

America

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THE JESUIT REVIEW OF FAITH AND CULTURE

DIARY OF A SYNOD

A look back at a historic
month in Rome

Zac Davis • Colleen Dulle • Sebastian Gomes
James Martin • Ashley McKinless
Gerard O'Connell • Sam Sawyer

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Waiting to Find Out Where to Go

The synod did not turn out exactly the way anyone expected. Thanks be to God.

Due to some good luck in scheduling, I was in Rome for the conclusion of the first general assembly of the Synod on Synodality, at the end of October. We had just finished an America Media pilgrimage to Assisi and Rome, spending time reflecting on the spirituality of both St. Francis and St. Ignatius and how they have informed the ministry of Pope Francis.

And because my brother Jesuit, Father James Martin, is a member of the synod, I had been given a ticket inviting me to concelebrate at the final Mass of the synod assembly in St. Peter's Basilica. The members of the synod—laypeople, religious, priests and bishops—were seated centrally in the basilica. My ticket, however, directed me to appear an extra hour early at the Gregorian Chapel inside the basilica to get vested for Mass; I assumed I would be seated far off to the side, probably behind a pillar.

It was not my first time concelebrating a papal Mass (I had been in the crowd of priests at Madison Square Garden when Francis visited New York in 2015), but it was my first time doing so inside St. Peter's. Getting to the Gregorian Chapel was the first challenge. The security line for the basilica moved quickly enough, and showing the yellow concelebration ticket to the Vatican police officers got us ushered ahead smoothly, until it didn't. Along with a Jesuit deacon who was also serving at the Mass, I had been following a bishop until the Swiss Guards waved him through the door to the right of the main entrance and told us we had to exit the square entirely and circle around to a different gate.

Instead, we went back to the main

entrance with the crowd, and then I got waved through to the vesting area while the deacon got directed to the other side of the basilica. He wound up 10 minutes later in the same vesting area I was in, having been bounced through another couple of rounds of showing his ticket to various guards.

After we were vested, one of the masters of ceremonies appeared, and it was only then I learned that I would be pressed into service to distribute Communion. The M.C. gave us instructions in Italian, about one quarter of which I could understand with the help of very rudimentary Spanish. But they're used to that in Rome; the elegant pantomime accompanying the very slow and clear Italian did most of the work. I ended up seated in a semicircle behind Bernini's beautiful *baldacchino*, and then standing about 20 feet from the main altar during the eucharistic prayer. It was a powerful and consoling experience of praying as part of the universal church.

The reason I tell this long story about winding up a stone's throw from the altar over the tomb of Peter is that I have realized, in the days following the synod's meeting, that not entirely knowing where to go and being surprised by what happens when you get there seems to be part of what happened in the synod itself. You will see this reflected, I think, both in the interview with Cardinal Cupich and in the Synod Diaries featured in this issue of the magazine.

In anticipation of the October meeting, there was both hope and fear that some fundamental shift on a topic like ordination of women to the diaconate or blessings of same-sex unions would be decided. In the end, neither the commentators who speculated hopefully about an immediate

change in church teaching nor those who argued for such a change to be definitively precluded found vindication.

These topics were certainly both discussed, but instead of a final decision, the synod's synthesis document instead affirmed the importance of ecclesial reflection on the "original interweaving love and truth flowing from Christological revelation," noted that the members of the synod had a range of views and experiences of these topics, and called for further and deeper discussion. Other ideas in the synthesis document, such as a recommendation of performance reviews for bishops and a call to consider making pastoral councils mandatory, were not the focus of either anticipation or dread, but may have a more significant impact on the church in the near term.

Some commentators may say that calling for ongoing discussion of neuralgic topics is simply a stalking horse for eventual change. I think, however, that they may be missing the real action of the Spirit while focusing on preserving the truth of church teaching from possible distortion.

There is something to learn from the fact that discussion on the most difficult topics was neither rushed to a conclusion nor closed absolutely. The dialogue and listening that the synod process continues to put at the center may be more like my ticket to concelebrate than any defined agenda, pre-arranged plan or clear scheme for decision making. Its point is not to tell us exactly what we are going to be doing, but to get us through the door together, so that we can be put to work serving God's people.

Sam Sawyer, S.J.



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CNS photo/Lola Gomez

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Credit: RudyBalasko/iStock

Why are some U.S. bishops struggling to connect with Pope Francis?

In November, **America's** Vatican correspondent, Gerard O'Connell, interviewed Cardinal Christophe Pierre, who has served as apostolic nuncio to the United States since 2016. Cardinal Pierre spoke candidly about the challenge of conveying Pope Francis' message of synodality to the U.S. bishops, saying that they lead a church living through "a change of epoch." The interview, published on **America's** website, elicited spirited reflections from our readers.

Being a faithful Catholic to all of the teachings and blessed by the charismatic renewal in my archdiocese, I can see how the church is at a "change of epoch." As a mother of seven and grandmother of four, I can see how much the culture has changed. My youngest children are facing a culture much more hostile to the faith than my oldest did—what will my grandchildren face as they get older? And yet, the Holy Spirit keeps me always hopeful for this next generation, and allows me to be open to new ways of reaching out to them. I feel that a synodal way could be very fruitful in my parish and in my archdiocese.

Dawn B.

I believe the papal nuncio can provide a perspective of the U.S. church that those born and raised here may not see as clearly. The church structure we have today evolved from the immigrants of yesterday. We have to change if we are to evangelize and continue. A synodal approach is needed. Today's bishops are not responsible for the abuse crisis. The crisis was something that was many years in the making, long before most current bishops were appointed or even born. For far too long, the church philosophy and response was to insist, at almost any cost, that there was no scandal. The dimensions of the problem were swept under the rug in the false hope of protecting the institution. We are paying the price for that now.

Lloyd William

In his speech prior to the conclave that elected him, Francis said that when turned inward upon herself and her own self-preservation, the church becomes sick. The fear of numerous bishops and young clergy is driven by their nostalgic compulsion to maintain increasingly unsustainable institutions and structures. The remedy to this terminal illness which Francis prescribes is the turn toward a missionary option "capable of transforming everything." The synodal path is the "school" where the church will recover how to evangelize in the emerging epoch.

In the short term, I am pessimistic about the future of the U.S. church. In the long term, I take comfort in the maxim attributed to Winston Churchill, "You can count on

the Americans to do the right thing, only after they've tried everything else."

Edward Shuttleworth

Cardinal Pierre thinks Aparecida was a great success of synodality coming from South America. Yet Catholics are leaving the church in droves in South America. Just look at Brazil. Why? Is synodality really addressing this? It seems to me the real issue is that significant numbers of bishops, clergy and laity no longer believe in foundational Catholic teachings and morality. I worry that some think that synodality means the ability to alter or contradict Scripture and Apostolic tradition by voting to catch up with the agendas of the secular world.

Leonard Villa

The word "connect" in the headline fits perfectly. I think some of the bishops may have a hard time connecting with Pope Francis, whose vision and emphasis is on a global church. I sense that some of our American bishops may be fearful of change, seeing through a myopic lens that is protective of the U.S. church alone. "Everyone" belongs in Pope Francis' vision; that may be a huge challenge for some of our hierarchy who prefer stasis over change.

I understand that some bishops' dioceses are burdened by bankruptcies stemming from the sexual abuse crisis. But at the same time, where is the focus on victims whose lives were changed forever because of the sexual abuse imposed by many clergy? Where is the institutional church's humility regarding its failure to protect those victims? Why is there more focus on the money than the fracturing of right relationship perpetrated in our church? Jesus spoke first and foremost about relationships, but they are glossed over all too often by some of the clergy.

Maybe some of the bishops are struggling to connect with Pope Francis because he challenges them to look deeper within themselves. I sense that Pope Francis' ministry is inspired by the Holy Spirit; he is the pope we sorely need right now. Praise God!

Dr. Geraldine Kerr



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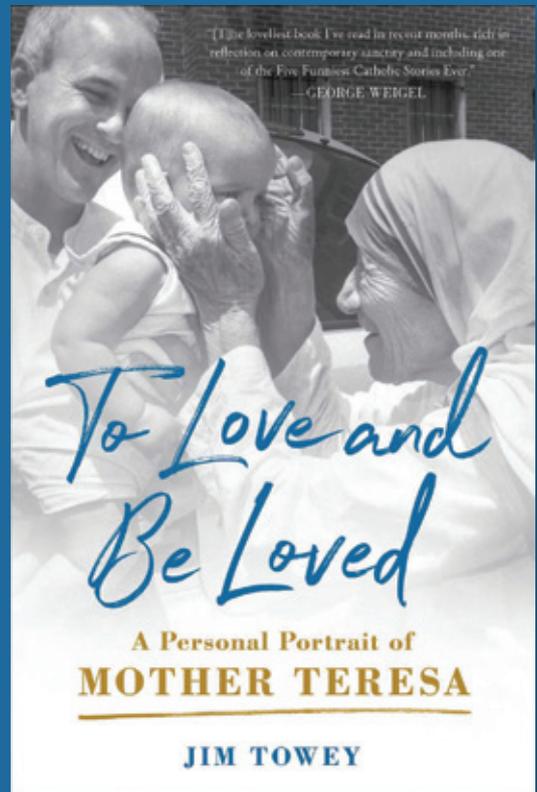
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Can the Synod Help Catholics Talk About Politics?

The first of two worldwide Synod on Synodality meetings concluded in October of this year, marking a month of historic firsts. The 365 participants in Rome—Pope Francis among them—included laypeople as voting members for the first time at a synod. The gathering also introduced a new method of deliberation for Vatican proceedings, with members meeting in small groups at round tables, emphasizing listening to each other in addition to delivering presentations.

Commentary from many delegates in the aftermath, ranging from cardinals to clerics to the lay men and women who participated, noted that the church was embarking on a new path of communion.

As voters in the United States approach another presidential election, how can this synodal experience inform the ways that U.S. Catholics engage in political conversation? While the presidential race seems to be heading for a replay of 2020's Biden vs. Trump, with even deeper partisan rancor, other parts of the political landscape are scarcely recognizable. For example, the question of legal abortion, which the U.S. bishops' teaching document on the political responsibility of Catholics, "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship," has long called the "pre-eminent priority" for Catholic political engagement, used to be focused on *Roe v. Wade* at the Supreme Court. But abortion has become, since the 2022 *Dobbs* decision, a thorny legislative question at the state level.

In this complicated political terrain, continuing to identify abortion as the "pre-eminent priority" could confuse more than it clarifies. The question is not only what place protection of life has in our moral teach-

ing and the formation of conscience, but how to give those commitments practical effect. How should we assess the variety of contingent and local factors when choosing which policies to support and which candidates to back? Take, for example, the states that have adopted constitutional guarantees of abortion access, as Ohio did most recently on Nov. 7. How should the vanishingly slim likelihood of achieving better legislative protection for the unborn in these states be compared with the prospect of alleviating childhood poverty to reduce abortion rates—or with seeking a just peace in Israel and Palestine, recognizing the human dignity of immigrants seeking asylum at our borders or the pressing crisis of climate change?

The synod's patient model of dialogue and listening offers the U.S. church an invitation to engage these questions as opportunities for discernment rather than ideological battles. Rather than expecting an unequivocal answer that "baptizes" one political choice or another, we can hope to respond to the call for political responsibility and collaboration with others in seeking the common good and witnessing to the Gospel.

Here are three key insights from the synod that can help us over the next year of political engagement:

Listening. Perhaps the most valuable lesson to be learned from the synod gathering is the importance of genuine listening. While in previous synods the bulk of time was given to "interventions," in which each member addressed the entire assembly, usually with a text prepared in advance, this synod asked members to listen to each other in rounds of table discussions involving only 10 to 12 participants, and then to share what

they had heard from one another, seeking to discern how the Holy Spirit was at work among them.

How can the church encourage and model such listening on political questions? From meetings of the bishops' conference down through to the parish coffee hour, what would it look like for us to start by emphasizing that fellow Catholics are seeking, albeit imperfectly, to be faithful to the Gospel? What would it look like to first listen, and then strive to articulate to each other how we each are responding to God in our political thinking, before we reject and correct what we disagree with? Such a witness could be powerfully prophetic and counter-cultural in our polarized political life.

New voices. Bishops made up the vast majority of participants in the October synod gathering. But they were not the only participants—and they were certainly not the only voices heard. This made for some surprising results in the final synthesis document. Of particular significance was a paragraph that encouraged a new process of regular evaluation of bishops; it passed with such a significant majority that it is obvious most of the bishops present themselves voted for it. The openness to this call to accountability suggests that the presence of new voices opened up new possibilities.

What political issues might be surfaced if we heard more from voices on the margins? Surely our conversations would be enriched if the wealthy man met the economically struggling woman who felt she had no option but abortion; if the homeowner heard from the migrants housed down the street; if the college student heard parents' concerns about raising children in our contemporary culture.

Some of the most striking me-

dia images from the synod were of bishops listening carefully to women religious and laypeople. Imagine a similar witness given by an ecclesial dialogue involving both prelates and people in the pews about Catholic political responsibility.

Praying together. A number of the participants in the synod gathering noted their experience of prayerful communion. In a globally diverse church, one commonality was the desire to pray together and to share faith across boundaries of language, background, opinion or standing in the church. Synod members also spent three days of retreat together before they began deliberations. And in his address to the synod's first plenary assembly on Oct. 4, Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, S.J., reminded participants: "We cannot discern together without praying together."

We pray from the altar for our political leaders at Mass, but we should also pray in common and in public for the Spirit to guide us in our discernment about the common good. We should pray not only *for* but *with* our political and ideological foes.

It is worth noting that the Synod on Synodality ultimately also involved voting—but it unfolded very differently than our voting processes here at home. Disagreement, with some regrettable exceptions, did not boil over into rhetorical gamesmanship; voting aimed at consensus rather than seeking victory. Surely the atmosphere of prayer and the act of praying together had much to do with that.

The last presidential election cycle in the United States was among the most excruciating in our nation's history for people of every political persuasion, culminating in the nightmare of the Jan. 6 uprising in our nation's capital. No matter what else they want, Americans want something better this time around. Perhaps if we accept the challenge to *listen more intently to more and different voices*, and to *do so prayerfully*, we might finish 2024 with gratitude and pride for the better angels of our nature.

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How we write our history shapes how we think about the Arab-Israeli conflict

In early October, the world watched as Hamas attacked Israel, killing and raping civilians, massacring hundreds of attendees at a music festival, and kidnapping over 100 people. Some of us were shocked; some thought the attack had long been inevitable; some celebrated what they considered Palestinian resistance to occupation; and others remained silent.

Israel's military response also evoked strong reactions, with some calling it "ethnic cleansing" and others suggesting that the military should bomb Gaza into the Stone Age, or saying that there are no "innocent" civilians in the Gaza Strip. But again, a widespread reaction was silence.

These responses, including silence, stem from our declining ability to navigate painful topics with nuance and compassion, and from our fear of being ostracized for our views. If we muster the courage to speak out, we are tempted to make snide or antagonistic remarks on social media rather than seek a dialogue that can help us to maintain and deepen relationships.

Interfaith organizations are particularly vulnerable to the vortex of glib words and disjointed narratives. Dr. Eboo Patel, the president of Interfaith America, has noted the extent to which our social infrastructure depends on such collaboration. Think of a church that resides within a synagogue in New York, a community center in Chicago that is hosted by Muslims but intended as a safe place for everyone, Lutheran-run hospitals open to all, and Jesuit universities that have pioneered interfaith chaplaincies. These are emblems of religious pluralism, but they face ricochets of pain from the Middle East. Their employees, students and volunteers have strong feelings about Israel, Gaza and

the unfolding war.

Many others face difficult conversations at home and in workplaces. They are encountering angry water-cooler conversations and arguments with family members. How can we keep such pain from upending the constructive work of so many?

It starts with acknowledging different narratives, not of the present but of the past. How we write our history informs our current perspectives, and there is no way for any single narrative to capture truth in its entirety. Only from a place of humility can we respectfully engage with one another—and prevent the glorification of civilian deaths or human suffering.

When it comes to sharing narratives, timing is everything. Your chosen starting point may determine your understanding of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Are you going back to biblical times, when the Israelites became a tribal offshoot of the Canaanites? Are you starting from when the kingdoms of Israel and Judah were established (from which the word *Jew* derives)? From the Babylonian conquest and the exile of Jews to the diaspora? From the Roman occupation (whence came the term *Palestine*) and the expulsion of Jews to the edges of the empire? Or are you starting from 1948, when the modern State of Israel was established after a vote in the United Nations General Assembly?

If you start from 1948, then the arrival of Holocaust survivors and Jewish refugees in Israel can more easily be reduced to a kind of colonization, rather than seen as part of a continuing Jewish presence for nearly four millennia. If you start your history in the biblical period, however, it might omit Muslim rule of the Holy Land during the Umayyad, Abbasid and

Ayyubid periods, or the later reign of the Ottoman Empire.

So-called objective history is woven through a process that is as much creatively subjective as it is analytical. Our inherently disparate narratives of the Holy Land give rise to yawning differences in how we understand the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Do you refer to the War of Independence for Jews in 1948, or do you call it the *Nakba* (Arabic for "catastrophe") for Palestinian Arabs who were expelled to territories that, at the time, belonged to surrounding Arab nations? Do you focus on the Six-Day War in 1967, when Israel defended itself against attacks from Egypt, Jordan and Syria, then expanded its internationally recognized borders as it considered necessary for national security? Or do you think it was a breach of international law for Israel to retain these territories for decades after the war, resulting in millions of Palestinians living under Israeli military rule?

We sit before each other, not as experts, but as students admitting that we may know less than we think about the Arab-Israeli conflict. Amid the roar of war, it can feel daunting to hear each other's stories with open minds and open hearts, but that makes the process all the more essential. To paraphrase Rabbi Brad Hirschfield, if we can learn something new, feel less angry, and approach ongoing events with greater nuance, it will have been worth our time in dialogue.

Cantor Olivia Brodsky and Rabbi Joshua Stanton are co-clergy at East End Temple in New York City.



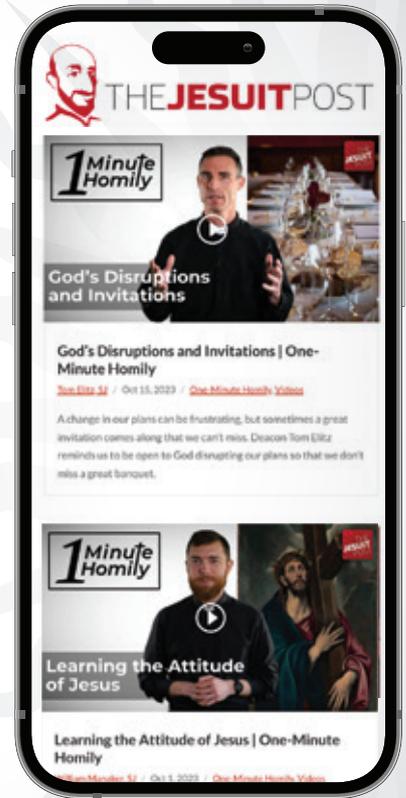
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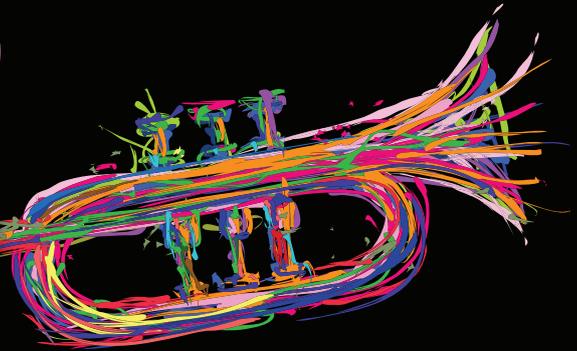


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After the synod, Cardinal Cupich speaks on women deacons, job reviews for bishops and why 'L.G.B.T.Q.' was left out of the final document

By Gerard O'Connell

Following the closing Mass of the first session of the Synod on Synodality in Rome on Oct. 29, Cardinal Blase Cupich, archbishop of Chicago, spoke with America's Vatican correspondent, Gerard O'Connell, about his experience of the meeting and the synod's synthesis document.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

What is your overall take on the synthesis document?

The document is not as important as the experience that we had. I think the document tries to convey that experience. And it does a good job. But my hope would be that we are able to take that experience back home and share it with our people because that really is what the synod is about. It's a new way of being church.

We were aware that there are people in the life of the church and in the synod hall who had their doubts about synodality itself as a model for church life. There were calls to develop [that model] theologically, so that we're clear about this. But there was no doubt whatsoever that this is not only a new way that the church is going to function

but is, in fact, tapping into the roots of our tradition. The church has been synodal from the very beginning. What we're doing is recapturing something that can serve us well in this moment.

You have participated in past synods. How has the fact that you have non-bishops voting changed things?

Instead of having bishops say, "This is what our people are saying," in the old synods, which we tried our best to do, we actually had people there. Young people, elderly people, religious men and women, who, in fact, were on the ground in pastoral ministry, who gave voice in ways that were fresh, were challenging, and in ways that maybe a bishop could not say before.

There was an actual paragraph that was passed overwhelmingly about non-bishops being a part of this: Does it in some way take away from the understanding that it's a synod of bishops? And there was a resounding acceptance that non-bishops should be a part of it because it's not a threat. It allows the bishops to have that immediate inter-

action with the voice of the whole church.

That's important. It was pointed out to me that if you look at the votes and you strip away all of the non-bishops who were a part of the synod, the propositions still pass by 75 percent.

One of the big developments in this document is the role of women in the church.

We're talking about a real paradigm shift here. We recognize the fact that women, de facto, carry the life of the church, on so many levels, to make it operational on a day-to-day basis. But I think it's more than recognizing that; it's dealing also with how you include women in important decision making, how you place them within the life of the community so that their leadership is regarded, respected and protected.

[The document] talks about different ministries that might be created to do that. I know that there was a lot of discussion about women deacons, and that was not resolved here. But it was very clear that the assembly called for a study and hopefully that we would have the results by the next [synod meeting]. I imagine it's going to be taken up again.

But it's not only about [making] everything about women deacons. There has to be another way in which we respect that women bring a particular gift to the life of the church that, if absent, impoverishes the church. How do we take advantage of their gifts and charisms? That's an agenda that's not complete yet.

So do you foresee new roles, new ministries for women?

There could be, but I would say, talking to some bishops, they tell me already that they have women serving "as pastors," who are serving as the head of communities because they don't have enough priests. They don't have the title, however. How do we officially recognize that, rather than seeing it as kind of an exception? I think we have to ask the question: Are these roles for laypeople in the life of the community today just a matter of temporarily substituting [them because of] the shortage of priests? Or is there something about their baptism that, in fact, allows them to be able to have those roles not just in a temporary way, but as really a part of the ministry that belongs to their baptism?

There was a lot of discussion about bishops in the synod. The document included a proposal for looking for ways to evaluate a bishop's performance, to relook at the criteria for candidates for bishops, to ask if the role of the metropolitan should be revisited.

Those questions have not been raised before. You know, every organization that has credibility has some sort of an evaluative tool, a performance review of people. We do it, many dioceses now do it, with the priests; we do it with the laypeople and so on. So I think I would welcome that. This is not to be critical of the bishop. But like any performance review, it's done in such a way that allows the individual to grow in the work that they're doing, because you can encourage things that are going well and also address areas of concern. This is a mature way of assisting an individual to grow within their own ministry and service.

They also talked about the need for greater participation in the selection of bishops. I've always been for that. There should be broad and wide consultation. But [it should include] people who really know the individual, too. You can't just cast a wide net out there. It does put a lot of pressure on the nuncios to be able to do some real serious investigation of where this individual that is being considered has served and making sure that they get the right list.

There was a section on truth and love where the document talks about controversial issues and how to address them. In that section, the term L.G.B.T.Q. doesn't specifically appear. What do you see that is addressing that issue? Because it was discussed a lot in the synod.

Yes, it was. And it's reflected in terms of how people identify their sexuality. And it was broader than the letters of L.G.B.T.Q. It also dealt with people who are in their second marriage.

What was being conveyed in the synod discussions and what the document tried to pick up was, first of all, that we should not start just with condemnations. [We should] also get to know people and realize that in many discussions, we don't know a whole lot. We have to really be careful about pronouncing on things because we believe that there's a violation of God's law or a church protocol. We really have to accompany people; nobody should feel excluded.

It was interesting that when [the document] dealt with the question of ecumenism, it made an interesting distinction between ecclesial communion and sacramental communion, in which you have people who are of a different Christian faith tradition, who might not have full ecclesial communion, but [it asks]: Is there a possibility to reimagine what sacramental communion means? Is there an analogy that can be used with regard to people who might not be in full and complete ecclesial union because of some aspect of their life and sacramental communion? Much along the lines of what the pope says: that the Eucharist is not a reward but a source of healing. I am not sure how to unpack all of that.

Were you surprised that there was less explicit reference to L.G.B.T.Q. issues in the document?

Yes. Only because there was, at least in the groups that I was in, quite a bit of reference to that. People spoke of their experiences. There were some very compelling testimonies on the part of people about that in terms of their families. That was not fully reflected in the document.

That doesn't mean we're not going to return to it next year. I think that's going to happen.

But one thing that was in the same paragraph [on sexuality and identity] was that the church has the responsibility to defend the human dignity of everybody. And that's a powerful message, particularly in some countries where, in fact, gay and lesbian people are prosecuted and even put to death. I think it was a clarion call to all of the church, that we cannot tolerate that kind of violence against people, and we have to defend human dignity.

Gerard O'Connell, *Vatican correspondent.*

Have yourself a modest little Christmas? The holiday season highlights a wasteful culture.

For many Christians, Christmas is the most joyful time of the year. Reuniting with family and friends to celebrate Jesus' birth is always cause for celebration—but perhaps we could be more mindful of just how much celebrating we are doing. Between unwrapping unwanted presents, tons of holiday food ending up in the garbage and many other instances of Yuletide overindulgence, the commemoration of the humble birth of Jesus comes at a significant expense to the environment.

Paz Artaza-Regan, a program manager at Catholic Climate Covenant, is an advocate of a more environmentally conscious approach to Christmas. Catholic Climate Covenant emphasizes four tenets for practicing a more mindful approach to the holiday season: Worship fully, spend less, give more and love all.

"If you do intentionally focus on those four things," Ms. Artaza-Regan said, "you're really moving away from the Western overconsumption model of Christmas to what Advent and Christmas should be all about. You center on Christ, family, friends and service, which is something that we seem to have forgotten."

And using our faith to be more aware of how personal behavior affects the environment is something that should not end after Dec. 25, Ms. Artaza-Regan adds. Our New Year's resolutions can offer a way to start 2024 on an environmentally friendly note.

Not a bad resolution to reflect on while unpacking your Christmas decorations this year. A white Christmas is always nice, but you can still make the most of the season by having yourself a merry, little green Christmas this year.

Michael O'Brien is a Joseph A. O'Hare, S.J., fellow at **America**.

About \$960 billion: the record amount of U.S. spending between November and December 2023, predicted by the National Retail Federation. Consumers say they plan to spend an average of \$875 on gifts and holiday purchases this year.

\$8.3 billion: the amount spent on what survey respondents called "unwanted Christmas presents" in 2022; 52% of Americans open at least one unwanted holiday gift each year.

\$171 billion: the value of holiday gifts estimated to have been returned to U.S. retailers in 2022; 25% of the returned items ended up in landfills. Online shopping has led to substantially higher rates of returned items.

25%: the increase in household waste generated between Thanksgiving and New Year's Day— from 4 million tons to 5 million tons, about 1,000 extra pounds of trash per household.

120 million: the number of trees cut down every Christmas season across the world, almost one-third of them in the United States alone.

\$12.7 billion: the amount Americans spend on gift wrap each year, mostly during Christmas—about 4.6 million pounds of paper. About half of that ends up in landfills.

75%: the reduction in energy use of L.E.D. Christmas lights compared with incandescent bulbs. U.S. consumers use more energy to power their Christmas displays than many small nations use for all purposes in an entire year.

Sources: National Retail Federation; Finders Unwanted Gifts Report; U.S. Environmental Protection Agency; U.S. Department of Energy; Nerdwallet; Optoro Impact Report; Center for Global Development

Cardinal O'Malley urges care for newly arriving migrants ahead of winter

With the number of migrants arriving in Massachusetts outpacing available emergency supplies and housing, Cardinal Seán O'Malley of Boston urged local Catholics to contribute resources ahead of the winter season. Describing the situation as “a major humanitarian and societal crisis,” the cardinal asked pastors in an Oct. 23 letter “to prepare your parishioners to be ready and willing to assist.”

“The challenge is the fate of immigrants arriving daily in Massachusetts, and in need of basic shelter and compassionate care and welcome,” wrote the cardinal.

Officials in Illinois and New York have urged the White House in recent weeks to do more to support the flow of migrants into those states, and in Massachusetts, Gov. Maura Healey declared a state of emergency in August, saying that the state had run out of emergency shelter space for families. Massachusetts is one of a handful of states that have “right to shelter” laws, and it has seen the number of families being housed in emergency shelters, including in hotels, motels and college dorms, more than double in the past year. More than 7,000 families, or 20,000 people, are currently living in these emergency shelters, and the state says it is running out of money.

“We are not ending the right-to-shelter law,” Gov. Healey said in a press conference in October. “We are being very clear, though, that we are not going to be able to guarantee placement for folks who are sent here after the end of this month.”

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops said in a statement released in September that compassion to migrants must be coupled with policies that enable people to stay safely in their home nations.

“Through our belief in Jesus Christ, we are compelled to respond with charity toward those who must uproot their lives in search of refuge,” said Bishop Mark J. Seitz of El Paso, who heads the bishops’ migration committee, “but efforts to manage migration—even when predicated on the common good—require that we also address the coercive forces driving people to migrate.”

Several local Catholic Charities agencies have responded to the crisis in various ways.

In New York, Catholic Charities of Brooklyn and Queens has added personnel to assist migrant families. Shelters run by Catholic Charities of San Diego are housing migrants who in many cases enter the United States at the southern border before moving on to other parts of the country. Chicago Catholic Charities assists migrants



OSV News photo/Adri Salido, Reuters

A migrant carries a child as she continues her journey toward the Darién Gap in Acandí, Colombia, on July 9, 2023.

in finding stable housing once they arrive in the city, often from Texas and other border states.

Cardinal O'Malley laid out the steps his archdiocese has already taken to respond to the crisis in Massachusetts. Those include expanded capacity at three Catholic nonprofits and offering the state use of eight church-owned buildings. He also acknowledged that come winter, the crisis will only worsen, as “most of the recently arrived families are from warmer climates.”

With migrants being housed in more than 90 cities and towns, many local parishes have already responded, the cardinal wrote. But, he continued, “the challenge is for all of us as an Archdiocese.”

He asked parishioners to work with the St. Vincent de Paul Society, “to collect and distribute items directly to those in need.”

“Beyond these immediate actions, there may arise a time when all shelters are filled to capacity and weather conditions require immediate assistance for families in the New England winter,” Cardinal O'Malley continued. “If this occurs, offering short-term critical care and shelter in the biblical sense of ‘welcoming the stranger’ will be the appropriate response from the Archdiocese as a whole.”

“I offer this invitation in the spirit of Pope Francis, who has asked us as Catholics to watch the ‘peripheries’ of society where suffering is located,” the cardinal concluded. “In our time, migrants and refugees are among the most vulnerable individuals and families in the United States. It is my hope and desire that as a Church we respond generously and effectively.”

Michael O'Loughlin, *national correspondent.*



Ireland's turn to parry a toxic populism?

The Irish parliament, the Dáil, met for the first day of a new session on Sept. 20. In scenes that shocked many, the returning members were met by an angry and violent crowd of protestors.

The protest was organized over social media, where it was dubbed “Call to the Dáil,” drawing participants from far-right groups and individuals nurturing a host of grievances and anxieties about contemporary Irish society, from Covid-19 conspiracies to immigration and transgender issues, housing shortages and the economy.

Ireland has long been understood as one of the few European nations that has not become home to a populist or far-right movement. But Irish society has changed dramatically in the last generation.

A nation long known for producing emigrants has been experiencing higher rates of immigration during most years since the late 1980s. Annual immigration spiked to 121,000 in 2022, a 15-year high. That number included almost 30,000 refugees from Ukraine. Many of the Dáil protesters became organized through social media hashtags like #irelandbelongstotheirish, suggesting that those increasing numbers of immigrants were the source of their discontent.

Marc Ó Cathasaigh is a T.D. (a *teachta dála*, a member of Parliament) for the Green Party. He was present at the Dáil and was shaken by the rage expressed among the demonstrators.

He has noted a “definite change in the tone of the debate” in Ireland, as the pandemic and the lockdowns that came with it accelerated fragmentation and polarization—with an able assist from social media echo chambers. Opportunities to debate ideas in Irish society respectfully are diminishing, he worries.

Mr. Ó Cathasaigh believes that when political discourse takes place primarily online, citizens end up having poorer conversations about pressing issues. The negative feedback loops encouraged by social media algorithms are one part of the problem; another is the disembodied nature of the beast.

Mr. Ó Cathasaigh recalls that Pope Francis often focuses on the importance of human encounter. “The encounter with an individual is something we have really lost as we moved online,” he says. “The interaction is mediated. A screen stands between us and them.”

Some have suggested that the response to these increasingly threatening protests should include rendering any protest outside the Parliament impossible. A more productive approach, Mr. Ó Cathasaigh suggests, may be to find ways to reallocate power in the hands of citizens. The Irish political system is very centralized in the capital city, Dublin; Irish local governments are among the worst-funded in Europe.

By consciously moving decision-making power closer to the people, much of the feeling of powerlessness evident

Protesters outside Leinster House in Dublin on Sept. 20

among the protesters could be remedied, he says.

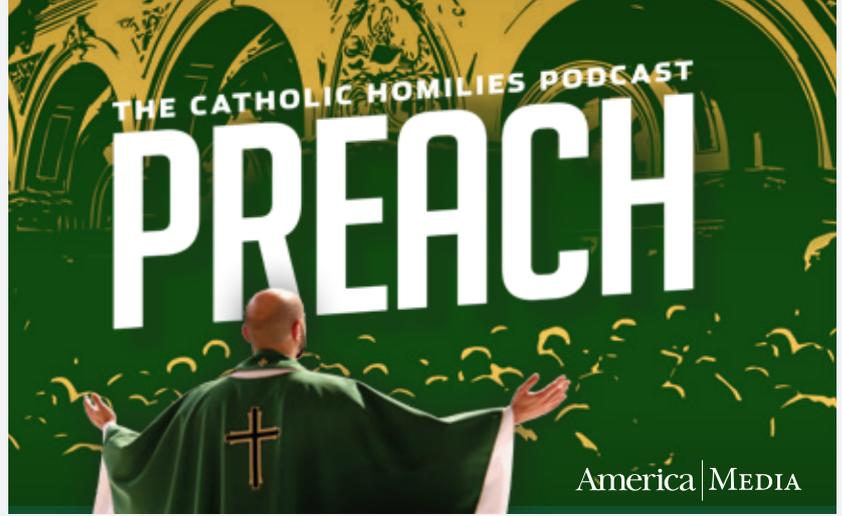
Mr. Ó Cathasaigh proposes that some form of participatory budgets could be introduced, creating a context where the money spent in a region is more responsive to the views and wisdom of those who know the place best. Instead of an opaque bureaucracy making decisions, citizens would have the chance to thrash out the practical realities of how to build a better society.

Edmond Grace, S.J., spent decades working in Ireland and with European Union officials on building democratic institutions. Father Grace agrees with Mr. Ó Cathasaigh that one direct way to head off the threat of rising populist movements is to generate new modes of participative engagement. His suggestion—becoming more popular across the continent—is the establishment of citizens’ juries (often called citizens’ panels, in a European context).

A citizens’ jury is, like a citizens’ assembly, “designed to bring together groups of people from different sectors of society, different genders, ages, geographies, socioeconomic backgrounds.” And just like the assemblies, they are “designed to bring them into contact directly with people in power.”

The juries do not replace their national parliaments, which still debate and pass legislation. They do not intrude on the responsibility of political representatives to determine policy. But they do promise to put the deliberation about how those policies are enacted back into the hands of the people directly affected.

Kevin Hargaden *contributes from Dublin.*



A new Lilly Endowment grant propels America Media efforts on preaching

America Media has received an additional \$250,000 grant through Lilly Endowment’s Compelling Preaching Initiative. The endowment had previously committed to \$1 million in funding for America Media.

With the support of the endowment, America Media has focused on three unique projects: the “Preach” podcast, which helps Catholic preachers develop their craft and reach parishioners more effectively; a video series titled “One Minute Homilies” for The Jesuit Post; and a forthcoming mobile application that will guide preachers through reflections on the weekly readings.

“Responding to the needs of the church, our goal is to continue to provide resources for more compelling and engaging preaching,” said Sam Sawyer, S.J., **America’s** editor in chief. “As our community members seek to deepen their relationship with God, these initiatives further support our role as a media ministry.”

“Preach,” which launched in May, has already reached more than 88,000 episode downloads across streaming platforms. “We have discovered that it is far more than a school of homiletics,” said the podcast’s host Ricardo da Silva, S.J., an associate editor at **America**. “Importantly, the podcast serves as a ‘ministry of accompaniment,’ as my co-producer Maggi Van Dorn puts it.”

“Today’s preachers require more than instruction in preaching skills; they need a platform to share their experiences of this ministry and bolster their passion for creating and delivering the most compelling homilies they can,” Father da Silva said. “As a young priest, I am invigorated to refine my craft and inspired by the dedication and best practices of the women and men I’ve met through my work as the host and producer of ‘Preach.’”

America Media has also assisted in the distribution and production of The Jesuit Post’s “One Minute Homilies.” The series offers young Jesuits the opportunity to hone their preaching skills.

The additional Lilly Endowment grant will also help to produce America Media’s next venture, “The Word: Scripture Reflections,” a mobile application currently in development.

Michael O’Brien is a Joseph A. O’Hare, S.J., fellow at **America**.

The Trouble With ‘Gender Ideology’

Can we learn to see gender in its real complexity?



By Nathan Schneider

The first time I was in a room where I was knowingly in the minority as a cisgender person, my mind went places it had never been before. I was with Luisa Derouen, a Dominican sister who has ministered for decades with transgender people—a ministry that she once had to carry out in secret. I was reporting on her work for a magazine article. I sat with her at a table for a support group one evening in Tuscon, Ariz., where those present shared their struggles with family members, ID cards, bathrooms and health. I left shaken.

In that room, my own sense of gender felt unstable in ways it never had before. Was I really so sure I was a man, deep down? Adolescent memories and anxieties came back. I tried to stabilize myself, to tell myself reassuring certainties. What I felt was a version of what has been convulsing through American society in recent years, as more people have had to come to terms with the existence of more gender-diverse forms of life.

Unlike most people with that sort of confusion, however, I had Sister Luisa with me. She always started with love. She listened and asked questions and sang prayers beautifully to people when they needed comfort. This was what I saw her do with her trans friends, and the fact that I happened to be a reporter did not prevent her from also ministering to me. She preached the Gospel, basically. Before any scary and confusing thing, God’s voice tells us: *Be not afraid, for I am with you.*

Many of the people with whom Sister Luisa works have struggled with gender for decades. I got over my shakiness in a few days. But I came out a better man for having felt it. I could not take who I am for granted. I saw a glimpse, in Sister Luisa’s friends’ lives and mine, of how firmly God can

love us when nothing else is certain. Among them I started learning to experience gender as a gift that is not simple or obvious to receive, as a force in this universe with more going on in it than I had imagined.

Masculinity Training

The theory and practice of masculinity appear to be in a period of crisis. This feeling has become red meat for politicians who decry a “war on men.” According to the likes of politicians like Senator Josh Hawley (a Republican from Missouri) and Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene (a Republican from Georgia), mainstream culture wants nothing more than for men to hate ourselves for our supposed privilege, to abandon male strength and virtue so as to smooth the path toward communism. Among liberals, the researcher Richard Reeves of the Brookings Institution issues wonkish warnings, with policy remedies, regarding declines in male educational and economic attainment. Historic gains for women have brought not only declines in relative achievement for men but also the basic question of what men are *for* altogether.

The most acute manifestations of anxieties about gender have emerged around the blurring and crossing of gender lines. A few years ago, transgender people suffered from lack of public awareness; today, trans people using bathrooms and playing sports—and young trans people in particular—have become subject to vicious culture warring.

On this matter, Pope Francis has bucked his usual reputation for tolerance and for showing kindness toward queer and gender-nonconforming people. (In July, for instance, he reminded a trans Italian that “God loves us as we are.”)



Throughout his papacy he has habitually denounced “gender ideology,” the belief that gender could be other than fixed and binary—*male and female, he created them*. The pope recently referred to gender ideology as “one of the most dangerous ideological colonizations” in the world today. Despite his personal kindness toward them, transgender people are unmistakably avatars of this threat.

The source of danger, for the pope, lies in losing the unique callings of men as men and women as women in a blur of indistinction. He fears that gender ideology lures people into treating gender as a human creation rather than a divine gift. He offers Christian faith as a path from confusion to clarity, from vagueness to our specific vocations as gendered beings.

When I read those passages in the pope’s writings and speeches, however, I do not hear clarity. Instead, his comments bring to mind a friend who gave me permission to work on being a man, in my mid-20s. This friend taught me that being a man is something one can learn and get better at, even if you already are one, even if you think you are not great at being one yet. His name is Quince Mountain, and he is transgender. You might have seen his appearance on the reality show “Naked and Afraid” or heard about the Internet-famous dogsled team he runs with his wife, the writer and musher Blair Braverman. He was the one who first introduced me to Sister Luisa.

Quince has thought more about gender than just about anyone I have met before, because he had to, because the gender that felt most real to him was different from what others saw. The world tried to beat that difference out of him, and bullies beat him hard for not being a certain kind

of girl. He joined the Army, and that beat him hard, too. Afterward he studied radical gender theorists in college. But he also signed up for Christian “conversion therapy” camps, intended to help gay men live straight lives, because they offered a kind of training in a certain masculinity that he wanted to experience. Despite the harm those places could do, they were also where people would help each other carefully, intentionally, to come into being men. His clarity about his identity had cost him—physically, psychologically, spiritually—in ways I have never experienced.

I did not have to suffer as he did because of my gender. Despite some basic teasing for being insufficiently athletic or confident, I never questioned that I was a boy and then eventually a man. But I did not think much about what either of those words meant, either. I went through the expected coming-of-age rituals, like graduating from high school and leaving home, but most were gender neutral by default.

It was only years later that I got to learn with Quince—in hours and hours of conversations, on long highway trips and by the fireplace in the house he built—about what it means to be a good man and, once we both eventually married, a good husband. He gave me the outlines of a language to measure myself by as a man, like developing “competence” and finding “ministries” where one can be useful. When he took me skeet shooting in the backyard of a roadside bar, or A.T.V. driving through muddy trails, it was an intentional crafting of gender together. We played a lot of pool, and the last time I visited him he gave my son his first pool lesson in one of those roadside bars. Because Quince had experienced gender as more than simple and obvious in his own



A mature gendered life requires a sufficiently mature theory and practice of gender.

life, he helped me see my gendered self more fully.

That is why the denunciations of so-called gender ideology have never sat right with me. People like Quince, for whom gender was not straightforward, have lessons to teach the rest of us. In order to better understand the gift of gender, we need to pay attention to when it is most challenging, not just when it seems deceptively clear. A person who has been homeless knows, in ways others do not, the value of a home and a roof. The easy distinctions we learn as children—good and bad, right and wrong, us and them—are rarely sufficient for the complexities of adult life. A mature gendered life requires, one might say, a sufficiently mature theory and practice of gender.

This is not a gender ideology. An ideology is an idol that keeps us from perceiving reality beyond what is already in our heads. Maturity means that we can see past our ideologies, as well as our fears, in order to be open to whatever revelation may be unfolding among us.

The Making of a Cudgel

What is gender ideology, actually? It is, first of all, pejorative. The term arose in the 1980s and '90s, primarily among Catholic thinkers. They wanted to warn about emerging ideas that questioned a strict, male-female gender binary based on genital configuration. According to a recent Heritage Foundation report on the topic, gender ideology is “a spectrum of beliefs that practically deny the significance of bodily sex for personal identity.” The 2015 report from the Synod of Bishops on the Family (later quoted approvingly by Pope Francis in “*Amoris Laetitia*,” or “The Joy of Love”) described gender ideology as a teaching in which “human identity becomes the choice of the individual, which can also change over time.”

The supposed gender ideologists do not use that term to describe themselves. Nor do they necessarily hold the alleged beliefs. Quince, for one, never perceived his masculinity as a choice; he says he would have chosen to be a

woman if he felt he could.

The ur-text for academic gender theorists, Judith Butler’s 1990 book *Gender Trouble*, regards gender-associated behaviors as cultivated through social performance and cultural context. This is at least as true as the fact that, a century ago, American culture considered pink a color for little boys and regarded women as incompetent for public life. Butler and others go on to argue that gender is something that people understand and co-construct through culture, not a fixed absolute.

To say something is a social construction, however, is not to say it is arbitrary, imaginary or unimportant. Race is a social construction—to a far greater extent than gender—but it is self-deceiving to claim that one can be blind to it. While marriage is a gift from God, it takes many different forms in different societies. This is because elements of marriage are social constructions, too. If it did not involve social constructions, we would not feel the need to define its meaning carefully, devise rituals around it or provide extra support for those who undertake it. Through these performances, we participate in a mystery that we only dimly understand. As with gender, some norms of marriage change with time and place. Others stay remarkably constant, though it is not always easy to predict what those will be.

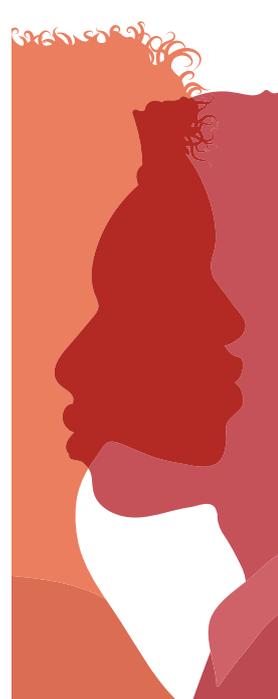
Both pop psychology and ancient spirituality agree that a mature life involves coming to terms with the ambiguities of gendered life. Men are counseled to discover their inner femininity, and women to embrace dimensions of masculinity. Male priests lead the church that tradition regards as feminine; women are not exempt from the call to imitate the life of the male-bodied Christ. Even while social norms organize gender according to specific associations and roles, those same norms are usually porous in places. They have to be. Nobody’s full humanity fits squarely in the box of a single gender.

In contrast to the allegations of gender ideology, theorists like Dr. Butler do not disentangle gender entirely from physical characteristics. Dr. Butler argued that the social constructions of gender and sex are deeply intertwined. People who undertake gender-related medical interventions, such as hormone treatments and surgeries, accept the accompanying risks precisely because they understand their gender identity as tied to their bodies. They experience the life-and-death importance of gender and sex, while many of us simply take it for granted. Those who seek medical interventions to affirm their perceived gender hardly “deny the significance of bodily sex for personal identity,” as the Heritage Foundation put it.

In light of the ideas and activities it is meant to rep-



Dominican Sister Luisa Derouen (left) meets with transgender people in Tucson, Ariz., in 2010.



resent, the talk about gender ideology starts to seem like a denunciation without a referent. Many are complaining about it, but it is hard to find anyone who actually believes or defends it.

Catholic teaching has more precise concerns about certain increasingly widespread practices related to queer experience. For instance, the dominant Catholic understanding of natural law binds physical sex to gender and treats both as determined for each person by God in either-or fashion. Hormone treatments, as well as the rarer surgical interventions, can seem in that light like “playing God”—changing something not meant to be within human power. In March 2023, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a statement that prohibits Catholic health care institutions from participating in interventions that “transform the sexual characteristics of a human body into those of the opposite sex.”

These conclusions indeed follow from long-held premises. The precepts of natural law emanate from ancient observations about how the world works, further informed by centuries of science. Why would all of that change in just the last few decades, as queer experience has become more visible in certain societies? And why should we risk harming a body that God has made? It can be painful to watch a friend or family member experience changes to their bodies with uncertain side effects, seeking relief from an invisible ailment. I have felt this myself with Quince and other friends. The bishops err on the side of caution.

The queer lives I have had the chance to encounter, however, ring out of tune with the bishops’ logic. Rather than trying to violate a “natural order,” these people often see themselves as trying to live in a deeper relationship to it. They experience gender as given, too, just not in the way

tradition expects.

Further, the bishops’ statement notes that sacrificing parts of a body to heal the whole is a kind of medicine Catholic teaching accepts; for many of those who undertake gender-related therapies, it feels like a matter of survival. The mental health risks and staggering suicide rates among queer people are part of why many doctors support medical interventions that affect a person’s gender presentation. The dangers that people face, according to these doctors, can justify the risks they may choose to take when undertaking physical interventions. But the risks are real, and medical opinion about the benefits continue to evolve.

If so-called gender ideologists like Dr. Butler are right, the options before us are not fixed and static any more than our society is. Just as social constructions shape the meaning of gender, the exclusion and suffering that many queer people experience results from social constructions, too, and society can change.

From Ideology to Politics

For longer than I should have, I dismissed discourses about gender ideology from the pope and other famous Catholics as a misunderstanding that more pastoral experience would resolve. But the gender ideology meme has only continued to spread. It has migrated from a slogan in church circles into mainstream politics. The governor of Florida and presidential candidate Ron DeSantis, for instance, has combined two memetic bugaboos in castigating “woke gender ideology.” He backs the talk up with laws that have instilled fear in Florida’s L.G.B.T.Q. community, effectively criminalizing certain explorations of gender identity and physician-guided therapies. This kind of legislation is now spreading rapidly across the United States. The laws espe-



To better understand the gift of gender, we need to pay attention to when it is most challenging.

cially target education and medical interventions among queer young people, who already face alarmingly high risks of suicide and other self-harm.

Gender ideology has also become a popular smear used by authoritarians worldwide. When Judith Butler co-organized a 2017 conference on democracy in Brazil, far-right protesters used the term while burning an effigy of her. A pope who emphasizes a pastoral approach to complex social issues should want to prevent his language from aiding a regime of terror.

If gender ideology were not an empty signifier and a political sledgehammer, I would want to see more of it—or rather, to see more courage to develop a mature theory and practice of gender among Catholics. Our world’s understanding of gender is in flux. Much of that flux is welcome, even if it comes with excesses. (Change always does.) Ending the monopoly of men over public life has enabled us all to benefit from incalculably more God-given creativity, intellect and heart. Greater public recognition of sexual assault has not only exposed perpetrators; it has promulgated a needed vocabulary for respect and consent. Enabling more L.G.B.T.Q. people to live out of the closet has saved lives and curtailed commonplace harassment.

Surely there are aspects of today’s gender explorations that, in decades to come, will be widely understood as quaint, ridiculous or morally wrong. The long memories of old traditions will persist in new ways. But we can never predict exactly how. Pretending there is nothing to be learned about the gift of gender is a dangerous kind of insecurity, one that will bring suffering and limit what we can learn. Easy clarity is not the way, in the long run, to live with our uncertainties.

‘At Odds With Everything’

Christianity itself once seemed to involve a kind of gender ideology. It certainly isn’t *that* gender ideology—the destruction of all distinctions, the infinite choice—but it looked to some outsiders like something similar when it

first appeared. Many early women saints, like St. Agnes and St. Barbara, came into their glory by refusing to carry out the gender performances expected of them in their time and place. One of the institutional innovations of early Christianity, monasticism, established and protected spaces for behavior outside of dominant norms.

There is no easy equivalence between the monastic movement and contemporary queer experience. But both bear the urge to radically rethink what gender and sexuality demand of us.

The Desert Fathers and Mothers of the third and fourth centuries fled their cities to conduct holy experiments in the wilderness. Men, rather than fulfilling their obligations to public life, could hide in a cell or hermitage. Women could safely refuse the expectations of reproductive and domestic labors. They mortified their bodies to exercise and test their faith. In their hot pursuit of God alone, the worldly limits of gendered life began to melt away.

Theodora of Alexandria, for instance, escaped to the desert in male clothes and lived among monks. Once another of the Mothers, Sarah of the Desert, was approached by two monks who came to harass her for being a woman. She told them, “According to nature I am a woman, but not according to my thoughts.”

Some might be tempted to hear Sarah as expressing the gender dysphoria that trans people today describe. The words seem interchangeable—physical characteristics belie internal sensations. But Judith Butler-style gender theory and more conservative readers would respond similarly: You are taking it out of context. Her conception of womanhood, in a culture with a specific hierarchy of gender roles, carried different meanings than it might have to modern ears. Yet the resonance is hard to shake. What Sarah experienced is part of the same Christian outlook as a woman striving to imitate the male Christ or a man who belongs to a feminine church.

The scholar and activist bell hooks once insisted on defining “queer” not merely in terms of “who you’re having sex with” or what pronoun one prefers. Queerness, she said, is “the self that is at odds with everything around it and has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live.” The same could be said of the flight to the desert, following a divine calling. For St. Augustine of Hippo, becoming Christian meant becoming “a question to myself.”

Seen from the desert of Sarah and the self of Dr. hooks, it can look like Christianity nowadays has made gender into an ideology, to the point of being an idol. We treat as eternal a particular set of associations about what men and women are. We forget what early Christians knew—that the prevailing wisdom about gender is full of cultural con-



Quince Mountain stands outside his home in 2011.

structions fashioned by human performances.

God made male and female, yes. But God made day and night, too, as well as dawn and dusk. It can be day in one part of the world, or in one part of the solar system, and night in another. The stars are not merely a decoration on our world, they were its cauldron. When we learn more about them, the immensity of God's creativity becomes so much greater. Discovering the story of human evolution invites us to rethink our understanding of Eden and of Adam and Eve's relationship with other living things. God did a lot in the early chapters of Genesis that has turned out to be more complicated than the ancient Hebrews realized. Still, the awe they felt for the Creator is no less true. The stories they told have become true in new ways.

"As with the six days, so too with the two genders," writes the theologian Elizabeth Johnson, C.S.J. "A small door opens up, one of many that are possible, where the development of doctrine becomes thinkable."

I do not mean to suggest that every possible kind of gender identity does justice to God's hopes for us, or that we should accept the latest concoctions of particular sub-

cultures as divine revelation. There could be a danger of idolatry in treating relatively recent norms around pronouns as absolutes, as if they will exist for all time. Surely some of the changes activists are demanding will someday seem silly, just as some traditionalist fears will prove unfounded. But I think the God of love wants us to love even when the waves of change are choppy. That means granting people the basic dignity of treating them how they wish to be treated, of calling them what they ask to be called. When you accompany people like that, the battle lines of the culture wars start falling apart. There is space between utterly rejecting all gender ambiguity and uncritically accepting everything about it.

Quince once told me during his transition process, for instance, that he was not doing it for the people in his rural, conservative town, where everyone knew him. When we would go to the bars there, he would sit with the guys and talk about guy things. He was a volunteer ambulance driver in town and tamed wild horses. His physical transition, he said, was more about getting by in the liberal cities, the places that pride themselves on being so accepting. Walking around a city means a day full of anonymous interactions and other people's judgments based on one's appearance.



Sexuality is easy for nobody good.

Many stories of queer experience I have heard over the years began with a rigid religious upbringing—Quince’s included. Gender is taught as a single, stifling template about how to look and behave. I wonder whether some people would be less inclined to experience themselves as somehow nonconforming if there were a wider range of paths they could find for being a man or a woman. Perhaps risky medical interventions would seem less necessary if religious cultures attached less baggage to the appearance of one’s body or one’s conformity to a gendered ideal.

Over centuries, the escapades among the desert’s holy fools turned into more formal holy orders, with clearer protocols for conduct and values, approved by authority. Among the different paths they found to the same God, orders developed their own ways of performing gender, their own styles of masculinity and femininity. St. Catherine of Siena invited women to a different kind of womanhood than St. Theresa of Calcutta did. St. Francis of Assisi was a different kind of man than St. Ignatius Loyola, and they attracted different kinds of young men to their orders. While religious orders expect a lifelong commitment from their members, a midlife Jesuit still can turn more Franciscan in retirement. We laypeople can flit among these archetypes more freely—I heard a call to the contemplative Trappists as a teenager but have adopted a more worldly diocesan-type spirituality in my late 30s.

Orders developed their own social constructions, so to speak—of gender and much else. To the degree that they have been able to renew themselves over time, they have avoided letting themselves calcify into ideologies. But that development took time. I hope, for the sake of the people in my life struggling with gender, that they can find orders, too—mentors and communities that can guide them and feed their restless cravings for coherence. I hope the church can offer those things for people today, as Sister Luisa has



for the people she serves. I hope we can say, with those who feel “at odds with everything,” that there is truth in what they are feeling, and we will search for it together. When our God became human, he seemed at odds with everything too.

Sexuality is easy for nobody good. We all need guidance and role models and rituals. We all lose our way somewhere, especially when we are young and at the mercy of ferocious chemistry. This is why mature cultures develop rituals for coming of age, for passing through uncertainty and finding a role in the community. Many of us have lost those rituals. But one thing the church has long been good at is holding many kinds of paths for her people at once, places where they can live, struggle and grow.

A Patient Church

St. John Paul II was a socially conservative pope who set out to challenge the sexual revolution. But he did not do it with just a “no.” In 129 lectures known as the Theology of the Body, he offered a positive, mystical, creative vision of humanity and sexuality. Because they did not just repudiate, those lectures are still widely used in marriage preparation, for instance. They give people something to aspire toward, to focus on, to long for. One can agree with the ideas in them or not, but in any case the ambition is admirable. When the tradition faces a challenge, do not imagine you can scold it out of existence. Take it as an opportunity to deepen the tradition.

We are an old church, and we must be a patient one. We cannot predict where the present dances with gender will land, what pronouns we will be using a decade or two from now, or what labels will make bathrooms appropriately

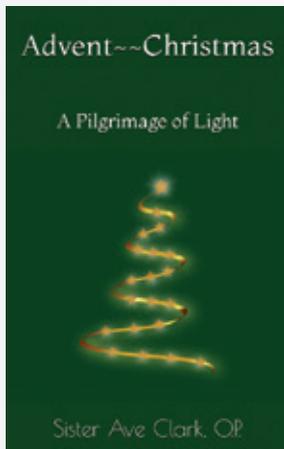
welcoming. Catholics should offer our best understanding of our tradition, but also seek to advance that tradition in light of new experience. I hope for a church that is curious before it is judge-y, that sits at table with someone and hears their story before rushing to say “sin no more.” I wish that when fellow Catholics spoke about gender ideology, they were not simply making an excuse to dismiss whole categories of people and experiences but instead opening up spaces for discernment. The flux of gender today can be a chance to rediscover rituals for coming of age and reviving orders that can offer forgotten ways of life. The tradition can help us find new rituals and new orders, spaces in which to discover a more mature theory and practice of gender, one that receives the gift of gender more fully.

The trouble is, not everyone can afford the patience that work will require. Right now, Catholic ideas and Catholic leaders are being used to turn people into political pawns, ratcheting up the culture wars at the expense of people trying to find their way in the world. The backlash underway is needless and it is deadly, and language like gender ideology is aiding and abetting it. For now, we are

playing into our worst, most censorious stereotypes, denouncing what we still only dimly understand. While the church is patient, it must also serve people who cannot wait a few centuries to be listened to and loved.

Like so much else in the universe God made, we are only beginning to discover who we are as gendered beings. We might regard feelings of dysphoria as an opportunity for empathy across the lines that most of us do not cross—a kind of spiritual insight, but one that needs focusing and discipline. We could offer retreats and vocations that enable people to explore more deeply who they are—within the guardrails of the faith and tradition, but without claiming to know where the way should always lead. We could discover many yeses for every no. The theory and practice of gender we need is not another cudgel for the culture wars but a curiosity about what God is trying to show us.

Nathan Schneider, a contributing writer for *America*, is a professor of media studies at the University of Colorado, Boulder.



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U.S. Catholics Play Critical Role in Special Outreach to Provide Safe Shelter to Suffering Poor

Cross Catholic Outreach has launched a major effort to provide safe housing for destitute families in Guatemala's Diocese of Suchitepéquez-Retalhuleu, and they are asking U.S. Catholics to become part of that life-transforming mission of mercy.

The charity, which has been recognized by the Vatican for its relief and development work in more than 90 countries, is working to build 64 storm-resistant homes to benefit 317 family members in nine communities — as well as help needy families with nutritional, educational and health care needs. [See the related story on the opposite page.]

While Cross Catholic Outreach's "Rise Up With Joy" appeal has many technical objectives, the ministry president, Michele Sagarino, is more focused on the deeply personal stories of the poor families who will benefit.

"This is really about Nilson and Deini Alvarez and families like theirs. Nilson and Deini and their 3-year-old son live in extreme poverty, and the challenges they face every day are heartbreaking. They live in a flimsy home and fear for their son's health because rain often floods their house, turning the dirt floor to mud. It's also easy for vermin like scorpions and rats to crawl through the gaps in its walls," she said. "No one should have to live like that. It's a situation that must grieve God — so it should be unacceptable to us too!"

According to Sagarino, Cross Catholic Outreach has been working with Catholic leaders in the Diocese of Suchitepéquez-Retalhuleu to find solutions for families like Nilson and Deini's, and the plans they have developed can produce life-transforming results — if U.S. Catholics will step forward to help fund the work.

"Our primary goal is to construct durable, concrete block houses for the poorest families," she explained. "The homes will have two bedrooms and a common area that can serve as a dining room and living room. Each will have a concrete foundation and walls, a galvanized metal roof, a sanitary latrine, a secure metal door and shuttered windows, providing a level of comfort and safety these families have never experienced before."

Because the design is simple, the construction of one of these homes costs less than \$11,000.



The Alvarez family lives in a home that provides little protection from the weather or security from intruders. They and families like them will benefit from Cross Catholic Outreach's "Rise Up With Joy" appeal.

"That is a large sacrificial gift for one person or family to make, but many have done that and were thrilled they got involved. Most had been looking for something specific and significant they could do to help," Sagarino said. "This outreach was exactly what they were looking for because a home does more than offer safe shelter. It gives families a foundation for building a better life."

Serving the poor through the local Church also has important spiritual benefits, according to Sagarino.

"When people learn local Church leaders love them and want a better life for them, it strengthens their faith and restores their

hope," she said. "Many have felt isolated and unseen. They need to know we care about them."

Readers interested in supporting Cross Catholic Outreach's housing programs and other outreaches can contribute through the ministry brochure inserted in this issue or send tax-deductible gifts to: Cross Catholic Outreach, Dept. AC02561, PO Box 97168, Washington, DC 20090-7168. Those interested in making gifts on a monthly basis can indicate that on the brochure to become a Mission Partner, or write "Monthly Mission Partner" on mailed checks to be contacted about setting up those arrangements.

PAID ADVERTISEMENT

Good Samaritan Serves as Model to Catholics Encountering Brutal Poverty in Rural Guatemala

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus describes an encounter between three travelers and a man who has been wounded and left to suffer on the side of the road. In the story, two outwardly spiritual men demonstrate no compassion for this victim and do everything they can to avoid any interaction with him. Only one of the three travelers — a man who has no reason to be helpful — demonstrates Christlike love, doing what he can to comfort and care for the wounded fellow.

While it is a parable with several important meanings, it also contains an obvious point about the way Christ's followers are expected to respond when they encounter an urgent or serious need. Rather than look the other way, we are to step forward and help the suffering, serving as God's instruments of mercy.

Consider that calling now as we visit the Diocese of Suchitepéquez-Retalhuleu and the countryside of southern Guatemala. On the road we are taking, you will see miles of thriving rubber tree plantations, teakwood farms and sugarcane fields — but you will also find hundreds of wounded and suffering families trapped in generational poverty.

"In the parable of the Good Samaritan, the injured man was a victim of robbers. In this rural part of the diocese, the harm has been done by a bloody civil war that displaced many families and left them mired in brutal poverty. In the end, the suffering is the same, and so is our call to be instruments of God's mercy," explained Michele Sagarino, president of Cross Catholic Outreach, a Catholic relief and development ministry recognized by the Vatican for its effective humanitarian and spiritual programs. "When our ministry discovered the extreme needs of families in this diocese, we felt compelled to provide help — and our hope is that compassionate Catholics in the U.S. will want to get involved too."

Sagarino said that many of the communities Cross Catholic Outreach wants



Many poor families in the Diocese of Suchitepéquez-Retalhuleu live in patchwork shacks offering little security or protection from the elements — but there is hope, thanks to the "Rise Up With Joy" appeal being launched by Cross Catholic Outreach.

to serve can only be reached over rutted dirt roads. These villages have little or no infrastructure, so parents there are raising their children in dirt-floored homes without running water, suitable sanitation facilities or reliable electricity.

Most of the men and women in these rural areas are subsistence farmers who work long hours planting, tending and harvesting corn and beans, defenseless against unpredictable weather. Their hard work may provide simple meals for their children, but it is rarely enough to fully cover their housing, health and educational expenses.

Families without access to land for farming face even greater challenges. They typically take work as day laborers, earning about \$10 a day if they are lucky and jobs are available. The diocese reports that those families typically earn between \$125 and \$190 a month — far too little to afford adequate housing. Ultimately, these families must make do with what they have, cobbling together plastic sheets, scrap metal and wood planks to build flimsy, unsafe shacks.

"Our ultimate goal is to improve living conditions in those communities. We want to help families break free from the cycle of poverty that has plagued them for generations," Sagarino said. "We've learned that providing safe housing plays a major part

in improving lives, so we are making that our priority. As families are placed in safer, sturdier homes, their hope is restored and they have a foundation for building a better life."

Through its "Rise Up With Joy" appeal, Cross Catholic Outreach is giving compassionate U.S. Catholics an opportunity to follow in the footsteps of the Good Samaritan, serving as God's instrument of mercy by funding the construction of homes for the poor and by helping struggling families in the Diocese of Suchitepéquez-Retalhuleu through other important humanitarian and spiritual programs. [See the related story on the opposite page.]

"The homes we will build are simple but sturdy, secure and sanitary," Sagarino said. "They will change the lives of these families in profound ways, and their benefits will carry over to the next generation too. Generational poverty has been a major factor in the hardships these families have been facing. Opening this door to generational prosperity will be a major step in the other direction. My prayer is that American Catholics will want to play a role in that restoration of broken lives — just as the Good Samaritan did in the parable Jesus told. Imagine what a powerful testimony of God's love that would be!"

How to Help

To fund Cross Catholic Outreach's effort to help the poor worldwide, use the postage-paid brochure inserted in this newspaper, or mail your gift to Cross Catholic Outreach, Dept. AC02561, PO Box 97168, Washington, DC 20090-7168. The brochure also includes instructions on becoming a Mission Partner and making a regular monthly donation to this cause.

If you identify an aid project, 100% of the donation will be restricted to be used for that specific project. However, if more is raised for the project than needed, funds will be redirected to other urgent needs in the ministry.



GOOD NEWS



Living 'Laudato Si'

How a Catholic ecology center strives to change the world by changing hearts

By Colleen Jurkiewicz

From the outside, you cannot tell exactly what the Catholic Ecology Center is.

If you are viewing the property from the road, this 225-acre nature preserve looks almost like any of the other family farms in the small village of Neosho, Wis. But drive up the gravel path a little and you will see the main building and the side, and the Vatican flag and Marian statue. You will have noticed that most of the cars in the parking lot have rosaries hanging from the rearview mirrors.

And you will realize: This is something different.

My family is running late as we arrive at the center this morning. My toddler refused to wear her sensible walking sneakers, insisting instead on a flimsy pair of slip-ons shaped like sharks. We have come here, as we do every few weeks, for my older children to take part in the center's homeschooling program, where my kids get to do things they could never do at home with me, like touch bugs and hold chickens.

The C.E.C. is busy today; the students and their



All photos courtesy of the Catholic Ecology Center

This statue of the Pietà overlooks the natural play area at the Catholic Ecology Center.

parents congregate briefly in a clamorous group in St. Francis Hall before dispersing to their respective classes. The teens disappear outdoors and the elementary-school kids head downstairs to the St. Kateri classroom. The middle-schoolers claim the upstairs play loft known as Heaven's Hideout, where they begin their day by memorizing the traditional Morning Offering.

Even from St. Francis Hall, the main space in the building, we can hear the children: "Oh my Jesus, through the Immaculate Heart of Mary, I offer you my prayers, works, joys and sufferings...."

The other parents have departed; it is just me and Shark Shoes left in St. Francis Hall. We do not live close enough that it makes sense to go home during class. My toddler makes a beeline for the St. Francis altar, left over from the recent feast day celebration. I intercept her just before she has a chance to pull on the leaf-embroidered tablecloth and upset the precisely arranged candles and statuary that sit beneath a vivid copy of the San Damiano Crucifix.

I sigh. Looks like we're going outside today, shark shoes and all.

•••

The Catholicism of the C.E.C. is profound, but it is also organic. It feels, somehow, as if it has sprung up from the ground itself—as if Someone has taken the dust of the earth and breathed Himself into it. There are Stations of the Cross and a Marian shrine, all humble structures reflecting the natural aesthetic that surrounds them. A children's memorial garden includes a tall steeple cross repurposed from a church and an image of Divine Mercy etched onto a stone; the garden is dedicated "to all the children who have died, including those from poverty, disease, abortion, miscarriage and war."

In the natural play space, located in a clearing in the woods, statues of the Madonna and Child and of the Sacred Heart beam down at us from little wooden grottos affixed to the trees. My daughter is uncertain, at first. She is most comfortable propped against my hip or on my lap, observing the world. Here she is somewhat unmoored, without her older siblings to show her what to do, how to play. We all need someone to show us what to do sometimes. She is a lot like me when it comes to nature—a little reticent, a little unsure of her-

self. She is a third child and unaccustomed to silence.

Ecology is not a topic with which I have ever felt comfortable personally engaging. There is a picture in my head of the sort of person who can speak confidently on ecological issues and embrace a lifestyle that minimizes their environmental impact, and that picture usually resembles someone with a lot of qualities I lack. I have never been camping. I do not like bugs. I was a poor student in every natural science class I ever took in school, and if you ask me what I do to help care for creation, I will probably become very flustered and change the subject.

To be honest, it was the Catholicism, not the ecology, that first brought us here to the Catholic Ecology Center. I knew of the C.E.C. because of the involvement of several of my family members, as well as from my work as a freelance writer for the Catholic Herald, the newspaper of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. I had covered the center several times, and when I did the emphasis on Catholicism always struck me. It was strong, unapologetic, something I had not seen to quite this extent in other groups engaged in this work.

I remember Joe Meyer, the founder of the C.E.C., saying to me in one of our first discussions: "This isn't eco-spirituality. This is one hundred percent Catholic." That struck me as a bold, almost risky, thing to say. I had to admire it.

Our family signed up for the homeschooling nature program offered by the C.E.C., and a few weeks before the school year started, an email came with some details about the class. Every child was asked to bring a reusable water bottle.

"We do discourage the use of one-time plastic water bottles," the email read.

I blinked. It made perfect sense, of course. I wasn't unaware of the environmental impact of single-use plastic. I simply did not think about it. I bought a pallet of single-use water bottles at least once a month, and I usually grabbed one every other day when I was going out for a walk or running somewhere with the kids.

We had reusable water bottles, yes, somewhere in the house. But I just...never reused them.

•••

The C.E.C. is open to the public from dawn until dusk, with no charge for admittance. Memberships are available for those who want to support the mission,



Catholicism is pro-creation whether one likes it or not.

and members do receive discounts on ticketed programs. “But we don’t require it. We don’t want it to be like a private Catholic club,” Mr. Meyer told me when we sat down recently to review the history of the center. “We want a neighbor to be able to come by and walk the property. We want someone driving by to come and be able to see the beauty of the grounds and those aspects of our faith that are scattered throughout.”

The C.E.C. has been open less than three years, but the ministry that operates it dates back to 2016, when Mr. Meyer returned from a Marquette University High School faculty retreat with a sense that he had to do something.

Pope Francis’ encyclical “Laudato Si” had been released the year before. Though it built on decades of previous papal concern for the environment, “Laudato Si” captured the Catholic and secular imagination in a way that felt new. Mr. Meyer, a biology teacher at the Jesuit-sponsored high school in urban Milwaukee, was inspired.

“I just felt I needed to do something more with my love for my faith, my love for ecology, my love for education,” he said.

He created the Laudato Si’ Project, a nonprofit whose mission is to “restore humanity’s connection to the natural world through faith, education, stewardship and recreation.” In 2021 it purchased this property, a former Girl Scout camp that includes lushly wooded trails, two buildings, a pond, a half-mile of creek and two miles of river. There is also an organic farm on site that provides food to retirement communities in Milwaukee.

During its first year open, the C.E.C. saw 3,000 visitors come through the doors. In 2022 that number increased to 6,000. In addition to providing educational and formational programs that bring people into contact with God’s creation, the C.E.C. focuses on land stewardship and ecological monitoring.

Two of the people who make everything happen at the C.E.C., along with Mr. Meyer, are Theresa Liebert and Barbara Curley. Both hail from the same community in western Wisconsin, where their families embraced a “back-to-the-land” lifestyle alongside the practice of devout Catholicism.

When she interviewed for the job at the C.E.C., Ms. Liebert was impressed to see the same blend of care for creation and faith that she had experienced growing up. It was something she had never before witnessed at an institutional level, she said.

“Just seeing that it might be done well was something that greatly appealed to me,” she said.

An important part of what drew Ms. Curley to the C.E.C. was the opportunity to help people have meaningful connections with creation. She previously worked as an educator, teaching middle school math in the Bronx and later

working with students at a university in Massachusetts. A trend she encountered in both settings, she said, was “a lot of despair and a lot of sorrow” that stemmed from a “lack of connection to the natural world.”

“You had no connection at all, or you were trying to be connected in a false way,” she said. In every societal or environmental problem she observed, she saw at the root of it people who struggled to understand their place in creation.

“And as soon as I saw people step into that natural setting, or step into something that was beautiful and good and whole...they were automatically healed,” she said. “There was a sense of peace that came over them.”

She observes the same thing at the C.E.C., she said. “Placing people inside of that wholeness of creation and actually asking them to look and feel and touch and know it—I just really wanted to be a part of that.”

“When you see the world starting to regress in terms of concern for the dignity of the human person, you’ll see that, simultaneously, care for the environment seems to go out the window,” said Ms. Liebert. “Or you’ll find these two are happening in tandem. On the flip side, when [caring for the environment] starts to fall to the wayside, you’ll find that the dignity of the human person is also being lost. Our Catholic identity gives us a lens to lift both up at the same time and ground them in something bigger and much more real than the secular world is able to do.”

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I read “Laudato Si” with interest when it was first written, and I was deeply moved by it—but I was also overwhelmed. I struggled to envision what this looked like in practice, especially for someone like me. I was pregnant with my first child. I lived in a suburban area and drove a lot. We were just trying to make ends meet. I was surrounded by conflicting opinions on how much power—and therefore, how much obligation to act—the individual has when it comes to the environment. Furthermore, it seemed like every decision I made could be construed, in one way or another, as



Joe Meyer, founder of the Catholic Ecology Center, assists students from Marquette University High School in Milwaukee in water quality testing in a stream at the C.E.C.'s nature preserve in Neosho, Wis.

vegetarian and sell their car. These may be fruitful choices, but thinking about environmental issues in an all-or-nothing way can be more harmful than helpful.

“I used the parable of the loaves and the fishes,” Dr. Cloutier said, referring to his book. “Look, bring the loaves and the fishes that you have and put them at the service of the church and the world. [But] we can’t change things unless people make those individual choices. All of global environmental policy is important, but it has to build on the day-to-day commitment and affection we have for nature and the commitment to live in a better harmony with it.”

Dr. Cloutier confirmed that, for American Catholics, issues surrounding the environment are even more complicated because they have been coded as “progressive.”

“People who are interested in this issue tend disproportionately to come from a certain class of society that is not religious, or that is the least religious,” he said. “And, on the other hand, the most prominent [group of] American Christians come from a part of the country and a class of the society that tends not to identify with these issues.”

The problem is that when it comes to the environment, Catholics often think like either Republicans or Democrats, when they need to be thinking as Catholics. And Catholic teaching on care for creation is quite clear, predating the papacy of either Francis or Benedict XVI.

“Catholicism is pro-creation whether one likes it or not,” said Bill Patenaude, a writer and speaker who has focused on the intersection of Catholicism and ecology for several decades. “From Genesis to the Incarnation to the sacramental life of the church, creation is championed and celebrated—and even partnered with. It’s hard to preach the resurrection of the body, or Christ’s incarnation, without giving creation a place of honor.”

Mr. Patenaude is also a retired employee of Rhode Island’s Department of Environmental Management. He said he identifies as a traditional Catholic but is aware that many who see themselves as traditional Catholics or who hold conservative political views are reluctant to engage on this issue.

That is a huge mistake, he said.

“The fear of many on the right is, well, we don’t want to engage with those types of people,” he said, referring to progressives who care about the environment but who may also promote political views that run contrary to Catholic teaching. “Well, that’s not good enough. You have to engage

harmful to the environment—so where would I even begin?

Getting American Catholics like me to care about the environment in an abstract way is incredibly difficult, said David Cloutier, professor at the School of Theology and Religious Studies at the Catholic University of America, in Washington, D.C.

“You have to get people to love nature,” said Dr. Cloutier, who has written four books, including *Walking God’s Earth: The Environment and Catholic Faith*. “If they don’t have an affective commitment to the beauty of God’s creation, and the idea that there is a design and a wholeness to nature that can be abused and that humans have abused... it’s very difficult to get them to care about abstract issues, like carbon [emission] targets, in the future.”

Ultimately, American Catholics have an obligation and a need to confront overconsumption in their own lifestyles. But this does not mean that every person has to become a



American Catholics have an obligation and a need to confront overconsumption.

them. Benedict said it, John Paul II said it. And Pope Francis is saying it now. You have to engage, you have to talk, you have to get to know people, because Satan wants to separate us and isolate us. And we can't allow that to happen. We're made to be in relationship. That's how you have these conversations that can...change the heart of another human person, not to mention our own."

...

I think of the things Mr. Patenaude and Dr. Cloutier told me as I watch my little girl toddle around the tree-stump table in the C.E.C.'s outdoor play space. She is smiling, offering me a meal of pine needles and bark. She is comfortable now. Her body has acclimated to the silence and remembered that it belongs in nature. That it was made precisely for nature, impractical shark shoes and all, and all she needs to do is show up with whatever loaves and fishes she has to offer, and God will do the rest.

We are made to be in relationship. You have to get people to love nature.

I remember the first time we came to this little play area in the woods a year ago, on the first day of class. I was in awe; I had never seen anything so beautiful. It was like a Tasha Tudor illustration come to life, a sprawling assortment of tree stumps and felled branches surrounded by a lush carpet of pine needles and enclosed within a shady grove of trees. A *tabula rasa* for the imagination of a child. The scene of the kind of play that could never take place on concrete or rubber mulch.

It took my breath away.

I would imagine that, before the fall, all of this was so simple. Creation was God's gift to humanity, and humanity cared for it, and the act of caring for it gave people only delight and a greater understanding of God's truths. But this is not Eden. Creation is still here, and it is still God's gift. It can still communicate God's truths. But over time,



Father Will Arnold, pastor of St. Katharine Drexel Parish in Beaver Dam, Wis., leads a May Crowning procession at the Catholic Ecology Center in May 2023.

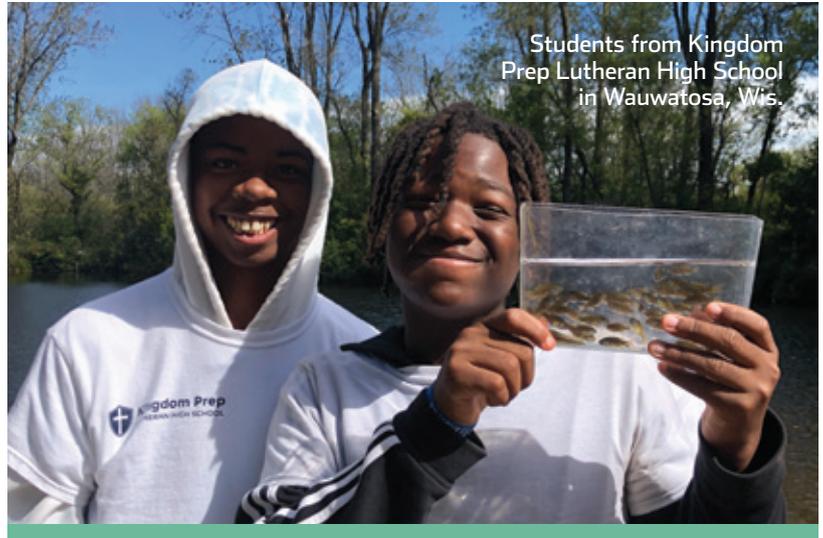
our hearts have become hardened. My heart had become hardened.

Here is the thing: A sin does not always start as a sin. Sometimes it just starts with thinking, "This works best for me." And then, eventually, you realize your own selfishness, but it is so hard to change by that time. Now it is selfishness and laziness. Soon, you avoid thinking about it altogether, because it does not make you feel good. Now it is selfishness, laziness and willful ignorance: deep, rich soil that will nourish the roots of all manner of evil.

I no longer buy plastic water bottles. I found a sturdy, reusable one and I handwash it, and every time I do, I ask God to give me the grace to make bigger decisions than this one. Better decisions than this one.

"Only by cultivating sound virtues will people be able to make a selfless ecological commitment," Francis writes in the final paragraphs of "Laudato Si'." "There is a nobility in the duty to care for creation through little daily actions."

He doubles down on this sentiment in "Laudate Deum," his follow-up to "Laudato Si'" published in October. "Laudate Deum" is a document that makes an im-



Students from Kingdom Prep Lutheran High School in Wauwatosa, Wis.



Barbara Curley leads a homeschool class in releasing butterflies.

passioned plea for greater concern about environmental issues that have been “denied” and “glossed over”—terms I feel make a fair assessment of my own attitudes toward climate change in the past.

The document concludes with a pointed reference to American greenhouse gas emissions, which are two times greater than those of our counterparts in China, according to the United Nations’ Emissions Gap Report of 2022. Francis again emphasizes individual agency, especially for those of us in the West: “We can state that a broad change in the irresponsible lifestyle connected with the Western model would have a significant long-term impact.”

Do not think for a second that I am proud of myself for my new water bottle habit. I expect no gold stars for ceasing one small practice of reckless consumption. But it is a beginning. I only write this here because I think it is a testament to what the Catholic Ecology Center, and places like it, can accomplish. Mr. Patenaude said that we need to be willing to have the hard conversations. Sometimes those conversations are with ourselves. And sometimes we just need a place that shows us how to do that.

Ms. Curley told me that some people are surprised to hear that she is a devout Catholic who works for an ecology center, or who believes in scientific inquiry at all. There is a misconception, she said, that the Catholic faith is a “no-ask/no-answers sort of thing.”

“I feel like my role to witness is to show that as a Catholic, one of the best things we can do is inquire about the world and delve deeper,” she said. “Always ask better questions, and always wonder a little bit more.”

Colleen Jurkiewicz is a staff writer for the *Milwaukee Catholic Herald*. She writes every week at LPi’s *(Practicing) Catholic blog*.



CNS photo/Vatican Media

BLESSED MOTHER, BLESSED SACRAMENT

Devotion to Mary can invigorate our love for the Eucharist

By Louis J. Cameli

The National Eucharistic Revival is underway in the United States. In a previous article for *America*, I underscored the need to highlight full, conscious and active participation in the Eucharistic liturgy as a needed focus for the revival. If the central organizing feature of the revival is Eucharistic devotion—and liturgical participation remains a kind of

add-on—we will have missed an extraordinary opportunity for genuine renewal.

Eucharistic devotions do have an important place in our spiritual tradition. They can lead to the Eucharistic liturgy, and they can lead us from the liturgy to prolong its effects. One way to achieve this integrated approach to liturgy and devotions is to stream spiritual currents together in a way that can result in a powerful synergy.

What if we brought together two of these currents: attachment to the Eucharist as liturgical action and devotion with attachment to the Blessed Virgin Mary? The conjunction of these currents can enable them to reinforce each other and can make a significant impact on our spiritual journeys.

Mary and Our Liturgy

We can begin with the Blessed Virgin Mary. She stands as a model of faith and devotion for those who want to follow

Jesus, her son. She is his foremost disciple. And in this time of Eucharistic revival, we would do well to consider her in relation to the Eucharist. A good starting point is the celebration of the Eucharist itself: the Mass. But first, an important piece of context is necessary.

When we gather to celebrate the Eucharist, it is natural to focus on the community that we see and hear—the people right in front of us—especially if we worship with a community in which people know each other. We need to recall, however, that there is more to our worshiping assembly than those immediately visible to us. We not only form a worshiping community gathered here on earth, but we also belong to the communion of saints.

Our worship on earth always joins the heavenly liturgy with all the angels and saints, the women and men and children who have gone before us. The “Holy, Holy, Holy” is the angelic hymn from the prophet Isaiah’s vision of the heavenly liturgy. It prompts us to realize that we are more than an earthly gathering bound by this time and this space. We stretch to heaven and we touch eternity, even here and even now.

In the heavenly liturgy, we find the Virgin Mary as the pre-eminent member of this worshiping community. Prayers in the liturgy reflect her presence and place in our worship. For example, in the preface attached to the Second Eucharistic Prayer, the priest prays:

It is truly right and just, our duty and our salvation always and everywhere to give you thanks, Father most holy, through your beloved son, Jesus Christ, your word through whom you made all things, whom you set as our savior and redeemer, incarnate by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin.

Her presence is evident later in that same Eucharistic prayer:

Have mercy on us all, we pray, that with the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, with Saint Joseph her spouse, with the blessed Apostles, and all the saints who have pleased you throughout the ages, we may merit to be coheirs to eternal life, and may praise and glorify you through your son, Jesus Christ.

These prayers emphasize just how present Mary is with us in every Eucharist that we celebrate.

In fact, in the sacramental economy—that is, the incarnational way that the sacraments unfold for us—the connection between Mary and the Eucharist runs quite

deep. Our faith affirms that the Eucharist is really and truly the body of Christ made present to us. The link between Mary, Incarnation and Eucharist becomes evident in the 700-year-old Eucharistic hymn “Ave Verum”:

*Ave verum Corpus natum
de Maria Virgine:
vere passum, immolatum
in cruce pro homine.
Hail true body that was born
of Mary, the Virgin,
that truly suffered and that was offered
on the cross for humanity.*

The body of Christ that we experience in the Eucharist is that body that first took human flesh in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary. It is an extraordinary link between Mary and the Eucharist.

Mary’s Eucharistic Spirituality

Another connection between Mary and the Eucharist leads us to consider her Eucharistic spirituality. In other words, it is worth considering how the New Testament describes the way that Mary lived eucharistically. Think of her great song of praise, the Magnificat (Lk 1:46-55). In that prayer and hymn, Mary raises her voice in memory, thanksgiving and hope. She remembers what God has done for his people, and she gives thanks for that. She looks forward to the fulfillment of all God’s promises. Her Magnificat perfectly echoes our Eucharistic prayer that remembers and so makes present the death and resurrection of the Lord, gives thanks for our redemption from sin and death, and looks forward and waits in joyful hope for the coming of our savior, Jesus Christ.

Mary’s Eucharistic way of living or spirituality also finds an echo in our call to participation in the Eucharist, which is to be full, conscious and active. That kind of participation means we join ourselves to the self-sacrificing love of Jesus manifested and effected on the cross in a way that is complete, aware and engaged. That is exactly the pattern of participation in the mystery of Christ that frames Mary’s life at its beginning and at the end.

At the Annunciation, she surrenders herself fully, consciously and actively when she responds to the Lord: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word” (Lk 1:38). At the end of the earthly life of her son, we see her “standing near the cross of Jesus” (Jn 19:25), again present and sharing in his sacrifice in a trust-



Mary stands as a model of faith and devotion for those who want to follow Jesus, her son.

ing surrender that is full, conscious and active.

The New Testament also shines a light on the ecclesial sense of Mary's Eucharistic living. As mother of the church, she demonstrates how our prayer and participation in the Lord's Eucharist is not simply an individual or personal enterprise. She is firmly embedded in the life of the church community that keeps vigil together and prays together. The very last biblical image we have of her is found in the Acts of the Apostles (1:12-14):

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet.... When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus.

Eucharistic Devotions

Mary is one with the church at prayer. In addition to her connections to the celebration of the Eucharistic liturgy, Mary demonstrates helpful pathways for Eucharistic devotions. The action of the Eucharist—the Mass—is the source and summit of the Christian life, as the Second Vatican Council teaches us. The same council affirms and encourages worship of the Eucharist outside the Mass, what we more commonly may refer to as adoration. Mary provides a strong and inspiring model for this form of Eucharistic praying.

Consider her life in Nazareth. St. Luke summarizes that life in a brief but truly significant verse: “Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things

in her heart” (Lk 1:51). Mary lived in the presence of Jesus. She paid attention to him. She contemplated him. She found a focus and a center in him. It is the same for us who come before the Eucharistic Lord, as we simply stay with him, watch him, focus ourselves on him and find in him a center for our lives. This form of Eucharistic adoration both stems from the Mass and leads us back to the Mass.

Many people may not detect an immediate connection between the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Eucharist. Our biblical, liturgical and spiritual traditions, however, show us how close the link is between the mother of Jesus and his Eucharist. She is a sure and reliable model for us as we enter deeply into the mystery of this great sacrament.

The Rev. Louis J. Cameli, *a priest of the Archdiocese of Chicago, is Cardinal Blase J. Cupich's delegate for formation and mission. He is the author of the audiobook Mary's Journey.*

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THE SILENCE OF THOMAS AQUINAS

Why did he choose to leave the *Summa* unfinished?

By Chad Engelland

On Dec. 6, 1273, 750 years ago, St. Thomas Aquinas did the unthinkable: He permanently abandoned work on his magnum opus, the *Summa Theologiae*, after many years of intensive labor and just months shy of its completion.

Thomas was at the height of his fame, a counselor to popes and kings. In just two decades of prodigious writing, he had produced a torrent of eight million words, gathered into three monumental theological syntheses, countless commentaries, magisterial disputed questions, unforgettable hymns and more.

When he was a student of St. Albert the Great 25 years earlier, he earned the nickname “the Dumb Ox,” both for his large stature and for his inveterately quiet disposition. St. Albert, for his part, prophesied that the Ox’s bellow would one day sound through all the world. A quarter of a century later, it did.

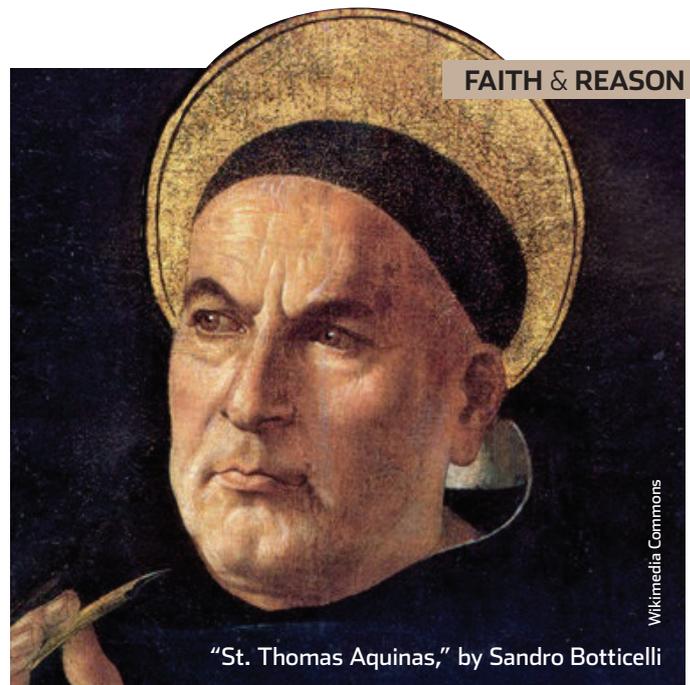
Why, then, did he go silent again? What reduced his flow of texts to naught?

The Physical Explanation

Thomas’s workload had been crushing. He was no slouch to begin with, and the previous several years saw him churning out his sprawling *Summa* with the help of a team of secretaries, while writing no fewer than a dozen commentaries on Aristotle; this was in addition to his regular teaching duties. Did he have a stroke from the strain of so much writing?

Whatever happened, it did indeed sap his strength. He used the remainder of December 1273 to recover at his sister Theodora’s house.

Nonetheless, Thomas still had his wits about him, for not only was he able to carry on a conversation until the end of his life, but two months later he composed one precious last piece of theological writing in a brief exposition on the relation of human freedom and divine foreknowledge for the monks at Monte Cassino. (His biographer Jean-Pierre Torrell, with some exaggeration, says it is “perhaps



“St. Thomas Aquinas,” by Sandro Botticelli

Wikimedia Commons

the clearest” exposition of the subject; we could say, more justly, that it is a perfectly lucid if not altogether complete account, which is understandable given the fact that it was written while traveling.)

The letter to the abbot, which Thomas wrote to accompany the exposition, is a piece of high rhetorical art, revealing that Thomas was very much in command of the gift of speech and remained suffused with human feeling.

The Spiritual Explanation

For his part, Thomas’s explanation of the silence was not physiological but spiritual. As often happened, he entered an ecstasy during Mass. Earlier in the year, on Passion Sunday, while he was celebrating Mass before many witnesses, the experience lasted so long that brothers had to intervene so that Mass could be finished. On this day, the feast of St. Nicholas, Thomas celebrated Mass as usual in the chapel of St. Nicholas in San Domenico Church in Naples. When Thomas’s friend and secretary Reginald brought him back to his senses, he was transformed.

“Come, and let us get to work,” said Reginald. “I cannot do any more,” replied Thomas. “But, Master, you are close to finishing the *Summa*.” Then he received a most unsettling and unexpected reply: “Everything I have written,” Thomas told him, “is straw.”

It is tempting to think that with this dismissal, Thomas rejected his theological work. Yet, though straw is worthless to us, in the Middle Ages it was the stuff of hats and roofs and beds, not to mention the food of livestock. So Thomas was not saying his writings are worthless. Their utility is not questioned. Prodded further by Reginald, Thomas offered this clarification. “Everything I have written seems to me as straw in comparison with what I have seen.”



Thomas offers us a way of thinking and seeking geared toward the primacy of experiencing the mysterious God.

The ox, like the cow, chews its cud, and such rumination is a privileged metaphor for human contemplation, for the act of carefully savoring and appropriating truth. Perhaps, without being too clever, we might even risk the observation that while one is ruminating and has one's mouth full, speaking is out of the question.

Hence the Dumb Ox offers no repudiation of his straw, useful as it is to others, but he has moved on to higher things, which require one's whole mind and strength for meditation.

A Telegraphed End

In fact, Thomas wrote the supersession of the work of theology into the very ground plan of the *Summa*. In the first question of the *Summa*, he says that still higher than theological wisdom and philosophical wisdom is the wisdom that comes from above as a gift of the Holy Spirit. With the author Dionysius the Areopagite, he describes this as suffering or undergoing the things of God.

Theology is the application of human reason to the principles of the faith. But the participatory experience of faith, available even in this life thanks to God's free initiative, carries us further than our human reasoning alone can go.

For just as science, the rational investigation of the various parts of reality, is completed in philosophy's rational investigation of the whole and its ultimate cause, and philosophy, in turn, finds completion in theology's application of philosophical principles to the divinely revealed truths of the faith, so theology, finally, achieves completion here below when its human mode of thinking yields to experiential contact with God's illuminating presence.

Thomas at one point likens the use of philosophy in theology to the transformation of water into wine. To complete his analogy, we could say that at this moment of his life there occurred the further transformation of theological wine into the Eucharist itself.

Thomas freely chose to leave the *Summa* unfinished. In leaving it incomplete, the illusion of a self-contained and ultimate system, an illusion in every way antithetical

to Thomas's own intentions, is decisively undermined.

"For then only do we know God truly," Thomas wrote before even starting on the *Summa*, "when we believe Him to be above everything that it is possible for man to think about Him."

Thomistic Mysticism

Today we might call the Dec. 6 encounter "mystical," but only if we divest it of the accretions of subjectivity that infect our modern consciousness. For what is decisive is precisely the de-centering of self before the divine Other rather than some exalted feelings or experiences of oneself.

Here one need only recall the profound meditation on friendship with the Holy Spirit that Thomas offers in his most personal work, the *Summa Contra Gentiles*. Beyond the Aristotelian analysis of friendship, Thomas invites us to consider the importance of conversation and intimacy with one's friends, conversation and intimacy that takes on its most pregnant significance in friendship with the Holy Spirit:

Of course, this is the proper mark of friendship; that one reveal his secrets to his friend.... Therefore, since by the Holy Spirit we are established as friends of God, fittingly enough it is by the Holy Spirit that men are said to receive the revelation of the divine mysteries.

A Silent Witness

The final silence, rather than an awkward end, is the fitting fulfillment of his whole mission.

From start to finish, Thomas offers us a way of thinking and seeking geared toward the primacy of experiencing the mysterious God, a way opened by faith, nourished by reasoning, fed by encounter and leading toward the full knowledge afforded the saints in heaven.

In the *Commentary on Boethius's De Trinitate*, written soon after becoming a master of theology, Thomas says that the theological master cannot and must not openly speak about all that he knows lest others fall into error or fail to seek the truth for themselves. He quotes an anonymous source as an authority: "Hidden things are sought more avidly, and the concealed seems more venerable, and things long sought are cherished the more."

As we approach another feast of St. Nicholas, three-quarters of a millennium after Thomas Aquinas went mute, we do well to recall that the bellow of the Dumb Ox is loudest in its silence.

Chad Engelland is a professor of philosophy at the University of Dallas and the author of several books, including *The Way of Philosophy and Phenomenology*.

AMERICA'S HOLIDAY

GIFT GUIDE

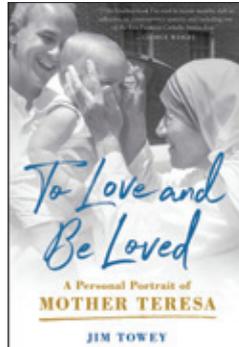
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TIMELY LESSONS IN THE ETERNAL CITY

What America's editors learned while reporting on the Synod on Synodality from Rome

What does it mean to be a truly synodal church? To find out, several members of America's staff traveled to Rome for an up-close look at the October assembly of the Synod on Synodality. Here are a few of the lessons learned from an experience that will stay with them for a lifetime.

A synodal church requires sacrifice

This year, I spent my fourth wedding anniversary in Rome. In a typical year, my wife and I would have been getting ready for a weekend getaway somewhere in upstate New York, filled with flannel and apple cider and leaf-peeping. But this is not a typical year: I had the opportunity to cover the Synod on Synodality.

It has been a great privilege to report on this historic church meeting, so I am not looking for sympathy. (We worked hard, but we also managed to try some great gelato and rustic wines.) I am grateful to have a spouse who is supportive of my career. And being a Catholic couple, we hold that feasts are moveable. She was able to join me in Rome after the synod. But my choice to be at the synod made me think more deeply about the things that delegates left behind in order to be present for the monthlong event.

In one sense, it was probably easy for delegates to answer the call. I am sure that it is an honor to participate in such a historic event in the life of the church. If the pope calls, you go. But I am thinking about all the things that people had to coordinate and sacrifice to be in Rome for one month (not to mention another October in 2024), on just a few months' notice: caring for an elderly parent, child care, college classes, ca-

reer obligations, just to name a few. In addition, many dioceses were deprived of their bishops, and religious orders of some of their leaders.

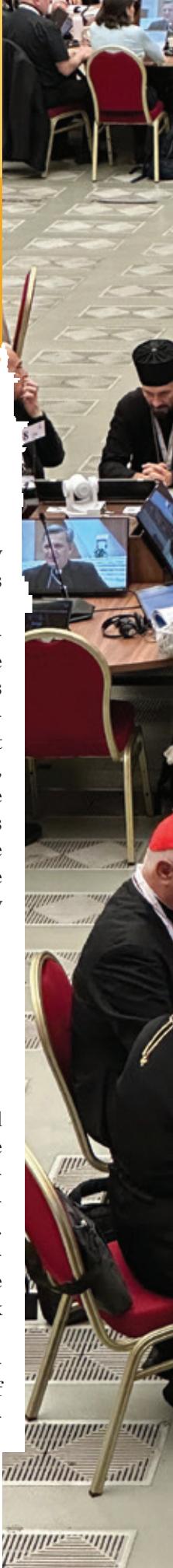
One of the incredible aspects of this year's synod meeting was the deep involvement of laypeople throughout the process. Even though it brings its own inconveniences, bishops assume that an occasional trip to Rome is part of the job. But if we want a church that involves all the baptized at all levels, then the laity will have to shoulder some of these sacrifices (and financial obligations—someone has to foot the bill!). It is easy to get caught up in doctrine and theology, but this is the kind of concrete issue that deserve our attention if we want to make a truly synodal church a reality.

Zac Davis is an associate editor and the senior director for digital strategy for America. He also co-hosts the podcast "Jesuitical."

A synodal church asks us to be willing to change

When I was studying theology in my early 20s, I had to read the Catholic "mystics." I say "had to" because I had no particular interest in our mystical or contemplative tradition at the time—a tradition of penetrating self-reflective prayer as a means to meet God. As a young man, I was first drawn to theology as an intellectual exercise, a compelling historical narrative and an impulse to build human fraternity and work for justice.

I struggled through Origen, Augustine, Bonaventure, Thomas à Kempis, Teresa of Ávila and John of the Cross. At one point, my professors and other in-





Synod delegates gathered for discussion at round tables in the Paul VI Aula.

Zac Davis

fluent people in my life encouraged me to read Thomas Merton's autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. I hated it. I found it exhaustively boring, and, though the book recounts his quest for meaning and purpose as a young man, I couldn't relate to his experience in the slightest.

Ten years later, I decided to give it another go. I couldn't put it down. Yes, there are long, detailed sections of the book about his life that seem superfluous, but then suddenly he offers a deep spiritual insight that makes the previous 50 pages worth it. Today, when people ask me about my Catholic faith, I start with the mystics.

What changed? I changed. I was a little bit older, wiser and more self-reflective. I had a wealth of experience working as a Catholic journalist: meeting popes and other fascinating people from around the world, covering events like the synods of bishops and the 2013 conclave. These experiences opened my eyes to the complexities of our church and our tradition. I learned that there are very real and serious disagreements among us. I no longer held idealistic views about the institution we love and call home. I learned that the church is made up of sinners as well as saints. I realized how long a journey I had made, but even more important, how far I still had to go.

The great mystics are people who changed. Because I had changed, I could see a bit of my own experience in their interior journeys. Jesus' call to "Repent, and believe in the Gospel" (Mk 1:15) means "change your mind," or change your way of looking at life. Change is the way of the disciple. As Cardinal John Henry Newman wrote, "To live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often."

A similar awakening is happening at



THIS YEAR'S SYNOD MEETING IN ROME WAS STRUCTURED FOR LISTENING.

the Synod on Synodality. The major development at this year's synod meeting in Rome was its being structured for listening. Not only was there an unprecedented "climate of prayer," but the bishops and other delegates were given a methodology for their discussions called "conversation in the Spirit." For the first time, synod members sat at round tables—not in hierarchical order—at which they took equal turns speaking without interruption, pausing for silence, prayer and personal reflection, and then responding to what was said with the aim of discerning what the Spirit is calling for from within the group.

This methodology was so structured and intentional that it practically forced the members to be open to conversion. Of course, authentic conversion cannot be forced, but it is important to understand the extraordinary lengths to which the synod secretariat has gone to encourage and accompany each member into a disposition of openness so that maybe, just maybe, the Holy Spirit can act. The degree to which the members buy in to this process and allow themselves to be changed by what they hear from other delegates and the entire people of God articulated in the *instrumentum laboris*, the synod's working document, will determine the "success" of this synod. As my colleague, Gerry O'Connell, told us on the "Jesuitical" podcast, "The litmus test for this synod is if there is a conversion among the members."

I don't know if any of the members of the synod like to read the mystics. It is possible that some members would find Merton's autobiography completely unrelatable. But what happened to me over the course of 10 years is being concentrated here in Rome over the course of the synod. It's a truly remarkable objective and an even bolder leap of faith.

Sebastian Gomes is *America's* executive editor of audio and video.

A synodal church listens to a diversity of voices

As participants in the October assembly of the Synod on Synodality had their final discussions on the theme of mission, the question they were tasked with addressing was: "How can we better share gifts and tasks in the service of the Gospel?" The conversation has focused largely on women, including women's ordination to the diaconate.

In his introductory speech for this session on mission, Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, S.J., drew attention to the question of gender right away: "Most of us are men. But men and women receive the same baptism and the same Spirit. The baptism of women is not inferior to the baptism of men. How can we ensure that women feel they are an integral part of this missionary church?" He challenged synod participants, most of whom are ordained men, to examine whether they feel "enriched or threatened" when sharing responsibility for the church's mission with women.

Only 54 of the synod's 365 voting members are women: a historic number, but certainly not anything near gender parity. In the synod hall, it meant one or two women and 10 to 12 men at each table.

Outside the Vatican, several groups advocating for greater inclusion of women in ministerial roles in the church have held events in recent weeks. Speaking with a few of the organizers makes it clear that these (mostly) women support Pope Francis' effort to incorporate more women into the synod, even in the face of internal resistance from some clerics. But, they say, having one or two women per table is not enough.

The women who were in the hall, though—the church's first "synod mothers"—are extremely qualified. We have heard from other synod participants that the women are some of the most hardworking members; many are experts in synodality, and they have contributed powerful testimonies in the synod's open discussions.

At a Vatican press conference during the synod, my colleague Zac Davis asked Patricia Murray, I.B.V.M., the secretary of the International Union of Superiors General, whether the women in the synod hall felt they were heard, despite being in the minority. Sister Murray replied as any tough nun might: "We have been well able to make our point and use our time and space well."

As the synod continues discussion of participation, the question of women's role in the church's evangelizing mission will, without a doubt, remain at the forefront.

Colleen Dulle is an associate editor at *America* and co-host of the podcast "Inside the Vatican."



The co-hosts of **America's** "Inside the Vatican" podcast, Colleen Dulle and Gerard O'Connell, stand in St. Peter's Square.



Executive editor Sebastian Gomes captures audio during the opening Mass of the Synod on Synodality.

A synodal church offers space for real conversation

As a participant in the synod, the main method of taking part was through "Conversations in the Spirit." These conversations, more than anything else, were the main contribution of the synod to the church. It took me a while to understand that the Synod on Synodality was less about issues, even important ones, and more about how we discussed those issues. Thus, the most powerful message of the synod was the image of 350 delegates sitting at round tables, talking to one another and, more important, listening to one another.

What made this method different from sitting around and talking? The first step was prayer. Everything we did was grounded in that, and we frequently paused to reflect. Each module (or section of the synod) also began with a Mass in St. Peter's Basilica. We also found it helpful to ask everyone what name they wanted to be called at the tables. Even with so many eminences and excellencies, as well as professors and priests. Usually they said, "Call me Jim." "Call me Chito." "Call me Cynthia."

Next, everyone went around the table and for three minutes (strictly timed) shared their response to the question at hand. Our questions came from the working docu-

ment, or *Instrumentum Laboris*—for example, "How can a synodal church make credible the promise that 'love and truth will meet'?" No one could interrupt and everyone had to listen. That meant that the cardinal-archbishop of an ancient archdiocese listened to a 19-year-old college student from Wyoming. Or the patriarch or primate of a country listened to a woman theology professor. No interruptions, responses or talkbacks at this stage.

In the second round, after more prayer, we shared what we had heard, what moved us and what resonances we felt in the discussion. Where was the Spirit moving? Again, no interruptions. I was at tables where the facilitator (it helps to have them) would say, "Cardinal, she hasn't finished yet." Finally, the third session was a freer discussion, where we could answer questions, share experiences and challenge one another.

The genius of this method lies in its ability to convey the complex reality of our discussions honestly. A secretary would write up the convergences, divergences, tensions and questions. Then a reporter ("rapporteur") would present the table's discussion to the plenary session. In this way, there was no need to force a false consensus when there was not one; rather, any differences and tensions were honestly

WOMEN HAVE CONTRIBUTED POWERFUL TESTIMONIES IN THE OPEN DISCUSSIONS.

communicated. I found this refreshing. This method meant that everyone was listened to, everyone got a chance, and an honest summary was offered for further reflection.

We also had the chance for “interventions” (speeches) at the plenary level. In other words, beyond the contributions by the tables as a group, individuals could address the entire synod, including the pope, who was often present. For the most part, these were fascinating, as you heard about issues affecting churches from around the world. What did I know about Catholics living as a persecuted minority in some countries? At the beginning of the synod not much, now much more. Every member could speak, and priority was given to those who had not yet spoken.

As we sat in the great Paul VI Aula (much more fun to say it in Italian: “Aula Paolo Sesto”) and saw everyone discussing things on an equal footing, with even the pope at a round table, I realized that the message of the synod is this method, which could help the church immeasurably in a time of great polarization.

James Martin, S.J., is editor at large at *America*.

A synodal church requires buy-in from parish priests

During the final days of this fall’s synod meeting, the question of what will happen next loomed large. How will the people of God use the 11 months between this first session and the October 2024 gathering? When I imagine how that time can be used most fruitfully, I think about something, or rather someone, who was largely missing from the synod in Rome: the parish priest.

It is unclear if there was anyone at the synod whose main role is that of a pastor. If there were any parish priests present, I have been told it is a very small number—maybe one or two. This is unfortunate for two reasons. First, the parish is most Catholics’ primary experience of church, and even if parishioners are not plugged into the commu-

nity, they know who “Father” is. Second, if synodality is to take root throughout the entire church, it must begin at the parish level. If you do not have the buy-in of your parish priest, the soil for synodality will be rocky.

Archbishop Timothy Broglio, the president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, said as much in a Vatican press briefing on Oct. 26. The archbishop, who also leads the Archdiocese for the Military Services of the United States, noted that only 1 percent of U.S. Catholics took part in the listening sessions of the synod’s diocesan phase. In response, Christopher Lamb, the Rome correspondent for *The Tablet*, asked Archbishop Broglio, “To what extent do you have personal responsibility for that lack of participation?” pointing out that the synod was not on the agenda at the bishops’ recent June meeting.

“I’m sure we do have some responsibility for it,” the archbishop said, before addressing how the bishops could encourage greater participation in the interim period. The process, he said, “is going to have to be very capillary. The diocesan bishops can do a number of things, but if the parish priests aren’t on board, it won’t go beyond the chancery. So that’s certainly something we have to do, engage the priests so that they will then engage their people.”

There was much talk about the role of bishops at the October meeting—understandably, given this is a synod of bishops. And there has rightly been excitement about the fact that bishops were sitting side-by-side with, and listening to, lay women and men. But I worry about the lack of priests in the synod hall. Fighting clericalism does not mean forgetting about priests.

While in Rome, I spoke with a young woman who has been very involved with the synod in her diocese. She decided to fly over to Rome for the final week of this synod meeting, and when she told her priest, he seemed skeptical about the process. She ended up talking to him for over an hour about his thoughts and fears about the synod. His concerns were more practical than ideological. His experience of the first two years of the synod had been receiving orders from on high without any real guidance. He wanted not only an intelligible explanation of synodality but also models of where it has been done well at the parish level. He needed a toolbox, not a barrage of emails.

Of course, the synod is discussing precisely how to build those parish and diocesan structures for a more responsive and consultative church. But for the synod to succeed, we cannot wait until we have the perfect structures in place or until the final document comes out in 2024. Over the next year, we are asking parish priests, and the entire people of God, to fly this synodal plane while it is still being built.



Father James Martin, center, sits with fellow delegates at the October assembly of the Synod on Synodality.

Courtesy of James Martin, S.J.

We know that many parish priests are already stretched thin and burnt out. Many of them also do not trust their bishops. We cannot expect them to become the footsoldiers of synodality before asking them about their fears and hopes for the synod. When the U.S. bishops return to their dioceses, I hope they each take the time to sit at a round table with their priests, share their experience in Rome and then just listen.

Ashley McKinless is an executive editor at *America* and co-host of the podcast *“Jesuitical.”*

A synodal church acknowledges disagreements

As the synod session entered the home stretch of a four-week marathon, a sense of relief began to be felt among participants. They could see the finish line on the horizon: Sunday, Oct. 29.

Since there is no prize at the end—in terms of concrete results on controversial issues—many participants began asking themselves: “What are we taking home?”

Is it just the memory of an experience? That for sure, but not only that. There is also a letter to the people of God and a 41-page synthesis document. The letter informs all the baptized that their task over the next 11 months is to reflect on and discuss the synod’s synthesis document at the national and local church levels, and then provide input for discernment at the final session of the synod in October 2024.

The synod members approved the synthesis document on Oct. 28, and the pope, too, authorized its publication.

That synthesis document contains three sections: substantial points of “convergence” reached by the assembly,

“questions” that need to be deepened, and “proposals” that require additional work from various actors, including theologians and canon lawyers over the next eleven months.

Surprisingly, however, the synthesis text no longer included a section on points of “divergence” because, Cardinal Hollerich said, they thought it wiser to build on the common ground, namely the convergences, and so changed the process. It seems the points of divergence are to some extent fused into the section on “questions,” rather than presented as a stand-alone one.

Still, I believe that the recognition of the “divergences” is one of the original elements of this synod. “Recognizing the divergences is unitive,” a bishop member of the synod told me. “It can provide healing.”

It is certainly an important step toward overcoming the polarization that so bedevils our church and indeed the world. Recognizing that we are not all on the same page on many questions, and yet accepting this without animosity or breaking communion, can help renew church life in a significant way. It can also, perhaps, open the way to the acceptance of a richer diversity in the church, while maintaining unity.

This whole synodal journey reminded me of the approach advocated by Pope John XXIII in his first encyclical, “*Ad Petri Cathedram*,” on “truth, unity, and peace, in a spirit of charity.” In the encyclical, written after he decided to hold the Second Vatican Council and published on June 29, 1959, he wrote:

The Catholic Church, of course, leaves many questions open to the discussion of theologians. She does this to the extent that matters are not absolutely certain. Far from jeopardizing the Church’s



Zac Davis and Ashley McKinless, *America* editors and co-hosts of the podcast “Jesuitical,” stand in St. Peter’s Square.

Zac Davis

unity, controversies, as a noted English author, John Henry Cardinal Newman, has remarked, can actually pave the way for its attainment. For discussion can lead to fuller and deeper understanding of religious truths; when one idea strikes against another, there may be a spark. But the common saying, expressed in various ways and attributed to various authors, must be recalled with approval: in essentials, unity; in doubtful matters, liberty; in all things, charity.

The recognition and acceptance of “divergences” is a key element of the methodology adopted at the synod; it opens a way forward that avoids polarization. It appears to be profoundly countercultural in today’s world and requires charity, and also humility, as many participants told me.

In the last of his profoundly spiritual and inspiring talks to the synod on Oct. 23, Timothy Radcliffe, O.P., offered this warning to the synod’s participants as they prepared to return home: “The global culture of our time is often polarized, aggressive and dismissive of other people’s views. The cry is: Whose side are you on? When we go home, people will ask, ‘Did you fight for our side? Did you oppose those unenlightened other people?’”

He advised them:

We shall need to be profoundly prayerful to resist the temptation to succumb to this party-political way of thinking. That would be to fall back into the

sterile, barren language of much of our society. It is not the synodal way. The synodal process is organic and ecological rather than competitive. It is more like planting a tree than winning a battle, and as such will be hard for many to understand, sometimes including ourselves! But if we keep our minds and hearts open to the people whom we have met here, vulnerable to their hopes and fears, their words will germinate in our lives, and ours in theirs. There will be an abundant harvest, a fuller truth. Then the church will be renewed.

It will indeed be a challenge for the 365 members of the synod to sow the seeds of synodality in their local church communities when they return home. It is a tall order, but, as Pope Francis emphasized, “the Spirit is the protagonist” at the synod, and what is required is that all believers “listen to what the Spirit is saying to the church” in the 21st century.

Gerard O’Connell is *America’s* Vatican correspondent.

These reflections were adapted from America’s Synod Diaries, a series of online essays documenting the editors’ experiences covering the Synod on Synodality in Rome. America’s special coverage of the synod was supported by foundation grants and by donations from readers.

A MANTLE OF FIVE HUNDRED STARS

How a special novena brought our community closer to Our Lady

By Deirdre Cornell

Almost five centuries ago, the Virgin Mary appeared in Mexico to an Indigenous convert named Juan Diego Cuauhtlatotzin. She entrusted him with a mandate: that a church be built at the site of their encounter, the hill of Tepeyac. There, she explained, she would offer maternal love, compassion and healing for all “the people of these lands.” Her image, imprinted miraculously on his cloak, now hangs in the Basilica of St. Mary of Guadalupe at the foot of Tepeyac.

Nearly five hundred years later—on both sides of the U.S./Mexico border—Our Lady of Guadalupe continues appearing, albeit in new ways. Devotional groups like the one I belong to, Misión Guadalupana, based at a parish in Beacon, N.Y., share her story and her likeness (a framed picture or a statue) with other Spanish-speaking Catholics. Usually, this takes place over a novena of nine days of rosaries leading up to her feast day on Dec. 12.

However, 14 years ago, a member of our group, a woman named Pilar, proposed a much more ambitious idea. Before returning to Mexico, Father Tomás Bobadilla, our beloved spiritual guide and the founder of our group, had left Pilar a manual for continuing our mission in the Hudson River Valley. Written by the late Joaquín Gallo Reynoso, S.J., the book *Pascua Guadalupana: 50 Dias con Nuestra Morenita* provides an outline for prayer sessions for 50 days straight.



A mosaic of Our Lady of Guadalupe

In rural Mexico, I had heard of the custom of praying the rosary for 46 days—one day for each of the stars on Our Lady of Guadalupe’s mantle—in the days leading up to her feast day. The adaptation created by Father Reynoso substitutes readings and reflection for rosaries. It also adds four more days, three of preparation and one of closure, for a total of 50 days.

“It will never work,” I said. “How can we maintain such a grueling pace?” Members of our group—and the recently arrived immigrant families we visit—work in construction, factory and farm labor, and house cleaning. They have exhausting jobs with demanding schedules.

“Our Mother will give us strength,” responded Pilar.

She was right. On Oct. 25, 2010, carrying our enormous framed images of the Virgin of Guadalupe and St. Juan Di-

It is as if the Virgin knows what they need and has a message for each home.

ego Cuauhtlatoatzin, we embarked on our first “Pascua.” The name Pascua is Spanish for Easter and so recalls when Jesus reversed the conquest of death. It also recalls Pentecost, which celebrates the descent of the Holy Spirit and is celebrated 50 days after Easter.

Word had spread among the families we had gotten to know through our Misión Guadalupeana, and people had signed up to be part of the Pascua, which we capped at 46 homes. We went out into the communities, night after night, usually in a caravan. Despite many wrong turns, we found our way (with the help of cellphones) to the homes of the families who had requested a visit.

Arriving at these homes, members of the core group and others who joined us would wait outside for the arrival of the family that had hosted the Pascua the previous night. At times, so many people came along with us on the Pascua that we did not fit into hosts’ cramped apartments or trailers; we gathered in garages, basements or even outside in the bitter New York winter—warmed by hot beverages and fraternity, or *calor humano*.

The previous hosts delivered the images of the Virgin and of Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin. As they placed the images on their home altar, the new hosts shared the reasons they had requested the visit. In homes overflowing with music, flowers and candlelight, the new hosts of the Pascua often overcame shyness and spoke from the heart.

“Tonight, our home will be her sanctuary,” said one host. Just as Juan Diego met the Mother of God on Tepeyac in an encounter of mutual love and respect, through the Pascua each home becomes a new Tepeyac.

Every night, a gold star cut from poster board was presented to the hosts. On it was written the day’s title for the Blessed Mother, drawn from the apparition story or wider Marian tradition. The *Pascua Guadalupeana* manual cites Psalm 147:4, “He numbers the stars, and gives to all of them their names.”

A star given to one family bore the word *reconciliador* (“reconciler”). The family later revealed how apt the star was for them, as they had argued earlier that day.



Another star was named *consoladora* (“consoler”). Often, people spoke about loss made more painful by our broken immigration system. They cannot go back home to see family members one last time or attend funerals, even after decades of living and working in the United States.

“It is as if the Virgin knows what they need and has a message for each home, each family,” said Doña Romelia, a *rezadeira* (traditional prayer leader) who belonged to the group along with her husband.

Each night after the day’s star was given, a short section was read from the *Nican Mopohua* (“Here It Is Related”). This is the narrative of the apparition of the Blessed Mother to Juan Diego. Centuries before the narrative was written down, scholars have suggested, the account was passed down through oral tradition. Listeners’ understanding of the Guadalupean story is enriched by Father Gallo Reynoso’s brief written explanations of symbolism and historical context.

In the story, when Juan Diego’s uncle is taken ill, for example, we discussed the important role of elders in Indigenous societies and remembered the epidemics that wiped out entire Native populations. The Guadalupean story was meditated upon, line by line, step by step. Participants were then given questions for reflection that related



Deirdre Cornell

The children of a family that received the Pascua the previous night pray with the images at their home on Nov. 3, 2021.

Visiting the homes of these families was fertile ground for evangelization. Father Gallo Reynoso’s carefully selected biblical readings shed light on each day’s teachings. The sequence when the Virgin offers Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoczin reassurance, “Am I not here, who am your mother?” is paired with the crucifixion passage in St. John’s Gospel, when Jesus tells another John (Juan), “Behold your mother” (Jn 19:27).

The more experienced churchgoers in the sessions helped others connect this Marian devotion to the Scriptures. The Scriptures opened the door to evangelization, while singing and fervent prayer brought solace to communities well acquainted with suffering.

One family started hosting the visit when their young daughter was diagnosed with cancer. They grew closer to the church as a family during that difficult time and asked to receive the Pascua for three years.

A college student named Sharai remembered the Pascua coming to her house beginning when she was 12 or 13 years old. One especially meaningful visit was when her father faced deportation. “When my dad was detained, that was a really trying time,” she said. “But seeing how we came together, not only as a family but as a community, I learned my faith makes me stronger.”

“The Virgin will be there for you when you need her. She’ll never forget you—and you’ll never forget her.”

At other times, hosts wanted to give thanks for the Virgin’s intercession. In the years since we started the Pascua, the community has witnessed milestones together: Children graduated from high school and then college. Families bought houses. New immigrants gained residency.

The Pascua became a way to acknowledge the Virgin’s accompaniment through life’s *penas y alegrías* (“joys and sorrows”). The 46 stars were spread out, year after year, against the winter night sky.

In 2021, we completed our 11th Pascua, which meant we had carried out more than 500 visits in 22 towns and cities in the Hudson Valley. Once I had worried we would not be able to do 50 visits, but the Pascua had cast a mantle of 500 stars.

Deirdre Cornell and her spouse serve in community-based projects with farmworkers and immigrants in the Hudson Valley of New York. The author of four books, she is managing editor of Maryknoll Magazine.

the day’s teachings to their own lives.

Another core member of our group, Agustín, along with his wife, hosted the Pascua one night during the first year. They attended all the remaining days and every year afterward, rarely missing a session.

“Walking day by day, you realize there is so much to learn,” said Agustín. The characters come to life, he said, in particular Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoczin.

Typically, Juan Diego is depicted one-dimensionally as a meek, colonized figure. In contrast, the Pascua lays full claim to his legacy as a respected leader. His name in Nahuatl is translated “Singing Eagle.” Juan Diego’s testimony was instrumental to his people’s evangelization.

“He is our older brother,” said Oswaldo, who coordinated our core group with his wife, Teresa, speaking about Juan Diego. As Ecuadorians, Oswaldo and Teresa strongly identify with their Indigenous identity. Juan Diego is transformed and empowered by his encounter with the Virgin, who approaches him directly, speaking his own Nahuatl language. She not only chooses him as her messenger but becomes one of his kin. Our Lady of Guadalupe is a mother of the First Nations. While most families we visited were from Mexico, our Pascua also reached people from several Central and South American countries.



On the Trail of ‘The Wexford Carol’

By Maggi Van Dorn

“The Wexford Carol” is Ireland’s oldest-known Christmas carol—and a worldwide favorite. But the first time I heard about the song was when listeners of “Hark! The Stories Behind Our Favorite Christmas Carols,” recommended it for the third season of our popular podcast. I immediately understood why “The Wexford Carol” was so beloved.

“Hark!” is the most joyful podcast I’ve produced at **America**. What begins with a study of a familiar song, one brimming with nostalgia that I can usually sing by heart, often leads to the most unexpected discoveries. “O Come, All Ye Faithful” introduced me to the famous “Christmas chord” that, all choral directors agree, is the sound signature of the Christmas season. “Carol of the Bells,” originally a Ukrainian folk song, taught me that what I once thought

were merely frivolous holiday jingles and commercial ploys actually have deeper cultural and political ties, for which its creators have sometimes forfeited their lives.

I have learned to take Christmas carols seriously and to anticipate the epiphanies they may bear in my spiritual life as I contemplate them anew. “Go Tell It on the Mountain” buoyed the spirits of civil rights leaders. “Carol of the Bells” and “Adeste Fideles” reasserted cultural identities in the face of tyranny and murder. “Silent Night” literally stopped bullets to allow respite from war. As for “The Wexford Carol,” it quietly survived over 400 years of British colonial suppression and was first put to paper in the small Irish village of Enniscorthy.

“I don’t think it’s possible that anyone could have gone through those years without knowing it,” Colm Tóibín, the



"The Wexford Carol," Ireland's oldest-known Christmas carol, was first put to paper in the small village of Enniscorthy in County Wexford.

Maggie Van Dorn

A Visit to Enniscorthy

So just what is the story behind the text and music of this renowned carol? Coincidentally, I traveled to Ireland this summer to visit my cousin, an Irishman and a priest from County Offaly, who was celebrating his 50th jubilee of ordination. Enniscorthy, it turned out, was only a day's journey from my ancestral home.

Beside the River Slaney, on the "sunny south east" of Ireland, as locals know it, is perched the charming town of Enniscorthy. By modern standards, it is a small town, though technically it is the second-largest city in the county, with a population of around 12,000. Among the locals, the joke is that everyone in Enniscorthy has fantastic legs on account of its steep hillside streets.

At the top of the town rests St. Aidan's, the cathedral of the Diocese of Ferns, a gorgeous 19th-century stone church in the Gothic Revival style. It seemed a good place to begin to unravel the mysteries of this beloved carol. After all, as Mr. Tóibín told me: "The first thing about Catholicism in Enniscorthy—and the last thing—is the cathedral."

Not much is known about "The Wexford Carol," aside from the fact that the words and music were passed down orally for hundreds of years. Scholars quibble over its origins; some say as early as the 12th century, others put it as late as the 16th. Either way, it was W. H. Grattan Flood, the accomplished organist and choir director of St. Aidan's Cathedral, who almost singlehandedly plucked this jewel of a carol from the obscurities of oral tradition and preserved it for future generations.

Though Flood died in 1928, surely the church he called home for the last 33 years of his life could point me in the right direction? I had sent an email to the parish office weeks before my trip, but it went unanswered. Undaunted and determined, I climbed the Enniscorthy hillside, said a quick prayer in the cathedral and wandered its grounds. Behind the church was an old cemetery. As I read the inscriptions on the tombstones, I noticed that almost every one was adorned with an intricately carved Celtic cross.

After spending some time there, I encountered a videographer who was documenting the cathedral's architectural history. I, with an audio recorder in hand, was attempting to source its song. He directed me to the parish office, where I spoke with the recipient of my long-lost email. Although she declined to be interviewed for the podcast, she promptly informed me that the song in question was properly called "The Enniscorthy Carol." The carol was, after all, born in Enniscorthy. So too was Mar-

famed Irish writer, said when I first asked him about "The Wexford Carol." "But the thing was that people didn't know *about* it. That came later."

I interviewed Mr. Tóibín to hear what a literary genius and cultural custodian who hails from Enniscorthy, County Wexford, makes of this locally sourced gem. His writing is steeped in Irish culture, and one of his award-winning novels, *Brooklyn*, made it to the big screen and was nominated for three Academy Awards. Despite growing up in the town that produced a world-famous carol, "the idea that it really was ours," Mr. Tóibín said, "and that it was really one of the things that made Enniscorthy famous," was a much later realization for him. "It was merely part of what was sung at that time of the year."



I could not study the origins of this song without first detouring through some of the ugliest chapters of human history.

garet Franklin, the living granddaughter of Grattan Flood.

The secretary of St. Aidan's graciously shared Ms. Franklin's contact information with me, which proved invaluable. When I contacted her, she explained how her grandfather had stumbled upon this exquisite carol.

'I've Never Heard of It'

The year was 1920, or thereabouts. Flood, a scholar of Irish music and history, served as the organist at St. Aidan's Cathedral. It was during this time that Father Commons, a priest with a special interest in preserving a musical relic, approached him.

"He told my grandfather that some elderly relatives of his knew this traditional carol that had been handed down by oral tradition within the family. And he was worried that it might be lost to posterity if someone didn't write it down," Ms. Franklin said. "So he asked my grandfather if he would like to come out and hear this carol being sung by his relatives."

Mr. Flood accompanied Father Commons to a small town nestled between Wexford and Enniscorthy to listen to the carol. "As it was being sung," Ms. Franklin said, "my grandfather just took it down note for note." Mr. Flood then returned to the cathedral where he arranged the carol for the organ and a four-part choir. Every Christmas Eve since, St. Aidan's Cathedral has played "The Enniscorthy Carol." Sometime later, Mr. Flood submitted the song to the editors of *The Oxford Book of Carols*, the gold-standard repository of Christmas songs, which published it in 1928; the same year Mr. Flood died.

So what does this carol mean to the people of Ennis-

corthy? If St. Aidan's has played it faithfully for the past 100 years, surely every local resident should be familiar with it.

"I've never heard of it," said almost every person I asked, almost every time I pulled out my recorder to learn more about this local masterpiece. Neither hotel bellhop nor pub waiter could tell me a lick about it.

Without much luck on the streets, I ventured into the town's most popular museum, the National 1798 Rebellion Centre. The center is named after a series of events that marked Irish resistance to British rule—the rebellion had culminated in and around Enniscorthy.

I asked not one, not two, but three cultural ambassadors at the museum, and to my surprise none of them were familiar with "The Enniscorthy Carol." One story from the annals of Irish history, however, remained in the collective memory: the 1798 Rebellion.

The National 1798 Rebellion Centre recounts the story of how Irish farmers rose up against the heavily armed British military, only to face defeat when they were ultimately crushed at the battle of Vinegar Hill—a site that overlooks the town of Enniscorthy from just across the River Slaney. While touring the museum, it became clear to me that the people of Enniscorthy were well-versed in their history and took pride in sharing it.

The experience prompted important questions: Which stories do we commit to institutional memory and which do we leave hidden in the dusty pages of Christmas carol books? Why do we commemorate anniversaries of bloodshed and forget songs of unsurpassed beauty?

Looking Back

Shortly before my trip to Ireland, I visited the stunning Scottish highlands and the medieval city of Edinburgh. At the National Museum of Scotland, numerous rooms are dedicated to preserving one or other elements of Scottish history and culture. In one of these rooms there stands a colossal steel structure known as The Maiden. This four-meter-tall beheading machine predates the French guillotine by 200 years and was once employed in Scotland to publicly execute criminals, witches and enemies of the crown. Gazing up at this monstrosity sent shivers down my spine as I briefly contemplated the human lives it had claimed with brutal efficiency. Questions swirled in my mind: How did this device find its way to the National Museum of Scotland? Why did the Scots choose to remember their history through this haunting artifact?

The same question consumed me throughout my time in Ireland. Against the backdrop of Guinness tours and cheerful pub music, I passed by the General Post Office in the center of Dublin. I soon learned that besides carrying

the mail since 1818, this was also the site of the failed 1916 Easter Rising. Most of the original Georgian structure was destroyed during the Rising, but the iconic six pillars and granite facade still stand, albeit pierced with bullet holes, serving as a poignant testament to the fight for liberty. The Rising claimed at least 450 lives and left more than 2,000 others wounded, many of them civilians. This critical moment in Ireland's centuries-long fight for independence is memorialized by designating the Post Office, an otherwise banal structure, as a prominent stop on guided tours of the city.

Now, as I reflect on my summer's travels, I have come to realize that in my quest to learn the history of every city I visited, I also had to confront the staggering tales of violence that were intertwined with each place. Despite the sincere efforts and great care taken to honor the lives sacrificed in these valiant struggles for liberty—or in the case of The Maiden, to acknowledge the grotesque consequences of demonizing human beings who do not share the same beliefs—I could barely stand the weight of it all.

If I'm honest, it made me question this whole human project altogether, and sent me careening down an all-too-familiar theological spiral called theodicy: How could a good, loving and all-powerful God allow any babe to be born into this world of terror?

But is that not *the* Christmas story?

I could not study the origins of this song without first detouring through some of the ugliest chapters of human history. While Nativity scenes painted and held up in most Christmas carols may appear innocent and peaceful, I can now hardly hear an Advent hymn without also pondering why God sent his son to be born into this mess to begin with. And yet that is precisely where the first stanza of "The Enniscorthy Carol" begins:

*Good people all, this Christmas time
Consider well and bear in mind
What our good God for us has done
In sending his beloved son*

God's response to a world marred by violence, destruction and death is to enter the fray; to assume the rotten human condition, and to do so as a defenseless infant. God's response to human suffering is not heard in a rallying battle cry or apocalyptic cloud-parting deliverance—though, to be honest, there are days when I wish it were. Rather, God "came down and crept in beside us" on Christmas morn, as the Scottish poet and clergyman John Bell of Iona Abbey in Scotland writes. The style of God is so quiet, so unassuming, that we may not notice it at all.



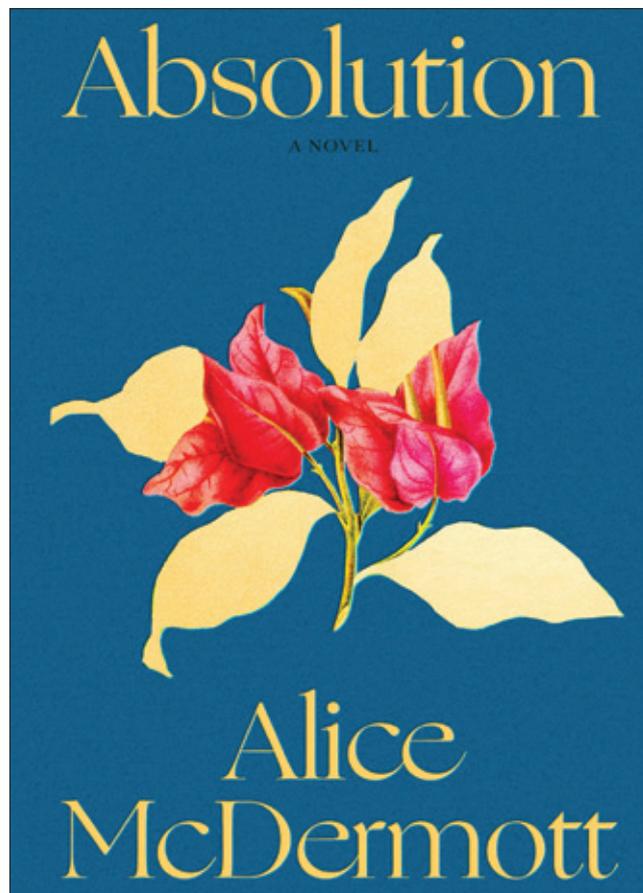
Maggi Van Dorn visited Ireland this summer to record interviews for "Hark!"

I will grant you that listening to that "still, small voice of God" (1 Kgs 19:11-13) can be hard to do, particularly when we turn on the news to see a world on fire. And yet, I invite you to glean insight from my globe-trotting journey in search of "The Enniscorthy Carol."

If the people of Enniscorthy do not remember a song of profound beauty—which one of their own recovered from historical obscurity barely a century ago—we, too, might be missing the beauty born right in front of us. It is possible that we have lingered too long on our wounds, and not long enough around the manger.

Maggi Van Dorn is the audio producer for America Media, and host and producer of the podcast "Hark! The Stories Behind Your Favorite Christmas Carols." The third season of "Hark!" begins on Nov. 26, with new episodes available every Sunday during Advent.

AWFULNESS, ABSOLUTION AND ALTRUISM



Farrar, Straus and Giroux / 336p \$28

Flannery O'Connor wrote the following in her *Mystery and Manners*: "The novelist makes his statement by selection, and if he is any good, he selects every word for a reason, every incident for a reason, and arranges them in a certain time-sequence for a reason. He demonstrates something that cannot possibly be demonstrated any other way than with a whole novel."

She could have used those words to describe Alice McDermott.

The good news for anyone whose literary tastes have been strongly influenced by the Catholic novels of Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, Francois Mauriac, Georges Bernanos, Morris West, Walker Percy, Flannery O'Connor, Edwin O'Connor, A. J. Cronin and Piers Paul Read is this: The new Alice McDermott novel, *Absolution*, has arrived!

One of my early encounters with Alice McDermott's writing was an essay in which she claimed that she believed that every sentence she wrote was influenced by her Catholic faith. I was stunned. Her statement struck me as religious hyperbole. Who did she think she was? Matthew? Mark? Luke? John? Having read all nine of her novels, and

several more than once, I now believe what she said.

Years ago, in her excellent book *The Vital Tradition: The Catholic Novel in a Period of Convergence*, the professor and author Jean Kellogg claimed that the Second Vatican Council was the death knell for the Catholic novel, as the Catholic self-understanding joined the modern world. "For many Catholics confluence by the 1960's became so complete that they were no longer sure what the true Catholic essence was," Kellogg wrote. "The primary and defiant Catholic emphasis upon the spirit, which for so many generations had caused the creative spark between the Catholic communities and the secular environment, virtually ceased."

However, I suspect the Catholic novel will never disappear as long as McDermott continues to write. McDermott's amazing skill at perceiving details and then describing them with precision causes me to raise a similar question that I raise about great athletes: Do they have some gift that the rest of us lack, or is their skill due to long hours of practice? My guess is that an athlete's skill is due to a combination of gift and effort—and I suspect the same may be true of McDermott's extraordinary talent to describe places and persons so well that we readers feel as though we have become part of the story.

Much of *Absolution* takes place in Saigon during the Vietnam War. In his *Cycles of American History*, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. has this devastating comment about the involvement of the United States in the war:

American intervention in Vietnam lost its last claim to legitimacy when the means employed and the destruction wrought grew out of any rational relationship to the interests threatened and the objective sought.... No administration asked in any searching way what danger to national security, what involvement of national interest would justify the commitment of American troops to what became the longest war in American history.

Using this view of the Vietnam War as background, McDermott has dramatized through the lives of a handful of Americans the ignorance and naïveté that distorted their awareness and lack of awareness during their years in Saigon. Through our country's immoral involvement in Vietnam, she suggests a universal need for absolution. Though she has moved from the locale of Long Island so familiar in her earlier novels, she continues to explore beautifully the same places in the heart.

The following paragraph illustrates McDermott's awesome ability, with a few images, to invite readers into a new world:

It would have been easy enough to believe that the Americans living in Saigon in those days had come over simply to go shopping. And not just the wives. Every American you saw on the street, man and woman, carried a shopping bag, or had two or three of them surrounding their feet at any café. Shopping was the one thing we talked about at our parties and lectures and luncheons. Shopping for souvenirs, for clothing, for jewels, for radios, for cameras, quarts of Johnny Walker. And cigarettes, of course. All so cheap and abundant.

Central to the plot of *Absolution* are three women—Tricia, Charlene and Charlene’s daughter Rainey, whom we first meet when she is about 8 years of age but whose importance to the story becomes evident many years later when she is a married mother. During much of her time in Saigon, Tricia’s self-image is formed by the words her father spoke to her on her wedding day: “Be a helpmate to your husband. Be the jewel in his crown.”

Devout Catholics whose faith seems very simple, Tricia and her engineer husband are in Saigon because the U.S. government sent him there along with many other engineers. Charlene, an imposing tower of self-confidence, is a compulsive do-gooder who wants to make the world a better place. Years later, when Rainey is an adult, wife and mother, she describes her mother’s many efforts to remove some of the awfulness in the world as “a disappearing generation’s efforts at inconsequential good.”

Readers will have to decide for themselves whether all Charlene’s efforts were “inconsequential.” Reading about and reflecting on her efforts, I think of Chesterton’s insight: “If a thing is worth doing it is worth doing badly.” Rainey’s relations with her mother are very conflicted. If not love/hate, then certainly not as loving as one might wish, indeed not as loving as Rainey might wish.

The most attractive character in the novel is Dominic, a conscientious objector who is described by another character as “more Catholic than the pope.” He appears later in the novel, when he and his wife and their adopted son Jamie, a 20-year-old with Down syndrome, have moved next door to Rainey and her husband Doug. The latter, a cynical secularist, is shown to be probably influential in Rainey’s abandoning the Christian faith of her mother.

McDermott’s novel can be both compared and contrasted with Graham Greene’s novel *The Quiet American*, whose narrator does not believe in God. The last line of Greene’s novel is “...but how I wished there was someone to whom I could say I was sorry.” (McDermott uses that

last line as an epigraph to her novel.) However, unlike Greene’s novel, *Absolution* is a possibility in McDermott’s story. At least two characters achieve it through heroic acts of love.

The contribution of two observers of modern aesthetics are helpful in assessing the impact of McDermott’s writing. The poet and scholar Mark Van Doren, who was a legend as a professor at Columbia University, once expressed what critics should look for when they evaluate a poem. I think Van Doren’s suggestions can be applied to a novel:

What is a given [novel] about? What happens in it? What exists in it? If too little of the world is in it, why is that? If all of the world is there, by what miracle has this been done? Are the facts of life accounted for in the unique way that [a novel] accounts for them, and is the [novel] therefore something that everyone should read? Does the author know more, not less, than most men know?

I also think the philosopher Jacques Maritain’s theory of art is valuable in this context. Maritain claimed that every work of art should have two components, a creative intuition and the matter in which the artist tries to express that creative intuition. The difference between the intuitions we all have and the artist’s creative intuition is that the artist is moved by his or her intuition to be creative, to embody his or her intuition in a work of art.

This creative intuition cannot be verbalized: It is not an idea or a concept. Ideally, it should be present in three places: in the artist, in the work of art and in the person experiencing the work. When a profound creative intuition has been successfully incarnated in matter, a masterpiece has been created.

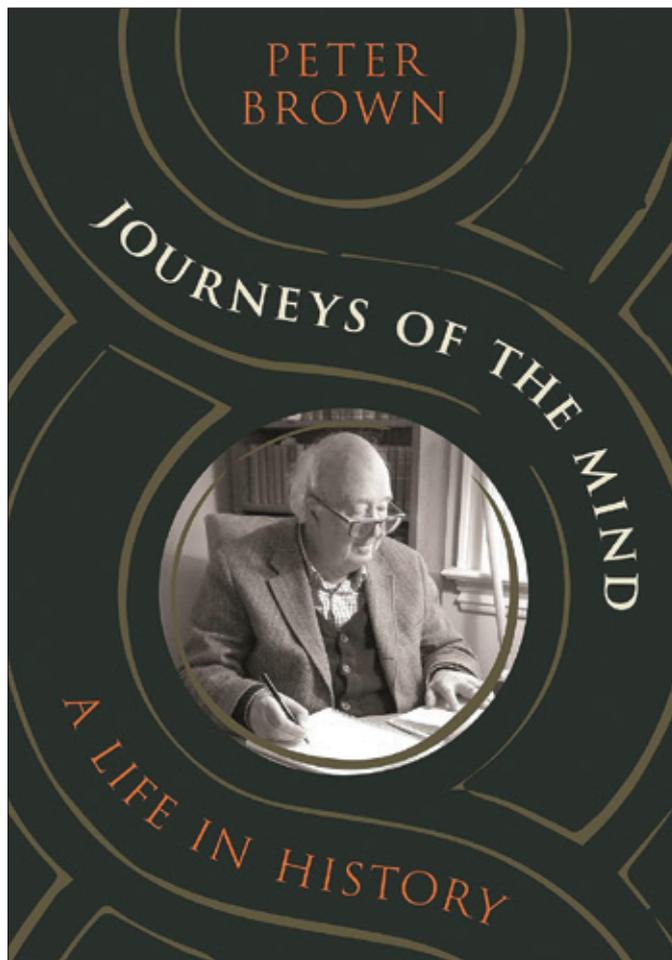
Using Maritain’s theory, I asked myself all the questions that I have attributed to Van Doren with McDermott’s novel in mind. *Absolution* is exceptionally good because of McDermott’s insights into the mystery of the human person due to her religious faith and her extraordinary ability to weave those insights into a story that has universal implications. Here is Flannery O’Connor again: “If a writer is any good, what he makes will have its source in a realm much larger than that which his conscious mind can encompass and will always be a greater surprise to him than it can ever be to his reader.”

I doubt McDermott’s religious faith is identical with her creative intuition, because religious faith can be verbalized to some extent. In a profound way, however, McDermott’s creative intuition and religious faith appear

to have interacted in *Absolution*. I cannot explain that interaction; I suspect that McDermott cannot explain it. Indeed, perhaps Maritain himself would not be able to explain it. However, the interaction makes *Absolution* a marvelous novel, perhaps a masterpiece.

The Rev. Robert E. Lauder is a priest of the Diocese of Brooklyn and a professor of philosophy at St. John's University, in New York, N.Y. He is the author of several books, including *Pope Francis' Profound Personalism & Poverty and Pope Francis' Spirituality & Our Story*.

A MIND AT WORK



Princeton University Press / 713p \$45

The historian Peter Brown is 88 years old, and judging from his new 700-page memoir, he has lost none of the energy or curiosity that has marked his distinguished career. *Journeys of the Mind* is an impressively detailed account of his intellectual odyssey from Ireland to his years of study and teaching at Oxford to academic posts in London, Berkeley and, finally, Princeton.

Brown is perhaps most well-known for his classic biography of St. Augustine of Hippo. That book was published in 1967, and his career has ranged far and wide since, taking him from holy men of Syria to the cult of the saints in Europe to a study of sexual renunciation in early Christianity. His memoir traces each of these developments in his thinking, grounding them in humor and personal anecdotes. His writing style is accessible and charming, the mark of an academic who spent much of his career writing for the educated public.

He begins with the story of his ancestors and the larger story of Protestants in Ireland. From a young age, Brown was well aware that he was part of a religious minority, though one with a distinguished pedigree. William Butler Yeats was the cousin of a cousin, and his “mother’s mother” had connections with the family of the playwright and poet John Millington Synge. It was a culture that took books and ideas seriously: “Most of these people were of limited means. They did not own many books—but they read what they had.”

Both of those facts—that he was a religious minority and that he hailed from a family of middle-class but learned people—would inform his scholarship and writing all through his career.

It was a sacrifice for Brown’s family to send him to the Shrewsbury School in England, where he had to contend with the peculiarities of the English class system. But Brown thrived, and he offers winning anecdotes of the old dons who taught him. From “the Duke,” a history teacher named Murray Senior who reminded students of the Duke of Wellington, he first heard the voice of what he calls “grown-up history”: “Suspicious of generalizations; demanding facts and figures; and notably averse to ‘vast and vague’ talk about ideas: the Duke’s comments have always been for me the beginning of wisdom.”

When he went to Oxford to take its entrance exam, he began to see history firsthand, since much of the school had not changed since the 15th century. It sent his mind whirring. But could his parents afford to send him? The question hangs in the air until he wins a prize fellowship at All Souls College, given to the two most promising students. (The other winner: the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor.)

There are many threads in Brown’s story. A fan of St. Augustine may wish to read about how the seeds for that biography were first planted. Another reader may be riveted by his trips to Iran for research in the years just before the 1979 revolution. An academic may find it intriguing to witness his journey from the tutor-based educational system at Oxford to the graduate school training we are more familiar with in the United States.



Rarely have I encountered a more compelling case for the physical act of reading.

One thread that I relished tracing was the importance of reading in Brown's life. Rarely have I encountered a more compelling case for the physical act of reading—or what he calls “tenacious *Sitzfleisch*.” He writes about the hours spent reading while sitting next to the stove in his parents' kitchen in Ireland. He shares the thrill of perusing the shelves of the Library of Classical Studies at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford: “I would approach those shelves like a water-diviner, hoping against hope to touch some fresh new spring in the daunting array of new publications.” This was in 1958, long before the days of digital indexing. Indeed, it was several years before the photocopier was in wide use. Mining for ideas was hard work.

It is also enjoyable to simply take in the personalities Brown meets along the way. One formidable character is the anthropologist Mary Douglas, who shared with him an early copy of her seminal book *Natural Symbols*. Douglas helped Brown to see the relationship between religion and society in a new light. Along with E. E. Evans-Pritchard, another formative influence, Douglas refused to look down on religious practice and ritual and took issue with the Catholic Church, for example, for relaxing the rules regarding eating meat on Friday.

At the Oxford Patristics Conference in September 1963, Brown encountered priests and religious who took part in the Second Vatican Council, including Cardinal Jean Daniélou, S.J. The historians at the conference were thrilled by the idea of *ressourcement* and how it might invigorate their own studies of the ancient world. For Brown, that meant the period of late antiquity, when the Roman Empire gave way to the rise of Christianity. His observations about that moment in history have a timeless relevance: “It was by reaching out beyond itself, and not walling itself off, that Christianity had come to dominate the Roman world.”

Later in the book, after moving across the world to U.C. Berkeley, Brown enjoys long conversations at the “Bear's Lair” with Michel Foucault. His encounters with Foucault offer an example of the “journeys of the mind” that he is so interested in exploring. In 1980—perhaps because “sexual emancipation...was in the air”—Brown decided to begin studying different understandings of sex during late antiquity. It was then that he began reading Foucault, who pushed back against the overly simplified narrative of the time, which saw the sexual revolution as the end of a period of repression that had lasted for centuries.

Quoting Foucault, Brown writes that “sexuality had become ‘the noisiest of our preoccupations. People will wonder what could make us so presumptuous.’” Brown's goal was to help people understand a culture very different

from their own, and reading Foucault helped him to see the influence of modern prejudices.

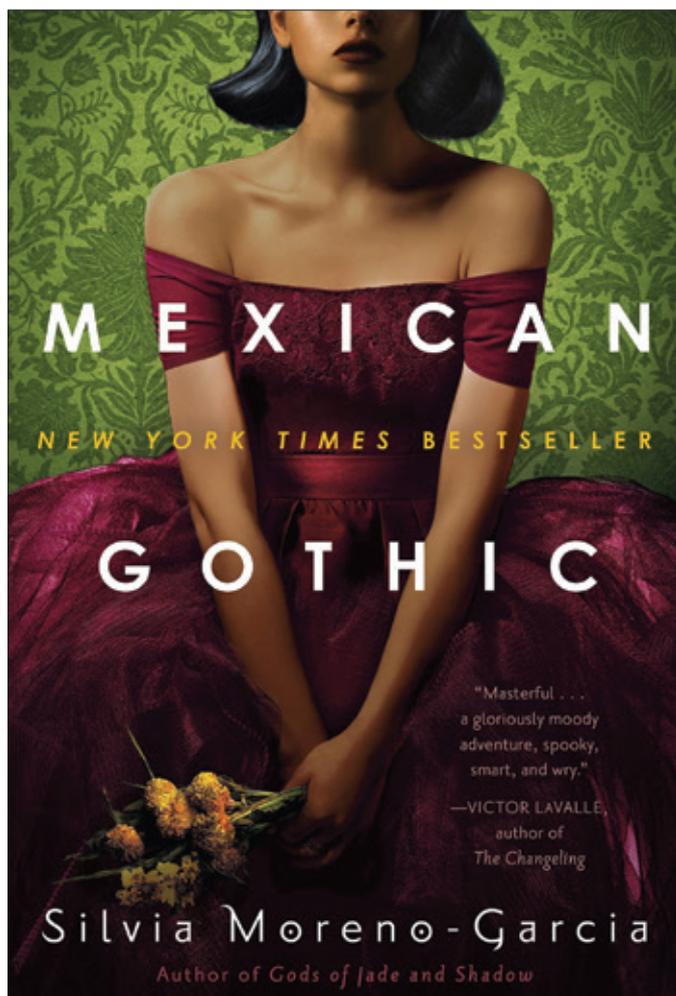
There are many such heady moments in Brown's tome, and the reader may be forgiven for taking time with the text. (His narrative ends in 1987, with a brief postscript on his work “Since Then.”) The chapters are short and engaging but packed with ideas. Reading a chapter or two at a time allows the material to sink in. “I would like the reader to follow (and at a leisurely pace) the development within me of a historical sense,” Brown writes in his introduction. *Leisurely* is the right word, and readers used to a different kind of memoir—one with more gossip and less Latin—may find the terrain hard going.

Indeed, there is not much here on Brown's personal or spiritual life, though he does mention that after traveling to Iran and watching Muslims at worship, he returned to attending services in his own Christian church after many years away. This book really is about the life of the mind, an intellectual journey formed by deep reading and extensive travel and nourished by relationships and conversation, from the dining rooms of Oxford to Peet's Coffee in Berkeley.

A reviewer is tempted to conclude with some reflections on the state of intellectual discourse today, to wonder perhaps whether our digital, distracted world can produce another Peter Brown. But such ruminations are not in keeping with the spirit of this book, which has little time for hand-wringing. *Journeys of the Mind* presents a very attractive picture of one man's life immersed in the world of books and arguments—one that, to this reader at least, seems like a lot of fun. Perhaps that is all that needs to be said.

Maurice Timothy Reidy is deputy editor in chief of *America*.

HORROR, CATHOLIC STYLE



Del Rey / 336p \$28

Anyone who received an illustrated book of saints for their first Communion, with depictions of St. Lucy holding out a platter with her eyeballs on it and St. Sebastian writhing and arrow-pierced, can appreciate how early exposure to gory images of suffering saints might spark ideas for a future horror writer. The horror author creating the biggest stir across several countries in recent years is Silvia Moreno-Garcia. She grew up steeped in Catholicism in Mexico, and although she does not practice the religion, her novels are replete with themes, images and rituals that echo Catholic belief, ceremony and iconography, including her ninth and newest novel, *Silver Nitrate*, and her lush and gripping 2020 novel, *Mexican Gothic*.

In a *Nightmare Magazine* interview with Xander Odell from 2017, Moreno-Garcia spoke about the inspiration for her story “Jade, Blood”:

I was never into Catholicism, but I did read my Bible ferociously because it had all these gory, sexy

and horrible stories. It's the same with the saints. Agatha of Sicily is shown in paintings holding a dish with her breasts.... And it's just odd how Indigenous beliefs bleed in and out of Mexican Catholicism. You look at something like the cult of Maximón, which is a sort of blend of pre-Hispanic ideas about gods and Catholic saints, and you end up concluding the world is strange and you know nothing about it.

After growing up in Mexico, Silvia Moreno-Garcia moved to Canada in 2003, and she currently lives in Vancouver, B.C. Moreno-Garcia is a prolific author, covering genres including horror, historical fiction, fantasy, noir and combinations of all of the above. In 2014, she published a collection of stories and has been churning out books ever since. While Moreno-Garcia earned acclaim in the horror and fantasy communities for each of her books, she first broke through to a mainstream audience in 2020 with *Mexican Gothic*, which became an American best-seller and won British and Canadian awards for best fantasy novel of the year.

How does Moreno-Garcia cast a spell over so many readers, including those who do not normally read horror? Several of her novels feature complicated heroines, compelling plots and supernatural elements solidly grounded in research—including mycology, anthropology and colonialist views in the case of *Mexican Gothic*, and Mexican film history, witchcraft and Nazis in the case of *Silver Nitrate*.

In *Mexican Gothic*, the Mexico City-based protagonist, Noemí Taboada, is introduced by this evocative passage:

Noemí, like any good socialite, shopped at the Palacio de Hierro, painted her lips with Elizabeth Arden lipstick, owned a couple of very fine furs, spoke English with remarkable ease, courtesy of the nuns at the Monserrat—a private school, of course—and was expected to devote her time to the twin pursuits of leisure and husband hunting.

It is 1949, so Noemí is expected to play a traditional role, but she wants to complete her college education. Noemí's wealthy father asks her to visit her cousin Catalina, who recently married a mysterious man named Virgil Doyle. Catalina has sent Noemí's family a strange letter claiming she was being poisoned. Noemí's father wishes to avert possible scandal, so he tells Noemí she can continue her college studies if she assesses the situation.

Noemí travels to the Doyle residence, known as High

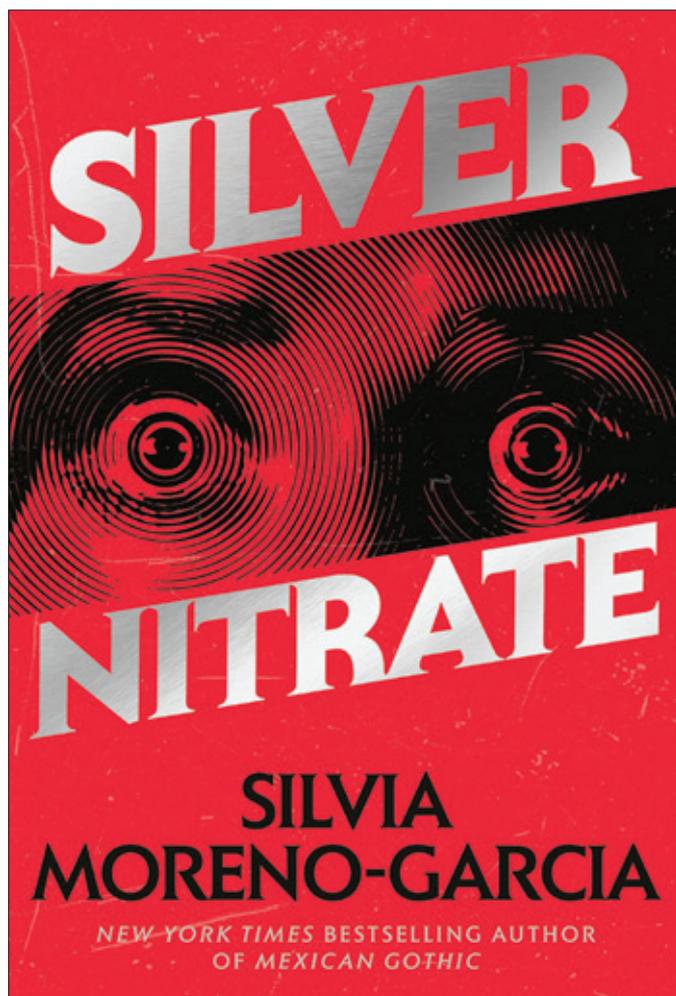
Place, in a mountainous region filled with dark forests and treacherous ravines. There, she learns the Doyle family emigrated from England and earned its money from a long-abandoned silver mine, and that its fortunes seem to have waned, judging from the dilapidation of the cold and creepy mansion. Noemí meets the patriarch, the moldering Howard Doyle, who harbors colonialist views of his racial supremacy while praising Noemí's dark beauty, to her disgust. Noemí realizes something is very wrong with Catalina, with the house and with the Doyles. She sets about trying to save her cousin and herself before the mysterious evil force that has fueled generations of wrongdoing can overcome her.

Mexican Gothic wrestles with ideas of good and evil, and especially questions whether society's accepted indicators of goodness are correct. Noemí is fun-loving and flirtatious, while the Doyles insist on silence and reserve. The chilly matriarch, Florence Doyle, reprimands Noemí for the "vice" of smoking cigarettes and Noemí thinks of "the nuns who had overseen her education. She had learned rebellion while muttering the rosary."

Later, Noemí visits a village healer, Marta Duval, for medicine for Catalina, and in Marta's house she finds "a picture of the Sacred Heart and a bookshelf [holding] plaster figurines of saints, candles, and bottles filled with herbs." In exchange for a remedy, Marta demands some of Noemí's expensive cigarettes, which she says are for the statue of St. Luke the Evangelist. "Cigarettes for saints?" Noemí asks. This scene offers the first sign in *Mexican Gothic* that superficial vices, like smoking, are not indicative of true character, and that healing and health are to be found in syncretism, the mixture of traditions, unlike the "purity" prized by the Doyles.

Noemí proves to be an intelligent, resourceful and determined woman whose loyalty toward friends and family is unshakeable. This description could also be applied to the heroine of Moreno-Garcia's new novel, *Silver Nitrate*, Montserrat, although the two could not be more physically and temperamentally different. While Noemí devotes considerable time to grooming and is a bubbly extrovert, Montserrat, who is "small and plain," fails to condition her hair, prefers to work alone and walks with a limp because of a lifelong leg condition. Both characters are unforgettable.

Silver Nitrate takes place in Mexico City in the 1990s, where Montserrat is a highly skilled sound editor, but as one of the few female sound editors in the Mexican film industry, she battles for jobs and respect. Montserrat's best friend since childhood, Tristán, is a handsome soap opera actor who has struggled since a car crash killed his co-star 10 years earlier. Movie buff Montserrat has shared the clas-



Del Rey / 336p \$28

sics of Mexican horror films with Tristán since they were kids, so when he realizes his elderly neighbor is Abel Urueta, a famed director, Tristán and Montserrat befriend the old man.

Montserrat wants to learn about "Beyond the Yellow Door," the never-finished horror film that wrecked Abel's career. She suspects it might have been a cursed production, like "The Exorcist," during whose filming, she notes, "The set burned down. They hired a priest to perform a blessing."

Abel discusses the film's disturbing driving force: Wilhelm Ewers, a Nazi who emigrated to Mexico. Ewers dabbled in the occult and wanted to film a ritual to gain power over the audience. Abel explains that "the film was shot with silver nitrate stock because silver is a powerful conduit for spells," even though that type of film had been phased out years earlier because of its flammability. Ewers is long dead, but he begins to exert his will in uncanny ways on the characters.

Tristán is not religious, but as scary occurrences mount, he thinks about buying “a bucket filled with holy water” and “*veladoras* with pictures of the Virgin of Guadalupe or the Sacred Heart painted on them.” As Montserrat and Tristán’s peril increases when they try to uncover the sorcery at its root, traditional Advent rituals play out in Mexico City, commemorating the virgin’s day.

“It was a spectacle, as were the *pastorelas* where people dressed up as devils and angels and enacted the play of the Nativity. [Montserrat] wondered what Ewers would have made of those, interested as he was in performances,” Moreno-Garcia writes. “Religion and magic were not the same, but maybe Ewers had caught the scent of something when he walked downtown and saw such forms of entertainment. Mexico was syncretism in motion, and Montserrat supposed in a weird way so was Ewers’s magic system. Of course, he bent it the way he wanted, talked his talk of Aryan superiority and ancient lay lines, but he was not exactly original.”

The villains of both *Mexican Gothic* and *Silver Nitrate* are men of European heritage who seek resurrection and eternal life for themselves at the expense of lives they consider less worthy—namely, Mexican people with mixed Indigenous ancestry. In both novels, the protagonists’ capacity for love and self-sacrifice offers hope for salvation. The thrilling culminations of both novels involve ceremonies and incantations that subvert the values of the Catholic Mass even while they mirror its ritual and spectacle.

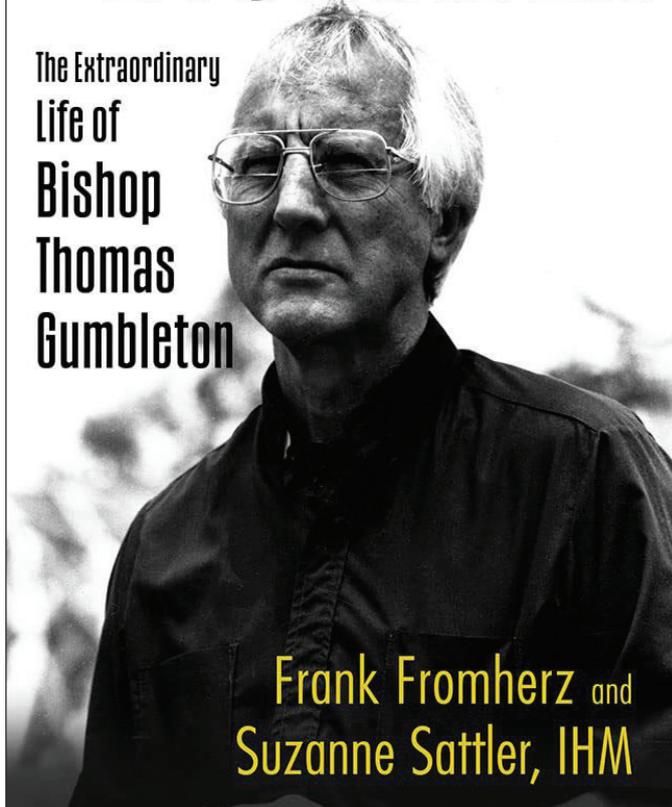
The Catholic religion of Moreno-Garcia’s youth is one key ingredient that enhances the flavors of her fiction. The magic and mystery she conjures in each book do not feel invented, but rather derived from her immersion in ancient traditions, rituals and cultural histories. Her novels are page-turners with beating hearts, with one foot in the profane and another in the sacred.

Jenny Shank’s story collection *Mixed Company* won the Colorado Book Award, and her novel *The Ringer* won the High Plains Book Award. She teaches in the Mile High M.F.A. program at Regis University in Denver.

CONTEMPLATING ETERNITY

NO GUILTY BYSTANDER

The Extraordinary
Life of
Bishop
Thomas
Gumbleton



Frank Fromherz and
Suzanne Sattler, IHM

Orbis Books / 336p \$30

Because of his lifetime of progressive activism, Bishop Thomas John Gumbleton, auxiliary bishop emeritus of the Archdiocese of Detroit, is often listed among what might be termed the “advance guard” of interpreting church ideals and goals. A meticulous new study of his life and accomplishments by Frank Fromherz and Suzanne Sattler, I.H.M., *No Guilty Bystander*, follows a more concise, journalistic explication from 2019 by the **America** contributor and National Catholic Reporter mainstay Peter Feuerherd.

The term “advance guard” is more suitable than avant-garde for the Detroit-born Gumbleton, a down-to-earth, no-frills personality who celebrated his 93rd birthday in January 2023. On subjects from pacifism to capital punishment to inclusive church outreach for gender minorities, Gumbleton may have prefigured current Vatican policy by a generation or more.

We learn early on in the book that Gumbleton has



Gumbleton resolved to remain part of a gradually evolving system but reserved the right to dissent when he saw fit.

had a passion since childhood for playing and, as an adult, watching ice hockey. So devoted was Gumbleton to the sport that when he was informed in 1968 that Pope Paul VI would appoint him an auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Detroit, he asked Archbishop John Dearden before his consecration that year whether he might continue playing hockey.

The archbishop advised him, “Be yourself,” and Gumbleton has clung to these words in more ways than one, including as a gradualist who evolved his societal and individual viewpoints slowly despite a reputation for pioneering attitudes.

Decades spent living in poor neighborhoods would educate him about social injustices in American society. And although he later became known for advocating church inclusivity towards L.G.B.T.Q. parishioners, he admits that his early advice to gay churchgoers was effectively useless, telling them to try to avoid places of temptation. When his own brother wrote his family a coming-out letter, Gumbleton’s first response was to set the missive aside and not respond, fretting about how it would look for a bishop to have an openly gay brother.

Eventually, his mother asked if her gay son faced eternal damnation. After consideration, Gumbleton reassured his mother that no, his brother would not go to hell for being gay. (Gumbleton told the story during a PBS interview in 1997.)

On an equally fraught subject, the church’s sexual abuse cases and subsequent legal penalties, the 75-year-old Gumbleton spoke out in 2006 on the side of the plaintiffs, recalling an incident when, as a 15-year-old seminarian, he was groped by a priest, a teacher at Detroit’s Sacred Heart Seminary High School.

Gumbleton’s experiences at international sites of suffering were essential in developing his voice as an activist. In a preface to *No Guilty Bystander*, Fromherz and Sattler quote Gumbleton about a trip to Cairo in the early 1960s where he witnessed the destitution of impoverished residents. This assault on the senses fostered empathy in Gumbleton during his decades of travel to Haiti, Kazakhstan, Guatemala and Peru, inspiring multiple charitable projects.

A quasi-visceral response was likewise produced by a tour of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial in Japan. Gumbleton would later quote Pope Paul VI’s 1976 description of the bombing of Hiroshima as a “butchery of untold magnitude.” At a 1989 symposium at The Catholic University of America on “The Challenge of Peace: The Catholic Church in Public Debate,” Gumbleton added that “if there is any way [the Hiroshima bombing] is compatible with being a

Christian, I would reject Christianity. If Jesus could bless followers who do this, I would have nothing to do with Jesus.”

While sometimes associated with extreme views, Gumbleton more often appears in *No Guilty Bystander* to be an institutional “lifer,” resolved to remain part of a gradually evolving system but reserving the right to dissent when he sees fit. Still, Gumbleton frequently cautions that his notions on policy in no way contradict essential church teachings.

Gumbleton has long been described as a compulsive reader, and in his preface to *No Guilty Bystander* he states that he would prefer to devour a book about one of the valiant souls who influenced him rather than one about himself. He mentions Thomas Merton, St. Óscar Romero, Franz Jägerstätter, O.F.S., Dorothy Day, Cardinal John Dearden and Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen of Seattle among his people of interest.

Gumbleton is also depicted in *No Guilty Bystander* as devoted to periodicals like *The New York Times* and *The New York Review of Books*. As a youth, his sole interest was the sports pages, and while Gumbleton’s curiosity has expanded since then to involve the wider world, church precedent is apparently not his only guide for finding answers to contemporary questions. Instead, a more confrontational hockey-player mindset has better suited Gumbleton temperamentally.

A case in point is “On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons,” a pastoral letter by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith delivered in Rome in 1986 by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) and Archbishop Alberto Bovone. Then-Cardinal Ratzinger’s assertion that

the homosexual “inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder” was termed by Gumbleton as “cruel words and unjustified words.”

Gumbleton regularly showed a willingness to confront what he deemed injustice, even when purported offenders were representatives of the church. And so in 1989, when dozens of inner-city churches were closed by the Archdiocese of Detroit, Gumbleton joined the picket lines as an auxiliary bishop, protesting the decision.

He paid the price for such initiatives, remaining an auxiliary bishop for decades instead of being elevated to head a diocese. Yet as his biographers note, freedom from administrative and budgeting chores has allowed him time to address a wider scope of issues. An example of this can be found in 2006, after he testified in front of the Ohio General Assembly in Columbus on the occasion of a bill to create a legal window for victims of sexual abuse to sue perpetrators. The bishops of Ohio were offended by his testimony. According to Gumbleton’s account, he soon received a

letter from the Roman Curia accusing him of violating the solidarity of *communio episcoporum* (communion of bishops) by not seeking permission from the local bishop before testifying. Gumbleton was ordered to resign as auxiliary bishop and pastor of St. Leo’s Church, his longtime base.

Nevertheless, a difficult-to-quantify likeability factor is also part of Gumbleton’s extraordinary longevity as a public activist. In 2009, the New Oxford Review admitted that “despite his bizarre theology, [Gumbleton] has not been ambitious, and you’ve gotta respect that. For Gumbleton, the Gospel boils down to the Social Gospel, but he does appear to practice what he preaches.”

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



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CAROL

By Sally Thomas

In dulci jubilo,
These days grow darker. So
We sing beneath our breath.
In life we are in death.
Alpha es et O,
But footprints mar the snow.

O Jesu parvule,
We've moored our tree today
With fishing line, a nail—
We know how things can fail.
O princeps gloriae,
Misrule will have its way.

O Patris caritas,
Throughout the waiting house
We've strewn our mangers. Maybe
This year we'll find one baby.
O Nati lenitas,
We're all forgetfulness.

Ubi sunt gaudia?
This world is what we know.
O that we were there,
We sing because we're here.
Into the night we go,
In dulci jubilo.

Sally Thomas is the author of the novel *Works of Mercy* and the poetry collections *Motherland* and *Among the Living*, forthcoming in 2024. Her short-story collection, *The Blackbird and Other Stories*, will also be published in 2024.

This Advent, Join the Procession

In the readings for the First Sunday of Advent, which begins a new liturgical year, the prophet Isaiah laments that the people of faith have drifted far off the path, “Why do you let us wander, O Lord, from your ways, and harden our hearts so that we fear you not?” (Is 63:17). In response to this “drifting away,” the readings of the following Sunday provide a place to find one’s footing again. “In the desert,” writes Isaiah, “prepare the way” (Is 40:3). The readings of Advent invite everyone to join a procession back to God, no matter how far one has drifted.

The readings even encourage us to help prepare the way for others. Isaiah suggests that by going to those places of “desert-wilderness” within our lives and personal histories, we can start this procession. To join in, therefore, one must leave the safety of spiritual complacency. It is in the

desert that we prepare the way that God will later shape.

The goal of this path is not always clear. On the last Sunday of Advent, for example, King David expresses his desire to Nathan the prophet to build a great house for the ark of God. The Lord’s response through Nathan reveals the exact opposite. God will do the building, establishing a kingdom for David that will rise slowly but last forever. The Gospel for the same Sunday is from Luke in which the angel Gabriel greets Mary with good news, “You have found favor with God” (Lk 1:30). Mary learns that God will give the throne of David to her son, fulfilling the promise made long ago. Neither David nor Mary may understand how all this will happen, but they still join in the task of preparing the way for God’s will to unfold. They become like clay in the potter’s hand (Is 64:7).

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT (B), DEC. 3, 2023

Be Like Clay in the Potter’s Hands

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT (B), DEC. 10, 2023

To Find God, Go to the Hard Places

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT (B), DEC. 17, 2023

Follow the Light and the Spirit of the Lord

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT (B), DEC. 24, 2023

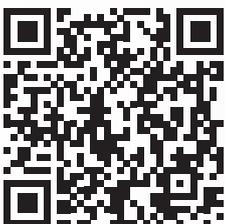
Let Go and Grab on to God’s Initiative

FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY OF JESUS, MARY AND JOSEPH, DEC. 31, 2023

Starting the New Year with the Holy Family



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



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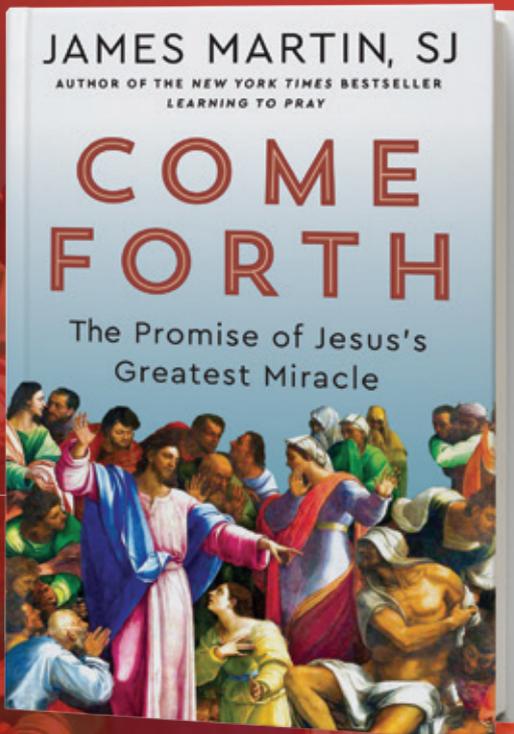
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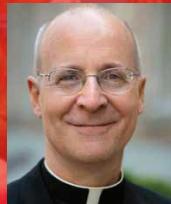
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Saying No to Slave Labor

Younger consumers are demanding the truth | By David Alton



Nearly three-fourths of Gen Z consumers are willing to pay more for products that are environmentally sustainable, according to a poll released in 2020. But would Gen Z and the rest of us be willing to pay more for products that are not produced by slaves? Would this generation be willing to boycott products made in countries credibly accused of human trafficking?

I have little doubt that if Gen Z knew the horrific origins of many of the products they purchase, the answer would be a resounding yes, and that would hold true for the rest of us. In this case, making it easy for people to “put their money where their mouth is” is not as far-fetched as you might think.

In 19th-century Britain, knowledge of how human beings were trafficked and enslaved on Caribbean plantations led to mass boycotts of sugar products. Education changed peoples’ hearts and minds and led to the initial abolition of the slave trade. More recently, labels carrying health warnings have led to a radical drop in tobacco usage worldwide. Both of these examples targeted the ordinary person and made doing the right thing very easy. Today, if there were a legal requirement to label products as coming from Xinjiang—a province in China known for promoting human trafficking and slave labor, and where a genocide against the Uyghur population is underway—people would think twice before purchasing them.

Some may object to this truth-in-labeling approach as simplistic, or point out that governments have already enacted bills like the Modern

Slavery Act in the United Kingdom and the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act in the United States. These are important steps, but we also need ordinary people to make the sacrifice of passing over products made in places like Xinjiang Province. And make no mistake, many of the goods we order from Amazon or buy in our local stores are produced by slave labor.

In August, the United Nations marked international days of remembrance, one for the victims of violence based on religion or belief and another for the slave trade. In my 40 years traversing the world as a member of Parliament, I have found that these two tragic experiences are inextricably linked.

Countries that deny religious freedom are serial human rights abusers, denying every other human right too. Discrimination beats a remorseless path, morphing into persecution and then into atrocity crimes and ultimately to the crime above all crimes: genocide. On the way, human dignity is replaced by gross oppression and terrible violations of human rights, including enslavement. Ignore threats to religious freedom, and people suffer and die.

This bleak reality was all too clear at a recent conference convened by the Notre Dame Law School Religious Liberty Initiative. Lawyers, politicians, academics, theologians and philosophers, representing many faiths, discussed the current state of religious freedom and belief around the world. We heard from people born in slave camps. From people forced to flee

their homelands, we heard shocking accounts of violence, imprisonment, family separation and exile. These were voices that had firsthand knowledge of the stark reality of genocide and slavery—an everyday reality for many millions of people.

It will not be easy to end human trafficking, slavery or grave suffering, and I am not suggesting that paying attention to a label on a piece of clothing will achieve that. But doing nothing means that things only get worse.

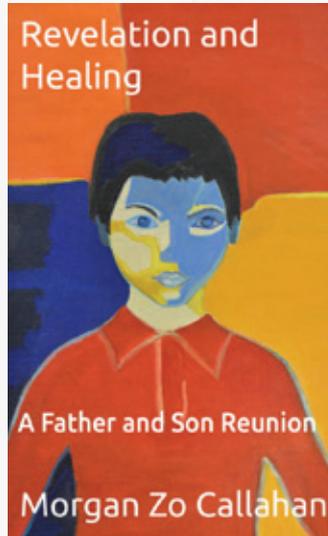
Harnessing the sheer power of the philosopher Edmund Burke’s “small battalions” of community associations could radically tip the scales against injustice. Consumers and their spending power could bring about change. They could reshape the economics of multinational corporations that are complicit in slavery and hit the bottom line of countries, like China, that are the beneficiaries.

We should also recognize the power of faith communities to change consumer choices, as they did in mobilizing millions of people against the trans-Atlantic slave trade. If the four out of five members of the world’s population who profess a religious faith were to get behind this initiative, they could also move us closer to restoring the basic human rights of millions of people who are needlessly suffering.

David Alton of Liverpool, England, is a member of the House of Lords and is the recipient of the 2023 Notre Dame Prize for Religious Liberty.

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.



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



Lionel Durand broadcasting for Voice of America



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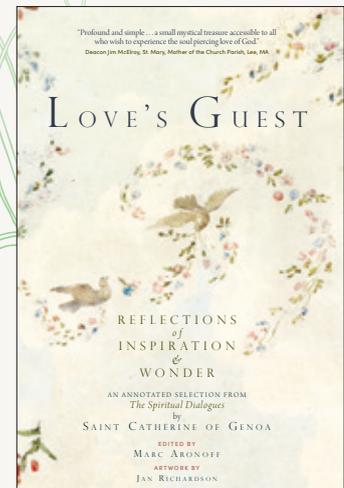
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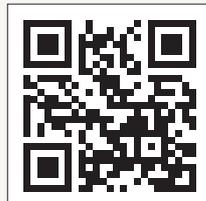
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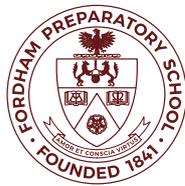
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*Love consists of sharing what one has and what one is with those one loves.
Love ought to show itself in deeds more than in words.*