

# America

MARCH 2023

THE JESUIT REVIEW OF FAITH AND CULTURE

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AT 10

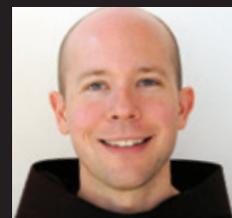


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# America

**America** invites you to come on our pilgrimage “From Francis to Francis” as we go from Assisi to Rome in the footsteps of St. Francis and Pope Francis on October 19-28, 2023. James Martin, S.J., and Dan Horan, O.F.M., will lead the trip.



Key pilgrimage highlights include a general audience with His Holiness Pope Francis and visits to:

- La Verna (where St. Francis lived and preached)
- The Church of Santa Maria degli Angeli (known as the mother church of the Franciscan Order)
- St. Peter’s Basilica
- The Church of the Gesu (the mother church of the Jesuits)
- the Vatican Museum

Our journey will be an inspirational retreat, visiting historical sites, participating in Masses, and gathering for faith sharing, personal reflection, prayer, and silence that connect us more deeply to our faith.

**Registrations will be accepted on a first-come, first-served basis and must be received by March 31, 2023.**

For more information or to register for this trip, contact Alessandra Rose, at [ARose@americamedia.org](mailto:ARose@americamedia.org) or 212-515-0116.

## ‘This Is Nothing Else but the House of God’ (Gn 28:17)

“He is here” and “Thank you, Lord.” It is the second day of our visit, and we have seen these words at least 10 times already on the walls of chapels and near the entrances of other apostolates we have toured.

These phrases are painted on either side of the gate of a place named Jacob’s Ladder, about an hour outside of Kingston, Jamaica, run by a ministry called Mustard Seed. The organization was founded in 1978, the same year I was born. I had encountered it briefly more than 20 years ago, during a service immersion trip to Kingston during my undergraduate years, but I am back now because of a colleague. Traug Keller, who became president of America Media at the same time as I started as editor in chief, has been involved with Mustard Seed and served on its board for years, and he invited a group of us to go to Jamaica and see its work. We made the trip at the end of January.

Mustard Seed began as a response to the needs of abandoned and disabled children in Jamaica. As those children have grown, so has Mustard Seed, to continue to care for their needs and offer them a dignified place to live. It has expanded as well, to serve other needs in Jamaica and in places as far away as Zimbabwe.

Jacob’s Ladder, which we visited on our second day in Jamaica, is built on land that used to be a bauxite mine, carpeted in the brilliant green that covers the mountains that we drove through to get there. It is not a building but a village, or actually a set of small villages: not only homes, but a community for the people who are at the heart of Mustard Seed. More than one hundred people living with disabilities make their homes there, sharing the space with the staff of caregivers,

cooks and farm workers who keep the place running. In addition to the small residential villages, each with seven or eight homes circling a small green, there are fields and greenhouses, providing food for Jacob’s Ladder and other Mustard Seed sites as well.

One of the women we met there came to Jacob’s Ladder when a state-run home shut down, and she has been there almost since its start 15 years ago. She shares her home with friends with whom she has been together for more than a decade. Her disability leaves her unable to walk easily, but she gestures at one of her friends, who is blind and mostly does not speak, and says, “She’s my legs. I’m her eyes.”

Not just in slogans, but in the evident joy of a deep friendship: “He is here” and “Thank you, Lord.”

There were more challenging sights during our visit, as well. Children at the central Mustard Seed apostolate, called My Father’s House, who lived with feeding tubes, whose limbs were twisted with cerebral palsy or heads enlarged by hydrocephalus—loved profoundly and cared for well, but whose needs will always require more intensive assistance. But there were also other joys, such as seeing a toddler who had recently learned to walk, albeit with a posture different from the norm, determined to lead her caregivers on a chase.

Any priest, and most likely anyone who has been willing to share their faith with others, has been asked about the problem of evil. Why does an all-good and all-powerful God allow suffering? How can the pain of a child be compatible with a God who loves us?

I have learned, over 18 years as a Jesuit and eight as a priest, to stop trying to answer that question with

any kind of an explanation. Because it is not a question looking for a reason; the point is exactly that no reason could possibly be a justifiable answer.

But what I sometimes suggest instead—with fear and trembling, when I can say it without sounding too sure about it and it seems that hearts are vulnerable and brave enough to hear it—is that Christianity itself is God’s response to that question, not first as a doctrine but as an offering. That the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and the community of the church that is his body are what God is doing in response to evil and suffering in the world. Rather than delivering an answer to us, God instead invites us into the one that is being given and will not be fully complete until all things are made new.

“He is here” does not just mean that Christ can be found in the face of any human being and especially in those most in need, though that claim is both true and beautiful. “He is here” also means that God has chosen solidarity with humanity, both with human suffering and with human love. And that solidarity, God’s with us and ours with each other, is the shape of salvation itself.

For that, thank you, Lord.

—  
Sam Sawyer, S.J.  
Twitter: @SSawyerSJ



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The Francis transformation

Cover image: St. Mary's Church  
in New Haven, Conn.

Jon Bilous /Alamy

Dancers perform during the  
entrance procession as Pope Francis  
celebrates Mass at the John Garang  
Mausoleum in Juba, South Sudan,  
Feb. 5.

CNS photo/Paul Haring

## The legacy of Benedict XVI

**America** published a number of articles commemorating the life and passing of Benedict XVI, the first pope to abdicate the chair of St. Peter in hundreds of years. In the February editorial, the editors recognized both his accomplishments and the more controversial aspects of his papacy, noting in particular his resignation as “a stunning historical development” that “required wisdom and courage.” At the time of his resignation, Benedict asked “pardon for my defects” and said his “strengths, due to an advanced age, are no longer suited for an adequate exercise of the Petrine ministry.” Our readers offered a variety of perspectives on Benedict and his ministry.

I appreciate the ministry of both of these popes (Benedict and Francis). I am of the belief that God sends those who are necessary for each particular moment of salvation history. I hope that a pope’s agenda is God’s agenda for us as a people. If I look to Pope Benedict, an intellectual, I see a man that brought to light the whys of church teachings. There are a lot of Catholics out there who are lacking in this regard, which makes them very vulnerable to media disinformation. Pope Francis places those teachings into our everyday life, particularly in teaching us about how to encounter each other and how to respect the natural world that we are an integral part of. Both were needed. If their agenda doesn’t match our expectations, then we just might need to open our hearts to change through prayer.

**Christine Gall**

Why is no one writing articles about how Benedict [investigated the Leadership Conference of Women Religious]? Major communities were put through hell for several years during his reign trying to prove how they served God. It was horrible what he and his bishops did to these holy women. I will never forget it!

**Jean Hansen**

Respectfully, while Benedict may well have been a “humble laborer” as pope, his actions leading the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith are hard to reconcile with the post-feudal church many of us hoped had been set in motion by Pope John XXIII. For example, Benedict’s “Dominus Iesus” largely dismissed the legitimacy of other faiths, as did his subsequent ban of the Jesuit theologian Roger Haight. Moreover, his actions at C.D.F. emboldened and enabled the reactionary cadre of bishops in the United States who continue to sow division among their peers, Catholics and our fellow citizens.

**Ed Dailey**

As a clerical abuse survivor, I see Benedict as a controversial and complex figure in the life of the church. I commend

him for his extraordinary intellect, theological prowess and for meeting with victims a few years into his papacy. But in the same vein, he looked the other way when it came to the hierarchy for years as head of the C.D.F. and as archbishop of Munich and Freising. His forcing of my friend Tom Reese, S.J.—a real truth-teller in the church regarding the [sexual abuse] scandal—out from leading **America** magazine has always given me pause. What was he afraid of? I pray God is merciful to Benedict in eternity. I am grateful for his courage to resign, which gave the church Francis.

**Mark Williams**

I hope there’s no rush to canonize Pope Benedict. He has a very mixed legacy, especially concerning sexual abuse cover-up allegations in Germany. No one should be canonized until several decades after his or her death, since every detail of everyone’s life comes out in modern times.

**Pamela Berdanier**

What a blessing to have had two great popes (St. John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI). Benedict will be a saint and deservedly so. I encourage those who don’t like or know him to read his words. They are incredible. Don’t believe the partisan propaganda. Santo subito!

**Pat Carington**

Benedict was truly a doctor of the church. A clear thinker, a man devoid of ambiguity and foolish off-the-cuff remarks. A great man. The church was blessed to have had the miraculous papacies of both St. John Paul II and (hopefully soon) St. Benedict XVI. They were the true embodiment of Vatican II. Both men will be read, studied and remembered for centuries to come.

Let us pray for clear teaching and unambiguous truth. It is what the world needs now more than ever. Truth, clarity and, most importantly, the call for all men to return to Jesus. *Santo subito!*

**Marcus McMaster**

# LOOKING FOR WEEKLY IGNATIAN INSPIRATION?



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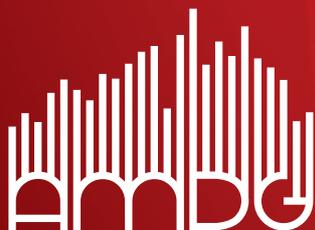
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## Ten Years of a Pope Who Gives Interviews

In August 2013, a few months after his election, Pope Francis gave a then-unprecedented interview to a consortium of Jesuit journals, including *America*, which we published under the headline “A Big Heart Open to God.” In a column introducing the interview, then-editor in chief Matt Malone, S.J., noted that while other popes had given interviews, they tended to be formal; he suggested that this more conversational interview, along with Pope Francis’ style in his in-flight press conferences, might “represent a new genre of papal communication, one that is fraternal rather than paternal.”

In the 10 years of his papacy thus far, Francis has made the papal interview almost commonplace, even though it is still breaking news whenever he gives one. He was interviewed in November by *America*, in December by the Spanish newspaper ABC and in January by The Associated Press. It is possible, perhaps even likely, that by the time you read this the pope will have given another interview to some other outlet.

In many senses, Pope Francis has proven the most communication-savvy pontiff in history. Interviews, informal press conferences, daily homilies, tweets, transcripts of meetings with the faithful from around the globe—all have poured out of the Roman Curia over the past 10 years at a rate that would have astonished and bewildered Francis’ predecessors. Some of this change can be attributed to advances in communications technology and an increase in media saturation, but Francis has also proven willing to make himself available to a degree that previous popes never even considered.

Francis has thus been a far more visible pope, making him popular and accessible but simultaneously more vulnerable to knee-jerk criticism and misinterpretation. This vulnerability has led some observers of the papacy—both supporters of Pope Francis and his critics—to question his approach. While he can certainly command a news cycle, complaints of confusion and unclarity in teaching often get almost as much airtime as what the pope intended to convey. With this volume of communication, from the pope as well as from various supporters and detractors responding to him, it can be difficult for the church to determine what is signal and what is noise.

One great danger of such ease of communication in the life of the church is hyper-papalism, where the church is equated in the minds of believers (and nonbelievers) with the person of the pope. The impression is that the church’s fidelity to its mission turns on the day-to-day activities of one specific person. This is not a new problem—“ultramontanists” tend to be associated with the 19th century, but the label has existed since medieval times. Yet the past half-century has seen it grow in ways that are not always healthy for the church.

This media-enabled ultramontanism can make it appear that any papal statement is an epochal moment in the development of doctrine. But while an impromptu press conference on a plane is not immaterial, it is also not an encyclical—and neither is an audience in the Vatican, nor a tweet, nor an interview. The real challenge facing the church, though, is not just assigning the correct level of authority to a given medium, as if the only significant question about any statement

is how binding it is, but instead how to listen discerningly to a vastly expanded range of papal communication.

Of course, there are some who would say this style of papal communication is itself the problem, and that the pope should stick to more clearly established forms and avoid saying anything that could cause confusion or unclarity. Others rush to defend and clarify whatever Pope Francis says, as if to suggest that the only problem is those who question him. The reality is that sometimes Pope Francis is confusing and unclear, and he might be better served by slower and more deliberate communication. And the reality also is that some of Francis’ critics in a deeply polarized church are looking for opportunities to turn anything he says into a crisis for his papacy.

But this dilemma is mostly a misunderstanding of Francis’ style of communication itself. In his more informal and frequent communication, Francis is not primarily expounding doctrine, much less changing it, but *pastoring*. He cajoles, encourages, scolds, jokes, inspires and exhorts. His goal is to evoke in his hearers their own encounter with God and trust in God’s “closeness, compassion and tenderness.” Francis frequently describes this triad as the “style of God,” and Francis’ own style is an attempt to concretize these qualities in the life of the church.

Indeed, by some measures Pope Francis has done less explicit teaching than his predecessors. St. John Paul II produced 14 encyclicals over his 26 years as pope; Benedict XVI wrote three in eight years; Francis has written three in 10 years, and the first of those was the completion of a text already partially drafted under Bene-

dict. Some of this difference reflects the increased importance of the synodal process and post-synodal exhortations under Francis, but it also marks a different rhythm to the papacy. Pope Francis' impact has been felt as much in the images he has given us (the church as a "field hospital" and "smelling like the sheep") and his direct engagement with people (making phone calls and responding personally to letters) as in his formal exercise of the magisterium.

Francis was elected to the chair of Peter in part because of a speech he gave before the conclave about the need for the church to go out of itself to evangelize, to avoid becoming sick and "being self-referential, a type of theological narcissism." His approach to communication as pope should be understood in this light: His availability and willingness to speak freely even at the risk of being misunderstood is medicine against a graver illness. He is teaching us that no amount of carefulness and clarity of teaching can compensate for a church that is not bold enough in proclaiming God's mercy and being with God's people.

As Francis predicted, and as his willingness to give interviews has helped demonstrate, a church that is more willing to go outside itself will also receive more bumps and bruises. A real-time engagement with the world is inevitably messier than self-enclosure. Whether his boldness turns out to be wisdom will depend not just on what he says in interviews or even in encyclicals, but on whether the rest of us in the church are inspired to be similarly bold and faithful ourselves.

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## I support Ukraine, but as a Catholic, I also pray for Russia

It is no secret that ice dancing is a discipline long dominated by Russians. I am an American who was granted Ukrainian citizenship in order to represent my ice dance partner's home country of Ukraine in the 2014 Winter Olympics. But I encountered many Russians during my competitive skating career and have been blessed to call some of them friends.

My exposure to Russian people and culture increased as I pursued an education and career in international affairs. When Russia began its all-out invasion of Ukraine last February, escalating the war that began with its annexation of Crimea in 2014, I was doubly heartbroken: first for the Ukrainians who were suffering, but also for the way this tragedy would affect my Russian friends.

One year later, many American Catholics are still grappling with a response to the support for the war by most Russians. Our response must incorporate an unflinching denunciation of Russia's actions but also the humility and charity that our Catholic faith demands.

First, we must call evil by name and be a voice of moral clarity. Ukraine has justice on its side, and our church and our country must stand in solidarity with Ukrainians. Some Russians have been blinded by ideology and have chosen loyalty to the "Russkiy Mir," or Russian world, over the bonds of charity and common humanity.

I suspect, however, that many Russians support the war because of the information they receive and the sources they trust. It is easy for Americans to say that Russians should know better than to believe that their country is fighting "Nazis" in Ukraine or engaging in a humanitarian mission of liberation. But I ask myself: Would

I be better able to discern the truth in their place? Humans are morally responsible for their actions, but we must exercise humility and restraint in determining the extent to which individuals are guilty, especially when family relationships or friendships are at stake.

This means that I speak out in support of Ukraine, but I still consider some Russians who are sympathetic to Vladimir Putin as friends. I know that efforts to foster mutual understanding through public diplomacy have failed to prevent the current crisis, but I believe they have the potential to bear fruit in the long term. I sympathize with Ukrainians who have stopped speaking Russian, but I am trying to teach my 2-year-old daughter the language. I believe there is something distinctly Catholic about this approach.

As G. K. Chesterton noted, Catholicism is a both/and faith. We believe in a God of both justice and mercy, a Trinity that is both one and three. We yearn for peace, yet we understand that wars can be just. We are tasked with upholding moral truth and calling sinners to repentance, but also with embracing humility, forgiving the sins of our enemies and removing the planks from our own eyes. To those with only a superficial understanding of the Catholic faith, the both/and character of Catholicism may seem confusing; in reality, it beautifully reflects the love of an all-powerful God who entered the world as a helpless infant.

Applying this both/and sensibility to Russia will look different for each person. For those who do not have strong ties to Russia, it may be largely an intellectual exercise. But for all Catholics, it is an opportunity to grow as followers of Christ and, following

the example of Pope Francis, to pray for both Ukraine and Russia.

This kind of witness is particularly needed in the United States, where the both/and approach has been largely abandoned. Many Americans shun friends with whom they disagree on important issues. The notion that decent people might disagree, even when presented with the same information, is no longer a mainstay of our supposedly pluralistic society. Putting the both/and of our Catholic faith into practice has the power to remind all Americans that we can be people of deep moral conviction while seeking to understand, and even see goodness in, those who do not share all our conclusions.

Americans' attitude toward Russians is not the cause of this war, and getting our response right will not, in itself, end it. I do believe, however, that God brings good out of evil, and our response to the evil of Russia's war is an opportunity to mature as Catholics and as Americans. So yes, I will continue to teach my daughter Russian, hoping against hope that there will come a day when Mr. Putin no longer reigns, when Russians rise up against the atrocities perpetrated in their name and when she can visit the places and people I love—and greet them in their own language.

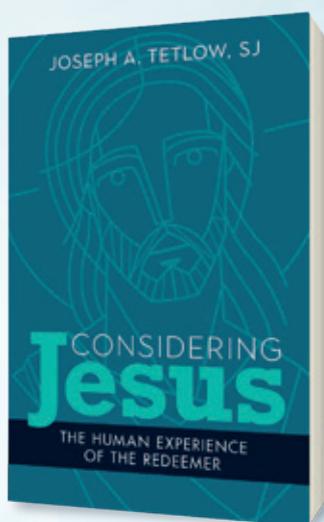
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*Siobhan Heekin-Canedy is a freelance writer with a background in international affairs. She represented Ukraine as an elite-level ice dancer from 2008 to 2014, including at the 2014 Winter Olympics.*

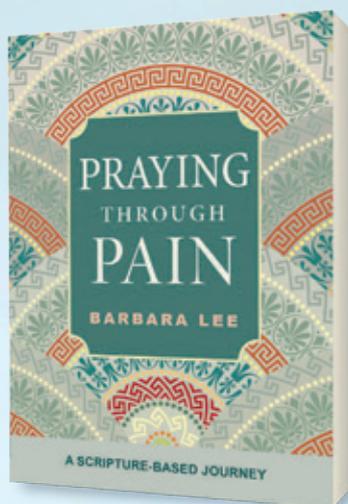
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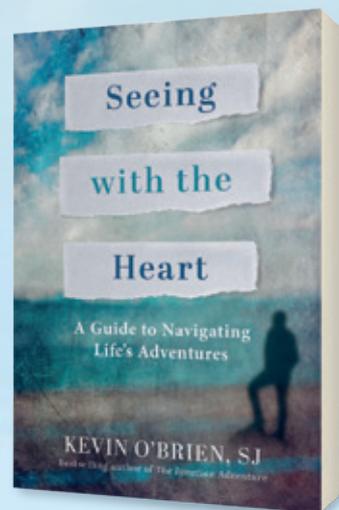
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## Preachers' progress

America Media launches a new effort to deliver better homilies

By Michael Simone

“Please, the homilies.... They are a disaster.” Pope Francis recently made this dismal assessment when speaking to a group of students in Rome. They had gathered to study ways to improve the liturgy, and the pope, with his usual candor, put into words something that I and many Catholics have felt for years: Catholic preaching is often very poor.

It is not clear why this is the case. The Catholic Church has produced preachers like St. Ambrose and St. Bernard of Clairvaux, people whose inspiring words resulted in the immediate conversion of their hearers or in lifelong commitments to the works of mercy. Even today, there are many excellent Catholic preachers, but this does not seem to be the norm, as Francis’ remarks made clear.

America Media has made a commitment to improving this situation. The Lilly Endowment, which supports the development of religious communities in the United States, recently awarded America Media a \$1 million grant as part of its Compelling Preaching Initiative to develop a mobile phone app that will pull together preaching resources and reflections on the weekly readings, a new weekly podcast on great homilies and how they are prepared, and improvements in production and distribution for the “One-Minute

Homily” series already produced by The Jesuit Post. As a first step in this effort, America Media teamed with the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate to survey preachers in the United States to learn how they prepare homilies.

In October, CARA invited nearly 18,000 parishes across the United States to participate. Enough responded to provide a strong statistical sample. The largest group of responses came from the Midwest (39 percent), followed by the South (25 percent), the Northeast (23 percent) and the West (14 percent). These percentages closely match the actual distribution of parishes across the United States.

Of the respondents, 84 percent were priests and 14 percent were deacons. Two percent of the respondents were non-ordained religious or lay ministers, a sample size that was unfortunately too small to yield many insights.

There was broad agreement among respondents on the features that make an effective homily. Priests and deacons alike list “delivery style/rhetorical technique” as extremely or very important. In fact, priests list “delivery style/rhetorical technique” as the single most compelling aspect of a homily. And for a good homily, respondents agreed that time was of the essence; 97 percent of all respondents said that

The Rev. Ajani Gibson of the Archdiocese of New Orleans preaches during a prayer service in honor of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. at St. Kevin Church in Queens, N.Y., on Jan. 16.

it was very important that a Sunday homily should be under 15 minutes. Fifty-three percent said it should be under 10 minutes.

The biggest divergence between priests and deacons also appears in this category. Many priests (63 percent) believe an “extremely” or “very” effective homily is one that relates to contemporary events or issues. Almost as many priests (56 percent), however, believe that a homily on spiritual traditions or prayer is compelling.

By contrast, a whopping 78 percent of deacons said that a homily that relates to contemporary events would be “extremely” or “very” effective, whereas many fewer (40 percent) believed that about a homily that connects with spiritual traditions or prayer. The survey does not suggest a reason for this divergence, but deacons are often engaged in secular occupations and perhaps may be more sensitive to the need for theological reflection on the events of the day. Priests, meanwhile, may be responding to needs they encounter as spiritual directors and confessors. Diversity of background perhaps allows preachers to meet a variety of needs.

The survey identified variations in the way preachers prepared their Sunday homilies. Preachers of every type in the West and South, as well as generally in rural areas, took the longest to prepare them, often spending more than four hours per week. Deacons, no matter their location, also spent more than four hours weekly to craft their homily. Nearly half of all priests, meanwhile, took fewer than two hours to prepare.

Preachers of all regions and statuses agreed that certain tools were especially useful. These included commentaries like the *Sacra Pagina* series and critical interpretations of Scripture like the *Jerome Biblical Commentary*.

Priests said they frequently supplement these tools with weekly homily helps, like *America's* “Word” column. Deacons reported using weekly helps only infrequently. Relatively few preachers drew on patristic or other historical homilies, and it was very rare for any to go back to their notes from seminary. Few preachers reported it helpful to their own preparation to listen to other preachers.

Deacons were less likely than priests to tune in to other preachers—about one-third of deacons reported

listening to other preachers regularly—but both groups said that was something they would prefer to do even less often. This is perhaps a tacit admission that even regular preachers recognize that “the homilies.... They are a disaster.”

The renewal of the culture of preaching will take a long time, but one area where Catholics can help their preachers today is by offering feedback. According to the CARA survey, few preachers receive any kind of feedback aside from comments in passing, usually after Mass.

As someone who preaches regularly, I know how important feedback can be. I treasure emails and messages people send on my preaching. Even when these are challenging, they can contain something important to learn.

The most helpful notes balance compliments with invitations to further reflection. For example, one parishioner wrote, “You focused so much on Martha; I would have loved to have heard more about Mary, especially since Jesus thought she was doing the right thing.”

Another wrote, “You talked about the choosing of the 12 from their perspective. Did you ever understand the story from the point of view of the people who weren’t chosen? I think many people feel that way today.”

Feedback like this improves my preaching every time I receive it. Offering it regularly is one area where Catholics can have a significant and immediate effect.

There is good news here. This survey suggests that preachers recognize the preparation, delivery and content choices that result in effective homilies. The survey also subtly reveals preachers’ own frustration with the state of things now. Many of the problems, then, are not systemic but arise in execution. These are problems that can be solved.

With the right tools and good feedback, the culture of Catholic preaching can slowly improve, and perhaps a future pope will someday say, “Please, the homilies.... They are a wonder!”

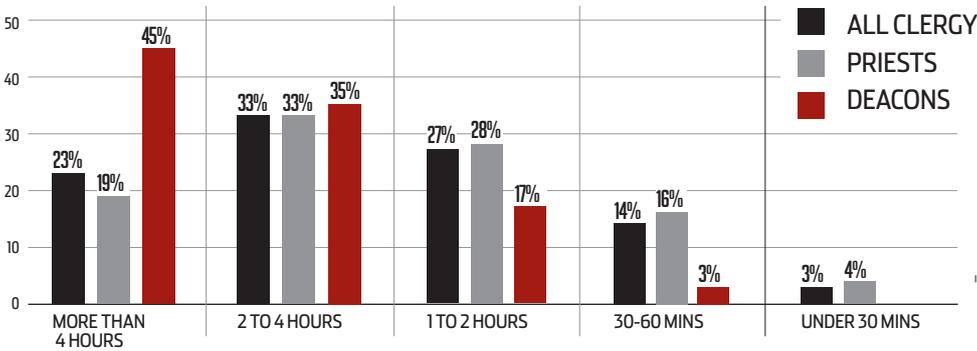
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Michael Simone, S.J., *contributing editor*.

# WHAT THE PREACHERS HAVE TO SAY ...



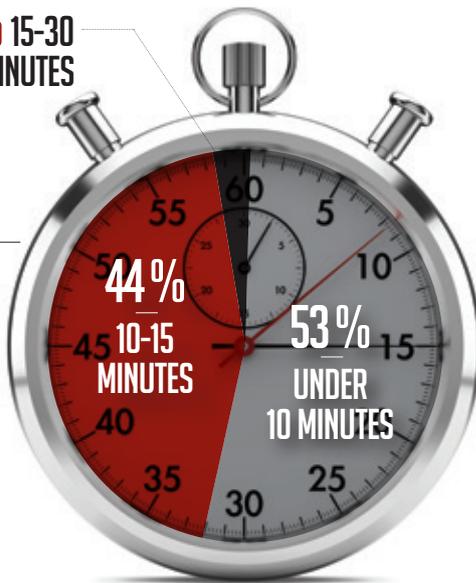
How long do you usually spend preparing for a homily?



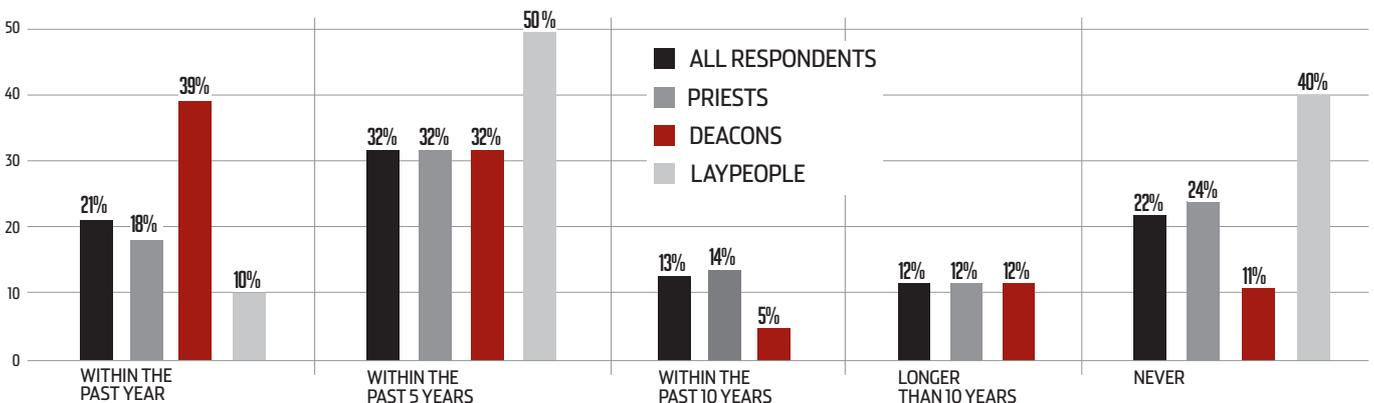
**45% OF DEACONS SAY THEY USUALLY SPEND MORE THAN FOUR HOURS PREPARING A HOMILY COMPARED WITH 19% OF PRIESTS.**

**3% 15-30 MINUTES**

What do you consider an appropriate length of time for a homily or an equivalent preaching opportunity in your parish or community?



How recently have you participated in ongoing formation or continuing education for preaching?



**78% of deacons** said how readings relate to current events or issues was “very” to “extremely important” to making homilies compelling, compared with **63% for priests.**

**56% of priests** believed that it was “very” to “extremely important” that good homilies connect to “spiritual tradition or suggestion for prayer,” a belief shared by only **40% of deacons.**

**38% of deacons** said personal stories were “very” important to a good homily; **30% of priests** agreed.

Source: “America Magazine Preaching Survey,” conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University and funded by the Lilly Endowment

## GOODNEWS: Ignacio House opens in Harlem

In December, Ignacio House received permission from the Archdiocese of New York to move into its new home, a former Christian Brothers' residence in Manhattan. Since 2019, at a Bronx address, Ignacio House has been home to 15 "resident scholars," formerly incarcerated men who are now studying at colleges and universities in the New York area. On Dec. 19, Zach, who asked that only his first name be used, was among the first to move into the program's new site in Harlem.

That building will do double duty as a living space for the program's residents and as the offices of Ignacio House's parent organization, the Thrive for Life Prison Project Inc. The relocation is the first step in a nationwide expansion for the program.

Another Zach—Zachariah Presutti, S.J.—founded Thrive for Life in 2017 after spending years working behind the walls of jails and prisons. Father Presutti, a social worker and a priest who has served as a prison psychotherapist, said that educational opportunities and housing security are crucial components for a successful recovery after incarceration.

"If you're not traumatized before you go into prison, you certainly are by the time you come out," he said. People returning to society from incarceration, he explained, will have to tap into a number of "tools and resources wherever they are in their mental health development," but first "it's really necessary to have...successful re-entry."

Also necessary is a supportive environment, something the new Ignacio House is designed to offer, with welcoming communal spaces and bigger rooms for residents.

The new location is convenient for Zach, who commutes to class at Columbia University nearby. Many of the house's residents attend other Manhattan colleges, like New York University and Hunter College, that host special degree programs for people currently or formerly incarcerated.

He first applied for the Columbia program without knowing where in New York he might live. In prison, Zach had studied mathematics, but he pivoted after his release to pursue a career in law. He said that he wanted to work more directly to help other people, especially those who have also been incarcerated, "the way I was helped."

Zach's journey to Ignacio House began after his acceptance to Columbia. Scouring the internet for suitable lodging, he stumbled on some information about Ignacio House. That allowed him to avoid the frustration of apartment hunting in New York with a criminal record, a well-



Zach Presutti, S.J., center, with Ignacio House residents and volunteers in their new home in Harlem

known obstacle to finding housing.

The problem has prompted action from local politicians and advocacy groups. Earlier this year, New York City Council Member Keith Powers introduced the Fair Chance for Housing Act, an effort to prohibit landlords from discriminating based on tenant-applicants' criminal records. Previous attempts to approve that municipal regulation in New York have failed, but similar prohibitions have passed in San Francisco and in the state of New Jersey.

For someone like Zach, who lived with family in Pennsylvania after his release in 2019 while pursuing his associate's degree, the move to New York to attend Columbia might have proved impossible without Ignacio House.

The new Ignacio House will include a library, a large workout room and private bedrooms for each resident. Father Presutti said the former brothers' residence is just the right size to create both a sense of belonging to a community and sufficient capacity to allow individual attention, the Ignatian notion of *cura personalis* that he called a "hallmark of Jesuit education."

Only six years after its founding, Thrive for Life is solidifying plans for national expansion. It has purchased a location for a second Ignacio House in Milwaukee, which should open this summer, and a site for a residence for women has also been secured in Queens. Discussions are underway to partner with Georgetown University in Washington and Loyola University in New Orleans to bring Ignacio Houses to those cities.

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Christopher Parker is a Joseph A. O'Hare, S.J., fellow at *America*. Twitter: @cparkernews.

## Is Ireland's civil war finally over?

The appointment of Leo Varadkar as *taoiseach*, Ireland's prime minister, on Dec. 17 was groundbreaking, though you could be forgiven if you did not notice this particular political transition. While Irish governments are typically made up of coalitions of several political parties, since June 2020, power has been shared between the contemporary center-right parties that represent the two factions that fought the Irish Civil War a century ago. Mr. Varadkar's return as taoiseach at the end of 2022 is the first time that the coalition has held even as the leadership post has been handed off from one party to the other.

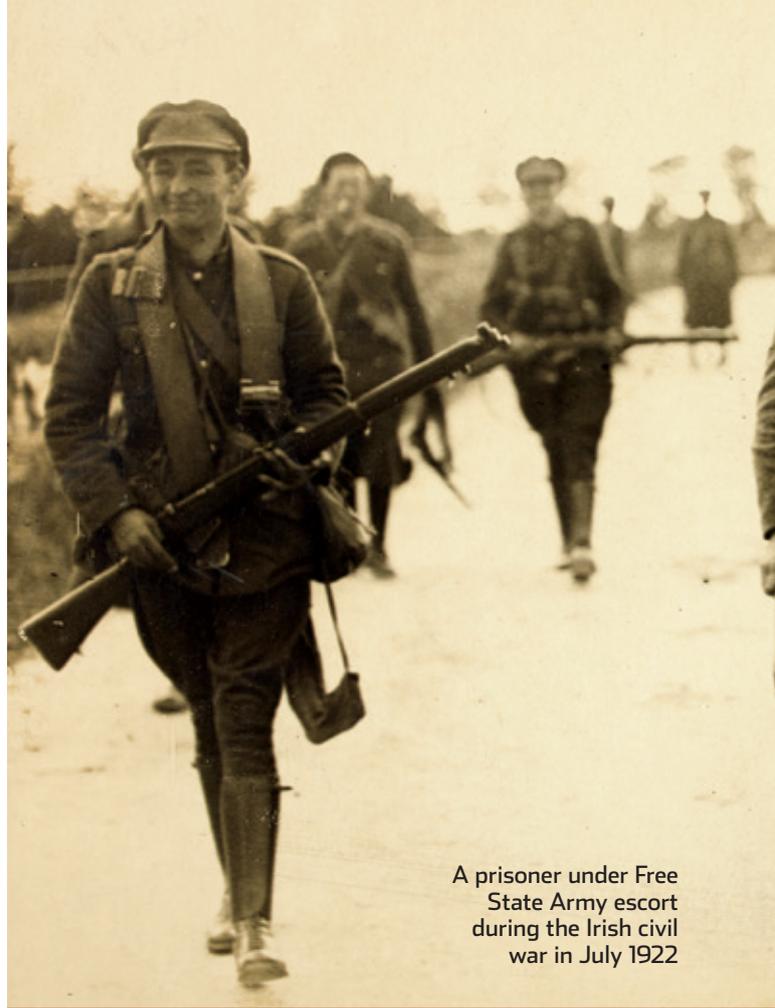
Fianna Fáil, founded in its present form in 1927, emerged from the side opposed to signing the treaty with Great Britain in December 1921 that ended the Irish War of Independence. Founded in 1933, Fine Gael emerged from among the pro-treaty faction, the leaders of the Irish Free State who had waged a brutal campaign against former comrades in the remnant Irish Republican Army from 1922 until 1923.

In the decades since the two hostile parties were created, no Irish government could be formed without a coalition involving one of them, but for generations it was inconceivable that any government could be formed that included both of them. The bitterness of the civil war—when the Free State Army executed more I.R.A. members than the British had done during the War of Independence—ran deep. That this negotiated transition of power from Fianna Fáil to Fine Gael has occurred without any protest from within the parties themselves and without any discomfort among voters suggests that a profound shift has occurred in Irish politics.

The coalition between the two former antagonists was established, including the Green Party as a junior partner, during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. Many saw the power-sharing compromise as an attempt by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael to reinvent themselves before a new generation of Irish voters.

Réada Cronin, a member of Parliament for leftist Sinn Féin—the largest opposition party in the Republic of Ireland and a major threat to two-party dominance—certainly believes so. The coalition, she said, was formed “really to keep Sinn Féin out of power. I think it was out of necessity rather than any hope of a real reconciliation.” That this fragile coalition has survived indicates decisively that the Irish political scene is no longer in thrall to 20th-century disputes.

Huge challenges face contemporary Ireland, including



A prisoner under Free State Army escort during the Irish civil war in July 1922

a housing market and a health system in crisis, an unprecedented influx of refugees from Ukraine and rising national debt in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Yet from its less-than-auspicious start, the Irish state has flourished in many ways. It never succumbed to the various totalitarian impulses that seduced other European nations. It established a respected position in the international community while maintaining a historic neutrality. Ireland now stands as an educated and affluent society at home among the other progressive states of the European Union.

The peaceful sharing of power by Irish political parties that once went to war may be understood as a triumph of the common good. As Ireland approaches the centenary of the end of the conflict in May, it might be possible to declare that the civil war is finally over.

But some of the work left undone in that era remains a bedeviling challenge.

Northern Irish demographics have been shifting for years, with a Catholic majority being counted for the first time last year. And as the consequences of Brexit are more fully felt, the number of people from Northern Ireland who once understood themselves as British but who now travel on a passport stamped by the Irish Republic is growing. In this context, many people believe that the question of uni-



Courtesy of National Library of Ireland

fication must again be re-examined.

Ms. Cronin is keen to explore this possibility. Sinn Féin has become particularly popular among younger and working-class voters, in large part because of its ambitious housing policies and commitment to health care reform.

Ms. Cronin acknowledges the democratic virtue of a peaceable exchange of power between the republic's two main parties. But she is clear that thinking purely in terms of what has been achieved since the civil war leaves unaddressed what remains left to do. For her, the partition of Ireland created by the treaty is an example of a "job undone...a job we walked away from because it was too difficult."

Kevin Hargaden *contributes from Dublin. Twitter: @kevinhargaden.*

## 'Hands off Africa,' Pope Francis says in Congo



CNS photo/Paul Haring

A young woman gestures in the shape of a heart, awaiting the start of the papal Mass at Ndolo airport in Kinshasa, Congo, on Feb. 1.

He may have been in a wheelchair, but Pope Francis came out hitting as hard as any pope has ever done in an address in Kinshasa, the capital city of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

He drew applause when, departing from his prepared text, he denounced "the forgotten genocide" that has taken place in this country over the past 30 years.

He demanded that other countries, both near and far, and multinational corporations stop the economic exploitation of this country and of the continent and said to enthusiastic applause: "Hands off the Democratic Republic of the Congo!" he said. "Hands off Africa! Stop choking Africa: It is not a mine to be stripped or a terrain to be plundered."

Describing Congo as "host to one of the great green lungs of the world, which must be preserved," he called for "fruitful cooperation" with the international community "without imposing external models that are more useful to those who help than to [the people who] are helped."

The pope was beginning a six-day trip to Congo and the Republic of South Sudan on Jan. 31.

Pope Francis noted that Congo is "a beautiful, vast and luxuriant land."

"Yet," he said, "if the geography of this verdant lung is so rich and variegated, its history has not been comparably blessed."

The country has been "torn by war" that left millions of people dead, Francis said. He told the Congolese he had come "in the name of Jesus, as a pilgrim of reconciliation and peace" to stand with them, together with the worldwide Catholic Church, "as you fight to preserve your dignity and your territorial integrity against deplorable attempts to fragment your country."

Pope Francis said, "It is a tragedy that these lands, and more generally the whole African continent, continue to endure various forms of exploitation."

Gerard O'Connell, *Vatican correspondent. Twitter: @gerryrome.*



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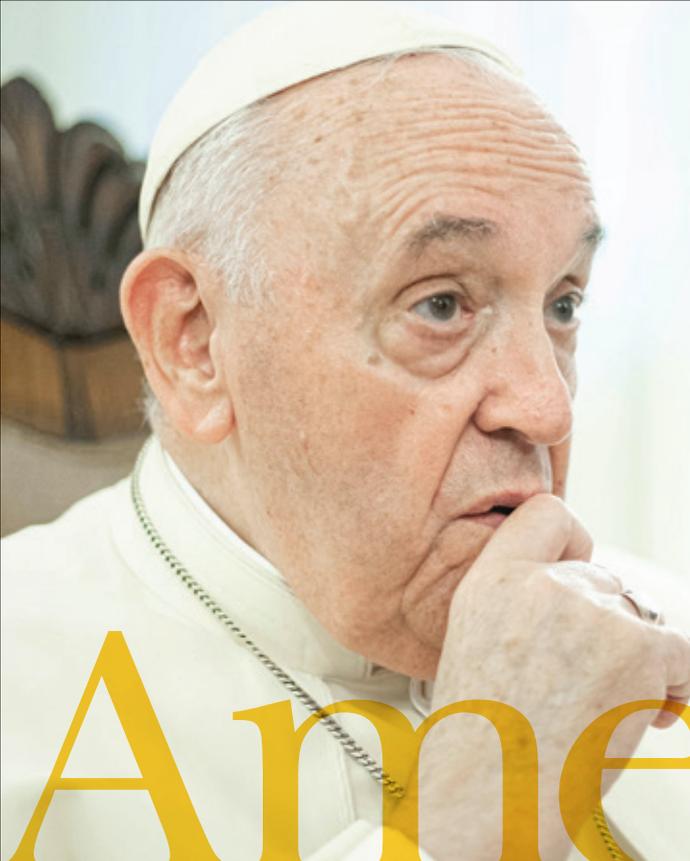
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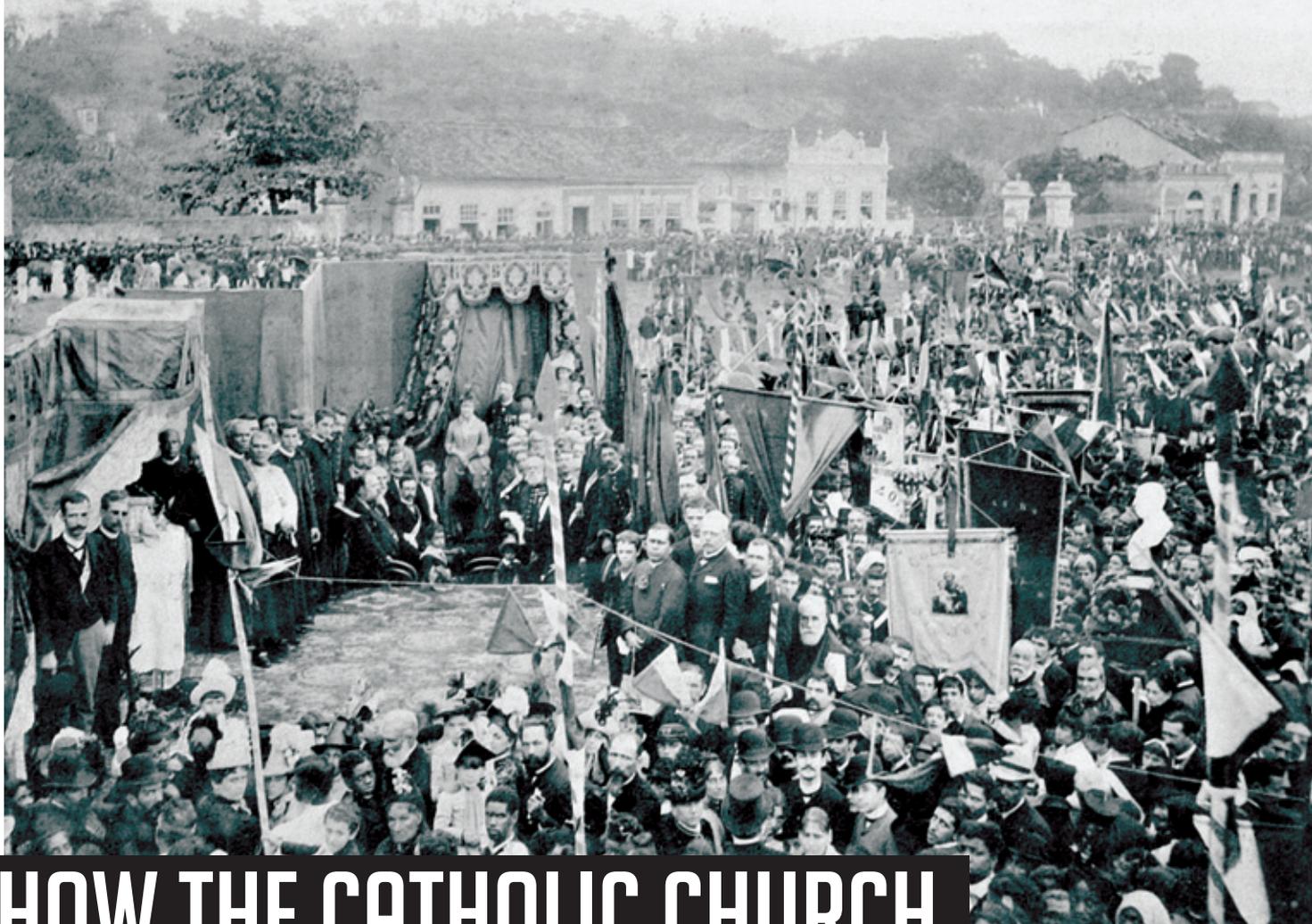


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# HOW THE CATHOLIC CHURCH REVERSED COURSE ON SLAVERY

*And why we must reckon with this history*

By Christopher J. Kellerman

It was the morning of May 24, 1888, and a large, ethnically diverse crowd waited in the Sala Ducale of the Apostolic Palace in Rome for the pope to arrive. Led by Cardinal Charles Lavigerie, the French missionary archbishop of Algiers, the group had traveled to Rome on a double pilgrimage from North Africa and from the Diocese of Lyon, France. The pilgrims had earlier entered St. Peter's Square with camels and a special gift for the pope: a pair of gazelles wearing silver collars inscribed with Latin verse.

Shortly after noon, the smiling Pope Leo XIII and his entourage entered the Sala Ducale to sustained applause from the pilgrims. It was a special year for Leo: the golden jubilee of his ordination to the priesthood. Preparations had been underway throughout nearly the entirety of 1887 for the yearlong celebration in which the pope would receive thousands of gifts from all over the world and greet an

abundance of well-wishers.

Among the pilgrims who traveled to Rome during Leo's jubilee, however, this group was unique, and its uniqueness was indicated by the 12 men strategically placed at the front of the crowd. These 12 African men had been enslaved before their freedom was purchased by Lavigerie and his missionaries. They were at the head of the group because today's audience was an unofficial celebration of the release of Pope Leo's encyclical on slavery.

On Feb. 10, the Brazilian statesman and abolitionist Joaquim Nabuco had met with Leo in a private audience and asked the pope to write the encyclical. Brazil was on the cusp of abolishing slavery, which would make it the last country in the Western Hemisphere to do so. Due to the Brazilian princess regent Isabel's devout Catholicism, Nabuco thought a letter from the pope condemning slavery



An open-air Mass in Brazil on May 17, 1888, commemorating the abolition of slavery

might embolden her to support abolition more aggressively. Leo was happy to oblige, and the news about this anti-slavery encyclical began to spread.

Upon hearing of it, Cardinal Lavignier wrote to the pope and asked him to include something about the continuing presence of slavery in Africa. The anti-abolition prime minister of Brazil, however, was not happy with the news from Rome, and he successfully pressed the Holy See to delay the issuance of the encyclical.

Despite the prime minister's back-channel machinations, Brazil's parliament passed the abolition bill, and it was signed into law by Isabel on May 13. When the encyclical, titled "In Plurimis," was released to the public on May 24, it was dated May 5, as if Pope Leo wanted it on the record that he had supported Brazilian abolition before it became the law of the land. Nevertheless, this late release intersected perfectly with Cardinal Lavignier's pilgrimage. The day before the audience, the 12 formerly enslaved men had been given the chance to read the document. Though other encyclicals of Leo would come to overshadow this one, it surely was one of his most theologically significant. For with "In Plurimis" and his fol-

low-up encyclical, "Catholicae Ecclesiae," Leo XIII did something astounding: He changed the church's teaching on slavery. The Catholic Church, for the first time in its history, had finally gotten on board with abolitionism.

### **Divergent Explanations**

That revolutionary day when Leo XIII became the first pope to condemn slavery is not well known by many Catholics and is rarely mentioned in scholarship related to the church's history. This is not terribly surprising. The church's historical engagement with slaveholding is very complex, and it is also widely misunderstood. Even in the past several years, well-intentioned Catholic writers have published accounts of the church and slavery that are full of inaccuracies.

Often, those inaccurate accounts are written to defend the church in some way. In 2005, for example, Cardinal Avery Dulles wrote a book review in *First Things* claiming that the popes had denounced the trade in African slaves from its very beginnings and yet had never condemned slavery as such, retaining a continuity of teaching that always allowed for some "attenuated forms of



# The history of the church was nothing close to a steady, if interrupted, march to eliminate slavery.

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servitude.” Other apologists have taken a more absolute position: The church has always been against slavery itself. Both these lines of argumentation seem to agree on two central assertions: The popes always condemned the trade in African slaves, and the church’s teaching did not change.

Defending the church, either in its reputation or its doctrinal continuity, can be praiseworthy. But when it comes to the history of the Catholic Church and slaveholding, this posture of defense has been deeply damaging. It has unnecessarily led to confusion around the church’s history with slaveholding, and that confusion has helped to prevent the church from reckoning with a troubling history whose consequences are still present in our world.

And yet it was once widely known, and still is among historians of slavery today, that the Catholic Church once embraced slavery in theory and in practice, repeatedly authorized the trade in enslaved Africans, and allowed its priests, religious and laity to keep people as enslaved chattel. The Jesuits, for example, by the historian Andrew Dilal’s count, owned over 20,000 enslaved people circa 1760. The Jesuits and other slaveholding bishops, priests and religious were not disciplined for their slaveholding because they were not breaking church teaching. Slaveholding was allowed by the Catholic Church.

One of the reasons the church’s past approval of slaveholding is so little known among the general Catholic population today is that the very popes who reversed the church’s course on slavery and the slave trade also promoted that same inaccurate narrative that defended the church’s reputation and continuity—even, intentionally or not, at the cost of the truth.

## Condemning the Atlantic Slave Trade

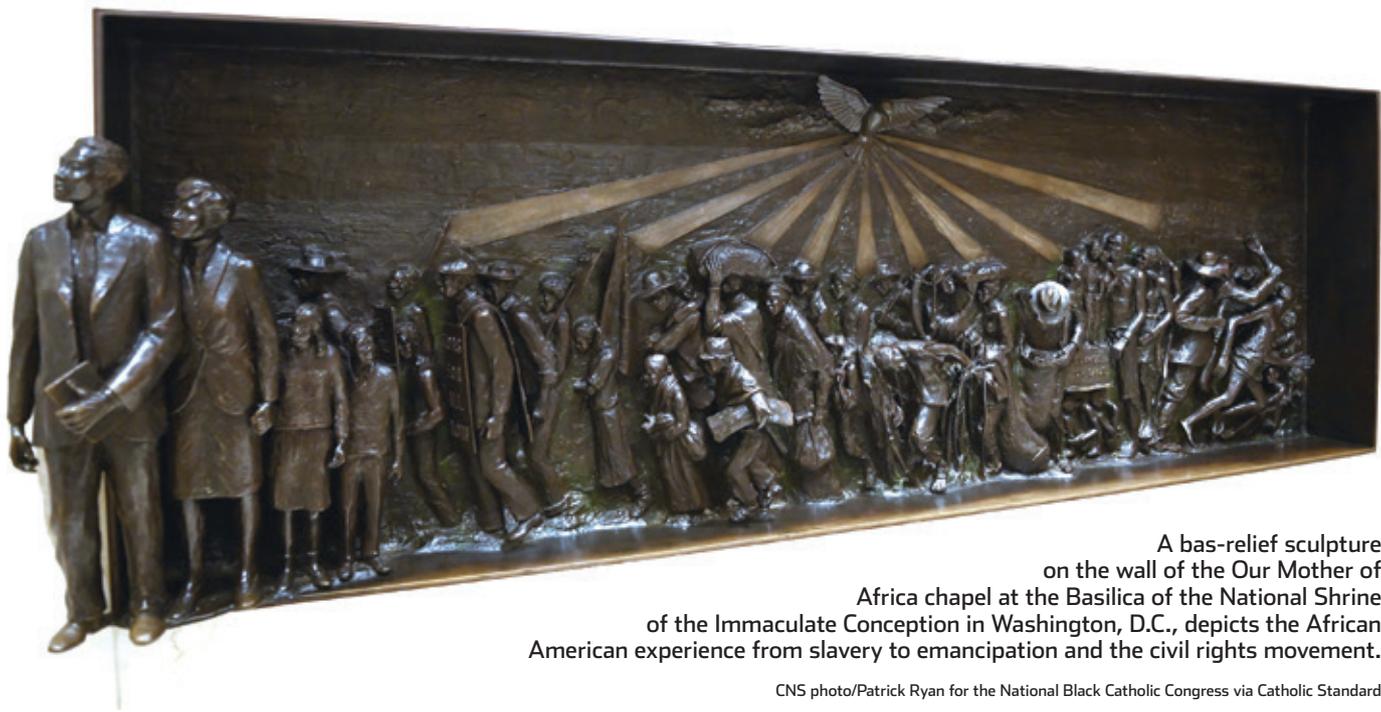
The shifts began quietly. In 1814, Pope Pius VII, at the request of Great Britain prior to the upcoming Congress

of Vienna, privately sent letters to the kings of France and Spain asking them to condemn the slave trade. At this time in history, condemning the trade did not equate to condemning slavery itself. “The slave trade” meant the transatlantic shipping of enslaved persons from the African continent to the New World. Hence, the slaveholding U.S. President Thomas Jefferson, prior to signing an anti-slave-trade bill into law in 1807, saw no contradiction in referring to the trade as “those violations of human rights” against “the unoffending inhabitants of Africa” all while continuing to keep Black descendants of the trade’s immediate victims enslaved. Britain itself outlawed the trade in 1807, but slaveholding remained legal afterward in parts of its empire. In the same vein, Pius’s private letters referred only to the trade, not to slavery itself.

The papacy’s condemnation of the trade became a public one in 1839 with Gregory XVI’s bull “In Supremo Apostolatus.” Though the bull came, once again, at the request of Great Britain, Gregory deserves praise for being the first pope to publicly condemn the Atlantic slave trade after nearly four centuries of its operation. The bull was a strong one in many ways, blaming the advent of the trade on Christians who were “basely blinded by the lust of sordid greed.” And yet, as with Pius VII, Gregory did not speak directly on the issue of whether slaveholders in the Americas should free their enslaved people, something he easily could have included.

So when some abolitionists in the United States greeted Gregory’s bull as a fully antislavery document, Catholic bishops like John England of Charleston, S.C., and Francis Patrick Kenrick of Philadelphia argued that the only thing the bull did was precisely what the United States had already done: ban participation in the international slave trade. Gregory corrected no one’s interpretation, and so Catholic slaveholding was able to continue in the United States and elsewhere, arguably without disobedience to church teaching.

Why Gregory was the first pope to publicly condemn the trade is an agonizing and perhaps unanswerable question. The arguments that Gregory used to support his condemnation had been articulated by countless theologians and activists over the previous few centuries, including by the representatives of Black Catholic confraternities who protested the trade before the Holy See in the 1680s. Any pope since at least the 1540s, when the Dominican friar Bartolomé de las Casas changed his opinion on the trade after researching its injustices, could have issued nearly the same bull as Gregory did. Gregory was just the first to choose to do it.



A bas-relief sculpture on the wall of the Our Mother of Africa chapel at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C., depicts the African American experience from slavery to emancipation and the civil rights movement.

CNS photo/Patrick Ryan for the National Black Catholic Congress via Catholic Standard

### Rewriting History

Unfortunately, Gregory also provided a narrative in his bull that did not present a truthful portrait of the church's engagement with the trade. Pius VII had made an ambiguous and dubious claim that the church had helped to abolish much of the world's slavery and that the popes had always "rejected the practice of subjecting men to barbarous slavery," but Gregory expanded upon this claim in detail. He wrote that in ancient times, "those wretched persons, who, at that time, in such great number went down into the most rigorous slavery, principally by occasion of wars, felt their condition very much alleviated among the Christians." He claimed that slavery was gradually eliminated from many Christian nations because of "the darkness of pagan superstition being more fully dissipated, and the morals also of the ruder nations being softened by means of faith working by charity."

In Gregory's telling, this steady Christian march toward eliminating slavery from the earth was then interrupted by greedy Christians who reduced Black and Indigenous peoples to slavery or who bought already enslaved persons and trafficked them.

Gregory claimed that the papacy had been opposed to these new situations of enslavement: "Indeed, many of our predecessors, the Roman Pontiffs of glorious memory, by no means neglected to severely criticize this." As evidence for this statement, he cited the bulls prohibiting the enslavement of Indigenous peoples in the Americas written by Paul III, Urban VIII and Benedict XIV, as well as the then recent condemnations of the trade by Pius VII. He

also included a curious reference: a 1462 letter of Pius II that, Gregory wrote, "severely rebuked those Christians who dragged neophytes into slavery."

This narrative was deeply misleading. The history of the church was nothing close to a steady, if interrupted, march to eliminate slavery. Rather, the early church embraced slaveholding both before and after Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, and the medieval church expanded the ways by which someone could become enslaved beyond those allowed by pagan Rome—allowing, for example, that women in illicit relationships with clerics could be punished with enslavement. Theologians like St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas theologically defended the practice of keeping humans enslaved, and St. Gregory the Great gave enslaved people to his friends as gifts.

Moreover, while it was true that the popes condemned the enslavement of Indigenous peoples in the Americas, the trade in African slaves was permitted and encouraged by a series of popes from Nicholas V, who died in 1455, forward. Gregory XVI mentioned none of this, instead seeming to suggest that Pius II's letter meant the popes' hands had always been clean with regard to the trade. But Pius II's condemnation had nothing to do with the general Portuguese trade in enslaved Africans; it instead concerned a particular instance of Catholic converts being kidnapped. Nicholas V's bulls had specified that only non-Christians could be seized and enslaved. Pius II's letter was in accordance with Nicholas' permissions, not against them.

The inaccuracy of this narrative did not go unnoticed.



# The Catholic Church approved, multiple times and at some of its highest levels of authority, of one of the gravest crimes against humanity in modern history.

The Portuguese consul in Brazil scoffed at the bull, writing that “its doctrine has been most rarely sent forth from the Palace of the Vatican, for it is well known that Nicholas V... and Calistus III...approved of the commerce in slaves” and that Sixtus IV and Leo X also approved of the trade even after the letter of Pius II. He noted that Scripture did not condemn slavery and that the popes had previously condemned only the enslavement of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas.

Erroneous as Gregory’s narrative may have been, he was not pulling it out of thin air. Some British and American abolitionist historians had been promoting such a narrative for decades in an attempt to argue that Christianity had historically been an antislavery religion. Just five years prior to Gregory’s bull, for example, the American historian George Bancroft falsely claimed that the slave trade “was never sanctioned by the see of Rome.” It is possible, then, perhaps even likely, that Gregory XVI honestly believed this narrative to be accurate. Nevertheless, it was wrong, and its publication in a papal bull meant that it would spread more widely.

## An Abolitionist Church

When Leo XIII condemned not merely the slave trade but slavery itself on that exciting day in 1888, it may have not been too shocking to most people who heard the news. Slavery was now legally abolished in the Christian world; why would the church not be opposed to it? And yet both Nabuco and Lavigerie understood that Leo was making history. The condemnations of slaveholding that Leo issued in 1888 and 1890 did not represent merely a change in policy, which itself would have been momentous enough. The change was a theological one. What the Holy Office only a couple decades prior had proclaimed was “not at all contrary to natural and divine law” was now declared by

Leo to be contrary to both.

Leo even used the arguments of abolitionists to make his case. There was a certain set of theological propositions that abolitionist theologians had been promoting for centuries, from as early as St. Gregory of Nyssa to the 19th-century abolitionists Maria Stewart, Frederick Douglass and the French Catholic journalist Augustin Cochin. These propositions had been criticized or ignored by most Catholic theologians who wrote in favor of slavery, but Leo’s documents were filled with them. His successors would repeat and even deepen those abolitionist ideas in their own anti-slavery documents over and over again.

And yet, bold and praiseworthy as Leo’s abolitionist encyclicals were, he further concealed the truth about church history. Ignoring centuries of papal, conciliar and canonical approval of slavery, Leo strengthened Gregory’s narrative of a long antislavery march through history and inaccurately listed additional popes who had supposedly condemned the trade in African slaves and even slavery itself—including one of the popes who had renewed Nicholas V’s permissions.

As with Gregory, Leo may sincerely have believed these falsehoods to be true. But far from being officially corrected, this erroneous papal narrative has survived online and in print. Even St. John Paul II, who apologized for the participation of Christians in the slave trade, repeated the false claim that the trade had been condemned by Pius II.

## The Need for Reckoning and Reconciliation

The Catholic Church’s change in teaching regarding slavery was striking. While that change raises important theological questions about ecclesiology and doctrinal development, we must reject the temptation to jump straight to those questions without also doing the hard and painful work of reckoning with this history. It is morally imperative that we admit and deal with a series of difficult truths: that the Catholic Church approved, multiple times and at some of its highest levels of authority, of one of the gravest and longest-lasting crimes against humanity in modern history—and did not withdraw that approval for nearly 400 years.

During the full history of the Atlantic slave trade, roughly 12.5 million African men, women and children were forced onto ships to be sent across the ocean to a life of forced labor. Almost two million did not survive that journey. The survivors and millions of their descendants, all human beings made in God’s image, were the chattel property of other humans who had the power to whip them, force them to work unpaid their entire lives and keep their



The Door of No Return is a memorial in Ouidah, a former slave trade post in Benin, a country in West Africa.

children enslaved as well.

As Catholics, we must consider the human beings affected by the church's actions. How many people died chained to the disease-ridden hulls of ships because the popes before Gregory XVI repeatedly failed to take a bold stand? How many enslaved people were sexually assaulted because they were placed in a legal position allowed by the popes before Leo XIII that left them vulnerable to such abuse? How many enslaved people fell away from the Catholic faith because priests told them that the oppression they were experiencing was occurring with the approval of Holy Mother Church?

A process of reconciliation is needed. Our church needs to admit these past injustices.

As part of that reconciliation process, we need to do our best to repair the harm caused by the injustices our church perpetuated. Anti-slave-trade Catholic theologians of the 16th century were already writing about the need to make restitution to enslaved people. One 17th-century Capuchin even wrote about the eventual need for the descendants of slaveholders to make restitution to the descendants of the enslaved. Some religious communities have taken steps toward reconciliation, including the Jesuits of the United States, but at some point the Vatican will have to do the same. Perhaps there could be an international commission, or maybe a synod. When we consider the millions of lives

the trade harmed and still harms to this day, it is difficult to imagine even the convoking of an ecumenical council as being too extreme a remedy.

Pope Leo XIII righted one significant wrong when he changed the Catholic Church's teaching on slavery in 1888, and the popes since then should be lauded for their continual denunciation of slavery, slavery-like economic practices and contemporary human trafficking. But as with every unconfessed and unaddressed sin, harm remains. It takes courage to pick up that examination of conscience and pray with it. It takes courage to enter the confessional, say what needs to be said and commit to doing what needs to be done. And yet the justice and love of God demand such steps.

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Christopher J. Kellerman, S.J., is the author of *All Oppression Shall Cease: A History of Slavery, Abolitionism, and the Catholic Church* (Orbis Books, 2022).



*Listen to Gloria Purvis interview Christopher J. Kellerman, S.J., about his book and the history of the church's teaching on slavery on "The Gloria Purvis Podcast," at [americamagazine.org/podcasts](http://americamagazine.org/podcasts).*

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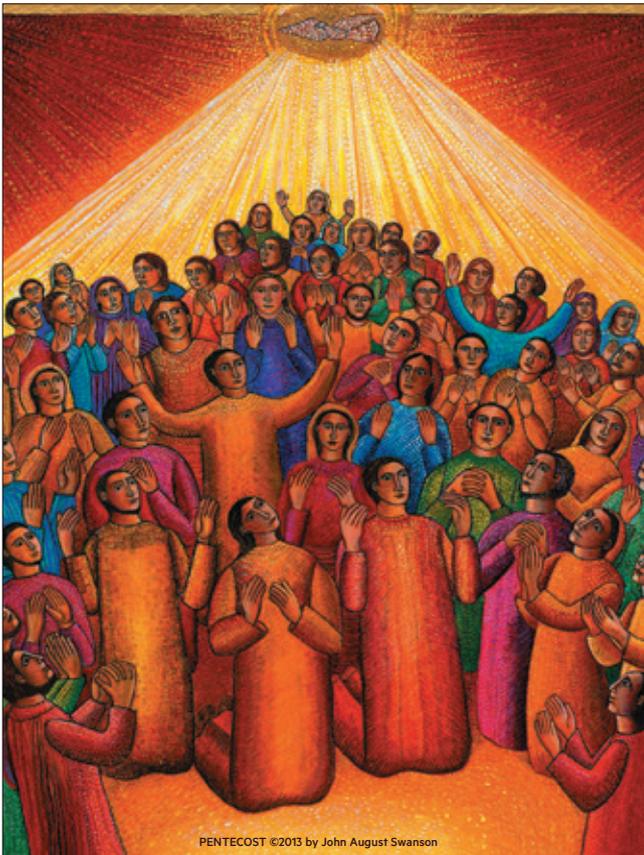
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# THAT ALL MAY BE ONE

*A year in the life of a parish in transition*

By Valerie Pavilonis

The night of Nov. 30, 2021, is bitterly cold, but it is warm inside St. Mary's Church in New Haven, Conn. Well over 100 parishioners kneel in the pews for adoration, and incense wafts through beams of dim light. Outside, dozens of paper lanterns are arranged on the ground in the shape of a heart. It is the last service led by the Dominican priests who have served as the spiritual leaders of this parish and have resided in its neighboring priory for 135 years.

The announcement of the Dominicans' departure ignited immediate controversy in the New Haven Catholic community, with many people who frequently worship at St. Mary's taking to social media and speaking to the press about their disappointment. St. Mary's is nestled in the Yale University campus, at the foot

of Hillhouse Avenue—a street lined with 19th-century mansions, including the home of Yale's president. The parish has long held a reputation as a gathering place for Catholics, from both the city and the surrounding areas, who seek a more traditional style of worship. (Think Latin chants and incense.) Integral to this reverence, many parishioners have said, is the presence of the Dominicans.

In a letter dated Oct. 5 posted on St. Mary's website, John Paul Walker, O.P., then the pastor, wrote that as of January 2022, "the pastoral care of this municipal parish will be entrusted entirely to the care of priests of the Archdiocese of Hartford—and thus a continuing presence of the Dominican friars in the pastoral ministry of St. Mary Parish or in residence at St. Mary Priory will no longer be possible." (Full



iStock

St. Mary's parish in New Haven, Conn., has long held a reputation as a gathering place for Catholics, both from the city and from the surrounding areas, who seek a more traditional style of worship.

disclosure: I used to worship at St. Mary's and was drawn there after it became one of the few churches offering services during the pandemic.)

The decision was part of the implementation of the second phase of a larger reorganization plan for the Archdiocese of Hartford, which, like many, faces a declining number of priests. The city of New Haven also faces a declining number of Catholics—to 10,000 today from 70,000 in 1930. The first phase of the plan in 2017 led to the merging of St. Mary's Church and St. Joseph's Church into one parish. The 2021 phase included a new “municipal model” for Catholic life in New Haven, in which all area churches would come together into one entity, with St. Mary's Church at the center. In essence, a city that once was home to numerous parishes, each with its own pastor, would function as the equivalent of a single parish, with each of the worship sites sharing a dwindling number of priests.

Overseeing this united model is a “moderator,” or a “first among equals” as defined in Canon Law, according to a statement by Archbishop Leonard P. Blair. The archdiocese implemented a “process of pastoral planning,” according to the statement, in order “to take an honest look at the situations and structures of the Catholic population of the Archdiocese in order to begin making changes that will assist in re-organizing the local Church not just for today but also into the future.”

Father Walker declined to comment for this story, but various parishioners at St. Mary's spoke with **America**, both at the start of the transition and in the ensuing months. In the time since the announcement was made, anxiety among the faithful has waxed and waned, moving in some cases from apprehension to peace; in others, consternation remains.

The difficulty of the transition has been underlined by the fact that such passionate feelings about one's place of worship are not unique to the St. Mary's community. As the Catholic Church in the United States faces changing demographics, lower Mass attendance and the cost of maintaining infrastructure, adjustments are required on the diocesan, parish and personal levels. Dioceses may or may not ask for feedback, and parishioners may or may not feel heard. Bishops must be responsible stewards of resources, but parishioners are also understandably protective of their parish history and communities.

In many ways, the story of St. Mary's is noteworthy not because it is unique but because it is a tale occurring, in various iterations, across the country. Catholic life in the United States is changing and will continue to change. Many have argued that when there is a vocal reaction to such change, it is worth listening to those voices in an effort to learn how people are affected and how we, as a church, can move forward together.

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# The announcement of the Dominicans' departure from St. Mary's ignited immediate controversy.

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## A Listening Church?

Michael Mercugliano, whose family has traveled the 20 miles from Durham, Conn., to attend Mass at St. Mary's since 2006, described his reaction to **America** in November 2021. Mr. Mercugliano explained that while he does not think Archbishop Blair is "doing anything scandalous," he was among several parishioners who mentioned a wish that more members of the parish had been consulted.

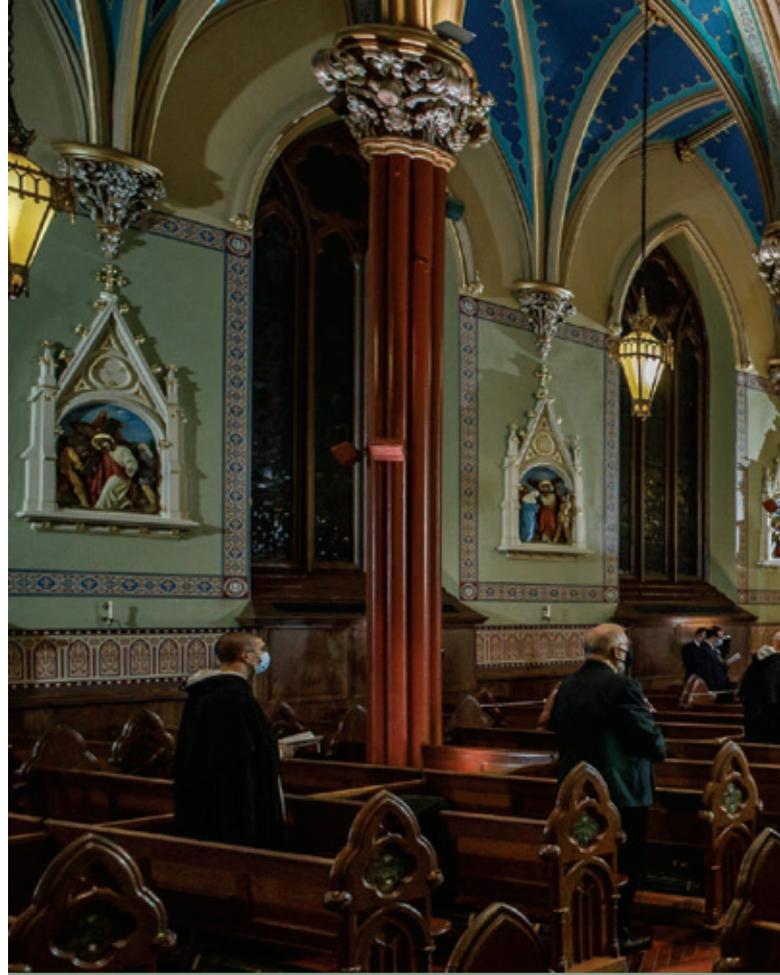
"God is found in relationships, right?" Mr. Mercugliano said. "He communicates with us through ordinary means and people; and certainly I think as a dad, as a husband, if I'm going to make a decision that's going to impact the family, here at home, I'm going to sit down and talk with everybody."

He added in a later email that he is "pretty certain" that St. Mary's will "do fine" and continue to grow even with the changes. "Only time will tell how things will pan out," Mr. Mercugliano wrote. "I do believe the bishop is doing the best he can for the church." He also praised the leadership of Father John Paul Walker.

In an email in December 2021, David Elliott, the associate director of communications and public relations for the Archdiocese of Hartford, responded to criticisms of the archdiocese's communication patterns. He noted that research conducted by an external consulting group combined with "sacramental and financial" data factored into the decision.

He wrote that parishioners' sense of feeling ignored was upsetting, and that he had personally responded to every communication he received.

"Depending on the size and scope of any given pastoral planning initiative, approaches will differ," Mr. Elliott wrote. "Some parish merger decisions originate at the parish level, with conclusions and proposals being reached by



clergy and lay leaders, but for a municipal model merger involving nearly a dozen churches, this approach was not feasible. However, the Archdiocese did rely heavily upon the many small and large group discussions that took place throughout the course of our 2020 Synod (where lay representatives from all New Haven parishes were present), taking into account the sense of urgency and desire for long-lasting, quality pastoral care expressed by our lay leaders."

The archdiocese published a letter from Archbishop Blair in *The New Haven Register* about the change and posted videos featuring the new diocesan priests assigned to New Haven. Registered households also received a letter from Archbishop Blair.

"Change is not easy and transitions are challenging, but I am confident that just as linkages and mergers elsewhere in the Archdiocese have been successful, they can also be successful in New Haven," Archbishop Blair wrote at the time.

## A More Peaceful Transition

The difficulty adjusting to new parish structures or leadership felt by some at St. Mary's is common. Especially in the Northeast and Midwest of the United States, many parishes have closed or consolidated in recent years. In 2021, the Diocese of Pittsburgh went to 81 from 107 par-



Catholics at a Mass of thanksgiving at St. Mary's Church in New Haven, Conn., on Nov. 1, 2020

CNS photo/Aaron Joseph, Archdiocese of Hartford

ishes. In 2022, the Archdiocese of St. Louis took steps to go to approximately 100 parishes from 178. In the last five years, the Archdiocese of Chicago has gone to 247 parishes from 350; and since 1997, the Archdiocese of Boston has dropped to 284 parishes from 394.

According to Mark Mogilka, a consultant with over 30 years of experience in pastoral planning at the Diocese of Green Bay, Wis., there are several steps that church leadership can take to ensure a smooth reorganization process. He pointed to the example of Manitowoc in the Diocese of Green Bay, which underwent an extensive pastoral planning process in the early 2000s. Each of six churches was invited to choose two lay representatives who together, along with the pastors, formed the diocese's planning committee. Mr. Mogilka says that "ideally" this is done in consultation with their pastoral councils. The committee was then given membership and financial data as well as future projections and was tasked with outlining a plan to reorganize the parish structures of the area.

The group's first proposal was rejected, but the second attempt was stronger: All six churches would be consolidated into one parish under the direction of a pastor and two associates, with three of the six buildings closing.

Mr. Mogilka emphasized that the committee's plan at this stage was a draft—a draft that underwent scrutiny by

all parties involved. Minutes of meetings were published, he said, pastoral councils were consulted, and public town halls were held, with Mr. Mogilka himself leading a meeting of about 600 people at a local high school in which participants looked at the draft and asked questions.

The plan did not please everyone, Mr. Mogilka said, but in the end, the number of people who were "aggressively unhappy" with the results was limited.

But even the best planning cannot dictate where people feel at home or the people with whom they connect. The plan was implemented in 2005, and Mr. Mogilka later analyzed community members' attitudes after a decade. Around 40 percent of those surveyed said that unity had been achieved since the restructuring. But around 50 percent said that some unity or little unity had been achieved, and around 10 percent said that despite the new consolidated model, the community had not come together at all.

"You can't mandate community," Mr. Mogilka said. "It doesn't work. It disrespects the culture and especially the deep roots of people's faith and generational investments in the sacred space that they've worshiped in."

Mr. Mogilka said that the best pastoral planning processes are "open, collaborative, transparent." When these terms are met, he said, "when the final plan is announced, there are few, if any, surprises, because all the various op-

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# In transitions of parish leadership, the spotlight often lands on the new pastor.

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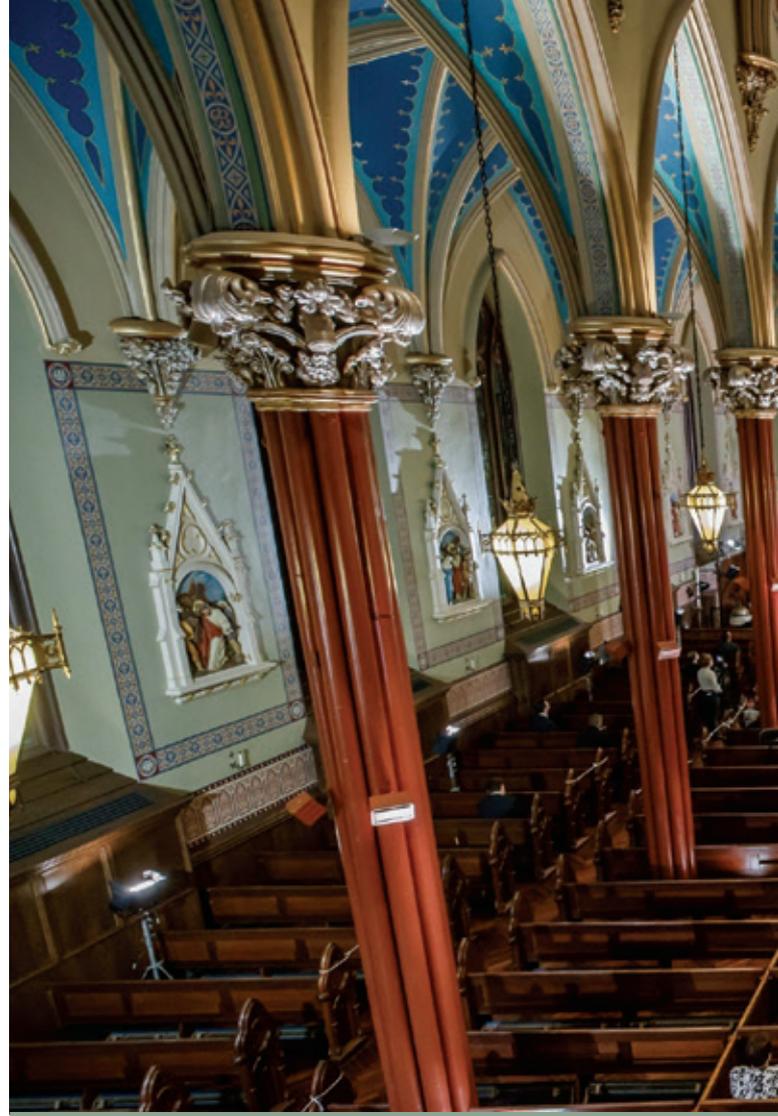
tions have been discussed, and lay leadership from each of the parishes involved are at the table, in the conversations and in the creation of final recommendations that are forwarded to the bishop.”

## The Leaders of the Municipal Model

In transitions of parish leadership, the spotlight often lands on the new pastor, who may be viewed as a savior by some or an interloper by others. In the case of St. Mary’s, the moderator is the Rev. Ryan Lerner, the current chaplain of Yale University and the former chancellor of the Archdiocese of Hartford. *[Editor’s note: Father Lerner serves on the prize committee of the George W. Hunt Prize, an award that is administered by America Media and the Catholic chaplaincy at Yale.]*

Tacy Woods, a parishioner at St. Mary’s for over 25 years, told **America** in December 2021 that she was worried that the move might indicate a top-down mentality to the new arrangement. But despite her concerns, she said that she planned to give Father Lerner the benefit of the doubt. When he served as parochial vicar for St. Margaret’s in Madison, Conn., Ms. Woods knew him distantly because she regularly brought Communion to a nearby nursing home. Whenever someone wanted to receive the anointing of the sick, she said, he was “so responsive and genuinely caring about people.”

Father Lerner concluded his role as chancellor earlier this year, and in an interview with **America** before he began to be moderator, he acknowledged he had seen a range of responses from among those who would be his new parishioners. He said he was taking parishioners’ unease seriously as the timeline moves forward, and he acknowledged that some have shown skepticism because his service to the church has largely been as an archdiocesan administrator, not a pastor.



“This is a community that feels they have not been heard, that this seems to have come top-down and seems to be very shocking for them,” he said.

Father Lerner also described how the leadership structure at St. Thomas More, where he shares duties with a team of chaplains, would help him in his new role. He added that immediately after the announcement of his new role, Father Walker reached out to him to talk about the transition; and since then he has spoken at length with the Dominican pastor about how to minister best to the people of St. Mary’s. “First on [his] list,” Father Lerner said, is speaking with parishioners and hosting town halls and listening sessions.

“It will be extremely important for me to be present to them,” he said.

The Rev. Anthony Federico, the newly appointed parochial vicar of St. Mary’s, also added in December that, although he knew there might be some “bumps and bruises,” he planned to “offer [his] life in full service”—in addition to meeting as many people as possible, from staff to volunteers to “all the folks in the pews.”



People maintain social distancing during a prayer vigil at St. Mary's Church in New Haven, Conn., on Oct. 30, 2020.

CNS photo/Aaron Joseph, Archdiocese of Hartford

The first days and months of a new pastor can require a major adjustment for all involved. Brett Hoover, an associate professor of practical/pastoral theology at Loyola Marymount University, told *America* that pastors should keep several things in mind when taking on a role at a new parish. He pointed especially to the need to take into account the differing viewpoints of church leadership and parishioners. He said that the leadership has a “much bigger kind of chessboard,” to deal with—for example, they must take a broader view of dioceses, particularly how the scarce resource of priests is distributed—while parishioners are, understandably, focused on their smaller communities.

He further emphasized the importance of making any changes slowly, and said he would advise pastors in transitions not to make any “sudden moves.”

“There used to be an adage that, if you’re a new pastor, don’t change anything for a year,” Dr. Hoover said.

He also noted that while some parishioners may vocally air their grievances, that doesn’t equate to a threat to leave the parish. Still, he said that if parishioners are venting their feelings, it’s critical for pastors to listen to those

feelings and make sure they feel heard.

### ‘What Are We Going to Lose?’

While Catholicism does not have independent local congregations like some branches of Protestantism, Dr. Hoover noted that Catholics sometimes subscribe to the concept of de facto congregationalism, the idea that one’s parish is their congregation.

Among the concerns noted by parishioners at St. Mary’s, the overarching one was that of identity. St. Mary’s allows only male altar servers, and Mass attendees often dress more formally than those at Masses in other Catholic churches in New Haven. Walking into a service, one will often see young families with several young children kneeling in the pews, and sometimes a woman will wear a veil.

“It’s your particular faith community,” Dr. Hoover said. “It belongs to you.” As a result, some parishes have a particular character associated with them—a character that, when new leadership arrives, may appear to be endangered.

“What are we going to lose?” Ms. Woods asked. “We’re



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# Difficulty adjusting to new parish structures or leadership is common.

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really losing a lot of our identity by losing the Dominicans, and as good as the new pastors may be, they're not Dominicans, and it's going to be hard for us to no longer be a Dominican parish."

But both Father Lerner and Father Federico emphasized that the heart of the parish identity is something they will strive very hard to keep.

"Nothing dramatic is going to change, and certainly not the core identity of this place as a place where liturgy is exquisitely done, and solid orthodox Catholic preaching is expected, a place where young families are welcomed and celebrated," Father Federico said. "All of that is going to stay the same."

He added that his own faith journey was accompanied by the Dominicans—he attended the Dominican-affiliated Providence College in Rhode Island for his undergraduate degree and studied later at Albertus Magnus College, which was founded by the Dominican Sisters of St. Mary of the Springs (now the Dominican Sisters of Peace) and located in New Haven. During his time at the latter, he said, he often prayed at the nearby St. Mary's.

Father Lerner said much the same in the Dec. 5, 2021, bulletin for St. Mary's, acknowledging the now-former pastor Father Walker's work at the church and noting his own relationship with St. Mary's, where he prayed while in seminary. While smaller details of parish life—a Mass time, for example—may change, Father Lerner emphasized that the core of the community will remain true to the spirit of the community.

"In that spirit, I want to assure you that I have no hidden agenda," Father Lerner wrote in the bulletin. "This will continue to be a place where God is worshiped with the utmost reverence and joy, where the truth is preached in love, the Gospel is proclaimed unapologetically, and individuals and families, both in the pews and [among] those who are searching, journey ever closer to Christ together."

## Looking Back—and Forward

Months later, in the spring of 2022, the faint aroma of incense hangs in the air. Ms. Woods said that while parish life is not exactly the same without the Dominicans, she appreciates the hard work that goes into being a parish priest and pointed out multiple times the vast number of responsibilities split between Father Lerner and Father Federico. "I don't know how they're still alive with the amount that they have to do," she said.

Sara Hunter, another St. Mary's parishioner, echoed Ms. Woods, saying that she understands that the priests are doing the best they can given how many responsibilities they have.

Both Ms. Hunter and Ms. Woods circled back to what Ms. Hunter called "one of the elephants in the room": distrust between parishioners and the archdiocese. When asked about some parishioners' distrust, Mr. Elliott responded by email on June 17 that throughout the months of April and May, archdiocesan representatives met with an estimated total of 200 parishioners from several New Haven churches on six separate occasions.

"I believe that through these forums, which combined total roughly 18 hours worth of in-person engagement, as well as other efforts, we have exercised a high level of transparency and communication," Mr. Elliott wrote.

In an interview in early June, Father Lerner said that for the most part, he thinks things are going fairly well, despite a few glitches. **America** asked Father Lerner about the town halls and listening sessions he mentioned in a prior interview. While he originally intended to host such sessions, he wrote in an email on June 9, it "quickly became apparent that opinions and feelings were all over the place." A resultant "toxic" atmosphere, combined with outsiders—for example, people with little connection to St. Mary's, or people who lived outside Connecticut—who would loudly comment on the situation, led him to determine that something else was needed.

"I felt that providing an open forum where a few voices might dominate the conversation, and pose issues that I as the new pastor would not have been in a position to address, would have proven unhelpful, deepen wounds, and potentially worsen an already tense situation," Father Lerner wrote. He added that he felt a more "ordered and quantitative analysis" of the situation would be best.

In early spring 2022, leadership at St. Mary's held a SWOT analysis—a business term that stands for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats—to better understand the status of the community. After consultation with parish leaders, the priests invited nearly 40 parishioners to attend, many of whom still said they felt unheard by the archdiocese.

"We come to take pastoral care of this parish, and we do

the best we can,” he wrote, adding that more SWOT analyses are also being conducted in other New Haven parishes. And these other parishes, he said, must not be forgotten in the bigger picture of local Catholic life in New Haven.

“My job, both as pastor and moderator,” Father Lerner wrote, “is to shepherd the process of bringing all the Catholics in New Haven together, those of Saint Mary’s and the other parishes who make up this local manifestation of the Body of Christ.”

When asked what other changes are on the horizon, Father Lerner pointed to his most recent project: creating a citywide Mass schedule that coordinates priests and parishes to avoid stretching resources thin. The updated schedule resulted in Masses offered on Sundays at 15 different times, along with several options for daily Masses and confessions. This, Father Lerner said, will allow New Haven’s priests to be more available to parishioners, leaving them more time to mingle with church members and provide more services outside of Mass.

Most people he consulted, Father Lerner explained, said that the changes seemed reasonable. But they cautioned him that some parishioners wouldn’t be enthusiastic.

“It’ll enable us to be more present to people,” Father Lerner said. “And I think that that would be important. It’s also important that people understand that everyone’s giving something up. We’re all losing something for the common good.”

The new Mass schedule was announced in the bulletin on Pentecost.

The transition’s impact on St. Mary’s, from beginning to the present—and on priest and parishioner alike—has been significant. But in conversations with **America**, nearly everyone interviewed mentioned that central to dealing with the change was additional prayer and reflection.

“One thing that I’m constantly going back to is St. John Chrysostom,” Ms. Woods said, “who said something to the effect of not to be confused when things look other than what God wants to do, because it’s an opportunity for God to show that everything is done in his power.”

St. Mary’s has offered many opportunities for prayer and reflection in the past year. In October 2021, Father Lerner said by email that some of those events included “a candle-lit Vigil for Divine Mercy Sunday, with the Archdiocesan Director of Deliverance and Healing Ministry as a special guest celebrant and homilist, veneration of the relics of Saint Faustina and Saint John Paul the Great, confessions and adoration throughout the night.” He added that the parish had “one of the most successful, well-attended Corpus Christi Processions in recent history,” which drew people from both the parish and the region. He expects

more than 10 people to be received into the church this year, through the parish R.C.I.A. program.

Father Lerner also noted that the SWOT analysis has been completed and two to four lay leaders have been appointed at each parish as part of what he described as a “city-wide transition team” through which lay and ordained “can work together towards becoming one New Haven Catholic community, with manifold expressions of the rich diversity of our Catholic faith.”

One year after the transition, at a Sunday morning Mass in November 2022, St. Mary’s remains a vibrant parish, thanks in part to a devoted core of parishioners who come to the parish to encounter God. The incense still hangs in the air, drifting toward the ceiling. Thirteen altar boys line the sanctuary, and some of the women in the pews are wearing veils. The atmosphere is rich with reverence and tradition.

Immacula Didier, a lector at St. Mary’s, put it simply and eloquently: “What I was looking for was the feeding of my soul, and that continues.”

Michael Tortora, a parishioner since the 1990s and member of the parish’s Knights of Columbus council, still feels unsatisfied about the handling of the transition, but he said that the entire parish and its leadership have made the best of it.

“It led me to question how I wanted to be involved [at St. Mary’s], and did I still want to be involved?” he said. “But the culture and the community has stayed the same.”

“They’re working really hard to provide the quality homilies, that reverent liturgy that we are used to, the smells and the bells.”

A parishioner since 2002, David Lobo said, “The path of the last two or three years has been rocky, but in no way, shape or form has that rockiness shaken our devotion to St. Mary’s. We never left.”

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Valerie Pavilonis is a staff analyst for NewsGuard, based in New York City, and a graduate of Yale University.

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Christopher Parker contributed reporting from New Haven, Conn.



For more on the changing landscape of parish life in the United States, watch **America**’s documentary “People of God,” directed by Sebastian Gomes, at [americamagazine.org/peopleofgod](http://americamagazine.org/peopleofgod).

# A PARABLE OF ENCOUNTER

## How Pope Francis reads 'The Good Samaritan'

By Peter C. Phan

Like his predecessors Benedict XVI and John Paul II, Pope Francis often introduces the theme of his writings by way of a spiritual exegesis of an event in the ministry of Jesus or a biblical text. Whereas in his apostolic exhortations "Evangelii Gaudium" and "Querida Amazonia" and his encyclical letter "Laudato Si'," Francis' appeals to the Bible are numerous but diffuse, he focuses on specific texts in "Amoris Laetitia" and especially in "Fratelli Tutti." These are Psalm 129:1-6 in the former and Luke 10:25-37 in the latter, and he presents them as the leitmotifs of his basic teaching on love in the family and social friendship, respectively.

Here I would like to examine the way Pope Francis interprets the parable of the so-called good Samaritan, whom Francis calls "a stranger on the road." Noting in "Fratelli Tutti" that this parable is "a ray of light" for our contemporary life, which he has described as a place of "dark clouds

over a closed world," Francis presents the Samaritan as the prototype of the fraternity and social friendship that creates the "culture of encounter" and builds bridges of love among all ("Fratelli Tutti," No. 2).

### The Contexts of the Parable of the Good Samaritan

Luke places his parable of the good Samaritan, which is unique to him, in the context of Jesus' travel from Galilee to Jerusalem to fulfill the mission that God has entrusted to him. In this "journey narrative" (9:51-19:27), Luke records Jesus' various miracles and instructions, often in the form of parables. The Gospel speaks on sundry matters concerning Christian life, such as missionary travels, the use of possessions and prayer. One incident during Jesus' journey toward Jerusalem is his encounter with a lawyer who wants to test him with the question about what must be done "to inherit eternal life" (10:25).

The story in Luke 10:25-37 has two parts. The first (10:25-28) contains the lawyer’s question about the way to achieve eternal life, Jesus’ counter-question about the teaching of the Torah on this issue, the lawyer’s answer citing the twin commandments on the love of God and love of neighbor in Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, and then Jesus’ acknowledgment of the correctness of the lawyer’s answer. Implicit in this first part is Jesus’ affirmation of the validity of the Torah and its ability to lead to salvation.

The second part (10:29-37) contains the lawyer’s further question about the identity of the neighbor, Jesus’ answer by means of a parable about a traveler from Jerusalem going down to Jericho who is robbed and then cared for by a Samaritan, Jesus’ question to the lawyer about who is the neighbor of the wounded traveler, the lawyer’s answer, and then Jesus’ command to imitate the behavior of the Samaritan.

Pope Francis’ commentary on the parable of the good Samaritan places it in the wider context of human relationships as a whole, which he terms “fraternity” and “social friendship.” As a prelude to his comments on the parable, Francis cites God’s question to Cain about the whereabouts of his brother Abel and Cain’s answer: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gn 4:9). Pope Francis argues that God’s very question leaves no room for moral indifference to the sufferings of others but instead “encourages us to create a different culture, in which we resolve our conflicts and care for one another” (“Fratelli Tutti,” No. 57). The pope goes on to cite Job’s affirmation of our certain common rights, derived from our being created by the one God, as the foundation of our fraternity and social friendship (Jb 31:15). To underline this unity, the pope recalls St. Irenaeus’s metaphor of humanity as a melody of different notes in which each person is not perceived separately from the others but instead as part of the whole melody (No. 58).

Pope Francis notes that in early Jewish traditions, the duty to love and care for others was restricted to fellow Jews, but later it was expanded to include all humans, in imitation of God’s compassion for all living beings (No. 59). In the New Testament, Rabbi Hillel’s Talmudic negative formulation of the command “Do not do to others what you would not want them to do to you” was turned into a positive command: “In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you” (Mt 7:12). The pope comments: “This command is universal in scope, embracing everyone on the basis of our shared humanity, since the heavenly Father ‘makes the sun rise on the evil and on the

good’ (Mt 5:45)” (No. 60).

Regarding love of the stranger, Francis recalls that in the Hebrew Scripture its basis is said to be the Hebrews’ memory that they themselves were at one time strangers in Egypt (Ex 23:9). It is in the context of love for all and not just for members of one’s group, of whatever kind, that the parable of the good Samaritan makes sense, according to Francis: “Love does not care if a brother or sister in need comes from one place or another” (No. 62).

### **The Passersby and the Abandoned Stranger**

In his commentary on the parable of the good Samaritan, Pope Francis describes the characters of the story: the robbers, the three passersby and the injured victim. Today, the robbers are not simply evil individuals but include “the dark shadows of neglect and violence in the service of petty interests, gain, and division” (No. 72). The two passersby who ignore the wounded man and move to the other side of the road include religious people, represented in the story by the priest and the Levite, who think they are close to God even when they abandon those who suffer.

The injured victim today is not only the victim of robbery and physical violence but all those who in a globalized society are “helpless because our institutions are neglected and lack resources, or simply serve the interests of a few, without and within” (No. 76).

To fully grasp the revolutionary character of Jesus’ parable of the good Samaritan, it is necessary to note the background behind the lawyer’s question about who is the “neighbor” whom the Hebrew Scripture commands to love as oneself. The question stems from debates in Jesus’ time about who belongs to the people of Israel, God’s people, and is, therefore, the object of neighborly love.

Jesus’ parable in answer to the lawyer’s question disrupts its theological and legal framework. His counter-question to the lawyer: “Which of these three, do you think, was the neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” (Lk 10:36) turns the lawyer’s question on its head by telling him not to ask who belongs to God’s people—and who is thus the object of neighborly love—but rather to ask about which conduct is incumbent upon the members of God’s chosen people.

What is more subversive—and offensive to pious Jews—is that Jesus holds up the conduct of a Samaritan as the exemplary model of neighborly love, or (to use Francis’ favorite expressions) “fraternity” and “social friendship,” for Jews. As Francis notes later (No. 82), Samaritans were shunned by Jews, who viewed them as



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# Pope Francis: ‘Those who claim to be unbelievers can sometimes put God’s will into practice better than believers.’

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mixed-race, “impure, detestable, dangerous” people who practiced an unorthodox, half-pagan religion. While the Jews held that God chose Mount Zion in Jerusalem as the holy place of orthodox worship, Samaritans believed God chose Mount Gerizim, near Shechem. Pope Francis highlights Jesus’ irony: “Paradoxically, those who claim to be unbelievers can sometimes put God’s will into practice better than believers” (No. 74).

## **The Samaritan as a Neighbor Without Borders**

Pope Francis does not consider the good Samaritan’s conduct simply a private act of charity. To Jesus’ counter-question about who is the real neighbor to the victim of the robbery, likely a Jew, the lawyer responds: “The one who shows him mercy” (Lk 10:37). Luke does not record Jesus’ answer to the lawyer this time to note the correctness of his answer, as he does in the first part of the story in response to the lawyer’s answer to the question of how to achieve salvation. We simply hear Jesus say, “Go and do likewise.” True belief (orthodoxy) must be translated into true action (orthopraxis).

For Pope Francis, a true neighbor must act socially and even politically. Together, neighbors must take “an active part in renewing and supporting our troubled societies” (No. 77). This action begins with a simple desire: “We need only have a pure and simple desire to be a people, a community, constant and tireless in the effort to include, integrate and lift up the fallen” (No. 77). We may start, Francis says, “from below, and, case by case, act at the most concrete and local levels, and then expand to the farthest reaches of our countries and our world” (No. 77). The Samaritan’s act of neighborly love inspires the innkeeper to act likewise; thus

it is expanded farther and farther, creating a ripple effect.

Francis calls this dynamic of neighborly love “the culture of encounter,” of which the Samaritan is the paradigmatic example. In this culture, all become “neighbors without borders.” As Francis writes, “He [Jesus] asks us not to decide who is close enough to be our neighbor, but rather that we ourselves become neighbors to all” (No. 80).

Note that there is a strange twist in the logic of the parable of the good Samaritan. It would be more logical for Jesus to answer the lawyer’s question about who is our neighbor by making a Samaritan the victim of the robbery and a Jew the generous caretaker. In this way, the Jew, who despised and hated the Samaritan, would be taught to be a good neighbor to the Samaritan by practicing fraternity and social friendship with him.

In contrast, Jesus seems to have it all wrong in making the Jew the victim and the Samaritan the generous caretaker. The Samaritan, who is the victim of ethnic and religious discrimination, has all kinds of reasons to neglect the Jew and pass him by, as the priest and the Levite do. Yet he takes good care of him and thus becomes the paradigm of the culture of encounter. The Samaritan “challenges us to put aside all differences and, in the face of suffering, to draw near to others with no questions asked” (No. 81).

Furthermore, Luke makes Jesus’ portrayal of the Samaritan as the model of friendship and hospitality all the more striking by placing the parable in his Gospel shortly after the story of a Samaritan village refusing to welcome Jesus and his disciples (9:51-56). Because of the Samaritans’ hostility and lack of hospitality, the disciples James and John asked Jesus if he wanted them to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them. Jesus turned and rebuked his disciples, says Luke.

Jesus, the erstwhile victim of the hostility of the Samaritans, becomes himself the good Samaritan, the divine embodiment of mercy. He has all manner of reasons to condemn and punish the Samaritans, yet he makes a Samaritan the hero of social friendship. Such is indeed the unexpected marvel of the culture of encounter: It changes the victims of injustice into protectors of their persecutors.

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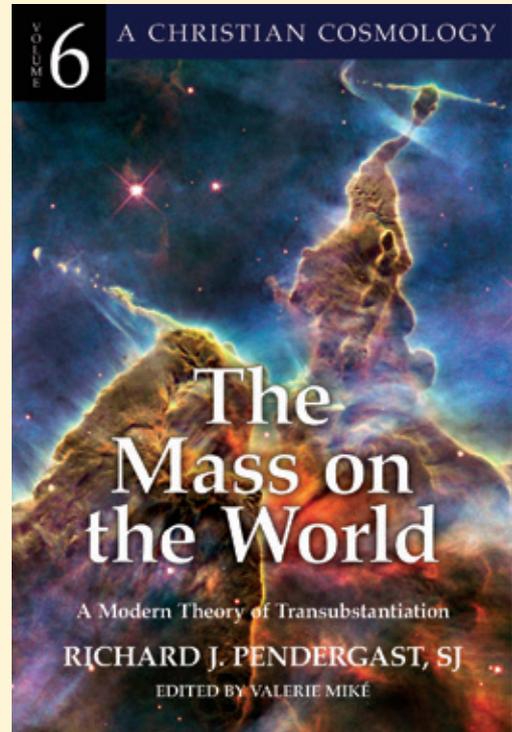
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# WHY EUCHARISTIC PRESENCE MATTERS

*It reminds us of the reason for the church's existence*

By Timothy P. O'Malley

What do Catholics mean when they talk about the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist? Depending on who you ask, most Catholics don't necessarily know exactly what they are encountering in the eucharistic liturgy. Consecration and transubstantiation, along with Real Presence itself, are terms that are not always precisely understood by the very people whose experience of God's divinity is being mediated through the Eucharist. For that reason, the U.S. bishops' National Eucharistic Revival (which I serve as a member of the executive team) is concerned with a deeper formation into the meaning of the doctrine of Real Presence.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' document "The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church" calls the Eucharist a manifold mystery involving the interplay of divine gift and human response. While "no document can exhaust the mystery of the gift of the Eucharist," the bishops write, "it is desirable to reflect on certain facets of the mystery that are relevant to contemporary issues and challenges and that help us to appreciate more deeply the gift of grace that has been given to us."

The data surrounding belief in the doctrine of Real Presence is, well, complex. A 2019 Pew study—widely criticized by sociologists and theologians alike—declared that only 30 percent of U.S. Catholics believed in this doctrine. A 2022 study conducted by Georgetown's Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate and commissioned by the McGrath Institute for Church Life at the University of Notre Dame (where I am on the faculty) found that 50 to 60 percent of U.S. Catholics believe in the doctrine, even if they were not able to precisely articulate the doctrine using the language of transubstantiation.

Why does any of this matter? If you are a Catholic who pays attention to ecclesiastical news, it may seem like there are more pressing matters for the life of the church than eucharistic doctrine. There is the dilemma of disaffiliation, the closing of parishes throughout the United States, the far-too-regular revelations related to sexual abuse of the faithful by clergy, divisions among U.S. Catholics and the



refusal of many to recognize the gift of the multicultural church that (in my assessment) should be the special charism of U.S. Catholicism.

One can certainly understand such objections. And yet, perhaps the doctrine of Christ's Real Presence in the Eucharist may provide a framework in which an array of pastoral problems both named and unnamed may be attended to. Here I list but three ways that this doctrine matters for the renewal of Catholicism in our age:

1. Christ's Real Presence reminds us of the reason for the existence of the church.
2. The transubstantiation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ points toward the destiny of the entire created order.
3. The Real Presence of Christ, under the signs of bread and wine, invites us to see the presence of the beloved in the hidden places of love.

## **The Reason for the Church**

First, the doctrine of Real Presence is closely connected to the *raison d'être* of the church. The church is not a bureaucratic institution created for the sake of delivering surveys but a space of encounter with the risen Lord. The people of God—to use a phrase so beloved by Pope Francis—is a fundamentally eucharistic motif. We are those who have been convoked, assembled not to create strategic plans but to let our lives be transformed by Jesus himself.

Such transformation is not an abstraction. It unfolds at every eucharistic liturgy, where Christ comes to feed us with his very body and blood. Every man and woman in all their particularity is invited to the Supper of the Lamb. None of us gets to create the guest list for this feast, where



CNS photo/Bob Reller

The “sense of mystery” and awe Catholics should experience at Mass is prompted by an awareness of sacrifice of Christ and his real presence in the Eucharist, Pope Francis said in a document released June 29, 2022.

When we gather as a multicultural communion, our individual particularities do not need to be left out of the equation. This is because every dimension of creation, including the cultures that each belongs to, can in fact point toward the presence of divine love in the world. Yes, they must be transformed (perhaps even “transubstantiated”) to become spaces of love. This, after all, is what the church means by evangelization. But such evangelization does not mean joining some sort of mindless cult, where difference is erased. Every facet of creation can become a sign pointing toward the eucharistic Lord.

### Hidden Signs of Love

This transformation, of course, is hidden. We do not see the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ. Rather, we must give ourselves over to this mystery, to learn to see more in the consecrated gifts of bread and wine. This is an act of faith, as St. Thomas Aquinas summarized in one of his eucharistic hymns: Where the senses fail, faith alone suffices.

The doctrine of Real Presence forms us in this eucharistic way of seeing the hidden presence of love in the world. We go to the margins, as Pope Francis has reminded us, because there the hidden Christ dwells. It takes time to see this presence in the faces of the unborn infant, the criminal to be executed by the state and in the migrant looking for a cup of cold water. But there the hidden Lord appears.

Perceiving this presence of hidden love in the world is an initiation into contemplative beholding. In this sense, promoting eucharistic adoration (within the context of eucharistic worship as a whole) is a way of inviting every bishop, priest, deacon, consecrated religious and member of the baptized faithful to recognize that the thing which is most worthy of love is often hidden to our senses. Such adoration should not be a spectacle intended to violently move the passions—as it is often treated in youth and young adult ministry—but a free invitation to love the hidden Lord.

Perhaps the doctrine of Real Presence might be more important than initially thought. Not because it is the only concern of the church in 2023, but because it is through the presence of love itself that every Catholic may discover anew the art of self-giving love.

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Timothy P. O’Malley is the director of education at the McGrath Institute for Church Life and academic director of the Notre Dame Center for Liturgy in Notre Dame, Ind.

the Lord gives himself to every man and woman. Whether we are members of this or that political party, whatever country we are from, whatever our status in the hierarchy of the church, we are first and foremost citizens and sojourners convoked so that the Lord himself might feed us.

Well enough, you might say. But does it really matter if we understand the precise language used for this doctrine, if we understand what is called transubstantiation? On the one hand, no. I have no doubt that many of those who are now in heaven praising God face-to-face lacked all understanding of transubstantiation as members of the church militant. On the other hand, this doctrine may open our eyes to what it means to hope that “God will be all-in-all” (1 Cor 15:28).

### The Destiny of All Creation

Transubstantiation is the church’s belief that the gifts of bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ, contrary to what the senses perceive. This is because the substance (what something really is) changes, while the accidents or species (what appears) remain. Bread and wine—as material goods—are taken up entirely into God’s own life. In this transformation, they still appear (and taste like) bread and wine.

The Lord feeds us in a way that we can receive it. Bread and wine do not have to lose their characteristics to be taken up into divine life. In fact, the particularities of this bread and wine matter more now than ever. Bread, after all, is made through a sacrificial process in which the seeds of grain are watered and the wheat is cut down, ground up and then baked in fire. So too the grapes are grown, crushed and fermented. The material significance of the erstwhile bread and wine matters even more, pointing entirely to the mystery of Christ’s sacrificial presence of love.

Is this not a hopeful doctrine for the U.S. church?



# AT HOME IN CASA SANTA MARTA

The open, joyful and surprisingly normal experience of interviewing Pope Francis

By Kerry Weber

One of the first things I do when I enter Casa Santa Marta is take off my shoes. It has rained almost all day, and the cobblestones of Rome are wet and slippery; there is no way I would have survived the walk from my hotel to the pope's home in heels. I change out of my black flats and into red pumps that are more of a stylistic nod to Pope Emeritus Benedict than Pope Francis. But it is Francis we are here to see. And we are thrilled.

The days leading up to our interview have been filled with a sort of triage, sorting what matters from what does not; what we have time for from what we do not. My colleagues and I discuss questions for the pope and our trav-

el itineraries. We discuss photographers and translators, WhatsApp group chats and dinner plans.

My husband and I also figure out how to make the puzzle of each day fit together while I am gone. (Hint: My saintly mother plays a very large role.) My children will need to get to and from school. My in-laws will arrive from Ireland for their first visit in years. The Thanksgiving pies will need to be picked up from the farm-stand bakery.

I have asked my older son and daughter what they think the pope should know or what they want to tell him. My 6-year-old wants to know the pope's favorite animal, and my ever-wise 4-year-old wants him to know that play



Pope Francis prays with the editors of **America**, including Gerard O’Connell, Vatican correspondent, and Kerry Weber, executive editor, in Casa Santa Marta.

ment kind of way. Yet, on my way to the airport, while my husband and kids waited in the car, I sprinted into a DSW and scanned the shelves. I grabbed a pair of “poppy”-colored “microsuede” heels and then rushed to the register. Because, as important as the shoes then seemed, making the flight was more so.

There has been so much going on, so many people to plan for, that it is not until the night before the interview, when Father Sam Sawyer and Gloria Purvis and I stand in the middle of St. Peter’s Square, that I really allow it to sink in that I will have the chance to meet our church’s first Jesuit pope. As we eat gelato on a chilly night, surrounded by a cloud of witnesses cut in stone atop the nearby walls, I hope that some part of the next day’s conversation will help to build our church.

The next morning, there is little pomp to entering Santa Marta. We simply pass by a few Swiss Guards in rain gear and some gentlemen who help us hang up our coats. After the shoe swap, we walk through double doors to the room where we will speak to Pope Francis. It feels oddly familiar, like the lobby of a retreat house but with more velvet chairs. A huge painting of Our Lady Undoer of Knots watches over us as Father Sawyer sets up the audio equipment and the rest of us gather our notes.

Moments later, the doors open and Pope Francis walks in leaning on a wheeled walker, the kind with the little seat and the mesh basket underneath. In the basket is a cane, stored at a diagonal, with a little silver crucifix wrapped near the top. No one announces his arrival, and he seemingly appears in our midst like the Holy Spirit in the locked room.

One of the strangest things about sitting face to face with Pope Francis is how normal it feels. How, despite the unusual surroundings and company we’re in, the pope makes us feel at home in his home.

I thought that I would be nervous, that I’d stumble more than usual over my words, or literally stumble in my heels. But instead I feel calm. Which is a marked contrast to 3:30 that morning, when I had called my mom from my hotel room because I couldn’t sleep thanks to my nerves. “Just say to yourself: Not me, but God through me, because that’s all it is anyway,” she says shortly before settling in to watch “NCIS” in real time. “Just say, ‘Holy Spirit be with me,’ and go.”

I catch parts of what Francis says in Spanish but rely on Elisabetta Piqué, our translator, for the full answers.

is important. They have drawn the pope pictures, as have their cousins. The 6-year-old has drawn the logo of the PBS show “Wild Kratts,” along with an ocelot, a leopard and a Komodo dragon. He writes his first name and his favorite color, summing up all the relevant info a first grader needs to form a friendship. The 4-year-old draws a red cross and red hearts and candles and little people holding the crosses. My 2-year-old draws a red scribble, which I can only assume is a theologically advanced yet abstract reflection on Pentecost.

In the hours before my flight from Hartford to Rome, I begin to worry that I do not have the right shoes, even though I know that it does not matter what shoes you wear to meet the pope. Or perhaps it matters so far as your attire may be used to show respect (or not), but it does not matter in a Jesus-will-ask-you-about-it-at-the-last-judg-



Antonello Nisica/America Media

Pope Francis hands Kerry Weber a copy of his book *Let Us Dream* following *America's* interview with the pontiff.

There is a frustrating element to the gap between my hearing and understanding, but there is also something freeing. It gives me the chance to simply observe. I do not analyze Francis' words or wait impatiently to respond. I can simply be with him, notice how he looks at people when they talk to him. How he pays attention. His laugh. I find it remarkable how much I *feel* like I understand him, even when I don't understand all his words.

Being near Francis made me want to love people more and love more people. The experience made me feel a deep bond to the people beside me in the room. But being with him also kindled a desire to extend that bond to others. To look to them the way Francis looked to us: open, loving, joyful, vulnerable. Willing to show weakness and honesty and to dwell in the messiness. The excitement I felt with Francis has continued to grow the more I reflect on my time with him.

After the interview, I give Pope Francis my kids' drawings, and to my surprise he seems genuinely delighted. "For me?!" he asks as his face lights up. "Sí!" I say as he flips through them and then stores them in the basket of his walker. He does not have a favorite animal but jokes that maybe he is "a concentration of all the animals."

I laugh, throwing my head back. But his comments also make me think of how much pressure we put on him, how much so many of us expect him to be everything to everyone. How hard it must be on him and how joyful he manages to be in the midst of it.

Being at the Vatican and in the midst of all the beauty that is part of it—in the Sistine Chapel, in the Scavi, in St. Peter's Basilica and in the pope's own home—gave me a greater appreciation for the role of the papacy. But it also helped me appreciate the limits of the office. Talking to Francis is a lot like talking to your mother at 3:30 a.m. It makes you feel like everything will be O.K., but you know there's a lot you still have to figure out.

I think there is a part of me that went into the interview looking for answers, not just to our questions but to the sort of doubts that arise from just being a part of a church filled with sinners and from being one myself. But over and over, Francis pointed us back to the important questions, the ones that come from a close reading of the Beatitudes and Matthew 25. Some part of me hoped that the interview would help teach me how to be more like Francis. But it's clear the only thing he wants is for us to want to be more like Jesus.

Kerry Weber is an executive editor of *America*. Twitter: @Kerry\_Weber.



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# HOW TO ANSWER 'WRONG' QUESTIONS

## What teaching sex ed taught me about how to approach the synod

By Abraham M. Nussbaum

A few years ago, my wife and I asked to speak to a priest in private. We met him in his office, coming from our home parish with our hats in hand and questions on our hearts. When we spoke questions from our mouths, the priest dismissed them quickly as wrong questions.

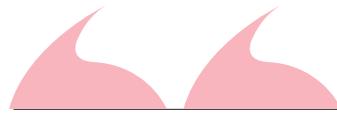
Everyone asks wrong questions. A good teacher helps you ask the right one. I thought his “no” would be a prelude to a discussion about how to reframe the question. Instead, he meant that it was wrong for us to ask questions. The meeting did not end right then, but it could have. Ten minutes later, my wife and I left in the darkening evening, silenced.

Because I know what it feels like to have your questions questioned, I try to bring a different approach to the sex education classes my wife and I teach at our children’s parochial school. And I’ve realized that the approach we take offers some guidelines that could be useful not just for our students, but for the church as a whole, as we seek to engage in honest conversations as part of the Synod on Synodality.

### Setting Ground Rules

Every spring for the last decade, my wife and I have been teaching sex ed at the invitation of our parish school’s fifth-grade teachers, who have asked us to give the birds-and-bees talk. Since it’s a sports-besotted Catholic school, the archdiocesan-approved slides begin with the title “Always Changing” and a basketball.

As parents (and physicians) we invoke the prerogative of Adam. We tell the children ground rule one: We call every part by its formal name. (To paraphrase Freud, sometimes a ball is just a ball.) The class is separated by gender, and we teach boys. So we start with how some boys can out-leap you, outshoot you and out-rebound you in a basketball game. The boys can relate to differences in abilities and appearances, sizes and smells. They ask why some kids have hair on their arms and why the rates at which arm muscles grow under all the sprouting fur varies. I promise to answer their questions if they use formal words—testicles instead of balls. Eventually they get used to ground rule one.



# WHAT WE'RE ASKING FOR IS A KIND OF DIALOGUE THAT WELCOMES EARNEST QUESTIONS.

Ground rule two is that everyone has to submit a written question. I pass around index cards and pencils. I get back scrawled queries.

Some are simple. *What are these red bumps sprouting on my face?*

Some are aesthetic. *Do I have to grow an itchy beard?*

Some are spiritual. *Why do we change at all?*

Before answering them, I share ground rule three: Respect your peers and their questions. I model by answering every question and promising they will have more questions. We pass out more index cards and begin in earnest.

In the crucial final minutes, I show them a doctor's cartoon, a teaching aid version of the male anatomy, and I name its landmarks. It's Human Anatomy instead of Church Latin, but just as spine-stiffeningly formal. Every year, someone snickers at the sight. Trying to explain it all, I sometimes feel that bodies are God's joke on us. But if we have done our job well, the laughter dies down quickly and the students use the language. They ask questions, I answer and then ask whom they can pose further questions to after the class. The slides encourage trusted adults: fathers, mothers, uncles, grandfathers, teachers and school nurses.

I don't say anything to the students, but I always silently reflect that "priest" is not on the archdiocese's trusted adult list for this conversation. I know the omission is deserved, but it saddens me every time that I can't call priests trusted for a conversation so essential to becoming an adult. This past year, that sadness went in a different direction. I started thinking about the Synod on Synodality and how the way in which we approach sex ed might be applied to the synod.

## Journeying Together

When Pope Francis announced the synod, he called it a "journey together, in order to experience a church that receives and lives this gift of unity, and is open to the voice of the Spirit." He asked everyone to participate by encountering, listening and reflecting. Unlike the previous 15 synods, Francis called for this one to start at local churches, especially with laypeople. After meetings across the world, the synod culminates with assemblies at the Vatican in October 2023 and 2024, before being operationalized throughout the church in 2025.

We are now halfway through the synodal process, and in our archdiocese, we're checking our progress. A few weeks ago, in place of the usual announcements, a kind couple took the lectern at the end of the 4:30 vigil Mass and offered an update. A year ago, they were selected to represent our parish with the archdiocese. They shared that the

archdiocese received 168 reports, representing 3,700 participants in parish-based synod meetings, and invited 350 representatives to a three-day retreat where the archdiocese reformulated the questions. They reported back on their experience.

I wasn't with them at the retreat, but listening to them from the pews, I thought about our evening sessions with the students. Like the students, the couple used specific terms. Accompaniment, blessing, vocation. They even used a few squirm-inducing words: supernatural unity. But I remembered ground rule one: Any real talk begins with naming things rightly.

I also got the sense that the participants followed ground rule two and gave everyone the chance to ask questions. It even seemed that ground rule three was in place and everyone respected one another's questions. The synod sounded a lot, in their telling, like sex ed—not so much in terms of topic but in form.

I hope it did, because I think we can take these rules further. There are so many uncomfortable conversations to be had in our church and our world, and these ground rules allow us to frame those conversations in a way that is calm, respectful and holy. We need to name what's going on in Catholicism today, give everyone a chance to ask ques-

tions, and respect the questions posed by the laity and clergy alike. We have models for doing so in our parishes. When we teach sex ed, we begin every response that follows the first rule by saying, “That’s a good question.” I hope the diocesan synod meetings did the same.

After our fellow parishioners presented their synodal experience, I went home and read the most recent progress report, the “Working Document for the Continental Stage.” The first page had a colorful logo of people of all ages and abilities. Beneath the cartoon was a quote from Isaiah 54: “Enlarge the space of your tent.” The 56-page English-language version of the document says, “This tent is a space of communion, a place of participation, and a foundation for mission.” The image of an enlarged tent, the text goes on, is the interpretive key to the document’s vision of expanding vocation for the people of God. I read the pages, marking phrases like “a profound re-appropriation of the common dignity of all the baptized” and “a desire to be less a Church of maintenance and conservation and more a Church that goes out in mission.” At the heart of the process of synod, the text says, is an account of “a Church capable of radical inclusion, shared belonging, and deep hospitality according to the teachings of Jesus.”

To support their claims, the authors offer quotes from around the world. Zimbabwe calls up “that dream of a Church of credible witnesses, a Church that is [an] inclusive, open and welcoming Family of God.” Poland registers concerns that “Without listening, answers to the faithful’s difficulties are taken out of context and do not address the essence of the problems they are experiencing, becoming empty moralism. The laity feel that the flight from sincere listening stems from the fear of having to engage pastorally.”

Reading both comments, I felt a sense of joy and relief. I share the dream voiced from Zimbabwe and the fear surfaced from Poland. For most of my adult life, being Catholic has been privately associated with a feeling of connection across time and space to a cloud of witnesses, but publicly associated with hiding the sexual abuse by clergy instead of answering the questions of the faithful.

And this nexus where the public and private meet is also where I have to admit that I skipped most local synod activities. I filled out an online survey but missed the parish listening session and only skimmed the archdiocese’s progress messages.

Why? I could say that I am what Walker Percy once called a Bad Catholic, someone whose faith does not fully inform his actions. I could say that being a physician married to a physician keeps me busy. I could say that I was afraid to participate. Maybe I take after our middle child.

When it was time for us to have “the talk” with her and her classmates, my daughter hid in her school locker.

In the years since that unfortunate conversation with the priest, my wife and I have stayed active in the church and our parish. She serves as a lector. I coach basketball. We attend Mass every Sunday and holy day of obligation and send our children to the parish school. We help out where we can, but we could do more. We do not because a nun told me long ago that the secret to staying Catholic is to get as close as you can to the saints but at the right distance to the institutional church. We keep our questions to ourselves. We know many people in a similar silence. Catholics practically invented “quiet quitting.”

We are willing to submit to the authority. We want to. It’s essential to being Catholic, believing that others know more than you. We are not asking for debates on the nature of the Trinity or another aspect of Catholic dogma, but the chance to ask difficult questions about the role of the church in our always-changing world. After establishing the right ground rules, you can, as Pope Francis has written, “work for the culture of encounter, in a simple way, as Jesus did.”

And so we remain committed to giving those sex-ed lectures. Every year, for one night, we get to ask and answer questions. We use the archdiocese’s presentation. We share the three ground rules. We take questions, we answer them together. We don’t debate about whether or not hormones exist; we explain how we currently understand them to work. What we’re asking for is a similar kind of dialogue that welcomes earnest questions about what being a people called Catholic means for our bodies and all the bodies that make up the body of Christ.

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# The Dark Catholic Imagination of Martin McDonagh

By Angela Alaimo O'Donnell

Bleak, blistering, horrifying and hilarious, the Irish Catholic filmmaker Martin McDonagh's new movie "The Banshees of Inisherin" serves up sad enough stuff to leave viewers crying in our beer. But first we laugh.

We laugh at Pádraic Súilleabháin, played by Colin Farrell, an easygoing, simple man who racks his poor brain trying to figure out why his best friend, Colm Doherty, played by Brendan Gleeson, ups one day and says, "I just don't like you no more," banishing him from his presence. We laugh at the genial pub owner, Jonjo Devine, and his goofy sidekick, Gerry, eternally ensconced on "his" stool at the bar, played by the Irish comedy duo D'Unbelievables, as they pour pints and try to keep the peace between the former B.F.F.s now become fractious friends. We laugh at Pádraic's attachment to his adorable miniature donkey, Jenny, and at the naïveté of Dominic, the slow-witted local boy, who tries to help Pádraic repair his relationship with Colm.

We laugh and we are also gobsmacked. First, by the stunning beauty of Inisherin, a mythical island off the coast of Ireland—a fictional version of the Aran Islands in Galway Bay, where the movie was largely filmed—where the sea, the cliffs, the mists and the round of sunrise and sunset evoke Eden, an unspoiled paradise where the inhabitants live in harmony with the earth and the daily passage of time. However, as with the first Eden—and every Eden since—it can't last. Soon enough we are gobsmacked again, this time by blood and brutality, the old story of human sin and suffering that unfolds in the midst of all this beauty. (Fair warning to readers: spoilers lie ahead.)

## Friends, Enemies and Holy Fools

Like all of McDonagh's films and plays—among them "Seven Psychopaths," "In Bruges" and "Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri"—"Banshees" is smart, dark and mordantly funny. The natives of Inisherin are grotesques,



In "The Banshees of Inisherin," two men who have been lifelong friends become bitter enemies because of a failure of love. Pictured: Brendan Gleeson and Colin Farrell.

country people who are comic exaggerations of themselves, much like characters in a Flannery O'Connor story. (The influence of O'Connor is evident in all McDonagh's films, but perhaps most obvious in "Three Billboards," in whose opening scenes one of the characters is seen reading O'Connor's signature short-story collection *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*.) Also like O'Connor's characters, McDonagh's live in a backwater, though it is rural Ireland rather than rural Georgia. McDonagh takes pains to isolate them. Inisherin is not just an island but an island of an island, a world that is as remote from what we might call civilization as it is possible to be. However, despite the idyllic landscape and its depiction of a place that seems far from the madding crowd, that madding crowd asserts its stubborn presence in the form of bursts of gunfire taking place on the mainland, just



across the water. The setting is 1923, and Ireland's civil war is raging, brother fighting against brother (reminiscent of the first murder) as each asserts the primacy of his ideal of what the newly founded state of Ireland should be.

The plot of the story begins simply and moves quickly to dark complications. The two men who have been lifelong friends become bitter enemies because of a failure of love. Colm, the elder of the two, becomes overwhelmed with existential dread and, seeing his inevitable death in the offing, vows to waste no more of his precious time in the company of his kind-hearted but “dull” friend. Pádraig, a contented, almost child-like “fella” who has never experienced a moment of despair in his life, is dumbfounded by his friend's rejection, so much so that he pesters him again and again—in the pub, where they were wont to meet for their

daily pint and craic at 2 p.m., on the roadways where their paths inevitably cross, and even in Colm's home. Colm's response is violent and extreme: He threatens to chop off the fingers of his own left hand, one by one, with a pair of garden shears each time Pádraic speaks to him, and chop them off he does as the incredulous Pádraic repeatedly violates Colm's wishes in spite of the shocking ultimatum in a doomed effort to win his friend back.

It is a loud story on a quiet island, a place where everyone knows everyone else, including their dark secrets, which they agree to keep to themselves as they look away. But Pádraic is a man without secrets. His generous, open nature is evident to all and is expressed most plainly in his devotion to the simple creatures he cares for: his cows, his pony and especially his donkey, whom he loves as a parent



# 'Banshees' is a loud story on a quiet island, a place where everyone knows everyone else, including their dark secrets.

loves a child. Colm's cruelty confounds the inhabitants of Inisherin as much as it does the viewers of the film—to be unkind to Pádraic is to be unkind to one of God's holy fools.

This archetype of the holy fool resonates throughout the film. Another simple soul in the village is young Dominic. Unlike Pádraic, who is merely an uncomplicated man, Dominic is genuinely intellectually limited and, therefore, thinks with his heart. Pádraic's fellowship and kindness to him suggests a hierarchy of fools on the island, one in which everyone has a place, including Colm, who thinks he is exempt because he loves and composes music and is devoted to the arts, as evidenced by the artifacts with which he furnishes his home and the Victrola phonograph from which emerges gorgeous classical music.

But Colm is, perhaps, the biggest fool of all. When he accuses Pádraic of being boring, Pádraic's sister, Siobhán (played by Kerry Condon), a reader and thinker who has no intellectual match on the island, tells Colm bluntly, "You are all feckin' boring!" Wearing by the pettiness, the gossip and the daily round of a life that leads to nowhere, Siobhán has sought escape through reading about the lives of others. But that isn't enough. Pushed to the limit by the feud between Colm and Pádraic, she makes the agonizing decision to leave Inisherin, to set out for the mainland where a war may be raging, but it's no worse than the one raging on the island. McDonagh's lesson is clear: Human nature is human nature—corrupt, selfish and cruel—no matter where human beings live.

Siobhán's departure is a second blow to poor Pádraic. As the old gossip at O'Riordan's General Store and Post Office warns Siobhán, "If you leave, you'll crucify him." Her prophecy stuns the viewer, for this is exactly what we witness in the film—the slow crucifixion of an innocent man. The loss of his friend and the loss of his sister leave Pádraic without love and human companionship in his daily life. The only solace he has is in his affection for his animals,

especially Jenny, whom he inevitably loses when she is inadvertently killed by Colm. It is this final death that undoes Pádraic. Unlike the crucified Christ, Pádraic does not forgive his torturer. He cannot and will not forget the outrage against an innocent creature—or the outrage against himself.

Throughout the film, Pádraic is described as "nice." He is not characterized as "good" or "upright" or "virtuous"—only "nice." And niceness is what he seeks from others. There is something terribly bland about the word in its popular usage, for we understand that niceness can be a form of subterfuge, a mask that one wears while vile thoughts and feelings seethe beneath a seemingly kindly demeanor. It is telling that among the artifacts Colm keeps in his house is a collection of wooden masks that dangle ominously from the ceiling and are empty-eyed faces, each of which wears a different expression. It is also telling that the Latin origin of the modern English word "nice," *nescius*, means "ignorant" and that the word nice in Middle English translates as "stupid." To be nice is to be a fool—a person ignorant of his or her own true nature—and not necessarily a holy one.

Colm's cruelty toward Pádraic ultimately leads to a transformation of his former friend, from a seemingly good-hearted fellow into a raging avenger. After Pádraic burns down his new enemy's house, hoping that Colm will burn with it, Colm offers to shake hands and call an end to their agon. But Pádraic refuses. As long as his enemy draws breath, Pádraic will not rest.

And so the film ends not with a conclusion to the conflict Colm set in motion but with an escalation. As the two men stand on the beach looking across the water to the mainland where the big war seems to be subsiding, Pádraic makes it painfully clear their supposedly small war has just begun.

## McDonagh's Catholic sensibility

This is where an already dark story grows even darker, and this is also one of the places in the film where McDonagh's Catholic sensibility is most clearly manifest. McDonagh, born to Irish parents and raised in an Irish enclave in working-class London, was brought up in the church and attended Catholic schools as a child; and though he is no longer a practicing Catholic, the signs, symbols and language of his spiritual and cultural formation are indelibly inscribed in all his work. McDonagh's vision is one that acknowledges the legacy of sin, from which no human being is exempt, including the seemingly innocent Pádraic. Once the veneer of niceness is stripped away, the human capacity for savagery becomes all too evident. Our appe-

tite for revenge is infamously insatiable, and as the screen goes dark at the end of the film, we see no good end for either Colm or Pádraic. They are locked in mortal combat on their tiny island. The little Paradiso has become a circle of the Inferno. As in Dante's story, this is a Hell each man has freely chosen.

Yet even as McDonagh dramatizes this Catholic view of sin, the corrupt use of free will and the refusal of grace (proffered to Pádraic in the form of Colm's outstretched hand—notably, the one that still has its fingers), he characterizes the institutional church as impotent to alleviate human suffering. The statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which overlooks the villagers as they file in and out of church on Sunday, is just that—a statue made of inanimate stone, like all the other stones on this rocky island, only this one is shaped and painted in the likeness of a loving mother. Mary's face is another mask, one that hides the absence underneath. Passive and detached in the midst of their agonies, she does nothing but stare into the distance, as does the wizened and witch-like old woman, Mrs. McCormick, who wanders about the island, head draped in her black shawl much as Mary's is covered by her blue mantle, as she prophesies death and doom and then stands by to watch it happen. This chilling identification of Mary with the old woman, who serves as a stand-in for the banshees of the film's title, equates pagan magic with Catholic dogma. Mary—and, by extension, God—cares no more about these foolish mortals than the nameless, faceless forces of the natural world that ultimately destroy them.

This view of the church is corroborated by the two scenes in which Colm goes to confession to seek absolution for his sins. The decent but feckless priest who comes to the island on Sundays to dispense the sacraments is no real help to Colm in the midst of his despair. They engage in banter that demonstrates the priest's inability to fathom Colm's spiritual desolation, despite his efforts to be sympathetic. In one telling scene, Colm asks whether it is a sin to refuse to talk to his friend, and the priest responds: "No, it's not a sin. But it isn't very nice." That word "nice" again, this time in the mouth of a priest, who is in theory concerned with actual virtue rather than the mere appearance of it.

It is here where one sees the priest's limitations, and that of the rule-bound, by-the-book church he represents, for Colm's denial of Pádraic is certainly a sin, as surely as Peter's denial of Jesus. It is a sin against loyalty, a sin against charity and a sin against love. The second of the two commandments Christ issues his followers is to love one's neighbor as oneself, and Colm fails in this spectacularly. This is a broken church, one that doesn't understand its own theology or, more precisely, its own story. Only love

can save us from ourselves, from the darkness we all harbor within us. Where there is no love, there is no hope, no life, no God. The banshees win.

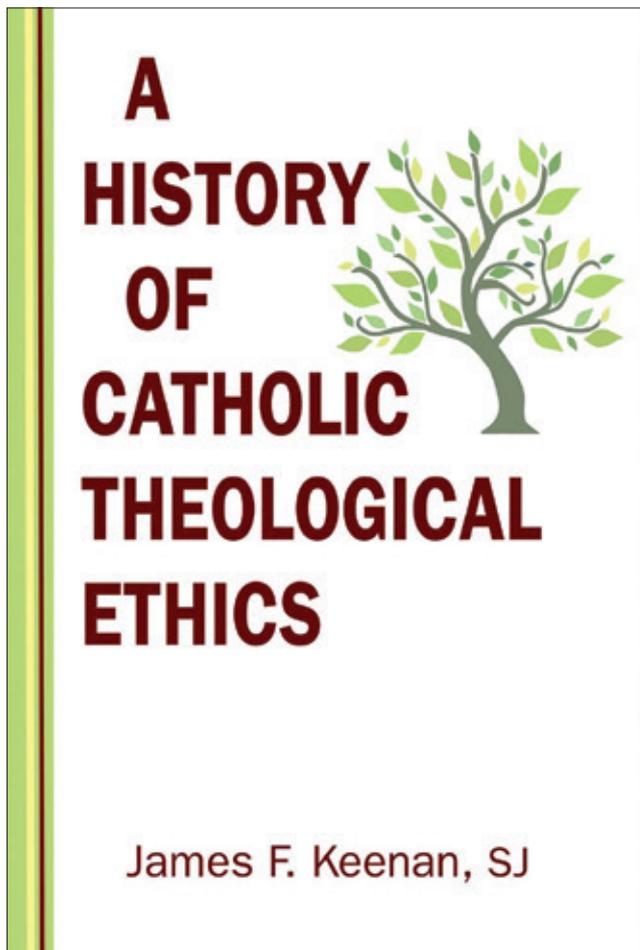
Colm's violation of the law of love constitutes a sin against community as well as a sin against God. He behaves as if he has unlimited free agency and no obligation to anyone besides himself, including Pádraic. But everyone on Inisherin is inextricably bound to one another, and his actions reverberate, leading to serious consequences for all. His selfishness tears the community apart. By the end of the story Siobhán has left for a new life on the mainland, enacting a kind of death; Dominic is dead (whether by accident or suicide is unclear); Colm's house and his hand are destroyed (his fiddling hand, no less, the one he needs most to play and create new music); and peace- and pint-loving Pádraic has been transformed into a monster voracious for vengeance. This is all Colm's doing, whether purposely or not, and what's done can't be undone.

"The Banshees of Inisherin," much like McDonagh's previous films, trains its gaze unsparingly on the darkness within the human soul. The humor of the dialogue, the haplessness of the characters and the beauty of the setting help to alleviate some of that darkness, but the film's sudden and graphic violence shocks us out of our complacency, as it is designed to do. (Another lesson McDonagh learned from O'Connor.) Like a wreck whose aftermath we witness on a highway, we are reminded what a dangerous enterprise it is to be alive in this world. Like the banshees of the title, the film leaves us with a warning of the darkness within and the darkness to come.

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## MORAL TRUTH DOES NOT ESCAPE HISTORY



Paulist Press / 456p \$50

A confession: Rarely do I treat a book as rudely as I did the latest from James Keenan, S.J., *A History of Catholic Theological Ethics*. My copy is dog-eared and marked-up and basically ruined for anyone's use besides my own. It was pure selfishness. But at least my sin comes with an explanation: I mistreated Keenan's work because I regard it as such an informative and clearly written exposition of the past, present and (hopefully) future of Catholic thinking on ethics and morality that I could do no other.

I ruthlessly annotated nearly every page, not just for this review but for what I am sure will be repeated future references. Indeed, my conscience tells me that my motivation mitigates my failing. You may think otherwise. But if we have both read Keenan, we will at least be able to discuss our differences—and far graver matters—with the intellectual rigor and generosity of spirit that is needed today more than ever.

Admittedly, the rather prosaic title of Keenan's book

would not seem to portend such a payoff. Don't be misled. Keenan, a Jesuit priest and moral theologian at Boston College who is renowned both as a teacher and as a prolific writer with a global profile, demurs at the start that he is not a historian. But if you are looking for a one-volume overview of Catholic history, this is a good place to start—simply because Catholicism is, by definition, a community characterized by what its adherents believe and how they behave.

Most chronicles tend to focus on tales of popes and monarchs, schisms and saints. That is an entertaining but also a limited and rather secular point of view. Keenan's approach is intellectual history with flesh and bones and a soul, which is what you expect when you are talking about figures like Augustine and Abelard and Alphonsus Liguori.

As Keenan writes, "Moral truth does not escape history." And that observation points to the second lesson from Keenan's title: Theological ethics, he explains, is not moral theology per se. It is the integration of classic moral theology (as codified and taught in seminaries after the Council of Trent) with the fields of sexual, social and medical ethics that arose in the 19th century (but which really began in the 17th) and that continue to expand and develop today. This "more comprehensive, inclusive view," Keenan writes, "is what we now call theological ethics."

The very emergence of theological ethics, in other words, underscores the crucial lesson that "progress is constitutive of the tradition." That tradition remains grounded in the teaching of the Gospels but is elaborated in principles and methods developed over the centuries.

This progress is not change for the sake of change or change in pursuit of a particular outcome or agenda, as so many fear. Rather, it is about conversion in the pursuit of holiness, a process that necessarily responds to the people and circumstances of each era. "I am trying," Keenan says, "to make sense out of why at different times particular ways of thinking about the moral life arose, crested, and ebbed, and why other topics, stances, and methods subsequently replaced them." It is a history "formed not by the grand achievers but more by the innovators."

The delight of this history, at least for me, is Keenan's telling of the stories of those innovators and achievers but also his explication of the origins of moral theology in the Scriptures and the lives of early Christians who did not even possess written Gospels.

It is important to remember that the faith was first expressed by an ethic of love, one that likely accounted for the church's initial growth. But also valuable are the various schools and categories of moral thinking that lat-

er evolved, some of them today so obscured by ancient accretions or contemporary biases that we fail to understand why they took root and why they once had value. Keenan's treatment of the manualist tradition, for example, is necessarily critical but also charitable, and his explanation of casuistry gave me both a better understanding of that oft-criticized method and a greater appreciation of it.

The same with ideas such as intrinsic evil, which is used (and misused) in so many contemporary political debates among Catholics. Want to understand parity of matter or natural law, consequentialism or proportionality? Keenan's got you covered. The difference between probabilism and probabiorism? Frankly, I'm still working through those, and their correct pronunciation. But that's on me, not Keenan.

The gradual fixation on anything related to sex as a category of sins unto themselves, Keenan argues, isolated by a rigid absolutism and unique in their dominance of the spiritual lives of believers, is notable and regrettable. "One only has to see that girls' dresses and male sperm received more attention than atomic weapons to appreciate how distant the manualists were from the world as it tried to emerge from World War II," Keenan writes.

And the development of teachings on human rights, human dignity and self-determination as a response to the horrors of imperial colonialism is enlightening but also depressing. That this development took so much effort, and such a long time, and had to face so much opposition in the church, is sobering. Yet it ought to inspire us for today's struggles.

Making all of this interesting and accessible is key to another central lesson of Keenan's: namely, that moral theology and social ethics has expanded from the exclusive province of clergy and confessors to include all of the faithful, both teachers and disciples. This shift has been as dramatic (and necessary) as any in the church's history.

In just the last few decades, the field of theological ethics has come to be dominated by laypeople rather than the clergy, a growing number of them women, and the discipline has become as global and diverse as Catholicism itself. It can be easy to take this for granted, but this change is not only welcome; it also has a profound and ongoing influence on what the field covers and how it is practiced.

This shift is also relevant for nonspecialists—that is, the vast majority of us pew-sitters. Keenan describes "discipleship" as the foundational identity of the modern Christian, tracing it to the Second Vatican Council's charge to Catholics of every state of life to actively respond to that call in forming society—and not just preparing one's soul for Mass. In a sense we are all theological ethicists now.

And we always have been. "Every human act is a moral act," as Aquinas said; or, as Keenan puts it: "Ordinary life is the matter for moral reflection, intention, and action."

As we seek to fulfill this mission, Keenan's reframing of the notion of sin that has long been ingrained in Christians of every tradition is especially critical: "Sin," he proposes, "is the failure to bother to love." Sins of omission are as important as the sins of commission that we usually obsess over. Sin is not so much about our weaknesses but about the strengths that we did not employ in order to love our neighbor; it's about the failure even to be aware of this sin.

Moral theology was founded on "the pursuit of holiness," Keenan writes, "and not on the confession of sin"; and that journey of conversion is communal as well as individual, dialogical rather than the memorization of a series of precepts. For all the brilliance of the medieval period, he notes, the idea of sin that emerged in those centuries was "effectively about wrong actions that we can barely prevent happening." In those centuries, Keenan writes, "love vanishes from the field of moral theology" and even the works of mercy focused on sinful behavior rather than on mercy as God sees it: "the willingness to enter into the chaos of another."

Keenan's book arrives at a propitious time. Pope Francis' focus on accompaniment and mercy, discernment and synodality, is an epochal shift away from rote catechesis and toward a restoration and renewal of moral theology. As Francis told a gathering of moral theologians last May:

All of you are today asked to rethink the categories of moral theology, in their mutual bond: the relationship between grace and freedom, between conscience, the good, virtues, longstanding norms and Aristotelian *phrónesis*, Thomist *prudéntia* and spiritual discernment, the relationship between nature and culture, between the plurality of languages and the uniqueness of *agape*.

This collective rethinking is welcome and necessary, but it requires a guide for the perplexed in this increasingly globalized church and interdependent world, and James Keenan has written the *vademecum* we need to undertake this journey responsibly and faithfully.

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## AMERICA'S FAVORITE COURTSIDE NUN



Harper Select / 240p \$29

Writing a memoir is no mean feat at any age, but it is perhaps most impressively done at 103. The famous Jean Dolores Schmidt, B.V.M., beloved chaplain of the Loyola Chicago Ramblers men's basketball team, has written a book about what she has learned in her first 100 years. The memoir is a collaboration with Seth Davis, an award-winning college basketball analyst for CBS.

Billed as “part life story, part philosophy text, and part spiritual guide,” *Wake Up With Purpose!* follows Sister Jean's 103 years from humble beginnings to international fame when Loyola made an incredible Cinderella run to the 2018 Final Four. The book is imbued with Sister Jean's trademark sense of humor and good-natured observations about her century of life. She jokes, “It only took me 98 years to become an overnight sensation.”

Sister Jean was born Dolores Schmidt in 1919, just months after the end of World War I. She was, she admits, “kind of a ham, even back then,” with an early love for

teaching and being in front of a classroom. A beloved third-grade teacher who was a Sister of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary set a young Dolores's heart on joining the order herself.

A particular standout of Sister Jean's childhood was her family's pet monkey, Jerry, who disliked men and “was a teetotaler.” He lived in a cage in the yard, where he subsisted on toast and coffee. The monkey took his coffee with sugar, then dunked his toast in it before eating each slice.

Sister Jean entered the B.V.M. motherhouse directly after high school, taking vows in 1940. At the time, the sisters were not allowed to drive, wore a habit they sewed themselves and were not supposed to have their pictures taken. These requirements were lifted in the '50s and '60s, but it is safe to say that Sister Jean at the time would have been startled to see her 2018 self stopping for selfies.

The amount of history the memoir encompasses is staggering, from the dropping of the atomic bomb to Black Lives Matter protests. Throughout the book, Sister Jean intersperses lessons and advice that helped her meet a century's worth of challenges and change. She preaches tolerance, diversity, open dialogue, face-to-face communication, morning prayer and waking up with purpose. They are her secrets to a long life well-lived, easy and applicable to anyone looking to have a life even half as long, full and meaningful as hers has been.

But her biggest secret and strength, she writes, is her students. As a Loyola alum, I can attest that it only takes one look at Sister Jean as she walks around campus, eats at the late-night Finals Breakfast or celebrates honor society inductions to see how being around students brings her to life. Working with students has been her life's joy, and she says it has kept her young at heart.

In the decades before Sister Jean was at Loyola, she was a teacher and administrator at several schools. One early assignment was at an elementary school, when Catholic school tuition was \$1 a month and “God Bless America” was newly recorded by Kate Smith. When her students were having trouble with a math lesson, she swung the class troublemaker upside down in front of everybody to teach about inverting fractions.

*Wake Up With Purpose!* is at its best when Sister Jean is talking basketball. At nearly every school she was assigned to, Sister Jean started or coached sports teams. When she played basketball herself in high school, the sport was barely over 40 years old. The rules held little similarity to today's, with the court divided into three zones and only forwards allowed to shoot. When the first-ever N.C.A.A. championship was held in 1939, Sister Jean had already

# HOLY THURSDAY

By Jasmine Marshall Armstrong

Perhaps among the lupines  
and mustard flowers,  
grown from faith small,  
yet enough  
for the red-winged blackbirds  
and sparrows to crown,  
I will see you again—  
And see a table made  
of grass, a meal of those fish  
you caught at the lake's shore.  
Perhaps I will taste the brine  
of their flesh, the salt that was  
with us in the beginning,  
when the world was the sea,  
when the alpha and omega  
were diatoms.  
My blood was in that sea,  
and yours, too.  
I shall know this world  
is ever yours,  
That even as men cause  
the seas to rise,  
or rain fire in the name  
of innocents,  
with you, I can sit at your  
feet, and feel the troubled  
waters of my body  
still, the pulse become  
a sleeping cat, no need  
to hunt or leap,  
at rest in this field of yours.

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entered the B.V.M. community. Who could have guessed then that her love for the sport would take her to primetime on ESPN, CBS and “Good Morning America”?

When Loyola's 1963 men's team won the school's first national championship, Sister Jean was teaching at Mundelein College, a women's college that shared a campus with and would later merge with Loyola. Sister Jean and the other B.V.M.s crowded around the single tiny TV to watch the Ramblers win their first title. It was a particularly memorable win because their championship run included the famous “Game of Change,” in which Loyola broke racial barriers in college basketball by violating the unwritten rule that no more than two Black players could start at a time.

Sister Jean wouldn't become chaplain of that same team until 31 years later in 1994, at the young age of 75. Supposedly her “retirement,” that chaplaincy would be the defining assignment of her life and one of the most iconic parts of Loyola's incredible and unlikely run to the 2018 Final Four.

Like any good Loyola alum, I own plenty of Sister Jean merchandise. I have both bobbleheads, the “Sister Jean for President” pin, the “Worship, Work, Win” rally towel and the T-shirt with her face on it that was given to students who trekked to the Final Four. But more than any merch or meme, *Wake Up With Purpose!* brings us close to the fierce, funny, faithful woman at the center of it all.

Sister Jean still keeps the door to her office open, in the heart of the Damen Student Center at Loyola, for students to drop in and chat. She is still active as the team chaplain, emailing scouting reports, encouragement and advice to each of the players. And she still opens every home game with a prayer, in which she urges the refs to make good calls, the players to share the ball and God to nudge the Ramblers to a big W.

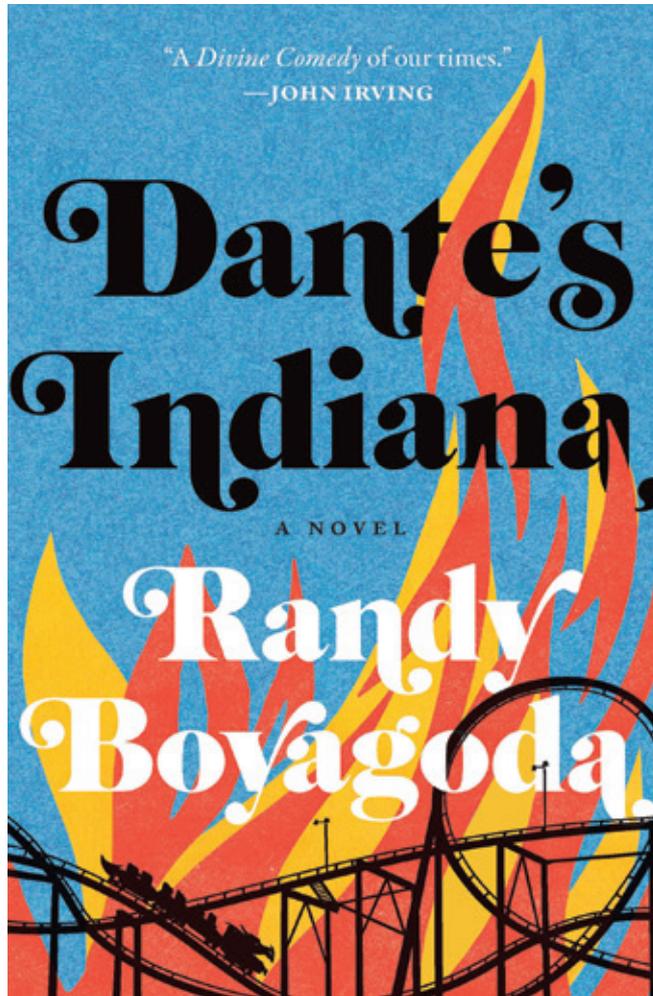
In the prologue, Sister Jean sets out her hopes for the book: “I hope to do what I've always done: use my words to help others learn, grow, serve God, and serve each other. I hope when people read this book, they will be able to wake up the way I do. I want them to wake up happy. I want them to wake up with purpose. And I want the Ramblers to win.” With warmth and wisdom, that's what *Wake Up With Purpose!* accomplishes.

As Sister Jean says to end every courtside prayer, “Amen and go Ramblers!”

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Sarah Vincent is an assistant editor at *Reader's Digest* and a former O'Hare fellow at *America*. She has also written for the *National Catholic Reporter* and *Sojourners*.

## UP IN FLAMES



Biblioasis / 280p \$22.95

Using the literary framework of Dante's three-part epic poem "The Divine Comedy" as a lens through which to cast a sardonic eye on the present moment is hardly a new idea, but it has proven to be a durable one.

To take just one example, it's hard to think about T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" without its many haunting allusions to Dante's "Inferno."

There is always opportunity for provocation and mischievous commentary in this game of "compare and contrast." When writers and playwrights take classic narrative structures and play them off against diverse settings and time periods, there's a chance that new insights will be revealed—like transforming Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" into "West Side Story" or Jane Austen's *Emma* into "Clueless."

In *Dante's Indiana*, the Canadian novelist and University of Toronto professor Randy Boyagoda has added a witty, rambunctious and occasionally touching entry to

this list. The second novel in a planned trilogy, it continues the story that began with *Original Prin*. There we met the eponymous Prin (short for Princely, son of Kingsley), a somewhat feckless academic of Sri Lankan heritage, attempting to navigate the treacherous, highly politicized waters of contemporary university life, sustain a marriage fallen on hard times, bear with a pair of occasionally overbearing parents and confront his own wavering faith in the Catholic Church.

What made *Original Prin* so wincingly effective was the way Boyagoda's satire merely extrapolated already cartoonish trends and phenomena. Some of this consisted of the skewering of progressivist pieties in academia—hypersensitivity to alleged "microaggressions," endless conundrums about which sorts of speech are free and which are not, and the emerging alliance between politicized ideologies and therapeutic culture.

But at its best, *Original Prin* went beyond the clichés of Fox News outrage items to explore the ways that higher learning has increasingly compromised its traditional educational mission. (The only evidence of the protagonist's college's prior incarnation as a Catholic institution is the persistence of Sister Contra Melanchthon on the faculty.) As Prin learns to his cost, the efforts of Big Academia to survive difficult economic times (and its own bloated budgets) has led it to enter into dubious alliances with Big Business and Big Government (including foreign governments)—with mixed results.

As *Dante's Indiana* opens, Prin has been recovering from a traumatic event that took place when he was asked to go to a small Middle Eastern country and lecture on Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. But instead of P.T.S.D., his greatest anxieties now seem to center on the expensive, large-scale renovation of his home in Toronto (he has blown his savings by adding a swimming pool to the deal) and the trial separation that has taken his wife and four daughters to Milwaukee. So when he is contacted by an eager young agent with an offer to lecture on Dante's "The Divine Comedy" at various venues in Indiana—in exchange for a hefty paycheck—he impulsively agrees.

It is during this lackluster speaking tour that he comes to the attention of an older man named Charlie, who has retired and turned over his business to his son. Charlie is the proud owner of one of the finest collections of Dante manuscripts and related materials outside of major university libraries, and he has a plan for two down-at-the-heels sports arenas in downtown Terre Haute. He wants to turn them into theme parks based on Dante's "Inferno" and "Paradiso" ("Purgatorio" being off-limits as a Catho-

lic thing). Charlie, it seems, is convinced that Prin can be a “translator” between a motley trio of professors who are advising him on the project and the people who can actually make it happen.

Cue the absurdity, you are thinking. And you’d be right.

But before that happens, Charlie reveals something significant in his conversation with Prin. It turns out that his interest in all things Dantean stemmed from his service in Vietnam, where a fellow soldier—who had been a daily reader of Dante—was killed in action. After that, “I started reading Dante in country,” Charlie says, “and I didn’t understand a damned thing except that a man could live or die from reading it.” In a novel like *Dante’s Indiana*, so full of the bizarre, the fanciful and the ludicrous, one can detect here the actual hard edge of reality—literature as a meaningful response to trauma, as a life-changing force.

There will be only one or two more moments in the entire book where reality makes an appearance as direct as this, so naturally Charlie completely misses the deeper import of his experiences and commences to involve Prin in his grandiose and profoundly tacky theme park project. And, oh, there’s a ton of fun to be had along the way. As Charlie puts it:

So there’s going to be rides, floor shows, I don’t know, acrobats, sorcerers, spaceships, choirs. People walking around dressed like angels, devils, demons, fireworks, light shows, ice capades.

Other ideas include a romantic whirling teacup ride based on the Paolo and Francesca episode from the “Inferno” and a roller coaster called Geryon, after the Monster of Fraud in a lower, darker part of Hell. Along the way, Prin will take research trips, such as to Genesis Extreme, a biblical theme park in Kentucky—and the home of a national television series called “America’s Got Jesus”—that features a trademark ride, “David’s Sling...which put people in cars shaped like smooth stones that went flying above the park’s main causeway and into the smoking, smashed-in forehead of a snarling, brass-helmeted Goliath.”

If *Original Prin* was largely about secularized institutions and the ersatz religiosity that tends to fill the vacuum when true faith departs, then *Dante’s Indiana* is about how religious people can succeed at almost completely emptying their faith of meaning, choosing spectacle over substance. What saves the new book from being yet another heavy-handed thumping on evangelical Christianity is that the narrative remains firmly centered in Prin’s own personal struggles. In Terre Haute, for example, he encounters

a Sri Lankan gas station attendant who calls himself Payatta (as in “pay at the pump”). Despite Payatta’s constant gifts of cuisine from the home country, Prin allows the class difference between them to stand in the way of making a genuine connection. His sin remains pride, which he later dutifully confesses.

What Prin encounters with Payatta is echoed in several other moments in the novel when reality barges in upon the fantasy Charlie and others are attempting to build—in the form of the opioid crisis, racist police violence, the economic woes of aging or obsolete industries, and the consequent struggle to find new ways to create dignified employment. If “The Divine Comedy” begins in the middle of a wood—and the middle of a life—Terre Haute is, as one character says, “the middle of the middle of the middle.” Or as another character says, they don’t live in “flyover country,” they live in “flyswatter country.”

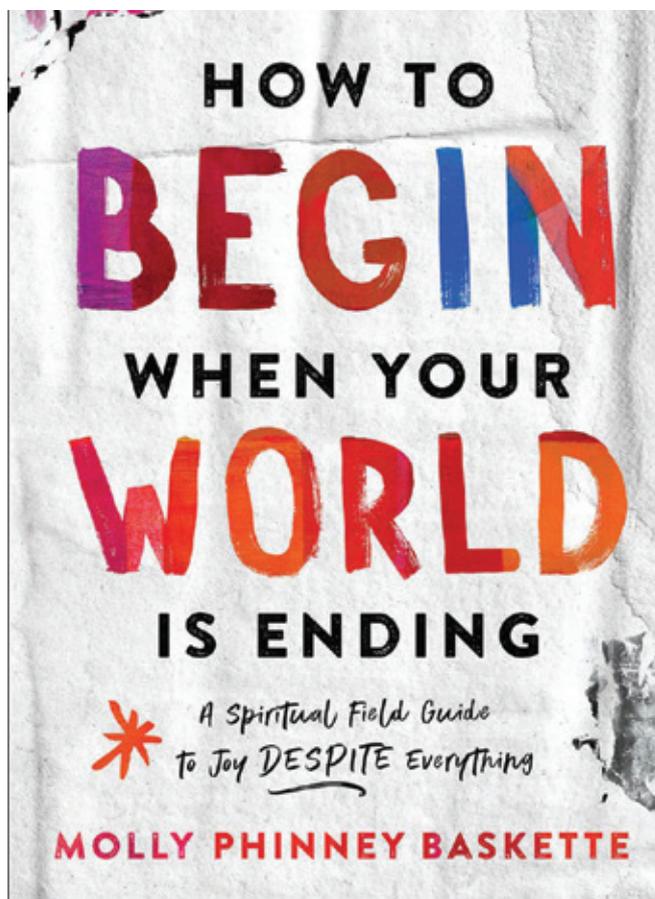
Prin’s own inner tensions and contradictions keep us grounded. He inhabits a world of white privilege, but his own racial and ethnic background is an issue for his white peers; he genuinely loves teaching but finds it hard to do that within mainstream institutions. These and other fears fuel his self-doubt. Late in the novel Prin manages a reconciliation with his wife, but by the end there are flames licking at the edges of the theme park.

It is unclear what the third volume in Boyagoda’s trilogy will bring. If the first two volumes are any indication, there will still be plenty more “Inferno” to come, but we can still hope for a glimpse of “Paradiso.”

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Gregory Wolfe is the publisher and editor of *Slant Books*. His own books include *Intruding Upon the Timeless*, *Beauty Will Save the World* and *The Operation of Grace*.

## FACING MORTALITY HEAD-ON



Broadleaf Books / 215p \$27

When a friend of mine was diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer, instead of becoming tranquil and cheerfully focused on survival, her generally cranky personality became even crankier. The chief targets of her rage—other than the election of our former president in 2016 and the health care organization that wanted her to leave her home and enter a hospice—were the kinds of treacly and sentimental cards and “inspirational” books about illness and death that seem to proliferate in this country. Every time someone would send her one, she would thrust it in my or another friend’s direction, saying “get this out of my house right now.”

An entire industry has sprung up around making sickness and death palatable and even trendy, with “illness influencers” attracting hundreds of thousands of followers on social media and book publishers cranking out seemingly endless tomes turning sickness into a journey, a means of embracing life more fully, even an adventure. The reality is that potentially mortal illnesses and chronic ones are painful, ugly and terrifying. To face up to them with wry humor and a taste for the ironic takes a delicate touch, but that is

what the United Church of Christ pastor and writer Molly Baskette does in her new book, *How to Begin When Your World Is Ending*.

Just over a decade ago, at the age of 39, Baskette was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer. Her children were very young, and she was just beginning to transform the church where she was pastor from moribund and shrinking into thriving and growing. Baskette, raised by a parent with a major depressive disorder, had turned out to be a high-achieving woman, the kind of person who attends an Ivy League school not once, but twice. But her “brand” of strength and success, like that of many successful people confronted with illness and mortality, wouldn’t be enough on its own to vanquish her mortality.

In the face of cancer, she writes, “the workaholic self I had carefully constructed to make myself a valued and therefore indispensable person wherever I went found no purchase.”

Early in the book, Baskette mentions that every person in training for ministry takes a class in systematic theology in which they examine the “nature and being” of God along with concepts like sin, salvation, redemption and resurrection. The ultimate goal is to give ministers a “blueprint for a boat of sorts,” an understanding of God’s presence that will survive the travails of working up close with human suffering. By opening the door to what her own suffering was like in the face of illness, Baskette’s book also allows readers to experience what it is like to be a Christian minister who works with human suffering as she experiences her own suffering.

In *The Wounded Healer*, Henri Nouwen wrote that “for a compassionate person, nothing human is alien.” Baskette walks the reader through her own medical transformation from healthy and long-haired to bald and frail, trying to explain what is happening to her small children, celebrating small milestones like throwing a “peach fuzz party” with bellinis when her hair begins to grow back. In a broken world where stories like Baskette’s and those of the people she ministers to are all too common, she reminds us that “God doesn’t make the fractures, but God will make use of them.”

The risk in any story about a person moving through illness is that it will pivot into a feel-good tale of beating the odds and surviving—the kind of book my friend with cancer would have thrown across the room. Baskette avoids that by balancing her own survival story with those of parishioners she worked with who did not survive, and by being frank about the toll cancer took on her marriage, her children and the church she served.

Being a parent, for example, can sound like a lot of fun

# GOOD FRIDAY

By Tamara Nicholl-Smith

Now is the lilac hour, the deep  
bruise of the afternoon, when the  
sun shuddered, turned its lengthening  
face from the blotted sky, from the  
impending sacrifice at the day's  
ninth hour, and closed its bright eye, closed  
the sky's lid, plunged noon's peak into  
eclipse, into the plum-dark night.

This happened. This is happening.  
Then and now merge. It's time to exit  
the forty days. It's time to strip  
the altar. Time to hollow, time

the crocus purples morning, time  
the hellebore, the Lenten rose,  
bloods its pale petals. Time to yield.  
Please, empty me, of everything

and burn this yoke of days, this shade  
of living until I become a  
clean crucible, a burning bowl  
a hallowed column of fire. I give

all I said *no* to, all I did  
not drink, or eat, or keep.

I give my emptiness and pour cold ashes  
on fields of violet-bright sadness.

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Tamara Nicholl-Smith's poetry has been featured in several publications, including the anthology *Enchantment of the Ordinary*, *Kyoto Journal Issue 95* and *Catholic Arts Today*. She is currently pursuing an M.F.A. in creative writing at the University of St. Thomas in Houston.

in Baskette's accounting of it, though she will also admit it "will also take you to new levels of fury, disappointment, anxiety, and stone-cold terror." Stories like her church congregation breaking out into dance or her family throwing a Covid-19 prom in their living room, and tales of "besties" who seem to proliferate in her life at times of crisis (which is not always the case for sick people) can risk being sentimental or cheesy. But just when the book threatens to tilt that way, Baskette will remind readers that for cancer survivors, "these are not happy endings. They are new growth after devastation."

Throughout the book, Baskette is also more than willing to puncture some of the more banal Christian sentiments about suffering, from "God has a plan" to the notion that suffering is always redemptive. God's role in suffering, she writes, is more complicated than that, because "faith requires both relinquishment of control and taking charge of the freedom God gives us that no circumstances can take away." That is the blessing and curse of living in a human body.

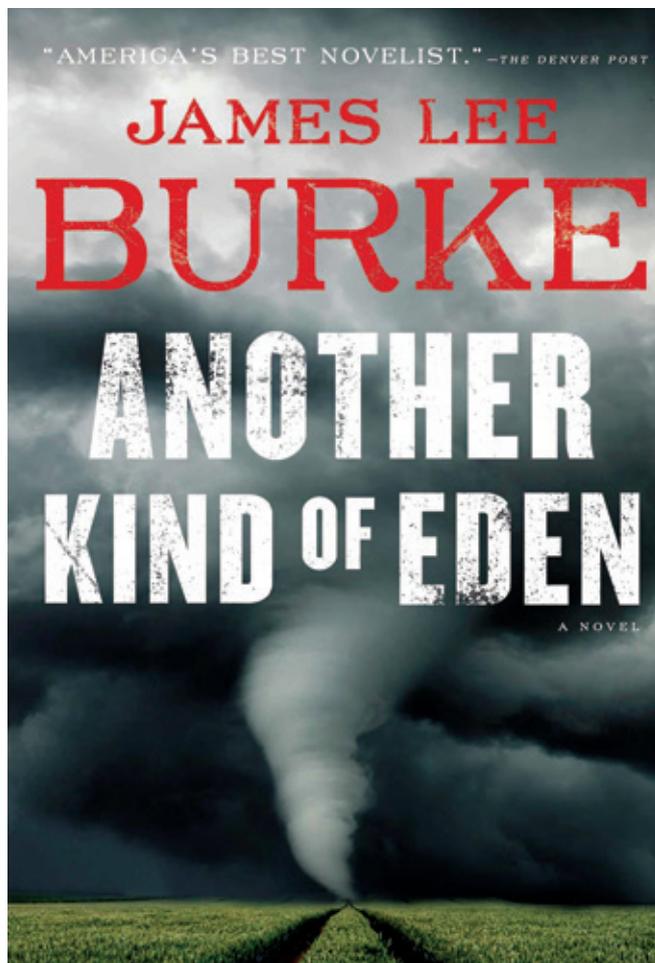
Baskette is also frank about the challenges of life as a pastor, including leaving the church community that saw her through cancer only to land at a new church in Berkeley that caught fire soon after she arrived (full disclosure: I have spoken at Baskette's church). This, too, could be a cheesy resurrection story, but Baskette is frank that deciding how to rebuild the church and the ensuing fights about what to do can be a challenge among Berkeley's trenchant NIMBYs, as goodhearted as they might be. But even NIMBYs can provide opportunities for spiritual movement. "I don't believe that God is responsible for disasters and cancer," Baskette writes, "but that does not mean that our God is a safe God and won't ruthlessly take any opportunity to break and enter our hearts."

My friend died a few years ago, not because she wasn't brave in the face of cancer, but because cancer is wily and determined to have its way. For anyone diagnosed with an illness or the people who care about them, Baskette's book is a reminder that God doesn't make us sick, and God doesn't make us well. God is with us in the suffering, the rage—and even in the redemption. God is at the chemo infusion and the follow-up scans. And God is with us at the funeral, on the dance floor, at the five-year survival party and in our bodies, no matter how sick or well they may be.

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Kaya Oakes, a contributing writer for *America*, teaches writing at the University of California, Berkeley. Her fifth book, *The Defiant Middle*, was released in the fall of 2021.

## THE LIGHT IN HUMAN SOULS



Simon & Schuster / 256p \$27

In August 2019, *America* ran a cover story headlined “The God-Haunted Characters of James Lee Burke.” Written by a senior editor, Edward Schmidt, S.J., the profile discussed a “theology” of Burke, the influential crime novelist who since 1965 has churned out 41 novels and two short-story collections. While Burke might not admit to having his own theology, the author certainly brings a sense of awe, mysticism and transcendence to his many works.

In *Another Kind of Eden*, Burke furthers the author’s literary speculations on the presence of evil in a fallen world—a post-Eden existence that nonetheless makes occasional stabs at goodness and light.

Set in the southwestern United States in the early 1960s, the novel features Aaron Holland Broussard, one of the central characters who serve as Everyman in the Burke story-spinning canon. Another Everyman character for Burke is Dave Robicheaux, a tortured, fading and alcoholic deputy sheriff who patrols the seedy environs of northwestern Louisiana in the latter decades of the last century.

Although the Broussard and Robicheaux characters have never appeared in the same story, they both speak and act for the author, reflecting his observations on the ongoing struggle between good and evil in the United States in recent decades.

“I’ve seen enough evil in people without looking for the devil,” Aaron Broussard says early in *Another Kind of Eden*. “They’re people who look like the rest of us, but they feed on evil. Are they born like that? No one knows. They take their secrets to the grave. My own guess is they make a conscious choice to murder the light in their souls. They never come back from that moment.”

The recognition of the light in human souls, however dim, is more than a metaphor. In many of Burke’s stories, even the most sinful of characters strive for a final act of goodness before leaving the world forever.

In *Another Kind of Eden*, Broussard is a Korean War veteran struggling to come to terms with the horror and bloodshed he witnessed during that conflict. He is also a failed writer and news reporter who, between writing gigs, finds work on a Denver-area tomato farm.

Broussard’s adventures as a fledgling writer and itinerant farm worker mirror Burke’s own writing history. Burke published his first novel, *Half of Paradise*, in 1965, but he languished in literary limbo for years before his fiction began to resonate with new readers. Burke also worked in a variety of jobs—teacher, social worker, oil pipe layer—before turning to full-time writing.

*Another Kind of Eden*, however, is more than a fictionalized portrait of Burke’s career as a writer who has special insights into the darker side of human nature. Broussard’s experience of violence, conflict, abusive human relationships and exploitation of powerless farm workers melds effectively with the themes in most of Burke’s fiction.

Burke’s stories often focus on the presence of evil, either within individuals or as made manifest through structures of power and oppression. Consider, for example, Broussard’s interior monologue partway through the novel:

I learned early in life that human beings are capable of inflicting pain on one another in ways that are unthinkable. I’m talking about a level of cruelty that has no peer among animals or the creatures of the sea. Once you witness it, worse, participate in it, it takes on a life of its own, much like a virus finding a host. It burrows into your soul; robs you of your sleep and clouds your days.

Burke’s latest novel, like many of his more recent works, makes use of paranormal characters who bring a dream-

like aspect to the narrative. The reader is often forced to decide if these creatures really exist or are just phantoms from the narrator's troubled imagination.

The book also reiterates Burke's steady focus on the problems of exploitation and injustice in society. His themes of atonement for despoiling a near paradise on Earth are especially relevant today, with contemporary efforts to address the failings of a materialistic society rife with racism and the abuse of vulnerable, voiceless people.

At one point, Mrs. Lowry, who owns the tomato farm with her husband, warns Broussard that "if you have money, people will do everything they can to take it from you. The Irish sailed here on the coffin boats and were treated like bilge when they arrived. Then they died in front of Confederate cannons, and not for the slaves, either, but to protect the profits of the textile mills."

Further, she says, her husband's Puritan ancestors "got off the Mayflower and set about murdering and spreading disease among the Indians, and when they ran out of Indians, they hanged their neighbors. That's the bloody truth. Don't be deceived by the nonsense you were taught in public schools."

*Another Kind of Eden* builds to a climax in which the worst of the evildoers come to a violent end. It is as close as Burke will get to showing good triumphing over evil. Burke's characters understand that violence and injustice are never completely overcome or even understood. They simply exist and will continue to hold some sway in earthly affairs.

A resigned Broussard notes at the denouement: "I've acquired little knowledge and even less wisdom in my life, but early on, I learned not to argue with the world.... I also learned that madness is madness, and we should not question its presence in the majority of the human race."

The author repeatedly returns to the notion of a paradise lost because of the thoughts and actions of its first stewards. *Another Kind of Eden* picks up on the image of an earthly paradise lost that Burke conjured up in *Half of Paradise*. "I wondered if Eden had been like this," Broussard reveals. "I also wondered if the founders of our country had this very scene in mind when they envisioned the agrarian republic. And I wondered if they regretted staining it, just as Eden had been stained, when they placed a portion of the human family in shackles and chains and murdered unknown numbers of indigenous people."

Burke is not quite ready to rest on his writing laurels. Another novel, *Every Cloak Rolled in Blood* (a reference to Is 9:5) was released last May. It also features Aaron Broussard, now an established novelist who struggles with the death of his daughter and agonizes over the embrace of des-



James Lee Burke

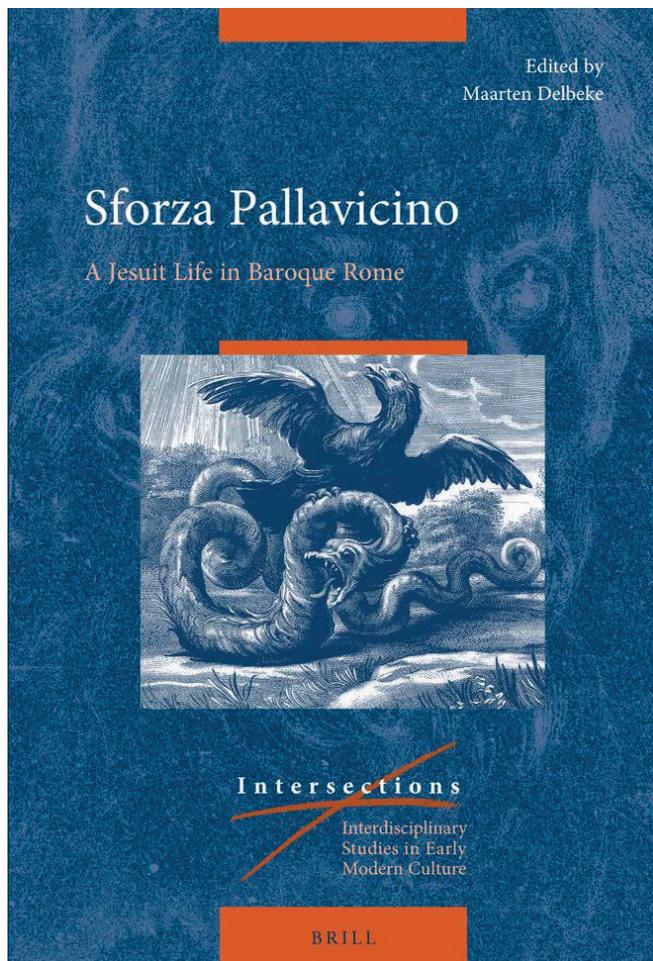
James McDavid

potism in national affairs. Burke describes this next work as his "most powerful and most extraordinary." While it will almost certainly feature some of the fragile redemptive elements Burke regularly includes, it might also serve as a warning that modern America is encroaching on dangerous ground.

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Mike Mastromatteo is a writer, editor and book reviewer from Toronto.

## A BAROQUE CARDINAL IN ROME



Brill Academic / 352p \$139

Cardinal Sforza Pallavicino, S.J., was a church historian so charismatic that he was deemed *la fenice degl'ingegni* (a phoenix among the ingenious ones) by Roman high society in the 1620s. The influential German thinker Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, who agreed with Pallavicino that theology and philosophy were one and the same thing, expressed regret that he had never had the pleasure of meeting the cardinal. Those who did, like his friend the sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini, were permanently impressed by Pallavicino's tolerance. The cardinal, as the historian of philosophy Sven Knebel notes in his chapter "Pallavicino the Optimist" in *Sforza Pallavicino: A Jesuit Life in Baroque Rome*, edited by Maarten Delbeke, had an "open mind and cared little for the uniformity of doctrine."

This intellectual flexibility combined with intense faith was unusual in his era. An early supporter of the astronomer Galileo Galilei, who would eventually be tried by the Inquisition, Pallavicino remained devoted to science. As he wrote to one friend, his passion for studying specimens under a microscope inspired him at least once to put

the eucharistic host under the lens to examine it, in an episode alluded to by Knebel. Pallavicino did not report what, if anything, he discovered as a result, but surely the experience reinforced his notion that religion and science were symbiotic. For an Italian ecclesiastic in the 1600s, this was a rare perception indeed. Pallavicino would be praised by later Italian philosophers from Giambattista Vico to Benedetto Croce, as the historian Stefan Bauer details in his chapter "Writing the History of the Council of Trent."

His stature within the church was in good part due to being assigned the essential task of writing a definitive history of the Council of Trent, held in the mid-16th century in northern Italy. Prompted by the Protestant Reformation, the council condemned what it defined as heresies committed by Protestants and issued statements about church doctrine on Scripture, the biblical canon and other essential related subjects.

Pallavicino succeeded so well that his *History of the Council of Trent* remained the authoritative text on the subject into the 20th century. Translated into Latin, French, Spanish and German, the *History* was praised by the 19th-century historian Leopold von Ranke as "scrupulously exact" in carefully consulting documents "in their entirety." Bauer notes, however, that Ranke also underlined the methodological "limits" in Sforza's attempt to provide a point-by-point refutation of a previous account of the council instead of "creating his own structure" of independent historical analysis.

As master of the Jesuit novitiate on Quirinal Hill, the highest of the seven hills of Rome, Pallavicino helped plan the Church of Saint Andrew on the Quirinal. Well known to operagoers as the setting for Act I of Puccini's melodramatic "Tosca," the church became the site of an ornate tomb at the entrance for Pallavicino, who died in 1667.

Pallavicino's theological expertise was also solicited for such landmarks as the ceiling of the Barberini Palace, which now houses Rome's National Gallery of Ancient Art. Some of his personal allure is communicated in two widely differing artworks showing different sides of his multifaceted personality. In a painting dated 1663, by an anonymous hand, now in the collection of the British Embassy to the Holy See in Vatican City, Pallavicino's warm brown eyes radiate empathy and fidelity. The pallor of his skin, under which can be discerned a network of blue veins, may be seen as the result of long hours spent in indoor study. The nattily curled mustache and well-groomed goatee are the sole potential signs of vanity in this sympathetic, bookish cardinal.

A red chalk drawing created just a couple of years later by his friend Bernini, now in the collection of the Yale University Art Gallery, conveys a different message. More

humanly flawed than the sedate, smooth, contained figure in the formal portrait, Pallavicino as sketched by Bernini is a scruffy, emaciated figure, something like Don Quixote. Pallavicino's slightly dilated pupils and smile also echo the painter El Greco's depictions of saints, suggesting that he may have just had an illuminating insight.

Brain power was essential for the challenging task of counteracting the previous historical work by Paolo Sarpi, a fellow historian and Galileo enthusiast. Often caustic in discussing Catholic tradition, Sarpi's writings would influence such later anticlerical writers as the philosopher Thomas Hobbes and the historian Edward Gibbon. Sarpi's *History of the Council of Trent* (1619) defended freedoms of Republican Venice as well as the separation of church and state, to the point where a number of readers suspected him of holding Protestant views.

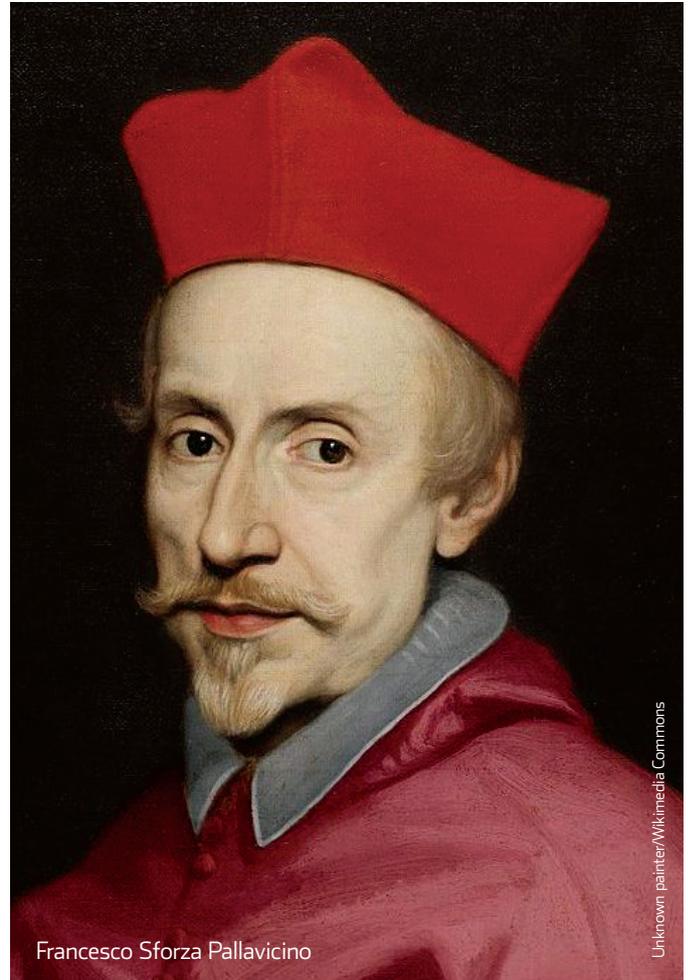
Taking a strictly political view of church actions, Sarpi's history became popular among Anglican readers, who saw the Council of Trent as a prelude to further religious conflict. The poet John Milton lauded Sarpi as the "great unmasker." The Vatican was convinced that a reply was necessary to this work signed with a pseudonym consisting of an anagram of its author's name: Petro Soave Polano.

To accomplish this task, Sforza Pallavicino delved into the Vatican archives, emerging with a three-volume tome with the full title: *The History of the Council of Trent written by P. Sforza Pallavicino, of the Company of Jesus, in which a false history upon the same argument put forth under the name of Petro Soave Polano is refuted by means of authoritative testimony.*

Later historians have charged both Sarpi and Pallavicino with writing partisan works, but most agree that while the former fabricated and distorted stories, the latter was wholly reliable (if tending to accumulate evidence to prove points that he wished to make). Stefan Bauer termed Pallavicino's *History* an example of "psychological warfare."

Earlier writings by Pallavicino included a tragedy, "Saint Hermenegild, Martyr," performances of which in the Jesuits' Seminario Romano earned high praise. Pallavicino's play tells of the last day in the life of St. Hermenegild, a Catholic convert who rebelled against his father, a monarch. Perhaps not entirely coincidentally, Pallavicino himself had taken holy orders against the express wishes of his father, a wealthy nobleman.

In a postscript to his play, Pallavicino idealistically explained his hope of providing audiences with inspirational characters to serve as role models. Pallavicino disdained supernatural effects onstage, preferring realism whenever possible. He asserted: "Wonder without verisimilitude is easily achieved and gives no pleasure, except perhaps that



Francesco Sforza Pallavicino

Unknown painter/Wikimedia Commons

of laughter among those who hear the plot, nor does it merit the name of poetry."

Among other theological writings, Pallavicino's *Vindications of the Society of Jesus, in which the accusations of many are rebutted against its institution, laws, schools, and manners* (1649), propounded an ideal intellectual environment to be pursued by progressive elements. He pointed out that innovations were always occurring in philosophy and therefore it was necessary to address new topics. Correspondingly, even past masters of thought like Aristotle might be proven wrong in terms of natural philosophy by later researchers.

This new collective tribute by a baker's dozen of erudite specialists adds up to an erudite, if in some parts abstruse, overview of a remarkable life and ecclesiastic career. Its overall sympathetic, enthusiastic tone should win over readers intrigued by the legacy of Cardinal Sforza Pallavicino.

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

## A Different Approach to Lent

In the month of March this year, the church takes a pause from Matthew's narrative and draws three of the Sunday Gospel readings from the Gospel of John. On the Third Sunday of Lent, the Gospel recounts Jesus' encounter with a woman at the well in a Samaritan village (Jn 4:5-42). A meeting at a village well in the Old Testament often signals a coming betrothal that will turn into a lifelong marriage commitment, but in this passage, the encounter between Jesus and the mysterious woman marks a commitment of faith that will last forever. Jesus overlooks the details he knows of the woman's marital history and pays attention instead to her understanding of eternal truths. She is a remarkable figure in her thinking and action. In her story the church finds a different way to think about Lent.

Lent often evokes a sense of repentance for past actions that are deemed problematic or sinful. There is space for this type of repentance during Lent, but the readings this March center on the theme of renewed sight. For repentance to have power, it must arrive at this renewed sight with a deepening of faith. These readings prompt questions not of ethical changes but of truth. They are not so much about which behavioral patterns a person wishes to correct but about one's faith in Jesus. Is he the Christ? Where does the "seeing" of that truth take someone? Does a person desire to believe so as to see? And how do one's actions reveal what one truly believes? This is a different approach to Lent, one that brings an opportunity to think, act and believe.

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### SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT (A), MARCH 5, 2023

Seeing a half-truth in the transfiguration of Jesus

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### THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT (A), MARCH 12, 2023

Seeing the woman of Samaria, who hungers and thirsts

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### FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT (A), MARCH 19, 2023

Seeing that the blind can regain their sight

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### FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT (A), MARCH 26, 2023

Seeing is believing, but those who believe already see

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*Victor M. Cancino, S.J., lives on the Flathead Indian Reservation in western Montana and is the pastor-delegate for St. Ignatius Mission. He studied Sacred Scripture at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome.*



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# TOP 10 MOMENTS OF FRANCIS' PAPACY

Pope Francis has done a lot in ten years. Here are the ten most consequential moments according to the editors of America Magazine.



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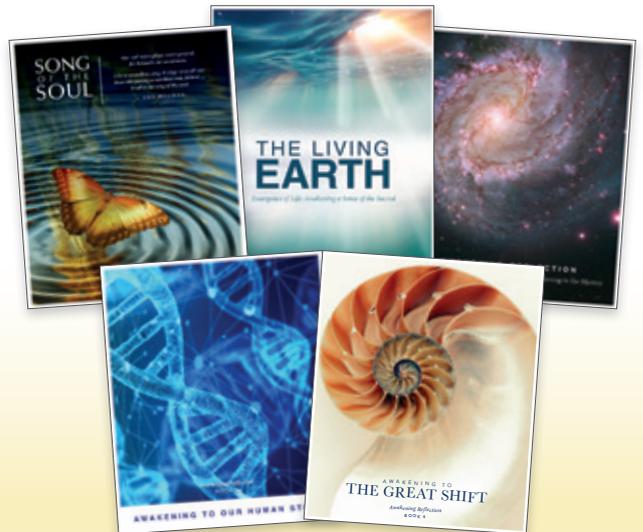
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# The Francis Revolution

## This pope has reasserted the church's true power

By Austen Ivereigh



The path was signposted at the start, but looking back after 10 years, it can be seen more clearly: Pope Francis has sought a transformation of the internal life and culture of the Catholic Church, at the heart of which is a conversion of power.

He announced it in the homily of his inaugural Mass on March 17, 2013, when he asked us never to forget that true power is service. He was referring at that moment to the power conferred on him as pope: to be inspired by “the lowly, concrete and faithful service” of St. Joseph, to protect the poor and care for creation. But as he has spent the past decade teaching and enabling, all true authority in the church is the participation in that same divine power. From Rome, through the college of bishops, and extending through the synods, to the whole church, the recovery of that divine power that serves has been the hallmark of his reform. And its fruits are visible.

Where not long ago the Vatican was notorious for its haughty manner, its centralism and its authoritarianism, there is now a climate of service and of freedom. No longer is there a stream of directives issued without first engaging the parties affected. The few that the Vatican issues these days follow extensive, patient consultation. No longer does Rome use anonymous denunciations (“delations”) to discipline bishops, and it is hard to recall a single instance in the past decade where a theologian’s orthodoxy has been put on trial.

Bishops from local churches on their *ad limina* visits to the Vatican are amazed now to find they are no longer treated as subordinates. Officials look visiting bishops in the eye, want to listen and help.

Papal governance is now not remote and impersonal but “collegial”—that is, in partnership with the college of bishops by means of regular consultations and free-flowing exchanges. The structures and governance of the universal church now reflect better what Francis calls the “style of God”: graciousness, kindness and closeness. It is a major category error of the pope’s critics to see this more vulnerable kind of authority as weakness or loss of nerve. It is a mark of the true strength of the church to rely not on *potestas*—power over—but the *ministerium* of divine power.

These and many other changes signal not merely a reform of governance but a shift in agency: from a semi-Pelagian trust in the power of law to a new confidence in the power of the Spirit. It is to enable the church to live ever more under the effect of the Spirit that Pope Francis in October 2021 called the three-year global Synod on Synodality. Even now, at its halfway point, it is clear that the experience of deep mutual listening has been transformative, awakening a desire among the faithful for greater responsibility and participation in the life and mission of the church. The clericalization of authority is already underway in the Vatican, where laypeople, as well

as religious women, are occupying significant executive roles.

One of the signs that the transformation is taking hold is the increasingly strident resistance it is provoking. The opposition to Francis throughout his pontificate has been at its most intense and ferocious precisely in his reform of authority and governance, and notably in and around the synods. There is a new willingness in the Catholic Church, modeled by Pope Francis, to hold its disagreements in fruitful tension, allowing the Spirit to show new paths forward that transcend those divisions.

This way of proceeding causes fear and anger in those seeking the apparent securities of an imagined past. They must be listened to respectfully, and their fears appreciated. But as Pope Francis understands, the church can only evangelize today’s world using “God’s style” if the medium is not to undermine the message. The church’s true authority lies in its sharing in God’s power, which is always expressed in humble service. It is among Francis’ greatest achievements that after 10 years we are able not just to understand this, but to see it in action.

*Austen Ivereigh is a Fellow in Contemporary Church History at Campion Hall, at the University of Oxford, and a biographer of Pope Francis. In 2020 he collaborated with Pope Francis on Let Us Dream: the Path to a Better Future, published by Simon & Schuster.*



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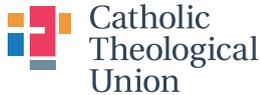


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