

America

MAY 2023

THE JESUIT REVIEW OF FAITH AND CULTURE

MARRIAGE AND BELIEF

When Catholics and non-Catholics marry

Simcha Fisher
p20

**In High School,
In Recovery**

p28

**Unpacking the
Hierarchy of Truths**

p40

**Willie Nelson's
Amazing Grace**

p50



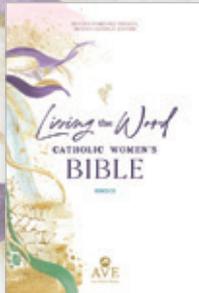
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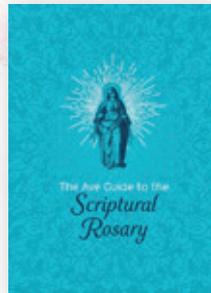
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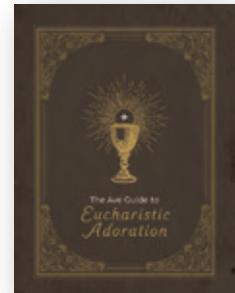
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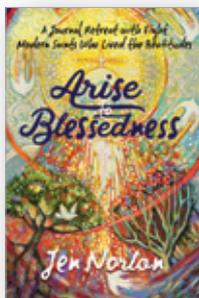
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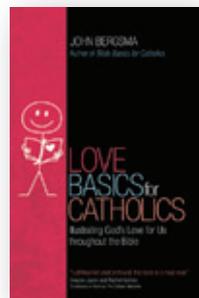
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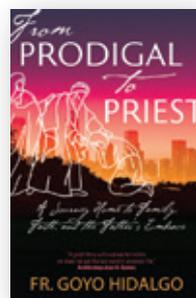
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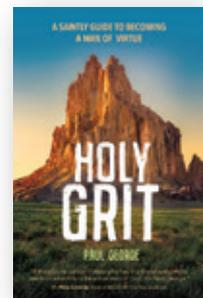
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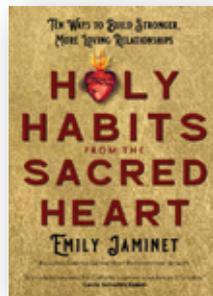
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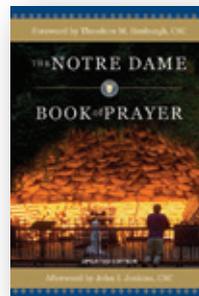
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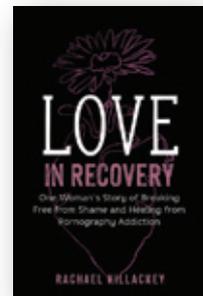
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Talking to Artificial Intelligence, and to Ourselves

Tell me, in the style of Jesuit priest Sam Sawyer, about what ChatGPT means for religion:

Well, my friend, the emergence of ChatGPT certainly presents an interesting opportunity for the intersection of technology and religion. As a Jesuit priest, I believe that faith and reason are intimately connected, and that our ability to understand and communicate with one another is a fundamental aspect of our human nature.

In that sense, ChatGPT can be seen as a tool for enhancing our ability to engage with religious traditions and ideas in new and dynamic ways. With its vast database of information and sophisticated language processing capabilities, ChatGPT can help us explore complex theological concepts, engage in interfaith dialogue and even offer guidance and support to those seeking spiritual direction.

Of course, like any technology, ChatGPT is not a panacea. It cannot replace the human connection that lies at the heart of religious experience, nor can it provide the kind of personal relationship with a divine being that many believers seek. However, I believe that when used wisely and in the service of the greater good, ChatGPT has the potential to enrich our religious lives and help us better understand the mysteries of the universe and our place within it.

That's...not too bad, actually. I don't think I'd really begin with "Well, my friend" but the rest of it is an embarrassingly good mimicry of my prose style; presumably the **America** website was in the corpus of internet text on which the model was trained. (Though it has not picked up on our house style; there was an Oxford comma in the prose it generated before

we copy-edited it.) And I definitely do believe that faith and reason are intimately connected and that the ability to communicate is fundamental to human nature.

But I would never, for a host of reasons, suggest that ChatGPT could "offer guidance and support to those seeking spiritual direction." Among the reasons, which is something ChatGPT got right, is that it certainly cannot replace human connection or a personal relationship with God.

You need not worry that I will be outsourcing "Of Many Things" columns to our robot overlords in the future. The start of this column was actually inspired by a colleague, Zac Davis, who gave ChatGPT a prompt to "write in the voice of Jesuit priest Sam Sawyer" as a joke in the midst of discussions about how these new tools might affect our editorial work.

Before I was a Jesuit, I was a software engineer. I never worked in artificial intelligence, but I followed developments in the field and I knew the standard joke about how A.I. had been just 10 years away for the past 40 years. The large language model chatbots and generative A.I. image tools are the first developments I have seen that really seem to disrupt that always-off-in-the-future timeline.

What is perhaps most disconcerting about the new A.I. chatbots is how much talking to one feels like having a "real" conversation, even when you know that in the background there is just a giant model predicting what word should come next in the chain. By the time you read this column, **America** will have published on our website a selection from a conversation about A.I. between two Loyola University Chicago professors and Blake LeMoine, the former Google

A.I. researcher who made news last summer over his concern that an A.I. called "LaMDA" had become sentient. In the excerpt from the journal *Nexus: Conversations on the Catholic Intellectual Tradition*, he argues that when we try to get an A.I. to understand humans, it ends up, as he says, "somehow, some way, perhaps metaphorically," experiencing what humans experience.

One reason talking to an A.I. feels like a real conversation is that we are talking, through elaborate mediation, to all of the human text and learning and history on which the A.I. itself was trained. We are in that sense—somehow, some way, perhaps metaphorically—talking to ourselves, each other and our tradition.

And that can be discomfiting because it confronts us with how much of our own experience of one another is mediated by language and conversation, how much we are *ourselves* modeling the experience of others based on the words we exchange with them.

But—and here's why I won't be sending anyone to ChatGPT for spiritual direction—while we are inevitably modeling other humans in order to understand them, our relationships are not fulfilled solely in understanding, but in loving. It is charity and willing the good of the other, not mere comprehension, that most deeply undergirds human connection.

These new A.I. tools can profoundly accelerate some kinds of understanding in ways that will be both helpful and harmful, as all tools can do. The task of turning them to the works of love, however, will remain ours.

Sam Sawyer, S.J.
Twitter: @SSawyerSJ



THE ISSUE

GIVE AND TAKE

6
YOUR TAKE
Escaping the polarization trap

8
OUR TAKE
The teen mental health crisis

10
SHORT TAKE
Charles III, George III and the problematic American presidency
Jeffrey von Arx

DISPATCHES

12
SPECIAL REPORT FROM
HONDURAS

Water brings life and hope to farm families

Immigration leaves communities and loved ones behind

Honduras at a glance

Q&A: Why violence is on the rise across Africa's Sahel region

After the earthquakes, can the Christian community of Samandag survive?

Pope Francis to Latin American bishops: Make sex abuse protections a priority

FEATURES

20
TO HAVE AND TO HOLD
Navigating marriages of different religious beliefs
Simcha Fisher

28
IN HIGH SCHOOL, IN RECOVERY
The challenges faced by young people with addiction
John W. Miller

FAITH & REASON

40
THE HIERARCHY OF TRUTHS,
EXPLORED
Teaching the essentials—and the entirety—of the faith
Aaron Pidel



OSV News photo/Reuters

People gather for a Good Friday procession on the grounds of the Metropolitan Cathedral in Managua, Nicaragua, April 7. The government banned Holy Week street processions this year due to unspecified security concerns.

Cover: iStock

FAITH IN FOCUS

46
WHY I TAKE MY TEENS TO MASS
I hope their belief will deepen. And the wider church wants them there.
Sherry Antonetti

48
A family matriarch who shunned the spotlight
Paul Ginnetty

IDEAS

50
WILLIE NELSON'S AMAZING GRACE
The rebellious singer has long admired the teachings of Jesus
Kaya Oakes

BOOKS

53
Our Hearts Are Restless; The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida; The Future of Catholic Education; Dirtbag, Massachusetts; The Need to Be Whole

POEMS

47
UNFINISHED MASTERPIECE
Alfonso Sasieta

56
THE DUMPSTER FILLERS
Josh Dugat

THE WORD

64
An Invitation to Breathe
Victor Cancino

LAST TAKE

66
BLASE J. CUPICH
Pope Francis, St. John Paul II and Vatican II

Readers on *America's* commitment to lessen polarization

In our April issue, Editor in Chief Sam Sawyer, S.J., argued that the practice of “Presupposition,” found in the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, offers a way out of our current ecclesial, cultural and political polarization. St. Ignatius writes “that every good Christian ought to be more eager to put a good interpretation on a neighbor’s statement than to condemn it.” Father Sawyer explained that at **America**, “We commit ourselves—and we will exhort our contributors—to both imagine and acknowledge the best motives of those with whom we may disagree, especially within the life of the church.” Readers had much to say in response.

Lots of wisdom here. I especially appreciate the emphasis in trusting the action of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Thank you for this thought- and prayer-provoking article.

Karen Genest

A small anecdote: A number of years ago, at least 15 (so way before the current levels of polarization in our church and country), I was asked to lead an “ask the deacon” adult faith formation session in our parish. It was a well-attended, lively session. I was peppered with lots of good questions, to which I tried to give thoughtful answers. At home later in the evening I received two strong emails from parishioners who had attended. Each one said, “How could you answer [question X] THAT way?!” One was from a very “traditionalist” parishioner, the other from a very “progressive” parishioner. I could only chuckle at the irony and then lament how much of what I was trying to say fell on, maybe not deaf, but at least unwilling ears.

Richard Currie

This is a bold and optimistic, if fragile, prolegomenon. May God bless Sam Sawyer, S.J., in his new role and let him bring some peace to our discourse.

Paul Discok

I hope the ideas of this article are embraced by the full editorial staff and content moderators of **America**. Father Sawyer, you have your work cut out for you!

I tried (in my own poor way) to point out this as a deficiency over these past months, frustrated at seeing two articles in three months by Cardinal Robert McElroy. I hope that the true hard work of listening to contrarian views is something **America** is still willing to commit to. There are more than 190 bishops in the United States. Focusing on only two or three who all think alike doesn’t seem to be in line with the ideas behind this article. It also doesn’t come across as very inclusive.

Daniel Ray

This is a compelling commitment to communion, and I certainly applaud **America's** leadership to pursue the “gift of communion.” It is little wonder that the rest of us have such difficulty in putting “a good interpretation on a neighbor’s statement” when institutional leaders pursue polarization.

Ed Dailey

This is the best article I have read on polarization. Having shared many heart-to-heart conversations with adult Catholics, I have found that the divisions in the church are not as hard to break through as we imagine them to be. The key, as Ignatius said, is to concentrate on discovering the good in others. It is also another reason why, as the U.S. bishops said decades ago, we need to concentrate our efforts on adult formation since we cannot go back to a pre-Vatican II church of primarily undereducated parishioners. I would also add that our adult formation must be a synodal experience for participants if it is to be effective in building up the church for its mission to evangelize.

Christine Gall

These are really challenging times for conversation/communication/community. I recognize the stress you refer to as cross-pressure and also the constant temptation to talk past others because listening is challenging and even threatening at times. While we may intend to converse in order to clarify, the result may be further confusion and instability, which is difficult to endure. So the temptation is to claim the higher ground or talk over, refusing to hear the other. Honest conversation calls for humility and a deeply prayerful life to maintain equilibrium and to continue to stay close to the Lord during these stormy times.

Maureen O’Riordan Lundy



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How Faith Communities Can Respond to the Teen Mental Health Crisis

On May 11, President Biden is expected to end the Covid-19 national and public health emergencies. But three years after the start of the pandemic, we are still grappling with what this time of fear and isolation has exposed about our society. One of the most concerning revelations is how an already serious mental health crisis among U.S. teenagers deepened during the pandemic.

Earlier this year, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released their latest Youth Risk Behaviors Survey, reporting results of a poll of 17,000 students in the fall of 2021 about their health and well-being. While certain detriments to health, including risky sexual behavior, drinking and smoking, have all decreased over the past decade, the C.D.C. found that negative mental health outcomes and thoughts of suicide have all increased significantly since 2011. Some groups saw even more alarming increases in recent years, including girls, Black students, and gay, lesbian and bisexual adolescents. In 2021, 60 percent of female students (compared with 40 percent of all students) said they had “experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness” within the previous year, and nearly a quarter said they had made a “suicide plan.” Among students who do not identify as heterosexual, those numbers were even higher, nearly 70 percent and 25 percent, respectively. Black students were less likely to report poor mental health but more likely to report a suicide attempt.

There is no simple explanation for these distressing trends. In 2021, Surgeon General Vivek Murthy issued a public statement on the “devastating” challenges to young people’s mental

health, challenges that he said predate the pandemic. Experts disagree on just how much social media use drives poor mental health outcomes, but research shows teenage girls are particularly harmed by online bullying and that apps like Instagram and TikTok have a negative effect on their body image. Perhaps even more important than the apps themselves are what screentime is replacing: sleep, exercise, hobbies, time with friends or family, and time in nature—all necessary ingredients for good mental health. And too often, when teens are engaged in social activities, it is not to relax and connect with others. Rather, they have been told they must build a lengthy résumé or even to build a “personal brand” in order to get into increasingly selective colleges and compete in a high-stakes economy.

It is striking to compare the risks to teenage well-being in the pre-digital world with today’s teenage experience. Drinking, smoking and risky sex can certainly be dangerous, but today’s crisis is foremost one of isolation and disconnection, often masked by online lives of performative happiness and success. Gen Z, which encompasses those who are just beginning their careers, is characterized by a lack of trust in and sense of belonging to institutions—and not without good reason. They have never known a world before the clerical sex abuse crisis, the debacles of U.S. intervention in the Middle East, the reckless banking practices leading to the global financial crisis of 2008, and a government unable to curb climate change and gun violence. Lacking any sense of communal belonging, they are left to define themselves and to perform that identity on social media for their

peers and complete strangers to affirm or denigrate.

This crisis is both psychological and spiritual, and it demands a response from both mental health and faith communities. What is needed from the former is by no means an insignificant undertaking but is more straightforward. Every day in this country, hundreds of teens at risk for suicide spend the night in emergency rooms because there is no open spot in an inpatient treatment center where they might receive the therapy they need. Pediatricians, especially in rural and low-income areas, are being flooded with patients in severe emotional distress that they may not have the training to properly address. Even for middle-class Americans with good insurance, seeing a therapist on a regular basis can be prohibitively expensive. Investments in the institutions and practitioners to provide young people with the care they deserve is a necessary first step.

The role of faith ministers, including in the Catholic Church, is less clear-cut but one we must not overlook. Research from the Springtide Institute, which studies the faith lives of young people, has found that religiously affiliated young people report higher levels of flourishing (though that relationship is not necessarily causal). That is good news, but the question should not be “How do we get young people back in the pews?” You cannot get them back if they were never there, and nearly half of Gen Z are religious “nones.” The question is rather, “How do we make our church again a place of belonging for young people who are hurting?”

Pope Francis offers one answer. “The thing the church needs most

today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity,” the pope said in his 2013 interview with **America** and several other Jesuit journals. “I see the church as a field hospital after battle.” That means meeting troubled teens where they are, not in order to get them back to church, but so they know there are adults in their lives whom they can trust to have their best interests at heart, adults who are not trying to supply easy answers but are willing to listen to their questions, doubts and pain. It means believing that helping teens care for their mental health is a work of mercy and a cooperation with God’s grace already at work in their lives, even when they may be far from the church and not yet ready to engage with it.

As Josh Packard, the former executive director of the Springtide Institute, has said, caring for mental health is not just preparatory work for other evangelization or catechesis, but “this can be the real work of showing what faith looks like in action.” It is a hopeful sign that more dioceses around the country are taking this work seriously.

In 2022, Bishop Thomas J. Tobin of Providence, R.I., launched a diocesan Task Force on Youth Wellness to respond to the post-pandemic increase in mental health problems. “We have professional, pastoral and spiritual gifts we can bring to help support and heal the wounded and frightened members of our community—Catholics and non-Catholics alike,” he said in announcing the task force. Other dioceses should consider similar initiatives.

Neither the church nor mental health professionals can address the crisis among teens on their own. But they, and the church as a whole, can and must become places of understanding, meaning and community for hurting members of the body of Christ.

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Charles III, George III and the problematic American presidency



King George III (iStock)



Queen Elizabeth II (Library and Archives Canada, via Wikimedia Commons)



King Charles III (Georg Wendt/dpa via AP)

The British monarchy has evolved over the years...

The death of Queen Elizabeth and the coming coronation of King Charles III on May 6 have focused attention on the institution of the British monarchy at the same time that we Americans have been pondering the presidency in the light of four years of Donald Trump in the White House, the insurrection he fomented on Jan. 6, 2021, and the refusal of many to accept Joe Biden as the legitimate winner of the 2020 election.

In Great Britain, the succession of a new monarch has happened smoothly and has helped provide stability amid the recent string of prime ministers who proved unsuitable for or inadequate to the job. (Still, it should be noted that Jacobites, supporters of the Stuart line of King James II, who was deposed in 1688 after he became a Catholic, say that it is his grandson, Charles Edward Stuart, who had rightful claim to the title King Charles III.)

The contrast between the position, powers and prerogatives of a British monarch and an American president raises some interesting questions. In the British system, the positions of head of state and head of government are separate, and the head of state plays a mostly ceremonial role. This is also the case with the other European monarchies, though

in some republics it is the president's office that is mainly ceremonial. Then there are republics with strong presidents (like France) who share or delegate power with premiers or prime ministers. The United States is one of the few countries where the same person is both head of state and head of government, on the one hand representing the dignity and unity of the state and, on the other, in charge of the executive branch of government.

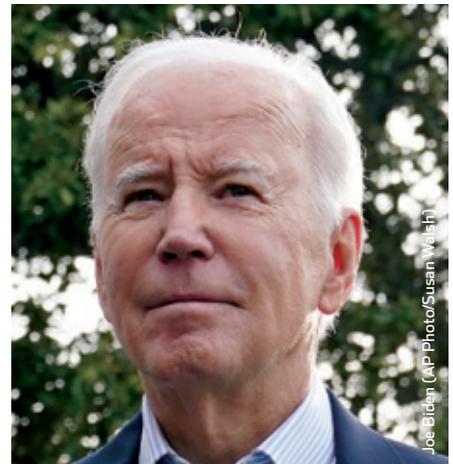
What is truly fascinating is that at a certain point in the late 18th century, the British monarch and the American president occupied the same position relative to their roles in the governance of their countries. The great British historian of the United States, Lord Bryce, in his *The American Commonwealth* (1885) points out that when the Founding Fathers at the Constitutional Convention cast about for a model for the executive of their new nation, what they had at hand was the British monarch, King George III—whom, of course, they had recently vilified in the Declaration of Independence!

George III, at that stage in the evolution of the British monarchy, still had considerable executive power. He appointed government ministers, and they were answerable to him more

than to Parliament. It was truly the king's government.

The king could not, it is true, govern without Parliament, especially with regard to raising and spending tax revenue, but he could propose legislation for Parliament to consider. He could (and did) veto measures passed by Parliament, and it was the responsibility of his ministers to smooth the way for the “king's business” in Parliament, not least by distributing royal patronage and honors. It was, if you will, a system of checks and balances, but the king had real power and was an essential party in that balance.

Over the course of the 19th century, the position of the monarchy in the unwritten British constitution changed, especially with the emergence of mass political parties, an executive branch responsible to Parliament, and a cabinet system wherein the prime minister is the clear head of government and ministers are answerable to him, not to the monarch. By the end of Queen Victoria's reign, this change had been largely accomplished, and the only remnant of the king's official role in government was the “kissing of hands,” when a new prime minister is asked by the monarch to form a government (as hap-



...but the American presidency is stuck in the 18th century.

pened twice within a month last year).

By contrast, the position and powers of the U.S. president, as defined in Article II of the U.S. Constitution, are fixed, and those powers have not been appreciably altered either by the 22nd Amendment (which limits the president to two terms) or the 25th Amendment (which provides for the replacement of a president after death or resignation). They are in many ways the same powers exercised by George III at the time of the American Revolution.

That is, the president is head of the executive branch, and ministers (cabinet secretaries) are appointed by and answerable to him for the running of their departments. The president can propose legislation to Congress and he can veto bills passed by Congress. His secretaries serve as liaisons with Congress but are answerable to him, not to Congress. He nominates judges and appoints many federal officials. He can propose a budget to Congress and is responsible for the expenditure of federal funds appropriated by Congress. Once elected, the president is not dependent on Congress for his tenure in office, except in extraordinary circumstances. The great difference, of course, between the American

president and the British monarch as envisioned by the founders is that the president is elected for a fixed term, whereas the British monarch receives his office by inheritance and serves for life.

The evolution of the British monarchy has concealed the close similarities that once existed between that office and the U.S. presidency, and this raises further questions. Has the United States been well served by essentially maintaining the constitutional position of the president as an avatar of George III? On those occasions when we have really needed to remove a sitting president, we have faced an impasse because the president is also head of state—a situation especially acute when there is a “mad king,” as in George’s later reign and, arguably, in the last presidential administration.

Americans like to pride themselves that their head of state is elected and not hereditary, but that has not prevented most of our presidents from being mediocre at best (several truly awful), with only a handful of real leaders. So, too, with British monarchs and prime ministers in a parliamentary system, but the former now do less damage and the latter are more easily replaced.

It is unlikely that the United States will move away from a presidential system to adopt a parliamentary system with a ceremonial head of state and a separate, effective head of government. But we have seen in our country, especially in recent years, the problems associated with having both offices united in one person who is almost impossible to remove from power. It is not clear, short of rewriting the Second Article of the Constitution, how these problems could be addressed. Could the vice president, so clearly underutilized and already a part of Congress, undertake more prime-ministerial responsibilities in managing the president’s business there (and perhaps be elected separately from the president)?

For now, the coronation of King Charles III will give us Americans the opportunity to ponder, and perhaps to envy, the ways in which the British monarchy has evolved over time, unlike our own head of government.

—
Jeffrey von Arx, S.J., is a visiting professor of the history of Christianity at the Boston College School of Theology and Ministry.



Water brings life and hope to the Dry Corridor in Honduras

By Kevin Clarke

A drip irrigation project, sponsored by Catholic Relief Services, produces a healthy bean crop near El Cedro, Honduras.

Neri Garcia's bean crop is coming in nicely. Neat green rows march down a gentle slope not far from his humble wooden homestead on a mountain plateau near El Cedro, Honduras. The individual plants look strong and healthy: no sign of pests or scorching from the sun.

This crop will produce a good amount for him to dry and set aside for his family to eat, and if he can get a few more bean crops in over the coming year, he will end up with a surplus to take to market. The beans, a foundational component of the daily diet here in Central America, will produce income he can use to buy agricultural supplies like fertilizer, as well as clothing and other goods for his family.

Life is *bien duro*—"hard enough"—for subsistence farmers like him, he says. Picking beans and harvesting corn and coffee can be backbreaking work; and farmers in Honduras, like farmers everywhere, live at the mercy of the elements.

In recent years, climate change has made that *bien duro* life even more difficult. Dry seasons are getting hotter; drought is a greater, relentless threat. At the same time, the tropical storms and hurricanes that harass the region appear to be growing more frequent and more violent, dumping greater quantities of water leading to mudslides, ruined fields and lost crops.

The weather this day in late March is cold and rainy,

and a heavy mist shrouds the mountainside. But it should be hot, Mr. Garcia says. The sun should be blazing overhead.

His coffee plants are stumped by the erratic weather. Coffee cherries have already matured on lower branches, ready for picking, while branches near the top are just beginning to flower. Timing the harvest will be a guessing game—that is, if the flowering buds are not desiccated completely by the sudden return of dry and hot conditions.

The only thing that is clear to him is that this year's coffee bean yield will be diminished again by the unpredictable conditions. In years past, he says, the hot and rainy seasons were as reliable as clockwork, and the rain-dependent farmers around him were able to time planting and harvesting to these months-long cycles.

Now persistent drought can devastate crops, and unexpected rains can flood fields and produce landslides. Hail has even stripped corn stalks to their stems. Because of severe drought in 2018, more than 65,000 farm families in Honduras suffered a near complete crop failure, according to Catholic Relief Services.

The isolated farms in the scores of small communities that surround Mr. Garcia's growing parcels are part of the Dry Corridor, a mountainous area in Honduras's south and west where conditions are typically hot and dry, and where



Kevin Clarke



Norma Martinez García, her daughter Emelilecticia, a visiting neighbor and Neri García stand in front of their home in El Cerdo, La Paz, Honduras.

Kevin Clarke

water is an obsession among thousands of small producers in mestizo and Indigenous villages. Honduras is one of the poorest nations in the Western Hemisphere—in 2021, per capita income was \$2,772. According to the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization, this year nearly five million Hondurans face moderate to severe food insecurity and 1.5 million are undernourished.

Dependable access to water can help reverse such trends. Mr. Garcia will assure you that it has transformed his family's life. He may be worried about his coffee crop this year, but he is feeling much more confident about other crops he is raising for food and income.

In 2020, a program administered by Catholic Relief Services led to the creation of a small watershed-fed reservoir in the hills above Mr. Garcia's fields. It introduced drip-line irrigation and included training on crop diversity, drought resilience, natural pest resistance and judicious fertilizer use. The program, funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development's Bureau of Humanitarian Affairs, reached 3,990 families around El Cerdo. It was extended this year as part of C.R.S.'s Water Smart Agriculture program, with support from the Howard G. Buffett Foundation.

The water delivery system in this often-parched part of the world has given Mr. Garcia renewed confidence

about the prospects for his family and this Lenca Indigenous community even while climate change looms as a new threat to overcome. In many other water-stressed communities in the Dry Corridor, that confidence is being drained by climate-change hardship. Without help soon, many will face the stark choice between hunger and the dangers of a journey north, through Central America and Mexico, to the United States.

Mr. Garcia is relieved that he will not have to contemplate that decision. He urges "just a little help" from agencies like C.R.S. and rich countries like the United States to "lift up" farmers like him. He is sure it will mean many thousands would remain here in El Cerdo with their families in the *bien duro* life they have always known and accepted.

Kevin Clarke, *chief correspondent, reported from Honduras as a member of Catholic Relief Services' 2023 Climate Change Journalism Fellowship. You can find more reporting from around the United States and around the world in America's Dispatches section: americamagazine.org/dispatches.*



In Honduras, poverty and drought drive immigration to U.S., leaving families behind

By Kevin Clarke

A father and son from Honduras wait to surrender to Border Patrol agents after crossing the Rio Grande into Roma, Tex., in November 2022.

The tidy town square of Mercedes de Oriente this sunny morning in March is shaded by palm and pine trees. The plaza in this small mountain village in the department of La Paz in Honduras is flanked on one side by the Our Lady of Mercies chapel and on the other by a row of small aqua- and pink-pastel shops. The bright plaza and market offer a post-card-perfect image of what a visitor might suppose small-town life in Honduras's mountain-clinging villages is like.

But outside the plaza, first impressions fade and a harder reality about life in this isolated community becomes evident. Subsistence farmers on the small parcels around the village struggle with erratic growing conditions because of climate change; the people are hard pressed by poverty and hunger. For many in small towns just like this across Honduras, there is only one option—the migrant path to the United States.

The young people do not leave “just because they want to,” Gabriela Morales says, but because they have no other choice if drought or mishaps deprive them of a good harvest. Ms. Morales is an elder in this Lenca Indigenous community and vice president of the village's Community Organization of Faith and Hope.

“Our families, our people, they want to get ahead,” she says, meeting reporters on a fellowship tour sponsored by Catholic Relief Services in mid-March. “They want to live a comfortable life, and they're willing to risk their lives to get that.” She knows that migration, primarily to the United States, will mean many sacrifices both for the people who leave and for the ones left behind.

“Sometimes they never get to see their families again; they never get to see their mothers or their fathers again,

but they have to do it.... There are no more opportunities to be had here.”

Worse, some are killed or badly injured while working in the United States or even before that during the perilous trek to get there. “Their lives are in danger. Sometimes they make it; sometimes they don't,” she says.

Hours after Ms. Morales shares these concerns, two men are discovered dead and 15 others near suffocation in two freight cars near Uvalde, Tex., on March 24. The migrants concealed on the train were from Honduras. On March 27, 39 migrants died, including a number of Hondurans, after fire broke out in a detention facility in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, near the border city of El Paso, Tex.

Concepción Velázquez, president of Faith and Hope, allows that some success stories can be told by those who return from the United States with money to invest in land, start a small business or build a new home. And remittances, the money flowing back home from laborers in the United States to families in Honduras, represent more than 25 percent of the gross national product.

But the decrepit, abandoned homes of people who have never returned tell another story. For many here, migration has come to mean only sorrow and regret.

Undocumented Honduran immigrants, once in the United States, often have no safe means by which to return home. Marriages have failed, Mr. Velázquez says. Families have fallen apart. “There are men who leave for 20 years and by the time they return their woman has already remarried or their kids are all over the place and they don't recognize them.”

“Sometimes there are families where both parents



Omar Ornelas/The El Paso Times via AP

A woman weeps against an ambulance as a loved one is treated by medics after a deadly fire at a detention center for migrants in Juarez, Mexico, on March 27.



Kevin Clarke

The Rev. Luis Melquiades Suazo

migrate,” Ms. Morales says, “and they leave their kids here with their grandparents.” Their care will never be the same as they could expect from parents, she says.

“As catechists, we’ve had to sometimes attend to children like these...and you see how much they miss their parents.”

Parentless kids just “don’t grow up the same,” Mr. Velázquez agrees. “Some become criminals; others don’t work. They don’t care about anything; they’re just waiting for the remittance.”

“If there is no parent, then there is no model to follow in a home,” he says. “They’ve lost the love of a mother or a father.” They lose respect for the community, he adds, for their families and for themselves.

“It has affected us a lot,” Mr. Velázquez says, “because not everyone makes it big up there. Some only come back with vices and addictions, and they are even poorer than when they left.”

The Rev. Luis Melquiades Suazo, pastor of St. Anthony of Padua parish in the nearby municipality of San Antonio del Norte, notes that the sacramental life of the community and its families—baptisms, marriages and funerals—pass by without the presence of those who have emigrated. Sometimes the only funerals they attend are for the migrants themselves when they die in the north or while trying to get there, and “they come home in a coffin.”

Of course some are lost in lonely places in Mexico or in U.S. deserts, and they have no funerals at all. Their families will never learn their fate, he says.

Father Melquiades knows only too well migration’s impact on family life in these small communities. His own

father left when he was 14 and did not return for 16 years. His younger brothers and sisters barely remembered their father; one was only an infant when he left their home. What he remembers is anger and sorrow because of his father’s absence, “judging and blaming him” for it.

“We were raised by our mother,” Father Melquiades says.

He sees the pattern repeat itself today as drier conditions prevail and the once dependable rains come in fits and starts—deluges that flood fields of beans or corn or rainy seasons that are interrupted by days or weeks of untimely hot and dry conditions that will mean much lower yields or a ruined growing season altogether.

The young men leave after such lost seasons.

“Older brothers leave; the fathers leave,” Father Melquiades says. “Some never return.”

After widespread drought in 2018, thousands were forced off the land. According to the Border Patrol, the number of Hondurans apprehended at the U.S.-Mexico border leaped fivefold, from about 50,000 in 2017 to 250,000 in 2019.

These subsistence farmers have little choice but to seek work as laborers in the United States. Many have borrowed from local loan sharks or mortgaged their small parcels of land to pay for the season’s “inputs”—fertilizer and mulch, seeds and pesticides. A lost crop represents a double, even a triple loss: nothing grown to eat, nothing to sell—the only harvest a debt that threatens their small holdings.

Mr. Velázquez often feels the practical pinch of immigration when he polls the community for help with a civic improvement or new agricultural project. Mercedes de

Oriente is home to a little over 1,000 people. It does not take the loss of many residents to create a significant social vacuum. Because of migration, there is no “young muscle” left in Mercedes de Oriente, Mr. Velázquez complains, only older people or mothers who cannot help him do the work.

Deputy Mayor Darwin Nain Turcios Martínez cannot say whether the rains will come as they are supposed to in mid-May this year, but he knows previous droughts have badly hurt corn and bean producers on the mountainside parcels around the village. Dry conditions also mean less food can be raised for grazing cattle, assets that have to be sold off by smallholders who cannot afford cattle feed at the market.

Mr. Turcios has been turning to the local Caritas office for help. Technicians there offer training to help farmers adapt to water scarcity or to build out irrigation systems. He hopes Caritas can also offer “seedlings of opportunity” to help this small town official develop alternative income streams for its young people.

“Those who stay behind...constantly lament their loved ones’ leaving,” he says. “It is something that they can never overcome.” He would like to put an end to it.

“We have to keep looking for the possibility to generate local opportunities,” he says. At least enough to convince more young people that they have a future in Mercedes de Oriente regardless of growing conditions—better options than “forgetting everything they leave behind and those who stay behind.”

Kevin Clarke, chief correspondent, reported from Honduras as a member of Catholic Relief Services’ 2023 Climate Change Journalism Fellowship.

HONDURAS AT A GLANCE

Honduras is one of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere. It endures rising levels of food insecurity linked to the impact of climate change and has one of the world’s highest homicide rates. According to the Honduran government’s National Institute of Statistics, the country “faces enormous challenges” in reducing poverty and inequality, creating better jobs and living conditions, and improving health, education and food security.

Population: **9.7 million**

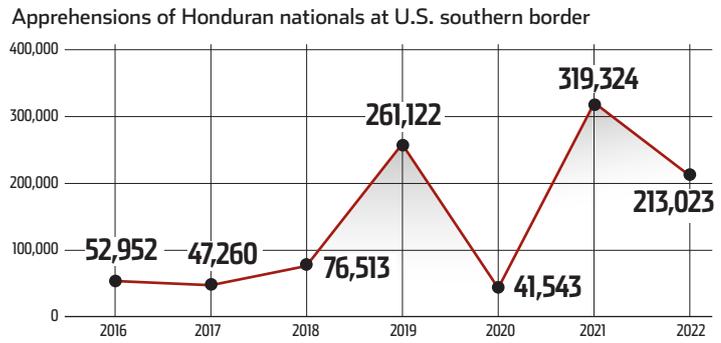
Workforce: **4 million**

73% of the country’s population is poor; **53%** live in **extreme poverty**

350,000 are unemployed; **2.5 million** are underemployed

\$8.6 billion: money returned to Honduras in 2022 from family members working in other countries. Remittances are Honduras’s primary source of foreign currency and represent **28% of the country’s G.D.P.**

CLIMATE IMPACTS ON MIGRATION



A spike in the number of apprehensions in 2019 followed five years of drought, culminating in 2018 in the loss of 80 percent of the crop anticipated by 68,000 farmers. About half a million Hondurans endured moderate-to-severe food insecurity in 2019, according to U.N. agencies, leading to an unprecedented surge in the number of family units apprehended at the U.S. border—more than 188,000. Apprehensions fell in 2020 as Covid-19 lockdowns led to a global decline in migration, but the numbers rose again in 2021 in the aftermath of two 2020 storms. Hurricane Eta made landfall as a tropical storm on Nov. 5 and was followed less than two weeks later by Hurricane Iota, a devastating one-two punch that displaced thousands of Hondurans.—K.C.

Sources: Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas-Honduras; Brookings Institution; International Monetary Fund; U.S. Customs and Border Protection

Insurgencies and banditry spread misery across Africa's Sahel region

In an interview with *America*, Christopher Chatteris, S.J., a South African journalist who is the administrator of the Jesuit community in Johannesburg, discussed the roots of insurgent violence and growing banditry in the Sahel region and other parts of Africa.

What nations in Africa are currently struggling the most with insurgencies or banditry?

In Nigeria, Boko Haram and other Islamist extremist violence has been a plague for decades; but criminal gangs and rising clashes between villagers and pastoralists, who are moving livestock for grazing and watering, have created even more suffering. Across Africa's Sahel region, including Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, Islamic and ethnic insurgencies and criminal violence have displaced hundreds of thousands of people. And Al Shabab extremists still trouble Somalia, Kenya and Mozambique.

Observers routinely note that in most of these countries the civil, extremist or criminal violence has been fueled by resource extraction, especially of coltan, a metallic ore used in mobile devices and other modern electronics. That is particularly true in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

What socioeconomic factors make a state more susceptible to insurgency?

A state that is failed or failing, like Somalia, for example, where the population is poor and desperate, the borders are porous and much of the territory is bush, makes an ideal target for any outlaw group, whether it is motivated by religious zeal or lust for lucre or perhaps a little of both. Financing such a group and procuring its arms is done by tapping into foreign sources—sympathetic governments or wealthy individuals who may wish to undermine the regime of the country.

And an insurgent group can become self-supporting by extorting protection money from the people, or they can exploit the local mineral or agricultural resources. Drugs, of course, are an extremely lucrative trade for insurgents.

What are some other drivers of conflict?

Inequality among a nation's regions or within its ethnic groups and classes plays a role. In Nigeria, 75 percent of the more Muslim north lives in poverty, while only 23 percent of the more Christian south does. Resentment is a powerful political force, easily manipulated for political ends. Ethnic affiliation and culture also play a part.



Relatives gather around one of the victims of an attack at St. Francis Xavier Church in Owo, Nigeria, in June 2022 that claimed 50 lives.

Today, poverty, unemployment and corrupt politics are used by extremists to justify violence. Competition for the all-important resource of land between the herders and farmers in Nigeria's Middle Belt region is often the spark that ignites violence among the different ethnic groups.

How are Africa's faith communities responding?

The history of the competition for adherents between Christianity and Islam in Africa is a reality that needs to be faced. The fact is, both religions regard it as a religious duty to proclaim and spread their respective messages.

In the past this has been done through violence. That is a history we all have to acknowledge, confront and beg pardon for from God. The ongoing confrontational approach needs to be reassessed. Frankly, we need to grow up and adapt to a multi-religious world. Ultimately, two religions, both of which have the solemn duty to propagate their faith, will have to formulate codes of conduct for the sake of the peace that they both proclaim is their aim.

Does geopolitics play a role in the conflict in Africa?

There is a global dimension to all this. Sergey Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, recently made a tour of the African continent, trying, with varying degrees of success, to garner African support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

One of the quid pro quos he was able to offer countries battling against insurgents was Russian military support. Mali, in particular, is a West African nation that has welcomed the Russian private military group Wagner and Russian military equipment.

Meanwhile, the United States is looking to counter Russian influence in Africa, including militarily. If much of the so-called terrorist activity in Africa is fueled by a scramble for resources, could this continent be in for a new "scramble for Africa" by the opposing superpowers?



Can the Christian community of Samandag survive?

“We’ve been here for 2,000 years, and we’re here to stay,” said Ibrahim Gülenay, a lifelong resident of Samandag in Turkey’s Hatay Province.

“We are an Arab people,” he said, speaking of his ancestors, one of the first population groups to settle in the region while modern borders were drawn around them. This duality of national and ethnic identity is common in Hatay, one of the regions most affected by two devastating earthquakes that struck in February. At least eight members of the city’s small Christian community died in the earthquakes.

Long before the disaster, the viability of the Christian community in Samandag had been under cultural and economic threat. Now community leaders fear the earthquake may have struck a fatal blow.

Samandag is located just 20 miles from Antakya, modern-day Antioch and the capital of Hatay Province, and 100 miles from the epicenter of the twin earthquakes. It had been a picturesque city of 120,000 inhabitants with a long sandy beach running into the Mediterranean Sea. Though many homes in residential neighborhoods survived the earthquakes, Samandag’s city center, once bustling with busy shops and crowded restaurants, is in utter ruin.

Mr. Gülenay pointed out that the Christians of Hatay are descendants of the world’s first Christians. “We need to protect the Christian community of Samandag,” he said. “This is our home.”

“We love our traditions, our culture; we have been living this way for two thousand years,” said the Rev. Abdallah

Yumurta Trifon, pastor of the heavily damaged St. Elias, a Greek Orthodox church.

Samandag’s Christian community resides primarily in the neighborhood of Zeitouneh, from the Arabic word *zeitoun*, “olive,” a part of the city close to the sea. It had been a wealthy neighborhood—each house a villa with large gardens and everywhere the aroma of oranges. Now the residences of its long streets are mostly empty. Most homes here have been declared uninhabitable. All four of Samandag’s churches were damaged by the earthquakes but are still standing.

The Christian community here was 2,300 families in the 1950s, about the time they began to drift away to seek better opportunities. “There was no money, no jobs here, so many [Christians] left,” Demyan Emektas, who represents the Zeitouneh Christian community in meetings with government officials, said. Now only 430 families remain in Samandag, around 1,600 people.

The Christians of Samandag say the different Islamic and Christian communities here have always enjoyed good relations, though most say they support a secular Turkey.

Under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the Turkish president, state authorities and bureaucracies “are becoming more and more Islamist,” one Samandag Christian, who asked to remain anonymous, said. “This is not something we view in a positive way.”

Local people complain that aid coming from the state has been insufficient to the need and that what did arrive came too late to help. It was three days after the earthquake



A motorcyclist passes through debris in Samandag on Feb. 22.

AP Photo/Emrah Gurel



Boston Cardinal Seán P. O'Malley, center, visits the Center for Studies on Human Dignity and Prevention of Abuse in Asunción.

CNS photo/Courtesy of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors

Pope Francis to Latin American bishops: Make abuse protections a priority

before government assistance began reaching Samandag. By then, many of the people entombed under the rubble of their own homes had perished.

But Turkish citizens have tried to fill the void when the government proved slow to respond in Hatay. “We have volunteers from all of Turkey,” said the Rev. Dimyan Yaacoub. They have been crucial to the local relief effort.

Father Yaacoub has lived in Zeitouneh for 15 years. He has a plan for its restoration: Churches come last. “First, we need to fix the houses and the shops for people to come back to, then fix the country,” and only then, he suggested, should resources be expended on repairing the churches. “For now, we can pray outside, but if our community disappears because their houses aren’t repaired, it’s useless to restore the churches,” he said.

Clotilde Bigot reports from Beirut, Lebanon. Twitter: @Clo_Bigot.

In a message to participants at the second Latin American Congress on the prevention of abuse by clergy members, Pope Francis emphasized that all local churches must fully implement norms meant to protect minors and combat sexual abuse that he issued in the 2019 decree “Vos Estis Lux Mundi.”

“Your work in favor of protection of the most vulnerable is urgent and essential,” Pope Francis told the Latin American church leaders gathered in Asunción, the capital of Paraguay, on March 14. “Anyone who lessens the impact of this history or minimizes the current danger dishonors those who have suffered so much and deceives those they claim to serve,” he said.

The pope is aware that bishops in many dioceses across Latin America have not yet put in place the new procedural norms and relevant structures to combat sexual abuse and hold bishops and religious superiors accountable as outlined in “Vos Estis.”

“The work of establishing clear procedures for the protection of minors in the church needs to become a priority in every local church,” Pope Francis said.

“Those parts of the church where efforts at promoting adequate prevention measures are still in the early stages because of a lack of resources need special attention,” he added. “The cruel inequalities that plague our societies must not be allowed to plague our church.”

“Sexual abuse by anyone in the church...is a clear and present danger to the well-being of God’s people, and its mishandling will continue to debase the Gospel of the Lord in the eyes of everyone,” the pope said.

He acknowledged that “much has been done by church leaders to confront this evil and to prevent it from recurring” and applauded the establishment of a new Study Center for Human Dignity and the Prevention of Abuse in Asunción. He encouraged the congress participants to continue on this road, adding, “We must be able to see the results that children are safer in our church.”

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



To have and

istock



To hold



What is it like to be a non-Catholic married to a Catholic?

By Simcha Fisher

When Laura Frese was three days postpartum, she had to take her newborn back into the hospital to be treated for jaundice. They had been home for only 12 hours, and it was right in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic, before vaccinations, and she had to leave her other two children behind with no family to help. At the hospital, she just couldn't get herself out of the car.

"I've seen my wife cry all of three times," said her husband, Bradford. This was one of those times. Laura was simply overwhelmed.

So Bradford held her hand and started saying Hail Marys. This comforted her and helped her compose and center herself, and she found the strength to drag herself back through that hospital door.

Not an extraordinary story, perhaps, except that Bradford Frese is an atheist. He does not believe in God or intercessory prayer. But he does love his wife.

"I tried to find some way to comfort her in that moment that was specific to her, and not just what I thought. Not telling her what I needed her to hear, but to understand what might bring her strength in that moment," said Mr. Frese.

He has noticed that prayer is good for his kids, too. It calms





Religious leaders used to warn that such marriages were doomed.

them down, helps them regulate their breathing, and aids in teaching them to hold themselves to high moral standards. He believes it has empirical benefits, if not precisely the ones religious people believe in.

The Freses, who live in Washington, D.C., are part of a growing trend in the United States. In the 1950s, only 5 percent of marriages in the United States were between Christians and religiously unaffiliated people, and fewer than 20 percent were between people in different religious groups, according to a 2015 Pew study. But things have changed. At the time of the study, the share of spouses in different religious groups had climbed to 39 percent, and 18 percent of marriages were between a Christian and a “none.”

Such marriages may be more common than they once were, but they are by no means easy. It might feel, in the first, heady days of a couple’s relationship, like love can smooth over any differences, including those between a believer and a non-believer. In reality, there must be open communication, clarity, flexibility and probably compromise on both sides. How to raise children is a frequent point of contention, and so are matters of sexual ethics. As Catholics, it can be illuminating to understand better how these matters land “on the other side”—how it feels to be the non-Catholic married to a Catholic.

No Longer “Doomed”

Religious leaders used to warn that such marriages were “doomed, absolutely doomed,” said Dale McGowan, author of *In Faith and In Doubt* and several other books on raising kids without religion. “The fact is, that’s less often borne out than it once was.”

As these marriages have become more common, the warnings surrounding them have become less dire—and

with good cause. The risks of marrying outside one’s faith are much more intense when such partnerships cause a rift with your familiar social, political and religious communities. But today, the average American moves 11 times, and the insulated, isolated, homogeneous communities of the past are now rare and fragile. We simply encounter more different people than we used to.

“The culture itself has adapted to the idea of being exposed to different influences,” Mr. McGowan said. And that goes both for the believer and for the non-believer in the mixed-belief couple.

In Mr. Frese’s case, growing up in a religiously diverse private high school in Albuquerque, N.M., helped him to respect people with differing beliefs from a young age. Mormons, Catholics, Lutherans, Presbyterians, atheists and agnostics all mixed together and spoke freely about their beliefs and disagreements, in and out of class. He absorbed the idea that diversity is desirable. He could also see that children who took their religion seriously tended to be kind, and that made a good impression on him.

“It was a big deal in their personal lives, and it motivated them, but it wasn’t a divisive factor,” he said. Still, religious practice didn’t draw him personally. “I’m cut off from this way of thinking. It’s not something I’ve ever been motivated to do or to think about,” he said.

Mr. Frese was obliged to think about religion several years into his marriage when his wife, a nominal Catholic when they met, started diving deeper into her faith. They had been married in a vineyard, and for the first few years, she went to Mass only sporadically. But her parish priest encouraged them to get married in the church. Ms. Frese liked the idea, so Mr. Frese agreed, and shortly after the birth of their second child, they had a ceremony in the church with family and friends. She began to be more involved in her faith and in parish life.

The birth of a child is one of three major life events, after the engagement and the marriage itself, that Mr. McGowan calls a “landmark” that “really brings out the issues” in a marriage between a believer and a nonbeliever.

Mr. McGowan said it is vital for a couple to talk about expectations ahead of time, so that no one ends up feeling duped. And he says when shifts in belief do occur, both parties should strive to be as flexible and open to other points of view as possible.

Mr. Frese and his wife did have open discussions about family size before they were married and decided it made sense to have two children, and that a girl and a boy would be ideal. If they had two children of the same sex, perhaps they would try for a third or even adopt (Laura is an adoptee herself).



Laura Frese, a Catholic, and Bradford Frese, an atheist, are part of a growing trend of marriages between people of differing religious and spiritual beliefs in the United States.

Photo courtesy of the Frese family

They had a boy and a girl.

“I was like, ‘Great, I’m gonna have a vasectomy,’” Mr. Frese said.

He was shocked when his wife asked him to wait, because she might want a third child. Her pregnancies had been difficult and complicated, and because of her severe morning sickness, he ended up juggling his job and a lot of child care.

“I said, ‘Well, we had a plan and I’d like to stick to that plan, but I’ll forgo this for you,’” he recalled. So Laura had their third child, a daughter. She made it clear that a vasectomy was not something she believed in, but that the decision was up to him to do what he thought was right for himself.

“So that was that,” he said.

The Freses are perhaps lucky because, although she is Catholic and he is atheist, he said he is the more politically conservative of the two. This combination—a nonbeliever matched with a more left-leaning Catholic—is one of the more statistically successful pairings of believers and nonbelievers, according to Mr. McGowan’s research. Research also shows that atheists pair well with cultural (not religious) Jews and with mainline Protestants.

Marriages tend to founder, according to Mr. McGowan,

when one spouse adheres to a faith that shuns members who marry outside the faith. Islam and Orthodox Judaism outright prohibit mixed marriages (although Islam sometimes allows Muslim men to marry women “of the book”—that is, of another Abrahamic religion, i.e., Christianity or Judaism; and Conservative Judaism, as distinct from Orthodox Judaism, is showing some signs of shifting). And while Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses are not doctrinally prohibited from such marriages, some communities cut ties with such couples, which can be devastating to a spouse from one of these faiths.

The dynamics are further complicated, said Mr. McGowan, by the fact that for many women, their spiritual life and their family life are closely intertwined. When Mr. McGowan (an atheist) and his own then-Southern Baptist wife were dating in Los Angeles and discussing their future (they now live in Georgia), she told him that if they married, she must continue to go to church. He later discovered that this request was a sort of “proxy redemption” for her own mother’s past. Her mother had married a Baptist minister and expected to live a certain way; but her husband fell away from the church and forbade her to go, ripping away a good part of her identity in the process.

Mr. McGowan said his wife “saw her mom suffering



It can be immensely painful for a nonbeliever to see their children being taught something they consider foolish or untrue.

under the loss of that community and the things that defined her,” and she wanted to make sure history would not repeat itself.

He assured her that was not his intention. “As if I would have the right,” he said.

Bridging the Gap

Marriages undergo strain when one spouse cannot bear to acknowledge that there is anything of value in the other one’s point of view. An atheist spouse may especially chafe if they marry someone who is not devout at the time of the marriage but becomes more God-fearing years into the union. They often report feeling there is suddenly a third person present in the marriage, especially in the bedroom.

“You’re beholden to something outside your marriage,” Mr. McGowan said.

A God they do not even believe in suddenly has an unmistakable and unwelcome authority over their relationship. Even if the spouse who has undergone conversion describes the shift as enlightenment, it feels to the atheist as if their spouse can no longer think freely.

Mr. McGowan said that marriages can survive such dramatic shifts (all lasting marriages face changes, after all), but flexibility and willingness to treat the other spouse with respect even if you disagree are crucial. Even if both spouses are Christian with similar beliefs, sometimes the details can make a big difference, with the potential to drive a wedge between them.

Lynnsie Pairitz is Christian but does not identify with any particular denomination. She and her Catholic husband are raising their four young, homeschooled children Catholic, because that is what she agreed to do when they

married. The kids attend faith formation at their local parish in Colorado, and they attend the Catholic homeschool co-op once a week.

“At first I was feeling uncomfortable, but it’s been nice meeting other moms and kids. Some of it is stuff I don’t know. I’m learning along with the kids. That’s something overall in our marriage: I’ve grown overall deeper in my faith because I’ve had to research more of what my faith is. I’ve had to defend more of what my faith is,” she said.

Some of what she learned was new, but still jibed with her existing worldview. This includes natural family planning, which she learned about in premarital counseling from the Catholic Church. She has always felt that the medical community pushes hormonal contraception on women without sufficient regard for their overall physical health and without explaining it well to them. And so, while the ethical arguments for natural family planning were less compelling, the social and medical benefits appealed to her.

“The reason he and I are married is because we had a lot of the same values already, and that’s why we’re able to make the marriage work. Because we had similar ideas and upbringing already, so there wasn’t a big leap to be made,” she said.

This agreement on key values is what Mr. McGowan says is “the most fundamental thing that makes a marriage work” between people with different belief systems. And distinguishing between beliefs and values is important, he says.

“Beliefs are opinions about what’s true; values are opinions about what’s good. You can have the same values for different reasons,” he said.

If one spouse rejects contraception because he believes it’s immoral, and the other rejects it because she believes it’s unhealthy, they have a good shot at avoiding conflicts around family planning.

“They’re arriving at it from a different path, but they can have total integrity,” Mr. McGowan said.

But not all Catholic doctrines can be grasped from a secular point of view. In the Pairitz marriage, like the Frese one, the Eucharist has the potential to strike a note of discord.

“I have a hard time with the idea of transubstantiation, which is *the* whole idea,” Ms. Pairitz said. “And I get jaded at the fact that I am left out.” She says she sometimes prefers to watch the Mass online so she does not feel like as much of an outsider.

Her oldest child is preparing to receive her first Communion. Ms. Pairitz is trying to step aside and allow it, focusing on buying her daughter a pretty dress and planning





Lynnsie Pairitz is a nondenominational Christian married to a Catholic. They are raising their four young homeschooled children Catholic.

a party, and trying not to fret about the theology, while simultaneously making sure her daughter is participating of her own free will.

Ms. Pairitz acknowledges the division in her home, but said she tries consciously to make strengths out of the things that might divide them, and she and her husband spend a lot of time talking through the points they disagree on.

“I do think that’s what allows us to have a strong marriage. Because we do have these two viewpoints, we have to discuss it in more depth, more frequently, so we’re very strong and clear on where each other stands. We don’t just go through the motions and not necessarily know why,” she said.

Although she agreed to raise the kids Catholic, she underestimated how much she would have to give up, or how much it would hurt.

“I probably didn’t understand my husband’s commitment to raising children Catholic, and what that entailed. I always kind of thought, hey, we’ll meet each other halfway. I’ll give a little, you’ll give a little, and that’s where we’ll meet. But that’s not how it’s worked out,” she said.

She doesn’t always let him get his way, though.

“I have battles I have won,” she said. Their first daughter was baptized in a Lutheran church.

“[My husband] was somewhat uncomfortable [going to a Lutheran church], but the fact we were attending church was better than not,” she said.

Now the pendulum has indisputably swung toward the Catholic side, but the conversation is ongoing. She said that when her kids ask something she doesn’t know, she’ll often end up referring them to her mother-in-law, with whom she has a warm relationship.

The Key to Family Harmony

According to Mr. McGowan, when parents don’t agree, the key to family harmony is to raise children with the understanding that no question is off limits.

He said that when his own children would ask him if Jesus really rose from the dead, he



It is the calling of any family to make their home into a spiritual haven.

would answer, “Well, people have different opinions. I don’t think he did. I think it’s something people say to make themselves feel better about death. But you should talk to Mom.” And their mother, who was then a Southern Baptist, would then tell them what she held to be true.

Both parents, said Mr. McGowan, told the children, “You should make up your mind, and you can change your minds a thousand times. And we will love you no less, whatever you decide.”

He stressed to them that their beliefs might change over time.

“An identity doesn’t have to be your feet in cement,” he told them.

This is an assurance perhaps easier for a nonbeliever to offer than a believer. Mr. McGowan said that, for example, when one spouse believes in hell and one does not, it is harder to make co-parenting work. A Catholic who believes in immortality sees much higher stakes at play when a child leaves the faith behind, or begins experimenting with things the parent understands to be immoral. But the nonbeliever also suffers on the child’s behalf when there is a mismatch of beliefs. It can be immensely painful for a nonbeliever to see their children being taught something they consider foolish or untrue.

With this in mind, Mr. McGowan’s person-first example of respect for his wife is especially striking. He said, “I fell in love with a Southern Baptist. What if I said the worst thing in the world is for [my children] to be what my wife was when I fell in love with her?” Even though he did not assent to the spiritual beliefs his wife professed, he loved his wife herself, and so wanted his children to be like her in some way. But his wife eventually left her church—and this caused Mr. McGowan some distress.

“My kids were in the middle of growing up, and we had to work harder to make sure they had outside influences, so they had multiple perspectives. It’s like other kinds of diversity. The more you’re exposed to it, the less you’re afraid of it,” he said.

Reflecting the Union of Christ

In some homes, that diversity is very close to home. Jason Wells’s daughter is very familiar with two congregations: St. Joseph, the Catholic cathedral in Manchester, N.H., where her mother, Courtney Wells, is a cantor, and St. Matthew’s Episcopal Church, also in Manchester, where Jason is the priest-in-charge. Their daughter serves at the altar at both churches.

Rev. Wells said that when he was in his 20s and unmarried, he wondered how he would meet a partner, because as an Episcopal priest he is not allowed to date anyone in his congregation. But another Episcopal priest knew both him and Ms. Wells, who is an attorney. He knew they both took their faith seriously and could not resist introducing the two earnest young people, who were hard at work at different churches on opposite street corners.

“She was somebody who would sit across the table and talk Latin and saints and liturgy and how much that means to us,” Rev. Wells said. They have now been married for 13 years and have a 12-year-old daughter.

He describes their understanding of the theology of marriage as “90-ish percent the same.” But even an Episcopal priest was required to attend pre-Cana classes at a Catholic church, and he remembers going to Ms. Wells’s church for their mandatory session.

“I was tucking my collar into my pocket as I came into the room,” he recalled. Then afterward he would walk over to his own church to say Mass.

The couple thoroughly discussed the theology of marriage, and the way they wanted to live their spiritual life as a family, with a Catholic priest, who ended up being godson to their daughter. They both believe that their marriage is supposed to reflect the union of Christ with the church. Rev. Wells knows all these things well, because he teaches them to other couples when he counsels them for marriage in his church.

“We might have some space [to disagree] where we talk about same-sex marriage, but there’s a lot that is very much in line with what the *Catechism [of the Catholic Church]* teaches,” he said.

But things get a little more complicated when it comes to their daughter.

“What would we do about the sacraments, in what church, in what order?” he said.

So far, they have alternated.

“Courtney felt the Catholic Church respects the Episcopal Church’s sacraments, so [our daughter] was baptized in the Episcopal church I was serving at at that time,” he said.

But she made her first Communion at the Catholic

cathedral in Manchester. “We had honest and open conversations about whether it would be hurtful, or if it would feel like a loss, if it didn’t happen this way,” he said.

Their daughter is now 12, and their goal is to raise her so that she will be truly free to make her own choices about her faith. But making that choice requires knowledge and experience.

“As soon as she could be taken out of the house, she was on Courtney’s hip at the cathedral in the choir loft. She would also bring her to the early liturgy at the church where I was serving,” Rev. Wells said.

That is one thing all the parents in this article, including Mr. McGowan, expressed: They hope that whatever their children decide for themselves about faith, it is done thoughtfully, deliberately, for some defensible reason—not just at random or because it is the easiest thing.

Because they are both so active in public life, the Rev. and Ms. Wells are not only constantly prepared to hash out theological questions at home, but they tend to be representatives for their respective faiths in public, as well.

“Courtney gets dragged into conversations with people who want priests to be able to marry. You’re a projection screen for that, for ‘this is why the Catholic discipline on celibacy is wrong. Or someone wants to re-litigate Henry VIII with me,” Rev. Wells said. He is glad they can both provide people with a perspective they might otherwise not find.

He jokes that sometimes he would rather just sit down with his coffee and talk about football, but ultimately he’s up for the challenge that his unusual marriage brings.

“That’s a calling of its own, bearing witness,” he said.

When a couple with different faith traditions approaches him, as a priest, for counseling, he tells them to ask themselves, “What is it that is in my faith life that absolutely must come with me, and if it didn’t, I would feel loss or grief?”

He said a lot of spiritual practices are more compatible in family life than some of our denominational differences would have us believe.

“It is the calling of any family to make their home into a spiritual haven. These couples will be doing it in a way that looks a little different, but if it is born out of good communication and honesty, it makes for a very strong marriage,” he said.

There is one pain they cannot overcome with good intentions and honest communication, though, and that is not being able to receive Communion together.

“The schism hurts,” he said.

He is not sure where his daughter will land, since he describes her as “incredibly, maybe too at home in two

churches.” At the very least, she cannot claim no one educated her about the faith.

“Whatever she chooses, it will be done with full knowledge,” he said.

Although Rev. Wells laughed frequently while describing the sometimes offbeat patchwork of their daily life, he acknowledged that this at-homeness in not one but two communities has left him feeling a little bereft at times. “When you’re equally at home everywhere, it’s hard to make a home somewhere,” he said. “You can feel like neither fish nor fowl. Every now and then, there’s sort of a moment of grief. You can’t be with the other families, and there’s nothing about us, short of abandoning your church for another one, that changes that. We’re always a little different from other families for whom these traditions are easier to navigate.”

He recalled the “Peanuts” comic strip in which Charlie Brown asks Snoopy in frustration, “Why can’t I have a normal dog, like everybody else?”

He laughed again and said, “Our family will never be a normal dog.”

Simcha Fisher is a speaker, freelance writer and author of The Sinner’s Guide to Natural Family Planning. She blogs daily at simchafisher.com and weekly at The Catholic Weekly. She lives in New Hampshire with her husband and 10 children.



IN HIGH SCHOOL, IN RECOVERY

The spiritual and practical challenges facing teens with addiction

By John W. Miller

Scott Weeman was 17 when he slipped into addiction at his small-town Wisconsin high school. His dependency started with a drink and exploded quickly into a dependency on marijuana, cocaine and hallucinogens. His addiction followed him to college and slowly turned his world upside down. A few years later, Mr. Weeman lost his college debating scholarship and dropped out.

The addiction took a long time to heal. "Every day, I told myself, 'Tomorrow, I'm going to take action, but today I can't muster the will,'" he said. It was only when he was 26 that he found sobriety. After his recovery as an adult, Mr. Weeman, who is now 38, founded Catholic in Recovery, a nonprofit that helps people in the church recover from addiction. His program is



October 2022, 101,751 Americans died of drug overdoses, up from 90,093 in the 12 months prior to October 2020, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The overdose rate among teenagers almost doubled in 2020, the first year of the pandemic, and increased another 20 percent in the first half of 2021, compared to a decade ago, according to a report by researchers at the U.C.L.A. School of Medicine.

The first opioid abuse wave took place in the 1990s, when Americans got hooked on drugs like Purdue Pharma's Oxycontin. These were prescription drugs given by doctors who had started treating pain as the fifth vital sign, along with temperature, pulse, respiration and blood pressure. "Get ahead of your pain" was a common mantra among the medical establishment. Too often, pharmaceutical companies and medical providers pushed highly profitable pain medications over longer-term treatment plans.

In its literature, Purdue said that Oxycontin would grant a slow release of opioids, making it less addictive. Still, millions got hooked, building a market for the second great wave of addiction: heroin from Mexico flooding into the United States. Now the United States is facing a third overdose wave triggered by the introduction of fentanyl, a powerful synthetic opioid analgesic that is similar to morphine but is 50 to 100 times more potent, and that has singlehandedly driven up the death rate among American adolescents. In 2021, fentanyl was identified in over two-thirds of adolescent overdose deaths, the C.D.C. said.

Drugs are a fact of life for many teenagers, and the risks are increased because dealers often lace drugs like heroin, cocaine and methamphetamine with fentanyl to make them stronger. Approximately one quarter of students in grades 8 to 12 have used drugs in the past year, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse. Less than 10 percent of those have entered any kind of treatment program, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

Educators, administrators and policy specialists are still rolling out new ideas for helping adolescents cope with addiction to opiates. There are more and more responses that explicitly address the plight of people under 18. In November 2022, Cincinnati Children's Hospital opened its Opioid Use Treatment Clinic in its Division of Adolescent and Transition Medicine. The program aims to provide outpatient medication treatment for young people between the ages of 16 and 21.

The hospital's promotional material noted that "it is one of the only outpatient clinics offering medication

one of a growing number of faith-based efforts to combat drug dependency. Mr. Weeman's initiative is an example of a church-based approach that works to solve some of society's trickiest problems through sharing information, offering support and loving one another. But church efforts must also find the right balance of prayer and clinical treatment, positivity and psychiatry. And then there is financing. Those behind the most successful Catholic efforts to treat addiction know that solutions can be complicated but must be community-based. And they also know that, sometimes, the only thing we can do is share each other's pain.

The challenge of addressing addiction can be particularly difficult when it comes to treating young people. Children in the United States are facing terrible mental health issues. The teen suicide rate is up 29 percent over the past decade. The rate of addiction of teenagers to drugs, especially opioids, has also dramatically worsened since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. In the 12 months prior to



Approximately one quarter of students in grades 8 to 12 have used drugs in the past year.

treatment to people under 18 years old in the region.” The patients targeted are suffering from addiction to drugs including heroin, Percocet, oxycontin, fentanyl, oxycodone, hydromorphone and Vicodin. “Opioid addiction is still a growing problem in adolescents and young adults,” said Daniel Cohen, a nurse practitioner at the clinic. The hospital is licensed to prescribe Suboxone, an opiate substitute that helps wean people off opioids. There are new faith-based programs in the region, too, including from local Catholic Charities chapters.

The Recovery School Challenge

Even after young people are on their way to recovery, going back to school can pose a challenge. Returning to the same environment increases the likelihood of making the same mistakes. Opioids, which are derived from, or mimic, opium (a drug made from the poppy plant), block the brain’s perception of pain, an almost irresistible lure once it has been experienced.

That factors into current relapse rates up to 60 percent. Some hope that recovery schools—which specifically serve young people struggling with addiction—can help make a difference through a supportive environment. Studies show that the relapse rate in the six months after completing a recovery school curriculum is only 30 percent, less than half that of interventions at traditional high schools.

The first secular recovery high schools were launched in the 1980s. If they attract enough students, they can be a good solution. The high school dropout rate for teens with addiction issues is 10 percent for those who go to recovery high schools and 27 percent for those who do not.

There are currently 45 recovery schools in the United States. They all face a challenge in recruiting young people. On average the schools last only 9.5 years. “We’re finding that there are fewer kids who admit to being in recovery,” said Roger Oser, the former chair of the Association of Re-

covery High Schools and the principal of William J. Ostiguy High School, a recovery high school in Boston. And it is important that adolescents commit to recovery. If they are not committed to abstinence from substances, they are likely to relapse, and that makes education impossible. “It’s not like ‘Field of Dreams’ and if you build it, they will come,” Mr. Oser told me. “It’s always a complicated situation, and you need referrals and recommendations. But people need help.”

The story of the Kolbe Academy in Bath, Pa., illustrates how difficult it is even for the most well-intentioned Catholic activists to start a faith-based education alternative for teenagers with addiction. The only Catholic high school for teenagers in recovery, Kolbe Academy, which I visited recently, is closing its doors after five years of operation. Despite good intentions and generous funding, it failed to draw enough families to join.

At Kolbe, located in a town of 3,000 in eastern Pennsylvania, I met Pete, a wiry high school senior with a sharp, curious manner. He was 12 when he first grabbed a pill from his aunt’s medicine cabinet. The Allentown, Pa., adolescent said he had been living in a house dominated by a violent, abusive adult relationship. But this pill soothed his pain. For the first time in his life, Pete told me, he felt “a sense of relief.”

The peace was a trap, but he didn’t know that at the time. Like millions of Americans, Pete got hooked. He was just a child, and he craved the feeling of ease he got from the pills. His life spun out of control. At school, Pete failed and failed. “My G.P.A. was always under one,” he said. “My dad was abusive, and during those times, my mom used to say she saw my father in me.”

Pete did more drugs. He started drinking. The aunt he stole his first pills from almost died from a heart attack because she couldn’t take the medications he had taken from her.

When I visited, there were only three students enrolled, and two students attending class. This number was down from the school’s peak enrollment of 11 students during its first year, but school officials tried their best to put their low attendance into context. “If we save Pete’s life, it’s all worth it,” said Andrew D’Angelo, the school’s principal. His comments echoed a passage from the Gospel of Matthew: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” Kolbe, he hoped, was also like the Gospel metaphor of a mustard seed, an idea that might grow, find offshoots in other ideas and offer a broader hope based in love.

Kolbe Academy was founded by a Catholic school administrator named Brooke Tesche. At the high school



John W. Miller

Kolbe Academy in Bath, Pa., was the only Catholic recovery school in the United States. It is closing its doors because it could not find enough students like Pete, who said he had hit rock bottom and wanted to get sober.

where she was working, “a lot of kids were self-medicating,” she told me. “And the educators knew little to nothing about addiction.” Interested in finding a way to help, she visited the Bridge Way School, a recovery high school in Philadelphia, and she came to believe in the principle of recovery schools.

Ms. Tesche raised a million dollars and hired a principal, John Petruzelli. “I thought it was important to have a Catholic recovery school that integrated faith and what we’ve been learning about recovery and how to help children,” he said.

The founders named their school after Maximilian Kolbe, a Polish conventual Franciscan who was murdered at Auschwitz in 1941 after volunteering to take the place of another prisoner selected for execution.

The school held Mass every two weeks and drug-tested regularly. Students could only be admitted if they had gone through a recovery program. The tuition was around \$20,000, but scholarships were available. In at least one case, a public school district paid full tuition.

“When I came to Kolbe, I was broken and didn’t know what to do,” said Joe Scrip, a 2021 graduate who is studying surveying at a trade school. “I was skeptical at first, and didn’t have good experience with school, but Kolbe was different. The teachers really cared about me, and I had sober friends.”

Still, there was always the risk of relapse. About a month before my visit in November, one of the school’s students had stopped attending classes because he had started using drugs again. He was allowed to resume attending some classes online.

The two boys still taking classes at the school when I arrived were Pete and Travis, who had soft eyes and a quiet manner. Pete and Travis are like brothers. “We’re not the best of friends, [but] we stick up for each other,” said Pete.

Travis, who is from Washington, N.J., was 13 when he started smoking marijuana, followed by abusing alcohol and opioid pills. He is one of five children, and the only sibling wrestling with addiction. He found Kolbe out of desperation—his own and his parents’. It is different from other schools, he said. “At other schools, you can say, ‘Hey, I’m good,’ but here they’re on top of you at all times,” he said. “It’s like they care. They’re not just worried about what I’m doing in school. They’re also worried about what I’m doing outside of school.”

In a morning English class, Rob Schiller, a sunny 70-year-old, was teaching a class in literature. Mr. Schiller worked in food service management for 22 years before discovering a love of teaching and literature. “I treat these boys with respect, so I get it back,” he told me. “All kids run into bumps in the road, and some bumps are bigger than others.” Mr. Schiller said his father was a functional alco-



Teens are likely to isolate themselves while in the depths of addiction, rather than make it publicly known.

holic, and he has seen a family member overdose. “Addiction never goes away,” he said. “I feel badly for these guys, it’s such a heavy cross to bear.”

As soon as they sat down, Travis asked Mr. Schiller if he could go get some water. “Sure, but you come right back,” Mr. Schiller said, firmly and clearly.

The lesson that day was about Edgar Allen Poe, the 19th-century American author of gothic fiction, and himself an addict. As he read an introduction to Poe’s life, Mr. Schiller noted, “there was no therapy back then, only alcohol.” Mr. Schiller said he tries to draw parallels between the boys’ lives and recovery, and the human weaknesses revealed in literature.

A Change of Mindset

On the evening of my visit, Kolbe’s board had gathered in the basement of the school. The board members, charged with raising funds from church-affiliated donors, knew the school was at risk of suffering the fate of other recovery schools. There are four main reasons that recovery schools close, according to administrators: difficulties with transportation, stigma, lack of awareness and lack of funding.

All 11 of the board members had chosen to become involved with Kolbe for different reasons. Some had lost family members to opioid addiction.

A former addict in recovery named Brian Sabo, who runs a local recovery program, offered a seminar on addiction to the board. With all the overdoses on fentanyl, somebody asked, why are drug users still flocking to buy drugs on the street?

Mr. Sabo pushed back his chair and faced the board



Kolbe Academy had three students enrolled when it was closed. “If we can save one life, it’s all worth it,” said Andrew D’Angelo, the school’s former principal, standing with Pete by a statue of St. Maximilian Kolbe, for whom the school was named.

members. “You have to understand the mindset of the addict,” he said. “If you see a friend overdose, what you’re thinking is not, ‘I need to stay away from that.’ What you’re thinking is, ‘This is where the good stuff is, and I need some of this.’”

A woman named Linda Johnson, whose son suffers from addiction, talked about educating people about opioid abuse. “We don’t want to cover it up,” she said. “We want more kids in the schools. We have a duty to educate people in the community.”

The board members discussed ways of expanding its mission, including offering remote lessons, or teaming up with local schools to share what it has learned about recovery and teenagers.

“We need more students or more donations to keep the school going,” board chair Mike Metzger told me later in a phone interview.

The next morning, Mr. D’Angelo met with the two students. Travis wasn’t doing well. He slumped in his chair. Time for the Kolbe Promise, said Mr. D’Angelo. The boys stood up and declared: “As a member of Kolbe Academy, I will trust in God’s plan for me. I will be honest in all that I do. I will be kind to myself and others. I will have the courage to persevere. I will humbly know who I am. I will open-



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— Jim McDermott, S.J., associate editor



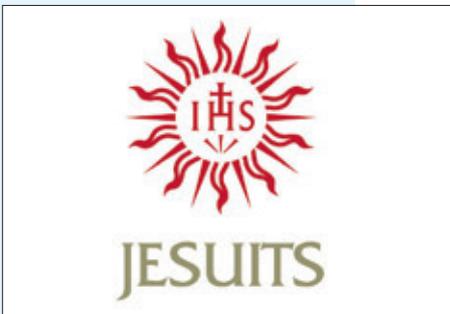
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Students recite the Kolbe Promise: "As a member of Kolbe Academy, I will trust in God's plan for me. I will be honest in all that I do. I will be kind to myself and others. I will have the courage to persevere. I will humbly know who I am. I will openly accept God's grace each day."

ly accept God's grace each day."

Mr. D'Angelo motioned to Travis. "Come with me," he said. Travis followed him as Pete headed downstairs to play pickleball. Later I asked Mr. D'Angelo what was wrong. Could it be a relapse? "No, I've seen that and I know what that looks like," Mr. D'Angelo told me. "He's just having a bad day. These guys are in recovery, but they're also teenagers, and they're going to have bad days."

The boys played pickleball. "We both like basketball, but we can't really have a basketball team," joked Pete. Mr. D'Angelo tries to mix up extracurricular activities, which have included pumpkin picking, baseball games and theater.

I asked Travis why drugs attracted young people. "Peer pressure's a thing for sure," he said. "But for me it's because everybody's telling you not to do it, so I'm like, well, what's it like? And if you're telling me not to do it, I'm a lot more likely to do it."

Was he a victim? "No, I'm not a victim," he said. "I made bad choices." But he's been lucky, he knows. "Everything I got was from the street. I know a couple kids who died of Xanax."

After taking the first pill that he found in his aunt's medicine cabinet, Pete discovered that drugs made him

feel like he was elevating himself to the person he actually wanted to be. "I always wanted to be bolder, and when I was using drugs, I was being a bold, cooler guy."

One Christmas morning, before he had enrolled at Kolbe, Pete got drunk and left his house. He ripped off his clothes as he ran through a park. When he got picked up, his "whole family was waiting in the cop car," he said. "I knew I never wanted to feel that again."

Going to rehab helped get Pete on track for sobriety, and going to Kolbe "rekindled my relationship with God," he said. Pete also has been touched by his encounter with the Catholic faith at Kolbe. "How we treat each other and how we talk to each other, and how we respect each other, that's the number one priority here," he said. He recently received the sacrament of confirmation.

Travis does not consider himself as religious as Pete. "I was raised Catholic, but I'm not really into it anymore," he said. He dreams of training to be an electrician. "I've heard that's a good, stable career," he said.

In another class that day, 63-year-old Paul Messner taught science. "Inertia is not a force, it's a mass," he explained to Pete. "[The term] was invented by Galileo to explore what was going on in the universe."

"Do you have inertia?" he asked.



Many families erroneously feel that they caused a teen's addiction, they can control it, and they're responsible for curing it.

"Yes," said Pete.

In the spring, the school board met to try to save the institution. Mr. D'Angelo resigned. Board members stopped answering my phone calls. "We are closing," a school official finally told me.

The 'Three C's'

Mr. Weeman, the founder of Catholic in Recovery, had never heard of Kolbe or any Catholic-based recovery high school. "That would be a wonderful idea if you could find enough teenagers who had committed to recovery," he said. The problem is that teens are likely to isolate themselves while in the depths of addiction, rather than make their addiction publicly known. Families trying to help their teens are vulnerable to the "three C's," he said. Many erroneously feel that "they caused it, they can control it, and they're responsible for curing it."

Catholic in Recovery runs retreats around the country. Mr. Weeman speaks to seminaries and colleges and runs retreats. He has also written *The Twelve Steps and the Sacraments: A Catholic Journey Through Recovery*.

Families have to let go of the three C's, he said. The problem is that addiction can only be solved by the person who is suffering taking the steps to get better. And that usually happens after high school.

"Someone hitting rock bottom is hard to manufacture, and trying to do that can have damaging effects," Mr. Weeman told me.

For Pete, the moment of clarity didn't come in school at all but in the rehab community he attended before he enrolled, where he was grouped with older men. "Rehab

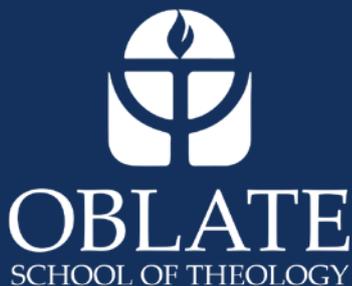


Why do teens get into drugs? "For me it's because everybody's telling you not to do it," said a Kolbe student named Travis. "So I'm like, well, what's it like? And if you're telling me not to do it, I'm a lot more likely to do it."

changed me," he said. "There were older people there who said they saw me as their younger self, and that really changed me."

It was only after that epiphany that Pete agreed to get sober and attend a recovery high school. After graduation, he dreams of working as a medical assistant and getting involved in local politics. "I'd like to work for the betterment of my community," he said. "Allentown and Bethlehem could be much better cities." And, he added, "I'd like to crack down on drugs."

John W. Miller is a Pittsburgh-based former Wall Street Journal staff reporter and co-director of the PBS film "Moundville."



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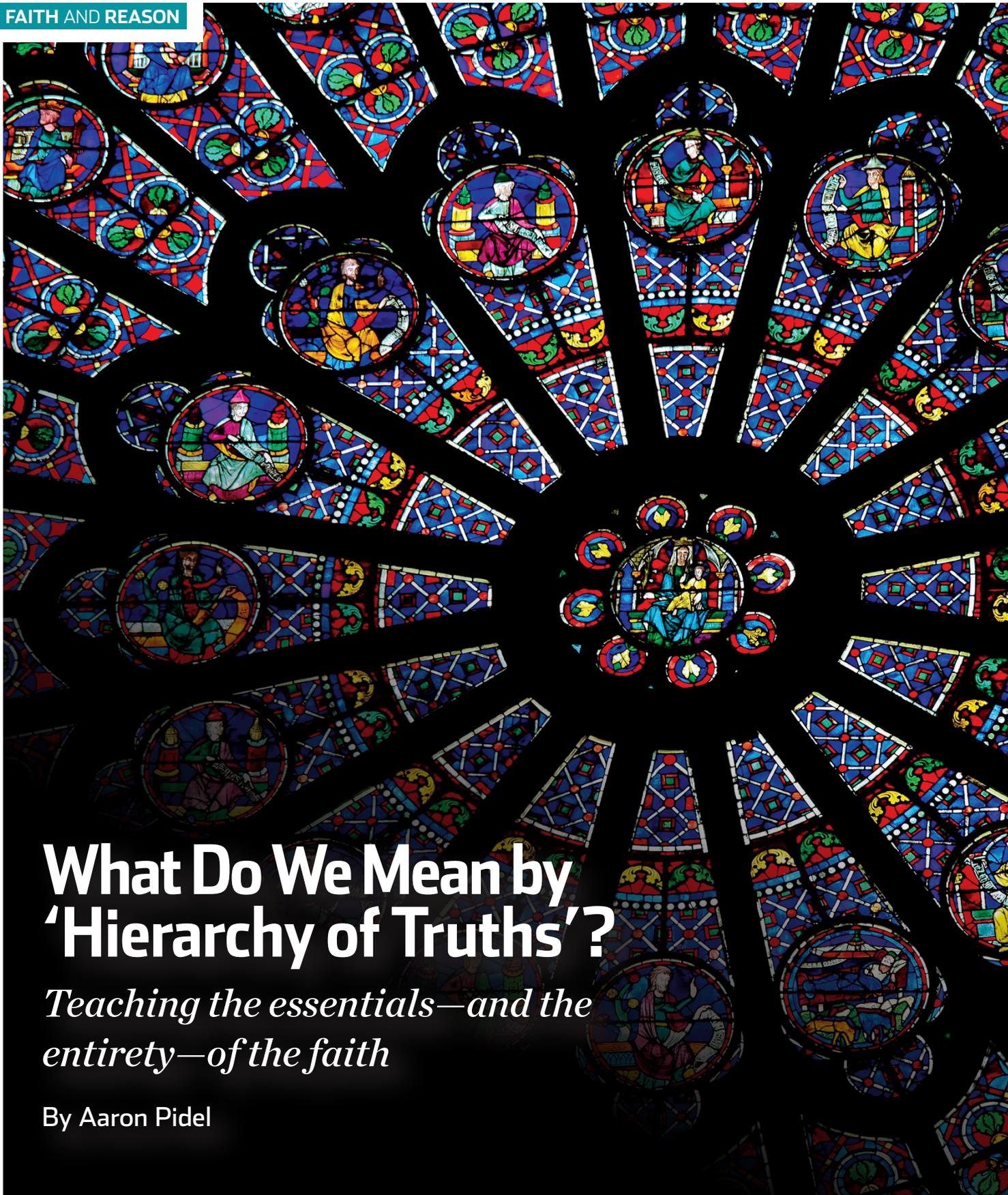


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What Do We Mean by 'Hierarchy of Truths'?

Teaching the essentials—and the entirety—of the faith

By Aaron Pidel



My first encounter with the phrase “hierarchy of truths” did little to endear it to me. Early in my Jesuit formation, I once ventured that the well-known doctrinal disagreements among Jesuits—especially in matters sexual—weakened our collective credibility. One of my fellow Jesuits in training dismissed the concern with a remark along the following lines: “Don’t let the culture wars define you; after all, even Vatican II teaches that there’s a hierarchy of truths. We agree on essentials—the Trinity, the Incarnation, the sacraments—so let’s just focus on those.”

The remark caught me flat-footed. A don’t-sweat-the-small-stuff approach to doctrine struck me as suspect on the face of it, but I was unprepared at that time to dispute what appeared to be the unassailable authority of the Second Vatican Council. Nevertheless, the ensuing cognitive dissonance left my mind magnetized for solutions. Twenty years later, with a good amount of theological reading and more than a few lectures on the anatomy of the Catholic magisterium under my belt, I find myself in a better position to do two things: first, to acknowledge the importance of the hierarchical organization of Catholic doctrine; and second, to better articulate my initial skepticism about a minimizing application of this principle.

The term hierarchy of truths entered common theological parlance through “Unitatis Redintegratio,” the “Decree on Ecumenism” from Vatican II. In a paragraph dedicated to the “way and method in which the Catholic faith is expressed” in ecumenical dialogue, the council fathers made the following observation:

In ecumenical dialogue, Catholic theologians standing fast by the teaching of the Church and investigating the divine mysteries with the separated brethren must proceed with love for the truth, with

charity, and with humility. When comparing doctrines with one another, they should remember that in Catholic doctrine there exists a “hierarchy” of truths [*ordinem seu “hierarchiam” veritatum*], since they vary in their relation to the fundamental Christian faith [No. 11].

The statement appears to contain a tension bordering on contradiction. It envisions that Catholic theologians will continue “standing fast by the teaching of the Church,” designating this teaching rather monolithically. Yet it reminds Catholic theologians that this same body of doctrine comprises an ordered hierarchy of truths. Why mention that the truths are hierarchically ordered in the same breath as the requirement that theologians hold fast equally to all?

To see why “Unitatis Redintegratio” was not introducing a distinction without a difference, it helps to pay attention to the context. The treatment of a hierarchy of truths appears in a section addressing the “way and method in which the Catholic faith is expressed” in ecumenical encounter. It comes after the decree’s warnings against any “false irenicism, in which the purity of Catholic doctrine suffers loss,” as well as its insistence that “the Catholic faith must be explained...in such a way and in such terms as our separated brethren can also really understand.”

All this suggests that “Unitatis Redintegratio” is speaking not about a hierarchy of obligation to assent but a hierarchy in the order of intelligibility. Theologians should address Catholic doctrines that are objectionable to non-Catholic sensibilities, in short, only by starting from doctrines closer to Christian origins and more widely held.

This order-of-intelligibility interpretation of “Unitatis Redintegratio” finds confirmation in the history of its magisterial reception. The Secretariat for Christian

South Rose Window of the Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris



Whereas the hierarchy of authority means that not all teachings are infallible, the hierarchy of truths means that all are nevertheless organically related.

Unity's "Reflections and Suggestions Concerning Ecumenical Dialogue" (Aug. 15, 1970) offered the following illustration of how mindfulness of the hierarchy of truths might facilitate ecumenical dialogue:

For example, the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, which ought not be isolated from what the Council of Ephesus declares about Mary Mother of God, supposes—in order to be grasped correctly, within an authentic path of faith—the dogma of grace to which it is linked and that depends necessarily on the redemptive incarnation of the Word.

Three years later the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith's "Mysterium Ecclesiae" (June 24, 1973) elevated this example into a principle, observing, "This hierarchy [of truths] means that some dogmas are founded on other dogmas which are the principal ones, and are illuminated by these latter. But all dogmas, since they are revealed, must be believed with the same divine faith." To foster mutual understanding, in other words, ecumenical dialogue should take as its point of departure the mystery of the Incarnation, retracing the developmental path from this foundational mystery to those mysteries that lie a little farther down the road.

In his apostolic exhortation "Evangelii Gaudium" (No. 37), Pope Francis affirms this intelligibility interpretation while adding a couple of his own accents:

All revealed truths derive from the same divine source and are to be believed with the same faith, yet some of them are more important for giving

direct expression to the heart of the Gospel. In this basic core, what shines forth is the beauty of the saving love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ who died and rose from the dead. In this sense, the Second Vatican Council explained, "in Catholic doctrine there exists an order or a 'hierarchy' of truths, since they vary in their relation to the foundation of the Christian faith." This holds true as much for the dogmas of faith as for the whole corpus of the Church's teaching, including her moral teaching.

The new accents concern principally Francis' extended application of the hierarchy of truths. It is no longer just for ecumenical dialogue but for evangelization more generally, and no longer just for supernatural mysteries strictly speaking but for the church's moral teaching as well. Still, he avoids suggesting that any truths are "dispensable" simply because they occupy a lower rank in this hierarchy, recalling that "all divine truths derive from the same divine source and are to be believed with the same faith."

In extending the hierarchy of truths to the church's moral teaching and evangelization, then, Francis seems to be inviting Catholics to start from the fundamentals on whose basis alone the more controverted teachings can make sense. Tellingly, "Evangelii Gaudium" (No. 38) goes on to cite Thomas Aquinas's teaching on the hierarchy of the virtues as exemplary in this regard. The analogy is especially apposite because Aquinas—while maintaining the priority of prudence among the cardinal virtues, wisdom among the intellectual virtues and charity among the theological virtues—simultaneously insists on the "unity of the virtues." That is, we cannot truly possess any virtue unless we possess them all.

Applying the idea of the hierarchy of truths to the church's teaching on sexual matters might thus mean showing the organic connection between certain neuralgic positions—on divorce, pornography, contraception, homosexual acts and so on—and more intuitive virtues, like justice and temperance. I myself once took this approach while teaching an undergraduate course on the Christian vision of the family. Practically, it meant first elaborating the classical virtue of friendship—a virtue everyone spontaneously admired—and only later inviting students to consider what kind of sexual arrangements would be compatible with pursuing Aristotle's "friendship in the good."

Does this mean that everything taught by the church enjoys the same (absolute) level of authority? Not exactly. Even though "Unitatis Redintegratio" does not equate the hierarchy of truths to a hierarchy of doctrinal importance,

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the church does in fact have a graded approach to teaching authority, or a hierarchy of authority. Traditionally in seminaries, teachers used to initiate their students into the subtle—some would say oversubtle—art of assigning labels, or “notes,” to church teachings. Students were instructed that there were as many as 10 grades of teaching authority ranging from “dogma of faith” (e.g., the Immaculate Conception) down to “more probable theological opinion.” The different notes of authority called, in turn, for different levels of assent, ranging from the absoluteness of divine faith down to complete freedom to disagree.

How is this terraced approach compatible with the insistence of “*Evangelii Gaudium*” that all “divine truths” are to be believed “with the same divine faith”? The simple answer is that not every Catholic teaching is a “divine truth”—that is, a dogma requiring faith’s absolute assent. The virtue of faith is doubly supernatural. Not only does it reach conclusions beyond the scope of human reason; it also assents to them on the authority of God the revealer. It is reliance on divine authority that distinguishes the virtue of faith from the habit of theology. Theology also assents to certain theological conclusions, but does so on the authority of human reason—because it sees these conclusions as logically implied in other things God has revealed.

The Immaculate Conception, to return to a familiar example, began its long history as a widely held theological conclusion. It finally became a dogma of faith when in 1854 the church’s supreme teaching authority solemnly declared it to be contained in the apostolic tradition. Because the church participates in God’s own authority, the reasoning goes, those who assent to the Immaculate Conception after its definition no longer assent to it by their own lights—that is, as a rational deduction from other revealed truths—but by a supernatural light refracted through the church.

Though the church’s derivative authority may require the absolute assent of faith, as in the case of the Immaculate Conception, it does not always do so. This is because the church participates in the divine light in a way proper to her human and historical nature. She must often form her judgment gradually, propose teachings with differing levels of authority, and move to definition on different grounds.

John Paul II’s “*Ad Tuendam Fidem*” (1998), the last significant magisterial statement on this topic, drew on “*Lumen Gentium*” to offer a simplified set of notes, distinguishing between those truths to be “believed with divine faith” (*de fide tenenda*), to be “definitively held” (*definitive tenenda*) and to be embraced with “religious submission” (*obsequium religiosum*) of intellect and will. Opposing teachings in the first two categories might amount to heresy and/or result in loss of full communion with the church.

The presence of the third category, however, shows that the church acknowledges a grade of doctrine that is authoritative but not infallible. Hence, though my confrère was probably mistaken when he invoked the hierarchy of truths as he did, it remains true that a hierarchy of authority governs both doctrinal and moral teachings.

Much of the current debate, in fact, turns not on the hierarchy of truths but on this hierarchy of authority, the notes to be assigned to certain teachings such as the reservation of ordination to men or the prohibition of contraception. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published a “*Nota Doctrinalis*” accompanying “*Ad Tuendam Fidem*.” This offered examples of teachings in each of the three categories, placing the male-only priesthood, for example, in the second category. But because the C.D.F. did not claim any special magisterial authority for these classifications, its judgments remain debatable.

So was my Jesuit confrère’s only mistake terminological, appealing to the hierarchy of truths when he should have been appealing to the hierarchy of authority? I think there is still something more—a failure to consider the interplay between the two hierarchies. For whereas the hierarchy of authority means that not all teachings are infallible, the hierarchy of truths means that all are nevertheless organically related. Hence dissent even from non-infallible-but-still-authoritative teachings will tend to have broader repercussions on the life of faith, complicating the disposition of childlike trust. In faith no less than ecology, everything is connected.

It is perhaps for this reason that the theological tradition has often compared faith to a living organism, to the supernatural vitality of the soul. When the 16th-century Dominican Melchor Cano offered his own very influential version of the notes regarding levels of authority, for instance, he did not speak, as we might today, of dissenting from teachings *de fide credenda* and dissenting from teachings requiring only *obsequium religiosum*. He preferred to speak of error that “destroys faith” and error in which “faith grows sick but does not die.”

The medical analogy brings out something that the juridical categories obscure. By recalling that error even in non-infallible matters typically leaves faith infirm, it implies that widespread disagreement on such matters cannot be of little account—especially to a church aiming to be a “field hospital.” Though contemporary evangelizers need not always lead with the bitterest doctrinal pills, they ought never give up on the goal of restoring us to full health.

—
Aaron Pidel, S.J., teaches at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome.



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WHY I TAKE MY TEENS TO MASS

I hope their belief will deepen. And I hope that my fellow Catholics will demonstrate that the wider church wants them there too.

By Sherry Antonetti



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Every year, someone writes about squirmy toddlers and babies at Mass, begging the congregation to understand that the parents are doing everything they can; they simply want to be present at the Mass. I know that struggle, I've lived it. I've felt the stares and the silent rebukes. But now I have teens.

These days, I'm an older mother with several children who struggle with the faith I hoped they'd embrace as their own from the get-go. Still, they come to Mass. Yes, one has hair over his eyes and ripped jeans and sits the whole time. Yes, another is wearing shorts and a hoodie and it's winter. Yes, that one took out her phone, though I made her put it back. And each in turn made a trip to the bathroom at some point during the homily.

I would love for them to be fully present. It would be nice if we could persuade them to dress more formally. However, these days I just rejoice that they came. I take comfort in the parable of the two sons, one who says "yes" but does not do it and the other who says "no" but obeys in the end. Who did the Father's will? The one who did what was asked. I asked them to come and they came. And, yes, that counts.

My hope is that, over time, by attending Mass they will find something there that speaks to them. That their lives may bring them to a point where they hope for more and discover it is here and will be here and has been all along. It would be a great joy to me personally, but it's not about my joy. I just want them to know that God is, God loves them, and God hears all their hearts' cries. I want them to know that this place, this church, this Mass, each Mass, is an invitation to them personally. I want them to know they belong, however they show up.

They might ask, "Well, if God hears your heart's cry for us to return, why haven't we? We know you have faith." There is that gift of free will, I might say, the generous forbearance of a loving God. He won't insist on his will over ours at any moment in our lifetime. My children are always free to choose our faith. Believe me, I'd love to insist and sometimes wish God would.

However, I trust and know that God wants them to rest in his heart of their own free will even more than I do. And I know God is not above courting their souls all of their lifetimes, with every gift at his disposal. So I wait in joyful hope, for the coming of that day of both Easter and Christmas in

their faith lives, when all the joy God has offered pours into their hearts at their consent. It is my hope, my prayer, my heart's cry. And I know God hears it.

As a parent of older children who are resistant to the Catholic faith, I have to hope that one day the reverence and deepening of their faith will come. And I hope that my fellow Catholics in the pews will help to demonstrate that the wider church wants them there too. It is a harder road if the vibe they get from others at Mass is an irritated glance that translates to: "You don't belong here."

If perfect faith were the admission price for Mass, none of us could enter. None of us are mature in the faith at 15 or 21 or even sometimes at our current adult ages. We are—all of us—at some point grasping and wandering. All of us are at times wondering if all we have learned is a part of us or apart from us, something we just grew up thinking.

When you see a parent with older kids at Mass and something about how those teens are sitting or how they are dressed starts to draw your scorn, maybe instead of judging them, say a prayer to St. Monica for the family. In the meantime, smile each time you see a teen or college student in the pews, no matter how they look. Do not become the rationale they use to stop coming.

We all want to live in a way that witnesses to why, despite all its challenges, we stay in the church. We want to be the witnesses that show by our love—for Christ, for our children, for all in the pews and all who are missing—we are Christians. In a world where one can be anything for any reason, we need to show the teens and young adults of the world, and indeed the whole world, why we follow Christ when there are a million easier options. We need to live in the pews as though nothing is more important than being before the Eucharist, and in a way that reveals to the world that heaven, all of joy, all of peace, all of hope, can be found here.

How do we do that in a jaded and distracted world? In a world that seems too often to believe that all answers for the having can be found on a small screen, and that the best we can hope for is to be amused? By radiating something alive in our words, our deeds, our actions and, most essentially, our presence. By being people who are on fire for Christ, and deeply in love with those whom he loves. It will require our constant assent. Light attracts. Joy invites. Love reveals. We must bring all three gifts to the altar. Christ will do the multiplying and we will have a church brimming with squirmy teens and toddlers, and we will rejoice that we are overflowing with people.

Sherry Antonetti is a Catholic mom, writer and contributor to multiple Catholic books, web ministries and online publications.

Unfinished Masterpiece

By Alfonso Sasieta

after Eddie Palmieri

The combo of bongo & piano
is hypnosis. The sound
of eros & the brushstroke of fire,
the wild Ram
of the timbal & a cowbell
converting sound
into longing

& here is the banishing trumpet!
Here, the carpenter
will be driven to the brow
of the cliff.
He must code
switch from bongo
to piano
& then slip
through the cracks
& risk is so frequently
the moral
in the prophet's
story.

Provoke. Survive.

Rewrite God's poems
until the mob
in us
froths at the mouth. Shroud the facts

in too much flute
& the edge
is perpetually out of sight.

Alfonso Sasieta's poems have been published or are forthcoming in *The Christian Courier*, *Presence*, *Vita Poetica*, *Sojourners* and elsewhere. He works in a L'Arche community near Washington, D.C.

Toward Something Greater

A tribute to a family matriarch who shunned the spotlight

By Paul Ginnetty

She had spent the final evening of her life the way she often spent her evenings, half-listening to a Red Sox game while perusing the contents of *The Boston Globe*. We'll never know for sure, of course, but there is a good chance that her sharp mind had begun to compose one of her famous letters to the editor offering an informed Catholic take on some social issue. Shortly after 10 p.m. on the evening of Sept. 28, 2016, my mother, Mary Catherine, settled into bed and drifted into a tranquil sleep from which she never awoke—a fittingly peaceful finale for a devotee of St. Joseph, the patron saint of happy deaths.

My mother had been adamant that while we could say a kind word or two about her at her wake, there was to be nothing that smacked of a eulogy once her casket was wheeled into the church. The funeral liturgy Mass, she had frequently reminded us, is not supposed to be about the decedent; like any Mass, it is entirely about Christ and his gift of himself in the Eucharist.

Mom got her wish. The carefully crafted prayer service at her wake was a lovefest with open-mic sharing of stories about her—from the amusing to the profoundly inspiring. But there was nary a mention of her many achievements and contributions to the church during the funeral itself. In addition to heeding her request, this was an understandable consequence of both her age and circumstance.

Although my parents had been decades-long pillars of the church in the rural community in which they raised their five children, at 96 my mother had outlived all her contemporaries who would have remembered her legacy



of selfless service. She had also outlasted her beloved gang of fellow WAVES (Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Service). She was inspired to enlist in this women's reserve for the Navy shortly after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

My mother's funeral was at her childhood parish, but she had returned to it only late in life. It was a function of circumstance in that financial challenges and my father's declining health had made it necessary for them to leave first one, and then another, parish community in which they had become well-known to move in with one of my sisters, just a stone's throw from the urban church in which she had been baptized and married but which she had not frequented for half a century. My father had died shortly after that move, but my mother became as active a member of that parish as an octogenarian and then nonagenarian could be.

The pastor of her parish had been reassigned shortly before my mother died, so it happened that her funeral was celebrated by a priest who had never met her and whose homiletic references to her had an unmistakably generic "insert decedent's name here" quality. I am embarrassed to admit that bothered me. A part of me that is way less wise and mature than she wanted to stand up and shout out, "You should have known her in her prime. She was a powerhouse, a veritable Catholic V.I.P."

But I realized that my mother was right about what mattered at such moments: that being a good Catholic is not about status or reputation, that nobody should expect



Juliana Kromminga



We were gathered to celebrate something more than any one of us.

a special seat at the table, either at the liturgy or in the kingdom, because *all* are welcome. There are no privileged insiders; there is no rope line to cut. We were gathered to celebrate something more than any one of us. We gathered to celebrate the faith community, the mystical body, the communion of saints (among whom I was convinced she had already taken her place, happily beyond the ability of any homiletic words to add or detract from the living legacy of her steadfast faith).

All but one of her 11 grandchildren were seated in the pews. Their beliefs, not unlike those of many other members of their generation, run the gamut from true believer to millennial seeker to “not really my thing, thanks.” But they all recognized that Grammy’s deep faith had inspired everything that made her such a fascinating and attractive figure to them—her warmth, humility, candor, self-deprecating sense of humor and generosity of spirit from which they, and so many others, had benefited. Whatever their beliefs, they had a shared sense that what was taking place at that moment was profoundly spiritual and consequential.

The interment followed the usual military protocol. The obligatory playing of taps was provided by a recording from a boombox, since there have been so many recent deaths among veterans that no live trumpet player was available. Two young women in Navy uniforms presented us with the flag that had draped my mother’s coffin and offered the condolences of “a grateful nation.” Like the priest celebrant, they, of course, had never heard of her. Still, they likely would have surmised that her life had been about

sacrifice and service. That assumption would have provided connection enough.

After the burial, we made our way to one of the local Irish watering holes—a *de rigueur* element of funeral protocol in my family. Somehow, amid the din of reacquaintance and reminiscences, I made out the faint bleating of my cellphone. My wife was calling from 250 miles away to announce that at approximately the same moment that we were tossing roses into the gash in the ground that had enveloped the earthly remains of my mom, a surgeon’s scalpel had been slicing into the belly of my daughter—that one missing grandchild. And through that gash, two new family members were ushered into the clan that had just bid farewell to its matriarch.

The mood in the room, which had already been celebratory—a life so splendidly lived!—became exuberant as we welcomed the news of these two little miracles into the circle of love and laughter that their great-grandmother had done so much to create and sustain. There was a powerful communal sense of yin and yang. A shared, if implicit, marveling at the paschal mystery—the cycles of dying and new life. Our God was a God of abundance; the family tree had sprouted two verdant branches to fill in for the one that now lay bare.

The members of my immediate family were soon racing along the Massachusetts Turnpike and the Merritt Parkway. With each mile that brought us farther from Boston and closer to that maternity ward in New Jersey, the day was becoming less about the sorrow of a loved one lost and more about the ones we were about to meet, less about the past—however cherished—and more about the exciting prospects of a shared future. Fare thee well, Mary Catherine. Welcome to the clan, Molly Kathleen and Fiona Grace.

We ended the day of my mother’s funeral looking forward to the new life ahead of us. No better tribute to her could be offered.

Paul Ginnetty is a professor of psychology at St. Joseph’s College, Long Island campus, where he also serves as the director of the college’s Institute for the Study of Religion.



Willie Nelson, who turns 90 this year, might not be the first person who comes to mind when you think of a “Christian musician.”

Amy Harris/Invision/AP

Willie Nelson’s Amazing Grace

By Kaya Oakes

In 2006, Willie Nelson—author of some of America’s most beloved songs, noted marijuana enthusiast, and rebel icon to musicians and music fans around the world—did something unexpected. He bought a church. Nelson, who was born in 1933 in the tiny town of Abbott, Tex., had learned that Abbott’s Methodist church, built in 1899, was in danger of closing because of dwindling attendance. At the celebration of the church’s rescue, Nelson told the assembled congregants and media that “[My] sister Bobbie and I have been going to this church since we were born,” and in honor of their musical childhood years, the siblings played a set of gospel songs.

Willie Nelson might not be the first person who comes to mind when you think of a “Christian musician.” His trademark braids, beard and bandana, relics of his years as the co-founder of the Outlaw Country movement, aren’t a look you often see in church. His open defiance of the government on taxes and marijuana, and his idiosyncratic

politics on everything from his support of L.G.B.T. priorities to the rights of American farmers, along with his four marriages, are also reasons why he does not fit neatly into country music’s often conformist environment. But Nelson, rebellious as he might be, has long talked about his admiration for the teachings of Jesus, and he continues to sing the gospel music of his childhood today. In fact, gospel music brought his family together during the Covid pandemic.

Nelson’s live sets have featured gospel songs from the beginning of his career, and he has released at least half a dozen albums that primarily consist of gospel songs, from 1972’s classic “The Troublemaker” to 2021’s “The Willie Nelson Family,” recorded with his kids and sister while they sheltered in place during the Covid pandemic. It was during the pandemic that Nelson also lost his longtime drummer and best friend, Paul English, just as the virus was surging in 2020. Nelson’s big sister, Bobbie, who had

played piano by his side since childhood and onstage with him since the early 1970s, also passed away, in early 2022 at the age of 91. Neither died from Covid, but you can imagine that a man who has spent most of his life playing music on the road with the same Family Band members for decades might be feeling the sharp sting of loss as he approached his 90th birthday this April. But every artist, every music fan and every religious person knows that music can heal. Music is a fruit of the spirit. And Willie Nelson has been offering musical healing for longer than many of his fans have been alive.

The Family

It's hard to talk about Willie Nelson and religion without talking about Sister Bobbie, as he refers to her, and the tight bond between them that started with a hardscrabble, Depression-era childhood. When Bobbie passed away, Nelson wrote a note to her on his website titled "Dear Sister." In part, it reads, "you were a natural musician from the beginning, and I would never have become the musician I am without you." Nelson also reminisces about the day they played again in their childhood church, telling Bobbie that "when we play Amazing Grace together, I'm reminded that all songs are, in their own way, gospel songs."

Methodism, like America, was founded by rebels. John and Charles Wesley broke off from the Church of England in the 1700s, and Methodism spread rapidly in Europe, but the Methodism that Nelson experienced in Texas likely had a very American bent. During the First and Second Great Awakenings of the 1800s, Methodist traveling revival meetings grew the denomination, and the Methodist emphasis on sanctification and the movement of the Holy Spirit would influence Nelson's songwriting for the rest of his life. And Methodists have always been steeped in music. Charles Wesley himself wrote at least 6,000 hymns, including many Nelson and his sister likely grew up singing in church.

In his 2015 book *It's a Long Story*, Nelson wrote of his Christian faith that "I was a believer as a kid, just as I am a believer as a man," and "I've never doubted the genius of Christ's moral message or the truth of the miracles he performed." When he is writing a song, Nelson says that he often wonders if it's him or God pushing the pen. Sometimes, he reveals, he will ask himself: "Am I just a channel chosen by the Holy Spirit to express these feelings?" The first song Willie Nelson is reported to have learned to sing, at the age of 5, was "Amazing Grace."

Nelson and Bobbie were bonded for life when their parents abandoned them as children, leaving them to be raised by their grandparents, who were themselves musicians and

music teachers. Nelson got his first guitar at 6 and wrote his first song at 7. Bobbie was playing piano and a pump organ from the age of 5, and by the time they were both teenagers, they had moved beyond playing in church and began performing in Texas honky-tonks. Bobbie, who married as a teenager, lost custody of her three children in her first divorce because the court believed a woman who played honky-tonks couldn't be a fit mother. She quit touring for decades and went to work for the Hammond Organ company so she could get her kids back. When Nelson called her up in 1972 and asked her to play gospel piano on the "Troublemaker" album, Bobbie said yes. They were rarely onstage without one another again until her death, Sister Bobbie's long, flowing hair swaying with her as she sat at her brother's side, making music together just as they did as children.

When Willie Nelson started calling his band The Family in the 1970s, Bobbie might have been the only blood relative, but some of the other band members, like Paul English (drummer), Mickey Raphael (harmonica player) and Jody Payne (guitarist) would go on to play onstage and in the studio with Nelson for more than 50 years. These days, Nelson's sons Micah and Lukas often join their father onstage, and Lukas's band, Promise of the Real, has become a success of its own.

But it takes more than blood relations or playing together to make a family—and to keep it together. Any musician will tell you that when things are working musically, when a band is tight or a harmony springs forth naturally, that's a spiritual experience. Throw in some gospel tunes and maybe you could call a Willie Nelson concert, hours long and full of singalongs and tributes to musicians from the past, a kind of religious experience too.

On the Road With Willie

When I was a child, my family had rituals: dinner each night at the table; Christmas Eve at the grandparents' house, where you were allowed to open a single gift; church on Sunday night at the Newman Center.

But our biggest ritual was travel. My father's sixth child was a 1971 VW Vanagon named Old Dog, plastered with National Parks stickers decades before "Van Life" was an idea in the mind of Instagrammers fed up with grind culture and the pressure to conform. All five of us kids would pile into the van with our parents in the front seat and a mess of sleeping bags in the back, ready to camp out for weeks on end, and my father would lean over and pull a tape from the glove compartment. Every trip started with Willie Nelson, and it was always the melody of "On the Road Again" that took us out of Oakland and onto the back roads. By the



Willie Nelson has been offering musical healing for longer than many of his fans have been alive.

time I graduated from high school, I had rarely been on an airplane; but like a member of a traveling band, I knew the country I lived in from its roads.

Religiously, my family today is a very contemporary American tangle of lapsed and practicing Catholics, Buddhists, Jews and every flavor you can imagine of agnostic. We all revere nature and love hiking, backpacking and road trips, thanks to those ritualistic journeys in our childhood. But my late father, child of Irish Catholics, believed that God, the church, literature and music were all of a piece with those trips on the road. All of them were things you used to escape from the pressures and stress of work. My father was by nature a nonconformist who liked being alone but who also happened to be responsible for a very large family. I don't remember seeing my father pray outside of church, but when he listened to Willie, Miles Davis, the Beatles, John Coltrane or Bob Dylan, I'm pretty sure that's what he was doing.

A Willie Nelson concert is also a ritual, always opening with "Whiskey River," a Texas flag flying in the background and Willie's Martin guitar, Trigger, around his neck. It's been played so much for so long that his guitar pick has bored a hole in the soundboard. You'll hear songs you've heard a million times and you'll sing along joyfully, and you'd better get comfortable because you'll be there for three or four hours. Nobody knows how he keeps doing it, night after night after night. It's a celebration, but it's also moving to witness that level of dedication and persistence.

I married a musician, the son of a musician. My husband, a child of divorce, grew up both in Berkeley and in Austin, Tex., where his dad managed a western swing band called Asleep at the Wheel. My husband spent many nights

as a kid at The Armadillo drinking Shirley Temples and taking in music. The Armadillo is a legendary Austin nightclub where The Family and many other bands honed their sound. Nelson fled the conformity of Nashville in the early 1970s for the more freewheeling Austin scene, where he let his hair go long and grew a beard and started collaborating with other nonconformist country musicians like Waylon Jennings, Emmylou Harris, Merle Haggard and Kris Kristofferson.

Every summer, Willie would host a huge, rowdy picnic at a ranch outside of Austin where bands would play and people would drink beer and eat barbecue. My husband still remembers burning his hand on a picnic grill on one of those Texas Fourth of July days. In our early days getting to know one another, my husband and I would listen to "The Red Headed Stranger" and "Phases and Stages" and "Shotgun Willie" over and over again. We still do.

My husband isn't religious, but like many other musicians, for him the stage and the music studio are sacred spaces. Musical collaboration is communion, and playing live is a chance to share with an audience the fruits of struggling to keep a musical career alive over decades when it's hardly a financially tenable career on its own. Writers like me mostly work alone, but musicians bond, and I often marvel at the depth of those connections. They are fathoms deep.

When I hear musicians talking about playing live and witness the intensity required to do it, I also think about my own experiences of spiritual direction, church and prayer. I think music is spiritual, and it's clear that Willie Nelson does too.

In 2021, Willie was interviewed for the long-running television show "Austin City Limits" and was asked about his religious beliefs. He said, "Music will move you, period. It'll make you laugh or cry or jump or clap your hands. And anything that will move you, do it." But he added something that is, perhaps, the key to understanding what keeps him playing into his nineties, even after losing family members and friends. "Here's what I believe," he told the interviewer. "God is love, period. Love is God, period. You can't have one without the other."

Kaya Oakes, a contributing writer for *America*, teaches writing at the University of California, Berkeley. Her latest book is *The Defiant Middle*.

INVITATIONS TO EVERYDAY HOLINESS

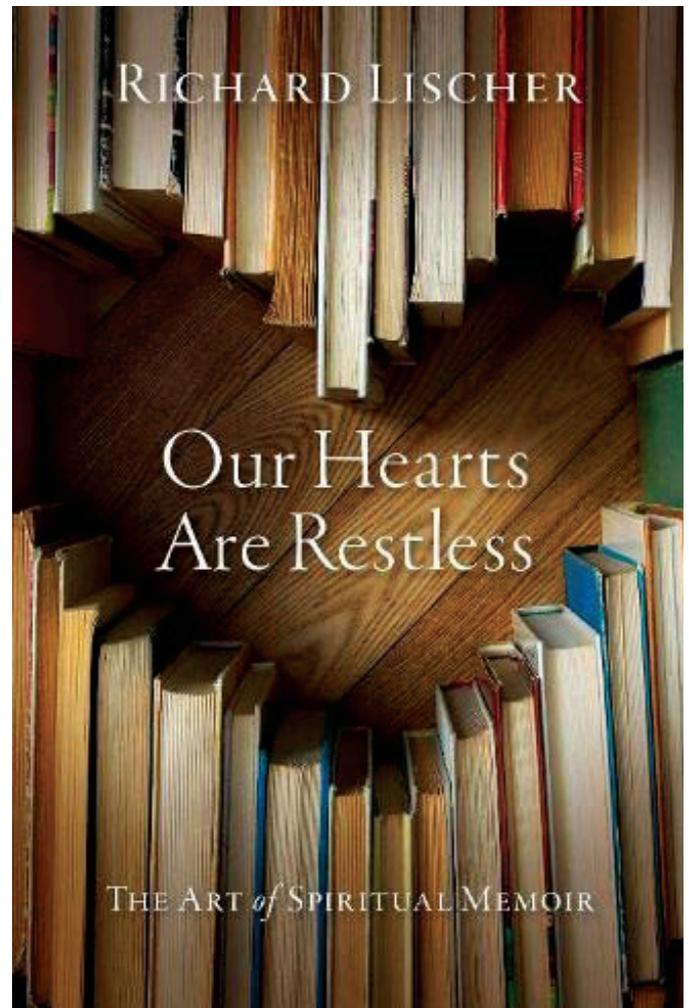
Many years ago, I had the opportunity to teach a course on spiritual memoir at a Jesuit university. Eighteen students and I spent the semester reading selections from St. Augustine to Dorothy Day to Tim Tebow. (You've never read Tebow's *Through My Eyes*? Don't, it's terrible.) In lieu of a traditional final exam, I asked the students to write their own 15-page spiritual memoir. Because many of them were graduating seniors and had more or less checked out by mid-March, I did not have high hopes.

I was wrong. Students who were not always articulate when analyzing literature or evaluating the interior lives of noted spiritual writers proved to be remarkably eloquent and insightful on the subject of their own. They identified struggles with belief, emotional and mental breakthroughs, cathartic realizations about the faults (or sacrifices) of their parents and mentors, the reverberations of personal traumas, and even the occasional moments of unexpected grace in their lives. I was impressed by the depth of their reflections—and somewhat taken aback by their vulnerability and honesty in relating such personal stories to a teacher.

In Richard Lischer's *Our Hearts Are Restless: The Art of Spiritual Memoir*, the author notes that "spiritual memoir is an intimate genre, perhaps the most intimate." Further, engaging with the spiritual memoirs of others seems to work as a goad for every reader to do some self-reflection. As Lischer writes of the more than 20 authors (all Christians) whose memoirs he covers in *Our Hearts Are Restless*, "they had become my friends. As with any friend, I became involved in their lives." Further, he writes, "I interrogated their lives for the meaning of my own."

Readers of his book, I suspect, will find themselves doing the same, interrogating Lischer's analyses of the stories within for glimpses of meaning in their own, as Lischer offers apt interventions and careful focus on particular themes to guide us through the memoirs in question. An emeritus professor at Duke Divinity School, Lischer is also a Lutheran pastor and the author of numerous books on preaching. He has written two spiritual memoirs himself as well: *Open Secrets: A Memoir of Faith and Discovery* and *Stations of the Heart: Parting With a Son*.

In *Our Hearts Are Restless*, he separates the memoirs under investigation according to seven themes, some of which are expected, like "search and surrender" or "pilgrimages," and others startling but insightful, like "nomadic faith" and "stripping of the altars." That last refers to stories where ruin comes before insight or redemption or wisdom or grace—or where the removal of all earthly optimism (as with Etty Hillesum or Dietrich Bonhoeffer)



Oxford University Press / 384p \$35

spurs an embrace of a theological hope. The authors covered, too, run the gamut from the expected, like St. Augustine and Thomas Merton and St. Thérèse of Lisieux, to the more surprising, like Richard Rodriguez and Abélard and Héloïse.

One caveat for readers: In *Our Hearts Are Restless* Lischer is exploring the *art* of spiritual memoir, not necessarily the content of them. He is interested in questions that normally might not arise in the course of devotional reading or reading for enjoyment. How is the story constructed? Where are the turning points, the moments of metanoia, the darkness before the dawn? How does the author bring it home, so to speak? As such, *Our Hearts* is not so much an introduction to the spiritual memoir as a study of the craft of their composition.

This approach provides new insights into stories that are otherwise perhaps well-known, like those of St. Augustine or C. S. Lewis, and also serves to complicate any preconceived notions the reader might have about the

narrative arc of spiritual memoirs in general. Lischer notes in the epilogue that while we may assume the story of St. Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus "provides the normative plot for Christian autobiography, that assumption deserves a closer look." In some cases, the defining moment is escape from sin; in others, the author seeks a cure for restlessness; in still others (including the story of St. Paul himself), there is a shocking intervention from God that completely changes an existence lived until then with certainty and conviction. Not every pilgrim, in other words, starts out without a previous world of meaning.

Many of the most famous sainthood stories in our Catholic tradition—including those of St. Francis of Assisi and St. Ignatius Loyola—are tales of conversion from dissolute living to a kind of militant asceticism. The story writes itself, from the callow youth immersed in vice to the penitent hurling himself into a thorn bush to mortify the flesh. Even today, some Catholics (intentionally or not) distort or diminish the power of the witness of Dorothy Day by depicting her holiness as a story of redemption from a life of sin, an approach that tends to diminish her prophetic voice. Yet she—like many of Lischer's subjects—hardly fits smoothly into such a narrative.

Another example that confounds the traditional memoir narrative—and to my mind the most remarkable treatment in Lischer's book—is the story of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, which Lischer locates along with those of Harriet Jacobs, Dorothy Day and Kathleen Norris under the rubric of "Pilgrimages" (a clever irony, as the convent Thérèse entered at 15 and left only at her death at 24 was less than a mile from her father's home). Lischer points out that Thérèse's primary accomplishment is a "heartfelt but artless autobiography" of a woman who "made no mark, achieved no advancement, and left no footprint in the world." And yet now, 125 years after her death, she is one of the most venerated saints in France and worldwide, called by Pope Pius X "the greatest saint of modern times" and named a doctor of the church by Pope John Paul II. Indeed, Lischer notes, "[t]here are more statues of St. Thérèse in American churches than anyone save the Virgin Mary. How did this happen?"

The answer, of course, lies in that "artless autobiography," *The Story of a Soul*, which has captured the hearts and the imaginations of millions since its publication in 1898, a year after St. Thérèse's death (she was canonized 27 years later). Her account of her nine years in a convent where her own sister was the no-nonsense prioress remains a best-seller today. Written as she was suffering from the

tuberculosis that would kill her, *The Story of a Soul* begins as simple childhood memoir (one heavily rewritten by her prioress sister) but progresses to a spiritual manual of sorts on how to experience divine love through the "Little Way": simple daily acts of penance, obedience and humility. One important detail? It all takes place in the context of a community of 26 women living in close quarters, seeking holiness but also driving each other mad. (One of Thérèse's early spiritual disciplines is to show kindness to a fellow nun whose teeth-clicking she finds infuriating.)

"She is the most *intimate* and *imitable* of all the spiritual memorists," Lischer writes, in part because there is no pretense to her story. "By narrating the smallest and least complicated moments in her own life, Thérèse opens a door onto everyday holiness and invites the least of us to enter."

And perhaps it is in that invitation—come through this door into everyday holiness—that the true genius and enduring popularity of spiritual memoir can be found.

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

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A NOVEL OF IMAGINATION AND VERVE

In an interview for The Booker Prizes website, Shehan Karunatilaka says he first started thinking about his novel *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* after the end of the Sri Lankan civil war in 2009, “when there was a raging debate over how many civilians died and whose fault it was” and he “decided to write a ghost story where the dead could offer their perspective.”

That perspective gives the novel its unique flavor. It echoes elements of several all-time classics, including *The Divine Comedy*, *Alice in Wonderland* and almost everything by Kurt Vonnegut, whose voice and vision can be felt throughout.

Karunatilaka won the Commonwealth Prize for his debut novel, *Chinaman*. His second novel, *The Seven Moons* (originally titled *Chats with the Dead*), received the 2022 Booker Prize. Considered fiction’s most respected award, the Booker is given to novels of superior quality written in English and published in England or Ireland.

Karunatilaka is the second Sri Lankan-born author to win the prestigious award, following Michael Ondaatje (1992) whose Booker-winning novel, *The English Patient*, was an end-of-World War II romance. *The Seven Moons*, which is set in the midst of the 25-year-long Sri Lankan civil war, contains little that could be called romantic, although it has its moments.

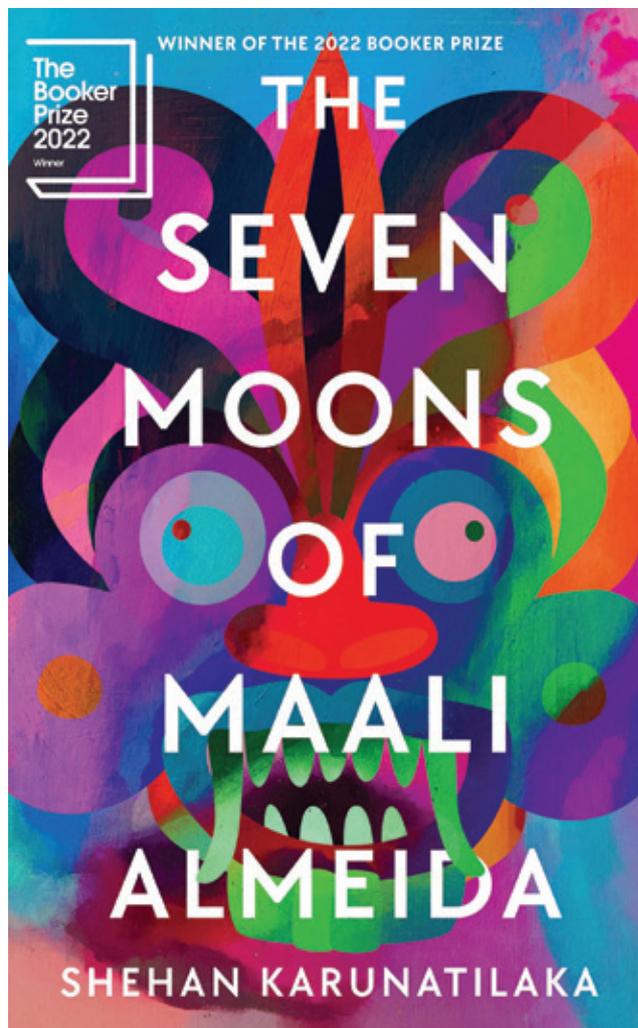
According to this year’s Booker Prize judges, the novel exhibits “tremendous imagination and verve” as it “dissolves the boundaries not just of different genres, but of life and death, body and spirit, east and west.”

With its story line based partly on the killing of journalist photographer Richard de Zoysa during the Sri Lankan civil war, *The Seven Moons* is part murder mystery and part historical novel.

The story begins in 1990 in the city of Colombo. Fought from 1983 to 2009, the civil war had two sides—the Sinhalese-dominated Sri Lankan government and the minority Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. The insurgent Tamils tried to establish a separate state in the south of Sri Lanka. Revolting against the government, they killed 13 soldiers. This incited Sinhalese mobs to mass violence resulting in 3,000 deaths, one of which was de Zoysa’s.

A reference to de Zoysa’s poem “Good Friday, 1975,” with its odd mix of reverence and blasphemy, leads the story. A line from the poem that is especially telling with its black humor (“Father, forgive them, for I will never”) serves as the epigraph for Part One of Karunatilaka’s novel—and also suggests its background.

The poem itself is a gloss on the crucifixion, connecting the last moments of Jesus to 20th-century atrocities. The latter bring to mind the atmosphere of the Sri Lankan civ-



Norton / 388p \$19

il war, with its share of “blood flows murmuring, congeals turning black upon the purpling flesh,” in de Zoysa’s words.

In *The Seven Moons*, the main character, Maali Almeida, is based on de Zoysa. To an extent, the novel resembles de Zoysa’s poem. But there is a twist. The poem is told from the perspective of the dying Christ, while the novel is told from the perspective of Almeida—who has died and is trying to figure out who killed him, when and why. While he’s doing that, he experiences the afterlife, which as an atheist he does not believe in—at first.

The story starts with these words: “You wake up with the answer to the question that everyone asks. The answer is Yes, and the answer is Just Like Here But Worse.”

Readers must deduce the question (Is there life after death?) and decipher how much worse by following Almeida, a 34-year-old war photographer, as he realizes he is dead and now exists (or not) in the “In-Between,” which is a kind of purgatory. He must journey to “The Light” (à la “The Divine Comedy”), which he does by bringing to view photographs that could end the civil war. He has seven days

(or moons) to do so.

While on this journey, he (as a ghost) accompanies the police who visit a (fictional) Canada Norway Third World Relief center. He clings to the roof of the car, “thoughts prodding him like infected needles.” He remembers that as a freelancer, he took photographs of the dying and maimed for a newsletter. One photograph, in a box marked “Queen,” shows a police massacre of 600 Tamils. Almeida only vaguely remembers the photograph and those people working at the relief center. Nor is he able to communicate with them—yet.

Almeida experiences absurd adventures in a nightmarish wonderland where playing cards—kings, queens and jacks—flutter “in a mad swirl.” A being dressed in black garbage bags with yellowish green eyes seems like a monster but may be a friend. A “Dead Atheist” with a decapitated body (his head bearing an uncanny resemblance to our hero) comes to The Light every so often “just to see if you guys have anything new to offer.”

Almeida sees a book that contains “wisdom of the millennia, insight from when the universe was first audited.” (I won’t spoil the plot by telling you what the wisdom is.) “Screaming souls and fools [dressed] in white” surround Almeida. But there is also a kind of tea party where he has the opportunity to choose how, where and with whom he spends eternity.

Drenched in poetry, the novel fuses the detective genre with magic realism, the macabre with absurdist humor and the political with philosophical speculations about the afterlife, as well as occasional off-putting biblical references, as in: she “has her arms spread out like a martyred Christ.” Heavy with figures of speech, the narrative at first is difficult to understand. The frequent puns are sometimes annoying. But as one reads, the sheer luminosity and audacity of the language generally work their spell.

Ultimately, Almeida experiences ghosts, ghouls, a Hindu goddess who eats souls, a Beatrice-like friend from his past life and other non-bodily inhabitants of this place. He tries to communicate with his mother and his significant other, a boyfriend named DD. He wants to tell them about a stash of his photographs in which he has documented the war’s murder and mayhem. These photos, he hopes, will bring down politicians in high places, including some in the government, and may bring justice to ordinary Sri Lankans.

But will they? With humanity revealing its weaknesses as it does continually in this novel (and in life, as Karunatilaka implies), there are no assurances of justice or anything else.

Diane Scharper is a writer and critic. She teaches the Memoir Seminar for the Johns Hopkins University Osher Program.

The Dumpster Fillers

By Josh Dugat

They arrive at night, unseen
except for headlights splitting hedge.
All the other scenes are sounds—

arthritic door hinge, radio drowned
beneath the engine’s windy idle.
A trunk yawns up. Cuss and heft

and rattle-shatter. What is it
you cannot stand to live with
any longer? Toss it in

and make a wish. Listen—
quarters chime the offertory
platter. Cherries ringing jackpot

from the slots. The dumpster is
an inadvertent music box,
a mausoleum-portalet—

you deposit what you cannot bother
hoping to forget. Roll the stone away
this time next week, the tomb will be

untenanted. Nothing full of possibility
like emptiness. You can start again.
When there is nothing to be salvaged

of the day, bring it here. Heave it
to the asphalt if you have to.
Leave it in the car, and leave the car.

The noise that you are making
is the song I’ll wake up wishing
I remembered all the words to.

I am trying to sing it back to you.

Josh Dugat has published poetry in journals including *The Literary Review*, *TriQuarterly* and *Christian Century*. He lives in Tuscaloosa, Ala.

WILL THE CIRCLE HOLD?

The secularization of Protestant higher education in the United States was the result of incremental dalliances with secular culture that took at least a century to reveal their full weight and impact. The secularization of Catholic higher education in this country, by contrast, was the result of a cultural lightning strike that took mere decades, if not just a few short years, to reveal its effects.

Through the 1950s and even into the early 1960s, most Catholic colleges and universities in the United States largely lived unto themselves as wholly Catholic cultures. Their students, faculties and staffs often existed as what some critics referred to as “bunker Catholics.” The expectations for the lives they shared were largely as predictable as they were secure in expectations.

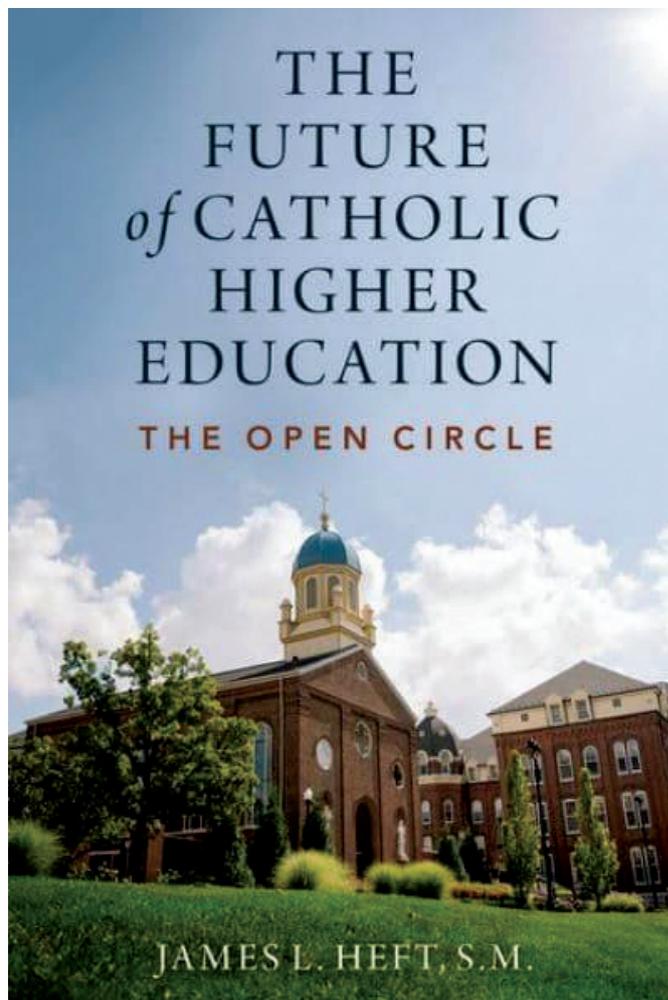
No sooner had the Second Vatican Council’s doors closed in 1965 than the clarity and security of those expectations began to fade. Many priests, sisters and brothers who once led (and provided low-cost labor to) Catholic colleges and universities chose to pursue other callings. Laypeople who took over their roles often did not have the same appreciation for, or understanding of, the charisms of the institutions they then began to lead. When Catholic colleges and universities left their bunkers, the need for an appreciation for the riches of the Catholic intellectual tradition was nothing short of great.

How to cultivate such an appreciation is the focus of the Rev. James L. Heft’s *The Future of Catholic Higher Education: The Open Circle*. Heft, a former provost at the University of Dayton and founding director of the Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies at the University of Southern California, is an expert on Catholic higher education and contemporary Catholic life.

His central concern in *The Future of Catholic Higher Education* is not only how “to preserve the continuity of the Catholic intellectual tradition, but also recognize how it might be adapted.” Heft borrows from Nicholas of Cusa the image of a circle as a way to illustrate “how our knowledge of God in this life can never be complete.” The Catholic university, Heft argues, is a community that can be defined as an open circle because of its ability to engage with other traditions.

With intellectual dexterity, Heft turns to an array of resources from the humanities and social sciences to support his argument. (Other, comparable studies are often heavy on descriptive appraisals drawn from sociology or normative propositions drawn from theology.) Heft thus not only provides his readers with an astute understanding of present realities but also a clear vision for future possibilities.

In order to make that argument and assemble the need-



Oxford University Press / 285p \$30

ed resources, Heft divides his book into four parts over 15 chapters. Part I focuses on the lives and legacies of Jesus, Mary and St. John Henry Newman as points of theological inspiration for the Catholic university. For example, Christ’s presence in the Mass and the ongoing ministry of the Holy Spirit affords the Catholic university with a sacramental appreciation for God’s presence in all it explores. Such an appreciation sees and is in open dialogue with what other ways of seeing capture. However, it also values God’s ongoing presence in the world.

With that theological framework in place, Heft focuses in Part II on the relationship shared by the Catholic university and the church. Heft acknowledges that critics may view the Catholic Church as an entity that limits the reach of the Catholic university’s pursuit of truth. Drawing again on the image of the open circle, Heft sees such a relationship—when properly ordered—as necessary for a full appreciation of reality. Absent such a relationship, the university’s appreciation for God’s ongoing presence in the

world is limited at best.

In Parts III and IV, Heft moves toward working through more practical details concerning how the relationship with the church is found in the identity and work of the faculty—and then the relationship the faculty shares with co-curricular educators or student life professionals. Faculty are often viewed as a secularizing force driven by their commitment to freedom wherever truth may lead. Heft views such debates as they work themselves out (for example, in relation to liberal education and research) as opportunities that need purposeful direction that reflects the riches of the Catholic intellectual tradition.

Despite the successful ways Heft argues for the integral strength of the Catholic university as an open circle, his insights concerning the role student life professionals or co-curricular educators play fall short of his insights concerning the role faculty or curricular educators play. Part III, focusing on faculty, includes five chapters; Part IV, focusing on student life professionals and co-curricular educators, has only two. Heft makes little mention of the roles of residential life, student leadership and activities, multicultural programs, calling and career offices, intramural athletics, and intercollegiate athletics in the “open circle.” While campus ministry programs are addressed at length, none of those other areas—areas also critical to student formation—are mentioned at a sufficient length.

Time will tell whether the open circle as Heft proposes will hold. He makes a successful argument for its value, showing how the Catholic university is uniquely poised to cultivate a full appreciation of reality. Prayerfully heeding his words will invariably lead to a growing appreciation for how, as Heft writes, “Catholic higher education is important not only for the Church and our country but also for the world.”

Todd C. Ream serves on the faculty at Indiana Wesleyan University, as the senior fellow for public engagement for the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, and as the publisher of *Christian Scholar's Review*. He is presently working on a series of books concerning Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C.

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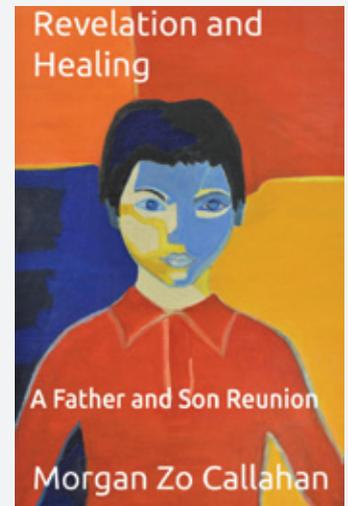


Revelation and Healing: A Father and Son Reunion

recounts the author's slow journey from an adoption that left him longing for his biological parents and wondering if he had any Black blood. He was assured he did not. Discovering, while in high school, his mother's identity, years later he found that of his biological father, Lionel Durand (1920-1961), a Black man born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Suddenly the author realized the source of his own immediate empathy as a boy with Martin Luther King Jr.

and the civil rights movement

he led. The author shares the often-shocking details of his adoption and the grounding therapies which facilitated self-acceptance. With filial admiration, the author traces the life of his beloved father, Lionel Durand, friends with Jean Cocteau and Picasso, an internationally acclaimed newsman and journalist, who fought in the French Resistance during World War II, twice imprisoned, twice escaped. Welcome to this reading journey and its wondrous surprises. Available on amazon.com



Lionel Durand's cover painting of his mixed-race daughter, Barbara. Same Black father as the author, a different White mom.

TALKING TO GOD

Isaac Fitzgerald's collection of essays *Dirtbag, Massachusetts: A Confessional* isn't a Catholic memoir. Except when it is.

Fitzgerald, who is also a children's book author, begins at the start of his turbulent childhood: "My parents were married when they had me, just to different people." From there, things get ever rockier. His father leaves his mother and him behind for stretches at a time. Fitzgerald acts out with drugs and alcohol. There's a fair bit of violence. And lots of instability.

But Fitzgerald's childhood had one constant: It was saturated with Catholicism. His parents, young and unable to get their footing financially, had moved during his youth into Catholic Worker houses in Boston, including one situated in the city's South End, on Massachusetts Avenue. "It was called Mass Ave for short, and as a child, I used to think that our street was named after a church service, not the state we lived in," Fitzgerald writes in his opening essay, "Family Stories."

Fitzgerald's mother secured work at Boston's Cathedral of the Holy Cross, tidying up and completing secretarial tasks while getting to know the clergy who frequented the complex, including the notorious protector of abusive priests, Cardinal Bernard Law. Fitzgerald regularly spent time exploring the church and the residence while his mother completed her work. The soaring ceiling and stained-glass windows made an impression on the child.

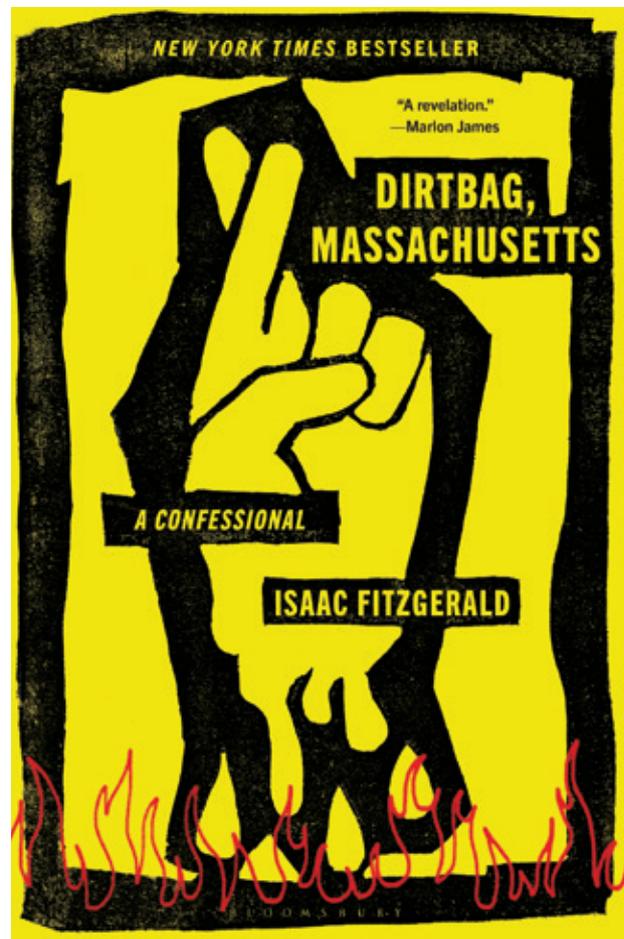
"It would feel massive to anyone at any age, but when you're six and enveloped by the shadow of the enormous organ as you follow its countless pipes reaching up and up and up to a ceiling so far away it might as well be the sky, it was so deeply lonely and self-abnegating that it was almost transcendental," he writes.

But that space would eventually represent something else to Fitzgerald.

One afternoon, he and his older half-brother were playing at the cathedral when a friendly priest whom the boys did not recognize joined in, cajoling them into an attic as part of a pretend mystery that needed solving. The priest gave Fitzgerald and his brother candy. They laughed at his jokes. Here was a fun priest, Fitzgerald thought.

Another priest, who seemed much less fun, discovered the priest and the boys in the attic. He became angry and yelled at the boys. Fitzgerald had always felt welcome at the cathedral, he writes, "But something changed after that day in the attic."

"My mother was told that I couldn't come to work with her anymore," he recounts. "I could of course come to church for mass on Sunday and the like, and it was okay for me to be there with my ma for a minute if she was just swinging by, but that put an end to my hours wandering around the grounds alone."



Bloomsbury / 256p \$18

It was only in retrospect that Fitzgerald discerned that there was perhaps something more going on in that attic. "That indignant priest, while perhaps *acting* like a prick, was not *being* a prick," Fitzgerald writes. "By forbidding me to hang out in the rectory—hell, the whole entire church during off-hours—the angry priest was trying to make sure I didn't become a victim myself."

Later, Fitzgerald would find out that a priest for whom he had served as an altar boy in the 1990s had been accused of abusing children in the 1970s. When *The Boston Globe* broke the story about abuse in Boston, Fitzgerald's mother seemed for years unable to speak about it. His father, a Catholic school principal who had been in recovery, began drinking again for a short time.

Eventually, through an intense conversation with his mother, in which much was left unsaid, Fitzgerald was nonetheless able to allay her worries that her work had put him in jeopardy. He was never physically abused, though he recounts a creepy episode with a prurient priest during confession. While his parents stayed active in their faith, Fitzgerald stopped going to church once he began boarding school, taking advantage of the freedom that came with having no adults around to tell him he had to go to Mass.



‘There is always a place to talk to God, even if it’s a God you don’t believe in.’

“I don’t regret it, though occasionally there are things I miss about church,” he writes of his decision to leave behind his childhood faith. “The high, exalted feeling of my soul full to the brim after Sunday Mass (though I only truly felt this when I was a kid and suspect that even if I were a practicing Catholic now this joy would be lost to me). The fun of getting together with a large group of people and belting out songs. Like some sort of religious group karaoke. A very pious kind of karaoke, sure, but karaoke nonetheless. Plus, there’s wine.”

But something from his faith stuck with Fitzgerald. And he’s not alone.

A study from 2015 found that about 15 percent of Americans identify as “former Catholics.” Taken as a group, that would make lapsed Catholics one of the largest religious groups in the country. But it is a group we know too little about. There are many memoirs written by individuals who have left the church but who remain filled with enough anger to fill an entire book. Fitzgerald’s stories are different. They are an invitation to consider thoughtfully the inner life of someone who was shaped by Catholicism but who no longer practices his faith.

Though *Dirtbag, Massachusetts* is confessional, it is not pious. Fitzgerald’s discussions of religion are interspersed with page-turning stories chronicling teenage drinking, his experience working in the pornography industry and his adventures smuggling supplies to persecuted groups in Burma.

Fitzgerald has experienced enough distance and time away from the church that he can reflect in a fairly positive light on the faith his parents tried, seemingly unsuccessfully, to pass down to him. And his writing about what his faith means to him is as nuanced and thoughtful as the prose penned by some practicing Catholics trying to bring others to the church.

“My time in that space has shaped my entire life,” Fitzgerald writes. “Catholicism wasn’t for me, but it’s in me;

it’s around me; it’s a lens I look through sometimes without even consciously realizing it. It’s in and on my skin. In so many ways, I can’t help but carry the Catholic Church and its philosophies with me, always, even though I left the church long ago.”

On a recent Christmas, Fitzgerald attended Mass at a Benedictine church in Massachusetts. He was struck by the simplicity of the chapel, how it spoke to him in ways that rivaled the soaring windows in the cathedral of his youth.

“I’ll never attend church regularly again. I’ll never sit for confession again. But I can’t deny that on Christmas morning, in the right church, with the right people, the sunlight cutting across the crucifixion can be a beautiful thing,” he writes. “Speaking and singing old, old phrases together can be a beautiful thing.”

But it’s on the grounds near the church where Fitzgerald feels connected to something larger than himself.

“Still, the best part of visiting Glastonbury Abbey is walking among the nearby pines,” he writes. “That despite the endless ways in which [Fitzgerald’s parents and he] diverge, we agree on this: There is always a place to talk to God, even if it’s a God you don’t believe in.”

—
Michael J. O’Loughlin is national correspondent at *America* and author of *Hidden Mercy: AIDS, Catholics, and the Untold Stories of Compassion in the Face of Fear*.



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NO COUNTRY FOR WHOLE MEN

In every facet of modern life, we are being exploited, fragmented and alienated from the reality of the world and our own human natures. For over 60 years, Wendell Berry, writing from his farm near Port Royal, Ky., has attempted to draw back into relationship things that human sin, always wrapped up in “our destruction of precious things that we did not and cannot make,” has made separate through pride and greed. He has attempted to heal the great divisions that afflict us: our estrangements from the place where we are, the soil that we stand on, the people that surround us and the call of the natural law within us.

Now nearing the end of his life, Berry has looked back over what he has done, the long labor of one who has “entered the way of love and taken up its work,” and attempted in a new book, *The Need to Be Whole*, to give a glimpse of the undivided foundation that underpins all he has ever tried to think and say. Perhaps by necessity, he is only partly successful.

According to Berry, *The Need to Be Whole* is about race relations. Though it is about that—and especially about “the chattel slavery of the antebellum South...as one of a continuum of violent exploitations, including other forms of slavery, that has been with us since the European discovery of America,” injustices that Berry sees as “our history’s dominant theme”—those who pick up this book expecting an exhaustive treatment of racial exploitation in America will be disappointed. Rather, Berry’s task is philosophical and anthropological.

Insofar as racial prejudice is a *human* problem, it implicates the human person in a disruption to her right relation to all things. In other words, such a disconnect from our fellow humans has implications beyond the way we see human society; it affects the way we see all of creation. For example, “a key word in the story of American development or progress,” says Berry, is that “anything ‘superabundant’ or ‘inexhaustible’ can be treated as *dispensable*.” A dispensability mindset led to the continued commodification of human life after the end of the Civil War.

“One of the cruelest ironies of the postbellum period,” Berry claims, is that “emancipation, in freeing the slaves of white proprietorship, freed them also from their market value and made them individually worthless in the ‘free’ economy,” much like “the poor whites whose ‘free labor’ was already abundantly available, and who were thus individually dispensable.”

This mindset also resulted in the exhaustion of Eastern farmland as “apparently endless tracts of ‘new’ land” continued to be discovered in Western expansion. The evil of racial prejudice is therefore not simply reducible to racial

THE NEED TO BE WHOLE

Patriotism and the
History of Prejudice

WENDELL BERRY

— AUTHOR OF —
The Hidden Wound and The Unsettling of America

Shoemaker and Company / 528p \$24

prejudice itself. Rather, it issues in a deep, willful ignorance of the truth of things that can’t help but pervade and disorder all of a person’s relationships to other human beings and to reality as a whole.

Though logically coherent, Berry’s reasoning leads to conclusions that might leave some readers wanting more. Writing about reparations, for instance, Berry contends that “the sins of the past are real” and that “reparations are therefore called for, but not exclusively to one category of people.” Black people cannot be the sole recipients of reparations, as this “surprisingly and obviously leaves out the reparations that are owed to the American Indian tribes,” as well as people of other races and origins who have “also been seen as distinctly inferior and also have been used for the fundamental work that some white people have thought themselves too good to do,” including Mexican migrant workers.

But Berry also includes the land itself as being owed restitution, as we use it “with the same condescension and cruelty with which we have used racial minorities whom we have subjugated to our use and convenience.” If we wish to

get to the heart of the matter, he recommends that we “consider the dominance, especially among those who have been dominant, of the willingness to separate things that belong together and, above all, to separate land and people.”

Berry sees “the law of love operating in this world” as pointing toward a path of forgiveness and reconciliation. This law “understands health as wholeness,” diametrically opposed to “fear, anger and hate” that “beget two sides, each the enemy of the other” and working only “for the defeat of the others, telling itself that its victory will bring righteousness and peace “in the future.” Love as health and wholeness is not satisfied with abstract promises of future victory; it impels us “toward particular knowledge.”

Thus, love, health and wholeness are bound up in holiness. Berry sees the Gospel as the cornerstone of the law of love. Careful readers will note how striking it is that Berry is so theological and outspoken in this book, given his hesitance in earlier writings. This probably stems from his expressed distaste for the “discrepancy between the behavior of much of organized Christianity and the teachings of Jesus.” But it is precisely an organized Christianity—or, more precisely, a mystical body of Christ that mediates God’s grace to the world and each person in a radically particular way—that Berry is looking for.

Berry’s project, in this book and his life, has been to diagnose the ills of where and who we are and to propose remedies. But the deepest and most hidden wound in the human heart, the disconnect that causes all others, the cancer that Berry confronts (more explicitly in this book than anywhere else in his corpus—though he cannot cure it) is the alienation of humanity from God. Only the incarnation can cross this divide and make whole this sundered communion, but though Berry is an outspoken Christian, he pays little attention to Jesus as God, as the *logos* through whom all creation was made, the archetype of our being made in *imago Dei*. When Berry invokes Christ, it is usually as a teacher and a healer: an exemplar, for instance, of “radically unsymmetrical forgiveness,” as “Jesus forgave from the cross those who had crucified him.”

Unfortunately, this dramatically limits his view of humanity’s relationship with divinity. Reflecting on this theme in the *Odyssey* and *Paradise Lost*, Berry declares that “both Odysseus and Adam must make themselves whole, or wholly human...by choosing to become *only* human, forswearing for the sake of their merely human love any attribute of divinity.” Though he writes of the artistic call of “joining human work rightly to the work of God...earth and heaven, the human neighborhood and the kingdom of God, health and holiness” and certainly holds some sort of incarnational theology, more fully developed in his novels,

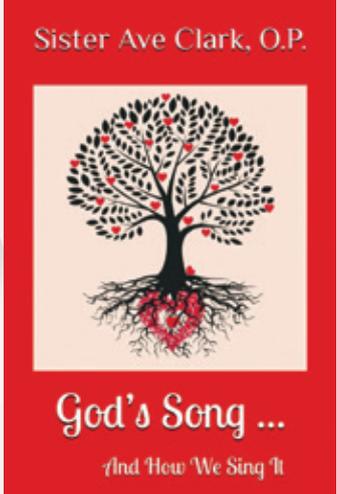
he only does so implicitly here, alluding to a Christological solution. Berry calls for conversion but has no divine Christ to convert *to*—Jesus is simply a good person, not the fulfillment of humanity.

Why such hesitance to affirm explicitly the transformative power of the incarnation when it is the only solution to the problem of our alienation from God, nature, and one another? Without Christ as true God and true man, Berry’s critiques in *The Need to Be Whole* run the risk of slipping into incoherence.

John-Paul Heil studies marriage and the family at the Pontifical John Paul II Institute in Washington. He received his doctorate in history from the University of Chicago and has written for *Time*, *Smithsonian* and *The Week*.

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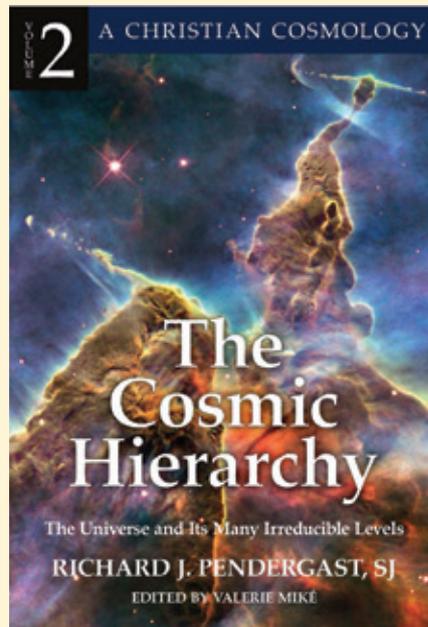
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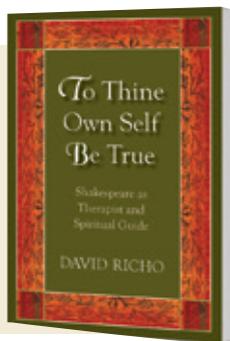
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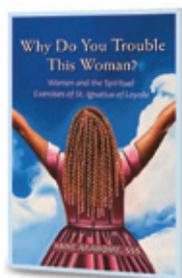
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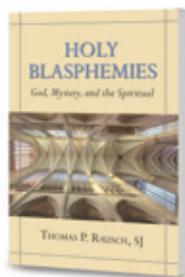
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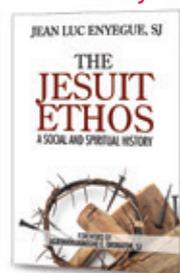
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An Invitation to Breathe in a Suffocating World

Throughout the month of May, the Gospel readings remind us to “breathe in” the Spirit. These texts show the Spirit easing the anxieties of early Christians, and promise that the same Spirit remains at work both now and in the life to come to guide our own walk of faith.

On the Fifth Sunday of Easter, Thomas and Philip ask about the destination of their journey with Christ. Where is this path going? This passage from the Gospel of John is often used for funeral liturgies because of its frank concern for the afterlife. “Master,” says Thomas, “we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?” (Jn 14:5). Jesus’ immediate reply is meant to be reassuring: “I am the way and the truth and the life.” Philip has another request, however: “Master, show us the Father, and that will be enough” (Jn 14:8). John’s Gospel

reveals an early church anxious that it would be left alone to navigate a complex world that threatened to suffocate the movement of the Spirit.

The succeeding Sundays in the month of May also respond to this anxiety. On the Sixth Sunday of Easter, Jesus makes a bold promise: “I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you” (Jn 14:18). Jesus’ promise invites us to consider in prayer: How does he come to us today? A potential answer surfaces during our celebration of Pentecost on the last Sunday in May. In a final post-resurrection scene with the group of disciples, the Risen One reveals how he will not leave them orphaned. The passage reads, “He breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” (Jn 20:22). This month’s Gospel readings invite us to draw in this same divine breath, and then let God navigate the way.

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER (A), MAY 7, 2023

Curiosity About the Way

SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER (A), MAY 14, 2023

Loneliness Along the Way

THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD (A), MAY 21, 2023

Trust Throughout the Way

PENTECOST SUNDAY (A), MAY 28, 2023

Breathing in the Spirit Who Leads the Way



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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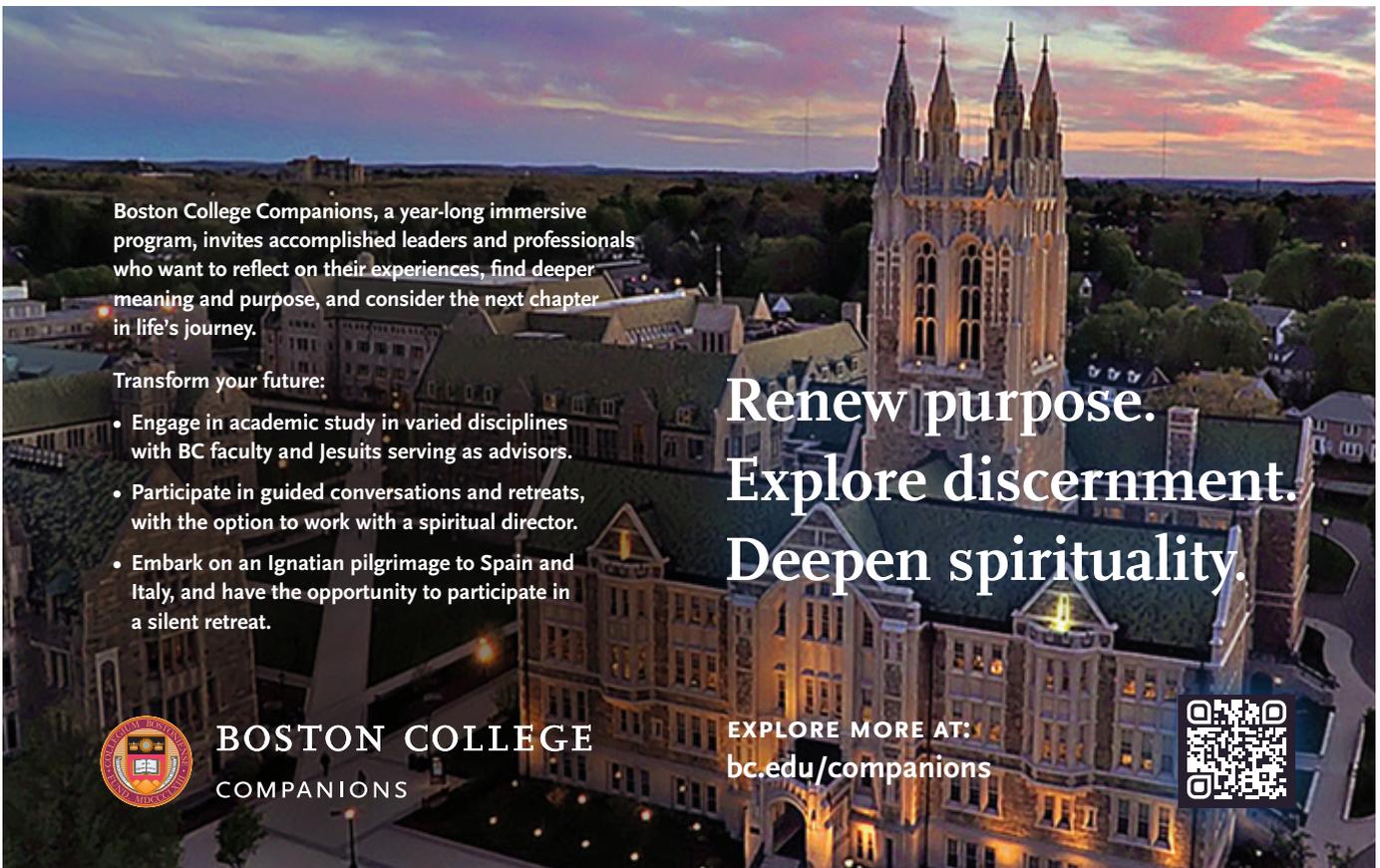
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A Commitment to Renewal

Francis follows St. John Paul II in embracing Vatican II



“There is nothing new under the sun.” That Scripture verse from the Book of Ecclesiastes (1:19) comes to mind as I reflect on the agitation expressed by some in the church and the media over the Holy Father’s *motu proprio* “Traditionis Custodes” and the recent confirmation given in the “Rescriptum ex Audientia” released by Cardinal Arthur Roche, prefect of the Dicastery for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments.

Let us remember that in those documents, the successor of Peter, who is the guarantor of unity in the church, called bishops to assist all Roman Catholics to accept fully that the liturgical books promulgated by St. Paul VI and St. John Paul II are the unique expression of the *lex orandi* (the law of praying) of the Roman Rite. The fact that the Holy Father had to do this 60 years after the Second Vatican Council saddens but does not surprise me. Over my 50 years as a priest and 25 as a bishop, I have seen pockets of resistance to the council’s teachings and reforms, especially the refusal to accept the restoration of the liturgy.

In fact, St. John Paul II challenged this resistance head-on in his apostolic letter on the 25th anniversary of Vatican II’s “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy” (“Sacrosanctum Concilium”) on Dec. 4, 1988. There he wrote:

Some have received the [liturgical reform] with a certain indifference, or without trying to understand or help others to understand the reasons for the changes; oth-

ers, unfortunately, have turned back in a one-sided and exclusive way to the previous liturgical forms which some of them consider to be the sole guarantee of certainty in faith.

Yes, he admits, some outlandish innovations harmed the unity of the church. But, he added, “This should not lead anyone to forget that the vast majority of the pastors and the Christian people have accepted the liturgical reform in a spirit of obedience and indeed joyful fervor.” And then he wrote something that all Catholics, especially leaders in the church, should take to heart: “We should give thanks to God for that movement of the Holy Spirit in the Church which the liturgical renewal represents.”

My point is this: Like St. John Paul II, Pope Francis takes seriously that the restoration of the liturgy was the result of the movement of the Holy Spirit. It was not about the imposition of an ideology on the church by any one person or group. And so no one should now suggest that Francis has any motivation other than the desire to remain faithful to the promptings of the Holy Spirit that gave rise to the teachings and reforms of the council.

There is another thing the late, saintly pope wrote in his 1988 letter that we bishops should take seriously. After listing the many reasons for holding fast to the teachings of the “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy” and to the reforms it made possible, he quoted from the final report of the ex-

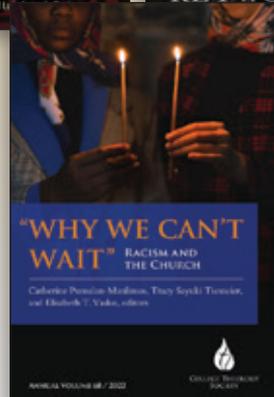
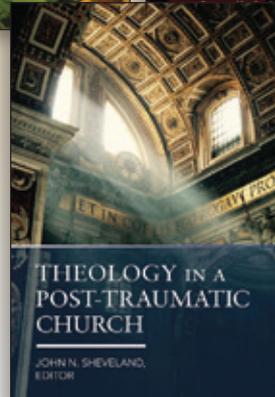
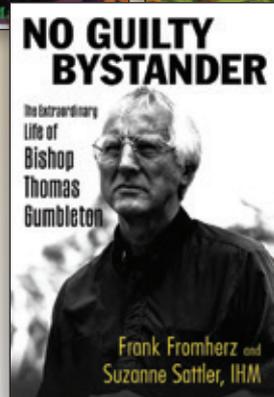
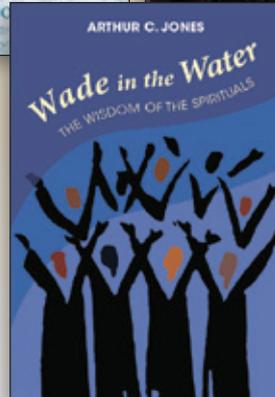
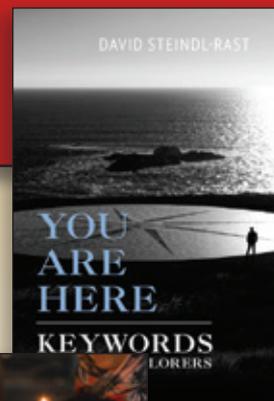
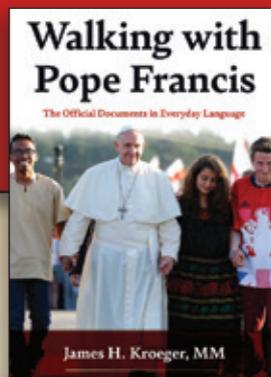
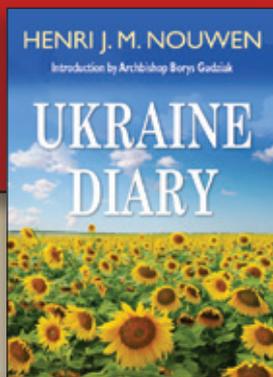
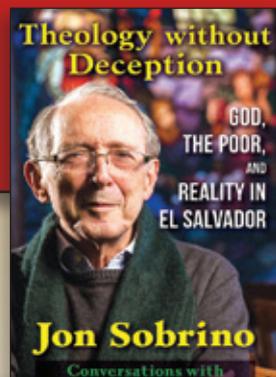
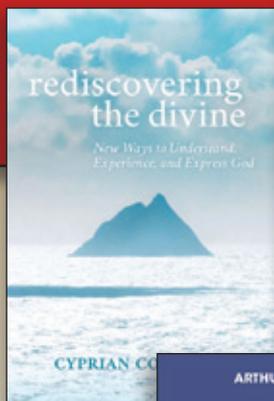
traordinary synod of 1985: “For many people the message of the Second Vatican Council has been experienced principally through the liturgical reform.”

The point is clear: If we bishops are serious about helping Catholics fully receive the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, then we have an obligation to promote, in union with the successor of Peter, the complete embrace of the council’s liturgical reforms. This is the reason Pope Francis has called all Catholics to accept Vatican II’s restoration of the liturgy as the unique expression of the *lex orandi* of the Roman Rite. His aspiration has deep roots in the ancient church tradition first uttered by Prosper of Aquitaine: “Let us consider the sacraments of priestly prayers, which having been handed down by the apostles are celebrated uniformly throughout the whole world and in every Catholic church so that the law of praying might establish the law of believing.”

Continued dismissals of the Holy Father’s efforts toward achieving the goal of full acceptance of the restored liturgy as the unique expression of the way of praying in the Roman Rite would not surprise me, as there is nothing new under the sun. But we should name it for what it is: resistance to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, and the undermining of genuine fidelity to the See of Peter.

Cardinal Blase J. Cupich is the archbishop of Chicago.

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