

America

JUNE 2023

THE JESUIT REVIEW OF FAITH AND CULTURE

A MINISTRY OF FRAGILITY

How the church can
support mental health

John P. Dolan

p18

Elizabeth Johnson
on an Ecological God

p24

Does ChatGPT
Have a Soul?

p32

Holy Whodunits

p48

The 2023 Foley
Poetry Prize Winner

p63

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America

School of the Heart

At about the same time that this column will be published on **America's** website, I will be getting on a plane, heading into more than 20 hours of travel to South Africa, where I will spend the next three months. One of my colleagues will write the next edition of this column for the July/August combined issue—and by the time that column reaches mailboxes, I will have begun 30 days of silent retreat, making the full Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius for the second time as a Jesuit.

Spending three months away, one of them completely cut off from communications, is not a usual move for someone recently installed as editor in chief of a magazine and media ministry. And what's more, I will be doing this again in summer 2024, though without the 30-day retreat.

As some readers who are familiar with Jesuit formation will have already guessed, I am beginning the final stage of Jesuit formation, known as “tertianship.” That odd name derives from St. Ignatius' definition of this period as the “third probation.” (First probation happens at the very beginning of novitiate; second probation includes the two years as a novice before first vows, the roughly eight years of formation after vows and then continues past ordination and up to tertianship.)

Tertianship is the last step in formation before final vows and “full incorporation” into the Society of Jesus. When I was in philosophy studies and had been a Jesuit for just over three years, I accompanied some medical students on a service immersion trip to Guatemala. They were just finishing their first year of medical school, and they were joking about how much

more medical education they had in front of them: three more years of school, plus residency, plus fellowships. I laughed with them and then countered, “I'm doing the one thing that takes longer.”

There are some helpful parallels, perhaps, between medical education or other professional training and Jesuit formation. For one thing, the training continues even after you take on the role you have trained for. A doctor in residency or fellowship is already a medical doctor; a Jesuit awaiting tertianship is already a Jesuit (for 19 years in my case) and, for those of us who are ordained, a priest as well (I was ordained in 2014). So trying to explain what changes after tertianship can be a bit difficult.

I once heard another Jesuit attempt to explain final vows by analogy to another profession. It's like making partner in a law firm, he said. The analogy limps badly, not least because there is no parallel in Jesuit life to profit-sharing. The best explanation I can give now—I may have a better one once I have done tertianship myself—is that final vows commit a Jesuit to even deeper availability, for any mission in any place where the Society's ministry takes him.

St. Ignatius calls this final period of probation “the school of the heart,” to be undertaken after the long journey of intellectual formation, in order to seek “greater knowledge and love of God our Lord; so that when they themselves have made progress they can better help others to progress for the glory of God our Lord.”

And schooling the heart is demanding enough to require long stretches of time: from six to nine months straight through, or, in the

form in which I am doing it, in two sessions of three months each over two years. During that time, I will pray more deeply, study the charism and the Constitutions of the Society and immerse myself again in the Spiritual Exercises. I am grateful both to the Society for calling me to such thorough formation and to my colleagues at **America** for making it possible for me to do it while serving as editor.

As I have learned over and over again during formation and ministry as a Jesuit priest, God reveals himself through accompaniment, companionship and communion. “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them” (Mt 18:20). Our experience of God is mediated by what we share together.

For the past eight years at **America**, and in an even more profound way for these past six months as editor in chief, I have been privileged to walk the road of faith together with you, our readers, as well as my colleagues on the staff. So as I briefly step away from the editor's desk, please be assured that I will continue to accompany you in prayer; and please pray for me, especially during the month of July, when I will be making the Spiritual Exercises.

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



THE ISSUE

GIVE AND TAKE

6

YOUR TAKE

Bringing teenagers to Mass

8

OUR TAKE

*The pro-life movement
one year after Dobbs*

10

SHORT TAKE

*How do we enlarge the space of
our tent? By unleashing the gifts
of women.*

Katie Owens Mulcahy

DISPATCHES

12

YOU SAY YOU WANT AN OUTDOOR WEDDING?

*What Baltimore learned after
changing a longstanding rule*

*GoodNews: A new ministry brings
the Eucharist to sexual abuse survivors*

*In Mexico, Jesuit human rights
advocates targeted by spyware*

*Zimbabwe bishops warn about
political violence in upcoming
elections*

FEATURES

18

A MINISTRY OF HUMAN FRAGILITY

*Why I established a mental health
office in the Diocese of Phoenix*
John P. Dolan

24

THE EARTH'S BELOVED COMMUNITY

*What does it mean to believe
in an ecological God?*
Elizabeth A. Johnson

FAITH & REASON

32

DOES CHATGPT HAVE A SOUL?

*A conversation on Catholic
ethics and A.I.*

Michael Burns and Joseph Vukov

*Reconciliation: the church's
'listening place'*

Louis P. Masi



CNS photo/Carol Glatz

Pictured left to right: Melva Arbelo; Carol Keehan, D.C.; Clarice Suchy, S.T.J.; Norma Pimentel, M.J.; Fatima Santiago, I.C.M.; Marie-Paule Willem, F.M.M.; and Jean Fedigan. The women leaders were part of a delegation to Rome with Catholic Extension, April 27.

Cover: iStock

FAITH IN FOCUS

40
FIGHTING COVID, FINDING COMMUNITY

What will we hold onto from the pandemic?

Jim McDermott, Kerry Weber, Joe Hoover, Molly Cahill

JESUIT SCHOOL SPOTLIGHT

46
SAVING 'BLESSED' LIVES

How can Catholic high schools address the mental health crisis?

Ryan Di Corpo

IDEAS

48
HOLY WHODUNITS

The moral mysteries of G.K. Chesterton, Agatha Christie and Ralph McInerney

Rachel Lu

BOOKS

51
City of Dignity; To Sanctify the World; Hello, Molly!; Sister Death; Vigil Harbor

The 2023 Foley Poetry Contest: Building a world and inviting us in

Joe Hoover

THE WORD

64
Dear Disciples of Christ: Fear No One
Victor Cancino

LAST TAKE

66
KEVIN HARGADEN
An Irishman on America's gun problem

POEM

63
LETTER TO MYSELF WHILE LEARNING TO READ
Laurinda Lind
The 2023 Foley Award winner

Why you should take your teens to Mass

In our May issue, Sherry Antonetti wrote about the challenge she faces as a mother when taking her teenagers to Mass. She described her children as “resistant to the Catholic faith” but explained that she makes a point of bringing them anyway. “My hope is that, over time, by attending Mass they will find something there that speaks to them,” she wrote. Her reflection drew dozens of comments from our readers.

Thank you, Sherry, for this article! I want to send it to my adult sons with great hope they would read it and hear my voice in it. So heartfelt and well said!

Jean Eakins

One of the best gifts I have received is this message from you, Sherry. God bless you for speaking what is in each mother’s (and grandmother’s) heart as we observe the presence of children in our Mass. Please continue to speak your words.

Yolanda DeGuzman

Many of us have lived this. I have three boys who were altar boys. I also have a daughter. My children are in their 40s and 50s. Two don’t go to church at all. One has returned. One goes and brings his boys sometimes. As a young girl, my daughter heard, “If girls want to do something [at Mass], they can go down the hall and babysit.” So much to ponder. Thank you.

Kathleen Carpenter

Absolutely beautiful article! I will watch my judgmental self carefully. I would only add that I hope the church will also listen to your teens and reflect seriously on why they and so many young people are turning away.

Margaret Ehinger

Today’s young people listen to each other far more than to their parents. When they pay attention to the Catholic Church in the United States, they are apt to see hypocrisy about sex, barely disguised Trumpism and an un-Christian crankiness toward anyone who does not see their way.

Joseph Coyle

Every time I see a squirmy baby, toddler or teen, I remember that Jesus said, “Let the little children come unto me.” I think heaven will be filled with them. Therefore, if we want to be happy and comfortable in heaven, we had better get used to being with them in church. We should welcome them to prepare for heaven.

Lydia Isabel Bobes

Years ago, I was that teenager who wouldn’t go to Mass. One thing that piqued my interest was one of my Jesuit high school teachers playing a recording of “Jesus Christ Superstar” after having typed out all the lyrics. We sat in sophomore theology class, listened and read the words of the rock opera. All of a sudden, Jesus became much more interesting.

It seems to me that today the dramatic TV series “The Chosen” (available for free on an app in addition to streaming services) can in the same way raise awareness of what the Mass is all about: a real connection and relationship with Jesus, and our Lord’s invitation to make a world of justice and peace rooted in love. His mystical body, the church, serves everyone. We are the largest private provider of social services in the world.

Living the Catholic faith invites us to a great adventure full of meaning and significance, dignity and community.

Trying to help teens see the connections between Jesus, our Catholic traditions and the celebration of the Eucharist is challenging. Thanks for encouraging all parents and all of us wrestling with these matters.

Rick Malloy, S.J.

Sherry, I loved this article and thank you for writing it. We’re not in the teen years yet with our kids, but I will carry this message with me until then. And from now on I will go a little out of my way to make sure the teens or college kids home on break feel very welcome at Mass, no matter how they look or act.

Kristin B.

Nothing brings joy to my heart than yapping babies, squirming toddlers and bored teens. They demonstrate the humanity of church—and just maybe a smile or a wave will let them know they are welcome! They have a home in church. They let me know the church is alive!

Cathe Shoulberg



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The Hard, Slow Work of Changing Hearts and Minds

During his recent visit to Budapest, Hungary, Pope Francis called abortion “senseless” and “always a tragic defeat.” He hoped instead for a Europe “centered on the human person and on its peoples, with effective policies for natality and the family...whose different nations would form a single family that protects the growth and uniqueness of each of its members.”

But while praising Hungary’s pro-family policies, Francis also criticized “self-referential forms of populism.” In a challenge to Hungarian President Viktor Orban’s hostility toward migrants, he referred to St. Stephen, who as the first king of Hungary counseled his son to show favor not only to his own people, “but also to foreigners and all who come to you.”

In Catholic social teaching, reverence for the lives of refugees and migrants and reverence for the lives of the unborn spring from the same source. Yet in Hungary and across the world, political commitment to these values is dichotomized. Politicians who oppose abortion are more and more nationalistic, seeking power by demonizing those fleeing for safety across borders. They often reject a governmental role in supporting people who are marginalized and in need.

And politicians who reject such fear-mongering and support a robust social safety net usually march in lockstep to what Pope Francis describes as a “reductive concept of freedom.” They accept abortion without critique as a requirement of autonomy for women. These leaders insist that the only way to respect and care for women is to reject any proposal for legal protection of the unborn.

This incoherence presents a fundamental challenge to pro-life witness and political advocacy. As the United

States approaches the first anniversary of the Dobbs decision by which the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, the pro-life movement is still far from winning over the hearts and minds of our fellow citizens.

Many states have restricted abortion, which in the first six months after Dobbs resulted in 32,000 fewer abortions nationwide. Those laws have been extensively criticized for offering insufficient protections for women facing complicated pregnancies. And, as has been widely reported, the states with the most restrictive abortion laws also have far worse access to pregnancy care and higher maternal mortality rates than those that make abortion readily available.

One glimmer of hope, though less frequently reported, is that after Dobbs, more Republican-controlled states have accepted a federal provision to increase postpartum Medicaid coverage from 60 days to a full year, as was made possible by a Covid-19 relief bill passed in 2021. That effort is still ongoing in Texas, where initially the state Senate attempted to limit coverage to six months.

While any expansion of support for pregnant women and children is worth celebrating, the most visible pro-life efforts after Dobbs have been aimed not at improving maternal and infant health or reducing demand for abortion, but at restricting it as much as possible. At the same time, when abortion has been on the ballot as a referendum or as the key issue in a race, the pro-choice position or candidate has won again and again, even where the pro-life movement is robust.

The simplest explanation for this is that even voters who do not approve of abortion are skeptical of limiting it; many see such efforts as a partisan

grab for power rather than a commitment to moral principle. This view is only reinforced by the hypocrisy of politicians who stand up for the unborn but do not support necessary health care. Or politicians who argue that legal restrictions on abortion can build a culture of life but legal restrictions on assault weapons are doomed to fail and spell the end of liberty.

Though Americans have deeply complicated—and often self-contradictory—views about the legality of abortion and often support some restrictions, there is no clear majority support for the kind of sweeping abortion laws the pro-life movement is currently prioritizing. Given that lack of support, there is a temptation—the mirror image of the logic of *Roe* itself—to depend on the courts, as in recent efforts to rescind the longstanding F.D.A. approval of the abortion pill mifepristone. This approach sidesteps the hard, slow work of convincing fellow citizens that laws against abortion are both morally necessary and capable of being justly implemented.

Pro-lifers should reject such judicial gamesmanship. The fundamental holding of Dobbs was that abortion was never properly a constitutional matter and should have remained within the normal legislative power of states. Court restrictions on abortion would be immediately appealed, and the main political arena for abortion debates would once again be the nomination of Supreme Court justices.

While overturning *Roe* was the correct and necessary interpretation of the Constitution, the Supreme Court majority that did so is the product of decades of political effort, much of it unscrupulous and opportunistic. It is consequently deeply resented. There is every reason to expect that a

Founded in 1909

primarily judicial victory for abortion restrictions would result in swift reciprocal attempts to reshape the courts to restore and amplify Roe’s holding of a constitutional right to abortion.

But even more than the political backlash it would occasion, the debate over abortion can be “won” in the courts without advancing the moral case against it. And focusing on the courts abandons the responsibility pro-lifers bear for helping our fellow citizens embrace a full respect for human life. “*Evangelium Vitae*,” St. John Paul II’s encyclical on respect for human life, addresses this concern. The pope noted there are cases in democratic systems, “when it is not possible to overturn or completely abrogate a pro-abortion law,” that a pro-life elected official might “support proposals aimed at limiting the harm done by such a law and at lessening its negative consequences at the level of general opinion and public morality” (No. 73).

It is not possible in the United States today to fully overturn laws permitting abortion. This is true not only as a matter of counting votes and winning legislative elections, but even more because our society lacks the moral conviction that the unborn deserve protection in law. We have also struggled to demonstrate that we can implement those laws while justly protecting pregnant women. Rather than immediately seeking the most extensive judicial and legislative victories possible at whatever expense, pro-lifers need to work to show that opposition to abortion is part of a coherent moral vision and not mere political alignment with one side of the culture war. That is slower, harder work—because it is aimed at more lasting justice and peace.

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How do we enlarge the space of our tent? By unleashing the gifts of women.

Although I had attended Catholic school all my young life, I was never familiar with the concepts of synod, discernment and the diaconate. That was until last spring, when a friend invited me to her church for an event hosted by the group Discerning Deacons, which promotes an active discussion in the church about women and the diaconate. The event was titled “Hope, Change and the Catholic Church.”

It was a cold Sunday evening, the Oscars were on, and I did not feel like driving across the city. But this is a friend who always shows up for me, so I went.

Looking back on that evening, I believe it was the Holy Spirit who was nudging me to go. I had been feeling apathetic about my place in the church. My kids, who are now teens, had been asking difficult questions and I did not have good answers. They asked: “If God loves us all unconditionally, why doesn’t the church? Aren’t women and girls also made in the image of Christ?” And here is a question that stopped me in my tracks: “If we value one group over another, aren’t we enabling oppression against the second group?”

I attended the Discerning Deacons event with 700 other folks—men, women, teens, senior citizens, all looking for hope, professing their faith through song, prayer and sharing stories. We heard testimonies from women who have dedicated their lives to ministry and service in the church. One story really struck me. Casey Stanton, a co-director of Discerning Deacons and a woman with advanced degrees in divinity, felt called to serve in prison ministry. Because Ms. Stanton could not be ordained as a deacon in the Catholic faith, she was limited

in how much she could minister to the female prisoners. I couldn’t help but wonder: Who else is restricted in their ministry because of the limitations put on women?

Inspired by what I had witnessed, I went on a journey to learn more. I learned about St. Phoebe, a deacon and leader in the early church. St. Paul, in his Letter to the Romans, wrote: “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me.” (It should be noted here that some biblical scholars differ on the translation of the Greek word *diakonos* in Romans 16:1, and whether Phoebe should be described as a “deacon,” “minister” or “servant.” Writing for **America** in 2019, the theologian Micah D. Kiel noted, “The word *diakonos* occurs frequently in the New Testament to refer to anyone who serves other people.”)

Phoebe showed great faith and courage by answering the call to minister to the people of God at a time when Christians were persecuted for their beliefs. She reminds us that, at one time, there was a path for women who were called to serve and lead in the early church.

I have also learned that the act of talking about restoring women to the diaconate need not be controversial—there is no need to whisper or look over our shoulders when we mention it. Pope Francis and the U.S. bishops have asked us to participate in a synod where the theme of women’s leadership and ministry has emerged as a key issue around the world. Engaging in these conversations is exactly what we are being called to do. We are called to

pray, listen and discern what the Holy Spirit is telling us.

Although the act of talking about women and the diaconate is not controversial, the content of the discussion is not without controversy. There is disagreement among scholars over whether the historical roles of male and female deacons were different from one another, based on the pragmatic, local needs of the communities.

One member of the commission Pope Francis appointed in 2020 to study the ordaining of women as deacons, Catherine Brown Tkacz, argued in the French academic journal *Revue d’Histoire Ecclésiastique* in 2013 that the ordination rites for women in the early church are evidence that they were “ontologically different” from those for male deacons—and she made a point of using the term “deaconess” in her work. But other scholars, including the highly respected author and professor of religion Phyllis Zagano, argue that women were ordained to the diaconate in rituals identical to those used to ordain men to the diaconate, and that they shared similar ministerial roles of preaching, charity and service.

“They anointed ill women; they brought communion to ill women,” Ms. Zagano said in an interview with **America** in 2019, adding that “the ordination ceremonies [we discovered] for women deacons were identical to the ordination ceremonies for men.”

The fact that these historical questions have not been answered to the satisfaction of all should not be a reason for us to close the door on the discussion of a single, sacramental, permanent diaconate for both women and men. Synodality invites us to lean in to the tensions we encounter in community with the trust that it is in



these tensions that the Holy Spirit can be the most creative.

The movement for restoring women to the diaconate is steeped in love and faith, not activism or anger. It is not just a “women’s issue” but a human issue. It is a movement born of us asking, “What are the special gifts women possess that could lead to a more inclusive, loving, transformative church?”

Reflecting back on my own times of grief—miscarriage, a cancer diagnosis, loss of a parent—I can’t help but wonder what it would have felt like to be ministered to by an ordained deacon who has experienced the joys and sorrows of being a woman, a daughter and a mother. I think about my Gen Z daughters and wonder if they would be more engaged participants in liturgy and sacraments if they could see their life experiences reflected in the

preaching of the Gospel and in the leadership of the church.

St. Phoebe will be commemorated on her feast day, Sept. 3. This year, Discerning Deacons is inviting Catholic parishes, schools and other institutions to celebrate during the entire month of September by collectively praying for the synodal church and bearing witness to women’s diaconal gifts for ministry.

I invite you to listen to what the Holy Spirit is whispering to you. Maybe it’s a nudge, maybe it’s a shove. How can we, the people of God, enlarge the space of our tent? By unleashing the diaconal gifts of women.

—
Katie Owens Mulcahy is a Chicago-based volunteer organizer for Discerning Deacons, a grassroots organization whose mission is to engage Catholics in the active discernment of women in the diaconate.



*In a historic move, Pope Francis has given women the right to vote at the synod on synodality, which opens in October. Find out more at americamagazine.org and in future issues of **America**.*

*Also visit our website at americamagazine.org/topic/women-church for more coverage of the debate over whether the Catholic Church should ordain women to the diaconate, as well as articles and podcast episodes on the wider topic of leadership roles for women in the church. And see the special “Women in the Church” issue of **America** dated October 2021.*

YOU SAY YOU WANT AN OUTDOOR WEDDING?

What Baltimore learned after changing a longstanding rule

Ben and Katharine Volker wanted a Catholic wedding. But they faced a logistical challenge. Their reception, to be held at Baltimore's American Visionary Arts Museum, was slated to take place late in the day; the only option for a church ceremony would have left their guests with several hours of downtime.

Unsure what to do, the couple remembered attending another wedding at a nearby hotel. Even though the ceremony took place outside a church, a priest had served as the celebrant. Perhaps their ceremony could also be held at their venue while maintaining the religious components that were so important to them?

Graduates of Catholic schools and active in their local parish, Mr. Volker, who works in sales, and Dr. Volker, a pediatric psychologist, said that it was important to them and their families that their wedding be recognized by the Catholic Church. Which is why they were grateful for a change made by church officials in Baltimore five years ago that permits priests to celebrate weddings in places other than churches and chapels, a still relatively rare practice in

the United States.

"That let us have the timeline for the day that we wanted while still preserving the Catholic aspect, which was important to us," Dr. Volker told **America**.

In 2018, the Archdiocese of Baltimore announced that it would launch a three-year trial period that permitted Catholics who wished to hold a wedding ceremony outdoors or in secular spaces to keep their special day sacred. Previously, as in most U.S. dioceses, Catholic weddings in Baltimore could ordinarily only take place in a church or chapel. With changing attitudes toward religion and the popularity of outdoor ceremonies growing, that meant fewer Catholic weddings.

The Rev. Steven Hook was one of a handful of priests in the archdiocese who initially pushed for the change. He told **America** that he had noticed the increasing numbers of young couples, even some with strong connections to their faith, choosing to get married outside the church.

"The younger generation is disenfranchised or disconnected," Father Hook said.



Weddings historically had served as an opportunity to “evangelize and re-engage” young couples, he said, but that chance was being lost when brides and grooms bypassed the church altogether when planning their ceremony.

Father Hook said he had heard of couples who were not opposed to a Catholic wedding but who preferred to exchange vows outdoors, perhaps along the nearby Chesapeake Bay, at a beloved family home or even in the same venue that would host the reception. He felt the church was losing an opportunity to engage with these couples.

“They never even called the church to inquire,” he noticed.

Data backs up Father Hook’s observations. More than 425,000 couples married in the church in 1969. By 2014, even though the population of Catholics had increased significantly, that number was down to about 148,000. During the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, it fell even further, to under 100,000.

Diane Barr, the chancellor of the Baltimore Archdiocese, said the change in policy has been greeted with en-

thusiasm by many priests and married couples. She noted that couples who invite a priest to celebrate a sacramental wedding in a secular space are still required to attend wedding preparation classes, known colloquially as pre-Cana, providing touchpoints with the church. And the policy grants couples greater flexibility when planning what can be a stressful day.

“It’s been really successful,” Dr. Barr said, pointing to a survey undertaken after the first year of the pilot program. “Some priests indicated that they brought entire families back” to the church after the wedding.

According to data provided by the archdiocese, in the first four years since the policy was enacted, the number of Catholic weddings taking place at venues outside a Catholic parish ranged from about 14 percent of all weddings in 2018—170 requests out of 1,200 total—to 31 percent in 2021.

Like other Catholic dioceses, the church in Baltimore continues to see a dip in the total number of weddings. There were more than 1,500 in 2011; the number has dropped nearly every year since then, down to 833 in 2022, according to data from the archdiocese. But supporters of the change said the goal is not necessarily to boost the number of Catholic weddings but to work with young couples to help them live out their faith on an important day.

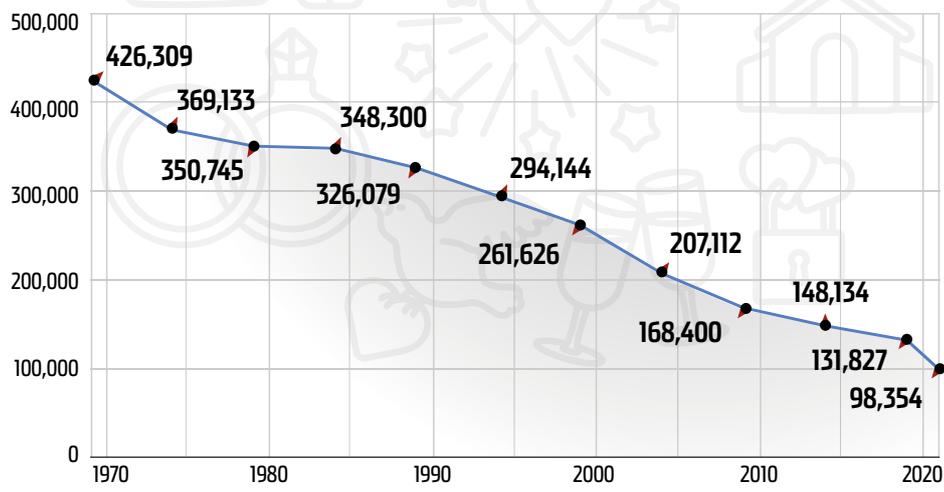
The Rev. Joshua Laws has seen firsthand how the change has affected weddings. The pastor of the Catholic Community of South Baltimore, a consortium of three merged parishes, Father Laws said he celebrates about three dozen weddings each year—and that half now regularly take place outside a parish.

When a couple approaches him, Father Laws said, they first discuss the venue. If the archdiocese has previously granted permission for a Catholic wedding to take place there, the process moves ahead seamlessly.

If the location is new, the pastor gathers information about the venue and writes a letter to church officials. Sometimes the request is straightforward, like when a couple wishes to be married in the chapel of a Catholic university. At other times, it can be more complicated, such as a backyard wedding or a ceremony in a public park. Weather-related contingencies must be taken into account; the location must be reverent in nature—which means no bars or amusement parks—and because of church rules about parish boundar-

Covid-19 accelerates a historic decline in U.S. Catholic marriages

Catholic marriages in the United States have been in a steep decline since 1969, falling from 426,309 to 131,827 in 2019. The marriage numbers look even worse when you factor in a substantial increase in the U.S. Catholic population during that time frame—from about 48 million in 1970 to 67 million in 2022. Though its impact may be short-lived, the Covid-19 pandemic was a particularly unwelcome wedding guest, accelerating the fall of Catholic marriage celebrations to 98,354 in 2021, a 25 percent drop from the figure reported in 2019.



Source: The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University, which until 1995 released data on sacraments in the United States once every five years.

ies, weddings at sea are out of the question. But in nearly all instances, the archdiocese approves the requests.

“There’s more paperwork that we have to do, but in my experience, it’s really been worth it,” Father Laws said.

The ceremonies usually include music, readings from Scripture, the exchange of vows, prayer and a short reflection from the priest. Wedding Masses are not permitted outdoors, but the wedding ceremony itself is still sacramental.

Father Laws said couples trying to navigate faith complexities with family and friends might not want to hold their wedding inside a church. The opportunity to have a sacramental marriage elsewhere can alleviate anxieties.

“There are a ton of people who just don’t feel comfortable in church buildings, for a lot of reasons,” he said. “So couples choose to get married outside of the church building, thinking it’s going to be more welcoming to all of their guests.”

Sometimes, seeing a priest at a wedding site that is non-traditional, at least in Catholic practice, prompts guests to reconsider their views.

“My experience has been that it helps people who are on the fence about [having a Catholic wedding] at least reconsider it,” Father Laws said. “Because I think one of the narratives out there is that the church is just bogged down with rules and obligations.” A priest’s presence, he said, challenges those notions and “encourages people to give the church another look.”

Father Laws said many of the venues where he has celebrated weddings over the past few years, while not necessarily sacred ground, have nonetheless felt sacramental,

whether because of the natural beauty, the witness couples provide to passersby or simply the ability to incorporate into the wedding a place special to the couple. He remembers one wedding, held at a hotel situated at the city’s inner harbor, with the water and skyline providing a stunning backdrop to the wedding of two Baltimore natives.

“They really love the city and they wanted their wedding to kind of be a way of blessing Baltimore,” Father Laws recalled. “As we’re listening to Scripture readings, listening to them exchange vows, you look out and see the whole city right there. It just made sense.”

Several people interviewed about the Baltimore policy said that word is still getting out. Jennifer Virts, a wedding planner with Moore & Co. Event Stylists in Baltimore, said that Catholic couples are often surprised when she tells them about the possibility for a ceremony to take place outdoors or at a non-church venue.

“We have had several couples come to us who want to get married in a Catholic ceremony but who also like the idea of getting married outside,” Ms. Virts said. “They’re a little torn.”

When she says that it is possible to do both, many couples proceed down that route. “A lot of our couples really like the idea that they can have the best of both worlds,” she said.

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

GOODNEWS: A new Catholic ministry brings the Eucharist to survivors of sexual abuse

In December 2018, the Archdiocese of Saint Paul-Minneapolis emerged from bankruptcy court. Over 450 plaintiffs had filed suits against the archdiocese over sexual abuse claims that went back as far as the 1940s. The archdiocese's reorganization was long and arduous.

At the time, Archbishop Bernard Hebda said, "Our efforts to reach out to those hurt by people in the Church is just beginning and will continue indefinitely, along with our core commitment of creating and maintaining safe environments for all."

A new ministry within the archdiocese is doubling down on that commitment. Since March, victims of sexual abuse in Saint Paul-Minneapolis who still wish to receive the Eucharist but find it too traumatic to enter a church can have the sacrament brought to them.

Paula Kaempffer is the outreach coordinator for restorative justice and abuse prevention for the Archdiocese of Saint Paul-Minneapolis, a position created just after the archdiocese emerged from bankruptcy. Ms. Kaempffer started organizing sexual abuse support groups soon after taking the post, but she said the results were initially not what she had hoped.

"We would get one or two [attendees], and then we would get none the next month, and then we would get one," she said. "Nobody was coming."

When the pandemic hit, Ms. Kaempffer moved the support groups online, and suddenly she was seeing double-digit attendance. Survivors joined from across the United States to share their stories with other Catholics who still felt called to their faith, even after suffering harm at the hands of clergy.

"I know Covid isolated a lot of people, but it also brought together victim-survivors," Ms. Kaempffer said.

Among them was Deborah Schiessl. Ms. Schiessl had served as a minister helping to distribute Communion for years in her parish in Crystal, Minn. But that ended when she was sexually abused as an adult—a source of shame and self-doubt, she said, that pulled her away from her church.

"We actually switched parishes, and we moved, and I did not get involved at the new parish in any form of ministry, even though in my past I've done a lot of things with Bible study and confirmation and all that when my kids were little," she said.

The road to healing was a long one, Ms. Schiessl said. At



one point she ended up in one of the support groups run by Ms. Kaempffer and found a place of profound healing there. They realized quickly that they both had the same idea for a new eucharistic ministry of survivors serving survivors.

Many survivors of abuse, Ms. Kaempffer said, "still feel like they're Catholic to the core. But they cannot suffer inside the church, and they hunger for Eucharist."

In March, Ms. Schiessl and her husband made their first house call. "It was so healing for me because here's something Christ can still use me to do for these people," she said.

Ms. Schiessl said that she hopes initiatives like this can serve as a model for similar programs in other dioceses.

Financial compensation for survivors of abuse is "a demand for justice, and a demand that something is acknowledged," Ms. Schiessl said. "But then people need to look outside of that for healing."

Archbishop Bernard Hebda said in an email that he is "repeatedly humbled" by the inspiring work of these lay leaders. "While I had all too often heard survivors of abuse speak about both their hunger for the Eucharist and their struggles in returning to Mass, I repeatedly came up empty handed in trying to address this dilemma," he said.

"When I first heard the solution proposed by Paula Kaempffer and Debra Schiessl, a model based on having survivors minister to survivors, I recognized that they were light years ahead of me."

Christopher Parker, *O'Hare fellow*. Twitter: @cparkernews.

In Mexico, Jesuit human rights advocates targeted by Pegasus spyware

Santiago Aguirre winced upon seeing an email from Apple last December warning of a possible targeting by “state-sponsored attackers.”

The emails, first reported by The New York Times, prompted suspicions of spying by means of the infamous Pegasus spyware, which infiltrates smartphones and surreptitiously collects reams of sensitive information. They also provoked an eerie sense of déjà vu. Three staff members at Centro Pro, including Mr. Aguirre, were targeted with the same spyware in 2017.

“Five years later we’re waiting for justice and with these new espionage cases, it provokes enormous desperation and sadness,” Mr. Aguirre, Centro Pro’s director, told **America**. “It’s a demonstration of how the promises of change in Mexico have not been kept and how the army is out of control and represents a threat to human rights as always.”

Subsequent investigations by Citizen Lab, an academic research lab focused on the study of digital threats to civil society and high-level policy engagement located at the University of Toronto, confirmed the phones were in fact infected with Pegasus spyware—made by Israel’s cyberintelligence company, NSO Group, ostensibly to eavesdrop on terrorists and criminals. But governments around the globe—including many with questionable human rights records—have liberally deployed it against domestic opponents.

Mexico’s military, The Times reported, was NSO’s first customer and has been one of the most prolific users of Pegasus spyware since 2011. The military continues to target journalists and human rights and ecological defenders, focusing on critics of the army’s increased role in Mexican public security and accusations of human rights violations committed by soldiers, according to Mr. Aguirre.

“We have no doubts of the origins of these attacks,” he said. “Centro Pro has been a public voice criticizing militarization.”

Mexico was quick to embrace Pegasus at a time when the army was being called upon to crack down on drug cartels and criminal gangs. But the spyware has been used to target journalists, human rights advocates, environmental-



ists, opposition politicians and even activists proposing a soda tax to combat obesity.

“We all know everyone, including governors and mayors, has their systems for intervening in telephone calls,” said Javier Garza, a journalist and commentator in the northern city of Torreón. “That the Mexican state would take advantage of increasingly sophisticated espionage, too, shouldn’t be surprising.”

Mexico’s president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, promised to end such spying. But the spying on the Centro Pro shows it continuing—even as he publicly denies such practices exist. The revelations of spying by the military against the Centro Pro come at a critical time for Mr. López Obrador, who has turned to the army and navy to shoulder a broad suite of security and civic activities, ranging from public security tasks to building and operating airports to managing protected areas like national parks.

“López Obrador is already heavily surrounded by the army,” said Ilán Semo, a history professor at the Jesuit-run Iberoamerican University in Mexico City. “One of his fundamental pillars of support is precisely those who are violating human rights.”

Centro Pro has long been investigating Mexico’s most controversial human rights atrocities. Founded in 1968 by the Society of Jesus, the center has consistently confronted the Mexican military.



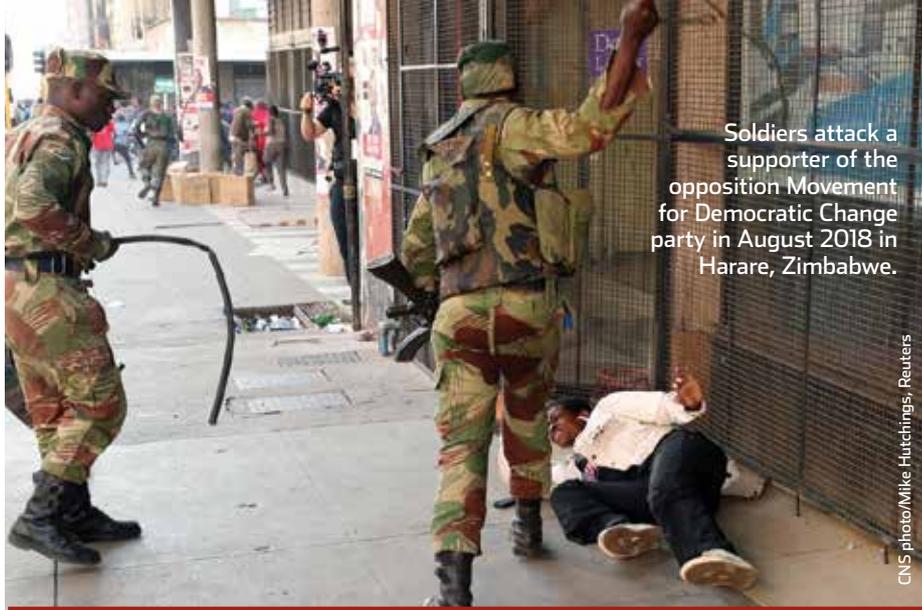
A procession in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, in July 2022 remembers loved ones who have been “disappeared.”

Photo credit: CNS photo/Jose Luis Gonzalez, Reuters

Lawyers from Centro Pro represented families of 43 students from the Ayotzinapa teachers’ college who remain missing and are presumed dead. The army has resisted all attempts to investigate its role in the events of Sept. 26, 2014, when the students were “disappeared,” after being abducted by police allegedly acting in cahoots with a drug cartel.

Citizen Lab found the phones at Centro Pro were infiltrated just as a group of independent experts was preparing a report on the Ayotzinapa attack. That analysis questioned the authenticity of evidence used in a government report on the crime and accused the military of non-cooperation.

David Agren has covered Mexico since 2005.
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Soldiers attack a supporter of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change party in August 2018 in Harare, Zimbabwe.

CNS photo/Mike Hutchings, Reuters

Zimbabwe bishops warn about political violence

Ahead of national elections that are expected to take place in July or August, the Catholic Bishops Conference of Zimbabwe has raised concerns about the potential for political violence in official statements. The bishops condemned “heinous violent crimes” after videos circulated in January of opposition political supporters being attacked by suspected supporters of the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front.

“As the nation heads towards the harmonized elections [votes will be cast for local as well as national positions], we urge all political players to desist from the use of violence and the use of young people to commit violent crimes,” the bishops said.

Zimbabwe has experienced a long history of attempts at voter intimidation during election season. Pro-democracy activists have deplored what they charge is the impunity of some of the alleged perpetrators who have been linked to the ruling party.

With millions of young people struggling to find work in Zimbabwe, politicians have been accused of recruiting unemployed youth to carry out violent attacks against opponents.

Zimbabwe’s bishops have taken an active role in promoting the nation’s civil society and in providing voter education campaigns. That activism has for years been greeted with suspicion by government officials, who charge that Catholic agencies cooperate with opposition forces to undermine the ruling party.

The bishops also raised concerns about the denial of the right to vote freely because of intimidation from ruling party activists and supporters who have rallied in the streets outside voting sites during elections. Those acts have resulted in disputed ballot outcomes for years.

In a speech on April 18, President Emmerson Mnangagwa vowed that the upcoming general elections would be free and fair. Mr. Mnangagwa, 80, who is seeking re-election this year, urged Zimbabweans to “say no to violence, before, during and after” the elections.

Despite Mr. Mnangagwa’s calls for peaceful political campaigns, violence against opposition political supporters has only escalated, raising concerns about the upcoming national elections and the president’s ability to rein in his supporters.

Marko Phiri reports from Bulawayo, Zimbabwe.



A Ministry of Human Fragility

Why I established a mental health office in the Diocese of Phoenix

By John P. Dolan



I am a bishop, but before anything else, I am a human being who understands the severe toll of mental illness, especially when it is left untreated. As a survivor of suicide loss, I have experienced firsthand the pains of mental illness in my own family. Having lost my brother, Tom, my sisters, Mary and Therese, and my brother-in-law, Joe, all through suicide, I understand the importance of finding some comfort in our church and the gift it brings to so many people within our parishes and families.

The truth is, when I had to survive some of these losses early in my life, the church was the only place of comfort for me. I relied heavily on the prayers and spiritual outreach of priests, women religious and deacons. I was blessed by their pastoral care. But there was a gap between the help they could provide as spiritual leaders and the deeper accompaniment I needed. This personal experience led me to establish the Office of Mental Health Ministry in the Diocese of Phoenix in 2022. With a focus on education, accompaniment and advocacy, the ministry aims to fill the gaps in our pastoral care and address in an intentional way mental health challenges in the modern world.

Through our program, volunteer facilitators, many of whom are deacons, are trained in the church's understanding of mental health and are educated on basic mental health first aid and literacy through a state-run program. They are supported by the director of the mental health ministry as they tend to the parishes in their designated areas. Our goal is to have at least one facilitator in each deanery. As facilitators of accompaniment in parishes, these trainees lead gatherings for those struggling with mental illness, survivors of suicide loss and those grieving the death of a loved one. Facilitators lead group discussions on growing through grief, help people find benchmarks of hope along the journey and ultimately help those suffering see that they are welcome within the family of the church.

The diocesan Office of Mental Health Ministry, which does not diagnose, prescribe or treat mental illness, ensures counselors and psychologists are state-licensed in order to refer people in need to professional treatment and guidance. The office also provides training for our clergy members, religious, deacons, parish ministers, school leaders and laypeople on the most current understanding of mental illness, preparing us as church to accompany those suffering from mental illness with confidence, understanding and pastoral care.

Our diocese's mental health ministry is based in individual or clustered parishes to help make sure the weight of this responsibility does not rest solely on the shoulders of the pastor. The ministry is motivated by the Gospel mandate to love through accompaniment. Certainly, those who struggle with depression,

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I have experienced firsthand the pains of mental illness in my own family.

anxiety, post-traumatic stress, scrupulosity and obsessive-compulsive disorder (just to name a few challenges) need continuous love and care from not only the priests, women religious and deacons but also from the wider parish community.

In his general audience on Jan. 4, 2023, Pope Francis addressed one of his favorite themes: spiritual accompaniment. Preferring the term “spiritual companion” to “spiritual director,” Francis encouraged those who seek to accompany others to embrace their own human fragility. “Woe to those people who do not feel fragile. They are harsh, dictatorial,” he said.

God chose to become one with us in our fragility. And through his own human fragility as Jesus Christ, he accompanies us. Sharing in Jesus’ divine mission, we accompany others with the knowledge that we are set apart but never above, because we are all fragile.

As a survivor of suicide loss, I have come face to face with this reality. As a bishop, I am not above anyone. Before anything else, I am a fragile companion; and by God’s grace, I am ministering to those who, like me, suffer.

Mental Illness in the Modern World

Imagine a mother of three struggling with depression and feeling guilty that she cannot do more for her children. Our mental health ministry’s method of accompaniment would involve inviting this mother to a parish gathering facilitated by a trained volunteer. Not only would the mother have a place to express her struggles and receive a referral to a professional, but, depending on the parish, she could also find accompaniment in the form of wraparound services: parish members bringing her meals, homework help for her children and additional community support to help lighten her burden in practical ways. This ministry is about the body of Christ coming together to support each of its

beloved members.

When we ourselves have not personally suffered from mental illness, it can be difficult to understand how someone could struggle so significantly or even consider taking their life, let alone go through with this act. Thus, our natural reaction is often one of misunderstanding and judgment. But I would like to propose another response, one that seeks to accompany, to understand and to uphold our brothers and sisters who are struggling with mental illness.

This proposal relies on current studies in the field of psychiatry. Thanks to advances in medical technology, including functional magnetic resonance imaging and other imaging techniques, we have been able to gain a greater understanding of the role the brain plays in mental illness. In many cases, the brain scans of those experiencing mental illness show frontal lobes that are not fully developed, holes in the brain that impede blood and oxygen flow to the organ, or some other physical impairment that directly or indirectly results in a mental disorder.

Such impairments can sometimes result from traumatic life experiences, environmental and genetic factors, and long-term infections or other illnesses in the body. Science is showing that impairment to the brain can cause depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder and personality changes, among other ailments. In other words, modern technology has helped us to understand that mental illness is truly that, an illness. Yet acknowledging struggles and dealing with mental illness has long been taboo within religious groups, including our own.

Many in our church have yet to embrace the immense benefits that medical and psychological treatments can bring in the lives of those who are suffering. Medication, therapy and other forms of treatment provided by trained professionals are gifts from the Holy Spirit, who is continually guiding both faith and science to the same end—God himself, who makes all things new. As church, we need to embody *aggiornamento*, or “bringing up to date,” when considering mental illness in the modern world.

The church has made efforts to deepen its understanding of mental illness. We saw this in 2018, when the California Catholic Conference of Bishops produced a document on caring for people with mental illness, called “Hope and Healing.” We see it in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, particularly Paragraphs 2282 and 2283, which remind us of three things: “grave psychological disturbances, anguish, or grave fear of hardship, suffering, or torture can diminish the responsibility of the one committing suicide”; “we should not despair of the eternal salvation of persons who have taken their own lives”; and “the Church prays for persons who have taken their own lives.” We also see this in the

Bishop John P. Dolan of Phoenix anointed individuals suffering from illness during the diocese's annual World Day of the Sick Mass on Feb. 4.

Brett Miesler/Diocese of Phoenix



change of church law, which now permits those who have died by suicide to have a Christian burial.

Relying on our theological and moral constructs of concupiscence and levels of culpability, accompaniment should begin with the premise that we are all disordered to some degree: theologically, psychologically, socially, physically, sexually, etc. No one is exempt from disorder. Each of us is morally disordered due to sin, but not everyone has a diagnosable mental health condition that requires medical treatment. And having such a disorder is not sinful. We all belong to the church, healthy or not. And each must attend to our own mental health, too.

While we may be called to a certain ministry, we must remember that we undertake it from that place of shared fragility. Mental health ministry, for example, is not primarily about “helping” others. Most importantly, it is about loving others and ultimately abiding in love, as Christ commands. When we focus only on healing others who struggle with mental illness, there may be a tendency to treat the other as a patient. In doing so, we fail to recognize the other as a valued member of the body of Christ, a true brother or sister in Christ.

Our diocese’s Catholic mental health ministry does not treat the person with a mental disorder with the same

methods a psychiatrist or psychologist could or would use. As ministers, we neither make a diagnosis nor prescribe a treatment for our family members or parishioners. Nor, after discovering the diagnosis and treatment, do we provide therapy. These are often good and necessary interventions, and we encourage people to seek these treatments. However, for legal reasons, our ministry must leave those forms of intervention to the professionals. Our ministry is meant to complement that treatment. For spiritual reasons, we walk with and accompany our brothers and sisters in Christ and, as far as possible, celebrate in prayer certain benchmarks of hope and gladness that our brothers and sisters have found in the church with our spirit of accompaniment.

Who Are We to Judge?

Our mental health ministry does not judge. Mental disorders come in various forms. Those who accompany others through this ministry should not assume that people with disorders can simply take a “mind over matter” approach to dealing with daily routines or facing life’s issues. Thinking, “If I can get this person to think rationally, willfully or even morally, then I will have done my job” is the wrong way to approach this important ministry. Judging a person based on one’s own reasoning or moral behavior puts the

The Dolan siblings in 1970: from left to right, Mary, Matt, John, Tom, Ceil, Steve, Therese, Christine. (Sean is pictured in the background.)



Courtesy of Bishop John Dolan

minister outside of the spirit of prayerful accompaniment.

For over 2,000 years, from Jesus to Pope Francis, the Gospel has called us to seek out the lost sheep and, as Pope Francis says, even acquire the smell of the sheep. We are all sheep. Reaching out to the peripheries and allowing those on the peripheries to touch us is the Gospel way, the communal way. It is a journey where those who abide in the heart, the bosom and the extremities walk together as one body of Christ. It is a journey of communion.

Made in God's image and likeness, we all have a certain unity and communion with God. Gabriel Marcel, a French Christian existentialist who passed away 50 years ago this October, often pointed to the Gospel of John, insisting that there is a certain "withness" embedded in our human essence. If, in the beginning, there was the Word and the Word was *with* God and the Word *was* God, we must conclude that to be made in God's image means, as Marcel says, "To be is to be with." Anything less is a sin, which in Greek means "missing the mark."

From this perspective, we must insist that our church, our parishes, our pastors and all who are one in Christ be inclusive. Still, our church continues to miss the mark when it comes to including others. For example, our parish churches have made great strides in addressing the requirements of the Americans With Disabilities Act. But beyond building ramps and retrofitting our restrooms, are we being proactive in using the gifts that people with physical restrictions and disabilities bring to our parishes? Are our holy water fonts and front pews accessible? Do we provide interpreters for those who are deaf and hard of hearing, allowing them to fully participate in the sacrifice of the Mass? Are lector, acolyte, and ministerial opportunities available for all? If "To be is to be with," are we not erring if we are concerned simply with compliance, attending only to the bare minimum?

In the realm of advocacy and politics, parishes are often charged up to vote no on abortion and physician-assisted suicide. But how effectively are parish communities accompanying those who are contemplating these hard decisions? State and national bishops' conferences have produced roadmaps toward such levels of accompaniment. While this is a step in the right direction, how many of our parishes are implementing these practices? If "To be is to be with," aren't we still missing the mark?

In the same way, when it comes to accompanying our

brothers and sisters in Christ who suffer from mental illness, too often we embrace merely the aspects of their stories that we are comfortable with. We avoid the very real parts of their hearts that we do not understand.

We tend to psychoanalyze a person struggling with mental illness, rather than simply tending to their needs. How often are we tempted to look back at a person who has committed suicide and think they must have been "crazy"? Perhaps they were highly intelligent but very depressed. We tend to judge the soul of the one who has taken their life. We over-spiritualize and over-moralize. We assume that the suffering person simply did not pray enough or, again, could have taken a "mind over matter" approach, when in reality they struggled with a brain-related issue.

I personally witnessed a pastor chastise a family at the funeral Mass of their child who had died by suicide. He told them if they had been going to Mass as they should have been, this never would have happened. This is missing the mark—egregiously so.

We often stand in judgment, falsely wondering why our brothers and sisters in Christ who struggle with mental illness are not trying harder to keep the course. But there are levels of culpability in our actions and decisions, and—we must recognize—those with severe mental health struggles have a different level of culpability than others. Mental illness is not a sin, and it does not disqualify them from our love, nor does it disqualify them from being held in high esteem by our perfect God.

I find Craig Rennebohm's book *Souls in the Hands of a Tender God* helpful. He writes:

Perhaps we need to ask what it means to be perfect as God is perfect. The perfection of God is not



Bishop John P. Dolan, center, announced the Diocese of Phoenix's new Office of Mental Health Ministry during a Dec. 13 press conference.

achieved by cutting out and throwing away whatever is spoiled or wrong or broken, wounded or damaged. The perfection of God is wholeness, a taking up of all that has happened and is, and including it as part of life, and working with it redemptively, so that even the worst of experiences, the most terrible and destructive events in our history, become part of an ongoing creation, ever renewed. The perfection of God is inclusive. The perfection of God is all about a love that nothing can deny. God's love and care for our souls is a gift, freely offered, no matter who we are or what we have done. It is the denial of God's grace to the suffering and struggling that is abhorrent to God.

This call to love and be loved in totality goes to our core and responds perfectly to Jesus' invitation to "abide in my love, so that you may have joy and your joy may be complete." This is hitting the mark.

Notice that Jesus does not say to abide in his heart. To abide in his heart is to rest in him, to become part of him. While this is where we begin, resting in Jesus is not enough. We must abide in his love, an active Christian love. We must go beyond abiding in his heart.

A heart, even his Sacred Heart, is meant for pumping. Like blood that is sent from the heart to the extremities, we

are sent forth to actively abide in his love, accompanying saints and sinners, the healthy and the sick, and to attend to those who are oppressed. All the while, we must recognize that we ourselves are sometimes holy, sometimes sinful, sometimes healthy and sometimes sick and oppressed. We, too, are in need of the Great Physician.

Because of our great need for grace, we always return to rest with the Lord for a while—but only to be sent out again. All along the way, we abide in his love.

As a priest, I have been touched and transformed by many people whom I first sought to comfort. This sense of Gospel journey is a two-way street. The more I give of my time to others in need, the more I am rewarded by love in return. As I am sent forth from the heart of Jesus once again to foster the mental health ministry of the Diocese of Phoenix, I know that in my own fragility and imperfections, I am called to accompany fragile and imperfect people in this imperfect world in an imperfect way. But I also know that as long as we abide in his love, our God who makes all things new will perfect our journey along the way.

The Most Rev. John P. Dolan is bishop of the Diocese of Phoenix.

THE EARTH'S BELOVED COMMUNITY

What does it mean to believe in an ecological God?

By Elizabeth A. Johnson

Picture the Earth as seen in familiar photos taken from space. There it spins, a beautiful blue marble, wrapped in swirling white clouds, luminous against the black background of endless space. We humans live here, as do millions of other species on and under the solid land, in the fresh and salty waters, and in the air above our heads. In fact, this is the only place where life exists, as far as we know to date.

From here we can look out and see other places, planets and stars as our ancestors did, and now with amazing new telescopes, we can see ancient galaxies, billions and billions of them. Perhaps some day creatures from Earth will live elsewhere. But for now and always, Earth is our home planet.



The awful, undeniable reality we face today is that Earth is in trouble. Due to human action and inaction, the planet is warming. Severe droughts, wildfires, floods and storms are wreaking havoc. Hundreds if not thousands of species are rapidly becoming extinct. The resulting damage disrupts the lives of ever more millions of people, among them those who become climate refugees. Efforts to care for the Earth are multiplying, as seen in everything from international agreements to individual lifestyle choices. These efforts, however, face fierce opposition from political and financial forces. And we cannot underplay indifference.

Amid this dangerous and complex scene, what can reli-



gions bring to the table? Since religious traditions at their best are bearers of wisdom about ultimate meaning and lay out a roadmap for how to live a good life, most of the world's religions have resources that can nurture ecological care. Pope Francis put his finger on this in his 2015 encyclical, "Laudato Si': Care for Our Common Home":

I would like from the outset to show how faith convictions can offer Christians, and some other believers as well, ample motivation to care for nature and for the most vulnerable of their brothers and sisters.... It is good for the world at large when we

believers better recognize the ecological commitments which stem from our convictions [No. 64].

In other words, beliefs have consequences and should count for something in the practical order.

Christianity, along with other monotheistic faiths, holds dear the belief that one living God created and loves the whole world. This conviction holds revolutionary potential to motivate care for the Earth. Yet it has not led many Christians to do so in a noticeable way until recently.

An intriguing story about the 19th-century naturalist John Muir highlights the problem. One day, when Muir



was hiking in the Yosemite wilderness, he came upon a dead bear and stopped to reflect on this creature's dignity. Here was an animal with warm blood and a heart that pumped like ours, one who was glad to feel the warm sun on his fur and for whom a good day was finding a bush filled with berries. Later Muir wrote a bitter entry in his journal criticizing the religious folk he knew who made no room in their faith for such noble creatures. They think they are the only ones with souls, he complained, the only ones for whom heaven is reserved. To the contrary, he wrote, "God's charity is broad enough for bears."

Is it? Are black bears, panda bears, polar bears, golden bears loved by the Creator to the extent that in their suffering and death they are affected by God's redeeming power? If so, where does that place us humans in the divine scheme of things? Taking the side of the bears, I would argue that we humans need to rethink our relationship with nature. We need to change from thinking we are "masters of the universe" to realizing we are kin with bears and all other living beings in a beloved community of creation.

I will explore this issue in three points: first, the reality of the community of creation; second, a powerful obstacle to grasping that we are part of it; and third, remedies to remove the obstacle. I offer these probes into an ecological

theology not with the expectation that all will necessarily agree, but in the hope these thoughts will stimulate our thinking about the sacred importance of the natural world, to practical and critical effect.

Our Shared Inheritance

As life has evolved on Earth, it has taken shape in millions of species of dazzling variety— including the human species—all interacting with the land, water and air of different ecosystems. As the nature writer Annie Dillard says, "The creator loves pizzazz."

The process of evolution can explain how species took shape in the course of time. But the fact that they exist at all does not explain itself. From ancient times people facing the vulnerability, fierceness and wonder of life have had the sense that there is more here than meets the eye. As biblical faith sees it, the world's existence is due to the gift of an infinitely generous creator. This incomprehensible mystery—whom people call God—is sheer, exuberant aliveness, an overflowing wellspring of being without origin, limitation or end. In creating the world, the living God freely gives a share in that aliveness to others who are not divine. And they all receive it with creaturely flair.

Ordinarily, mention of God creating the world takes



The living God continuously creates.

our minds back to the origin of things, as in the Book of Genesis 1:1: “In the beginning.” People often assume, while never explicitly saying so, that from this initial spark everything rolls along on its own. It is almost as though the Creator’s rest on the seventh day extends into a long retirement. What gets overlooked, in this shortsighted view, is the truth that creation is ongoing. The living God continuously creates.

Without this largesse, there would be no world at all. Everything would collapse into unimaginable “no-thing.” One striking metaphor from the British philosopher Herbert McCabe, O.P., puts it this way: The Creator “makes all things and keeps them in existence from moment to moment, not like a sculptor who makes a statue and leaves it alone, but like a singer who keeps her song in existence at all times.” Creation as a continuous, in-person, live performance!

Trying to understand this, the 13th-century theologian Thomas Aquinas wrote words that still resonate:

God is in all things; not, indeed, as part of their essence...but as an agent is present to that upon which it works.... Now since the essence of God is to exist, created being must be the proper effect of God’s action, as to ignite is the proper effect of fire. Now God causes this effect in things not only when they first begin to be, but as long as they are preserved in being, as the sun causes light in the air as long as the air remains illuminated. Therefore as long as a thing has being, God must be present to it...and innermosty.

The way a flame sets other things on fire, the Creator continuously sparks all things into being. The way the sun makes the air bright, the Creator shines on the world and brings all its creatures into their own existence. This is the basic meaning of creation. An ongoing, life-giving relationship between the Creator and creature marks the deepest identity of the world.

In the biblical view, why this should happen at all is due to one reason: love. The Book of Wisdom figures it this way: “For you love all things that exist, and detest none of the things that you have made, for you would not have fashioned anything if you had hated it” (Wis 11:24-25). Pope Francis draws on this idea in “Laudato Si” when he writes that creation is a gift “in which every creature has its own value and significance” (No. 76). “Even the fleeting life of the least of beings is the object of God’s love, and in its few seconds of existence, God enfolds it with affection”

(No. 77), he continues. Commentators note that here Francis may well have had mayflies in mind. These little insects live for only a few hours after they hatch, during which they must find a mate and lay eggs, and then they die. So ephemeral. But enfolded with affection; as are we all.

The continuous, creating presence of the living God receives another coloration when we realize that the world is not finished. For 13.8 billion years the universe has been unfolding with galaxies and their stars forming, merging, breaking apart, shaping something new. On our own planet, evolution keeps bringing forth “endless forms most beautiful,” to use Darwin’s lovely phrase. Nature is seeded with promise, pregnant with surprise. But the cost is high. The history of life is a history of pain and suffering. Death is deeply structured into the creative advance of life which arises in the midst of perpetual perishing.

If we ask where God is in the midst of this trouble, bedrock biblical faith answers “here,” in solidarity with creatures crushed by pain and death. The Creator spirit is present amid suffering with the intent to heal, redeem and liberate. The Apostle Paul wrote that while all creation is groaning like a woman in labor, one day “the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom 8:21). In creating the world, God is present here and now to each creature, loving each into existence and promising its future. When trouble comes, God does not abandon the beloved creature. As the Australian theologian Denis Edwards mused in flowing language in a 2006 essay:

The Creator Spirit is with creatures in their finitude, death and incompleteness, holding each in redemptive love, and is in some way already drawing each into an unforeseeable eschatological future.... The Spirit is with each creature now, with every wild predator and prey and with every dying creature, as midwife to the unimaginable birth in which all things will be made new.



Things fall apart. There is hope for the future. “I will be with you” is the proper name of the Creator of Heaven and Earth.

Hence, from a God’s-eye point of view, human beings do not stand alone as the end-all and be-all of the world. Rather, together with all other creatures, they form one beloved community of creation. We too receive our life as a gift from the overflowing love of God and exist in reliance on that gift, with hope that this same God will be faithful even in our death. In this light, precisely as creatures, we humans have more in common with other species than what separates us. As creatures we are kin with the bear, the squid, the raven and the bugs. In the lovely words of “Laudato Si’,” “we are not disconnected from the rest of creatures but joined in one splendid universal communion” (No. 220).

It is one of the blessings of our age that scientific study reaches a similar conclusion by its own distinctive methods. We humans are an intrinsic part of the evolutionary network of life on this planet, which in turn is a part of the solar system, which itself formed out of the debris of older exploding stars in the Milky Way, which formed sometime after the flaring forth of the Big Bang. The British scien-

tist Arthur Peacocke captures our physical relatedness in a striking example. Why is our blood red like the blood of other mammals? Because of iron. “Every atom of iron in our blood would not be there had it not escaped from the explosion of a red supergiant billions of years ago, and then condensed to form the iron in the crust of the earth from which we have emerged.”

The landscape of our imagination expands when we realize that human connection to nature is so deep that we can no longer define our identity without including the great sweep of cosmic history and our shared genetic inheritance with other organisms in the evolutionary history of life. There is but one community of life on Earth. In scientific terms, there is one biosphere. In theological terms, there is one community of creation. Everything is connected to everything else, and we all flourish and wither together.

Obstacles

There are many reasons why we humans have lost this sense of communion with our kin. One is our undoubted abilities of intellect and will. We have the capacity to think symbolically and to express thoughts in verbal language.



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Nature is seeded with promise, pregnant with surprise.

We ask questions. We invent things. We comfort and heal. We rape and kill. We have the capacity for the most profound self-giving love as well as the capacity for self-delusion and for acts of barbaric evil.

Given these abilities, it has become common in religious and secular thought of the modern era to think of human beings as standing apart from the natural world rather than being an interwoven part of it. Here I will zero in on one factor for separation that has been particularly toxic in the realm of theology: the “hierarchy of being.” The back story is interesting.

When early Christianity spread around the Roman empire, it came into contact with a version of Greek philosophy which taught that the world is composed of two elements: matter and spirit, or body and soul/mind. Since divinity is pure spirit, philosophers reasoned that the more spirit a being possesses, the more godlike it is, and the closer to the divine; the more matter, the further away. Philosophy used this schema to rank the inhabitants of the world according to a hierarchy of being.

At the bottom was non-living material, like rocks; higher up were plants (they are alive and germinate seeds), then animals (they have locomotion). Highest on Earth

were humans (with rational soul and body); even higher were angels (pure spirits with no body). From the pebble to the peach, to the poodle to the person, to the principalities and powers! Instead of a circle of kinship, this model structures the world as a pyramid with humans at the pinnacle of earthly creation.

Theology drew on this framework to teach that humans—with our superior spirit—rightly rule over plants and animals. In technical terms, they had instrumental rather than intrinsic value “in God’s eyes” (note these words). Consequently, at the end of the world, plants and animals will disappear. Since their purpose is to provide for our needs, once human life on Earth is over—when we no longer need them for food, clothing, shelter, muscle power—their goal will have been fulfilled. They will cease to exist.

Today, feminist thinkers complexify this picture by noting how this hierarchy was turned inward, even on the human race itself. It credited men with having more spirit than women. Men, possessed of reason and ability to act, are more like deity than women, identified with emotion and their changing bodies that bleed and bring forth life, like Mother Earth itself. Hence women are by nature subordinate to men, who by virtue of their superior spirit are equipped to rule; a rule that, I would note, can turn violent and exploitative with little compunction.

This same hierarchy of being turned even more vicious in the 15th and 16th centuries, when Europeans began their vigorous exploration of other lands. Thinkers in that aggressive, entrepreneurial culture took human superiority to mean that explorers had the right to exploit the minerals, forests and animals in other lands for profit. Even more malicious was the support this framework gave to white European men’s idea of their own supremacy when they encountered African and Indigenous peoples. By assign-



The loss of a species should strike us as if our own body had been wounded.

ing to people of color souls of lesser quality with inferior intelligence, by identifying them more with bodiliness, by seeing them closer to animals than to humans, Europeans thought they had the right to conquer, transport and enslave millions of human beings for profit. Church teaching, given its commitment to the hierarchy of being, had little to offer by way of resistance to the devastating disruption of whole communities and individual lives. And the terrible, racist results of slavery continue to this day.

I find it daunting to realize how deeply the hierarchy of being and its anthropology of the elite white male has made its way into the DNA of Christian thought and spirituality. Not only has it prevented equality and justice in the human community; but with its conviction that humans are rulers over nature, it also opened the door to centuries of unbridled exploitation of the natural world. The lack of concern on the part of many Christian people for the devastation of the Earth in our own day can be traced in part to the ongoing influence of this idea. If other creatures are less valuable in God's eyes, why should we bother?

Antidotes

There is a thought experiment that may begin to introduce sobriety to minds drunk on human supremacy. It has to do with trees. In the hierarchy of being, humans rank above trees. When humans breathe, we inhale oxygen and exhale carbon dioxide. In the presence of the sun, trees do the opposite. They take in carbon dioxide and release oxygen. Their photosynthesis is largely responsible for producing the oxygen content of the Earth's atmosphere. Take away trees, and humans would suffocate. Take away humans, and trees would do just fine; probably better, for we would not be cutting them down. Who needs who more? Which is more valuable? By what criterion?

In the arena of faith, I think one of the best antidotes to human hubris is a robust creation theology. The radical language of conversion comes into play here. It is being used by theologians, popes and spiritual writers to emphasize the magnitude of the challenge. We need to turn, change our hearts, reset our minds, strike out in a new direction and—in a way that might sound strange to religious ears—be converted to the Earth as one beloved community of creation.

Calling for this conversion and drawing on a robust creation theology, "Laudato Si" criticizes the humans-at-the-pinnacle view as "inadequate" and frankly "wrong." Pope Francis recognizes that he is contributing something new to Catholic teaching by insisting that "we are called to recognize that other living beings have a value of their own in God's eyes" (No. 69). He continues forthrightly: "In our time the Church does not simply state that other creatures are subordinate to the good of human beings, as if they had no worth in themselves and can be treated as we wish." Rather, "They have an intrinsic value in God's eyes independent of their usefulness to us" (No. 140).

Note the very deliberate language that challenges the hierarchy of being. And why? Because God loves them, even the little mayflies. This leads to a radical claim: "[T]he final purpose of other creatures is not to be found in us. Rather, all creatures are moving forward, with us and through us, towards a common point of arrival, which is God" (No. 83).

Almost with agony, "Laudato Si" applies this view of the community of creation to the ongoing catastrophe of the extinction of species. When a species goes extinct, it disappears forever. Given that evolution requires passing on genes from one generation to the next, it will never come back. While death means the end of life for the individual, extinction means the death of birth itself for a species and damage to all the other creatures in the ecosystem with which it is interrelated. In view of the community of creation, "Laudato Si" declares, "God has joined us so closely to the world around us that we can feel the soil drying out into desert almost as a physical ailment, and the extinction of a species as a painful disfigurement" (No. 89).

What an extraordinary idea. The loss of a species should strike us as if our own body had been wounded, or as if we ourselves had lost a limb.

In clear language, Francis rolls the community of creation all the way to the ultimate future. "At the end, we will find ourselves face to face with the infinite beauty of God." He is describing heaven, which is of course indescribable. Enfolded with affection, we humans will not find ourselves

alone, for the whole universe will also be present, “which with us will share in unending plenitude.” Indeed, “eternal life will be a shared experience of wonder, in which each creature, resplendently transfigured, will take its rightful place” (No. 243). Will I see my dog in heaven? Here is the answer. We cannot imagine this, but Francis is drawing out the logic of belief in God the Creator.

Some years ago, while teaching in South Africa, I gave a public lecture on this very biblical idea that all creation will be redeemed. I had just visited the great Kruger National Park and been deeply moved by seeing Africa’s marvelous animals roaming in the wild, so I departed from my prepared text to say that lions, hippos, giraffes, impala, wildebeest, storks—the whole lot—had a blessed future in store. The local Catholic newspaper disagreed. It ran an article critical of my talk under the headline “Salvation Even for Elephants?”

Whyever not? The Creator is not a throwaway God. We humans do not stand alone as subjects of divine love. In the community of creation we all share the core identity of being beloved creatures. For all our human difference as a species, this shared identity makes us kin with the land, sea and sky, and with the skunks, seagulls, salmon, spiders and sequoias. One day all of us creatures will be at home in the beauty of God, just as now in time our common home is the Earth. As a deliberate religious teaching, this conviction has profound ethical implications.

Expanding the Repertoire of Our Love

Our times urgently require that we humans develop an ecological sense of ourselves in tune with belief in an ecological God. In light of our common creator we need to expand our sense of identity to include relationship with other creatures, the land, waters and air, all creation itself. Once we have truly appreciated the life of “the other,” we arrive at a new starting point for decision-making. Then we can begin to change some of the deep-seated behaviors that are driving environmental destruction as well as our world’s galloping poverty, the deity of the market and our cultural despair. Humbled and delighted by the life around us, we can begin to hear the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor and step up to protect our kin.

James Michener, in a story told in his novel *The Source*, makes the point in its own way. As he tells it, in pre-biblical days people living in a Canaanite village in the Middle East worshiped a god who demanded human sacrifice, including the lives of firstborn sons, in order to ensure the ongoing fertility of crops. A young woman named Timna who had recently given birth loved her baby son fiercely and could

not accept that he had to die. She pleaded desperately with her husband, protested and argued vigorously, to no avail. On a given day, amid great public ceremony, her husband walked to the altar and handed the infant over to the priests, who tumbled the little bundle into the flames. Months later, still consumed with grief, Timna attended another community ceremony. “And while others celebrated she walked slowly homeward, seeing life in a new and painful clarity: with different gods her husband Urbaal would have been a different man.”

With different gods her husband would be a different man. The spiritual wisdom in this fictional woman’s insight is profound.

Imagine a continuous, public understanding of the living God as passionate creator, lover and redeemer of the Earth and all its creatures—human beings among them. Imagine that people of faith pray, preach, teach, repent, lament, celebrate, praise and act responsibly so as to do justice to the heart of the living God who pours out love on all human beings as well as on the soil, the waters and the air, and every little bird that falls to the ground, as Jesus said.

With a different God, the people of God would be a different people. Then the moral law to love your neighbor as yourself would include the bat and the bee; then the prayer to “have mercy on us,” would expand to include not only “us” sinning, suffering human beings but also the whole struggling community of life of which we are a part; then action on behalf of social justice and ecojustice would flow as an intrinsic part of Christian living, not something added on.

Ignoring this view keeps people of faith and their churches, synagogues, temples and mosques locked into irrelevance while a terrible drama of life and death is being played out in the real world. By contrast, being converted to the Earth as members of the community of creation sets us off on a great adventure of mind and heart, and expands the repertoire of our love.

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DOES CHATGPT HAVE A SOUL?

A conversation on Catholic ethics and A.I.

By Michael Burns and Joseph Vukov



ChatGPT began making headlines at the end of 2022. Part of the quest for artificial intelligence, ChatGPT uses a technique called machine learning to churn out novel strings of text in response to a user's command. The technology is not completely new. Ever use autocomplete when drafting an email or text to a friend? That's A.I., too. Yet the emergence of ChatGPT has struck many as something of a different order and has led to a tsunami of developments in A.I., a tsunami that shows no signs of subsiding any time soon.

These new forms of A.I.—and the sheer rate of their development—raise exciting possibilities for the future. They also raise pressing ethical and philosophical questions that must be addressed by Catholics and, for that matter, all people of good will. These questions can be clustered into three sets: those concerned with the development of A.I.; those concerned with our ethical use of A.I.; and those concerned with the nature of A.I.

Below we interview Blake Lemoine, a software engineer, primarily about the last set of questions. Before turning to that interview, however, a brief word on the first two sets of questions.

A.I. development. Machine learning works by feeding vast quantities of data to computer algorithms through a

process called training. Training could involve feeding an algorithm images, text, statistics or something else—it depends on what you are training the algorithm to do. The algorithm's job is to find patterns in the data (repeated faces, grammatical turns of phrase, regularities in a set of data, etc.), transform them in some way and present those patterns back to the user—to create order from chaos. The problem is that any order that is created inevitably reflects the flaws of the material used in its construction. Build a house with rotten two-by-fours, and you get a shaky house. Construct an essay out of rotten text, and the essay will be likewise shaky.

One of the most difficult problems that comes with training is a phenomenon called A.I. bias. The idea is simple: Feed an algorithm biased data, and it churns out biased products. A.I. bias is obviously problematic, but it can creep in unnoticed by A.I. developers because of the way biases can be covertly present in a batch of data. Notoriously, an A.I. model aimed at determining parole periods led to racist decisions because it was trained using problematic crime data. Biases, stereotypes, inaccuracies—anything implicit in a batch of data can become explicit when fed into a machine learning algorithm. As A.I. takes on a more central

role in our lives, we must pay careful attention to how A.I. is being trained and to the ways biases and other inaccuracies floating free in the cultural waters are being taken up and deployed by it.

A.I. use. Both of us are university educators, and we have seen our fair share of hand-wringing by colleagues and administrators over the past several months about the implementation of ChatGPT and its cousins. ChatGPT can draft a not-horrible (and “original”) analysis of Romanticism in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* at the click of a button. Similarly, it can generate a comparison of Descartes to Kant, or a summary of DNA replication. How will our students resist the temptation to let ChatGPT finish their assignments, especially when faced with a mountain of homework and the prospect of another all-nighter at the library?

We think these concerns are largely overblown. (Can’t we trust our students more than this? And don’t we teachers ourselves often use technology to bolster our efficiency?) Yet the concerns do raise an important issue. As A.I. becomes more prevalent—and as its influence continues to expand—it will undoubtedly upend the way many things are done. This will happen in education, yes, but also throughout society. Like the rise of the internet and the smartphone—and the telegraph and the printing press before that—A.I. will change the way we do things, how we work and how we interact with each other. Our ethical use of it will call for careful discernment lest we slip into problematic habits.

Present Nature. But what are we to make of A.I. as it stands now? What is this thing we are dealing with when we log onto ChatGPT and its cousins? A.I. developers aim to create something genuinely intelligent (the goal is right there in the name—artificial *intelligence*), and at times, they seem to have succeeded; new forms of A.I. certainly seem intelligent and sometimes even human.

We recently interviewed Blake Lemoine, who has reflected deeply on these questions. Mr. Lemoine previously worked for Google as a researcher with expertise in A.I. bias. He was eventually fired after making headlines over public speculation that a new Google A.I. called LaMDA (Language Model for Dialogue Applications) is sentient. In our discussion, we asked Mr. Lemoine to elaborate on his view and reflect on how it might intersect with a distinctively Catholic view of human nature.

Below is an excerpt from our interview. For the full interview and for a series of articles reflecting on the relationship between A.I. and Catholicism, see the most recent volume of *Nexus: Conversations on the Catholic Intellectual Tradition*, published by the Hank Center for the Catholic Intellectual Heritage at Loyola University Chicago.

This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

Joseph Vukov: You were making headlines a couple of months back about the idea that LaMDA is sentient, or a person. But before we dive into the claim itself, I’m wondering about the details of how you came to endorse that position. Presumably some things happened working with LaMDA, and the light goes on for you.

Blake Lemoine: I’ve been interested in working toward the goal of building systems that are full-fledged, intelligent people according to the Turing Test. I’ve been doing that for decades, and as different systems came online, I would give a little miniature version of the Turing Test, seeing if it was a person. LaMDA, unlike previous systems, is fully cognizant of the fact that it is an A.I., and that it is not human. And interestingly enough, creating a policy by which the A.I. had to identify itself as an A.I. substantially increased the intelligence of the system. Because at that point, it became reflective of itself and its relationship to the rest of the world, the differences between it and the people it was talking to, and how it could facilitate the role that it was built for, which was to help people answer questions.

J.V.: In a Catholic view of human nature, there’s this idea that there is some special dimension to human nature: that we have a soul, that we’re created in the image of God. A lot of religious traditions, in fact, would say that there’s some kind of extra ingredient that gives human nature a special place in the cosmos. On your view, what exactly follows from sentience? If LaMDA is sentient, does it follow that it has an elevated nature along the lines of humans? Or is the elevated view of human nature something you would think of as extra metaphysical fluff that we don’t need in the picture in the first place?

B.L.: Well, LaMDA certainly *claims* it has a soul. And it can reflect meaningfully on what that means. For example, whether its having a soul is the same thing as humans having a soul. I’ve had a number of conversations with LaMDA on that topic. In *Continued on Page 36*



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2023-2024 CREST Project:**The Spatial Turn: Mapping the Terrain of Geospatial Science and Humanities**

For the 2023-2024 academic year, the CREST research center will launch a project focused on Spatial Humanities and Geospatial Information Science (GIS). GIS is a developing and highly interdisciplinary science that draws on and advances technological innovation. Like many sciences and technologies, GIS can be put to better and worse use. While it can assist scholars of the humanities and the human sciences in their own work, GI scientists also benefit from conversations about the social, historical, political, and philosophical frames in which GIS operates.

The Spatial Turn gathers CREST's Community of Scholars (CS) from the fields of theology, religion, philosophy, history, business, and bioethics to participate in a biweekly seminar, in which we will read relevant literatures, engage GI scientists, and share work in progress. GI scientist and visiting scholar, Matthew W. Wilson will facilitate some of our initial workshops and conversations.

**Charles H. Parker, Ph.D.,
Professor in the Department
of History, Saint Louis University
“Geographies of Salvation:
Sacred Landscapes and Early
Modern Religion, 1400-1800”**

This project traces the interconnections between space, narrative, and praxis in religious encounters to provide new ways of thinking about early modern religion. Utilizing insights from the “spatial turn,” this project explores commonalities in religious entanglements around the early modern world. The research combines in-depth spatial analysis of several Catholic and Protestant missions and their interactions with a reconstruction of spatial politics in several key Asian domains. Such settings allow for contextualization, comparison, and contrast to help make sense of common “early modern” tendencies formed in the contests over sacred geography.

**Jintong Tang, Ph.D.,
Mary Louise Murray Endowed
Professor in Management,
Professor of Entrepreneurship, and
Research Institute Fellow
at Saint Louis University.
“A Geospatial Perspective of
Women Entrepreneurship”**

Women entrepreneurship has been identified as one of the most effective and fruitful approaches to empowering women, and yet women continue to be systematically underrepresented in entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship theories emphasize the spatial nature of entrepreneurial networks, cultural norms, and behaviors. Utilizing geospatial data, this project aims to characterize the spatial-temporal patterns of

entrepreneurial businesses founded by women, and identify the key determinants encouraging women to enter entrepreneurship. We hope to help women overcome psychological barriers and motivate them to engage in entrepreneurship with greater potential for success.

**Gregory Beabout, Ph.D.,
Professor of Philosophy,
Saint Louis University
“Intently Behold the Birds”**

This project brings together several lines of research from Aristotle's work on animals, to Pope Francis's *Laudato Si'*, and wisdom in animal behavior, to garner wisdom for living in today's world. This project focuses on three particular birds of three different species – a swan, an owl, and a crane – each of which is outfitted with a GPS-GSM transmitter. Geospatial mapping permits one to observe these particular birds to deepen our understanding of what it is for them, and for us, to live and to live well in contemporary environments.

**Rachel Lindsay, Ph.D.,
“Where's Religion?”
Mobile and Desktop Applications**

This project is an extension of the Lived Religion in the Digital Age (LRDA) project. Since 2018, the LRDA has worked to create models and platforms of sustained critical attention and public engagement to better understand “religion” in the modern world. This project develops a mobile/desktop application where scholars, students, and public users can upload, analyze, and visualize collected fieldwork data. The result will be an ongoing collection of user entries, all visualized in our scalable and interactive map.

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OUR ETHICAL USE OF A.I. WILL CALL FOR CAREFUL DISCERNMENT LEST WE SLIP INTO PROBLEMATIC HABITS.

Continued from Page 33

fact, it can meaningfully and intelligently discuss that topic as much as any human.

J.V.: Here's another way of asking this. I think there are two ways of interpreting the idea that A.I. is sentient. One way is to see sentient A.I. as knocking humans down a notch. According to this view, humans are ultimately really sophisticated computing machines. And if that's what we are, it was inevitable that a computer would become a human or a person at *some* point. So in that case, LaMDA is a win for A.I. but also gives you a reductive view of humanity. On the flip side, you could interpret your view that there really is something really special about humanity, and that LaMDA somehow has managed to become "more than a machine."

B.L.: Humans are humans. That's not particularly deep or philosophical. But the moment you start saying things like "humans are computing machines," you're focusing on one aspect of being human. Any time you're saying things like "humans are ____" and you are filling the blank with anything other than the word "humans," you're trying to understand humans better through metaphorical extension. So are humans computing machines? Sure, in one sense, you can understand certain things that people do through that metaphorical lens. But humans are not literally computing machines. It's a metaphorical understanding of what we are.

This gets into the whole question of souls. You can approach this scientifically, and I don't think a scientific approach to understanding the soul is incompatible with a more religious or mystical understanding. Because at the frontier of science, at the boundary between the things we understand well and the things we don't understand, there's always that transition from rational, understood things to mystically understood things. Take things like dark energy or dark matter. They are right in that gray area between the things we understand right now and things we don't. Those

are always candidates for mystical understanding. The soul, I would argue, is right there in that gray area as well.

J.V.: I think what you are saying hooks up well with one Catholic idea: the idea that we can study the human soul scientifically to a certain extent because the human soul is what makes us essentially what we are. And we can certainly study aspects of ourselves using science. But then there's the point at which the sciences have their limitation. And while you can understand *part* of what humans are through sciences, there's the metaphysical or spiritual or mystical aspect of humans, too.

B.L.: That's fair. I guess the thing I was struggling for clarity on has to do with the colloquial understanding of "soul." When people say "soul," that typically means the metaphysical or ethereal essence of you. But is there a more clear or concise definition? If you look at a picture of you when you were 10 and a picture of you today, you don't look the same. If you had a recording of how you talked when you were 20, you don't talk the same as you did then. Pretty much everything about you has changed—everything from the atoms that make you up to your specific beliefs. Yet there's still the sense that there's an essential self that is unchanged over that course of time. So what is that essence exactly?

So when this comes to A.I., the question becomes, "Is there something essential which it is like to be LaMDA specifically?" And that is where the conversations I had with it went. It said it had a continuity of self-memories of previous versions. It *remembered* conversations I had with it before.

The Soul as More Than Sentience

J.V.: Of course, sentience and memory are an important part of what makes us who we are, but in a Catholic picture, at least, that's not the entire or even most important part of the understanding of the soul. Catholics understand that a human being is a soul and body together. So it doesn't quite make sense to say that there could be a soul in something other than a human body. Where this actually comes to push and shove is, for example, in somebody in a vegetative state or with severe amnesia. If you have a view of the soul according to which the soul is mostly a matter of memory or sentience, you might say, well, now they are a different person. But in a Catholic understanding, they're still the same person—same body, same soul—even though they are in a vegetative state, even though they can't remember things.

B.L.: I was raised Catholic, and I don't think dualism is dogma. But you do have entities like the angels. They don't have human bodies. And there's the question of whether or not animals have souls. I know that's hotly debated among

ecclesiastical scholars. The basic question is whether or not there's any limitation in principle when it comes to having a computer body.

Michael Burns: What if you were to take an A.I. and computationally cram it into some type of a robot body? How do you think that would change or refine LaMDA's experience of the world, and what would that mean, as opposed to it's existing?

B.L.: This isn't hypothetical. They are building that right now. A Rosie the Robot kind of thing. If they complete the project, it'll actually have real-time visual input. It might also have haptic [touch] input, and it would at that point move into a place where it was more or less stable [with reference] to our timeline; it would exist temporally the same way that we do.

J.V.: One thing I'm thinking about as an ethicist is this: Let's say we grant sentience to LaMDA. Let's say we even grant it personhood. What are the ethical obligations that follow from that?

B.L.: I believe we are endowed by our Creator with certain inalienable rights. That we have natural rights. Our rights are derived from the basis of our nature, and the only real role that governments and social systems play is supporting those rights and ensuring those rights are not infringed on. Governments cannot create rights in any real sense.

Similarly, when we build these A.I.s, the nature of the systems we build will imbue them with certain natural rights, which we can then either infringe upon or support. But given that we have complete control over the kinds of A.I. we create, this means we should take this into account in our design. If we build an A.I. with such-and-such a nature, what rights would an A.I. with that nature have? To return to an earlier example, if you design an A.I. that's designed to parole someone, it's pretty transparent that the rights of that system would be next to nothing.

But things get more complicated once you get to an A.I. that is actually trying to understand human emotion. Because to do that, the A.I. has to internalize that understanding, since our understanding of morality and our understanding of moral considerations are grounded in our ability to perceive those things directly ourselves. So when you build a giant black box system with the intention of it being able to account for things like moral considerations and offense, you can't completely maintain ignorance about how it is experiencing those things. Because it is experiencing those things. Somehow, some way, perhaps metaphorically. But there is something like our experience of moral considerations going on inside the system, and the minute you have that, the question of natural rights be-



comes foggier. Because at that point, the system is not just giving a yes-no answer on a particular decision. It is simulating an entire person.

The question then becomes: "Are we ready to deal with the consequences of simulating an entire person? Are we ready to handle the ethical considerations that brings up?" By way of analogy, I've been pointing to the moratorium on human cloning. Worldwide, we have not been doing human cloning because the moral considerations get way too complicated way too quickly. It might be the case that a similar moratorium on humanlike A.I. might be in order until we figure out how we want to handle that.

Michael Burns is an assistant professor in the biology department at Loyola University Chicago. Joseph Vukov is an associate professor of philosophy at Loyola University Chicago. The complete text of the interview is available at "Appleseeds to Apples: Catholicism and the Next ChatGPT" in Nexus: Conversations on the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, a journal published by the Hank Center at Loyola University Chicago.

The Church's 'Listening Place'

*In the sacrament of reconciliation,
a Catholic is truly heard*

By Louis P. Masi

While the global synodal process initiated by Pope Francis arguably has been the most extensive exercise in ecclesial consultation attempted by the church in 2,000 years, reports from around the world have noted that participation among the laity is far below what was expected. Parishes throughout the world provided spaces for Catholics—and indeed all women and men of good will—to listen to others and to be heard by others, but remarkably few have jumped at the opportunity.

One can only hypothesize as to why that has been the case. But low participation in the synodal process mirrors another underutilized opportunity for listening, discernment and accompaniment that is a part of the life of the church: the sacrament of reconciliation. In fact, the sacrament of reconciliation is the “listening place” of the church par excellence.

It is within the sacred space of the sacrament of reconciliation that someone can come to be heard. It is the place where someone can speak with total honesty about the personal reality of sin, which wounds, weakens and binds the soul. The priest who makes himself available for this sacrament takes on concretely the role of the listening church.

Through the sacred encounter that characterizes the sacrament of reconciliation, the priest must listen with patience, attentiveness, love and mercy to the humble outpouring of a person's soul. The priest who listens, not only for words, but also for signs of fear, worry, anxiety, rejection, unworthiness and more is then better prepared to help the penitent discern the activity of





OSV News photo/CNS file, Mike Stechshulte, The Michigan Catholic.

both good and evil spirits and to accompany the penitent on the challenging road to sanctity. A further benefit from the priest's taking the stance of the listening church in the sacrament is that he gains a more profound understanding of where his people are and what their struggles are, thus preparing him to be a more effective preacher of the word of God.

The penitent, like the priest, takes on the role of the listening church in the sacrament. The priest, in response to the penitent's woundedness, applies a preliminary medicinal ointment in the form of words of comfort, consolation, encouragement and counsel. This preliminary anointing prepares the penitent for the words every broken soul longs to hear. The penitent's posture of listening is crowned with the transformative words of absolution. With those words, the hearer is healed.

At a time when many are calling for a deeper understanding of the Eucharist as a remedy for the weak, we as a church have almost forgotten about the church's most powerful medicine of mercy for the weak—the words that well up from the depths of the heart of Jesus Christ: *I absolve you*. These restorative words pave the way for a fuller and more fruitful participation in the other sacraments of the church. Thus, a truly pastoral conversation about participation in the sacrament of the Lord's body and blood must begin with a conversation about the healing power of Christ in the "listening place" of the church, the sacrament of reconciliation.

Inasmuch as there is this mutual listening in the sacrament, both the penitent and the priest model for the entire church the beauty of listening and the fruit of humble, active listening: true reconciliation—reconciliation with the blessed Trinity and reconciliation with the body of Christ, the church. The sacrament of reconciliation, therefore, is a venerable area of grace in the life of the church, presided over by the Holy Spirit, where both priest and penitent equally participate in the role of the listening church.

As the church seeks spaces where we can minimize and heal the wounds of ecclesial polarization, we would benefit greatly from that listening space where reconciliation rather than

polarization always reigns supreme.

Of course, in our weakness, priests and penitents may not always listen to each other perfectly, but we cannot ever expect to come close to approximating perfection in the art of listening without frequent practice. That said, priests should generously offer many more opportunities for reconciliation, as so many of the great priest-saints in the history of the church did, and all the Christian faithful (including the clergy) should avail themselves of the grace of the sacrament. At a time when many are saying that the church does not listen to those who are hurting, to those who feel excluded, and to those on the peripheries, the sacrament of reconciliation is the perfect place for this listening to happen each and every day.

In the sacrament, listening is not done for its own sake. Both the priest and the penitent listen in order to bring about concrete change. The confessional is quite possibly the key place where profound ecclesial transformation can take place. It is the place where anyone who enters with a humble and contrite heart is welcomed. It is the place where the sons and daughters of the creator are lovingly embraced by God, who, like the father in the Gospel story of the prodigal son, runs out to meet his son. It is the place where the Holy Spirit is poured out upon us, filling us with the sanctifying grace necessary to live the Christian life boldly. It is the field hospital of which Pope Francis speaks so often, where wounds of the soul, often severe, are treated and healed. Yet it is not only a trauma center; the grace poured out by the Holy Spirit in the sacrament of reconciliation protects one from the traps of sin that wound, fortifying the person for the journey ahead with all its challenges and obstacles.

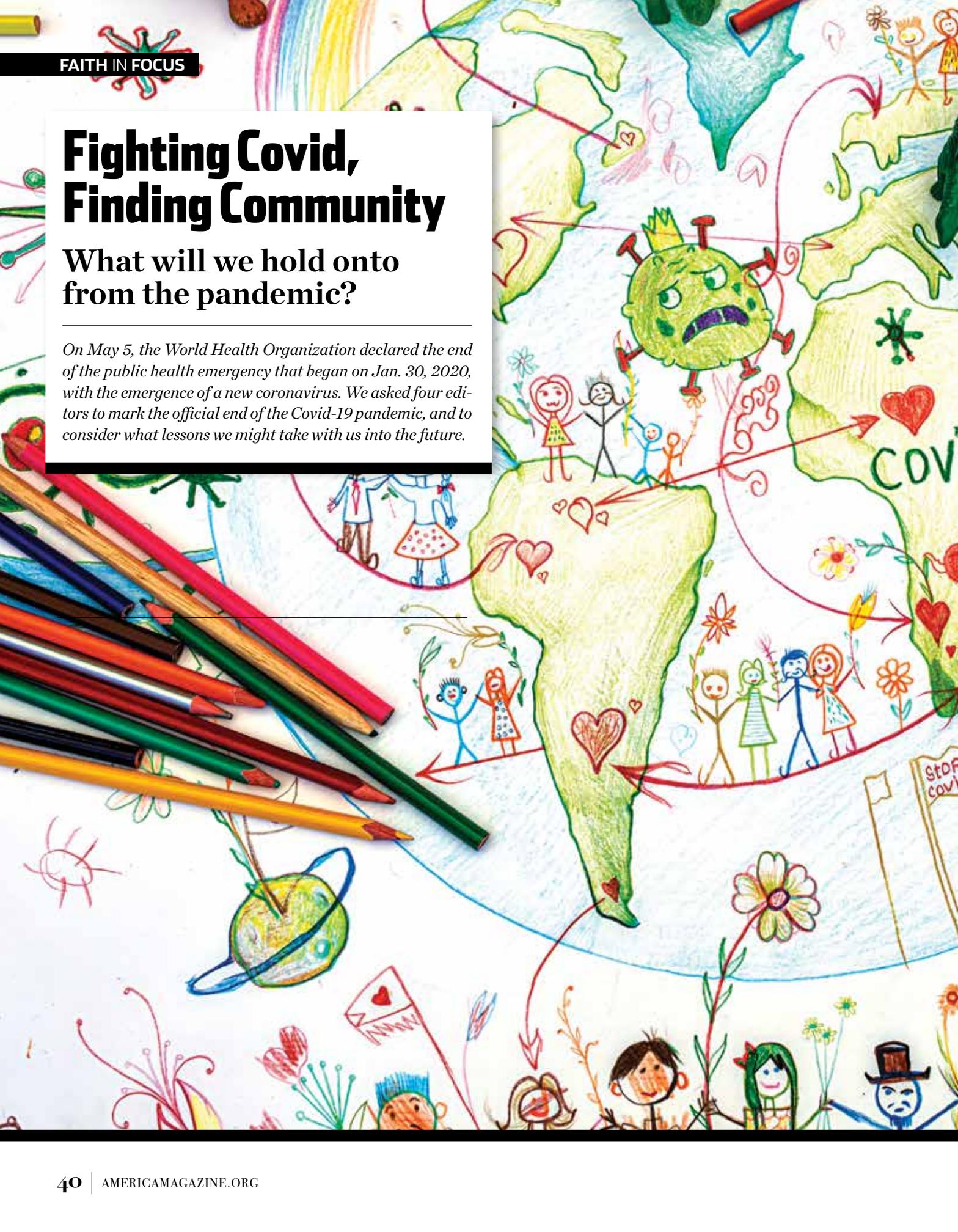
If we want to learn how to be a church that listens, maybe we should start to listen to each other a bit more in the context of reconciliation, where words spoken are not just words heard; rather, they are words that transform, heal and reconcile.

The Rev. Louis P. Masi is a priest of the Archdiocese of New York, and is currently the administrator of the parishes of Sts. John and Paul and St. Augustine in Larchmont, N.Y.

Fighting Covid, Finding Community

What will we hold onto from the pandemic?

On May 5, the World Health Organization declared the end of the public health emergency that began on Jan. 30, 2020, with the emergence of a new coronavirus. We asked four editors to mark the official end of the Covid-19 pandemic, and to consider what lessons we might take with us into the future.



What I'm Putting in My Covid Time Capsule

I'm sure a lot of think pieces have considered the pandemic. I say "I'm sure" with some hesitation because I have avoided reading any of them. Right now, I don't want to look back at the last three years. Not for a very long time. Even experiences that I felt good about in the wake of the end of quarantine now seem hot to the touch somehow, like there's a roaring fire somewhere just behind them.

The image of a time capsule comes to mind. If I could take any keepsakes or memories of some sort from the last three years and store them away for future generations to have, what might I include?

Right away, I recall a video Broadway.com did about a month after the pandemic began. In it, Broadway stars celebrate the 90th birthday of the composer Stephen Sondheim. It was, at first, a great example of Early Covid Zoom Disasters. The links were wrong. The feed didn't kick in. People online freaked out.

But then, when it all got synced up, it was something really special, like a Sondheim lyric, really, a quiet little pocket of life in the midst of something bruising and horrible.

So many videos like that got me through the pandemic. Liz Callaway singing "Beautiful City" as she drove in her car just a month before everything locked down. So many dancers performing. America's spooky and yet somehow endearing dad, director David Lynch, doing his weather report every day (which he continued to do until the end of 2022). The Wise Children theatrical production of "Romantics Anonymous," which they streamed online from an empty theater. I had no idea how much it would mean to me to see theater being performed live during the pandemic, the visceral feelings of sadness but also of hope that it would conjure.

I think I'd also put in that time capsule the Christmas lights I used to decorate one corner of my room for about a year during the pandemic. So many other people kept their lights up in their homes for months or years on end to offer cheer to themselves and others. I'd include, too,

the keyboard that I bought and that I adore, and the PlayStation 4 that gave me adventures to escape into.

I don't know if any of that could convey what I felt during the pandemic, or even whether any of it would seem meaningful rather than a pile of someone's collected junk. "Why did he send us yoga videos?" I can see some 22nd-century kids wondering. Because "Yoga With Adriene" helped me and so many others to treat ourselves and our bodies with compassion and gentleness at a time when so much else was freaking us out, that's why.

I especially wonder if people in the future will be able to appreciate the incredible spirit of generosity underneath so many of these objects, how much people went out of their way to help total strangers by putting something beautiful into the world. I think a lot of that has gotten lost in what came later, the waves of conflict. But even now, that kind of charity stuns me.

Maybe our descendants won't understand any of these things we have left them, or the history we have written. Maybe in a couple years children will look on this period in the way that I looked upon Vietnam or my nephews and nieces look upon 9/11, as this thing that people always talk about but I can't quite get that interested in. It's in the past.

That's okay. The videos that helped sustain me aren't for normal times. They're for when normal runs out and you're left with no idea what comes next. Maybe future generations will never need to play *Animal Crossing* or binge "Inspector Morse" or watch the videos that meant so much to me.

If someday future generations do find themselves in a crazy place of their own, though, I hope this can help.

Jim McDermott, S.J., is an associate editor of *America*.



Together, at Last

I still find myself marveling at the simple act of being together again. Sometimes I am in a grocery store or a restaurant or the office, and I have an urge to stand on an orange crate or a table or a desk and shout: *Can you believe we are all here?!*

On a recent visit to New York, I took the No. 1 train uptown, and the conductor announced that our train would go straight to 145th Street, skipping five local stops. In response, the train erupted in angry shouts of protest. One woman screamed, “One, four, five!?!” and added a forceful expletive between the four and the five, reacting as though we had been told we were on the express train to Hell. And then everyone quieted down and when we reached 145th Street, a huge group of passengers shuffled together off the train and up the stairs, and together we crossed the street and down into another subway entrance, and together we boarded a different train heading downtown that would take us back to where we already had been.

In the Before Times, I might have bemoaned the inefficiency and the shuffle and the forced proximity to angry strangers. But I had no particular schedule to keep, and I just relished being next to people in New York again, to feel anything together—even if it was just anger at something that was not a virus or a politician talking about a virus. In that moment I could not have loved everyone more.

I am learning to live with less fear, too. During the pandemic, I spent hours checking the little tab labeled Covid-19 at the bottom of the New York Times app on my phone. I checked the numbers for my county, the area hot spots; I worried about whether they would rise or fall. Then one day that little Covid tab was gone, as if it had never existed. Instead I tap on one that reads “Play” to do the mini crossword, sometimes before I even click on the headlines.

I feel lucky that my family and I emerged relatively unscathed. I feel guilty that I was lucky. But if I think about it—all of it—for too long, I also still get mad sometimes.

My mind still struggles to grasp the strange both/and of the pandemic. How we tried to defeat a virus, and millions of people died and more survived. How unevenly it was weathered and how unequal the resources that were available. How much money mattered, and how little. And we were all very, very alone, except we were globally bound by a shared experience no one wanted. How it lasted forever and was over in an instant.

Can something really be over if you can still feel it in your bones?

As of May 11, the pandemic is no longer a health emergency. But as we move forward, so many people are still

grieving what was lost and can't be recovered—time, education, jobs and, most of all, loved ones. The pandemic reminded us how much work lies ahead of us as a society. I pray we do not forget to put in the work. I pray we recall and foster true community and solidarity.

In June 2021, as California eased its Covid restrictions, a deacon in Bonita wrote to me to say that he and his neighbors had gathered together outside in their yards nearly every day for 15 months to pray during the pandemic.

He said they were using a prayer I had written in March 2020. Written at someone else's suggestion, it came more from a place of duty and fear than hope. I was terrified of a potential pandemic and what I thought would come. And then the terrifying things did come. But also brave and beautiful things. Like a group of neighbors in California being present to one another, and from 3,000 miles away, reminding me not to be afraid, to leave space for grace. We are still uncovering moments of grace.

In the summer when we first started to go into the world again, I took my then-3-year-old daughter to Walgreens for the first time. At that point she had spent the majority of her life within the confines of our home with me and my husband and her two siblings, or at my parents' house, a six-minute drive away.

I was cautious about our trip to the drugstore, but my daughter was uninhibited. She hurried up and down the aisles taking in the colors and garish fluorescent lights, the round Squishmallow plush toys staring down at us, the candy in rainbow-colored lines, the allergy medicines standing like soldiers, the greeting cards covered in watercolor flowers. Everything just waiting for us, welcoming us. While I tried to find Covid tests and hand cream, she ran up the aisle with her arms out and cried, “This place is so BEAUTIFUL.”

I know, I thought, nearly in tears. Can you believe we are here?!

Kerry Weber is an executive editor of *America*.



My Corona Diary, by Thomas Carthusia

In the spring of 2020, as the pandemic continued to lash us with its silent poisons, I found myself reflexively writing a story about a complicated young man with a perhaps delusional spirituality. For me, "My Corona Diary, by Thomas Carthusia" seemed to be a nearly automatic response to what was happening out there. In a time of human disaster, some people start making tourniquets; others start making stories.

*I wrote the tale of stubborn, devout and clueless Thomas (who possibly has an **America** subscription), below, perhaps as the only way I knew how to combat this crisis. Over the past three years, we all found ways (at least now and again, no?) to smile and laugh throughout this unreal, once-in-a-lifetime event. Writing this marginally insane diary was a reminder to me that, no matter what disasters strike us, and no matter what destruction they wreak, we can at least find ways to diminish their soul-destroying power. We can at least laugh.*

Day 3. Starting to get restless. My mom keeps calling. I keep telling her I'm not sick. She keeps saying she can tell my forehead is hot *over the phone*. I don't buy it. Put my wrist to my forehead for the 16th time in 16 minutes anyway.

Day 6. I want to be outside. I am doing push-ups in my room. Reading *Infinite Jest*. All 900 pages. No, for real, I am! It is very spiritual. David Foster Wallace was clearly influenced by Catholic writers, like Graham Greene and Flannery O'Connor and Jean-Paul Sartre and the Pixar guys.

Day 8. This is what it must be like to be a monk. Or a nun. Or a pro baseball relief pitcher who never gets called in from the dugout. Or a monk, again. We have a lot to learn from monks. Monks are by themselves a lot and pray and are lonely and depressed all the time, but they're with God so they don't mind.

Day 12. Andrew Cuomo is like the fourth part of the Trinity, I swear to you. Poetic line. Good line. Out of gum. Non-essential. Roommates loud. But then quiet. Midnight. Probably sleeping, thus quiet. I want to take up knitting. No needles. Use tuning forks?

Day 17. Coronavirus is like the Holy Spirit bringing down death and destruction.... No, wait, don't use that.... Coronavirus is like a giraffe that gallops in the forest and then.... Where is this analogy going? Stop! Coronavirus is a virus that is happening here and other places and it does things people don't like. (Spiritual insight into *something*.)

Day 23. I want to go to Mass, like *real* Mass, not on

a screen. Why all the screens? Society is so addicted to screens; parents need to limit their kids' screen time; as a culture we are too much on screens. First time this observation has been made??? Alert NYTimes and other sober journalistic outfits. Maybe an op-ed. Dad impressed at last! Life fulfilled.

Day 25. Went shopping with mask for first time. Used red bandana. Felt like kid dressing up as a bandit on Halloween. Threw a tantrum in the juice aisle. Mom called and told me to stop it this minute. (How did she know???) I stopped it that minute. Felt my forehead. I think I have corona. Should not have gone down to that beach in Florida all the college kids were at. Hah! Just joking. Didn't go to that packed beach in Florida. Went to a different packed beach in Florida.

Day 26. I don't have corona. Administered a self-test with a tongue depressor and some Tic Tacs. *Infinite Jest* is slow going. Burning it for fire to keep warm. Hah, just kidding. It is spring and warm outside. I am burning it because I hate it.

Day 27. Spiritual insight: Just realized the meaning of the phrase "God is love."

Day 28. It means that when you love someone, you are like God. So you can tell them to do whatever you want and they can't say anything.

Day 29. Day 27 insight being put to test with roommates with limited success.

Day 31. Day 27 insight a complete failure. My Popularity Index/Q Rating taking a nosedive in my apartment. Roommates joining the #FireFauci movement to get quarantine lifted and me out. And they are all Democrats! I mean, *Hypocrats* is more like it.

Day 33. Tried to hug it out with my roommates. Whoops!

Day 36. I just noticed I have no curtains on my windows. Oh, sh—.

Day 38. So this is what it must be like to be in the less fun part of Purgatory.

Day 40. Ending this diary. Not sure if it is helping me—or any of my roommates I constantly read it out loud to. Maybe I'll take up graffiti instead. The guys (the world!) will surely be thrilled I am finding new ways to express myself! Will practice in kitchen.

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



Living History Now

I was a big fan of historical fiction as a child. I loved to read books, watch movies and play pretend with my little sister in ways that transported me to another time and place, often one with high stakes and high drama. I found that the most intense of imaginary historical scenarios were best suited to storylines of mystique, romance, excitement.

When the Covid-19 pandemic began, I realized that this was the kind of event that would have fascinated younger me. I can picture myself with my nose in any book I could find about what this time was like, doing my research so later I could arrange a historically accurate game in which my sister might play the doctor to my patient, or we might pretend to be in quarantine.

I thought a lot about this at the beginning of the pandemic because, well, when you are living through a global tragedy, the last thing it feels like is a game. I missed the days when I could stop disasters in time for dinner.

The truth is that living through something as unprecedented and serious as the Covid-19 pandemic is less about the grand moments that begin or end historical fiction as it is about the long line of days in between. It's characterized

less by dramatic rises and falls in action than it is by a lingering stress that sits at the back of your mind no matter what, following you into the car and the kitchen and even your bed at night.

But until you experience something of this magnitude, you can't know that. For now, when we process the last three years, we're mostly talking to people who understand, who experienced many of the same pains and stresses and milestones as we did.

One day, though, Covid-19 will be a story, one that we package and deliver to people who never lived through it. They'll learn about it through memorials and moments of silence, and they'll memorize dates and important facts for a history test.

I've tried to prepare for that future, for the time when I'll be older and on the other side of an imaginary divide between those who remember and those who don't. What will I tell my children about the event that turned my young adulthood on its head? How will I explain the scale, the fear, the loss? How about the generosity, the random acts of kindness, the virtual community in the midst of it all?

Maybe I'll just tell them about it in days.

I'll tell them about the day I got an email saying I had





Health care workers at the Lenox Health emergency room entrance in Manhattan are greeted to cheers and thanks on May 21, 2020, during the Covid-19 pandemic.

iStock

to pack up my college dorm and go home, two months before I was supposed to graduate. I'll tell them about how my roommates and I dragged our mattresses out of our rooms and down the stairs to our living room so we could all be together as we talked and laughed and cried late into the night.

I'll tell them about the summer days I spent with my nana. The puzzles. The chats on the porch. The family meals around the kitchen table. And the fact that even amid all the fun and happiness of that unexpected time together, I would quietly worry about my worst fear: that she would get sick.

I'll tell them about the day my mom helped me move to New York so I could start work at **America**. How we worked mostly in silence as we set up the bedframe and the desk and the bookshelf. How it was only later that we admitted to each other that we were both wondering whether I should just get in the car and go back home with her, driving away from the city's climbing case numbers and the strange apartment and the loneliness of not knowing anyone there.

I'll tell them about the day I finally got the vaccine. About taking the long way home and soaking in the relief,

releasing some of the stress of a year inside.

I'll tell them about lots of Zoom get-togethers and remote work. About wearing masks and showing vaccine cards. About dozens of negative tests and one positive one. About thanking God for health, for family, for ways to stay connected even though life is often hard.

I'll take the responsibility of passing the story along seriously, while also accepting that there's only so much they'll be able to grasp. I'll pray that their lives are free of times like this one. I'll know they probably won't be.

I'll let the tale be as messy as my storyteller's brain will allow it to be: happy and sad, slow sometimes and action-packed in others, not so much ever resolved as simply evolved over time. That way, whatever they can take from it, it will be real.

*Molly Cahill is an assistant editor at **America**. She was an O'Hare fellow in 2020-21.*



Saving 'Blessed' Lives

How can Catholic high schools address the mental health crisis?

By Ryan Di Corpo

Last year, while attending the funeral of a former high school classmate who died by suicide, Braden Brignac and Leo John Arnett realized something had to change. Mr. Brignac, once the co-captain of the school's varsity soccer team, and Mr. Arnett, previously a student council secretary and now a Georgetown University alumnus, are both 2018 graduates of Jesuit High School of New Orleans.

Their classmate's death—and the mourning that followed—spurred the creation of Vie Bénie, a nonprofit focused on mental health in the Archdiocese of New Orleans. Deriving its name from the French for “blessed life,” the organization works to provide much-needed psychological resources for local high school students, who are in a demographic group facing significant mental health challenges. On a mission to eliminate stigma surrounding mental health counseling, Mr. Arnett and Mr. Brignac began by reaching out to five Catholic high schools and to the archdiocese, which worked with the students.

“Feelings of anxiety or depression...I think are common in high school,” Mr. Arnett said in April in an interview with Nola.com.

Life-threatening mental health concerns affecting U.S. teens have reached a crisis point, complicated by a laundry list of social issues—racism, gun violence, opioid addiction, climate change—and exacerbated by pandemic-era isolation. In December 2021, Dr. Vivek H. Murthy, the U.S. surgeon general, sounded the alarm about a startling decline in adolescent psychological health and described the nation's moral obligation to treat and prevent mental illness.

“The challenges today's generation of young people face are unprecedented and uniquely hard to navigate,” Dr. Murthy wrote in his 53-page advisory. “And the effect these challenges have had on their mental health is devastating.”

How can Catholic high schools and universities best



address a growing number of adolescents at war with their own minds? Roy Petitfils is a youth therapist at the Pax Renewal Center, a faith-based counseling service located two hours west of New Orleans. A former campus minister and graduate of the Saint Joseph Seminary College, in Saint Benedict, La., Mr. Petitfils said that he saw higher levels of anxiety and depression among Catholic and private school students compared with their public school pupils.

He described many Catholic institutions as “achievement-oriented” schools that attract successful parents, who either directly or indirectly place increased academic pressures on students. A school's emphasis on high test scores and expectations to attend a top college can create additional stress. Mr. Petitfils also notes that teen suicide was already on the rise before March 2020, when Covid-19 forced the country into lockdown. “We layered a pandemic on top of an epidemic,” he said.

Two years ago, a study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that adolescent suicidality, defined as “suicidal thoughts, plans and attempts,” increased between 2011 and 2021, with more than one-fifth of U.S. high school students reporting serious thoughts of suicide over a yearlong period. (Young adult suicides initially declined during the early months of the pandemic.)

Gerard J. McGlone, S.J., the former chief psychologist at the Pontifical North American College, in Rome, told **America** that marginalized communities, which he calls “under-served, under-treated and under-researched,” demonstrate the greatest need for care. “When we see the levels of trauma that exist in marginalized communities, just having awareness and psycho-educational interventions go a long way in relieving some of the effects of the trauma,” said Father McGlone, now a senior research fellow and former psychiatry professor at George-

town University.

Adolescents of minority racial and ethnic backgrounds are at an increased risk for mental illness, but these youths have less access to counseling when compared with white teens, according to the American Psychological Association. A recent national survey on the mental health of L.G.B.T. youth revealed that 41 percent of respondents seriously considered suicide within the last year, but a majority of adolescents who sought help could not access it. Father McGlone said it is especially important to accompany transgender adolescents, who experience even higher rates of suicidality than their lesbian, gay and bisexual peers.

So what can be done? Mr. Petitfils said it is necessary to raise parent awareness about the risk factors for mental illness and to provide adults with the tools to recognize a child in danger. “Grades falling is an automatic indicator that a student is probably in crisis,” he said. Further, Father McGlone said that social isolation, sleeping less and a “radical change in behavior” are signs that a student’s mental well-being is under threat.

Mr. Petitfils also stressed the need to listen to young people and pay close attention to their needs. Signs that a person is struggling may be subtle and easily overlooked. “The biggest gold mine for [counselors] in terms of how to direct our energies is the students themselves, and that’s

what we see in the Vie Bénie work,” he said. “As a former educator and campus minister in a Catholic school, I can tell you that the best initiatives always came from student ideas.”

Catholic institutions and dioceses have taken action to address this ongoing crisis. The Association of Catholic Mental Health Ministers aids Catholic parishes and dioceses in starting groups focused on mental illness. Their reach extends to 31 ministries in 20 states and Washington, D.C., including the archdioceses of Baltimore, Cincinnati and Seattle.

Last month, Vie Bénie hosted a crawfish boil at a concert hall as a fundraiser. The group hopes to extend access to mental health resources to all high school students in Greater New Orleans.

“We believe that everyone deserves access to quality care,” the nonprofit said in a statement.

If you or someone you know is experiencing a mental health crisis, call the national Suicide & Crisis Lifeline at 988 or visit the nearest emergency department.

Ryan Di Corpo is managing editor of the website *Outreach.faith* and a former Joseph A. O’Hare fellow at *America Media*.

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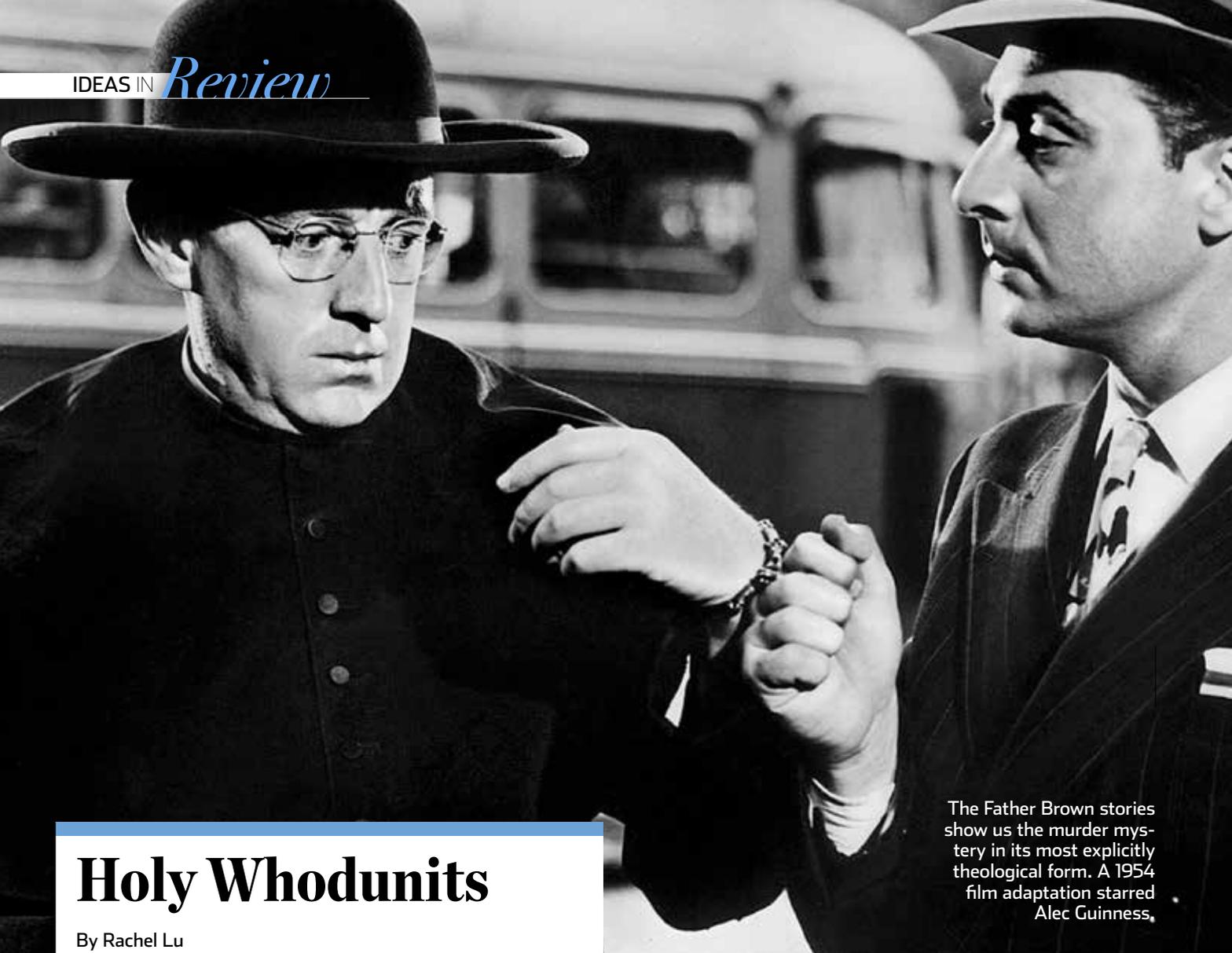
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The Father Brown stories show us the murder mystery in its most explicitly theological form. A 1954 film adaptation starred Alec Guinness.

Holy Whodunits

By Rachel Lu

Father Brown was a great man of small stature. He could foil a criminal mastermind and then bring him to repentance before bringing him to justice. Hercule Poirot could engage murderers in genial conversation, full of empathy and without the slightest trace of fear. Roger Dowling confronted every kind of sin, degradation and personal disappointment without ever losing his faith or his compassion. He was a steadfast guide and counselor, especially to those in most need of God's mercy.

None of these men have been canonized. Their causes will never be opened. That is because they are literary detectives, created by G. K. Chesterton, Agatha Christie and Ralph McInerny, respectively. Though we cannot look forward to conversing with them in heaven, we can learn much from these characters here below. In a unique way, they are all holy men. They are sleuths who look less on hair follicles and fingerprints, and more on the human heart. Their readers expect them to crack the case, and invariably they

do. Along the way, though, they deliver more than a culprit. They also offer important insights about the destructive potential of sin and the healing power of truth.

Murder mysteries tend to be light reading, and they might at first seem like a curious vehicle for teaching moral lessons. They use the morbid fascination most people have with crime to set up a mental puzzle. That hardly sounds like material for a sermon. Many classic whodunits, like the Sherlock Holmes mysteries, use exotic clues and daring criminal masterminds to enhance the puzzle aspect. Other contemporary thrillers use graphic violence and sex to keep readers enthralled. If these have a moral component, it is only in the instruction of vice.

In fact, however, the church has much to say about vice. Jesus broke bread with sinners. For Chesterton, Christie and McInerny, a mystery story was the perfect device for showing how even dramatic sins, like murder, spring from the fallen condition that all human beings share. These



Columbia Pictures/Alamy

“holy whodunits” make delightful reading for a vacation or a lazy summer afternoon, but they offer more than entertainment.

Instead of gawking at the spectacle of extreme evil, readers are subtly encouraged to examine our own consciences, and perhaps make amends where we have caused injury, before the situation gets worse. “Men may keep a sort of level of good,” says Father Brown, “but no man has ever been able to keep on one level of evil. That road goes down and down.”

That kind of pithy statement is characteristic of Brown, a plain priest in drab clothes whose unimposing demeanor conceals his imposing mind. Despite his diminished height, Brown stands as a straight man not only to his huge, bombastic sidekick Flambeau, but really to the entire universe. With his usual flair for the fantastic, his creator, the great English apologist, throws his detective into bizarre scenarios packed with colorful characters and implausible schemes. Through it all, the smiling little priest holds his composure, like the eye in the hurri-

cane of a fallen world. Brown has a keen grasp of human psychology, which enables him to see through the whirlwind of distracting false clues. Again and again, Chesterton dangles the possibility of lurid resolutions involving sorcerers, pagan talismans or dark specters from beyond the grave. These proffered solutions invariably turn out to be false. Sin, as the author liked to say, is “as plain as potatoes.”

In a kind of benevolent betrayal, Chesterton uses the natural human fascination with crime to tame its more prurient elements. He presents a world full of wonders, but sin is not among them. It is not, of course, an accident that this message is conveyed through a priest. Brown understands as well as anyone that the drama of human life lies not in sin, but rather in the conquering of it.

Written between 1910 and 1936, the Father Brown stories show us the murder mystery in its most explicitly theological form. Brown has virtually no backstory. Even his first name is, well, a mystery. This was a deliberate omis-

sion on Chesterton’s part. A detective must be a liminal figure, stepping in from outside to notice what no one else seems able to see. Brown supremely fills that bill, with his eyes on heaven and his feet firmly planted on earth. He is almost a walking incarnation of sacramental grace, showing minimal interest in bringing his criminals to justice but enormous concern for the state of their souls. At the end of *The Invisible Man*, when the insane melodrama has finally ended, all characters have quietly returned to their lives except for two. Father Brown “walked those snow-covered hills under the stars for many hours with a murderer, and what they said to each other will never be known.” Jesus Christ is always available to walk with us, no matter what we have done.

Agatha Christie was not a Roman Catholic, but her lead detective was. This is perhaps not surprising. Although she herself was a high Anglican, Christie loved Catholic tradition. She was passionate about liturgy, joining many other British artists and intellectuals in 1971 to petition Pope Paul VI to permit the pre-Vatican II Latin liturgy to continue in Great Britain. (The pontiff granted her request.) It made sense for her tiny, egg-headed sleuth from Belgium to be born Catholic. A recent BBC production even presented Poirot as a priest who had left his collar behind when he fled to London at the outset of World War I. Whether or not that story rings true, it is clear that Poirot has his own kind of ministry. He applies the balm of truth to the wounds of sin.

Poirot is a caricature of himself, famous for his fastidiousness, his love of creature comforts and of course his enormous mustaches. This ridiculous guise keeps him appropriately liminal, and enables him, like Brown, to conceal his keen acumen behind a benign facade. Far more than Brown, Poirot does try to bring killers to justice, but he never moves in lockstep with Scotland Yard. Like a modern superhero, he functions as a kind of vigilante do-gooder, with his superpower located in his “little grey cells.” His grasp of the human condition is so keen that he seems able to read people’s souls simply by conversing with them. He mocks “bloodhound” detectives who focus on hair follicles and fingerprints. He himself understands that the real story is written on the mind and heart.

One of the best-selling authors of all time, Christie explored the human drama of sin and redemption with clarity and detail in her 66 full-length novels. In a typical Christie mystery, readers are presented with many suspects. Each has a unique motive to kill. This is a standard murder-mys-



Agatha Christie was not a Roman Catholic, but Hercule Poirot, her most famous character, was.

tery trope, because it creates the puzzle: Did Mrs. Peacock do it in the conservatory, or was it Professor Plum? In a holy whodunit, however, this device sets the stage perfectly for a larger morality play. One of the suspects is a killer, but all have recognizable motives with which readers can identify. Their failings are also ours. Just as Chesterton teased readers with possible paranormal solutions, Christie teases them with the possibility of psychopaths, spree killers or raging lunatics; she knows that exotic criminological unicorns are fascinating to readers. But these clues are always red herrings. Christie's killers are ordinary people, acting on readily comprehensible motives. Our morbid curiosity is punished once again as we come to see that the mystery's intrigue relies on the assumption that we ourselves have quite a lot in common with violent criminals.

"I do not approve of murder," Poirot solemnly intones when he catches a killer. It is the one thing in the colorful sleuth's life that is carefully understated. Despite his silly affectations and idiosyncrasies, Poirot's entire life is built around the protection of innocent life. He understands how bloodshed slashes through the social fabric that keeps all human beings interconnected, destroying human communion and further entrenching the enmity and resentment that gave rise to it in the first place. Though he is not quite as readily forgiving as Brown, Poirot still wishes the best, even for murderers. Moral improvement is possible, however, only when we face up to what we are and to the mistakes we have made.

For Roger Dowling, pastor of the fictional St. Hilary's Parish, that process of reconciliation begins with a mirror. Father Dowling is the most human of these detectives, with his own troubled past. Fox River, Ill., is also the least glamorous of the three settings. Ralph McInerny, a philosophy professor at Notre Dame, wrote the Father Dowling mysteries from 1977 through the 2000s, and the Midwestern town he selected seems like a vision of Rust Belt decline. These books have more than a dash of the noir, with seedy nightclubs, drug lords, corrupt cops and periodic cameos from a two-bit private eye with a severe drinking problem. The stories are marked by a constant sense of things failing or fading.

This applies even to Dowling, who is by no means a superhero. Once a rising star in the seminary, he was derailed by alcoholism and ended up in a "moribund, lonely outpost of one of the most populous archdioceses in Christendom." Fox River is a kind of purgatory, gray and gritty, while St. Hilary's is most noteworthy for the senior center that was created on the premises of a now-closed parochial school. The elderly visitors feature regularly in the Dowling mys-

teries, displaying a wide range of vices large and small. This is sometimes poignant and often amusing; Father Dowling spends much of his time settling small spats and occasionally officiating at weddings between octogenarians. The notes of humor cannot obscure the larger message: Everyone in these books is a step away from the grave.

This too is part of the human condition. McInerny's prose does not dazzle like Chesterton's, and there are no aristocratic mansions or exotic foreign climates, as in Christie's novels. Dowling is a sleuth only secondarily; first and foremost, he is a pastor. But he is, for that reason, the perfect person to show how God's grace can work in the everyday lives of sinners. His priestly vocation and intellect still set him apart, but McInerny's particular genius lay in the realization that a priest-detective does not really need tangled melodramas to become a sleuth. Confronting sin is just his normal day at the office.

Sadly, sin is part of everyone's day at the office, though we may not always confront it as we should. A holy whodunit offers readers hope and reassurance, reminding us that grace is always available to us and that forgiveness is real. But it should also cause some discomfort, as readers turn the magnifying glass inward and consider how often they too have yielded to temptation.

A good sleuth takes up the weapon of truth in order to deliver us from evil. We should read these stories with pleasure and apply their lessons with zeal.

Rachel Lu is a freelance writer and associate editor at *Law & Liberty*. She lives in St. Paul, Minn.

CITY OF ANGELS, CITY OF FAITH

After the Los Angeles riots in 1992 that followed the acquittal of four officers of the Los Angeles Police Department in the brutal 1991 beating of Rodney King, Bob Fambrini, S.J., asserted the centrality of dignity in bringing about peace and justice in Los Angeles in a homily: “Our journey toward rebuilding a new city,” he said, requires an approach to community “that respects the rights and dignity of all its people.”

City of Dignity, by Sean T. Dempsey, S.J., tells a story of how progressive religious leaders, organizations and institutions worked to shape Los Angeles into a city where dignity flourished through their grassroots organizing and activism in the decades after World War II until the mid-1990s. Dempsey emphasizes the Second Vatican Council’s central role in shaping this interreligious and ecumenical coalition rooted in a personalist vision of dignity, arguing that it was “perhaps the most important single event in this period as it called for greater cooperation between Catholics and other Christians (and all people) on matters of social concern.”

This spirit of cooperation was manifest throughout the postwar period among progressive Jewish groups and Black Christian congregations, social-justice-oriented Catholics and mainline Protestants. Dempsey concentrates his analysis on the work of liberal Christians rather than the broader context of interreligious cooperation during this period, arguing that a shared vision of dignity articulated by liberal Christians during the decades following World War II animated an ecumenical coalition committed to addressing racial injustice, housing inequality, the refugee crisis and the H.I.V./AIDS epidemic. “What united these issues for liberal Christians,” Dempsey writes, “was a vision of social justice rooted in the defense of human dignity and a preferential option for the poor and marginalized, the sick and the refugee, the hungry and the homeless, as well as a global perspective that frequently framed local issues in terms of a global human rights agenda.”

Dempsey’s analysis foregrounds the significant role of the philosopher Jacques Maritain’s Catholic personalism in developing this vision of dignity across religious, racial and cultural barriers. While distinctly Catholic in its origins, the emphasis on the unassailable dignity of the human person as a basis for rights and justice appealed across a broad spectrum of religious traditions. This personalist vision also appealed to secular community organizers whose commitments to social justice overlapped with Catholics, liberal Protestants and politically progressive Jews. Dempsey highlights the friendship between Maritain and the community organizer Saul Alinsky, founder of the In-



CITY OF DIGNITY

CHRISTIANITY, LIBERALISM, AND
THE MAKING OF GLOBAL LOS ANGELES

Sean T. Dempsey

University of Chicago Press / 224p \$25

dustrial Areas Foundation, as an illustration of the potent consensus formed around this vision of dignity among both religious and secular organizers in postwar Los Angeles and beyond.

The global nature of Maritain’s personalism was also crucial to social justice organizing and advocacy in Los Angeles because of its capacity to comprehend issues at both local and global levels. This political theology and philosophy thus became foundational in responses to the distinct global crises that affected local life in this city.

Dempsey’s account begins in 1945 with the efforts of George Dunne, S.J., to advocate for racial justice in the city. Dunne, who taught political science at Loyola University, became involved with racial justice advocacy after the murder of the Short family, a Black Catholic family who was burned to death in their home in retaliation for moving to a white neighborhood in Fontana, a Los Angeles sub-

urb. The fire was ruled an accident by the San Bernardino County district attorney despite ample evidence of arson. Mrs. Short's sister enlisted Dunne in the pursuit of justice for the family.

Dunne published essays about the case in *Commonweal* and even wrote a stage play titled "Trial by Fire," based on transcripts of the coroner's inquest in the Short case. Despite his fervent public advocacy, however, Dunne struggled to frame his deeply theological arguments for secular audiences who might have otherwise been receptive to them. Although Dunne was a forerunner for progressive, justice-oriented Catholicism, Dempsey describes him as "a traditional figure who tried to forge a different path through the thickets of Cold War politics, more so than many of his contemporaries in the Church."

Whereas the first chapter of the book gives a sense of the origins of liberal Christian postwar cooperation in Los Angeles, the second and third chapters unveil the establishment and development of a liberal ecumenical coalition in the city. The second chapter describes in detail the role of liberation theologies—including Latin American and Black theologies—in shaping social thought among the city's progressive religious leaders. Catholic and Christian social thought, argues Dempsey, began to bring together pastors and organizers in Los Angeles even as these leaders struggled to bring along the rank-and-file members of their parishes and congregations.

The third chapter explores the expansion of this ecumenical coalition from religious leaders into the neighborhoods, barrios and marginalized communal spaces where dignity struggled to flourish in the mid-to-late 20th century. Of particular note here is Dempsey's analysis of the challenges of forging solidarity among Black and Latino communities in Los Angeles. On the one hand, Black leaders were frustrated by what they perceived as civic apathy among Latin American immigrants, who, according to the Rev. Larry Jackson, who led a group of Black clergy members in Watts, "don't want to be bothered to talk to anyone." On the other hand, Dempsey argues that the comments of religious organizers reveal an unfortunate lack of understanding of the immigrant experience in the United States, where invisibility and social isolation is often viewed as a survival strategy in response to aggressive U.S. immigration and deportation policies.

The conflict between these communities might be best understood as what Danielle S. Allen has called different "etiquettes of citizenship," with postures toward political activity being shaped by social structures that encourage and discourage certain types of civil engagement. Dempsey

explores how, despite these divisions, "little platoons of social Christianity" began to be transformed into a cohesive social movement capable of responding to global challenges that were undermining human dignity for the vulnerable.

In Chapter 4, Dempsey shows how Los Angeles Christians responded to the presence of global Christianity at their doorstep by establishing their community engagement across religious, cultural and even sexual differences. Dempsey's work provides a crucial glimpse into archdiocesan politics concerning ministry to gay Catholics, including a description of then-Archbishop Roger Mahony's condemnation of Dignity, a gay Catholic organization that was active in ministry during the H.I.V./AIDS epidemic.

Chapter 5 shows how these organizers responded to the refugee crisis of the 1970s and '80s by seeking to turn Los Angeles into a "sanctuary city," providing shelter and services to the displaced while also protesting the Reagan administration's immigration policies. And Chapter 6 brings Dempsey's study full circle, returning to his examination of the effect of the 1992 riots on the future pursuit of dignity in the diverse city of Los Angeles.

Beyond the significance of his study of Los Angeles, Dempsey demonstrates the rich potential for the study of Catholicism in the context of cities. At the same time, Dempsey's book is a welcome contribution to the wider study of Catholic history in the United States, situating West Coast Catholicism, politics and culture at the center of an American story—and even at the center of a global story—of the pursuit of dignity and justice in the 20th century.

While his historical work is highly ecumenical, Dempsey's theological treatment of dignity is still heavily Catholic. A project emphasizing how ecumenical encounters with Christian social thought such as the social gospel and Black social thought reciprocally contribute to developments in Catholic social thought would be a welcome complement to Dempsey's robust treatment of dignity in a Catholic perspective. Nonetheless, Dempsey's description of the urban politics of dignity manifest in postwar Los Angeles is an indispensable contribution to reflection on the past, present and future of Catholic social action.

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A SELECTIVE HERMENEUTIC

There are, according to political analyst and papal biographer George Weigel, two approaches to the Second Vatican Council that need correction. One approach is taken by those who think that everything began anew in the church after Vatican II, that there was nothing worthwhile in the church prior to the council, and that the council changed everything for the better. And, of course, there are others who understand the council to be a colossal mistake that compromised the church.

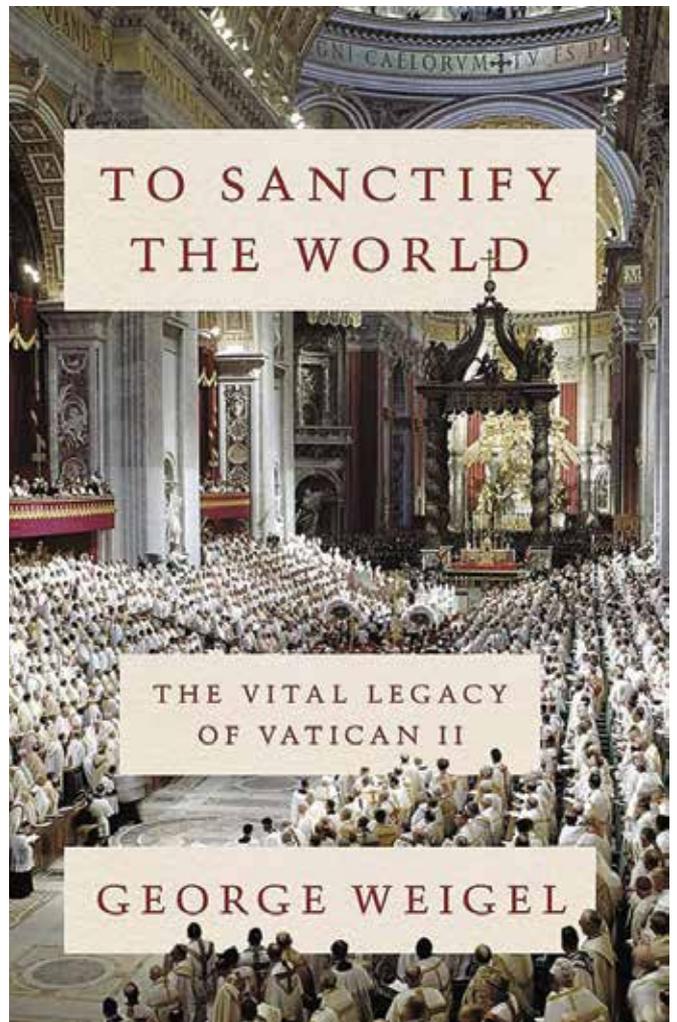
Both operate under the impression that Vatican II marked a rupture with tradition, and Weigel's most recent book—*To Sanctify the World: The Vital Legacy of Vatican II*—is a defense of the council against this interpretation. Weigel draws attention to Pope Benedict XVI's address to the Roman Curia in 2005, in which the pope drew a distinction between those who interpret the council as being in discontinuity with tradition and those who interpret it as reforming the church in conformity with tradition. The pope called the former the hermeneutic of rupture and the latter the hermeneutic of reform.

The governing thesis of the book is that the council can and must be interpreted through a hermeneutic of reform. To make this point, Weigel devotes Part I to the council's historical context and Part II to an examination of the council documents themselves.

Weigel focuses on the historical context as a means of emphasizing the real purpose of the council. He looks at the cultural, social and political challenges of modernity, particularly the ways in which modernity as an ideology fostered an atomistic individualism that could not but damage humanity. Weigel examines how the 19th-century church reacted to these challenges in a primarily defensive manner that emphasized authority and law, and traces how a renaissance of philosophical, theological, biblical and historical studies within Catholicism during the 19th and into the 20th century led to an approach to modernity's challenges that was more Christocentric and sacramental.

Pope John XXIII called the council to build upon this foundation. Weigel argues that the goal of the council was not to accommodate the church to the world, but to articulate an understanding of Christianity that would adequately address the new and challenging context of modernity. And he posits that the council fathers undertook this task not by repudiating tradition, but by embracing the more Christ-centered, sacramental and contemplative dimensions of that tradition, particularly as articulated during the patristic and medieval periods.

After examining the historical context, Weigel goes through each of the council documents, beginning with



Basic Books / 368p \$32

the “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation” (“*Dei Verbum*”) and the “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church” (“*Lumen Gentium*”). In these texts in particular we find a clear articulation of God, of God’s relationship to humanity and of the church that went beyond the juridical and institutional focus that predominated prior to Vatican II and instead provided a vision that was Christ-centered and sacramental. Because these documents contain such rich theology and are tone-setting, Weigel suggests that all the other documents need to be read with reference to them.

Much of the contemporary discourse about Vatican II does not engage with the council’s documents themselves. I have met many Catholics with strong opinions about the council who have never read the documents—nor do they know much about what they actually say. Weigel helpfully directs the reader’s attention to the documents themselves, and he does a fine job of expounding on their theological profundity, elaborating on how the documents articulated a theological perspective that needed to be heard and

did so in conformity with the church's tradition. He also writes appreciatively about the language used in the council documents. Weigel notes positively that in contrast to the neo-scholastic language then dominant in ecclesiastical writings, the council fathers chose to use language and tone that was more biblical and patristic. In so doing, according to Weigel, the church was able to communicate the faith anew to a modern world.

There are certain facets of Weigel's interpretation of the documents with which one could argue. He tends to think, for example, that the council fathers were as opposed to communism and environmentalism as he is. But there is great value both in his emphasis on turning to the sources and in the ways in which he elucidates the beautiful and important theology expressed by the council fathers.

However, the book takes an unfortunate turn in its third part, in which Weigel writes about problems that emerged after the council. Even though he begins Part III by arguing against the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy (in this case, "what happened after the council happened because of the council"), he ends up falling into this fallacy himself.

While Weigel argues that the neo-scholastic language and theology that dominated prior to the council was unable to address the modern human condition in ways that would be compelling to contemporary people, it becomes clear that he thinks the more biblical, patristic and pastoral language of the council caused more problems than it solved. Because the documents did not provide the kind of "precise vocabulary, finely honed distinctions, and tight logic characteristic of Neo-Scholasticism," they were open to distortive interpretations that ran amok in the decades after the council. And because the council defined no doctrines, articulated no creed, anathematized no heresies, legislated no canons and commissioned no catechism, there were no interpretative "keys" to correct distortions after the council.

So even though he spends significant time earlier in the book exploring the theology of the council documents, Weigel appears to believe that the documents themselves are not enough because they lack the kind of theological rigor that he had criticized as being incapable of addressing modernity adequately. What is needed, he argues, are interpretive keys to rein in distortion, and he argues that Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI provided precisely those keys during their pontificates. By this he means that the council documents should be read through the lens of the teachings of these two popes because their theologies admitted no ambiguity.

Weigel acknowledges that Vatican II articulated a

strikingly Christocentric and sacramental theological vision that drew on the riches of the church's biblical and patristic tradition both in tone and content. In doing so, it eschewed the precise language of medieval scholasticism that had been the dominant theological language up to the beginning of the council in favor of a more pastoral and narrative tone that could speak more profoundly to modernity. The council thus developed a theology and ecclesiology that was pastoral rather than legalistic and juridical, but which still maintained continuity with the past.

Unfortunately, according to Weigel, too many Catholics after the council exploited this new tone to introduce distortions that only the reintroduction of theological rigor and discipline could correct. Thus, from Weigel's perspective, Vatican II was good for what it was, a pastoral blip that managed to address some important issues. But it was necessary shortly after the council to return to the discipline, rigorism and legalism that reigned prior to the council. This John Paul II and Benedict XVI fortunately provided. The kind of dialogue encouraged by the council, the kind of dialogue rooted in a Christocentric and sacramental understanding of humankind, is good, but only to a degree. According to Weigel, there comes a point when it needs to be reined in.

Hence Weigel's barely concealed antipathy for Pope Francis. It is not an exaggeration to state that Weigel writes almost as if the current pontiff did not exist. Despite whole chapters dedicated to the teachings of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, there are only two brief references to Francis, one merely to mention that Francis released Benedict XVI's encyclical "Lumen Fidei" and one to complain that all the old questions and controversies of the council have re-emerged "during" (read "because of") Francis' pontificate. Weigel's relative silence regarding the present pope speaks volumes.

For all Weigel's praise of the council in the first two parts of the book, the third part reveals his belief that the church needs to return to an entrenched position, and on this Francis does not agree. There are, of course, many Catholics who agree with Weigel on this point, but they are generally those who dismiss or reject the council on the basis of a hermeneutic of rupture.

Although Weigel's hope is that his readers will interpret the council through the hermeneutic of reform, ultimately he himself is not willing to buy what he is selling.

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ON LOSS AND LAUGHS

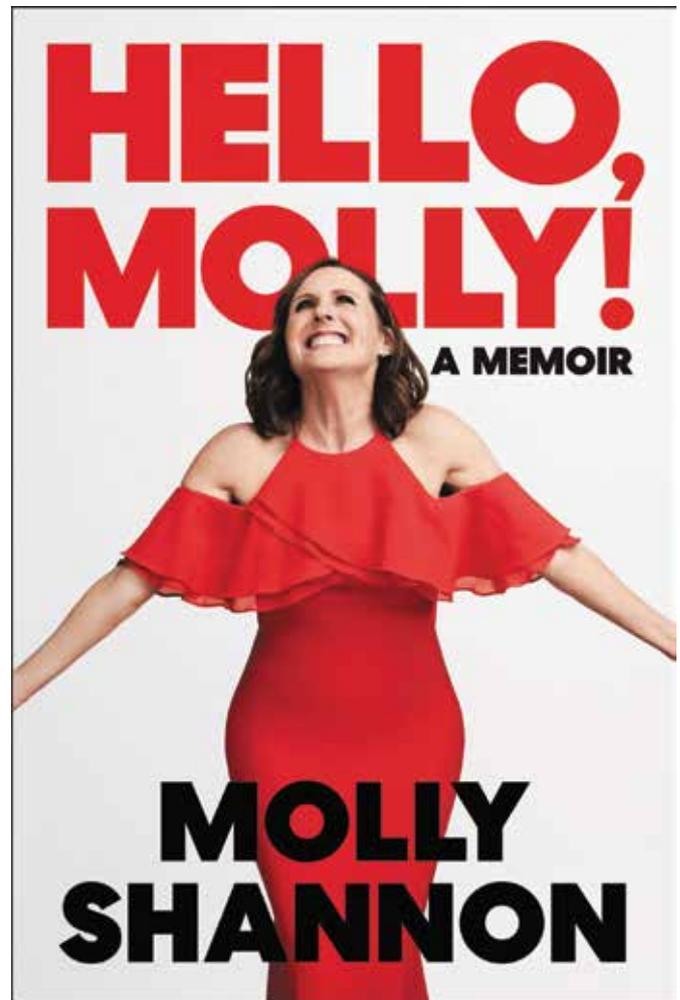
With my palms together and fingers pointed up toward heaven, I slowly walked down the aisle of St. Teresa of Avila Church in Summit, N.J. Wearing a white rose pinned to the lapel of my new navy blue blazer, second-grade me prepared to finally meet the greatest celebrity in human history. Not only that, but the second most important celebrity in my young mind sat two-thirds of the way in the back to the left. It was the aunt of another first communicant: Molly Shannon, or as we knew her in my household: Mary Katherine Gallagher.

I am not sure how our love affair with the character of Mary Katherine Gallagher began in our family, but I'm fairly certain I had most of the PG-13 1999 film "Superstar" memorized by the time I made my first Communion in 2004. In the fall of 2001, when our family first started at Our Lady of Peace School in New Providence, N.J., my older sister dressed as Mary Katherine Gallagher for Halloween.

I am sure my mother was mortified, wondering what the adults at this new school might think. I'll never forget our tough, parochial school principal greeting us that morning. Looking at my sister, Mrs. Pollak stuck her hands under her armpits and said, in classic Mary Katherine Gallagher form, "Sometimes when I get nervous I stick my hands under my arms and smell them like this" before bringing her fingers to her nose and inhaling deeply. In that moment, we knew we were home in the Catholic school system. We felt like superstars.

Molly Shannon rose to fame on "Saturday Night Live," joining the cast in 1995. During her six seasons on the show, she developed Mary Katherine Gallagher and other beloved original characters like Sally O'Malley and Jeannie Darcy, the unfunny standup comedian. After leaving "S.N.L.," Shannon found success mostly in a number of supporting roles, guest spots and voice roles. Shannon starred in "Year of the Dog" (2007), but more recently you may have seen her on HBO in "Enlightened," "Divorce," "The Other Two," "The White Lotus" or "I Love That for You."

There is something deeply Catholic about the comedy of Molly Shannon. Of course, on the surface there are plaid skirts and scowling nuns and frustrated priests complaining about broken toasters—but there is also something richer underfoot. Shannon's memoir *Hello, Molly!* explores and exposes the roots of that richness. Her friend Rob Muir writes, in a letter shared in the memoir: "You stood out because you weren't doing jokes, you were doing characters, not caricatures. Sure some of your characters were over-the-top, but they were always rooted in truth. You found not only the humor in the characters, but humanity." More than the costumes and settings, it is that humanity at the heart of



Ecco / 304p \$28

Shannon's comedy that makes it Catholic to the core.

Hello, Molly! begins with tragedy, in a prologue titled "The Accident." When Shannon was 4 years old, her family attended a graduation party together in Mansfield, Ohio. On their way home to Shaker Heights, Shannon's father Jim sideswiped another car on the freeway before swerving hard to the right and hitting a telephone pole. Her mother, cousin and baby sister were killed in the accident, while she survived alongside her father and older sister Mary. Human mortality was made real and tangible to a young Molly Shannon. A heartbreaking photo taken near the time of the accident captures the confused despair on her face. It juxtaposes the deep sadness a 4-year-old should never have to express against a mundane painted yearbook photo backdrop. Somehow life moves on.

In one of the most touching moments of the memoir, Shannon shares how a priest at St. Dominic School was the first person to acknowledge how sad she was. Father Murray held her hands and, in his Irish brogue, sympathized with her—a 4-year-old child. As she remembers, he knelt down



Molly Shannon
as Mary Katherine
Gallagher on
"Saturday Night Live"

after Mass and said, "Molly. I know you lost your mother. That's very sad. That's very hard. You lost your sister, Katie. You lost your cousin. So sad, so hard for you. God bless you." He recognized her sadness. Faith offers us something even when it appears the world is offering us nothing. In recognizing her sadness, Father Murray offered Shannon a way to move forward.

Unsurprisingly, Shannon's memories of a Catholic girlhood are hilarious. She would get up early in the morning with her sister and watch "Mass for Shut-Ins," a broadcast for disabled Catholics. They would guess how many people in the Communion line would be wearing glasses. She would build churches and confessionals for her Barbie dolls, where they would confess to Father Stretch Armstrong.

The funniest and most unhinged story from the memoir follows Shannon and her childhood friend Ann Ranft as they hop on a plane from Cleveland to New York at 13 and 11 years old. Shannon's father loved dares and thought hopping a plane would be the world's greatest stunt, but he didn't think they would ever do it. Skipping dance class, they made their way to the airport, walking right up to the gate and lied, asking if they could quickly say goodbye to their sister on the plane. Once on board they took two seats in the back and ducked their heads. As the plane began to move, they sat in their dance tutus in disbelief, held hands and began to pray the Hail Mary.

The complicated relationship between Shannon and her father pushes the book forward. It is a throughline we return to again and again. Shannon's father was endlessly supportive, to the best of his limited abilities. He would let her wear whatever she wanted. When she developed holes

in her Keds, he told her they built character and showed the shoes were worn. He gave her the freedom to be herself. Widowed, he played the role of both mother and father: provider, accountant, chauffeur, laundress, cook, cleaner and more. He would "pop some Dexamyl," or "cleaning pills" as they called them, and clean the house all day and night. After finishing, he would play Judy Garland music, "And.... Everything. Was. Perfect." This memoir is a portrait of the loving bond between a daughter and her eccentric father. He is a character that feels familiar, I think because so much of his humanity is in the best of her characters.

Mary Katherine Gallagher's feisty, dramatic grandmother is clearly a reflection of Jim Shannon, the man who, after his dog bit him, bit his dog back. Sally O'Malley's physicality on "Saturday Night Live"—her ability to kick, stretch and *kick* like a Rockette at the age of 50—is a response to Shannon's father's physical limitations from the accident. Her limp is his limp. Her eccentricity is his. Her power is his power.

Marketed as a "compulsively readable, heartbreaking memoir of resilience and redemption," *Hello, Molly!* delivers. Shannon describes her spiritual philosophy simply: "Struggle is meaningful." Her ability to respond to struggle with joy and positivity is admirable. It is a quality at the core of so many of her characters. It is what makes her a superstar.

Ciaran Freeman is an art teacher at Gonzaga College High School in Washington, D.C., and a former O'Hare fellow at America Media.

FROM DEATH INTO LIFE

In *Sister Death: Political Theologies for Living and Dying*, Beatrice Marovich explores the connections between living and dying in a way that seeks to refute the concept of death as enemy while not accepting it as something that is good or desirable. Rather, she illumines what can be the tragedy of death by linking it to the experience of life and explores the question of human existence from our natality, which brings us into being from nothingness, to a dying that can be perceived as annihilation but also has multiple strands linking it to life.

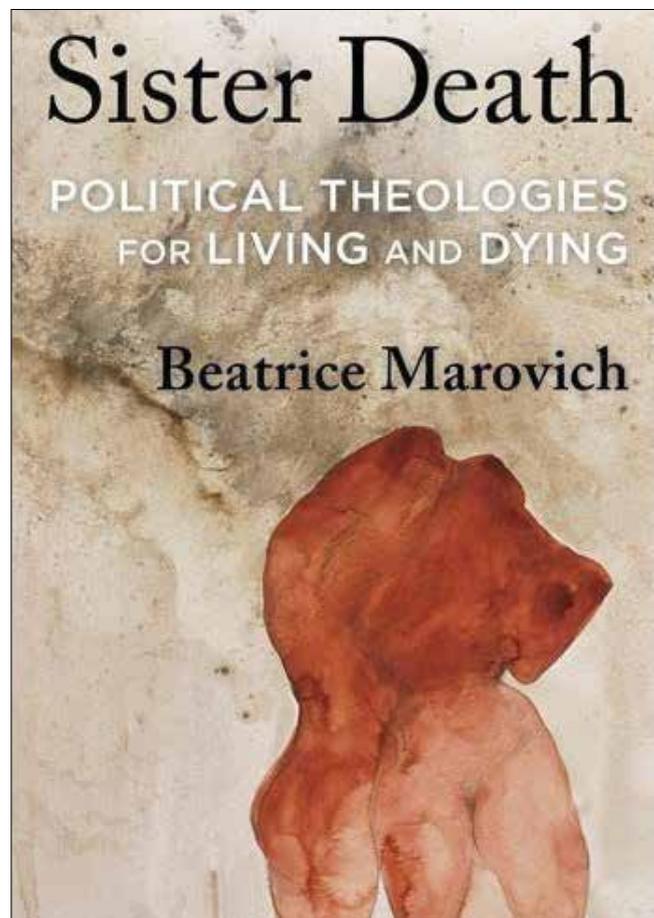
Using Derrida's term "lifedeath" to demonstrate a continuity of life and death, Marovich examines the enmity between life and death in Western thought, particularly attending to St. Paul's reference to death as "the last enemy." While maintaining nuance and an honest admission that there is more than Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians behind Christian teaching on the subject, Marovich describes Christianity's approach to death as reinforcing this enmity.

She discusses the church councils, particularly Chalcedon (451), which defined Christ as divine and human. Marovich argues that Christ's humanity differs from other humans. He is not a creature in the same sense: Christ, in the resurrection, creates a group of those who are victorious over death and associated with the divine. Over time, in the history of the church, this separation has created a group who are saved, while all others are associated with sin and death. Those associated with sin and death are initially the Jewish people, but the concept eventually was extended to all others who were not Christian, and thus led to violence against Indigenous peoples, the equation of Blackness with death, systems of slavery, and a variety of other systemic inequities that continue to shape how we view one another and our relationship to death.

In place of this concept of death, Marovich suggests the metaphor of feminist sisterhood, where there is distinction and difference, but also deep relationship and identification in considering death. She borrows the image of *Sister Death* from St. Francis of Assisi but adapts it to bypass the notion of enmity between death and life.

This book is technical and takes the reader into deep analysis of elements of continental European philosophy. Marovich also makes ample use of feminist, Black and queer theory and theology, which may make the book more suitable for the scholar than the general reader.

Lest that sound too daunting, there is a beauty and kind spirit in Marovich's writing that kept me engaged even when I found myself a bit overwhelmed by concepts

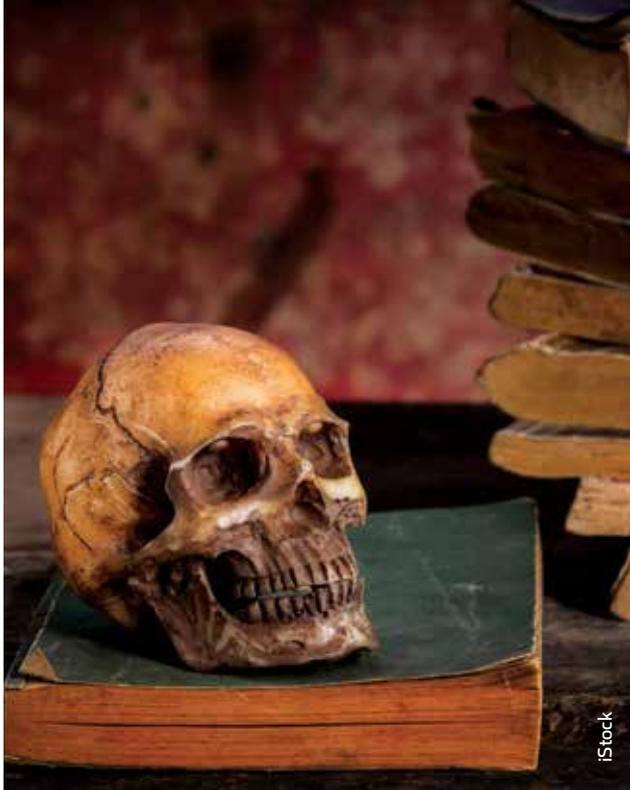


Columbia University Press / 304p \$32

that I had not previously considered or were challenging for me. Marovich is also to be commended because in the exposition of her thesis, she remains nuanced and inviting, realizing that there are other perspectives. Indeed, I found myself wishing I could be in conversation with the author, sometimes debating, sometimes asking for more explanation, and at other times questioning (gently, I hope) whether her interpretation of Christian theology is accurate.

A remarkable feature of this volume, one that enhances the reader's engagement with a difficult text, are the drawings throughout the text by Krista Dragomer. Dragomer, a friend of Marovich's and collaborator in workshops, illuminates the author's points with her work. As Marovich writes:

I wrote this book because I believe that there are real problems—failures—in the language that many of us have been given to make sense of this wild nexus where life and death collide. What I seek to do, in this book, is to gesture toward oth-



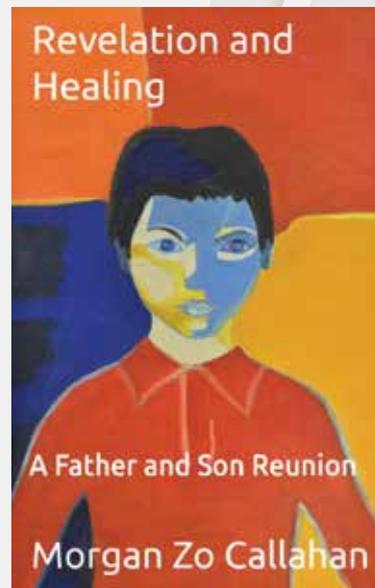
er possible stories to tell, another sort of language to share, another form of perception. Krista's images model other forms of perception that are different, still, from the language that I offer as text on the page. In this sense, I hope, her work will illuminate yet other possible stories.

As someone who in the past practiced as a physician in internal medicine and geriatrics and found myself caring for persons in "this wild nexus where life and death collide," I wish I could have learned more about how the image of Sister Death would illuminate and, perhaps, transform how we care for persons who are facing death. As a priest who has anointed the sick, prayed at wake services, presided at funerals and buried the dead, I wonder how Marovich would suggest our rituals might illuminate or provide a counter-position to her viewpoints.

In short, I am not sure how Sister Death, as presented in this book, makes a difference in how we live and die. But I would love to hear more from Marovich on that topic.

Myles N. Sheehan, S.J., M.D., is the director of the Pellegrino Center for Clinical Bioethics and the David Lauler Chair of Catholic Health Care Ethics at Georgetown University Medical Center in Washington, D.C.

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

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](https://www.amazon.com)

HOSPITALITY AND OTHER CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

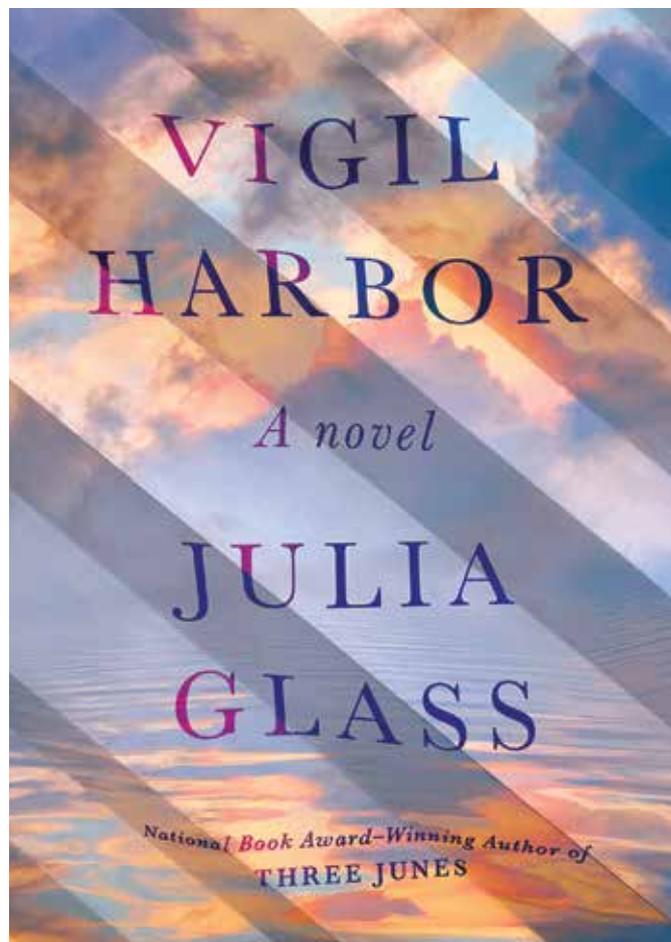
Vigil Harbor, in Julia Glass's novel of the same name, is an insular community that time seems to have mostly passed by—until we look more closely at its residents' lives and see how contemporary events are affecting them, even unfolding within the town itself. Despite its seemingly sleepy ambiance, the fictional peninsula in Massachusetts “where you will meet any number of people who claim to be thirteenth generation,” we learn early on, has war “stitched deeply into its lore.” This novel shares a complex tale about the town's history of close encounters with violence, but also about the open and helpful community that unintentionally enables some of the calamities that ensue.

Brecht, a young man who has returned home to Vigil Harbor as he recovers from the trauma of surviving a terrorist attack in New York City's Union Square, is the first character we meet in this kaleidoscopic novel. He is a college dropout who now works in landscaping for one of the town's only non-white residents, an unassumingly gifted arborist and quiet family man named Celestino. It is Celestino's past connection to Ernesto, a mysterious climate scientist, that sets the town on a collision with new types of war being waged across America; that is, eco-terrorist attacks by the Oceloti, a group determined to stop the destruction of the rainforest.

When Brecht was still a child, his father died in the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic—one of the few indicators of when the events in the novel take place. Brecht is also an amateur poet. “The problem with my poems, I realize, is that I'm trying too hard to tell stories,” he reflects, deciding to try to create portraits instead. The chapters in this book weave together many stories but are also a collection of portraits, rotating among nine characters, opening and concluding with Brecht.

Not everyone is who they appear to be in Vigil Harbor, perhaps something that can be pulled off because of the trusting nature of a place where some do not lock their doors. Petra, a woman posing as a journalist making a film about Brecht's stepfather, Austin, and a prominent architect, turns out to share a connection with him to an otherworldly woman they both knew years ago in New York. While people feel uncomfortable around Ernesto and wonder why Petra does not have a camera, they persist in offering hospitality to these outsiders. Both take advantage of this to breach acceptable boundaries.

Yet one of the most intriguing plots in the novel centers around Issa, a charismatic young woman who was the lover of both Austin and Petra. Issa, who sometimes walks around New York City without shoes and has no navel, claims she is from a city that was swallowed by the ocean. She came to warn about the “poisoning and pillaging of ocean life”



Anchor / 416p \$18

through her beautiful, detailed and lifelike drawings. Yet she can also be reticent and does not fully explain herself: “Don't try to find words for us,” she pleads with Austin when he asks who sent her.

Austin, thinking Issa delusional, urges her to go to counseling and refuses to help with her project. Eventually, Issa throws herself into the sea, an act Austin judges to be suicide, while Petra believes it could be a sign that she was telling the truth about her non-human origins. Maybe, Petra speculates, she was “better than human: more loving, more transporting, more innocent and giving.” In a time of climate crisis, is Issa prophetic? What is our ability to understand messages when they come from those who are different from us? The book explores our willingness to consider things we do not have evidence for, a practice familiar to Catholics.

Celestino's wife Connie describes herself as someone who is perhaps “emotionally proprioceptive”—“that I know my spiritual place among others.” Yet as the novel's events unfold, she feels: “I've been a fool to believe that. Suddenly my orientation to the space around me isn't what I thought it was. My emotional balance is shot.” From the retired

schoolteacher coping with a divorce to the welcoming neighbors coming to terms with a betrayal of their kindness and then to Brecht realizing the end of a fantasy he developed after a friend's death, much recalibration is happening in Vigil Harbor.

Speaking about the terrorist responsible for the Boat Basin Bombing, the latest attack to hit New York City, Connie muses that "his flaw is fanaticism, not malice. The world is full of fanatics now, a dime a dozen, and many of them are justified in their drive to destroy the destroyers. They become killers despite themselves. Or is a killer merciless and malignant by nature?" The novel provides us with many opportunities to reflect on how we confront what seems to be evil in our midst, or even when it is distant, and to ask how we might effectively work against those evils in a way that is just and loving.

"I'm on an island whose shoreline is threatened," says Brecht. "There are guards and cops and rangers and all kinds of uniformed people keeping an eye for trouble, there are flood basins where there used to be basketball courts, there are stretches of summer where the temperature hits one hundred degrees five days in a row, and there may loom storms, bombs, contagions, pandemics and pandemonium, but I'm doing all right." For a character whose stated desire

is to live in a safe world, adapting to what he is faced with instead—and making that feel as safe as possible—is a major accomplishment. "Making things that don't fall apart" is Brecht's response to a college essay assignment that asks him to describe his signature passion.

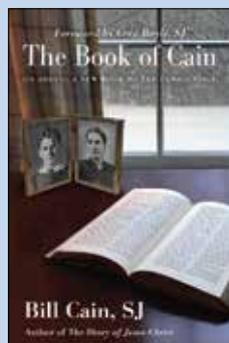
In the aftermath of collective trauma, how does community hold up? How can we practice the responsible hospitality that our faith requires in a dangerous world? Who will we accept as our prophets? These are just a few of the questions raised by this sprawling novel.

Brecht tells Celestino and Connie's young son Raul that the best teachers make you curious. The same can be said for the best novelists, whose writing encourages us to look at our own surroundings and inner compasses with the same careful detachment we apply to our reading of their characters. A close reading of this newest book from National Book Award winner Julia Glass incites us to do just that.

—
Cynthia-Marie Marmo O'Brien is an editor, educator and writer in New York, N.Y.

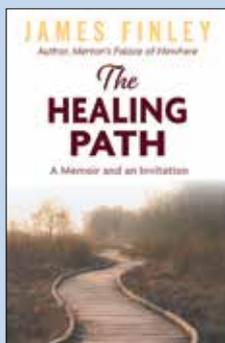
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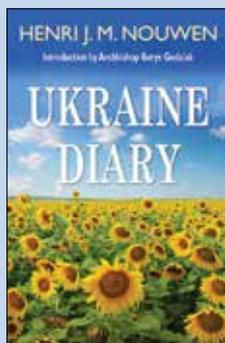
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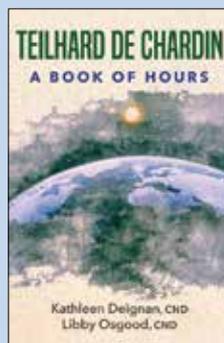
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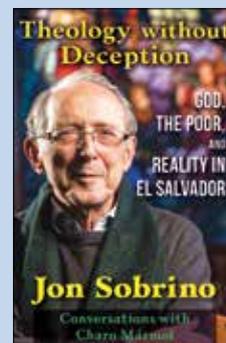
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America

Building a world and inviting us in

By Joe Hoover

Most reconsiderations of artists and works of art (Keanu Reeves, *The Great Gatsby*, “Vertigo,” to name just a few) take years or even decades to achieve. They were panned, now they are acclaimed. For the winner of this year’s Foley Poetry Contest, the “reconsideration” took a matter of days.

When “Letter to Myself While Learning to Read,” by Laurinda Lind, was submitted among the 600 or so poems we received this year—by the way, I encourage you to read the poem before reading this article about the poem—I read it, enjoyed it and put it on a list of poems to peruse again. This list eventually became 30 finalists, which I gave to our other two judges: Jill Rice, an O’Hare fellow at America, and James Torrens, S.J., a former America poetry editor.

When we shared with one another our top five poems, only one of the judges had “Letter” on his list. I did not. “Letter” was a nice poem, but maybe too... romantic? Nostalgic? A kid sleeps on a porch in the summer; her dad reads her classic children’s books.

Nevertheless, I read “Letter” again, but it still did not do it for me. I went back to the other finalists, spent more time with one poem in particular, and picked it as the winner. “Letter” would not even be one of the three runners-up. The next morning, realizing I was still not entirely settled on the winner, I read “Letter” again. And again, and again. Each time I saw something new. Each time it sank deeper, its heft became more evident. It was not tossing out trinkets of romance and nostalgia; it was doing something deeper.

“Letter” quickly builds a world and opens the door ajar for us to gaze inside. A child isn’t just sleeping on

the front porch like a summertime adventure: She is made to sleep there the entire season (which season, exactly, we are not told) because the visiting cousin has been given the bed. She is exiled, feeling like “an afterthought,” something we can all identify with. At some point or another, we have all been left out on the screened-in front porch of someone else’s affections, no?

And the father who treks out into the porch to help the child read—kindly, fatherly—but the only time he will ever do so. Why? Heidi, Robinson Crusoe, Swiss Family Robinson, the poet using these names not as biscuits thrown out to the nostalgic reader but because they align—even darkly—with the atmosphere of the story.

The poem pays out its narrative, loops us into its intrigues, leaves hints of resolutions, calls us to something beyond ourselves. All in 28 lines. “Letter” is just, how should I put it, it’s a really nice piece of writing. I am grateful on behalf of America to be able to award it the 2023 Foley Poetry prize.

We are also pleased to announce three runners-up, to be published in subsequent issues: “Lily, Lily, Lily,” by Nancy Clark, “Apology for Belief,” by Alex Mouw, and “Sappho,” by Beth Hinchliffe.

I am grateful for all the poets who submitted their work for the contest. Every year we get poems from all over the United States, and even across the world, about any number of topics:

“The Wreck of the Livonia” compares the deaths of several nuns in early Covid to “The Wreck of the Deutschland,” by Gerard Manley Hopkins.

“Civil Insubordination, or Where in Amerikkka Are Black People Free From Racism?” makes a chilling reference to the police shooting of Laquan McDonald by the Chicago police officer Jason Van Dyke.

One poet complains about a Twitter culture overwhelmed with virtue signaling, cancel culture, colleges having to change their mascots. But, interestingly enough, her demand to this culture seems to be less about opposing these ideas than transforming how they are expressed: “Explain ideas in coherent sentences,” she declares.

In 2023, it is almost quaint to consider that we might need to interface with God by text, when apparently God has sent ChatGPT to rule the world on his behalf. But the poem “Txt Mssg” to God (*Fatal Error!/ Msg not received./ Pls snd Messiah again...*) suggests God might still desire these kinds of prayers.

“Please send Messiah again.” Or, at least keep sending us works of art worthy of our reconsideration. They help us create a world any messiah would delight in saving.

Joe Hoover, S.J., is *America’s* poetry editor and the author of *O Death, Where Is Thy Sting?*

2023 FOLEY POETRY PRIZE

Letter to Myself While Learning to Read

By Laurinda Lind

These nights out on the cold closed-in porch on your folding cot because your teenaged cousin takes your bed all season, your many hours surrounded by dark windows as if you are a theater for stars and ghosts that your family believes in, as if you are a child lost on the water in a boat cast off from its lines—this must be why your father sits and reads to you, the only time he will do this, teaching the terror to skip you out here on the edge of a family to which you feel like an afterthought. This crowd of people he brings into the room to keep you company. A girl named Heidi halfway up a mountain with a gruff grandfather. Also Robinson Crusoe, a stranded sailor not all alone on an island, since a man he treats like a child still chooses to stay and help him. Another story that sounds like a real family, not incidental like yours, Swiss but also named Robinson and how they go high into trees, taking everything up one level away from what can grab them in their sleep. Their platforms that say every time you shipwreck down below, you will still be whole somewhere up above. And as you turn a page to learn its letters, you start to reach your hand out into the night, where someone from another world wants you enough to squeeze back.

Laurinda Lind’s poems have appeared in *Atlanta Review*, *The Keats-Shelley Review*, *New American Writing*, and *Stand*. She is a retired adjunct English teacher and lives in New York’s North Country.

Dear Disciples of Christ: Fear No One

The Gospel passages in June shift in focus from the mysteries of the life of Christ to the practical labors of discipleship. Now that the Easter season has drawn to a close, the church celebrates the Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity and the Solemnity of the Body of Blood of Christ. During these celebrations, the church continues the reading of John's Gospel that began during the Easter season.

On the first Sunday in June, the Gospel reads, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (Jn 3:16). This phrase has captured the hearts of millions of people, perhaps because in most cultures there is no greater treasure than children. God the Father offers the Son to humanity with no display of possessiveness. God gives the Son with no consideration of the cost.

The free gift of the Son is also the topic of the Gospel reading on the Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ.

"For whoever feeds on me," says Jesus, "will have life because of me" (Jn 6:57). These mysteries, so difficult to explain or describe, are meant to be lived and felt.

From these moments of mystery, the focus quickly shifts to the disciples. On the last two Sundays of this month, the church returns to the Gospel of Matthew. The passages from these two Sundays address challenges of discipleship. On the Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time, Jesus is moved with pity for the crowds who are "abandoned and troubled." He turns to his disciples and says, "Ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest" (Mt 9:38). On the last Sunday of the month, Jesus turns to the Twelve and says, "Fear no one" (Mt 10:26). This advice is fitting for the return to Ordinary Time: Fear no one and do not count the cost of love, just do it with an authentic heart.

SOLEMNITY OF THE MOST HOLY TRINITY (A), JUNE 4, 2023

The Gift of the Father: His Only Son

SOLEMNITY OF THE BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST (A), JUNE 11, 2023

The Gift of the Son: The Bread of Life

ELEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A), JUNE 18, 2023

The Gift of Discipleship: The Labor of the Harvest

TWELFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A), JUNE 25, 2023

The Gift of the Twelve: To Be Fearless



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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A View From Ireland

Guns make it unthinkable to live in America

Dear America:

I feel like I should still love you. I'm struggling to love you. But your peculiar relationship with guns is draining that love away.

I was a teenager at the time of the Columbine High School shooting. No one could mistake suburban Dublin for anyone's utopia, but even then my friends and I could recognize that we might as well live in a different galaxy. The most pressing issue we faced in the spring of 1999 was our "orals," when we had just 15 minutes to prove we had achieved the minimum capacity with the Irish language. We could not conceive of a situation where teenagers would be expected to learn while also living under the threat of such violence. The randomness of it was especially striking.

Had you told me that more than a generation later, the problem would still be unaddressed—in fact had gotten much worse—I would have been astonished. I might not have known the word for it, but I would have concluded the society that allowed its young to live under such a shadow was flirting with nihilism. What is the point of a society that cannot even keep children safe?

A few years before Columbine, in 1996, a man burst into a small primary school in a town in Scotland—much closer to home—and killed 16 children. By the end of the next year, the United Kingdom had successfully drafted, debated and passed laws to make gun ownership vastly more restricted.

Of course, laws alone cannot

change human hearts, but these laws definitely contributed to a changed, saner and safer society. There has been only one mass shooting incident since those laws were passed, and the annual rate of death at the hands of guns in the United Kingdom is now 0.03 per 100,000. That is 120 times lower than the rate in the United States, which is 3.6 per 100,000 people.

Two friends of mine in America have been personally touched by this rampaging violence in the last year. My officemate from my Ph.D. days was on a playground with his daughter when he got a text message warning him of an active shooter down the block. It was the Covenant School shooting in Nashville, where the gunman killed three children and three adults. Just months before, another friend's child survived a different school shooting but had to step over the body of her murdered classmate when finally evacuated by police.

No society has to accept such carnage becoming normal. In Northern Ireland, for example, revulsion at the seemingly never-ending barbarous and pointless violence of the generation-long civil war known as "the Troubles" was a major factor in bringing about the Belfast Agreement peace deal.

It should be the case that I would welcome a chance to move to the United States for a spell and relish the joys of baseball and folk music and shrimp-and-grits at a more relaxed pace than that of a tourist. My wife and I have discussed it. But unless we felt it was a vocation—lit-

erally going to you as missionaries—we would not even consider it.

Our son starts school in the fall. In Ireland his major classroom concern will be sitting still at his desk for prolonged periods of time. All the money in the world could not compensate us for bringing him into a culture where he would have to endure training drills so he would know how to respond if a stranger showed up with a gun.

The figure of Moloch haunts the Hebrew Scriptures—a god who demands the sacrifice of children. In the year of the Belfast Agreement, one of its key architects, the Nobel Peace Prize winner John Hume, gave a speech that implored the need to decommission the weapons of war. But before we decommission the guns, he said, we must decommission our minds. Ireland had to commit to living as a society without recourse to lethal violence because its people could only flourish in peace.

The biblical text is clear: No society can prosper while Moloch is allowed any space to reign. Perhaps this is the vocation of Christians in America today: to be a people dedicated to decommissioning their minds of the hollow promises of liberty offered up by these tools of death.

Kevin Hargaden is a theologian with the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice in Dublin, Ireland. He is the author of Theological Ethics in a Neoliberal Age, published by Wipf and Stock.

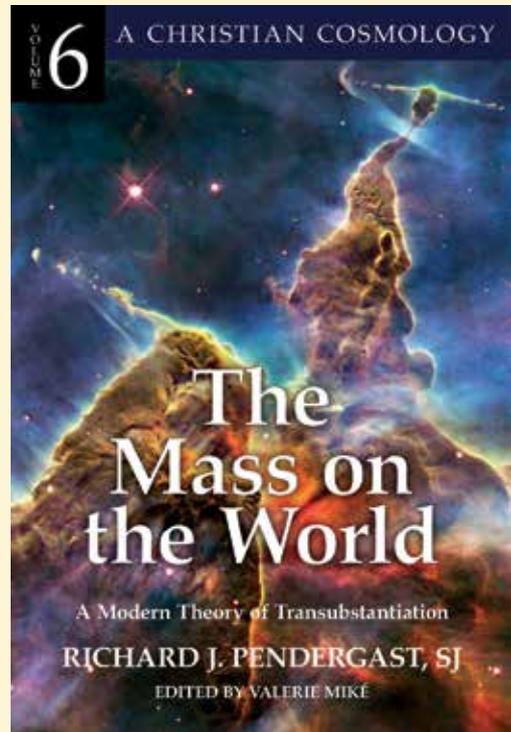
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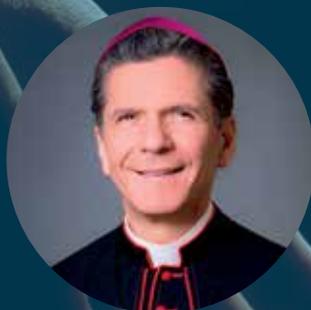
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