

America

THE JESUIT REVIEW OF FAITH AND CULTURE

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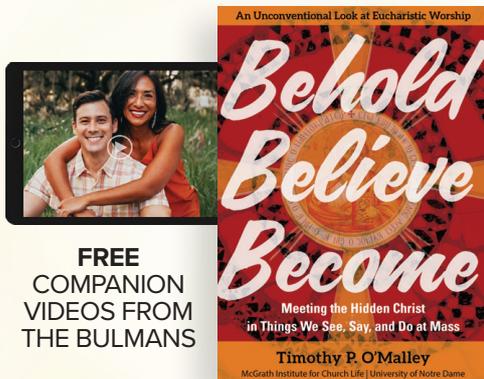


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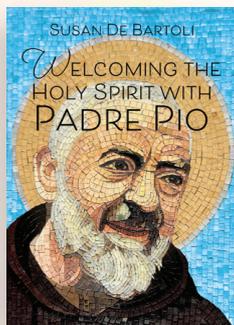
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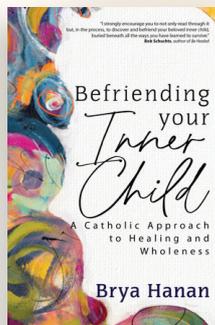
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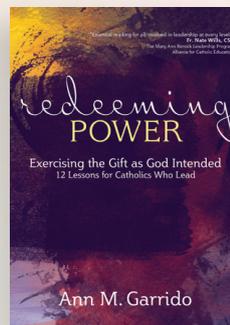
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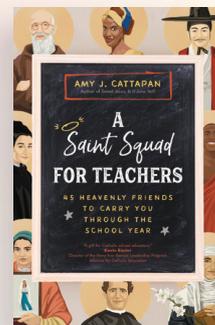
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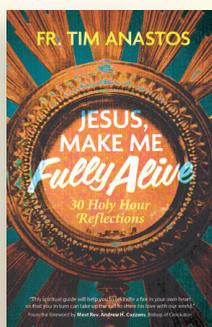
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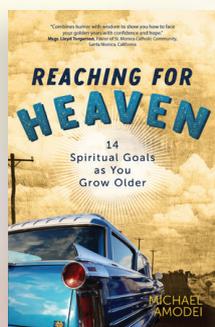
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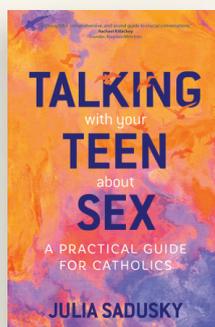
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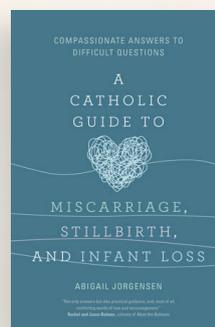
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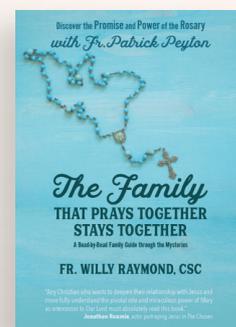
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When Reading ‘Dignitas Infinita,’ Start by Slowing Down

Almost all of the secular media’s coverage of “Dignitas Infinita,” the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith’s new declaration on human dignity, led with the paragraphs at the end of the document that criticized gender theory, sex change and surrogacy. Sometimes these accounts noted that the document also reaffirmed the church’s opposition to the death penalty and abortion.

But few of them gave anything more than a brief mention to the other “grave violations of human dignity” with which those topics were grouped, which include: poverty, war, the travails of migrants, human trafficking, sexual abuse, violence against women, euthanasia and assisted suicide, the marginalization of people with disabilities, and digital violence.

All of those topics were in the fourth and final section of the document. Perhaps unsurprisingly, none of the secular coverage I read spent much, if any, time on its introduction and first three sections, which explain how the theological underpinnings of human dignity have been clarified and deepened over time.

Maybe it is understandable—it is certainly predictable—that secular, and even some Catholic, readings focus on the most contentious issues, treating the rest of the document as theological throat-clearing on the way to the “business end” of moral conclusions. But we should not settle for such a narrow reading of the Catholic tradition on dignity.

“Dignitas Infinita,” in its opening sections, presents a kind of case study of the development of doctrine. It tracks what the title of the first section calls “a growing awareness of the centrality of human dignity” from its seeds in classical antiquity, its roots in Scripture, and its development

through patristic and medieval theology, the Christian humanism of the Renaissance and even its more secular expressions in the Enlightenment.

Moving into the 20th century, the document notes that reflection on subjectivity deepened the idea of dignity and “enriched contemporary Christian anthropology.” Finally, Vatican II made the concept central to “Dignitatis Humanae,” the declaration on religious freedom.

The final sentence of Section 1 of “Dignitas Infinita” is worth quoting in full: “The church’s magisterium progressively developed an ever-greater understanding of the meaning of human dignity, along with its demands and consequences, until it arrived at the recognition that the dignity of every human being prevails beyond all circumstances.”

Too often, discussion and thinking about development of doctrine can turn into a set of arguments about what can and cannot change in the church’s teaching. Such an approach can lead to an implicit view that “development” is basically a kind of ecclesial power politics by other means, a view that has sadly been in evidence both among some who are hostile to Pope Francis’ magisterium and also among some who expect specific changes from it.

But “Dignitas Infinita” reminds us that development of doctrine is a vital aspect of the church’s theological tradition and a gift to be received gratefully. The centrality of human dignity and its relationship to inalienable human rights are relatively new articulations in Christian theology, but they grow from the most fundamental of roots: our creation in the image of God and God’s embrace of human nature in the Incarnation.

How, then, do we receive this gift gratefully and obediently, as part of

the church’s tradition? Let me offer two brief suggestions.

First, go slowly. Take the time to read the document and pray with it. Resist, at least for a little while, the temptation to find “takeaways” or to boil it down to the specifics of what it affirms or denies. Also, do not jump to the conclusion that the document’s moral teachings either amount to or require exclusion from the church of those who disagree with them. The church’s teaching is not just a logic to be understood and applied, but a gift to be received and nurtured over time.

Second, let its coherence be a call to conversion. “Dignitas Infinita” presents human dignity as incomparable and unconditional, and thus the basis for true human freedom. It asks us to consider moral questions not just from the standpoint of what is practical or acceptable in our own experience, but in light of what follows from recognizing each human person, body and soul, as a unique and infinitely valuable gift from God. If you are not challenged somewhere in your own moral thinking by reading it, then you most likely have not read it thoroughly enough.

Some people may feel, understandably, that such a stringent and absolute moral standard is in tension with Pope Francis’ example of pastoral inclusivity and welcome. Responding to “Fiducia Supplicans,” the declaration on blessings for remarried or same-sex couples, the editors of *America* noted that “we should not be too quick to measure all teaching against our own limited tolerance for confusion.” With regard to “Dignitas Infinita,” perhaps we should not be too quick to measure teaching against our own limited capacity for coherence, either.

Sam Sawyer, S.J.



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OSV News photo/Jose Torres, Reuters

Migrants walk toward the United States in a caravan called Viacrucis Migrante from Tapachula, Mexico, on March 25, 2024.

Cover: Yusniel, a migrant from Cuba, holds his 10-day-old son, Yireht, and wife, Yanara, along the banks of the Rio Grande after wading into the United States from Mexico at Eagle Pass, Texas, on Oct. 6, 2023.

OSV News photo/Adrees Latif, Reuters

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Is the diaconate the best way for the church to recognize the gifts of women?

The synthesis report of the October meeting of the Synod on Synodality called for further research and deliberation on whether women should be admitted to the diaconate. In a piece published online in **America** in March, Katie Owens Mulcahy urged the church to “[recognize] the gifts of diaconal women all around us—those who are preparing liturgies, going out to the margins, serving the poor and breathing life into the church.” She called readers to consider: “Imagine what could be possible if these gifts were empowered through ordination?” Her piece invited spirited debate from **America**’s readers.

The church needs women deacons so that a feminine understanding of the Gospels is heard at Mass. Women understand the Gospels somewhat differently than men do, and this other view is important. Women have always done the charitable work of deacons, so the primary reason for ordaining them in that capacity is to allow them into places that will only allow ordained ministers to serve.

“It is not right for us to neglect the word of God to serve at table” (Acts 6:2). That line applies to women as much as it does to men.

Lisa Weber

I take issue with the suggestion that the deacon’s role is currently limited to liturgy. Perhaps the deacon is seen more at liturgy than in outside ministry; however, the notion a deacon is involved in just liturgy is far from the norm.

First of all, the deacon has experienced an ontological rebirth through ordination, and most carry out their ministry in their secular professions. Additionally, there were many deacon popes in the early church, and they were involved in charity, administration, education, evangelization and every single aspect of church—not just liturgy.

Although it is unlikely that they would be elected as pope, the modern deacon continues the tradition of the earlier diaconate. The problem the modern church faces is that it has all but eliminated the diaconate as a permanent ministry and relegated it to a “stepping stone” ministry to the priesthood. As a result, there is a lot of catching up in the faithful’s mind to understand what deacons really do.

James Graham

With the decline of convents, there are few avenues of service for powerful and educated Catholic women other than domestic ones, and so many of us seek spiritual meaning elsewhere. A case could likely be made that certain virtues, like celibacy and the ability to be compassionate, come easier to women than to men. Just like people have preferences for different gendered doctors, it would logically be the same for spiritual mentors, since some topics are easier discussed without gender-related tension.

I find it interesting that many female saints over the

centuries have not strictly adhered to traditional gender roles. No one seems to have had a problem canonizing them. There are precedents for female deacons. Just do it.

Jo Schaper

Christians are all called to serve in the ways the author has pointed out. I’m confused how this service is justification for holy orders and ordination to the diaconate, since this is a responsibility for all Christians.

As for the 35,000 refugees you mention whose spiritual needs are unmet, I worry that attributing that struggle to the lack of priests and deacons implies that the clergy should do all the work. This attitude is why the numbers for volunteers and lay ministers are reducing. This work belongs to all of us, lay and ordained alike. Look at Dorothy Day and the Catholic Workers. None were clergy, and they changed lives and filled souls as well as stomachs.

Women do preach—not within the liturgy, but in retreats, days of reflection, as Lenten speakers, in podcasts and YouTube. It is already being done, and they are really good. But is that justification for ordination?

The role of a deacon has never changed. It is to serve the bishop and God’s church, serve at the altar, and also fulfill all corporal works of mercy for all souls.

Chris Germak

Amen, Katie! I know many spirit-filled women in my life who are deeply invested in the church. For those who feel a call or would be open to a call to the diaconate, I am stirred at the thought of the extra strengthening they could receive through the outpouring of sacramental grace through ordination to the diaconate.

The Synod on Synodality’s synthesis document declares: “It is urgent to ensure that women can participate in decision-making processes and assume roles of responsibility in pastoral care and ministry.” As the father of two young daughters, I feel this same sense of urgency. And I hope they get to grow up in a church where they know their full dignity and gifts are honored because they see the church uplifting voices and perspectives like theirs!

Aaron Sinner



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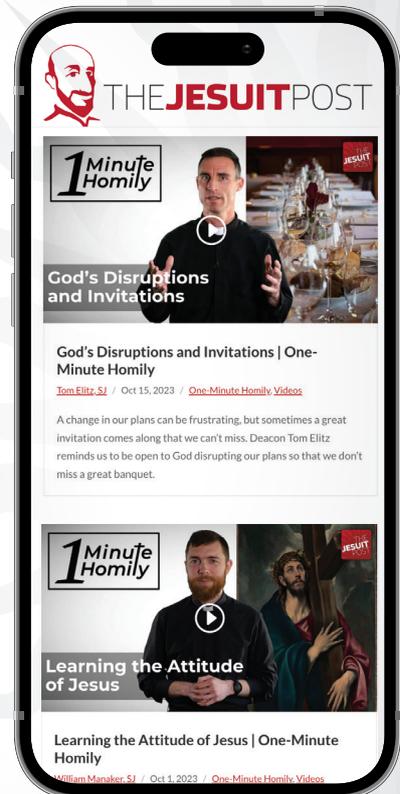
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Why People Are Rejecting Religion and How to Draw Them In

In March, the Public Religion Research Institute released a report examining the common phenomenon of “religious churn” in the United States: people leaving the religion in which they were raised. Some of these people join other faith traditions, but many do not. Indeed, P.R.R.I. found that 26 percent of Americans now identify as religiously unaffiliated, a 10-point increase since 2016; and its data suggest that more than one-fifth of people who left their religion identify as former Catholics.

From its polling in both 2016 and 2023, P.R.R.I. concluded that the Catholic Church as a whole had retained less than two-thirds of Americans who were raised Catholic while gaining few new adherents. At 68 percent, Hispanic Catholics had a slightly higher rate of retention. In contrast, white evangelical Protestant and Hispanic Protestant faiths had grown slightly after accounting for those who left and those who joined. A majority (55 percent) of those surveyed who left the Catholic Church identified as “unaffiliated,” meaning that they did not leave the church for another Christian denomination or another faith tradition. Instead, they left organized religion altogether. And only four in 10 of those unaffiliated Americans even describe themselves as “spiritual.” It seems that many Americans think religion has nothing to offer them and that they have no need for whatever religion offers.

The decline in religious affiliation coincides with America’s “historically unprecedented decline in face-to-face socializing,” writes Derek Thompson in a recent essay in *The Atlantic*. In an increasingly atomized world, it is hard to get people together in any setting,

not just a faith-based one. And a religious community needs to be bound together by something greater than the sum of individual agreements.

The most common reason P.R.R.I. respondents cited for leaving their childhood faith was that they “stopped believing in the religion’s teachings” (67 percent said this was an important reason for disaffiliation). Another significant reason for disaffiliation, at 47 percent, was a religion’s “negative” teachings about or treatment of L.G.B.T. people. At first glance, these reasons could suggest that it is primarily the *content* of religious teaching that is at issue.

But P.R.R.I. also found that only 9 percent of the unaffiliated are looking for a religion that would be right for them. In other words, it is not just that people do not like the religions available to them (a supply problem). There is perhaps an even greater demand problem, a lack of the sense of a need for religion or even spirituality. It may be that “stopped believing,” full stop, is a more important reason for disaffiliation than the teachings themselves.

Often discussions about evangelization can bifurcate into two focuses: on the one hand, clarifying and explaining doctrinal teaching, and on the other, accompanying and meeting people where they are. But if people are not even conscious of a need for religion, the church must also ask how it can help people recognize that the most basic restlessness only finds its rest in God.

“Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction,” Pope Benedict XVI wrote in “*Deus Caritas Est*.”

The challenge for Catholics is to inhabit the truth of Christ’s salvation and allow it to change us, to give us life, to bestow us with joy and hope so profound that they radiate from us to all whom we encounter. Within our church communities, we can live out the culture of encounter to which Pope Francis has called us so that all might come to know Jesus. We must be driven toward each other, both within and beyond the walls of church buildings.

During the Easter Vigil this year in France, more than 12,000 adults and adolescents were baptized, an increase of more than a third from 2023 and part of an increasing trend over the past 10 years. Most have not had any formal religious education before seeking baptism; an increasing fraction come from “families without religion.” At a press conference for a report on these baptisms, one of the adults baptized in 2023, Jean-Yves Lépine, said, “It is clearly the encounters,” pointing to “attentive priests, a joyful and dynamic parish community. Through them, I discovered an open and welcoming church, and extremely diverse!”

In his 2013 interview with *America* and other major Jesuit journals, Pope Francis spoke about the church as a field hospital after battle, that most needs “the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity.”

This does not mean that we should de-emphasize the church’s teaching or the need to explain it clearly. But without an encounter with God, without coming into contact with God’s grace, mercy and love, Christ’s teachings become mere rules, not the saving help they really are. In order for the church’s teachings to be

understood as coming from God's love for us, wounds must be bound up and hearts must be warmed. More than just meeting people "where they are," this means drawing them out of where they are isolated and helping them imagine a community worth being a part of.

A church of healing, of mercy and of encounter is a church where the beauty of God and human community can be realized. This community is a place where we experience the beauty of God's merciful love together.

In our increasingly unaffiliated world, we all need reminders that religion has something to offer. But before embarking on a search for a panacea to solve religious decline, we would do well to remember that the transformation of humanity is not our work, but God's. Our job is to proclaim his saving message through looks of love, encounters that always communicate the reality that "Jesus Christ has saved you."

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Would Mother Cabrini's story be possible today?

The new film “Cabrini” tells the story of Frances Xavier Cabrini, the Catholic patron saint of immigrants. Born in 1850 in what is now northern Italy, Mother Cabrini founded the Institute of the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and immigrated to New York City in 1889 to minister to the teeming population of recently arrived immigrants. She encountered prejudice, including from city officials, but for the rest of her life, Mother Cabrini worked tirelessly to establish a network of schools, hospitals and orphanages, improving the fortunes of countless immigrants and their families.

Although Catholics celebrate the life of Mother Cabrini, even some of the faithful now ask, with respect to today's immigrants, “Why can't they come legally, like my ancestors did?”

The truth is, most of the immigrants with whom Mother Cabrini worked carried no papers and faced only the most cursory of border inspections. It was only after 1917 that immigrants to the United States even needed visas. Mother Cabrini herself most likely arrived without formal immigration documents and did not become a naturalized U.S. citizen until 1909, or 20 years after her arrival.

If Mother Cabrini came to the United States today, she would most likely do so with an R-1 religious worker visa, which would permit her to stay up to 60 months with renewal. But because of federal processing backlogs, after that initial five-year period, she would likely have to return to Italy, re-apply for a visa, and apply for lawful permanent residency and eventually citizenship to continue her ministry. Most likely, this process would take over a decade.

It is easy to imagine that Mother Cabrini would still seek to minister

to immigrants suffering in the United States. Yet today, she would encounter an additional obstacle: our broken immigration system, which fails to treat immigrants with human dignity because of its outdated laws, complexity and inefficiency.

Despite our ostensible welcome of the tired, the poor, the “huddled masses,” the modern immigration system lacks a viable pathway for immigrants from poor backgrounds who wish to make a better life in the United States. Low-income immigrants trying to escape persecution, violence and lack of economic opportunity face extremely limited options to apply for a U.S. visa from their home countries and obtain a visa that matches their skill sets.

At the same time, there is a desperate need for their labor in the United States—jobs that native-born Americans are unwilling to do. Further, immigration appears to be a key component to a rebounding economy. As a result, today's huddled masses who seek the American dream may find opportunity, but there is often only one realistic option to pursue it legally: asylum.

Asylum is a legal U.S. immigration pathway that is available only to migrants who can prove that they have been persecuted (or are at risk of persecution) in their country of origin on the basis of at least one of five protected grounds: race, religion, nationality, social group and political opinion. Asylum seekers must go through an arduous and adversarial process in immigration courts across the country to win the right to remain in the United States. During the past decade, fewer than one-fifth of applicants were granted asylum each year, and the cases themselves take years to be adjudicated. Work authorization takes months to be approved.

Throughout this process, applicants can be detained or deported at a moment's notice.

In addition, asylum seekers are barred from many government benefits by law, a common frustration among social workers. Many applicants fall through the cracks of the system and are destined to a life in the shadows. The system is dispiriting for immigrants and for all Americans, and at times, it feels like it is designed to ensure that asylum seekers will fail.

It seems clear that if Mother Cabrini were alive today, she would dedicate her mission to creating a new American dream: a pathway that respects and upholds human dignity and reforms American immigration. That would demand congressional action, but that requires legislators and policymakers to negotiate in good faith, and there is little evidence that they are doing so.

Until Congress passes comprehensive immigration reform, Catholic organizations, religious orders and volunteers are called to follow their faith and work within the confines of the current broken system. In today's polarized environment—where religious workers and organizations seeking to aid immigrants have faced increasing challenges to their efforts—Catholics should take comfort and inspiration from Mother Cabrini's example. To find a path toward reform, we must remember Mother Cabrini and her ministry to immigrants. As they say in the old country, *Santa Cabrini, prega per noi!*

Julia G. Young is an associate professor of history at the Catholic University of America, in Washington, D.C. Christopher Ross is an immigration attorney and the vice president of migration and refugee resettlement services for Catholic Charities USA.

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President Bukele has achieved remarkable success against gangs in El Salvador, but at what cost?

By Kevin Clarke

Two anniversaries of note were recorded in March for the people of El Salvador. March 24 marked 44 years since the martyrdom of St. Óscar Romero, assassinated by agents of a political elite that had come to see its own people as the enemy. And March 27 began a third year under a “state of exception” declared in 2022 by President Nayib Bukele. The decree authorized extraordinary means, including the suspension of civil liberties, to suppress gang violence.

The president has used his emergency powers to detain more than 78,000 suspected gang members in security sweeps that human rights groups charge are often violent and include arbitrary arrests. Many arrests have been based on a person’s appearance or the neighborhoods where gang suspects reside. The government has had to release more than 7,000 people because of a lack of evidence connecting them to any crime.

The “state of exception” order, originally set for 30 days and declared in the aftermath of a two-day storm of 87 homicides, empowers security forces to arrest anyone suspected of belonging to a gang or providing support to gangs. It also suspends the right to be informed of the reason for detention, to legal defense during initial investigations, to privacy in conversations and correspondence, and to freedom of association. The state of exception also extends to 15 days the time that a suspect can be held without charges.

A 2022 U.S. State Department assessment noted: “Numerous reports of arbitrary arrests, invasion of homes, un-

fair judicial procedures, and deaths of detainees followed the declaration. More than 52,000 persons were arrested in the first six months of the state of exception, leading to allegations of overcrowding and inhuman treatment in the prisons.”

One year into the decree period, the Central American human rights advocacy group Cristosal issued a report documenting 153 deaths of people held in custody under the decree. “None of the people who died had been found guilty of the crime for which they were charged at the time of arrest,” the report’s authors said. Cristosal includes accounts of deaths that have resulted because of torture, negligence and even malnutrition.

Since the emergency declaration, according to the report, “tens of thousands of people have been arrested with no prior investigation and subjected to torture, cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment in an already collapsing prison system or prisons created to enforce the regime. The end result is that the terror of the gangs has been replaced by the systematic violence of the State.”

The president’s special powers have been deplored repeatedly by civil libertarians and human rights advocates both inside and outside El Salvador. In a normally functioning society, they might be the kind of authoritarian powers that the general public would be reluctant to hand over to government, particularly in a society like El Salvador’s, which is all too familiar with the potential agony of

Men detained under a state of emergency are transported to a detention center in a cargo truck in Soyapango, El Salvador, on Oct. 7, 2022.

a government and security force running amok on its own people. But in this crime-exhausted nation, Mr. Bukele's *mano dura* ("hard-handed") approach to the gangs has enjoyed broad public and even ecclesiastical support.

A few months after the decree was issued, Archbishop José Luis Escobar Alas of San Salvador acknowledged that most Salvadorans supported the measure. The gangs, rooted in the Los Angeles gang culture experienced by Salvadoran immigrants to the United States who were later deported back to El Salvador, have controlled entire communities. They have battled each other and Salvadoran police; their members have run lucrative kidnapping and extortion rackets and harassed and killed with impunity.

The Catholic Church in El Salvador has welcomed improving security conditions even as it has at times expressed misgivings with the process that has achieved it. Archbishop Escobar Alas has been criticized for expressions of tacit support for the president.

"People are afraid of returning to the way it was before, now that they have begun to live without this scourge," the archbishop said at a news conference in July 2022. "People don't want the violence to return. They not only want these [emergency measures] maintained, they want them to advance, to end the violence."

The archbishop is in the midst of a canonization campaign promoting 47 people martyred, like St. Óscar Romero and Blessed Rutilio Grande, S.J., because of their resistance to government oppression and brutality. Among the candidates for sainthood are six Jesuits and their staff members infamously murdered in 1989 on the campus of the Jesuit University of Central America in San Salvador. These martyrs, the archbishop said, were like Father Grande and Archbishop Romero: always close to the truth and justice and always in defense of the poor.

The archbishop was recently interviewed by journalists at the U.C.A. radio station and asked if there were similarities between the political context in which these 47 priests and catechists and laypeople were martyred and the current state of affairs in El Salvador, a period where the suspension of fundamental rights has been broadly tolerated in pursuit of civic security.

The archbishop said that in history, similarities and differences can always be identified. "Contexts are not repeated in history," he said, "but attitudes are."

Family members of those arrested under the emergen-

cy decree, many of whom insist on the innocence of their detained relatives, struggle to find out what happened to them, where they are being held and when they may face trial. Thousands of gang suspects have been sent to a new megaprison, the Terrorism Confinement Center; according to The Associated Press: "Prisoners here do not receive visits. There are no programs preparing them for reinsertion into society after their sentences, no workshops or educational programs." The new gang prison can hold 40,000 people.

But despite the apparent human rights calamity engendered by the "state of exception" declaration, it is hard to argue with success—and comparable peace. Homicide numbers dropped from 6,656 in 2015—an average of about 18 *per day*—to 18 altogether for 2024 as of March 9. In all of 2023, there were just 214 homicides—about one every 40 hours. If government numbers are accurate, El Salvador has been transformed into one of the safest nations in the Western Hemisphere.

Mr. Bukele's campaign against the gangs has been viewed favorably across Central America, where gang violence has been a force of chaos and a driver of emigration. President Xiomara Castro of Honduras, emulating Mr. Bukele, declared a state of exception covering the parts of her country with the highest crime rates in December 2022. And in January, Ecuador launched its own no-holds-barred campaign against drug gangs in an attempt to stave off the social unraveling that has followed the rise of gangs in other Latin American and Caribbean countries like Colombia, Haiti, Honduras and El Salvador before Mr. Bukele.

Success in such anti-gang campaigns clearly offers major benefits to the region's emerging populist politicians. In February, Mr. Bukele became the first president of El Salvador ever to be re-elected, enjoying a landslide victory—87 percent of the vote—which he proposes is a repudiation of his many critics. He celebrated the re-election as a victory for democracy, a somewhat paradoxical assessment considering that his campaign was allowed to proceed only after the nation's constitutional court—packed with supporters of Mr. Bukele—set aside El Salvador's constitutional limit to one-term presidencies.

The nation's traditional political combatants, the political parties Arena and F.M.L.N.—both of which emerged out of El Salvador's bitter 12-year civil war—were obliterated in the recent election, their candidates swept away by candidates from Mr. Bukele's Nuevas Ideas party. Now democracy advocates worry that the overwhelming victory could inaugurate the beginning of one-party rule in El Sal-

vador. Mr. Bukele does not share their concern.

“It will be the first time in a country that just one party exists in a completely democratic system,” Mr. Bukele said, noting that “the entire opposition together was pulverized.”

Riding a political crest of what critics have described as “punitive populism,” Mr. Bukele has enjoyed unprecedented public approval as president, often scoring higher than 90 percent in surveys of voter sentiment. He has jokingly referred to himself as “the world’s coolest dictator.”

Mr. Bukele’s success and popularity have not gone unnoticed by political networks outside El Salvador perhaps seeking to replicate or at least bask in his appeal. In February, Mr. Bukele was invited to speak at the annual Conservative Political Action Conference in Maryland, where he said many U.S. cities were on the same path to ruin as El Salvador had been unless authorities followed his “iron fist” strategy.

U.S. conservatives apparently do not share concerns that Mr. Bukele has been following a script first innovated by political strongmen like Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and Viktor Orban in Hungary—

gaining the trust and confidence of the public, suppressing a free press, and then capturing judicial and legislative branches of government.

With more peaceful conditions on its streets because of the suppression of the gangs, El Salvador is experiencing a significant drop in emigration. The Congressional Research Service reports that in 2023, U.S. Customs and Border Protection encountered 61,515 migrants from El Salvador, down from 97,000 in 2022—an outcome surely appreciated by a Biden administration that has struggled to manage conditions along the Mexican border.

Washington policymakers will no doubt continue to raise concerns about Mr. Bukele’s still-emerging authoritarian tendencies. But his success against the gangs and its impact on immigration may override worries about diminishing civil liberties in a country that, despite its own painful experience with state-sanctioned violence, appears willing to reward Mr. Bukele’s *mano dura*.

— Kevin Clarke, chief correspondent.

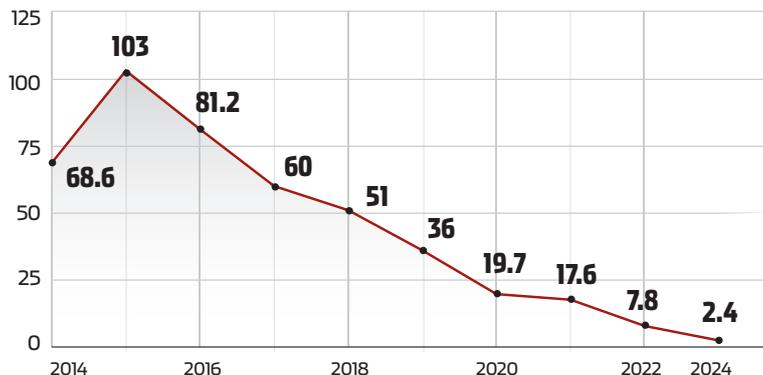
A record low in homicide rate follows an incarceration surge

El Salvador registered the lowest homicide rate in Latin America in 2023, at 2.4 per 100,000 inhabitants, down from more than 100 murders per 100,000 people in 2015. The homicide rate in the late 1990s had been much higher, and it spiked in 2014 after the breakdown of a gang truce. The historic low comes as the Bukele government continues its national crackdown on street gangs.

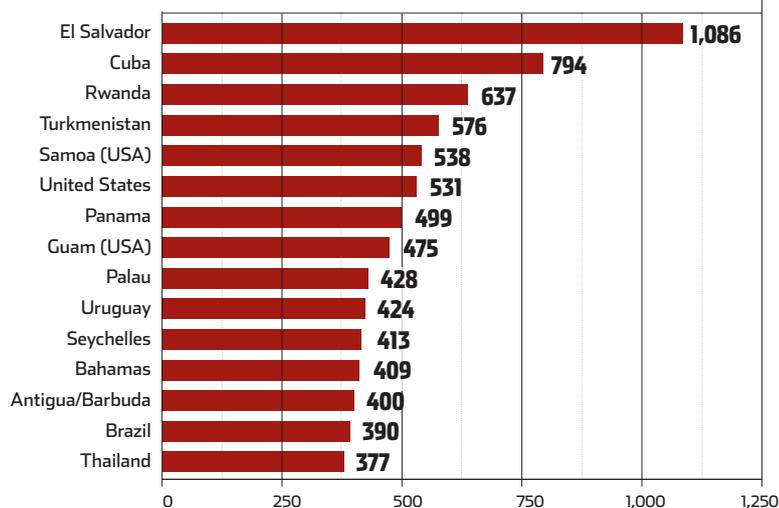
Critics have challenged the most recent data. The Observatory of Human Rights of the Central American University charges that homicide figures are underreported, missing discoveries of skeletons, deaths of people in state custody and of gang members in confrontation with security forces, and other deaths previous governments had included in homicide statistics. El Salvador now has the highest incarceration rate in the world, according to the World Prison Brief, with almost 2 percent of its adult population behind bars, more than 1,000 per 100,000 people.

—Kevin Clarke

El Salvador annual homicide rate (per 100,000 inhabitants)



Top 15 nations/territories by rate of incarceration per 100,000 people



Sources: Insight Crime; World Prison Brief

GOODNEWS: Can 'hybrid' schools address a need for more affordable Catholic education?

Independent Catholic school “hybrid” programs straddle the line between homeschooling and traditional diocesan schools, featuring in-person, formal instruction and independent study days. These programs typically emerge from the homeschool movement, but their affordability is beginning to attract a new demographic.

St. John Bosco School, a hybrid 7th through 12th grade program located in Sterling, Va., opened in 2019 with a group of 20 homeschooled students. Today it serves 80 students, about 30 percent of whom came to it from local parochial schools, said Kelly Sonnhalter, a founding parent and faculty member.

Students learn in person on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. During in-person days, teachers—some retirees, some otherwise stay-at-home moms with teaching backgrounds, one graduate student—introduce topics, facilitate class discussion and administer tests. On intervening days, students are expected to study 45 to 90 minutes per subject area on their own.

Legally, the students at St. John Bosco are considered homeschooled. But their school days, during which the students wear uniforms, are much like those at any other small school.

“We have clubs,” said Ms. Sonnhalter. “We have student government. We have athletics, and we have dances.”

And because the cost of running the school is minimal—teachers work part-time and the school is able to use a local parish’s space at no cost—tuition is considerably lower than at traditional counterparts. At \$4,250, one year’s high school tuition is a quarter or less of the sticker price of local diocesan high schools, which range from about \$17,000 to \$21,000 per student each year.

For parents like Heather Ruffner, a northern Virginia resident, the price of a diocesan high school seems out of reach. She has struggled with the decision of where her son, 14, will go in the fall.

“We can’t be the only family in this area struggling financially and unable to afford the local schools,” Ms. Ruffner said in an email to **America**.

“It’s hard to deny that [Catholic school tuition is] a big commitment financially for families,” said Joseph Vorbach, the superintendent of schools for the Diocese of Arlington in Virginia. He noted that the jump from primary to secondary school tuition can be especially challenging to families.

The diocese will offer about \$7 million in need-based tuition assistance this year to Catholic school families, said Mr. Vorbach. Most of that money is raised from parish collections, a diocesan tuition-assistance endowment and



CNS photo/Karen Bonar, The Register

A homeschool student works in his "Writing Our Catholic Faith" handwriting book.

recurring philanthropic support.

Tuition rates for all Catholic families, regardless of aid, are lower than the actual student cost.

But for those who are not eligible for aid (or who do not qualify for enough tuition aid), hybrid programs that allow students to still practice their faith in an academic setting offer a different option than either public school or full-time homeschool.

“I am absolutely considering a hybrid situation,” Ms. Ruffner, who recently toured a hybrid program in Manassas, Va., said. “But my preference would be for my child to be in a classroom setting more often than not.”

Ms. Sonnhalter said that some students who have enrolled in St. John Bosco may have preferred a full-time Catholic high school but came to appreciate what the hybrid program offered.

“They ended up with us, but they ended up loving us,” she said.

Catholic hybrid programs across the country—St. John Paul II Preparatory Academy in St. Charles, Mo.; St. Thomas Aquinas Classical in Des Moines, Iowa; and St. Benedict Classical School in Bloomington, Ind., to name a few—often follow a classical curriculum.

But while classical education, and, indeed, the homeschool movement in general, has come to be associated with social conservatism, not all hybrid schools reflect that demographic. According to a national survey of hybrid programs conducted in 2023 by the Coles College of Business at Kennesaw State University in Georgia, most respondents made use of other curricula, including one STEM program and one special education program, and not all were religiously affiliated.

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The Hungarian contradiction: Government allies with churches, but religious affiliation plummets

Even as Prime Minister Viktor Orban of Hungary continues to position his government as one of the last defenders of Christian culture in Europe, religious affiliation in Hungary has dropped to a record low. In its latest census, published late last year, a majority of Hungarians, 57 percent, failed to declare an affiliation with any faith tradition. The census outcome marks the first time that religious identity has fallen below 50 percent in Hungary.

The Catholic Church in Hungary saw the steepest loss of membership, dropping 30 percent since the last census in 2011. But even as the Catholic Church in Hungary lost membership under Mr. Orban, it has been lavished with financial and practical support by his government.

Botond Feledy is a political analyst and the deputy director at the Jesuit European Social Center in Brussels. He said that when Mr. Orban and his Fidesz Party gained leadership in 2010, most of the church property nationalized under communism remained under the control of the Hungarian government.

Seeking to firm up public support for his political agenda, Mr. Orban sought first to improve relations with faith groups in Hungary. Returning confiscated properties was one way to improve his standing with Hungary's churches. The property restoration, said Peter Zachar, a political scientist at the Ludovik University of Public Service, was

a tremendous opportunity for the Catholic Church to rebuild its institutions in the post-communist era.

In 2016, responding to the migrant crisis that erupted across Europe during the previous year, Mr. Orban established the State Secretariat for Assistance to Persecuted Christians within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as Hungary Helps, a state-funded development agency that provides aid to Middle Eastern and African countries with a particular focus on assisting persecuted Christians to allow them to remain in their homelands.

"As a result of [the secretariat's] existence, the government, and Viktor Orban in particular, is happy to meet with church leaders, to invite bishops of the Christian churches of the Middle East to Hungary and to project the image of [Hungary as the] 'bastion of Christianity' to the outside world," Mr. Zachar said.

The prime minister "considers churches as allies, his friends, and the historic churches didn't reject the friendship," said Gergely Rosta, a Hungarian-born sociologist at the University of Munich.

According to Mr. Zachar, that alliance has led to some confusion about the role of church leaders and even popular resentment against the church in a nation that, despite the intentions of its leadership, remains a fundamentally secular state and society. Many Hungarians sense that

Pope Francis meets with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban at Sándor Palace in Budapest, Hungary, on April 28, 2023.

churches have let themselves be captured by Mr. Orban.

The reality is a bit more complicated, Mr. Zachar believes. Rhetorically, Fidesz positions often overlap with basic Catholic doctrine—insisting that marriage can only be between a man and woman, for example, a position recently written into the Hungarian constitution by the Orban government. But even as Pope Francis has praised Hungary for upholding “traditional values,” he has strongly criticized its opposition to receiving Middle Eastern and African refugees.

Mr. Zachar noted that the Christian self-identification of the Orban government has been founded principally on two issues—keeping non-Europeans and presumably non-Christian asylum seekers out of Hungary, and standing against gay marriage and policies advocated by the transgender community. Fidesz, known for its well-oiled propaganda machine, intensely leverages the culture war for political purposes that can have negative secondary effects, among them fostering resentment against the L.G.B.T.Q. community and activist groups.

According to Mr. Rosta, there is no direct evidence linking Mr. Orban’s politicization of faith and values to declining church affiliation, nor has the Hungarian Catholic Church been shaken by the kinds of scandals that have greatly diminished people’s self-identification with the church in other European states, like Ireland.

But social surveys conducted over the last decade suggest a possible source of disquiet, he said, tracking a growing sense among Eastern Europeans that churches are too involved in politics. “The proximity of religion and politics,” Mr. Rosta said, may explain why far fewer Hungarians are now willing to describe themselves as members of any contemporary church.

Bridget Ryder contributes from Spain.



Pope Francis greets Teresa Kettelkamp at the Vatican on March 7, 2024.

New appointments add experienced leadership to Vatican office for protection of minors

In a move to strengthen the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, Pope Francis on March 15 appointed a Colombian bishop, Luis Manuel Alí Herrera, to be its new secretary and a lay woman, Teresa Morris Kettelkamp, former executive director of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Secretariat of Child and Youth Protection, to be its adjunct secretary, a new post. Both appointees are already commission members with broad experience in child protection.

Bishop Alí, a psychologist, has been auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Bogotá since 2015, and secretary general of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Colombia since 2022. Ms. Kettelkamp, a Chicago native, retired after 29 years with the rank of colonel from the Illinois State Police before beginning work with the U.S.C.C.B.

Commenting on the appointment, Cardinal Sean O’Malley, O.F.M.Cap., who has been president of the commission since Pope Francis established it in 2014, said the dual appointments mark “a further important step in making our church an ever-safer place for children and vulnerable persons.”

“Coming from different backgrounds and possessing unique gifts in safeguarding, Bishop Ali and Teresa share a common passion for the well-being of children and vulnerable people, with lifetimes of service to the church in this important area,” he said.

“They bring both stability to the commission’s agenda and a high degree of professionalism to their new roles.”

Cardinal O’Malley recalled that Bishop Ali “is currently the longest serving member of the commission and has been an advocate for child protection in Latin America for many years.”

Speaking of Ms. Kettelkamp, he said, “after a career in law enforcement at the highest levels, Teresa ran one of the largest national safeguarding offices in the church in the United States.”

Gerard O’Connell, Vatican correspondent.



FORMING A PARISH FAMILY

What happens when dioceses take a synodal approach to parish restructuring?

By Kerry Weber

When Mary Ellen Mitchell first heard about Beacons of Light—a plan by the Archdiocese of Cincinnati to arrange its 208 parishes into 57 “families of parishes”—she felt confident that Bellarmine Chapel, her own parish of 13 years, would not be affected. The family parish model combines previously independent parishes together under one pastor with the eventual goal of becoming a single canonical parish. She assumed the plan mostly would apply to struggling parishes.

Bellarmino Chapel, a Jesuit-run parish in Cincinnati is a vibrant faith community where approximately 1,000 people attend Mass each weekend, so Ms. Mitchell was surprised when she learned that under the new plan, Bellarmine would be sharing a pastor with St. Xavier Church, another Jesuit parish. Still, she assumed the alliance would be mostly on paper.

In August 2023, Paul Lickteig, S.J., was made responsible for the administration of both parishes, and the changes began. Rather than two part-time business managers, the parish family has one, full-time business director. A staff member who previously worked on social mission at one parish was made responsible for sustainability and social mission at both parishes, and an assistant staff member was hired to work on social mission at each parish. The parishes began co-advertising events, and the parish councils began holding joint meetings.

As the reality of the changes unfolded, Ms. Mitchell became more enthusiastic. “It just made sense,” she said. “This was an opportunity to restructure.” She said the staff changes have allowed for new opportunities for parishioners, too. Ms. Mitchell recently brought a group of high school students to a Saturday evening Mass at Xavier—at

a time not offered at Bellarmine—and to a Eucharistic adoration evening there, an event she wouldn’t have been aware of before the parishes joined forces.

The parish family structure has “given us wider breadth to participate in things and still feel like we’re not leaving our parish,” Ms. Mitchell said. “The fact is this is all our parish now, and we have two locations. If you think of it like that, your church is suddenly offering a lot more.”

The desire to use church resources responsibly—including buildings, parish funds, staff and priests—has caused many dioceses and archdioceses across the county to embark on similar initiatives to reimagine church structures, both physical and administrative. These strategic planning processes are attempts to address the fact that the resources available to many of those communities have begun to dwindle.

In the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, for example, the number of active diocesan priests has dropped from 180 in 2013 to 138 last year. The diocese expects another 22 diocesan and religious order priests to leave active duty in the next five years. Beacons of Light is meant to prepare the archdiocese for this future but also to offer some hope.

In Phase Zero of what the archdiocese calls the Pastoral Planning Pathway, the archdiocese suggested the groupings for 57 families of parishes. In the fall of 2021, it sought feedback about the families of parishes from parishioners and received more than 8,000 online comments. Jeremy Helmes, director of the center for parish vitality in the archdiocese, said every comment was considered, and the feedback resulted in more than 20 changes to how parishes were grouped.

In the winter of 2022, the final parish families were



announced. Eight parishes remained solo parishes, and the rest were made into families of between two and eight parishes.

Each family of parishes is now responsible for jointly making the decisions around the buildings, Mass times, staff and ministries at their group. The archdiocese offered six principles (Eucharist, church, leadership, stewardship, evangelization, love in action) and 31 parameters (the musts and must-nots) to guide the process.

Similar efforts to seek feedback are taking place in dioceses across the United States. Although the levels of input and the structures may differ, many diocesan strategic plans today involve a concerted effort by the institutional church to provide a deliberate, transparent, multiyear process that relies on relevant data and assistance from trained consultants and professionals, as well as the opinions of the people in the pews. Although these plans may eventually involve combining, merging or closing parishes, their focus is on how the church can best use its resources to serve people today.

A Changing Church

Not every change in the Archdiocese of Cincinnati has been welcomed. One area mother told local television reporters that she feared that St. Martin of Tours, her childhood parish that was grouped into a five-parish family, would close. “I will chain myself up to that church,” she said. “I will protest that all day long.” Two local organizations have been created to help guide parishioners seeking to appeal the decisions.

Cincinnati is not the only archdiocese in the United States making hard choices. Across the Midwest and Northeast, the Catholic population is

shrinking, especially in urban areas that previously were home to many Catholics of white European heritage. Members of those communities have largely moved to the suburbs over the past several decades, and population growth more generally has shifted to the Southeast and the West, said Tom Gaunt, S.J., executive director of the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate. “Many areas simply do not need as many churches as they once did,” he said.

Some neighborhoods bear more of the burden than others in responding to these demographic shifts. Michal Kramarek, a research associate at CARA, was commissioned last year by FutureChurch to complete a demographic study of 50 years’ worth of data from 11 dioceses in the Northeast and Midwest. The study compared parish statistics with data from the Census Bureau and analyzed the differences between the parishes that closed and those that stayed open.

“Our overall takeaway was that the neighborhoods where parishes closed were neighborhoods where the share of people below poverty level and unemployment level was increasing and the numbers of Latinos and African Americans were increasing,” said Dr. Kramarek, though he noted that poverty played a bigger role than race.

Since the 1960s many parishes have relied upon subsidies from their diocese to cover operating costs, Father Gaunt said. Often the practice is well-intentioned—for example, when a diocese creates a subsidy in a lower-income neighborhood where it wants to provide services. But there comes a point where cash runs out, he said, noting that sometimes a bishop or parish or finance council delays a difficult decision and it may fall to their



successors to provide a quick response. Years of financial assistance have also left many parishioners unaware of their parish or parochial school finances until they reach a crisis point.

In rural areas, Father Gaunt said, the reality of limited resources often is more obvious, as priests or women religious working alone minister to a small population of Catholics spread across large geographic areas. But in a large diocese, it is easy for parishioners to “get this sense that the bishop always has some money tucked away somewhere,” he said. The goal of a parish, Father Gaunt adds, is “they should be able to sustain themselves,” including having enough people to form a viable community.

In some ways, past mergers and closures have helped to bolster membership numbers at individual parishes. Dr. Kramarek said that between 1970 and 2020, the number of parishes nationwide decreased by 9 percent and the number of individual Catholics per parish increased by 60 percent. But, he said, starting around 2000 there has been “a notable decline in sacramental participation” that was accelerated by the pandemic.

Across the country, even the dioceses that show an increase in Catholic population do not always show an increase in the sacramental life of the parish. “If you measure parish life by sacramental engagement, the parishes have been declining over the last 20 years,” Dr. Kramarek said. “If a particular diocese ought to have 1,500 baptisms [based on the Catholic population], they’ve only recorded 500.”

All Things New

When Archbishop Mitchell Rozanski was assigned to the Archdiocese of St. Louis, he was told that some strategic planning needed to be done. The archdiocese consulted with the Catholic Leadership Institute, which advised that the most effective way to proceed would be for one person to be engaged with the process full-time. The Very Rev. Chris Martin was asked to fill the role of vicar for strategic planning.

As Archbishop Rozanski worked to get a sense of the needs of the archdiocese, one of the first groups he met with was young priests. “One of their biggest concerns was that they would spend their priesthood ministering to buildings instead of people, or buried in administration,” said Father Martin.

The archdiocese’s plan, All Things New, launched on the feast of the Conversion of St. Paul in 2022, with Father Martin at the helm. This strategic plan combined 178 parishes into 134 families of parishes. The archdiocese created a website, made prayer materials available and published an overview of what the process would include.

It also began small group conversations and more data

The Rev. Chris Martin oversaw a strategic plan in the Archdiocese of St. Louis that combined 178 parishes into 134 families of parishes.

St. Louis Review/Jacob Wegand



gathering and hosted over 350 listening sessions across the archdiocese. While many people understood the status quo could not continue, Father Martin said there was also a strong resistance to change. “Everybody really hopes that there is a solution that happens around them, that benefits them, that doesn’t ask anything of them,” he said.

Strong feelings are understandable, given the deep love many hold for their parishes, but parish loyalty can come at “the detriment of seeing themselves as part of a larger diocesan family,” Father Martin said.

But merging parishes or creating parish families can also help to create a stronger sense of community, said Michael Laughery, director of partner services for PartnersEdge, a Catholic consulting company that has worked with many dioceses, archdioceses and religious orders. Even the simple act of praying in a church that is more than half full can make people feel more connected, he said.

Getting a community to the point of accepting this change can be difficult. “If you want to navigate organizational change successfully, there is a personal component to that, and in particular for nonprofit and religious organizations, there is an emotional connection,” Mr. Laughery said.

The Diocese of St. Louis worked to respect that connection by collecting feedback from many people across the archdiocese, but that, too, brought new challenges. Father Martin noted that some parishioners felt their concerns were not heard and that many parishioners believed the results of the process were predetermined.



MANY AREAS SIMPLY DO NOT NEED AS MANY CHURCHES AS THEY ONCE DID.

The summary notes from each planning area's listening session were posted to the All Things New website. At St. Sabina Parish in Florissant, the summary notes stated: "It's important to address the question not only of whether people are being heard, but whether they feel they *are* being heard," adding, "When people *feel* they are being heard, they are usually much more generous in following the hard decisions leaders have to make."

Father Martin said much discernment happened after the listening sessions, but it was not possible to make every person happy. "Being listened to and getting your way are two different things," he said. "We could have done a better job of articulating that."

The archdiocese has made available online the information needed for parishioners to submit appeals to the Vatican. Several appeals have been filed, including one by St. Richard Parish requesting not to be subsumed into St. Monica Parish, both in Creve Coeur, Mo. In February, the Vatican's Dicastery for Clergy declared that it had not found just cause for the closure. But the Vatican has upheld other archdiocesan decisions. As of early April, 12 unresolved appeals remained in the archdiocese, according to Father Martin.

Father Martin noted that even when an appeal is approved, the reality on the ground often remains unchanged: "That doesn't magically make more people appear in church. It doesn't make the buildings not have the infrastructure needs or make more priests appear." He said that in one parish where the appeal was upheld, the parishioners asked for several Sunday Mass times to return, but the pastoral reality made that impossible. He also noted that while awaiting the results of an appeal, a parish may be left in stasis. "For people looking to begin new initiatives, it can feel like they're in limbo," he said. "If you're treading water; you're also declining."

He said he understands that some changes will be painful, but Father Martin urged people to consider the big

picture. "I'm never going to argue that there are not good things going on at all of our parishes," he said. "The question we need to ask is: Are we willing to offer up the individual goods going on at our parishes to ask what is the best thing for our diocese in this moment?"

An Eye Toward Growth

In the summary notes of the listening sessions for All Things New, parishioners voiced the need for evangelization multiple times, and this is one area in which there is little disagreement. In fact, many dioceses are making evangelization a cornerstone of their efforts to reimagine parish structures.

Previous efforts to reconfigure or merge parishes were "more of a stabilizing, not an evangelizing effort," said Father Martin, who in July 2023 was named the vicar for parish mission and vitality. In years past, "we pulled together three struggling parishes and the church was full again. However, if we don't equip ourselves to evangelize as this parish ages and new people move in, we will be in the same spot as we were 10 years ago." A report from the archdiocese estimates that, in 2021, "only 25 percent of our pews were occupied during the typical weekend Mass."

Indeed, some parishioners have recognized that the status quo cannot stand. The summary notes from the listening session at St. Norbert Parish in Florissant stated: "Any change(s) will take a change in mindset by all of us."

St. Rose Philippine Duchesne Parish in Florissant was the product of a merger in 2005 of St. Dismas, Our Lady of Fatima and St. Thomas parishes. The summary from its listening discussion notes that the change at first "felt like death" but resulted in a "more vibrant parish experience." Still, the number of households in the parish has dropped to 759 today from 2,221 in 2005. In May 2023, Archbishop Rozanski declared the parish would be amalgamated into Sacred Heart Parish in the same town.

Despite the challenges of the last two and a half years, the strategic planning was the comparatively easy part, Father Martin said. He said the archdiocese is now asking, "How do we help parish leaders to build up their own plans and equip people to go out and share the faith?" To Father Martin, at the heart of the process of All Things New is this question: "Using the resources we have, how are we trying to align ourselves to proclaim the Gospel for future generations, and not just preserve the infrastructure that has served well previous generations?" As he explained, "Sentiment doesn't keep churches open; disciples do."

Living Into Change

A path forward for any archdiocese or diocese often begins with taking stock of its current situation, Mr. Laughery



HOW ARE WE TRYING TO ALIGN OURSELVES TO PROCLAIM THE GOSPEL FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS?

said. As a consultant, one of the first questions he asks clients is about available resources: “Do you have the skills and talents in your organization, and do they have the time?” Often, he said, a diocese may find that the way they are using their “gifts and resources does not align with the needs of the church.”

One way in which dioceses can effectively create change, he said, is by helping those involved have a true understanding of the current state of affairs. “They need to come to the conclusion that the status quo is not an option,” he said. “Once people understand that, the Holy Spirit can really take root in our hearts.”

Robust data gathering, local decision making and multiple levels of consultation can help a diocese find direction, he said, adding that “the more clarity we have with the vision of what Jesus is calling us to in this community, the less likely we are to dispute Mass times.”

The Archdiocese of Seattle is one of the groups that has sought out Mr. Laughery’s advice, as it began Partners in the Gospel, its effort to combine 170 parishes and worship sites into 60 families of parishes. Caitlin Moulding, the diocese’s chief operating officer, and the Rev. Gary Lazzeroni, the vicar general, assembled a core team of multidisciplinary leaders, including laypeople and members of the clergy, and established working groups, all before the project publicly launched.

In June 2022 the archdiocese introduced the plan for suggested parish family groupings to its priests. Their team spent time talking with the priests formally and informally and put together focus committees about different aspects of parish life. They revised the drafts and again offered the plan to the priests for review.

The website for Partners in the Gospel launched publicly in January 2023 and included a timeline and the suggested parish families. Consultations with priests, deacons, school leaders and parish staff followed. In fall 2023, the archdiocese encouraged parishioners to attend listening sessions following a synodal model, through which they could offer feedback on the plans; parishioners could also offer input online. Although several parishes were struggling financially, Ms. Moulding said the archdiocese did not have definitive financial goals in mind.

Father Lazzeroni estimates that the steering committee read over 3,000 pages of input from Catholics around western Washington State. Following that feedback, 25 parish families were changed, and then parishioners had another chance to offer input on the new configurations. “The work and the discernment happens at the local level,” Ms. Moulding said.

When the final configurations were announced in February 2024, there were no surprises. Still, the work is

just beginning. The parish families now enter into a phase of what the website describes as “welcoming, restructuring and re-envisioning.” The archdiocese acknowledges that some buildings will close by the projected end of the process in 2027, but Father Lazzeroni hopes to move away from the typical language around closing parishes. “It isn’t about closing my parish, but ‘How do we come together to better use resources?’,” he said. “For most people, they’re just going to have to live into it.”

Ms. Moulding said that the initial response has been overwhelmingly positive. The archdiocesan Mass counts are up since Partners in the Gospel began, and a recent gathering of Catholic middle-school children was four times the size of last year. “We are optimistic that we can continue to grow,” she said.

Still, both Ms. Moulding and Father Lazzeroni noted that many tough decisions have yet to be made. “There will be loss in this,” Father Lazzeroni said, ranging from the loss of a favorite Mass time to the closure of a beloved church. “We know there is real grieving that will go on. There’s no way to get to the other side and start something new until you attend personally and communally to that grief.”

Ms. Moulding emphasized that it is important for the archdiocese to “honor and be present to the grief that people will rightly feel,” but she also hopes people will grow to understand that the process is “re-envisioning mission at the archdiocese,” and she said a successful end result will include full Masses, more youth and young adult ministers, and more social justice ministries at parishes.

Responding in Real Time

Father Lazzeroni and Ms. Moulding said they learned from the efforts at the Archdiocese of Cincinnati and were inspired by its synodal approach. Jeremy Helmes, director of



the center for parish vitality in Cincinnati, said that, in the midst of the second year of a five-year effort, the archdiocese is still learning lessons from the process.

“We are trying to respond in real time and to recalibrate as we go,” he said. For example, the five phases of the strategic plan do not directly correspond with the five years of the project, and each parish family is moving at its own pace. But Mr. Helmes said some families have struggled not to compare their own progress against that of another parish family.

Mr. Helmes said another challenge has been a “general sense of distrust of church leadership,” and he still meets people “in a phase of denial” that change is required. “I wish more people understood that there is not a predetermined way that this [process] is going to end” in terms of what happens to various parish buildings, schools or staff, he said. “Each [parish] family has the responsibility and wherewithal to make those decisions.”

Beacons represents a move away from “pre-formed, centralized decision” making and toward an emphasis on subsidiarity. But that also means that there are tough decisions ahead. “We are going to have decisions made at the family level that will bring forth grief,” Mr. Helmes said. “We are trying to have our pastoral leaders and pastors be equipped for those stages of mission. We’ve got to find a way to respect the past. As a church built on tradition, if we are not respecting tradition, we’re doing it wrong.”

“At the end, some church buildings will not be needed, some schools will close, some parishes will merge,” he said. But the hope is that “each of our 57 families is able to better able to do the mission of the church, which we’ve articulated as ‘to make missionary disciples that bring people to Christ.’”

The archdiocese, he said, has learned from past mis-

takes. He said planning processes in the 1980s and 1990s never “felt complete” because parishes often were combined under one pastor without a plan for what that meant for staff and organizational structure, and without a unifying vision. “We knew the people in the field needed a new reality,” Mr. Helmes said.

In the Beacons process, Mr. Helmes says, the archdiocese committed to the “ministry of liaisons” and hired nearly two dozen professionals who are available to any pastor. The liaisons spend an average of five hours per week with a parish family and in that time might meet with the pastor and his team, review documents or offer advice on organizational leadership. Currently, about 40 pastors have requested a liaison.

Under the new parish family structure, each pastor has at least one vicar or retired priest to assist at the parish. Many have reorganized their staff, and the archdiocese has offered sample organization charts and suggestions such as ways to combine pastoral councils, if the parish desires. “There is an expectation that the planning you’re doing as a family is for evangelization and for growth. It’s not just maintenance,” Mr. Helmes said.

Supporting the Church on the Ground

Father Lickteig at Bellarmine in Cincinnati noted that he has been impressed with the quality of resources provided by the archdiocese. As part of the process, each family of parishes held a fall “Visio Day,” which brought the individual parishes together to create a shared vision. Father Lickteig felt the day was productive and allowed “people to come together to say we do have a lot of the same hopes and goals, even as we are articulating an individual mission of how we live out that vision.”

Ms. Mitchell, who also attended the meeting along with about 100 people from each parish, said that the all-day meeting was “really well run,” and it was the first time she could imagine the two churches sharing resources effectively. “I got the sense that there was a sharing of the charism,” despite some “differences in the texture of each parish and worship style,” Ms. Mitchell said, although she also noted that a parish with fewer resources might have different feelings about the process. “I think there is a lot of promise. If we can lean into the strengths of it and be less territorial of our particular Mass.”

Ms. Mitchell also said the process has made her more aware of how many sacrifices have been made by people managing the process and parish staff. She said Father Lickteig often travels between Masses from one church to the other just to be physically present to greet people in the narthex before or after Mass on a Sunday.

Father Lickteig appreciates concerns like Ms. Mitch-

Priests from King and Pierce counties look over maps at a May 2023 meeting about creating parish families in the Archdiocese of Seattle.



Stephen Brashear

ell's about the possibility of overloading pastors, and he sometimes feels he is stretched thin. But he also said that becoming a part of a parish family has given him a greater understanding of the importance of working in concert with his fellow priests and staff. He has started asking lay staff members, as well as his fellow clergy, to also spend time outside the churches after Mass, which he says is an adjustment for some parishioners. "They want to see a priest," he said. "How do we allow people to realize that this is a ministerial staff and we're all companions and disciples in ministry?"

He said he understands when parishioners are wary of changes at a parish. "People are suspicious because they have been hurt [by the church]," said Father Lickteig, which means sometimes other questions need to be answered before those regarding logistics. "The other conversation we've been having is: What does healing look like for us? It's fraught, he said, especially in the current political climate where many people are immediately combative or have their guard up. But he hopes to let people know that their parish family will be a place of healing.

The question becomes: "How do you repeat the mes-

sage patiently and peacefully in a way that people can hear it?" said Father Lickteig. "And how do you live it out in a way that backs up what people are saying?"

Father Lickteig said that meetings like the community vision session give him hope. "That conversation has been difficult and fantastic. I've loved every minute of those meetings, even in the midst of sometime chaos and tension and personalities," he said. "It's about holding that center and letting people know that ours is a big church and we are going to find our way through this."

Kerry Weber is an executive editor for *America*.



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When the Doors Close

What is the proper way to repurpose a church?

By John W. Miller

Inside the former St. Elizabeth's Slovak Catholic Church in downtown Pittsburgh, the evangelical pastor in pressed blue jeans appears 12 feet tall on a movie screen. Young adult worshipers take notes on his sermon and glance at open Bibles. Inaugurated in 1908 and sold by the Diocese of Pittsburgh two decades ago, the red brick church now belongs to Orchard Hill, a suburban evangelical church.

"These walls have seen so much," says Dan Irvin, pastor of Orchard Hill's downtown campus.

On the other side of Pittsburgh that day, Monique Herrera helps an asylum seeker from Nicaragua and her 2-year-old son prepare for their Sunday in a rectory converted into a halfway house for refugees. The rectory closed last year, and St. Joseph the Worker Parish, in a



Church Brew Works in Pittsburgh, Pa., was once a Catholic church, but the building was sold in 1993. The diocese now mandates that prospective buyers of church property promise not to sell alcohol.

church buildings. Starting in the last few decades of the 20th century, dioceses facing declining church attendance sold off church real estate; some ended up as brewpubs, art galleries, condos, bookstores or museums. Now, in the third decade of the 21st century, advocates inside and outside the church are spearheading a more intentional approach to repurposing church buildings.

In 2018, the Vatican hosted an international conference titled “Doesn’t God Dwell Here Anymore?” and published guidelines for dioceses looking to sell church property. They included the prohibition against selling sacred relics and turning over buildings to “sordid” use, such as liquor stores, abortion clinics and nightclubs, and a reminder to destroy altars when a church ceases to be a church. In a letter to the conference, Pope Francis reminded delegates of the model given by St. Lawrence, a third-century deacon who is remembered for “selling the precious items of worship and distributing the proceeds to the poor.”

In practice, canon law gives dioceses around the world a great deal of freedom, specifying only that bishops can relegate buildings to “profane but not sordid use.” That freedom has invited research and debate, and, a few years ago, the University of Notre Dame launched the Church Properties Initiative, which among other things tracks adaptations of church properties into shelters, community centers, art spaces and other uses.

“The church has a public vocation,” says the program manager, Madeline G. Johnson. “It’s not a private club.”

The reuse of church buildings “is an opportunity for the church to reimagine its relationship to the market and itself,” says Ms. Johnson, who wrote a master’s thesis about churches in Montreal renting out their spaces at below-market rates to socially conscious organizations such as a Polish cultural center, a music co-op and a public relations firm that helps nonprofits.

From Temples to Churches

Whether you are a believer or not, there is still something special about churches. They are free to enter. They are an invitation to contemplate the transcendent. They are community centers, where people gather to celebrate the miraculous and sacramental, like births, love and death.

The first churches were converted temples in ancient Rome, and these churches “differed from traditional Roman temples by the mere fact that the people were in

move approved by the diocese, now offers free use of the building to Casa San Jose, a Pittsburgh group that helps immigrants.

Because of shrinking numbers in the pews and fewer vocations to the priesthood, the Catholic Church, the largest private real estate owner in the world, faces decisions about what to do with its extensive real estate portfolio. Particularly in the Northeast and Midwest, where more parishes are closing or merging than in other parts of the country, the church has a chance to transform the way it serves urban neighborhoods. The two buildings I visited in Pittsburgh—two of the thousands of churches, schools, rectories and convents across the United States that the Catholic Church and other religious institutions have closed in recent years—show how wildly different the outcomes can be.

We are now in the second generation of converted



The Culinary Institute of America is located on the site of a former Jesuit seminary in Hyde Park, N.Y. The Jesuits built and occupied St. Andrew-on-Hudson from 1903 until 1968.

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the building,” says Christopher Denny, a theologian at St. John’s University in New York. “The preferred model for Greek and Roman temples was a statue of the virgin goddess, and a lot of priests, and ordinary people were outside the building.”

In medieval Europe, towns dedicated centuries to erecting cathedrals and chiseling, carving and sculpting them to perfection. Masons would move to a town and begin work on a cathedral that their sons and grandsons would finish. Once built, the cathedral appeared invulnerable to the ravages of time. Secular authorities in Europe, who have often subsidized the church, often moved to preserve buildings even as church attendance dwindled. “In Europe, governments feel a responsibility to maintain churches,” says Daniel Rober, a theologian at Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, Conn. Witness the French government’s management of the renovation of Notre-Dame de Paris.

When Catholics from Ireland, Italy, Germany and other European nations migrated to U.S. cities in the 19th and 20th centuries, they built churches that served as community centers, where millions were baptized, married and

honored at funerals. When their children and grandchildren migrated to the suburbs after World War II, participation at city churches withered, leaving dioceses like Pittsburgh with empty churches, schools and rectories within their city limits. In the United States, where there are fewer tax-funded subsidies available, the church has been quicker to sell off buildings.

It’s a shock to see so many abandoned churches in cities across the United States while cathedrals in Europe built in the 11th century are still standing. If they can last 1,000 years in Brussels, Paris and Rome, why can’t they last 100 in Pittsburgh? The age and traditions of Catholicism invite us to believe that churches last forever. “You are Peter and on this rock, I will build my church,” Jesus tells Peter. But Peter is a person, not a building, as a new wave of advocates point out.

“Almost inevitably, decisions are financial,” says Patrick Hayes, an archivist for the Redemptorist congregation in Philadelphia. “The question the diocese has to resolve is, ‘Can we afford to keep this church, with a leaky roof and crumbling walls?’” The result is a tapestry of different deci-



The closure of a church opens the possibility of a gift to the community.

sions around the country, he says.

Sadness over church closures is part of the necessary grieving process for communities. “There’s a sense of lament and loss when a church closes,” says Dr. Rober, the theologian. “But it should be directed inwardly. Church buildings are beautiful but temporary dwellings, and what’s in our hands is to present the Gospel as good news, not yesterday’s news.”

And that, as Deacon Herb Riley of St. Joseph’s Parish in Pittsburgh points out, means doing something with the building. The closure of a church opens the possibility of a gift to the community. It also raises healthy human questions we should all be thinking about: What makes a place sacred? Can we have church without buildings? Is it wrong to convert churches to brewpubs and condos? How about museums or libraries? Many Catholics believe the church’s real estate holdings are a gift, and the question is simple: What’s the most loving thing we can do with them?

For Dr. Denny, the theologian at St. John’s, the desecralization of a church building is the end point of a gradual process that begins when people stop attending Mass. “The process of desecralization begins when people in the community are no longer aware of who is missing,” he says. “When a church closes, it’s depressing, but it’s also a call to witness.”

Bars and Comedy Clubs

In the United States, sold-off Catholic and Protestant churches have turned into bars, comedy stages, bookstores, community centers, libraries, restaurants, wrestling arenas, bridal shops, skateparks, auto garages, ropes courses, breweries and gyms. In a secular world, stained-glass windows, pews and altars have become part of businesses’ brands. There is a booming secondary market in church windows and benches.

In Pittsburgh, one of the most prominent converted

churches is Church Brew Works, a brewpub on Liberty Avenue, which runs from downtown to the eastern part of the city. To the dismay of the diocese, the brewpub has kept the altar, pews and stained-glass windows as part of the pub decor. Ironically, in a neighborhood being taken over by young hipsters and tech workers who tend not to go to church, Church Brew Works markets itself using church symbols and iconography. The diocese sold and deconsecrated the building in 1993, but it felt betrayed by Church Brew Works and now mandates that prospective acquirers of church properties promise not to sell alcohol, among other requirements. Church Brew Works did not return calls seeking comment.

For some Catholics, a decommissioned church becoming a restaurant is an acceptable outcome. People eat and gather and commune in restaurants. It’s not a place of outrageous sin. And isn’t a restaurant a better outcome than a boarded-up building crawling with rats? But many theologians have given serious thought to the matter of converted church buildings. If a church becomes a brewpub, “that is something I care about becoming a novelty,” says Jason King, a theologian at St. Mary’s University in San Antonio, Tex. “There’s history embedded there you can’t find anywhere else, and it’s painful to contemplate a restaurant making a profit out of those memories.”

The Culinary Institute of America is located on the site of a former Jesuit seminary in Hyde Park, N.Y. The Jesuits built and occupied St. Andrew-on-Hudson from 1903 until 1968. The culinary institute moved there from New Haven, Conn., in 1972, and it does not shy away from touting the religious past of its campus. Indeed, it recently issued a press release inviting visitors to the burial place on its grounds of the famous Jesuit philosopher and scientist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Teilhard once wrote that the day “will come when, after harnessing space, the winds, the tides, and gravitation, we shall harness for God the energies of love.” What would it mean to harness for God the energies of church buildings, even when they are no longer churches?

Bethany Welch, S.S.J., who holds a doctorate in urban revitalization, advises religious orders on the use of their buildings. “There’s a mandate to be attentive to those on the margins, attentive to those outside the circle,” says Sister Welch. “The first use should still be to serve the needs of the poor. I don’t think a restaurant is a good outcome. There’s a lot of creative ways people can use these buildings.”

In 2012, the St. Thomas Aquinas parish in South Philadelphia asked Sister Welch to help renovate a former convent and turn it into a multilingual community center. After serving as director of the center until 2019, Sister



The church has a chance to transform the way it serves urban neighborhoods.

Welch entered the Sisters of St. Joseph in Philadelphia. She now considers the conversion of church buildings part of her vocation, and she works with Depaul USA, an organization that houses students facing homelessness in former convents. She points to charter schools, senior housing, low-income housing, job training and youth centers, and day care centers as other examples of successful adaptive reuse projects.

In Philadelphia, Sister Welch has helped convert a convent into a shelter for college students. “God is still at work in the world, and we can join God with this work,” she says. The right question dioceses should be asking themselves, she adds, “is if there aren’t enough Massgoers, maybe there are enough people who need housing, who need medical services.”

Sister Welch pointed me to the Philadelphia-based nonprofit Partners for Sacred Places. Founded in 1989, the secular organization aims to assist religious communities looking to transform or find other uses for their buildings. It hires itself out to churches and congregations to reform, renovate or revamp property. When churches close, there is grief and sadness, says Dana Dabek, the group’s director of transition services. “There’s a lot of fear; you don’t want to be the one that failed,” she says. “But it’s not always closure. It’s transformation.”

Partners for Sacred Places has offices in Nashville, New York and Chicago, but it does work all over the country. “Our work is not to fill the pews on Sunday, but to help define what the building can be used for from Monday to Friday,” says Ms. Dabek. “Sacred places have always served as de facto community centers.”

The work of Partners for Sacred Places is a reminder that secular people, many with a Catholic background, feel an attachment to churches even after they leave the church. “They are often so beautiful architecturally, and have a lot of thought that goes into curating the space inside,” says Mike McDermit, a former Catholic filmmaker from Cres-

son, Pa., who loves going to events in churches converted into theaters and restaurants. “Often, it’s one of the only places in a small town where people can gather together.”

Even for a former Catholic, a building holds deep meaning. “They are also often mystifying, with their ornate iconography and a seeming reverence for suffering,” he says. “When they are repurposed, I feel like the goal is often to acknowledge their history, however complex, and to try to transform it into something useful or more inviting for all.”

The Story of St. Elizabeth’s

In 1908, when St. Elizabeth’s opened in downtown Pittsburgh, nobody could have foreseen brewpubs or suburban megachurches. On Sunday, Aug. 5, 1908, a parade led by the Knights of St. David Assembly No. 484, a uniformed society of 200 men dressed like the Austrian infantry, marched from Union Station with Bishop J. F. Regis Canevin to show off their new church. The drillmaster “trained the society up to the standard of the Austrian regular army,” The Pittsburgh Press reported. After sermons in Slovak, the bishop gave a speech in English, “praising the Slovaks for their fidelity to the church and exhorting them to adhere to the faith of their fathers.”

It was one of the diocese’s jewels. “This church is among the very few in the diocese which was consecrated with full rites, as it is the rule of the church not to consecrate a church as long as there is a debt on it,” The Pittsburgh Press noted.

But less than a century later, the diocese sold St. Elizabeth’s to an event company. When I moved to Pittsburgh in 2011, it was called the Altar Bar. I saw some great gigs there, including a country singer named Wanda Jackson, who told a classic story about going on a date with Elvis. “We went for a burger and a matinee,” she said with a wink.

Now the building is a worship space once again. Orchard Hill is an evangelical church founded in 1989, and when I visited on a recent Sunday, the mood was lively. There were more people, particularly young people, than I often see at most Catholic Masses in Pittsburgh. Dan Irvin, the young campus pastor, welcomed everybody. Then a screen dropped from the ceiling. Kurt Bjorklund, who has been pastor of Orchard Hill since 2005, gave a 45-minute sermon. He invoked the Old Testament and riffed on the HeGetsUs ads displayed during the Super Bowl, which he says properly conveyed Jesus’ message of inclusion. After that, worshipers approached and took Communion. “We have a lot of ex-Catholics, and we designed our Communion ritual so they’d feel comfortable,” said Mr. Irvin.

St. Elizabeth’s is far from the only church to be converted into a building used by a different faith community. In Buffalo, N.Y., two former church buildings were convert-



Queen of Peace Roman Catholic Church in Buffalo, N.Y., is now the Jami Masjid mosque. Thanks to recent immigration, around 5,000 Muslims now live in Buffalo.

ed into a mosque and a Buddhist temple. Queen of Peace Roman Catholic Church is now Jami Masjid mosque, and St. Agnes Roman Catholic Church is now the International Sangha Bhiksu Buddhist Association. That first transition makes sense demographically; thanks to recent immigration, around 5,000 Muslims now live in Buffalo.

St. Joseph the Worker, with the support of the Diocese of Pittsburgh, has resolved to convert shuttered church buildings into uses that correspond to the Gospel instead of selling them on the real estate market. That is how Ms. Herrera, the caseworker for Casa San Jose, came to live in the former rectory with her husband and two children. She helps shepherd one family of refugees at a time for a maximum of six months, helping them find housing and work. “There’s a lot of grief when you have to close a church,” says Deacon Riley. “But it’s also an opportunity to give a gift to the community.”

Deacon Riley and the Rev. Frank Almada wanted to avoid a future of concert halls and brewpubs. “Father Frank and I both share a concern for social justice,” says Deacon Riley. “So we wanted to use the buildings to help

people.” They have also converted four parish churches by collaborating with shelters for women and veterans operated by outside charities.

When I stopped by, Ms. Herrera introduced me to a woman from Nicaragua also living in the former rectory with her husband and daughter. They had arrived in Pittsburgh two months before and were applying legally for asylum. Now they were receiving care in the form of a building erected to serve previous generations of immigrants to Pittsburgh.

“I’ve been to Dachau, which has the stain of evil, and I’ve been to Assisi, which is the opposite,” says Kevin Hayes, a Pittsburgh-based Catholic activist and architect. “The sense of the sacred in Assisi comes from the people. When holy people occupy a place like Assisi for 800 years, it leaves behind something, but buildings should evolve—and they can.”

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

THE BORDER IS NOT A PLACE OF CRISIS

It's where God is calling us

Mark J. Seitz

There are figures in life to whom it is given to stand “betwixt and between.” They are neither here nor there but are able to stand astride multiple realities—be they cultures, nationalities or historical periods—whether by force of personality, birth at a particular juncture in time or a unique personal vocation.

These pivotal figures often have the ability to see multiple sides of an issue and thus can transcend the blinders that can constrain our imaginations to possibilities yet unrealized. With their vision, they propel us forward culturally, historically and even religiously. In the Jesuit tradition, St. Ignatius Loyola is certainly one of them, and Pope Francis another.

Bartolomé de las Casas

One of these transitional figures I would like to briefly consider here is the Dominican priest and bishop Bartolomé de las Casas. Born in Seville, Spain, at the very end of the 15th century, he arrived in the New World as a young man to participate in the economic and imperial project that was the Spanish *conquista*. From that moment onward, his entire life would be caught up in the moral and ethical dilemmas of the Spanish conquest. Young though he was when he arrived on the island of Hispaniola, he would have

been a slave owner and would have participated in expeditions against the Indigenous Caribbean populations.

But he soon returned to Europe to study theology and was ordained a priest at the young age of 22. Las Casas soon returned to the New World after ordination, where he displayed personal development and an evolution of conscience. As a secular priest, he was *de facto* a chaplain of the Crown and therefore deeply implicated in the colonial project. As an agent of the established power, he witnessed up close the exploitation of the land, the forced labor, the forced religious conversions and even the mass killings that accompanied the colonization. He also saw firsthand the factions in the clergy, which in some sense facilitated these atrocities. This eventually drove him to join the Dominican order, many of whose members at that time stood for moral clarity and coherence and resisted the prevailing order.

One decisive moment for las Casas came during the preparation of a homily for the feast of Pentecost. Preparing a sermon on the Book of Sirach, he came across these words: “Ill-gotten goods offered in sacrifice are tainted. Presents from the lawless do not win God’s favor.” (Sir 34:21-22).

This Scripture further cauterized his maturing conscience and propelled forward his advocacy on behalf of

Orlando, a migrant from Ecuador, carries 4-year-old Peter as they wade through the Rio Grande from Mexico into Eagle Pass, Tex., on Oct. 6, 2023.

the Indigenous people.

Not long after, in response to his strenuous advocacy, the imperial government granted las Casas the title Protector of the Indians, a title he embraced to distance himself from the status quo, document the empire's human rights abuses, advance a critique and counternarrative in service of the dignity of Indigenous populations (including in the famous Valladolid debates on the rights and treatment of Indigenous people), and build alternative structures more consistent with the Gospel and human dignity. He had to contend with his own vested interests as well as with enemies within the church. He was eventually named bishop of Chiapas, a vast diocese that encompassed a wide swath of territory in what is today southern Mexico and Guatemala.

Other Voices

The life of las Casas is significant for many reasons, one being that his advocacy marks an inflection point in the development of the human rights tradition in the Western imagination. Very often, human rights are presented as entirely a creature of the Enlightenment; this partial narrative leaves out an important Christian contribution to its development. More important, this one-sided presentation erases the Indigenous historical dimension of the Western conception of human rights.

Here, it is important to be careful. On the one hand, we need to avoid simplification, overlooking the painful history of the conquest and reducing Indigenous history to its functional relation to the development of Western thought. We also need to recognize las Casas' own implication in the colonial system. However, it must be noted that las Casas' ministry matured within a journey toward greater moral integrity, in the light of the Word of God. And an essential step in that spiritual journey was that he allowed himself to be converted by the evident humanity of the Indigenous people he encountered—by their cosmivision and universe of values, by their religious reverence for life and the complexity of their social organization. It was shameful and immoral to deny their dignity as human beings.

In the figure of las Casas, the one missioned to civilize and evangelize is himself civilized and evangelized. This priest, in turn, becomes a pointed evangelist of human dignity to a Western culture blind to the moral weight of genocide and unrestrained exploitation. He is a "betwixt and between" figure: one between empire and periphery, Europe and the New World, established religion and Indigenous wisdom, oppressor and oppressed, Gospel and his-

tory, privilege and poverty. Here, I would argue, is the real birth of modern human rights: in the crucible of disarmed recognition of the dignity of the oppressed, penetrating self-critique, openness to radical revision in the fiery light of the Gospel and penitence as a way of life.

The Latin American theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, O.P. (who, curiously, also found late refuge with the Dominicans), wrote extensively on las Casas. In a 1992 essay, "Bartolomé de Las Casas: Defender of the Indians," he notes that las Casas anticipates Dietrich Bonhoeffer's injunction to read history from below—that is, from the perspective of the victims of history. For Father Gutiérrez, las Casas asks us to read history from the perspective of "the other," as if we were the other:

We need, he said, to see our modern historical moment "from below." Las Casas' discussion with theologians affirms this, and in my opinion it is a very central point in understanding Las Casas' theology. He says if we were Indians, our points of view would be very different. In his discussions with other theologians, Las Casas said, "If you were an Indian, your theological opinions would be very different."

There are connections here with the global reality of migration today.

Today's Reality

I am the bishop of a diocese on the southern border of the United States. When I consider the topic of migration, I think of those who arrive at the border every day, coming from countries all around the world, looking for safety and to be part of a community that can sustain them. Every day, because of this office entrusted to me by the church, I find myself in a place "betwixt and between."

This is what it means to live on the border: One lives enmeshed and implicated in the aspirations and hopes of the poor knocking at our nation's doorstep, the stark reality of death in the desert and in the waters of the Rio Grande, the joys and anxieties of those who are able to obtain safe passage, the frustrations of those who cannot. One also encounters the prosaic realities of border enforcement and border walls and broken immigration laws, the posturing and compromises of politicians, the everyday heroism of ordinary people. One hears Spanish and English; one encounters people Latino and Anglo, from Mexico and from the United States. One lives in a world of *quinceañeras* and human trafficking, *corridos* and cowboy boots and Our Lady of Guadalupe. All of these collide at the border, sometimes



One of the things that angers me most is how often complexity and nuance at the border are flattened and manipulated.

cacophonously, sometimes painfully, sometimes tragically and often beautifully.

Having served at the border now for more than a decade, one of the things that angers me most is how often complexity and nuance at the border are flattened and manipulated. We can all see how the border is represented by politicians, pundits and the media. One of the most troubling examples of this is when the border and migration are spoken about in terms of “a crisis.”

There is no denying that the number of people coming to our border in recent years has been considerable. This comes with political, social and logistical challenges. But there are those who abuse the language of crisis in order to present migration at the border as fundamentally problematic, as something to fear and as a perilous threat. Let me be clear, as someone who lives this reality every day: This is not just wilful mischaracterization but often part of a deliberate, historical project of dehumanization at the border.

This reductionist approach is a manipulative, mediocre and fearful type of thinking that must be challenged. It flattens the reality of border communities like El Paso, which for decades have done yeoman’s work to welcome migrants every day, much of it done by the Catholic Church. It flattens the reality that border communities are beautiful, safe, diverse, economically and culturally vibrant communities. It flattens the reality that binational communities on the border are living, breathing organisms, interconnected in thousands of ways. It flattens the reality that respect for the rights of asylum-seeking persons and vulnerable migrants are enshrined in our national law and in international law for a reason. It flattens the reality that migrants contribute in ways uncountable to our nation’s prosperity, vitality and resilience and cannot be scapegoated for our nation’s ills.

Yet this language of crisis is repeated over and over again and has become a staple of both political parties,

even by those wishing to effect a certain pragmatism. This is a fundamental pastoral challenge for our church—to unbind our social imaginations and see the shared humanity of the other before me.

I think that this is where las Casas’ wisdom can help us. Were he alive today, he would suggest to native-born Americans that if you were a migrant crossing the border this very day, your opinions about migrants and the border would undoubtedly be very different.

I have shared the story before of an experience I had crossing the border in 2019 following major restrictions on asylum-seeking persons, known as the “Remain in Mexico” policy. This policy stripped asylum seekers of the right to enter the United States and returned many of them to places like Ciudad Juárez, a city that sits just across the river from El Paso, Tex.

One day following the policy’s implementation, I walked with a family from Honduras over the international bridge as they prophetically challenged this policy, just by their presence, by merely petitioning for mercy and refuge. I was there only in solidarity. It was tense; there were scores of observers from the international media, and there were border enforcement officers perturbed by this disruptive challenge to the new policy. I was at a loss as to how the situation would resolve itself. I must confess, I was fearful of the consequences this action might have for me. Would things turn violent? Would I be arrested? As I began to walk across the bridge, the family’s 9-year-old girl grasped my hand. Celia was her name. We smiled at one another, and I said to her in Spanish, “*¡Vamos a marchar, como en un desfile!*” “Let’s march, like in a parade!”

Looking back now, I can say I did not lead Celia across the bridge. Rather, she led me. She led me not just across a bridge but more deeply along a journey of moral coherence and conversion. This was an evangelizing experience—not for her, but for me. A young refugee, dehumanized by a policy decision, led me, an ordained minister, down the path of moral integrity and conversion. Suddenly, I saw the world quite differently through her eyes. *If we were migrants, indeed our opinions would be very different.*

A Spiritual Gaze

One can approach the issue of migration from multiple angles, of course. There are the principles of Catholic social doctrine. There is the failure of nation states and the global community to meet the needs of historically high numbers of displaced persons. There is the historical weight of racism embedded in the structures of immigration enforcement at our southern border. There is the polarization and gridlock that precludes efforts to overhaul our national immigration system. And there are the growing numbers

of climate-displaced persons; there are wars and land grabbing and violence against women and poverty and inequality and lack of opportunity and human rights violations driving migration. We all see the religious, cultural and ethnic tensions in certain parts of the world provoked by the movement of persons, the shockingly high number of children and women trafficked as sexual and economic slaves, and the push and pull factors of economic inequality.

No one in the contemporary world has been more prophetic on the question of migration than Pope Francis. But the starting point for Pope Francis is unmistakably and indisputably spiritual. We have simply rendered ourselves unaccountable for our brother. “*The Lord asked Cain, ‘Where is your brother Abel?’ He answered, ‘I do not know.’*” (Gn 4:9). At the root of our inability to address global migration is a fundamental misrecognition. It is not primarily a question of how many migrants we should let in or how many visas we should give out. Rather, it is a question of the borders we have internalized, the spiritual borders that prevent us from recognizing our shared humanity with people who migrate.

Do we know the immigrant nurses who kept our country healthy and ministered to our dying relatives during the pandemic? Do we know the farmworkers and meat processing plant workers and poultry packers and drivers and store clerks who keep us fed? The teachers who educate our kids? The Uber drivers who ferry us around? The contract workers who prepare food in our kitchens and who keep the facilities clean? The care workers looking after our parents and grandparents right now? The undocumented veterans in our armed services?

We have forgotten that despite all the fits and starts, despite the history and legacy of injustice and exploitation, migration is an indispensable part of our American narrative, not something to fear. Yes, it has always been aspirational and asymptotic, but undoubtedly a thread woven deeply into our common history, key to our national prosperity in the deepest sense of that word and essential to our future.

If, then, the problem is spiritual, the solution must be as well. The remedy, Pope Francis proposes, is the recovery of a spiritual gaze. We are desperately in need of contemplatives and mystics, people with penetrating vision who can see the sin at the root of the systems—political, social and economic—that we have erected which displace and uproot persons and then brutally police them and push them into the shadows. So too do we need contemplatives and mystics, people willing to suffer with those who suffer rather than disregard them or seek quick escapes.

The Mystics

We need people “betwixt and between” who can serve as spiritual ambassadors of dialogue and encounter, who can discern more durable and just solutions, ways to put love into practice. Pope Francis has repeated many times that we are not just experiencing a period of epochal change, but that we are in the midst of a change in epoch, a rapid transformation in our ways of life and how we relate to one another. Who will be ushers of this change, its Moses and its Deborah? Its prophets? This spiritual vision starts simply by asking this question: *If we were migrants, if we were hungry, if we were abused and exploited women, if we were politically persecuted, if we were trying to reunite with family on the other side of the border—would not our opinions be very different indeed?*

Las Casas’ insight is that Jesus’ self-identification with the poor teaches us that truth is not always seen most clearly from an abstract distance. It is revealed with greatest clarity when we seek it through the eyes of the *anawim*, God’s beloved poor.

This work is urgent because we need new solutions, including political solutions. In the last couple of months, both political parties came to the brink of enacting a major legislative assault on our system of asylum and protection at the border. This was a moment when political leaders spoke unreasonably and irresponsibly of “shutting down the border,” as if one could, with the stroke of a pen, shut down a living organism. This was a moment when serious political leaders considered suspending our obligations to the vulnerable just because they became politically inconvenient.

These are not the political solutions we need, because they are not *just*. We must not mistake an ill-suited compromise between contending, politically motivated interests for a just solution. Less still can it be a system in which the majority seeks to annihilate the minority in the quest for a winner-take-all political victory, which it subsequently takes as license to impose a draconian and vengeful agenda.

In this sense, our pursuit of justice is connected with the recovery of a mysticism, a spiritual training in the act of recognition—an honest search for structures which promote human solidarity, interrelatedness and the flourishing of the family, and an understanding that the good of the earth and the fate of the poor are connected. Grounded in a deep sense of mutual responsibility and accountability, it should uncover and do penance for our constant human propensity to violence and look for common ground. It should make room for the unpredictable and uncontrollable narrative and needs of the other, who



Do we know the immigrant nurses who kept our country healthy and ministered to our dying relatives during the pandemic?

is no longer seen as other but as my neighbor, my brother, my sister.

The Work of the Church

In what way must the church be engaged? This is something I think about deeply not only as a border bishop but also as chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Migration. Here, I think, we can turn again to las Casas for inspiration. What defined las Casas' work and ministry? I think there were three elements.

First, we can recognize his solidarity with the poor of his time, which was born of and engendered spiritual conversion and capacious social imagination. We need to continually ask the question: *What if we were refugees, if we were undocumented?* We need to ask if our institutions—our Catholic schools and universities, our service agencies, our parishes and diocesan structures—are fully engaged in the lives of the poor and people affected by the reality of forced migration. Are we in the streets? Are we taking risks? Or are we inward-looking? This is the pastoral conversion Pope Francis is asking of our church.

The second element, of course, is las Casas' unrelenting and eloquent defense of the rights of the dispossessed. His lifelong advocacy for the dignity of the poor, which extended into his 80s, can serve as an inspiration. It is important that the entire Catholic community in the United States organize a robust, tenacious, unrelenting and eloquent defense of the rights of those who migrate, in season and out. And in a church that is rediscovering the practice of synodality, it can no longer just be the bishops, it can no longer just be migrants, it can no longer be just the professional advocates and scholars—it needs to be all of us together.

The third element of las Casas' life and work that I think it is important to highlight is his rich social creativity. He did not limit his advocacy to rhetoric or letter writing. As bishop of Chiapas, he endeavored to open new social

spaces at a distance from the political and economic structures of the time—*encomienda* and slavery—where local populations could engage in new, just social practices from the bottom up. Chiapas was a laboratory for these counter-cultural efforts toward social justice, and in many ways, this experimentation continues both in the church and society of southern Mexico in Indigenous communities up until today.

The creative rearranging of social space has happened in our country, too. Historically, the church in the United States has been one of the main institutions welcoming and assisting migrants in integrating into this country. We have much to be proud of. The Catholic Church in the United States is an immigrant church. In the 19th and 20th centuries, in particular, when waves of Catholic migrants arrived to the country (largely from Europe but also from Latin America), the U.S. church established an extensive network of institutions to assist migrants and aid them in transitioning to mainstream American society—our parochial schools, our universities, our hospitals, our social service agencies, efforts by pioneering religious women and men, our Catholic labor unions, our legal clinics.

It is true that much of this work was done to buffer Catholic immigrants against the prevailing ethnic and religious discrimination of the time and was not necessarily aimed at social transformation. But in retrospect, these creative spaces provided ferment for a more just and vibrant United States and were exercises in the creative reorganization of social space that led to outcomes more consistent with human dignity. And their legacy lives on today in our existing universities, hospitals and organizations like Catholic Charities, Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Catholic Relief Services, the Catholic Campaign for Human Development and more.

But this is not just history. This creative reweaving of society from the bottom up, nourished in our Christian vision of creating a space where everyone belongs, is happening even as we speak. You might not know it, because the media and the politicians are fixated on the challenges and on the narrative of “the crisis.” But communities are not waiting for politicians. This work is happening in organized acts of Christian hospitality at the border where churches and local communities are welcoming the next generation of newcomers.

It is happening in places like Oak Park, outside of Chicago, where churches are coming together to find housing for migrants and help them integrate. It is happening in New York City, where parishes are working to provide a dignified welcome to migrants shipped around the country on buses by cynical politicians. It is happening in some Catholic universities, which are considering how best to defend



Migrants seeking asylum in the United States gather near the border wall on Jan. 22, 2024, as seen from Ciudad Juárez, Mexico.

the Dreamers on their faculties and staff, continuing to employ them even if their legal protections are abolished by judicial fiat. This is powerful work, a reweaving from below, a real form of Christian resistance to the forces of indifference and exploitation and atomization in our society today.

The Situation in Texas

Let us consider an emerging situation at the border right now. As you may know, the attorney general of Texas has made efforts to shutter a longstanding migrant hospitality center on the U.S.-Mexico border, Annunciation House. This Catholic organization has a history of engaging in this work for more than 45 years and works very closely with our parishes and parish migrant shelter centers in El Paso. Very early on in this legal battle, I issued a strenuous defense of Annunciation House, not only because I know the work that the organization does very intimately but also because of some more foundational reasons.

The attack on Annunciation House represents an escalation in Texas' efforts in recent years to militarize the border and to enact legislation criminalizing migration and people who migrate. You have seen the Humvees and the concertina wire and the National Guard soldiers on television. While these actions are transparently political, they are serious. I must tell you that people are dying in El Paso because of these efforts, in the river and in the desert. I have administered the last rites to them. And as I mentioned

earlier, they are part of a broader brutal historical project in Texas to criminalize and police people who migrate, people of color.

All people of faith have a duty to resist these racist projects.

There are two additional reasons I would like to mention. The first is that Texas' efforts constitute a direct attack on a faith-based provider and an attack on the ability of people of faith to put into practice deeply held religious convictions. This is not just a reflexive defense of our own institutions. We need to be prepared to more forcefully engage on this front because this is not an isolated episode. But on a deeper level, conscience is the last bulwark against dehumanization—and when it is threatened, it should alarm us all. And the church must respond.

Religion and people of faith have historically been the motor of change toward a more just and compassionate society in the United States, and the muzzling of this voice in our political climate raises fundamental concerns.

The last reason I have felt a duty to speak out in defense of Annunciation House is because the state of Texas is now *attacking the Christian act of hospitality*. I spoke earlier about Pope Francis and his spiritual point of departure. His practical point of departure has been to engage directly with vulnerable people on the move, to go to the global hot spots of migration—to borders, to the places where the rubber hits the road for those who migrate, the places where

international conventions and the rule of law are often suspended—but also to places of hospitality. The Holy Father has a perceptive sense of the injustice of the global barriers we erect against people who migrate, the injustice of the walls and detention centers. For this reason, he has leaned in with his personal visits and shows of support to places of hospitality. For Pope Francis, acts of hospitality are not just acts of mercy but acts of reparative justice. As he has said, in touching the flesh of the poor, we touch Jesus. This is where the people of God are called to be today.

The Field Hospital

Our church is not, as Pope Francis famously said, a nongovernmental organization. It is a people redeemed by Jesus Christ, the field hospital where we are taken from dysfunction and sin to freedom, from cynicism and hopelessness to reconciliation and redemption. If there are any places where Pope Francis' metaphor of the field hospital really becomes en fleshed, it is in the migrant shelters that dot the U.S.-Mexico border and run through Latin American and the Caribbean, as well as the shelters in the interior of our country.

Hospitality is about providing aid with no other motivation than compassion. It collapses the political distances between us and creates co-presence, reweaving a fractured world; those who would categorize and patrol us based on immigration status are really opposing this. This is the real reason that Christian hospitality finds itself in the crosshairs of political debate and the reason religious leaders have an obligation to strenuously defend it.

You can see why the Holy Father's message to decolonize our imaginations through the practice of a spiritual mysticism and to touch Christ through the flesh of the poor and those who migrate resonates so much with a border bishop. But I think these two proposals of Pope Francis can be deeply renewing for the broader church in the United States and our advocacy for those affected by the reality of forced migration.

While we need to be engaged in the fight for immigration reform on the national level through federal advocacy, that is not sufficient. We need to ensure that the church is actually engaged in the building up of the reign of God by prophetically proclaiming and creatively enacting justice and mercy, allowing ourselves to be knit back together for the healing of the world. As the Rev. James Cone used to ask, *does the church have anything to say to the world at this time?*

Migration is a privileged space in which this salvific mystery is being acted out. If the church is not present in this arena, the proclamation of the Gospel is truncat-

ed. And this should take place not only on the border but throughout the country, in acts of hospitality, in organizing on a local level for more just policies, in opening up spaces where the flesh of Christ can be touched in encounter with the poor. This can reset and reframe the church's advocacy, making it more credible and giving it more depth.

And we do need prophetic witnesses. We cannot work for a world we cannot imagine. We need mystics who can see through to the other side to justice and who can walk with us to that place, and people, like las Casas, who can fruitfully engage borders and the tensions of modern life. Our church needs people who can help us to rewrite the next chapter of our national story so that it is inclusive, grounded in fraternity and justice, and cognizant of the unique role that migration has played in enriching our country.

The Most Rev. Mark J. Seitz is the bishop of El Paso. This essay is adapted from a talk originally delivered at Fairfield University on March 24, 2024, as the inaugural event for a partnership between Fairfield University and America Media.



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One Bread, One Body

What community organizing
can teach us about parish unity

By Jill Rauh



In a homily for Corpus Christi Sunday, Pope Francis declared:

In celebrating and experiencing the Eucharist, we too are called to share in [Christ's] love. For we cannot break bread on Sunday if our hearts are closed to our brothers and sisters.

What a challenging call this is! We seek to reflect Christ's love in our relationships with one another, but in reality this vision can sometimes seem far from our actual parish experience.

We often do not know the names—let alone the hopes and fears—of the people we sit beside in the pews each Sunday. Many parishes have multiple cultural families who worship in the same space but exist as parallel communities. In addition, we often select our parishes based on theological or political leaning, thereby creating communities that are homogenous. We sometimes lack the skills—or the interest—to get to know one another and to talk about meaningful issues.

These are difficult challenges, but I believe we have the tools to address them.

About 10 years ago, I was a member of an urban parish

in a neighborhood in Washington, D.C., that was historically working class but was quickly being gentrified. As the home for many African American, Salvadoran, Haitian and Vietnamese Catholics, the parish benefited from the gifts of multiple cultures and language groups. More recently, young white professionals had moved to the neighborhood as it became more “desirable.” At times, the parish experienced tensions worsened by a lack of interaction among the various races and ethnicities in the church.

Sometimes parishioners in one language group felt that those in a different group were receiving more attention from the pastor, in the form of the number of ministries, the ability to reserve prime meeting space or the times for Masses celebrated in that language. Some who had worshiped at the parish for decades had disagreements with newcomers, mostly young adults. For many members of the parish, the most common interaction with members of other cultural families took place between celebrations of liturgy, when one group was leaving and the other arriving. Opportunities for authentic encounter were much needed in this parish of separate communities.

Several strategies can help to bridge communities and heal divisions—for example, the U.S. Conference of



A central tool in organizing is a one-to-one conversation.

Catholic Bishops' training on building intercultural competencies, which teaches Catholics how to minister effectively among diverse cultural communities (by developing cross-cultural communication skills, understanding racism, fostering integration and inclusion, etc.).

An additional tool that I have found particularly effective is community organizing, which helps neighbors discover concerns that they have in common. A central tool in organizing is a one-to-one conversation of around 30 minutes. Each participant in these face-to-face encounters aims to better understand the other's gifts, challenges and priorities.

With the blessing of the pastor, a parish team at my church adopted the goal of completing 100 listening conversations among parishioners. The entire parish family was invited to a meeting in the church basement for a brief training, then parishioners paired up with people they did not know (with encouragement to connect across cultural groups).

Parishioners who did not attend the gathering could also participate; announcements at the end of Mass on several Sundays invited anyone who was willing to get involved. The parishioners leading the effort held conversations at the back of the church or outside on the sidewalk after Mass. The conversations were grace-filled and life-giving.

Our one-to-ones focused on two questions: "Why are you a member of this parish family?" and "What challenges or concerns prevent you, your family or community from thriving?" I found myself moved by the love that my fellow parishioners had for their parish family. I was also challenged by honest sharing about tough realities facing community members: quickly increasing rents and concerns about the cleanliness of the neighborhood, as well as struggles to make ends meet. Through the one-to-ones, I connected with my fellow parishioners in new ways. The experience of encounter opened my heart to my brothers and sisters.

Besides fostering relationships, the conversations helped identify common needs and interests across the parish. We found, for example, that leaders from several cultural groups were concerned about the trash and plastic water bottles that often littered the sidewalks and park outside the church. Some suggested helping those within their own community better understand the need to care for creation. This led to the integration of this important topic into existing religious education programming. In addition, a team of young people became recycling ambassadors, standing near the receptacles in the back of the church to ensure that items like plastic water bottles and

paper were properly disposed of.

We also learned that leaders in multiple cultural groups were concerned about homeless members of the community who frequently sat on the steps near the church entrance and sometimes sat in the back pews during the liturgy. As a result, members of cultural groups who had not previously volunteered at the parish's dinner program began to do so. More parishioners became active in the parish's work with Washington Interfaith Network (a local community organization that has received funding from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development) to advocate for more affordable housing in Washington, D.C.

Later, parish leaders received training from WIN before city elections for nonpartisan "get out the vote" efforts, going door to door in the surrounding neighborhood. The parish joined other WIN member institutions at citywide forums to remind candidates to prioritize the needs of the poor.

The work of parish organizing developed over multiple years and was not easy, but that is because relationships take time. When done well, the result is stronger, better-connected communities. Such communities can relate to one another as members of a family instead of as strangers and can work together to address issues that impact many peoples' lives.

A New Parish and a Synodal Process

Fast-forward to 2021. Having moved to Maryland, I was now a member of a different parish, St. Camillus, a large multicultural community whose parishioners come from more than 100 countries. As in so many other parishes, our wonderful ministries—from children's liturgy to in-person adult faith formation—were disrupted by the pandemic for much longer than anyone expected. Upon returning to in-person worship, I found myself feeling disconnected from parish life and from those I sit beside at Mass.

The parish's engagement with Action in Montgomery, another community organization funded by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, has proven effective at opening my heart to my brothers and sisters in my community. AIM, as it is also known, is a nonpartisan, multifaith, multi-ethnic organization whose member institutions help



Opportunities for authentic encounter were much needed in this parish of separate communities.

families thrive. AIM institutions work together on issues like affordable housing, child care and environmental justice.

Shortly after I joined the parish's community organizing ministry, I was invited to participate in a listening campaign. From previous experience, I knew that the Holy Spirit could work through such efforts of encounter.

I volunteered to participate in listening conversations with individuals as they were waiting in line at the parish food pantry. These conversations felt privileged and sacred; I was surprised by how eager people were to share their stories. One woman, for example, lamented the unavailability of affordable, high-quality child care as a barrier to finding employment to supplement her family's income. Another person spoke about job loss and the rising cost of living, including skyrocketing rents that left him worried his family would eventually have no place to live. A mother spoke of her anxiety about the safety of her children because of crime and fast-moving traffic in a neighborhood near the church.

A second experience of sacred listening was with the parish's large, active Hispanic young adult group. Participants discussed challenges like (again) rising rent, pandemic-induced mental health concerns and access to higher education. Meanwhile, other members of the community organizing ministry connected with parishioners involved in other ministries within the parish.

The listening process was quite synodal—as has been the case elsewhere in the church. During this three-year Synod on Synodality, Pope Francis has invited us to encounter one another, for in doing so, we encounter the Lord in our midst (“Instrumentum Laboris,” No. 6). In our parish, we found that the listening process of organizing facilitated this encounter. In addition, we were able to share findings from our listening with the parish synod coordinator, helping to ensure the inclusion of voices from the margins—from the food pantry line, for example—in this important process.

The Work Continues

Over the past few years, members of the community organizing ministry have listened *with* and accompanied parish neighbors. Through leadership training offered by organizers from AIM, a group of immigrant mothers in a neighborhood near the church are learning to advocate for measures to slow down automobile traffic on a busy street in front of a school. They have successfully won the installation of a stop sign, improving safety for children and their crossing guard at the start and end of the school day. In addition, as a direct result of their advocacy, sidewalks will be installed on several neighborhood streets that currently lack them.

I have attended several meetings of these empowered mothers with the county chief of police, officials from the county Department of Transportation, and county councilmembers. As I listened to the mothers share their challenges and experiences with those who can influence those issues, I felt grateful for such a tangible way to express my unity with my fellow parishioners and neighbors.

Members of the parish organizing ministry are also working with AIM organizers and the principals of two local schools to empower local parents to become active leaders in the schools' P.T.A.s. In fact, one parishioner and neighborhood resident recently became the president of a local school's P.T.A. The leadership skills these parents are developing will benefit their children, schools, neighborhoods and parish.

At the county and state levels, parishioners have joined their voices with those of other AIM member institutions to seek solutions that will benefit many families. Parish members were proud to contribute to the passage of an important rent stabilization bill that will help prevent families from being priced out of their neighborhoods. With AIM, we are currently weighing in on other bills in support of affordable housing and expanded availability of pre-K.

As these efforts continue, I often reflect on how this work is both rooted in and an expression of our celebration of the Eucharist each Sunday. We gather together to receive Christ's body, and then we are sent to become bread broken for others. Sharing in Christ's love, we open our hearts to our brothers and sisters as a means of building unity as members of Christ's body, and then those relationships help us to transform our communities.

Jill Rauh is the director of the Office of Education and Outreach for the Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

INTIMATIONS OF ETERNITY, IN THE FOURTH GRADE

By Brooke Stanish

you discovered heaven spread to the edges
of a max lucado picture book you slid to the librarian
like a business transaction, as in: *for 2 weeks, please
(i'd like to trace the golden pathways of this place
with my fingers)*, leading toward what you figured
was willy wonka's factory or a ripley's museum
with those mirrors in which you stared at your body
curl until you no longer understood: *what is this body?*
anymore, which is why you wanted heaven
in the first place, *isn't it?* why when you asked
your mother: *is that really what it looks like?*
& she said: *i guess*, you packed a box
with your stuffed dog & some pop-tarts
& waited on the street corner
like you saw bugs bunny do once: one thumb
extended heavenward;

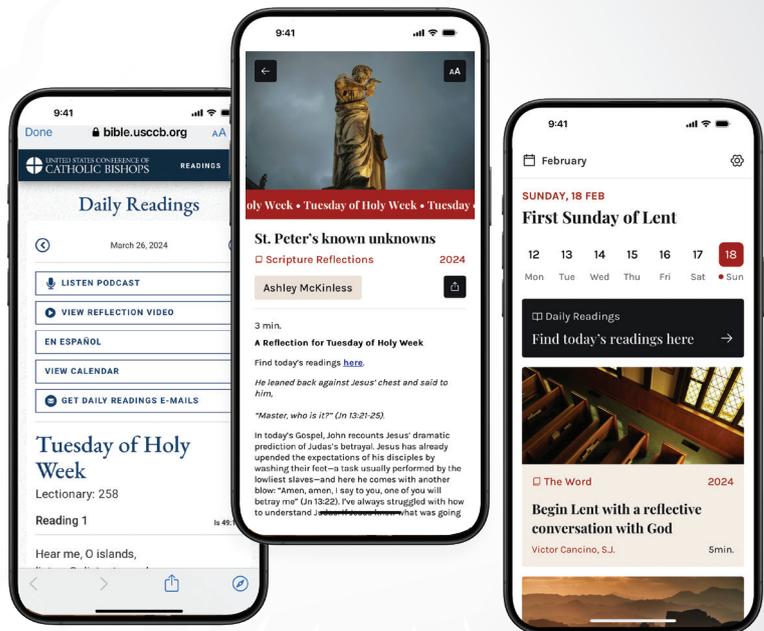
your daydream consisted of incongruent stills:
God arrives in your mother's blue van & takes your box,
an angel shows you to your room which is, of course,
lined with books & stuffed dogs with eyes as droopy as
yours when you discovered you couldn't go—
no, not yet—as in: *(never?)* your fingers caught
in the pearly gates of your picture book closed.
your heaven-lust frightened you
like angels in the living room.
it's not that you wanted to die so much as it was that
you wanted to feel your significance—you wanted your love
to steal you from earth & your body to evaporate,
heavenward: a plume & then ash,
joan of arc's skin settling in a pile,
too neat for death

Start your day with Scripture

Daily reflections from the
Jesuits, writers and lay staff of
America magazine.



"The Word" app is made possible through the generous support
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GROWING INTO MOTHERHOOD

A silhouette of a woman holding a young child against a bright, glowing background. The woman is on the right, looking up at the child on the left. The child is reaching out towards the woman's face. The overall mood is intimate and tender.

The joys and challenges of a new child stretched me in ways I couldn't have imagined

By Jessica Mannen Kimmet

He wouldn't stop talking about the laundry.

I stood in the back of the church, wiggly toddler in my arms, walking that ever-precarious balance between teaching my child to participate in Mass and keeping him from disturbing those in the pews around us. He was going through one of the many phases of exploring the world that no one had thought to warn me about. In this one, his favorite pastime was to grab fistfuls of my neck skin between his chubby fingers, and he pursued this goal relentlessly.

In the meantime, our freshly ordained associate pastor stood at the ambo delivering what I'm sure was, on paper, a lovely homily. He was talking about the sanctifying power of love, and he pointed to moms as an example. Mothers take up so much for their children, shouldering never-ending errands and housekeeping tasks to keep their families happy and healthy, he said. They do laundry, and dishes, and laundry, and tidying, and more laundry (the laundry example was, for some reason, really sticking with him).

But moms take all this on, he said, out of love for their children. I think he talked his way into a quote attributed to Mother Teresa, whom he credited with saying, "I have found the paradox, that if you love until it hurts, there can be no more hurt, only more love." If you love your child enough, he seemed to say, it doesn't hurt anymore. My brain filled in the rest: If it's still hurting, you don't love your child enough.

In the meantime, my child had his nonmetaphorical fingernails dug into my literal neck skin, leaving me longing for the days when I had been blissfully unaware that I even

had enough neck skin to grab. I loved my child, but unsurprisingly, this truth did not cause his tiny razor fingernails to stop hurting.

And that was the least of my pain. Ten months prior, I had pushed a nine-pound human out of my body, which tore my perineum and left me with a web of scar tissue that made exercise uncomfortable and marital intimacy excruciating. My sacroiliac joint had been pulled out of place by the weight of pregnancy, and I was deeply naïve about the kind of rehabilitation my body needed after birth. My efforts to "get my body back" resulted in injury—I kept hurting my back, over and over again. I had yet to discover the healing power of physical therapy for the pelvic floor. (I don't think I even knew yet what a pelvic floor is.) And I thought all this was part of the normal pain of bringing a child into the world.

And beyond the physical pains, my mental and emotional health was in shambles. My mental capacity was diminished. My patience, my problem-solving, my persistence were all gone. I wasn't bonding with my baby the way I thought I should be. I often felt anger and resentment where I expected the overwhelming rush of love that everyone had promised. I was sure I'd made a mistake, that I had somehow been wrong my whole life about my desire for children and my very call to motherhood.

I had wanted this baby so badly. I'd been so scared that my irregular cycles would mean my fertility would be compromised. I'd charted those cycles and consulted multiple doctors and given up sugar and taken hormone supple-

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ments. When our first year of marriage had been nearing its end, my husband and I had traveled to Lourdes to pray for this intention, and we found out we were pregnant one month later.

When I found out I was pregnant, I was surprised not to feel wholehearted joy taking the place of this wholehearted yearning. Others reassured me that this was common but that I would feel it when he was born, that when he was placed in my arms I would experience an overwhelming rush of love like nothing I'd ever felt.

I did not. I should have felt nothing but gratitude and wonder toward the tiny blessing in my arms. The guilt at feeling anything else was overwhelming.

And it quickly became clear that having a baby was much harder than I realized it would be. We lived far from the support of family and often felt adrift as we figured out our oldest. He was one of those babies who never wanted to be put down; any semblance of separation from us led to urgent panic. He was (and is, seven years later) a tough sleeper, stubbornly resisting all our attempts at sleep training.

Where Was the Goodness?

In hindsight, I see many signs in myself that were consistent with a diagnosis of postpartum depression, with which I would be formally diagnosed after my second child was born. After the first, though, I thought this was standard, just what life was like now that I was a mom. I thought I'd be in this physical and mental pain forever.

And this man would not stop talking about the laundry.

I bring up this homily because I think it represents well the lack of connection I have often felt between what the church has taught me about motherhood and my own lived experience of it. This is a church that (rightly!) affirms the goodness of children and the sacredness of mothering. As a young adult, I was eager for motherhood, impatiently counting down the days until I met my husband, we married, and we started trying to have a baby. I expected this to be the pinnacle of my life, the most love I would ever hold, the closest I would ever get to God as I participated in God's life-giving nature. Maybe it was all that. But it also hurt. A lot.

Where was the goodness I had been promised? Where was the joy with which motherhood was supposed to fill me? I was participating in God's loving and life-giving work; where was the consolation my faith had always seemed to promise?

Then I remembered: Both can be true at once. Motherhood can be both the best thing I've ever done and the hardest. The absence of a fickle human emotion does not equate

to the absence of God. And suddenly a lot of other things made sense: Time with my kids is both interminably long and heartbreakingly short—there's room for both of these.

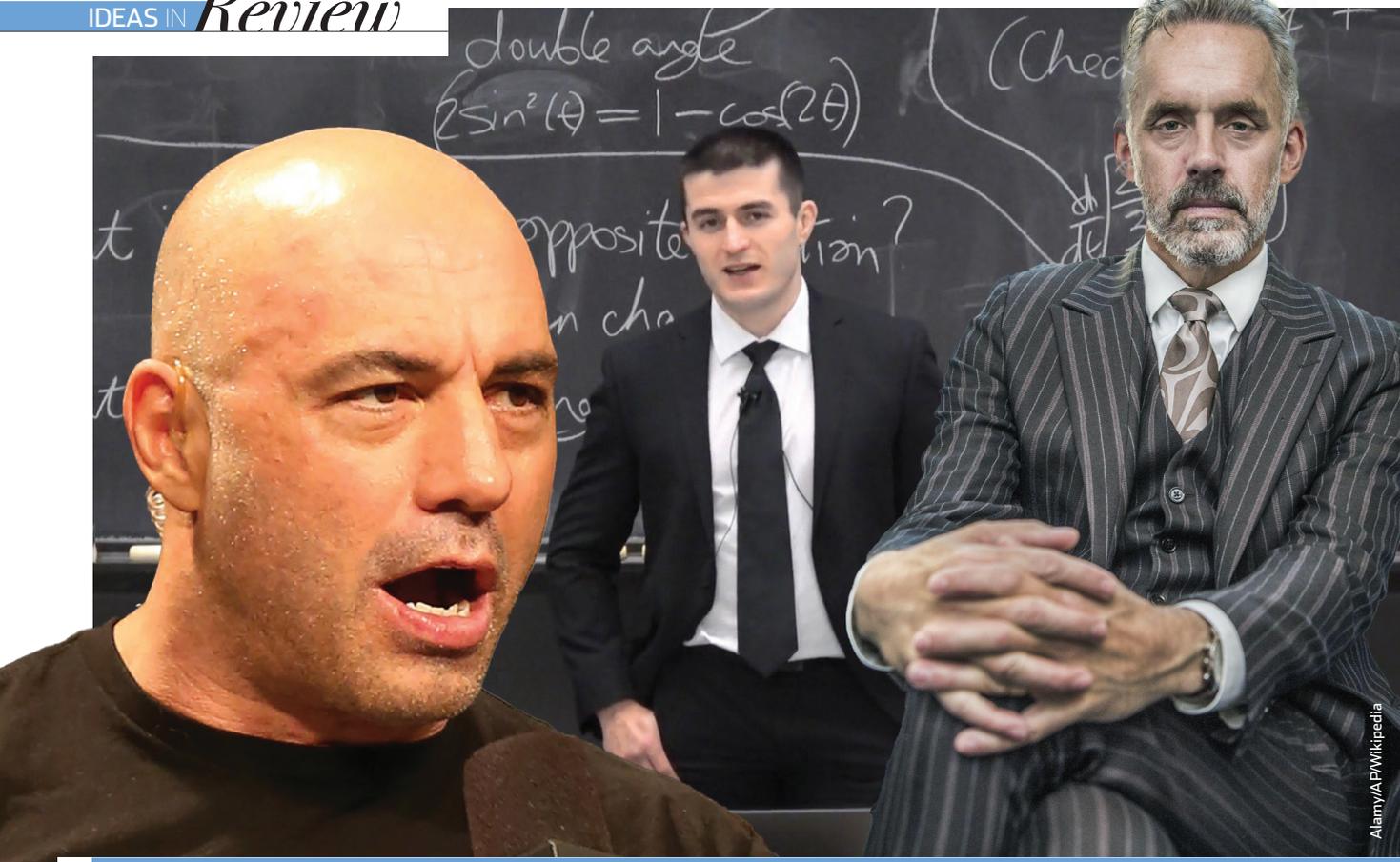
To smooth over these contradictions would be to do myself a disservice. Motherhood doesn't always fit into tidy containers—it is, after all, a participation in the life-giving work of an infinite God. My human heart cannot always hold these contradictions in their fullness, but when I try, there is a paradoxical peace to be had.

Life flourishes within these tensions. While it's not always easy to welcome them in all their complications, doing so opens us further to a God who is always bigger than we can imagine.

It took time to grow into motherhood; I suppose it still is taking time as my children continue to surprise and stretch me. My recovery from postpartum depression was supported by compassionate medical and mental health professionals—and it was also supported by prayer (which, I should note, does not substitute for medical and mental health care). My greatest gifts from God came from reading Scripture, which dynamically spoke to my real life.

In Scripture, there are no stories about postpartum depression specifically. But I found words of hope and healing that spoke to my experience. I found companions like Mary Magdalene, who did not recognize Jesus at the tomb even as he accompanied her in her grief. I was reminded that good things can be hard, too—that the suffering motherhood brought me made it no less good. And most important, I found God's hand outstretched to me in my own grief. I found that even when my pain blinded me for a time to God's presence, God was faithfully waiting all along.

Jessica Mannen Kimmet is a freelance writer, liturgical musician and mother to three young sons. She is the author of Groaning in Labor, Growing in Hope: Scripture Reflections for the Hard Days of Early Motherhood (Liturgical Press), from which this article is adapted.



The YouTube Philosophers

By Nathan Schneider

When I started teaching college almost a decade ago, I began hearing the young men in my classes refer to a group of podcasters. The students who brought up these figures admiringly, even adoringly, were usually quiet and sat in the back of the room. Their feeds included Jordan Peterson, Lex Fridman and Joe Rogan—the elder sage, the curious ascetic, the guy to talk trash with over a protein shake. They were then on the verge of becoming household names.

After fairly B-list careers in their primary professions, they have found their callings in the earbuds of the young. Each enacts a distinct but mutually reinforcing persona of white manhood, sponsored by a distinct set of advertisers. They appear on each other's shows. Together, they inhabit a self-proclaimed "intellectual dark web."

As I tried to understand what my students were drawn to, I noticed a few things. First, virtually all of the content was extremely long. Podcasts and videos went on for hour after hour, as if in grueling rebellion against the supposition that kids these days need everything bite-sized. Second, at a time when white masculinity is often a target of

criticism, they gave a kind of permission for dudes to just practice being dudes together, to think big thoughts, to take nothing off the table.

Through their muscular anti-brevity, these guys carry out a further kind of performance: an insurgency against the political lines in polarized times. They present themselves as aloof from the political categories of the moment, as if in an alternate universe where giving offense is a virtue and nobody gets canceled.

Jordan Peterson is the only one of the three who both-ers to publish books. His major writings are less about culture-warring than about Jungian psychology and the practical wisdom of decent living. He encourages readers, for instance, to stand up straight and be kind to animals. But what first brought him most to prominence was his objection, as a professor at the University of Toronto, to a law that added discrimination by gender identity to Canada's human rights code. He complained that the law would inhibit free speech by compelling the use of a person's preferred pronouns. Peterson later compared trans identity to a "social contagion" on Rogan's podcast. In 2022, Twitter

suspended him for referring to the actor Elliot Page by his “dead” name and pronoun.

Joe Rogan has defied cancellation for his casual use of a racial slur and his penchant for promoting medical misinformation. Like Peterson, he has promoted anti-trans activists as guests; he has also welcomed trans people on his show. There are interviews in his catalog with the commentator Ben Shapiro and with Senator Bernie Sanders, whose political differences did not hinder Rogan from signaling his support for them.

Lex Fridman exemplifies the persona of category transcendence, of innocent curiosity. He brings on leaders from various religions—Bishop Robert Barron, for example, representing Catholicism—to explain the basics of their beliefs to his listeners. He does the same for political pundits, tech entrepreneurs and scientists. The Israeli prime minister was a guest just before a Palestinian poet. His questions are more leading than he lets on—he seems to enjoy asking guests how they would praise Elon Musk, for instance—but we are told he is merely curious.

The common thread among Peterson, Rogan and Fridman is a studied resistance to commitment—political, religious and otherwise. More than mainstream news broadcasters these days, the podcasters go out of their way to defy political labels. None of the three claims a specific religious affiliation. Over and over, when criticized, these figures insist that they are just interested in the conversation, the dialogue, the hard questions.

In polarized times like ours, there is something refreshing in refusing to choose a side. It’s like being John Wayne on a horse, dealing justice in the way neither the gangsters nor the lawmen want. Accordingly, the podcasters are wildly interdisciplinary, juxtaposing politics and culture wars with deep dives into theoretical physics and ancient mythology.

Among those educating young people on streaming media these days—via podcasts and videos, and even through the brevity of TikTok—the eminent modality is the rabbit hole. Like Alice’s descent into Wonderland, these rabbit holes are journeys of obsession, fascination, impropriety and conspiracy that unsettle the supposed rules of normal life. To get lost in one is to find some relief from the heat and false simplicity of the Boomer-led culture wars. Listen carefully, say the streaming philosophers, but do your own research. People who are coming of age crave complexity, and their favorite content creators know it.

A Return to the Spoken Word

The internet has done something important for philosophy: a return to orality, to the eminence of the spoken word. Many ancient philosophical texts, from India to Greece, took the form of dialogues or monologues, where any written record presented itself as a mere approximation of the original. We know about Socrates’s teachings, including his anxieties about literacy, only because Plato wrote them down. Orality presumes that philosophy is as much a genre of public performance as of abstract ideas, that a persuasive presence is as much a sign of wisdom as what one says. Streamer philosophy thus counteracts the trend of Western philosophy over the past few centuries: an ever-deeper wallowing in the production of increasingly bewildering written texts meant only to be read.

I first encountered Daniel Schmachtenberger when he was onstage at a cryptocurrency conference in 2022. His oeuvre cannot be found in any book, only in hours of monologues and interviews, live or online. Perhaps you caught him on Rogan’s podcast. He has this concept of the “metacrisis”—basically, all the ways the world is falling apart. Over many hours of videos and podcasts across various platforms, Schmachtenberger explains how “we” today find ourselves trapped between the options of unbridled climate-tech-bioweapon chaos and a dystopian, A.I.-authoritarian lockdown. The source of hope is in “sensemaking” our way toward finding a “third attractor,” a technology-enabled option where human decency and planetary ecology still have a chance.

Schmachtenberger represents the more mystical branch of the streaming philosophers, more likely to associate with the “liminal web” than the “dark” one. Until recently, relevant hangouts took place on YouTube channels with names like The Stoa (a reference to the architectural site of much ancient Greek philosophizing) and Rebel Wisdom. Schmachtenberger and his peers, again, claim no specific religious or political confession, but one does feel (and occasionally directly hears) the lingering presence of the New Age philosopher Ken Wilbur, the now-elder purveyor of demanding books and workshops offering a “transpersonal” “theory of everything” that unites science, spirituality and experience. Schmachtenberger, for his part, attended Maharishi International University in Iowa, which is associated with the Transcendental Meditation movement.

The streamers induce nostalgia for me as much as anything else. Most of what I read in my coming-of-age

The YouTube philosophers believe that everything important is big—the trends that are all-consuming and inescapable.

years were textual versions of the same sort of thing: highly confident men in militarily dominant societies explaining the world at length. The more abstract the better.

The apogee of this genre was the 19th-century German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel. His writings are lengthy, impenetrably dense and supremely confident about the workings of the universe. Many of these texts are actually notes from his lectures transcribed by students. I know the appeal of this sort of thing; my first book, a zealous history of proofs for the existence of God, cribbed its core idea from some of those lectures. If Hegel were alive today, I bet his disciples would be encountering him not primarily in books, not on TikTok, but on the vast monologue-friendly expanses that YouTube and Spotify afford.

For Hegel, all philosophy is actually history. Ideas develop in evolving relationships to each other through sequences of dialectic: thesis, antithesis, synthesis. To philosophize, then, is not solely to apprehend certain ideas; it is to stand above and beyond all ideas and observe their swirling development. Politics that mattered to Hegel, like Prussia, were the agents of history. Non-European peoples, peripheral to his story, are people without history. China has no real history, he believed, and stateless people have no history. Their fates do not ultimately matter. They are expendable, philosophically speaking, despite whatever they might say about themselves.

Hegel saw Napoleon marching on Jena as the “world-soul,” the angel of history; Lex Fridman has been similarly obsessed with the proposed cage fight between Mark Zuckerberg and Elon Musk. For the YouTube Hegelians, the agents of history worth caring about are tech-startup founders.

Like Hegel, his online successors seem to think that everything important is big—the trends that are all-consuming and inescapable. In an age like ours that is so full of division and polarization, identity politics and information overload, these metanarratives offer a simplifying sort of

complexity. The point is not which side of a culture war wins or loses, because both sides of the dialectic are necessary participants in the process of history discovering itself. As Ken Wilbur’s “integral theory” would suggest, they are just squares on a quadrant, points on a map of possible positions. No particular position matters, ultimately, but only the map, the view from nowhere that can see how they all interact and where they are leading.

The price for achieving the view from nowhere is time. Schmachtenberger’s monologue introducing the third attractor—the first of two parts—lasts almost three hours. He likes to insist that properly understanding one of his ideas will take multiple hours and several sessions. I am astonished that anyone can talk into a camera for that long and do so coherently, and that tens of thousands of others show up to watch. But they do. The amount of time spent with the philosopher is inseparable from the ideas he uses that time to convey.

Duration is no accident in the Hegelian tradition. The longer a philosopher can draw you into his universe—with its extensive terminology and opaque phrasings—the more you drift from identification with the world of mere particulars, mere location, mere identity. You become a philosopher-king in a universe of philosophical sovereigns. You see the universal and become a citizen of it. Length and difficulty are the table stakes, the hard-won ante that keeps disciples in the game and renders them trustworthy. These videos serve the same time-gobbling purpose as a heavy and difficult text.

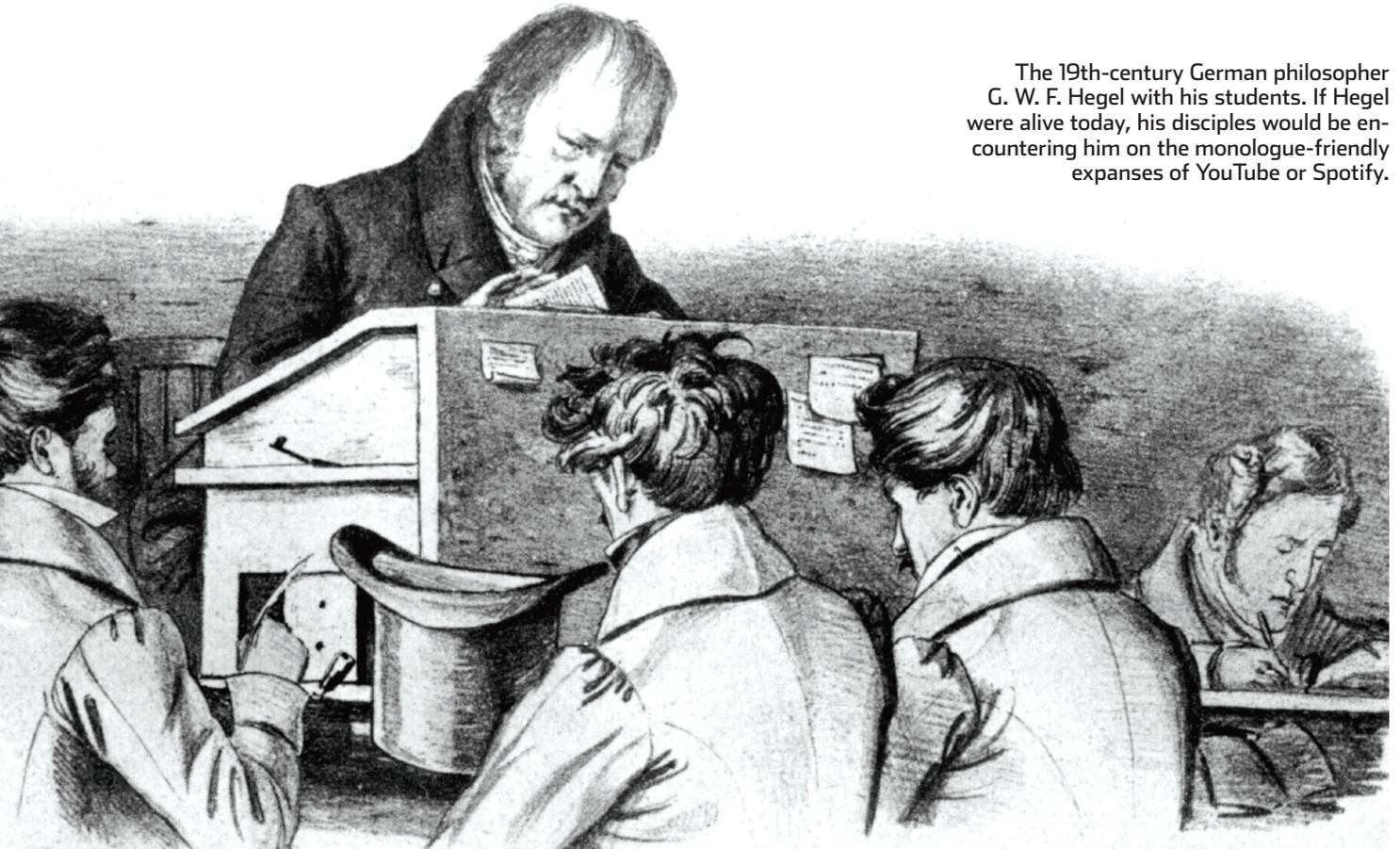
Plus, more time means more ad views.

Hegel’s ideas proved useful for calamities. Writing certain places and peoples out of history surely eased the self-deceptions necessary for colonial regimes. Among the “Young Hegelians” who built their ideas on the foundations of the master was Karl Marx; his metanarrative of class struggle has justified regimes willing to let millions of their own people die for the cause. The centrality of what became the German nation in Hegelian thought prepared the way for Nazi mythology. Once you understand the dialectic of history in the Hegelian sense, nothing else really matters, and human life can seem expendable.

I do not mean to malign the YouTube Hegelians



The 19th-century German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel with his students. If Hegel were alive today, his disciples would be encountering him on the monologue-friendly expanses of YouTube or Spotify.



through such associations, but the associations are cause for caution. They love to talk about complexity theory, but they tend to ignore the complexities and differences among human cultures. They abhor the claims of identity politics and rarely talk about sexism or racism or ableism, except in ridicule. In their grand storylines, such trifles ultimately do not seem important. The dialectics at play will be absorbed into what is really real: tidal waves of “exponential” technologies and epochal shifts, such as life extension and space travel.

The philosophers can claim innocence from the fray of culture wars because they have their eyes on the meta-wars. And they are particularly influential in the world-colonizing subculture of tech startups.

Going Meta

When Mark Zuckerberg renamed his company from Facebook to Meta in 2021, he did so under duress. Especially after the 2016 election, he became the leading villain of a “techlash.” Politicians, journalists and even some Silicon Valley peers accused him of destroying democracy at home, enabling genocide abroad and committing a host of other wrongs. A former employee, Frances Haugen, released troubling internal documents and testified about them before Congress. The language of “meta” offered an escape, a

way up and out. Zuckerberg made the rounds on Joe Rogan and Lex Fridman’s podcasts.

Many teenage millennial nerds like Zuckerberg (and me) learned about meta-ness from Douglas Hofstadter’s glorious 1979 book *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*. It is also a favorite of Schmachtenberger, who features the book at the top of his recommendation list, and, reportedly, Meta employees consulted with Hofstadter during the company’s rebrand. Hofstadter argued that “going meta” is a kind of law of nature, as well as a formula that recurs in mathematics, art and music. To change the frame of reference, he added, is to change the set of possibilities. When you shift from the individual melody to the symphony, or from binary instructions to JavaScript, the rules of the system change.

Long before Hofstadter, the language of meta entered the Western canon through Aristotle’s book *Metaphysics*. Aristotle did not actually name the book that; a later editor simply attached to it what seemed the most obvious possible title. “Meta” means “after” in Greek, and this work was in the catalog after the book called *Physics*. But the prefix took on a life of its own. *Metaphysics* discourses on the nature of being, causation and God—the conditions of possibility for everything else. Thus, to speak of the meta has become not a mere matter of sequence, but also one of



They can claim innocence from the culture wars because they have their eyes on the meta-wars.

transcendence. It is a claim to move from one level of reality to a more fundamental one.

To speak of the “metacrisis,” then, is to claim access to a crisis more real than reality appears to most of us. Going meta means shifting attention away from the problems of politics and culture, away from the world we read about in the news. Rather than fixating on election interference or genocides, Zuckerberg wants us to fixate on a future occurring in virtual worlds, as his company’s “metaverse” products seek to enable.

Jordan Hall, a tech entrepreneur and streaming philosopher, is with Schmachtenberger one of the leading theorists of the metacrisis. He speaks of it in terms of two distinct sets of rules: Game A and Game B. The distinction, we are told, takes many hours of content consumption to comprehend. But as near as I can grok it, the idea is that Game A is the dominant way of the world (acquisitive, competitive, self-destructive) and Game B is an orientation that prioritizes collective flourishing (creative, coordinated, coherent). Maybe Game A was working well for a while, but it runs into trouble because of “exponential” technologies—things like the internet and artificial intelligence, whose effects seem to accelerate and transform everything beyond anyone’s control.

The Game B philosophers have a technique for putting the culture wars in their place. Calls for undoing racism and sexism through social movements, for instance, are just Game A thinking. While Donald Trump and Ron DeSantis oppose feminists and antiracists with legislation and polemic, these philosophers do it with their transcendence—simply shifting attention elsewhere, away from the supposed present and toward what is just over the horizon. When one of the rare non-white streaming philosophers, Vinay Gupta, attempted to raise questions of race and colonialism in Game B discussions online, he experienced hostility and censorship from the community there. The leading voices seemed unwilling to challenge the prevailing behavior. Gupta characterized Schmachtenberger, for

instance, as “a spineless s—bag on race issues.”

The metacrisis playbook has been particularly visible since the release of the artificial intelligence chatbot ChatGPT. Tech entrepreneurs and investors have rallied around a science-fictional framing of the problem: Large-language models, which learn by analyzing huge amounts of digital text, are an exponential technology that will change everything, and policymakers should start taking responsibility for addressing the catastrophic threats that the supposedly intelligent technologies pose. This is what Sam Altman, the chief executive officer of ChatGPT creator OpenAI, has preached on his roadshows on Capitol Hill. Technologists can thus present themselves as the angels of history, the sources from whom the forces of true importance will come, while passing off the responsibility for their products’ harms to the geriatric politicians.

Meanwhile, tech critics like the former Google ethicist Timnit Gibru see the framing of future catastrophe as a distraction. We have enough problems with A.I. already, they say, and we know what they are: racial discrimination, evasions of accountability by decision-makers, corporations profiting from others’ creativity and an underground network of exploited human workers propping up the appearance of automation. When C.E.O.s point attention to the meta, the worry goes, they are turning regulators’ eye away from the actual injustices going on right in front of us.

In the light of the metacrisis, actual crises become harder to see. Weavers of abstraction obscure the agents of power politics, yet they come together around Joe Rogan’s mic.

Philosophy and Power

In early 2022, Lex Fridman announced: “I will travel to Russia and Ukraine. I will speak to citizens and leaders, including Putin.” He went on: “War is pain. My words are useless. I send my love, it’s all I have.”

Fridman was born in Soviet Tajikistan and claims family members on both sides of the Russian-Ukrainian border. His reflections on the war there have been particularly heartfelt and tortured, even for him—the rare public figure who regularly speaks and invites others to speak about love and hate. He seemed to place great hope in the peace-making potential of an interview with Vladimir Putin; repeatedly, he would ask guests for advice on what to ask. He seemed to imagine—in a sweet sort of way, really—that with the right kind of conversation, the fighting might end.

He traveled to Ukraine and described visiting the war’s front. The interview with Putin, however, did not materialize. The war rages on. Echoing Plato’s failure to reform a Sicilian despot with philosophy, once again philosophy could not corral political power. As Plato and Hegel found

in their own careers, philosophy's easiest path to political relevance is to concoct elaborate justifications for the powerful. This appears to be the role that the streaming philosophers are performing, not on behalf of some political party but for the corporate tech elite.

What do these self-described “heterodox” thinkers really believe? Perhaps it is more difficult to pin down an oral tradition than a written one, though that is less the case in a universe where every thought becomes a video on the internet and A.I. can transcribe it all. The streaming philosophers discussed here harbor a general skepticism of liberal institutions, such as government regulators, public health authorities and salaried journalists. During the Covid-19 lockdowns, they generally erred on the side of vaccine “skepticism” and whatever else might upset the designs of Dr. Anthony Fauci. Today, Lex Fridman invites guests to ponder the harms of “woke”-ness. And Jordan Hall has flirted with the right-libertarian school of propertarianism, which privileges the right to property over all else.

I asked Hall about his relationship to the culture wars over dinner at a conference we both recently attended at Harvard University. As a conversationalist around a crowded table, he was alternately pensive and jovial. But he said he would have to think about my question. The next morning he took me aside and said that the political debates of the moment are “not the hill I want to die on.”

Through the media of interviews and monologues, the philosophers themselves seem anxious to maintain plausible deniability with respect to any given position. Their calling is the bottomless sensemaking. Fridman seemed to believe, with respect to Vladimir Putin, that if the right men get together and have the right conversations, the great problems of the world can be solved. And yet he and his fellow philosophers have a kind of parasitic relationship to the culture wars they claim to transcend, because it is by enraging the partisans that they attract attention to themselves and their advertisers.

In 2022, David Fuller, founder of Rebel Wisdom, went on a retreat in India and decided to close down his platform. This move seems in tune with the anti-institutionalism and ephemerality of streaming philosophy. Yet in a series of essays and interviews, he lamented what had become of the movement he had helped build. Fuller laments that Jordan Peterson, whom he once admired, “is now little more than a boilerplate conservative commentator.”

Fuller described a kind of capture that streaming philosophers often fall for as they chase the dollars and dopamine rushes of online virality. “If you’re outside the institutions,” he explained, “you’re dependent on your audience, and audience feedback becomes a warping factor.”

A willingness to challenge certain political pieties can turn a person into an uncritical devotee of the opposite pieties. Probing the uncertainties of a pandemic in public can lead to obsessive anti-vaxxery.

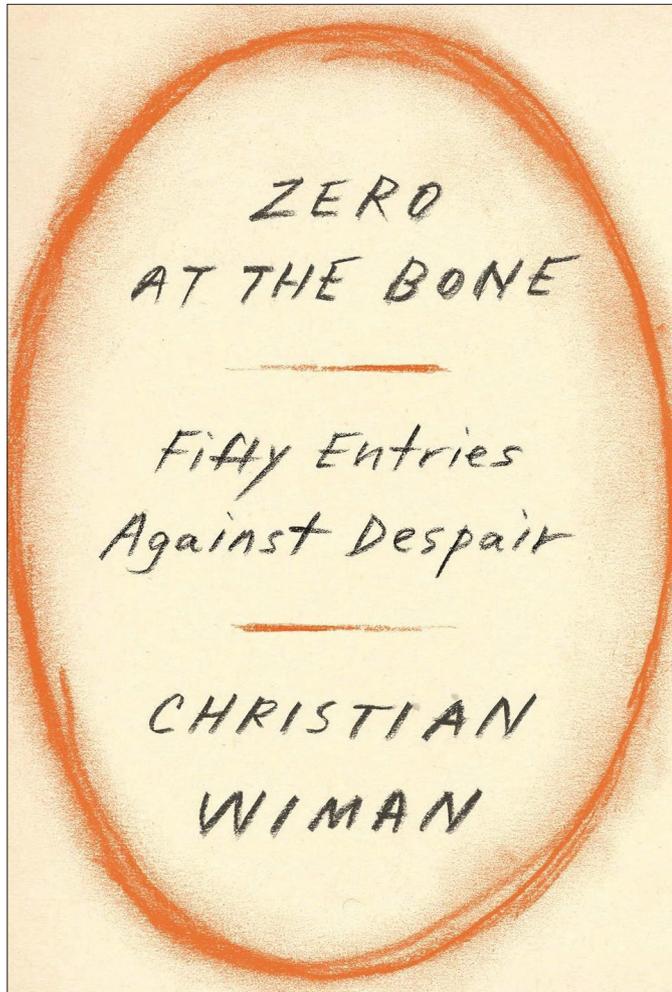
As Fuller considers next steps in his own career, he says he is interested in projects focused on masculinity. This has been the central topic for most of these streaming philosophers all along, though they have rarely acknowledged it as such. I mentioned to Hall that I considered him a role model for young men in particular, and he said he had not thought of himself that way. Yet he agreed that nearly all his public conversation partners happen to be men, just as nearly all the guests on Lex Fridman’s podcast are. Perhaps a more explicit examination of masculinity might help them recognize their interests as dependent upon the particular perceptions of a certain class of experience.

The world does need more conversation across dividing lines. I consider it a testament to my students and other young people who follow these figures that they crave this stuff: long conversations against the culture of brevity, and ideas that challenge the homogenizing pressures of a polarized time. But there are other lessons I hope my students learn—lessons that tend not to come up when tech founders are presented as the angels of history. Try to see the world through the eyes of the poor, not just the powerful. As much as you stay open-minded, be willing to commit.

It should come as a relief that humankind still has an appetite for depth. But is the depth we need to be found in rabbit holes?

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

LOOKING DESPAIR IN THE FACE



Farrar, Straus and Giroux / 320p \$27

A dozen years ago, Christian Wiman withdrew an essay before it could be published in a magazine. It concerned the writer's family in West Texas, where his father and sister suffered from severe drug addictions. An "unacknowledged sin" festered between the essay's lines.

The sin was his, Wiman confesses in his new book *Zero at the Bone: 50 Entries Against Despair*. Visiting his father and sister in a squalid motel "so close to the freeway you could touch the hum of the tires in the walls," Wiman thought his kin doomed. He fled Texas, allowing his love for them to sink "into the form of despair that doesn't simply refuse hope but actively snuffs it out."

"Sometimes we want a despair to be ultimate because it absolves us of action. Sometimes we simply seek protection from pain that in the past has found us too exposed," Wiman writes. In the essay, which is finally published in *Zero at the Bone*, he confesses in a coda: "I have finally faced this essay and the sin that lay at the center of it: a willed death of hope

in the face of a fragile but furious will to live."

His sister is now a beloved aunt to his twin daughters, and Wiman is a celebrated poet, memoirist and professor at the Yale School of Divinity. Their reconciliation began as he contemplated a question his sister asked years earlier. Wiman suffers from a rare form of blood cancer that requires painful experimental treatments. What is it like to live with death in your veins, she asked—one kind of estranged blood, asking about another.

Wiman recalls that his answer was lacking.

In *Zero at the Bone*, Wiman provides a more generous, though stringently unsentimental answer. This is not *Chicken Soup for the Literary Soul*. No tidy anecdotes or saccharine couplets. "A poem that's reducible to a message is not a good poem," Wiman asserts. Though an evangelist for poetry, Wiman defines good literature the way an apophatic theologian defines God, through a series of erasures and negations: "not this, not that."

"I'm tired of all this talk of literature as moral agent, beauty cultivating empathy (please), poetry as prayer, the endless instrumentalization of art," Wiman writes. He is also bored, for that matter, by "preachers and teachers and other professional talkers who treat poems like wisdom machines or shortcuts to a conclusion." And he is weary as well of the "megaphone mouths and stadium praise, influencers and effluencers and the whole tsunami of slop that comes pouring into our lives like toxic sludge."

"Hosanna!" sings the soggy choir.

What Wiman offers instead is a prismatic series of 50 chapters (52, counting the mystical zeros at the beginning and end) featuring essays, poems, theological reflections, personal reminiscences and literary analyses. Some chapters read almost as liturgies—quotations that ripple around a central mystery—while others feel like lectures from Wiman's classroom at Yale.

Though Wiman's cancer requires continual treatment, he remains prolific in his literary endeavors. The editor of *Poetry* magazine from 2003 to 2015, he has written six books of poetry and four books of prose, including his widely praised 2013 memoir *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer*.

Zero at the Bone most accurately reflects what he describes as his "Ninja blender of a mind." Wiman writes:

I have published poetry, translation, criticism, theology, memoir, anthologies. They come out discreetly, but I don't experience them that way.... I want to write a book true to the storm of forms

and needs, the intuitions and impossibilities, that I feel myself to be. That I feel life to be.

Life today for many of us feels pretty stormy and desperate, not to mention fragmented and often inscrutable. In those senses, *Zero at the Bone* is of the moment. But Wiman is not against despair in the sense that he is “against, say, Donald Trump.” In fact, he writes, “I’m sometimes very much in favor of despair when it’s a realistic appraisal of odious circumstances—like Donald Trump.”

But the kind of despair Wiman is most interested in is existential. He focuses on the fate, as Philip Larkin writes in his poem “Aubade,” that we can neither accept nor escape: “the sure extinction that we travel to/ and shall be lost in always.” Or, to paraphrase the French mystic Simone Weil, a theological touchstone for Wiman, to be human is to be haunted by the awareness that every second brings us closer to something we will not be able to bear.

Wiman, who learned of his cancer diagnosis nearly two decades ago, is an expert in this kind of suffering. He writes, “I had—have—cancer. I have been living with it—dying with it—for so long now that it bores me, or baffles me, or drives me into the furthest crannies of literature and theology in search of something that will both speak and spare my own pain.”

The fruits of that search appear in *Zero at the Bone*, which has drawn comparisons to a “commonplace book,” a form with roots in the Renaissance when readers inscribed quotations into personal notebooks. Insta-quotes before the “infinite scroll.”

I have my own erratic commonplace book, a notebook that is full of Wimanisms from *My Bright Abyss*. Someday I will add these quotes from *Zero at the Bone*: “Paradise is the purity no one ever wanted.” “Faith is a grace, not an achievement.” Keen observations about how a family at a funeral is “knit together by this death,” storefronts in vacant towns “fuse failure and survival into a single aspect” and how our lives can be “sewn shut with habit.”

Wiman also includes wisdom from others, featuring poets like Emily Dickinson, Adelia Prado, Etheridge Knight and William Bronk. He is at his most convincing when plumbing the depths of poetic lines. He explains, for example, why Bronk’s poem “The World”—“the saddest poem I know”—also, somehow, brings him “major peace.”

Bronk’s poem reads, in part:

*There isn’t an anchor in the drift of the world. Oh no.
I thought you were. Oh no. The drift of the world.*

Wiman, a Christian with a mystic’s sense of God’s ul-

timate unknowability and a saint’s impatience with formal religion, says he has found faith to be less a source of comfort than “a provocation to a life I never seem to live up to.” Still, Bronk’s poem sends him lurching for the anchors of his life: “My wife and my work, my God. Oh no.”

So how does this “cosmically compressed elegy” inspire elation? Its power is partly technical: its sounds, form and strategic silences. But for Wiman, the deeper meaning derives from the sense of solidarity it evokes. We may not have an anchor, but at least we are in the same boat.

“Something of our deepest sadness, which is our deepest loneliness, has been faced and, precisely because it has been faced, lifted up,” Wiman writes. The load has been lifted, if not lightened. “It is, literally, deadweight. Which makes the way it’s been raised all the more miraculous.”

Daniel Burke is the director of communications at the Center on Faith and Justice at Georgetown University. He previously covered religion for Religion News Service and CNN.

ANOTHER DOUBTING SONNET

By Renee Emerson

When my daughter broke her foot, misshapen
scream at the bottom of the slide we built
ourselves in the joy of our children’s joy,

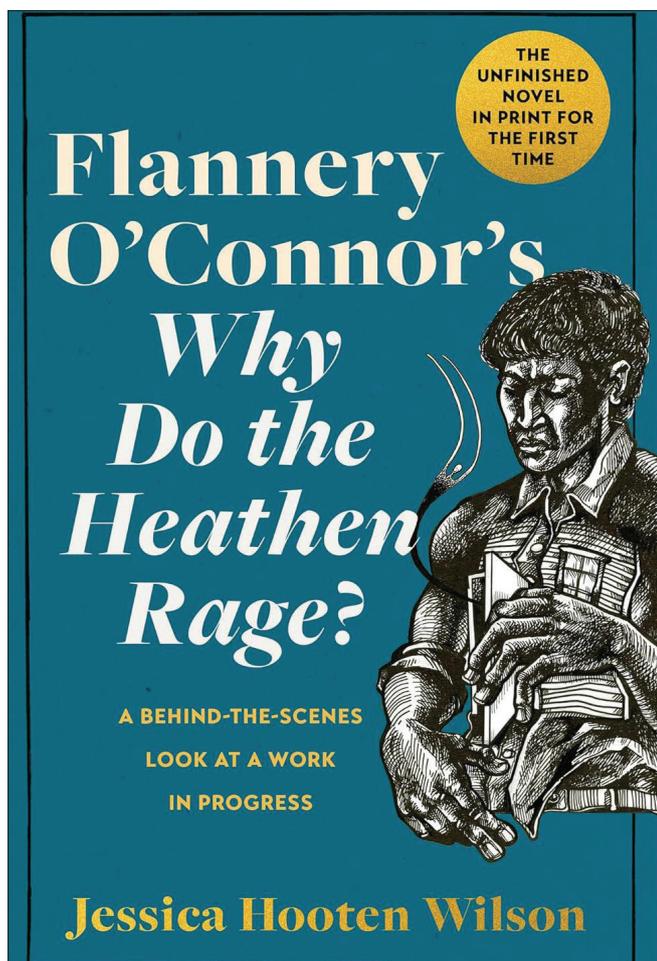
I wondered if God feels this too—
His cliffs and those that slip off them,
His oceans swiftly closing up lungs
like a thief in a jewelry box, emptied.

So many beautiful creatures devouring
beautiful creatures, even as some of our own
bodies devour the body, cells innocent
in their hunger. I held her hand while she fell
asleep, a mercy, and skilled hands set it straight.

I forget—did God make death? Or only
the knowledge of it—hanging on a tree, growing
brighter in the sun, so as to catch the eye.

Renee Emerson is the author of the poetry collections *Threshing Floor* and *Church Ladies* and the YA novel *Why Silas Miller Must Learn to Ride a Bike*.

O'CONNOR'S SACRAMENTAL VISION



Brazos Press / 192p \$25

Flannery O'Connor once made a dinner-party defense of the Eucharist that became so well known in Catholic literary circles it was made into a T-shirt slogan. Around the table: O'Connor, the poet Robert Lowell and the writer Elizabeth Hardwick, the writer Mary McCarthy and her husband, Robert Broadwater. Writing about the evening in a letter to a friend, perhaps pointedly referring to Mary McCarthy as "Mrs. Broadwater," O'Connor described how McCarthy said she thought of the Eucharist "as a symbol and implied that it was a pretty good one." Compelled to speak for the first time that evening at a table where she felt out of place, both scornful of others and scorned herself, O'Connor said—"in a very shaky voice"—"Well, if it's a symbol, to hell with it."

In some ways, this scene from O'Connor's life could be drawn from one of her stories: a misfit character, uncomfortable and out of place. A prophetic (and profane) voice, puncturing a self-satisfied culture. Language—an act of speech—becomes something more than itself, transcending dinner-party chatter. Something else is happening

here. Continuing her letter to her friend, O'Connor writes, "That was all the defense I was capable of but I realize now that this is all I will ever be able to say about it, outside of a story, except that it is the center of existence for me; all the rest is expendable."

I found myself thinking of this scene—and these words—often as I read Jessica Hooten Wilson's deft and important new book, *Flannery O'Connor's 'Why Do the Heathen Rage?': A Behind-the-Scenes Look at a Work in Progress*. Framing it as a "literary excavation," Hooten Wilson builds the book around the previously unpublished manuscript pages of O'Connor's third novel, which was never finished. Indeed, O'Connor was working on and struggling with the manuscript when she died at the age of 39 in 1964.

In the decades since O'Connor's untimely death from the complications of lupus, she has at times been made into a kind of symbol, in the way artists who die young or tragically sometimes are, although her dark, complicated and theologically rich work defies that flattening. With this book, Hooten Wilson braved a fraught project; it would be easy to approach an excavated and eternally unfinished manuscript by one of American literature's most canonized writers from an overly symbolic or hagiographical perspective. Throughout the book, Hooten Wilson mostly resists any symbolic flattening or posthumous domestication, bringing the reader back with her into O'Connor's archives and into our past, and demonstrating how that past shapes our present and future. Like O'Connor, Hooten Wilson knows that we need more than symbols—we need a sacramental vision.

To tell the story of the unfinished manuscript, Hooten Wilson uses three interwoven narratives: the materials and processes of O'Connor's work-in-progress; Hooten Wilson's research and relationship to that work; and the reader's own relationship to what is found here. "Just like O'Connor's work," Hooten Wilson writes, in explaining the choice to share this unfinished work in this way, "the full story includes the reader."

As shown by O'Connor's earlier epiphany (that she has said all she can say about the Eucharist "outside of a story"), she feels she can say more with story than she can speak. And yet the pages and scenes O'Connor left behind—excerpted, collected and contextualized in this book by Hooten Wilson—do not fully become a story, in the archives or in these pages. Hooten Wilson acknowledges this tension usefully in the introduction and throughout her curatorial and editorial material.

Part of the story, then, becomes how Hooten Wilson makes sense of what is here. When she first visited the



O'Connor was working on and struggling with the manuscript when she died at the age of 39.

O'Connor archives at the Georgia College & State University in 2009, she was confronted with a daunting task. In 1970, when O'Connor's papers were first acquired, the archiving librarians identified and separated out 378 typewritten pages that belonged to a new novel project, with the working title *Why Do the Heathen Rage?* Although these pages fill 19 file folders, they do not convey an order or structure. The names of characters change, along with their histories and contexts. Hooten Wilson notes that there are "a dozen or so episodes" found in the manuscript pages, 10 of which are included in the book.

Hooten Wilson is meticulous with citations and sources, carefully detailing in endnotes the files from which each section draws. She notes that "my version of these pages comes from intersplicing sentences and paragraphs from left-behind pages, making editorial choices about which words O'Connor meant to cut or keep, and presuming to show the best of what was left unfinished." At times, I desired a closer look behind the scenes of this process: Why were these 10 episodes chosen out of the 12? How exactly did the intersplicing work? How did the manuscript itself teach Hooten Wilson how to read it, if it did?

In one pivotal chapter, Hooten Wilson does give us a quick feel for O'Connor's drafting process, introducing an initial opening sentence, showing it mid-edit with the writer's strike-through marks, and then showing what O'Connor eventually landed on. On the whole, however, Hooten Wilson's decision to feature the scenes from the novel interspersed with her own bracketed reflections and insights conveys a lovely sense of reading the primary text alongside her, sharing in the archival process of slowly turning pages between different kinds of work and mulling over the connections.

Adding to that sense of turning pages and joining an ongoing conversation between thinkers and artists are the linoleum cuts by Steve Price, created for this book, that offer a striking visual contrapuntal throughout, often paired with specific scenes in the novel. I found myself looking at each for a long time, and flipping back to look again after finishing the connected section, with what felt like a deeper vision. With characteristic editorial insight, Hooten Wilson was inspired to ask Price to illustrate after a precedent set by the artist Benny Andrews's illustrations for a special edition of O'Connor's short story "Everything That Rises Must Converge."

The son of a sharecropper, Andrews was born in Georgia in 1930, just a few years and a few hundred miles away from O'Connor. Hooten Wilson quotes from Andrews's accompanying afterword to that story, which he says describes characters "at the crossroads, but that's just where

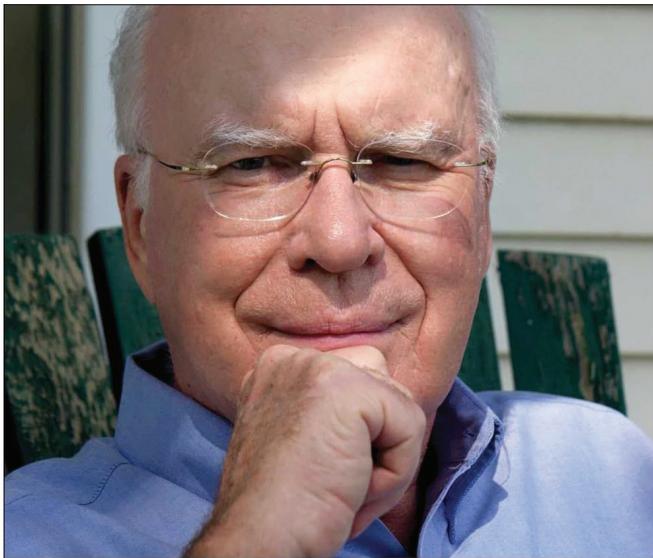
they are."

In his own afterword to Wilson's book, Price shows a similar sense of nuance and generosity of vision, as he worked with a text that at times shows O'Connor's failures of vision, especially around race. He names the guiding image for his part of the project as the sankofa, a Ghanaian mythical bird: "This bird moves forward while looking back."

Ultimately, I think that image also describes Hooten Wilson's project with O'Connor's work here: moving forward while looking back. Moving forward, in fact, *because* one has looked back, to see more fully what is there. Re-counting her own journey with a Flannery O'Connor who taught her that "faith should never be used to sanitize fiction," Hooten Wilson describes seeking out "professors... who would teach her to me."

With this close and careful excavation, Hooten Wilson teaches us how to read O'Connor, and how to let O'Connor read us. She shows us both O'Connor's sacramental vision and where it ultimately—and painfully—falls short. This way of reading invites us to see where we are falling short, where our own vision fails us: where we make the mistake of seeing symbols, instead of sacraments.

Sophia Stid is the author of the chapbooks But for I Am a Woman and Whistler's Mother. She has also published poems and essays in Best New Poets, Poetry Daily and the Kenyon Review.



The
Road Taken

— A MEMOIR —

Senator Patrick Leahy

Simon and Schuster / 480p \$30

Like many great statesmen, Patrick Leahy is a chameleon. He is the small-town lawyer from Vermont who became a Democratic senator and moved comfortably for decades in the corridors of power. He is the “Watergate Baby” who challenged the old ways of doing business in Congress before evolving into one of the greatest defenders of the institution’s norms. On matters of both policy and cultural sensibility, the now-retired politician has a way of seeming simultaneously traditional and progressive.

These juxtapositions are at the core of *The Road Taken*, Leahy’s deeply personal new memoir. He writes lovingly about his family, his Catholic faith and his home state but seems focused largely on describing the Washington, D.C., that was—and what it has become.

Leahy is one of many Washington veterans who lament the erosion of old-fashioned give-and-take, across-the-aisle, art-of-the-possible parliamentary imperatives, laying blame for their decline largely at the feet of Donald Trump and his political allies. In the latter stages of the book, Leahy pillories Trump as a gasbag who never listens

to anyone. In Leahy’s mind, the Trump administration succeeded primarily in unmooring the country’s governing institutions to the point of unworkability, putting piles of right-wing judges on the bench and setting the stage for the Jan. 6 insurrection.

Leahy concedes that the ignorance he witnessed from the MAGA crowd has crept into the Democratic side of the aisle. Citing the Amy Coney Barrett confirmation hearings for the Supreme Court, Leahy bemoans the counterproductive tactics some liberal and left-wing groups employed to oppose Barrett’s nomination. These included the idea that Democratic senators should have simply boycotted the hearings, which would have allowed for her confirmation without Barrett even facing serious questioning.

Despite Leahy’s extensive discussions of recent events in Washington, his memoir is not primarily a rumination on the recent past. It reads more like a requiem for a far-from-perfect, though basically positive, political culture. Nor is this a book thorough in its dissections of public policy or the legislative process. *The Road Taken* is a kind of catalog of *dramatis personae*, but not just of people, because Leahy also focuses on the places he inhabited.

Leahy spent eight terms in the Senate; many of the people he cites are well-known. Never does the appearance of a big figure come across as name dropping. If anything, he talks about his interactions with Washington bigwigs to show how much the kind of person inhabiting those positions has changed.

“Mr. Conservative,” Barry Goldwater, for example, takes the stage to stand up for the Supreme Court nomination of his friend and longtime colleague Sandra Day O’Connor against criticism from ideologues within his own party. O’Connor went on to be confirmed 99-0, a tally that would be unthinkable today.

Leahy writes with great warmth about three prairie legislators, all with distinct political inclinations, who mentored him upon his arrival in Washington: Bob Dole, George McGovern and Hubert Humphrey. As a native Vermonter, he related a great deal to each of their rural upbringings and admired their respective commitments to working in a bipartisan fashion to achieve shared policy goals. Though Leahy never discussed it explicitly, his memoir demonstrates the degree to which the political diversity that existed in Washington several decades ago has dissolved in favor of a politics of litmus tests.

Leahy spends considerable time discussing his life as a Catholic in Vermont, historically a Protestant stronghold. His father was an Irish Catholic Democrat in a state where their numbers were few and far between. Leahy’s education came entirely through Catholic schools. He



Leahy is one of many Washington veterans who lament the erosion of old-fashioned give-and-take.

attended parochial elementary and secondary schools in Montpelier before spending his undergraduate days at St. Michael's College in Colchester, Vt., studying government at the Edmundite institution. At St. Michael's, Leahy found a mentor in Ed Pfeifer, a historian who had attended the same schools that he had in Montpelier. Pfeifer played a significant role in shaping Leahy's interests and aspirations, "challenging us to think critically, test our ideas, and debate relentlessly."

Leahy concluded his education at Georgetown Law School. Well before attending law school in Washington, Leahy caught the "political bug"—a product of both his upbringing and formal education. In 1960, Leahy knocked on doors for John F. Kennedy. He heard time and again from Vermont voters who, even though they were not exactly fond of Richard Nixon, felt that they had to vote for the Republican because Kennedy was a Catholic. Even after Kennedy's historic election win, this lesson about voter prejudice remained front and center in Leahy's mind.

When Leahy decided to run for the Senate in 1974, not only were his youth (he was 33) and party affiliation considered detriments to his electability; his Catholic faith was still also considered a hurdle, nearly 15 years after Kennedy was elected president. A castle keep of Yankee WASPdom, Vermont had elected its first Catholic governor, Tom Salmon, only two years earlier, but Leahy benefited from the "throw the bums out" mentality of the first election after Watergate. The Vermont press dubbed him "the accidental senator"—the election of a Catholic in that state being no small part of the "accident."

Turning to more recent times, Leahy expresses particular ire with "the convenient, sudden interest of so many non-Catholics in defending the faith," pointing out episodes of Republican politicians advancing their policy goals by painting their opponents as anti-Catholic bigots on issues such as abortion. He seethes at Republicans such as Rick Santorum and Josh Hawley (who was raised Methodist but later joined a Reformed church), whom he describes as explaining to him what political opinions made someone a "real" Catholic—itsself a bizarre manifestation of litmus-test political culture.

Shockingly, the event that made Leahy a statewide figure in Vermont, giving him sufficient name recognition and reputation to challenge for a Senate seat, receives nary a mention. During his tenure as state's attorney in Chittenden County (Vermont's most populous county), Leahy took down a villainous narcotics agent named Paul Lawrence who planted drugs on dozens of young Vermonters and put piles of innocent people in jail. Leahy and his squad caught Lawrence red-handed, and the one-time

Green Mountain State "super cop" found himself behind bars. Governor Tom Salmon ended up pardoning 71 people convicted based on Lawrence's testimony.

While *The Road Taken* offers an incomplete look at the legacy of the senator from Vermont, it reveals a series of often compelling snapshots of his life and times. At its best, it reads like an acquaintance's yearbook, replete with the signatures and recollections of other familiar faces.

Clayton Trutor *teaches history at Norwich University in Vermont. He is the author of Loserville: How Professional Sports Remade Atlanta—and How Atlanta Remade Professional Sports and Boston Ball: Jim Calhoun, Rick Pitino, Gary Williams, and College Basketball's Forgotten Cradle of Coaches.*

Catechisms in Verse

By Delaney Coyne, Joe Hoover, Christine Lenahan and Michael O'Brien

In Spencer Reece's poem "Ayer," from his new collection, *Acts*, the priest-poet talks about his bishop, who "had spent the day visiting churches/ and a gypsy that was begging for the host."

The worth and work of religious poetry are summed up right there, in seven words about a gypsy craving, *begging for* the Eucharist. They are a catechism unto themselves, saying more about Christ's needful place in the human universe than perhaps any doctrinal statement about God ever could.

For **America's** spring poetry roundup, we have selected several collections that bear the traces of the divine, of the needful Christ—whether they name him directly or indirectly, by plumbing the depths of his creation.

•••

Philip Metres's *Fugitive/Refuge* traces his family's journey as refugees from Lebanon to Mexico to the United States in the form of a *qasida*, an Arabic poem in three parts. Though it takes a centuries-old form, *Fugitive/Refuge* is intensely contemporary, painting the immigrant experience with vivid emotional color. With palpable melancholy, Metres recalls reconnecting with his mother over Zoom: "In a poem, I once wrote// *If the sky were a voice, it would/ be yours*. The years rub it to a fluted rasp,/ raspier over the audio// of compressed memory."

As he writes about these stilted connections, Metres rejects the immigrant dream as channeled through Americana like Emma Lazarus's "The New Colossus." (In Metres's retelling of that poem in "The New New Colossus," he writes about the "Mother of Exiles," a migrant woman crying out: "Storied landlords, open your doors/ to us, the roofless.") But Metres does not portray an immigrant nightmare

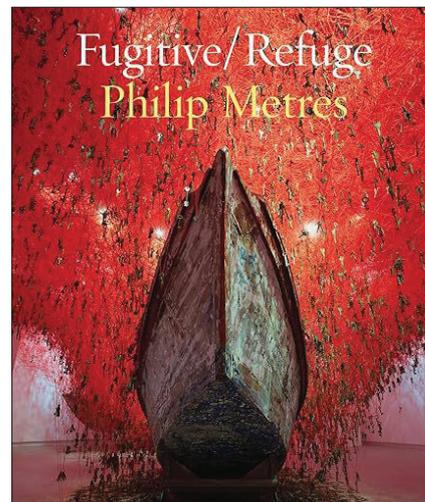
either. Even as he laments what was left behind, he writes with reverence about the new life being forged on this unstable terrain: "O crucible of continents shifting table of continents/ O cumulative quake O unfolding quote O hip bowl/ you tilt as you spill into hope."

Delaney Coyne

Written during the shifting tides of the early 1980s in the Soviet Union, the Russian poet Olga Sedakova's *Old Songs* (translated by Martha M. F. Kelly), finds shelter in her expansive inner world to navigate questions about life, death, memory, faith and eternity. She engages the paradoxes inherent in all these things and writes about them with the precision of a practiced craftsman. Sedakova warns against self-obsessive ruminations about death and legacy. Her Orthodox faith enables her to contemplate death with assured curiosity: "Better instead to wonder aloud:/ what gleams white there on the green hill?" She does not regard faith as a balm to quell one's morbid neuroses, though; it is a fragile thing that must be protected. "I know that the soul is an infant/ an infant until its final hour,// that it believes absolutely everything,/ and it sleeps in a den of thieves," she writes.

Sedakova places her hope in what lies beyond, but she does not reject the world. She embraces all things good, from glass beads to her beloved, even if they will all one day be washed away: "Ocean will never fall into river,/ and river will never return to its source, and there's not one soul that time has spared—/ and yet I love you as if/ all of that was and will be."

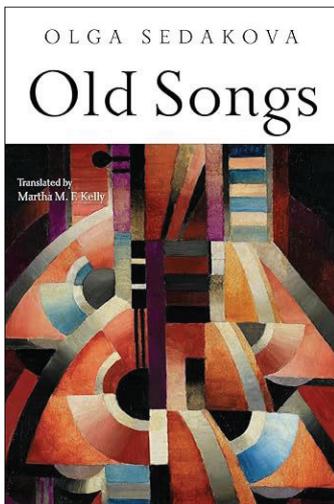
Delaney Coyne



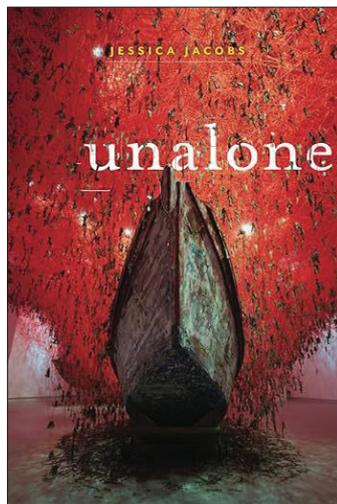
Fugitive/Refuge by Philip Metres
\$22 / 144p
Copper Canyon Press

"*Make a fence*, said the rabbis, around the Torah. And this world/ is lousy with them," Jessica Jacobs laments in her new collection, *un-alone*, a poetic journey through the Book of Genesis. Jacobs (whose book has a strikingly similar cover to that of Philip Metres's *Fugitive/Refuge*) takes a different approach from the rabbis: "Let every fence in my mind have a gate./ With an easy latch and well oiled hinges." Her thoughts on Scripture, Jewish life and tradition, her experience as a queer woman, and the beauty and brokenness of this world effortlessly flow together, bleeding and blending like watercolors.

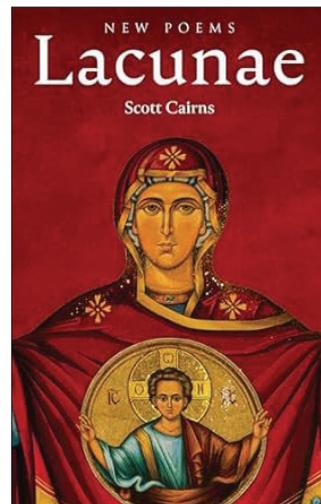
Jacobs charts a chronological path through Genesis, dialoguing with other writers and the text itself. She does not treat the characters in Genesis as towering figures but as human beings. From there she draws a lineage of humanity: a winding thread connecting Isaac's complex relationship with Abraham to the lingering questions the writer herself cannot ask her mother. To Jacobs, Genesis is a living, breathing thing. That contemporary connection is not only personal but political: The text's floods and famines are not so far from today's climate crisis. She sketches the poem "That We



Old Songs by Olga Sedakova
(translated by Martha M. F. Kelly)
\$17 / 98p
Slant Books



unalone by Jessica Jacobs
\$18 / 208p
Four Way Books



Lacunae by Scott Cairns
\$21 / 112p
Iron Pen

May Live and Not Die” as a kind of outline, and she concludes with a few recommendations: “a. Remember/ i. These stories are old ones./ (a) And they repeat.”

Delaney Coyne

The title of Scott Cairns’s newest collection of poems, *Lacunae*, means “unfilled spaces” or “gaps.” The gaps Cairns vividly illustrates in this collection consist of those moments when we feel a hole in the space where God usually is—both for better and for worse.

In “Absent Gods,” Cairns writes of a void humanity collectively feels regarding a lack of a relationship with God, noting that “...all the living/ are obliged to be in their confused slog/ across such chafing days as these./ Nor, I gather,/ so gods as these give any thought to us.”

With these words, Cairns laments that often, the apathy that higher powers have for us (or can seem to, anyway) is a two-way street: God (or the gods) doesn’t think about us, so why should we think about God?

But Cairns also views the search for God in moments when we think God is absent to be just as beautiful and meaningful as the moments when

we know God is right beside us.

In “An Opening, A Glimpse” (a title both similar to and a foil of the title of the collection), Cairns likens God’s presence in our lives to a wide sea; it will always be there, but we often take for granted how wide and expansive a body it is. We can even forget it is there.

Michael O’Brien

A collection of spiritual poetry does not traditionally begin “topless at the office/ like a scandal.” (Do not worry, dear reader, she is “Pumping Milk,” as the title of the preface poem tells us.) But there could be no finer way to begin Heather Lanier’s new book *Psalms of Unknowing* masterfully broaches both motherhood and misogyny. Lanier is a kind of poetic psalmist, whose lyrical poems traverse conversations with politically charged neighbors, gun violence, the merits of good humor and the spiritual wonderment of a silent retreat.

Lanier’s poems about her daughter in the section titled “And The Child...” add up to a raw portrayal of raising a child with a disability. “Your Eyes, My Daughter, Are Genius Caliber” feels like a childhood blanket

fresh out of the dryer, coming to swaddle our hearts and make us whole. But the most important to note in *Psalms of Unknowing* are the poems that look at violence and oppression, particularly “The War We Barely Knew” and one that begins “Bear Leads Police in Wild Chase,” and ask what bounty we can make out of the very little left behind when tragedy befalls us and grief steals our joys. Motherhood, Christianity and social responsibility are thoughtfully examined and reframed in this collection, leaving the reader to wonder if we can ever find “*the kingdom/ said Christ/...at hand.*”

Christine Lenahan

Diana Woodcock’s collection *Holy Sparks* draws us into the beating heart of the ecological crisis, investigating the relationship between the Creator and the created. In the prophetic and prayerful voice of the “eco-poet,” Woodcock invites the reader into an ecological exegesis while masterfully crafting succinct, rhythmic lines. Woodcock’s meditations on the natural world, particularly on birds and their habits, serve as metaphors for how we ought to approach the climate crisis, just as birds “approach the

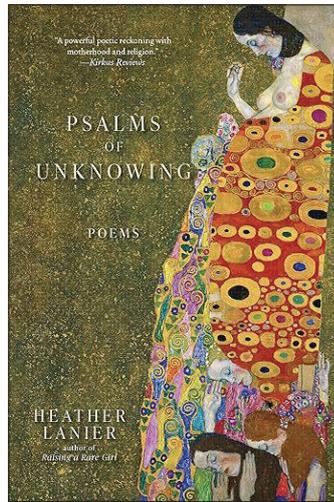
world with such/ non-aggression and clear vision.”

There is a subdued cry for ecological justice in her lines, but just because the voice calling for change is quiet, that does not mean it is any less important. In “We Are Not Gods,” Woodcock describes in detail the earth’s current ecological devastation, highlighting “how close/ we are to the edge” and how the impact of our overconsumption and irrevocable decisions to pollute the earth remind us that “Behold,/ we are not gods. What if it’s already/ too late?”

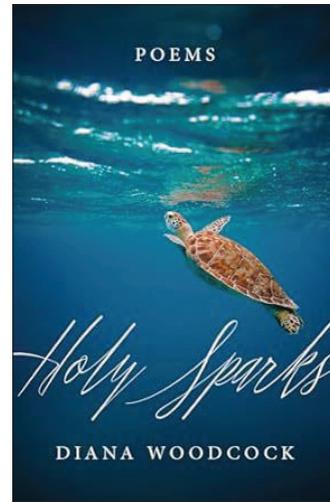
Christine Lenahan

“Poems, ideally, should be like saints’ lives. That is, they should be experiments in magical thinking and include at least two miracles,” writes Sara Nicholson in her collection *April*. Even though “One must occasionally allow oneself/ Bourgeois imaginings,” Nicholson puts her magical thinking under scrutiny, asking the reader if there are “any good poems/ About saying it./ If you find one let me know.” The antecedent of that “it” is unclear, which intentionally obfuscates any central thematic elements of her collection.

But throughout each poem, these thematic elements reveal themselves to the reader. Much of her collection questions whether or not language is considered “art.” Nicholas describes the complexities of Cézanne’s painting “Léda au Cygne” (“Leda and the Swan”) in her poem “The Archetype.” In “The Goatherd and the Saint,” she watches a woman play Candy Crush on her cellphone in an art museum. In both pieces, Nicholson plays with prosody and the limits of language as



Psalms of Unknowing by Heather Lanier
\$17 / 92p
Monkfish Book Publishing



Holy Sparks by Diana Woodcock
\$21 / 128p
Paraclete Press

it attempts to describe art.

Nicholson is conscious of herself as a poet. In “The Burden,” she reveals that she does not have the artillery of language that other poets may have. “I don’t know the Latin names of flowers. I know that there are cities wherein stars// Will labor to appear in bursts...” And yet Nicholson seems to mirror saints’ lives in her miraculous use of language in “Utopia”: “I aim to simplify/ my loss, ambition, rage and joy/ Into a single word/ And speak it to you, Love.”

Christine Lenahan

A few verses in his poem “Pentecostes” sum up the tone and tenor of the acclaimed poet Spencer Reece’s *Acts*. Reece, an Episcopal priest, tucks the exigencies of the body into the reality of modern-day religion into the native humor to be found in church life: “We used to say Holy Ghost but now we don’t, our British organist with hemorrhoids,/ one of the only Anglican things we’ve got,/ sitting on her foam donut/ said the church thought it too Halloween.”

Reece, who was born in Connecticut and raised in Minnesota, focuses this book on a period he spent in Spain

as the chaplain to a local bishop. This collection is not an easy read, trafficking as it does in disease, discharge, blood, violence, hemorrhoids and, on top of it all, religion, which can cause its own trauma. The poems glance in and look out, motioning back and forth between church and body and condoms and sex and Lorca and Vega and the residue of life under the dictator Francisco Franco, who hated Protestants.

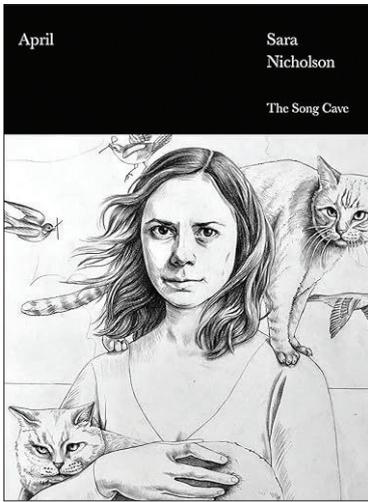
What is it like, ultimately, to be an Episcopal priest in a Catholic land? “Spaniards whisper as if nothing had less hope/ than to be childless and worship without the Pope.”

Joe Hoover

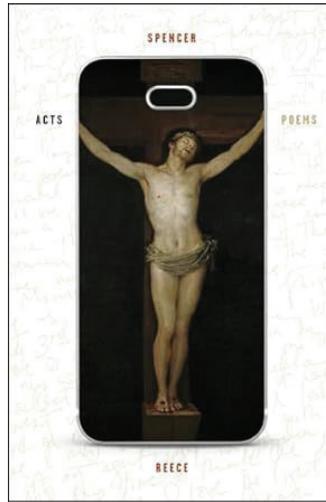
Fog fills the hollows of the land and the contours of Ryan Wilson’s soul in his masterful new book of poetry, *In Ghostlight*. This volume is a stunner, blistering quietly through shrouds of fog and mist and longing.

In the opening poem, “The Call,” a boy wakes up to a world dark, foreboding, macabre, and then he gets out of bed “to seek what I could not possess,/ Life howling through the dark hill’s wilderness.”

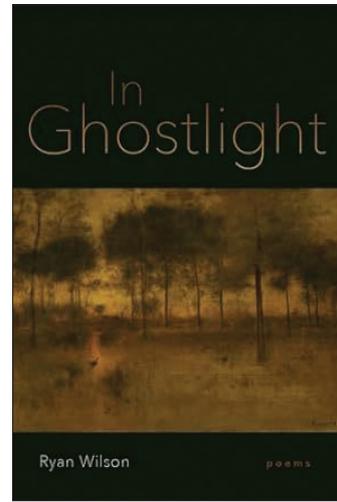
Wilson journeys back to a home-



April by Sarah Nicholson
\$19 / 90p
The Song Cave



Acts by Spencer Reece
\$27 / 128p
Farrar, Straus and Giroux



In Ghostlight by Ryan Wilson
\$18 / 72p
LSU Press

town he hasn't visited in two decades and offers us a quiet, lyrical homage to Springsteen territory: "It's twenty years since I last came back home./ The nearby houses sag, bleared clapboard ruins."

The book is populated by people exhausted by life, walking in death, a ghostly moonscape. Wilson describes the basic human duties of life as being "like those one-hit wonders still// Crooning in ever-smaller dives of soon-/ To-be-ghost-towns beloved tunes they hate."

It is something of a relief to find a basic, lovely truth in the poem "Christmas Party":

"And bless that hallowed world which no names name,/ Where we're all citizens, and loved the same."

Joe Hoover

Delaney Coyne, Christine Lenahan and Michael O'Brien are *America O'Hare* fellows. Joe Hoover, S.J., is *America's* poetry editor.

Here are some other new works by poets who rotate in the general **America** universe—some of whom we have published before—that we thought might be of interest to our readers.

Survivor's Notebook,

by Dan O'Brien

The playwright and poet lays bare the bones of his life, giving us entrance to the reality of his struggles in the space of a few perfectly chosen words. "Like the summer after my brother tried suicide when nothing was resolved or named."

Chance Encounters,

by Sister Sharon Hunter, C.J.

A member of the Congregation of Jesus contemplates the everyday sacred moments of religious life and the childhood that birthed it. "Every large family has a strange child/ in my family that was me."

Salt of the Earth,

by Patrick T. Reardon

Punchy, brawny poems of a Catholic and a former Chicago Tribune reporter. "How pipe the foreign/ How altar the yearn?/ How street the knowledge of death?"

Butterfly Nebula,

by Laura Reece Hogan

Sea creatures, moths, stars and Ophelia

tangle with the exigencies of the body and the longings of faith. "She would think better of it. She would shed/ the capsizing layers of skirt. She would wedge-cut/ the tresses, say good riddance to tangle."

Prayershreds,

by Bruce Beasley

Psalms from an abundance of religions, a thesaurus, a chatbot and anything else the author can get his hands on. "I am words in a language I don't speak."

Meditations at Midnight,

by Gary Jansen

Meditations on the passion of Christ and on the wider passions and stories of the author's abundant life. "Don't cry for me, you say/ The World keeps God away/ Weep because of that."

Dear Dante,

by Angela Alaimo O'Donnell

A conversation in verse with the 14th-century Italian master Dante Alighieri. "Lured by your language, we blindly follow you,/ pray none of the things you write comes true."

What Can Ancient Solemnities Teach a Modern People?

The month of May brings the end of the Easter season and with it several important liturgical observances. Many of these are strange in a dominant culture that is more and more unchurched. How does the Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity, for example, speak to a teenager who does not know the first thing about Jesus beyond a media reference? What do the Holy Spirit's "tongues of fire" on Pentecost mean to a people of faith so distant in time from the church's birth two thousand years ago?

With every difficulty comes an opportunity. The biblical readings for the Sundays of May can inspire a sense of awe for mysteries that challenge everyone. In particular, the readings for the last Sunday in May provide an opportunity for basic catechesis, deeper spiritual formation and renewed love for a God who communicates through direct relationship with humanity. The first reading on Trinity Sunday considers God's self-revelation through a set of questions: "Did anything so great ever happen before?"

Was it ever heard of? Did a people ever hear the voice of God speaking from the midst of fire, as you did, and live?" (Dt 4:32-33). As Moses spoke to his people with encouragement about divine things, the biblical readings for the month of May speak to us about divine mysteries that can still transform.

Jesus "ascending" with the sound of royal trumpets can comfort and empower a community in a time of crisis. The "fire" of the Holy Spirit can inspire churches wishing to be of greater service to their communities. In places where rugged individualism is the highest value, reflecting on the shared space of the divine persons of the Trinity can lead to a deeper appreciation of human community and interdependence. The most important lesson in the month of May, however, may come right at the beginning, on the Sixth Sunday of Easter: "This I command you: love one another" (Jn 15:17).

SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER (B), MAY 5, 2024

There Is No Greater Love Than Service

SOLEMNITY OF THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD (B), MAY 12, 2024

There Is No Greater Power Than That From above

PENTECOST SUNDAY (B), MAY 19, 2024

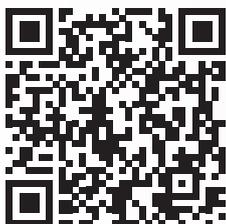
There Is No Greater Fire-Starter Than the Spirit

THE SOLEMNITY OF THE MOST HOLY TRINITY, MAY 26, 2024

There Is No Greater Faith Than the One That Is Shared



Victor M. Cancino, S.J., lives on the Flathead Indian Reservation in western Montana and is the pastor of St. Ignatius Mission. He received his licentiate in sacred Scripture from the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome.



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Lessons From Volunteering

And a solution to our epidemic of loneliness

By Kerry Alys Robinson



Four years ago, we celebrated our daughter's graduation from college with as much creativity as possible to overcome the unusual circumstances and overwhelming disappointment that members of the Class of 2020 all over the world experienced.

Covid-19 resulted in a chaotic and lonely end to millions of students' final semester of college. Sophie was understandably disconsolate when she learned on spring break that she could not return to campus or see her friends, classmates and professors in person. Resourcefully, she turned her sorrow into service, by volunteering to deliver groceries to newly resettled refugee families while completing her final semester online.

I was reminded of this extraordinary antidote to despondency when I was invited by Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Washington to address high school student leaders who have inspired their classmates to dedicate time to service. Their attentive listening, insightful questions and enthusiasm caused me to marvel at how quickly in their young lives they have figured out the secret of life: being a beneficial presence in the world.

As president and C.E.O. of Catholic Charities USA, I have visited local Catholic Charities agencies all over the country to witness their service to the most vulnerable members of their communities. From agency to agency, one constant has been the indispensable presence of volunteers in this urgent work.

It is a reminder of an uplifting truth: Volunteering nourishes the soul.

As we grapple with fragmentation, political polarization and rising distrust in institutions, a national embrace of volunteerism could go a long way toward healing what ails us as a society.

Last year, the U.S. surgeon general published "Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation," a sobering report documenting alarming levels of isolation and social detachment nationwide that are directly associated with poor physical and mental health outcomes. Any increase in in-person socializing would help those who are isolated and dispirited, but community service is a particularly beneficial tool.

Generosity is humankind's birthright, and volunteer work allows us to be generous with our most valuable assets: our time and attention. Central to Christianity is a disposition of other-centeredness that helps us be less solipsistic. All the volunteers I encounter say to me that, paradoxically, they are the true beneficiaries of their encounters with others in merciful service.

Of course, a broad increase in volunteer work would also directly benefit people in need. Nonprofit organizations provide critical services to every vulnerable population one can imagine, and volunteers play a crucial role in this work. Across the Catholic Charities' nationwide network, we have 45,000 staff members and 215,000 volunteers. Thanks to their collective efforts, the network serves 15 million people each year. We could not do this work without our volunteers.

Studies from the Generosity Commission and the University of Maryland's Do Good Institute speak to the

urgency of the need. In 2023, nearly two-thirds of nonprofits reported experiencing an increase in demand for their services. Simultaneously, the percentage of Americans engaging in formal volunteer work has precipitously declined. A concerted effort to engage in and promote volunteer work across the country would lead to a greater percentage of people in need receiving the support they deserve.

As the surgeon general's report shows, isolation and loneliness threaten the well-being not only of individuals but of our society as a whole. Higher levels of social connection in communities are correlated with better societal health outcomes, disaster preparedness, community safety, economic prosperity and civic engagement. To that end, Catholic Charities USA recently partnered with Habitat for Humanity International, Interfaith America and Y.M.C.A. of the U.S.A. to launch the Team Up Project, a national effort to heal our divisions and promote bridge-building opportunities in local communities.

I have spent my life in the company of people who have devoted themselves to service and the alleviation of human suffering. Without such people, our world would be bereft of mercy, hope, charity and justice. And we would not have the compelling example of purpose, meaning, enthusiasm and joy to which their lives of service attest.

Kerry Alys Robinson is the president and C.E.O. of Catholic Charities USA.



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