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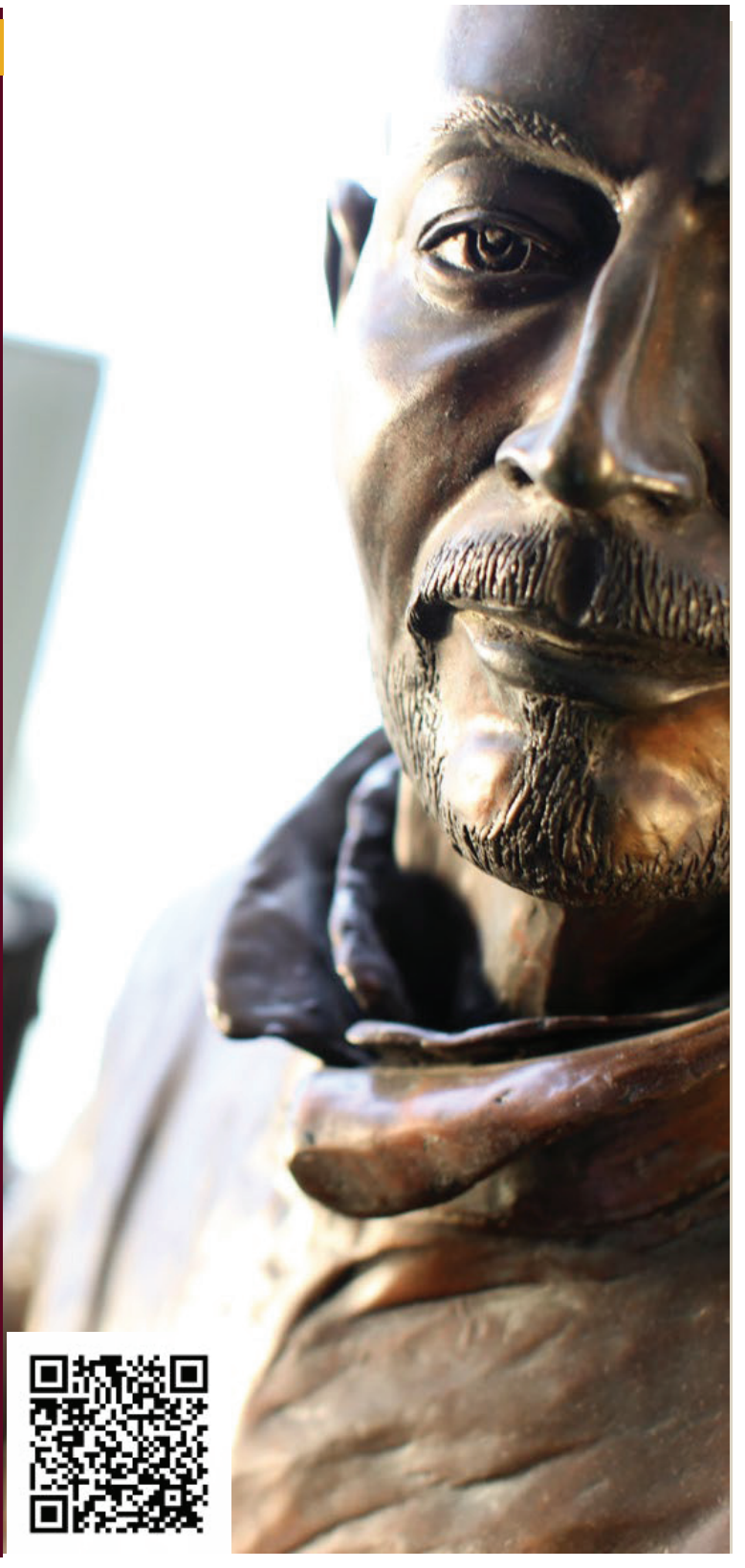

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

What Does the United States Aspire to Be?

At the end of his first address to a joint session of Congress in his second term, after more than an hour of very combative rhetoric, President Donald J. Trump offered a description of the American character, saying that "Americans have always been the people who defied all odds, transcended all dangers, made the most extraordinary sacrifices, and did whatever it took to defend our children, our country and our freedom."

This was less than a week after the unprecedented scene in the Oval Office in which he and Vice President JD Vance berated President Vladimir Zelensky of Ukraine, accusing him of ingratitude and disrespect for the United States and of "not being ready for peace" because of his insistence that any cease-fire agreement with Russia must include security guarantees for Ukraine. Before that meeting ran off the rails, it had been expected to cement an agreement with Ukraine for American access to its mineral resources as a way to compensate the United States for its expenditures in support of Ukraine's defense against Russian aggression.

In these last weeks, but especially after the Oval Office meeting, I have been thinking about my maternal grandfather. He retired as a colonel after a career in the U.S. Army, having served in Europe during World War II, in the occupation of Japan and in the Korean War. He was as fine a man as I have ever known: faithful, honorable, decent, generous and dependable.

He was also a staunch Republican, committed to limited government and policies that supported the American economy. After his career in the military, he worked for New York Life and was a disciplined and careful student of the free market. I remember him attempting to explain to me when I was 12 or 13 how currencies could fluctuate in value relative to each other.

He made "buy American" a principle of the first order, going so far as to once return a new vehicle, made by one of the Big Three of course, when he discovered from reading the documents attached to the bill of sale that it had been assembled outside the United States.

From those economic views, he would have agreed that trade imbalances between the United States and other countries need to be rectified and might have supported the use of tariffs to do so. At least in that regard, I can imagine him having some policy agreement with the Trump administration.

But I cannot imagine him abiding the scene of an American president telling the leader of a country that is suffering under years of Russian assault that he does not think he would "be a tough guy without the United States." I cannot imagine him cheering on American leaders talking over an ally attempting to describe why U.S. security interests are also implicated in Ukraine and why apparent Russian willingness to negotiate cannot be taken at face value.

The reason I cannot imagine my grandfather tolerating that scene is because he would never abide bullies, which is how Mr. Trump and Mr. Vance were acting.

Some of Mr. Trump's proponents claim that his bluster and bravado are a mark of authenticity, of his willingness to say what others will not and to speak bluntly. Some claim that, as a deal-maker, he is deliberately pushing buttons to disrupt a broken status quo and put new options on the table, and they point to the frantic responses of other world leaders to his provocations as evidence that these tactics are working.

Such views, however, betray an assumption of hypocrisy. They suggest that no one is *really* motivated by values beyond immediate advantage and leverage in negotiation, and that Mr. Trump is simply the first leader smart enough or brave enough to drop the charade and, as he says so often, "put America first."

That brings us to the question of what the United States aspires to be.

At its best, the United States defines itself not primarily by its borders, but by its values and principles. To be sure, such values are honored as often in the breach as they are in the observance. We can point to the pendulum swings between American welcome to immigrants on the one hand and nativist prejudice on the other, or to the centuries-long struggle to build a racially integrated democracy. There are many instances where we might say that the United States and its leaders have been hypocritical about our own best values.

But if so, such hypocrisy has at least been, as the saying goes, the "tribute that vice pays to virtue." I fear that what we are seeing in Mr. Trump's bullying and transactionalism is something different. It is not hypocrisy but instead a meanness, a lack of generosity that distrusts the motive for generosity in others. Vice is no longer paying tribute to virtue, but instead holding it for ransom.

These tactics may succeed at a transactional level, if only by destabilizing the status quo so much that some leverage can be gained from the chaos. But we must hope and pray that they do not become what our country aspires to be.

Sam Sawyer, S.J.

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CNS photo/Lola Gomez

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Above: People pray the rosary for Pope Francis in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican on Feb. 24.

Cover: Filming a scene with the apostles in Season 4 of "The Chosen"

The greatness of Catholic kitsch

In the March issue of **America,** Executive Editor Kerry Weber wrote of her appreciation for Catholic art often dismissed as mere kitsch. While some might look askance at the aesthetics of popular devotion, she argued, "Catholic kitsch" should be granted due respect and consideration as a sincere expression of personal faith: "These statues and images evoke vibrant memories of individuals whose lived faith is rich and complicated and nuanced, whose lives were themselves works of art." Her writing struck a chord with our readers, a sample of whose reactions we have reprinted here.

This article made me smile from warm memories of faithful family members and friends who had questionable artistic taste. My late aunt, who had a notoriously poor sense of direction and was no good at reading maps, always had a St. Christopher statue glued to the dashboard of her car. That statue—and many, many stops at nearby gas stations to ask for directions—was the only way she ever arrived at the destination on her adventures. My husband recently referred to her St. Christopher's statue as an early form of G.P.S.!

Annette Elmholt

Your article was helpful in my artistic practice. I will never have art in the Metropolitan or the Louvre. I've wondered if I am just commercializing my faith with what some might categorize as "kitsch." My ceramic sculptures tend to be inspired by the angels or are some form of a cross. They do tend to sell quickly and I hope that in some way, they are informing or confirming some unknown family's home life. I say a prayer for blessings with each one as it goes forth.

Chris Thomas

Back in the early 1950s, I received a $5^1/_2$-inch glow-in-the-dark statue of a child standing next to his guardian angel for my First Communion. In 1966, with two years of college under my belt and the statue in my suitcase, I sailed to Europe on a student boat and eventually landed in The Netherlands, where I lived and worked for two years with a Canadian friend, a young woman like me I'd met on the student ship. In the summer of 1968, France was rocked by a national strike, or *la grève,* as it was called. That meant no trains for our trip to Spain, since all trains must go through Paris to get to the southern provinces and southern Europe. So with the guardian angel snug in my backpack, we hitchhiked to Barcelona. That August we sailed on the very last student ship of the last century headed for North America, the Aurelia. It is now more than, dare I say it, 50 years later. My guardian angel still keeps watch on my bedside table. It still glows in the dark.

Christine Gerber

I teach sacramental prep and my children love glow-in-the-dark rosaries that bring them peace as they go to sleep in a dark room. As the author noted, "Jesus heals" bandages are equally popular. I love to do something akin to *lectio divina* with religious fine art, but we need to honor the child and the child within us in terms of "simple" things. Children are, after all, "first in the Kingdom of Heaven."

E. N. Albury

Our Catholic kitsch becomes woven into the fabric of our lives, and I love answering my kids' questions about the items I have.

Although it is not kitsch, the crucifix has always been foundational to our family's life of faith, as it is in many Catholic homes. I'll never forget being blown away by my now-grown child during a conversation about the crucifix. As we were having breakfast, we were chatting about how our children could stop and ask Jesus for help by simply bowing their heads to pray anytime during their school day, even though they were in public school. One of my kids asked me why they couldn't pray out loud in school. I said, well, not everyone believes in God the same way we do. My first-grader looked up at the crucifix and innocently said, "That's why Jesus is on the cross, mom. Because others don't believe in Jesus." I cried at the depth of understanding.

We never know how our Catholic symbols and art affect visitors who see them, but they form our identity; and kitsch is just as important as fine art, because taken together, they help us tell our stories. Our stories are important, and anything that helps us to tell them is good! Please share your stories with your kids, because if you don't, who will?

Stephanie Lloyd

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America Media offers pilgrimages to the sacred places of our faith led by America's Jesuit priests and other well-known Catholic leaders. Interested pilgrims are encouraged to register promptly as spots are assigned on a first come first served basis.

An Easter Hope

The various liturgical calendars in use throughout most of Christianity feature a happy coincidence in 2025: Easter Sunday will be celebrated on the same day in almost every Christian church, be it Protestant, Catholic or Eastern Orthodox. Due to the alignment of the lunar cycles that determine the date of Christianity's primary feast in both the Julian and Gregorian calendars, April 20 is this year an almost universal celebration for followers of Christ and believers in his good news. It will happen again in 2028, but in most years, the date of Easter varies widely between East and West, sometimes by as much as a month.

It wasn't always this way. As Pope Francis noted during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in January of this year, Christians shared an established formula for calculating the date of Easter for more than 12 centuries until the Catholic Church adopted the Gregorian calendar in 1582. Like Pope Paul VI half a century ago, however, Pope Francis has indicated his willingness to accept a common date for the celebration of Easter with the Christian churches of the East going forward. (Almost all Protestant churches already celebrate Easter on the same day as Roman Catholics.)

Celebrating Easter together might seem like a simple expression of union, but it can also breathe new life into efforts toward true Christian unity and the fulfillment of Jesus' prayer in John 17:21, "so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me."

That such an initiative is underway just as the Christian churches celebrate the 1,700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea is not by chance, for it was at that momentous ecumenical gathering that the early church fathers determined that Easter would be celebrated on the first Sunday after the first moon following the vernal equinox. Nicaea was also where the early Christians agreed upon a standard expression of their shared beliefs: the Nicene Creed. It remains unchanged still today; even the later variation in that creed in the Western churches—the *filioque* clause—is almost always omitted by Western Christians during shared celebrations with their Eastern brothers and sisters who do not include it.

To recognize this anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, Pope Francis made plans to travel to Turkey at the end of May, including a meeting with Bartholomew I, the Eastern Orthodox patriarch of Constantinople. Meetings between popes and patriarchs might appear so commonplace today as to seem not even newsworthy, but we should not forget that less than a century ago, such a meeting would have been unthinkable. When Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras of Constantinople met with Pope Paul VI in Jerusalem in 1964, it was the first time such a meeting had occurred in over five centuries. While tensions between the Eastern patriarchs—largely over the Russian invasion of Ukraine—could make this year's meeting a fraught one, the symbolic value of the gathering is still powerful.

In a world marked by division and strife, the kind of consistency of accord that the Council of Nicaea brought about is no small thing. Every person of faith can surely admit that religion has often been a cause of conflict between different peoples or nations, and the history of Christianity is no exception to that sad reality. Christian wars of religion may be largely a thing of the past, but still today our ecumenical efforts—to say nothing of our interreligious ones—can be marred by rancor and distrust. The Council of Nicaea and its 17-century legacy are, in that sense, also beacons of hope for the future.

The first step toward greater union between Christians is to acknowledge that unity does not have to mean uniformity. The path toward unity does not lie down the road of claiming there are no differences between the Christian churches or that the differences do not matter. Nor is it reasonable to expect—or even want—every Christian to experience liturgy or prayer in the same way in every place. We cannot expect our Orthodox brothers and sisters to accept every structure and tradition that has developed in the Roman Catholic Church over the past millennium since the Great Schism of 1054; nor would most Catholics be willing to do the same with regard to either Orthodox or Protestant practices.

At the same time, Christians can acknowledge what we share, beginning with the Nicene Creed but including much more. For almost all the churches, our shared understandings include a common baptism; and for Catholics and the Orthodox, a mutual recognition of the validity of each others' sacraments, including ordination and, most importantly, the Eucharist.

Our celebration of Nicaea and our recognition of what we share in common can also offer us another important lesson: Unity is not always born in harmony. The end result of Nicaea might have been the establishment of a common creed, but the council itself was hardly an occasion of peaceful or complete agreement. Rather, theological disputes about the nature

of Jesus—particularly over the view known as Arianism—were threatening to tear the early church asunder, and the council was called in large part to settle those questions. It did so only after intense debate and occasional physical violence among the more than 300 bishops present.

In other words, Nicaea teaches us that efforts in the expectation of unity can be messy. As long as Christians differ in their theology, ecclesiology, structures of worship and more, we can hardly expect such differences to disappear with the signing of a document or an exchange of affection. But the end result of engaging in good faith with the difficult questions and convictions at stake can still be—as it ultimately was at Nicaea—a greater unity among us all.

As we journey through Lent in the expectation of our shared celebration of Easter this year, we join together in a prayer Pope Francis offered during an ecumenical prayer service in Rome in January. Calling the anniversary of the Council of Nicaea "a year of grace, an opportunity for all Christians who recite the same Creed and believe in the same God," Francis prayed: "Let us rediscover the common roots of the faith; let us preserve unity! Let us always move forward! May the unity we all are searching for be found."

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Trump and Vance are targeting the most vulnerable—and attacking Catholic ministries

The Trump administration is targeting programs that serve the most vulnerable people in our nation and world. It is also seeking to intimidate and undermine Catholic leaders and ministries that serve the poor and vulnerable with attacks, falsehoods and the cutting-off of resources. The strategy seems to be working. After many years at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and advocacy with both Democratic and Republican administrations, I have never seen such reckless actions and sweeping proposals that threaten the lives and dignity of so many people.

It is no accident that one of the administration's first efforts to destroy government capacity has been directed against the U.S. Agency for International Development, which serves the poorest people in the poorest parts of the world with food, medicine, development assistance and disaster relief. No doubt there have been some unwise investments by U.S.A.I.D., but the administration's actions are not about reform or improvement. It is focused on destroying our nation's commitment and capacity to help those who are hungry, sick and desperately poor around the world. Elon Musk, who has led this attack, bragged on X about "feeding USAID into the wood chipper," and 90 percent of U.S.A.I.D. contracts have been cancelled.

"Foreign aid" has never been politically popular, in part because many believe it is more than 20 percent of the federal budget; it actually makes up less than 1 percent. At the same time, global anti-hunger programs, H.I.V.-AIDS efforts, and development assistance have had significant bipartisan ownership and support. Recklessly eliminating them will destroy millions of lives and damage US security and our reputation around the world.

At home as well, the Trump administration and congressional Republicans have targeted programs that serve the poorest children and families. President Trump has endorsed, and the G.O.P.-controlled House has passed, a budget resolution that would require massive cuts to programs that feed the hungry and provide health care to the sick; at the same time, they are pushing for massive tax cuts that will primarily benefit the wealthy and corporations.

These early actions of the Trump presidency and Republican leadership in Congress have one common element: They target the programs that serve those who are poor, sick or vulnerable at home and abroad.

Vance's Theological Defense

This targeting of the most vulnerable contradicts fundamental biblical values and Catholic social teaching. When the Catholic bishops and other religious voices questioned these policies, the administration did not explain or try to persuade; instead, they attacked. When the U.S.C.C.B. released a respectful statement identifying areas of agreement and disagreement with the Trump administration's policies and priorities, Vice President Vance went on the attack specifically and publicly. He said on CBS that the U.S. church served refugees for profit, and that the U.S. bishops were worried about their "bottom line" and were indifferent to "children who have been sex trafficked."

These attacks are outrageous and false. The U.S.C.C.B., Catholic Relief Services and Catholic Charities do not profit from federal programs that help them serve those who are hungry, sick and desperately poor. Public information and audits make clear that providing these services costs more than the government pays. These partnerships are a wise investment for the government, because religious groups carry out these programs to reduce hunger, combat disease and promote development with greater compassion, effectiveness and efficiency than government acting alone.

I have been involved in these issues long enough to remember when conservatives and Republicans fought for the rights of religious groups to participate in federal programs to help those in greatest need without violating their religious principles. I have seen the lifesaving work of C.R.S. around the world and the life-giving care of our Catholic Charities in our own land. These efforts are expressions of our faith and essential contributions to the common good. They should be sources of pride for our church and nation, not targets for misguided attacks.

Recently, Mr. Vance cited the traditional moral principle of *ordo amoris* to suggest that a commitment to protect the lives and dignity of immigrants and the poor and vulnerable violates a more compelling call to love our own families, neighbors and country. As others have made clear, this is a false choice and misapplication of the principle. It also distorts the Gospel and Catholic teaching on solidarity and subsidiarity. In the Gospel of Luke, after the Beatitudes, when Jesus said blessed are those who are "poor" and "hungry," he warned: "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do the same" (Lk 6: 32-33).

The vice president's theological defense of the Trump administration seems designed more to intimi-

date Catholic leaders and to divide the Catholic community than to advance a dialogue about the demands of our faith and call to serve "the least among us."

The U.S.C.C.B. has sued the Trump administration, calling the abrupt halt to funding of refugee programs unlawful and harmful to refugees and to the church's resettlement programs. The administration responded in court that it was not merely suspending its contract with the U.S.C.C.B. but that it had been "terminated."

In general, the responses of the bishops to Mr. Vance's allegations and other attacks have consisted of brief descriptions of the church's work, without a strong public defense of the church's ministries. And there has been little response from U.S.C.C.B. leadership to Mr. Vance's efforts to instruct Catholics on our moral obligations, in contrast to specific statements in the past correcting President Joe Biden and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi on abortion and related issues.

Pope Francis Steps Up

Sadly, the outrageous and false claims that Catholic ministries serve people in need for financial reasons, and that the refugee resettlement programs contribute to human trafficking, have been amplified by allies of the administration in the Catholic community and beyond.

In this context, Pope Francis wrote an extraordinary public letter to the U.S. bishops. Offering encouragement for their efforts and emphasizing key elements of Catholic teaching that apply in this time of "crisis," he recognized "the right of a nation to defend itself and keep communities safe." He also warned that "what is built on the basis of force, and not on the truth about the equal dignity of every human being, begins badly and will end badly."

OSV News photo/Kent Nishimura, Reuters

A woman protests outside the U.S. Agency for International Development building in Washington, D.C., on Feb. 3.

Specifically, the pope challenged the misunderstanding of *ordo amoris* offered by Mr. Vance. "Christian love is not a concentric expansion of interests that little by little extend to other persons and groups," the pope wrote, adding that the failure to follow "the love that builds a fraternity open to all, without exception" can lead to an imposition of "the will of the strongest as the criterion of truth."

Pope Francis has stepped up, and when the lives and dignity of the "least of these" are threatened at home and around the world, it is essential for Catholic leaders and citizens to defend efforts to help those in greatest need. It is our responsibility to call on our leaders to put the needs of the poor and vulnerable first in budget choices and national priorities.

President Trump pledged many things in his campaign, but taking nutrition assistance and health care from those in need was not what he campaigned on or what people voted for. Whatever their partisan or ideological agendas, I doubt many members of the House and Senate came to Washington to take food from hungry children or health care from their families.

Catholics must come together across political, ideological and theological lines to stand in solidarity with our ministries that bring food, health care and hope to our sisters and brothers here in our nation and around the world. This is Gospel work and reflects the best of our national values.

This is a time for all of us to keep in mind that Jesus explicitly taught that our salvation depended on our response to the hungry, the thirsty, the sick and the stranger (Mt 25), and that in the words of President John F. Kennedy, who created U.S.A.I.D., "here on earth God's work must truly be our own."

John Carr *is the founder of the Initiative on Catholic Social Teaching and Public Life at Georgetown University. He previously served as director of the U.S.C.C.B. Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development and as chair of the board of Bread for the World.*

A J.R.S. team member works with Sudanese refugees in Renk, South Sudan, in November 2023.

Jesuit Refugee Service

Jesuit Refugee Service seeks to continue its work despite Trump administration foreign aid freeze

By Kevin Clarke

The abrupt shutdown of the U.S. Agency for International Development and a 90-day freeze on most foreign aid ordered by President Donald Trump threw U.S.-sponsored humanitarian programs around the world into disarray in February.

The aid halt and apparent termination of U.S.A.I.D. were deplored by Alistair Dutton, the secretary general of Caritas Internationalis, the umbrella organization in Rome for 162 Catholic charities working in more than 200 countries. He charged in a statement released on Feb. 10 that the halt to the agency's work "will kill millions of people and condemn hundreds of millions more to lives of dehumanising poverty."

"This is an inhumane affront to people's God-given human dignity that will cause immense suffering," he said. "Killing U.S.A.I.D. also presents massive challenges for all of us in the global humanitarian community, who will have to completely reassess whom we can continue to serve and how."

"The lives and dignity of millions hang in the balance," Mr. Dutton said, calling on other governments and stakeholders "to speak out and strongly urge the U.S. administration to reverse these dangerous measures." Although other nations donate more to foreign assistance on a per capita basis, the United States has historically been the world's leading humanitarian donor, representing $4 out of every $10 in aid accounted for by the United Nations in recent years.

Isolationist America?

The administration's unraveling of U.S.A.I.D. is expected to lead to drastic workforce reductions at Catholic Relief Services. U.S.A.I.D.-funded programs accounted for nearly half of the U.S. church's relief and development agency's $1.2 billion budget in 2023.

The foreign aid freeze also affects programs administered by Jesuit Refugee Service. Its work with refugees around the world has been supported by the State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migrants. J.R.S. had been anticipating about $18 million from that agency in 2025 to pay for programs in Iraq, Chad, South Sudan, Colombia and other nations where refugees have sought protection and assistance.

"Every administration should carefully look at how it spends its money," J.R.S. President Kelly Ryan said in an interview with **America**. "I will be the first to say that there are probably things in the foreign assistance budget that should be cropped and should be reformed."

But a wholesale shutdown of overseas programs, she argued, is both unwarranted and detrimental to U.S. interests. "The idea that we should become isolationists—I think that's a mistake."

"Since the Second World War, all of our foreign assistance has advanced U.S. interests by creating peace and security," Ms. Ryan said. "And that's a greater good for the world too. It's advancing the common good."

Responding to widespread appeals to keep critical humanitarian aid moving, Secretary of State Marco Rubio said his office would begin issuing waivers for "life-saving programs." J.R.S. is among the many humanitarian agencies now lining up for those waivers to continue at least some of its work.

"Right now, we're looking to raise between one and two million dollars [to get J.R.S. programs through the 90-day freeze]," Ms. Ryan said. "Our hope is we will get the [State Department] money, but we want to continue the life-saving activity right now and not turn off the lights."

According to a J.R.S. statement, the Trump administration's aid halt is affecting "103,000-plus refugees and other forcibly displaced people" directly and perhaps another 300,000 people indirectly. About 400 J.R.S. staff members around the world have already been laid off.

Information Deficit

Public apprehension and misunderstanding about the effectiveness and importance of foreign aid have become apparent in social media discussions of the president's shock-and-awe campaign against U.S.A.I.D. Ms. Ryan pointed out that misinformation about foreign aid is not exactly a new problem, but contemporary social media has clearly accelerated its dissemination. Fraudulent reports have led to broad attacks by social media users on the work of J.R.S. and other overseas agencies.

"It's a highly political time, and it's unfortunate people don't have the full information about the value of foreign assistance," Ms. Ryan said. "Polling data show that Americans are unaware that foreign assistance is less than 1 percent of the federal budget. When they become aware of that, their support for it grows considerably," she said.

"And when they learn what foreign assistance does—whether it's life-saving medical interventions, including [responding to] Ebola or treating children [with] pediatric AIDS—their hearts and pocketbooks are open. They want to fund this."

"What we have to do is tell the stories of successful foreign assistance like the Pepfar program," she said, referring to the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief. "There are 27 million lives that have been saved because of that program. It's a remarkable achievement."

Controversy over the foreign aid clampdown inspired a unique evaluation of the spiritual underpinnings of U.S.-sponsored interventions aimed at mitigating disease, poverty and hunger in other countries. Vice President JD Vance's attempt to explain cuts to foreign assistance as justified in Catholic teaching by *ordo amoris*—a theological concept he suggested meant that love and attention be paid first to family, neighbor and community before others—drew a rebuke from Pope Francis himself.

"Christian love is not a concentric expansion of interests that little by little extend to other persons and groups," the pope wrote in a letter to U.S. bishops on Feb. 10 that did not refer to Mr. Vance by name. "The human person is a subject with dignity who, through the constitutive relationship with all, especially with the poorest, can gradually mature in his identity and vocation. The true *ordo amoris* that must be promoted is that which we discover by meditating constantly on the parable of the 'Good Samaritan' (Lk 10:25-37), that is, by meditating on the love that builds a fraternity open to all, without exception."

The contrasting statements from two of the world's most prominent Catholics drew global interest. For her part, Ms. Ryan perceives neither theological nor practical obstacles to extending humanitarian outreach beyond U.S. borders.

She noted that Catholic teaching on solidarity, subsidiarity and the primacy of the common good are the foundation of a powerful moral call to support humanitarian assistance overseas. At the same time, she acknowledged that there is "no shortage of problems" at home that require attention.

"I don't think it is an either/or," Ms. Ryan said. "Obviously, we have to take care of the problems in the United States." But, she continued, "as the richest country in the world, the most powerful country in the world and the country that has been a leader on humanitarian and development assistance since the Marshall Plan, [we cannot] turn our backs on those who need us."

"And if we do that," she warned, "there will be rival forces and people and governments and non-governments that will fill that void, that will not advance U.S. interests, whether it's China, Russia, Wahhabism—whatever it is. It's not advantageous for the United States to step back from the wonderful work that we've been able to accomplish."

She added that the public-private partnership represented by U.S. agencies collaborating with church-based and other nongovernment actors is a source of strength and effectiveness in humanitarian service, not a cause for suspicion.

J.R.S. assists more than 1 million people annually around the world, according to Ms. Ryan. Its programs, she said, are a

J.R.S. staff work with Karenni refugees from Myanmar in Thailand's Mae Hong Son Province in April 2019.

lifeline to "marginalized communities at the very edge."

Among them: children with severe disabilities in South Sudan "who would be bullied or harmed...if they were not able to have that safe space" for their education; refugees driven into Thailand because of the ongoing conflict in Myanmar; and Yazidi and Christian communities struggling to re-establish themselves in Nineveh Province in northern Iraq.

"The work is just going to stop in places like South Africa, where we won't visit the dying. We won't be able to get the medicines out in Iraq.... In Chad, the work we're doing is in education, [reaching] tens of thousands of kids, but it's also the teachers from the community who will no longer have a paycheck in order to be able to support themselves and have independence."

"Each place is a little different, and each [program] is very, very valuable." Ms. Ryan also points out that J.R.S. is one of the few humanitarian organizations assisting Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar and other refugees who fled to Bangladesh and India to escape intercommunal violence in 2017.

"We go to places other N.G.O.s won't go, and we need support to do that," Ms. Ryan said.

Ms. Ryan is confident that broad bipartisan support for humanitarian assistance to refugees—for decades a given—can be restored. Few collaborators make as effective partners with government as groups like J.R.S. and Catholic Relief Services, she argued.

Despite the continuing chaos and cultural uproar, Ms. Ryan said morale at J.R.S. remains high. "Our team is laser focused on the mission, telling our story.... We honestly believe that we'll get the [State Department] exemptions because the work we do is really important, and it is life-saving."

On Feb. 26, J.R.S. learned that five of its nine agreements with the State Department had been terminated, shutting down programs in Thailand, Iraq, Chad, Ethiopia and Uganda that had served thousands of people. The status of the agreements on the remaining U.S.-funded programs at press time was uncertain.

Kevin Clarke, *chief correspondent.*

Lives on the Line: J.R.S. Programs Around the World

Country	Core Activities	Direct Beneficiaries	Indirect Beneficiaries
Chad	Secondary education in refugee camps	32,329	129,316
Colombia	Mental health; psychosocial and livelihood support; education	12,370	13,568
Ethiopia	Services and care for unaccompanied children	9,600	27,000
India	Child education	5,116	20,464
Iraq	Medical and subsistence assistance; psychiatric care	28,134	25,986
South Africa	Health care, housing and food support	3,022	18,132
South Sudan	Medical and other services for children with severe disabilities	6,198	18,594
Thailand	Case management; subsistence and medical support; housing	4,050	8,000
Uganda	Medical and subsistence services; psychiatric care	3,710	11,130
		104,529	**272,190**

New Vatican document on artificial intelligence warns against 'creating a substitute for God'

As the United States and China vie for primacy in the field of artificial intelligence, the Vatican issued a wide-ranging reflection in January, "Antiqua et Nova," that explores "the relationship between Artificial Intelligence and Human Intelligence," addresses "the anthropological and ethical challenges raised by AI" and warns against "creating a substitute for God."

According to the documents, critically evaluating A.I. "involves not only mitigating risks and preventing harm but also ensuring that its applications are used to promote human progress and the common good."

"AI research has advanced rapidly," "Antiqua et Nova" notes, and, as a result, "many tasks once managed exclusively by humans are now entrusted to AI" and "many researchers aspire to develop what is known as 'Artificial General Intelligence' (AGI)—a single system capable of operating across all cognitive domains and performing any task within the scope of human intelligence."

The document restates the church's opposition "to those applications [of technology] that threaten the sanctity of life or the dignity of the human person." Like any human endeavor, it said, "technological development must be directed to serve the human person and contribute to the pursuit of greater justice, more extensive fraternity, and a more humane order of social relations."

"Antiqua et Nova" warns that "while AI holds many possibilities for promoting the good, it can also hinder or even counter human development and the common good." It recalls a warning issued by Pope Francis in an address to scientists in Rome in March 2023: "[D]igital technologies have increased inequality in our world. Not just differences in material wealth...but also differences in access to political and social influence" as well as "creating new forms of poverty."

The Vatican document adds that the concentration of power over mainstream A.I. applications in the hands of a few companies raises significant ethical concerns.

Artificial intelligence could further isolate people or "hinder a true encounter with reality," the Vatican warns, adding that "while AI promises to boost productivity by taking over mundane tasks, it frequently forces workers to adapt to the speed and demands of machines rather than machines being designed to support those who work."

"Antiqua et Nova" acknowledges that while A.I. holds "immense potential in a variety of applications" in medicine, it should "enhance" but not "replace the relationship between patients and healthcare providers."

CNS photo/ courtesy of France Diplomatie - MEAE

Bishop Paul Tighe, secretary of the Dicastery for Culture and Education (far right), joins a discussion at the AI Action Summit at the Grand Palais in Paris on Feb. 10.

Similarly, speaking of artificial intelligence and education, the Vatican emphasizes "that the physical presence of a teacher creates a relational dynamic that AI cannot replicate."

A.I.-generated misinformation and deepfakes are new threats, "Antiqua et Nova" notes, that could "gradually undermine the foundations of society" by "fueling political polarization and social unrest." It calls for "careful regulation" of A.I.-generated media.

Speaking to one of the most common criticisms of artificial intelligence, the amount of energy and water it requires and its significant contributions to carbon dioxide levels, the Vatican urges "sustainable solutions that reduce their impact on our common home."

"Antiqua et Nova" next focuses on A.I. and warfare. It recalls Pope Francis' words in his "Message for the World Day of Peace" in 2024 that "the ability to conduct military operations through remote control systems has led to a lessened perception of the devastation caused by those weapon systems and the burden of responsibility for their use, resulting in an even more cold and detached approach to the immense tragedy of war."

The last topic raised by the Vatican document concerns artificial intelligence and humanity's relationship with God. Here it states that "the presumption of substituting God [with] an artifact of human making is idolatry, a practice Scripture explicitly warns against (e.g., Ex. 20:4; 32:1-5; 34:17). Moreover, AI may prove even more seductive than traditional idols for, unlike idols that 'have mouths but do not speak; eyes, but do not see; ears, but do not hear' (Ps. 115:5-6), AI can 'speak,' or at least gives the illusion of doing so (cf. Rev. 13:15)."

Gerard O'Connell, *Vatican correspondent.*

AP Photo/Omar Sanadiki

After Assad, what does the future hold for Christians in Syria?

The Church of St. Francis of Assisi in Aleppo, Syria, stands at the center of the city's Aziziyeh neighborhood. Mass is celebrated here daily at 8 a.m. and 6 p.m., with church bells ringing a call to prayer. Aleppo, separated for years between its east and west sides as Syrian government troops and opposition forces battled for control, suffered terrible damage during Syria's civil war.

Razed during the war, Aleppo's *souk*, its ancient marketplace, had been partially rebuilt by the Bashar al-Assad regime before Hayat Tahrir al-Sham forces stormed out of rebel-controlled Idlib Province in November, driving Mr. al-Assad from power. The rapid victory of the Sunni opposition fighters over regular army units has left many wondering how Syria's minority faith groups—Alawites, Christians, Shiites and others—will fare as H.T.S. consolidates its control.

"We have been here for 2,000 years! Why would we leave?" asks Antoine Makdis, founder of the Warsha Production House, a media group specializing in preserving Syrian cultural heritage. Mr. Makdis, speaking to **America** in Aleppo on Jan. 20, had been imprisoned after a falling-out with the Assad family.

After that experience, Mr. Makdis appears confident that he can manage whatever challenges the future may hold. "The revolution starts now," he said. "We must be careful with the new people in power, and we need to keep our guard up and make sure we do not lose the rights we fought for over years."

His view is shared by most in the St. Francis community, including its pastor, Bahjat Karakach, O.F.M. "Personally, I was very happy when the regime fell," Father Karakach said on Jan. 21.

"There was no future for Syria under the Assad regime," he said. After H.T.S. forces reclaimed Aleppo, "I was very optimistic in the first weeks," he said, "and now that the adrenaline has come back down. I would say I am still optimistic, but with caution."

Father Karakach believes, guardedly, that H.T.S. leaders will keep their promise to organize elections and that they will eventually surrender their weapons and evolve into a normal political party, though one rooted in Sunni Islam. The H.T.S. leader Ahmed al-Shara met with Christian leaders in Damascus in December, assuring them that the rights of religious minorities in Syria would be preserved and that "Christians are an essential part of Syria's identity."

Christians made up 10 percent of the Syrian population before the civil war, a figure now diminished to about 2.5 percent, falling from 1.5 million in 2012 to about 300,000 in 2022.

Since the fall of Mr. al-Assad, Christians in the Bab Touma district of Damascus go about their daily lives as before. H.T.S. fighters are stationed at the boundaries of the mostly Christian neighborhood to protect it, joined by vol-

Holding up the Quran and the cross in a demonstration of unity in Umayyad Square in Damascus on Dec. 27, 2024

unteers from the neighborhood itself. This night in January the neighborhood taverns are doing a brisk business, especially a local favorite, Abu Georges.

"Before, we couldn't even speak politics out loud, and look at us now," marvels one young woman, who, all the same, asked to remain anonymous, a small reminder of the precariousness of this Damascus political spring.

Ruba, a 25-year-old Alawite living in the neighborhood, joins the conversation. "It is very interesting to be finally able to talk politics with people from different backgrounds," she says.

For now, these Christian and Alawite young people remain optimistic, knowing that the world is watching H.T.S. intently.

"We want to be all Syrians, on the same level," said Father Karakach. "A lot of [international focus] is put on the Christian communities in Syria, but we do not want to stand out or be used by the West as a tool for its presence here or right-wing politics. That could put us in danger or create jealousy from other communities. We wish to live freely, amongst our brothers and sisters, as we are all one Syrian people."

His words echo the chants that are often heard these days rising spontaneously in the streets of the capital: "One, one, one, the Syrian people are one."

Clotilde Bigot *reports from Beirut.*

A CEPA immersion at TS Designs in North Carolina in 2023

Ignatian Solidarity Network program sources college gear that is ethically ready to wear

Brooke Talbot learned a lot about business in the classroom at John Carroll University in Ohio. But her experience during a manufacturing immersion program offered by the Ignatian Solidarity Network brought her face to face with some of the people often just talked about in business textbooks—the workers at an apparel manufacturing site in North Carolina who put the clothes on her back.

Speaking in an I.S.N.-produced video, she recalled classroom discussions about sustainability. "Can you actually achieve a triple bottom line [of people, planet and profit]?" J.C.U. students asked. The visit taught her it was possible. "The word I keep coming back to is *hope*," she said.

The garment manufacturing industry worldwide produces 80 to 150 billion items of clothing every year, contributing to rising rates of global textile waste. The International Labor Organization reports that many of the garments in circulation today were produced by women workers enduring precarious working conditions and outright exploitation. Unregulated factories around the world pollute the air and local waterways with dyes and other chemicals.

In 2021, after years of working with Catholic institutions from parishes to colleges to support ethical apparel manufacturing in purchasing practices, I.S.N. helped launch CEPA, the Catholic Ethical Purchasing Alliance, a partnership between I.S.N. and Ethix Merch, a promotional products supplier that relies on union labor and ethically sourced materials. The project connects Catholic institutions to apparel producers that adopt ethical business practices, balancing profit margins against respect for worker rights and care for creation.

CEPA sponsors immersion experiences that allow students and campus staff the chance to "meet cotton farmers, people involved in the milling of fabric and thread; [in] cut, sew and assembly; and [in] dyeing processes"—the many real people involved in apparel production, Christopher Kerr, I.S.N.'s executive director, said.

The immersions demonstrate, in Ms. Talbot's words, how "companies are achieving profits" and "staying in business, but they are also keeping an emphasis on the environment [and people]."

Céire Kealty *contributes from the Philadelphia area.*

Where Is God in the Liturgy?

A way forward for liturgical reform and renewal

By John F. Baldovin

Father Luigi Portarulo, left, and Father Bonifacio Sarte Lopez VI of the Diocese of Rome celebrate a Mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City on Nov. 2, 2024.

OSV News photo/Gregory A. Shemitz

Some 60 years on, the reform of the liturgy following the Second Vatican Council is at an inflection point. At this critical juncture, how shall we find a way forward that will help the Catholic liturgy to fulfill its mission of helping us to live the Gospel? Understanding how God brings us together in worship—in other words, the priority of God's action and invitation—can help. The synodal and liturgical vision of Pope Francis is also key.

Let me begin by outlining what I see to be five different approaches that Catholics take when seeking to understand the liturgy today. (I confess I am writing from a North American perspective and cannot speak for other areas, like the Global South, which bring with them a number of different issues, especially with regard to popular piety.) So, what are these five approaches?

1. Support the current reformed liturgies of the Roman Rite. The reforms of the Mass and other liturgies by and large have been enthusiastically received. They may have taken some getting used to, especially the change to the vernacular and the change of the position of the priest at the altar, which were indeed radical. The reforms also included the vast enrichment of the readings at Mass and a fairly significant restructuring of the liturgical year.

This was not the only important reform. Others included the transformation of the rite of baptism of children into one that paid attention to the condition of children and the responsibility of the parents. Further, an order for the Christian initiation of adults was introduced. It was now possible to celebrate penance in three different forms, with communal penance becoming perhaps the most popular. And finally, the rite of anointing of the sick was no longer reserved for the deathbed but could be used in the circumstances of any life-threatening illness, as well as advanced age.

2. Reject the reforms. Pope Benedict XVI, in his 2007 apostolic letter "Summorum Pontificum," explicitly granted permission for the wider use of the pre-Vatican II liturgy to those relatively rare groups that were attached to it. That liturgy is often referred to as the traditional Latin Mass or the extraordinary form (or sometimes, by aficionados, the *usus antiquior* [older rite]). The extraordinary form received an enthusiastic reception by a number of groups, particularly younger priests and younger people in general.

3. Reform the reforms. This approach represents somewhat of a mediating position. It can be characterized as a "strict constructionist" reading of "Sacrosanctum Concilium," the Vatican II "Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy." An examination of the writings on liturgy by Joseph Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI, shows that this was the position he favored.

Candidates to the diaconate stand in prayer during ordination Mass in St. Peter's Basilica during the Jubilee of Deacons at the Vatican on Feb. 23.

CNS photo/Pablo Esparza

Proponents of the "reform of the reform" object to many of the changes found in the 1970 Missal of Pope Paul VI. Not every proponent wants all of the same things, but most would like to see a restored entrance rite to the Mass with prayers at the foot of the altar. Most proponents favor having the readings in the vernacular, but many among them would like a return to a one-year cycle of readings, as in the pre-Vatican II Missal. Most would like to see chant as the only music allowed at Mass. Most want the restoration of the Pentecost octave and the season of Septuagesima (i.e., the former calendar's three Sundays preceding Lent).

Further, most seem to argue for having only one Eucharistic prayer, the Roman Canon, which is currently Eucharistic Prayer No. 1. Some would like to see that prayer said in Latin and recited quietly. Many would like to see the return of Communion rails and receiving Communion on the tongue while kneeling. Some would claim that this is exactly what Pope Benedict XVI was referring to in his letter accompanying "Summorum Pontificum," in which he stated that he hoped that the ordinary and extraordinary forms of the liturgy would mutually influence each other.

4. Pick up the pace. Many in this category show impatience with the pace of inculturating the liturgy, including showing a good deal of dissatisfaction with the current English translations of the liturgical rites. As is well known, the fifth instruction "For the Right Implementation of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of the Second Vatican Council," titled "Liturgiam Authenticam," reversed the approach to translation advocated by the reformers that is characterized by "dynamic equivalence," which gives preference to making the original intelligible in the receiver language. "Liturgiam Authenticam" represents a wholesale rejection of that translation strategy in favor of what can be called "formal correspondence." The latter requires that every lexical and syntactical element of the original Latin be accounted for in a translation, as opposed to giving priority to rendering the thought of a prayer in a way that people can easily understand.

Many who favor further inculturation appeal to Paragraph 40 of "Sacrosanctum Concilium," which allows for a more robust cultural adaptation of the rites. A good example (although not very radical) is the *Roman Missal for Use in the Dioceses of Zaire* (now called the Democratic Republic of the Congo) that was approved by the Vatican in 1988. Recently the Vatican approved several other adaptations for liturgical use by certain dioceses in the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico. Some Catholics were quick to condemn this rite—often inappropriately called the Mayan Rite—as a ca-

pitulation to pagan practices. However, this viewpoint fails to account for the many adaptations of the liturgy made in Christian antiquity in accordance with the surrounding cultures of the time.

Another example of significant cultural adaptation is the *Missa Terra Spiritus Sancti*, which incorporates certain elements of Aboriginal culture, approved by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference for the Diocese of Broome in Northwest Australia in May 2024. This Mass awaits approval by the Vatican.

5. Reject the rules. This approach is really more of a series of practices at variance with the official books of the Roman Rite. I would characterize these practices as prioritizing informality and "creativity." It is no secret that at the end of the 1960s and through the '70s, the official liturgical reform was taken as a license to exercise a great deal of freedom with the liturgy. This is unsurprising for two reasons.

First, the reform was experienced like opening the gasket of a pressure cooker. It let off a lot of steam. Second, some flexibility ("in these or other words" and various introductions) was built into the various rites. For example, some freedom could be used in the introduction to the liturgy; some commentary could be given at the beginning of the readings; the priest was/is allowed to introduce the Eucharistic prayer; and comments/announcements could be given after the post-Communion prayer. These were all intended to be very brief and in the spirit of the liturgy itself.

But brevity is in the eyes of the beholder. Often enough, priests offer descriptions of the weather or some other form of cheerful introduction intended to warm up the assembly. Such practices, well intended as they might be, are not helpful in a communal ritual act like the liturgy. The theologian M. Francis Mannion astutely pointed this out in a 1988 essay in Worship, titled "Liturgy and the Present Crisis of Culture." One of the challenges that Monsignor Mannion identified was the "intimization of society"—in other words (as he put it), "warmth is God." Only intimacy is authentic. But it is a misunderstanding or a category mistake to think that a ritual activity like liturgy should be intimate.

In addition to this misconstrual of the intent of the post-Vatican II reform, there were also unfortunate attempts to make the liturgy more relevant. Examples would include replacing the Scripture readings with non-scriptural texts, idiosyncratically composed Eucharistic prayers (of dubious value and questionable theology) and the use of popular music. There were also well-intended but ill-conceived attempts to replace parts of the role of the ordained minister, not to mention substituting more "relevant" food and drink for the required bread and wine.

Many of the practices of this last approach are relatively rare today, but they do persist in some small circles. As I asserted at the outset, the first approach—support for the Vatican II "Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy" and subsequent reform—predominates today, but the other approaches certainly exist. It seems, at least anecdotally, that the traditionalist approach is growing, especially among the young who have been told that Vatican II was a mistake and that we need to return to "real Catholicism." One can find this attitude in the occasional disparagement of synodality.

The reform was experienced like opening the gasket of a pressure cooker.

These divergent interpretations of the liturgy indicate that we have not done a very good job of putting the reforms of Vatican II into practice. I should also note here that these debates are, in my experience, most prevalent among white Catholics. Among the crucial and growing Hispanic, African and Asian communities in the United States, it seems to me there are two factors that complicate the picture. The first is the natural desire of a community to retain connections to language and to national or ethnic identity. The second, which is very much tied to the first, is the relation to the liturgy of popular piety and devotions.

A Complicated Picture

The current popularity of a traditionalist approach to the liturgy, especially among some young Catholics, is troubling, but it is not without some foundation. In the first place, among many young people, to identify oneself as a Catholic is countercultural. It is not that the majority of their peers are anti-Catholic so much as that they do not give formal religious belonging much thought at all. The traditional liturgy is at least in some part attractive because it is so different. It is similar to the way we knew we were Catholics before the council because we did not eat meat on Friday. That practice may seem trivial today, but it did set people apart.

Much of the current enthusiasm can feel like nostalgia for a time that many of the young traditionalists never knew, but it certainly does at least seem more compelling than the garden-variety uninspired liturgy that they have been accustomed to. People of my age who experienced the pre-Vatican II liturgy know very well that the older liturgy was frequently humdrum and minimalistic in its own way, but there was little doubt that it was serious and dis-

There were unfortunate attempts to make the liturgy more relevant.


Father Giulio Albanese, a Comboni missionary priest and journalist, prays during a penitential liturgy at the Basilica of St. John Lateran in Rome on Jan. 24, 2025.
CNS photo/Lola Gomez


Ciara Hogan proclaims the first reading during Mass at Holy Family Church in New York City on Sept. 30, 2024.
OSV News photo/Gregory A. Shemitz

ciplined—not to mention that you were going to go to hell if you missed Mass on Sunday. At the same time, the old Mass could be celebrated beautifully, with an elaborate choreography and sometimes with marvelous music—chant and/or polyphony.

So, what is the problem? After all, aren't we today sensitive to the need for diversity? Why not let people who want to be attached to the extraordinary form simply have their way? After all, there are different rites in the one Catholic Church—Byzantine, Coptic, Armenian, Syrian and now the Anglican Ordinariate, to name a few. Why not just consider the extraordinary form another rite? This was Pope Benedict XVI's basic argument in "Summorum Pontificum," when he claimed that the one *lex orandi* of the Roman Rite existed in two forms: ordinary and extraordinary. Why rob a significant minority of Catholics of a liturgy that they find spiritually nourishing?

Nevertheless, I believe that the pre-Vatican II liturgy should be definitively abrogated, for three reasons. These reasons are theological rather than purely aesthetic. In a very perceptive article that appeared in Worship in 2012, "*Summorum Pontificum* and the Unmaking of the Lay Church," the theologian Georgia Masters Keightley argued that "because the pre- and post-Vatican II liturgies of the Eucharist rest upon different understandings of the Church, particularly in regard to the Church's priesthood and its mission, each enacts a different ecclesial form."

She identified three areas in which the post-Vatican II Eucharistic liturgy embodies a significantly different understanding of the church than that embodied by the older rite. First, the Universal Prayer (a.k.a. the Prayer of the Faithful); second, the exchange of peace; and third (and perhaps most important), the presentation of the gifts by the people. Each of these embodies a vision of the church that is in line with the insistence in "Sacrosanctum Concilium" on "full, conscious and active participation" by the faithful as well as the attention given in "Lumen Gentium" ("The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church") to the church as the people of God before dealing with the church's ecclesiastical constitution (pope, bishops, priests, deacons).

I agree with Dr. Masters Keightley's position. But, second, I think that there is something even more serious at

issue. Many people say that they are attracted to the beauty and the reverence they find in the traditional liturgy. This is no doubt true. However, the heart of the liturgy is always about more than the liturgy itself. Liturgy is about the very nature of the church, as well as Christian anthropology.

If one seriously reads critics of the reform like the writer Peter Kwasniewski, one finds an underlying anthropology and ecclesiology that reject modern Catholicism altogether. For Dr. Kwasniewski and many of his fellow traditionalists, modernity is a disaster for the Christian faith, and Vatican II is a perfect instantiation of that disaster. Rejecting the liturgical reform goes hand in hand with rejection of the church's encounter and dialogue with modernity ("Gaudium et Spes," the "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World"), of ecumenism, of interreligious dialogue, of religious freedom, of the relation between Scripture and tradition, and of an ecclesiology rooted in the common baptism of Christians as the people of God. In other words, Vatican II and all that follows must be rejected as a whole. No half-measures are allowed.

This is precisely why Pope Francis severely restricted the use of the older liturgy in his letter accompanying the landmark *motu proprio* letter of 2021, "Traditionis Custodes." Allow me to quote him at length:

> I am saddened by abuses in the celebration of the liturgy on all sides. In common with Benedict XVI, I deplore the fact that "in many places the prescriptions of the new Missal are not observed in celebration, but indeed come to be interpreted as an authorization for or even a requirement of creativity, which leads to almost unbearable distortions." But I am nonetheless saddened that the instrumental use of *Missale Romanum* of 1962 is often characterized by a rejection not only of the liturgical reform, but of the Vatican Council II itself, claiming, with unfounded and unsustainable assertions, that it betrayed the Tradition and the "true Church."

Further, Pope Francis wrote:

> The path of the Church must be seen within the dynamic of Tradition "which originates from the Apostles and progresses in the Church with the assistance of the Holy Spirit" (*Dei Verbum,* No. 8). A recent stage of this dynamic was constituted by Vatican Council II where the Catholic episcopate came together to listen and to discern the path for the Church indicated by the Holy Spirit. To doubt the Council is to doubt the intentions of those very Fathers who exercised their collegial power in a solemn manner *cum Petro et sub Petro* in an ecumenical council, and, in the final analysis, to doubt the Holy Spirit himself who guides the Church.

Pope Francis went on to "declare that the liturgical books promulgated by the saintly Pontiffs Paul VI and John Paul II, in conformity with the decrees of Vatican Council II, constitute the unique expression of the *lex orandi* of the Roman Rite."

My third reason for wanting to abrogate the old rite is the fact that its use takes time, resources and energy away from the need to do better catechesis and implementation of the "unique expression" of the church's *lex orandi*, the current Roman Rite.

At the same time, however, I do not think it is sufficient simply to reject what attracts people to the pre-Vatican II liturgy. We must find a way to recover reverence and an appropriate sense of mystery. That way is by emphasizing the priority of God's action in the liturgy.

Gathered by His Love

To get to the heart of the matter, let me use two prayers from the current Roman missal. (I am doing this with the conviction that as the ancient adage goes, "*lex orandi, lex credendi*"—the rule of prayer inspires the rule of faith.) The first prayer is taken from what immediately follows the "Holy, Holy, Holy" in the Eucharistic Prayer for Various Occasions:

> You are indeed Holy and to be glorified, O God,
> who love the human race and who always walk
> with us on the journey of life. Blessed indeed
> is your Son, present in our midst when we are
> gathered by his love, and when, as once for the
> disciples, so now for us, he opens the Scriptures
> and breaks the bread.

This prayer articulates beautifully the Liturgy Constitution's affirmation in "Sacrosanctum Concilium" (No. 7) that Christ is the primary actor in the liturgy. Indeed, the whole Christ, head and members, celebrates the liturgy, but the liturgy is always primarily an act of Christ the priest. Christ is acting now in our celebration.

The second prayer is easily passed over, since it is a Prayer Over the Gifts which is used only twice a year—on Holy Thursday and on the Second Sunday in Ordinary Time. It is, in fact, quoted in both "Sacrosanctum Concilium" and in the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal.*

> Grant us, O Lord, we pray, that we may participate

The traditional liturgy is at least in some part attractive because it is so different.

> worthily in these mysteries, for whenever the memorial of this sacrifice is celebrated the work of our redemption is accomplished.

This is quite an astounding proposition. The liturgy is a real participation in Christ's saving act for us. This is at the heart of what we mean by the Mass as a sacrifice. Sacrifice here does not mean that we are doing something to Christ, but rather that Christ himself is uniting us to his own act of total self-giving. That is the point of the Eucharist, after all—that we live out in our own lives this act of self-giving. As St. Augustine famously said: "There is your mystery on the altar. Become what you receive."

It seems to me that these two prayers are excellent examples of what it means to say that God acts first in the liturgy. We have become accustomed to saying that liturgy is the work of the people. That is true, but the origin of the Greek word *leitourgia* lies in the fact that a liturgy is first of all a work *for* the people, a benefaction. What we do in the liturgy is always a response to what God has done for us.

That is why the first major part of the liturgical celebration always consists of a Liturgy of the Word. Everything else that happens in liturgy is a response to God's prevenient revelation and grace. (This is the case, ideally, even in the celebration of the sacrament of penance for a single individual.)

Let me suggest that priority be given to the awareness that God is actually convoking us. God is speaking to us in the Scriptures; God is associating us with the act of our salvation. Let us be honest: This awareness is often lacking in our liturgies. We live in a society in which consumerism and individualism are the air that we breathe. The Jesuit Byzantine scholar Robert Taft captured (albeit somewhat caustically) what I am trying to say in an essay called "Sunday in the Byzantine Tradition." He reported that people sometimes told him: "I don't go to church because I don't get anything out of it." His response: "What one gets out of it is the inestimable privilege of glorifying God."

Now, glorifying God is serious business, very serious business, and it means a lot more than nourishing my spiritual and moral life, as important as that is: "For whenever the memorial of this sacrifice is celebrated, the work of our redemption is accomplished." The liturgy is always and first and foremost our participation in Christ's redeeming and saving act for the life of the world.

It is precisely the serious nature of liturgy that I think is so often lacking in the way we celebrate, not with the post-Vatican II liturgy itself, but in the casual and friendly manner in which it is celebrated. I do not mean here that we should embody a robotic stiffness. Formality and warmth are not mutually exclusive. For example, despite rather clear instructions about brevity and the introduction of the Mass of the day, it is very difficult for many presiders to exercise proper self-discipline. In addition, even though it is necessary to recognize many cultural variables, the music chosen is often enough unsuitable for the particular function it is to play in the liturgy or for the depth of its content. Perhaps chant in the vernacular should be the default mode, at least for the Eucharistic liturgy.

Reverence and Wonder

The core of my argument is very much inspired by and in line with Pope Francis' excellent apostolic letter on liturgical formation, "Desiderio Desideravi," of 2022. In it, the pope reaffirms the priority of the liturgy as an encounter first of all with Christ, saying, "Here lies the powerful beauty of the liturgy" (No. 10). Although he insists that rubrics and other elements that the church requires must be carefully observed, he also points out that the liturgy is "not the search for a ritual aesthetic" (No. 22). Thomas P. Rausch, S.J., made this very point in an excellent essay in **America** (1/31/25).

For Francis, who shows great appreciation for one of his own favorite theologians, Romano Guardini, the key to liturgical formation is to be found in an appreciation of the gift of Christ's presence for us in the paschal mystery, which is made real for us in liturgical celebration. To emphasize the power of this encounter he uses words like *amazement*, *astonishment* and *wonder*. He writes:

> Wonder is an essential part of the liturgical act because it is the way that those who know they are engaged in the particularity of symbolic gestures look at things, It is the marveling of those who experience the power of symbol, which does not consist in referring to some abstract concept but rather in containing and expressing in its very concreteness what it signifies. (No. 26)

My interpretation of this is that through the very serious and careful performance of the liturgy, and respect for its symbolic power, we are brought into contact with who Christ is (the real presence) and what he has done for us,

Students from St. Ephrem Catholic Academy in Brooklyn, N.Y., present the gifts to Bishop Robert J. Brennan of Brooklyn during Mass.

OSV News photo/Gregory A. Shemitz

his saving act. For Francis, recovering the capacity for appreciating and celebrating symbols is the essential factor in liturgical formation.

Another way of saying this is that liturgical reform is unsuccessful without liturgical renewal. I think it is fair to say that we have gone only part way in this liturgical renewal and that we need to put more energy and resources into liturgical formation. Some 60 years after Vatican II, we can say that, to paraphrase what G. K. Chesterton said of Christianity, it is not that the reform has been tried and failed so much as it has not been thoroughly digested and interiorized.

In part a great deal of the responsibility for this formation falls on priest presiders. Although the pope recognizes the fact that all celebrate the liturgy, he notes how crucial the priest's leadership role is. I must admit that one of the greatest challenges of the liturgical reform has been to prevent the priest from becoming the center of attention. Francis has a remedy for this when he writes in "Desiderio Desideravi" that: "to preside at the Eucharist is to be plunged into the furnace of God's love" (No. 57).

Allow me to conclude with just one aspect that I consider crucial for liturgical formation at this particular moment: silence. Reverent silence is central to the liturgical experience, as is clear in the addition of a paragraph on it to the most recent edition of the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (No. 45). Of all the particular directives of the *General Instruction,* it seems to me that the necessity of silence is the one most honored in the breach. Silence should be observed after the invitation to recognize our sins, between the invitation to the opening prayer and the people's prayer articulated by the priest, after each reading, after the homily, in attentive listening to the Eucharistic prayer (Nos. 78, 147), and after all have received holy Communion.

We must be conscious that the liturgy is not first of all our activity but rather our response to God, who acts first, to Christ who makes himself present among us. Before anything else, the liturgy is a gift that we receive from God. Christ is the supreme gift we receive from God, and for that gift we should be endlessly grateful.

John F. Baldovin, S.J., *is a professor of historical and liturgical theology at the Boston College Clough School of Theology and Ministry. This essay is adapted from a talk originally delivered at Fairfield University on Feb. 27, 2025.*

A Jesuit Considers 'The Chosen'

The streaming series on the Gospels is an international hit. Is it worth your time?

By Joe Hoover

But I mean, is it any good? "The Chosen," I mean—the blisteringly popular TV series about the life of Christ and his disciples: Is it?

Or, more to the point, *for Catholics*. I mean, is it good and appropriate television fare, truly right and just, wise, thoughtful, replete with sound and nuanced theology *for us*, with all our discriminating taste and high artistic tradition and, you know, the Sistine Chapel and everything: Is "The Chosen" worth our precious, Michelangelic time?

"The Chosen" not only renders the stories of the Gospels for the small screen, but also imagines the backstories to them: Magdalene's conversion, the fish overwhelming Peter's nets, the call of Matthew.... "The Chosen" is also the show that has launched the career of a once little-known Catholic actor named Jonathan Roumie into worldwide fame as Jesus.

(Mr. Roumie himself said, in an interview with **America**, that when it comes to the question of salvific Christian art being worth your time or not: "You could have the key to salvation for people and exactly what to do to be saved and have the meaning of life encapsulated in a three-sentence index card, but if you bury that index card in a bucket of garbage, you've lost them.")

"The Chosen" is an international phenomenon, and its producers have claimed that, over its four seasons since its launch in the spring of 2019, it has been seen on streaming platforms and the CW by more than 200 million viewers. (It is ramping up for Season 5, centered on Holy Week, to be released first in theaters on March

Jonathan Roumie, center, as Jesus gathered with his disciples for the Last Supper in "The Chosen"

5 & 2 Studios

27). The show has been translated into 50 languages, and the producers claim that it has garnered 13 million social media followers. It has enticed thousands of fans from all over the world to pilgrimage to Utah and Texas for the privilege of being extras on the show. In March of last year, Brigham Young University hosted an academic conference solely focused on "The Chosen."

"The Chosen" has hit a Christian evangelizing dreamscape whereby, it claims, 30 percent of its audience members are non-Christian.

Good Art

Sure, OK, all very nice, all this success. But, again, is it *artistically good for us,* with our Dante and Bernini and Raphael and Mauriac and Hopkins and Joyce and Flannery and all those Catholic, Jesus-movie-making greats: Zeffirelli, Scorsese, Gibson (or even Pasolini—not Catholic officially, but he grew up in Italy, so honorary)?

Is it at least made by someone like that? No. It is not made by a Catholic. "The Chosen" was created by... *an evangelical.* An evangelical guy with one of the most evangelical guy names you can get: Dallas. Dallas Jenkins, from St. Charles, Ill.

Sure, a Catholic priest is one of the religious advisers to the show (the Holy Cross priest who is the director of Family Theater Productions, David Guffey, C.S.C., of Santa Monica, Calif.). But nevertheless, as a Catholic you prepare to watch "The Chosen"—a show made neither by Martin S. from Little Italy, N.Y., nor Francisco Z. from Actual Italy, Italy, but by *Dallas J. from the*

‘The Chosen’ went on to become the most successful crowd-funded media project of all time.

Midwest—and you plan to sniff at the show for, well, *filmic evangelicalness*. Clubbing one over the head with simplistic messages. The denuding of all nuance and complexity for the *golden beams of Christic wisdom.* The not-so-subtle *reactionary agenda.*

Where is the reactionary agenda, Dallas and your blisteringly popular TV show? Trot it out. We know it’s there!

And I mean, if it was good, if it was just really excellent, high quality, moving, poignant television, then why is it free? Because you can get “The Chosen” not only on Amazon Prime and Netflix but on thechosen.tv for free! Would they really give away something for free if it was any good?

Sure, part of the reason that the show airs for free is that “The Chosen” was crowdfunded, with an initial stake of $10.2 million by 16,000 donors in 2019. (The show used a provision in the Jumpstart Our Business Startups Act of 2016 that allows entrepreneurs to offer financial dividends to “donors.” They’ve got business savvy, we can grant.)

And, yes, “The Chosen” went on to become what may be the most successful crowdfunded media project of all time. (Before “The Chosen” came along, the highest crowd-funded television show, at $5.8 million, was the 2017 revival of “Mystery Science Theater 3000,” which is a tad funnier than the life of Jesus.) But “The Chosen” was successfully crowdfunded, *surely,* by simplistic reactionary Christians with Dallas-adjacent names (Cade, Hunter, Tammy) who go to swap meets and embed fruit in gelatin and who, when gathered for worship, use words like “victory” and “my walk” and, well, you know, *those kinds* of people, right?

And sure, you may have heard that “The Chosen” throws Catholics a bone and *actually has* a Virgin Mary. But it is highly doubtful that the Virgin Mary in “The Chosen” *even says the rosary*. Highly doubtful. You see the problematic nature of this TV series, Catholics? No rosary.

And then you actually watch “The Chosen.”

What ‘The Chosen’ Is Actually Like

In “The Chosen,” a follower of John the Baptist reports that “John calls money a social construct,” the kind of thing you might hear in a Bolshevik coffeehouse or an Occupy Wall Street camp.

In the show’s telling, Peter leaving his nets and following Christ does not mean that he has completely (and somewhat cruelly) abandoned his family. The man who has given up all to follow the Messiah still comes home every so often to his wife, like a soldier on leave.

In “The Chosen,” after his conversion, Matthew the tax collector is not instantly embraced and welcomed by the other disciples. He is still held under suspicion for being a collaborator with Rome and a traitor to the Israelites.

“The Chosen” brings up and handles with dispatch classic scriptural questions like: What does it mean that Christ will “bring a sword”? Why does Christ heal some people and not others? How might the women who contribute to his ministry have made their money? (In “The Chosen” they sell olive oil.)

Imagine staging “Hamlet” for a theater packed with devoted Shakespearean scholars, actors, directors and fans. All of them have their idea of how “Words, words, words” *ought to be* played, or “Get thee to a nunnery” or the raising of Yorick’s skull in the graveyard scene. A show about Christ is like “Hamlet,” but with stakes 1,000 times higher. Not many people have set the foundations of their very existence on good old Hamlet. But many have built their life on the rock of Christ. And they want to see him *done right*.

In an interview with Elizabeth Tabish, who plays Mary Magdalene on “The Chosen,” I remarked that the Christ the show portrays seems to upend preconceived notions and expectations viewers might have of him. “I love that there’s an anarchy in Jesus, right?” Ms. Tabish responded. “That really disregards all expectations and [Jesus] doesn’t apologize for the way he is.” She pointed out that Jesus’ attitude was: “I’m not here to change the things you expect me to change. I’m not going to get on a big horse with a sword. Like, that’s not what I want to say.”

At the National Eucharistic Congress in Indianapolis last summer, I met a woman who said she came back to her Catholic faith “because of Bishop [Robert] Barron and ‘The Chosen.’” The tone she used indicated: *Isn’t this how everyone comes back to the church, through “The Chosen?”*

Deb De Rosa, a member of St. Thomas the Apostle parish in Naperville, Ill., said that the Jesus in “The Chosen” is “simply adorable.” She said, “I like how the sets, costumes, etc., help us to visualize what it may have been like. I love the compassion that the characters emit. It’s so beautifully done.”

Hal Strickland, a management counselor based in New York who is obsessed with Flannery O’Connor and quotes people like Soren Kierkegaard and Carl Jung all the time, likes “The Chosen.” He loves “The Chosen.” He has watched every episode of “The Chosen” *several times* and

talks about it *all the time*. "As someone who loves Christ, inherent to that is a love for the Gospel. As glorious as it is, it can be arcane," Mr. Strickland said. "The gift 'The Chosen' has given us is accessibility. To the whole world of the Gospel." He predicted that "in 50 years, people will be watching these episodes."

But has Hal ever been to a swap meet? Does he even know what a swap meet is?

Dermot Sheehan, a student at Loyola University Maryland, is also a big fan of the show. "I was instantly captivated by 'The Chosen' because of the visuals it gave me," he said. "It gave my relationship with Jesus a more personal feel. He felt more relatable. And so did the disciples."

Dermot said it helped him see the disciples "as real people, struggling the same way I do."

In another John the Baptist sequence in the show, Jesus gently chastises his cousin, who is about to excoriate Herod Antipas for marrying his brother's wife, Herodias. "I understand it is against the law of Moses, but I'm here for bigger purposes than the breaking of rules," Jesus says. "The romantic lives of rulers and kings has been and always will be of enormous fascination to people. It was covered at length in Torah. I don't see why you feel the need to focus on it now." *Do you really need to preach so much about sexual sins?*

Upon returning from his mission to preach the Gospel to the Jews, the apostle "Little James" admitted: "I said things I don't comprehend or live by—I felt a fraud," something every preacher and missionary on earth who is honest with him or herself can probably identify with.

"The Chosen" opens up an entire thread of intriguing, cross-religious dialogue in a single, 30-second exchange between two disciples. Mary Magdalene chastises a new follower of Jesus, an Ethiopian named Tamar, for decorating her body with her family's ornaments and jewels. It is tantamount to being a pagan or an animist, declares Mary. Tamar snaps back that wearing these jewels is not pagan; she is simply honoring her ancestors. In a wisp of time, the scene evokes the entire Chinese Rites controversy of the 16th-century Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci: Could new Christians in 16th- and 17th-century China still perform their ancient rituals of honoring their ancestors, or was it tantamount to idol worship?

In "The Chosen," Jesus prepares for the Sermon on the Mount by speaking it aloud to the empty hills, as Matthew sits nearby and writes his words down. When the time for the sermon comes, the disciples create a stage with a fabric backdrop for Jesus to speak from, they hand out leaflets in the nearby towns and his mother chooses a suitable blue sash for him to wear at his big performance.

"The Chosen" employs complex, interwoven storylines, such as the two-part final episode of Season 3, centered on water and cleansing. The episode yokes together the repair of a sewage system, a woman with a flow of blood, a miscarriage, the feeding of the 5,000, Peter and a Roman centurion fixing the cistern, the ritual cleansing of both the woman with the flow of blood and the woman who miscarried, and another "ritual cleansing" for Peter in the Sea of Galilee after he walks on water, sinks in the sea and is rescued by Christ.

Series creator Dallas Jenkins directs children in a scene from Season 1 of "The Chosen."

Scripture and Truth

"The Chosen" goes big, takes leaps of imagination, is not afraid to provoke its viewers, privileges holding "the mirror up to nature," as Hamlet would put it, over the rigidity of simply sticking to perfectly accurate retellings of the Gospel.

Ms. Tabish said she has met women who were survivors of abuse or trafficking, and who were plagued with a deep sense of worthlessness, who strongly identify with the story arc of Mary Magdalene—in particular, with her despair. A despair which then goes on to "the happiest ending there is," said Ms. Tabish. "And so for these women to have gone through their own traumas and recognize themselves and see themselves in Mary Magdalene? It's just so beautiful to know what they have to look forward to in this story, too, and for themselves that there can be a very happy ending here."

When I talked to himself, the man, "The Chosen"'s creator, Dallas Jenkins (*Dallas! Evangelical! Reactionary! His dad co-wrote those intense "Left Behind" books!),* he was straightforward and seemingly grounded *(seemingly!)* and sharp and ironic and kind of funny (and annoyingly broad-shouldered, good-looking, etc.) and, disappointing-

Erick Avari, left, as Nicodemus, and Elizabeth Tabish as Mary Magdalene in Season 1 of "The Chosen"

ly, not really reactionary.

When asked about the creative approach to Scripture that "The Chosen" takes, Mr. Jenkins said what every artist who has ever created anything based on factual events says: "Our goal is to capture capital-T truth, which means that even if we don't know if this event or this phrase was factual, it reflects the character and intentions of Jesus in the Gospels. It is something that God would see as, or that we would see as, plausible."

Ever since his 2017 box-office failure with his Christian comedy "The Resurrection of Gavin Stone," Mr. Jenkins said, he has moved beyond worrying about what other people think of his work. He appears to be what we might call in the Jesuits a "free man." "When I do 'The Chosen,' I don't think about that stuff anymore. I just try to tell the truth," he said. He wants to tell "a truthful story that makes sense and is organic, and the Christian message doesn't feel crowbarred into it out of the blue."

"I'm just trying to make a great product that pleases God and is good entertainment."

During the unveiling of her original "Last Supper" photos of "The Chosen" cast in New York mid-February, the renowned photographer Annie Leibovitz, a self-proclaimed fan of "The Chosen," described Mr. Jenkins as the artist who was "taking on" Christianity for this century in the way Leonardo da Vinci did in the 1500s. Annie Leibovitz! The utterly cool artistic icon. (The Polaroid of a nude John Lennon embracing Yoko Ono is perhaps her most famous picture and hangs in the National Portrait Gallery.) Her! She! A fan! Not only of "The Chosen," but of *Dallas!*

Over-Commercialized?

Okay, fine. But there are still things to critique, no?

"The Chosen" was initially distributed by Angel Studios, but after a dispute about revenues, it split from Angel and created its own studio, 5 & 2. In the offing for 5 & 2 are an animated series, "The Chosen Adventures," to be released later this year. Also in the works are a limited series centered on Joseph, and another on Moses. 5 & 2 also plans to eventually release a show based on the Acts of the Apostles. There is already a "Chosen in the Wild" partnership with Bear Grylls, where the celebrity survivalist takes cast members of "The Chosen" out into the wild for conversation and adventure.

Has "The Chosen" started to believe its own hype (no matter if the hype is real)? Is "The Chosen" on its way to becoming an overextended, faith-based version of Marvel Studios? Is it scaling up its business too quickly but with possible diminishing returns on quality? Does it think it can catch lightning in a bottle again and again? (How many "Avengers" sequels and spin-offs have there been?)

And just look at merchandise on the thechosen.tv website. You can buy, among other items, "Follow Him" T-shirts, "People Must Know" T-shirts, "The Chosen" wall calendar, "The Chosen" waffle-knit beanie, an "Against the Current" gold bracelet, an "Against the Current" mustard zip hoodie and a "Cast Your Nets" card game. You can buy an (admittedly clever) "Sons of Thunder" T-shirt and sweatshirt, proclaiming "'The Chosen Tour'—Sep. 6 Judaea, Sep. 8 Galilee, Sep. 10 Nazareth." You can get a "Three Fish" phone wallet, stainless steel "Chosen" tumblers, a

"The Chosen" creator Dallas Jenkins, left, and Jonathan Roumie, who plays Jesus, discuss a scene in Season 3 of "The Chosen."

"Chosen" Bible study guide, a "Chosen" fishermen's blend coffee, or a rubber wristband declaring "Binge Jesus." The list goes on.

For the past two years, the producers have staged "Chosencons"—conventions including talks, panel discussions with creators and cast, musical performances, a ventriloquist—with 3,500 attendees in 2023 and 5,000 in 2024. Another is planned for this year.

Is "The Chosen" phenomenon on its way to becoming a kind of spiritual Nike, a juggernaut of religious marketing? Has it taken its popularity and tried to cash in on it in ways that can make it a bit ridiculous, just another big-time Christian ministry trumpeting its wares? "The Chosen" *socks*. Really? "The Chosen" *beanie?*

(For whatever it is worth, I made repeated requests for a follow-up interview with the public relations team for "The Chosen," in an effort to engage these and other questions, but was never given one.)

Nevertheless, perhaps a Catholic could appreciate the show's online marketing machine as a cyber version of a modern-day urban cathedral, one that relies on revenue from donations and gift shop sales—the rosaries, the medallions, the Catholic tchotchkes—to keep the boiler running and the lights on. As for the studio's scaled-up plans—if they are making something people want and they can pull it off with the same efficacy the original show had, why not?

But OK, regardless of all that—regardless of all these positive comments and benefits of the doubt and Annie L., a Gen Z guy and Hal...nevertheless, clearly "The Chosen" is not worth your time because...because...something about gelatin...gelatin.... I like gelatin—even gelatin with fruit—raspberry Jell-O with bananas, for instance. And the thrift stores I go to are pretty much just permanent swap meets, right? And just a few days ago in a church talk I sincerely used the phrase *Christ has won the victory.*

OK, OK. *Fine.*

But have we answered the opening question of this whole article? Overall, as a thing, as a *wholesale artistic enterprise* in the tradition of the Catholic arts greats, is it, you know...?

Is it Good? Does It Matter?

To answer that, we have to travel to 119th and Pacific in Omaha, Neb., to a pizza place called Big Fred's. Big Fred's pizza is heavy on the cheese, and the salad is heavy on the oil (drenched, really). Friday nights after high school football games, Big Fred's is packed. Saturday nights after college football games, packed. Tuesday nights after "Jeopardy," packed. Big Fred's is that pizza place. Everyone knows it; everyone goes there; it is a mile from my childhood home; I have been there 11,000 times. Big Fred's is named after a guy named Fred and Fred was Big. It had, at one point, red shag carpet on its walls. What else is there to say?

One night my brother and I were about to take an out-of-town visitor to Big Fred's. She asked us, *So, is the pizza any good?*

My brother Bob and I looked at each other. Silence. *Is Big Fred's good?* We had never heard anyone, anywhere, *ever,* ask that question. *Is the pizza good?* "I've never even *thought of* that question," said Bob. *Is the pizza....* "I don't know if the pizza is good," he said. "It's just...it's Big Fred's."

Joey Vahedi, left, as the apostle Thomas, and Yasmine Al-Bustami, who plays a fictional disciple, Ramah, in Season 4 of "The Chosen"

Is it good? What? Really? Who cares? *We have no idea if it's any good. It's just where everyone goes. Get in the car.*

Is "The Chosen" good, sublime even? Is it worth your aesthetically discriminating time, Catholics? Sure, you could make critiques on both the positives and the "growth edges" of the show. Acting, writing, directing, camera angles, lighting set-ups, art direction, all that. The whole deal. If I wanted to be quite plainspoken about it, I would have to say it pulls it off quite well. It is a strong piece of work. You can agree or not with the artistic choices the show makes, but it pulls off those choices effectively. "The Chosen" packs the proverbial emotional wallop.

But in the end, whether "The Chosen" is "good" or "not good," is marvelous TV or not, is less important to me than this fact: I have been a baptized Christian for 53 years, attended a Catholic Christian grade school, high school, college and two graduate schools and for more than two decades have been a member of a religious order that *bears the name of Jesus*...and the "The Chosen" television series has done things for my understanding and engagement with the life of Christ and his disciples that nothing else ever has.

No sermon, no theological exhortation, no master's degree, no class on John or Mark or Luke, no spirituality workshop, no 30-day biblically based retreat has brought the Gospels home and made Christ and his people real and relatable to me in quite the way "The Chosen" has. I think that is worth something.

"The Chosen" has simply become *what is*. It is a thing that has lodged itself in the culture that is here to stay. The proof is in the pudding: Millions of people, all over the world, are *really into this show*. And if a Catholic today—and in particular any kind of Catholic minister—is not present to "The Chosen," then they are not present to an increasing number of their people. Because at some point everyone in the church, in one way or another, is going to engage with "The Chosen."

I do not write this necessarily as free advertisement for the show, but as an advertisement for reality. Whether "The Chosen" is to your taste or not, it is time to pull up a chair and watch.

Joe Hoover, S.J., *is* ***America****'s poetry editor and producer of a new film, "The Allegory."*

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OSV News photo/Mihoko Owada

The National Prayer Vigil for Life Mass was held at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, in Washington, on Jan. 23.

Data and Discernment

How the church can make better use of empirical evidence

By Maureen Day

I have so much hope in the future of our church.

As a co-author of the recently released book *Catholicism at a Crossroads: The Present and Future of America's Largest Church*, I have cooperated with fellow sociologists in using some typical data-gathering methods: a survey of over 1,500 randomly selected adult Catholics as well as interviews. We opted to talk to nearly 60 Catholics who are in significant leadership positions, from cardinals to those more "behind the scenes" at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to leaders of lay apostolates. Both the survey and the thoughtful interview responses reveal big challenges as well as immense graces. Now the findings are available to the public.

And so, I wait.

I wait to see who will read it. I wait to see how those readers will use our analysis to inform the discussions and ministries of the church. In short, I wait to see how our empirical data and engagement with the broader context of Catholicism will actually matter for the life of the church.

And in my waiting, a question arises that is really for all of us: How and why should the church use empirical evidence for ministry and discernment?

Proper Orientation

My initial response, given my own sense of vocation and ministry through my scholarship, is one of enthusiasm. I have been engaged in my scholarly work at the intersection of Catholicism and so many topics: Hispanic stewardship, campus ministry, young adults, Catholics who attend Mass infrequently and priestly well-being, to name just a few. My research has provided a better understanding of the problems as well as illuminated possibilities for going forward. I want my research to make a difference.

But my second response is more tempered. Even with my near-perpetual "Let's do it!" attitude, I am also keenly aware of the complicated nature of the move from research findings to prescribing practical steps forward. Whenev-

er I offer specific pastoral recommendations, I do so with humility, believing that those closest to the situation know best. I know there is no cookie-cutter solution to something as wonderfully complex as church life.

And yet even with my reservations, I want to offer a guiding principle to people approaching scholarship and looking for a path forward: Be mindful of how you are grounded—that is, of your orientation—when you approach empirical data. That orientation can shape everything.

We need to be aware of our orientation when we approach data and discern ways forward.

The Good Samaritan

To draw a parallel with Scripture, I look to the parable of the good Samaritan. Often, if you ask folks about that parable, they'll recount the story itself. What is often forgotten is the conversation before and after the parable between Jesus and the expert in the law.

First, the man wants to know how to attain salvation. This is important information! Jesus asks him what the Scriptures say. The man responds, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." Jesus applauds his answer, but the man asks Jesus a follow-up question: "And who is my neighbor?" In other words, he wants to know the limits of this call to love; he wants to know who he can exclude from "neighbor" and yet remain in God's favor.

To this straightforward yet disorienting question, Jesus responds with the parable of the good Samaritan, which might seem at first to be akin to telling his interlocutor the price of tea in China. But he closes with an altogether different question, one that is meant to reorient: "Which of these three [the priest, the Levite or the Samaritan], do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" Jesus shifts the question from one of limits and exclusion to a call for compassion and inclusion.

If we ask the wrong question or look for an answer with a misaligned orientation, our "answers" will not be fruitful. They may even be distracting or, worse, destructive.

Fear, Denial and Trust

In *To Flourish or Destruct*, the sociologist Christian Smith uses the philosophical approach of personalism to explain what motivates human behavior. After exploring in most of the book the natural goods that motivate human behavior, he turns to give an explanation for sin.

The relevant takeaway for our purpose is that humans share a universal experience of vulnerability. Smith highlights three common orientations people take toward their vulnerability. First, they can *fear* it and take an embattled posture, seeing challenges as threats. Second, they can *deny* their vulnerability. Third, they can *accept* their vulnerability and still flourish in their admittedly fragile existence through an orientation of trust.

We do the same when we approach data. If we approach the reality of undocumented immigrants through a lens of fear, we will be suspicious of their intentions, feel unsafe when "we" find "them" in our neighborhoods and churches, and want them sent back to their country of origin (fortunately, my co-authors and I found much support for immigrants among Catholics and the leadership of the church). If we deny climate change data, the way forward is moot; we reject the methods of the study or the human role in the changes, sidestep accountability and continue with business as usual. Unfortunately, both fear and denial are often more like reactions than true responses to reality.

However, with an orientation of trust, we are fully aware of our reality. We see the challenges as well as our capacity and limits to respond. We don't give up hope, even if "the plan" is nebulous or fluid. We recognize that the scope of our knowledge is also limited, but we trust that we will learn more as we proceed. We do what we are able to do without being overwhelmed by the pieces of the plan we cannot do; we trust that others will do theirs. This orientation is the one we should adopt when we are figuring out the "what's next" from the experiences in our lives. This applies to us as a church, too. We need to be aware of our orientation when we approach data and discern ways forward.

The Way Ahead

What I say of trust could be said for any of the virtues. Not only should trust inform the church's application of data to new directions, but so should hope, fidelity, tenderness, generosity, kindness, gratitude, humility, faith, mercy, courage, compassion, patience, justice, tenacity, wisdom and, most of all, love. Fear (e.g., "I'm feeling really overwhelmed by these obstacles") or denial (e.g., "Meh, we'll be fine.... Find a quick fix") might find their way into our thoughts and deliberations, but we should acknowledge this and prayerfully reorient ourselves toward the good.

The whole process of the recent Synod on Synodality

There is no cookie-cutter solution to something as wonderfully complex as church life.

was permeated with trust. From the conversations at tables in parishes around the world to those on the synod floor, Pope Francis called for a process in which we would listen to one another. We did not know what the outcome would be. We could safely assume that it would be neither clean nor uniform across the world's Catholics. But we could trust that the Spirit would guide us.

And although the synod itself is done, its ending is actually a beginning. As the ripples grow and the work gets underway in earnest, we will continue to discover the fruits of these dialogues as well as what more is to be done. For instance, the synod's discussions of the roles of women in the church led to my involvement with a project at the Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies at the University of Southern California exploring women in Catholic leadership roles across the United States, as well as a similar project in my diocese. Local, regional, national and global communities are still asking great questions that will shape the future of our church.

I offer two suggestions as the church considers how it might more effectively use empirical findings to discern new directions. My first suggestion is practical. It would be wise for dioceses and the U.S.C.C.B. to have interdisciplinary advisory bodies of Catholic researchers. When new data comes out, it is helpful to know whether this represents a broader pattern or is just a fluke. Bishops and other ministers have a lot on their plates; to keep up with the vast amount of Catholic scholarship across a variety of disciplines is simply not possible.

These advisory bodies would help leaders think through the implications of the data (as well as any methodological or analytical questions) and collaboratively situate potential next steps within a broader context informed by both ministry and research. This way we can better ensure that we are *responding* to new findings and not just *reacting*.

My second suggestion is more human. We are called not to succeed—that is, for an intended outcome to come to fruition—but to be faithful. There are a lot of factors we, as individuals or as groups or as a church, cannot control. We can't let that overwhelm, distract or discourage us. One thing we *can* control is ourselves and our responses.

There is a lot of overlap between trust and hope. The Jubilee Year's theme, "Pilgrims of Hope," reminds us of our call to be faithful even when things seem dark and the challenges great. Amid all that we cannot control, what we can do is respond with immense goodness.

I think there is no more compelling example of this hope-filled orientation in Scripture than the women who went to anoint Jesus' body on that first Easter morning. On their way it hit them: "Who will roll away the stone?" Although they realized they could not do this on their own, they did not turn back discouraged. Instead, even with this unanswered question and facing the apparently impossible, they pressed on, determined to be faithful to what was theirs to do.

Catholicism at a Crossroads is a part of what is mine to do. My co-authors and I explore Catholics' experiences with parish life, their approach to authority and the ways in which their faith intersects with politics, race, family life and more. For that reason, we left ample loose ends, depending on the readers to weave them together as appropriate for their contexts.

Following this study of the pulse of American Catholic life, I know we have the ability to become the church God is calling us to be. The question is whether we will do all that this requires—together—in a spirit of love and encounter. This truly is Catholicism's crossroads.

As I said at the outset, I have a great deal of hope in the future of the church. As we sift through whatever data we come across, let's walk together, faithfully do our part and trust that when we get to "next," we'll find the stone rolled away.

Maureen K. Day *is a research affiliate at the Center for Religion and Civic Culture and the Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies, both at the University of Southern California. She is the author of* Cultural Catholics *and the co-author of* Catholicism at a Crossroads.

AMERICA'S RETREAT DIRECTORY

Finding time for a retreat can feel daunting, and choosing the right location can be even more challenging. Our list of retreat houses is here to help guide your search. But before diving in, let's start with the basics.

What is a retreat, and why should I consider one? Simply put, a retreat is an extended time dedicated to prayer, often incorporating moments of silence or opportunities for sharing your faith. At a retreat house, spiritual directors or speakers are available to help you connect with God.

How do I know which retreat is right for me? There are various types of retreats, so you can select one that aligns with your spiritual needs. A directed retreat involves meeting daily with a spiritual director to reflect on your prayer life. A guided retreat may focus on a specific theme (like women's spirituality) and offer talks along with opportunities to meet with a director. Preached retreats typically include listening to spiritual talks and praying independently or in faith-sharing groups.

How do I find a retreat that suits me? The retreat houses featured in this guide are excellent starting points. They provide the opportunity to connect with trained professionals who can help you choose a retreat style and location that resonates with you, or even pair you with a regular spiritual director.

Bellarmine Jesuit Retreat House
420 W. County Line Road, Barrington, IL 60010
847-381-1261 • jesuitretreat.org • info@jesuitretreat.org

Bellarmine Jesuit Retreat House is located on 80 acres of rolling meadows and wooded countryside 40 miles northwest of Chicago. Bellarmine offers silent retreats for men and women based on St. Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises. Other offerings include day-long spirituality programs, 12-step recovery retreats, and directed retreats. Learn more at jesuitretreat.org.

Loyola House - Retreats & Ignatian Training, Ignatius Jesuit Centre
5420 Highway 6 N, Guelph, ON N1H 6J2 Canada
519-824-1250 x 266 • loyolahouse.com
registration@ignatiusguelph.ca

Loyola House is a welcoming space for silent directed and guided retreats, the Full Spiritual Exercises Experience, plus training programs in Spiritual Direction and Retreat Ministry. The retreat house is located on 600 acres of beautiful farmland, with walking trails through rolling hills, woods and wetlands—all of it an integral part in retreats and programs: a place of peace where nature gives strength to mind, body and soul.

Jesuit Retreat Center of Los Altos
300 Manresa Way, Los Altos, CA 94022 • 650-917-4024
jrclosaltos.org • retreat@jrclosaltos.org

Situated in the heart of Silicon Valley, yet a million miles from it, the Jesuit Retreat Center of Los Altos in California considers The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius a spiritual progress blueprint. We offer silent and non-silent retreats for men, women, couples, religious communities, and people in recovery.

Jesuit Spiritual Center at Milford
5361 South Milford Road, Milford, OH 45150
513-248-3500 • jesuitspiritualcenter.com
reservations@jesuitspiritualcenter.com

The Jesuit Spiritual Center at Milford, located outside Cincinnati, Ohio sits on 37 beautiful park-like acres providing a tranquil place for prayer and renewal. In the Ignatian tradition, JSC has weekend retreats and personally directed retreats. Additionally, the Center offers spiritual direction, a spiritual direction training program and an Ignite Missionary program. Visit www.jesuitspiritualcenter.com for more information.

Linwood Spiritual Center
50 Linwood Rd, Rhinebeck NY 12572 • 845-876-4178 x302
linwoodspiritual.com • linwooddirector@gmail.com

Linwood Spiritual Center is located within the beauty of the Hudson Valley, with stunning views of the Hudson River. Rooted in the Ignatian tradition of finding God in all things, Linwood welcomes individuals and groups to join us for our programs and retreats or to facilitate your own. We look forward to welcoming you to Linwood!

Loyola Institute for Spirituality
434 S Batavia St, Orange, CA 92868 • 714-997-9587
www.loyolainstitute.org • office@loyolainstitute.org

Loyola Institute for Spirituality offers a dynamic approach to Ignatian spirituality. Programs are offered online or on-site, in English or in Spanish, including the Spiritual Exercises (19th and 18th Annotations), Ignatian formation, discernment and leadership courses, retreats, workshops, and days of reflection to serve individuals, groups, and organizations.

Loyola on the Potomac, A Jesuit Retreat House
9270 Loyola Retreat House Rd./ P.O. Box 9, Faulkner, MD 20632
301-392-0800 • loyolaonthepotomac.com
reservations@loyolaretreat.org

Loyola on the Potomac sits on 235 wooded acres overlooking the Potomac River in historic Southern Maryland. Our 2025 retreats include: Journey to Justice June 6 – 8; Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius July 14 – August 15; 5 and 8-Day Directed and Private Retreats May 27 – June 4, June 24 – July 2, July 14 – 22, and August 12 – 20. *Come Aside and Rest Awhile.*

Manresa Jesuit Retreat House
1390 Quarton Road, Bloomfield Hills, MI 48304
248-644-4933 • manresa-sj.org • frontoffice@manresa-sj.org

Experience the spiritual serenity of Manresa's 39 wooded acres with river, outdoor stations, labyrinth, meditation areas and nature trail. Attend individual or conference retreats, days of prayer and reflection, programs, workshops, an Internship in Spiritual Companionship and more. See details and schedules on our website.

Mercy Center Auburn
535 Sacramento Street Auburn, CA 95603
(530) 887-2019 • mercycenter.org • infoMCA@sistersofmercy.org

Our peaceful 33-acre Retreat Center is in the beautiful Northern Californian foothills near Sacramento, CA. With 40 bedrooms, green walking spaces, and a labyrinth, our contemplative space is ideal for private and group retreats. Sponsored by the Sisters of Mercy, we offer guided retreats, centering prayer, spiritual direction programs, Spanish programs, and more.

Sacred Heart Retreat House
4801 N. Highway 67, PO Box 185.,Sedalia, CO 80135
866-930-1181 • www.sacredheartretreat.org
reservations@sacredheartretreat.org

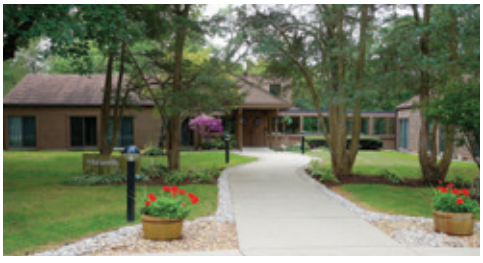
A Colorado Oasis of peace and quiet, surrounded by the spectacular natural beauty and panoramic views of the Rocky Mountains, Sacred Heart Retreat House is a perfect setting for solitude, prayer and reflection. We offer year round directed and private retreats, as well as silent group retreats from outside churches and organizations.

San Alfonso Retreat House
755 Ocean Ave, Long Branch, NJ 07740
732-222-2731 ext. 159 • sanalfonsoretreats.org
info@sanalfonsoretreats.org

San Alfonso Retreat House and Conference Center, a ministry of the Redemptorist fathers and brothers, is situated on eight acres on the New Jersey coast, providing a setting of great natural beauty to meditate and pray, reflect and study, and to be still and listen.

Servants of the Holy Heart of Mary
2041 W. State Route 113 Kankakee, IL 60901
815-937-2244 • tinyurl.com/SSCMOHOS • OHOS@sscm-usa.org

Located 64 miles south of Chicago, One Heart, One Soul and our 2 hermitages sit on a beautiful spot along the Kankakee River. Our retreat house hosts many programs and guided retreats throughout the year. Contact us to host a day of prayer, group meeting, or overnight retreat at our facilities.



Nazareth Spirituality Center
717 North Batavia Avenue, Batavia, IL 60510 • 630-879-1296
tinyurl.com/SSCMNazareth • nazareth_sscm@sbcglobal.net

Nazareth Spirituality Center is a beautiful and welcoming place set in a quiet and prayerful setting in Batavia, IL. Nazareth hosts many day programs, workshops, and retreats throughout the year. The facility is also available 9 months of the year for groups to hold their own days of prayer, group meetings and overnight retreats. Nazareth has 2 suites with private bathrooms, 16 individual bedrooms that share 2 community bathrooms, a chapel, a fully equipped kitchen, and a dining area/meeting room. We are located approximately 44 miles west of downtown Chicago. Contact us to book or for further information.

Springbank Retreat
1345 Springbank Road, Kingstree, SC 29556 • 843-372-6311
springbankretreat.org • springbank@springbankretreat.org

Escape to a place of peace and renewal. Nestled among ancient oaks and serene landscapes, Springbank Retreat offers sacred spaces, contemplative walking trails, and a rich variety of programs—spiritual retreats, creative workshops, and nature immersion experiences. Find rest, reflection, and inspiration in this sanctuary for the soul.

CNS photo/Vatican Media

The Marks of a Synodal Church

Relating, listening, discerning and self-emptying

By Charles Jason Gordon

Every Sunday we recite the Nicene Creed. In it we declare, "We believe in one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic church." We do not often pause to reflect deeply on this line. Yet these are the four marks attributed to the church during the First Council of Constantinople in A.D. 381, which led to the creed that we recite today. These four marks serve as a point of discernment, helping us to recognize the presence of the church of Jesus Christ. They are always present, even if not always clearly visible, and they refer to the church as a whole, rather than to its individual members.

At the start of the recent Synod on Synodality, I had a conversation with Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, S.J., a distinguished African theologian who is now the dean of the Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University in Berkeley, Calif. During our discussion, he spoke about the marks of a synodal church that emerged from the *instrumentum laboris* for the synod. This idea sparked my imagination.

Now that we have the final document of the synod, I believe looking at the document through the four "marks" is a way to make the document more accessible and understandable.

What are the most vital "marks" or attributes of a synodal church as revealed in the text?

It took the early church nearly 400 years to articulate the four marks that we profess in the Nicene Creed. It may also take some time to determine the definitive marks of a synodal church. In the meantime, we must remain attentive to, and reflective on, this crucial theme. If synodality is indeed a constitutive dimension of the church (as stated in Paragraphs 12 and 28 of the *instrumentum laboris*), then we should expect to observe certain attributes when synodality is flourishing and maturing.

Reflecting on the final document of the synod, I propose four marks of a synodal church: *relating*, *listening*, *discerning* and *self-emptying*.

Relating. A synodal church is a *relational* church. The subheading of Part II of the final synod document is "The Conversion of Relationships," a phrase that is profoundly significant. Catholics worldwide, engaged in the synodal listening process of 2022 and 2023, expressed a clear de-

Pope Francis and members of the Synod on Synodality attend the synod's final working session on Oct. 26, 2024, in the Paul VI Audience Hall at the Vatican.

sire for a relational church. The synthesis report from the first monthly gathering of the synod in 2023 states: "This process has renewed our experience of and desire for the church as God's home and family, a church that is closer to the lives of Her people, less bureaucratic and more relational." This desire is echoed in the final document (No. 28).

From this longing for a relational church, synod delegates rediscovered the church's ancient roots. The final document states: "We recognize a synodal church by flourishing interpersonal relationships flowing from the mutual love that constitutes the 'new commandment' left by Jesus to His disciples (cf. Jn 13:34-35)" (No. 34).

At the heart of relationality is the concept of mutual interconnectedness, aligning with Pope Francis' encyclicals "Laudato Si'" and "Fratelli Tutti" on integral ecology. The term "integral" describes the interconnected web of relationships among people, creation and God. This concept, though often overlooked, is vital to our tradition. The final document emphasizes:

> To be a synodal Church, we are required to open ourselves to a genuine relational conversion that redirects each person's priorities, and we must once again learn from the Gospel that attending to relationships is not merely a strategy or a tool for greater organizational effectiveness (No. 50).

If the church is not relational, it cannot be synodal, and therefore it cannot be faithful to Christ. Relational conversion is essential.

Listening. A synodal church is a listening church. To be open to relational conversion, the church must first learn to listen—to the word of God and the marginalized in order to understand God's will. The final document states: "The synodal process has renewed the awareness that listening is an essential component of every aspect of the Church's life" (No. 78). More importantly, listening paves the way for conversion (No. 51).

The document outlines various dimensions of listening: to the people (No. 3), to the Gospel (No. 5), to the poor (No. 8), to the word of God (No. 27) and to the Holy Spirit (No. 31).

Listening in a synodal church is not passive; it is deeply relational and closely linked to discernment. The synod document presents Mary as a model of this kind of listening:

> We see the features of a synodal, missionary and merciful Church shining in full light in the Virgin Mary, Mother of Christ, of the Church and of humanity. She is the form of the Church who listens, prays, meditates, dialogues, accompanies, discerns, decides and acts. From her we learn the art of listening, attentiveness to God's will, obedience to God's Word and a readiness to hear the needs of those who are poor and to set out along the path (No. 29).

Here, listening is part of a continuum leading to attentiveness to God's will and active discipleship.

Discerning. A synodal church is a discerning church. Relationality and listening are prerequisites for synodality, but discernment is its spiritual core and daily practice. It calls for humility, openness to the Spirit and a commitment to ongoing conversion. Discernment is the axis upon which the synodal church finds the "paths of mission" (No. 79). The document states: "Ecclesial discernment...is both the condition and a privileged expression of synodality, where communion, mission, and participation are lived" (No. 82).

Discernment involves three interconnected practices: ecclesial discernment, decision-making processes and a culture of transparency, accountability and evaluation (No. 11). It must be undertaken in a spirit of transparency, guided by evangelical principles (No. 95). Discernment is affirmed through leaders and, ultimately, by God and the entire people of God through the fruitfulness of the mission.

Discernment is the inner dynamism of synodality and is envisioned as the pathway to the renewal of the church. The document states that "the renewal of the Christian community is possible only by recognizing the primacy of grace" and adds: "In this sense, while drawing on the rich spiritual heritage of the Tradition, the synodal perspective contributes to renewing its forms: a prayer open to participation, a discernment lived together, and a missionary energy that arises from sharing and that radiates as service" (No. 44).

Discernment also transforms the community into a spiritual family that relies on God for its mission. Such a discernment "entails the contribution of everyone," as it is "both the condition and a privileged expression of synodality" (No. 82). Living as a discerning community demands "continuous care for and formation of consciences" and the development of the *sensus fidei*, recognizing God's voice in all places (No. 83).

As ecclesial discernment entails the contribution of everyone, it is both the condition and a privileged expres-

Living as a discerning community demands 'continuous care for and formation of consciences.'

sion of synodality.

The inner dynamism of discernment fuels growth in faith, hope and love, forming the church into a community deeply attuned to God. The document calls for the transformation of synodal bodies established by the Second Vatican Council and by canon law, such as diocesan synods, presbyteral councils, diocesan pastoral councils and parish pastoral councils, into discerning communities (No. 103). When these bodies are transformed into discerning communities, they move the local church toward an "inculturated proclamation of the Gospel, for the community's mission in its milieu, and for the witness of the baptized" (No. 103).

Communal discernment even extends to ecumenism. The document suggests including delegates from other Christian communities and faiths in the discernment process (No. 106). It also outlines six steps for communal discernment (No. 84), which leaders should prayerfully reflect on. This approach is not about democracy or popular opinion but about forming a discerning community while respecting church hierarchy. As stated:

> In a synodal Church, the authority of the Bishop, of the Episcopal College and of the Bishop of Rome in regard to decision-taking is inviolable as it is grounded in the hierarchical structure of the Church established by Christ; it both serves unity and legitimate diversity.... Such an exercise of authority, however, is not without limits: it may not ignore a direction which emerges through proper discernment within a consultative process, especially if this is done by participatory bodies (No. 92).

A new culture must be embedded in seminaries and formation houses: The "formation of candidates for ordained ministry should be undertaken in a synodal way. There should be a significant presence of women, an immersion in the daily life of communities, and formation to enable collaboration with everyone in the Church" (No. 148).

The ultimate aim of relationality, listening and discernment is mission.

Self-Emptying. A synodal church is a humble, self-emptying church, modeled on Philippians 2:5-7: "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant." This calls for deep conversion and transformation into Christ.

To understand this mark of the synodal church, we must reflect on this three-year process of synodality. Pope Francis has exemplified self-emptying by decentralizing authority to involve the whole people of God. In his final address to the Synod on Synodality, he stated:

> I do not intend to publish an Apostolic Exhortation; what we have approved is sufficient.... This is why I am making it immediately available to everyone. It is the reason I said that it should be published. In this way, I wish to recognize the value of the synodal journey accomplished, which by means of this Document I hand over to the holy faithful people of God.

By forgoing the usual apostolic exhortation issued at the conclusion of a synod, Pope Francis has modeled a new form of leadership, inviting others to do the same. The final document, voted on by the 356 delegates, becomes part of the ordinary magisterium of the bishop of Rome. This is historic and a model for all leaders in this synodal church. The final document says:

> Synodality ought to be expressed in the Church's ordinary way of living and working. This *modus vivendi et operandi* works through the community listening to the Word and celebrating the Eucharist, the brotherhood of communion and the co-responsibility and participation of the whole People of God in its life and mission, on all levels and distinguishing between various ministries and roles (No. 30).

One key insight I gained this month was from a discussion with Patriarch Job, a fraternal delegate, about point No. 137 of our document, which states: "The Synod welcomes the recent publication of the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, *The Bishop of Rome: Primacy and Synodality in [the] Ecumenical Dialogues and in the Responses to the Encyclical Ut Unum Sint*, which opens avenues for further study." Patriarch Job described that document as

revolutionary for ecumenical dialogue. It asserts:

> Authority is inextricably linked to the mystery of the cross and the kenosis of Christ.... [A]uthority in the Church must be understood "as service to God's people based on the power of the Cross".... In this sense, the exercise of authority must be modelled on the kenotic example of Christ, "as a service that includes the willingness to practice self-renunciation" (No. 42).

Synodality invites transformation, requiring us to make space for others in the church's life, decision-making and mission. From Constantine onward, the church has grappled with self-emptying. Through 40 years of ecumenical dialogue, synodality has emerged, with the pope emptying himself and embracing his role as the bishop of Rome, guiding us forward.

Journeying Together

The final document is rich with insights worthy of further exploration, and it may take many years for the church to fully embody its invitation. For now, we must focus on the four essential "marks" of synodality: *Relating, listening, discerning and self-emptying*. Keeping these ever before us ensures that we stay on the right path.

Each mark is a call to conversion and mission. This spirituality weaves through each section of the document, inviting ongoing transformation. Synodality leads to mission through deep spiritual change or Christification—a process in which disciples become united with God and transformed into Christ's image (2 Cor 3:18). We act as Christ would act. The process of conversion also purifies the mission. This grace invites the whole people of God into a mystical union with the Holy Trinity, becoming an extension of God in this world while remaining intimately connected. Conversion and mission fruitfulness are intertwined with these four marks.

St. Teresa of Ávila's stages of prayer, depicted as watering a garden, can serve as an analogy. In the first stage, water is laboriously drawn from a deep well, requiring effort but yielding results as the garden begins to flourish. The second stage is easier: Water is pumped and distributed, symbolizing a deepening relationship with God. The third stage, a flowing stream, eases the gardener's work, representing a more natural and fruitful prayer life. Finally, in the fourth stage, the garden thrives with little effort, sustained by rain, indicating a soul fully aligned with God.

We begin with relationality, which requires intentional effort and grace. This must lead to deep listening—attuning ourselves to God, others and our community. Conversion through listening comes from grace poured into our hearts, guiding us toward discernment as a way of life and governance for our families, ministries and the church. Discernment invites us to align our will with God's, preparing us for self-emptying. This self-emptying is the most precious gift of synodality, requiring profound humility and service.

Each mark presents an opportunity for transformation and mission purification. Together, they act as an inner dynamism in the soul of the Christian and the church's structure, facilitating the Christification of believers and the realization of Vatican II's vision of universal holiness, as well as the church's call for missionary disciples at Aparecida. The document emphasizes the need for a Christian community committed to continuous, integral formation (Nos. 140-51), making synodality an invitation to deep spiritual renewal leading to missionary discipleship and the church as a community on mission.

We need to see catechesis through these four marks of synodality: a catechesis that is relational, listening, discerning and self-emptying. This should also guide pastoral care and decision-making in the church today. All pastoral life must be relational, listening, discerning and self-emptying. Our parish councils, finance councils and all our synodal bodies must embody these marks. Seminary formation and all our formation programs must embed them as well. Can we reimagine the church through these four?

Think of the Emmaus story as a model of movement toward a synodal church: The two disciples are on the road together (a "synod" itself). They are running away from the mission in Jerusalem, downcast and distraught. Jesus approaches them, beginning where they are, and enters into relationship with them. He listens deeply to them and responds to their cares and concerns. He deepens the relationship through breaking bread with them. Then they become a discerning community: "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" (Lk 24:32).

They drop their fears, their agenda and their will, aligning themselves with God's will—they head back to Jerusalem, their self-emptying leading to mission.

This Gospel story takes us through the four marks of a synodal church. Each encounter with Christ moves us to relating, listening, discerning and self-emptying, ultimately leading to mission.

The Most Rev. Charles Jason Gordon *is the archbishop of Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, Antilles.*

Unguessed Blessings

Lessons from 100 retreats at the Camaldolese hermitage in Big Sur

By Pico Iyer


Hiroko Takeuchi

I first began spending time with my friend Therese after she wrote me a letter about an old book of mine I'd written about trying—and failing—to be a monk. I'd been too young in my 20s to really understand what *kenosis*, or emptying of self, was about or to sift the aesthetics of the practice from the heart. But if ever I should like to visit, her letter said, we might have much to talk about.

Not many weeks later, I found myself back near her home in Big Sur, Calif. Therese lived alone in a little cabin in an unpeopled valley reached by a dirt road that was part of a Benedictine monastery. She'd stayed there for a quarter of a century with her husband Eric, but he was gone now and she was free, she told me, to enjoy all the meditative fruits of solitude and silence. Up the slope from where she lived was a community of 15 Camaldolese monks, their chapel, their refectory, their library and cells—and the 10 or so male workers who helped out with odd jobs around the property.

This itself was something I could not have imagined when I was young: that a monastery might house, and the monks look after, an elderly woman. They regularly came down to fix her toilet or secure her screen doors against summer flies; now that Therese was in her 90s, one of them wheeled her up to the chapel for Eucharist on Sundays. In the deep forest all around, she had made her own chapel of eclectic objects to complement the light-filled minimalist chapel up above: pieces of driftwood with stones in their laps, streams made of pebbles serenaded by wind chimes, a dancing Krishna, a Buddha sporting a turquoise necklace.

Most of all, lanterns, candles, colors everywhere in what otherwise might have been an impenetrable darkness, so that the wilderness all around resembled a festival of lights.

Thus Therese became one way I learned to free myself from my far too simple ideas about what a Catholic monastery might be. I'd gone through 15 years of Anglican cloisters while growing up in England: chapel every morning, chapel every evening, the Lord's Prayer in Latin every Sunday night, the Gospel according to Matthew in Greek by day. I'd begun to wonder whether I needed any more hymns or crosses. But after a forest fire reduced my home and everything in it to ash, and I was spending months sleeping on a friend's floor, I'd started to make retreats in this Benedictine hermitage a friend had urged on me.

At the very least, he'd pointed out, I'd have a bed to sleep in there, as well as a long desk, a private walled garden with an ocean view, three meals a day—all for $30 a night. The deeper prize, I soon found, was that I was freed from all my everyday concerns and frustrations, and released into a deeper self—or non-self—that I might otherwise have forgotten.

Almost as soon as I stepped out of my car, on my first visit, I felt transported. My plans were left down on the highway and replaced by an intuition I would have to trust. Over the next 20 years I began spending more and more time in the embarrassingly inexpensive retreat house, sometimes taking over a solitary trailer on the hills, complete with its own kitchen and bathroom, for weeks on end, sometimes even taking over a room in the monastic enclosure. At this point in my life, I estimate I have made about 100 retreats at the monastery.

Finding heaven in a radiant setting, free of emails and trifling news updates, is not so difficult, especially if you're a solitary writer who loves taking walks and reading and sitting out in the warm night trying to count the stars. But in time I learned that the monks who opened their doors to me and 15 or so other retreatants were members of one of the most contemplative orders in Catholicism; they were ready to welcome anyone who visited, confident that she or he, whatever their background, would find what was truest in them in silence, what T. S. Eliot had called "the Life we have lost in living."

The author walking at New Camaldoli Hermitage in Big Sur, Calif.

As I started haunting the monastery bookstore—Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, even Rumi—and joining the monks for Sunday lunches, I also found that they were far more down-to-earth and gregarious than I had imagined, the least dogmatic and most practical souls I knew. One was a trained psychologist who received calls from the Pentagon to lead workshops on suicide prevention; another was a scholar born in Hollywood whose life was blown open after his mother, when he was 14, gave him a copy of *Autobiography of a Yogi*. I met the celebrated mystic who slept on the floor of the Camaldolese ashram in southern India, clad in a dhoti and eating with his hands—he'd studied under C. S. Lewis—and the one from South Africa who liked to come to my trailer to talk about his favorite novels, leaving me on one occasion with a consoling greeting card in which Piglet offers solace to Winnie-the-Pooh.

The Camaldolese had been granted by the Vatican a dispensation to engage with what is true and holy in every religious tradition; more than that, I felt, the brothers were so deep in their commitment that they had nothing they needed to defend or protect. They were ready to learn from everyone.

They knew the outside world, these artists and chemists and engineers—the recent prior had given concerts of his own music everywhere from Beirut to Jakarta—but they had chosen a deliberate life of obedience and devotion. As the world began to speed up ever more furiously, I grew ever more grateful for the life of attention and kindness the brothers opened up to every visitor. And as the planet grew more and more divided, I started to spend more and more nights in their midst, in their enclosure, sometimes even in a monk's cell if one happened to be unoccupied.

I could never become a monk. I had a widowed mother to protect three hours to the south, and a wife and two kids across the sea in Japan (though after she retired, my wife would start delightedly coming to join me on retreats). Still, I knew of nowhere saner or more steadying, especially in a world of acceleration and contention. As soon as I arrived at my retreats, I remembered what I loved and therefore what I ought to be doing over the next three months. I also found a sense of purpose and of joy—as well as the meaning of commitment—that I had misplaced somewhere along the way.

Going to meet Therese became perhaps the final blessing in this slow move from skepticism to exultant solitude and then to a richer sense of community and even service. She baked fresh ginger cookies for me—and to take back to my aging mother—every time I visited her in her cottage. She set out a yellow legal pad as we spoke so she could note down anything of significance. She rejoiced in my horribly unflattering green sweater full of holes, and since I wore it on every visit, decided that "'holeyness' is a form of permanence."

Well into her 90s, she was screening a movie for me and my wife, "As It Is in Heaven," that she had seen, she reported with glee, more than 50 times. She was sending me elegant cards and letters whose poetry spoke for her 35 years in silence. She pointed us toward secret shadow shrines she'd set up amid the trees, handing me a cool moist towel every time I arrived at her cabin lest I was feeling hot.

I grew used to seeing her delicate features in her black velvet jacket, the mischievous eyes under the red Alice band that contained her soft white hair. Sometimes, when the remote hilltop hermitage got cut off by winter storms, she had to be helicoptered out after she'd had a fall; more than once, she had to be hurriedly evacuated as wildfires roared around the monastery. "We had two mandatory evacuation orders," kind Vickie, who began looking after Therese, told me in 2020, "even as we also had mandatory stay-at-home orders" during the Covid-19 pandemic.

"Sounds like real life," I said. In Japan the government had announced a state of emergency during the pandemic even as life proceeded very much as usual.

Just as the pandemic began to ease, Therese, at 96, passed away. But not before celebrating 38 joyful birthdays within the monastery, and brightening many a life with a clarity and wisdom that seemed the perfect complement to the heroic lives of the busy monks up the slope.

By then, I'd realized that I knew nothing of the tradition I had thought I knew too well; I'd never been introduced at school to *The Cloud of Unknowing* or Pascal, to Meister Eckhart or Father Thomas Keating. Whatever I'd imagined of a Catholic monastery had been a flickering projection that could not begin to take in women helping monks to stay true to their deeper course or non-Christians sharing in a Christian life. I think back now to Therese, and to all the old friends who are still living in that sometimes terrifying wilderness, and realize that no life I could lead down on the highway would make sense without the life of prayer I've met far above.

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Pico Iyer *is the author of 17 books, including most recently a meditation on the power of retreat and monasticism,* Aflame: Learning from Silence.

The Heart of a Paraguayan Jesuit Martyr

Discovering the inspirational life of St. Roque González, S.J.

By Maria C. Allende

iStock/johan10; iStock/Elena Shilina

Photo illustration using a portrait of St. Roque González de Santa Cruz from Paraguayan money

The open-heart bypass surgery was scheduled to last about four hours. My brother had been wheeled into the operating room to start the risky procedure, so his wife and I went to find the nearest church in downtown Buenos Aires to spend some quiet time in prayer. We walked four blocks and saw the Jesuit parish church, the Iglesia del Salvador. It had been a long time since I had resided in my home country of Argentina; I had been living in the United States for 30 years, but I returned home often to see family and friends.

Although I had been educated in the Catholic schools of Buenos Aires and was a devotee of St. Ignatius Loyola—Ignatian retreats made an impact on me in my youth—I had never entered this particular church. I had passed by it many times, and I knew about its school and university next door, which was founded in 1868 by the Jesuits.

At this moment, I was gripped by a feeling of extreme stress: As a physician trained in a cardiovascular hospital, I knew exactly what could go wrong with my brother's surgery. I was contemplating that life-threatening moment in the operation when the extracorporeal circulation is halted, and the heart is left to pump on its own the adequate volume of blood to keep the myocardium healthy. There is a risk that a slow response in the pumping will make the myocardium suffer ischemia (a low flow of oxygen) that could severely damage its integrity, with potentially serious medical consequences.

So I leaned into this opportunity for prayer and emotional comfort. We walked into the church and marveled at the frescoes depicting the story of Jesuit evangelization and martyrdom in the South American missions. I had read about the French Jesuit martyrs of North America, and I knew there were other martyrs, Spanish Jesuits, in the Viceroyalty of the Rio de la Plata. Even so, I had to admit that I did not even know their names, much less their stories of martyrdom.

Yet there they were in the frescoes—like a cloud of witnesses—radiant with their holy and innocent expressions along with their names: Fathers Juan del Castillo, Alonso Rodríguez and Roque González de Santa Cruz, the latter of whom was the first saint from Paraguay.

A Jesuit priest named Father Daniel came to greet us, walking down the aisle with a warm smile as if he had known to expect us. Seeing our expressions of wonder, he asked if this was our first time in the church; we confirmed it was.

Despite the splendor of the art, my mind was still gripped with frightening images of a potential myocardial damage that I envisioned could be happening at the hospital. Then Father Daniel gently asked us, "Have you seen the intact myocardium of Father Roque González de Santa Cruz?"

I heard his words and, all of a sudden, an overwhelming sense of calm and wonder filled me. I felt peace about the outcome of my brother's surgery and knew that he was being watched over by this holy saint, who had been previously completely unknown to me. "Where?" I asked.

Father Daniel pointed to a small chapel at the right side of the entrance to the church, where the relic of St. Roque González was kept in a glass reliquary. As we walked together to see the relic, Father Daniel told us the story of the saint's life and his martyrdom on Nov. 15, 1628.

The son of a Spanish noble and a native Guarani mother, St. Roque was born in Asunción, Paraguay, but he abandoned a life of privilege and instead embraced one of dedication to service and evangelization among the Guarani people of the region. He was a conquistador with a cross instead of a sword. He taught the Guarani about Jesus, and he educated them to seek heaven to better serve their brothers and sisters. St. Roque was fluent in the Guarani language, which he had learned from his mother. He founded 15 Jesuit missions in the northeast region of the upper Paraná River.

The martyrdom of St. Roque came at the hands of local shamans. He was attacked when he was working on the construction of a belfry for a new chapel. It was a slaying that filled the locals whom he had served so piously with

deep sorrow. The shamans ordered that the body of St. Roque be burned and his heart taken out to ensure that he was dead. But according to witnesses, his heart was not consumed by the flames and, in addition, kept beating in the fire. His astonished disciples retrieved it from the ashes, and it has remained intact for four centuries.

And now the heart of St. Roque lay in the display case in front of me. It still held the power of life and evangelization, announcing its presence at the very moment when I most needed faith and consolation.

I now reflect with gratitude on the impact that this serendipitous walk to a nearby church on a fear-filled morning had on my life and that of my family, an unexpected blessing. Besides strengthening my faith in an almighty God who loves us and takes care of our needs before we ask him, this encounter brought me closer to the life of St. Roque. In fact, it inspired me and my husband to visit the ruins of the San Ignacio Mini mission complex in the Iguazu region. Here among the still-standing stone buildings constructed by Guarani labor, we heard from the local guide that on the last Good Friday before our visit, the heart of St. Roque had been carried in procession throughout the place we were visiting, making for another close encounter with his life and the lasting presence of the Jesuit spirit in those hallowed lands.

My brother was inspired to read about the life of this new patron saint we had discovered. I also learned that three of my brother's employees were Paraguayans and had been praying for the intercession of St. Roque, who was the patron saint of Borja, the hometown of one of the employees. They had been praying for the health of my brother, whom they had come to know as a friend as well as a boss, and upon whom their sustenance depended. One employee, who was from Borja, brought me a St. Roque prayer card when I told her the story.

And I learned that Pope Francis, when he visited Asunción in 2015, had prayed before the heart of St. Roque, for whom he has a special devotion.

I began this journey simply looking for a church in which to find a moment of peace. But in my encounter with St. Roque I also found a new saintly model and companion who opened my eyes and my heart to the wonder of God's love in the martyrdom of the Jesuits of the Rio de la Plata, and to their living and loving impact on our lives and faith.

Maria C. Allende, *born and raised in Argentina, is a Maryland physician who has been living in the United States for more than three decades.*

A Prayer for Pope Francis During His Grave Illness

Loving God:
As Francis, our beloved pope, suffers from grave illnesses, we come before you in prayer.

We ask you to look with mercy on your servant Francis, who has served you devotedly and tirelessly as a Jesuit, a priest, an archbishop, a cardinal and as pope.

Most of all, he has served you as a faithful Christian sharing the love, mercy and compassion that your Son showed to all he encountered in his public ministry, especially those who were poor or in any way struggling.

During his papacy, Francis has striven to imitate your Son by reaching out to all who were feeling abandoned, ignored or neglected, making it his special task to care for those who were in any way sick.

As Francis himself now faces serious and complex illnesses, help the doctors, nurses and medical team who care for him, to help him bear any pain with grace and help him to heal quickly.

Send your Holy Spirit, your own breath, into his weakened lungs to heal him, inspire him and raise him up again so that he may live out his vocation as the Vicar of Christ.

But if it is your will, loving God, to take him to yourself, let his passing into new life be painless and peaceful.

We ask all this in your Holy Name.
Amen.

James Martin, S.J.


Carly Earl

A Writer Seeking Questions, Not Answers

By Grace Lenahan

Among the six finalists for the 2024 Booker Prize was the first Australian author in a decade: Charlotte Wood. The plot of Wood's seventh book, the 2023 novel *Stone Yard Devotional*, unfolds inside a tiny rural Australian convent, where one woman embarks on an interior journey toward a greater understanding of her place within a wider world. Wood's earlier novels contain explicit social critiques—*The Natural Way of Things* was a searing feminist dystopia, and *The Weekend* a vivid dissection of aging and friendship—but *Stone Yard Devotional* does its intellectual heavy lifting at an arm's-length distance.

"I wanted to write a book that doesn't teach or explain or condescend," Wood told **America** in an interview over Zoom in February. At the same time, *Stone Yard Devotional* contemplates global tragedies—but from a slant and without didacticism. The world in which it is set, quite like ours,

Charlotte Wood (at left) set her 2023 novel *Stone Yard Devotional* inside a tiny convent in rural Australia.

reels from a pandemic and the negative effects of climate change. Yet, in Wood's words, *Stone Yard Devotional* is "a book of questions, more than answers."

This interview has been condensed for length and clarity.

What was your source of inspiration for this book?

I feel like it's taken me 10 books to learn how to write one. *Stone Yard Devotional* emerged from strange experiences, including the catastrophic Australian bushfires of 2019, which made climate change feel undeniably present. Then the pandemic hit, pulling the rug out from under any "certainty" we had about control. All of this was a humbling realization of Western hubris; scientists had warned us for decades, yet we ignored it.

I started writing this book with a lighter tone, but lockdowns made everything feel more serious. Toward the end, I turned to the songwriter Nick Cave's words—"I felt chastened by the world"—and I thought: That's exactly it. That's how I feel. And those words became the book's epigraph.

Did you approach this novel differently from how you've approached your other projects?

Early on in writing this book, I learned my older sister had cancer. Then, six weeks later, I was diagnosed, and a week after that, our younger sister was, too. We've all come out the other side, but it never really ends—physically and psychologically, the ripples go on. Then, there was another great chastening amid rolling global shocks—Australia's fires, the pandemic, then devastating floods. All of this shaped the backdrop as I wrote about an atheist woman arriving at a Catholic convent.

Do you think works of fiction are obligated to engage in conversation with global events and tragedies?

The pandemic was so enormous that I couldn't write a novel where it hadn't happened, yet I didn't want to write about it directly. The same went for climate change—it stayed outside the novel's convent walls, though a real-life mouse plague made its way into the book. I believe novelists should respond to the world, but I didn't want to preach or teach. I found a guiding idea in Yeats's words: "Only that which does not teach, which does not cry out, which does not condescend, which does not explain, is irresistible." I wanted to write a book of questions, not answers.

In *Stone Yard Devotional*, the narrator wrestles with two ethical extremes—believing action is the antidote to despair, then confronting this action's failures. She begins to wonder if the convent's quiet restraint does more good than relentless action. She questions it. *What are the nuns achieving here with their silly little songs and praying all day long? What good is that doing in the world?* Then she realizes that, in staying still, they're not causing any harm. They're not slurping up resources. They're just containing themselves. Maybe that restraint is doing more good than all the relentless pushing and acting she has done throughout her life, which drove her to leave the city, her career and her marriage behind to retreat into stillness.

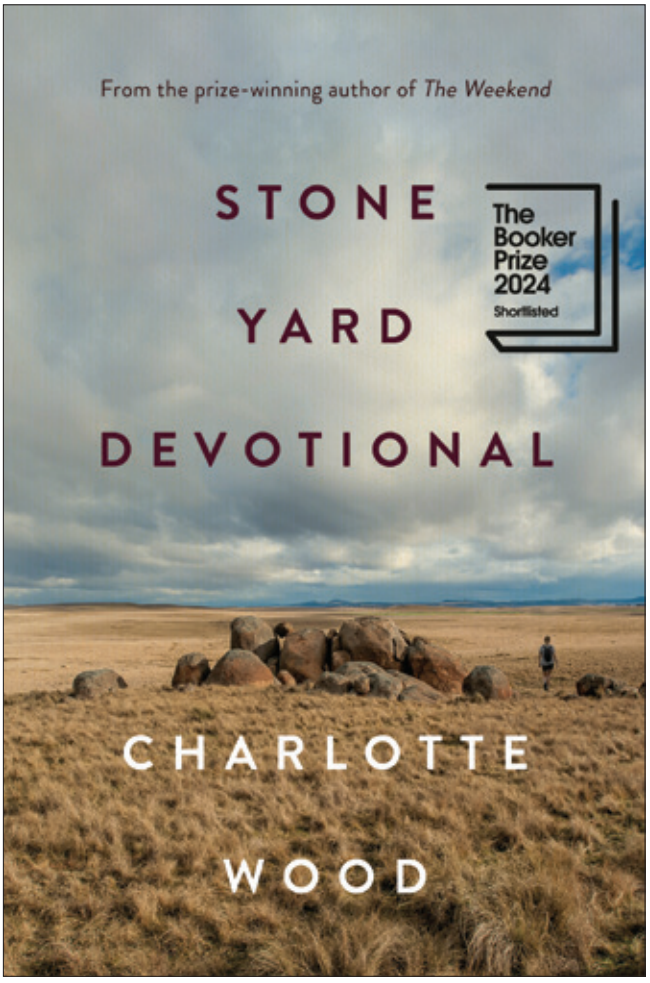
What motivated your decision to choose the convent as the central setting of the novel?

I started writing this book with a question: Why would a contemporary woman choose to become a Catholic nun? I understand it historically, but in today's world, especially as a feminist, it seemed like a strange choice, given the church's ongoing sexism. But once I explored the idea of retreat, I understood the appeal: a highly ritualized, ordered life, where labor itself is worship. I respect that restraint and introspection. Some see it as selfish, but I find that view strange—we're often suspicious of quiet, of stepping away from the world. Maybe we're just afraid of stillness and silence.

The landscape in the novel is the Monaro Plains in southern New South Wales, where I grew up. It's a stark, stripped-back place—treeless, with low grasses and scattered boulders. It can look almost lunar or desert-like, but there's a quiet beauty to it. I hadn't returned for years after my parents passed in my 20s, avoiding the grief tied to that land. But during the pandemic, I accompanied my husband on a work trip there, and something about stepping into that space after months of lockdown—being out in the world again—made me realize I wanted to write about it, my childhood and my mother.

As I wrote, I instinctively placed my imagined convent within that landscape, and I quickly saw how the two fit together. The voice of the book—stripped-back, unadorned—mirrored the land's austerity. Later, in interviews, I found myself saying something I hadn't consciously realized before: My narrator goes to this place because she knows the landscape will understand her. She's in a spiritually barren state, and the land is just as bare. Writing this book became a deeper exercise in trusting intuition over deliberation, allowing the unconscious to guide the work rather than forcing decisions.

Did you hope that the book would inspire readers to retreat from the contemporary world?



Farrar, Straus & Giroux / 354p $30

I haven't done religious retreats myself, though years ago, I stayed for a couple of days at a monastery guesthouse with a friend. However, I have spent weeks at a time alone on artists' retreats, working in rural places without speaking aloud. So when it came to writing this book, I didn't do much research—just a bit of superficial Googling. Early on, a young interviewer asked how many nuns I had interviewed, and when I said "zero," she was shocked. But I wasn't aiming for strict accuracy. I trusted my own experience of withdrawal from the world, of solitude, to inform the book's emotional truth.

That trust was unexpectedly affirmed when I was invited to speak at a conference of Trappist monks and Benedictine nuns. I was terrified they'd call out everything I'd gotten wrong, but they were incredibly kind and said that while there were a few minor quibbles, the emotional reality of the book rang true. That was deeply heartening.

What fascinates me about monastic life is how we in the secular world tend to either romanticize or demonize it. We imagine it as a peaceful, spiritual retreat, but real solitude—true silence—can be confronting. In our daily lives, we can stay endlessly distracted, reacting to the external world. But in a life of strict routine and repetition, there's no escape from the self. I once saw a nun mention how, in that environment, dreams and memories take on an almost hallucinatory vividness. I've experienced something similar in artists' retreats, where interior imagery becomes startlingly potent. That was something I wanted to explore in the novel—the intensity of the mind when there's nowhere left to hide.

'We're often suspicious of quiet, of stepping away from the world. Maybe we're just afraid of stillness.'

In terms of inspiring readers, I didn't have any particular hopes for the book beyond wanting it to move people, but I've been struck by how many readers have said: "I want to go to this place. Where is it?" The appeal of opting out of the world feels especially strong right now, when the constant onslaught of political and environmental crises can feel overwhelming. The idea of retreat—whether through digital detoxes or something more extreme—speaks to a deep craving for quiet. I just returned from the Jaipur Literature Festival, my first time in India, and the sheer sensory and ethical overload of seeing immense wealth alongside deep poverty reinforced that desire for stillness. But retreat is never as simple as escape; the reality is that you can't hide from yourself in silence.

I'm also fascinated by how people coexist in closed communities—monasteries, schools, workplaces—where they don't choose their companions but must find a way to live together. Over time, I think that's become the central question in my writing: How do we live with people we wouldn't choose, and do so in a way that is decent? It's a profoundly difficult thing.

In a separate interview, you said that you wanted "nothing trivial and nothing insincere about this book." Was using religion as a backbone for* Stone Yard Devotional *a way to achieve that end?

Yeah, maybe it was. Contemporary life often feels so trivial and insincere. When I step outside my house, I'm confronted by what feels like a flood of psychological, capitalist and

even literal garbage—just everything pouring in, overwhelming the senses. And yet, it's possible to be just as trivial in a religious institution if you choose to be. That's something my narrator struggles with, particularly when she sees younger nuns speaking about Jesus as if he's their boyfriend—like some kind of pop idol. What interests me about life in a religious community is the labor of being serious and the complexity of how to approach that. It's a kind of intentional depth that one must strive for.

For my narrator, who doesn't believe in God and doesn't understand prayer, the process of trying to take part in this life is hard labor—trying not only to fit in but to truly understand it. She respects it and longs for it, but there's always a part of her that wants to argue. She has this yearning to be as certain as the boss nun, yet she can't quite cross the threshold of actual belief.

You grew up in a Catholic home, and your father was briefly a monk, but you've said publicly that you are not a believer. Of course, this novel has a convent of nuns as its setting. Are there ways that your Catholic background has affected your current spiritual life and your craft?

I'm pretty sure that growing up as a Catholic made me a writer. I went to Mass every Sunday from birth until I was 18, and—I don't want to sound insulting—being forced into quiet boredom once a week was really good for a child like me. What felt like five hours when I was 7 years old meant that I had no choice but to enter into this sort of private, imaginative world while the rest of the church buzzed with activity.

The rich symbolism and material beauty of Catholicism also left an indelible mark on me—the stunning churches, the colors, candles, gold, incense, brocade and velvet—all of it captivated me, and it still does. I remember going to a non-Catholic Sunday school once and being horrified by how bare and uninspiring the space was in comparison to the sensory richness of the Catholic Church. It made me appreciate how deeply the experience of Catholicism has informed my sensibilities as a writer.

In addition to the sensory aspects, Catholicism gave me something deeper: the language of the Bible, its rhythms washing over me, and its sense of mystery, burning bushes, ascensions, water into wine, like magical realism.

Catholicism also instilled in me a strong sense of social justice. My parents, deeply engaged in community work, taught us that we have obligations not just to ourselves but to others and to the planet. That moral responsibility is central to who I am and to my writing.

What's next?

It's not top secret—I just haven't written any of it yet. I've realized my books tend to alternate between being "in the world" and "out of the world." My last book, set in a cloistered convent, was about withdrawal. This next one is the opposite—set in a contemporary urban retail workplace, right in the middle of modern chaos. That's all I know for now—we'll see what happens.

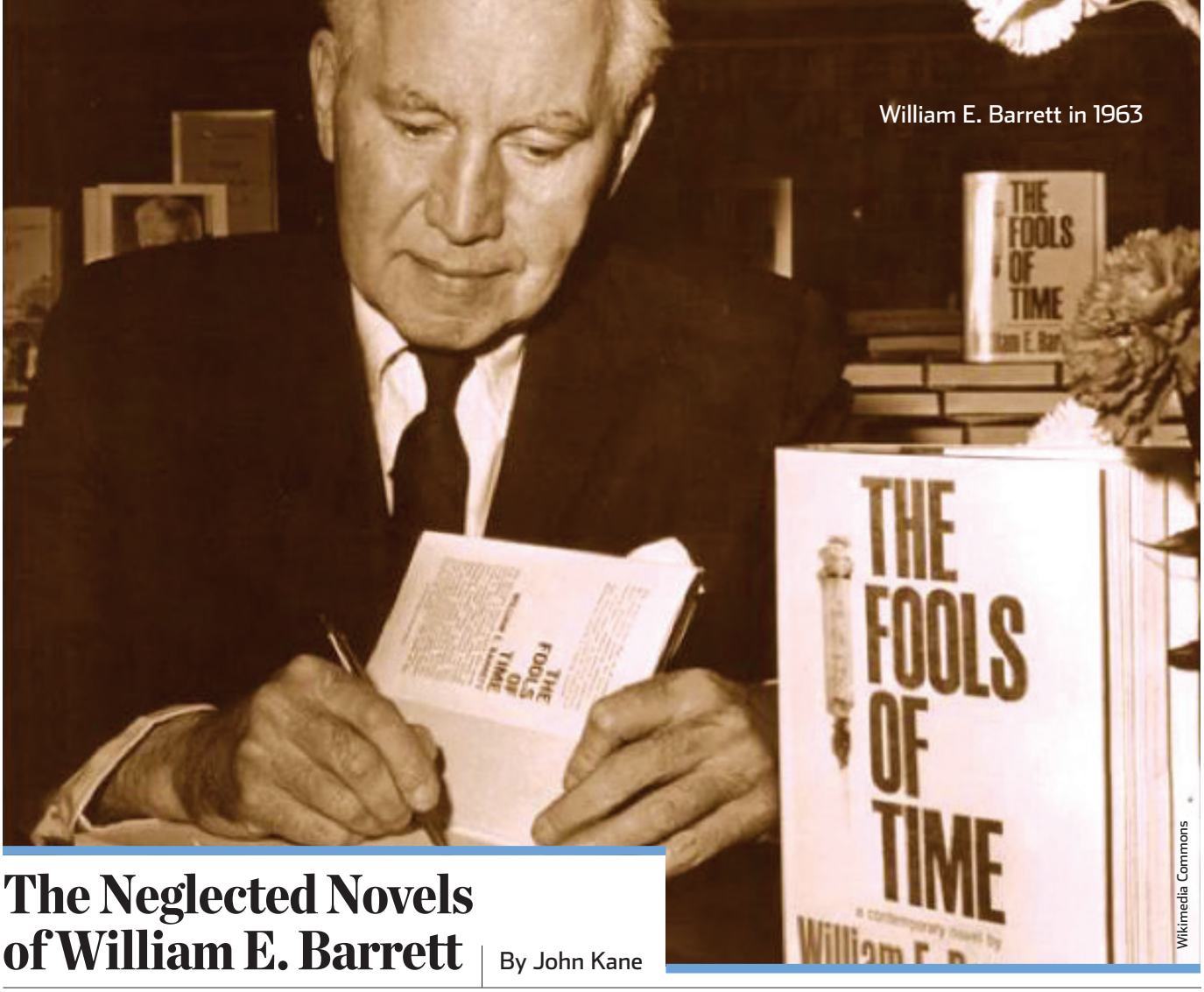
Grace Lenahan *is an O'Hare fellow at America Media.*

POMEGRANATE

By Gerald A. McCarthy

I quarter the fruit downstairs
in the cellar deep-well sink
squeezing each seed out,
tiny red *arils* floating in the bowl
of cold water—the color of dark sunsets.
The juice stains my fingers, like guilt,
like blood and pain and grief.
And suddenly, without warning
this long year of suffering
comes back in fragments,
the nightmare silence of children lost,
their cries muffled by smoke and fire—
dull shudders of the earth
heave up from bombs, from those
who should have known better—
men who will carry these lives
forever—the stupid cruelty
hate breeds, giving birth to ignorance,
anger, and last of all, regret.
Too late—the owl calls,
this cold December night—
too late. Now another winter
while we wait, listening to the wind,
to the song sorrow brings—wailing
against the nature of man,
against insolence and greed
hatred there is no cure for,
the tiny arils swirl in the water.

Gerald McCarthy's *latest book is* Hitchhiking Home from Danang: A Memoir of Vietnam, PTSD and Reclamation.



William E. Barrett in 1963

Wikimedia Commons

The Neglected Novels of William E. Barrett

By John Kane

My family moved to Denver during the summer of 1980. We soon found ourselves sitting on our front porch every afternoon to welcome the cooler air. Invariably, or so memory suggests, we would wave to a well-dressed elderly gentleman (always in a sport coat, tie and fedora) who would be walking up the block to get an evening paper. Only some years later, after that gentleman had moved from his apartment building into a nursing home, did we learn that his name was William E. Barrett.

Barrett, who died in 1986 at 85 years of age, was the writer of the 1962 novel that was later made into the 1963 hit film "Lilies of the Field," starring Sidney Poitier and rumored to be based on a convent of nuns located someplace north of Denver. An earlier (1955) film starring Humphrey Bogart was named after and based upon Barrett's 1951 novel *The Left Hand of God*. A third Barrett novel, *The Wine and the Music* (1968), the story of a Roman Catholic priest who decides to marry a wealthy Protestant divorcée, was also turned into a movie, the 1970 film "Pieces of Dreams."

I know nothing of his early writings, both short stories and novels—detective stories and tales of airplanes and pilots during World Wars I and II. I later learned that his knowledge of aeronautics was such that he was invited to lecture at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs.

What I gradually learned more about (I was then a professor of religious studies at Regis University in Denver) were what I will call his "religious" books, the majority of which are clearly "Catholic" novels, with setting and plot and character and themes that are all quite explicitly Roman Catholic.

That was certainly true of the previously mentioned *Left Hand of God*, about a downed American fighter pilot who hides in a Catholic mission in central China by taking on the role of the replacement priest expected at the mission about the time of his arrival. The same could be said of *Lilies of the Field*, about a just-retired young soldier traveling cross-country who helps a group of nuns build their new chapel.

I gradually purchased and read copies of his religious novels. He wrote 13 by my count, beginning with *The Left Hand of God* in 1951 and ending with *Lady of the Lotus* in 1975. The latter is the only one not specifically Catholic. It

is the fictional (but very well researched) biography of the wife Prince Siddhartha Gautama renounced (along with his wealth and class status) at the beginning of his journey into Buddhahood.

Along the way, in 1964, Barrett also published a biography of Giovanni Battista Montini before he became Pope Paul VI in 1963. He titled it *The Shepherd of Mankind.* My guess is that Barrett himself wanted to know more about this relatively unknown man (at least in the United States) who had succeeded the immensely popular Pope John XXIII and had to oversee the remaining sessions of the Second Vatican Council that John had convened in 1962. As a professional writer, he undoubtedly sensed the need for a book introducing the new pope to American Catholics and a wider religious readership.

Shortly thereafter, in 1967, he published *The Red Lacquered Gate*. As its subtitle tells us, it is the story of *The Early Days of the Columban Fathers and the Courage and Faith of its Founder, Fr. Edward Galvin*. Barrett was perhaps hired by the Columbans to write this book, but the story—which relates their mission work in China—is also of a piece with his wider interest in China.

Having recently re-read all of Barrett's religious novels, let me attempt here an overall critical appreciation of them.

As I have already noted, Barrett was a very careful researcher. He spent months in Italy doing interviews and searching archives for his Montini biography. And there is much evidence throughout his religious novels of his wide reading in Catholic history and theology as well in both Western and Eastern philosophy.

He was expert in his imagination of plot and character. The novels reflected widespread popular interests but never reduced events and people to stereotypes. Each was a carefully crafted original story with unique characters, settings and plots.

He was quite adept in his description of scenes, whether in contemporary Colorado or postwar China, in the St. Lawrence River area of Quebec in the 1950s or post-war Bavaria south of Munich. In every case, the reader gets a detailed sense of the general scenery of each area and the specific location of each story.

Many of his novels involve a well-told love story (typically involving a young professional couple) around which and within which a broader religious theme is developed. But these stories and their believable characters avoid the kind of sappy stereotypes that so often prevail in that genre.

Barrett, like many other writers in religion and spirituality, told stories involving the miraculous or the supernatural. Yet here as well, his stories are well researched and avoid the sensational and sentimental.

Of special note in this regard is *The Empty Shrine* (1958), which tells the fictional story of a possible apparition of Mary to a young 8-year-old girl on a small Francophone island in the St. Lawrence River during the 1950s. We are told about the life of the girl who thought she saw a woman or an angel in a hollow rock formation across a small bay, though she herself was never certain. She soon becomes a *cause célèbre* for some islanders hoping to benefit from the claim to a Marian apparition. Then we jump ahead 10 or so years to the life of that same "girl," now a young teacher on that island, where we are met with believable love stories about this woman and a local man she had grown up with—as well as with a skeptical writer who had come to the island to destroy the myth of any vision.

Barrett treats the possibility of a Marian apparition with critical respect. He includes a realistic discussion of Lourdes. He shows us the hypocritical character of many pushing the story of this supposed apparition. Yet he also shows us the careful conduct of the local parish priest and of the young girl's agnostic father. And he leaves open the possibility of an actual apparition in this or some other "empty shrine" (as had happened in Lourdes), as well as to the possibility of miracles like those that have happened at the shrine of St. Anne de Beaupré farther up the St. Lawrence River in Quebec City.

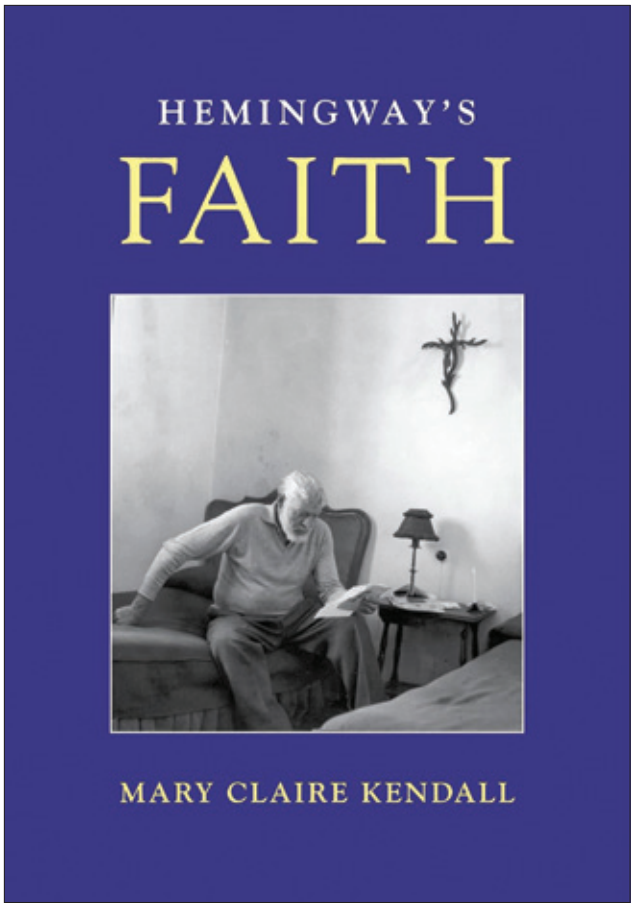
William Barrett's Catholic books are really quite good, but he is hardly remembered in Catholic academic or literary circles. I have written about this man whose work I gradually came to know and admire in order to suggest to others that they too might wish to take up and read—*tolle, lege,* in St. Augustine's famous words. The books are still available in many libraries and through secondhand book sellers, waiting for others to rediscover this neglected literary treasure.

John Kane *is emeritus professor of religious studies at Regis University. His latest book is* Building the Human City: William F. Lynch's Ignatian Spirituality for Public Life.

Selected works by William Barrett

The Left Hand of God (1951)
The Empty Shrine (1958
The Lilies of the Field (1962)
The Shepherd of Mankind: A Biography of Paul VI (1964)
The Glory Tent (1967)
The Red Lacquered Gate: The Early Days of the Columban Fathers and the Courage and Faith of Its Founder, Fr. Edward Galvin (1967)
The Wine and the Music (1968)
A Woman in the House (1971)
The Shape of Illusion (1972)
Lady of the Lotus (1975)

‘A GOD AFTER ALL’



Rowman & Littlefield Publishers / 256p $32

The American fiction writer and journalist Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961) was raised in the Congregational faith in an affluent suburb of Chicago. In high school, his flair for writing found him editing the school’s newspaper and yearbook. Though he was expected to attend the University of Illinois for college, he abandoned his studies to join The Kansas City Star as a freelance reporter.

But the Great War was raging in Europe, and he felt he was missing out on the excitement, so at 18 years of age he volunteered to be a Red Cross ambulance driver in Italy. It was there one night on the front lines that an Austrian trench mortar shell exploded just three feet away from Hemingway, cruelly injuring him as 227 pieces of shrapnel tore into his legs. Soaked in blood and unsure if he would live or die, the Protestant in a Catholic country found himself praying for the intercessions of “Our Lady and various saints.”

Crucially, an Italian priest happened upon the shelled soldiers hanging onto life and anointed them in the rite of extreme unction. In *Hemingway’s Faith,* Mary Claire Kendall notes that “Hemingway considered July 8, 1918, a day of spiritual rebirth. It was the day he had stared down death and was ‘anointed’ and absolved of his sins.” From then on, he called himself Catholic.

Yet it was a simple, devotional and very private Catholicism that was not uncommon then. A friend in the 1920s, Kendall notes, felt Hemingway “was a very strong Catholic. His religion came mainly from the apparitions of the Virgin Mary. He told me several times that if there were no Bible, no man-made Church laws, the apparitions proved beyond any doubt that the Catholic Church was the true church.”

Some 40 years later, Hemingway would tell a New York Post interviewer: “Politics and religion are two things I never discuss. If my books don’t make it clear how I feel about both, then I’ve failed in my life’s work.”

His leftist politics are fairly easy to discern in his writing—he was at one point considered “a person of interest” by the F.B.I.—but it’s the objective of *Hemingway’s Faith* to find the religious themes that are subterranean in his novels.

Kendall writes that *The Sun Also Rises* is “drenched in Catholicism,” noting a scene in which the war-injured Jake Barnes enters a cathedral in Pamplona and says, “I was kneeling with my forehead on the wood in front of me, and was thinking of myself as praying. I was a little ashamed, and regretted I was such a rotten Catholic” and that “it was a grand religion, and I only wished I felt religious and maybe I would the next time.”

In *A Farewell to Arms,* there is an important conversation with a Catholic priest about love. In *For Whom the Bell Tolls,* a major character named Pilar—a nod to Our Lady of the Pillar—says, “There probably still is a God after all, although we have banished him.” In *The Old Man and the Sea,* the fisherman Santiago—named for the Spanish pilgrimage destination of Santiago de Compostela that Hemingway loved—is chasing a marlin that is being hunted by sharks; Santiago claims he is not religious but “proceeds to pray one Hail Mary after another, adding, ‘Blessed Virgin, pray for the death of this fish. Wonderful though he is.’”

Unfortunately, there are only instances of religious considerations in Hemingway’s fiction, nothing that is head-on, probably because he thought of himself as “fallen away” and in over his head religion-wise. “His checkered marital history, he incorrectly believed, precluded him from full communion with the Church,” Kendall writes.

Kendall is particularly savvy in her perspectives on Hemingway’s irregular marriages. His first wife, Hadley Richardson, was wealthy, unbaptized and eight years older than he. After their civil wedding, she permitted the even wealthier Pauline Pfeiffer, a fashion journalist four years older than Hemingway, to live with the couple, seemingly oblivious to the inklings of a love affair. Because Hemingway’s marriage to Richardson had been outside the church,

the archbishop of Paris granted Hemingway an annulment to marry Pfeiffer, a Catholic, and he was finally officially certified as a co-religionist.

But his embrace of the faith did not last. Although he often castigated himself for his transgressions, he found it too hard to change. He engaged in multiple love affairs that ended in another divorce and his wedding to the World War II journalist Martha Gellhorn. She then divorced him as well after five years because of his bullying, heavy drinking and jealousy. She was followed by Mary Welsh, like him an alcoholic and war correspondent, who became Hemingway's caretaker for the final 15 years of his life as he descended into paranoia and mental illness.

Like his father, sister and brother, who all died by suicide, Hemingway seemed to have inherited hemochromatosis, a genetic disorder caused by an excess of iron in the blood, accruing the symptoms of diabetes, memory impairment and depression. But he was misdiagnosed and distressingly subjected to 25 electroshock treatments, about which he wrote to the editor and novelist A. E. Hotchner: "What is the sense of ruining my head and erasing my memory, which is my capital, and putting me out of business? It was a brilliant cure but we lost the patient. It's a bum turn, Hotch, terrible."

Evidence of his psychic losses includes that in 1961 it took him "a week to compose a simple note of congratulations to newly inaugurated President John F. Kennedy. He was writing between tears, frustrated that the words were so slow in coming."

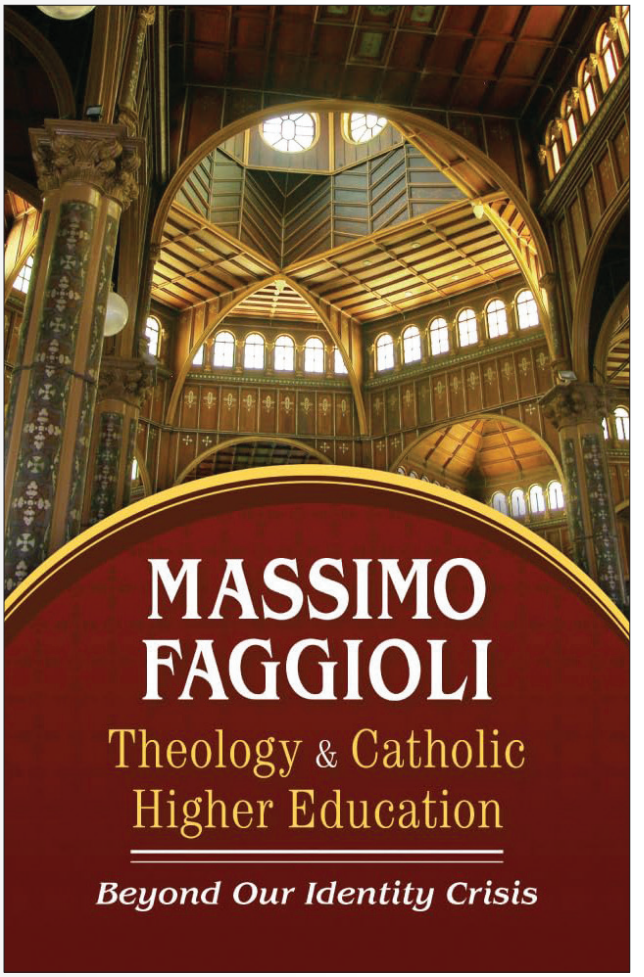
On Saturday night, July 1, 1961, Hemingway seemed to be in good spirits as he and his wife ate at a Chinese restaurant. His final words to Mary were "Good night, my kitten." Early Sunday morning, he took out his favorite shotgun. "Mary found him at the bottom of the stairs, slumped over, a bloody mess." He was not yet 62.

I found Mary Claire Kendall's book riveting and full of fresh information. She has done a wonderful job of sifting through the mountain of material on Ernest Hemingway and is wisely indebted to the research of the late H. R. Stoneback, "the foremost scholar on Hemingway's Catholicism and himself a convert."

The late Duke University poet and essayist Reynolds Price suggested that although he did not consciously know it, Hemingway's lifelong subject was saintliness. *Hemingway's Faith* provides ample evidence of that.

Ron Hansen *is the author, most recently, of* Hotly in Pursuit of the Real.

ACADEMIC THEOLOGY



Orbis Books / 192p $30

The problem with Massimo Faggioli's *Theology and Catholic Higher Education* is not that his aspirations are too large. If anything, they may be too small. On numerous pages, I found myself agreeing vigorously with what Faggioli offered but also repeatedly thinking, "Go further!" and "Ask more!"

Part of that response emanates from my vantage point as an evangelical Protestant. By the 1960s, secularization had beset the majority of colleges and universities that once afforded their respective denominations with places to do their thinking. Secularization would come calling on Catholic campuses 10 years later, but initially for different reasons.

Contrary to what some pundits offer, neither the Second Vatican Council nor the Land O'Lakes Statement are to blame (if only Catholic colleges and universities incorporated half of what Land O'Lakes commends!). The real culprit resides in the details of a less sinister story about the inability of institutions to form

Faggioli argues that theologians on the left have reduced theology 'to cultural anthropology and ethnography.'

lay leaders at a rate that kept pace with declines in men and women religious.

As a sympathetic outsider, I do not want to see Catholic colleges and universities make some of the same mistakes my Protestant predecessors made. Those mistakes resulted in evangelical colleges and universities being the only historically Protestant schools that offer some coherent rationale for why theology departments exist.

Catholic colleges and universities would find their missions well served if they addressed only half of the challenges Faggioli details in his book concerning theology, the role it plays on Catholic college and university campuses, and the role it plays in the church. Understanding what Faggioli shares in this important book, as well as where he could go further or ask more, may prove imperative.

Readers unfamiliar with Massimo Faggioli may find it interesting that he, in his own way, is a sympathetic outsider. Unlike most of his colleagues in theology departments at Catholic colleges and universities in the United States, Faggioli is Italian. He initially came to the United States to join the faculty at the University of St. Thomas and, since 2016, at Villanova University. As noted in the dedication, Faggioli has a deep appreciation for Catholic colleges and universities, his "adoptive alma mater."

During his time at Villanova alone, Faggioli has provided commentary concerning the ramifications of the truths theology departments curate for academia and the church. *The Oxford Handbook of Vatican II,* for example, which he co-edited with Catherine Clifford, is a reference work that should find a place on the desks of insiders and sympathetic outsiders alike. His articles dot journals serving scholars as well as periodicals serving laypersons. Revised versions of articles that initially appeared in Commonweal and the National Catholic Reporter, for example, became chapters in this book.

Regardless of the outlet, Faggioli looks to answer the same question, "What is [theology's] intrinsic value if it is not rooted somehow to the ongoing development of the life of the church as a community of disciples attempting to live Jesus-like lives?"

As Faggioli makes clear in the title, however, the future of theology "is very uncertain. Not only the discipline, but the future of the *universitas* as such is in doubt." That uncertain future is driven by "Catholic colleges and universities that compete in a market-oriented system." These "are cutting their theology programs in favor of more 'professionalizing' courses." To many "in the new cohort of lay (non-clergy, non-religious) administrators running Catholic colleges and universities these days," theology is "a luxury, a non-essential field among other, more practical ones."

Faggioli then unpacks that argument concerning theology's uncertain future in six chapters that follow a movement including confirmation of this crisis, what is at stake in the crisis and recommendations intended to alleviate the crisis. The most articulate of these is Chapter 5, "Catholic Theology vis-à-vis Ecclesia, Universitas, and Civitas." In order to clear space for the recommendations Faggioli makes in Chapter 6, he strives to free theology from the captivity it presently experiences.

Faggioli argues that theologians on the left, driven by a reduction of theological debate to "a current cultural canon of social issues," have reduced theology "to cultural anthropology and ethnography." He then argues that theologians on the right have reduced theology to "off campus anti-university and anti-theological initiatives." In contrast, Faggioli believes the courses theology departments offer on Catholic college and university campuses must "be Catholic." In essence, such courses invest "in the sense of wonderment, in a voyage of exploration that the intellectual and theological tradition as a living, ecclesial *corpus* can arouse." He argues that theologians on the right and the left have found themselves with few options for legitimacy other than what secular intellectual and anti-intellectual cultures offer.

This crisis of legitimacy becomes clear in the details concerning how Vatican II is received by theologians. On the left, many theologians view the council as freeing them to embrace the methods employed by the ranks of an intellectual establishment that, ironically, was grappling with its own legitimacy. On the right, many theologians view the council as abandoning the clerical institutionalism definitive of a golden ecclesial age at a level that never existed. Faggioli wisely cautions readers against the false allure afforded by these options, encouraging them to embrace fully what Vatican II offers.

As a result, Faggioli rightly asserts that the current crisis plaguing theology is one that poses a threat to both the church and the university. Faggioli notes that while the church would survive without efforts extended by theology departments, the church would also lose the service of a group upon whom it depended for almost a millennium. As the challenges the world brings to the church grow more complex, the relationship the church shares with faculties seeking to do its thinking should only grow.

Faggioli also rightly notes that envisioning a Catholic university apart from a group prepared to explore the language of the church proves, at best, difficult. As he indicates, some theology departments are indistinguishable in their methods from religious studies departments that house scholars who practice, for example, anthropological explorations of religious peoples. While of value in their own ways, such efforts contribute little to nothing to the ability of Catholic colleges or universities to differentiate themselves from secular universities.

My frustration with Faggioli's work emerged only when I found myself wanting him to press more in terms of what theology departments offer the church and the university. One grouping of those frustrations emerged when I wanted Faggioli to go further when detailing challenges these departments are facing. In particular, his writing style is defined by prose more suitable for summing up the significance of a challenge, not detailing its concrete existence. On several occasions, for example, he notes that administrators are "selling out to technocracy." Here, noting the number of theology courses and theology positions being eliminated would prove beneficial. This would allow readers to come to terms in tangible ways with the threats theology departments are facing.

Another grouping of those frustrations emerged when I found myself wanting Faggioli to say more. One quick example is in the brief Chapter 6, "Proposals for a Way Forward." While the three proposals Faggioli offers merit serious consideration, they comprise a mere eight pages, focusing on efforts related to: "the relationship between academic theology and the church; a new coherent vision around Vatican II; and a new engagement with the tradition."

The threats theology departments face merit far more detailed examination of what those efforts demand. I imagine that Faggioli has thought more about these threats than almost anyone—and I, for one, would be eager to consider what he has to offer.

I would also encourage the author to ask more of the responsibilities colleagues across the campus have for thinking through how faith and learning intersect in their respective programmatic areas. Along with campus ministry, theology departments play central roles in such efforts. The character of a Catholic college or university, however, is then also dependent upon the ways that voyage of exploration not only reverberates through other academic departments but also through programmatic efforts led by co-curricular educators leading residence life, student activities and, dare I even contend, intercollegiate athletics. Catholic colleges and universities can then fulfill their mission while also navigating the secularizing pressures prone to creep into almost any corner of a campus.

The ability of Catholic (as well as evangelical) colleges and universities to advance their missions is dependent upon fostering aspirations that run the risk of being too large. Massimo Faggioli's *Theology and Catholic Higher Education* is a work to which all concerned with the advancement of those missions should give deep and abiding consideration. Hopefully, he will follow this effort with one that will ask all of us to go further and ask more.

Todd C. Ream *is a member of the faculty and administration at Indiana Wesleyan University, a senior fellow with the Lumen Research Institute and the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, and the publisher of Christian Scholar's Review. His most recent book is* The Anxious Middle: Planning for the Future of the Christian College.

NO ESCAPE

Slant Books / 146p $28

Muriel Spark was only 40 years old when she published *Memento Mori*, her delicious satire about an aging circle of acquaintances who receive mysterious phone calls reminding them that they must die. By contrast, the distinguished American novelist A. G. Mojtabai is in her late 80s; she knows whereof she writes in *Featherless,* her new novel about aging, ailing and the inevitability of death. In this, she joins so many other prominent contemporary fiction writers (Toni Morrison, Phillip Roth, Marilynne Robinson and Margaret Atwood, to name a few) who have explored aging late in their careers.

Featherless, which takes place in the Shady Rest Home for the Aged, reminds me not so much of Mojtabai's contemporaries' work as of classics like "King Lear" and *The Death of Ivan Ilyich.* It especially reminds me of *Memento Mori,* though Spark and Mojtabai would never be mistaken for one another stylistically. Spark's language is rich in allusion, metaphor and barb, while Mojtabai's is spare and direct, her wit dry and subtle. Spark's characters are drawn in outsize comic outline, whereas Mojtabai's are sketched sympathetically, if sometimes wryly.

Yet the two writers share a tendency to dispense with many of the conventions of realism, even when describing a realistic setting, and their work often approaches allegory. *Featherless* might be called what the late novelist and critic David Lodge called *Memento Mori*: a "moral fable."

Rather than structuring her novel in a narrative arc that follows a protagonist's conflicts and crises, Mojtabai's method involves quickly and briefly entering the consciousness of a number of different characters, showing perspectives often filled with worry, fear and panic.

The old folks of *Featherless* have plenty of ailments to fret about. A reader first sees several of them lined up on a bench, three men and two women, "featherless bipeds." Overhead, five birds line up on a branch until one of the birds takes flight: "Now there are four." The opening chapter––stark, beautiful and complete in six lines––lays out Mojtabai's concerns: how even the most ordinary scene can be filled with pattern and beauty; how creatures congregate and to what purpose; how we must look at human aging in the context of all creation; and how life is filled with disappearance and loss.

One of the men on the bench, a reader quickly learns, is not old at all. Daniel is a young employee of the nursing home, as close as this novel comes to a protagonist. He is granted the most narrative space and interacts the most with the other characters, but his own story is not central in the way it might be in a more conventional novel.

Daniel works 10 hours a day and fears being "on call forever." Most of his own worry centers on whether he will ever leave Shady Rest and a job he has fallen into rather than actively sought. An orphan since early childhood, raised by his grandparents, he is not afraid of or turned off by old people—it was he who shepherded his grandfather through his final days––but everything in his life, including his solitude when he's not in the nursing home, seems "provisional."

A couple of the nurses who befriend Daniel think of him as "an old soul," but one will later wonder whether he isn't just a little "dim." His grandmother was protective of him because of his minor heart ailment, an affliction whose very existence he now sometimes doubts. Yet he thinks he might be good at this job, which involves everything from interviewing new residents of the assisted living wing to informing current residents when they need to be moved to the memory care unit. A reader comes to see that he is indeed very good at it, because so much of his interior life is devoted to his simple and direct concern about what his

aged charges are going through, even as he deals with his own anxiety.

Insofar as there is a recognizable plot to *Featherless*, it concerns Daniel's responses to the failing health of the residents. But Mojtabai is equally interested in how the residents respond to their own declines. Eli, who sports a bad combover and repels the female residents with his come-ons, becomes more and more confused as he loses both his directional bearings and his ability to recall words. But when he intuits a plan to move him to memory care, he rebels, inspired by watching an escape "skit" at a 100-year-old resident's birthday party.

A newer resident, Wiktor, who holds himself aloof, reflects that the skit's escaping centenarian is only "[f]ree to the full extent of her chain and easily reeled back in." Wiktor is full of contempt for Eli but is himself chained by his Parkinson's disease, with its alarming symptoms of dyskinesia (involuntary movement) and festination (a sensation of being stuck). An archivist in his younger days, he muses: "Who was it that called human beings 'featherless bipeds' and why? The reason seemed pretty obvious: to take them down a notch." Indeed, it is Wiktor's impulse, entering Shady Rest, to take his fellow residents down a notch—but by novel's end, as he loses more and more control over his own body, he becomes "nicer now than before."

The shifting perspectives of so many residents and employees allow the reader to form a vision of this community as "one body, many moving parts," a phrase also used by Maddie, who dreams of her fellow residents in a circle dance until Eli breaks free. It is also Maddie who fields a young reporter's query about what these old folks find to do all day: "How to explain? We breathe. We dream. We remember. We talk to people and sometimes they answer." And it is Maddie who remembers asking her husband: "What is it you want, Al? I can't tell anymore." He answers: "Everything."

This novel asks the most basic philosophical questions about what it is we humans want––about the meaning of our living, suffering and dying––even as climate change escalates and Covid-19 begins its inexorable spread.

A. G. Mojtabai's long and distinguished career examining our commercialized and alienated culture has often been informed by her abiding interests in religious faith, despair and witness. Because she has so often written about Catholic characters, including priests, she is often mistaken for a Catholic novelist; while she may be more worthy of that honorific than many a baptized Catholic, she is not. She studied philosophy before becoming a novelist, and all her work is imbued with a spirit of deep inquiry and an unusual measure of forgiveness for her characters' foibles.

The concision of Mojtabai's writing here is beautifully balanced by the generosity of her vision.

Featherless is brief enough that some will consider it a novella, but the concision of Mojtabai's writing here is beautifully balanced by the generosity of her vision, particularly her insistence on humanity as "one body." We meet the characters of this novel only briefly and spend little time with some of them before they disappear from this earth forever, but we sense throughout the author's solidarity with them, no matter how comically or helplessly they behave.

Featherless is not only an important contribution to the literature of aging, but a moving addition to A. G. Mojtabai's impressive and instructive body of work.

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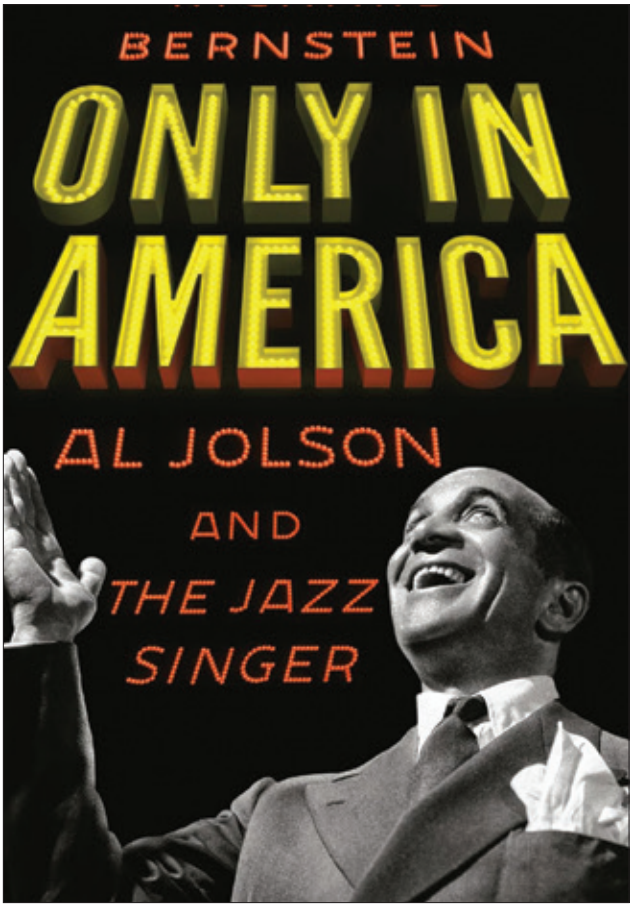
Valerie Sayers *is the Kenan Professor of English Emerita at the University of Notre Dame and the author of six novels and a collection of stories.*

MASKED MAN



Knopf / 272p $28

A third-season episode of the television show "Mad Men," titled "My Old Kentucky Home," finds Don Draper and the crew from Sterling Cooper at a Kentucky Derby party. But it's not the racing horses that get the crowd cheering. On bended knee, office rogue Roger Sterling serenades his young girlfriend with the titular song—but in blackface.

"There was a lot of controversy in the writers' room," the show's creator, Matthew Weiner, later admitted. "We have a very diverse crew, and everyone understood what was happening, that it was a period piece, and it was not pleasurable for anyone." It was also, Weiner added, "so clear that we were criticizing it." The episode now airs only after a content warning, and has been removed from some streaming services entirely.

Into this maelstrom steps the author and journalist Richard Bernstein, author of many books, mainly about China and Asia, reflecting the decades he spent as a foreign correspondent for The New York Times and Time. Which means that Bernstein—now 80 years old—is not necessarily the first person you'd expect to tackle the vexing and painful tradition of minstrelsy, which has become one of the more crowded corners of academia's "cultural studies" universe.

But *Only in America* is not a book solely about blackface, nor should it be. It is a short study of an extraordinary entertainer (born Asa Yoelson in Lithuania in 1886) and a profoundly important movie—and not just because "The Jazz Singer" is recognized as the "first talkie."

From the early 1910s to the late 1940s, Bernstein writes, "there was nobody...bigger than Al Jolson." He "was part of a cohort of entertainers whose roots were in the Russian Empire and who came nearly to dominate American popular culture, remaking themselves and remaking the country in the process. It's hard to imagine anything like that happening any place but [the United States]."

This veers awfully close to American exceptionalism, even triumphalism. But Bernstein has an important story to tell—so long as you don't expect him to resolve any of the larger questions "The Jazz Singer" raises about racism and show business, immigration and assimilation.

The Yoelsons came to the United States in April 1894, settling in Washington, D.C. Young Jolson's rabbi father prepared him to be the latest in a long family line of cantors—a synagogue's vocal leader in song and prayer. By the age of 10, though, he and his brother favored Stephen Foster pop tunes and were already performing on the streets "between Congress and the White House," Bernstein writes, adding: "The very fact that [the Jolson brothers] had turned their cantorial training into music like this was a sign of the speed of the Americanization of these two immigrant boys."

This is also about when Jolson's beloved mother died. So before even becoming a teenager, Jolson had experienced many of the traumas and conflicts that would inform his most famous role.

Bernstein's most insightful passages explore the evolution of "The Jazz Singer" from a short story, titled "Day of Atonement," to a stage musical, then to a movie idea developed by a fledgling studio owned by the Wonskolaser brothers—better known as the Warners.

Though officially recognized as a "talkie," only a few total minutes of "The Jazz Singer" actually feature synchronized sound and image. Nevertheless, the 1927 film revolutionized show biz while also assuming a prominent place in America's endlessly troubled history of race and entertainment. All of which has made it easy to forget that, whatever else "The Jazz Singer" is, it's an emotional portrait of faith and family, modernity and tradition. In that way, the film is not unlike Jolson's entire life, which, to Berstein, "is the American immigration story at its best, the escape from a place where a rise to fame and fortune like his would have been impossible to a place where such a rise is what the country considered special about itself."

One problem, of course, is that swaths of "the country" no longer think about the "immigration story" in this rel-

atively benign way, especially given the more combustible elements present in "The Jazz Singer," including race, religion and the broader social context of the film's release. Dozens of lynchings were still reported annually in the United States in the mid-1920s, which continued to fuel the Great Migration away from the Jim Crow South—which in turn fueled new kinds of Northern ethnic-racial conflict, about which Bernstein has little to say.

Even a short book with a narrow focus could have found a bit of room for, say, Jolson's aborted collaborations with "Birth of a Nation" director D. W. Griffith, who has his own prominent place in the history of race and pop culture, or Jolson's 1924 support for Calvin Coolidge, even after the president signed the most restrictive immigration bill in U.S. history, one supported by rabid antisemites in both political parties.

Bernstein leans heavily upon earlier works by Michael Freedland, Robert Oberfirst and Jolson's principal biographer, Herbert G. Goldman, who suggested that when the "nervous, monotoned, self-conscious" Jolson used blackface, he became an "impudent and joyous harlequin." Blackface was so widespread at the time, Bernstein adds, that Jolson "wasn't so much losing his inhibitions as he was copying everybody else."

More recent scholarship, of course, views such entertainers in a much more negative light. Blackface—especially within immigrant communities—further dehumanized African Americans, while allowing European peasants to "become white." Bernstein engages such writers, especially in academia, and even takes a swing at nuance, writing that "The Jazz Singer" includes a scene in which "a white girl in her sequined dancer's costume, and an imitation Black man [look] at each other lovingly, perhaps the first explicit suggestion of interracial love in American film history, even if the Black looking character is not a Black man but a Jew looking affectionately at a shiksa."

Then there's the 1930 movie "Big Boy," in which "Jolson's blackface character...save[s] the white girl from a villainous white man," thus inverting "the standard iconic racial offense [of a] Black man's sexual desire for a white woman."

That is certainly one way to look at all this. Many folks—understandably—will continue to see things very differently. And thus, the wide gulf between popular and academic historical narratives remains its own unsettling problem. Politicians who shape school curricula and budgets are forced to choose among contesting sides, while journalists and pundits in search of historical context remain unclear if Ellis Island immigrants should be considered part of America's dominant or of its marginalized culture.

The grandchildren of Russian serfs and American slaves did, after all, have a few things in common. (One of Jolson's first paid showbiz gigs was in the cast of Israel Zangwill's "Children of the Ghetto.") And for all of the bygone, sepia-toned trappings of "The Jazz Singer," a number of 21st-century performers from Ramy Youssef to Ali Wong owe a debt to Jolson, whether they know it or not.

Neither Jolson nor blackface disappeared after "The Jazz Singer." There was young Judy Garland in the 1930s, and Bing Crosby in the 1940s. In her 2022 book *Undoing the Knots: Five Generations of American Catholic Anti-Blackness*, the theologian Maureen H. O'Connell analyzed a "significant Catholic dimension of minstrelsy" at 1950s Philadelphia parish fundraisers.

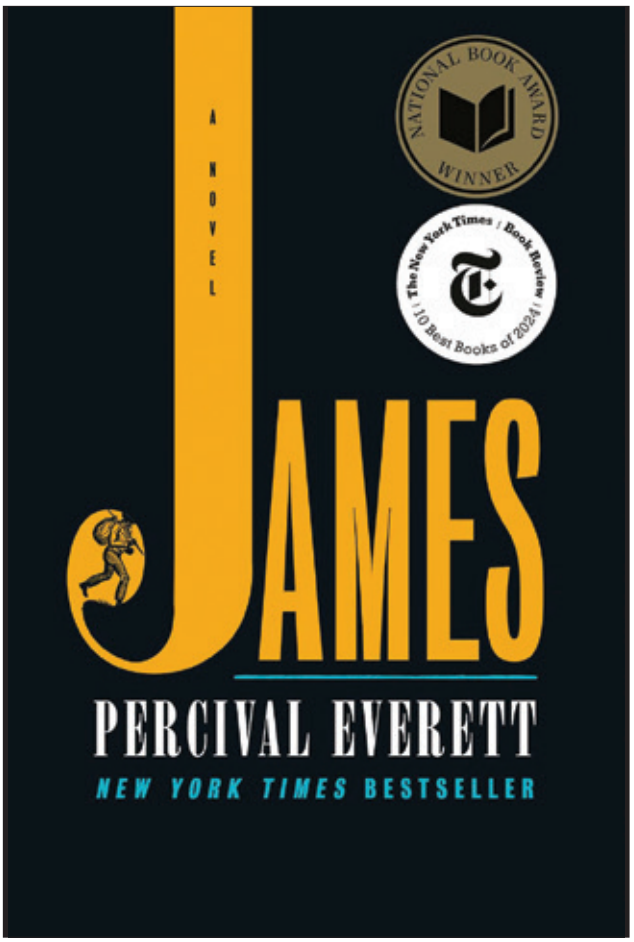
Then came the Civil Rights movement and new iterations of satirical blackface—from a 1975 episode of "All in the Family" to Spike Lee's 2000 film "Bamboozled" to Robert Downey Jr.'s surreal turn in 2008's "Tropic Thunder." Ann Powers's recent biography of Joni Mitchell had to confront the singer's 1977 album "Don Juan's Reckless Daughter" and the folk singer's perplexing public appearances "in character." Then there's the full-blown *mishegoss* that is "The Jazz Singer" remake in 1980 starring Neil Diamond.

Ideally, Bernstein's book—and the 1927 movie—could be taken as valuable opportunities to examine the wide array of ever-shifting questions raised by these diverse performances. Too often, though, controversy itself seems to be the only point of such debates—about blackface, or brownface, or yellowface or "Jewface," a term that arose after Bradley Cooper donned a prosthetic nose for the 2023 film "Maestro." Sides are chosen, cancellations declared, and we move on to the next controversy, rarely pausing to consider that whatever might seem enlightened or unenlightened right now may not look that way five or 50 years from now. And we also overlook more subtle, powerful moments, like those in the aforementioned "Mad Men" episode.

After singing, Roger Sterling kisses his girlfriend—staining her face black. Don Draper simply frowns, perhaps embarrassed for, or ashamed of, his pal. Don then knocks a few drinks back with a stranger, sharing details of his impoverished upbringing. Is the great Don Draper embarrassed for, or ashamed of, his own humble past? Is he suggesting he might actually be an ally of the marginalized? Or is Don's own frowning face also stained—with complicity? By Roger's terrible performance? By the crowd's enthusiastic cheers?

Tom Deignan, *a regular* ***America*** *contributor, has written about books and history for The New York Times, The Washington Post, The New York Daily News and The Irish Independent. He teaches history and English at CUNY and is working on a book about the 1920s.*

REVISITING HUCK FINN



Doubleday / 320p $28

Although sometimes criticized for its grammatical errors, vulgarities and racial epithets, Mark Twain's 1885 novel *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* inspired worldwide praise and numerous spin-offs, including a recent one: Percival Everett's 2024 National Book Award-winning novel *James*.

Telling the story of the two main characters of *Huckleberry Finn*, Huck and Jim, from Jim's point of view, Everett presents a character who is allegedly the real Jim: the one who reads Locke, Voltaire and Kierkegaard and who talks to them in his dreams, the one who speaks in correct English to Blacks and in dialect to whites, the one without the blackface and the minstrelsy, the one who calls himself James.

A distinguished professor of English at the University of Southern California, Everett is a prolific African-American author of 25 novels, eight poetry collections and four books of short stories. He has won numerous awards and was twice shortlisted for the prestigious Booker Prize—first for *The Trees* (2021) and most recently for *James*.

Described as "a masterful, revisionist work" by the Booker Prize judges, *James* is set in the South just before the Civil War. That conflict breaks out on the final pages of the story, as James travels to a farm that markets Black slaves, taking the ending of *James* to an adult level far removed from the childish hijinks that conclude Mark Twain's story.

"With its virtuosic command of language and moral urgency," *James*, as the Booker judges explain, "is a towering achievement that confronts the past while holding out hope for a progressive future, cementing Everett's deserved reputation as a literary sensation."

Everett's work grapples with philosophical and metaphysical questions as well as racial issues, while enveloping all in sarcasm and irony. It often makes for difficult reading. In *James*, for example, the eponymous hero reflects on his anger over enslavement: "I was as much scared as angry, but where does a slave put anger?... the real source of our rage had to go without redress, swallowed, repressed."

He also ponders matters of religion and God. "Waiting is a big part of a slave's life," he says. "Waiting for the just and deserved Christian reward at the end of days." But James doesn't believe that slaves are rewarded or that their prayers are answered and tells Huck as much: "you be the one to ax him [Jesus] for help. He don't seem to pay no mind to the wishes of no slave."

James goes into more detail when he says, "Religion is just a controlling tool they employ and adhere to when convenient.... There might be a higher power, children, but it's not their white God."

In Twain's book, Huck Finn has a crisis of conscience in which he expresses his belief that his "white God" will send him to hell for helping a runaway slave. That crisis reverberates in *James*, where Huck and James have heated discussions about religious matters.

There's more than enough irony in this metafictional story. James, using a stolen pencil and notebook, begins writing his autobiography; this, it turns out, is a narrative within the narrative that will sum up the meaning of the novel and add to the themes that Everett expresses through the central character.

James develops in three sections, with the first part most similar to the plotline of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*: Huck and Jim run away, hide out on Jackson Island and travel together on a raft on the Mississippi River. Throughout their adventures, they hope to arrive in Ohio, a state where slavery is prohibited.

James wishes to avoid being sold and doesn't want to leave his wife and daughter. Huck wants to avoid the Widow Douglas (who tries to civilize him) and Pap, the town drunk, his abusive stepfather, who locks him in a cabin and beats him every night.

The second and third parts of *James* mostly diverge

Everett's work grapples with philosophical and metaphysical questions as well as racial issues.

from Twain's novel. James, having been separated from Huck, joins a group of traveling minstrels and befriends Norman Brown, another light-skinned escaped slave. James then takes a job as a blacksmith. When James again meets Huck, he shows himself to be an educated man and one capable of revenge as he learns about a young slave who has been raped by her white overseer.

The opening pages of *James* contain poems written by Daniel Decatur Emmett (1815-1904), whom Everett brings into his story, making James seem more alive with this blending of reality and fiction. Everett includes "Dixie" and other songs that Emmett composed—all suggesting the poetic and musical devices embedded in Everett's style with sentences like: "Tell your story with your ears. Listen." Or: "He drew the leather back slowly, so that the sound became part of the torture."

In the novel, Emmett founds a minstrel group that James joins for a short time. Since James is light-skinned, he covers his face with black polish, evoking the irony that runs through the narrative.

As the novel develops, readers see that Everett's James is almost nothing like Twain's Jim. Both characters are Black men living in Hannibal, Mo., around the time of the Civil War; both care about Huck; and both are ostensibly slaves. James, however, is not owned by anyone—even though Miss Watson, Judge Thatcher, Huck and other characters in the story may think differently.

James's journey with Huck is not composed of boyhood adventures. There is nothing boyish about the protagonist. He is planning to free his wife and daughter from slavery. His actions are not playful; they are set against moral, metaphysical and philosophical codes.

James is also Huck Finn's friend and mentor. But is there more to their relationship—something that draws Huck's love and loyalty? And is James the voice of the author, the one who conveys Everett's opinions about religion, humanity and freedom? Those questions go to the heart of the story and will gnaw at readers' consciences until the final page and beyond.

Everett writes about the abuse that James and other slaves endured. But, he says, his book is not about slavery. It is about people who suffered and survived often by telling white people what they want to hear, as opposed to what they as Black people actually think. He doesn't call *James* a retelling of *Huckleberry Finn*, as most reviewers describe it. He calls it a conversation.

"I hope that I have written the novel that Twain could not have written," Everett said in an interview with the Booker Prize organization. "I do not view the work as a corrective, but rather I see myself in conversation with Twain."

He has read *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* 10 times. This gave him not only an understanding of the novel but an emotional connection to it, something that can be seen especially as he goes inside James's head and reveals his thoughts: "I can tell you that I am a man who is cognizant of his world," James writes, "a man who has a family, who loves a family, who has been torn from his family, a man who can read and write, a man who will not let his story be self-related but self-written."

Ultimately, Everett presents James as his own man. What that means is fleshed out in this novel—one that starts with ironic implications that build to a stunning climax.

Diane Scharper *is the author of several books, including* Radiant: Prayer/Poems. *She teaches the Memoir Seminar for the Johns Hopkins University Osher Institute.*

The Deer of the Dawn

For those who live near wooded areas, April is a propitious time of the year to wake up at dawn and welcome the rising sun and if possible, to catch a deer or two grazing in that morning freshness. It's a scene meant for spring and one that lends itself to contemplating our Easter mystery of the resurrection. Before the dawn of resurrection, however, there is the darkness of night. And there is no liberation of any sort, in Christian terms, without first passing through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. The readings this month bring the faithful through this emancipating journey.

Palm Sunday revisits the passion of Christ. The psalm for that day stands out for its significance to New Testament spirituality. The text begins with a reminder that the psalm ought to be sung to the tune of "The Deer of the Dawn" (Ps 22:1). But the actual musical score has been lost to time. Nonetheless, the image of a doe wrapped with the dawn is comforting, and pulls the heart toward the rejuvenating hope nature can often provide. Jesus will utter the next line of the text while nailed to the cross, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" (Ps 22:2; Mk 15:34; Mt 27:46). Quoting this line of the psalm is a way of invoking the entire psalm, and this provides reassurance, as the second half ends with confident hope: "And I will live for the Lord, my descendants will serve you" (Ps 22:31).

On Easter morning, the Gospel highlights the role of the first descendants in the aftermath of Jesus' crucifixion. What stands out is the deep affection of that first disciple, Mary Magdalene. According to John, she was on the move before dawn only to discover an empty tomb. "Mary of Magdala came to the tomb early in the morning, while it was still dark, and saw the stone removed from the tomb" (Jn 20:1). Mary runs back to report to Peter and the others. Her actions early in the morning reflect the image of the deer of the dawn from Psalm 22. It is an image of love and affection. Easter faith involves this level of intimacy. It was true for Mary Magdalene, and it remains true for us today who are challenged to be pilgrims of hope, which Pope Francis encourages all the faithful to embrace, especially during this jubilee year.

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT (C), APRIL 6, 2025
Is there anyone here without sin?

PALM SUNDAY OF THE LORD'S PASSION (C), APRIL 13, 2025
Abandonment and the willing spirit

THE RESURRECTION OF THE LORD (C), APRIL 20, 2025
Called to be pilgrims of intimacy

SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER (C), APRIL 27, 2025
Called to be pilgrims of hope

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.

THE ORGANIST

By Laura Trimble

I thought it was the flute
I wanted to play, but I found
    that wasn't it, so I tried
the violin next the bassoon
the dulcimer harp
                but each one
gave out only one tone. So I played
on paints and windows and dough
and socks in a perfect array
on long-fingered carrot peelings
lacing the air like harp strings
in suspension tuned to the sky
and the trash can
                until I found
I was playing the whole house, its ductwork
ringing every possible range
of whistling hues with a timbre
that rumbled my very foundations.

        Who was it that first decided
for the music in their soul
nothing less would do than a whole entire
building? its highest sunbeams
and lowest throbbing foundations
and all the rafters between
    resonating with song
so deep you will never hear it played
  only because
            like the spheres
you have never heard it cease.

Laura Trimble's *poetry and prose have been published by Ekstasis, Plough, Amethyst Review and have appeared in several anthologies.*

The Crisis of Disaffiliation

Seeking a connection with young Latino adults

By Joseph Espaillat

Nothing is worse than feeling alone and thinking that no one understands or you do not belong. Let's talk about the elephant and gorilla in the room: disaffiliation! Aside from the current crisis of faith, we also have social and relational turmoil, particularly with our Hispanic/Latino young adults. Even though we are more digitally connected than ever, our young adults seem most disconnected from God and each other.

We may be familiar with the rise of the "nones." According to the Pew Research Center, the fastest-growing religious category is the "unaffiliated," which includes 28 percent of all U.S. adults. Being "religiously unaffiliated" goes against our very nature. It is simply dismantling us as a people of God, and alarmingly, this is happening particularly among our Latino young adults: 49 percent of U.S.-born Latinos ages 18 to 29 claim to be unaffiliated.

We were not created to be alone and "unaffiliated." God desires us to be united with him and our sisters and brothers in the human family. A friend once told a youth minister gathering: "People want to serve after they have been served. People care after they've been cared about or for. People invest when they've been invested in."

This is the challenge of disaffiliation and the subsequent vocational crisis. In his apostolic exhortation "Christus Vivit," Pope Francis proposes that the word *vocation* can only be understood in the context of a relationship first with God and then with one another. We have been made in the *imago Dei*, and our lives are relational. Accepting these truths, he writes, "makes us realize that nothing is the result of pure chance but that everything in our lives can become a way of responding to the Lord, who has a wonderful plan for us."

If we keep "unaffiliating" ourselves, we will see the most extraordinary form of nihilism the world has ever seen. God calls us to turn away from our nihilistic/narcissistic mindset and teach our young adults the actual value and meaning of life as a community.

Toward this end, Latino young adult ministry must be more than just programming and events. As my brother bishops reminded us in the pastoral statement "Sons and Daughters of Light," we, the church, should engage young adults. The challenge is how to engage when young adults are disengaging.

Pope Francis understands this. "I dream of a 'missionary option,'" he writes in the apostolic exhortation "Evangelii Gaudium." "That is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation."

This means we are called to meet Latino young adults where they are. We must meet and involve their families (and minister to them), parish communities and the community at large. At the heart of ministering to young adults are caring, supportive relationships where they can have an incarnational experience of the good news in the flesh, or, as a mentor once put it, the "theology of 'hanging out.'" It takes an entire church to "Listen, Teach, Send" (which is the title of the new national pastoral framework for ministries with youth and young adults) and to practice *acompañamiento* as Jesus taught us on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:13-35).

We must all be involved, from the hierarchy to the laity. First, we must invest in ministry with young Latinos at all levels. Not only financially but also in terms of our time. Our dioceses and parishes need to make a more concerted effort for Latinos with strong catechesis and youth ministry programs. The sad reality is that 97 percent of our young Latino Catholics are not in our Catholic schools. This fact should be a couple of flares across the bark of Peter in the United States.

Second, we must intentionally serve U.S.-born, U.S.-raised young Latinos in our ministries. I know a lot about this since I fall into this category, but "one size does not fit all."

Finally, we need to be bold, authentic and unafraid as we reach out to our young Latinos in "at-risk" situations like the "unaffiliated," those who are homeless, imprisoned or involved with gangs, or those who struggle with addictions and the like. Let's get to work!

The Most Rev. Joseph Espaillat *is an auxiliary bishop in the Archdiocese of New York. He is featured in an upcoming video series from* ***America*** *and Boston College on young Latinos and the church.*

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The Joan & Bill
HANK CENTER
FOR THE CATHOLIC INTELLECTUAL HERITAGE

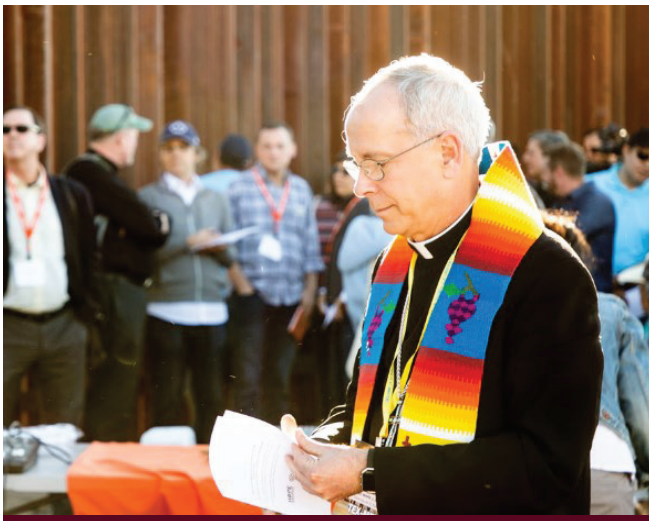
Images and Likenesses: Immigration, Dignity, and the Soul of America

Annual Cardinal Bernardin Lecture featuring Bishop Mark Seitz

The Hank Center is honored to welcome Most Rev. Mark J. Seitz, Bishop of El Paso and Chairman of the USCCB Committee on Migration, to deliver the annual Cardinal Bernardin Common Cause lecture.

In the midst of the contentious public dialog around immigration, Catholics find themselves at an important theological and moral crossroads. This is especially true in light of Pope Francis' recent letter calling for all Catholics to reject narratives that discriminate and dehumanize.

In addition to being an episcopal leader on the duty to care for immigrants, Bishop Seitz has served migrant families and refugees face-to-face in El Paso with compassion, solidarity, and love. In this way, Bishop Seitz's ministry models the gospel obligation to welcome the stranger with openness—a calling that is not only for a 'border bishop' like himself, but for all who seek to realize a true borderless church whose mission is to go out to the margins.



April 22, 7–8:30 PM
McCormick Lounge,
Coffey Hall, Lake Shore Campus

Attendance is free and all are welcome

Register online to receive the post-event video.

This lecture is named for Joseph Bernardin who served as Cardinal Archbishop of Chicago from 1982 to 1996. Cardinal Bernardin was committed to the vision of the Second Vatican Council—with a particular focus on the importance of peacemaking, lay partnerships, and interreligious dialogue. Cardinal Bernardin further sought to address social issues especially in developing his "Seamless Garment Ethic of Life"—a practice he modelled and developed in the ground-breaking Catholic Common Ground Initiative.

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