Palestinian residents and protestors in general—with a higher sensitivity to justice and mercy and the sacredness of human life than it has in recent years been demonstrating.

The goals of the vaunted Oslo Accords have long since been abandoned, and the settlement of almost 500,000 Israelis in the West Bank since the famous handshake in the Rose Garden in 1994 has made a farce of the proposed two-state solution. What is left among the ruins of Gaza, of the West Bank, of Jerusalem?

Because of a double blockade of transit and supplies by Israelis at one end and Egyptians at the other, the people of Gaza are unable to escape, forced to endure a diminishing civic and social infrastructure. This includes barely functioning sewer and water systems and an electrical grid that functions for only a few hours each day. The result has been some measure of hopelessness that hangs over every child born within Gaza's precincts.

Is the two-state solution doomed? Has Israel already moved beyond it? The alternative is one state with two classes of citizenship, arguably three. Arabs inside of Israel's official borders already know what it is like to live as second-class citizens. Absorbing other Palestinians from across today's lines of demarcation in Gaza and the West Bank will no doubt create an even more diminished class of citizenship in a one-state "Isralestine."

Further, for the international community to abandon the two-state solution in favor of a balkanized single state dominated by inequality is not just a human rights issue. It also tells the Palestinian people to abandon their hope for a homeland. When a similar message is heard from militant hardliners against Israel, that nation rightly sees it as an existential threat.

It will take a significant gesture

from the United States and the international community to help restore a credible path to a two-state solution—but it remains the only viable solution. Does the Biden administration have the courage and vision to offer one? Do the American people?

It is a political instinct among Americans to side with Israel; but that does not allow us to set aside or ignore the historical experience and national aspirations of the Palestinian people in the construction of U.S. Middle East policy. As the patron of Israel (with somewhere in the vicinity of $4 billion in U.S. military aid flowing into Israel each year), the United States is implicated in every missile strike and every loss of noncombatant life.

Real progress toward peace between these Middle East antagonists has been achieved only when the United States has taken an activist role; often that has meant U.S. presidents taking a firm stand with Israeli leaders, who do understand the importance of all that U.S. aid. In this case, that firm stand should include pressure on Israel to recognize the Palestinian right to a homeland and to seek out its aims at the negotiating table—not through the construction of more walls or the use of overwhelming force.

For U.S. Catholics, too, there is a special poignancy to the situation that cries out for more efforts toward peace and justice. The ongoing violence in the region is not just a Jewish-Muslim conflict; it is one that affects (or will affect) all of us. We cannot refer to Israel and Palestine as the Holy Land and simultaneously wash our hands of any interest or responsibility in establishing a just and lasting peace. To do so is to be complicit in the "continued bloodshed and hatred."

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The fight for a liveable minimum wage has a powerful opponent: credit cards

The former Republican in me hates what I am about to say: It is time to raise the federal minimum wage. More people, even on the political right, are coming to terms with the fact that a raise is overdue, even if there is no consensus on how much it should be.

One thing that has long obscured the great need for a higher minimum wage is easily available consumer credit. Credit cards make it easy to ignore how much things cost and how little money most people actually have. This is no accident. It is one of the reasons credit cards were introduced in the first place.

Consumer credit is a patchwork solution for something John Medaille of the University of Dallas calls the investor's dilemma. This is a problem that large companies and their investors regularly face: One way to increase profits is to lower wages, but if wages are too low, employees can't buy the company's products...which can lead to lower profits.

There are various ways to approach this dilemma. One is to create worker cooperatives, like the Mondragon Corp. in Spain, that make the investor and the worker the same person, eliminating the incentive to chase ever-higher profits by cutting wages. But on a society-wide basis, the United States has instead tried to solve the investor's dilemma by putting "money" in the pockets of consumers without actually increasing their wages, through consumer credit. This solution creates more problems than it solves.

First, credit cards slowly take money out of local markets. If a credit card user has to pay even a small amount of interest, that money is now unavailable for use by the consumer in the local market and is instead diverted by MasterCard, Visa or another credit card company to national or global markets. Credit cards also discourage shopping at smaller stores that may not be able to afford the fees involved.

Not only do credit cards slowly take money out of local economies; they also slowly take money out of your pocket. Of course, some individuals use credit cards only for emergencies or to accumulate benefits like airline miles, and they pay off their balances every month, but that is not the norm. According to the credit reporting company Experian, 75 percent of credit card users carry a balance on their account, and the average credit card debt owed by consumers in 2020 was $5,315. Consider this: If most people had the means to pay off their cards quickly, banks would not own so many skyscrapers.

Most Americans do not have enough cash saved to cover a $500 emergency, relying instead on credit. In 2019 a quarter of Americans used debt to cover basic needs like food and rent. NPR reported last fall that this number increased dramatically as the economy shut down because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Consumer credit gives only the illusion of compensating for a low minimum wage. This is not justice, nor is it good for the economy, which thrives when people are financially free. Going into debt is a way of meeting the immediate need for food, or a new water heater; but you will have to pay eventually, and with interest. Credit card companies are different only in degree from their more obviously exploitative cousins, payday lenders, which extend low-sum, short-term loans with absurdly high interest rates.

With credit cards, we may have fewer people going hungry. We may see more people with smartphones, tablets and televisions. What we don't see are the people stuck in a never-ending cycle of debt. We have to recognize the injustice inherent in this system.

We should also reduce our personal dependence on credit cards, for whenever we use them, we help feed the credit industry beast. Credit card companies entice you with "rewards" for frequent use, but those benefits represent a small slice of the profit generated from those who cannot afford to pay off their card each month and incur late fees.

Like most changes to economic structures, phasing out dependence on credit cards and other forms of consumer credit for everyday spending can happen only gradually. Opponents to regulation of the credit industry often cite how important lending services are for the poor to make ends meet. That necessity, however, is the exact thing that leads to predatory practices. Consumer credit cannot be eliminated, but we need to regulate predatory lenders and credit card companies to make sure they treat their customers fairly.

Credit cards feel like a cornerstone of our economy, but it wasn't always like this. Credit cards have served as an excuse to ignore the minimum wage problem for too long. That cornerstone is really made of sand, and it's time to replace it with a rock: a steady, livable minimum wage.

Patrick Neve *is a podcaster and writer based in Pittsburgh. He is a graduate of Franciscan University of Steubenville, in Ohio.*

A global population bust?

The U.S. will need more pro-family and pro-immigrant policies to continue to grow

By Robert David Sullivan

As long as the United States has been a global superpower, there have been arguments that it has begun its inevitable decline. Different writers have described an economic, cultural, moral or military diminishment, but in April the Census Bureau pointed to a more literal possibility. It estimated that from 2010 to 2020, the U.S. population grew at the slowest rate since the 1930s and at the second-slowest rate in the nation's history. And this was before the Covid pandemic, during which the U.S. birth rate dropped for the sixth consecutive year and deaths outnumbered births in 25 states.

In fact, growth in both the native-born and foreign-born populations has slowed in the United States over the past two decades. (Note: The foreign-born population actually fell between 1930 and 1970 because of more restrictive immigration policies.)

NPR reports that the U.S. fertility rate, which estimates how many births a typical group of 1,000 women will have over their lives, is now far below replacement level, or the number of children needed for a generation to replace

Why is this scene becoming such a rarity in the United States—and the world? Andie Pelletier, with husband Brian, holds newborn son, Samuel Aiden Pelletier, at Prince William Hospital in Manassas, Va., on April 29, 2020.

itself. In fact, the fertility rate has been below replacement levels in most years since the early 1970s, but the U.S. population has grown steadily with the help of immigration. Now immigration to the United States is also down significantly, in part because of the more exclusionary immigration policies during the Trump administration and the shutdown of the border because of the Covid pandemic.

Italy also has a falling birth rate. Pope Francis has referred to it as a sign of a "demographic winter," and he attended a conference on May 14 that the Italian Forum of Family Associations organized to address the prospect of becoming "an increasingly elderly and less populated country." The pope's descriptive phrase is a reminder that population decline in the United States would be economically calamitous and would not necessarily be positive for the environment; a country that turns away from regeneration can hardly be expected to address long-range issues like climate change.

At the May conference, Pope Francis underlined this point, saying, "the lack of children, which causes an aging population, implicitly affirms that everything ends with us, that only our individual interests count."

Many nations are already on a downward population slope: Japan, Hungary, Ukraine, Greece and Portugal, among others, lost people in the 2010s. According to a study in 2018 by Joseph Chamie, a former director of the United Nations Population Division, "a record high of 83 countries, representing about half of the world's population, report below-replacement level rates. By 2050 more than 130 countries, or about two-thirds of the world's population, are projected to have fertility rates below replacement level."

This demographic turnabout—50 years ago, apocalyptic scenarios resulting from a global "population explosion" were the stuff of best-selling books and horror films—has countries across the globe concerned about the effects a population drop would have on economic activity and on the care of older citizens. In May, the world's most populous country, China, announced that married couples would be able to have up to three children and that the government would provide more financial assistance to families. China had imposed a one-child-per-couple limit in 1979, but then saw its fertility rate fall below replacement level by 2020, on a par with aging countries like Italy and Japan.

The United States as a whole has never experienced outright population decline, but the states of Illinois, Mississippi and West Virginia lost people over the past decade, and a recent estimate by California's Department of Finance had that state losing 180,000 people in 2020 because of the decline in immigration. In fact, more U.S.-born citizens have been moving out of California than into it for a couple of decades now.

The question is how to prevent long-term population decline. Is it enough to provide more assistance to families wishing to have children? Or should the United States open its gates to more people wishing to start new lives here? Can it risk not doing both?

For moral and practical reasons, the United States needs more family-friendly policies. Democrats in particular have long advocated paid parental leave and affordable day care programs, but as Lyman Stone and Laurie DeRose point out in The Atlantic, these policies reinforce a U.S. obsession with "careerism" over family formation; they write, "persuading people to focus even more on work is a terrible way to help family life."

Both political parties are now considering more direct assistance, like the Biden administration's proposal to send $3,600 per child to every family each year and a proposal by Senator Mitt Romney, a Republican from Utah, to pair cash assistance with tax simplification for low-income families. But even this approach is probably not a sufficient response to a declining birth rate.

Nicole Narea reports in Vox that "pro-natalist policies" like tax credits have produced only "slight, short-lived bumps in birthrates" in other nations. It seems naïve to expect that they will be more effective in the United States, as it would take much more money to address all the costs of starting a family, including housing and education (and the combination of both needed to establish a home in a good school district).

Given the limitations of family-friendly government policies, there is no way to stave off population decline without turning to immigration, which accounted for more than half (55 percent) of U.S. population growth between 1965 and 2015. In her Vox article, Ms. Narea refers to immigration as "a kind of tap that the U.S. can turn on and off" as needed for population (and economic) growth.

Likening human beings to the water controlled by a

> The lack of children, which causes an aging population, implicitly affirms that everything ends with us, that only our individual interests count. - Pope Francis

faucet makes for an unsettling image. We are supposed to welcome people fleeing violence and poverty out of Christian compassion, not out of a calculation that we need more bodies to keep our economy going and to care for us as we get older. But it is true that the United States has always depended on immigration for growth and energy. Polls suggest that more Americans are recognizing this, despite (or perhaps because of) the xenophobic policies and language of Donald J. Trump.

A bipartisan effort to tackle the costs and the workplace structures that make it so difficult to raise children would be welcome both to encourage a culture of life and to help avoid population decline. Sadly, a bipartisan effort to reform our immigration system, which is needed both because it is the humane thing to do and because there is no real prospect of growth without it, seems to be a much tougher challenge.

Robert David Sullivan, *senior editor.*
Twitter: @RobertDSullivan.

THE LOST GENERATIONS

THE NUMBER OF BIRTHS IN THE UNITED STATES IN 2020 IS ESTIMATED AT 3,605,201, **DOWN 4% FROM 2019.** THIS IS THE **SIXTH CONSECUTIVE YEAR** THAT THE NUMBER OF BIRTHS HAS DECLINED, AFTER AN INCREASE IN 2014, AND THE LOWEST NUMBER OF BIRTHS SINCE 1979.

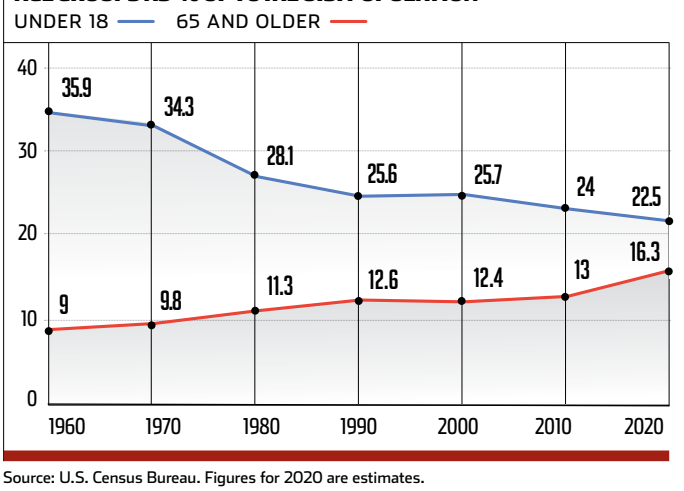
BIRTHS DECLINED 3% FOR HISPANIC WOMEN, **4%** FOR NON-HISPANIC WHITE AND BLACK WOMEN, **6%** FOR NATIVE AMERICAN WOMEN, **8%** FOR ASIAN WOMEN.

THE ESTIMATED GENERAL FERTILITY RATE FOR THE UNITED STATES IN 2020 WAS 55.8 BIRTHS PER 1,000 WOMEN AGED 15–44, **DOWN 4% FROM 2019**—ANOTHER RECORD LOW FOR THE NATION.

THE ESTIMATED BIRTH RATE FOR WOMEN AGED 20–24 IN 2020 WAS **62.8 BIRTHS PER 1,000 WOMEN**, DOWN 6% FROM 2019—A RECORD LOW FOR THIS AGE GROUP.

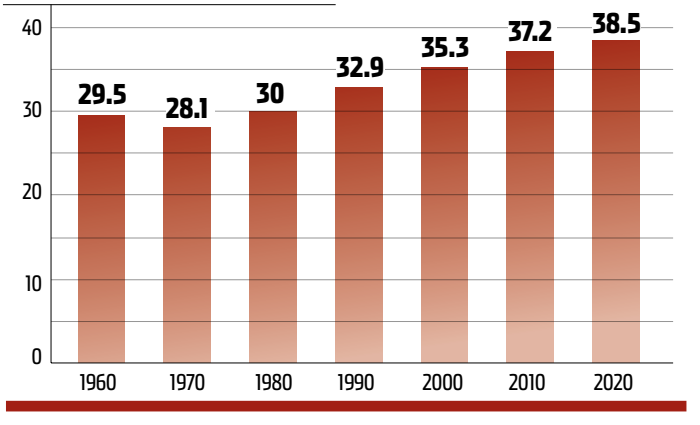
Sources: "Births: Provisional Data for 2020," National Vital Statistics System, National Center for Health Statistics.

AGE GROUPS AS % OF TOTAL U.S. POPULATION



Source: U.S. Census Bureau. Figures for 2020 are estimates.

MEDIAN AGE OF U.S. POPULATION



Source: U.S. Census Bureau. Figures for 2020 are estimates.

As vaccination rates rise, Catholic dioceses get closer to normal

CNS photo/Andrew Biraj, Catholic Standard

A family prays the rosary at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington on May 17.

Catholic dioceses around the United States announced in May that Masses will start to feel more normal this summer, following more than a year of mask mandates and capacity limits.

Many dioceses are dropping mask requirements and social distancing rules for fully vaccinated worshipers, relying on an honor system as pandemic restrictions ease further. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced in May that people who are fully vaccinated do not need to wear masks in most indoor settings.

In Detroit, Archbishop Allen Vigneron said on May 19 that anyone who has not been vaccinated must still wear a mask at Mass. "Parishes do not have the responsibility to verify who is and who is not vaccinated," the archbishop said. The church will rely on people to police themselves. Capacity limits, which had been 50 percent, are also being eliminated.

The Diocese of Brooklyn announced on May 21 that it was dropping mask requirements for vaccinated people and would, among other changes, return hymnals to pews.

"It is a good day," Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio said in a press release. "Our churches are at full capacity once again, though we continue to keep restrictions in place, knowing there are people yet to be vaccinated."

Choirs and altar servers will be allowed to return to Brooklyn churches. Unvaccinated people will still be required to wear masks, the diocese said, and keep their distance from other people. A shared Communion cup is still prohibited.

On May 29, vaccinated worshipers in the Archdiocese of Boston were no longer required to wear masks or practice social distancing. It has been left to individual pastors, however, to decide how quickly to drop the remaining restrictions.

"Every parishioner and every family will be expected to make a sound, reasonable decision about when they are ready to take off their masks and be near other people," the archdiocese said in a press release. "No pastor and no parish will be expected to ask people whether or not they have been vaccinated."

But should Catholics in the Boston archdiocese not feel ready to lose their masks, parishes should tell worshipers "that they are free to continue to wear masks as long as they like, and that they will be respected if they choose to do so." As for exchanging the sign of peace, the archdiocese suggested that pastors should be cautious about reintroducing handshakes and perhaps seek alternate methods.

The Archdiocese of Chicago took a slightly more cautious approach, embracing a sort of "vaccine passport" that will give some worshipers the ability to be in churches without masks. Fully vaccinated people should "bring proof of vaccination" to Mass, the archdiocese said, which could be "a picture of the vaccination card on the parishioner's phone." As in other dioceses, Catholic schools in Chicago will continue to require that masks be worn.

In the Archdiocese of New York, churches are being encouraged to create "physical distance" sections for parishioners who are either not vaccinated or would like to maintain social distancing measures. For New York Catholics who wish to sing in choirs, present the offerings at Mass or act as altar servers, proof of vaccination will be required.

In the early days of the pandemic, Catholic dioceses throughout the United States offered a general dispensation that freed Catholics from the obligation to attend weekly Mass. Some dioceses ended that practice fairly early. Now that nearly 63 percent (on June 1) of U.S. adults have received at least one vaccine dose, many other dioceses are hoping Catholics will return to church.

Michael J. O'Loughlin, *national correspondent.*
Twitter: @MikeOLoughlin.
Material from the Associated Press was used in this report.

Sister Nu Tawng is ready to risk everything for peace in Myanmar

The photo became an indelible image in the early days of the protests against the military junta that seized power in Myanmar in February: Sister Ann Rosa Nu Tawng kneeling in prayer, placing herself between Myanmar security forces and protesters outside her medical clinic in Myitkyina, the capital city of Myanmar's Kachin State. Her community superior has reminded her that she has now made this perilous gesture on two occasions. She suggested that Sister Nu Tawng not put herself at risk a third time.

But this is one instruction from her superior that she is prepared to ignore, she said in an interview from Kachin State on May 28. "I will do it at the cost of my life," Sister Nu Tawng, a member of the Sisters of St. Francis Xavier, said, "because I have to do it. I have to stand by the truth, and I don't want to see the injustice and killing right in front of me.

"I will not let that happen," she said. "I will do whatever I can."

Sister Nu Tawng has witnessed a great deal of violence since anti-junta demonstrations began after the coup. Three protesters were shot down in front of her small clinic; two of them died.

Now she watches in despair as state violence increases against the people of Myanmar. The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners reported on May 27 that 831 protesters have been killed since February. Large-scale protests have diminished because of the brutal response of the government, but people are finding small ways to resist every day, she said, and young people are fleeing to the nation's peripheries to take military instruction from the ethnic-minority armies in Shan, Chin, Kayin and other border states.

That movement may account for a sudden military escalation against ethnic militias after years of relative calm. The renewed conflict has provoked the worst dislocation of people in Myanmar in years. According to the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, more than 85,000 people across the country have been driven from their homes inside Myanmar because of conflict this year.

Local sources in the Thailand-Myanmar border region report harrowing conditions among refugees. Many have been driven back across the border by Thai officials, these sources said. They report that refugees are suffering from exhaustion and post-traumatic stress after enduring multiple attacks by the Myanmar armed forces, known as the Tatmadaw. Villagers have been sheltering in Catholic churches, Buddhist temples and other religious sites, presuming they would be safe, but a number of these sites have come under fire by the Tatmadaw.

After witnessing Myanmar experience so much economic and political progress in recent years, Sister Nu Tawng is

CNS photo/courtesy Myitkyina News Journal

Sister Nu Tawng's first intervention between police and protesters was on Feb. 28 in Myitkyina, the capital of Kachin State in northern Myanmar.

heartbroken about its condition today. All of that progress is being lost in just a few months, she said.

She described a nation living in fear of its own government and military, where arrest may come at any time or for any reason, where people are picked up by security forces in the morning and dropped off as corpses in the evening—or worse, held by police until families can ransom the bodies of their loved ones.

The military acts with complete impunity and in apparent indifference to the misery of the people, Sister Nu Tawng said. She prays that God will change the hearts of the junta leaders and inspire the international community to take stronger action against them.

"These are the people who are supposed to be our guardians," she said. "The people who should be protecting their own people are the ones who are repressing them, arresting them, shooting and killing them."

Her composure has not broken for more than an hour of conversation, but as the interview concluded, Sister Nu Tawng faltered. "Please," she said finally, weeping, "do what you can for us. Pray for the people of Myanmar, help Myanmar, save Myanmar."

Kevin Clarke, *chief correspondent.*
Twitter: @ClarkeAtAmerica.

Photo courtesy of the Diocese of Brooklyn

Caitlyn Ngo of St. Edmund's Catholic School in Brooklyn

GOODNEWS: Is cursive dead? Not for this Catholic school fifth grader

Fifth-grader Caitlyn Ngo wants to be a doctor when she grows up; if she follows through with those plans, she may finally put to rest the idea that all physicians have terrible penmanship.

A student at St. Edmund's Catholic Academy in Brooklyn, N.Y., Caitlyn was recently crowned Fifth Grade Grand National Champion in the 2021 Zaner-Bloser National Handwriting Contest, an annual competition sponsored by the academic publisher that has had more than two million student participants over the last three decades.

Caitlyn geared up for the competition by copying down sentences describing facts about the world's oceans. Plus, there was help from home. "When I was little, I practiced with my mom," Caitlyn told **America**.

About 75,000 students entered this year's contest. Winners receive a trophy, a $500 prize and a voucher for educational materials for their schools.

Caitlyn's principal, Andrea D'Emic, said that St. Edmund's gives students plenty of practice with technology, but she believes there is value in learning proper handwriting. According to one recent study, students who took notes on laptops performed worse on conceptual questions than students who took notes longhand.

In this year's contest, at least three other students from Catholic schools won national recognition. Catholic school children frequently perform well in the competition, according to Lisa Carmona, the president of Zaner-Bloser. "We have found that Catholic schools and Catholic school parents really put a high level of importance on foundational skills for their students," she said.

As for Caitlyn, she likes seeing how her writing improves over time. "I like handwriting because every time you practice, you write faster," she said.

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

INSIDE AMERICA

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CNS photo/Timothy A. Clary, Pool via Reuters

EDITORS' PICKS

A few of our latest arts and culture features:

"Rear Window":
The perfect movie for post-pandemic life
- Kevin Christopher Robles

The Sacramental Love Songs of Bachata's Romeo Santos
- Stephen G. Adubato

"Underground Railroad" teaches the Black history we do not know well enough
- Rob Weinert-Kendt

Every song on the Hillbilly Thomists' new album could be a homily
- Mary Grace Mangano

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PRODUCT HIGHLIGHTS

INSIDE THE VATICAN: Special Deep Dive on the German Synodal Path

What does a church that is always in reformation look like? In December 2019, in response to the clergy sexual abuse crisis, the Catholic Church in Germany embarked on a "synodal path." Not quite a Vatican-sanctioned synod, but certainly a practice of deep communal listening, the German Synodal Path is re-examining what it means to be church today.

"Inside the Vatican's" Colleen Dulle speaks to participants of the synodal path—both lay and ordained—to better understand the movement's mission and objectives, along with its potential pitfalls. This is uncharted territory—with German Catholic leaders seeking repentance, but also raising critical questions about the structures of the institution itself, including the role of women in leadership.

To listen to this documentary-styled episode, subscribe to "Inside the Vatican" wherever you listen to podcasts or visit americamag.org/podcasts.

Who is the Holy Spirit? Wisdom from senior Jesuits.

How is the Holy Spirit alive in the world today? We asked six senior Jesuits to reflect on their experiences of the Holy Spirit and where they see the activity of the Spirit in the church and the world. Come Holy Spirit!

Watch the video at YouTube.com/americamedia

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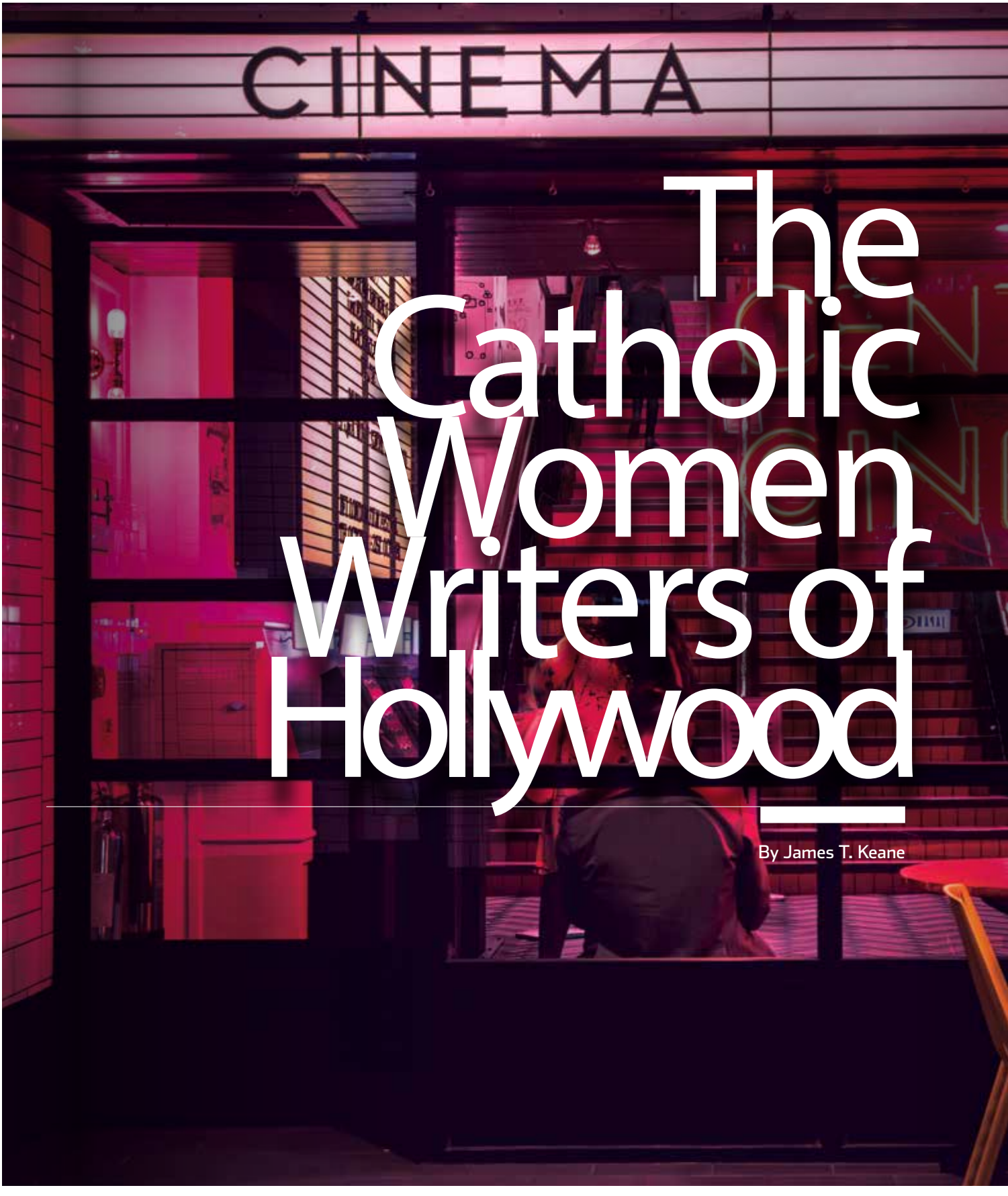
Meet America's smart, talented and dedicated contributors. Get to know the people who make all we do for you possible every day.

Dean Detloff
Toronto correspondent

Dean Dettloff has been **America**'s Toronto correspondent since 2016. In addition to his work as a freelance journalist, Dean recently defended his dissertation as a doctoral candidate at the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto, where he researches the intersections of media, religion and politics. He is a co-host of "The Magnificast," a podcast about Christianity and leftist politics. A recent piece from Dean looked at a battle between Toronto municipal authorities and a local carpenter trying to build small shelters for the homeless.

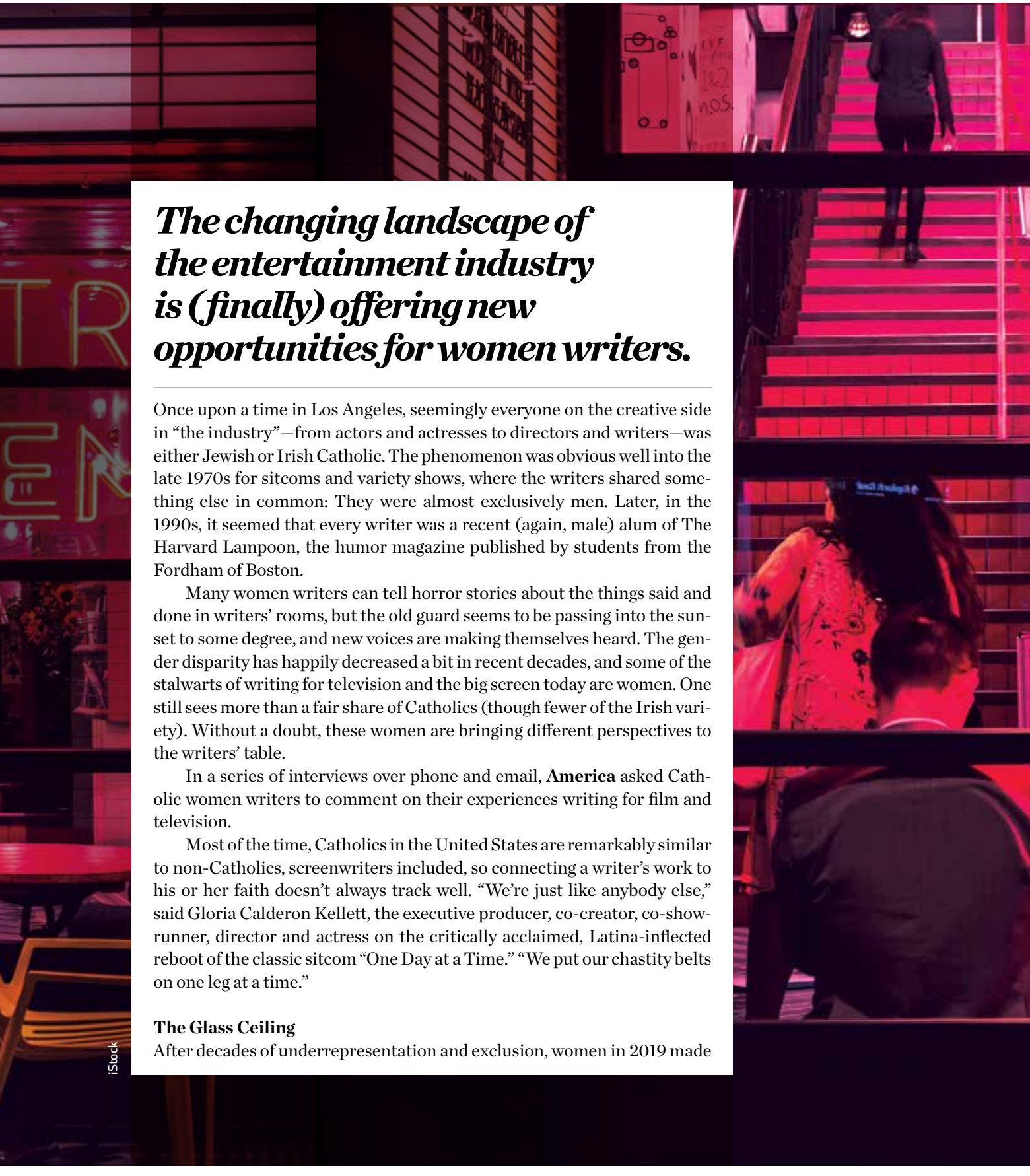
Jan-Albert Hootsen
Mexico City correspondent

Jan-Albert Hootsen has been **America**'s Mexico City correspondent since 2017. He is the Mexico representative for the Committee to Protect Journalists' Americas program and in addition to his contributions to **America** works as a correspondent for the Dutch newspaper Trouw. In a recent piece for **America**, he described how a former gang member helped negotiate a broad gang truce in Monterrey, Mexico's third-largest city.



The Catholic Women Writers of Hollywood

By James T. Keane



The changing landscape of the entertainment industry is (finally) offering new opportunities for women writers.

Once upon a time in Los Angeles, seemingly everyone on the creative side in "the industry"—from actors and actresses to directors and writers—was either Jewish or Irish Catholic. The phenomenon was obvious well into the late 1970s for sitcoms and variety shows, where the writers shared something else in common: They were almost exclusively men. Later, in the 1990s, it seemed that every writer was a recent (again, male) alum of The Harvard Lampoon, the humor magazine published by students from the Fordham of Boston.

Many women writers can tell horror stories about the things said and done in writers' rooms, but the old guard seems to be passing into the sunset to some degree, and new voices are making themselves heard. The gender disparity has happily decreased a bit in recent decades, and some of the stalwarts of writing for television and the big screen today are women. One still sees more than a fair share of Catholics (though fewer of the Irish variety). Without a doubt, these women are bringing different perspectives to the writers' table.

In a series of interviews over phone and email, **America** asked Catholic women writers to comment on their experiences writing for film and television.

Most of the time, Catholics in the United States are remarkably similar to non-Catholics, screenwriters included, so connecting a writer's work to his or her faith doesn't always track well. "We're just like anybody else," said Gloria Calderon Kellett, the executive producer, co-creator, co-showrunner, director and actress on the critically acclaimed, Latina-inflected reboot of the classic sitcom "One Day at a Time." "We put our chastity belts on one leg at a time."

The Glass Ceiling

After decades of underrepresentation and exclusion, women in 2019 made

iStock

Dorothy Fortenberry,
an executive producer on "Extrapolations"

Courtesy photo

> **The storytelling component so integral to Catholicism was surely my initial exposure to the power of parables.**

up 44 percent of television writers employed in the industry (a 5 percent jump over the previous year), but only 27 percent of screenwriters employed in that same period (a 4 percent jump from the previous year), according to the Writers Guild of America. For showrunners, the numbers also still show significant underrepresentation: Only 30 percent of showrunners were women in 2019. The industry also employs fewer people of color, people with disabilities and older writers—and statistics for these groups in the guild's 2020 Inclusion Report show significant divergence from their representation in the general population.

This is not to say that women (including Catholics) have not written for Hollywood for many years, or that women have not contributed significantly throughout showbiz history. Two prominent examples in television are Karen Hall and Barbara Hall. Karen Hall, who converted to Catholicism while working on her novel *Dark Debts,* has been writing for television since the late 1970s, garnering multiple Emmy nominations. She worked as a staff writer for shows like "M*A*S*H," "Hill Street Blues," "Moonlighting," "Roseanne" and "Eight is Enough," and has individual writing and producing credits for a number of other dramas and sitcoms. Her sister, Barbara Hall, also a convert to Catholicism, created, produced and wrote for "Joan of Arcadia," "Judging Amy" and "Madam Secretary."

Opportunities and Obstacles

While obstacles remain to full inclusion for any minority group in Hollywood—and expressions of religious faith can be met with a gimlet eye—the changing landscape of the entertainment industry has also offered new opportunities for women writers. Ms. Calderon Kellett, who was profiled in **America** in 2018, pointed to the increasing fragmentation of the market as a positive—and sometimes a negative. In addition to her reboot of "One Day at a Time," her writing credits include "Devious Maids," "Rules of Engagement" and "How I Met Your Mother." She also recently sold her first script for a feature film, "We Were There Too."

"I think that the good news about there being so many platforms is that it means more people have an opportunity to have a seat at the table. And that is true with women, with Latinos, with Catholics, and more," she said. "And I do feel sad that with so many services, there isn't one show that unites the country like it used to be, when we had four channels, but I do think that it allows for more niche entertainment and the ability for more voices to be heard, which is very important."

Langan Kingsley, who has written for the television shows "Corporate," "Robbie" and "Teachers" and who currently writes for "The Goldbergs" on ABC, said that when she first started out, "women were still considered a quota hire." She recalled visiting friends in the writers' room of a late night show in New York: "Every single person working on that show was a white man wearing a plaid shirt. No ex-

aggeration. They were all wearing plaid shirts that day. And every day, probably."

Now, however, "there's more equality—not just in who's working on a writing staff but in who is actually creating shows. I would say that is the direct result of people fighting hard to make that change and fighting hard to maintain it," she continued. "As this year has revealed, we need more representation across the board. Our work, essentially, is telling stories, and those stories get pretty boring when it's the same people telling them."

Dorothy Fortenberry, an executive producer on "Extrapolations," a new climate change series from Scott Z. Burns by Apple TV+, noted the changing demographics as well. "I've been on two writing staffs that were either 50 percent women or over 50 percent. I have not had the experience of being the lone woman in the writer's room and am grateful for that. No one is responsible for representing 51 percent of the population as the lone representative." Ms. Fortenberry has worked as a writer and producer on Hulu's adaptation of Margaret Atwood's novel "The Handmaid's Tale" since its first season. Before that, she worked for three seasons as a writer on The CW's "The 100." She has also written numerous plays as well as essays for journals including Real Simple, Commonweal and The Los Angeles Review of Books, among others.

"From my experience, it can still be difficult for women," said Kristen Lange, who started out in the entertainment world as a page on "The Late Show With David Letterman." She has written for HBO's "Divorce" and ABC's "The Goldbergs." "And when you do make it into a writers' room, you often have to work hard to have your ideas heard. That being said, I think there are more women being put into positions of power. And the more women with a say in the hiring process, the more diverse the industry will become—hopefully!"

The industry has definitely trended in recent years toward hiring more women, noted Elizabeth Beckwith, author of the comedic parenting book *Raising the Perfect Child Through Guilt and Manipulation*. She has written for ABC's "Speechless" and "The Goldbergs." As a standup comedian she has performed numerous times on "The Late, Late Show," and has written television pilots for USA, Fox21, Fox and Sony. "Generally speaking, men still outnumber women in comedy rooms, but the ratios are moving in the right direction. I'm hopeful that people in hiring positions are seeing the beauty of having a lot of different voices in a room, and that that trend continues."

Ms. Beckwith also noted the sexism—and ageism—that can still be found in the industry. "I do have concerns about women getting pushed out of the business as they age," she commented. "I've been in writers' rooms with men over 50, but never with a woman over 50, something that—as a woman in my 40s—I can't help but notice."

Melissa Blake got her start in the industry 24 years ago, and remarked on how certain realities in the writing world have shifted. "I have had the experience of going from writing staffs on which I was one of the only women to others that had only one male writer in the room," she wrote. Ms. Blake has worked as a writer and a producer on numerous dramas and comedies, including "Xena: Warrior Princess," "Heroes," "Ghost Whisperer," "Criminal Minds: Suspect Behavior," "Sleepy Hollow," "One Mississippi," and "October Faction." She currently serves as co-executive producer on Amazon's young adult series "The Wilds."

"The best scenario is to have a balance, not only of gender, but of race as well," she added. "I'm proud to be working on a series now whose writing staff is composed of three women and three men, three of whom are white, and three are people of color. That's true representation and what I hope every other staff I work on or run will look like."

A Twitch Upon the Thread

To what degree does the Catholic background of these writers influence their work? Is faith a major factor or a private matter that doesn't enter into the creative process? "Show business is not generally a place where you wear your faith on your sleeve," said Ms. Beckwith. At the same time, "I think having grown up steeped in Catholicism is very helpful for writing comedy. I strongly believe that a culture of guilt and constant self-reflection and criticism (not to mention having a grandmother constantly telling you that if you don't eat her food the Blessed Mother will weep) makes people funnier."

"It's not a coincidence that so many of the greatest comedy minds are Jewish—a culture also known for guilt and self-reflection," Ms. Beckwith continued. "And I have to say, you do get a little buzz of excitement when you are in a writers' room and you discover that a co-worker also went to Catholic school; it feels like an instant bond because being a 'Catholic school kid' is its own little specific American subculture."

"In many of the TV shows I've written and produced, a central theme has been that of good versus evil," said Ms. Blake. "Having formed my principles largely through a Catholic upbringing, I trust in my moral compass to guide me, not only for dramatic purposes, through the exploration of the

> **Growing up Catholic involves a tremendous amount of not taking the world as it appears literally in front of you as real.**

gray area that can exist between the two extremes, but also in making decisions in challenging moments I sometimes face in either the writers' room or on set."

While her faith background has not been an issue on the contractual or business side of the industry, Ms. Blake continued, "Where my being Catholic has come up has been in the creative process, during discussions with my fellow writers with the goal of building stories. That's where each individual writer on the staff may draw on their unique makeup and set of life experiences to help inform the characters we're creating and the dilemmas they'll face."

"I don't really experience what I do through the lens of being a Catholic. It's not like there's a Catholic way to write a screenplay. You have to do the craft. The same rules apply to you," said Barbara Nicolosi. "It would be like asking a baseball player that question. There's no Catholic way to hit the ball."

At the same time, she noted, "every so often you become aware of something that might be problematic from a faith standpoint. Most of those things for me have been on the business side, not on the creative side. I've had companies—and very often, Catholic or Christian companies—that ask me to lie to my union" about work regulations, Ms. Nicolosi added. "I find that a lot of religious people, when they approach business, think that they can just step outside their normal morality."

"I'm usually more drawn to comedy that comes from a general silliness or joy," wrote Ms. Lange, who is a graduate


Courtesy photo

Langan Kingsley,
who has written for the television shows "Corporate," "Robbie" and "Teachers," currently writes for "The Goldbergs" on ABC.

of the Jesuit-run College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Mass. "I tend to write about characters getting in their own way rather than different characters being mean to each other. I've never really considered why, but I wouldn't be surprised if it's at least partially due to all those years of Jesuits and nuns telling (sometimes yelling at) us to consider others before ourselves and to make something of our time on Earth."

Faith can also inform values in the writing process, noted Ms. Langley (not to be confused with Ms. Lange): "Does your comedy punch up or punch down? Are you leaving people more hurt than uplifted? Who, or what, is the target of the joke? How do you treat the people around you? Like many institutions, the entertainment industry can benefit from its members behaving ethically. Not in some grand, holier-than-thou sense, but by common-sense kindness."

"There is certainly a contemporary secular worldview that is focused on self-realization as the highest goal," commented Ms. Fortenberry. "The idea is that if you can understand yourself and articulate yourself and go after what you want, that is like the high point of life. But we exist in relation to each other and have obligations to each other, be that in our relationships, our families or otherwise. I like to

focus on obligation and sacrifice in my writing, and I think that probably comes from my religious beliefs."

Words of Advice

What wisdom might these writers impart to the next generation trying to break into the biz? "Humanize your story," said Ms. Calderon Kellet. "There's a lot of misconceptions about Catholics, so write your experience. I think if people see that they're not being represented on television, then they should feel empowered to write that voice, because it's obviously needed if it doesn't exist."

"The blockbuster era in film has had an overemphasis on the beat, on the external action. It seems to me that Catholic screenwriters should not be in the roller coaster game," said Ms. Nicolosi. "A female writer—especially a Christian or a Catholic one—might bring to the table a pastoral desire to help people through the story. The moment of transformation is where our focus should be as Catholic female writers."

"From a Catholic standpoint, what we're doing is showing people that, to paraphrase Flannery O'Connor, before grace can heal, it has to cut. And if we give people enough narrative experiences of that, they won't be so afraid. They'll trust God."

"Find something that sustains you in your personal life that is not movies or television shows," said Ms. Fortenberry. "This is partly to save your sanity and your soul, but it will also give you fresh ideas. Sometimes Hollywood can feel like all the ideas are copies of copies. If you don't have something else in your life other than television and movies, you will draw all your ideas from television and movies. Relying on something else will also give you a way of seeing the world that will be valuable in the writers' room, and also a resource for you when things go sideways. Which they will."

For Ms. Fortenberry, finding a parish that is not located in the heart of the entertainment industry has been helpful. "Hollywood is a hustle culture, and there is a sense of transience and impermanence that can be stressful and exhausting," she said. "My churchgoing life exists entirely outside the industry. I don't see anyone from work at my church, and I don't see anyone from my church at work. It's a part of your life that doesn't interact with the business side of Hollywood. It helps you remain sane."

"Get yourself a little St. Anthony of Padua relic to keep in your work bag," said Ms. Beckwith. "He's not just good at helping you find your keys! I'm not like his agent or anything, but I feel like St. Jude gets so much more attention.

Courtesy photo

Elizabeth Beckwith is author of the comedic parenting book *Raising the Perfect Child Through Guilt and Manipulation*. She has written for ABC's "Speechless" and "The Goldbergs."

iStock

My hope is that the church can use the immense power of its storytelling to move toward more compassion, more kindness.

(He's amazing, don't get me wrong; but not every case is a 'desperate one.') St. Anthony has a lot of tools in his toolbelt, so next time you're a little nervous before a pitch, shoot him a quick prayer."

Ms. Kingsley had more practical advice: "Go to therapy. Seriously. It helps."

Growing up Catholic

Is there something distinctive about a Catholic childhood that is an asset in Hollywood? Does it goad the imagination in specific ways? Writers and theologians like David Tracy and Andrew Greeley posited decades ago that there was a unique "Catholic imagination" that informed the lives of American Catholics—and the larger cultural scene as well. Does it exist? If you ask these writers, the answer is yes, without question.

"Attending church and catechism classes throughout my youth, the storytelling component so integral to Catholicism was surely my initial exposure to the power of parables," noted Ms. Blake. "So much of what I do as a writer, especially when writing scripts of the supernatural or sci-fi genre, is couch weighty subjects and high concepts in allegory, and there's arguably no better source for that than what can be found in the pages of 'The Good Book.'"

Ms. Kingsley expressed a similar sentiment. "I think the entire ethos of the Catholic Church is storytelling. It's how it has managed to stay in the game so long—the effective stories are the ones that endure," she said. "Prayers are poetry, the lives of the saints are fables, the Mass is a play. The church, for all its failings, values beauty: music, stained glass windows, golden vestments," she added. "I think there's a general sense that there's wonder and magic and value in the temporal gifts on hand. So use them! And then feel bad about it. And then do it again."

"At its most basic, growing up Catholic involves a tremendous amount of not taking the world as it appears literally in front of you as real," Ms. Fortenberry said. "Once you believe in transubstantiation, you are already at the point where you acknowledge there is something beyond the literal and the tangible. Once a cracker isn't just a cracker, a lot of things can be something other than what they appear to be."

"I get my best ideas in front of the Blessed Sacrament," said Ms. Nicolosi. "There will be some times when I'll be writing, and I just don't know what to do. I have written myself into a corner; I don't know the resolution. And then I'll go and and sit there and just pray about other things, and all of a sudden an idea will just pop into my head. It's happened so many times that I've come to count on it."

Experiences of Mass homilies also had their benefits on the imagination. "It was an early lesson in how to be a good entertainer—we all remember the priests that bored us to death and the ones that engaged us," said Ms. Kingsley, who is a graduate of Jesuit High School in Portland, Ore. "One of the Jesuits at my high school became a priest because it was pretty darn close to being an actor. He had a booming voice and a huge presence, and I would say he used his gifts extremely well."

"I've written so many things that have Catholicism woven in," said Ms. Beckwith. "I've written pilots inspired by my teen years as a Catholic school girl in Las Vegas, and a variety of projects that touch on the paradox of my Catholic parents raising their family in 'Sin City.' My book, *Raising the Perfect Child Through Guilt and Manipulation*, is in many ways a love letter to being raised in an Italian Catholic household."

More Words of Advice

The Catholic Church these women encountered in their formative years and interact with today is not the menacing, moribund one that Hollywood so often gleefully depicts. At the same time, it is not an institution they are afraid to challenge for its faults, including its treatment of women and its engagement with the entertainment industry.

Several of the writers interviewed also expressed gratitude for their experiences of Catholic formation, particularly in education. "I think my Jesuit education serves me well. It's a reminder to focus on the greater good, be a woman for others, and not be satisfied with the world the way it is," Ms. Kingsley said. "I don't always live up to it, but it's a nice goal to constantly be striving toward. And then I can stir up some nice Catholic guilt when I fall short, which in turn fuels better comedy. A great system!"

Courtesy photos

Gloria Calderon Kellett, center, of "One Day at a Time"; **Kristen Lange**, left, of "The Goldbergs"; and **Melissa Blake**, right, of "The Wilds," are among the female Catholic creatives in Hollywood today.

Ms. Fortenberry noted that her work on a new project has been heavily influenced by a recent papal encyclical. "I am currently working on a show for Apple TV+ about climate change. I find myself continually bringing up 'Laudato Si'"and the ways it shows us how climate change can be viewed as a religious issue. It can help people conceptualize the global nature of the crisis; you can imagine an entire Earth and care about what happens to it."

Ms. Nicolosi lamented a lack of support from the institutional church for writers. "The only thing the church ever seems to want from us is checks. But we're storytellers," said Ms. Nicolosi. "I lived in Los Angeles for 24 years. I went to a church in North Hollywood that was just down the street from Universal. In all those years, where I would sit in the pews with hundreds of people who were working in the industry, I only ever heard two homilies that even addressed the fact that Hollywood was there."

"There's a real need for pastoral ministry to the creative artistic community. We have very specific needs as storytellers. We have particular sufferings of rejection and instability and the difficulty of the creativity itself," Ms. Nicolosi continued. "The church can also help us with ethical formation. What can or can't you do that will help people or harm them in entertainment? I've had to do a lot of this work myself as a lay woman because nobody else has done it, and I had students that wanted it from me: Christian, Catholic principles in the arts—not only justifying a career in the arts, but also answering the question: How is this a holy profession?"

Ms. Kingsley's experiences as a writer have given her some insights that the Catholic Church might also heed if it seeks to grow and thrive in the future. "My hope is that the church can use the immense power of its storytelling to move toward more compassion, more kindness," she said.

"In our work as writers, we have to prune the things that no longer serve the central narrative. Sometimes we're extremely attached to them, but they don't serve the story. So they fall by the wayside. And I hope, in that way, the church can use its immense power to continue to tell a story that remains relevant, inclusive and progressive."

James T. Keane *is a senior editor of* ***America.*** *His parents, much funnier than he, wrote comedy for television.*
Erika Rasmussen *contributed reporting.*

THE G.O.P. AND THE AMERICAN WORKER

Conservatives are talking about the 'dignity of work.' Could Catholic social teaching help reinvigorate the Republican Party?

By Rachel Lu

Twenty years ago, it would have been unthinkable. The Republican Party had spent years crowing about the achievements of entrepreneurs, while advising ordinary workers to "pull themselves up by the bootstraps." Times have changed, however. Quite recently, the right-of-center think tank American Compass, established in 2020, posted "A Guide to Economic Inequality" on the main page of its website. Its founders are not dismissing the problem. Instead, they tell readers that "our economy is failing to spread prosperity" and "our gains are not being widely shared." The warnings get even more dire. "The longer such trends continue," warns American Compass, "the greater the threat to our social fabric, our political solidarity, and the legitimacy of our free-market system."

American Compass is directed by Oren Cass, a former advisor to Mitt Romney, the Republican senator from Utah. He and a growing number of conservatives have become increasingly concerned about the future of American blue-collar labor. For some time now, the Republican Senator Marco Rubio has been speaking and writing publicly about the "dignity of labor," often citing Catholic labor encyclicals in his public speeches. In March, Mr. Rubio publicly supported a drive to unionize Amazon warehouse employees, though he wrote that he was doing so because "companies like Amazon have been allies of the left in the culture war" and were implementing "'woke' human resources" policies.

So far, people like Mr. Cass and Senator Rubio seem to be groping for ways in which conservatives can make a better pitch to the American worker. To a great extent though, this is true of American politicians in general. Labor in the United States has changed radically in the past couple of decades, with concerns about wages and working conditions increasingly overshadowed by fears of being cut loose entirely by employers without warning. There is an opportunity for either party to position itself as being more responsive to the priorities of working families.

Many on the left are deeply skeptical of conservatives and Republicans who call themselves "pro-labor." That is unsurprising, as the Republican Party has had a hostile relationship with American labor for several decades. But the antagonism has not always been so deep. Calvin Coolidge, a Republican hero, was the first U.S. president to sign legislation giving workers the right to organize. Great 20th-century labor leaders like Samuel Gompers and George Meany worked closely with the political right, especially in opposing communism. Through the 1970s, it was common for urban districts to elect pro-labor Republicans like Jacob Javits, the four-term Republican Senator from New York. When Javits lost his fifth re-election campaign in 1980, it was a sign of things to come. Under the Reagan administration, the Republican Party's relationship with labor would become far more antagonistic.

In 1981, Ronald Reagan broke the air traffic controllers' strike. It was an aggressive move that nevertheless secured the admiration of the right-wing base. Conservatives believed that unions had become too powerful and corrupt, with little accountability to anyone but their members.

Photo by Michael Brochstein/Sipa USA)(Sipa via AP Images

For some time now, the Republican Senator Marco Rubio has been speaking and writing publicly about the "dignity of labor," often citing Catholic labor encyclicals in his public speeches.

Many on the left are deeply skeptical of conservatives and Republicans who call themselves pro-labor.

Under Reagan, free enterprise became a major component of the Republican Party's "three-legged stool," along with moral traditionalism and a strong emphasis on national defense. Labor unions were viewed as a drain on national prosperity, and they increasingly looked to the Democratic Party for support. In broad form, those political allegiances have largely persisted through the present day.

The major labor unions in the United States have certainly been a political asset to the Democratic Party. In 2020, public-sector unions alone contributed more than $90 million to political parties and campaigns across the nation, with the overwhelming majority of that (about 90 percent) going to Democrats. Total union contributions exceeded $200 million. Many of the largest unions endorsed Joe Biden in the presidential race, though exit polls suggest that Donald Trump won about 40 percent among union members nationwide and Mr. Trump had significant grassroots support in Ohio, West Virginia, Pennsylvania and other states traditionally associated with labor unions. The Republicans have continued to attack unions politically. Under the Obama administration, they undercut union power by passing "right to work" legislation in five more states, bringing the total to 27. These laws weaken unions by limiting their ability to collect dues from workers.

Those political dynamics could endure for some time. If the Biden administration's fiscal decisions seem to be destabilizing the economy, the Republicans could rediscover their old enthusiasm for limited government. In that case, the right might arc back into a Tea Party-like philosophy, abandoning any serious effort to unfurl a labor agenda. Republican politicians might continue to talk about "the dignity of labor," especially when this helps them to channel popular anger against Silicon Valley. It is also common for politicians to use labor concerns as a noble-sounding excuse for lavishing tax breaks on corporate friends. (Recall President Trump's effort to "save jobs" at a Carrier plant in Indianapolis by offering the company $7 million in incentives. Job creation can often provide a convenient excuse for showering benefits on the already-wealthy.) It is understandable that some see labor-interested Republicans as scavengers, pillaging the flotsam of the once-robust unions they helped to destroy.

That may be too cynical, however. Conservatives may truly get serious about the concerns of working-class voters in the years to come. They have both motive and opportunity, especially in Midwestern and Rust Belt states, where many voters are disillusioned with old political solutions and searching for new answers. By securing the loyalties of working families, the right has a chance to bolster its faltering coalition. Its countercultural message resonates with many voters in economically desiccated regions.

There are many conservatives for whom the renewed interest in labor seems to be sincere. Intellectuals like Mr. Cass clearly believe that they are charting a new course forward for conservatism, while a politician like Mr. Rubio has long shown an interest in cultural reform that transcends Reaganite limited-government principles. At gatherings of right-leaning Catholic intellectuals, "Rerum Novarum" and "Quadrigesimo Anno" are now being discussed with real enthusiasm and energy. Family policy has become a popular topic, as the rugged-individualist rhetoric of the Tea Party era fades into the background. Conversations about "the common good" are trendy once again. Social justice is no longer a taboo.

This could be a redemptive moment for the Republican Party. American workers do, after all, need help. Mr. Rubio and others have identified a worthy cause that merits serious attention. This could be the moment when the right turns a page, redirecting some of its reactionary angst toward compassionate advocacy and prudent policy. But given their strained relations with labor unions, Republicans will need to offer some game-changing new ideas if they hope to set the agenda moving forward. The challenge is formidable, but it may not be impossible, precisely because America's labor situation has indeed changed rather markedly over the past few decades.

Workers Adrift

Historically, labor movements have focused on the relationship between workers and their employers. Collective bargaining, for example, helps workers to leverage their worth to a company or corporation for the sake of securing better wages or improved working

conditions. Labor laws use the power of the state to pressure employers into maintaining certain standards with respect to employee treatment. Both of these measures help to prevent workers from getting trapped in dangerous, underpaid or soul-destroying jobs.

Poor and socially marginalized people tend to be especially vulnerable to employer exploitation, since they have few resources and feel compelled to protect at all costs the little they have.

This problem was widespread in the years following industrialization, when factory production undermined skilled labor and home industry. Many workers were forced by circumstances to take whatever work was available, and for many, the obstacles to moving or re-skilling were prohibitive.

Collective bargaining helped many to negotiate for better wages and working conditions. Other exploitative practices were ended by legislation, which improved safety conditions, ended child labor and offered workers more securities against injury, illness and old age.

Exploitation is still a relevant concern today, but for many workers, oppressive bosses and inhumane working conditions may not be the most significant problem. They do not feel trapped in soul-destroying jobs. Rather, they are adrift, unprotected in a labor market that offers them plenty of freedom but little security. Relatively few workers today are pressured to endure unsafe working conditions, or to put in 70-hour weeks. Many struggle, however, to chart a career path that promises stability and financial security across a lifetime.

To some extent, this is a cost of our dynamic and ever-changing economy. At one time in history, people expected their children to follow in their own footsteps, taking over the family business or farm, or learning their parents' trade. By the mid-20th century, this was less common, but it was normal for an adult to remain with one company for almost his entire working life. Pension plans and other retirement benefits were often created with that expectation. In the United States today, though, the average worker will hold at least 12 different jobs across his life. The median amount of time a worker has been with his current employer is just over four years. People often worry whether their profession will even exist long enough to support their children through high school.

Obviously, these uncertainties can be destabilizing for all families and communities, but poor and socially marginalized people pay the heaviest price.

At all socioeconomic levels, people must live with the expectation that they will likely need to change jobs or acquire new skills from time to time. We have accepted these costs, in general, as the price of widespread wealth and opportunity. For advantaged people, economic change creates anxiety, but the consequences are rarely catastrophic. Those in a relatively advantaged situation have created a number of social mechanisms to track and reward personal stability, enabling them to maintain their status and lifestyle across periods of economic turbulence.

We lean on these mechanisms regularly, often with very little thought. If I need a loan, a bank will check my credit score to see whether I have reliably paid my bills. My college diploma proves to an employer that I am the sort of person who can spend four years writing papers and passing tests. As we move through our adult lives, a résumé becomes the magical key that opens professional doors. If a company folds or a job becomes obsolete, an established track record of employment may persuade other companies to hire an established worker. None of these mechanisms guarantee a trouble-free life, but they do help certain workers to ensure that they will have options. Instead of forging a lifelong relationship with a given employer, an advantaged worker builds up a personal reputation for himself, documenting his desirability as an employee, client or business partner in ways that prospective associates can verify.

Mechanisms like credit scores and résumé can serve many good ends, but they also have the effect of concentrating privilege. Almost no one becomes an educated, financially stable adult without considerable help. It is much easier to build credit if parents, siblings or friends are able to offer short-term loans at need, helping to avoid late payments on bills. Without significant support from family, young people may find it prohibitively difficult to complete a four-year degree program or to take advantage of valuable volunteer opportunities. A good word from a family friend can be invaluable for getting a young person her first job. In myriad ways, we have built a world in which the stable get more stable, while the unstable get battered by every passing wave. The latter need more help, but the problem is more diffuse than exploitation by employers. They are struggling with structural disadvantages that may make it prohibitively difficult to find a foothold in a contemporary workforce.

A person with bad credit or nontraditional credentials can still make valuable contributions to society, but a human resources department may only see the risks. To overcome this problem, we need to do a better job of preparing people from all backgrounds for stable employment. We also need to motivate employers to think more creatively, finding new ways to tap the potential of underdeveloped workers. Our existing union structure may not be optimal

By securing the loyalties of working families, the right has a chance to bolster its faltering coalition.

for pursuing these particular goals, as unions specialize in serving the needs of people who already have stable employment.

Pro-Labor Conservatives

Protecting workers against exploitation is still a worthy goal. It needs to be balanced, however, against the need to create better jobs for a wide range of people. Can the Republicans devise a policy approach that balances both goals? Already, this is an active concern for politicians like Mr. Rubio and for intellectuals like Mr. Cass. Some of their ideas are interesting, and there is potential here for a healthy form of political rivalry, as the right and left both scramble to generate effective labor policy. Prudent reform will be possible, however, only if conservative politicians can resist the populist right's more vengeful impulses. That may prove difficult.

Many pro-labor conservatives want to motivate corporations to invest more resources toward employees. They rail against "shareholder primacy," arguing that American workers are suffering from decreased opportunity and stagnant wages, owing in part to a financial system that motivates corporations to prioritize the demands of their shareholders. This may not even be good for the companies themselves over the long run. Workers, argued Mr. Cass in a recent essay in Politico, are more interested in the company's long-term viability. Shareholders mainly want to make some quick cash.

This is an intriguing argument. It may not be entirely true. It is encouraging nonetheless to see conservatives making a serious effort to reassess our financial practices, considering who does and does not benefit from modern commerce. If the Republicans can generate serious recommendations for worker-friendly tax reform, for example, that might create a foundation for a new kind of labor policy.

Job training is another major focus for pro-labor conservatives. Mr. Cass argues in his book *The Once and Future Worker* that it is unfair to give massive public subsidies to our universities without offering alternatives to young people who are not interested in, or suited for, college. Need-based college scholarships have existed for decades, but four-year colleges still disproportionately attract students from privileged backgrounds. By investing more in trade schools and other credentialing opportunities, we can open a wider range of options to students from less-advantaged backgrounds. We can help struggling workers by opening more opportunities for "earned success," ideally at a stage of life where it can make a significant difference.

Pro-labor conservatives are also becoming more interested in unions, albeit in a modified form. Mr. Cass regularly discusses alternative union models like northern Europe's "Ghent system," under which unions run unemployment insurance programs, and sectoral unions that represent entire industries. It may seem that Republicans are just re-inventing the wheel here, proposing new unions in hope that these will be less hostile to them politically. But even if this is true, it might be healthy to have a public debate about the merits of different models of unionization. Sometimes re-invented wheels are needed when the old ones start to creak.

All of these ideas have potential. Some may be genuinely transformative. Before any policy agenda can take root, however, the Republicans will need leaders who can focus on the common good. The former president Donald Trump had an impressive talent for making disaffected workers feel heard, but while in office he repeatedly demonstrated his willingness to mortgage long-term goals for short-term populist approval. Building a worker-friendly economy is a slow and difficult job. Stoking the rage and resentment of disaffected voters is much easier.

Even if Trump's own political career is finished, his brand of politics may not be. Josh Hawley, a Republican senator from Missouri, presents himself as a pro-labor conservative, but his speeches are filled with the embit-


AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite

Under the Reagan administration, the Republican Party's relationship with labor was often antagonistic. Senator Mitt Romney and other Republicans are trying to find ways to appeal to today's workers.


The Manhattan Insitute

Intellectuals like Oren Cass clearly believe that they are charting a new course forward for conservatism.

tered rhetoric of class warfare. Where Mr. Rubio touts the benefits of worker-friendly investment, Mr. Hawley preaches darkly about the unpatriotic plutocrats who have decimated the "great American middle." In his narrative, American prosperity is being sapped by the privilege and indifference of educated elites. Each evening on "Tucker Carlson Tonight," the Fox News host offers a similar message, telling more than four million viewers about the evils of the "cosmopolitan elites" who, in his narrative, have ransacked the American heartland.

Politicians have often used class resentment as a spur to labor reform. After the events of last January, though, is it reasonable to worry whether the populist right's destructive impulses may overwhelm everything else in the Republican Party. Do conservatives really wish to reform fiscal policy and build trade schools, or will they be content to vilify Big Tech and destroy universities? Even under the best of circumstances, it is difficult to devise prudent policy that addresses the real needs of marginalized people. The challenges are especially intense in a politically polarized environment, where there is little trust between employers and workers. Intellectuals like Mr. Cass seem to understand this, but his mild-mannered advocacy may not electrify the right-wing base as effectively as Carlson's angry populism.

Still, we can hope. There are reasons why the political right has attracted more support in the heartland in recent years. Conservatives may not speak the language of exploitation, but they have a particular attachment to those elemental goods that make life meaningful for ordinary people. Hearth, home, tradition and family are all central to conservative patterns of thought. Conservatives can relate to the anguish workers feel when those things seem to be slipping away from them. When working class voters move right, this is generally a sign that a society's farmers, mechanics and factory workers are concerned about the difficulty of passing on the customs, creeds and cultural mores that have made life meaningful for them. Now it is up to the Republican Party to answer those concerns in a constructive way that genuinely supports the common good.

Rachel Lu, *a contributing writer for* ***America****, is a freelance writer and instructor in philosophy. She lives in St. Paul, Minn.*

★★★★

WHAT WOULD LEO SAY?

'Rerum Novarum,' workers' rights and today's gig economy

By Kenneth R. Himes

May 15 marked the 130th anniversary of Pope Leo XIII's landmark encyclical on human labor, "Rerum Novarum." Looking at the situation of many workers in the emerging industrial order of the late 19th century, the pope went so far as to claim that "the condition of the working population is the question of the hour." Of course, that was 1891. Some might say that Leo's reflections, however helpful they may have been, are not all that relevant today. Commemorating Leo's letter may have some purpose for those interested in the history of Catholic social teaching, but can his encyclical still teach us anything?

This brief reflection has as its aim to underscore the continuing relevance of Leo's text, particularly to help us understand the value of work and the downside of a recent economic phenomenon.

The 'Precariat'

One of the growing trends in work is the spread of what has been called the gig economy—a labor market where there is a prevalence of short-term or freelance jobs instead of workers in full-time employment in a more settled position that offers opportunities for career advancement, compensation that includes benefits, procedures for determining and appealing workplace rules and a measure of job security.

Alternative work arrangements have long existed, but there are more short-term jobs today without security or benefits. A common alternative work structure is that of independent contractors, self-employed workers who control their own work schedules and intensity of work. These workers are often thought of as talented, successful people, rather than unhappy workers desperate for added income. And there is no question that the increase in short-term jobs can be a plus for those who have marketable skills and wish to have greater control over work hours, more freedom in selecting work sites and colleagues and an openness to different and new modes of job performance. However, independent contractors comprise a shrinking minority of the people in alternative work arrangements.

A worrying facet of the gig economy is that it transforms many workers into members of what has been called the precariat. More commonly used in Europe, the term refers to persons in short-term jobs, without job security or benefits such as health insurance, sick time and reimbursement for vehicle maintenance.

Freelancers working at a coworking space in Brooklyn, N.Y.

Unsplash/ Shridhar Gupta

Workers who are part of the precariat lack the ability to bargain over the terms of their employment.

From the Catholic perspective, the dangers of work in the gig economy are substantial. First, these workers have mainly transactional relationships with employers. The worker is not viewed in an integral way, as someone who brings a personal dimension to the world of work. Rather, work in the gig economy is viewed reductively; efficient production of a good or provision of a service is the sole aim of the employer.

The transactional nature of the work means the social aspect of work is also undervalued. Jobs in the gig economy can also undercut personal relationships outside the workplace. The availability of only gig jobs can make a worker anxious about the feasibility of marriage and family life in the face of economic insecurity. Young people can become hesitant about starting a family, seeking a mortgage or doing simple financial planning when employment is uncertain.

The role that work plays in a person's development also suffers in a gig economy. Workers in short-term jobs do not have extensive opportunities, if any at all, for ongoing training and skill development. There is little encouragement for upward movement in status and income, since career advancement is almost entirely left up to the individual worker, with no workplace or societal support. Gig work is presented in terms dictated by the employer; and avenues for workers to have a say in the job description, compensation, performance evaluation, disciplinary action or any managerial decision are relatively few.

The Insight of 'Rerum Novarum'

If people know anything about "Rerum Novarum," it is usually that Pope Leo supported labor unions and the practice of collective bargaining. That is likely because of the timeliness of his defense of organized labor, which was vital in some nations, including the United States. An early labor union, the Knights of Labor, had been condemned by the archbishop of Quebec in 1884. This was mainly due to the origins of the Knights as an organization with secret rites of membership when it was founded in 1869. By the 1880s, however, the organization was distancing itself from such practices because its leadership (and probably membership) was mostly Catholic and would have been wary of similarities with Freemasonry.

The Canadian archbishop's condemnation raised alarms that a broader condemnation might ensue from the Vatican that would apply not only to Catholics in Quebec but in the United States. Several American bishops took up the task of defending the Knights and appealed to the Vatican not to endorse the action in Quebec. Leaders like Cardinal James Gibbons of Baltimore worried that offi-

cial church opposition to organized labor could lead to substantial numbers of Catholic workers choosing their economic survival over their ecclesial membership. With the promulgation in 1891 of Leo's encyclical, the issue was settled within the Catholic community: Labor unions were affirmed. The alliance between church and labor became a characteristic of American Catholic life, and many priests and lay people favored Catholic participation and leadership within the labor movement.

Important as that development was for Catholic workers, it is not the lesson of "Rerum Novarum" that I wish to dwell upon here. I want to focus on another significant statement in Leo's letter that put the church solidly on one side of another divide in economic life. He gave clear support to the idea of private property and a realm of legitimate freedom in the marketplace. Yet, on a crucial issue of the day, Leo broke with capitalist ideology; he denied the doctrine of free contract as legitimate.

Simply put, some advocates of free markets extended that freedom to include unregulated freedom in matters of contract between a worker and employer; no interference or regulation was permitted in a contract voluntarily entered into by the two parties. Owners offered a wage and if a worker accepted it; there was no role for a third party to challenge or invalidate the agreement. This view of freedom as dominant when compared to other economic concerns had been opposed by a number of social reformers, but it was still a position espoused by devotees of a pure economic liberalism and capitalists resistant to labor rights.

Pope Leo made clear his belief in a standard higher than voluntary agreement, that of natural justice. He reasoned, first, that human labor has two aspects. Labor is personal, and each individual is free to seek the profit or benefit that comes from work. Leo agreed with that view up to a point:

> Now, were we to consider labor merely insofar as it is personal, doubtless it would be within the workman's right to accept any rate of wages whatsoever.... But our conclusion must be very different if, together with the personal element in a man's work, we consider the fact that work is also necessary for him to live: these two aspects of his work are separable in thought, but not in reality.

Leo went on to reason, "Let the working man and the employer make free agreements, and in particular let them agree freely as to the wages; nevertheless, there underlies a dictate of natural justice more imperious and ancient than any bargain between man and man, namely, that wages ought not to be insufficient to support a frugal and well-behaved wage-earner."

The pope concluded his argument against the ideology of free contract bluntly, "If through necessity or fear of a worse evil the workman accepts harder conditions because an employer or contractor will afford him no better, he is made the victim of force and injustice" (No. 45).

Work as Duty and Right

Since work is not only personal but necessary—it is the chief way human beings procure for themselves the essential goods required for a dignified life—there is a duty on the part of those who are able to work. Self-preservation is a fundamental obligation; not in an absolute sense, but since it is the basis for the enjoyment of other goods, the duty to preserve and care for life is basic. Thus, people should work if they are able; it is unemployment, not labor, that is a curse.

It is also the case that work is intimately related to a person's ability to acquire knowledge and skills and to give expression to one's personality. Work allows a person to grow into the image of God by sharing in the process of creation, shaping and creating the world that God has shared with us.

Work is also social; it is a means whereby the individual can contribute to the common good of the human family and build up the society in which one lives and relies upon. Work is a participatory action in which the person can add to the development of society, enrich the lives of others and provide goods and services that enable fellow persons to attain well-being.

Owing to these necessary, personal and social aspects of work, no individual can lightly dismiss the duty to work. Of course, this duty cannot be made absolute, for there are individuals whose physical and/or mental limitations override the obligation to work. The duty to work, however, ought not be restricted simply to paid work. There are those who may not be capable of productive work that is remunerated, yet a person may work in some other mode of labor whereby they grow as persons and make a contribution to the good of others.

Within Catholic social teaching, there is a mutual correlation between duties and rights. It is not morally acceptable to insist that a person has a duty if that person does not have the ability to act in such a way as to satisfy the duty. Individuals cannot be told that they must work in order to eat and then be sidelined in the labor market, nor can they be told they must have specified skills and training to work, yet be denied the opportunity to acquire necessary skills and training.

Work and the Human Person

If we employ the categories of Leo, that work is necessary, personal and social, we can appreciate how this multifaceted view of work derives from Catholicism's understanding of the human person. However, it is this perspective on the person that is undermined by the negative aspects of the gig economy.

It comes as no surprise that the Catholic tradition wishes to safeguard and promote the spiritual dimension of the human person, but we are not disembodied spirits. Human beings are material as well as spiritual; we are also social beings, needing to both give and receive affection and to enjoy the company of others in a variety of groups. We all have an inner life as well: We have memories, a personal history, a self-narrative, an identity that situates us in our journey through life.

It is a common error of our age to embrace some aspect of *homo economicus* and equate that with the full humanity of the person. The error of consumerism reduces the person to a mere acquirer and user of material goods. We can also so strongly emphasize our role as workers that we lose sight of who we are when not at work; we measure our worth by what we earn or produce; we sacrifice leisure or relationships for more and more work; we find no satisfaction in life outside the workplace.

We can say that because work is personal, it is a human good that should play a role in an individual's growth. Work gives expression to who we are; we exert our energy and talent into creation when we work. We join in the continual act of creation that God sustains; we join our efforts in the process of transforming creation into what God desires it to be. By the means of work, we acquire new skills and refine existing ones, and we develop new qualities of character, such as self-discipline, thrift, perseverance and ingenuity.

Second, because work is not only personal but necessary, we labor in order to provide for the satisfaction of basic needs and enhance our material condition. We are able to provide for others dependent upon us, including children, the elderly, the infirm. Work becomes a way for us to express care and give support to others unable to care for themselves. Creation can be transformed into a more hospitable place for humans to survive and prosper through the medium of work, which secures necessary goods and services.

Third, the tradition of Catholic social teaching about labor that Leo initiated recognizes that work is social as well as personal and necessary. It is a cooperative process that is exhibited by specialization of skills and the division of labor, by economies of scale and organized workplaces that heighten efficiency. In so doing, human work affords opportunities for community, fostering bonds of colleagueship and friendship and developing a sense of responsibility and accountability.

Leo XIII and Justice for the Worker

Today many associate the idea of justice with fair and impartial rules, what is called procedural justice; if the rules are fair, whatever emerges as the end result is deemed just. Catholic social thought, however, informed by the biblical tradition, tends to see justice as more of an end state; it is the establishment of *shalom*, a community that exhibits a fullness of life as right relationships are created and maintained.

Justice in the realm of work entails ready access to employment, safe working conditions appropriate to the dignity of each worker, adequate compensation to secure for a worker and dependents sufficient income and benefits to maintain material well-being and a balance of work and leisure to ensure that the spiritual, relational, intellectual and recreational needs of the worker can be satisfied. Finally, justice in the realm of work entails making provision for those who cannot work, so that no one is abandoned or put outside the bounds of decent society.

When examining the gig economy, it remains especially helpful to recall Leo XIII's assessment of the dynamics of free contracts. He noted that if, from necessity, workers accept harsh conditions because of an employer's unwillingness to offer better conditions, then the worker is not freely consenting but is the victim of unjust coercion. Consent is problematic when there are few better options for members of the precariat. Increased pressures for labor market flexibility may effectively mean transferring financial risks and economic insecurity onto workers and their communities.

The threatening possibilities of the gig economy as the future of work for many persons is a moral challenge for theorists and practitioners of the Catholic social tradition. The plight of the precariat and their experience of human work is a reminder to us today that 130 years ago, Leo XIII was right to see the nature of work and justice for the workers as key to the entire social question.

Kenneth R. Himes, O.F.M., *is a professor of theological ethics at Boston College and a former president of the Catholic Theological Society of America.*

The Dangers of Driving While Black

By Bruce Wilkinson

Too often I have been viewed with suspicion for simply living and acting like anyone else

I watched the parents of Daunte Wright speak about the moments that led to his killing by a police officer. His mom was on the phone with him when he was pulled over. I watched her relay a heartbroken response, realizing that her son would be dead in 10 minutes, because former officer Kim Potter shot him in the chest, allegedly mistaking her gun for a taser.

It reminded me that I could have been Daunte Wright. In 1980, I was pulled over in Worthington, Ohio, after a cop saw me pass his parked car. I had Illinois license plates. He asked why I was driving through the town at 11:30 at night and told me that I had been driving erratically. I told him that *we* were on our way to a 24-hour restaurant and that *we* were students at the nearby seminary. He then looked into the car and saw two white men, my fellow seminarians, riding with me.

The stop ended with him handing me a warning slip, telling me to be careful. On the slip it said "single Black occupant in vehicle during suspicious behavior." My friends couldn't believe that "we" had been pulled over for doing nothing. They just didn't understand. But I did.

I knew that by the grace of God a racist cop had been stopped from giving me a ticket, or worse, that night because he saw two white males in my car. I cried later that night after we got back to the seminary.

Over the past few years, many in America have come to see that some Black men and women never make it home after a traffic stop. Yet many still do not see the emotional scars carried by so many more Black people who have had a bad encounter with the police. My seminary friends did not understand that another wound on my soul had been created that night during the encounter with the police officer. I knew that once again I was seen not as a "regular" person just out doing regular activities but as a "Black occupant" doing something suspicious.

Too often in our country I have been made to feel as if simply living and acting like anyone else might live or act is suspicious or dangerous because of my skin color. The emotions that I must too often carry—of worry or cautious fear or heightened alert—drain me and rob me of the ability to just enjoy living as an open, loving human being.

Recently a popular television series, "This Is Us," highlighted the tragedy of the divisions and emotional scarring that happens because of racism and the failure to have an honest dialogue about the pains this has created in our societies and in family life.

Two adult brothers, Randall, who is Black and was adopted, and Kevin, who is white and feels lingering resentment that his brother received special treatment from their parents, become estranged from each other. Kevin says that he regrets the day Randall was brought home to be a part of their family because "everyone" thought Randall


erik mclean/ unsplash

should receive special attention. Randall responds with sadness that he never wanted any "special" attention. However, because he was a Black person in a white family, he was seen as different even though all he wanted was to be treated as an equal. Randall says that no one ever asked him how he felt about being seen as different; no one ever asked him if he was in pain or scarred because he was Black.

In 1980, during that innocent outing to a restaurant, I was given another scar to carry because I was Black. No one—not my friends, nor anyone else at the seminary who heard of our encounter with the police—ever asked me if I was O.K. after that event. I was not. But like Randall, I still had to go forward in life while wounded and crying inside.

Bad policing and racism in the United States inflicts many scars on people of color within our society and within our church. I am a victim of bad policing caused by systemic racism, and by the grace of God I've never faced a situation in which I might have lost my life because an officer drew a weapon and fired. But too many times, the United States has witnessed the tragic loss of life following a police officer's decision to shoot now and ask questions later.

I do not wish for any person to be hated for committing a crime—only that justice be served. I want justice to be served for all the tragic killings that we have witnessed in the past few years when policing went wrong, from the actions of Derek Chauvin, who has now been convicted for the murder of George Floyd, to those of former officer Kim Potter and the devastating pain her family will go through next because of the shooting death of Daunte Wright.

I sadly believe that too many Americans are afraid to ask this question, especially to their fellow citizens of color in the country: Are you in pain or are you living in fear? We must have an open dialogue if we want to prevent another George Floyd or Daunte Wright or even a Bruce Wilkinson. In order to stop the hatred and violence of racism we must acknowledge the present pain and begin anew to find ways to peacefully change our society.

One excellent place for such a dialogue to begin is in our houses of worship. In these places, we are called to a higher morality and way of life based on love of God and neighbor—and we profess to be people of reconciliation. The only question remaining is if we are trusting enough in God's graces to lead us to open our hearts and be changed.

Rev. Bruce Wilkinson *serves as a priest in the Archdiocese of Atlanta.*

Vax Americana

The ordinary, miraculous, everyday, lifesaving experience of getting the Covid-19 vaccine

By Joe Hoover

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The quickest way to get to vax from Crown Heights is to take the No. 4 or No. 5 train straight to Grand Central. You don't have to transfer at Atlantic Ave-Barclays like you do getting to the **America** office near the Diamond District, where jittery men wearing diamonds stand in front of diamond stores to sell passersby diamonds. And where, in making the transfer, you go by a guy slouched on the floor against the wall. Every day he's there, soiled gray shirt, unshaven, a cartoon-thief-tiptoeing-with-a-money-bag kind of unshaven, who just as you're about to take the steps down to the B train, bays in a dismal voice, *Can anyone help me? I'm hungry, can you please help me get something to eat?* He directs his voice straight at you as you go by him, demanding your attention. The same tone, same register, day after day.

But no, on this day you don't commute past meal pleaders and diamond sellers but go straight to Grand Central to get the No. 7 train, which goes west to the Javits Center where you'll get vax.

Where the life you save with vax may be the baying man, the diamond men.

Or even the Irish guy on the Easter Vigil who calmly strolled into your church, planted his feet and rather sweetly bellowed at all of us, "Do Not Take the Vaccine! It Is the Devil's Work! Do Not Take the Vaccine! I Love You All!"

And we who were there were not entirely surprised that someone from the street a few minutes before Mass was yelling into the cream and gold nave, flanked by Mychal Judge's twisted steel and a thousand mute saints. This kind of thing happens in this church on a not entirely irregular basis. And maybe fitting because soon the fire, the water, Christ has died, got no vax, but then was given, you could say, vax, and now he's back on his feet no matter what anyone says about vax but nevertheless would probably be charmed, Christ, by the brogue warning about suspect national medicines at a church named after St. Francis who himself probably would have invited the Irishman in for some wine.

And after the man is gently ushered out of church they light a tall cauldron in the middle aisle, the room goes dark, a lone voice rises, and men slapping djembe drums dance toward the flame, a roaring South African hymn reclaiming the space. Two years since Vigil fire, cold baptisms, rude salvation and awesome.

You are getting vax for all of them.

Nevertheless, on the No. 5 train to vax, just two days later, Easter Monday, my thoughts all run in one direction: blasé, whatever, not a big deal, just doing this. I try to feel the moment but can't. Getting vax for distant others? It is not front and center. It is just something I do because now I am eligible.

Maybe it is not a big deal because we're America, we're

the West. We finally figured it out. In the end the science finally won. We took care of business. And besides, in this country Covid only drives 2 percent of the infected into the grave, right? All in all, we got this.

At the Javits Center, four or five aisles were roped off with vinyl bands like an airport. Normal things. I showed my phone, confirmed my appointment. Usual. Sent to a table for further questioning: ID, qualification (over 30), allergies, reactions, defects; just another medical visit.

Then I got up and went where they directed me, down past these rows of information-taking tables, to another line leading to where they give the shots. And it's then that something wells up. I'm walking to the place where *the thing* will actually happen, and suddenly I am all but striding down a causeway, catwalk, red carpet, to get to vax, life, miracle. Do you realize how insanely quick it was they turned this baby around and conjured up vax? (Like all overnight sensations, of course, it took years of preparation.) It is happening.

And while I'm not exactly weeping heading to the nurse's stations, I am traversing the felt conditions for the possibility of tears. A once-in-a-century American revival tent healing, where everyone running this thing is so nice and calm and orderly, sitting behind very fine black molded plastic tables or standing giving directions near rope lines throughout this vast, glass and girders convention center way out by the river on the edge of town and it's happening. The rescue of a desperate people in this slow-moving, diffuse way; shot after shot after shot, helping end this insane pandemic and all its unique and particular hells.

Like the opera singer who early on went back to Ohio to live with his family where they didn't distance, didn't take it seriously; and after he got Covid and went to the hospital, forced himself to keep his eyes open. For four days. For four days lying in a hospital bed the man did not close his eyes. He was afraid he would never open them again. The only thing that kept him alive, he said, was deep opera breaths. And furious at his family, who had scoffed at the pandemic and now he's lying there doing warmups for Don Giovanni, eyes open 96 hours and enraged. Covid almost took him to the 2 percent and now here we are with vax and yeah, I guess I'm feeling it.

My nurse wears a pink speckled smock. It's about to happen. I ask her name. Tanya. I tried to be charming with Tanya (an instant death blow for charm). But no, I wasn't trying to be charming. I wanted to connect with my nurse, insistent she know how grateful I was for this, my first shot. I asked Tanya, "How does it feel to be ending a pandemic?"

She laughed shyly as if she had never heard that before. A blushing, "Me, putting to route a pestilence?" kind of thing. She did not say what I assumed she would: "Yes, yes, *ending a pandemic*. I've heard it a thousand times from deficient charmers like you." But no, truly, looking at me like she had never been told *You are saving the world*. Are you kidding me? Not everyone is saying, "You are saving the world!" to Tanya? What kind of monsters live around here?

I rolled up the left sleeve of the black long-sleeve shirt I wear far too many days of the year, and she gave me the shot.

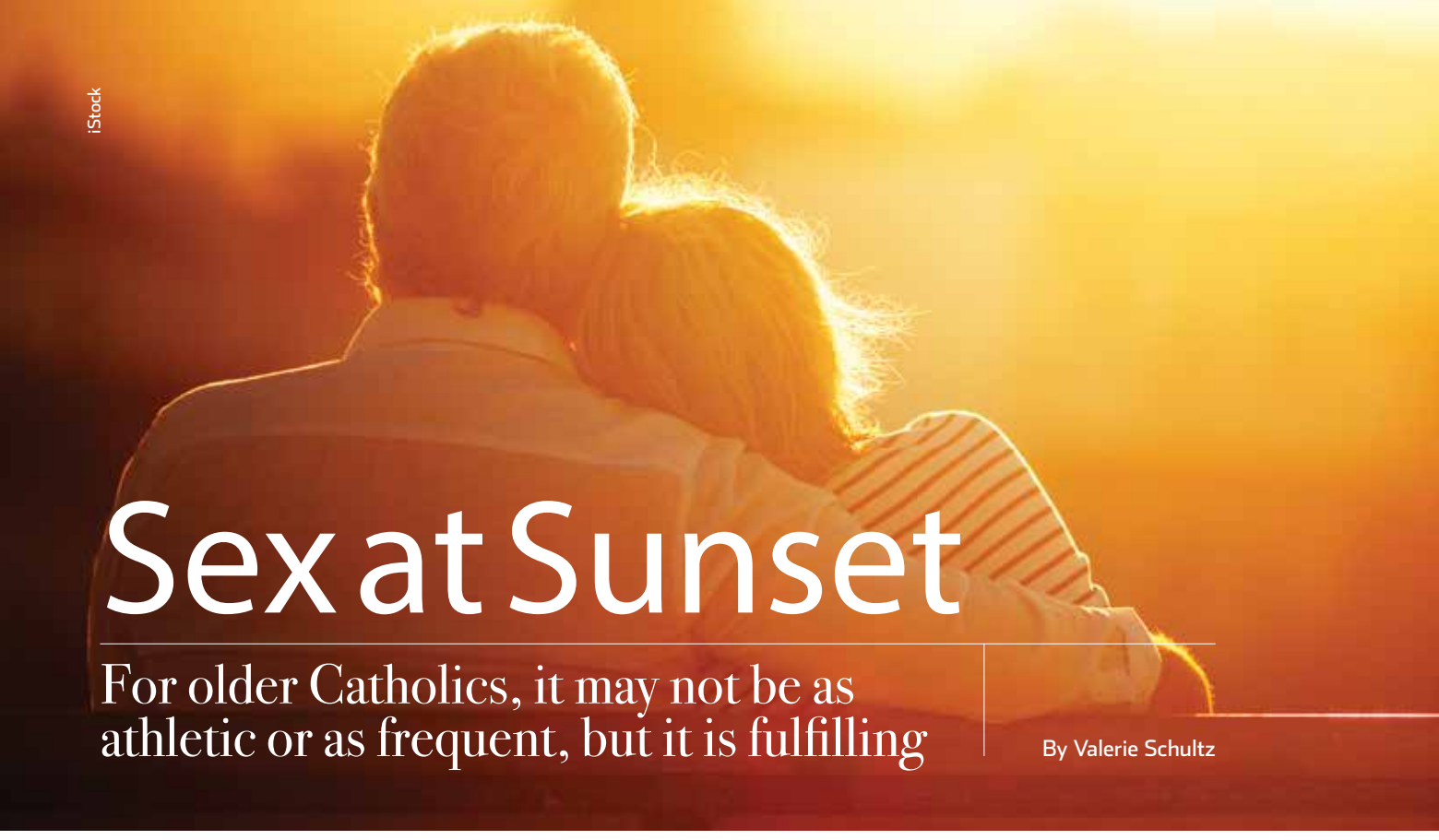
The vaccine (mine was Pfizer-BioNTech) is what is called an mRNA vax. It shoots into your body material that gives your cells instructions for how to make a spike protein—the crown-like protein that our lung-destroying coronavirus manufactures. This spike protein, though, when by itself, is harmless.

The vaccine shot injects a recipe for your body to make, you could say, something that looks like a wolf, but is actually a sheep in a wolf's mask. But seeing these sheep in wolf's clothing, other cells will train themselves to take up arms against a sea of wolves, even though this time around the intruder is harmless, not actually a wolf. But the next time an actual wolf comes, the body will have a memory of how to fight it and destroy it.

Tanya is shooting into my body a lie, a trick, a high-level war game, a fabrication of possibilities maybe never needed, and I take it and love it because the lie put in the body is serving a greater good. And welcome, vax.

Like the welcome I offered as I followed the Communion line at the Easter Vigil and passed a newly baptized guy in the front row, about an hour after the Irish interloper loudly encouraged us not to take the vaccine. "Welcome!" I said to this bearded young man in his cinched and perfect white robe. I just want to offer you my gratitude, my assurance you are saving the world somehow, channeling whatever energy you accrued in that water out to the rest of us. I get vaccinated for you, you get baptized for me; both seeping out into a country that got the science right, and oh so little else—diamond districts mocking one-note beggars and the paranoid lost, the 2 percent stacked with bodies of the poor. But these two medicines, vax and sacred water, training the cells to fight what infects us; to give us all a second chance. A chance to get things right around here, or at least a bit less wrong.

Joe Hoover, S.J., is *poetry editor for* ***America*** *and the author of* O Death, Where Is Thy Sting: A Meditation on Suffering.



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Sex at Sunset

For older Catholics, it may not be as athletic or as frequent, but it is fulfilling

By Valerie Schultz

Pope Francis, in his apostolic exhortation "Amoris Laetitia," writes that the sacrament of marriage "involves a series of obligations born of love itself, a love so serious and generous that it is ready to face any risk" (No. 131). After four decades of marriage, I get that. My husband and I have seriously and generously faced all sorts of obligations and risks that have challenged and graced us, broken and bonded us. We have even just weathered the riskiness of a whole year of looking at only each other's faces during a global pandemic, and we still like each other.

I was thinking recently about the phrase in Genesis about two becoming "one flesh." It was sunset, and our two fleshes had just made one. Sunset has become my favorite time to make love because it is an apt metaphor for this late chapter of our lives and because its soft light flatters my flesh. It is also especially sweet because, during much of our marriage, sunset was never a time for love-making, what with four children and activities and jobs and homework and chores and dinnertime and all the rest of it. Love at sunset might have happened on the rare vacation without the kids but was otherwise an impossible dream.

During our childbearing years, we tried to be "good Catholics" when we had sex. We charted my cycles and relied on Natural Family Planning to space the births of our children. A few times we sweated out pregnancy scares that turned out to be lateness. We were not perfect, as there were definitely occasions when we joined the large percentage of Catholics who have used other methods of contraception at some point in their lives (see previous mention of rare vacations, the timing of which could conflict with ovulation).

But we tried our Catholic best, taking as our guide the unitive and procreative aspects of married sex that the church teaches as inseparable. We honored our sacrament as "an intimate partnership of life and love," as the Second Vatican Council described marriage in the "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" (No. 48). We tended to our marriage like a newly planted garden. We were patient and kind, mostly. We were each other's loudest cheerleaders. We were a united parental front. We had plenty of trouble and sacrifice, but we stayed lovers and friends. We still are.

Now our nest is empty of its baby birds, and we enjoy this crazy liberty to do whatever we want, whenever we want. Because we are done making babies, we get to indulge in the unitive part of sex without worrying about the procreative. After the years of policing ourselves, this is a delightful bonus. We may not hear any talk about it from the Sunday pulpit, but we are free to make love at sunset, at sunrise, at noon, at night. Sex with someone you know and love is deeply satisfying. At our age it may not be as athletic or as frequent, but it is fulfilling. It is affirming. And it is fun.

In the past I have referred to marriage as the consolation sacrament, the one you can fall back on when you discern that you do not have a vocation to religious life or

the priesthood. It can seem to married people that the church treats sex as an ambiguous duty rather than a sublime gift. "Amoris Laetitia" does its valiant part to elevate marriage to a holy calling. It also assures us of God's joyful love for us, even if our marriages and families aren't traditionally configured. It prioritizes the need for mercy and tenderness in our marriages. And it makes us feel that even if we are not impeccably behaved, there is hope for us.

I confess I often feel foolish now when I remember how bound up in the rules of sex we were when we were young, how we parsed and fretted over the official guidelines, how we sometimes felt guilty for giving in to passion. I am grateful to N.F.P. for teaching us, early in our marriage, about respecting each other and appreciating our fertility. Still, the procreative portion of sex commanded a lot more attention than the unitive. Like many married people, we eventually found it more real-life to follow our private, imperfect path. Sometimes we ignored the rules.

Honestly, it can be a little tiring to read what still another celibate person has to say about the "nuptial mystery," to use St. Leo the Great's delicate, not to mention rather lovely, term for sex. With all due humility and respect, I propose that we long-married folks, with a little nudge from the Holy Spirit, might be the grounded experts at unraveling our own unique blessed nuptial mysteries.

My post-menopausal brain also wonders: If old or infertile couples are permitted the pleasure of unitive sex, why couldn't all couples in good conscience exercise that option? Would that not be in keeping with "the experience of belonging completely to another person," to refer to "Amoris Laetitia" again (No. 319)?

At sunset, the love we send out into the universe comes back to us and folds us into its warmth. In the twilight afterglow, I imagine writing down the recipe for a solid chance at the Catholic ideal of an "indissoluble" marriage: God. Love. Trust. Romance. Kindness. Kids. A sense of humor. A reliable vacuum cleaner. Sex at sunset.

With these ingredients, two people may find themselves traveling from some fancy vows at an altar to a marriage bed at sunset, with all their hopes and scars and sacred memories to keep them company.

Valerie Schultz *is a freelance writer, a columnist for The Bakersfield Californian and the author of* Overdue: A Dewey Decimal System of Grace. *She and her husband Randy have four daughters.*

Baby Mania

By Taylor Byas

In the middle of the night I wake, my arms hanger-
bent for the child I don't have. Somebody's wishing
fruit on this womb, and it tells me so—a half-step
into irregularity, a missed cycle, the sham of phantom

pains with no blood to show for it. I count my late
days like petals of a flower frazzled from its stem when
I leave things up to fate; *I'm pregnant, I'm not*
pregnant, I'm pregnant, I'm not pregnant. See, I'm

tired of funerals, the pallbearing of myself, the week-
long procession into fresh pairs of underwear. I grow
jealous of the flower, how it doesn't ask for anything,
how it splays itself in sunlight for the dusting of pollen

and this is enough. My family places month-old babies
in my lap and my body wills the crib of tissue it has
created to stick a little longer. Fussy children quickly
quiet to wonder under my gaze. Perhaps beneath

my heartbeat they hear the soft collapse of blood
and possibility, indelicate in its leaving. They coo,
offer their fingers to my lips almost in sympathy.
There, there, in their eyes. The child mothers me.

Taylor Byas *is a Black Chicago native, a second year doctoral student and Yates scholar at the University of Cincinnati. Her chapbook,* Bloodwarm*, is forthcoming from Variant Lit. This poem was a runner-up in* ***America****'s 2021 Foley Poetry Contest.*

photo by John Dlugolecki

‘You Have to Be Able to Discover Things That Are Divinely Wonderful’

An exploration of Jesuit pedagogy

By James T. Keane

As a 1992 graduate of Loyola High School in Los Angeles, I had Michael Mason as my AP English IV teacher. Mr. Mason is still teaching at Loyola High. Our interview has been edited for length and style.

It has been 29 years since I had you as a teacher at Loyola High. That was also your first year.

Yes. This graduating class will be my 30th. I am still teaching AP English IV! This year has been rather different from previous ones. Connecting the concepts behind everything we have taught and learned over the years while dealing with this incredibly bizarre event of Covid-19 has changed teaching dramatically in certain ways.

You went to a Jesuit high school yourself, Bellarmine College Preparatory in San Jose. Are there any teachers you remember from Bellarmine?

Yes, my undergraduate degree is from Boston College, and one of my master’s degrees is from Loyola Marymount, but I got my start at Bellarmine. Father Jerry Wade is the chancellor there now, but I had him for Latin. I am convinced he is the Benjamin Button of Jesuits, because he seems to get younger every year. We read Cicero, and [Father Wade] was terrific; you could tell he really knew the material, but also that he really knew what he was doing as a teacher. He made the material seem alive.

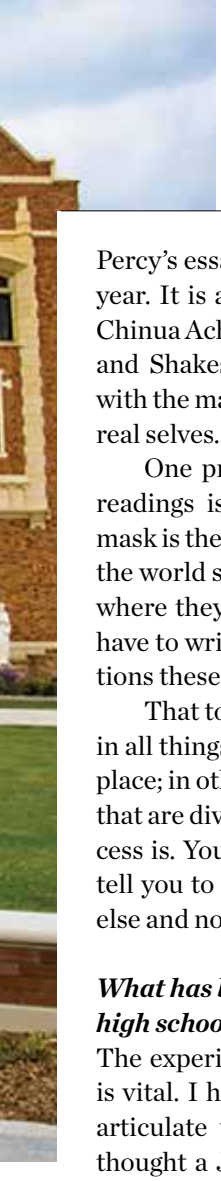
There was a lot of memorization at Jesuit high schools in those days. One punishment assignment I got was to memorize the Letter of Paul to the Ephesians.

That sort of stuff was still happening when I went to Loyola. We had a great math teacher—Al Martin—who one day drew a sine wave on the chalkboard. The class clown (who is now an Emmy-winning television writer) shouted, “Hey look, it’s Batman!” Dr. Martin assigned him to write 250 words on Batman for the next class—in Latin.

There were a lot of great people at Loyola when I started, of varying ages, and Al Martin was a classic example. A lot of them had been educated by Jesuits, and that helped. The handing off of the baton from Jesuits to lay people is not just a necessary evil; sometimes it is a good thing.

One of the great takeaways I took from your class was that you introduced us to John Irving’s novels, even though they were not likely to be on the AP English exam. I got very into Irving after and have read everything he has written. Do you think the school has been supportive of your own love of literature in your teaching?

Yes, I think some of the stuff we’re able to do in class with imaginative literature gets to the heart of what Ignatian discernment is about. I have my seniors read Walker



Loyola Hall at Loyola High School, Los Angeles, Calif.

Percy's essay "The Loss of the Creature" at the start of the year. It is about finding your authentic self. We also read Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart, Sophocles's "Antigone" and Shakespeare's "Hamlet." They all deal in some way with the masks we put up for the world to see instead of our real selves.

One project I like to do with my seniors after those readings is have them make physical masks—the outer mask is the projection of their public persona, what they let the world see about who they are. We do a "reveal" session where they present their mask to the class and then they have to write a paper on what they discovered. The revelations these kids have about themselves are incredible.

That to me is a kind of Ignatian pedagogy. To "find God in all things," you have to know how to find God in the first place; in other words, you have to be able to discover things that are divinely wonderful—no matter how scary that process is. You can't find God in following what other people tell you to love. We don't discern by listening to someone else and nodding our head yes.

What has been the highlight for you teaching at a Jesuit high school?

The experiential quality of Jesuit and Ignatian education is vital. I had a sabbatical a few years ago that helped me articulate what kind of community and environment I thought a Jesuit school should aspire to. I visited a lot of classes at two other Jesuit high schools. I saw a literature class where the students were tasked with putting Dr. Frankenstein on trial; I got to see different ways of teaching some of the material I teach, like Tim O'Brien's The Things They Carried. I saw a lot of different ways of making education more personal.

One skill I learned at Loyola—more a jesuitical than a Jesuit one, probably—was to think fast on my feet. I wrote my AP English IV exam question on Cervantes's Don Quixote, which I had never read; but the school's fall musical had been "Man of La Mancha." One of the Jesuits found out and rolled his eyes. "Don Quixote is a 900-page novel from the 17th century, Keane. 'Man of La Mancha' is a two-hour musical from the 1960s. Good luck." But I did pass, because I had enough of a grasp of the material—and how to write about it—that I could roll with the situation.

Absolutely. A great deal of life, everything from a job interview to a successful communication of your ideas, is about having an understanding of what might be the right points to mention, to emphasize, in order to communicate well with other people. Not faking it, necessarily, but knowing how to present yourself and what material and experiences to draw from.

A thornier question: Where does Jesuit education limp? In what ways can it be improved?

First and foremost, all our high schools need to be coeducational; I think the all-male institution does not work anymore. We are advertising ourselves as a college prep school but our students are not going to colleges that are single-sex. And the more that our young men are made aware that there is another whole half of humanity that is, to paraphrase Balzac, "equal to them in some ways but superior in most," the better off everyone is.

The question is complicated by the fact that a lot of research shows that single-sex schools are good for women, who benefit from the environment, but not for men. A coed environment changes the dynamic of a lot of things. It certainly has an effect in combating the homophobia that is a subtext at every all-boys school. The school bully doesn't survive in a coed atmosphere as easily. And young men and women need to start appreciating each other intellectually at the high school level.

The same goes for racial and economic diversity. We have to be careful Jesuit schools don't become rich, white, Catholic boys' clubs.

On a different issue, I think everyone involved in Jesuit education needs to be aware of the danger of giving in to fads, whether that be a kind of educational jargon or a sort of "teaching to the test," when we already have an educational system and philosophy that works very well. Part of that is a question of hiring and priorities. It is hard to keep a great system that works together for a long, long time unless you have people who are consistently aware of the ethos of the place.

We need to ask ourselves all the time: Are we a brand? Are we selling slogans that can be put on a T-shirt? Or are we the inheritors of a philosophy—one that is not necessarily always current but is relevant?

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

Jesuit School Spotlight is a new monthly feature focusing on Jesuit middle and secondary schools from around the country. It is underwritten in part by Jesuit high schools of the Northeast Province of the Society of Jesus.

Jordan Peterson Wants You to Grow Up

By Elizabeth Grace Matthew

The University of Toronto psychology professor, clinical psychologist, best-selling author and YouTube sensation Jordan B. Peterson published his third book and second international best-seller, *Beyond Order*, in March. The book expands in an intentional and direct way on its prequel, *12 Rules for Life* (2018). Like *12 Rules for Life, Beyond Order* offers 12 rules meant to help readers craft lives that include less pointless suffering (though not necessarily less suffering) and more meaning (though not necessarily more happiness).

As in *12 Rules for Life*, the presentation of these rules ranges from the literal and mundane ("Try to make one room in your house as beautiful as possible") to the metaphoric and abstract ("Do not hide unwanted things in the fog"). Overall, *Beyond Order* is well argued and provocative, though more prone to discursiveness than its predecessor.

Peterson's tendency toward tangents in *Beyond Order* belies the book's even sharper focus on one overarching argument: The meaning in life is found in taking responsibility.

This contention is made explicit only in Rule IV: "Notice that opportunity lurks where responsibility has been abdicated." But in fact, the moral and psychological argument for shouldering heavier personal and professional burdens rather than lighter ones animates every chapter of *Beyond Order*.

After five years of international fame, Peterson's reputation as a divisive public intellectual is often viewed as inextricable from his work itself. This is mostly because his controversial views on Bill C-16 (a Canadian law pertaining to the use of pronouns as related to transgender people) got a great deal of media attention in 2017 and helped to grow his burgeoning international reputation.

Yet Peterson and his central message about responsibility are difficult to shoehorn into either of our increasingly polarized political camps.

Rhetoric on the left tends to be invested in acknowledging people's suffering and the ways that trauma, oppression and the like can ravage the mind and the soul. Meanwhile, rhetoric on the right tends to be invested in telling people to strive regardless of their circumstances. Peterson does both; he is honest about how hard life is and how unfair it can be, and he offers practical guidance about how to order one's mind, body and environment to withstand inevitable suffering and pursue goals with purpose.

A deep dive into Peterson's books and lectures raised three questions for

'Peter Pan and Wendy' by James Matthew Barrie. Lebrecht Music & Arts/Alamy

For the best-selling author and YouTube sensation Jordan Peterson, Neverland has always been a lie.

me: 1) Why is this very old message about meeting profound suffering with heroic responsibility resonating in a new way in the 21st century? 2) Why is it resonating disproportionately with younger white men? 3) How does Peterson's argument, and the cultural context around it, challenge us specifically as Catholics?

An Old Message for a New Time

In many ways, life today is far easier than it was 100 (or even 25) years ago. People generally live longer and healthier lives, and there are ever more technologies that free us from drudgery and inconvenience. And yet this very technology has spawned new and unique mental, psychological and spiritual demands. One has to be quite organized to keep track of the average American's 100 passwords. It is disconcerting and stressful to make choices when the options seem endless. And it is particularly difficult to manage the incessant demands of modern life absent the familial, communal and religious contexts that those before us mostly took for granted.

When my paternal grandparents got married in 1944, there was no question that they would live in Philadelphia's Italian section. It was an equally foregone conclusion that the vast majority of their income would go toward paying their bills. They did not have a lot of choices, and they would not have known what to make of them if they did. Their parents had been born in Italy; neither of them had graduated from high school; and they were both Catholic.

Their load of responsibilities was not light—they raised children without a lot of means, and had the same concerns and struggles as everyone both before and after them—but there were many sets of shoulders to help bear those burdens. They lived among scores of family members and friends and went to the same stores, church and social events as nearly everyone they knew. With their community thus institutionalized by both geography and custom, their familial dramas included a cast of characters large enough to absorb any particularly operatic incidents with less collateral damage than would have been possible otherwise. Thus, their lapses as individuals, as spouses and as parents were less consequential to themselves and to their children than they would have been without the collectivized, communal responsibility that lightened their individual loads.

When my husband and I got married in 2012, by contrast, we were both

> Jordan Peterson and his central message about responsibility are difficult to shoehorn into either of our increasingly polarized political camps.

pursuing graduate degrees. Our decision to remain in the Philadelphia region, where I had grown up and we had met as undergraduates, was born of an explicit desire to achieve rootedness among family and friends—an outcome that we understood could no longer be taken for granted. And our decision to stay in Philadelphia was fraught rather than obvious. It meant not living in Cleveland, where my husband had grown up.

Moreover, even as we have sought to centralize, routinize and institutionalize many of our familial relationships and friendships, we recognize that our interactions with others are nearly always conscious choices rather than ever-present unconscious realities. For this reason, our responsibilities—professional, marital and parental—are ours alone in a way that was not true for either my Italian-American grandparents or his Liberian ones. Hence no amount of self-awareness or hard work can render us truly fit for the sheer amount of personal responsibility required of anyone trying to be a decent citizen, worker or parent in today's newly individuated world.

Enter Jordan Peterson with his now 24 rules, making what was communal, implicit and abstract for my grandparents individual, explicit and specific for me.

Thus, it is Peterson himself who has noticed that opportunity lurks where responsibility has been abdicated. His resonance with younger people reflects the extreme demands of modern life and the new isolation in which we are expected to meet those demands. It also reflects the failure of our parents and grandparents to prepare many of us for the logistical, psychological and emotional reality that they unwittingly created.

Leaving Neverland

Much has been made of the fact that Peterson's audiences tend to be dominated by younger white men. Progressive critics have tended to assume that if a lot of white men are buying Peterson's message about responsibility, there must be something sexist and/or racist in the message itself. If there weren't, this line of reasoning goes, more women and people of color would be enthusiastic about Peterson, too.

Putting aside the fact that there is more gender and racial diversity among Peterson's fans than the popular perception might lead us to believe, I speculate that there is a reason why comparatively fewer women and people of color find Peterson's exaltation of responsibility life-changing. It's not that his message doesn't apply to us. It's that it isn't news to us.

In order for a person to receive Peterson's injunction toward responsibility as transformative, he or she would have to have previously believed that avoiding adult responsibility while escaping dire consequences was not only desirable but possible. That is, he or she would have to have believed that failure to grow up could look more like the Neverland of "Peter Pan" than like the Pleasure Island of "Pinocchio" (both of which are among Peterson's many Disney-adapted preoccupations).

Neverland, where Peter Pan resides indefinitely, is a seeming manifestation of childhood's wonder. Bright and carefree, filled with fairy dust and games, and stretching out over endless tomorrows without the worries of aging or mortality, residence in Neverland doesn't appear to extract any price from its inhabitants.

By contrast, Pleasure Island, where Pinocchio alights briefly after missteps in his quest to prove himself "brave, truthful, and unselfish," is eerie even at first glance. Boys come to the ominously peripatetic carnival of their own volition; but they do not get to choose when or whether to leave. After a few hours of self-indulgent fun, they are transformed into braying donkeys, boxed and loaded onto ships. In short, their avoidance of responsibility robs them of their humanity.

No one needs Jordan Peterson to talk him or her out of a stay on Pleasure Island. Therefore, for those of us whose biological reality of gender, political reality of race, or material reality of socioeconomic status renders failure to take responsibility more likely to result in the kind of permanent and potentially dire consequences that Pinocchio so narrowly avoids, Peterson may be relevant but redundant. He echoes and explicates, rather than countering or complicating, what we understand

already about our own Pleasure-Island-like proximity to danger.

But for some young white men with sufficient academic ability to comprehend Peterson's writing and lectures, it is actually news that the worry-free irresponsibility offered in the seeming safety of Neverland has psychological, emotional and spiritual consequences. Many of these young white men were raised by baby boomers who accepted as individuals all the benefits of choices my grandparents never enjoyed—but not the attendant responsibilities of a revolutionized social regime that facilitated those choices by eradicating the communal safety net my grandparents took for granted. Now, as young adults, they actually need a psychologist to convince them of what the rest of us already know: Neverland has always been a lie.

Ultimately, the consequence of an extended sojourn in Neverland is just as bad as one in Pleasure Island. Perpetual childhood is just as much a form of dehumanization as transformation into an ass, since it is the ability to live a life of self-aware responsibility that renders humans different from asses in the first place.

Like most women, Wendy senses that Neverland has no real place for her (there are no other "lost girls" for a reason), so she leaves of her own volition. Peter knows that Neverland is made in his image, so he relinquishes the possibility of an adult relationship with Wendy and stays there—one more young white man who desperately needs Jordan Peterson's rules.

Our Catholic Abdication

Peterson has said that to be Catholic is, in his view, to be as "sane as a person can be." This makes sense, because Christ on the cross (and the Catholic determination to leave him there in our depictions, unlike our Protestant brothers and sisters) is the iconic representation of suffering. It is also the ultimate exhortation toward self-sacrifice (that is, the responsibility to love others) in the face of suffering.

So if we Catholics have both the crucifix and an intellectual tradition stretching back millennia that explains its significance, why does anyone need some psychologist's rules to understand what 1.2 billion people worldwide (not to mention one billion Protestants, many of whom profess much of the same) ostensibly already know?

Why does Peterson's ability to evince simultaneously both compassion for human suffering and insistence on moral responsibility despite suffering seem new, when it is the Catholic Church—the oldest continually operating institution in the world—that can most credibly lay claim to that concept?

The reason is that, per Peterson, "opportunity lurks where responsibility has been abdicated." And in the United States—despite the incredible work of many within the church (like Bishop Robert Barron, who recently had an illuminating conversation with Peterson)—we Catholics have abdicated our responsibility and forfeited our credibility in the face of political polarization and increasing secularism.

Too many of us too often live in what Simcha Fisher calls "a pre-furnished house of ideas." We allow political exigencies of the moment or sociopolitical stereotypes to dictate our uncontextualized expression of either the left's too often thoughtless "compassion" or the right's too often heartless "morality."

If more of us spoke at a uniform volume about the totality of what we allegedly profess—rather than loudly about the ongoing genocide of abortion but quietly about the evils of unfettered capitalism's sinful inequalities, or vice versa—we would not only be sane, but sound credible.

Clearly, there is an audience for the kind of rigorous pluralism that Peterson is offering—the kind that Catholic belief, rightly understood, demands. Moreover, an accurate understanding of our faith should render us fundamentally opposed to the craven creeds of each of today's increasingly monistic political camps.

So, just imagine if we American Catholics laid claim to a higher and more appealing truth than the political left, the political right or even a nonpartisan iconoclast like Peterson can provide. Judging by the sizes of the crowds at Peterson's lectures, we might be able to stop closing our churches and start opening them again.

And then maybe, just maybe, we could help to create an American politics that did not incentivize and almost require the abandonment of each fundamental truth on the altar of another.

But that is a task for another day. After all, we should, per Rule 6 of the original *12 Rules for Life*, "Set [our] own house in perfect order before [we] criticize the world."

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A message after the beep

By Susan Vickerman

Bev! Listen—I've got summat to say.
By the way, I'm done here
and it's been worse than sad. Horrendous.
Chapel packed, but crap. No proper plan,
no format. Not even a whip-round for that
place he detoxed in, or Free Palestine,
summat important to Martin.
No songs, no vicar, but why no humanist?
Just his brother, pissed. Pathetic.
Then we're outside, course it's raining isn't it
and I put up the brolly I bought changing trains at Birmingham
but it's flaming broken—you feel bloody silly
if a spoke's gone when you've a smart suit on—
and we're knee-deep in mud and staring at a coffin
wi' nowt on it, coz the brother's card said no flowers,
it actually said Merry Christmas, the funeral was a Post-It Note.
Then Adrian who found him the lad who actually found him
why did it take nine days? But he can't talk for crying
so nothing important gets said about who Martin was
that he was...
And worse: The pub! Shut! No wake!
They hadn't even ordered in a plate of open bloody sandwiches
godssake, so everybody sets off through the streets
seeking another hostelry, but rain's
coming down in sheets and I'm soaked
and no-one speaks to me and then thank christ
a taxi comes along so I'm back at the Jury's Inn.
No way was that the send-off he deserved.
It's been shocking. Grim is the word. Because no-one
really knew him, although it was packed, folk asking why? Why?
No-one should leave this planet wi' nowt said.
No proper eulogy, no facts. No-one
stood up, nobody just stood up and...
Bev, shall we get wed?
Helluva day, suit jacket sopping, this god-awful room's
got no heater in it, he should've had a Guardian obit,
he was a hundred percent. So how about it?
How come he had a gun, anyway?
Let's move. Let's buy a camper van and
move somewhere, Orkney, an island,
somewhere tight-knit, have kids

coz everything he didn't have was why.

And this tie's ruined.

Sue Vickerman*'s latest book is* Twenty Poems*, a translation of poetry by Kathrin Schmidt. She has published five poetry collections and a novel. She can be found at suevickerman.eu.*
This poem was a runner-up in ***America****'s Foley poetry contest.*

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A Case for Traditionalism

In *The Unbroken Thread*, Sohrab Ahmari draws inspiration from prominent figures in the Western classical tradition, including St. Peter, Plato and St. Augustine.

Sohrab Ahmari described his conversion to Roman Catholicism in his 2019 book, *From Fire, By Water*. The book illustrated that Ahmari's conversion was to a juridical church, one characterized by authority and law, a church that looked more like the 19th-century church of the First Vatican Council than the 21st-century church that followed the Second Vatican Council. Ahmari defines himself as a traditionalist, by which he means that tradition—marked by authority and law—provides a bulwark that preserves the church from the pernicious influences of the world. This is a form of traditionalism that is increasingly attractive to many Catholics today.

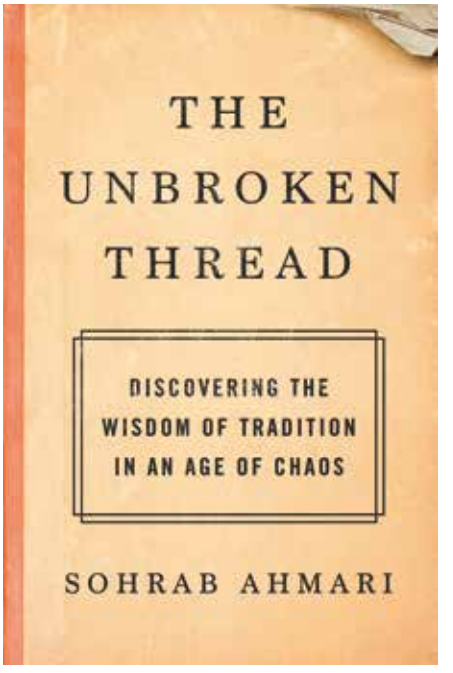
Ahmari's new book, *The Unbroken Thread: Discovering the Wisdom of Tradition in an Age of Chaos*, is a defense of the merits of traditionalism in the face of a society he understands to be unmoored from tradition and therefore disordered.

His concerns about American society are personal. Ahmari is a new father and is gripped by anxiety when he thinks about the influence contemporary Western culture will have on his son, Max. He worries that despite his best intentions, his son will pay only lip service to the Catholic faith of his father, declaring himself spiritual but not religious; that he will seek his happiness and purpose not in anything greater than himself, but in money and ambition; and that he will adopt wholesale a culture "that will tell him that whatever is newest is also best, that everything is negotiable and subject to contract and consent, that there is no purpose to our common life but to fulfill his desires."

To make his case for traditionalism, Ahmari poses a series of 12 questions, ranging from "Can you be spiritual without being religious?" to "What is freedom for?" to "What's good about death?" For each question, Ahmari focuses attention on the life and thought of one thinker who articulated what Ahmari understands to be a traditional response to the issue at hand. Not all are Catholic. Acknowledging that this appeal to non-Catholic traditions may seem odd to those who know of his own religious commitments, Ahmari points out that in the face of the myriad of threats posed by modern Western culture, people from different traditions may find they have more in common than not.

There is much within *The Unbroken Thread* that can and should speak to all Catholics, traditionalist or otherwise. Ahmari argues throughout the book that Western society's individualism and obsessive focus on material well-being result in profound unhappiness and the fragmentation of soci-

The Unbroken Thread
Discovering the Wisdom of Tradition in an Age of Chaos
By Sohrab Ahmari
Convergent Books
320p $27



ety itself. Moreover, in an illuminating chapter that focuses on the great civil rights figure Howard Thurman, Ahmari rightly notes that oppression and domination of one group over another is rooted in an unwillingness to acknowledge the inherent dignity of others, a dignity rooted in the divine. The lesson he draws from Abraham Joshua Heschel regarding the need for Sabbath rest and a rethinking of our priorities is an important one, as is the chapter on filial piety, which focuses on Confucius.

More troubling from a Catholic perspective are Ahmari's chapters on politics and on sex. In a chapter called "Is Sex a Private Matter?" Ahmari characterizes the 2010s as a sexual extravaganza during which everybody seemed to agree that all sex was good and healthy. His two main conversation partners in this chapter are Andrea Dworkin, a feminist with a reputation for being anti-sex, and St. Augustine of Hippo, whose understanding of sex continues to shape Catholic discourse on the topic. Ahmari rightly points to the devastation wrought by unrestrained sexuality, particularly for women, but he doesn't appear to find any way to think of sex as anything but a violation of human dignity.

"Once the 'sex-passion' takes over," he writes, "it beats into submission our noblest convictions about human equality and dignity, about restraint and self-mastery." Ahmari asks whether it is possible to have sex without lust (he doesn't think so) and asks whether we should abolish sexual intercourse altogether—also not possible since children are the result of intercourse and nonsexual reproduction brings with it more "monstrous exploitations."

"I prefer redemption," Ahmari writes near the end of the chapter, "and I can't view embodied sexuality as such as evil." But despite this caveat, the chapter as a whole reads as a diatribe against sex itself, even in the confines of heterosexual marriage. Moreover, his vision of sexuality is out of step with the church's own teaching. Recognizing that the procreative understanding of sex did not fully take into account the unitive function of sexual expression, Vatican II, in its pastoral constitution "The Church in the Modern World," recognized sex within marriage as "noble and honorable," and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that "the truly human performance of these acts fosters the self-giving they signify and enriches the spouses in joy and gratitude." The procreative function of sex cannot therefore be separated from its unitive function, and vice versa. Indeed, while Ahmari believes that the procreative function of sex has been separated from the unitive to disastrous effect, I would argue that he is himself guilty of separating the two.

However, even more disconcerting than Ahmari's depiction of sex is his argument for an integralist vision of politics. While at no point in his chapter on politics does Ahmari use the word *integralism,* it is telling that he draws on the work of the Rev. Edmund Waldstein, a Cistercian monk whose writings on his website, The Josias, have done much over the past five years to popularize an integralist political vision. It is a vision that calls on the church to reject the facile separation of church and state that characterizes Western liberalism and once again to carry the mantle of political power so as to direct society to higher spiritual ends. As Ahmari puts it, "if human dignity has divine origins, then a society that wants to fully honor it must also honor the divine."

The problem, as Ahmari depicts it, is that liberal society shunts spiritual concerns to the private sphere and submits that religion can have no role to play in politics whatsoever, given competing political and religious visions. From Ahmari's perspective, liberalism is therefore at the root of the moral chaos that characterizes modern Western society, and the only thing that can adequately address this chaos is a political order structured around a higher spiritual good.

Ahmari wants to see constancy instead of chaos, and a temporal order that is subject to the spiritual order. This logic, however, opposes the teaching of Vatican II on religious

Ahmari argues that Western society's obsessive focus on material well-being results in profound unhappiness.

liberty and the separation of church and state, teaching that focuses explicitly on the identity of Jesus as the suffering servant who did not establish his kingdom by force. By Ahmari's account, the choice is between a political order in which the church possesses political power and one where the church is silent and acquiescent. But this stark depiction does not account for the rich history of Catholic political thought, nor does it adequately allow the life and teachings of Christ to shape our conception of the political.

Ahmari is right to note that many people feel rudderless in contemporary Western society, and he presents a vision of tradition that is attractive to many. But it is a vision that is incomplete, insofar as it often relies too heavily on the juridical. Missing from Ahmari's appeal to tradition are the contemplative traditions found in all the great religions, including Catholicism. And while he had the opportunity to focus on this when delving into the importance of liturgy, Ahmari does not delve into the rich eucharistic tradition within Catholicism, particularly in terms of how we are united to God and to one another through the body and blood of Christ. This eucharistic ecclesiology was re-emphasized by Vatican II after too many years of neglect, but it is an ecclesiology as old as the tradition itself.

In his opening address at Vatican II, St. John XXIII spoke out against the "prophets of gloom" who see in the modern age only "prevarication and ruin." One of the great contributions of that council was to encourage the church not to take an inherently adversarial approach to the world, but instead to dialogue with it, learning from it. This dialogical approach was not an innovation of the council but was itself a re-emphasis on a tradition that extended from early Christianity through to the great doctor of the church, St. Thomas Aquinas.

While there is much of value in Ahmari's *The Unbroken Thread*, there is also too much "prevarication and ruin." As he continues to explore the richness of tradition, my hope is that Ahmari will also recover the dialogical thread, which remains unbroken.

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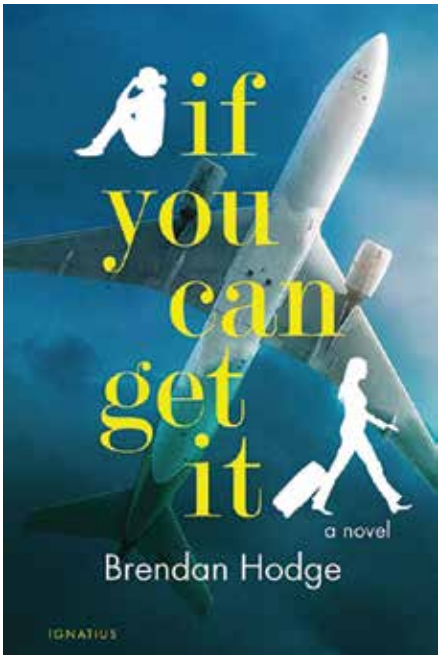
Finding the Treasure

Jen and Katie Nilsson look for love and happiness—in all the wrong places. The sisters inhabit an anything-goes world where people are more interested in material gains than in spiritual ones. They realize that something is missing from their lives but don't know what. Then happiness finds them, seemingly out of the blue. Or so they think.

That auspicious moment drives Brendan Hodge's fast-moving debut novel, *If You Can Get It*. Hodge's title alludes to the popular George and Ira Gershwin tune "Nice Work If You Can Get It." The reference works well for Hodge, since his story closely resembles the message in the lyrics. The song's refrain sounds almost as if it is set to this book's story line. I could almost hear these lines in my head as I read *If You Can Get It*:

The man who only lives for
making money
Lives a life that isn't
necessarily sunny
....
Fall in love—you won't regret
it
That's the best work of all—if
you can get it.

But Hodge is not just after a lighthearted treatment of love and marriage. He is also probing the relationship between parents and their adult children and the way religion plays out in their lives—if they "can get it." Jen and Katie, the focus of the story, are best friends who become romantic



If You Can Get It
By Brendan Hodge
Ignatius Press
285p $16.95

rivals. They barely knew each other growing up as siblings: Jen was 10 years older and traveled with the big kids, while Katie, the baby, toddled after their mom.

Their parents, Pat and Tom, had been only "Christmas and Easter" Catholics for years and raised their daughters in the same way. But after listening to the homilies of an assistant pastor, the parents become more ardent in the practice of their faith. In their zeal, they encourage Katie to return to the church and practice a more intense type of Catholicism. Katie angrily rejects their arguments.

Katie studied religious theory in college but has no personal connection to religious practice or notions regarding God and Jesus Christ. To her, religion is an academic study like science and does not have a particular link to her own Roman Catholicism. She finds it annoying when her parents try to share their enthusiasm for Catholic spirituality, which they do often.

When the book opens, Katie has left her parents' home and is sitting in her car outside of Jen's condominium (unbeknownst to Jen), hoping that her sister will take her in until she finds a job and a way to support herself. Just out of college, Katie is lonely and looking for a husband.

A hard-working and successful career woman, Jen takes Katie under her wing—but with misgivings. The more practical one of the two, she tries to help Katie find meaning in a career. In her mid-30s, Jen has a high-paying, prestigious job. She "lives for making money," and urges Katie to do the same.

Jen has had a few serious relationships—but none have worked out. She has a longstanding friendship with Dan, a Jewish lawyer, whose mother pushes him to find a nice Jewish girl, while Jen's mother attempts to persuade her to find a nice Catholic boy.

Katie settles in and finds a job at Starbucks. Jen, who has been working in product development, loses her job after a company merger. The loss turns out to be a blessing in disguise, as it forces Katie to become more responsible and more considerate of her sister. Jen begins to see that Katie is not so much of a bother as she is a comfort. In one of the more poignant moments in the story, she realizes that she had never actually known Katie but now she has "at last created a deep attachment" to her sister.

As the story progresses, Jen accepts another job closer to their parents in Illinois, and she and Katie move back to the Chicago area. The religious subplot (which has been simmering on the back burner) emerges more fully when their parents visit and attend Mass at the nearby Catholic church. At that point, the character of Paul Burke enters the story. Paul brings significant change to everyone and seems to be everything they are not.

A former seminarian, Paul is a handyman, a farmer, a lover of classical music and a devout Roman Catholic. He reads books by Wendell Berry and prefers the hymn "O Magnum Mysterium" to "Do You Hear What I Hear?" After Paul and Katie begin to date, Katie starts to "get it." She goes to confession, receives the Eucharist, studies the tenets of Catholicism and sees her family in a new light.

It becomes her turn to encourage Jen to find the meaning of true happiness. Katie tells Jen that the physical world is shot through with meaning and is "actually supernatural." For Christians like Paul, she adds, "how they live is...a reflection of how they believe," not the other way around. Katie alludes to the teachings of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, especially his book *The Divine Milieu*, but these are difficult theological concepts for Jen (and perhaps the reader). Jen, puzzling over Katie's words, now finds herself the one who cannot seem to get her life together.

What happens next in this many-layered story has much to do with the complications of being a Catholic in today's world, and the blessings that come as well.

Diane Scharper *is the author of seven books, including Radiant, Prayer/Poems. She teaches memoir and poetry in the Johns Hopkins University Osher Program.*

An Italian de Tocqueville

In 1818, Giovanni Grassi, S.J., published the first of three Italian-language editions of a pamphlet of his observations of the United States. *Georgetown's Second Founder* presents the first English translation of his insights based on his seven years of residence in Washington. This college administrator shared with Italian readers his observations and assessments of the young republic to explain various novel concepts, such as democratic self-government and freedom of religion. Father Grassi believed the Stati Uniti provided abundant opportunities for enterprising immigrants from the Italian peninsula to achieve financial success. He included a range of statistics and commercial facts, along with piquant comments about the American character, themes that later European visitors developed at greater length.

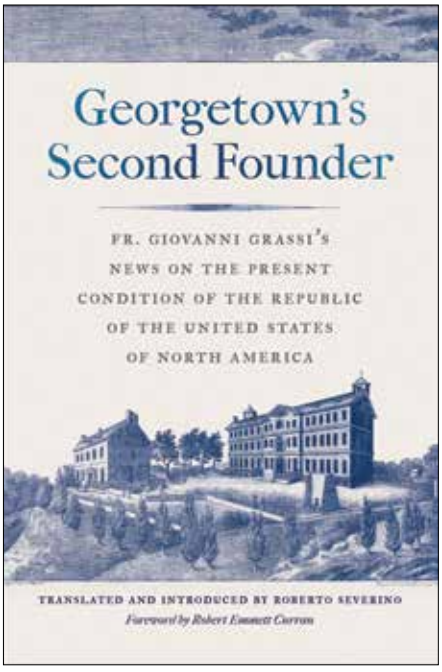
This slim volume rescues from obscurity one immigrant's views published almost two decades before the better-known classic by Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*.

Father Grassi (1775-1849) was born in Schilpario, northeast of Milan, entered the diocesan seminary at Bergamo, and at age 24 joined the slowly reviving Society of Jesus, which had been suppressed in 1773. His Jesuit superiors sent him to Paris for extensive training in mathematics and the sciences. Originally slated for assignment to China, Father Grassi was instead dispatched to be the provincial superior of the Jesuits in Maryland in 1810 through a circuitous process by the superior general. One year later, he was named president of the struggling Georgetown College.

Father Grassi's tenure as leader of the small school on the Potomac possibly inspired the book's publisher to concoct the odd title for this wide-ranging translation. While he included passing mention of the humble academy he guided, Father Grassi focused his observations more broadly on three major topics. He began with "News on the Present Condition of the Republic," continued with comments on "the Various Sects that Exist in the United States" and concluded with his insights on the "Present Condition of the Catholic Religion" in the young nation. Also inserted was a two-page table of "All the Remarkable Things to be Found in the Geography of the United States in North America." He listed, among other topics, each state's size, products, minerals, population, major cities, universities and colleges, and the total number in its congressional delegation.

Father Grassi opened his volume with "experiences that an Italian would find noteworthy." He reviewed the nation's climate and soil, products and commerce, population, character and customs, literature and government. This first section abounds in facts that befit an almanac. The breadth of the nation amazed him when he compared its population density with European nations, citing census figures that revealed 3,884,605 inhabitants in 1790 and 7,239,903 in 1803. Because of immigration and a thriving economy, he predicted the nation's population would double every 20 years throughout the 19th century. (It did not.)

Another matter that fascinated Father Grassi was the national government's plan to distribute land



broadly to "industrious settlers." Land was priced cheaply and was readily obtainable by those who would clear the forests, sell the timber, plant crops and pay off loans for purchasing self-supporting acreage. As he explained, "This is one of the principal reasons why the U.S. population grows at such an excessive rate."

Surveying the people of the nation, Father Grassi recognized "a republican deportment," which appeared as a spirit of independence, drive and a strong resistance to be subject to another. Even more notable, he observed, was the "avidity for profit" among Americans; it existed on a par with their industriousness. New Englanders were the most money-conscious, he wrote, and were "regarded as the most cunning and clever, capable of ingenious deceptions."

Father Grassi also lamented the prevalence of duels, the large number of sects, the "Negroes kept in

Georgetown's Second Founder
Fr. Giovanni Grassi's News on the Present Condition of the Republic of the United States of North America
Trans. by Roberto Severino
Georgetown University Press
152p $24.95

slavery" and the prevalence of unrestrained freedoms. He found it highly ironic that Americans exuberantly praised liberty but at the same time bought and sold human beings. Adding to this anomaly, the very school he led was holding women and men in bondage, a fact now widely known. Georgetown University and the Jesuits today are seeking avenues to make reparations for their slaveholding. Father Grassi, however, appeared little bothered by this situation.

Freedom of religion startled Father Grassi and elicited numerous observations. While the government did not involve itself in religious affairs, the Constitution also protected every religion and creed. Government impartiality extended so far as to protect even Catholics, so long despised in England. He cited a case in New York in 1813 in which defense lawyers argued that to force a priest to violate the seal of confession was to deny him the free exercise of his religion. While noting that many ministers preached anti-Catholic prejudice, Father Grassi praised the restraint shown by better-educated Protestants. What appalled this Jesuit, however, was the way sects divided and multiplied "every day" so that there existed "a chaos of every type of heresy." He included a compendium of generalizations about 10 principal churches, from Congregationalists and Anglicans to Quakers, Dunkers (Church of the Brethren) and Unitarians.

Father Grassi completed his volume with a review of the situation of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States. His role as superior of all Jesuits in the country brought him into contact with priests, women religious and bishops, particularly Archbishop John Carroll of Baltimore. He marveled at the phenomenon of circuit-riding priests traversing great distances to minister to scattered parishioners. Such incessant travel, along with the scarcity of clergy, however, left many priests lonely. Father Grassi counseled that these clerics could best dispel stereotypes of Catholics and anti-papist bigotry through explanations that were delivered "in a gentlemanly manner, with patient and kind hearted charity." American Protestants, he commented, proved more receptive of Catholic dogma when they received explanations in such a manner.

Roberto Severino, professor emeritus of Italian at Georgetown University, translated and edited the volume. His introduction and Robert Emmett Curran's foreword provide valuable context about Father Grassi, including information about the priest's later life in the Papal States.

This gem of a book warrants a wide readership for its insights into the role of Catholicism in the early republic. Father Grassi's excitement of discovery permeates the volume. Most significant is this kind Jesuit's recommendation that Catholic beliefs be explained with a gentle charity, as that was the more effective means to dispel rancor and win an audience. In our own day, his advice points toward a better way to achieving civic and social harmony instead of the polemics of the renewed culture wars.

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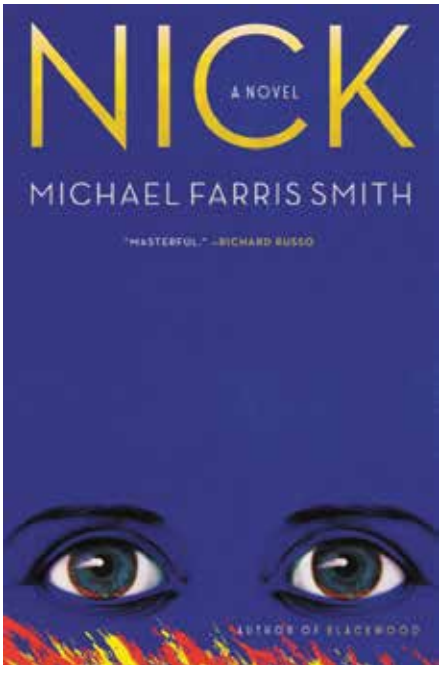
Candles and Carnival Lights

In the spring of 1922, F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote to his editor Max Perkins to tell him that his next novel would have "a catholic element" in it. As he began work on the novel, Fitzgerald centered its opening episode on a Midwestern boy's confession and reception of the Eucharist. Later, Fitzgerald abandoned this opening, releasing it instead as a stand-alone short story entitled "Absolution." The novel, which he went on to publish in 1925, was *The Great Gatsby*.

Though Fitzgerald changed his mind, *Gatsby* remains rooted in a Catholic sensibility, largely evident in its straddling of spirit and flesh, redemption and sin. Nick Carraway, the narrator, embodies this double vision. His refusal to judge makes him "privy to the secret griefs of wild, unknown men" and leads him to love and admire Jay Gatsby for his "extraordinary gift of hope," even though he also represents everything for which Nick has "unaffected scorn."

On Jan. 1 of this year, *The Great Gatsby* entered the public domain, just in time for Michael Farris Smith's new novel *Nick*, which attempts to tell the backstory of *Gatsby*'s narrator. Readers looking for a prequel written in the same vein as Fitzgerald's classic will be disappointed, however. Gone

Though Smith's Nick bears little resemblance to the narrator of 'The Great Gatsby,' his Catholic double vision remains.



is the innocent, lyrical first-person narrator of *Gatsby*. Smith's story is told in the third person, in terse, strong prose reminiscent of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. The gaudy opulence of West Egg gives way to blood and mud and fire, and the stench of death hangs over Smith's novel just as the green light does Fitzgerald's.

That is not to say that *Nick* fails. On the contrary, Smith's novel is transcendent, a chilling portrayal of a man and world broken by unspeakable suffering but sustained, however feebly, by a spark of hope. The first section of the novel takes place in France, alternating between scenes on the battlefront of the First World War and in Paris. Smith effectively juxtaposes the horrors of war with the human warmth of the city, where Nick pursues and finds love.

The loss of that love—and more—sends Nick into a spiral. Nearly catatonic, he volunteers to fight in the tunnels under the trenches at the front, a veritable death sentence. Nick emerges from the tunnels and returns to America with hopes of leaving every part of the war behind him. Haunted by demons, Nick travels to New Orleans and grows enmeshed in the lives of those who run the brothels and bars of the French Quarter. Unlike others, Nick is not drawn to the fleshly pleasures of the city; instead he finds kinship with those who find those pleasures to be an outlet for their grief. One bar owner named Judah is a war survivor like Nick and is dying from the effects of gas poisoning. As Judah moves in and out of opium-induced hazes, Nick nurses him and listens to his story.

Apart from a few scattered echoes, there is very little in the plot of *Nick* that links it with *Gatsby*. When, in the novel's last chapters, Nick moves into the West Egg cottage next door to the mansion owned by his soon-to-be friend, it feels like a *deus ex machina*, the author trying in vain to synchronize the two independent plots before his story ends.

Despite this, *Nick* breathes new life into *Gatsby*'s "Catholic element" in its own way. The incarnational vision of Catholicism makes it impossible to conceive of grace working separately from nature, and in Smith's novel the seeds of redemption are sewn in the black and bloody mire of the war front and of the dens of Bourbon Street.

At the heart of the novel lie several powerful Catholic images. When Nick arrives in New Orleans alone and in the throes of post-traumatic stress disorder, a convent of nuns takes him in off the street. Their ministry is to offer clean sheets and warm food to those living in the filth of the city, with no questions asked. As he accepts their invitation, Nick acknowledges that "you cannot run away from yourself," the beginning of his recovery of his identity. Later, Nick prays at a Catholic church that has for years kept a vigil for the dead, missing and wounded of World War I.

Like Nick, Fitzgerald too was a divided soul from the Midwest who had come East to witness the "abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men." Though raised in a devout Catholic family, Fitzgerald ostensibly parted ways with the faith in his early 20s. But the faith never really left him.

He went on to celebrate the major events of his adult life with Catholic rituals, and his first biographer, Arthur Mizener, called him a "spoiled priest." The scholar Joan M. Allen points to the twin images of candles and carnival lights to describe the tensions present in the identity of the author and his characters: "The carnival lights out-

Nick
By Michael Farris Smith
Little, Brown and Company
296p $27

shone the candles," she writes, "but the candles had indelibly touched him."

Candles and carnival lights are apt metaphors for *Nick* as well, set as it is among the churches and brothels of New Orleans. Though Smith's Nick bears little outward resemblance to the narrator of *The Great Gatsby*, his Catholic double vision remains. In both novels, Nick straddles the terrain of flesh and spirit, watching the world without fully participating in it. This gives him access to the "secret griefs of wild, unknown men" like Gatsby and Judah. "If there is one thing the lost are able to recognize," Judah muses, "it is the others who are just as wounded and wandering." In *Nick*, grief speaks to grief, and redemption is made possible only by entering into the midst of sin and death.

Mike St. Thomas *is the chair of the English department at the Portsmouth Abbey School in Rhode Island.*

Dana Gioia's Fateful Apprenticeships

Ralph Ellison once noted that the typical American "little man" is exposed to the arts haphazardly. However, Ellison wagered, bereft of systematic aesthetic education though he may be, the "little man has learned to detect the true transcendent ambiance created by successful art from chic shinola." In the United States, there is no innate correlation between artistic master and hierarchical class. The "little man" leaves his neighbors confused, and his "social mobility of intellect and taste" can feel like a threat to social order.

For Ellison, that lesson was delivered by his music teacher. The American musician, she said, must always play as if his audience could be Carnegie Hall, because even in a utilitarian dive like Chehaw Station, you never know when the "little man" will come out from behind the stove and show his chops, demonstrating an authoritative knowledge of and knack for not only "blues-echoing, train-whistle rhapsodies," but also the classics.

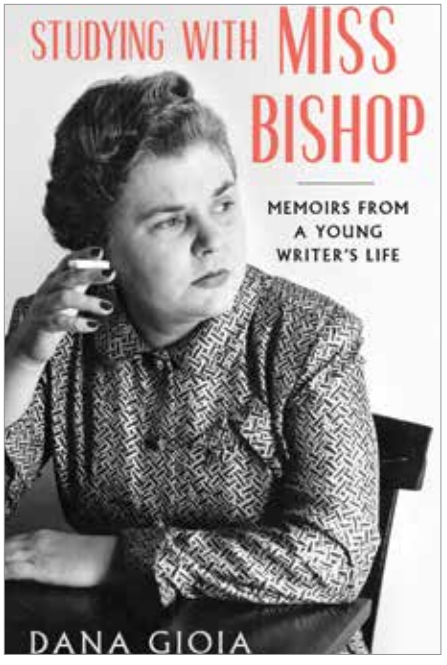
I was reminded of Ellison's story while reading *Studying With Miss Bishop: Memoirs From a Young Writer's Life,* by Dana Gioia. The son of Mexican and Italian parents, both of whom worked outside the home, Gioia could easily have had a childhood from which great books and classical music were absent. But his uncle, Ted Ortiz, was an "old-style proletarian intellectual" who taught himself five languages. He died when Gioia was 6, accidentally leaving the boy an intellectual inheritance.

Sure, Gioia says, his apprenticeship into poetry became habitual when he studied at Harvard with Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Fitzgerald. But without the random impact of his uncle, a man he cannot remember in any detail but who nonetheless "helped raise me," there would have been no contact with Brahms and Bach or with Dante. "Many of us," Ellison once noted, "heard our first opera on phonographs," glimpsing high culture while hunched over record players in tenements.

At home, Gioia writes, he saw no one except for his mother ever read a single book. He writes that in a "rough and ugly" industrial town like Hawthorne, Calif., his love of letters was "clearly excessive, indeed almost shameful." By fourth grade, his favorite book was Julius Caesar's *Gallic Wars*, and it was clear that he was a hopeless case. And so he learned to lead a double life, studying European paintings in secret the way other boys pored over sports statistics.

Gioia's double life eventually had its adult counterparts: a working class kid at Harvard, a business executive who was also a poet. At Harvard, he was much like Ellison's little man, beginning with a basement consciousness but later rising to unexpected prominence. And like that little man, his confounding of social expectations was seen as a "threat to social order." That a kid from a run-down California town could become a business executive at General Foods posed no problem. But when someone told his boss that "D.G." wrote poetry, Gioia writes, the former commanding officer with a feisty temper did not waste words. "Shit," he said.

That word seems to be the summation of Elizabeth Bishop's disposition toward teaching. Gioia describes her as "prim, impeccably coiffured, and smoking," but also as someone who "wanted no worshipful circle of students—and got none." She alerted her attendees that she was "not a very good teacher," and from Gioia's account she was telling the truth. In nearly every class she would throw up her hands, confessing that "I have no idea what this line means. Can any-



Studying With Miss Bishop
Memoirs From a Young Writer's Life
By Dana Gioia
Paul Dry Books
184p $13.56

body figure it out?"

To her students' ear, Bishop's suspicious repudiation of critics evoked a "fumbling conspiracy of well-meaning idiots with access to printing presses." She raged against the pretentiousness of "poetry analysis" and stated that "I am opposed to making poetry monstrous or boring."

If her distaste for literary criticism was perhaps in part a cloak for her own incapacity to practice it, Miss Bishop was not without a conscience. She would make students memorize many good poems, words that existed "for her in a sort of eternal present." And then, after a semester of scant feedback, she returned their term papers. Gioia's essay was filled with "dozens of corrections, queries, deletions, and suggestions in Miss Bishop's spidery hand." Some pages had been corrected in three distinct colors, and even the cover letter that she affixed to his assignment bore the marks of revision. Her many marks, she explained, were evidence that the paper is "very good."

Other literary luminaries in Gioia's academic life failed to give even passing encouragement. James Dickey, for instance, could not contain his choleric disapproval. Gioia had reviewed Dickey's poetry collection *Puella*. "You didn't like it?" the poet probed. "No sir, I didn't," Gioia declared with deference. Dickey fell into a rant that "reminded me of nothing so much as Molly Bloom's soliloquy from *Ulysses*." Gioia stretched out his hand, shook the poet's, and said, "How nice to meet you, Mr. Dickey." This first of not a few "unpleasant commotion[s]" of literary life did not sting Gioia badly enough to make him hate the poems of the author, but it taught him a certainty of literary life: "It is often better not to meet the writers you admire."

Set with the task of arranging an evening with the short story virtuoso John Cheever, Gioia found his admiration was left intact: the speaker failed to show up. His grim addiction to alcohol had gotten the better of him. But this melancholic man returns again later, and Gioia's reminiscence of him ends with Cheever in full form, answering questions asked by Gioia and closing the curtains with an insistence that "literature is our only continuous history of man's struggle to be illustrious and remains our most intimate and acute means of communication."

Along with the aforementioned literary mentors Gioia commemorates, perhaps the one of whom he is most fond is Robert Fitzgerald. "Whenever I read Maritain's phrase 'the secrets of being radiating into intelligence,'" Gioia says, "I always think of Robert." Fitzgerald's erudition shines forth with such elegance and humility (this translator of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* spoke to his students as "fellow students" of Homer) that the man emerges as something of an impossibility: a great-souled ancient who washed up in modern America.

Whereas Gioia initially considered references to "the four-letter word, *life*" out of style amid the hauteur of Harvard's literati, Fitzgerald's steady appeals to the interconnections between art and actuality healed one of Gioia's aforementioned divisions: "The ultimate measure of Homer, Virgil, and Dante's greatness was that their poems taught one about life, and that life, in turn, illumined them."

Studying With Miss Bishop is a love letter attesting to this illumination. Filled with wit and wisdom, the separate reminiscences have a strong sense of plot. They are marked by meetings that might at first seem evidence of Ellison's absolute randomness but which, gaining focus, have all the marks of Dickensian serendipity.

Joshua Hren *is founder and editor of Wiseblood Books. His books include the story collections* This Our Exile *and* In The Wine Press*, as well as the forthcoming* How to Read (and Write) Like a Catholic.

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Facing Rejection

FOURTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B), JULY 4, 2021
READINGS: EZ 2:2-5; PS 123; 2 COR 12:7-10; MK 6:1-6

One of the realities of life is the presence of rejection. At some point, everyone will encounter a "no" at work, at home or in the world. Today's reading gives biblical examples of expecting and accepting rejection and persevering despite the obstacles.

Ezekiel, Paul and Jesus all encountered hostility, particularly when they gave messages that were critical and difficult for people to accept. In the first reading, the prophet Ezekiel is called while living during the Babylonian exile. God tells him to ready himself to deliver messages to people who have rebelled, warning Ezekiel that they would be "hard of face and obstinate of heart." Despite the likely rejection, Ezekiel is still called to preach and teach.

God sends Ezekiel knowing that he would face rejection, and Ezekiel delivers his prophecies knowing the tough road ahead. In the second reading from 2 Corinthians, Paul too speaks of the challenges he faced, refering to "a thorn in the flesh...an angel of Satan." This hardship could refer to various opponents or adversaries Paul encountered or possibly physical or mental challenges. Paul considers these hardships worth enduring in his ministry for the sake of Christ. Paul, like Ezekiel, accepts and recognizes the challenging but important work that he is called to do. As many of us struggle today with a variety of burdens and barriers, we can find examples of perseverance in today's readings.

Similarly, the Gospel reading, from Mark, depicts Jesus' rejection in Nazareth. As Jesus taught in the synagogue, people wondered aloud about his abilities and authority. They knew his family background, and some questioned his ministry, saying his actions were inconsistent with his upbringing and familial connections. In response to these naysayers, Jesus offers proverbial wisdom about prophets not being accepted in their homes. This is not the first time Jesus faced scrutiny and opposition while at home. Earlier in the Gospel, people think he is insane (Mk 3:21). In today's reading, Jesus appears to be at peace with the idea that his teachings may be rejected but is still amazed at the unbelief in his community.

The Gospel includes a notable detail regarding what the people's unbelief means for their lives—they do not reap as many benefits as other communities. While he was in Nazareth, Jesus performed only a few healings. Matthew's Gospel states more explicitly why this is the case: "He did not work many mighty deeds there because of their lack of faith" (Mt 13:58). Both Evangelists highlight that faith is required to receive blessings. This assertion builds on the Gospels we have encountered over the past few weeks, which highlight faith in connection to Jesus' miraculous deeds.

As we inevitably face rejection, we are reminded today to maintain our tenacity and perseverance. The readings call us to consider and focus on the matters that we can control. Moreover, today's readings can inspire us to heed the words of others, even if they are challenges to our status quo.

'A prophet is not without honor except in his native place and among his own kin and in his own house.' (Mk 6:4)

Praying With Scripture

How do you deal with rejection?

How do you react to challenging messages and recommendations?

What can you do to overcome obstacles?

Get Ready

FIFTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B), JULY 11, 2021
READINGS: AM 7:12-15; PS 85; EPH 1:3-14; MK 6:7-13

Today's Gospel offers details about Jesus the strategist. We witness how Jesus prepares the Twelve Apostles for their missionary work. The instructions reveal some of the obstacles that emerged during the early Christian movement, and they can inspire us as we approach tasks where we might encounter resistance.

The Gospel reading, from Mark, is short but packed with nuggets of information about early Christian missionary work. First, Jesus advises his followers to go out in pairs, envisioning the spread of the Gospel as a group effort, not a task that needs to be performed alone. By going with another person, the apostles are given

companionship and a sense of security, especially when traveling to unfamiliar areas.

They are also given authority to cast out unclean spirits and anoint people with oil. This integrates blessing and healing into their mission, modeling their actions on Christ's own. Recall the beginning of Mark's Gospel. When Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee, he calls his disciples and then preaches in the synagogue, teaching as "one having authority" through his words and actions. Jesus' first sign of power was to rebuke an unclean spirit. Then he cured Simon's mother-in-law of her sickness, followed by curing various other diseases (Mk 1:21-34). The mission that Jesus gives the Twelve mirrors his early ministry.

In addition, the apostles are instructed not to take essential items like food, bags, money or extra clothing. Why? Wouldn't Jesus want the apostles to be prepared for the journey? Jesus likely has two goals in mind: first, to distinguish the apostles from other traveling preachers of the time; and second, to encourage the apostles to rely on hospitality. This second goal is confirmed when he instructs them to stay in people's homes while doing their work.

Jesus' vision for the apostles is not overly idealistic. While instructing them to preach a message of repentance, he alerts them to expect some rejection. Not everyone would greet the early Christians with open arms, and Jesus tells his followers to anticipate rejection and move on: "Whatever place does not welcome you or listen to you, leave there and shake the dust off your feet in testimony against them." This gesture visually condemns rejection of the Gospel and inhospitality. Moreover, it symbolically helps the apostles to move on quickly with their work, not becoming discouraged by rejection. In modern times, Jesus' attitude might be compared to Jay-Z's "Dirt Off Your Shoulder," Idina Menzel's "Let It Go" or Taylor Swift's "Shake It Off," depending on your preference in music. Jesus is very clear that the disciples are not to focus on those who reject the Gospel.

The first reading, from Amos, also has echoes of this sentiment. When the prophet traveled from Judah to Israel to condemn Israel's religious and political leaders for their corruption, he was rejected: "Off with you, visionary, flee to the land of Judah!" Many of Israel's leaders were not open or receptive to Amos' critiques, yet he still persisted in delivering his prophecies.

Today's Gospel and first reading offer examples of how to approach an important mission. The readings remind us to be realistic and recognize that not everyone will respond favorably, especially if they are being criticized or called to change their behavior. Despite this, the work must go on, and we can benefit from a persistent attitude that anticipates rejection but is not discouraged by it.

So they went off and preached repentance. (Mk 6:12)

Praying With Scripture

What do you do to prepare for difficult journeys?

How do you react to rejection?

What do you feel called to do?

Leadership 101

SIXTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B), JULY 18, 2021
READINGS: JER 23:1-6; PS 23; EPH 2:13-18; MK 6:30-34

Over the past few Sundays, we have heard about the role of teaching, preaching and healing in Jesus' ministry. Today's readings focus on leadership formation, another essential element of spreading the Gospel.

The short Gospel reading, from Mark, is the introduction to the story of Jesus feeding the multitudes, which we will hear next Sunday. The apostles meet with Jesus to share the teachings and works they have done. In response to their efforts, Jesus insists that they all separate themselves from the crowds in order to rest, giving the developing leaders time to reflect and restore themselves along the journey. The Gospel builds in self-care and renewal as necessities for good leaders. The group takes a boat to a deserted area to be by themselves.

Because Jesus was gaining notoriety on account of his ministry, many people recognized the group and hurried to meet them. Although Jesus calls for time alone, he changes course when he encounters the

people in need, because he had compassion for them. Jesus was "moved with pity," recognizing their desire to be with him. Jesus offers another model of leadership, selfless care and willingness to help. Jesus chooses to teach the crowd because he sees their need for leadership, as they were "like sheep without a shepherd."

This statement has echoes in the first reading, from Jeremiah. In his sermon, the prophet reflects on the lack of leadership in his community, with rulers (shepherds) contributing to destruction and exile of the people of Judah (flock). Jeremiah condemns these bad shepherds but offers hope that a remnant of the flock would return from exile in Babylon and rebuild. Jeremiah proclaims that a future leader from the line of David would govern this returning community wisely, doing "what is just and right in the land." This future leader might have been envisioned as Zedekiah or Zerubbabel, as the Hebrew text includes wordplays that allude to one or both of these leaders. Centuries later, the Gospel writers would come to connect this righteous leader from the line of David with Jesus.

Today's readings teach several important points about leadership. The Gospel instills rest, retreat and recovery into missionary work. Moreover, it instills compassion into leadership. Jesus recognizes an absence of leadership and the needs of people in the moment, and he steps up to lead. In this, he embodies Jeremiah's hope for good leaders who will embody justice and righteousness. Good shepherds govern justly and wisely for the benefit of all people.

Next Sunday we will hear John's version of the feeding of the multitudes, and today's Gospel is Mark's lead-in to this important miracle story. Jesus, moved with compassion, not only stops and connects with people and teaches them, but he then feeds them when they are hungry. Leadership is an active encounter and engagement that can nurture people spiritually and physically.

His heart was moved with pity for them. (Mk 6:34)

Praying With Scripture

How do you show compassion to others?

What do you think is needed for good leadership?

How do you react when you encounter people in need?

Leadership 102

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B), JULY 25, 2021
READINGS: 2 KGS 4:42-44; PS 145; EPH 4:1-6; JN 6:1-15

The miracle stories of the Gospels invite us to reflect on divine care and strategize ways that we can care for one another. Today's Gospel focuses on the well-known story of Jesus feeding the multitudes with loaves and fish, a story that has inspired many loaves and fishes ministries, which serve food to people in need. Each of the Gospels includes this story, and today we hear John's account.

John offers unique details about this event that have symbolic significance. He locates this miracle near the time of Passover, which is associated with God's saving power before the Exodus as well as unleavened bread. Fittingly, Jesus distributes bread to the crowd. Likewise, at the end of his ministry, Jesus' crucifixion occurs on Passover in John, so the timing of this miracle helps to connect it with past salvific events and salvation through Jesus' death on the cross.

After retreating to a mountain, Jesus and the disciples are followed by a large crowd. John says that Jesus knew he was going to perform a sign on this occasion, a detail that is not explicit in the Synoptics. If Jesus had planned to feed the people, his questions to the disciples take on a new significance. When Jesus asks Philip, for example, where they can buy food, this is interpreted as a test. Jesus may have wanted to see if Philip would realize his power or whether Philip would show compassion for the group.

It seems that Philip fails the test, neither affirming Jesus' power nor offering to help. Instead, Philip focuses on the difficulty of feeding so many people. When Andrew informs the group about the five loaves and two fish, Jesus has the disciples organize

the crowd so that he can serve them.

Jesus takes the food and offers prayers of thanksgiving. Unique to John is that Jesus himself distributes the food. In the Synoptics, Jesus has the disciples share the loaves and fishes. John may intentionally emphasize Jesus' personal care and abilities. Jesus is also providing an example for the disciples as future leaders, modeling an interest and care for others.

Also, by having Jesus distribute the food, John includes clearer echoes of the Old Testament prophets who performed similar acts. In the first reading, from 2 Kings, for instance, we hear the story of Elisha feeding multitudes. Even though his servant, like the disciples, objected to trying to feed so many people, Elisha shares a small number of loaves of bread and ears of corn with many people, and there are leftovers.

Miracle stories, or more accurately signs of power, served multiple purposes for early Christians. Traditions about Jesus as a prophet who could perform wondrous deeds likely attracted people into the faith community. Belief in Jesus' resurrection would be buttressed by having traditions of him doing extraordinary acts during his life. Beyond that, these stories offer examples and principles for Jesus' followers. Jesus recognizes the needs of his community, and he responds quickly and effectively, demonstrating selflessness, adaptability and concern for the welfare of others. Jesus even makes sure the leftover food is gathered and not wasted, offering a reminder not to squander resources, but conserve them for the future. As we reflect on this story, we can be inspired and intentional about integrating its principles of care into our lives.

'This is truly the Prophet, the one who is to come into the world.' (Jn 6:14)

Praying With Scripture

How do you respond to the needs of others?

What can you do to help people increase their faith?

How does Scripture help you to reflect on divine care?

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

Back to Mass

Navigating the post-vaccine world

By Kerry Weber

Mass felt a bit like a revival. The pastor, with great enthusiasm, announced to a socially distanced and masked crowd in May that, come the following week, the church would be back to full capacity and masks would not be required. The congregation applauded as if inspired by the Holy Spirit. The altar servers and eucharistic ministers would be returning, he continued, and the one-directional aisles and entrances the parish had instituted in the wake of Covid would be gone.

"You can come in or out any door you want," he cried. "You can come through the window if you want!" More enthusiastic applause followed.

For Catholic adults and older teens who are vaccinated, the new Covid-19 guidelines offer a welcome return to normalcy. But we have a 5-year-old, a 3-year-old and a 10-month-old, and as yet none of our children can be vaccinated. The older two are able to wear masks and as far as I can tell, should continue to do so at Mass. But what are we supposed to do with our 10-month-old?

The combination of a fully masked congregation, along with increased vaccination rates, meant that I was just beginning to think it might be safe to bring her along. But now I have concerns about bringing her to church and putting her in the middle of a crowd that inevitably will include unvaccinated, unmasked adults.

That Sunday in May was the first time our family had attended Mass in person for some time. It involved my husband and our 5-year-old attending the 8 a.m. Mass, while I went at 10 a.m. with our 3-year-old. We felt that splitting up was the only way to keep our older two safely masked and our youngest safe at home. But we hoped that we might all attend together soon. Now, given the loosening of restrictions, there is just no way I can see myself bringing my unvaccinated, unmasked 10-month-old to Mass to walk her through the aerosol aftereffects of people singing "Be Not Afraid."

But maybe the risk will be less than I imagine it to be? As of this writing, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention still hasn't issued much useful guidance for this young demographic, but in the meantime, there is plenty the church can do locally. I would love to see some creative thinking among bishops and diocesan officials about what it means to acknowledge the new C.D.C. guidelines while also recognizing they likely won't be followed by all in attendance and that they do not apply to the youngest parishioners.

For example, some have suggested that parishes could continue to have one Mass each weekend at which masks continue to be strictly required. Even without social distancing, this could make many people feel significantly more comfortable. Alternatively, parishes with the space to do so could offer one of the weekend Masses outside, no masks required. At the very least, parishes could continue to offer live-streamed services so that family members who still need to stay home could participate in the same Mass as those attending in person.

I am sure there are some who would argue that leaving the 10-month-old at home is best for everyone else, too. At the moment she's too young to mind either way. But leaving her behind means splitting up the family Mass schedule, and this has a spiritual impact, too. It is harder to establish our family as a part of a larger spiritual community when we can't actually join that community to worship.

We miss that time together on Sunday morning. It breaks my heart that our family has not attended Mass together in person since my youngest child's birth. If we have to wait until she is old enough to wear a mask, it will extend that streak to more than two years. I look forward to the day that I can feel confident we can safely attend Mass again as a family, as chaotic and stressful as it sometimes was to corral the kids, even pre-pandemic. Hopefully that day is coming sooner than I think. And when it does arrive, we will enthusiastically applaud.

Kerry Weber *is an executive editor of* ***America.***

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