

America

THE JESUIT REVIEW OF FAITH AND CULTURE

Imagining the Church's Future

Pascal-Emmanuel Gobry

p18

*A Jesuit's First Year
of Priesthood*

p26

**Mourning the
Holy Innocents**

p34

**Must-See
Christmas Films**

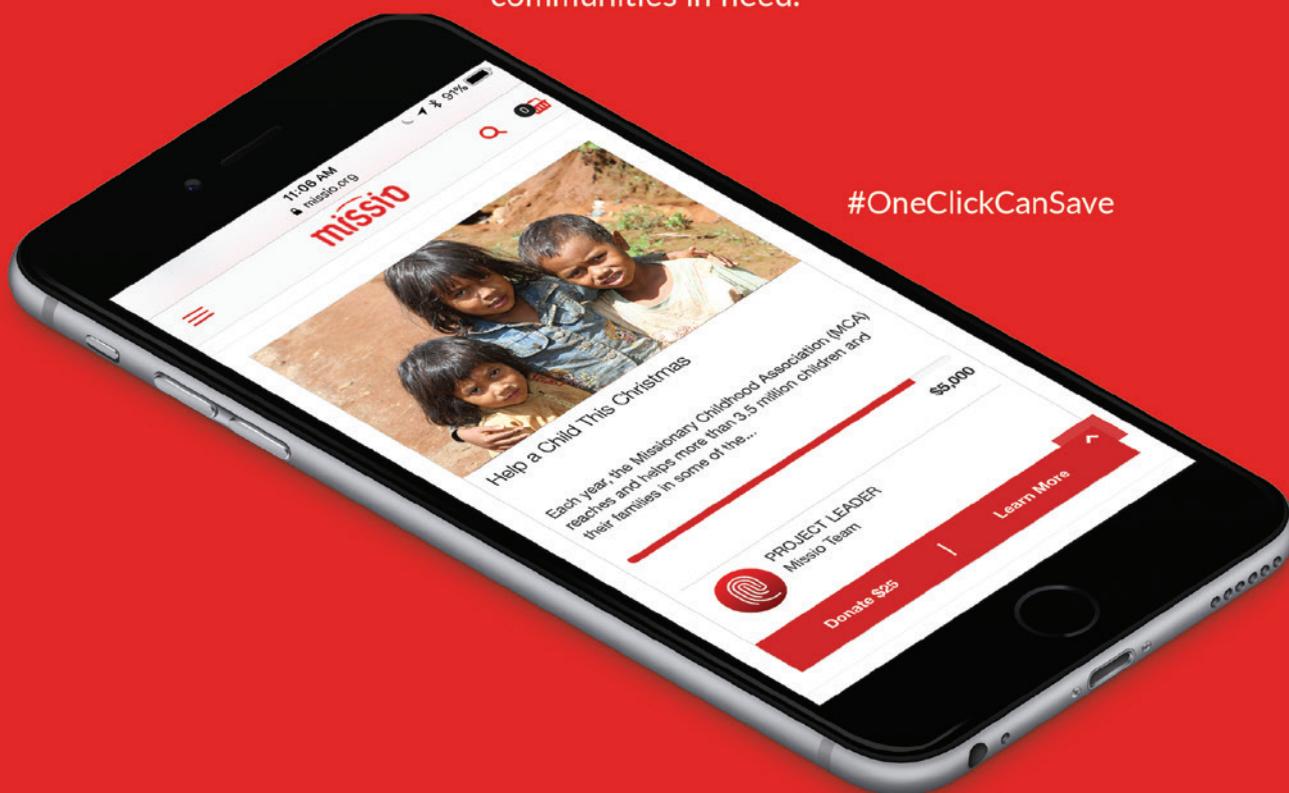
p38



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The Catholic Social Media Compact

Those who are engaged in the work of social communications full time like to point out that the only new, non-liturgical worldwide celebration called for by the Second Vatican Council was World Communications Day, set aside each year for the universal church to reflect on the wonderful “new avenues of communicating,” which affect “not only the eternal welfare of Christians, but also the progress of all mankind.” It is usually held on the Sunday before Pentecost, but the pope announces the theme for the forthcoming World Communications Day on Sept. 29, the feast of St. Gabriel.

Now one might be tempted to think that this is a lot of fuss for one day of reflection on a single topic, until one considers that, for Christians, the ministry of social communications does not exist for the sake of mere speech but for the one who is himself the Word. “Communication is more than the expression of ideas and the indication of emotion,” says “*Communio et Progressio*,” the 1971 pastoral instruction. “At its most profound level, it is the giving of the self in love. Christ’s communication was, in fact, spirit and life.”

With that in mind, it is easier to understand why Pope Francis has chosen this theme for World Communications Day 2018: “The Truth Will Set You Free: Fake News and Journalism for Peace.” Ordinarily, I caution American Catholics against thinking that every papal utterance is directed to the American church. The pope has a lot on his mind, and it is not always just our unique ecclesial challenges. But I think it is safe to say that the Vatican had the United States foremost in its mind when it recommended that the church should use 2018 to reflect “on the causes, logic and

consequences of misinformation in the media” and “to promote professional journalism, always seeking the truth, a journalism for peace.”

A quick glance at our Twitter feeds shows why. “The short-term, dopamine-driven feedback loops we’ve created are destroying how society works,” Chamath Palihapitiya recently said. And he should know. Mr. Palihapitiya is a former executive at Facebook. Due in large measure to the ways we are using social media, he said, there is “no civil discourse, no cooperation; [just a lot of] misinformation, mistruth.” It seems, then, that the pope’s chosen theme is particularly apt. So I asked myself what I might do on social media to improve the situation. What could America Media do that would place us more firmly in the solution camp?

What emerged was a set of suggested guidelines for Catholics on social media. Call it “The Catholic Social Media Compact.” As we head toward the 2018 World Communications Day, America Media will reflect on these propositions and recommit ourselves to pursuing the truth in love (our motto, after all). Would you like to join us in that work and perhaps sign on to the compact as well? We invite you to join us in imagining what the world might look like if we all agreed to observe these 10 principles and practices:

1. We will treat every individual, especially those with whom we disagree, with the respect owed them as children of God. While engaging in spirited disagreement and debate, we will pursue the truth in charity and seek the good of the other in all we do.

2. We will presume, as far as possible, the good intentions of our interlocutors. We will not attribute an opinion

to someone that he or she has not openly declared or is not logically implied by his or her actions. We will seek to build up, not tear down.

3. We will, as far as possible, question the logic, truthfulness and morality of propositions, rather than the motives, integrity or moral character of persons.

4. When conscience or the demands of justice prompt us to challenge people or institutions, we will not merely denounce the actions of others. As far as possible, we will propose an alternative, genuinely constructive course of action.

5. As befits the vocation of journalists, we will employ a healthy skepticism. As befits the vocation of Christians, we will avoid toxic cynicism.

6. We may employ levity and irony, but we will avoid sarcasm, sneering and hostile humor, which are destructive of comity and dialogue.

7. Even when we are the objects of calumnious attacks, we will not use a sharper mode of response than befits people of faith.

8. When we are wrong, we will promptly admit it, correct the public record and ask for forgiveness.

9. We will, as far as possible, identify and celebrate the good, the true and the beautiful as much as we name and challenge what is immoral, unjust or evil.

10. We will seek to bear witness to the one we serve in all our words and deeds. Accordingly, before posting content to social media, we will recite the prayer, “Lord, open my lips and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.”

—
Matt Malone, S.J.
Twitter: @americaeditor.



THE ISSUE

GIVE AND TAKE

6
YOUR TAKE
How do you ground your Christmas celebrations in your faith?

8
OUR TAKE
A new Christmas home; accounting for Puerto Rico; tax plan tricks

10
SHORT TAKE
A Catholic wish list for immigration reform
J. Kevin Appleby

DISPATCHES

12
MOST READ, MOST DISCUSSED:
A YEAR IN REVIEW

A Christmas delicacy for Venezuela's exiles

After ISIS, a new threat for Christians in Iraq

Censoring a Christmas message in Washington?

FEATURES

18
WHAT CATHOLICS CAN LEARN FROM SILICON VALLEY
The church was once a leader in innovation. Can it lead again?
Pascal-Emmanuel Gobry

26
SET APART, STILL LEARNING
I never wanted to be a priest. But here I am.
Brendan Busse



The lighting of the Christmas tree in St. Peter's Square on Dec. 7. CNS photo/Paul Haring
Cover: iStock composition

FAITH IN FOCUS

34
REMEMBER THEIR CHILDREN
A prayer to the mothers
of the Holy Innocents

A rabbi explains why Hanukkah
is not the Jewish Christmas

POEM

41
THE CHRISTMAS SPECTACULAR
JOE HOOVER, S. J.

IDEAS IN REVIEW

38
CHRISTMAS FILM CLASSICS
What to watch instead of
"It's a Wonderful Life"
John Anderson

BOOKS
*Heretics and Believers; Promise
Me, Dad; The Book of Dust; The
Catholic Hipster Handbook*

CULTURE
Michelangelo at the Met;
"Gunpowder"

THE WORD

50
Seek God's love anew through
your loved ones

Through us, every day,
Christ feeds multitudes
Michael Simone

LAST TAKE

54
PATRICIA HEATON
Why is Iceland targeting children
with Down syndrome?

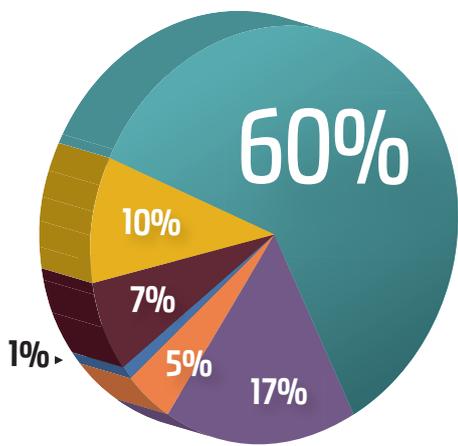
How do you ground your Christmas celebrations in your faith?

We asked our readers how they ground Christmas celebrations in their faith during a season that can be hectic and distracting. Sixty percent of readers told **America** that Advent prayers and Masses were the most important way for them to ground their celebrations in their faith. Many respondents noted that prayer was especially important at this time. “I try to pray more in Advent to find the real meaning of Christmas,” said Linda Epping of Los Angeles. Sheila Kelly of White Bear Lake, Minn., echoed this point: “I like to spend extra time in prayer during Advent. It helps me keep my perspective during the run-up to Christmas.”

Many readers talked about how rewarding it was for them to observe the liturgical traditions of Advent. Paula Berezansky of Indiana, Pa., put it plainly: “I try to celebrate Advent during Advent and Christmas between Christmas Eve and the Epiphany.” Daniel Tucker of Kalamazoo, Mo., told **America**: “The lighting of Advent wreaths or the celebration of Gaudete Sunday in the third week of Advent serve to delineate this time of waiting as a sacred one.”

WHAT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT WAY YOU EXPRESS YOUR CATHOLIC FAITH DURING THE CHRISTMAS SEASON?

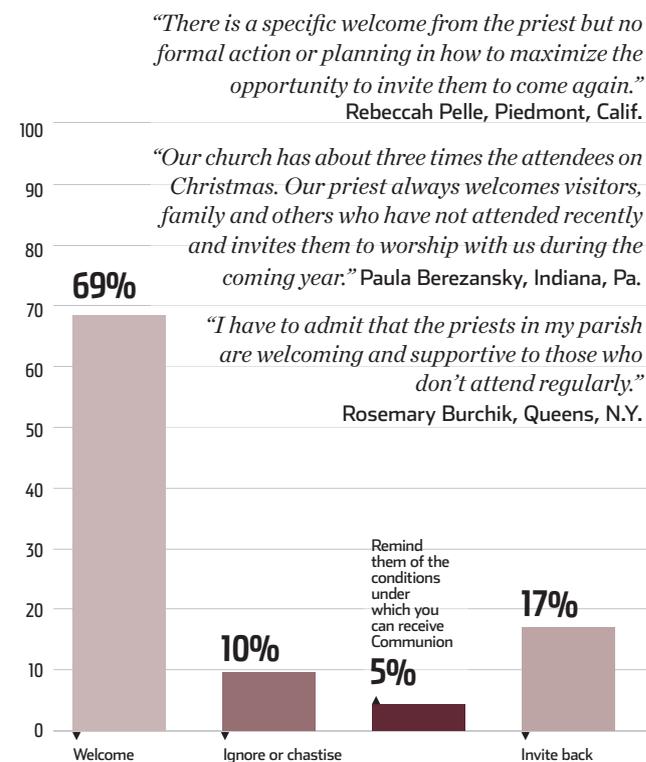
PARTICIPATE IN ADVENT PRAYERS AND MASSES	60%
HELP OUT IN YOUR PARISH (ORGANIZE GIVING TREE, COAT DRIVE, WREATH SALE, ETC.)	10%
RECONNECT WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS	7%
VOLUNTEER WORK	5%
CHARITABLE GIVING	17%
EVANGELIZATION/OUTREACH	1%



Readers (17 percent) also highlighted the importance of charitable giving as a way to express faith in the lead-up to Christmas. “Justice, mercy, kindness, compassion are at the heart of preparing for the celebration of Love born anew,” said Marion Danworth of Asheville, N.C. “Charitable giving for me includes thinking more intentionally about the many ways to share from my abundance.” Mary Louise Hartman of Princeton, N.J., described her understanding of charitable giving in similar terms. “Charitable giving is a ritual I enjoy early in the month of December,” she said. “It reminds of our responsibility to share our blessings and to help others.”

Another important way to incorporate faith into the preparation for Christmas includes reconnecting with family and friends. “Going to Mass with family is the important way that I join the two intertwined and equally important aspects of the holiday season, family and faith,” James Fanning of North Providence, R.I., told **America**.

HOW DOES YOUR PARISH RESPOND TO CATHOLICS WHO DO NOT ATTEND MASS REGULARLY, BUT COME ON CHRISTMAS?



These results are based on reader responses to a poll promoted on Facebook, Twitter and in our email newsletter. Because of rounding, percentages may not add up to 100.

Powerful Lessons

Re “Responding to Sexual Abuse Will Take Years, and It Should” (Our Take, 12/11): I agree that the Catholic Church’s handling of its sex abuse scandal offers powerful lessons to other institutions whose members have committed sex crimes. Sadly, these are, for the most part, lessons about how not to respond. The church could learn much from how some corporations are dealing with employees who have been credibly accused of abuse. Corporations, for example, seem much more willing than the church to expel abusers. How many pedophile priests have been excommunicated? Church leaders’ failure to expel abusers has resulted in the church not being a safe space for victims, which, in turn, has led many victims and those who stand in solidarity with them to leave the church. I pray that someday the church will adopt a real zero-tolerance policy.

Nicole Perez

Online Comment

Ought to Do

Re “Four Women and an Observation,” by Matt Malone, S.J. (Of Many Things, 12/11): When I think about it, the women I have most admired displayed their devotion to duty and service rather than what they personally might want at any given moment. It is almost as if they have a conversation in their heads, asking themselves: “What is it I want to do? And what is it I ought to do?” And when they do what they ought to do, the rest of us benefit.

Monica Quigley Doyle

Online Comment

Racism Is a Sin

Re “The Sickness of the American Soul,” by the Rev. Bryan N. Massingale (12/11): I heard Father Massingale speak at the Los Angeles Religious Education Congress this year. He said, “Racism is a sin.” It was good to hear someone say this aloud. We are afraid to use the word *sin* anymore. I would love to have more conversations like this in the church because it is there that the sin can begin to be healed.

Shemaiah Gonzalez

Online Comment

New Perspective

Re “Are U.S. Bishops Restoring the Seamless Garment?” by Michael J. O’Loughlin (12/11): Although we should choose

candidates for elected office by carefully considering a wide range of life issues, I do believe that protecting the innocent unborn should be of paramount importance. To me, this means not voting for any candidates who favor legal abortion. If a candidate is pro-life and reasonable on other issues as well, I think we are obliged to vote for that candidate. If such a “reasonable” pro-life candidate cannot be found, it may be necessary to abstain from voting for a candidate for that particular office.

Tim Donovan

Online Comment

Magnificent Truth

Re “Wisdom From Father G,” by Kerry Weber (12/11): I have always loved the ministry of Greg Boyle, S.J. And what a magnificent truth for all of us to know and remember: “God is too busy loving you to have any time left over to be disappointed.”

Megan DeFrain

Online Comment

Some Wonder

Re “Trial of Former Salvadoran Colonel Could Bring New Details of 1989 Jesuit Massacre,” by Melissa Vida (12/11): Some Americans wonder why people are leaving their homes in Central America and emigrating to the United States. Perhaps we could save a lot of money and trouble for everyone if instead of paying for a wall we just stopped spending our hard-earned tax dollars to arm, feed, clothe and house foreign gangsters.

Christopher McNally

Online Comment

Good in Theory

A problem with the “seamless garment” philosophy is it assumes there is only one solution to a given issue. No one is for nuclear war, but there are many legitimate methods to prevent it. The same is true of most other issues. “Tax the rich to feed the poor” sounds great in theory, for example, until the economy falters and even more people are forced to go without basic goods. Universal health care seems to be a life-affirming solution, until you consider whether a nationalized health care system would lead to declining quality of care for everyone.

William Juliano

Online Comment

A Time of Homecoming

For many of us, Christmas is a time of homecoming, a tradition Mary and Joseph would have appreciated. Road-worn travelers and far-flung families come together under the same roof to celebrate together and to share their gifts. In a special way, this is also true for us at America Media this year. On Dec. 1, Cardinal Timothy Dolan, archbishop of New York, blessed our new home on the Avenue of the Americas. Gone are

the packing boxes and ad hoc office arrangements; here for the future is our headquarters, under the patronage of St. Edmund Campion, S.J.

One of the many reasons we all appreciate our new home is the hard work and generosity that we know went into making it a reality. We at America Media are profoundly grateful to our readers, donors and supporters for sharing your gifts with us. Merry Christmas!

Puerto Rico and the Decline of Data

The official death toll from Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico stood at 58 on Dec. 6, more than two months after the storm, but few on the ground took the number from the commonwealth's Department of Public Safety seriously. Two demographers, one from the U.S. Department of Defense, heightened this skepticism with a report suggesting that the government's estimate of fatalities was off by a factor of 10. The researchers found that 455 more deaths than average were reported in Puerto Rico in September. This matched a CNN survey of funeral home directors, many of whom also questioned the accuracy of the official data.

Puerto Rico is obviously overwhelmed dealing with the aftermath of the storm, but it is bizarre to imagine future historians writing that they have no idea how

many people perished in one of the worst storms in U.S. history, as if it happened in a pre-modern era instead of in the 21st century. Then again, there seems to be an epidemic of vanishing data in a political environment where unpleasant facts are wished away.

The Trump administration has scrubbed data on climate change from federal agency websites, and the Republican leadership in Congress has dismissed attempts to measure accurately the effects of its health care and tax cut legislation. The Census Bureau is being starved of funds, and even the F.B.I. has inexplicably cut back on its publicly available crime statistics. It is time to reverse this trend and restore transparency in government. Getting an accurate picture of what Hurricane Maria wrought would be an appropriate first step.

A Tax Plan Designed to Collapse

Many lawmakers raised concerns about rushing the legislative process for the Senate's version of the Republican tax bill, exemplified by a barely legible handwritten amendment on an almost 500-page bill distributed only hours before the vote. But there are other parliamentary failures that have contributed even more greatly to the damage this bill will likely do: the misuse of the budget reconciliation process that allows for an expedited consideration of spending bills and the reliance on a 10-year budget score to determine eligibility for that process.

While the bill would make a corporate tax rate cut permanent, tax cuts for individuals decrease over the 10-year budget window of the bill. For poor and lower-middle-class taxpayers, the bill will mean regressive tax hikes after a few years. Republican lawmakers deserve blame for valuing the wishes of multinational companies above the needs of families, but they are not gleeful about phasing out tax cuts. That approach was necessitated by their (also blameworthy) decision to pass this bill through the reconciliation process that prevents a filibuster and does not require winning any Democratic votes.

The present bill is not the first time that the trick of sunset tax cuts has been employed. The most famous previous instances were George W. Bush's tax cuts in 2001 and 2003, timed to expire in 2010 to avoid the "Byrd rule" prohibition on a reconciliation measure that increased the deficit beyond the budget window. In 2012, during the "fiscal cliff" and its related debt-ceiling showdowns,

those tax cuts were made permanent for taxpayers making less than \$400,000 (\$450,000 for couples) but were allowed to expire for those making more. While that episode was no more laudable than the present bill as a legislative endeavor, it at least resulted in a less regressive outcome than what the United States faces now.

The reconciliation process and the Byrd rule were originally designed to protect the budgetary process from legislative gamesmanship aimed at extraneous issues. It is now time to admit that they no longer serve that purpose; instead, they incentivize lawmakers to design legislative structures for deliberate and dangerous collapse before they reach those procedural limits. U.S. politics has more than enough truly intractable problems without our legislators giving themselves artificial reasons to build in more.

Eliminating the reconciliation process or the Byrd rule probably would not have produced a morally better tax bill from the current Congress. Even the few reasonable ideas buried within the current bill, such as an increase to the standard deduction, are still outweighed by the focus on cutting taxes for the already wealthy. But we could have had a clearer debate about both the tax cuts themselves and their impact on the federal debt if they were not clouded by sunset provisions. The American people deserve to hear arguments about how to pay for what our lawmakers propose to do, not just about how to smuggle a bad bill through Congress.

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A Catholic's immigration wish list

The Trump administration has released a set of immigration principles that includes cutting legal immigration substantially, weakening asylum standards and, of course, a border wall with Mexico. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has opposed this agenda, but the next step for immigrant advocates, including the bishops, is our own wish list. We should call the president's ante and raise it.

What would a Catholic immigration wish list look like? Our first clue comes from the pastoral statement of the U.S. and Mexican bishops in 2003, "Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope," which lays out principles based on Catholic social teaching. From this and other Catholic sources, we can see how to reform the system in a humane and fair way. Here are some main objectives.

A path to citizenship for the undocumented. A path to citizenship that would keep families together and enable immigrants to fully integrate into society is central to immigration reform. This would be anathema to President Trump's political base, who label any form of legal status as "amnesty." But it would ensure that everyone is on the right side of the law before the rules change. And it is hardly a giveaway, as undocumented immigrants would have to travel an arduous path to attain citizenship, including paying a fine and waiting at least 10 years before becoming eligible for citizenship status.

Reform of the legal immigration system. There are only 5,000 green cards in the immigration system nationwide for low-skilled workers, despite the demand for immigrant

workers in industries like service, construction and agriculture. An expanded visa program that protects the rights of immigrant workers and gives them a chance to earn permanent residency would help meet this labor demand. Currently, the needs of the low-skilled labor market generally are being met by undocumented workers, who are subject to abuse and exploitation. Mr. Trump is proposing a system skewed toward wealthy and highly skilled immigrants. But with the U.S. workforce aging, we need new workers of all skill levels, not just the well-educated.

Strengthening the asylum system. Perhaps the most mean-spirited item on the Trump administration's list is the elimination of asylum protections for unaccompanied children fleeing gang violence in Central America. In addition, Mr. Trump has already lowered the cap for all refugees to 45,000 for fiscal year 2018, the lowest since the White House began setting a cap in 1980. Instead of reducing protection for the persecuted, the Catholic position would be to ensure that all asylum seekers are granted due process protections consistent with international law. Moreover, the use of expedited removal, in which a single immigration officer can decide whether to turn away an individual, would be limited to those who legitimately threaten national security.

Immigration enforcement. Catholic teaching recognizes the right of a nation to control its borders and to enforce the law, but due process protections, the elimination of unnecessary detention and access to counsel are essential elements of a just immi-

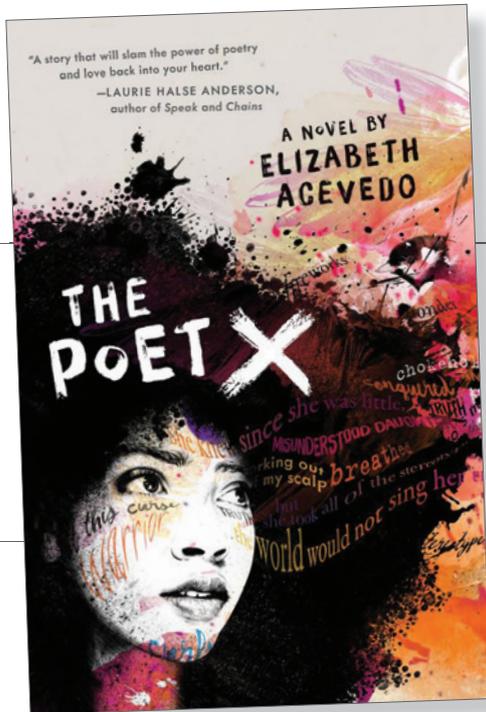
gration system. The Catholic position would be to put the vast majority of undocumented immigrants who are not a threat to our communities on a path to citizenship. Law enforcement could then focus on criminal threats.

Addressing the root causes of flight. If we address the endemic poverty and violence in the countries people are now fleeing, they could and would remain at home to support their families in security. This is a long-term solution that requires global cooperation, but it is possible. For example, apprehensions at our southern border are at their lowest in at least 17 years, in part because the Mexican economy has improved.

The most hopeful scenario for the next year is a compromise on immigration reform in which all sides are not completely satisfied but each comes away having met some of its goals. There will always be trade-offs in immigration policy, no matter which party is in power.

Regardless, the Catholic community should not shrink from our principles. We have cards to play in the national immigration debate and should not be afraid to lay them on the table. Let us not recoil because of the fear being peddled by some in the political world. Let's call their bluff.

J. Kevin Appleby is senior director at the Center for Migration Studies of New York. A longer version of this essay can be found at Americamagazine.org.



Product of Harper Collins

Acclaimed Dominican-American poet Elizabeth Acevedo will read from her old and new poetry, including the collection "Beastgirl," published in 2016. She will also read selections from her new novel "Poet X," due for release in March 2018.

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POPE FRANCIS AND 'SILENCE' WERE AMONG THE MOST POPULAR TOPICS OF 2017 IN AMERICA

Pope Francis' efforts to bring a Catholic perspective to global debates about migration, racial and religious prejudice and economic inequality inspired some of the most popular stories in *America* magazine and at americamagazine.org in 2017. But there was an impressively wide range of other topics that got readers' attention, including reflections on capitalism and philanthropy, a "30 Rock" writer reconnecting with the church through her wedding and evaluations of the music of U2 and Beyoncé.

Some stories had particular appeal for women; some for men. Women showed more interest in pastoral matters (like Pope Francis urging people to give to the homeless) and challenges facing the church (like outreach to millennials); men gravitated more to stories about political conflict, economics and, in one case, the evolution of high school debate rules. Younger readers were drawn to stories about popular culture and political activism, while older readers showed particular interest in liturgical matters and the statements of Pope Francis.

The most popular story of the year, as measured by the total time that all readers spent on each article (a metric that rewards not only attracting readers, but keeping them engaged), was an interview by Brendan Busse, S.J., with Andrew Garfield, star of the Martin Scorsese film "Silence," that ran in our Jan. 23 issue. "I have been drawn to stories that are attempting to turn suffering into beauty," Mr. Garfield said, including his role as a Jesuit priest in 17th-century Japan, a time when Christians were brutally oppressed in that country. In preparation for the film, Mr. Garfield undertook the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola under the guidance of *America's* editor at large James Martin, S.J.

Father Martin wrote the second most popular story of the year, an online post commenting on the viral video of a doctor being dragged off an airplane after refusing to give up the seat he had paid for. The incident "helps to reveal how corporate America often puts rules before people and how capitalism often places profits before human dignity," wrote Father Martin.

A scene from Martin Scorsese's 'Silence'



To give an idea of the variety of content in **America**—and the difficulty of predicting exactly what readers will take to—we have calculated the top story for each month from each of our three major sections: Arts & Culture, Faith and Politics & Society (see page 14). Sometimes readers gravitated toward a Catholic take on current events, like “Five Things Hollywood Could Learn From the Catholic Church,” by Jim McDermott, S.J., after allegations of sexual assaults by Harvey Weinstein and others were brought out into the open, or Michael Redinger’s essay on the tragic case of 15-month-old Charlie Gard, who died after being taken off life support in Britain. Other popular posts seemed to come out of left field, like Haley Stewart’s review of a TV series putting a darker spin on the classic children’s story *Anne of Green Gables* or Colleen Dulle’s history of the love-it-or-hate-it hymn “Here I Am, Lord.”

We have also calculated our most-viewed news stories, which include original reporting by our Vatican correspondent Gerard O’Connell and our national correspondent Michael O’Loughlin. These included Mr. O’Connell’s interview with the Vatican’s top legal expert, who affirmed that Pope Francis was making it possible for Catholics in nonlegitimate unions, including civil remarriage after divorce, to receive the Eucharist under certain conditions. Mr. O’Loughlin made news in the secular press by debunking the rumor that Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch had started a “fascism forever” club at his Jesuit high school and confirming that Sean Spicer, the former White House press secretary, had finally met Pope Francis, after being excluded from a Vatican trip while he was in the employ of President Trump.

On social media, politics got the most interest. Our most shared and most commented-upon stories on Facebook and Twitter tended to involve President Trump, as when he announced he was ending the DACA program that protects undocumented migrants brought to the United States as children or when Archbishop Charles Chaput of Philadelphia accused the press of being too harsh on the new chief executive.

Other popular stories involved the former

MOST VIEWED DISPATCH STORIES

1. Pope Francis says give to the homeless, don’t worry about how they spend it; Michael O’Loughlin, Feb. 28
2. Pope Francis: Stand with migrants, do not deny climate science; O’Loughlin, Feb. 16
3. No, Neil Gorsuch did not start a “Fascism Forever” club at his Jesuit high school; O’Loughlin, Feb. 2
4. Pope Francis has ordered a review of the new Mass translation rules; Gerard O’Connell, Jan. 26
5. Pope Francis opens the door to Communion for Catholics in irregular marriages; O’Connell, Feb. 22
6. Pope Francis rebukes Cardinal Sarah on liturgy; O’Connell, Oct. 22
7. Sean Spicer finally gets to meet Pope Francis; O’Loughlin, Aug. 29
8. Pope Francis says he consulted a psychoanalyst; O’Connell, Aug. 31
9. Pope Francis says Vatican II liturgical reform is “irreversible”; O’Connell, Aug. 24
10. Pope Francis appoints two laywomen to key positions in Roman Curia; O’Connell, Nov. 7

MOST RETWEETED

1. “@JamesMartinSJ: White supremacy is the opposite of Jesus’ message”; Aug. 14
2. “Pope Francis to activists: Stand with migrants, don’t deny climate change, there’s no such thing as Islamic terrorism”; Feb. 16
3. “Cardinal Dolan: Steve Bannon’s comments on immigration are ‘insulting’ and ‘ridiculous’”; Sept. 7
4. “Catholic Church condemns Trump administration’s decision to end DACA”; Sept. 5
5. “No, Neil Gorsuch did not start a ‘Fascism Forever’ club at his Jesuit high school”; Feb. 2

Trump advisor Steve Bannon—a Catholic who has clashed with the church on immigration policy and who has credited St. Ignatius for his abstention from alcohol. The most retweets, however, went to “White supremacy is the opposite of Jesus’ message,” posted by James Martin, S.J., in response to a violent far-right rally in Charlottesville, Va., in August.

America Media’s growing film division received considerable attention in 2017, with documentaries about the largest Catholic parish in the United States (in Charlotte, N.C.) and the Catholic Church in China among our most-watched YouTube videos. Our most-shared videos on Facebook were both filmed in Louisiana. One told the story of a priest who converted an old ambulance into a mobile confessional, and another followed a eucharistic boat procession in Cajun country.

Some stories from prior years continued to do well.

Some dealt with natural disasters (a hurricane prayer) and intractable social problems (like gun violence), but a continuing favorite was **America’s** landmark interview with Pope Francis in September 2013, shortly after he began his papacy.

There were also some stories that did not make our lists because of the Nov. 30 cut-off required by our production schedule, but late-rising stars included Eloise Blondiau’s review of the popular film “Lady Bird,” an essay by the actress Patricia Heaton on the abortions of Down syndrome babies in Iceland and Nichole M. Flores’s cover story on Dec. 11 about the legacy of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Whether their popularity this month offers any clues as to what will be popular in 2018, we dare not speculate, but we will surely keep counting.

Robert David Sullivan, *associate editor*.
Twitter: @RobertDSullivan.

MOST POPULAR STORIES BY MONTH

JANUARY

Andrew Garfield played a Jesuit in “Silence,” but he didn’t expect to fall in love with Jesus; **Brendan Busse**, Jan. 23 issue
On migrants and refugees: “I was a stranger and you did not welcome me”; **James Martin, S.J.**, Jan. 27
On Donald Trump: This is not what pro-life leadership looks like; **Sam Sawyer, S.J.**, Jan. 23

FEBRUARY

Please stop watching John Oliver; **Zac Davis**, Feb. 10
Pope Francis opens the door to Communion for Catholics in irregular marriages; **Gerard O’Connell**, March 20 issue
Confessions of a Catholic convert to capitalism; **Arthur C. Brooks**, Feb. 20 issue

MARCH

A priest and his mom watched the movie “The Shack”; **Eric Sundrup, S.J.**, March 2
Confessions of a porn-addicted priest; **Anonymous**, April 3 issue
Pope Francis says give to the homeless, don’t worry about how they spend it; **Michael O’Loughlin**, Feb. 28

APRIL

What can Beyoncé and Pope Francis teach us about love?; **Olga Segura**, May 15 issue
A sorta-Catholic’s very Catholic wedding; **Tracey Wigfield**, May 1 issue
The United Airlines debacle is about the morality of capitalism; **James Martin, S.J.**, April 11

MAY

“Anne of Green Gables” becomes a gothic nightmare; **Haley Stewart**, June 12 issue
The case for dragging your bored teens (and tired self) to Mass; **Karen Park**, May 18
Callista Gingrich picked as U.S. ambassador to the Vatican; **Michael O’Loughlin**, May 15

JUNE

The book Christians should read instead of *The Benedict Option*; **Jason Blakely**, June 14
Father James Martin responds to conversation surrounding his L.G.B.T. book; **June 19**
The case against philanthropy as we know it; **Nathan Schneider**, June 26 issue

JULY

Why does U2 irk so many people?; **David Dark**, Aug. 21 issue
Should we sing patriotic songs at Mass?; **James Martin, S.J.**, July 3
What some pro-lifers have overlooked in the case of Charlie Gard; **Michael Redinger**, July 5

AUGUST

Sex and the Catholic college campus (book review); **Charles Camosy**, Sept. 18 issue
Pope Francis says: the Vatican II liturgical reform is “irreversible”; **Gerard O’Connell**, Sept 18 issue
An open letter to Trump voters from a concerned Catholic priest; **George Wilson, S.J.**, Aug. 15

SEPTEMBER

How the Jesuits at **America** responded when Hugh Hefner sent them Playboy; **James Keane**, Sept. 28
Attacks on Father James Martin expose a cancer within the U.S. Catholic Church; **Bishop Robert W. McElroy**, Sept. 18
Here’s what Hillary Clinton says about Pope Francis in her new book; **Michael O’Loughlin**, Sept. 14

OCTOBER

The corrosion of high school debate—and how it mirrors American politics; **Jack McCordick**, Oct. 30 issue
Yes, millennials like brunch. But that’s not why they’re skipping Mass; **Jackie Semmens**, Sept. 25
Five things Hollywood could learn from the Catholic Church after Harvey Weinstein; **Jim McDermott**, Oct. 11

NOVEMBER

Day of the Dead is not “Mexican Halloween”; **Gina Franco and Christopher Poore**, Nov. 27 issue
A Thanksgiving prayer for Nearly Everyone; **James Martin, S.J.**, Nov. 22
Margaret Sanger was a eugenicist. Why are we still celebrating her?; **John J. Conley**, Nov. 27

A Yuletide treat recalls Venezuela's Christmas past

One of the best things about living in Miami is Christmas. No, we do not have snow, but last time I checked, neither did Bethlehem in 6 B.C. What we do have are rich, added layers of Christmas tradition on top of the Euro-American, Currier & Ives stuff.

The Cuban *cajas chinas* filled with roast pig in Little Havana. The Mexican *posadas* processions through Homestead. Pumpkin soup *joumou* in Little Haiti. Jamaican reggae carols. Sweet Colombian *natilla* and *buñuelo* fritters. And the cornucopia-like Venezuelan tamales known as *hallacas*, their festive preparation ritual as wonderful as the food itself.

Of all the Latin American and Caribbean Yuletide customs that grace South Florida, the *hallaca* (ah-YAH-kah) is undoubtedly the fastest growing—for reasons both merry and melancholy. As Venezuela's economy and democracy collapse under its socialist regime, tens of thousands of people are fleeing to Miami. That means not only more *hallacas* here at Christmas, but more opportunities for non-Venezuelans to try them.

Call me biased—my wife is Venezuelan—but *hallacas* are unique among the tamales popular in Latin America. Like Christmas trees and stuffed chimney stockings, they are so replete with delights that Venezuelans make them only in December. I often liken the moment I tried my first *hallaca* in Venezuela more than 30 years ago to an epiphany: I rediscovered Christmas.

And I keep rediscovering it every December when family and friends gather on our patio at a long, assembly-line table to enjoy a daylong marathon of *hallaca*-making.

Strewn about is a panoply of European, African and indigenous Latin American foods that remind you the *hallaca* is a display not just of Navidad but of the New World. The heart of it all, for example—the *guiso*, or stew—is a Caribbean swirl of flavorful ingredients ranging from pork leg to leeks, from capers to annatto seeds.

The *guiso* is poured lavishly into a tawny shell of cornmeal *masa*. Then the fun part starts, filling the shell to bursting with meats, raisins, olives, eggs, spices and any other suitable treat that comes to mind. It is all in keeping with the spirit of the *hallaca*'s origins centuries ago, when slaves and servants invented it using the assorted holiday table scraps of wealthy colonial Spaniards.

But just as important as the cooking is the communi-



William A. Contreras, via Wikimedia Commons

ty—the all-hands-on-deck fiesta that blesses every *hallaca* with the sort of spontaneous Christmas fellowship that has been drained from too many modern American kitchens and living rooms.

The air fills with the rolling, robust rhythms of *gaita*—the folk Christmas music inspired in part by one of Venezuela's patron saints, the Virgin of Chinququirá, or La Chinita—as well as the aroma of red peppers and, most of all, Caribbean rum. If you have got a political argument to vent, a ribald joke to tell, some juicy gossip to share or a warm-hearted toast to make, this is the moment.

When the *hallaca* can hold no more filling, it is folded and swaddled in smoked banana leaves that remind you of the lush, green palm-frond thatching of a Venezuelan beach hut. Then it is tied with string and placed in a steaming pot.

Your first bite of one on Christmas Eve makes you feel like a Caribbean version of Bob Cratchit savoring his wife's Christmas pudding in Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*.

But that tastebud revelation is also a reminder that back in Venezuela it is hard to find enough food for three meals a day, let alone *hallacas* for Christmas day. The *hallaca* was once a reflection of oil-rich Venezuela's bounty. Today, increasingly, it is the fare of exile.

That is something an immigrant city like Miami is all too familiar with. Especially at Christmas.

Tim Padgett, Miami correspondent. Twitter: @TimPadgett2.

After ISIS, can Christian communities be restored in Iraq?

Time is running out for the Christian communities of Iraq's Nineveh Plain. Shattered by years of dislocation and violence at the hands of Daesh, as ISIS militants are known in the region, thousands of Christian families have begun the difficult task of rebuilding the homes, churches and civic institutions destroyed during the three years ISIS rampaged through the province after its seizure of Mosul in June 2014.

With ISIS on the run in Iraq, those same Christian communities face a new threat as Kurdish peshmerga forces and Iraqi government troops square off across the province. In some instances, hostile brigades are just kilometers apart on either side of the Christian communities that had just begun reconstruction.

This stalemate between the Iraqi central government and the independence-leaning Kurdish Regional Government is the greatest obstacle to a successful reintegration of Christians in the province, according to Stephen Rasche of the Nineveh Reconstruction Committee. Speaking at the United Nations in an information-sharing conference sponsored by the Holy See Mission to the United Nations on Nov. 30, he said the standoff "has carved Nineveh in half and made towns in which we need to work inaccessible."

Archbishop Bashar Matti Warda, the Chaldean Catholic archbishop of Erbil, agreed that the current standoff represented yet another existential threat to Nineveh's Christians. "We cannot bear another collateral damage. Time is not on our side."

But in a small indication of how difficult unraveling that confrontation may prove to be, the Iraqi ambassador to the United Nations bluntly rejected the notion of a separate and independent Kurdistan. "Iraq should be one Iraq, and Iraq should remain united," Ambassador Mohammed Hussein Bahr al-Uloom said. "And the Iraqi people proved this in the struggle against Daesh.... There can be no Iraq without Kurds; there can be no Iraq without Christians; there can be no Iraq without Arabs," he said.

"This is our message," he said firmly, "and we need your support."



CNS photo/Mohammed Badra, EPA

According to the ambassador, the struggle against ISIS exhausted more than \$100 billion and the conflict left behind \$130 billion more in damage. This is a burden, he said, that the Iraqi state cannot be expected to shoulder alone. Defeating ISIS, he argued, is the responsibility of the world community because it means the protection of the entire international community.

The threat of renewed violence is just one of the challenges standing before the restoration of the ancient Christian community in Iraq. Millions will be required for the physical reconstruction of these devastated villages and neighborhoods.

The work is meant not only to restore Christian communities but to revitalize the role of Christians in Iraqi society as a mitigating and bridge-building force among the nation's diverse ethnic and religious communities. "Restoring and maintaining pluralism and diversity in the Nineveh Region is essential to defeating ISIS ideology that sought to eliminate religious and ethnic minorities from



An Iraqi police officer stands guard as worshippers pray during Christmas Eve Mass in 2016 at al-Tahira al-Kubra church in Mosul.

A moving Christmas message is blocked in Washington



The Archdiocese of Washington hoped to encourage consumers to “find the perfect gift” this Christmas by attending church, seeking spiritual gifts and serving the poor. But the transit agency in the nation’s capital is not having it, banning the ads from Metro buses because they contain religious content.

Archdiocesan officials responded by filing a complaint in federal court, hoping that an injunction will allow the archdiocese to purchase ads on dozens of city buses, as it has done in previous years. In its complaint, the archdiocese says that the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority rejected an ad showing a group of shepherds looking up to the stars, along with the words “Find the perfect gift.”

“We think there’s a First Amendment issue here,” Ed McFadden, the archdiocese’s secretary for communications said. According to guidelines posted on the W.M.A.T.A. website, advertisements that “promote or oppose any religion, religious practice or belief are prohibited.”

That policy dates back to 2015, when the American Freedom Defense Initiative, a group with anti-Muslim views, purchased a set of ads on the D.C. transit system that contained an image of the prophet Mohammed, a depiction that is considered sacrilegious to Muslims. But a federal judge refused to grant an emergency injunction on Dec. 8, ruling that it was unlikely church officials would be able to prove that their constitutional rights were being violated.

The message of the ads, the archdiocese contends, is not all that controversial. “The Archdiocese wishes to encourage our society to help feed, clothe, and care for our most vulnerable neighbors, and to share our blessings, and welcome all who wish to hear the Good News,” Susan Timoney, the archdiocese’s secretary for pastoral ministry and social concerns, said in a statement.

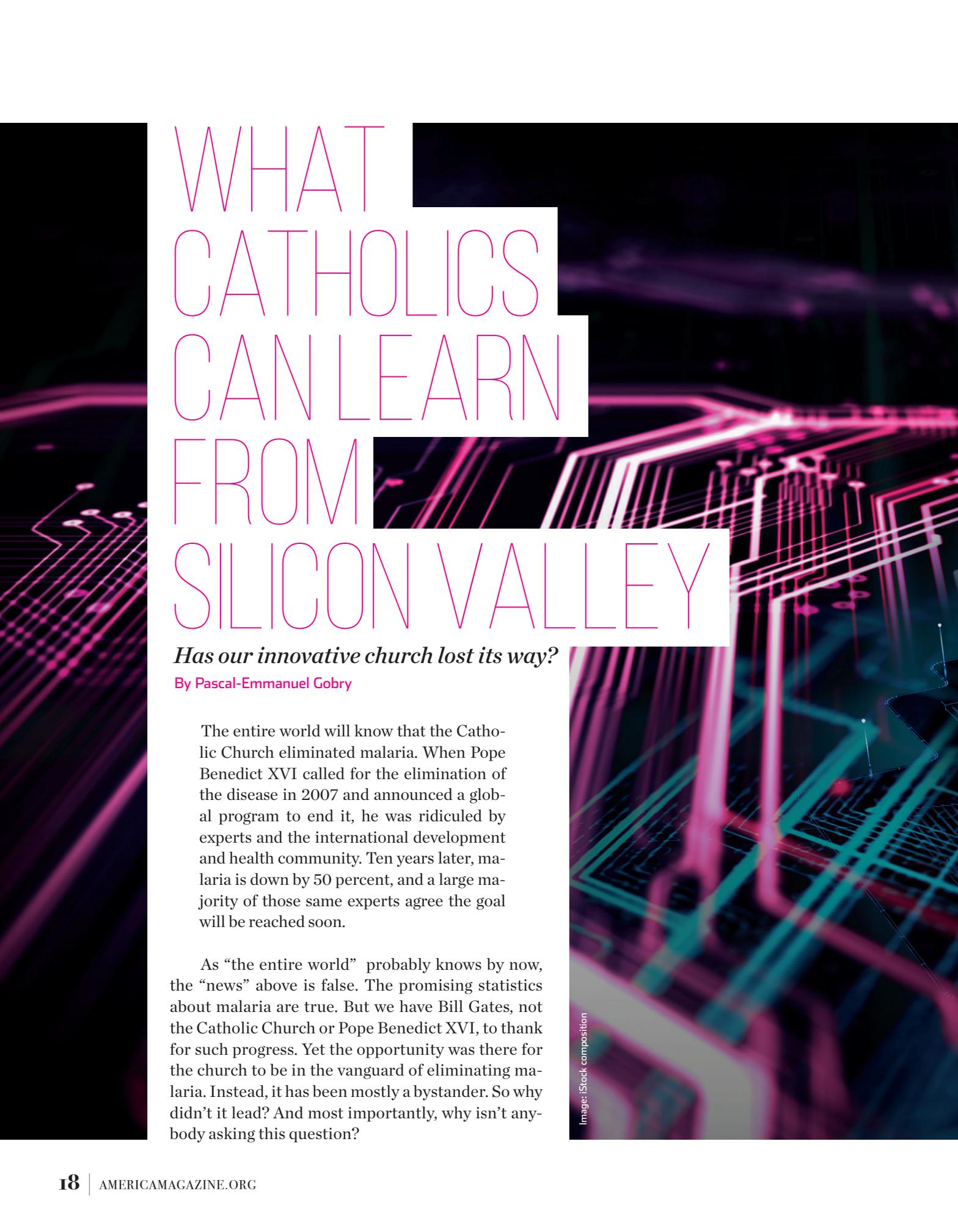
Michael J. O’Loughlin, *national correspondent.*
Twitter: @MikeOLoughlin.

their so-called caliphate,” said Edward Clancy, director of outreach and evangelization for Aid to the Church in Need-USA.

“If they are again to become a vital part of a diverse Iraqi society, Christians will need help from the international community,” he said. “Action is needed now, or the Christian community which has been present in Iraq for nearly two millennia will become a historical footnote.”

Toward that ambition of restoring Nineveh’s Christians and rebuilding sustainable civic and economic institutions for them, the Vatican has thrown its support behind the Return to the Roots project. That fundraising effort is being coordinated by the Nineveh Reconstruction Committee with the help of Aid to the Church in Need and the Knights of Columbus.

Kevin Clarke, *chief correspondent.*
Twitter: @ClarkeAtAmerica.



WHAT CATHOLICS CAN LEARN FROM SILICON VALLEY

Has our innovative church lost its way?

By Pascal-Emmanuel Gobry

The entire world will know that the Catholic Church eliminated malaria. When Pope Benedict XVI called for the elimination of the disease in 2007 and announced a global program to end it, he was ridiculed by experts and the international development and health community. Ten years later, malaria is down by 50 percent, and a large majority of those same experts agree the goal will be reached soon.

As “the entire world” probably knows by now, the “news” above is false. The promising statistics about malaria are true. But we have Bill Gates, not the Catholic Church or Pope Benedict XVI, to thank for such progress. Yet the opportunity was there for the church to be in the vanguard of eliminating malaria. Instead, it has been mostly a bystander. So why didn’t it lead? And most importantly, why isn’t anybody asking this question?

Image: iStock composition





THERE'S AN
OBVIOUS REASON TO
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LOT BETTER. 🔥🔥

The Gates Foundation is an example of success not so much because it has a great deal of money—plenty of foundations have billion-dollar endowments and comparatively little impact—but because it combines money with the mind-set of the technological entrepreneur. It combines faith in a vision so ambitious as to border on the delusional with a healthy disregard for conventional thinking—and particularly, a relentless focus on trying new things, measuring their impact carefully, tweaking them and then scaling them up once they work. This mind-set, more than any specific technology or even concentrations of capital, is why Silicon Valley is a unique phenomenon. As innovation scholars have pointed out, plenty of places outside the Bay Area have world-class scientists or access to capital, but what is unique is the entrepreneurial culture of Silicon Valley. To say that the Catholic Church as an institution lacks that sort of culture seems like the understatement of the century. We are the dinosaurs that Silicon Valley nerds laugh about.

For anyone who follows the intersection of social change and innovation, the church's lack of involvement is a grim spectacle. None of the most innovative endeavors in any field where the Catholic Church competes—for we do compete, whether we are aware or not—come from us, whether that is in education (Khan Academy, Udacity,

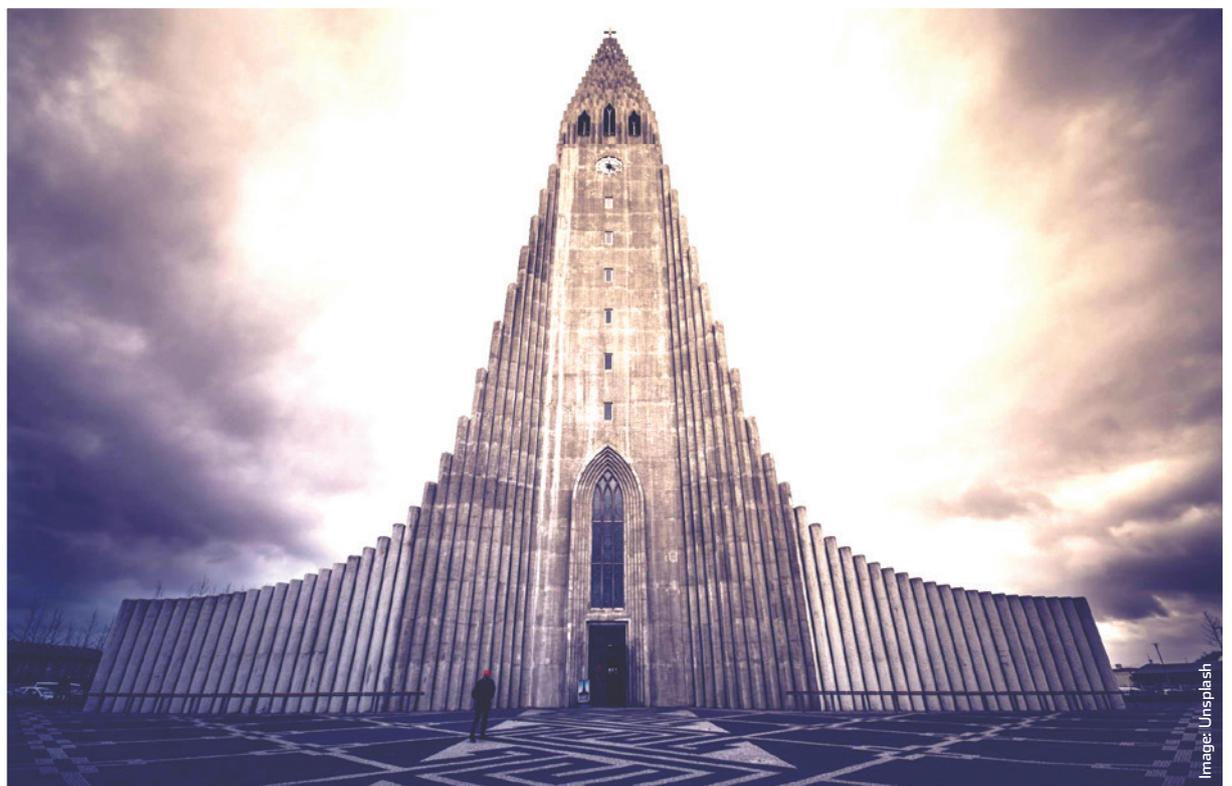
alt:school, One Laptop Per Child, Minerva Project, Harlem Children's Zone), health care (Mayo Clinic, Sherpa, Practice Fusion, Breakthrough), media (YouVersion, Wikipedia, social networking), development (International Justice Mission, the microfinance revolution, social venture firms like Acumen) or scientific research (Human Dx, M.I.T., Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab); the list goes on and on. There certainly are many worthy and innovative endeavors in the church, like L'Arche, the Cristo Rey educational program or Homeboy Industries, but any honest evaluation would have to reckon with the fact that, overall, the picture is dismal. Can anyone argue with a straight face that the Catholic Church is the undisputed leader of innovation in, well, any field?

A SPIRITUAL MALAISE

There is an obvious reason to be alarmed, which is that the church is called to serve its neighbors, and an innovative mentality would allow us to be more effective at it. But there is a less obvious, much more profound reason, which is that this reveals a deep spiritual sickness in the church.

A simple glance at the history of the church should show that the current situation is anomalous. As Rodney Stark, the invaluable social historian of Christianity, notes, Christians in the Roman world had longer life expectancies than their non-Christian peers, a fact that can be largely attributed to the church's welfare system, which was the first organized and professionally run welfare system in recorded history—in other words, a radical, world-changing innovation. It is attested by both Christian and pagan sources that Christians in antiquity provided health care lavishly to their own and to others; it is less often noted that in the process they literally invented the hospital, another rather important innovation.

It is also less appreciated that the era that dawned on the ruins of the Western Roman Empire was an era of enormous technological innovation, incubated and entirely powered by the Silicon Valley of the day: monasteries. The historian Lynn White Jr. has shown that monastic innovations in agricultural technology—like the wheeled plow, the horse harness, the nailed horseshoe and three-field crop rotation—caused an agricultural revolution that broke Western Europe out of the Malthusian trap in which the Roman Empire had been stuck for centuries and that made it vulnerable to the forces that brought about its downfall. In the process, they almost certainly saved “the West” from a similar fate from later would-be invaders, Saracen, Viking or Eurasian. (Meanwhile, the last centu-



The church is simply a human word for the miraculous work of Jesus Christ—a work that continues only to the extent that we, members of this body, cooperate with the grace by which he means to do it.

ry's green revolution, which saved a billion lives by conservative estimates, was driven by secular institutions.) The agricultural revolution fueled a population boom, which in turn fueled a centuries-long economic, cultural, artistic and technological boom, including the invention of the university, described by Jean Gimpel, the French historian of technology, as an "industrial revolution."

It is easy to miss from this already impressive picture that this new dispensation was probably both the cause and effect of the general disappearance of slavery across Western Europe during the early Medieval era, from the ninth through the 13th centuries. The standard economic literature tells us that higher labor costs push more investment in productivity-enhancing technology, which in turn causes wages to rise as the economic pie grows. We very rightly focus on the moral wickedness of slavery, but should also remember that it is economically destructive, since it removes incentives from both workers and capital owners to invest in productivity-enhancing skills.

The point is this: Historically speaking, the church has produced countless innovations, both social and technological. It did so prolifically, unabashedly, naturally, relentlessly. More than any particular invention—social welfare, the hospital, the university, the post-slavery economy—what stands out is the mind-set that made all of it possi-

ble, a mind-set whose closest contemporary equivalent is much more to be found in the Bay Area of California than in the Vatican or the vast majority of Catholic dioceses, parishes or ministries. Moreover, that Silicon Valley mind-set was crucial, central to performing the church's work of feeding the hungry, instructing the ignorant and effecting broad-based social change.

NOW AND NOT YET

And how else should it be? The Bible screams it at us. The Bible is bookended by a narrative of creation and redemption, the creation of a good universe later wrecked by sin, and its redemption, not by the special privilege of a select few, to escape a fallen world through a disembodied place called heaven. This is not a return to the Garden of Eden, but through new creation, the "world to come," which is this world, albeit made divine again, just as Christ's body was made glorious in the resurrection. The Book of Revelation calls this the New Jerusalem, which is described as descending to earth, not as a place to which believers ascend.

This eschatological vision is the running thread of the New Testament. Throughout his ministry, Jesus proclaims not a set of beliefs, not a code of moral behavior, not a spiritual message, but rather the kingdom of God, a reality that implies all these things but only because they are entailed



THE STAKES ARE HIGH, NOT JUST FOR THE CHURCH BUT FOR THE WORLD.

by the greater reality that God has broken through the barriers that sin has thrown up between God and his good creation and is returning to establish his reign, to transform all things. This is why, in N. T. Wright's phrase, the Gospel is "news, not advice." It is not a handbook of spirituality or morality but the trumpeting of the brute fact that God is back and that the plan he had always said he would set in motion has been set in motion. The same eschatological vision shines all through Paul's letters, a vision of "now and not yet," that the world to come will be consummated at the end of time, but that it has truly begun on Easter morning and is happening now.

And what is the link between the now and the not yet? The church, whose mission is to make the new creation concrete in the here and now: in other words, not merely to make things slightly better, but to effect transformational change at every level. The church is the body of the risen Messiah, who now reigns over the universe as king. In other words, the church is simply a human word for the miraculous work of Jesus Christ—a work that continues only to the extent that we, members of this body, cooperate with the grace by which he means to do it.

It is this Jesus, indeed, who intends to work through us. And this Jesus, we know, is king, but also *logos*, that is, the rational principle through which everything was made and which dwells at the heart of all creation, the father's own infinite divine wisdom and the one from whom the Spirit proceeds to dwell in the church. We should expect God's grace to lead not only to holiness, but also to greater intelligence, creativity and resourcefulness in getting the work of the church done. And through the Spirit we should expect, if we follow Jesus, to accomplish absolutely novel

and startling things.

The God described by the Bible is one of boundless creativity, who wishes to communicate this creativity to his beloved creatures, who, being made in his image, are called to be co-creators. We should expect a church that listens to the Spirit to be an unprecedented wellspring of creativity and inventiveness in getting the work of the church done, particularly in the area of science and technology, of *logos* and wisdom, a creativity that leads to transformative change of the kind that seems possible only in retrospect.

By the same token, if we should find that this is no longer the case, we should view it not merely as an inconvenience, but as a wholesale catastrophe, as evidence not only of the incalculable human good that we would certainly have done by trusting the Spirit, but also of a moral and spiritual disaster, a new Babylonian captivity brought about by some dreadful sacrilege on our part.

That the Catholic Church should put Silicon Valley—or any other institution or culture—to shame when it comes to world-changing innovation is not some tantalizing yet naïve prospect. It should be the baseline expectation for any educated Catholic.

WHAT WENT WRONG?

Theologically, the suspects line up. There is Christian individualism; in the wake of the Black Death, the question "How do I get to Heaven?" became an obsession of Western Christianity, leading to forgetfulness of the eschatological vision of a new creation. The church correctly pointed out that Luther's answer to that question was incorrect, but in its obsession to rebut Luther forgot that the question of how one gets to heaven is merely one, rather incidental component of the good news of the kingdom. Then there is the dualism that, in some form, has stalked Christian thought and piety from the start.

There is also (there is no nice way to put it) moral laziness and cowardice at play. I will make a sweeping generalization, but one that anybody who has been involved in almost any Catholic ministry will identify with: There is a quite powerful and omnipresent assumption that the most significant requirement for performing Christian works of mercy is to mean well.

Competence in ministry is a demand of Christian faith, but in too many precincts of the Catholic Church, competence is instead a dirty word. The phrase "works of mercy" includes the word work, and the way work is judged is by quality and result. And if we don't judge our



own works, someone else will, and we will not be able to say we were not warned. This mind-set of putting good intentions over competence is a sort of applied fideism, exalting sentimentality and shunting reason to the side—the opposite of the *logos*.

But the biggest culprit is the dogged inferiority complex many Christians have vis-à-vis the modern world. We forget to compete because we do not want to try, and we do not want to try because we think we will lose.

Catholics debate endlessly about how the church should “respond” to modernity. Some think we should change or adapt doctrines; others think we should just change the way we present them. Nobody gives a thought to the idea of beating the moderns at their own game. As Rodney Stark points out, pagans converted to Christianity en masse because it offered meaningful, tangible change to their quality of life and circumstances. This is not cheating; it is the church’s job. If we are beaten in the battle for world-healing, we should not be the least bit surprised we are being beaten in the battle for souls.

The Catholic Church today is profoundly anti-scientific, not in the sense that Catholic theology opposes the scientific method in any way, but in the more profound sense of a refusal to take reality—creation—as a teacher, and to address problems through trial and error rather than abstract speculation. We have become practical Cartesians, who prefer to live inside their own heads rather than receive the gift of creation and respond to it as image-bearers of God—with creativity in the service of world-healing and powered by the *logos*.

We can scarcely imagine the countless, insidious ramifications of our inferiority complex. One example is the church’s wholesale copying of the 19th-century German model of the research university (which was probably never useful, but is now more harmful than ever), and in its wake the transformation of Catholic theology into an academic discipline modeled on the social sciences. This is cargo cult superstition, aping the external attributes of secular scientific disciplines and hoping to achieve thereby a similar level of respectability. But theology is spiritual and practical as well as theoretical. The church fathers were almost all pastors; the Scholastics were bound by monastic rules to spend as much time in prayer as in study. In an unspoken way, theology has come to be identified with the academy, and in the process has become a sort of gnosticism, radically disconnecting the mind from the world, making theology the province of an elect few who are able to memorize

and recite arcane formulas. The intellectual and spiritual damage that this particular instance of our inferiority complex has wrought is massive.

A WORLD-CONQUERING ETHOS

Aux Captifs la Libération (“Freedom to the Captives”) is a Catholic ministry founded in 1981 by the Rev. Patrick Giros, a diocesan priest in Paris, with the goal of reinventing social work. The concept is both simple and earth-shaking. When Captifs train volunteers or workers roam the Paris streets at night to help the homeless, they do so “with empty hands.” They do not offer coffee or blankets. Only when there is a genuine bond and trust with a homeless person—something which might take days, weeks, months or even years to establish—do they propose specific interventions, which can range from free housing in a community apartment to training and rehabilitation programs. These interventions have a much higher rate of success in helping people off the street. Homeless people, who suffer greatly from social isolation and sometimes suffer from mental illness, need this recovery of social trust before they can begin to take charge of their lives.

This is genuine Catholic innovation, as well as incarnate theology in action. While the modern, mechanistic worldview sees people as machines who need correct inputs to function properly, Captifs sees people as made in the image of the Trinitarian God, whose most pressing, ontological need is relationship. This theology produces specific, novel techniques that bear actual fruit. Captifs is a good case study, because it shows that Catholic innovation need not involve whiz-bang technology; but it should involve techniques. Abstract ideas and doctrine, good intentions and even enthusiasm are not enough. Captifs is incarnate theology, while the church more often produces Gnostic theology and applied fideism.

But Captifs is a mustard seed. Silicon Valley’s dominance is not due to the quality of the ideas produced there; it is due to the highly effective, relentless, ambitious and hungry way in which it scales up those ideas to achieve global dominance. Facebook went from an online directory for students at one college to a global platform that offers countless communications services around its basic original insight of using the internet to enhance people’s real-world social lives. Of course Silicon Valley’s access to tremendous capital plays a role, but money just follows success; the capital is there because of the world-conquering ethos. The point of the parable of the mustard seed is not that the kingdom is a very small thing; it is that it is a positively enormous thing that grows from a very small thing.



HISTORICALLY SPEAKING, THE CHURCH HAS PRODUCED COUNTLESS INNOVATIONS, AND IT HAS DONE SO PROLIFERICALLY, UNABASHEDLY, NATURALLY, RELENTLESSLY.

The “tree” that can grow from Captifs’ miraculous seed is the wholesale reinvention of social work, all over the planet. The Spirit is generous in seeds, but (to mix parables) Catholic complacency and moral cowardice is rocky soil indeed.

The stakes are high, not just for the church but for the world as well. Pope Francis’ teachings are laudable for his emphasis on the “seamless garment” of Catholic social doctrine, whose every point is dependent on every other one, and his timely, urgent emphasis on the Catholic imperative of creation care through “Laudato Si’.” But there is an apparent contradiction. Sagacious minds will not fail to notice that the seamless garment of Catholic doctrine includes care for creation, but also includes the condemnation of artificial family planning. How does one reconcile environmental conservationism with a moral vision that, if applied consistently, would lead to explosive population growth? The only way to square this particular circle is to affirm that Catholic social doctrine necessarily presupposes that any just society will also produce significant technological and societal innovations, so that it can “be fruitful and multiply” without depleting resources, and therefore that this duty should be a central concern of the church.

We should be alarmed that it is mostly secular scientists who are taking on the project of creation-repair, for there is no good reason to believe that they, working from a deficient materialistic metaphysics, or profit-seeking businessmen and investors are up to that challenge, or that their cure will not be worse than the disease. It is still up to us in the church to fix the planet, as it always was.

St. Ignatius Loyola changed the world not because of his great spiritual and philosophical insights but because he cashed out those insights as techniques, methods and processes—the Spiritual Exercises, the Jesuit *Constitutions*—which he refined through trial and error even as he was moved by a Spirit-driven boundless ambition to see these techniques applied over the world and passed on to future generations.

As a Renaissance humanist, he had that scientific mind-set in spades. Without that we might still remember Ignatius as a saint, but nobody would know of a Society of Jesus. Where is our new, doubtless very different Ignatius?

The seeds are there. The Spirit lives. The Catholic Church has the means to be the engine of another renewal of civilization.

Pascal-Emmanuel Gobry is a contributing writer to *America* and a fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C.

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SET APART, STILL LEARNING

The urgent, lonely, relevant, humbling, joyful experience of being a newly ordained priest

By Brendan Busse

I never wanted to be a priest. As a child I wanted to be an architect. I liked drawing. I watched a lot of “This Old House” (PBS’s HGTV before there was an HGTV). I suppose I just wanted to make a better place of this world, a safer place, a kinder place. My mother occasionally refers to me as her Buddha-baby—the middle child born with eyes wide open, calm and observant. If I ever saw things clearly, I also remember wanting for them to be different than they were. I deeply wanted for us to treat each other better than we did. I wanted suffering to stop. I wanted things to change.

I never wanted to be a priest. But here I am. Newly minted *Father* Brendan, and still wondering how I got here. While most everyone around me seems happy enough to have celebrated my ordination, I’m still stumbling into the whole thing full of doubts and

Image composition: iStock, CNS



THE PRIESTHOOD, RIGHTLY UNDERSTOOD, IS NOT ABOUT POWER AND PRESTIGE, BUT ABOUT MEDIATION AND SOLIDARITY.

insecurities: How did I get here? What difference does it make?

I was ordained six months ago and am now serving at Dolores Mission in East Los Angeles. As I get to know the community I have asked again and again, what draws people to this place? What do they want from their priests? Responses vary, of course—a commitment to justice, community leadership, great food after mass, etc.—but it is not uncommon to hear that this parish, and the Jesuits who have served here over the years, have a habit of speaking to and from the struggles and challenges people in the congregation face on a daily basis. “You don’t see that in very many other parishes,” they say. “Their priests just don’t preach about real issues.”

In recent surveys of those who have left the Catholic Church for other denominations, the reasons given for leaving include both a mixed bag of disagreements on certain teachings and also a sense that “their spiritual needs weren’t being met.” It is as if over time a gap developed between their sense of meaning and the message on offer. What they hear, or who they hear it from, is not credibly related to what they know, or would like to know, by experience. People come to church on Sunday having spent the week buffeted by news of racism, injustice and political division. They come with anxiety about both economic and environmental well-being, about struggles and opportunities for their children. Too often these concerns are not being met, are being left not only unacknowledged but even unnamed.

Already, in only six months of priesthood, I know how easy it can be to convince myself that the abstract message of love is sufficient, how convenient it is to name sin and in-

justice just broadly enough so as to avoid making the congregation—or myself—too uncomfortable. After all, this religious thing we’re doing, this public act of worship, is already hard enough to believe in without adding the problems and provocations of any real prophetic challenge.

We will never be moved to authentic worship if we refuse to be touched by the complexities of lived experience. If the priesthood is to mean anything, we cannot avoid the dangerous and the difficult in the practice of our preaching. If our faith has anything to do with communicating the credibility of love, if the love of God has anything to do with the “real issues” of our day, then something has to give. Truth makes a difference. Love calls us to conversion. And I, for one, have much to learn.

A GREAT NEED

That so many bemoan the lack of relevance in the preaching at their parishes and that so many more have given up even going at all makes it clear that I am not the only one asking questions. I sometimes wonder if the complaints about what we do and do not hear in homilies reveals a deeper concern about the credibility of the priesthood in general. In an increasingly commercialized and secularized context what can religious worship say about authentic justice and real love? In a world where being religious is reduced to a lifestyle choice, an accessory to personal identity, what need is there for the sacraments and structures of organized religion? If the only criteria for priesthood are being baptized, male and unmarried, what credibility could it possibly have?

When people hear that I was recently ordained, their initial response is usually some form of “congratulations”—many are sincere, others just polite. Those who know better will ask if I am doing all right, if I have had my first crisis or not. These folks understand that the first year of priesthood, like the first year of many things—marriage, parenthood, a new job—can be full of complex challenges.

Celebrating Mass as a new priest can be like trying to recite a text you’ve heard a million times, but backwards. Suddenly your lines are their lines and their lines are your lines and, um, what were the lines in the first place? I trust that my liturgical fluency will come eventually. But we’re not there yet.

More than memorizing liturgical texts, I am also strug-

gling with a deeper challenge, a kind of isolation by consecration. To be ordained is to be set apart for a particular purpose. This sounds all fine and good, but being set apart can also leave one feeling cut off, irrelevant. When I was a brand new Jesuit novice and experiencing some of the challenges of integrating this new identity, I remember confiding to a close friend, “It’s great finding your cross. It just sucks getting nailed to it.” I have had friends tell me that the early years of marriage were marked by a certain loneliness as they stepped into a new identity as a couple, and even more so when the children came along.

The priesthood has its own flavor of this vocational isolation. The priest in the world today is bound to something which is widely thought to be archaic or unnecessary—the antiquated rituals and structures of organized religion. The loneliness of priesthood has less to do with celibacy, as many presume, and more to do with consecration. The existential strangeness of ordination comes from having crossed the line from religious experience into the very structure of religion. Having been publicly anointed for the purposes of priesthood, I am no longer protected from its contradictions and compromises. I find myself newly committed to a way of being in the world that seems less and less convincing to more and more people.

And yet there remains a sense of urgency and relevance to authentic religious commitment. We have need again of a moral vision, a prophetic voice willing to remind us of our obligation to care for the poor and the vulnerable. We have need again of people willing to give their lives in sacrifice before taking someone else’s in spite. We have need again of something greater than the compromised versions of God that have been sold to us for decades—the idols of our time—the gods of privilege, purity and prosperity. We have need again of something more.

TOTAL SURRENDER

A year before I was to be ordained I accompanied a group of volunteers to Ragusa, in Sicily, to work in emergency refugee reception centers operated by the Catholic diocese there. I had no idea what I was doing. I likely would not be a priest today if not for what happened to me there.

While we were in Italy, refugees were being pulled out of the ocean at a rate of about 2,000 per week as slave traders and smugglers pushed their surplus migrant labor from

the shores of Libya into the Mediterranean Sea. There were innumerable needs, but we, being first in the line of emergency support, were asked to begin with the smallest. The work we had to do was the little work—art projects and simple games to pass the time as these men and women were lifted from the Mediterranean Sea into the sea of bureaucracy awaiting them in the asylum process.

As a each new wave of arrivals overwhelmed the shelter staff, my principal responsibility became helping people to write their letters petitioning asylum. Every letter began and ended the same way: “I had to leave my country because...” and “...for these reasons I am seeking asylum.” Between those two phrases we filled in some of the most horrific stories I have ever heard. The wrenching process of helping these folks to write their petitions in their own hand, many of whom were barely literate, meant that we had to pass letter by letter and word by word through the most traumatic periods of their lives. “My...my family... my family was...my family was tortured...my family was tortured and killed. And I...and I was...and I was left...and I was left alone.”

For about five hours a day I would walk slowly through these stories. They trusted me with the most painful experiences of their lives. Their hope was tied directly to their vulnerability. They had a deep need for witness and accompaniment. They needed help in the process of making their petition and they needed desperately for their trauma to be heard. They needed someone to be with them and for them, an advocate and an alibi.

Perhaps nowhere have I found myself more powerless and yet more in touch with credible acts of self-giving love than in my time in Sicily. The credibility of sacrifice imposes itself upon us and suffering is not subject to belief. Our experience of suffering is often tied to that of faith because it is an undeniable reminder of our need for mercy and our longing for freedom. In a way that is hard to explain, Ragusa became a place of consolation for many because it was a place where the truth of our humanity became known in our vulnerability. It was and continues to be a way of the cross.

Does this make a difference? I am reluctant to claim too much here because many of those men and women still sit in those same so-called “reception” centers awaiting someone who will let them be anything more than surplus slave labor pulled from the sea and left to rot in adminis-



trative limbo while political and humanitarian attention turns elsewhere. But their resilience and their dignity imposed itself on me in a way that left no doubt of their credibility. I was consoled in the experience not by any foolish faith in deliverance but by the redemptive proximity and undeniable beauty of their humanity. I was moved to love by the depth of their sacrifice, the persistence of their hope and the intensity of their trust.

In that place there was a laying on of hands. In that place I was being ordained by and for self-giving love. In that place I was practicing priesthood. One man in the camp actually took to calling me his “chief priest.” I tried to explain to him that I was neither a chief nor a priest, but he insisted. “You are my chief priest,” he’d say. “I’m happy to have a chief priest with us.”

The priesthood was not my idea. It was a surrender to the invitation of others, to a litany of saints and a laying on of hands that have imposed themselves on me over a long period of time. I returned from Sicily and immediately wrote my own petition letter, not seeking asylum,

but priestly ordination. There was a mysterious resonance between the two experiences. Both were stories about the laying on of hands; both included moments of help and of harm. Both ended in a surrender to the will of the other. Both were written not by choice but by necessity. The hands imposed on me were supportive, while many that touched them were violent. My petition was accepted, while many of theirs never will be.

NO CONGRATULATIONS NECESSARY

One thing that has been clear to me from the beginning is an attraction to middle ground, to in-between places, to horizons and frontiers. That was the bait that led me into a Jesuit vocation and, ultimately, to the priesthood. My mother’s buddha-baby found his way to ordination because the priesthood plays in borderlands—it lives in liminal spaces. The priest stands between a people and their God, not as an obstacle or gatekeeper to that relationship but a bridge. The priest has no real power without the cooperation of both sides. I know this because, for most of my



A haunting image of the assassination of Blessed Archbishop Oscar Romero is mounted above the back door of the Dolores Mission church in Los Angeles, Calif. Painted by J. Michael Walker, it serves as a reminder of what sacrificial self-giving love can look like.

Photo by the author

friends and family, the Catholic priesthood has no claim on their lives. They have no need of a priest; my ordination was “good for me” but has little impact on them.

It is for this reason that the polite congratulations one receives upon ordination don’t really satisfy. They fail to appreciate the necessity of priesthood. They don’t understand the stakes. To congratulate the newly ordained is to relegate the priesthood to a nice thing they have accomplished, a reward for their work, rather than to recognize it as a deeper induction into service. The newness of ordination might suggest congratulations, but priesthood itself should not. The next time someone visits you in the hospital, helps you with legal documentation, accompanies you in your prayer or your grief, imagine congratulating them and you’ll feel for yourself the strangeness of such praise.

The priesthood, rightly understood, is not about power and prestige, but about mediation and solidarity. We stand with people so that they can stand with each other. Some will say that God has no need of mediators, but we have need of one another. We have, more than ever, a deep need of solidarity. As W. H. Auden observed on the eve of

the Second World War, the core of our human predicament is how “we crave what we cannot have—to be loved alone.” The priest is a reminder of the religious wisdom that tells us that we cannot, in truth, be loved alone.

LOOKING THROUGH ME

Those suspicious of the priesthood often ask, “Can’t I confess directly to God?” Of course. But God seems concerned that you find yourself and feel yourself forgiven in the real presence of a beloved community. That you feel yourself loved by them and that you dedicate some energy to the work of forgiving and loving them too. For this we need other people. We need priests because we need each other. God needs us to love and forgive one another. And ordaining people for this service is (or ought to be) a way of ensuring that it happens, that we actually do for one another what God wants for us to do.

In all the confessions I have heard so far, I have had no doubt of God’s closeness and mercy to the experience of human frailty and fault. What is clear in confession is how much we hunger for someone to remind us, to affirm in us



THEY HAVE BEEN
PRAYING LONG
BEFORE I SHOWED UP
THEY'LL BE PRAYING
LONG AFTER
I'M GONE.



the truth of that loving relationship. We want to know that we do not stand alone in our need of mercy. No one stands alone before God, and if someone leaves the confessional having experienced themselves respected in their vulnerability, understood in their frailty and accompanied in their humanity, then we truly go forth in peace.

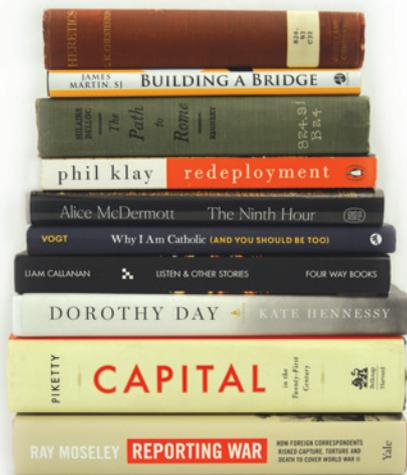
And so, every Sunday at Dolores Mission, I stand in the back of the church, careful not to block the door as the crowd drifts in and the people find their usual places in the pews. They have been praying long before I showed up. They will be praying long after I am gone. I pass through them, coming into their presence with humility and reverence, as one comes into the presence of God. I bow as I enter the sanctuary. I kiss the altar. And then I look up, always it seems as if for the first time, at the faces of the gathered congregation. I tell them what is already true, what I already know and long for them to realize: that the peace of Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Spirit is with them.

It is a great privilege to stand in that place—a privilege to look into the faces of those who are looking for God. It is a difficult thing to describe, but even though they are looking at me, looking to me, they are in a very real sense looking through me. Surely they notice my faults and stumbles, but they're not really looking for a perfect priest. They're looking for a credible sign of God's presence in their midst. They are not really expecting relevance, but rather relationship. I look at the faces of a community assembled in search of God, a community hungry for a reason to believe that this strange thing we're doing makes sense, makes a difference, and might actually put us in contact with real, merciful and self-giving love.

We come to the sacraments because we long to make invisible things visible and impossible things possible. People come to Mass because they want to be moved, because they want things to change—bread and wine into body and blood, sin and suffering into communion and reconciliation. We come because we need something to change and we realize that we cannot do it alone. I want to be a good priest. I am often not convinced that I am. But I want more than anything to experience the conversion for which we pray in every sacramental encounter. I want things to change, and I cannot do it alone.

Above the back door of our church hangs a large painting depicting the assassination of Blessed Oscar Romero, who was murdered while celebrating Mass in a small hospital chapel where he lived in El Salvador. It is a haunting image to look at as I stand at the altar with my own arms held outstretched in prayer. It is a poignant reminder of what sacrificial self-giving love looks like, a reflection of what the priesthood entails—mediation and solidarity, reconciliation and communion. As I look through the congregation at that image of Romero being shot through the heart, I take the bread in my hands and I say to my beloved community what Christ said to all of us: Take this. All of you. And eat of it. This is my body. Which will be given up for you.

*Brendan Busse, S.J., is associate pastor of Dolores Mission in Los Angeles and a contributing writer for **America**.*



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INNOCENTS

LOST

TWO THOUSAND

YEARS LATER

WE STILL

REMEMBER

THE PAIN THEIR

MOTHERS FELT

By Lisa McMullin

Thirty-four years ago I sat beside a hospital bed with its tubes dangling, pumps silent, all attempts at life support shut down, as I held my child, my 22-month-old son, cradling him in my arms as I watched the last flicker of his life ebb away. He died from drowning.

But you, you mothers of the Holy Innocents, you whose babies, your young sons, perhaps your 22-month-olds, there you were cradling your children, bloody from the stab wounds inflicted by the soldiers. I think of you and I wonder.

Did you hear of the order before the soldiers came, or did they appear in the night banging on your door, waking you and the baby with their shouts? Or in the morning as your drowsy child greeted the day, rubbing the sleep from his eyes? Did the soldiers snatch your little boy from you or did you cling to him? Did your husband, the little one's father, struggle with the soldier, fighting to protect his son so that you worried that he, too, might be killed? And did the soldier tell you that Herod's order was to kill all boys under the age of 2, or did you fear for your other children? Did you scream for them to hide, or did they stand by, frozen in terror? Was there, perhaps, one among you who suffered the double tragedy of a slain toddler and an infant? Did you plead with the soldier to let you give yourself for your child?

And then the aftermath. Did the soldiers disappear as suddenly as they had come, leaving you hugging your bleeding baby as his life ebbed away? Did you gather the other children to yourself, clasping them to you, seeking comfort in their small bodies? And your husband: Did he remove himself in his private sorrow

and perhaps even his shame? Did he think that he had failed his child, had failed you?

As years passed, did the nightmare diminish? As time went by, were you ever able to laugh again? To take joy in your family? Did you have more children? Did you talk often of that little boy or was it something you could not speak of to anyone? Did you think, as you celebrated Passover, of those children who had been spared in Egypt when a lamb's blood on the doorway lintel was a sign that allowed them to survive? Did you think of Abraham being willing to sacrifice his only child? Did your husband forgive himself? Did you?

For us your child, that Holy Innocent, died a martyr—a first martyr for Christ—giving his life so that Jesus, the newborn king, might live. And so for us, there is the comfort that your child was received at once into heaven. We can comfort ourselves as well that in the face of the terrible cruelty, your child's reward must assuredly be glorious. But that consolation is not for you—only the gaping wound and lifeless body.

Did you ever know the reason? Did you know of the child born in your village to visitors in a stable you perhaps did not even know existed? Did you wish for vengeance—or did God, in his mercy, grant you peace?

And what of 30 years later? Did you hear about Jesus, the man going about Judea proclaiming a new kingdom founded on love, working miracles, curing the sick and the lame? Did you know that this was the man who had escaped Herod's soldiers while your baby had been killed? Could you forgive him for living at the cost of your child's life? Could you pay heed to his words, his claims to be the Messiah, his message about love and forgiveness? Was there some comfort for you in hearing that many believed he was the long-awaited savior? Did you believe? Had you indeed been one of the many who had prayed for the Messiah? Did you become a follower, you or your husband or any of your children? When he was crucified, did a part of you feel as if you were reliving that moment so many years before? Did his death on the cross, his seeming defeat, at first extinguish any meaning you had found? Did word of his resurrection restore you?

Surely God, in his mercy, spared you a life of bitter resentments. And surely, you are reunited with your little one in heaven, understanding now the scope of God's plan and the part you played.

Do you see us now, the whole church spread throughout the world, on this day 2,000 years later remembering your children?

As years passed, it helped me to think of a balance scale. On one side was the weight of my child's death. On the other side were those occurrences, times of connecting with others who had lost children, moments of appreciation for the life of my other children, events that made me more compassionate, more grateful and a life that was heartbreakingly deeper and strangely richer for my having loved and lost a child. These moments could sometimes lift the weight of that sorrow a bit. Is it a consolation for you to now see how we are touched by your holy ones?

Look tenderly now, you mothers of the Holy Innocents, on all of us who have lost a child. Ask God for us that we may receive the grace to serve with no reserve that Jesus for whom your child gave his life, that we may be moved to give our all, grateful for your sacrifice on that bloody night.

May I someday be reunited with my son as you are with yours and find him in the company of your most holy innocents.

Lisa McMullin is a mother of five living children and of Nicholas, who is deceased. She is a grandmother of six and recently returned to the Catholic Church after nearly 45 years on hiatus as an Episcopalian.

HANUKKAH IS NOT THE JEWISH CHRISTMAS

BUT THEY ARE COUSINS

By Daniel F. Polish

“Have a merry Christmas, Rabbi,” one of the students chirped as we both set off for our winter break. I am sure she meant well. But still, I wonder: Should I have tried to correct her? Chances are she would have countered, as another student had years ago, “But isn’t your Hanukkah basically the Jewish Christmas?”

At times like this I wish the semester for the course I teach in world religions was a couple of weeks longer. Then I would have time to explain that the two holidays are actually very different. Christmas, after all, celebrates the birth of Jesus, whom Christians came to worship as the Christ, the Messiah, the second person of the Trinity. Jesus plays no role in our religious life

as Jews. However Jews might understand Jesus, and however much Jews and Christians increasingly make sense of the Gospels against the background of Jewish religion and history, Jews have no reason to include a celebration of Jesus’ birth in our already crowded calendar of holidays, holy days and festivals.

It is the calendar, I believe, that causes the confusion. Most years, right around the time that Christians are celebrating the birth of Jesus, Jews are celebrating a holiday of their own: Hanukkah. By the time the events of the Gospels took place, Jews had been celebrating that holiday for almost two centuries. The holiday began as a national celebration of the victory of





Jewish guerillas over the forces of the Syrian-Greeks.

In the second century B.C.E., a remnant of the army of Alexander the Great had come to dominate the Jews then living in their own land. In an effort to consolidate his power and impose a cultural uniformity on his subjects, the Syrian-Greek ruler Antiochus Epiphanes insisted that the Jews worship him as the rest of his subjects did and demanded that a statue of himself be erected in the Jews' Temple in Jerusalem. A family of priests known as the Hasmoneans (who came to call themselves the Maccabees) rebelled against Antiochus. Though they were far outnumbered, this guerilla band fought valiantly and defeated the oppressor's army.

Upon their victory, they found that the Temple in Jerusalem, the center of all Jewish worship, had been defiled and desecrated. In the course of cleaning and purifying it, they discovered that the oil for "eternal light," which in accordance with biblical instruction was to never go out, had been reduced to only a single jar with enough oil to keep it burning for one day. But when the messenger returned from the eight-day journey to retrieve the special oil, miraculously, the light was still burning. The Hasmoneans became the rulers of the Jews and decreed that every year at that time a national holiday was to be observed. They called it Hanukkah, which means rededication.

The rabbis who came somewhat later and were not enamored of the Hasmoneans changed the focus of the holiday from a national celebration of the dynasty's military victory to a celebration of the "great miracle that happened there": the one-day supply of oil that burned for eight days.

Today, the customs and observances surrounding Hanukkah are familiar to most Americans: lighting the menorah, children spinning dreidels and, of course, latkes—potato pancakes fried in oil, in commemoration of the jar of oil that miraculously lasted for eight days.

How could anyone confuse this holiday with Christmas? In the United States, both have come to include an element that was not part of the original religious purpose

of either holiday: gifts. Just as Santa Claus is not part of the Gospel account of the birth of Jesus, presents do not figure in the Hasmonean or rabbinic prescription of Hanukkah. And yet as Christmas presents began to loom larger, Jewish parents, not wanting their children to feel deprived, took to giving their children gifts at Hanukkah. As both celebrations became more centered on opening presents, the perception of the two very different holidays began to merge in popular thought.

Yet even if the two holidays are so different in their religious, historical and cultural connotations, they may in a different sense still be "cousins." Both of them respond to the same, very significant human reality. It is possibly no accident that both Christmas and Hanukkah fall when they do. Can it be a coincidence that both communities celebrate holidays at the time of the winter solstice? In the northern hemisphere, at the very time of year when the days are shortest, nights are the longest and the world is darkest and coldest, Jews and Christians, each in their own way, find themselves getting together as families in celebrations that involve lighting lights. Both act out the hope that light can triumph over darkness.

Human beings do not like the dark. We are eager to see it defeated. Jews and Christians alike celebrate miracles that reflect the hope that we can triumph over all the forces that afflict and oppress us. The light that is so central to both holidays represents this shared human affirmation. The stories we tell and the images we use are very different. But the human hope certainly seems the same.

"Have a merry Christmas, Rabbi," was off the mark. But in another, unexpected way, it carried an important grain of truth.



Daniel Polish, *rabbi of Congregation Shir Chadash of the Hudson Valley in LaGrange, N.Y.*, is the author of *Bringing the Psalms to Life*.



Christmas Classics on Screen, Familiar and Unexpected

By John Anderson



Image: Getty Images

► “The Shop Around the Corner” can serve as an old-movie alternative to “It’s a Wonderful Life.”

movie? The obvious answer would be Christmas spirit—and right away, the issue gets sticky like fruitcake: What exactly does Christmas spirit in a movie mean? Cheer? Merriment? If all you want are good tidings, watch “Duck Soup” (which, come to think of it, wouldn’t be a bad antiwar-themed holiday choice). If we are looking for a film that communicates a purely Christian message, or translates in some way the meaning of Jesus’ life on earth, then we need not limit ourselves to anything overtly seasonal. Conversely, there are movies famously set at Christmas time—“Die Hard” comes immediately to mind—that certainly seem antithetical to the whole peace-on-earth idea. Still, people will watch them annually and call them Christmas movies.

But like the smell of fresh-cut balsam, or the first belt of grocery-store eggnog (with its Proustian-madeleine afterburn), movies can trigger a rush of holiday recall, even sense memory. Which may be why we gravitate to the same films each year, the ones that awaken our dormant holiday emotions and help us relive, perhaps, the better Christmases of our lives.

Granted, Christmases past can, like Ebenezer Scrooge’s fitful night, be very personal and singular, but the holiday is ultimately about coming together. And the act of watching a film can be, in and of itself, a way of communing with our fellow celebrants, the ones we know are out there watching too.

They are certainly always watching “It’s a Wonderful life,” which has

become the Old King Wenceslas of classic films, and it is a phenomenon this reviewer has always resisted. It’s not that Frank Capra’s 1946 classic isn’t a tremendous movie. It is. But the reason its conclusion is so exhilarating and inspiring is that Capra has spent the previous 120 or so minutes painting an utterly despairing portrait of American life and the American soul. Without George Bailey (James Stewart), Bedford Falls is Potterville; children die; people go mad; alcoholism is rampant. Like several of Capra’s more famous films, (“Meet John Doe,” “Mr. Smith Goes to Washington”), the only thing that provides redemption from corruption is some kind of divine intervention—literally, in the case of “It’s a Wonderful Life.” What is bothersome about the film’s status as a Christmas staple is the way the happy ending obliterates everything else Capra was trying to say.

Not to scare anyone away from “Life” (which bombed, not surprisingly, at the postwar box office), but a possible old-movie alternative is “**The Shop Around the Corner**,” also starring James Stewart in one of the more delightful entries in the always delightful filmography of the director Ernst Lubitsch. The 1940 romantic comedy (the basis for the much-updated “You’ve Got Mail” of 1998), stars Stewart and Margaret Sullavan as gift-shop co-workers who can’t get along on the job, but are in fact the “dear friends” with whom each has been conducting a secret correspondence, and they have fall-

Christmas is a time for reflection. And that includes reflection on what we are watching at Christmas. Why am I sitting down to “It’s a Wonderful Life” for the 27th time? What would Charles Dickens have thought of “Mickey’s Christmas Carol”? Where can I buy a table lamp shaped like a woman’s leg in a black-lace stocking?

A more salient question would be: What do we really want from a Christmas



The 1951 Alastair Sim adaptation of “A Christmas Carol” has never been topped, despite what seems like 101 versions of the Dickens tale.

Image: Getty Images

en in long-distance love. The script is wonderful, the direction is deft, the actors are endearing, and there is a Christmas Eve denouement that hits the spot.

There is no shortage of musical movies that play well at Christmas, some of which we don't necessarily think of as Yuletide fare—“Meet Me in St. Louis,” for instance, whence sprang “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas.” The one that gets the most airplay at this time of year is, of course, “White Christmas,” which—I know, it's blasphemy—contains some of the lamest music ever composed by Irving Berlin, as well as his classic title song, which was first heard in “Holiday Inn,” starring Bing Crosby and Fred Astaire, which around here is much preferable

to Bing and Danny Kaye.

But the one that grows on me more and more with each passing year is 1993's “**The Nutcracker**” (a.k.a. “George Balanchine's *The Nutcracker*”), which got a lot of mileage back in the day because of the participation of Macaulay Culkin, whose 1990 megahit “Home Alone” is also thought of as a Christmas movie. The real star attraction, though, aside from Peter Martins's staging and the dancing of superstars like Darci Kistler, is Kevin Kline's narration, which is delivered in something approaching a whisper and does perfect justice to the awe inherent in Balanchine's ballet and the exhilaration of Tchaikovsky's music. Culkin is almost comically ill-used, but the production overall is a joy.

At the risk of playing it safe with this list—a list that indicates how durable these films are—the 1951 Alastair Sim version of “**A Christmas Carol**,” sometimes known as “Scrooge,” has never been topped, despite what seems like 101 versions of the Dickens tale made available every December (and starring everyone from George C. Scott to Mr. Magoo). Sim, a marvelous physical actor with a face made for radio, brings genuine dread to the role of Ebenezer Scrooge; the visuals are velvety blacks and grays; and the director Brian Desmond-Hurst, who had an otherwise unsung career, comes very close to making a psychological horror movie out of Dickens's oft-told tale. Sim walks along an edge of hysteria; the poverty that Scrooge

The Christmas Spectacular

By Joe Hoover

Rockettes practice in the basement
of St. Paul's—box jumps, zaps, tipping, strutting—
for the Radio City Christmas Spectacular
starring them.

The Rockettes! They are a real thing!
They come in and out the church side door
otherworldly like all dancers
aglow even in the dirty streets
postures so profound they look haughty
or righteous.
(If you yourself are haughty they seem haughty
if righteous righteous.)

Haughty righteous showgirls
coiled down into the bedrock, bubbling beneath
nave, narthex, tabernacle, sanctuary
tap heels flying, dance captain hollering
gestating below the sanctuary in autumn
until they burst out, like flowers in reverse
into the winter air.
And it is certain there are more than a few boys
plunked onto pews at St. Paul's
happier to know there are Rockettes below
than there is God above.

In a low unquiet time a priest once told me
my job was to follow Christ and die.
What precisely made him say this I don't recall.
Father, I think my duty in life is to play
hours upon hours
of Candyland.
Your job is to follow Christ and die.

What does it mean to follow Christ
and what to die, and why did
all the power of the universe whittle down
go limp and need hefting about anyway?
To save your soul? All that fuss for
the unseen spirit, for a rumor of a thing
that does who knows what?

Rockettes perform up to four shows a day
ninety minutes each, six costume changes

bears, snowflakes, wooden soldiers
struck by cannon fire.
They put on antlers and pull a sleigh.

They work hard as sin in that church
on Columbus Ave to give you
a stupendous show on Sixth
near halal meat and Sean Hannity.

They kick eye high
up to 300 times a show
burn 10 billion calories
take ice baths after
call each other ladybirds
ladybirds lets swoop to lunch.

They seem nice.

At the end they transform
into a living Nativity, and a poem
about Jesus scrolls down a screen.

Jesus who maybe did not come
into the world to save your soul
but to start up a season
where the ladybirds perform for you.
And where your only true duty is to
receive receive.
To let the spectacle settle
into the dusty manger of your heart
and gasp, a red flush of incredulity
the countless kicks, a cascade of taps
uniform as the Red Army
sequined line
toppled soldiers
profligate sparkle, antlers riding high
camels, crib, mezzanine
orchestra, footlights, high sheen.
To breathe it all in
and die right there
and then go to Tiffany.

Joe Hoover, S.J., is *America's* poetry editor.



“A Christmas Story” was based on the radio memoirist Jean Shepherd’s recollections of growing up in northern Indiana.

Image: Getty Images

finds so easy to ignore is made a very tangible thing.

About a half-century after Sim delivered his indelible nightmare before Christmas (also not a bad title), Will Ferrell made what is arguably the only real holiday classic of the last 30 years: “**Elf**,” a movie so endearingly silly and gleefully human it should be watched by everyone, together, under the Rockefeller Center Christmas tree. As an infant, Ferrell’s character, Buddy, crawled into Santa Claus’s sack and was taken to the North Pole, where he was raised as an elf. Papa Elf (the great Bob Newhart) made allowances for Buddy’s non-elfish size (Ferrell is 6’3”) but when Buddy learns he is actually a standard-issue human, he travels to Manhattan and drives his biological dad, Walter (James Caan), to distraction.

The director Jon Favreau makes great use of New York, which has been—from 1947’s “Miracle on 34th

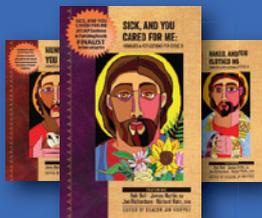
Street” to 1960’s “The Apartment” (yes) to 1988’s “Scrooged”—the nexus of Christmas movie-making. And we say “almost” because of the glaring, brilliant, cannot-be-denied Midwestern exception: “**A Christmas Story**” (1984), the very thought of which brings happiness, dreams of a “Red Ryder Carbine Action 200-shot Range Model air rifle with a compass in the stock” and not-quite-painful memories of post-midnight gift-wrapping during Turner Broadcasting’s annual marathon of director Bob Clark’s comedy.

Set on the brink of World War II, the film stars Peter Billingsley, Melinda Dillon and Darren McGavin in what may well be his greatest role and was based on the radio memoirist Jean Shepherd’s recollections of growing up in northern Indiana—where a lamp shaped like a woman’s leg placed in a parlor window would certainly have caused an uproar.

But that’s one of the things we look for in a Christmas movie. No, not a leg lamp: a world still innocent enough for such things to cause a scandal. It’s refreshing. Reassuring. And, these days, as elusive as reindeer on one’s roof.

John Anderson is a television critic for *The Wall Street Journal* and a contributor to *The New York Times*.

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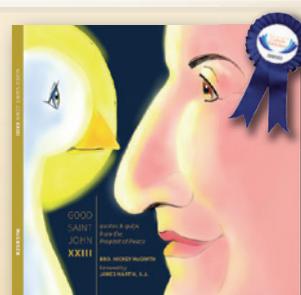
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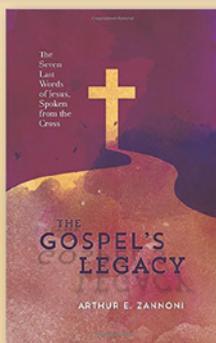


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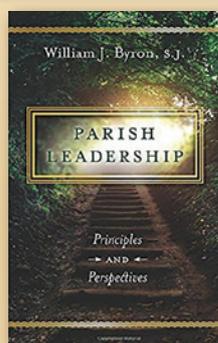
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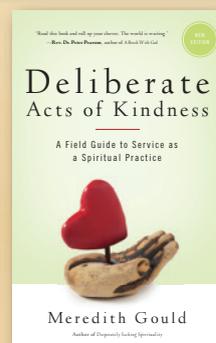
This book explores the seven last sentences spoken by Jesus from the Cross prior to his death as recorded in the four Gospels. It examines Jesus' final legacy by reflecting on how each Gospel portrays his departing. \$10

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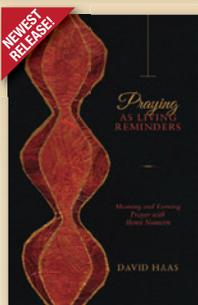
In his latest book, Fr. William Byron, S.J., provides a strong argument that lay participation in parish leadership will help the Catholic Church in the USA face up to the problem of the empty pews. It also explains how an integration of the principles of Catholic Social Teaching into the way parishes work is the key to parish renewal. \$17

Meredith Gould



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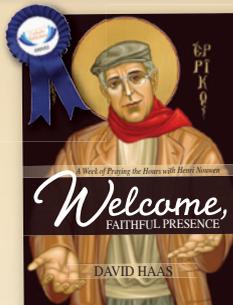
David Haas



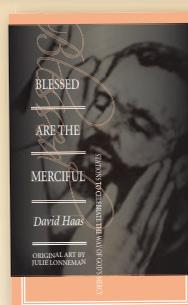
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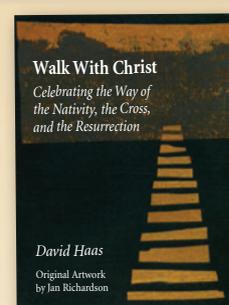
The psalms always hold a heart-centered power for all people who honor the Word of God. In these pages, David takes on all 150 psalms and offers a fresh and expanded path for the prayer lives of all believers, to be used on the journey of those seeking life, wisdom and grace. \$20



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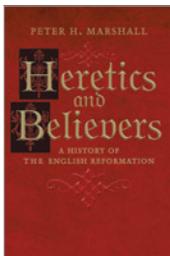


The various paths of prayer call out to be more than just an opportunity to look back and remember a historical story; it is an opportunity to discover a way for us all to embrace more deeply, right here, right now. *Walk With Christ* is intended to help promote a keeping of this prayerful path, centered in the Word and meditating on the Walk in our lives as contemporary believers and followers. \$20

As a movement directed at unity and uniformity, the English Reformation was a high-stakes failure.

Was the English Reformation inevitable?

By Robert E. Hosmer Jr.



Heretics And Believers
by Peter H. Marshall
Yale University
Press. 672p \$32

As we close out the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, the avalanche of commemorative studies is subsiding. Among them is *Heretics and Believers: A History of the English Reformation*, by Peter Marshall, professor of history at the University of Warwick. Marshall, who has specialized in the study of the Reformation since his graduate school days 30 years ago, combines his earlier scholarship with new archival research in an impressive synthesis.

Traditional scholarship on the Reformation, heavily influenced by 19th-century German historians of secular and liberal inclinations, reconstructed the period with several standardized features. The Reformation was an act of liberation from a corrupt institutional church that had failed to reform itself, an inevitable process unified in motive, objective and achievement that

followed a linear plot to a neat, clear conclusion. It was a campaign directed and dominated by Martin Luther. Ultimately it achieved both unity of the faithful and uniformity of doctrine and practice as it ushered in the world of the modern individual, modern capitalism and modern science.

In the course of *Heretics and Believers*, Marshall takes issue with all of these received notions. The Reformation did represent attempts at liberation from a church disfigured by corruption and abuse; but, as Marshall points out, the church had already made serious, if not altogether successful, attempts at reforming itself (e.g., 10th-century Benedictine reforms; the 12th-century papal imposition of mandatory clerical celibacy; several councils following upon the 14th-century Great Schism). In addition, some local manifestations, like the English Catholic church, were far more flexible, open and tolerant than traditionally understood. The Reformation was not *inevitable*.

In addition, Marshall makes it clear that Luther was but one player in a varied cast of characters (including

Erasmus, More, Henry VIII, Zwingli and Calvin). As a movement directed at unity and uniformity (Henry's vision), the English Reformation was a high-stakes failure: pluralism, diversity and division, not unity and uniformity, characterized the post-Reformation English religious landscape, a world that Henry would never have recognized.

REVISING REVISIONIST HISTORY

Marshall's criticism of this and other core beliefs is well grounded. First, the Reformation was not a single, unified movement, but a series of "discrete reformations" within Europe as well as the British Isles. These reformations were messy, often violent; sometimes productive, at other times counterproductive. They lurched toward ends that were diverse and pluralistic. Imposing a linear grid on the process distorts the reality of the lived experience.

Second, the radical transformations that occurred as part of the process came from within English Catholicism as much as from without. The orthodox Catholicism of the time was the seedbed of the Reformation

Westminster Abbey, Image: iStock

in England. What Marshall calls the “profoundly permeable boundaries” between orthodoxy and dissent made the Reformation possible.

Marshall shows how deeply Catholic many of those were who went over to the other side in the course of a turbulent 16th century. He lays out the political upheavals and intrigue that characterized the successive reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary I and Elizabeth I, and his depiction of these monarchs is masterful. Each one emerges as an individual of force, conviction, conflict and courage, particularly Henry, who was devoutly orthodox and open to reunion with Rome (at least in the earlier years).

Marshall rightly gives a great deal of attention to monastic foundations and their pervasive impact on daily life in 16th-century England (Benedictines, Carthusians, Cistercians). Carmelite, Dominican and Franciscan friars as well as Bridgettine (Augustinian) nuns figure in the narrative. It is a pity, however, that Marshall gives fewer than a dozen pages to the Jesuits, who through the intervention of Edmund Campion and others played a far more important role in Catholic politics of the Reformation than readers of *Heretics and Believers* might gather.

Marshall gives his reader a sweeping, panoramic, multiclass view of the Reformation era. His command of the complicated historical, cultural, political and theological issues that roiled the 16th century is impressive. He is a skillful synthesizer of earlier scholarship, both his own and that of others. Further, his uncanny ability to craft graphic, sometimes gripping narratives (not just scenes of martyrdom or riot, but even theological disputation) is noteworthy.

A TEXT FOR SPECIALISTS

But the publisher’s assertion that this book is “for general readers” is a debatable proposition. This is not a book for any general reader I know. Despite successful strategies to enrich the narrative with telling details of life in 16th-century England at all levels—royal, clerical and ordinary—*Heretics and Believers* is altogether too dense with them. In these instances and others, examples multiply when one or two would suffice. This is a book for only the most energetic and patient readers, specialists or academics.

Further, there is more to shaping text for a general reader than crafting an engaging narrative. Marshall’s strategy of eliminating a bibliography and jettisoning all footnotes to a “Notes” section at the back is unfortunate. Marshall’s rather too-breezy style and frequent use of stale metaphor and cliché create an unsettling, inappropriate tone and diminish his accomplishment. Expressions like “hot-button issue,” “think tank,” “charm offensive,” “put the squeeze on,” “crisis management,” “marriage made in heaven,” “a game-changer” and “to-do list” litter the text and seem a rather condescending attempt to communicate with the general reader. Too often, observations meant to be serious really only amuse: “Such an outcome was probably never on the cards: having test-driven, at speed, his exciting new vehicle, Henry was not about to return it to the shop”; “smart rats were starting to leave Wolsey’s ship”; “Henry stuck to his theological guns.”

And the publisher’s claim that *Heretics and Believers* is “a major retelling and reinterpretation of the story of the English Reformation...the first major

overview for general readers in a generation” demands clarification, if not correction. Part of that assertion rings true: It is a major retelling, and it appears to be the first major overview in a generation.

But *Heretics and Believers* is not a major reinterpretation of the story of the English Reformation: to make that assertion is to ignore the work of a number of scholars, most prominently Eamon Duffy. Particularly with his three most recent studies, Duffy has emerged as the pre-eminent scholar of the English Reformation within the United Kingdom. He and others have demolished the work of previous generations of scholars, particularly that of A. G. Dickens.

Others better versed in the extensive literature and materials of the period may perhaps disagree, but it seems to me that Marshall’s debt to Duffy and his colleagues for their groundbreaking work cannot be overstated and deserves more than a brief mention in the acknowledgments and references in the Notes.

Publisher’s hyperbole aside, Peter Marshall’s *Heretics and Believers* is a work of careful, reliable scholarship, freshened by the author’s research, reflection and insight. It is a substantial, scholarly contribution to revising our understanding of a cataclysmic cultural event whose reverberations are still felt 500 years later.

Robert E. Hosmer Jr. is an English professor at Smith College in Massachusetts.

Joe's long run

Will he or won't he? The answer hovers over Joe Biden's new memoir, *Promise Me, Dad*, which ends with his decision not to run for president in 2016, but raises the question of whether he will try again in 2020. But the book is not really about Biden's political past or future as much as it is about his family's struggle to deal with his son Beau's brain cancer. It is the story of a father who, having lost a wife and daughter in a car accident 45 years ago, must once again reckon with the greatest loss any one person can ever be asked to endure.

There is plenty of politics here, of course. Biden deals with his grief by keeping busy, and as then-vice president of the United States, that means

fielding emergency calls on the march of the Islamic State and bolstering our Ukrainian allies as they face down aggression from Vladimir Putin. What the reader encounters is a man who, far from the "gaffe machine" heckled mercilessly by critics, really knows his stuff, particularly in international affairs.

Biden was very close to saying yes to running, in part because of his own ambition, but also because Beau wanted him to. As Beau underwent treatment, the idea that dad might run gave hope to the whole family.

Joe Biden's deep love for his son is evident on every page of *Promise Me*, whether he is recounting their annual trips to Nantucket for Thanksgiving or the gut-punch of a conversation that gives this book its title.

When he is tempted to give up or break down, and especially when Beau finally loses his battle in May 2015, Biden turns to his rosary for consolation. He does not say too much about his faith, but the fact that he still soldiers on is evidence of a deep resolve. When he says that his sense of justice and fairness "flows from the teachings of the Catholic Church," you take him at his word.

Maurice Timothy Reidy, executive editor;
Twitter: @mtreidy.

The anti-C.S. Lewis

It has been almost 20 years since the trilogy *His Dark Materials*, Philip Pullman's answer to the Narnia chronicles, lit up the children's fantasy landscape—and sparked protests from Catholic groups who objected to the anti-Christian content of the series. Now Pullman has returned to the universe of Lyra Belacqua in *The Book of Dust: La Belle Sauvage*, the first in another planned trilogy.

Eleven-year-old Malcolm Polstead lives at his parents' inn, across the Thames from a priory. When Malcolm intercepts a message about the mysterious particle called Dust, he becomes involved with Oakley Street, a secret resistance movement against the evil empire known as the Magisterium. (I know, not exactly subtle.) In the

meantime, a baby arrives at the priory, ushered in by a flurry of scandal and intrigue. Malcolm instantly falls in love with little Lyra, the future heroine of *His Dark Materials*.

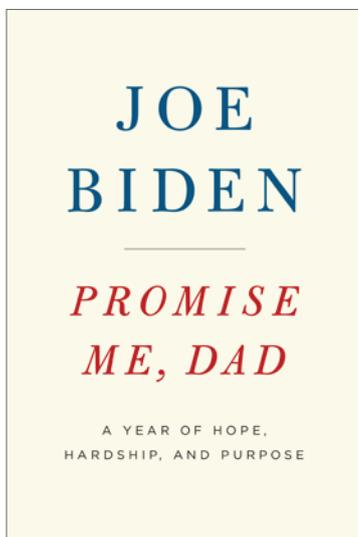
Pullman's prose is as beautiful as ever, but *La Belle Sauvage* is not as tightly constructed as its predecessors. One assumes that what feels like meandering in this book will pay off in a later installment. For now, though, *Sauvage* feels like what it is—an addendum to a previous, and superior, work.

There are good religious characters in *La Belle Sauvage*: the kindly Sister Fenella, the brave and upright Sister Benedicta. And yet there is no doubt that there is a right and a wrong side to this war, and the church is the wrong side. In the Pullman universe, religion is at best a mistake, at worst, a tool for oppression and guilt-mongering. The

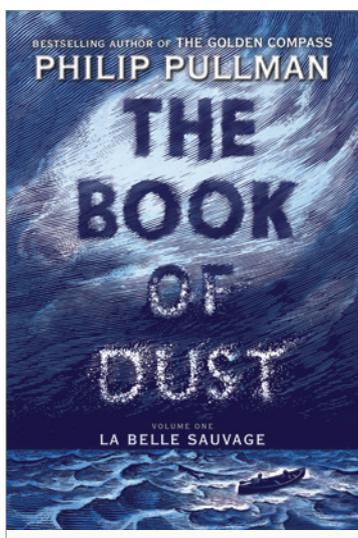
good people who support religion are dupes and enablers.

In a roundabout way, Pullman does Christians a service by writing his anti-Christian books. He reminds us, vividly and trenchantly, of what we do not want to be. Pullman forces us to ask: Does our faith make room for science? Are we open to new ideas? Pullman's criticisms may be exaggerated, but even his most heinous portrayals are not without some historical precedent. Sure, Christians might want to protest, but they might also want to pay attention. Pullman is pointing out all the most dangerous traps.

Elizabeth Desimone has an MFA in fiction from Oklahoma State University. Her work has appeared in *Busted Halo* and *Cricket magazine*.



Promise Me, Dad:
A Year of Hope, Hardship, and Purpose
By Joe Biden
Flatiron Books. 272p \$27



The Book of Dust:
La Belle Sauvage
By Philip Pullman
Knopf Books for Young Readers
464p \$22.99

A guide for quirky Catholics

Tommy Tighe is a prolific Catholic tweeter (@theghissilent), a family therapist who takes unabashed delight in all things Catholic, sharing his thoughts on everything from Latin Mass to Catholic social teaching in 140-character bursts several times each day. His tweets can be political, but they tend not to be easily identified as liberal or conservative, often transcending the typical divisions that exist within Catholicism itself.

When Mr. Tighe announced (on Twitter, of course) that he was editing *The Catholic Hipster Handbook*, I jumped at the chance to read it. I was hopeful that a young-ish Catholic voice would be able to present the faith in fresh ways, breaking free of the left/right divide that plagues our church in this country.

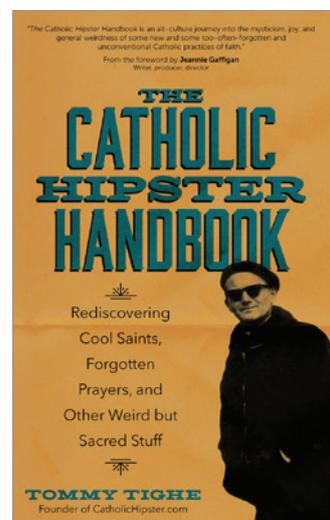
Mr. Tighe defines hipster culture as “going against the trend, turning away from the mainstream; it’s about the coolness of being a part of the ultimate counter-culture.” When it comes to defining what makes Catholicism hipster, he argues that being Catholic is hipster in itself. So, the book contends, why not mine the tradition for its quirkiest customs and celebrate them without reservation?

One of the downsides of hipster culture, however, is that it often comes off as exclusionary or condescending to those not in the know. Unfortunately, hipster Catholicism, at least as this book defines it, falls into the same trap. Many of the essays suggest that being Catholic in today’s culture leads to an inevitable clash with secular values.

For example, in an essay by FOCUS ministry’s Melissa Keating on finding one’s vocation, the author argues, “the very notion of vocation is under attack in a culture that cannot understand a healthy marriage between two people, let alone the spiritual marriage of religious life or priesthood.” That style of presenting the faith may not appeal to young adult Catholics.

If this were Twitter, *The Catholic Hipster Handbook* would merit at least a “like” and probably even the more highly coveted retweet. With 2,000 years of Catholic history, it is inevitable that parts will become lost, but the authors succeed in resurrecting some of the more offbeat stories and customs that are well worth remembering.

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



The Catholic Hipster Handbook
Edited by Tommy Tighe
Ave Maria Press. 224p \$15.95

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Michelangelo Buonarroti, "Archers Shooting at a Herm," 1530–33
 Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2017, www.royalcollection.org.uk

A spiritual experience at the Met

By Karen Sue Smith

For 500 years Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564) has occupied an uncontested place in the pantheon of Western art. A Renaissance master of design, drawing, painting, sculpture and architecture, Michelangelo was an energetic, irascible genius.

One must travel to Italy to see Michelangelo's greatest masterpieces: St. Peter's Basilica, the Piazza del Campidoglio, the Sistine Chapel ceiling and "Last Judgment" painting, and his sculptures of David, Moses and the Pieta. Yet a trip to Italy would leave out the 200 works currently assembled by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York for the exhibition "Michelangelo: Divine Draftsman and Designer." The exhibition (on view through Feb. 12) affords viewers a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to see works rarely shown and too fragile to travel again soon.

If Michelangelo's accomplishments make him seem superhuman, this exhibition (title aside) grounds

and humanizes him. Viewers see that Michelangelo had to learn artistic techniques as an apprentice and had to out-hustle contemporaries for commissions. He had to satisfy the demands and whims of patrons, including six popes, and to collaborate with formidable peers. This exhibition also shows the artist's impressive knowledge of classical mythology, Christian iconography, Scripture, the Roman Missal, military history and the apparel and interactions of differing social classes.

Drawings, sketchbook studies, handwritten letters, poems and gifts are especially intimate and reveal Michelangelo the man. Here one can glimpse the artist's candor and wit, his complaints to a friend, how deeply he grieves a loss. "I've already grown a goiter from this torture," Michelangelo wrote a friend about frescoing the Sistine Chapel ceiling.

Drawings, especially sketches, are intimate. One sees the haste in

Michelangelo's marks as he rushes to put on paper the flood of ideas pulsing through his brain. As Carmen C. Bambach, who curated the exhibition, put it, we can "almost look over Michelangelo's shoulder."

Before the 16th century, drawings were thought to be purely preparatory. The notion of a "finished drawing" as an artwork in itself came of age during Michelangelo's time. One can note differences (in the mouth, turn of head and serpent positioning, for example) between his sketch of Cleopatra and the completed drawing.

One can also see how "divine" Michelangelo's draftsmanship is, a term used by his fellow artists. In "Sketches of the Virgin, the Christ Child Reclining on a Cushion," the infant stretches his tiny finger toward his mother's lips; their eyes are locked in an embrace. In "Unfinished Cartoon of the Virgin and Child," a squirming infant sucks his mother's breast and clasps it with his

◀ A new exhibit of Michelangelo's work humanizes him.

hand. This tender tactility is shown by an artist who lost his own mother before he turned 7. The drawing "Risen Christ" shows the child having grown into a muscled nude bursting from the tomb, tossing the shroud of death behind him.

Michelangelo, a Florentine, spent the last 30 years of his life as a citizen of Rome, working on religious commissions. It was a period of deepening personal spirituality, stimulated in part by his love for Vittoria Colonna. A widow, a poet and a spiritual ascetic, she was 15 years younger than Michelangelo. They exchanged letters and poems. He drew a Pietà and a Crucifixion for her. In poetry they discussed their faith as rooted in a personal, unmediated relationship with God. Then Vittoria died in 1547. He was disconsolate. Eight years after her death, he referred to Vittoria in a sonnet as "that great fire which burned and nourished me."

"The Last Judgment" fresco on the altar wall of the Sistine Chapel was uncovered in 1541, almost three decades after the ceiling was unveiled, to public consternation. Most critics objected to the amount of nudity and the beardless Christ. Michelangelo was used to such criticisms and moved on to other projects. When he died, the dome of St. Peter's was still unfinished.

At the press preview for the exhibit, Ms. Bambach, the curator, described the exhibition as a "spiritual experience." I certainly concur. See it for yourself if you can.

Karen Sue Smith is the former editorial director of *America*.

From Jon Snow to Guy Fawkes

Culture shock would be overstating it. I am still searching for the appropriate anthropological term for my response to finding out, upon moving to London two years ago, that there are still places (O.K., maybe just one place) in Britain that burn the pope in effigy. Not all the time, mind you, just on Nov 5. Still, as an American Jesuit priest, discovering that Guy Fawkes Day was still a thing—complete with fireworks, public bonfires and the pontifical incineration by proxy—it was all a bit of culture...surprise.

This, in part, explains "Gunpowder," HBO's three-part series. The series tells the story of the Gunpowder Plot, when a group of Catholics, led by the nobleman Robert Catesby, plotted to blow up Parliament. The planned explosion would kill King James, all his ministers and the members of Parliament. In the ensuing chaos, the plotters believed, the persecuted Catholic minority of England would take over rule of Britain and restore the Catholic faith to the country.

"Gunpowder" loosely tells the tale of this eponymous plot, under the supervision of Catesby (Kit Harrington), with special appearances by Liv Tyler and the British Jesuits

for good measure. It could be argued that there is a substantial audience for this very thing, to judge by the phenomenon that is Mr. Harrington's most notable credit, "Game of Thrones." What fundamentally distinguishes "Gunpowder" from "Game of Thrones" is not the show's historicity; the depiction of Stuart-era English Catholics in "Gunpowder" is about as historically accurate as anything you will find on "Thrones." It is, rather, the fact that "Thrones" is good television: well written, well paced and well acted.

"Gunpowder" is really not much more than a series of awkwardly acted scenes amid innumerable gratuitously violent scenes. The subject matter offers up a multiplicity of interesting narratives and themes to be explored: religious intolerance, the strength of the laity and the limitations of the clergy. A historically accurate narrative of the events would have sufficed. Instead we are left with an off-brand "Game of Thrones."

Jake Martin, S.J., is a special contributor to *America*.



HBO's "Gunpowder" tells the story of a plot to blow up Parliament.

(Robert Viglasky/HBO)

Catching Sight of Grace

Readings: Gn 15:1-6, 21:1-3; Ps 105; Heb 11:8-19; Lk 2:22-40

Family life in the Bible is both difficult and grace-filled. Joseph's brothers planned to kill him and then decided instead to sell him into slavery, but their reunion years later is among the most touching scenes in the Bible. Similarly, David had a strained relationship with his brothers, but it was a visit to them that inspired him to fight Goliath. Even Jesus had a complicated relationship with his family. After he relocated to Capernaum, his visits back to Nazareth did not go well. Mark tells us that Jesus' family once came to drag him away because they thought he had lost his mind. Nonetheless, Catholics today honor his parents, grandparents and kinsman James among the greatest of the saints.

"He came to what was his own, but his own people did not accept him" (Jn 1:11). It is easy to miss the grace that comes from family. The old adage "Familiarity breeds contempt" is to no one more applicable than to the people with whom we live. Years of proximity to them can lull us into forgetting that in every person God is still at work. It is easy to miss the changes, or not to appreciate all they signify.

We must never forget that God works through created things to communicate divine love. This was certainly the case for Abraham and Sarah, who saw their son Isaac as the culmination of their own faith in God's promise. Isaac's birth proved that God was alive and at work in the world.

The author of this week's second reading saw an even deeper reality in the birth of Isaac. Through it, all humanity learned that God will fulfill every promise. Thus, the eternal life that God promised the Son and his disciples will be as inevitable as Isaac's birth.

Many of us might have difficulty finding such grace among our own families. If so, we are in good company; Mary and Joseph had the same problem. Patristic and medieval commentators found it odd that Simeon's prophecy about Jesus left Mary and Joseph "amazed at what was said about him." The child's parents had already heard from Gabriel, Elizabeth, the shepherds and the

The child's father and mother were amazed at what was said about him. (Lk 2:33)



PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE

How deep is your faith in God's promises to you?

How does God's work in the lives of others lead you to deeper faith?

whole heavenly host that Jesus was an exceptional source of divine grace. In spite of this, Simeon's reminder caught them off guard. Likewise, we often forget that our loved ones can play an extraordinary role in our own life.

Today's feast reminds us to seek God's love anew through our loved ones. It may be hard to spot. Long familiarity dulls our attention. Humility or embarrassment may cause those closest to us to hide evidence of God at work in their lives. We can catch sight of God in others only when we, like Abraham and Sarah, first recognize God at work in our own lives. We can let the grace in others transform us only when we, like the author of the Letter to the Hebrews, appreciate their struggle to trust God's word. The trust others had in God's promises led Jesus' parents through their amazement to a deeper faith. Just so today, the work of grace in our families can strengthen our own trust in God's love for us.

Michael Simone, S.J., teaches Scripture at Boston College School of Theology and Ministry.

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Rise Up; Your Light Has Come!

Readings: Isa 60:1-6, Ps 72, Eph 3:2-6, Mt 2:1-12

Two feasts of the Christmas season celebrate Christ's revelation to the whole world. Today's feast commemorates the "physical" revelation of Christ, the moment when Gentiles recognized the incarnate Messiah. Tomorrow we celebrate a "spiritual" revelation of Christ. The feast of the Baptism of the Lord marks the moment when Jews and Gentiles together recognized the divine sonship of Jesus. These two feasts mark the return to Ordinary Time, that period of the liturgical year when the church reflects on its continuing mission to reveal Christ to the world in body and spirit.

The story we hear as today's Gospel probably existed in some form before Matthew incorporated it into his account of the life of Christ. That earlier version found the fulfillment of several prophecies in the birth of Christ, including pronouncements from the prophet Micah and the seer Balaam. Matthew highlights the great vision of Isaiah 60 in the attention he gives to the magi and their gifts. In Isaiah's prophecy God's mercy to Israel becomes an act of divine mercy to the whole world. This prophecy comes from a time when the Jewish people had returned

from exile but before they had rebuilt Jerusalem. Just as God had summoned the nations to chastise Zion, God has summoned them again to restore the city. People from every corner of the earth will come bearing gifts and reparations for the Temple, the city and its people. As they stream toward Jerusalem, they encounter for the first time the divine illumination that Israel had always known. God's mercy to Israel thus becomes a gift for everyone.

In Matthew's hands, this prophecy foreshadows the Christian community's inclusion of the Gentiles. Jesus is the new Zion, the new place in which God has taken up residence on earth. The magi's gifts, which represent, among other things, earthly wealth, religious insight and mortality, are the reparations humanity offers to God through the magi. The joy they found at the end of their journey is one of the first effects of the divine illumination now available to everyone.

This twofold act of divine mercy continues today. The Christian community is the restored Israel. Like the returned exiles of the first reading, Christ's disciples often first come to him in great need. Whether we are cradle Catholics or recent converts, Christ's tangible presence in our lives is a mercy we cannot do without. In the liturgy, the sacraments, the Scriptures, our fellow Christians and sacred times and places, we can encounter physical reminders of the incarnate Son. Like the magi, we can respond with our best gifts—our industry, our devotion, our very lives.

We disciples are Christ's tangible presence in the world. That same child whose light brought such joy to the magi now, through us, offers his mercy to every person. Through us, every day, Christ feeds multitudes; he heals, teaches and guides countless people. Through individual volunteers and major institutions, through simple acts of kindness or worldwide coordinated efforts, the world can encounter, through the Christian community, the enduring, tangible presence of Christ.

Michael R. Simone, S.J., teaches Scripture at Boston College School of Theology and Ministry.

'Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage.' (Mt 2:2)

PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE

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Will you know when you have found him?

Have your efforts guided another person to find Christ?

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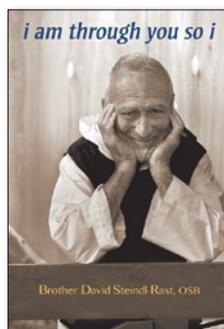
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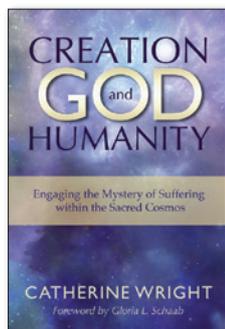
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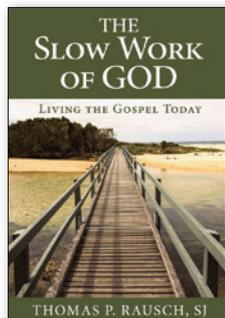
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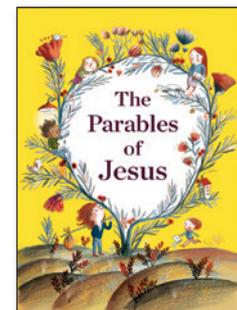
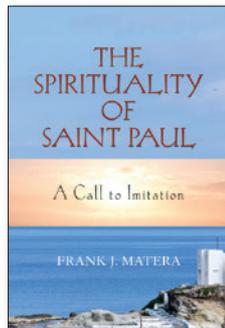
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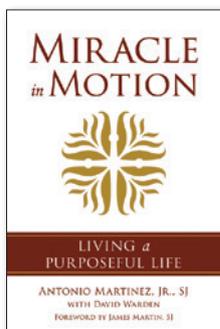
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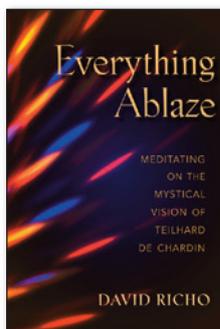
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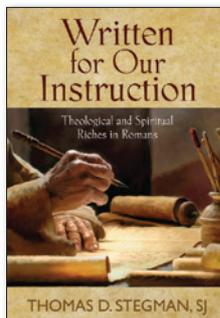
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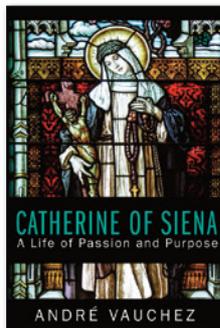
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Iceland Is Not Eliminating Down Syndrome

They are just killing everyone who has it

By Patricia Heaton



I was taken aback when I read the CBS News tweet that stated, “Iceland is on pace to virtually eliminate Down syndrome through abortion.” But as I tweeted on Aug. 14, the country was not, in fact, eliminating Down syndrome. They were just killing everyone who has it.

Not only was the tweet scientifically inaccurate, it did not really reflect the accompanying story. Yes, close to 100 percent of unborn babies diagnosed with Down syndrome in Iceland are, horrifically, aborted. But some of the people interviewed in the piece did not seem 100 percent sure it was the right thing to do. The hospital that performs all abortions in Iceland has a special room for the procedure and acknowledges the killing by giving the aborted child’s mother a “prayer” card that lists the baby’s sex and weight, along with the child’s footprints.

The birth of any child is going to bring great change to the parents’ lives; this is all the more true when it is a child with a disability. Whether that change is going to be seen as positive or negative often depends on how the news is delivered. Many parents have complained that doctors tend to paint an extremely dire picture when counseling parents upon discovering they are pregnant with a Down syndrome son or daughter. Mark Lawrence Schrad, an assistant professor of political science at Villanova University and a self-described pro-choice liberal, describes what he and his wife faced

when waiting to hear if their daughter would be born with Down syndrome. “Hammering home the momentous difficulties that would await us as parents was clearly a tactical move by the doctor to push us toward an abortion,” Mr. Schrad wrote.

This is despite the fact that not only do people with Down syndrome report having a very high level of satisfaction with their lives, but their siblings feel they are better people for having a family member with Down syndrome. While countries like Iceland are praised for their state-funded health care, the struggle to keep costs down creates an environment in which those who choose to give birth to a Down syndrome child may be considered selfish for using up precious resources. More recently, the Dutch Ministry of Health published a list of the 10 most expensive diseases, with Down syndrome at the top.

Fortunately, families and people with Down syndrome are speaking up and sharing their experiences. Karen Gaffney is one of those people. Her Down syndrome did not prevent her from swimming the English Channel, and she is a compelling speaker—her TED Talk is a must-see. The Global Down Syndrome Foundation is a public nonprofit “dedicated to significantly improving the lives of people with Down syndrome through research, medical care, education and advocacy.” There is also the Linda Crnic Institute for Down Syndrome, whose mission

is to improve the lives of people with Down syndrome and to eradicate the ill effects associated with it.

Finally, as Christians, we must always engage in this battle by being a voice for the voiceless and taking seriously Christ’s command to care for the least among us. In a world where we are daily conditioned to expect an environment that caters to our every need and desire, we must remind ourselves that the value of our lives and the lives of others is based not on material wealth or accomplishments but on the intrinsic worth we all possess as human beings created by God and in his image. As St. John Paul II said, “A society will be judged on the basis of how it treats its weakest members, and among the most vulnerable are surely the unborn and the dying.”

The morning after I posted the tweet, my feed started to explode in the most positive and joyful way. Not only did I receive thanks and encouragement, but followers started posting pictures of their beautiful and very loved children with Down syndrome. It was a deeply hopeful display of true humanity—the loving spirit of inclusivity that regards all lives as precious incarnations of our Creator, worthy of love and entitled to life.

Patricia Heaton stars in ABC’s critically acclaimed comedy, “The Middle.” She is best known for her role as Debra Barone on “Everybody Loves Raymond,” for which she won a SAG award and two Emmy Awards.

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