

America

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THE JESUIT REVIEW OF FAITH AND CULTURE

PEOPLE OF GOD



How Catholic Parish Life is Changing in the United States

Kevin Jackson and Ricardo da Silva

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Is It Time to Revisit Our Burial Practices?

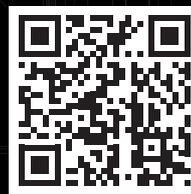
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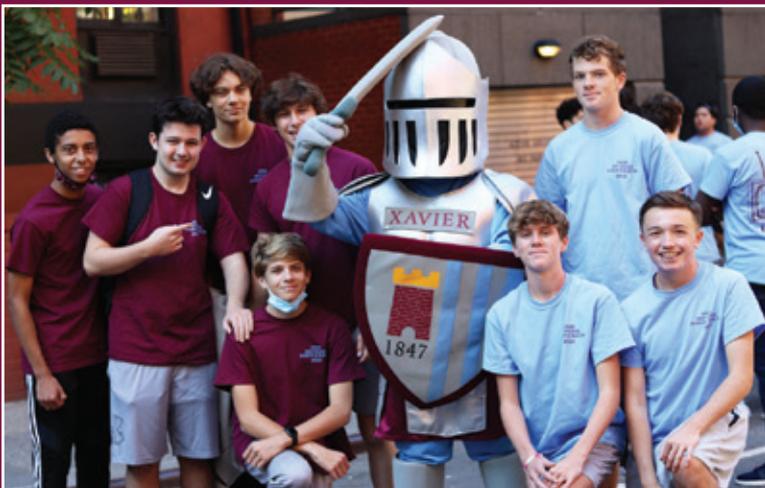
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Our Blessed Hope

In the course of my 10 years as editor in chief of **America**, I have sat on many a stage in order to address this or that pressing issue at the intersection of the church and the world. The formal talk is usually followed by some form of a question-and-answer period, the part of the program that is less scripted but no less predictable. That's because I am often asked the same questions. Indeed, over a decade, a strikingly consistent pattern of questioning lulled me into a false sense that I was unlikely to be asked anything new.

And then I was. I was speaking to a high school audience about faith and politics. That particular topic usually prompts questions along the lines of how Catholics in general should approach politics, or how bishops specifically instruct us to approach politics. But this question was personal: "How does your faith, Father Malone, shape your approach to politics?" That stopped me cold, mainly because I really had to think about it. I don't remember my answer—other than its stammering quality—but the question has haunted me since. I've given enough mental energy to it, in fact, that I have begun to formulate a better answer.... I hope.

As I thought about it, I quickly grasped the first obstacle: Many of the possible answers seemed to involve some eventual divorce of faith from politics, some moment when I would leave the realm of the "private" to enter the "public." But I cannot divorce my faith from my politics any more than I could divorce oxygen from my lungs. Faith and politics are not merely complementary; they are inextricably intertwined. Each needs the other

to be fully what each is meant to be. For the *raison d'être* of all political questions is hope that the world can change; in Christian terms, that it can be saved, that the world is, in fact, worth saving. That political hope finds its motive force in my ultimate hope, my faith in the one we call "our blessed hope," the one who has already saved the world and thus conclusively demonstrated that it is worth saving.

Yet while my Christian hope cannot be separated from my politics, it is not therefore the only cause for my hope. While it is immensely helpful, even necessary, one does not need to have a specifically Christian hope in order to find any hope in politics. For that, we need only look to our national history. That might seem like an odd thing to say, because for many of us politics has never seemed more hopeless. Yet while our country faces enormous challenges—chief among them the odious influence of ideological partisanship—the situation is not all misery and decay. It can seem that way, for sure, but that is only because both sides of the partisan divide have one thing in common: They both think that America is going down the proverbial tubes. One side says the present is irredeemably corrupt and so looks to a mythological past for salvation. The other side, meanwhile, says our past is irredeemably corrupt and looks to some fantasy future for our deliverance.

All the while, here in the present, the majority of the American people—good, decent people who are trying to make the most of their lives—are just getting on with it, reassured by the knowledge that past, present and future are all more complicated, more

intertwined than either ideological camp suggests. Yes, our history is pockmarked by evil and injustice. Yes, many—too many—died in chattel slavery, or through economic deprivation, social sins for which we must always atone. Yes, America was often too fast with the wrong question and too soon with the right answer. There have been many Good Fridays in our long history. And yet there have been many Easters too. I think of the hundreds of thousands who gave their lives to free Black slaves from bondage; of the sons of Iowa and Kansas, and Massachusetts and Alabama, who rescued Europe from the terror of Hitlerism; of the generations of women and men, Black and white, gay and straight, rich and poor, who provided a light for others during their darkest days; of the prophets who braved hatred's onslaught amid the terrors of the night, or in the corridors of power or on the Edmund Pettus Bridge.

I have an ultimate hope because I am a Christian. But I have hope here and now because I am also an American. I believe in the decency and wisdom of the American people. That gives me hope—not an idealist's fantasy, but a genuine hope—far more powerful than any partisan project, for it is born of the hard-earned wisdom of the American experience: The story of a people, who, though acquainted with the night, have always rallied at dawn's early light.

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



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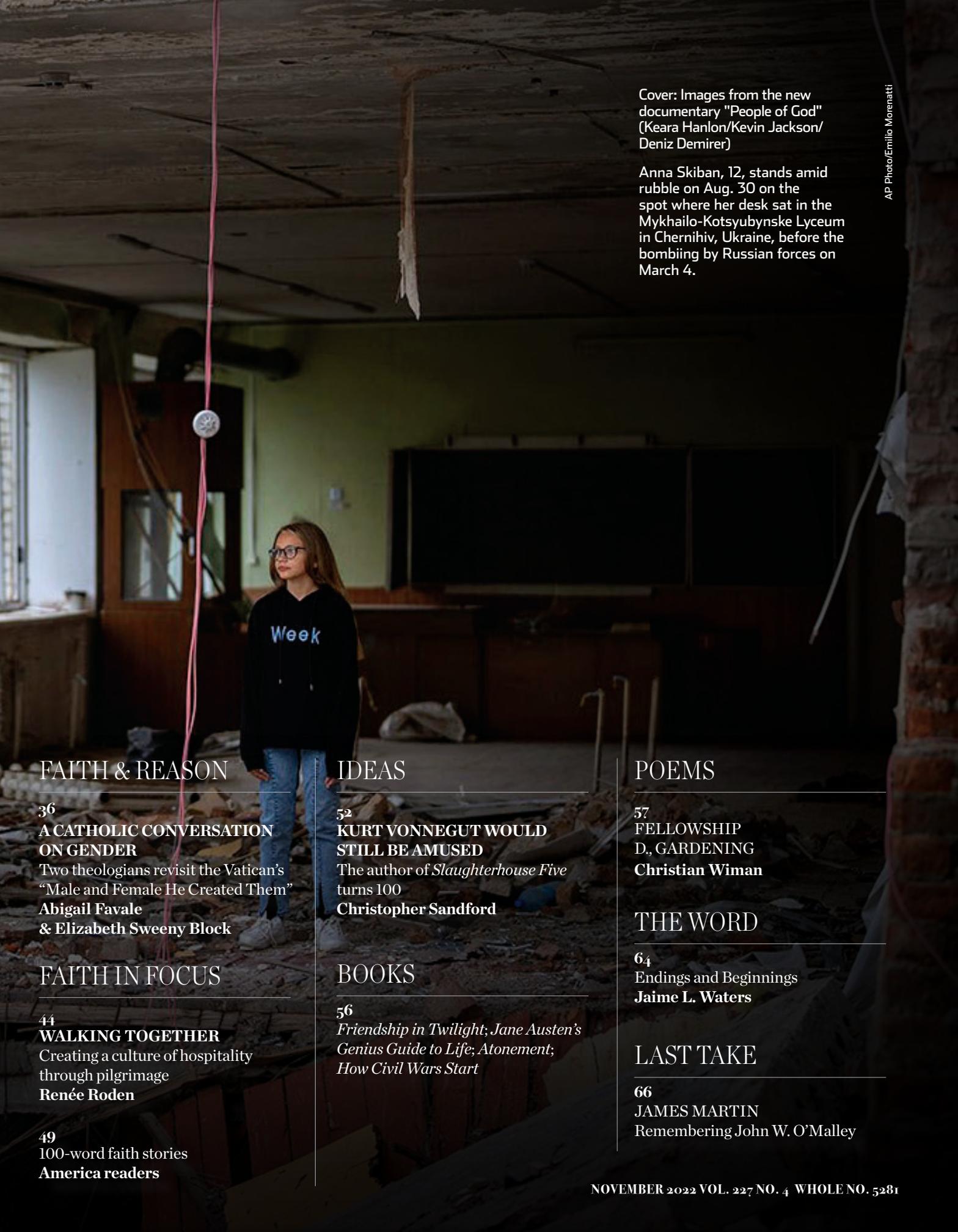
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A NATURAL END

Is it time to revisit our burial
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Collin Price



AP Photo/Emilio Morenatti

Cover: Images from the new documentary "People of God" (Keara Hanlon/Kevin Jackson/Deniz Demirer)

Anna Skiban, 12, stands amid rubble on Aug. 30 on the spot where her desk sat in the Mykhailo-Kotsyubynske Lyceum in Chernihiv, Ukraine, before the bombing by Russian forces on March 4.

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Did Biden's speech on MAGA Republicans fail?

On Sept. 1, President Joe Biden denounced MAGA Republicans in a speech in front of Independence Hall in Philadelphia. While welcoming Mr. Biden's message, "part warning, part exhortation," Matt Malone, S.J., argued in the September issue in "Of Many Things" that it did little to sway Americans who voted for Donald Trump in the election of 2020. The majority of these voters "are not the MAGA maniacs Mr. Biden is worried about," Father Malone wrote. "They are not intent on bringing down the republic." The column elicited numerous comments from readers.

Such addresses with an impending election, focusing on condemnation and forecasting violence against our government by the minority party, is destructive, accusatory, divisive, somewhat misleading, and provocative. Building on intrinsic common ground to promote cooperation between people of good will, rather than uttering blanket partisan condemnations to score political points ahead of the midterm elections, should have been the president's goal. We desperately need earnest bipartisan cooperation to improve the human condition which currently is suffering on too many fronts to list.

Heather Parisi

I agree with much of what President Biden said in his speech. I also agree with much of what Father Malone wrote. First of all, the term "MAGA Republicans" is a misnomer, since many of Mr. Trump's supporters were independents. He should not be viewed as a party leader but rather as a cult leader. Mr. Biden's speech at times basically "dehumanized" members of a cult that think their leader is a savior and the world is against him and them. While Mr. Biden addressed many truths, he should have spoken with the compassion due a member of a cult. Name calling or mislabeling members of a voting bloc as all alike will never get us where we need to be.

Christine Gall

President Obama tried very hard to "reach across the aisle." What good did that do him? The Republican-led Senate fought him on everything from health care to climate change to his moderate Supreme Court nomination. My son went to a Catholic school that in 2008 refused to allow an Obama poster on the wall of the social studies classroom. I've been to countless retreats where I've heard the left-wing agenda get villainized. I'm frankly tired of trying to "make things work" with these people. It's a dysfunctional relationship, and it's way past time to start calling them out from the top.

Lois Bushman

I disagree that President Biden's speech failed. He spoke the truth about MAGA Republicans, which he needed to do as president of a country whose democracy is being threatened by them. The president also mentioned the legislation his administration has been accomplishing to benefit the American people—many of whom are the poor and vulnerable. Unfortunately, Republican lawmakers have been afraid to support the laws and programs because of the toxic stronghold of MAGA on the Republican Party. This situation is harmful to our country, and the president has an obligation to call it out.

I agree, however, that the president could have left out the "right to choose" sentence, because that is another very difficult issue for another discussion and confused the very important central message of his speech.

Lydia Isabel Bobes

Mr. Biden's speech issued a clear warning. That was the point of it. Sometimes things simply need to be said, and let the words fall on whose ears that are receptive. The speech also signaled to others that Mr. Biden finally understands that there is no compromising with the MAGA folks—that you can't compromise with people who want no compromise. They walk around as if they have their fingers in their ears. There simply is no speech that Mr. Biden could have given that would speak to them.

Mike Joseph

I believe Father Malone was correct in calling the speech a failure because it was fundamentally a political speech, intended to stir the Democratic Party base. It was a mix of statesmanship with partisan politics. What Father Malone was doing was trying to separate the dangers represented by the former president and his most rabid supporters from the policies of either party.

Lloyd William



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Lessons to Learn From the Synod

Now that the church has gathered together reports from nearly all of the bishops' conferences around the world, Pope Francis has declared the first phase of the church's two-year-long Synod on Synodality over. But that first phase of consultation with the faithful has been more than just an exercise in gathering information. It has also offered some valuable lessons. It will be crucial to keep these in mind during the synod's second phase—meetings of “continental assemblies” from January to March 2023—and then the third phase, the international assembly of bishops at a later date.

Three primary lessons will be most instructive in the coming year. First, we have seen that shared governance of and responsibility for the church is possible, but it will require humility from all quarters. Second, we do not know all the answers—and we may be surprised by some that may emerge from the process.

Finally, a lesson we have been taught many times but need to remember once again: Universality does not mean uniformity. To be universal is to respond to the missionary call of Christ; to be uniform is to stifle the Spirit Christ sent.

Shared responsibility. Any reading of the synod reports that emerged from the United States makes it clear that participants focused on priorities that are not always reflected in the actions or policies of the U.S. bishops. To a certain degree, this is to be expected: The bishops are called upon to teach, sanctify and govern, and none of those three charisms is fulfilled simply by following the preferences of the majority or sailing according to the prevailing winds.

At the same time, when laypeople—

who are, after all, the vast majority of the members of the church—come to different conclusions about priorities on which the church should focus, can we see this as an example of the people exercising a teaching charism? The synod reports are a way for participants to impart their own wisdom to leaders whose governance might be improved by listening and learning.

In many cases, such listening can be enriched by learning tools that are already available. The churches in Africa, for example, have fully embraced the process, according to Cardinal Mario Grech, the general secretary of the synod. “They’re saying, ‘Listen, it has been such a very interesting ecclesial experience, we would like to proceed, to go forth,’” the cardinal told **America**. In South Africa, the church has begun addressing families that are broken. In Asia, participants have recognized that the lack of synodality is not limited to the church, but also includes the family. Laypeople are eager to accept responsibility for leading the church.

Unexpected results. There is no way to be certain of the outcome of a process like a worldwide synod. Participants must be willing to be surprised, disappointed or even chastened by some of the feedback that comes out of local and regional deliberations. In the United States, for example, it was clear from press reports after the initial release of the synod synthesis documents in September that some church officials and bishops were surprised at the level of rancor and discontent to be found in the documents. Not enough, some felt, was made of all the good the church does.

It may be true that we all need to

be more attentive to good news, to be more cognizant of the ways in which all the good present in the church (and all the good the church does) can be used to uplift us all. But the synod is meant to be a genuine deliberative process, not an exercise in public relations.

We should not be surprised when any notion of the church as a *societas perfecta* is not embraced by people who have real wounds and struggles. Will we be able to listen if large swaths of the church urge change on issues like married priests, L.G.B.T. ministries, women's sacramental charisms and more? Can laypeople embrace the uncertainty that may come when questioning their leaders in the synodal process? Will church leaders not only listen to young Catholics when they participate but also allow them to lead and implement their ideas? Will they listen if the perpetuation of clericalism in all its forms turns out to be an object of worldwide lament?

Universal, not uniform. We all have a version of what “the church” is, and for most of us that concept is refined in our local congregation or diocese. But of course the church is much bigger than any local community. Since the days of St. Paul, the church has been diverse in composition and in gifts. It makes sense that the synod reports from around the globe reflect a church that is far from uniform in its priorities and concerns. It may be that even the continental assemblies will express different desires and concerns. But this is not a design flaw; it is an opportunity.

It would be disastrous for our global communion if any group in the church sought to attain a uniform, one-size-fits-all result from the synod

process. This is not a fourth-century campaign to drive Arianism from the church, nor should it be a vehicle to impose our own ideological blinders on the eyes of everyone. This is an especially important lesson for Catholics from North America and Europe—long accustomed to having the dominant voice in the church—to remember in the coming year. The Amazon and the Nile flow into the Tiber just as much as the Rhine does.

We cannot tell what fruits the synod process will bear in the end; there is always the possibility that we will not recognize them for decades to come. But throughout this process, the church must remember Jesus' promise to send an advocate to be with us always (Jn 14:16).

It is that promise that Francis has time and again reminded us of during this process. It is the Holy Spirit—and not any subcategory of the church—that is the protagonist in the global synod. “The Holy Spirit guides us where God wants us to be, not to where our own ideas and personal tastes would lead us,” Francis said as the synod began. “Without the Spirit, there is no synod.”

The synod is far from over, and our journey together has only just begun. May we, as Francis calls us to do, place our trust in the Holy Spirit, who is now and always will be our advocate and guide.

Editor's Note: For more on the synodal process, listen to a special deep dive episode of "Inside the Vatican," released on Oct. 14.

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Most Americans agree democracy is in trouble. They don't agree on why.

In a Quinnipiac University poll conducted in August, 67 percent of U.S. adults said “the nation’s democracy is in danger of collapse.” Perhaps surprisingly, Republicans were just as likely as Democrats to agree with this dire assessment (69 percent in each party, and 66 percent of independents). Does this mean we have achieved a consensus without realizing it?

Unfortunately, no. The more convincing explanation is that Americans are so divided in how they define democracy that they can reach the same conclusion for radically different reasons. After President Biden said in a speech on Sept. 1 that supporters of Donald Trump “fan the flames of political violence,” some Republicans countered that it was Mr. Biden who was a threat to political stability (as “if Mussolini and Hitler got together,” as Donald Trump Jr. put it).

Based on how different candidates talk about our political system, one can see four distinct definitions of American democracy, each in conflict with the others.

Democratic Party democracy. The Democrats want to make voting as easy as possible, and they support the “one person, one vote” principle that says all votes in an election should be of equal worth, and each citizen should have equal representation in government. They generally want the government at all levels to be quicker in responding to the demands of voters and responding to crises like gun violence and climate change. They also support the principle of majority rule—at least since they started regularly winning the popular vote in presidential elections.

Traditional Republican Party democracy. Republicans have traditionally favored democracy with guardrails; that is, they don’t want gov-

ernment acting too hastily in response to public opinion, and they worry about “mob rule” and a “tyranny of the majority” eroding individual rights. They don’t always support the strict application of “one person, one vote,” and they defend the rules of the U.S. Senate, including the filibuster, as preventing more urban and populous states from dominating national government.

In normal times, Republicans would oppose Democratic Party attempts to maximize the power of the majority through such reforms as abolishing the Electoral College, expanding mail-in voting, and giving statehood to the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. But this year many “never-Trump” Republicans are allied with the Democratic Party because, as the conservative commentator Bill Kristol puts it, “If we don’t have two reasonably healthy parties, the unhealthy party has to be defeated.”

“Stop the steal” democracy. Most Trump Republicans do not agree that the Democrats are defenders of democracy. Mr. Trump himself, along with hundreds of Republicans running for statewide office this fall, claim without proof that President Biden’s victory in 2020 was “stolen” or “rigged.” On the surface, they support the small-d democratic process in the United States, but their insistence that certain election results cannot be trusted inevitably erodes confidence in the legitimacy of all elections.

The “stop the steal” movement does have various remedies for what it sees as a corrupt system. One is to give state legislatures the power to accept or reject election results; another strategy is to more tightly control voter participation by imposing ID requirements and registration deadlines, limiting the times and places

where one can vote, and challenging the validity of individual votes as they are cast. Tellingly, 67 percent of Republicans in a Pew Research Center poll from 2021 said that voting “is a privilege that comes with responsibilities and can be limited”; only 21 percent of Democrats agreed.

“A republic, not a democracy.” A smaller number of Republican and independent candidates say outright that democracy is not always a good thing, at least not in its most direct forms. Some think the problem is that voters ask too much from the government, and thus give it too much power to tax citizens and regulate behavior. Senator Mike Lee, a Republican from Utah, tweeted that “we’re not a democracy” in 2020, adding “We want the human condition to flourish. Rank democracy can thwart that.”

But some voters in both parties seem to be disenchanted with democracy because it results in a government that is too weak. In an Axios/Ipsos Poll conducted in early September, 42 percent of Republicans and 31 percent of Democrats agreed that “strong, unelected leaders are better than weak elected ones.”

There is a big difference between grouching about democracy and actively trying to replace it with another form of government. It is also uncertain whether there can be a lasting alliance between those who think democratic government is too strong and those who find it too weak. But the lack of consensus on what democracy is, and on what it *should* be, could end up doing away with democracy altogether.

—
Robert David Sullivan is a senior editor at *America*.



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OUT OF WATER?

Jackson's water crisis is no isolated incident

By Kevin Clarke

Residents of Jackson, Miss., already weary veterans of more than 300 boil advisories over just the last two years because of the city's faltering municipal water service, saw the system buckle altogether at the beginning of September. Heavy rains had overwhelmed pumps at Jackson's water treatment facility. Just days after the water crisis in Mississippi became national news, public works officials in Maryland issued a boil advisory of their own, when *E. coli* bacteria was detected in water samples from neighborhoods in West Baltimore.

It is worth trying to imagine what these tap water crises mean in practical terms for the residents of these communities. They are forced to buy or somehow get bottled water for drinking, brushing teeth and cleaning dishes. Those who cannot afford to buy water and do not have a car to reach free distribution sites often have no choice but to use the rusty or tainted water coming out of their faucets. They cannot take showers and cannot bathe their children. Toilets cannot be flushed in communities like Jackson that have lost water pressure.

Some of Jackson's problems are particular to that city. A freak winter storm last year caused serious damage to a system not designed to handle pipe-cracking cold. But even the weather-related damage could be symptomatic of what has become a national dilemma:

"Unprecedented" storms, likely related to climate change, are expected to become more common in the near future.

The 2021 Report Card for America's Infrastructure, released last year by the American Society of Civil Engineers, is the latest study to raise alarms about the nation's aging water systems. Many of the oldest still rely on pipes first laid in the 19th century; thousands of others are maintaining networks built after World War II that are now exceeding their life expectancies.

How bad is it? Aside from the occasional acute crisis like Jackson, on a normal day the nation's 2.2 million miles of underground pipes lose six billion gallons of water to leaks and breaks, the A.S.C.E reports. The engineers conclude that infrastructure improvement and replacement for U.S. waterworks have been severely underfunded for decades.

The utility disaster in Jackson follows other notable municipal water failures. Residents in Flint, Mich., still hesitate to use tap water years after a purported cost-saving measure ended in an epic lead-poisoning crisis, discovered in 2016. Two years later, lead in the water likewise made bottled water the only safe option in Benton Harbor, Mich. Bad water, because of either lead or bacterial contamination, has also made cooking, cleaning and drinking water a challenge in Milwaukee, Newark and Detroit.

Starting to perceive a pattern?

Racism baked into complex social structures is sometimes hard to discern. And sometimes it becomes hard to ignore. In Jackson, 25 percent of the city residents live below the poverty line, and 83 percent are Black, about the



Jeremy Myers, left, of the AIDS Healthcare Foundation delivers water to Shaun Brown in Jackson, Miss., on Sept. 1.

same as the Black share of the population in Benton Harbor and West Baltimore; 40 percent of Milwaukee residents and 77 percent of Detroit residents are Black.

The nation's water crisis is indeed the result of poor maintenance, mismanagement and negligent planning at all levels of government, but it is hard to dismiss the impact of decades of racial redlining and the chronic misallocation of government resources based on race, politics and zip codes. The Natural Resources Defense Council found in 2019 that drinking water systems that consistently violated federal water quality standards between 2016 and 2019 were 40 percent more likely to occur in places with higher percentages of residents who were people of color. If you are Black or Latino, you are twice as likely as white Americans to be among the more than two million U.S. residents living in a home without indoor plumbing or sanitation in the first place—and 19 times more likely if you are Native American.

Historically, responsibility for water and sanitation has fallen on local governments, and the “planning” done in the past was not dissimilar to what the nation experiences today—that is, municipal leaders lurching from one crisis to another. In the 19th century through the postwar era, that crisis management primarily consisted in water system expansions to keep up with population growth. Now many crises are the result of significant population contractions.

After steep population losses because of deindustrialization and white flight to the suburbs, many of the nation's “legacy cities” are now contending with diminished tax bases and low-income residents struggling to pay spiking user fees for water services. When representatives from largely low-income, nonwhite communities turn to state legislators for help, they often get just enough resources to merely patch up failing systems. Though state officials in Mississippi blame local mismanagement for the city's water problems, Jackson officials complain that they have received only a fraction of the funds they requested, while infrastructure monies were distributed elsewhere.

Two bills aimed at raising money for water system repairs in Jackson died in the Mississippi legislature last year. And in June 2020, Gov. Tate Reeves, a Republican, vetoed bipartisan legislation that would have allowed the city to help residents settle their overdue water bills, a measure that would have provided a much-needed revenue boost to the system.

Now Mr. Reeves says that privatization or receiv-

ership of Jackson's municipal water system are options worth considering, ignoring the evidence of recent history. Jackson officials have already partly privatized the system, an experiment that ended disastrously. And loss of local control through receivership was a significant factor in the disaster in Flint.

State and local officials in Mississippi may wish to end the finger pointing and direct their attention to Washington for a long-term fix. Since the Clean Water Act of 1972, the federal government has been raising quality standards for the nation's drinking water and wastewater treatment utilities, but just a few years later it began lowering its commitment to help pay for those mandated improvements.

Federal money to support capital improvements at municipal water systems, according to the A.S.C.E., fell from 63 percent of the government share in 1977 to just 9 percent by 2017. State and local governments have struggled over those years to bridge the funding shortfall.

The General Accounting Office reported in 2016 that water and wastewater utilities across the United States will need about \$655 billion over the next 20 years to maintain, upgrade or replace aging and deteriorating infrastructure. That is too much money to expect to squeeze out of ratepayers in some of the nation's poorest communities.

A response of that scale may only be possible at the federal level. The Biden administration's Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act marks a promising turnaround, with \$55 billion committed to support city water systems; but to resolve the nation's clean water crisis, that level of federal support—and more—will have to remain consistent for years to come. State governments will continue to play a prominent role in deciding how federal money will be distributed within their borders. They will have to be held accountable for doing so fairly, with an eye on the greatest need and the demand of addressing historical inequities including racism.

And rebuilding 19th- and 20th-century water systems will demand new attention to 21st-century problems, including the impact of climate change. Otherwise it will not be long before the national press returns to Jackson to discover that its residents have to contend with yet another boil advisory.

Kevin Clarke, chief correspondent.
Twitter: @ClarkeAtAmerica.

WATER WOES: MAIN BREAKS AND LEAKING PIPES REVEAL A NATION AT RISK

C- Grade assessed by the American Society of Civil Engineers in its 2021 “report card” on U.S. drinking water infrastructure.

2.2 MILLION: Number of miles of underground pipes that make up U.S. drinking water infrastructure.

EVERY 2 MINUTES: Frequency of water main breaks in the United States.

9,000: The number of swimming pools that could be filled each day with the 6 billion gallons of treated water lost to leakage and breaks in U.S. water systems.

9%: Federal share of total capital spending on drinking water infrastructure in 2017, down from 63 percent in 1977. Two-thirds of public spending for capital investment in water infrastructure since the 1980s has been made by state and local governments.

\$655 BILLION: The spending, according to the U.S. Government Accountability Office, that will be necessary to maintain, upgrade or replace aging and deteriorating water and wastewater infrastructure across the United States over the next 20 years.

GET THE LEAD OUT

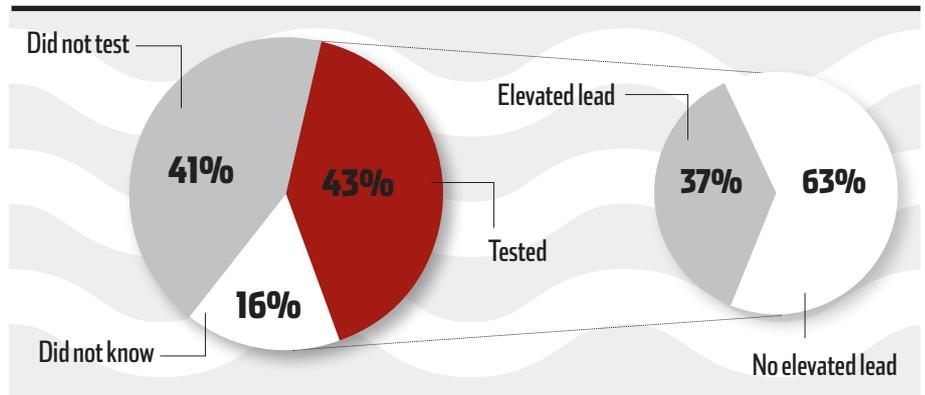
There are no federal laws requiring testing of drinking water for the presence of lead in schools that receive water from public water systems, even though these systems are regulated by the federal Environmental Protection Agency. There was little oversight of water safety in schools across the country until New York State first began to require testing for lead in school drinking water in 2016. The shockingly high levels of lead discovered in some N.Y. schools then highlighted a national problem.

Exposure to lead can result in significant health problems. Children are particularly at risk because their growing bodies absorb more lead than



A water main break in January 2015 snarls streets in Lower Manhattan.

Estimated Percentage of Public School Districts Reporting Lead Testing and Results for Drinking Water



Source: GAO survey of public school districts | GAO-18-382

adults. Negative health effects include anemia, kidney and brain damage, as well as learning disabilities and decreased growth.

0: Parts per billion of lead that is considered “safe” in drinking water. After previously recommending action when 20 ppb of lead were discovered in drinking water, the E.P.A. stopped offering a specific action limit in 2018. Growing medical consensus is that no amount of lead in drinking water is safe.

50 MILLION: Number of children who use drinking water each day at U.S. public schools.

41: Percent of U.S. public school districts that did not test drinking water at their schools; 16 percent more “did not know” one way or another.

37: Percent of the school districts that tested students’ drinking water that discovered “elevated lead.”

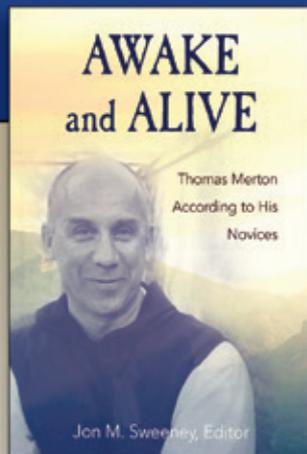
43: Percent of Head Start centers that had not tested for lead in 2019. An additional 31 percent of the centers, which serve 900,000 infants and preschool children, did not know if they had tested at all.

Sources: U.S. Government Accountability Office, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, American Society of Civil Engineers.

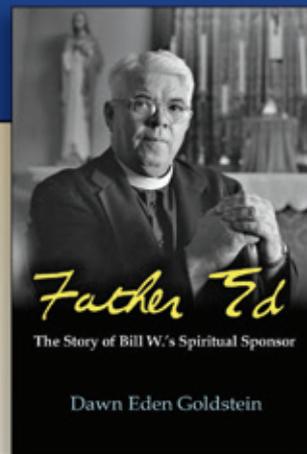
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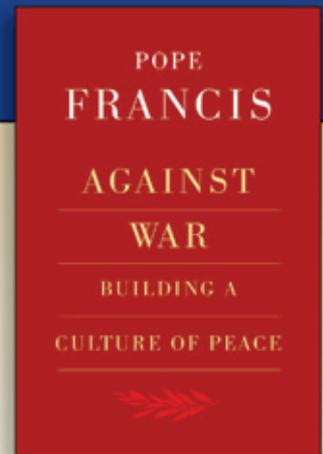
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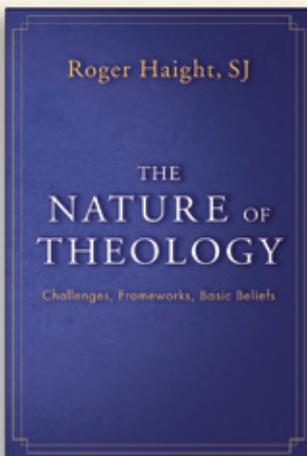
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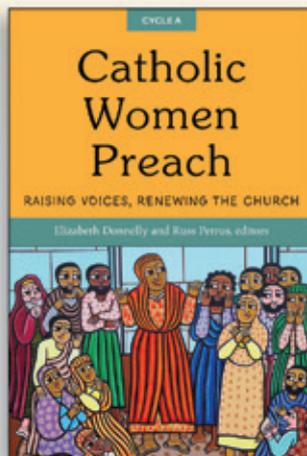
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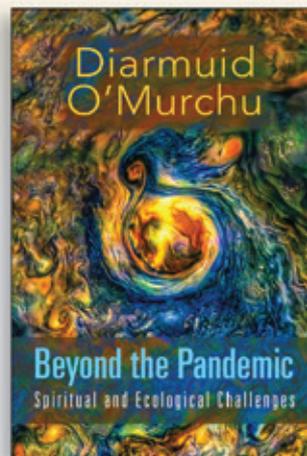
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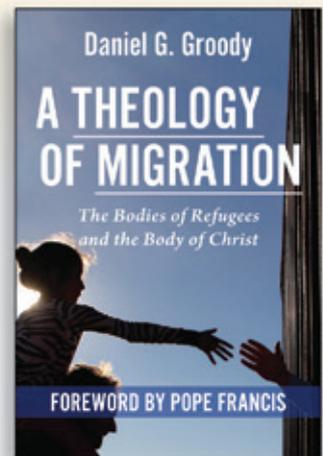
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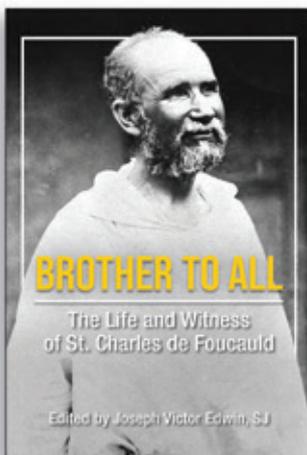
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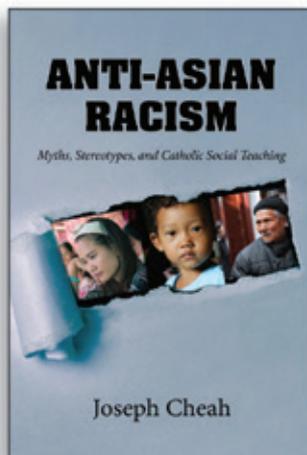
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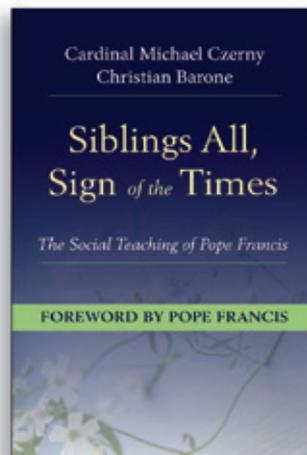
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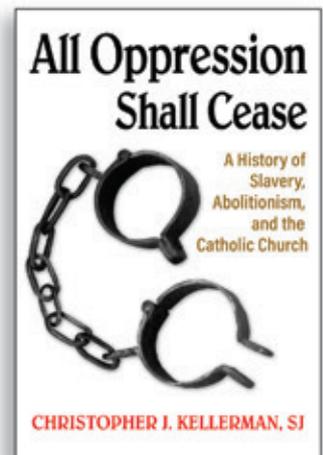
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Cardinal Grech: The synod is creating a listening church

Cardinal Mario Grech, general secretary of the Vatican's synod office, said he sees "a different church" emerging from the worldwide synodal process.

"The Holy Father in 'Evangelii Gaudium' speaks about pastoral conversion [and a] spiritual conversion, but now he adds a synodal conversion," he said. "And this is the aim, the focus of this synodal process."

As the process enters its "continental phase," in which the Synod of Bishops' office will group together the bishops' conferences' reports by continent, then draft a document that highlights the priorities and core issues that emerge, Cardinal Grech said he was not worried that some groups might try to hijack the synod process to push their own agendas. "I'm not afraid of these pressure groups, no," he said. "What I would like and what I pray for is that the Holy Spirit will really hijack this process."

He recalled that after the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon Region, Pope Francis told him that the reason he did not press forward on the question of *virī probati*—that is, ordaining mature, married men—was his sense that synod participants had not managed sufficient discernment on the matter.

"Believe me, there and then I thanked the Lord for the ministry of Peter," Cardinal Grech said.

Asked to confirm that the pope's response suggested "not a rejection" of the *virī probati* proposal but a sense that it remained "a question that hasn't matured yet," Cardinal Grech said, "Yes. We need time!"

Another aspect of the Amazon synod was its strong push for the recognition of more ministries for women. The cardinal confirmed that the same issue is strongly raised in the reports from the different churches during this synod.

"Across the board, there is this [desire] to discern more in depth about the role of women in the church, to appreciate their specific contribution," he said. "I really hope and pray that in time we will manage to find what is the right vocation of women in the church."

Another major change in recent synods has been how the Vatican has used the internet to solicit feedback. Cardinal Grech called an initiative to encourage Catholic social media influencers to host their own listening sessions this time "a breakthrough."

"It was not [a] bishop who went after the people," he explained, "but the people who are interested in the church



Cardinal Mario Grech and Pope Francis discuss the Synod on Synodality launch in October 2021.

that came forth and connected with the influencers and contributed in this process."

It was a new way, he said, of preaching the Gospel.

The synodal experience so far from his perspective suggested many reasons "I should be grateful to the Lord."

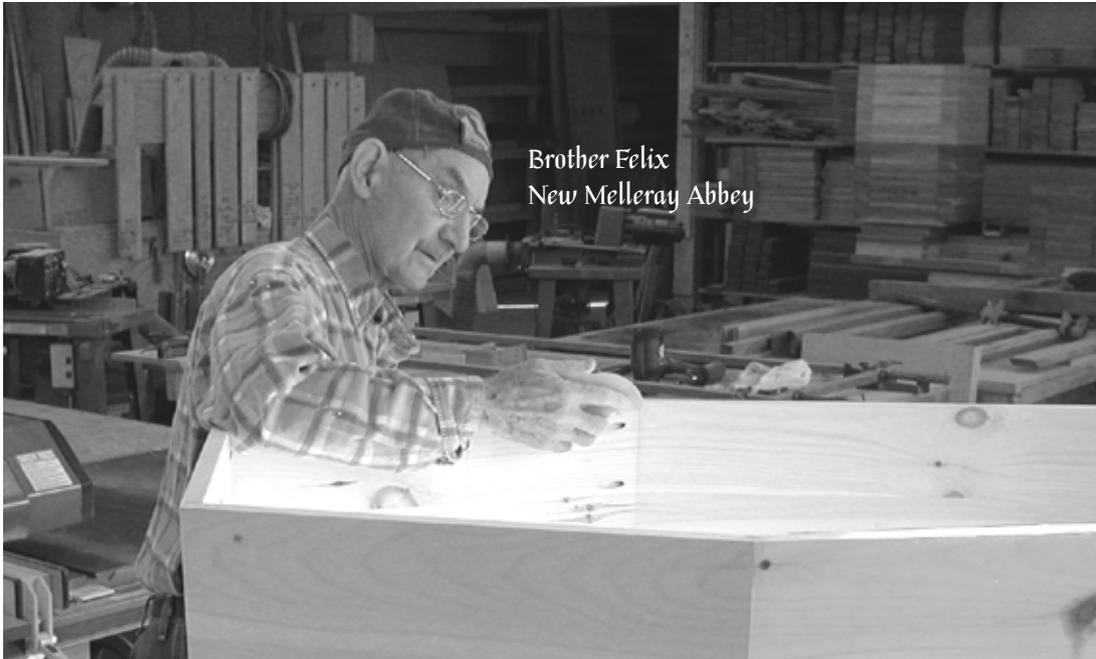
"Normally we wait for the conclusion of the bishops' assembly or for the exhortation published by the Holy Father to gauge the outcome of the synod," Cardinal Grech said. "But believe me, even today, we can appreciate the fruits of this synodal process. And I really hope that the local churches will continue to foster this synodal experience that has been going on."

At a day of reflection organized by the synod secretariat in 2021, on the eve of the formal opening of the global synodal process, Pope Francis cited the Vatican II theologian Yves Congar, O.P.: "There is no need to create another church, but to create a different church." Cardinal Grech said he is seeing that "different church" emerging from the synodal process.

"We are learning how advantageous it can be to listen, and to listen not only to the opinions [of others] but to listen to the Holy Spirit, because the protagonist of this process is not the individual, it is not the bishops, but the Holy Spirit. And if we want to capture what the Holy Spirit is communicating to his church, we need to lend a listening heart."

Gerard O'Connell, Vatican correspondent. Twitter: @gerryorome.

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GOODNEWS:

Dorothy Day didn't want to be called a saint, but what about a ferry boat?

The latest addition to New York's Staten Island Ferry fleet, the Dorothy Day, passed under the Verrazzano-Narrows Bridge on Sept. 16, delighting members of New York's Catholic Worker community and supporters who had come out to welcome Dorothy back to New York. The ship should be ready for passenger service on the 125th celebration of Day's birth, Nov. 8, according to Anthony Donovan, a longtime supporter of the Catholic Worker movement who called in a favor at McAllister Towing to arrange tug boat transport for the ferry's welcoming committee.

"To me this is like a birthing. This is a beautiful, kind of a sacred day," Mr. Donovan said as the tug approached the Dorothy Day, just then appearing on the horizon on a brilliant late summer morning in New York. "I know it's all symbolic," he said with a wry smile. "Dorothy is not a ship; Dorothy is in our hearts." But today, he marveled as the ferry neared Staten Island for the first time, "her message is being carried into the tides of New York Harbor."

Dorothy Day famously never wanted to be called a saint; how might she have responded to the idea of having a ferry boat named after her?

"If it helps awaken consciences and gives a platform for the poor and for an alternative way of life than what we're living right now, I think she would be very proud and happy," Deborah Sucich, a contemporary Catholic Worker, said.

Ms. Sucich is among a group of Catholic Workers who hope to open a house of hospitality on Staten Island, where the movement has historic ties but has not had a presence in many years.

"When they launch this boat, we have the perfect opportunity to educate Staten Islanders about Dorothy Day," said Ms. Sucich. "That would be the least we could do for



her cause and [the Catholic Worker] movement, and I'm hoping that the support will be so great that within a year or two we can open a house of hospitality on Staten Island."

"Given her deep, deep love for Staten Island and wanting to build bridges between different boroughs in New York City, I think this connector [vessel]—especially since it's free—would be something she would probably be very happy with," said Kevin Ahern, an associate professor of religious studies at Manhattan College, where a Dorothy Day Center for the Study of Social Catholicism is planned. Mr. Ahern, a former America Media board member, is also a member of the coordinating committee for the Dorothy Day Guild, which has been managing her canonization process.

That effort is in a waiting mode, he said, now that all materials supporting Day's canonization have been delivered to Rome. The arrival of the new ferry, he said, offers a unique opportunity to bring her life to the public's attention and "build momentum" toward her canonization.

Though the Dorothy Day, in the traditional orange and blue of the Staten Island Ferry service, will surely appear familiar to regulars of the daily crossing to Manhattan, her builders assure she is equipped with the latest technolog-



The Dorothy Day arrives in New York for final preparation before her first commuter run this month.

Photo by Kevin Clarke.

ical and safety advances and is built for comfort. The ferry naming, which began as a petition campaign in 2016 submitted to the city administration of Mayor Bill de Blasio, contributes to recent efforts in New York to find new ways to honor notable women and people from communities overlooked in the past.

The same could be said for the church’s canonization process, Mr. Ahern pointed out. “Dorothy Day as a laywoman, as a New Yorker, as a mother—we need more voices like that, more experiences like that formally recognized as saints,” he said.

Noting her connections to Staten Island, where as a young mother she lived in a beach bungalow, “I can’t think of a better place to memorialize her legacy in the public space of New York City,” he said.

Kevin Clarke, chief correspondent.
Twitter: @ClarkeAtAmerica.



An L.G.B.T. Pride parade in central Brussels in May 2018

CNS photo/Francois Lenoir, Reuters

In Belgium, no blessing but a prayer liturgy for same-sex couples

The Flemish-speaking bishops of Belgium, a subgroup within the national bishops’ conference, have created a prayer liturgy for same-sex couples—part of their effort, they say, to make the church more inclusive and welcoming.

The document, titled “Being Pastorally Close to Homosexual Persons: For a Welcoming Church That Excludes No One,” published on Sept. 20 on the website of the bishops’ conference of Belgium, states that same-sex relationships, which are not considered sacramental marriages by the Catholic Church, can nonetheless be a source of joy and happiness for the couple. The document cites “The Joy of Love,” the apostolic exhortation of 2015 in which Pope Francis wrote that the church needs to better accompany families with L.G.B.T. members, so that “those who manifest a homosexual orientation can receive the assistance they need to understand and fully carry out God’s will in their lives.”

The document suggests that if Catholic pastoral care providers are asked by same-sex couples to bless their relationships, they can use this newly published framework. The Vatican reiterated its ban on priests blessing same-sex couples last year. The church teaches that gay and lesbian people must be treated with dignity and respect but considers homosexual activity to be morally illicit.

The Belgian document appears to skirt that restriction on priests blessing same-sex relationships by suggesting that laypeople coordinate the prayer services. The Flemish-speaking bishops stressed that the “moment of prayer” was not akin to a sacramental marriage, which Catholic doctrine says is a lifelong union between a man and woman.

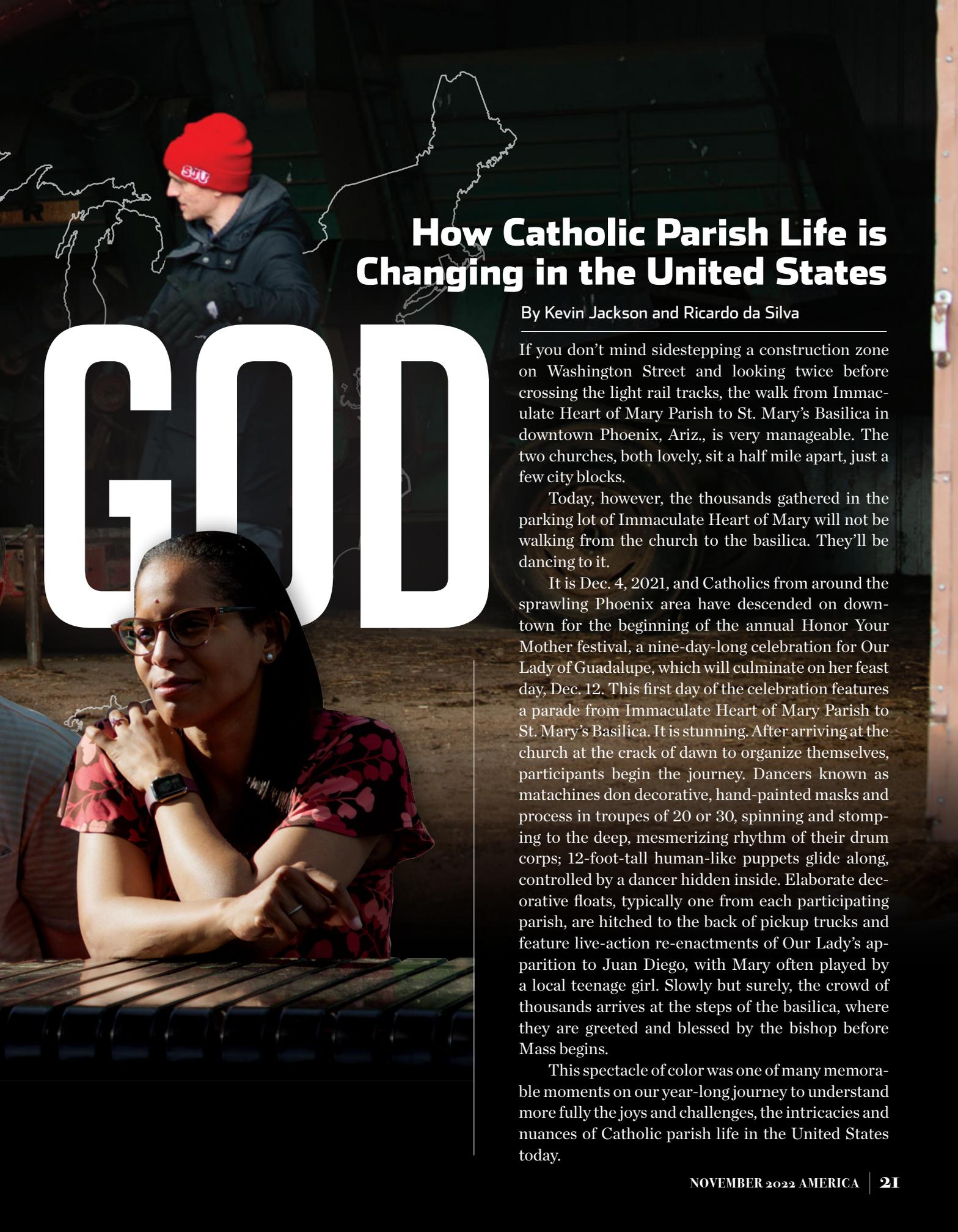
A spokesman for the Belgian bishops’ conference, Tommy Scholtes, denied that the proposal amounted to a “blessing,” much less a sacramental marriage. He told the Associated Press that it was part of the Belgian bishops’ decision to create contact people within each diocese who will be responsible for pastoral care for gays.

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

PEOPLE OF



Kevin Jackson/America Media



How Catholic Parish Life is Changing in the United States

By Kevin Jackson and Ricardo da Silva

GOD

If you don't mind sidestepping a construction zone on Washington Street and looking twice before crossing the light rail tracks, the walk from Immaculate Heart of Mary Parish to St. Mary's Basilica in downtown Phoenix, Ariz., is very manageable. The two churches, both lovely, sit a half mile apart, just a few city blocks.

Today, however, the thousands gathered in the parking lot of Immaculate Heart of Mary will not be walking from the church to the basilica. They'll be dancing to it.

It is Dec. 4, 2021, and Catholics from around the sprawling Phoenix area have descended on downtown for the beginning of the annual Honor Your Mother festival, a nine-day-long celebration for Our Lady of Guadalupe, which will culminate on her feast day, Dec. 12. This first day of the celebration features a parade from Immaculate Heart of Mary Parish to St. Mary's Basilica. It is stunning. After arriving at the church at the crack of dawn to organize themselves, participants begin the journey. Dancers known as *matachines* don decorative, hand-painted masks and process in troupes of 20 or 30, spinning and stomping to the deep, mesmerizing rhythm of their drum corps; 12-foot-tall human-like puppets glide along, controlled by a dancer hidden inside. Elaborate decorative floats, typically one from each participating parish, are hitched to the back of pickup trucks and feature live-action re-enactments of Our Lady's apparition to Juan Diego, with Mary often played by a local teenage girl. Slowly but surely, the crowd of thousands arrives at the steps of the basilica, where they are greeted and blessed by the bishop before Mass begins.

This spectacle of color was one of many memorable moments on our year-long journey to understand more fully the joys and challenges, the intricacies and nuances of Catholic parish life in the United States today.



THE PROJECT

New York, N.Y., September 2021

In the fall of 2021, America Media’s video team hatched an idea: What would it look like if we traveled to four parishes across the United States during the course of one year and assessed their similarities and differences? How would they diverge demographically, racially, politically? Where are parishes growing and where are they declining? What would the pastoral priorities and challenges look like in different communities? Would the concerns of everyday life in Catholic parishes vary in a way that paralleled the divisive social media landscape?

Keeping geographical and ethnic diversity in mind, we traveled to Phoenix, Ariz.; Antigo, Wis.; Cut Off, La.; and Boston, Mass. We wanted to explore what it means to be Catholic in a particular parish, a particular city, a particular region.

The stories that follow offer snapshots of what we found. It is hardly a comprehensive analysis of every aspect of parish life or every Catholic demographic in the United States; such a task would be impossible. Certainly national trends—the impact of Covid-19; influx of immigration; church demographics; parish mergers, clusters and closures; a desire for diversity and inclusion in parishes and more—are playing out in different regions of the country. But as we discovered, these ideas are balanced by the complex experiences of real people: undocumented immigrants, crawfishermen, lay parish employees, a priest who cross-country skis, dairy farmers, firemen with rich Boston accents, teachers and doctors raising three children.

Through our experiences with these Catholics, and through the stories of their parishes, we hope to paint a portrait of Catholic parish life in the U.S. today.



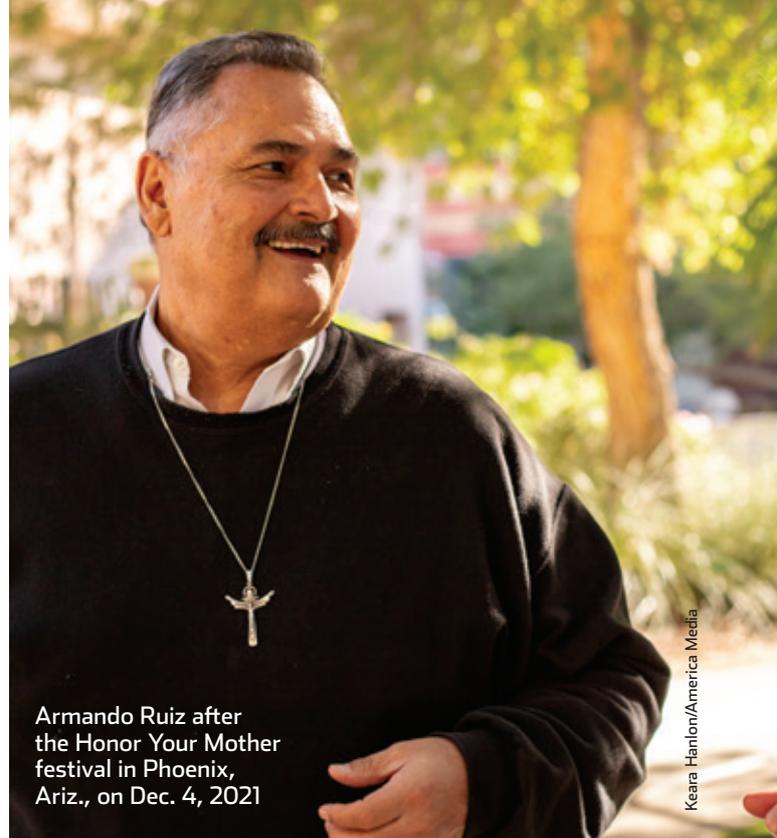
THE DANGER OF TWO CHURCHES

Phoenix, Ariz., December 2021

The Honor Your Mother parade begins at Immaculate Heart of Mary Parish, a location that has a painful historical significance for Hispanic Catholics.

Following a renovation of the basilica in downtown Phoenix in the early 1900s, which split the building into an upper and lower church, the pastor decided all Hispanic community activities, including Mass, would take place in the lower church, and the Anglo community would use the upper church. This decision was the impetus for the construction of Immaculate Heart of Mary parish, which the Hispanic community built as its own.

Today, amid explosive population growth in the Phoe-



Armando Ruiz after the Honor Your Mother festival in Phoenix, Ariz., on Dec. 4, 2021

Keara Hanlon/America Media

nix area and across southern states like Arizona, two things are true: The number of Catholics is growing, and the number of Hispanic Catholics is growing too, particularly among younger generations of Catholics. But almost as soon as we arrived in Phoenix, we discovered this growing church has a problem that echoes its past.

“You run the risk of having two churches, one that is an Anglo church, and then another one that is just a Spanish-speaking church, and that never the two shall meet. And that’s the danger,” said Armando Ruiz. “We have to figure out a way to intermix.”

Mr. Ruiz has worked as a consultant to Catholic Church leadership at both the diocesan and the national level and has seen the difficulties of integrating the Hispanic and Anglo communities at all levels of the church. For an example, look no further than the Honor Your Mother festival, which Mr. Ruiz helped develop. It grew out of an initiative from the diocese’s Immigrant Task Force in 2006 and was intended to focus on the dignity of migrants. Diocesan leaders hoped the festival could be an instrument of integration.

“In Our Lady, specifically Our Lady of Guadalupe, we have a great model for bringing about unity between diverse culture and language,” said the Rev. David Sanfilippo, the vicar of priests for the Diocese of Phoenix. “She [appeared] to an Indigenous man, Juan Diego, bringing the message of hope and the love of God and encouragement in the midst of a very difficult time in the lives of indigenous people.”



Keara Hannon/America Media

Dancers at the pre-procession activities of the Honor Your Mother Festival

But despite the diocese’s sincere push for integration, the effort was not reflected in the participants of the festival; nearly everyone we saw was Hispanic.

The challenges of integration are felt most profoundly by many Hispanic Catholics at the parish level. Sometimes this is due to a general attitude of skepticism or even hostility from the Anglo community toward Hispanic immigrants.

“Some people say, ‘Why’d these people come here? They don’t have the money,’” said Carolina Uribe, director of evangelization at St. Mary’s Parish in Chandler, Ariz. “Why [don’t they] stay in their countries? Why [did] they come here? They don’t speak the language.”

Ms. Uribe, herself a Mexican immigrant, has spent 32 years at St. Mary’s, a literally two-church parish. The parish opened its second church building, St. Juan Diego, in 2017 to accommodate the growing community. “People come to register almost every day,” said Ms. Uribe, who recalled that before the construction of the new church, 1,500 people would show up for Mass in Spanish on Sunday at St. Mary’s, a church that seats 750.

Over time, the parish has responded to the pastoral needs of a rapidly growing Hispanic community. In some ways, it has succeeded.

“When I came here, there was one Spanish Mass. Now there are four on the weekend and five days a week,” said Ms. Uribe, “Monday through Friday in Spanish.” She also noted that their pastor, the Rev. Dan McBride, has made an effort to have more bilingual employees and to staff the parish office with someone who can answer questions in Spanish.

But based on our conversations with Ms. Uribe and others in the diocese, it seems long-term integration must push further than Spanish Masses. Similar to Mr. Ruiz’s observation about two churches, Ms. Uribe said the Hispanic community and the Anglo community often seem to operate on different planes of existence, merely sharing the church buildings without a deeper connection. This arrangement does not allow the two communities to learn from and grow with each other.

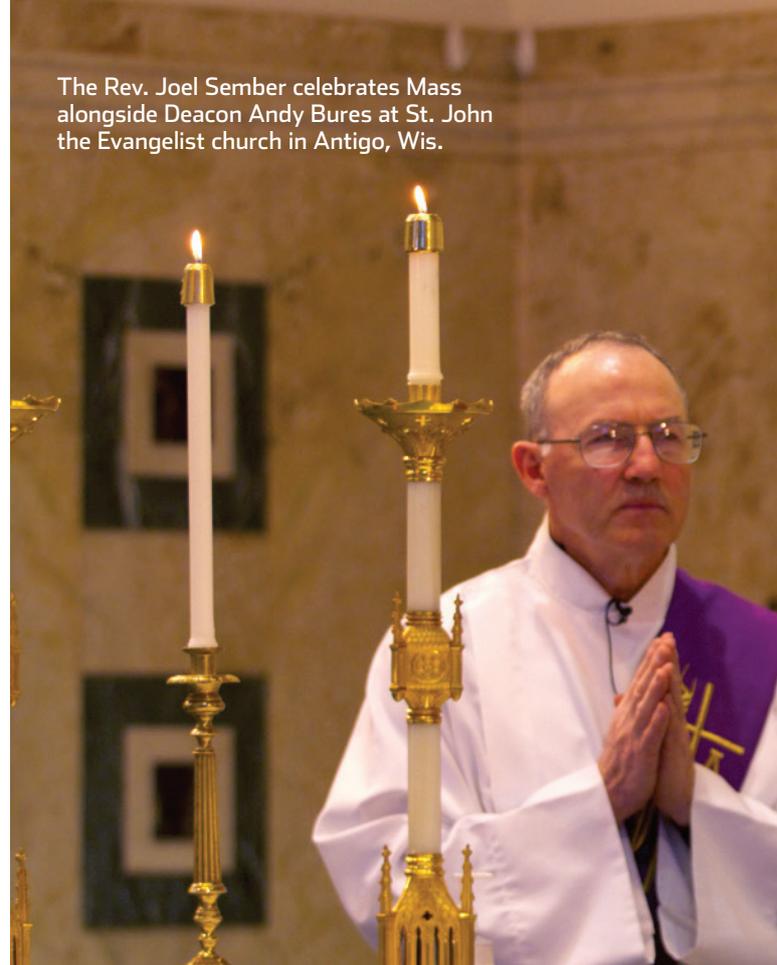
“When people [come] from other countries, they offer to our community [a sense of] family, of traditions. Tradition and family—I think this is the rock for Hispanics,” she said.

The Honor Your Mother celebration is “a big event, a big day for all the diocese, with almost all the Hispanic community,” she said. “Sometimes they ask for the day off from their jobs to be there.... These people come from work. They work in the hard places like restaurants, cleaning bathrooms, ladies cleaning houses, people doing the roofs during summer here. And then [the church] says, we need you because we want to have a big event this weekend. They’re not tired. They are so happy to serve the Lord in this way, to serve the church.”

This challenge to integrate the two communities—Anglo and Hispanic—will continue to play out in the Southwest, but it will not remain there. As the church nationwide becomes increasingly Hispanic, this same issue is already confronting parishes and dioceses in every corner of the country.



The Rev. Joel Sember prepares for cross country skiing outside Antigo, Wis.



The Rev. Joel Sember celebrates Mass alongside Deacon Andy Bures at St. John the Evangelist church in Antigo, Wis.



A HOPEFUL INSTITUTION IN STEEP DECLINE

Antigo, Wis., March 2022

Starting in the small town of Antigo and heading east toward the middle of nowhere, the Rev. Joel Sember can make the drive to White Lake, Wis., in just under 30 minutes. As he turns off the state highway to enter the town of 352 people, the road winds around the 153-acre lake from which the town takes its name. Spring started two weeks ago, but the lake missed the memo—it is covered in a thick sheet of snow and ice. So is the parking lot that Father Sember pulls into behind a quaint, wooden church.

He has arrived at the small-town parish of Saints James and Stanislaus, which will soon become the fourth parish of his “cluster”—a group of parishes that share a common administration under one pastor. Antigo, the town of 8,100 where Father Sember resides, used to have four parishes; then two were merged. Near White Lake’s parish was another rural parish, and they merged in 2021. At one time, each of these six old churches had its own priest.

Within a few months, Father Sember will be pastor to them all.

Declining numbers of priests and fewer Catholics in the pews have made this style of parish community a chal-

lenge to maintain in many areas of the United States, and the Midwest has been particularly affected. In this region, clustering is a common way for bishops to respond to shrinking numbers of people and resources. Although the practice preserves some elements of the original parish communities, it also brings its own set of pastoral challenges.

Father Sember has come to White Lake to meet with two of the key parishioners, Michael and Susan Hickey. He wants to put them at ease about the transition.

“My goal is to make as few changes as possible in the first year, just so that you guys get comfortable with us, we get comfortable with you, and we’ll have to work some bugs out,” Father Sember told them.

Mr. and Ms. Hickey, charmingly kind and generous with their time, put on a good face for the meeting, but their small community has suffered. Their parish merged with another small parish community only a year ago. One of the church buildings, which had been a home to Catholics for 120 years, had been permanently closed. “The reality is that we could no longer afford to maintain two buildings,” Mr. Hickey said.

Community members grieved and were angry. “There will be some people that aren’t talking to each other for a long time,” Father Sember told us. “Some of the folks involved in the decision-making process were told [by fellow



Deniz Demiret America Media

parishioners] not to come to the closing Mass.”

But clustering and parish mergers, though often painful, open up a new set of opportunities for a Catholic parish and allow pastors and lay people to think creatively about the type of community they want to build. “Here within Antigo, the fact that we have three clustered churches gives us a lot more resources that we’re able to work with,” said Father Sember. “We have a K–8 school that we’re able to maintain because the parishes are pitching in. We can do more with staff. We can do more with adult faith formation because we have more resources. And so there are benefits that come from pooling your resources.” Some of the parishioners suggest that the parish should simplify even further: Would it be possible to operate out of a single church to steward their resources more effectively? Father Sember filters all these options through a guiding principle: “To me, the question is the community. Are we growing in community with God, first of all, and then in community with each other?”

Father Sember’s patient pastoral approach stems from a wealth of experience with clusters. In fact, since he was ordained 15 years ago, he has always had at least two parishes under his care.

“My last assignment was a three-parish cluster; before that was a two-parish cluster; before that was a very com-

plicated cluster,” he said with a wry smile. “I’m pretty familiar with trying to maintain each community’s unique sense of identity.”

But despite the benefits of clustering, this does not offer a long-term fix for the declining numbers of priests. A vibrant group of permanent deacons and lay ministers has helped. There are more permanent deacons than ordained diocesan priests in this diocese.

“As a priest, you think all the ministry falls on you, but it doesn’t. You are a minister to the ministers. The people that you’re ministering to are then going to go preach the Gospel in their everyday life,” said Father Sember. “And so we need to be identifying the gifts that our lay people have. We need to be supporting and forming them in living those gifts.”

For a Midwestern church in steep decline, the answer to how best to encourage people in their faith may lie beyond the walls of a particular place.

“I think the church has been attached to being a successful institution, and we were good at it, but [an institution] doesn’t really change hearts,” said Father Sember. “Really, I need to just be content to serve Jesus without worrying about the numbers. Are hearts changing, are minds changing, are people growing in their faith? That’s what matters.”

Al Archer, left, a parishioner at Sacred Heart Catholic Church, talks with Sebastian Gomes of America Media outside a Catholic church on Bayou Lafourche in Galliano, La.



Kevin Jackson/America Media



RESPONDING TO CLIMATE DISASTER

Cut Off, La., May 2022

In their four decades in Cut Off, La., Ashley and Al Archer had never witnessed a storm like Hurricane Ida. On Aug. 29, 2021—the same day Hurricane Katrina had made land-fall 16 years prior—Hurricane Ida rampaged through Cut Off and much of southern Louisiana, leaving little in its wake.

Evacuation was mandatory. The Archers, both retired teachers, immediately boarded up their house and commuted to Mobile, Ala., where they stayed for several days before returning the following week. “It was just people’s homes and businesses just ripped apart. Nothing like we ever saw before,” said Mr. Archer. “Everybody was brought down to the same level; meaning that you had no power, hardly any water, no food, no gasoline, no anything.”

While a major weather event like Ida may seem unusual, the people of Lafourche Parish are hardly alone in feeling these effects. More than 40 percent of Americans live in places affected by climate disasters in 2021.

Every person we spoke to recounted the devastating impact of this 10-hour, Category 4 storm, the second-most damaging and intense natural disaster on record to strike the area. Miraculously, not a single death was reported in Lafourche Parish.

In Louisiana, the word parish does not necessarily refer to the local Catholic community but rather to political counties in the state. But the Catholic culture runs deep, so it was no surprise that people turned to the local church as a central place of refuge and aid in the aftermath of the storm. Community members crowded into the parking lot of Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Cut Off to help unload an 18-wheeler truck filled with essential supplies that parishioners from a Catholic church in neighboring Mississippi had donated. Sacred Heart also had a generator, which meant it could power the church’s air conditioning unit to offer some relief.

At the first Sunday Mass after the storm, the Rev. Greg Fratt, pastor of Sacred Heart, “was up there crying,” said Ms. Archer, who coordinates youth ministry at the parish and is a volunteer in the N.I.C.U. ward of a New Orleans hospital. “Everybody in their pew was crying.” But despite havoc and ruin, Ida also spurred thanksgiving and renewed faith and purpose. “The church stepped up as a reminder that God is still there in the end. This is all material stuff,” said Mr. Archer, who is the chair of the pastoral council and serves on the Lafourche Parish school board. “There’s always hope.”

Hurricane Ida took a toll on the coastal wetlands as well. Storms like Ida are intensifying and accelerating land erosion. Decades of dredging by the oil and gas industries, along with



A statue of Mary stands alongside a hurricane-damaged house on the coast of southern Louisiana.

Kevin Jackson America Media

rising sea levels, have also weakened the coastline.

“We know what’s happening, but we feel kind of helpless,” said Father Fratt in a telephone conversation months after our visit. “We’re in this long lament about our homeland washing away, but we don’t know what we can do about it.”

The fishing, oil and gas industries in southern Louisiana—which provide food and energy to huge portions of the U.S.—have provided well-paying jobs and lifted many people out of poverty, said Father Fratt. “It’s a very complicated reality.”

As the effects of climate change grow more severe, communities like Sacred Heart, who are among the most affected, have a unique opportunity to imagine a Catholic response to this issue.

“When I think of the Cajun community of people, I think of resilience, friendship, hardworking, values,” said Mr. Archer. All of these were on display as the community found a way to wade through this natural catastrophe. “Family is very important to the people down here.”

The pre-eminence of the family is also reflected in the

parish’s commitment to the protection of the unborn. It is a pastoral priority of the parish, based on our conversations with the parishioners. “We’re pro-life down here,” said Mr. Archer. “We feel that it’s a very hot and very important issue here in this church.”

“Pro-life is where you’re looking at two humans,” said Ms. Archer, “instead of the mom’s choice of ‘this is my body and I can choose to do whatever I want with it.’”

As a part of this ministry and recognizing the need to support pregnant women facing difficult decisions, parishioners have organized material and financial support for a crisis pregnancy center in Houma, La. They also host prayer services throughout the year and have previously sent delegations to the March for Life in Washington, D.C.

“It’s part of our pastoral ministry here to be a support,” said Father Fratt. “Not just only an advocate in prayer, but also a support for women who are in crisis trying to make that decision.”



The Rev. John Unni, pastor of St. Cecilia Church in Boston, Mass., delivers a homily.



THE HARD WORK OF INCLUSION

Boston, Mass., June 2022

It is probably safe to assume that for most Sunday churchgoers, the day starts slowly. But Natasha Hartman's alarm rings at 4 a.m. A mother of three young girls—a 7-year-old, a 3-year-old, and a 10-month-old, she has no time to sleep in. “I woke up at 4:45 this morning and we were still five minutes late” for 9:30 a.m. Mass, she said.

When Dr. Hartman, a pediatric hematologist, moved to Boston for work in 2011, she knew she wanted to get married in a Catholic Church and one day raise her children in the faith, but arriving in Boston as a young doctor with a grueling schedule and punishing working hours, she struggled to find a Catholic community where she might feel drawn to register as a parishioner.

“It was a time where I was trying to find a sort of a parish that I could call home,” she said. “It’s hard to do that when you can’t always be at a certain Mass, for example.”

In contrast to the other locations we visited, which were more suburban or rural, Catholics in major cities typically have numerous options when looking for a church to attend. But choosing a parish can be an intimidating process. For Dr. Hartman, the fact that she was unaffiliated with a parish proved to be an obstacle when she was preparing to marry her then-fiancée Jan Hartman. The couple struggled to find a priest willing to allow them to celebrate their desired nuptial Mass in his parish. Dr. Hartman was not yet registered as a parishioner anywhere, and Mr. Hartman did not have a parish because he is not Catholic.

A friend recommended she meet with the Rev. John Unni, the pastor of Saint Cecilia, a thriving parish in the Back Bay neighborhood of Boston that serves around 3,000 families, according to its parish website. “He was

like, ‘Sure, I’ll marry you,’” Dr. Hartman said. “That was really powerful for us, that that wasn’t an issue. He also didn’t try to change anything about Jan. He just said, ‘Yeah, of course.’ And at that point we said, ‘O.K. We’re gonna get married at this church. Let’s go see; let’s go find out more about this parish.’”

The welcoming spirit at Saint Cecilia is no accident. “Creating a welcoming community, an inclusive, non-judgmental parish, is key. It’s where people can just come as they are and meet, and then we go forward together,” said Father Unni. “That’s how Jesus did it; he just met people where they were at. He went and kind of found them; they found him. Then once you have that interaction, you go forward together. And, I think, that’s what I want the experience to be here at Saint Cecilia.”

From the day Dr. Hartman entered her newfound parish, she was enthralled. “We were like: ‘Wow, this is where we need to be,’” she said. “We were drawn to the community; we were drawn to the beauty of the place—and not just the beauty, the physical beauty, but it was the beauty that sort of welcomes you when you first just walk in there.”

Welcome was the word at Saint Cecilia. Everyone we spoke with—whether in a planned interview with a staff member or in random conversations with several parishioners after Sunday Mass—mentioned the community’s desire to be a place for everyone, and especially for those who found themselves on the margins.

“Father John has built a community here, but it is a community of communities. So there are various little groups that sort of coalesce and form here,” explained Mark Lippolt, a parishioner and a catechist, who also coordinates the parish’s Hunger and Homelessness ministry. Mr. Lippolt, like Dr. Hartman, found that something more than an appreciation of the aesthetics of the church kept him in

The Rev. John Unni baptizes Natasha and Jan Hartman's daughter at St. Cecilia Church in Boston, Mass.



the pews. “I’ve been here as an out gay man for my 30-year period here, and have been an out gay man as a faith formation teacher,” he said. Saint Cecilia has long been a place of welcome for the L.G.B.T.Q. community, “even before Father John’s time,” Mr. Lippolt added.

The death of George Floyd and the subsequent widespread protests for racial justice in the summer of 2020 challenged the parish, which is largely white, affluent and college-educated, to interrogate its members’ professed commitment to be agents for social justice and meaningful change and to offer an environment that is truly welcoming for all.

After some internal reckoning, and a recognition of its founding mission—as a parish started in the late 19th century to offer a community to the impoverished, working-class Irish immigrant community working in the wealthy Back Bay homes of Boston—the parish renewed its mission and desire to be a place where all could find a home.

The parish’s social justice ministry decided to form a racial equity team. It was initially composed of only white people. “I think that was somewhat intentional,” said Dr. Hartman, who is Black, “in that the parish was really insistent upon the fact that it wasn’t Black and people of color that needed to do the work.”

But ultimately Dr. Hartman was invited to join. “At some point,” she said, “the team said ‘We actually could use some people who’ve experienced this all their lives, and who have been thinking about this all their lives.’”

Understanding that diversity of experiences in the parish has been a key step in the committee’s work. Leah Bennett was the communications and operations manager and the parish staff person dedicated to oversee the committee’s work. (She no longer works at the parish.) Ms. Bennett shared an experience of the committee’s first meetings: “Somebody on the team who’s white said, ‘When I’m at Mass, I look out and I see a lot of different people from different backgrounds, different races, it really feels like a diverse place.’ And then one of the participants in the group who’s Black said, ‘Actually, whenever I’m at Mass, I feel like I’m the only one.’”

“The hardest part of being on any team like that,” said Dr. Hartman, “and being involved in the work is oftentimes being the only BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, people of color] person and potentially the only one with that background of years, decades, of dealing with racism. And feeling at times like somebody who needs to explain things, over and over again, educate individuals who haven’t had that experience.”

Saint Cecilia parishioners continue to discover that fostering real inclusion is a difficult but necessary task, and the community’s efforts continue to inspire Dr. Hartman and her young family.

“What continues to give me the courage, as well as the strength to continue doing a lot of this work, is seeing change and seeing growth, and seeing real desire on the part of people who really care about this work,” she said. “I think that the parish and the parishioners are so dynamic that they can go outside of the church and see others, and really appreciate what others are going through. And I think that changes the world.”

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Sebastian Gomes contributed reporting.



This article is based on the new feature documentary from America Media, “People of God: How Catholic Parish Life is Changing in the United States.”

To watch the full documentary, scan the code above or visit americamagazine.org/peopleofgod.

Is it time to revisit our burial practices?

By Collin Price

My grandmother died in the fall of 2021. She had lived 96 good years. I was lucky enough to see her the day before she died. She was weak, tired and in pain, but her spark was still there. She still wanted to tell stories about skipping school and riding horses when she was a farm kid in rural Oklahoma. Her nail polish—red like the soil of her Oklahoma homeland—still stood on her bedside table.

She loved the color red. When it was time to pick out a casket, the family knew that it had to be the bright red one, just like the giant red hats she wore and the giant red Lincoln she drove. The eulogy I gave at her graveside service centered around her bright red casket. It fit her, a bold symbol for her bold life. But as I watched the funeral director lower her red casket at the end of the service, something felt off. I felt something was missing, as if her presence was missing from the very place we should have been most likely to remember it.

Though the service was beautiful and honored her life and gave us a chance to mourn together as a family, our conventional burial practice left me feeling we were not ready to accept her death. The red casket surely honored her life, but it left me wondering: Did it honor her death? Like so many families, we did our best to bury my grandmother with reverence and respect. Despite that effort, the giant red casket, although it represented her in a way, also seemed to replace her.

A great deal of thought and work (and often money) goes into conventional burial practices. When a body is buried, it is first embalmed with a





formaldehyde solution. Then the body is sealed in a polished wood or metal casket and the casket is placed in a reinforced concrete vault. The casket is then buried six feet below ground and the grave is covered again by sod. All of these steps—the embalming, the casket, the vault, even the cemetery itself—do everything possible to gloss over a central fact of our death and its natural consequences: the decomposition of the body.

It is natural not to want to think of this. We want the bodies of our loved ones preserved with chemicals and air-tight containers because we want to remember them as they were, to recall how their bodies looked and felt in life, not the details of what happens to them when that life ends. We make a mental separation between our loved ones and these natural processes. And in many ways, our daily lives encourage this separation. So many of us live our lives separated from nature in climate-controlled wood and concrete structures, where we regularly fill our bodies with products and chemicals capable of turning our minds away from the chasm of finitude. Why would we do anything differently when dealing with death?

In life, little terrifies us more than the thought of maggots excavating our teeth and rove beetles devouring our soft tissues. So in death our mouths are sewn shut and we are packed with chemical-laden cotton balls, all to delay the inevitable reality: We are soil, and to the soil we will return.

Sadly, our spiritual denial has all-too-practical consequences. Conventional burial is hard on the environment. According to data compiled by the Glendale Nature Preserve from the Casket and Funeral Association of America, the Rainforest Action Network and the Pre-Posthumous Society, every year conventional burials in the United States require over 30 million board feet of hardwoods, 2,700 tons of copper and bronze, 100,000 tons of steel, 1.6 million tons of concrete and 800,000 gallons of embalming fluid, primarily formaldehyde. Producing all those materials generates pollution in the air, water and soil. The burial of those materials results in the leaching of embalming fluids, wood stains and heavy metals into the surrounding soil and groundwater.

Our denial of death, in other words, desecrates the earth. It results not only in polluted soil, water and air but also sustains a \$16 billion industry that perpetuates a consumerist cycle of extraction and waste with our very bodies. How did this happen?

A Growing Movement

The practices of embalming and casket-burial among Catholics in the United States today may seem normal to us, but they are cultural and historical anomalies when viewed globally. Indigenous Americans have been burying their dead directly in the ground for thousands of years. For many cultures in the United States today, embalming is uncommon or even explicitly forbidden. Burial practices



We want the bodies of our loved ones preserved because we want to remember them as they were.

in Judaism and Islam, for instance, prohibit both chemical embalming and cremation, opting instead for natural burial.

The movement for natural burial is growing and is slowly becoming more mainstream in the United States, but the practice is as old and widespread as our species. Here is what happens: The body is wrapped in a cotton shroud and placed directly into the soil. That's it. Some natural burials might use linen, wool or silk shrouds; some even use cardboard, wicker or untreated wood caskets. But in all natural burials there is no chemical embalming, no cherry red casket, no concrete vault. Instead, the body is simply returned to the soil, and the natural biological processes proceed. Natural burial eliminates the waste and pollution that can come with conventional burial and circulates the biological material of the body back into the ecosystem. It returns us to the soil and in so doing frees us from our pattern of consumption and destruction to become a life-giving constituent of the ecosystem. Natural burial reminds us, in the tender moments of mourning, that our bodies are part of the generative circular process of life, death and regrowth.

Burial practices as we know them in the United States today began during the Civil War. Dead soldiers' bodies needed to be shipped home to their families, so the army commissioned Dr. Thomas Holmes to come up with a way to delay the decaying process. Dr. Holmes invented an embalming fluid that used arsenic to kill the microorganisms in the body, which slowed decomposition long enough for the bodies to reach home intact. Holmes's concoction became the first commercially available embalming fluid in the United States.

Open-casket funerals with embalmed bodies became popular soon after the war's end, when the U.S. government embalmed the body of Abraham Lincoln and took it on tour by train from Washington, D.C., to his home in

Springfield, Ill., stopping in cities and towns along the way. After the public viewing of Lincoln's body, similar treatment for deceased loved ones became popular among people who could afford to give them such presidential treatment. Over the years embalming became less expensive and more and more common. Soon it became the default practice, and most of us cannot imagine simply covering our loved ones with soil. We now seem stuck in a system that monetizes our denial of death's reality at the moment when what we most need is acceptance of it. But we need not remain stuck. We can relearn what was once natural.

New Kinds of Burial

Reimagining our burials necessitates reimagining our cemeteries as well. Respecting the memories of our loved ones and honoring their bodies does not automatically require us also to create cemeteries with neatly manicured, heavily fertilized grass and non-native decorative plants.

As with burial, there is an alternative to conventional cemeteries: conservation cemeteries. These intentionally support biological flourishing by conserving and restoring native flora and fauna. In the words of the Conservation Burial Alliance, conservation cemeteries are "multidimensional social and ecological spaces that sustain us as they sustain the planet and all who dwell on it." When maintained with respect for the local ecosystem, conservation cemeteries can provide a refuge for local species that have lost their habitat to urban and suburban development. The bodies buried there provide nutrients that support the flourishing of native plants and wildlife, and the space becomes both a place of rest for the dead and a place of sustenance for the living.

Many nontraditional burial practices are on the rise. The Catholic Church does not accept or condone all of them, but the church has shown a willingness to adapt in the past. The church forbade cremation for Catholics until the 1980s. Today, according to the Cremation Association of North America, 57.5 percent of the deceased are cremated in 2021 and that figure is expected to rise.

According to Brian Pham, S.J., professor of law and canon law at Gonzaga University in Spokane, Wash., the church considered anything besides a "regular" Catholic burial to be a pagan ritual until the early 20th century. Cremation was a practice most commonly used in religious traditions that believe in reincarnation. These religions often see the body as merely a vessel; once the soul leaves the body, the body no longer serves a purpose. For them, cremation hastens the process of the soul entering



Credits: Collin Price, 5/1

The natural cemetery at the Sisters of Loretto Motherhouse in central Kentucky. The community has performed 10 burials there since the first in 2018.

a new body because it gets the old one out of the way. Such beliefs go against the teachings of the Catholic Church.

The church teaches that the body is an integral part of the human person and that the glorified body will someday be rejoined with the soul in the resurrection. Cremation was forbidden for most of the last two millennia because its association with reincarnation and the negation of the body seemed in opposition to Catholic beliefs. But by the mid-20th century, cremation was being paired with traditional Christian funeral and burial practices. So the church updated its teachings in the 1983 Code of Canon Law to allow for cremation “unless it was chosen for reasons contrary to Christian doctrine” (Canon 1176.3).

In an effort to clarify what that means in practical terms, in 2016 the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published instructions for handling cremation in a Catholic context. The document clarifies the church’s theological teachings about the body after death and applies them to acceptable burial practices. The church prefers whole-body burial but allows cremation as long as it is done in the context of church teaching about the body after death. “By burying the bodies of the faithful,” the document states, the church affirms the “great dignity of the human body as an integral part of the human person.” Any burial practice must honor the body as part of the human person and cannot consider death to be “the definitive annihila-

tion of the person, or the moment of fusion with Mother Nature or the universe, or as a stage in the cycle of regeneration, or as the definitive liberation from the ‘prison’ of the body.” In other words, the intent of the practice may not be to destroy the body after death and must show the body honor and respect.

Scattering ashes, for instance, is unacceptable in the Catholic Church because the body is dispersed across the water or land where it is scattered. Human composting, which turns the body into fertilizer that is then scattered over a garden or around a tree, is also unacceptable. In California, a recently passed bill legalized human composting in the state, beginning in 2027. The California Catholic Conference expressed strong opposition to the bill. And the New York Catholic conference has expressed opposition to a similar bill in New York. The church forbids human composting because the body is treated as a means to an end rather than an end in itself.

Father Pham summarized the theology underlying the church’s canon law about burial practices: “The primary focus has to be honoring and continuing to honor the person, which includes the body.” For the church, honoring means keeping the body together, putting it in a sacred place and marking the sacred place with the person’s name. “Canon law does not say a whole lot, other than that cremation is allowed but burial is preferred. Can you plant a tree over



We now seem stuck in a system that monetizes our denial of death's reality.

it? Sure, but there needs to be a plaque to remember the person.”

Natural burial and conservation burial occupy a gray area in the church's teachings about burial practices. Some people practice conservation burial as a way to merge the person with the earth, putting the body in an unmarked grave in a remote part of a forest. Such a burial would go against the church's teaching about public reverence for the place of burial and the sacredness of the body itself.

So is there a way for Catholics to honor the sacredness of the body in a conservation burial that also honors the sacredness of the land? The answer lies in a 200-plus-year-old community of women religious and co-members in the heart of bourbon country.

Following New Paths

The Sisters of Loretto Motherhouse in central Kentucky is just over the hill from the Marker's Mark distillery. The sisters might not have a copper still in their basement, but they do have an 800-acre working farm as their backyard. While their neighbors imbibe barrel-aged corn mash, the Loretto community members lead retreats, raise beef cattle with regenerative agriculture practices and even organized to block pipeline construction that would support fracking in the area.

Susan Classen has been a co-member of the Loretto Community since 1996. She is not a sister, but she lives in a house on the property and manages the retreat center. Ms. Classen said it was the organizing sessions for planning opposition to the pipeline that led the order to reimagine their burial practices. “People were asking the question: ‘Pipelines can't go through cemeteries, so what if we made our woods a cemetery?’ It isn't that easy,” she told me, “but it started the conversation.”

The conversation about transforming their woods into

a cemetery gained further traction after the community watched “A Will for the Woods,” a documentary about natural burial. With the idea of a cemetery already in mind, the Loretto community members realized that conservation burial would be a way for them to live out their charism even after death. So they did what religious communities so often do: They got to work.

Opening a conventional cemetery involves cutting down trees and shaping the earth, making way for concrete, sod, crypts and sarcophagi. Starting a conservation cemetery starts with pointing to a place and saying, “That's the cemetery.” The Loretto sisters chose a six-acre site amid the 300 acres of woods on their land. The site is about 200 yards from the edge of the woods, so they created a gravel path to make the site accessible for the less mobile community members.

The dense growth of cedar, ash, and maple trees rise to the sky and create a canopy that shades all that lies below. Entering the woods on the gravel path feels transformative. The woods embrace us and offer a reminder of the moment between the known and the unknown. We see limbs and leaves climb high to the sky, but we can only wonder how deep the roots burrow down in the ground. The widths of trunks hint at their age, but only the fallen trees with rings exposed reveal just how long they have lived and grown. When the Loretto Community buries one of their members in these woods, they enter a space of mystery and transition that provides a natural home for the feelings of grief and gratitude that accompany loss. The burial itself embraces the gifts the land offers in a ceremony that places the body within the woods.

Ms. Classen told me that some community members were initially hesitant about the practice but were deeply moved after participating in one of the natural burials. The community has performed 10 burials there since the first in 2018. The first step is to place the shrouded body on a cart along with cedar branches, flowers and other plants, “whatever is in season.” They process with the body to the burial plot, where the grave already has been dug. As Ms. Classen describes the burial itself, her voice conveys a sense of comfort and peace. She said they “place cedar like a nest to receive the body” in the grave. And after the body is laid on its bed of branches they “shower it with flowers and greenery.” Finally, they take turns shoveling the dirt, filling the hole with old soil and new grief.

“After our first burials, people described it as such a ‘tender’ experience,” Ms. Classen said. To some it may seem cold or painful to physically bury the body of a deceased loved one. But according to Ms. Classen, the result



The gravesite of Kay Carlew, S.L., in the natural cemetery at the Sisters of Loretto Motherhouse

is usually the opposite. “People who thought it would be stark and uninviting have been moved by how embracing it is,” she said. “After they experienced it, they were really, really grateful.”

Tender. Embracing. Grateful. How different are the words the Loretto Community uses to describe their experience of natural burial from those we usually use. But they are healing words that should be more commonly used to describe the way we mourn our beloved dead. These are the feelings I experienced when interacting with my grandmother during her life and longed for in her death. The red casket helped us mourn in some ways. But it fell short of the tender embrace of gratitude that Susan described to me, the one that resulted from the natural burials.

Given this result, it is no wonder that natural burial is catching on. As Ms. Classen said, “From the very beginning, I’ve been astounded by both the awareness and the interest in natural burial.... Across the board, people have been like, “That’s the way to do it. Can I be buried there?”” As of now, the Loretto cemetery is limited to the women religious and their co-members and close friends of the community, but they see potential to someday expand their burial ground

into a ministry for the public.

I think my grandmother would have appreciated a natural burial. She was not afraid of dirt. She loved her cars shined and nails polished, but she was a farm girl through and through. She was born dirt poor in the middle of Oklahoma, and she and my grandfather made a life from the generous soil on the banks of the Columbia River. We buried her in that same soil, but with a barrier that kept her separate from it. Maybe when it is time to lay the next generation to rest we will think back to the lessons she taught us and ahead to the example we want to set for those to come. In returning our bodies to the soil, we can embrace the reality of the earth below as we trust in the mystery of the life of the world to come.

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A CATHOLIC CONVERSATION ON GENDER

By Abigail Favale and Elizabeth Sweeny Block

*Editor's note: On both religious and secular levels and in seemingly every corner of the United States, debates about gender identity and gender theory have become more prominent—and more contentious—in recent years. This summer, **America** asked two professors of theology with backgrounds in gender studies, Abigail Favale of the University of Notre Dame and Elizabeth Sweeny Block of St. Louis University, to respond to the 2019 Vatican instruction from the Congregation for Catholic Education, “Male and Female He Created Them”: Towards a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education.” After both scholars offered their thoughts on the Vatican instruction, **America** then invited each to respond to the other. The following texts represent this exchange. The conversation will continue online at americamagazine.org.*



A GIFT OF NATURE

The Catholic view of the body is at odds with popular theories

By Abigail Favale



A consistent theme in the writings of Pope Francis throughout his pontificate has been a critical stance toward gender theory. The question of gender is intimately connected to his concerns about the technological domination of nature and the need to cultivate an integral ecology—an ecology that sees the human person as part of the created order. “Learning to accept our body, to care for it and to respect its fullest meaning, is an essential element of any genuine human ecology,” he wrote in “Laudato Si’.” The 2019 instruction from the Congregation for Catholic Education, “Male and Female He Created Them’: Towards a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education,” relies heavily on Francis’ encyclicals and addresses, primarily “The Joy of Love,” as well as the writings of his two papal predecessors. The last three popes, it seems, speak in unison on this theme.

The basic methodology of “Male and Female He Created Them” is a good one: Listen, reason, propose—with the aim of meaningful dialogue. One special benefit of being Catholic is the invitation to approach any idea or text with a spirit of generous curiosity: What truth will I find here? Yet even as we seek shared ground, we have to be honest about the deep fissures between the implicit worldview of gender theory and a Catholic understanding of reality. These two ways of seeing diverge sharply when it comes to conceptions of reality, anthropology, sexual difference, embodiment, language and freedom.

Where I see the most synergy between the Catholic paradigm and the gender theory paradigm is in their shared desires: the desire for body-soul unity, the desire for the body to reveal the person, the desire for rebirth, the desire for belonging. The path of accompaniment through the precarious terrain of gender might have to happen along these currents of shared desires, these good desires.

But the ultimate problem of the gender theory paradigm is that it makes promises it cannot fulfill because it is built on a false anthropology. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say it is built on false anthropologies, because there are several on offer. All of them, however, reject the idea that there is a givenness to the created order, especially to our sexed bodies—and I mean “given” both in the sense that we

have an intrinsic nature and that this nature is a gift.

The Catholic view of the body, as articulated by John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis alike, is at odds with that of gender theory, which sees the body as a tabula rasa, waiting for extrinsic meaning that can only be inscribed by the desiring will and/or institutional power.

In the Catholic view, being a man or a woman is personal reality—meaning it refers to the totality of the person. Gender thus includes the body but cannot be reduced to the body: A person is a biological-psychological-spiritual unity, one who is time-bound, embedded in history and culture. We are sexed beings; that is part of what it means to be human, and our sexed nature is the ground of our personhood and also a sacramental sign of our ultimate purpose: to give and receive love.

Many assume that speaking of the reality of sexual difference—maleness and femaleness—necessarily ignores those who are born with congenital conditions that affect sexual development, also known as “disorders of sexual development” (DSDs). There are over two dozen discrete conditions that fall under the canopy of DSDs, and each is different in its impact on one’s health and the best therapeutic response. The oft-used label “intersex” is an outdated and imprecise term; DSDs is better, but the best terminology is condition-specific (e.g., “a man with Klinefelter’s syndrome”).

The claim that the existence of DSDs upends the sex binary is dehumanizing, because it implies that a person with a DSD is something “other,” exempt from the reality of maleness or femaleness altogether. In fact, many DSDs are sex-specific, and the vast majority do not involve any apparent sexual ambiguity at birth. Those that do are exceedingly rare (0.02 percent of all births), and in these cases, the focus must be on supporting the individual’s unique needs.

The church needs to be clear and informed on this question because of the confusion that abounds. Moreover, the church, because of its defense of bodily dignity and integrity, can be a powerful voice against the practice of infant genital mutilation—invasive surgeries on babies born with a DSD that are harmful and medically unnecessary.

A truly Catholic approach to gender must also take a



In the Catholic view, being a man or a woman is personal reality—meaning it refers to the totality of the person.

more global scope, and this effort is clear in Pope Francis' writings. A framework that actively seeks to erode sex-based categories can be readily imbibed by wealthy, cushioned, laptop elites—but it will not speak to the experiences of most people in the world, especially most women, whose lives are very much contoured by the facticity of femaleness.

Increasingly, the United States and Canada are outliers; Europe is pulling back from letting purveyors of gender identity theory set the protocols for caring for gender-questioning youth. In Sweden, which has been a pioneer in the development of medicalized gender transition, the government issued new recommendations in February for addressing pediatric gender dysphoria. After conducting a systematic review of all available scientific evidence, the Swedish government concluded that the risks of puberty blockers and cross-sex hormones outweigh the possible benefits and that hormonal treatment for young people should be sharply curtailed.

Similar course corrections are happening across Europe; countries such as France and Finland are urging caution, paying greater attention to scientific evidence and prioritizing psychotherapeutic interventions for young people. In July of this year, Britain's National Health Service announced that it is shutting down the Tavistock gender clinic after an external review concluded the clinic had failed in its care for vulnerable youth. Tavistock will be replaced by regional clinics that take a holistic approach and prioritize mental health support. The United States, in contrast, is charging ahead, at least at the federal level, while certain states are attempting to ban medical transition for young people. In America, this contentious debate is fueled by the ever-renewable resource of political polarization and a profit-driven health care system.

The church in this historic moment has both a duty and

an opportunity to speak the truth about the human person, the goodness of the body and the sacramental meaning of sexual difference. In its high regard for the body, the church is also in a position to welcome the full range of human personality. When gender is seen as sex-lived-out, grounded in the sexed body, it is no longer defined by rigid stereotypes about how men and women should look, feel, be and behave. A boy who would rather knit a scarf than throw a football is just as much a boy, just as authentically masculine, as a star quarterback. This is because the male body, not a particular affectation or trait, is the ground of masculinity. The church must avoid the temptation to, in a panic, reassert pink versus blue scripts about gender.

Pope Francis' statements on gender, as well as the "Male and Female He Created Them" document, should be read as addressing the framework of gender theory and not as a wholesale rejection of persons who might adopt that framework for a range of different reasons. No two stories are ever the same. The church needs to hold onto a distinction between individuals with complex, varied experiences and the dominant framework(s) that interpret and shape those experiences.

While this is a difficult distinction to make when we are talking about frameworks of personal identity, it is an essential one to hold. When it comes to ideas, the church must patiently yet boldly speak the truth. When it comes to people, the church must be attentive to the person, to the desires, wounds and experiences that are being expressed.

To give one practical example of how this balance could be lived out: Perhaps a priest could give a homily on the beauty of Catholic anthropology and the view of sexual difference expressed in the creation accounts in Genesis. According to these accounts, our sexed modes of being human are the pinnacle of creation, the final flourish. Then, at the end of this homily, the priest could issue an invitation to those who question their gender or identify as transgender: I'm glad you are here. Please come say hello; I would love to hear more about your perspective and experience.

We, laity and clergy alike, must be willing to walk alongside those who are questioning, even as we profess the beauty of the Catholic way of seeing. That is the tight-rope the church has to walk in this moment—with tenderness and grace, but also with firm steps.

*Abigail Favale is a professor in the McGrath Institute for Church Life at the University of Notre Dame. Most recently, she is the author of *The Genesis of Gender: A Christian Theory* (Ignatius, 2022).*



GENUINE LISTENING

On questions of gender, the church should proceed with humility

By Elizabeth Sweeny Block

More than three years have passed since the Congregation for Catholic Education published the Vatican's singular statement to date on questions of gender identity, intended to guide and support Catholic educators, including families and lay organizations. In "Male and Female He Created Them": Towards a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education," the congregation turns its attention not to persons who are transgender and nonbinary but, more abstractly, to criticism of "gender theory" and "gender ideology." The document understands this as "an ideology that...denies the difference and reciprocity in nature of a man and a woman and envisages a society without sexual differences."

The text focuses its criticism on theory and beliefs about gender, with no attention to people's lived experiences and questionable reliance on science. As states across the United States introduce legislation that profoundly affects transgender individuals, and given the ongoing discrimination and pain endured by transgender youth and adults alike, this document is worth revisiting to consider its strengths, address its failures and suggest next steps for the church.

It is difficult to find strengths in this document. It acknowledges that sexual differences between men and women vary in distinct cultures. This recognition of diversity, however minimal, is important. It also emphasizes the significance of our bodies. Bodies are indeed important parts of our personal identities and relationships—both more and less important than they are often made out to be.

The document also insists that children should be taught "to respect every person," which is certainly true, but this strength is diminished by the caveat to welcome specifically "legitimate expressions of human personhood," which implies not actually welcoming everyone. Any small steps forward are overshadowed by glaring omissions and misplaced blame. I will focus on three: the absence of genuine listening, the mistaken claim that radical autonomy is

to blame for the existence of transgender and nonbinary people, and the lack of engagement with science.

The document is divided into three parts, based on actions suggested for both individuals and communities. The first of these is to listen "carefully to the needs of the other, combined with an understanding of the true diversity of conditions." Despite this objective, one of the greatest failures of this document is the absence of true listening, except to "cultural events of recent decades," and then only filtered through the perspective of the Congregation for Catholic Education.

"Listening" here consists of describing schools of thought that deny the givenness of our sex and therefore our gender identity, thereby eroding the biological basis of the family in favor of "a vision of the family that is purely contractual and voluntary." Such a claim assumes that gender theory aims to dissolve all differences among persons, which is simply not true. "Listening" without actually hearing the stories of transgender and nonbinary persons yields the mistaken conclusion that confused concepts of individual freedom, free self-determination and radical autonomy are to blame for the existence of transgender and nonbinary persons.

Genuine listening requires meeting transgender and nonbinary people where they are, hearing their stories, struggles and experiences of God, understanding their journeys as best we can and being open to being formed by these encounters. The church must engage lived experiences along with scripture, tradition and reason. After all, each of these sources depends on and exists because of lived experiences.

The absence of genuine listening leads to the erroneous conclusion that the goal of "gender theory" is a society without sexual differences and that a false sense of freedom is to blame. "A confused concept of freedom in the realm of feelings and wants, or momentary desires provoked by emotional impulses and the will of the individual" are cited as the cause of gender nonconformity.

Catholicism has long held, and rightly so, that freedom is not limitless autonomy but rather is linked with and dependent on truth and other values, such as fidelity, goodness and relationality. The "Pastoral Constitution on the



It is unjust to accuse transgender and nonbinary people of an abuse of freedom without having listened to them.

Church in the Modern World” asserts that freedom is perverse when it is used as a “license for doing whatever [one] pleases,” in contrast to “authentic freedom...[which] is an exceptional sign of the divine image in man.” Human dignity necessitates that persons “act according to a knowing and free choice that is personally motivated and prompted from within, not under blind internal impulse nor by mere external pressure.” Genuine freedom is freedom for the good and the just, and the choice to do evil is an abuse of freedom.

In “The Joy of Love,” Pope Francis shares these same concerns about limitless autonomy, but he also equates authentic freedom with an “openness to what is good, true and beautiful, or our God-given ability to respond to his grace at work deep in our hearts.” I share the church’s concern about freedom that ignores our relationality and the flourishing of all, but this concern is misplaced with respect to transgender people and their supporters.

Moreover, it is unfair and unjust to accuse transgender and nonbinary people of an abuse of freedom without having listened to them. Transgender individuals describe feeling relief and affirmation as well as a sense that they are no longer fighting but rather following God’s will. This is not the careless, reckless autonomy described in “Male and Female He Created Them,” nor are these decisions about gender identity made lightly. These are decisions of conscience.

Third, the document asserts the inseparability of sex and gender and an inflexible understanding of “biological

sex” that ignores the diversity and complexity of human beings. The document states that a “person’s sex is a structural determinant of male or female identity,” as if these are universal identities with stable characteristics, such as “women’s capacity for the other” and women’s central role in education.

The church ought to listen also to the science that tells us that a person’s sex is more complicated than what is indicated by external genitalia and X and Y chromosomes. Sex traits are complex and nonbinary, and include genes, chromosomes, hormones, external primary sex characteristics, secondary sex characteristics and more. These traits certainly have something to do with one’s gender but in much more complicated ways than the document conveys.

Transgender and nonbinary persons and proponents of gender theory are not trying to negate difference. Rather, they are revealing to us that difference is messier than any binary can reflect. The differing gifts and qualities that each person brings to relationships are essential, but surely our biological features and sex characteristics are not the most important thing about us.

Time and again, biology is treated as the primary measure of just relationships. Sex and gender are not as straightforward as implied in this document. The church would do well to engage scientists, anthropologists and sociologists, who can provide necessary insights, and to consider that biology is only one piece of human relationality.

These next steps require all members of the church to proceed with humility and a willingness to listen and learn, one from the other.

Elizabeth Sweeny Block is an associate professor of Christian ethics at Saint Louis University. She is writing a book on conscience, moral agency and social sin.



Abigail Favale,
University of Notre Dame

THE TRUTH BEYOND OURSELVES

Look to Scripture and tradition

Professor Sweeny Block and I have differing assessments of the document from the Congregation for Catholic Education—but we do have points of commonality, such as the need to listen to experiences of gender variance, as well as to science. We follow these points to different conclusions, however, so I would like to use this response as an opportunity to explore why.

Professor Sweeny Block criticizes the C.C.E. document for focusing on “theories and beliefs” about gender, rather than the “lived experiences” of persons. This bifurcation overlooks the fact that our experiences are refracted through the cultural frameworks on offer. This is something that gender theory gets right. Gender non-conformity is not new—just look at the saints, how often they thwarted convention—but the concept of subjective “gender identity” and a medicalized approach to gender incongruence are both historically novel, part of a recently emergent paradigm that has come to profoundly shape our self-perceptions.

True accompaniment requires listening to both lived experiences and the frameworks that filter them. I agree with Professor Sweeny Block that the church needs to engage the dimension of personal experience along with Scripture, tradition and reason. Where perhaps we diverge is that I would not place all of these at the same level of authority. Every conscience, every human heart, needs formation. We should be formed according to God’s self-revelation, not vice versa. This is where I part ways from the gender theorists: Cultural frameworks can shape our perceptions of reality, yes, but reality nonetheless exists. There is a ground of truth beyond ourselves, and there are good and bad frameworks of interpretation.

Professor Sweeny Block is correct that the goal of gender theory is not the dissolution of difference. More precisely—and the C.C.E. document recognizes this—gender theory is a project of denaturalization. The goal is to unmask what we commonly think of as natural and reveal it as always already social. In second-wave feminist theory, this happened with the norms and behaviors associated with sex, and often rightly so. Then, through the third-wave innovations of scholars like Judith Butler, this happened with sex itself. The sex binary, upon which the existence of our species depends, is now regarded as a social fiction rather than natural.

Professor Sweeny Block invokes the now common characterization of sex as a smattering of discrete and variable characteristics—a distortion that overlooks the fact that these characteristics are unambiguously arranged according to two distinct procreative modalities in 99.98 percent of the population. Some sexual characteristics fall along a spectrum, that is true. But sex as the totalizing structure of an organism is binary, and that is true for all sexually reproducing species. The cultural norms attached to sex are variable. Sex itself is remarkably stable. The C.C.E. document could have elaborated on this point more clearly, but it does correctly describe sex as a “structural determinant,” emphasizing the need to regard the totalizing structure of the body as a whole, not characteristics in isolation.

This fragmentary understanding of sex is itself, I would argue, already filtered through gender theory’s project of denaturalization. “Listening to science” and “listening to experience” cannot be neatly separated from an analysis of the ideas that are implicitly, and always, mediating our narratives of self-understanding.

Abigail Favale



REVISITING CATHOLIC ANTHROPOLOGY

Knowledge begins with experience

Abigail Favale offers a very optimistic read of “Male and Female He Created Them,” made possible in part by connections she makes between this document and the writings of Pope Francis and his two predecessors.

But in order for Dr. Favale to see the good in this Vatican document, she necessarily turns away from the words of “Male and Female He Created Them.” Indeed, there is some good happening in the church. For instance, Pope Francis has met with transgender persons four times in recent months. In a letter to James Martin, S.J., about Father Martin’s outreach to L.G.B.T. communities, Francis encouraged a “culture of encounter,” which “enriches us with differences.” However, it remains difficult for me to see this kind of encounter or appreciation for differences present in the Congregation for Catholic Education’s document.

Dr. Favale identifies opposing realities that the church must preserve. First, there is a difference between “the worldview of gender theory” and “a Catholic understanding of reality.” Additionally, the rejection of the framework of gender theory and certain ideas is distinct from the rejection of persons, which is never appropriate.

I appreciate Dr. Favale’s concern for persons with varied experiences, something not taken seriously in “Male and Female He Created Them,” and her pushback against rigid stereotypes. Yet the “Catholic way of seeing,” which did not arise from nowhere and has been influenced by contexts and cultures, can and ought to continue to be informed by experiences and in dialogue with secular theories.

Moreover, ideas have real consequences, and they can harm and exclude. Dr. Favale suggests more encounters between priests and transgender or gender-questioning parishioners—a very important step—but ideas matter to how people see themselves and how welcome they feel. It is hard to imagine feeling genuinely invited into dialogue on the heels of a homily that presents a framework that dis-

counts a person’s lived reality.

Instead of asking transgender persons to meet on our terms and fit into our paradigms, could we do more to take seriously their realities? Could the church step out of its comfort zone? Could the church adopt a genuine posture of humility and an openness to learning?

Theologians who take gender theory seriously can still do so through a theological lens. We can learn from gender theory and still reject the idea that bodies, sex and gender are unimportant or that gender should be eradicated. The Anglican theologian Sarah Coakley has something to teach us when she rightly warns that applications of gender theory can be distorted and potentially sinful, and yet theology that fails to make critical and discerning use of social science is far removed from “actual lived religion.” As I noted in my opening remarks (Page 39), embodied difference matters, but difference need not be reduced to the male/female gender binary.

The givenness of the created order, that it is a gift from God, is not rejected when one takes the concerns and lives of transgender persons seriously. Indeed, transgender bodies are gifts from God.

However, the givenness of creation does not mean that gender, or human nature more broadly, is static, nor is the givenness of creation or human flourishing limited to physical bodies, important as they are.

Moreover, what is natural and given cannot be understood in the abstract but must necessarily attend to and draw from the experiences of all, including transgender persons. St. Thomas Aquinas recognized that knowledge begins with experience. The ends or purposes of creation may be generally known, but practical experiences—in conversation with Scripture and tradition—reveal still more information about the human and what constitutes human flourishing. We need an anthropology, but we also need to question Catholic anthropological claims about human nature and discern whether they continue to hold true.

The laity and clergy alike do need to walk alongside transgender, nonbinary and gender-questioning persons, but our steps ought to be less firm and more informed by our own humility.

Elizabeth Sweeny Block



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Walking Together

Creating a culture of hospitality through pilgrimage

By Renée Roden

Pope Francis is not the only Catholic making penitential pilgrimages this year. In several cities in the United States, hundreds of pilgrims have participated in Catholic walking pilgrimages aimed at raising awareness of the cause of racial justice. Modern Catholic Pilgrim, the company organizing these pilgrimages, aims to reform the culture of the American Church—and even secular society—through the spiritual practices of hospitality and pilgrimage.

In May, the non-profit and the College of St. Benedict and St. John's University in Collegeville, Minn., hosted the first week-long Walking Together pilgrimage. A group of seven college students walked 86 miles across central Minnesota on a pilgrimage to George Floyd Square. In September, in Louisville, Ky., where police killed Breonna Taylor on March 13, 2020, pilgrims walked the third annual pilgrimage for racial justice. In October, a group of pilgrims in Minneapolis held vigil and visited sacred sites to commemorate the genocide of Native Americans, invoking the intercession of Servant of God Black Elk and St. Kateri Tekakwitha. And in November, on the feast of St. Martin de Porres, another pilgrimage group will gather in Memphis for the second year in a row to walk and pray for racial justice.

But this movement of walking pilgrimages began with just one pilgrim.

Will Peterson, 30, the founder of Modern Catholic Pilgrim, made his first pilgrimage on a whim. He was a rising junior at the University of Notre Dame, interning in Chicago during the summer of 2012. After work one Friday, he took a train to Ottumwa, Iowa, about 300 miles west. Mr. Peterson spent that first night in Iowa sleeping under a tree. He called his journey a “proto-pilgrimage” because he didn’t have a prayer intention or clear destination. But he knew his purpose: practicing trust. “Like in Matthew—why do we worry, he clothes the lilies of the fields, he feeds the birds—I just wanted to trust God that this will be a good experience,” he said.

The next night, it looked like rain. Mr. Peterson attend-



Pilgrims—including Courtney Huiras, second from left, Pat Martin, third from left, and Rozenia Fuller, center—in George Floyd Square in Minneapolis, Minn., at the conclusion of the first multi-day Walking Together pilgrimage.

ed a Saturday night vigil Mass, staying afterward to pray for several hours in front of the tabernacle. As he prayed, the priest let him be and left, locking the doors for the night. Mr. Peterson slept on a pew and took the train back to Chicago the next day.

Over the next year, Mr. Peterson read texts at Notre Dame that deepened his faith, including G. K. Chesterton's biography of St. Francis of Assisi and the writings of Dorothy Day. These saints' embrace of the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience and their dedication to the biblical practice of hospitality had convinced him that trust in God and biblical hospitality were “core aspects of the faith.”

During spring break in his senior year, Mr. Peterson took a train to Rugby, N.D., where he began his second attempt at pilgrimage. He asked the pastor at the local church if he could stay for three days. “I wanted to explore whether or not we had a biblically hospitable church in the United States,” he said. He spent three days in Rugby and became something of a local pilgrim celebrity.

The experience was so fulfilling that he thought others might want to participate in something similar. Thus Modern Catholic Pilgrim was born. Mr. Peterson and his colleagues seek to instill the practice of geographical pilgrimage in the United States in conjunction with the art of hospitality. “We believe that through geographic pilgrimage and biblical hospitality, we might be able to transform our American society,” said Mr. Peterson. They host a dozen or so pilgrimages each year, and Mr. Peterson helps coordinate hospitality for the pilgrimage groups with local hosts.

Mr. Peterson and his wife live in the Twin Cities, which became the epicenter of a renewed conversation about ra-



Credit: Brian Mogren

cial justice after a Minneapolis police officer killed George Floyd on May 25, 2020. Mr. Peterson began to think about how this spiritual practice of pilgrimage that meant so much to him could be a means to foster racial reconciliation.

Last fall, Mr. Peterson approached Patrick Martin, the assistant director of campus ministry at St. John's University in St. Cloud, Minn., to see if the college would be interested in a pilgrimage for racial justice that would start at the university and end at George Floyd Square. From the first conversation, he found a believer.

"When Will approached me, I was like, this is perfect," said Mr. Martin over Zoom. St. John's campus ministry had never offered a trekking pilgrimage before. They had led hikes out to the Stella Maris chapel near the abbey on campus—a favorite spot of monastic visitors like Thomas Merton, O.C.S.O. "But we'd done nothing of this kind, where we just hoofed it for the whole week," Mr. Martin said. He led seven college students on an 86-mile walk across central Minnesota, most of it following a new bike path called the Mississippi Regional Trail.

For most of those seven college pilgrims, the concept of a walking pilgrimage was unfamiliar. And most of them had never walked nearly as much as they did that week in May. In addition to spiritual formation in small group meetings, the pilgrims were supposed to prepare physically for the trek—their longest day of walking was 19 miles. But as busy college students, few had the time to train.

They began on Monday, May 9, at St. John's University—during a tornado warning. Courtney Huiras was one of the first students to show up. She said she sat outside in the rain with another pilgrim for several minutes until the rest of the group showed up.

Huiras, a sophomore at St. Benedict's, the sister col-

lege of St. John's, said that she first learned about the pilgrimage this past January online, and thought to herself, "There's no way I'm going to do that"; 80 miles of walking sounded too daunting. But Pat Martin kept encouraging her to join, and she eventually said yes.

Along the route, they stayed at four different homes of Catholic parishioners and at a Lutheran parish. The pilgrims said their journey, and the final destination of George Floyd Square, sparked a lot of conversations about racial justice with their hosts.

Mr. Peterson said one of Modern Catholic Pilgrim's goals is to "make pilgrimage accessible." International pilgrimage, Mr. Peterson said, "is set up for the 1 percent who can fly to Rome or the Holy Land or take a month off to do the Camino de Santiago." So he hopes his organization lends support to local groups to build a culture of pilgrimage here in the United States—and, as Mr. Peterson noted, to create a culture of hospitality that enriches both host and guest. Mr. Peterson has been building an online "hospitality network" on Modern Catholic Pilgrim's site to help connect pilgrims to potential hosts, even when the company cannot broker the connection directly.

In the months leading up to the pilgrimage in May, Mr. Peterson asked Catholic parishes along the pilgrimage route to find families who might be able to host large groups of pilgrims. He said a few priests were unwilling or unsure of how to make the ask to their parishioners or were concerned about liability. But, he said, most parishes were excited about the chance to support young people on the pilgrimage and were accepting of their nontraditional destination of George Floyd Square. Mr. Martin said the journey was the first time he had "owned the identity of a pilgrim."

Continued on Page 48

American Catholics Can Help End the Violence and Abuse of Human Trafficking

Sadly, human trafficking continues to thrive in the poorest parts of the world. That is because in impoverished communities, young people who are hungry, are isolated and fear for their future become easy prey for criminals who deceptively promise them a path to a better life.

Once a child is drawn into these lies, the trap is sprung and all pretense is dropped. At that point, the child becomes little more than a captive commodity to be sold on the streets for the pleasure of sexual predators. Sometimes, they are even sent thousands of miles away, making it almost impossible for them to reunite with their families.

“It’s a heartbreaking situation and one we in the Catholic Church need to address. Fortunately, there are missions we can support that have taken on that mission of mercy. One of the ministries involved in that work is the Laura Vicuna Foundation in the Philippines,” said James Cavnar, president of Cross Catholic Outreach, one of the leading Catholic charities working to end poverty in the developing world. “The wonderful sister who leads their mission has developed an incredible outreach to protect and nurture young people who might be susceptible to the human trafficker’s lies.”

In addition to offering abused girls a safe home, educational opportunities and counseling services at the Foundation’s center, Sister Marivic also sends out a mobile Child Protection Clinic to reach young people in the community with a program that offers



A child plays under a desolate bridge. Conditions like these eventually rob young people of hope, making them susceptible to traffickers who promise a better life.



Visiting Sister Eloisa from Tacloban (far left) is shown the “Child Protection Clinic” by Sister Marivic, the managing director at the Laura Vicuna Foundation.

them love, support and hope.

Cavnar continued, “The mobile clinic and Sr. Marivic’s team of roving support staff take a very proactive approach. They aren’t waiting for young people to come to them. They’re bringing a light into the darkness and helping children who may not otherwise have heard the gospel of hope understand their potential in the eyes of God. Their slogan for the program is ‘building a culture of protection for children’ and they are doing an incredible job.”

Because the Laura Vicuna Foundation operates on a meager budget, Cavnar is doing what he can to empower their ministries through Cross Catholic Outreach, and he says many American Catholics have stepped forward to support the work as well.

“I have been very encouraged to see so many American Catholics involved in this work of mercy — this effort to end the influence human traffickers have on vulnerable children,” he said. “They understand the terrible threat these sexual predators represent, and they want to do everything they can to protect the boys and girls at risk.”

For the dedicated religious sisters running

the Foundation, this help couldn’t be coming at a better time, according to Cavnar. Economic downturns increase the suffering of the poor and can push desperate parents and children to consider extreme measures.

“The Church must act now. We need to rise up and show these struggling families and children that there is hope — that there is a better way,” Cavnar said. “If we don’t, more innocent boys and girls will become the prey of these insidious human traffickers, and some will be lost forever to that depraved world of sin.”

Readers interested in supporting Cross Catholic Outreach’s many relief programs to help the poor can contribute through the ministry brochure inserted in this issue or send tax-deductible gifts to: Cross Catholic Outreach, Dept. AC02205, PO Box 97168, Washington, DC 20090-7168. The ministry has a special need for partners willing to make gifts on a monthly basis. Use the inserted brochure to become a Mission Partner or write “Monthly Mission Partner” on mailed checks to be contacted about setting up those arrangements.

By Addressing Poverty in Developing Countries, Catholics Reduce Risks Posed by Human Trafficking

While serving the poor in developing countries, the Catholic Church often encounters problems so horrific they are hard to discuss. Human trafficking is one of those issues. It is almost impossible for us to comprehend how an innocent boy or girl could be used by an evil person or criminal group to satisfy another's sinful lusts.

Still, as hard as it is to accept, human trafficking is real, and since that is the case, the Church and faith-filled Catholics should be doing everything they can to end its terrible spread and to protect its vulnerable victims.

One of the Catholic ministries involved in that important work is Cross Catholic Outreach. Founded more than 20 years ago to support Church-based missions around the globe, Cross Catholic Outreach has made it a point to mobilize concerned Catholics in the U.S. to help end human trafficking and the threat it poses to young people, particularly children living in the world's poorest communities. To achieve that goal, it begins with a focus on poverty relief.

"When you dig deeply into the root causes of human trafficking or prostitution in countries like Haiti, Guatemala or the Philippines, you discover that extreme poverty is often the reason those horrible practices exist and spread. Young girls and boys are hungry, vulnerable and hopeless, so when unscrupulous people approach them with promises of a better life, they can easily be led astray," explained James Cavnar, president of Cross Catholic Outreach. "That is one of the reasons our ministry supports feeding centers, educational programs and



Poverty in some areas of the Philippines is so severe that families there resort to living under bridges in communities of tiny homes. In the photo below, a young boy has entered one of the tiny crawl spaces in a warren of shanties. Poverty on this extreme scale breeds hopelessness in children, making them more susceptible to the lure of sex traffickers.

missions that restore hope to young people. When children understand God loves them and has a plan for their lives, the human traffickers lose their power to lure them in, control them and corrupt them."

The Church, Cavnar said, should be light in the darkness and work toward preventive solutions.

"The police and government agencies have a role too — to take on the gangs and rescue children from dangerous situations — and they are properly trained and equipped to achieve those objectives. We pray for their safety and success, but as the Church, our focus should be on keeping children from ever entering that degrading world of sin. That is our role, and American Catholics can have a big impact by supporting that mission," Cavnar said. "For example, we and our donors do what we can to empower the Laura Vicuna Foundation in the Philippines. It offers hope to desperate and searching young people by reducing poverty in their

communities and by offering educational and spiritual guidance to children." (See related story on the opposite page.)

As Cavnar sees it, these ministries help break the power and control of human traffickers by offering alternative pathways to self-worth and hope.

"The children blessed in this way start on a better and healthier journey through life. They feel valued and their self-confidence grows," he said. "Once young people come to know God, the siren song of the traffickers loses its power. These boys and girls realize they can depend on the Church, the greater Catholic community and each other. It doesn't mean their lives become easy or that they don't still face trials, but now they have a place to take their troubles and people to speak with who will help them overcome their challenges. These are the kinds of outreaches American Catholics should support if they want to end the influence of human traffickers."



How to Help

To fund Cross Catholic Outreach's effort to help the poor worldwide, use the postage-paid brochure inserted in this newspaper, or mail your gift to Cross Catholic Outreach, Dept. AC02205, PO Box 97168, Washington, DC 20090-7168. The brochure also includes instructions on becoming a Mission Partner and making a regular monthly donation to this cause.

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We believe that through geographic pilgrimage and biblical hospitality, we might be able to transform our American society.

When they reached Minneapolis that Saturday, May 14, the college pilgrims stayed at the St. Jane House, a house of hospitality run by the Visitation Sisters in North Minneapolis. The Rev. Rozenia Fuller, one of the pastors in the community who ministers at George Floyd Square, met them for dinner that night, and witnessed the strong community they had built together on the road.

Trained at Princeton Divinity School, Rev. Fuller is a Baptist minister who has maintained a ministry of presence at the square for the past two years. Rev. Fuller said that the George Floyd Square Memorial, like Golgotha, is a crime scene. And that it is a sacred place, because “the community there has decided that love is central—that they will center themselves around love,” he said by phone.

“It’s a space of power. It’s a space of pain and it’s a space of promise,” she added.

As happens at traditional pilgrimage sites, Rev. Fuller has encountered pilgrims and visitors from all over the world in George Floyd Square.

“What happens on 38th and Chicago affects folks so much in France that they come here. Folks come in and almost miss their flights just to go to George Floyd Square, even just for 10 minutes,” Rev. Fuller said.

Each of these Walking Together pilgrimages invokes the patronage of Servant of God Sister Thea Bowman. Speaking to the U.S. bishops’ conference in 1989, Sister Bowman shared her experience as a Black Catholic woman in the United States and called for the church to stand with her. “Today we’re called to walk together in a new way toward that Land of Promise and to celebrate who we are,” she said in her address.

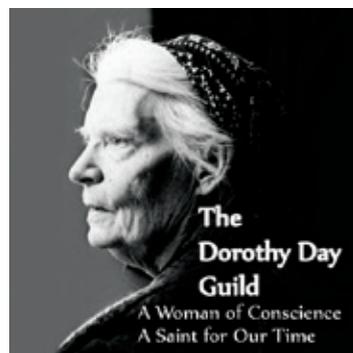
Janice Mulligan, the associate director in the Office of Multicultural Ministry at the Archdiocese of Louisville, finds that these pilgrimages offer a space for literal walking together and for learning about how to accompany each other better. Ms. Mulligan, who focuses much of her work on African American ministries, said that Mr. Peterson’s

invitation to co-sponsor a pilgrimage in the fall of 2020 resonated with their goal of giving Black Catholics another way to engage in this discussion of racial justice. “His whole premise about biblical hospitality resonated with what was going on and the kind of things we were trying to do,” Ms. Mulligan said.

Ms. Mulligan said the Walking Together pilgrimages are powerful because they take a familiar concept—pilgrimage—and reimagine it in the contemporary context of a polarized and divided American society. And, in its reimagining, pilgrimage helps ground participants in their communities, and find ways through division. “I like the way we can come together, walk together and find holy places in our local community,” Ms. Mulligan said. “These experiences are helping people to better understand the scope of where racism is touching various parts of our communities, and specifically our church,” she said.

Renée Darline Roden holds a B.A. and M.T.S. in theology from the University of Notre Dame and an M.S. in journalism from Columbia University. She lives at St. Francis Catholic Worker House in Chicago.

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100-Word Faith Stories

(Very) short essays about
unexpectedly experiencing
God in the world today

By **America** readers

God is in all things. But we don't always expect to feel God's presence in a particular moment or place. We asked readers to share these stories of surprising moments of faith and grace in no more than 100 words. These (very) short essays about unexpectedly experiencing God in the world today include feelings of joy, sadness, laughter, anger and anything in between. They demonstrate the many ways in which God is with us, if only we would take the time to notice.

Two parents and four boys make a small house feel like a sardine tin packed with firecrackers. I had my eye on a larger fixer-upper nearby. But despite its apparent practicality and my eagerness, my husband wasn't enthused. I suggested a quick attempt at discernment: Pray one Hail Mary while imagining we had settled on each choice, buy or stay.

We both felt God's presence. The "Stay" prayer brought unwelcome but undeniable inner peace. "Buy" brought anxiety rather than excitement. I could only respond, "Thy will be done." Our house is cramped and noisy, but we'll stay for now.

Jessica Carney
Ardmore, Pa

My sons and I were enjoying the wave pool at our local amusement park on a beautiful sunny day. There was the usual crowd of people—of different ages, from different neighborhoods and cultures—all enjoying the pool. I closed my eyes and was suddenly aware of the joyous cacophony. All the voices, screams and laughter of my siblings, my fellow children of God. I was awe-

struck, and with my eyes still shut, I smiled broadly, and I thanked God for that sudden grace of connection and awareness.

Matthew Whelehan
Rochester, N.Y.

My husband is a stroke survivor; I'm his caregiver. Ron has balance issues, garbled speech and swallowing difficulties. Once the primary breadwinner, Ron's now on SSDI. I struggle to bring in money while handling the numerous responsibilities of caring for my husband and household.

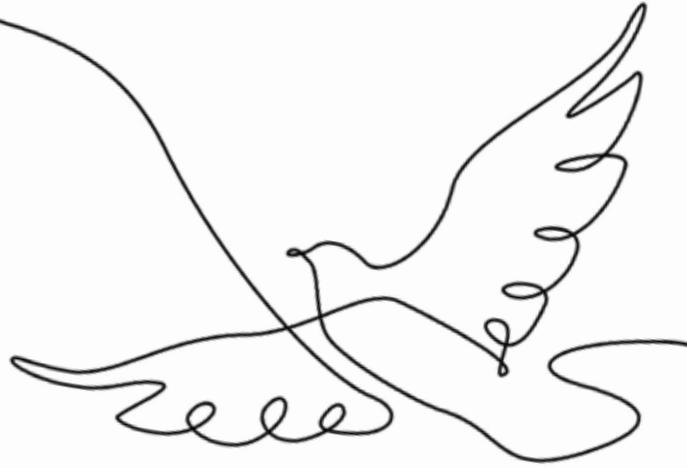
Earlier today I read the abandonment prayer of the newly canonized St. Charles de Foucauld: "Father, I abandon myself into your hands; do with me what you will. I am ready for all, I accept all. Let only your will be done in me, and in all your creatures."

I am now at peace.

Jerilyn Burgess
North Olmsted, Ohio

At my first holy Communion, when I was 7 in 1958, I came up to the altar and was so small I had to stand rather than kneel at the rail. The priest approached and put the host on my tongue. I felt drawn out of myself, forgetting where I was, feeling a sense of presence. It was like being a mini Samuel, and I said to the Lord, "Speak, for your servant is listening." My love for the Eucharist continues to this day.

William Eagan, S.J.
Weston, Mass.



I invited my all-white classmates to Mass at my Black Catholic parish. During Mass, my friend nudged me, “Lee, we’re the only white people here.” I responded, “Frank, how do you think...” but before I could finish my statement, Frank added, “Lee, I never thought about you that way.” The experience helped him to see my struggles as the only Black kid in our classes. We had just had a class that taught we were made in the image and likeness of God. We saw that in one another more clearly now.

Lee Baker
New Orleans, La.

As I walked a labyrinth, I couldn’t shake the image of playing hide and seek with God. Shrubs around the path made me alternately feel hidden and then exposed. I know God is always there waiting for me, but I often “hide.” I fear I haven’t done enough, or I’m not good enough to earn God’s love. But those doubts come from me, not God. Although I may think I’m hiding, God sees and loves me. When I embrace God’s unconditional love, I will grow into the person he created me to be.

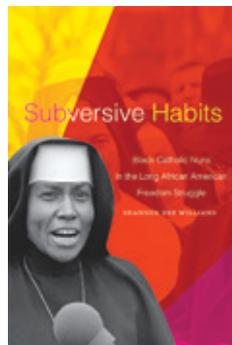
Cathy Cunningham
Framingham, Mass.

Deep in grief as I grappled with my husband’s determination to divorce, God felt absent, my faith rocked. My friend, Sister Noreen, told me to read the Bible. I mocked her. Unfazed, she insisted: “Open it at random. What have you got to lose?” On March 19, as I opened a newly purchased Bible, I cried: “God where are you?!” My eyes fell upon Jer 29:11. “For I know the plans....” I can still feel the jolt that coursed through my body at that moment—in shock and joy—the first of many such moments since then.

Mary Margaret Cannon
Washington, D.C.

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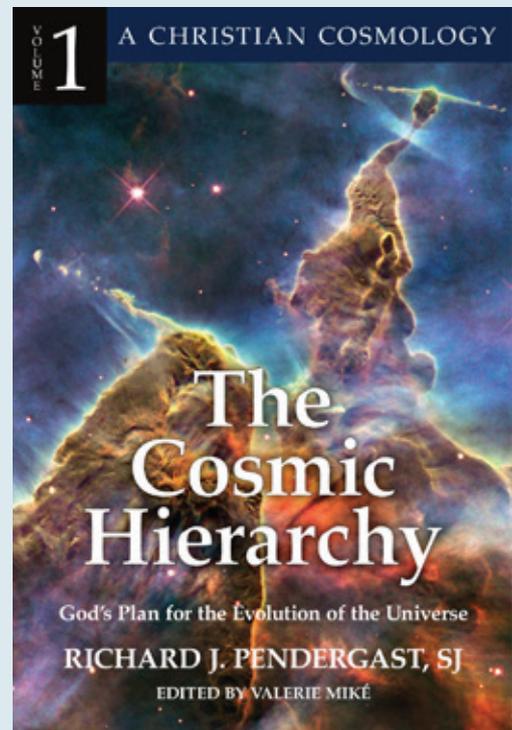
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Kurt Vonnegut Would Still Be Amused

By Christopher Sandford

The novelist Kurt Vonnegut, whose birth centenary we celebrate in November, was many things during his 84 years on earth: war veteran, trained mechanical engineer, crime reporter, corporate publicist, used car salesman. But perhaps his greatest contribution to humanity, and the quality that runs as the throughline of his public career, was the way he relentlessly mocked the presumptions of the ruling elite.

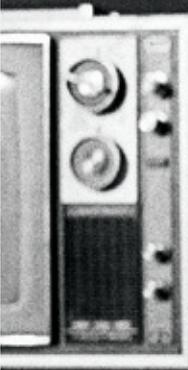
The absolute refusal to accept handed-down truths—whether in politics, science, religion or art—remains the constant in Vonnegut’s life and work. He was not the sort of man who believed that anyone should impose his or her concept of the guardrails defining the limits of acceptable behavior on anyone else.

Here is Vonnegut from his debut novel, 1952’s *Player Piano*:

The sovereignty of the United States resides in the people, not in the machines, and it’s the people’s to take back if they so wish. The machines...have exceeded the personal sovereignty willingly surrendered to them by the American people... for the good government. Machines and organizations and pursuit of efficiency have robbed the American people of liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Or from the same book: “Out on the edge you see all kinds of things you can’t see from the center.... Big, undreamed-of things. The people on the edge see them first.”

And, perhaps most apropos, the author himself, speaking in 1986 directly to a U.S. Senate subcommittee debating whether to bar foreign visitors whose views might be uncongenial to the government:



Kurt Vonnegut had a wry perspective on almost all the human follies he witnessed during his lifetime.

All citizens are entitled to hear and state any idea anyone from anywhere may care to express. And where did I get the notion that there was such an incredible entitlement? I got it from the junior civics course that was given in the seventh grade at Public School 35 in Indianapolis.

Vonnegut had a wry perspective on almost all the human follies he witnessed during his lifetime (1922-2007), and I sometimes wonder what he might have made of the accordion-style cycle of lockdowns and other restraints imposed on us these past few years. Would he have joined the likes of Neil Young and others of the generation of free love and open expression in becoming the sort of shrill, get-with-the-program authoritarian chorus they once warned us about? The answer is: One doubts it, but of course we can never know.

‘Be Honorable’

Both in a spirit of tribute to Vonnegut’s centenary and for the sheer pleasure of doing so, I recently reread all 14 of the novels he published in his lifetime. As is well known, his work was quite eclectic. There are authors whose last book



AP Photo/Marty Reichenthal

is very like their first. Having learned their trade, mastered it for once and all, they practice it with little variation to the very end. Vonnegut was a very different kettle of fish, moving from slightly dotty time-traveling science fiction to pity-of-it-all war horror and back again, all leavened by exasperated satire of the sort of “collective make-believes” that make the world go round, the prime examples being, to Vonnegut’s mind, organized religion and mainstream politics. Even the most defensible of them are what he calls “foma,” the harmless untruths that render life bearable.

You could perhaps make a distinction between Vonnegut’s earlier work, culminating in 1969’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* (dealing with the Allied fire-bombing of Dresden of February 1945, which Vonnegut, as an American soldier imprisoned by the Germans, was there to witness), relying on ingeniously wrought metaphors and parables as a narrative scaffold, and the last 30 years or so, where he largely abandoned this fictional effort in favor of informal, often acute, occasionally fortune cookie-like, philosophizing on the human condition.

Is there a common theme to the Vonnegut oeuvre? If so, perhaps it is that he was furious with humanity and disgusted by most authority but preferred to vent his spleen

in satirical and quite often surrealistic terms, rather than to shout it from the rooftops. He did not see much of a future for the human race, so his advice was palliative rather than prescriptive. “Sing in the shower,” he urged in *A Man Without a Country*. “Dance to the radio. Tell stories. Write a poem to a friend, even a lousy poem. Do it as well as you can. You will get an enormous reward. You will have created something.” Life, to Vonnegut, was a hard thing to get through, but one had to make the effort. Or, more instructively, there was this: “If there’s anything they hate, it’s a wise human. So be one anyway. Save our lives and your own. Be honorable.”

How did Vonnegut choose to broadcast his essential message to humanity? Again, his work shuns the lure of the pigeonhole, though something like “hallucinogenic science fiction, tethered to rage at the corruption of American values” might come close. Vonnegut himself described his core mission in life as propagating a “Christ-loving atheism.” He went about this in his own distinctive way. Take, for instance, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which more than 50 years after its publication still remains the best (or certainly best-known) delineation of his basic style, fizzing with ideas to the point of genius or idiocy, which solidified the



We can glimpse in Vonnegut some of Mark Twain's disenchanted idealism and H. L. Mencken's world-weary irony.

Vonnegut legend.

It is the sort of thing no self-respecting creative writing instructor would ever condone. The novel violates most of the conventions of the form by telling the reader what will happen to each significant character and situation before he or she comes to read the scene. It's not exactly Agatha Christie, in other words, nor is it the standard peacenik fulmination of fury at the madness of war. It includes a lot of heavy weather of sadness, but no real thunderstorm of anger at the futility and the waste.

Vonnegut's book went through an unusually long gestation period—a quarter of a century separated the central event of the Dresden bombing and its literary depiction—and a number of false starts. Having finally settled on the autobiographical form, Vonnegut had the morbid good luck to see his book launched at a time of maximum public disenchantment with the Vietnam War. It resonated immediately.

The novel as a whole is a literary highwire act that involves, among other feats, the use of flashbacks, fast cuts and surrealistic detours behind a Hemingwayesque facade of short, declarative sentences; it also includes a sideshow of time travel and alien abductions, with fourth-wall-breaking cameo appearances by the author himself. At the opening of the book's last chapter, Vonnegut surfaces to tell the reader that it is now 1968 and Robert Kennedy was shot

two nights earlier. "Martin Luther King was shot a month ago. He died, too. So it goes."

Wellsprings

Where does Vonnegut rank today in the American literary pantheon? These matters are necessarily subjective, but perhaps his closest peer would be Joseph Heller, and more specifically the energetically sustained gallows humor of *Catch-22*. Both authors mined a basic lode of anti-war satire, with a rich seam of absurdism, but Heller was the more slapstick in his approach. His humor was of the pie-in-the-face school, Vonnegut's more arch and detached. If Heller was Jerry Lewis, then Vonnegut was Dean Martin.

Perhaps it is also worth noting that, in keeping with nearly all the best public humorists, Vonnegut led an essentially humor-free life. And perhaps this was, in turn, the wellspring of his art. Certainly his personal circumstances were almost satirically bleak. His once wealthy family was impoverished by the Great Depression, causing strain in his parents' marriage. His mother committed suicide. His older sister died of cancer a day after her husband was killed in a train wreck. And then of course there was the matter of his war service, and more specifically the Dresden ordeal, which he somehow survived only to be sent into the smoking ruins as prison labor in order to collect and burn the bodies of the victims.

So perhaps it is not surprising that Vonnegut's often superficially funny prose was shot through with a sense of despair at humanity's folly, and that this same essential gloom was never far removed from his work. A writer brought up on the spectacle of charred corpses is likely to have a different perspective on life than one weaned on the products of Walt Disney.

Vonnegut also felt that, for all the accolades and prizes, the literary establishment never took him as seriously as he thought they should. Perhaps they interpreted his faux-naïf style, love of science fiction and basic decency as being beneath serious study. Gore Vidal once declared Vonnegut to be "exceptionally imaginative," while Norman Mailer hailed him as "a marvelous writer with a style that remained undeniably and imperturbably his own." That other daring young man on the 1960s literary trapeze, Tom Wolfe, allowed that Vonnegut "could be extremely funny, but there was a vein of iron always underneath it which made him remarkable."

It is worth remembering, however, that all these words were spoken by way of eulogies, when, with a few notable exceptions, the notoriously venomous literary fraternity treat a fallen colleague with a respect as exaggerated as, a day or two earlier, it would have been astonishing. (Vidal had previously described the author of the "unreadable"

Slaughterhouse-Five as “the worst writer in America.”)

Set on the broader canvas of Western literature, we can glimpse in Vonnegut some of Mark Twain’s disenchanting idealism, and of H. L. Mencken’s world-weary irony, while there is surely something to Billy Pilgrim’s progress in *Slaughterhouse-Five* that recalls one of Samuel Beckett’s surrealistic clowns, shambling through a barren, bombed-out landscape, the human punchline of some cosmic joke of unfathomable cruelty. In terms of Vonnegut’s heirs and successors, there are the likes of John Kennedy Toole and his grand comic fugee *A Confederacy of Dunces*, the more picaresque end of Hunter S. Thompson’s work and the early novels of Paul Auster, among a host of lesser spawn.

Deft and Wry

So it goes. That was Kurt Vonnegut’s catchphrase, and he happened to use it in our first exchange of correspondence, around 1998, when the great author was in his mid-70s. I had sent him a fan letter, and he wrote back asking me if I might do him a small favor. I was living in Seattle, and Vonnegut wondered if I could supply him with one or two specific details about the local scenery for a story he was writing. “We scribes should stick together,” he added, after apologizing profusely for the imposition. Talk about flattering.

I was at least lucky enough to once see him up close. It was in 2003, and I had read that Vonnegut was appearing at a book event not in my native Seattle but several hundred miles away in Spokane. Vonnegut speaking almost anywhere struck me as well worth the time and effort of travel, and my ancient Toyota and I eventually made it across the Cascade Mountains to the lecture hall.

The author was then in his early 80s. He was a bit slow on his pins and used a walking cane, but still had an impressive cloud of fuzzy gray hair. Pall Mall cigarette in hand (“More tar than the average brand,” Vonnegut later announced proudly), he hobbled over to where I was standing in the middle of a small reception committee, and looked us up and down. “Got any drugs on you?” he asked us. Everyone shuffled around a bit uneasily. Vonnegut remained deadpan. “I’d settle for an aspirin,” he added, which someone produced for him.

After his speech, which was wryly funny and deviated significantly from the Bush administration’s concept of the “war on terror,” Vonnegut circulated around the room, trailing a slipstream of stale smoke and beaming affably to the small groups of fans who approached him. Seeing him slowly make his way from point A to B was a bit like watching the old Queen Mary, with a fleet of tug boats servicing the rumples, but still in his way majestic, corduroy-jacketed figure in our midst.



A Kurt Vonnegut self-portrait from the National Portrait Gallery

I finally got the chance to introduce myself. Vonnegut looked at me blankly for a moment, but then to my surprise suddenly leaned in and embraced me. “These things are my idea of hell,” he muttered in my ear, still managing to smile at his young admirers. Someone interrupted us to ask Vonnegut what advice he would give to an aspiring novelist. “Use a computer,” he said.

After that, we parted with assurances that we should keep in touch. My last memory is of seeing Vonnegut silhouetted in a doorway, a tiny figure with hair piled up as high as a guardsman’s fur cap. About six months later, he sent me a copy of his novel *The Sirens of Titan*, inscribed “Merry Christmas” over a deft little self-portrait and his signature, but that was as close as we came. Kurt Vonnegut, writer and humanist, died in April 2007, at the age of 84. So it goes.

Christopher Sandford is the author of many books, including, most recently, *Zeebrugge: The Greatest Raid of All (Casemate)*.

EPISTOLARY REFLECTIONS

It has to be said upfront that this is a very unlikely book. For one thing, it is a correspondence between two friends who are notable in their own fields while not being exactly household names. Jack Miles is probably the better-known to readers of America, mainly for his best-selling *God: A Biography*. Mark C. Taylor is a significant figure in philosophical and theological discourse, but not widely known beyond these academic specialties.

Their exchange, which took place over a mere nine months but stretches to well over 400 pages of text, has been edited down from an original 1,400 or so manuscript pages. And while it tells a familiar story about how we all reacted to the first months of the pandemic, the immediacy of the letter format is challenged by the fact that, two years later, a lot has changed; as a result, many of the comments both authors make understandably

seem quite dated. What was it, then, that made the case for publication?

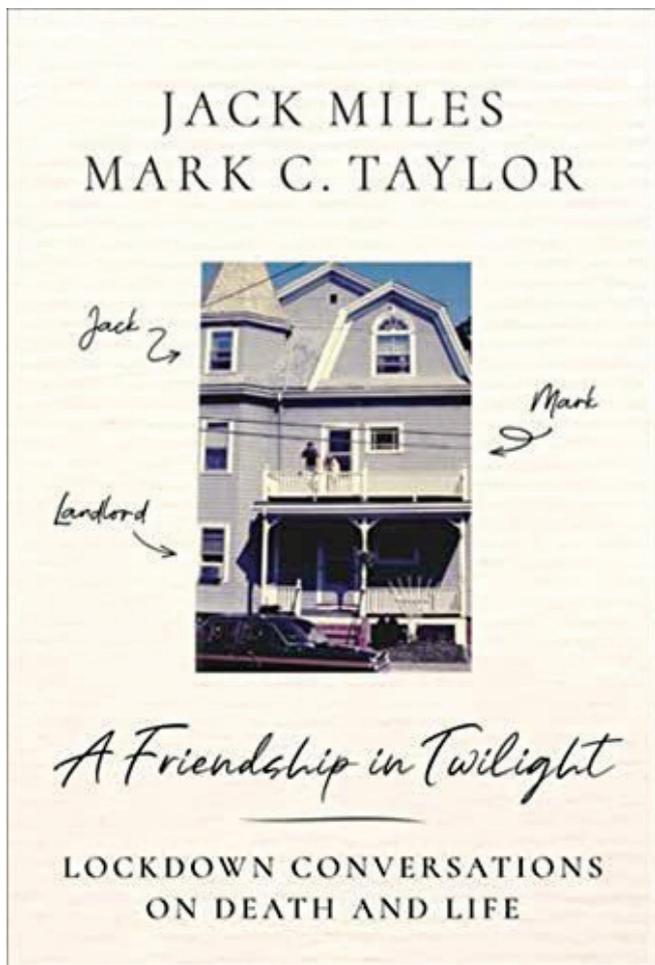
Certainly, it is not unreasonable to expect from these two distinguished authors and thinkers a lively and challenging set of reflections on living through the early months of the pandemic. Here, I have to confess to a little disappointment. Of course, their thoughts are sensitive and accurate; filled with the foreboding that was rightly current in the months before there was any vaccine, when we were all more or less locked down and daily seeing frightening tallies of the hospitalized and the dead. Surprisingly, there are few or no comments on the pandemic itself at which this reader at least stopped to think, “Wow, that was an amazing insight!” But there were many where I thought, “Yes indeed, exactly what I was thinking.”

Which only goes to show, I suppose, that great intellects with good pens can still be fairly pedestrian about matters that are not their specialty. To their credit, or that of the publisher, the title of the book points the reader in a different direction: *A Friendship in Twilight*. The pandemic’s early stages were real enough, sufficiently sobering for there to be conversations on death and life, particularly when the writers were well into their 70s. And if the reference to “twilight” seems just a tad maudlin, if not impossibly romantic, the focus on friendship hits the editorial nail on the head. This is really a book about friendship, not about the pandemic.

The true beauty of the book, then, is that while the early months of the pandemic are the background and occasion for the letters, the friendship they display is vastly more interesting. And while there are moments when the pandemic and the writers’ own health issues and age seem to steer the book toward the frankly morbid, there is a great deal to relish and cherish too. Care for one another and their respective families, exchange of ideas and reading recommendations, philosophical gossip and teetering around the transcendental together: All of these and more testify to the warmth of the relationship and, frankly, to the luxury of time to write at such length, an unintended consequence of the lockdown.

As for us readers, dipping in here and there seems to be best. Four hundred pages is very long, but a five-page bite in which the two of them exchange opinions about Niall Williams’s wonderful book, *This Is Happiness*, or an exchange on their respective tolerance level for country music is just enough to gnaw on for one day. Among my own favorites is Miles’s letter full of thoughts on Eastern religion, ending with Protagoras and pork chops.

The writers’ growing recognition of the interrelation-



Columbia University Press
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ships between the pandemic and the efforts of American political leadership to deny and then obfuscate its impact becomes a secondary theme of the letter exchange. Bit by bit, the run-up to the presidential election begins to play a larger role in their reflections, picking up speed with the electoral defeat of Donald J. Trump and all that followed. There are, the authors think, two problems, different in setting but related in form. As they say in their introduction, “Our world is ablaze with a virus that is both biological and political.”

Having recognized this complicated situation, they seem to have seen the need to pay rather more attention to the political toward the end of the book. The final section, entitled “Epiphany,” caps reflections on the November 2020 elections with a page or two, both elegiac and hopeful, occasioned by the events of Jan. 6, 2021. Here once again they give voice to thoughts that are not unusual, but better expressed than most of us could do, and, most importantly, salted by 50 years of friendship.

Miles’s last words suggest the perils of the pandemic “will grow worse before they grow better.” He ends in hope, however, based “on the power of truth.” Taylor’s conclusions blend Johnny Cash and Samuel Beckett—surely a rare pairing. Like Beckett, Taylor thinks, he will “go on.” For his students and his children and grandchildren, for sure, but also for his friend.

We have written this together, Taylor writes: “I wager our conversation will continue to change us after one of us, perhaps both of us dies.” Miles is the more overtly religious in outlook, but Taylor’s last words stand out: “Though ghosts are not holy, they are, I believe, real.” Happy are the friends who are so different and yet can so evidently hear one another. And maybe the book had to be this long to do justice to a 50-year friendship.

Paul Lakeland teaches in and directs the Center for Catholic Studies at Fairfield University.

Fellowship

By Christian Wiman

Tragedy and Christianity are incommensurable,
he declared, which we’d have chalked to bluster
had he not, within the month, held a son
hot from the womb but cold to his kiss,
and over a coffin compact as a toolbox wept
in the wrecked unreachable way that most resist,
and that all of us, where we are most ourselves,
turn away from.

Bonded and islanded
by the silence, we waited there,
desperate, with our own pains, to believe,
desperate, with our own pains, not to.

D., Gardening

By Christian Wiman

One form of matter completed by grief.

One psalm so utter its form is life.

One fire further than the one in which we’ve burned.

One world more than our wounds have earned.

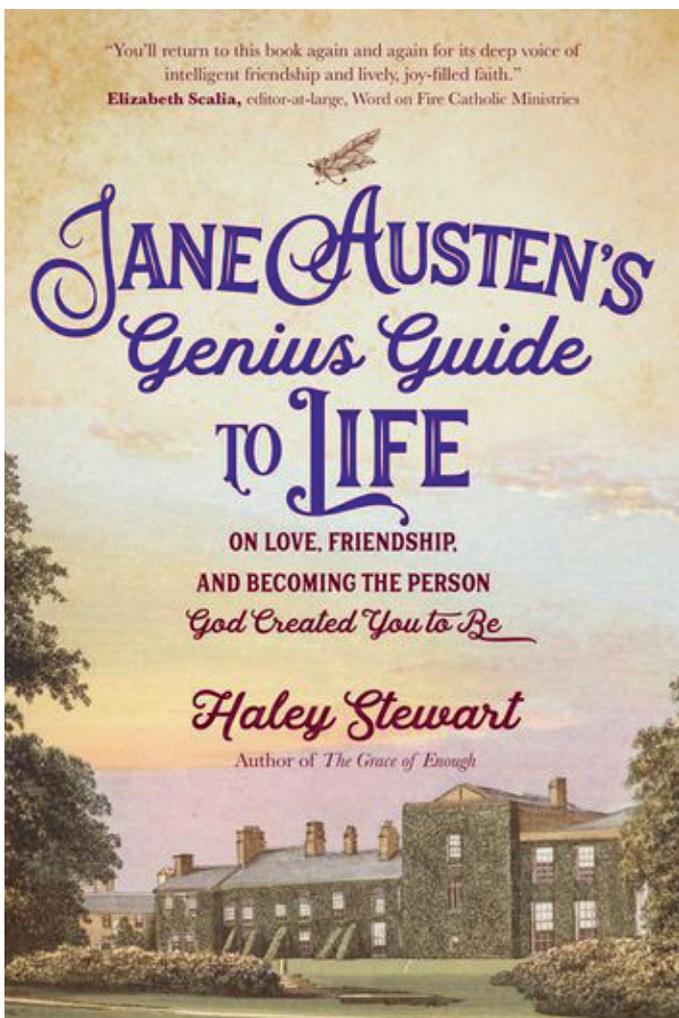
One love so lavish it is not one.

You look up, love, for a time entirely sun.

Christian Wiman’s latest collection of poems is *Survival Is a Style* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux). He teaches at the Yale Institute of Sacred Music.

FINDING THE GOOD LIFE THROUGH FICTION

During my second semester as a college professor, I sat in on a class devoted to Jane Austen. It was one of the most popular classes at the Protestant liberal arts college where I was teaching, and the professor of the course was a formidable force—and an invaluable mentor. The class read every single Jane Austen novel together. At the course's end, students were given an "honesty" test. If the students hadn't read all six Austen books in full, they were deducted a full letter grade. About a quarter of the students self-deducted that letter grade. I remember being shocked at the students' honesty. I also remember being surprised and captivated by the deep, immersive discussions we shared week in and week out—surprised how Austen's novels invited the students to reflect on their personal moral char-



Ave Maria Press
160p \$16.95

acters and how I, too, began to reflect on mine.

As I read Jane Austen's *Genius Guide to Life: On Love, Friendship, and Becoming the Person God Created You to Be*, by the popular podcaster and blogger Haley Stewart, I was taken back nine years to that semester. The year before, I had converted to Catholicism. That spring I was immersed in Jane Austen, my new Catholic faith and navigating a new profession in a new town. I was also immersed in forming, and sometimes stumbling into, new friendships and relationships.

It was a time when I often shared tea after class with that beloved yet somewhat irascible teaching mentor in her office. Over tea, this professor provided an opinion on every colleague at the university, on every student in the Jane Austen class and on my emerging teaching. Beyond that, we also spoke about philosophy, friendship, literature, religion and the arts—all through the lens of Jane Austen. It was a whirlwind of a semester, and it was one of the loveliest, most transformative experiences of my entire life.

Stewart offers the same opportunity I experienced to every reader who chooses to have it, but this time with her warm, inviting and much less irascible voice than my former mentor's as a guide. As you read the book, you feel as if you are having tea with Stewart and chatting about life's most important matters—matters that for both Stewart and Austen arise from daily intimate moments.

Stewart points out that Austen's literary genius lies in the fact that she crafts stories that impart the most pressing of human concerns in what seem at first the most mundane of experiences. "Our lives are made up of small things," Stewart writes, "dealing with financial worries, conversing with irritating neighbors, navigating relationships with difficult family members, making conversations at the dinner table, taking a short trip with friends, regretting past decisions, making small misjudgments of others." It is in how we confront these daily occurrences that we truly determine who it is that "God intended us to be." These are the moral quandaries, the battles we face as humans, that build our character.

Although Austen's novels were written over 200 years ago, they remain popular because they take situations we all face—social interactions with each other that are small and large in scale—and make us question how we would act in them as the pressure increasingly rises. Austen never preaches to her readers about the right thing to do. Rather, her readers witness everyday situations unfold and place themselves in them, intuiting what they ought to do. Her main characters are like us, too: imperfect people trying to navigate a morally complex world.

Stewart describes Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prej-*

udice as likable but flawed. Elizabeth is “clever,” she writes, “but overconfident in another intellectual gift: her powers of perception.” Elizabeth’s pride leads her to believe lies about her future love interest, Mr. Darcy, and her flaw leads to one of the novel’s major conflicts. Of course, Mr. Darcy’s pride also leads him to act uncharitably toward Elizabeth when he meets her, as well as at other key points in the novel. Importantly, though, we root for these flawed characters to be better, for their lives to flourish.

Indeed, throughout all of Jane Austen’s novels, we root for all of those with flaws to become more virtuous. Stewart argues that this is because Austen builds her novels “on the Christian tradition of virtue.” Stewart charmingly relates the story of her brother aspiring to be like Mr. Knightley after watching the 1996 movie version of *Emma*. This happens not because Austen tells readers Knightley is a good character but because she models how kind and respectful he is. Stewart then suggests Knightley is an exemplar of the cardinal virtue of prudence.

When the young, handsome Mr. Knightley chooses to spend time with Mrs. Bates at a picnic after Emma is unkind to her (Mrs. Bates is an old maid and known for her endless prattle), he exemplifies prudence. Knightley could have chosen to spend time with the young, attractive Emma, but he chooses Mrs. Bates because she needs his friendship most.

If we are to take Stewart’s anecdote about her brother to its logical end, it is not only Austen’s characters we root for to become more virtuous; it is also inevitably ourselves. This is the magic of Austen’s writing: It calls for us all to be better humans.

Throughout her book, Stewart outlines how Austen’s novels explore the cardinal and theological virtues. Interpreting Austen’s novels through the lens of virtue theory can help us better understand God’s design for our lives, she argues. Importantly, none of the main characters in Austen’s novels are like any other. The bashful Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park* is completely different from the lively Marianne Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility*, yet all of Austen’s characters hold lessons about how to develop their varied personalities for the better.

Stewart playfully calls Austen our “life coach” throughout her book: someone who can help you flourish and live “the good life.” Stewart acts as a life coach throughout the book as well. Her writing is at once accessible and erudite. Each chapter includes a short novel summary at the beginning for those who have not read all of Austen’s oeuvre, yet she quickly delves into thoughtful close readings. Stewart cites Cornel West, Flannery O’Connor, Dante Alighieri, G. K. Chesterton and many others to add context.

At the end of each chapter, Stewart also includes a paragraph or two devoted to the Virgin Mary. These paragraphs distill the chapter’s moral focus into a contemplative reflection about how Mary can ground an understanding of each Austen novel based on her own exemplary life.

This would be an ideal read for book clubs at churches, schools or simply with groups of friends who already love Austen or want to learn more about her.

I have loved Austen for years, and I found this book comforting and exhilarating. As someone who has identified with different Austen heroines at different moments of her life, this time I reflected anew on how reading Austen could make me holier. I can’t wait to assign an Austen novel—or perhaps six—in an upcoming class of my own, now with Stewart as one more mentor to refer to, as I and my students all explore how Austen invites us to consider “the people God calls us to be.”

LuElla D’Amico is an associate professor of English and coordinator of women’s and gender studies at the University of the Incarnate Word in San Antonio, Tex.



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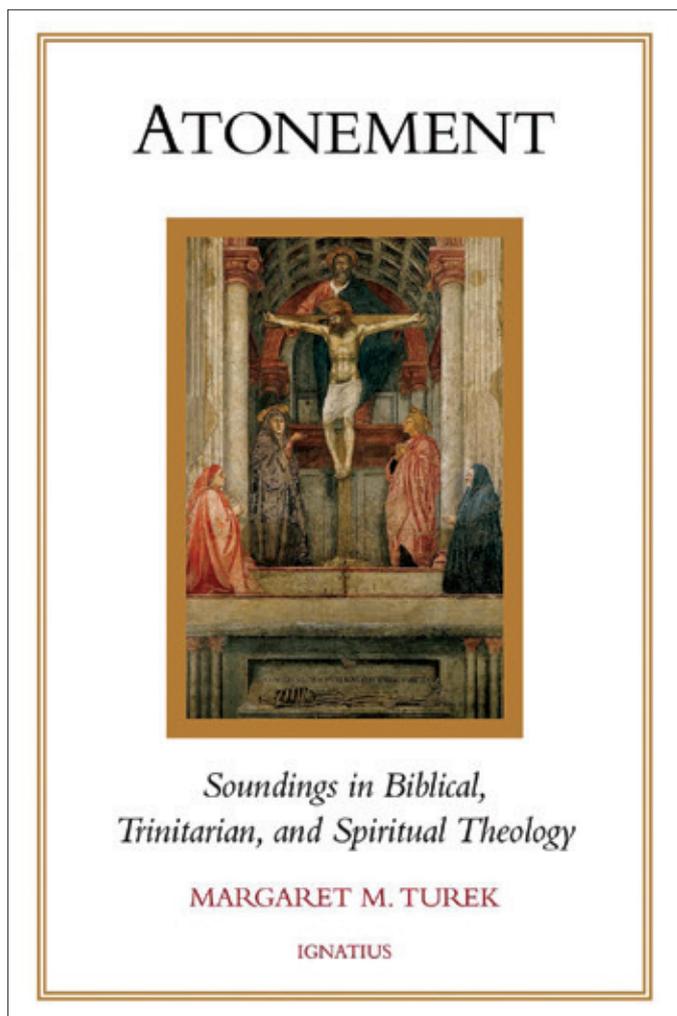
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BENEFICIARIES OF A LOVING SACRIFICE

The theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar famously called for a “kneeling/praying theology”—a phrase Pope Francis has several times made his own. In *Atonement*, Margaret Turek not only echoes that call; her book exemplifies it.

The doctrine of atonement, so central in the New Testament and the church’s tradition, has fallen into disfavor in some theological circles and into general neglect in Catholic life. Turek finds this situation to be spiritually and theologically impoverishing. She discerns a number of causes for this malady. Among them are a diminished sense of the gravity of sin and a one-sided appeal to God’s mercy—to the practical exclusion of the Bible’s equally acute perception of God’s “wrath.” But perhaps the greatest stumbling block is the grievous misconception of atonement as the price demanded by God the Father and inflicted upon the innocent Jesus Christ, which some have even likened to child abuse.



Ignatius Press
266p \$19.95

Turek’s rich study addresses each of these shortcomings, drawing upon the insights of a quartet of theologians: Hans Urs von Balthasar, St. John Paul II, Joseph Ratzinger and (less well known) Norbert Hoffmann. But her governing vision is that offered by the kerygma itself: “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that God loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins” (1 Jn 4:10). “Atonement,” Turek maintains, “is the form that the love of God takes in his Son, Jesus Christ, under sin-wrought conditions—a love than which no greater can be conceived.” Christ’s atonement does not “earn” the Father’s love for us, it is the fruit of that love.

But the Cross, as the heart of atonement, not only makes manifest God’s love, it also reveals the true depth of sin. Sin is the refusal to make God present in our lives and in our world. It is the refusal of “filiation,” spurning God’s loving invitation to become sons and daughters in the Son. God’s “wrath” is God’s passion for the well-being of his beloved creatures and God’s grieving judgment upon their rejection of love.

In atoning for sin, Jesus takes upon himself sinners’ estrangement and alienation, hostility and hatred. He thereby transforms sinful rejection into loving reconciliation. And he does so in his own body, which he continues to give for us in the Eucharist. In this, Jesus incarnates filiation in the midst of the world’s estrangement: “You are my beloved Son; in you I am well pleased” (Mk 1:11). We begin to fathom that “at-onement” is a radically interpersonal event that transpires between the Father and the Son and also embraces us who are its beneficiaries.

Tutored, then, by her quartet of theologians, Turek suggestively grounds the interpersonal process of at-onement in the very life of the Trinity. The mutual love of Father and Son in the Spirit is the source of humankind’s call to enter into and embody these life-giving relations. Indeed, atonement is not merely our redemption from sin; it enables the realization of our true vocation: to live out our inestimable dignity to become sons and daughters in Christ. Filiation is not less than divinization.

Thus, we are the graced beneficiaries of the atonement effected by Christ’s loving sacrifice. Our prayerful contemplation of this gift engenders in us both gratitude and generosity—gratitude that spurs to generous participation in Christ’s atoning work. In the rich third part of her study, “Toward a Spiritual Theology of Atonement,” Turek does not shy from speaking of “our mission of co-atonement.” With, through and in Christ (note the increasing intimacy of participatory prepositions), we are called to the awe-some task of becoming “vicarious atoners in the Atoner.”

As St. Paul paradoxically expressed it: “to complete in [our] flesh what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake

of his Body, the Church” (Col 1:24).

Radical as this vocation sounds—and is—Turek sees it as taking with utmost seriousness the Second Vatican Council’s issuing of a “universal call to holiness.” We are commissioned, by Christ’s atonement of us, received in baptism, to bear one another’s burdens, even the burden of another’s sin, so that all might be “recapitulated,” placed under the headship of Christ.

While enriched by so many of Turek’s insights, I would venture one concern. She rightly seeks to do full justice to Christ’s atoning sacrifice, his taking upon himself the weight of sin and the plight of the sinner. In this regard Turek draws upon von Balthasar and others to speak of “the God-forsaken Son”; of the Father “withdrawing from the one he has made ‘to be sin’ (2 Cor 5:21)”; of Jesus’ abandonment by the Father.

I wonder, however, whether this emphasis, though well-intentioned, relies too heavily upon the notoriously difficult and doubtless dramatic text from Second Corinthians? “For our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21). Does stressing “God-forsakenness” risk clouding Jesus’ loving fidelity to his mission and to the One who sent him, even in the midst of unspeakable anguish? Turek herself perhaps intuits the danger and hastens to assure the reader: “Doubtless it would be a serious mistake to regard the Father’s forsaking of Jesus as signaling a real rupture of the Father-Son relationship.” But does not the language of “forsakenness” and “abandonment” unwittingly threaten to do just that?

I think St. John Paul II provides a promising and fuller way forward when he writes in “Novo Millennio Ineunte,” “Jesus’ cry on the Cross is not the cry of anguish of a man without hope, but the prayer of the Son who offers his life to the Father in love, for the salvation of all.” And John Paul II adds: “At the very moment when he identifies with our sin, ‘abandoned’ by the Father, he ‘abandons’ himself into the hands of the Father. His eyes remain fixed on the Father.”

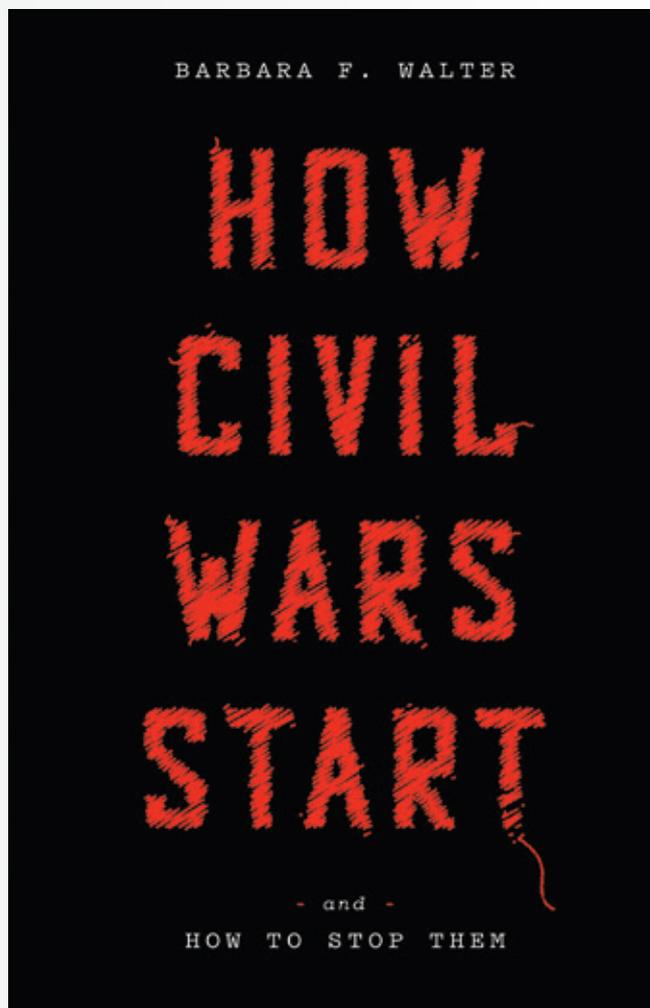
Jesus’ vision of the Father’s love both engendered and sustained his atoning mission, even to death on a cross. “Therefore, God has highly exalted him and given him the name above every name” (Phil 2:9). Jesus, “the Amen,” is “the faithful and true witness” (Rv 3:14) not of God’s seeming absence, but of his sustaining presence. Atonement is fully accomplished, when, “bowing his head, Jesus handed over the Spirit” (Jn 19:30).

The Rev. Robert P. Imbelli, a priest of the Archdiocese of New York, is the author of *Rekindling the Christic Imagination*.

WHEN INCIVILITY BECOMES VIOLENCE

My father was a U.S. diplomat with the good fortune to be posted to Paraguay, the same country in which he and my mother had served in the Peace Corps in the 1970s. The dictator Alfredo Stroessner had been deposed in 1989, and we were there in the early years of the country’s new democracy. I was in eighth grade in 1996, when General Lino Oviedo, fired from his position as army chief by Juan Carlos Wasmosy, the country’s first civilian president since before the dictatorship, began to barnstorm the country, threatening a military coup.

The coup was thwarted. Because at 14 one cares very little for his father’s role in such episodes, I had to look up the history later to recall precisely how. However, I can recall to this day the stories of Oviedo’s rambling hourslong speeches to the populace, told in a mixture of Spanish, German and the native Guaraní.



Crown
320p \$27

In her book *How Civil Wars Start: And How to Stop Them*, Barbara F. Walter, the Rohr Chair in Pacific International Relations at the University of California San Diego, offers a handy guide for interpreting this episode. Walter is an expert in civil wars, and a member of the Polity Project at the Center for Systemic Peace, a collection of scholars and researchers who “had taken civil war data from around the world and built a model that could predict where instability was most likely to occur.

Years of research and analysis tell us that “one of the best predictors of whether a country will experience a civil war is whether it is moving toward or away from democracy. Yes, democracy.” Researchers spend considerable energy cataloging and categorizing countries’ systems of government, rating them on a 21-point scale from -10 (autocracy) to +10 (democracy). For a full autocracy, think Saudi Arabia or North Korea. For a stable democracy, think Denmark, Canada and the United States...whoops. More on that below.

The middle zone, between -5 and +5, is what experts call “anocracies.” It’s a political science term of art, clunky at first, but one that made increasing sense as the book made its case. Anocracy describes governments moving toward either end of the spectrum—though of course, many occupy that middle zone for years and even decades without moving in one direction or the other. Importantly, it is the movement as such that serves as the best predictor of civil conflict, not the score or the direction. Countries becoming more or less democratic are at greater risk of civil war, and so anocracy can be seen as the necessary but not sufficient criterion for political violence.

The first half of the book lays out the political science, with each of the major predictors of civil war getting its own chapter, building sequentially on the foundations of the last. The chapters are driven by an explication of the familiar civil conflicts emblematic of these risk factors, even in their specificity.

In the chapter “The Rise of Factions,” Walter describes how aspiring autocrats cultivated racial and ethnic resentments that culminated in brutal ethnic violence in the former Yugoslavia and in Rwanda. In “The Dark Consequence of Losing Status,” she describes how a sudden change in the power of a specific ethnic group can be more inflammatory than a sustained structural imbalance. For example, in Syria, Sunni Muslims realized that they were being boxed out of power by Shiite Muslims, while the inverse occurred in neighboring Iraq. Ditto the Muslim population of Mindanao in the Philippines and the Abkhazians in Georgia.

In “When Hope Dies,” Walter explains how, despite literally centuries of British occupation, the Provisional

Irish Republican Army only came to be in the 20th century, when the Catholics finally lost hope that the British military would protect them against Protestant violence.

My only quibble in reading this was with the use of political science jargon. Terms like “ethnic entrepreneurs” turn out to mean almost the opposite of the plain language—not upstart small business-owning immigrants, but racist demagogues.

The second section of the book addresses the question any likely reader would presumably be asking: Is it going to happen here?

While this section of the book is unlikely to move the politically calcified, it is impossible to read in the light of the still-unfolding January 6 Committee hearings in Congress and not be terrified.

But the United States is a democracy, you’ll protest. Sadly, no. Our score on the autocracy-democracy scale slid considerably during the Trump years, as that administration, its enablers in Congress and sympathetic statehouses sought systematically to dismantle democratic institutions. In the wake of Trump’s attempts to overturn the results of the 2020 election, the United States slid down to a +5.

In Walter’s words: “The United States became an anocracy for the first time in more than two hundred years. Let that sink in. We are no longer the world’s oldest continuous democracy.” We entered anocracy at a time when the political parties have coalesced less along ideological or policy agendas than along racial, ethnic and religious lines.

As Walter makes clear, this is not a both-sides problem. This is a problem with the Republican Party, which enabled a racist demagogue to pursue an ethnic-nationalist agenda—the Muslim ban, the detainment of children across the U.S.-Mexico border—and is now, in plain sight, engaging in a second round of systematic, multi-level, extralegal attempts to subvert future elections to secure the rule of its largely white Christian party. If this paragraph makes you uncomfortable, I suggest poring over Walter’s 46-page bibliography. All of the data, all of the research and all of the current reporting back up these claims.

There is one remaining aspect to the argument. A civil war in the 21st century does not look like the civil wars of even the latter half of the 20th. It is best described as a state of sustained racialized insurgent violence, not unlike the diffuse acts of terrorist cells such as Hamas.

Recall that in 2020, antigovernment white nationalists sought to kidnap and execute the Democratic governor of Michigan. Later, Kyle Rittenhouse, a minor, traveled across state lines and then used an AR-15 rifle, a weapon of war, to murder two unarmed protesters. Earlier this sum-

mer, parade-goers celebrating the Fourth of July in Chicago were mowed down by a man who was also armed with an AR-15 rifle.

And lest we forget, on Jan. 6, 2021, a mob of Trump supporters—led, we now know, in premeditated paramilitary formation by white supremacist militias like the Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers—stormed the Capitol, assaulted police officers and sought to hang the vice president. To this day, almost every single elected Republican at any level of office in the country has made the minimization and denial of this meticulously documented event the cornerstone of their political agenda.

Perhaps when Walter describes a three-part escalation of insurgency, and puts the United States at approaching the middle stage, the reader finds the sense of urgency not proportionate enough to what is already happening.

As for how to prevent a civil war, that part turns out to be remarkably easy: “Bolster the rule of law, give all citizens equal access to the vote, and improve the quality of government services.” Easy, that is, if you ignore the fact that D.C. is a dysfunctional, corrupt and structurally unrepresenta-

tive circus of septuagenarian millionaires.

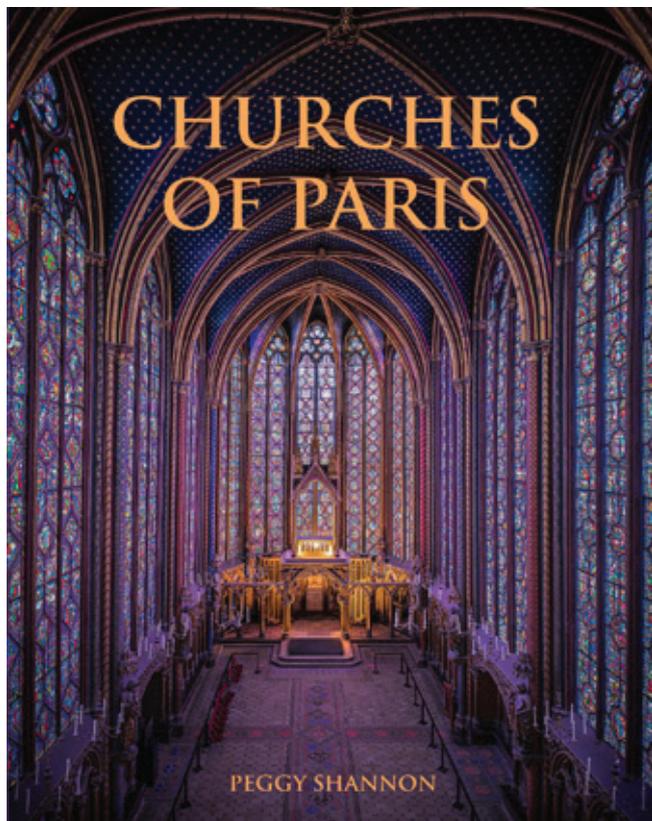
General Lino Oviedo, to his limited credit, was instrumental in the military coup that overthrew the truly despicable Stroessner. My friends—8 years old in 1989—remember the night well: grandparents trying to keep them quiet as they huddled behind couches, tanks rumbling through the streets, a neighbor shot in his yard because he refused to obey curfew.

After public protests derailed Wasmosy’s appeasement offer of another cabinet position, Oviedo ran for president. He had the right idea—after all, one of the best predictors of violent civil conflict is whether the country has already had one. Why not reinvent himself and exploit old grievances and a weak government? That’s the playbook.

Oviedo was leading in the polls when he was charged with plotting the coup and sentenced to 10 years in prison.

Imagine that.

Thomas Jacobs is a writer and budget analyst. He was raised overseas, mostly in South America, Turkey and Spain. He now lives with his wife and children in Massachusetts.



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Endings and Beginnings

November includes the last Sunday of Liturgical Year C as well as the beginning of Year A. This month of transition offers an opportunity for thoughtful reflection on the past year and planning for what is on the horizon.

The Gospels at the close of Year C focus heavily on the resurrection, and their placement is a reminder of the importance of the resurrection in our spiritual lives. On the solemnity of Christ the King, the last Sunday of the liturgical year, the Gospel centers on the crucifixion and the mockery that Jesus endured in his final moments, as he was called King of the Jews.

Jesus is described in conversation with the two criminals. While one joins in mocking Jesus, the other, often called the penitent thief, rebukes the other crim-

inal. He recognizes Jesus as Messiah and asks Jesus to “remember me when you come into your kingdom.” The statement is powerful in its simplicity. It is often repeated and sung as a form of meditative prayer that reminds us to contemplate Jesus’ suffering, death and resurrection.

The end of this liturgical year also marks the end of my time as columnist for The Word at **America**. I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to read, reflect and write on the Sunday Lectionary readings. I am especially thankful for the staff and reader support over the past three years.

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THIRTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (C), NOV. 6, 2022

Reflections on faith in the resurrection

THIRTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (C), NOV. 13, 2022

Implications of faith in the resurrection

SOLEMNITY OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST, KING OF THE UNIVERSE (C), NOV. 20, 2022

Salvation through faith in the resurrection

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT (A), NOV. 27, 2022

Beginning anew: The next columnist for The Word will debut with this column



Meet the Author

Jaime L. Waters teaches at the Boston College School of Theology and Ministry. She is an associate professor of Old Testament.



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A Teacher of Generations

Remembering John W. O'Malley

By James Martin



I do not know anyone who didn't love and admire John W. O'Malley, S.J. This great Jesuit priest, dean of Catholic historians and author of groundbreaking historical works who taught generations of Jesuits, priests, religious men and women and Catholic laypeople, died on Sept. 11 at the age of 95 at the Colombière Jesuit Community in Baltimore.

It is hard to know where to begin to praise John, so manifold were his gifts. And I certainly cannot sum up his rich and fruitful life as a Jesuit priest in just a few paragraphs.

First, perhaps, he was one of the best teachers I have ever had. I took his justly famous course in church history at the old Weston Jesuit School of Theology, now the Boston College School of Theology and Ministry, during my formation as a Jesuit. There was simply no question of whether or not one would take a course with John O'Malley. One simply had to.

He could command a classroom like no one else. Perhaps this was because he seemed to know everything that had been written about what he called (I think he invented the term) "early modern Catholicism." His course was given a bland title like "Church History, Part 2," but really it was an introduction to the church through the eyes of one of the greatest scholars of our time: awesomely learned, effortlessly erudite and always a lot of fun.

My first encounter with John was through his book *The First Jesuits*,

which my formation director had carried from the United States when he visited me during my time as a Jesuit regent in Kenya. I was astonished by the book, which introduced me to St. Ignatius Loyola and the early Jesuits through sparkling prose and vast research. (This was John's secret weapon as a historian: He was a superb writer.) It is still the best book written about St. Ignatius and the early Jesuits.

But John didn't hit his professional stride until relatively late in life, something many of his Jesuit friends remarked upon. *The First Jesuits* was published in 1993, when he was 66. His other magnum opus, *What Happened at Vatican II?*, was published in 2008, when he was 81.

John wasn't loved just as a scholar or teacher, distinguished as he was in those categories. He was loved by his brother Jesuits, his students and his friends as a person: unfailingly kind, helpful, generous, mild, curious, modest and always interested in you. John was never too busy to answer a question, give you some advice, point you to some resource or tell you some funny story. He had a great talent for friendship, and it was reciprocated.

That friendship was enlivened by his puckish sense of humor. In 2007, when I pronounced my final vows as a Jesuit at the Church of St. Ignatius Loyola in New York City, I was honored that he came all the way from Georgetown, where he worked and lived after he left Weston. He showed up in an elegant suit jacket, olive col-

ored, with a faint plaid. It looked very "European" to me.

"John," I said, "You look so dapper." His lips curled into an elfin smile, as if to let me in on a little joke. "No, Jim, I *am* dapper."

Even in his failing health, John continued to connect with people. When I heard he was in hospice, I emailed him. Within just a few minutes, I received a warm and gracious email, in the 16-point type he had come to use in the past few years. "You are special to me!" he wrote.

John was special to all who knew him: Jesuit, priest, scholar, teacher, writer, mentor, friend. I want to thank him for teaching me so much about St. Ignatius Loyola, about the Jesuits and about the church that we all love. It is primarily through John's eyes, his scholarship, and his interpretive framework that I see all those things today.

And now he enters into the heavenly banquet, where for the rest of time he will celebrate with Jesus, the one whose Society he entered, whose church he served and whose church history he taught.

May you rest in peace, John. May you who gave so much of your time to us, enjoy the time of joy that God now gives to you, and may we all meet in the fullness of time.

James Martin, S.J., is editor at large of **America**. He is the author of several books, including, most recently, *Learning to Pray: A Guide for Everyone*.



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