

America

THE JESUIT REVIEW OF FAITH AND CULTURE

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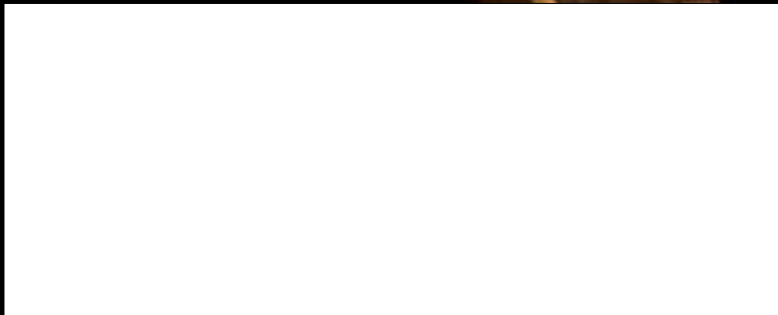
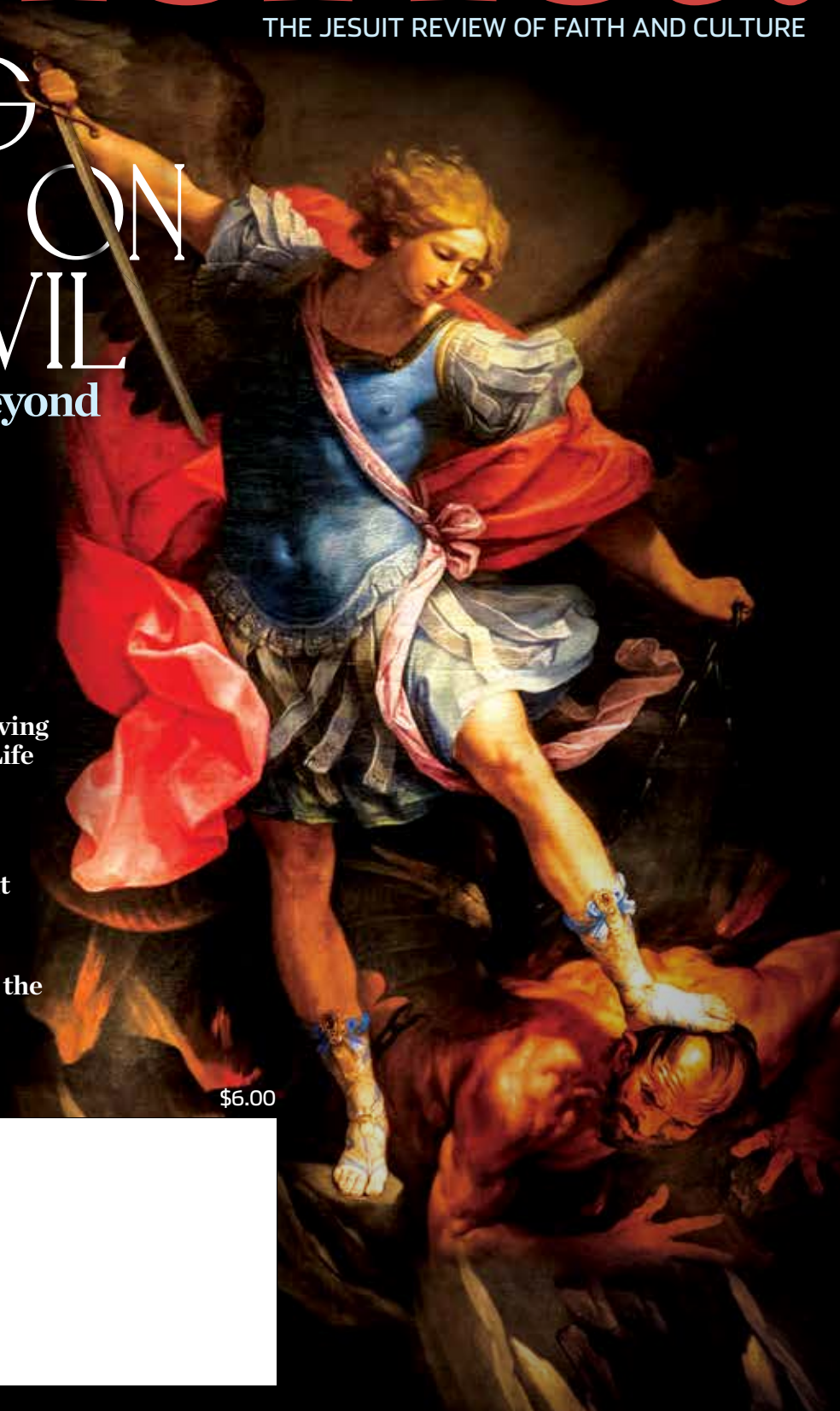
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What Is a Government Really For?

What is perhaps saddest about Kevin McCarthy's ouster as speaker of the House on Oct. 3 is that it came about in response to a brief glimmer of bipartisan consensus. For a few hours, the Congress acted for the common good of the United States, rather than for maximum partisan leverage. Its inability to do so consistently, however, is an even deeper problem than the political chaos that has temporarily vacated the speaker's chair.

After weeks wasted on bills that could only barely, or not even, pass under the Republican House majority and would never have passed in the Senate, Mr. McCarthy finally put forward a continuing resolution to keep the government open through mid-November. It passed the House by an overwhelming majority, with more than half the Republicans and all but one Democrat voting for it. It passed the Senate even more resoundingly, with only nine Republicans voting against it.

So the good news—and it is good news—is that even with the dysfunction within the House majority, easily more than three-quarters of our legislators are committed to keeping the government open and running.

The bad news is that such consensus can be acted on only under the most extreme conditions, when the United States is days away from default on its sovereign debt or hours away from shutting down the federal government. From outside Congress, it is like watching a game of chicken being played with the government and economy. Each time this happens, the disaster is usually going to be averted and the question is mostly who flinches first, but the risk of tragedy if someone's timing is off is entirely out of proportion to any possible reward.

Ordinarily, this problem is explained in terms of the very slim House majority, which can afford only four members voting against the rest of the G.O.P. on party-line bills (or the election of a speaker). The most politically conservative members of the Republican caucus could probably have used their leverage to extract some focused set of policy concessions, on border security or some funding cuts or even on reduced support for Ukraine, an outcome temporarily and almost accidentally achieved under the present continuing resolution.

But instead, as a condition of electing Mr. McCarthy in the first place, they essentially demanded a veto—maybe we can call it not a “heckler's veto” but a “chaos veto”—over any action of the speaker or indeed, the rest of the Republican majority. But that veto had a massive loophole. It was always going to be possible, if the speaker was willing to risk his chair, to end-run this veto by the process of bipartisan compromise. And Kevin McCarthy did so twice, to avoid default on the debt at the end of May and then again to avoid a government shutdown at the end of September. Even acknowledging his failures in renegeing on the funding deal he made as part of the debt negotiations and running out the clock while trying to avoid recourse to bipartisanship on the continuing resolution, Mr. McCarthy deserves some credit for finally placing duty above personal ambition.

Now that he has said that he will not seek the speaker's chair again, the country waits to see who the Republicans in the House will put forward, and whether the next speaker will be hobbled by the same “chaos veto” concession extracted from Mr. McCarthy.

But there is a deeper problem

than just what rules will govern the House under the next speaker: the question of what a government is for, and how it is to function beyond matters that a bare majority can vote through. In “*Gaudium et Spes*,” the Second Vatican Council's document on the church in the modern world, the council explained that any political community exists “for the sake of the common good, in which it finds its full justification and significance, and the source of its inherent legitimacy” (No. 74).

This may seem impossibly idealistic, but it is not inherently dissimilar to the idealism of the founding documents of the American republic. Both legislators and voters are called to aim for something more important than whatever they can win for the short run.

It is sadly likely that the next speaker will be operating under constraints very similar to those that bound Mr. McCarthy. But we should also remember that far more than half the country does not want the government shutdown; far more than half the country recognizes the need for immigration reform that does more than simply securing the border; far more than half the country thinks the government needs to do more to address climate change.

Our inability to agree to do things we mostly agree need to be done is not just a temporary symptom of a dysfunctional partisan majority. It reveals a deeper problem of viewing political compromise as a grudging surrender to avoid crisis rather than an achievement for the sake of the common good. We can hope for something better; we should vote for it too.

Sam Sawyer, S.J.



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Seminarians from the Pontifical North American College, the U.S. seminary in Rome, are seen in procession during Mass for the ordination of 18 deacons in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican on Sept. 28.

CNS photo/Lola Gomez

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Cover: "The Archangel Michael Defeating Satan," Guido Reni, 1636 (iStock)

Should the church expect donations with Mass requests?

In a Faith & Reason essay published on **America's** website in September, John F. Baldovin, S.J., examined the theological soundness of making a monetary offering for the sake of “having a Mass said” for an individual. Father Baldovin urged “that we clarify the role of the priest with regard to Mass intentions, that we attempt to celebrate Sunday Masses for the people in general and that we eliminate money from the equation.” Our readers had a lot to say about the practice of Mass intentions in the online comments.

I make a donation to my parish when I request a Mass for a loved one who is either terminally ill or celebrating a special moment in life (a milestone wedding anniversary, for example). While it is a small donation, I do expect our offertories to help the parish do things like pay the bills and look after building maintenance. It is inaccurate to say that one is paying for a Mass intention.

Barbara Neem

In churches, there is a donation box to light a candle. There is a collection at Mass. We pay for Mass cards. When is enough enough? Many Catholic websites only “suggest” a donation for submitting prayer requests online, but then they make it very difficult to submit that request without paying for it. I feel like I am being nickel-and-dimed at every turn, but I know this article is just about prayer. Prayer is our Christian obligation and duty, and I would actually say it is our privilege as people in Christ. We should be praying for everyone, all the time, for free. The church can ask for donations and support at other times and in other ways. Separate money from prayer.

Stephen Fratello

I am a pastor. I do require some sort of donation for Mass intentions. It is a practice I instituted a couple of years ago when I got here. Before, people tended to be a bit more flippant, with a half dozen “can you offer this up for” requests five minutes before Mass, expecting and listening for a name to be mentioned. It appeared almost as an afterthought—most would stop, turn their heads and make that request right before I gave the nod to the choir to begin. Now, people have to stop by the office, choose a date for their Mass and make a donation in the poor box I placed in the office. The offering never goes to me, not even as a stipend. No one knows what an individual person donated, since we only empty the box once a month. Honestly, I am ambivalent about the results of the change I made. The number of intention requests has been reduced, but

I do believe there needs to be some reverence toward the person for whom the Mass is being offered as well as some protection against flippancy.

(Rev.) Joseph Lody

This is a good article, although I must admit that a lot of it went over my head. It's a topic I've never thought about before. The idea of praying for a specific individual during Mass to remember them seems like the most normal thing in the world to me. If somebody's grandfather died this time last year and they'd like a Mass offered for him, I think that's a great idea. A prayer for the beloved departed and a comfort to those they left behind is a good thing. The money part is a bit tricky. I've always been under the impression that priests make a pittance, so I can't blame them for looking for ways to supplement their income. But paying for prayer—paying for access to God—sounds an awful lot like indulgences. And for somebody on a limited income, paying might put that small comfort out of reach. Father Joseph Lody (see comment above) has the right idea: The “cost” of the Mass should be a suggested donation, which can be any amount the person requesting feels compelled to give, and the request has to be made in advance.

Gwen Murtha

Just because a Mass is offered for a person or intention doesn't mean that those in attendance aren't free to offer it for their own intentions; God is infinite and can accommodate many prayers. I don't stress too much about a monetary offering for a Mass, since most of the time it's pretty nominal. In some parishes they don't accept an offering at all. I feel it is a comforting thing to have a Mass offered for someone's departed loved one, more so than buying flowers.

Katherine Nielsen

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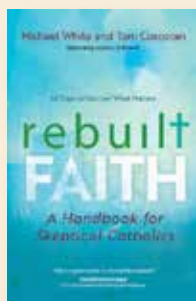
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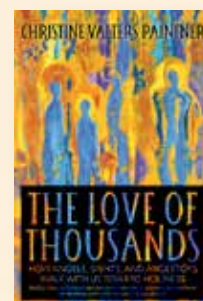
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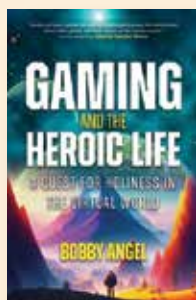
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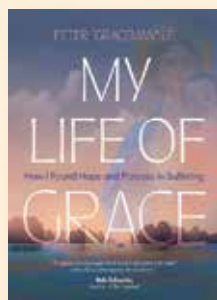
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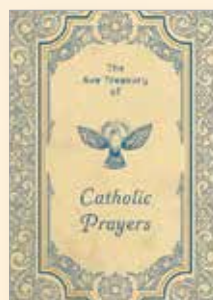
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Praise and Action: The Mandate of ‘Laudate Deum’

The release eight years ago of “Laudato Si” marked an important moment in history: For the first time, a pope had devoted an entire encyclical to the relationship between Christian faith and environmental ethics. No longer were issues like climate change and environmental devastation matters only for scientists to parse or politicians to debate; they were now definitively included among the moral concerns of a global church. The release on Oct. 4 of an apostolic exhortation, “Laudate Deum,” which renews and extends “Laudato Si,” makes it clear that these issues remain at the forefront of Pope Francis’ concerns—and should remain at the forefront of ours as well.

But has “Laudato Si” been heard? Will “Laudate Deum” be heard?

Pope Francis noted that we are not lacking for solutions: What we lack is any political will to address this crisis. Only a few months after the pope published “Laudato Si” in 2015, 196 countries adopted the Paris Agreement, which aims to limit global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) by the end of the century. To reach that goal, the industrialized nations of the world would have to work together to stop growth in greenhouse gas emissions by 2025. But eight years later, we are still not on track. The Financial Times estimates signatory nations have committed less than a fifth of the estimated \$4 trillion needed to achieve the Paris Agreement’s goals. All the while, ecological disasters increase in number and scope every year.

While from the early 1970s through the papacy of Pope Benedict XVI (who rightly earned the title of “the Green Pope” for his advocacy in parts of “Caritas in Veritate” for the care of creation), Vatican documents

have addressed environmental concerns more explicitly, the church has not done as much as it could. On the local level, many parishes and dioceses have undertaken efforts toward ecological stewardship, and many theologians and nonprofit leaders have incorporated “Laudato Si” into their work. Nonetheless, climate change has failed to penetrate the moral imagination of Catholics in the way that other pro-life issues have.

The pope writes in “Laudate Deum,” “I feel obliged to make these clarifications, which may appear obvious, because of certain dismissive and scarcely reasonable opinions that I encounter, even within the Catholic Church” (No. 14). More than 40 percent of U.S. Catholics reject the idea that human beings are responsible for climate change, according to a 2023 Pew Research survey; many also shrug and say, “There’s nothing to be done”—a sentiment rarely expressed on issues like abortion or immigration.

“Laudato Si” did not address only the overwhelming data showing the scope and effects of climate change but also stressed the moral dimension of caring for our common home. Pope Francis grounded his analysis in integral ecology, presenting climate change as more than a merely technical or scientific problem; it is also a profoundly human one.

Francis reminds us in “Laudate Deum” of two convictions he repeats frequently: “Everything is connected” and “No one is saved alone” (No. 19). He reminds us that even in the face of such intractable challenges, we have to work not only toward better policies and more effective implementation, but also toward greater solidarity: “To say that there is nothing to hope for would be suicidal, for it would mean

exposing all humanity, especially the poorest, to the worst impacts of climate change” (No. 53). It is only by renewing our hope that a better world is indeed possible that we can begin to build it.

For Francis, care for our common home is also an issue of human dignity. He calls for the conversion of our “throwaway culture,” in which anything fragile is crushed under the weight of the deified market. That economic system is amoral if not immoral, only concerned with feeding itself and progress for progress’s sake. Francis points to this cultural myopia as the central sin of the climate crisis: “When we fail to acknowledge as part of reality the worth of a poor person, a human embryo, a person with disabilities...it becomes difficult to hear the cry of nature itself” (“L.S.,” No. 117).

Francis offers the church as an interlocutor in the scientific and political conversation, suggesting a moral vision to a society dominated by a technocratic paradigm centered on profit, power and growth at all costs. The pope is not a Luddite, but he insists that we place technological innovation in service of a healthier view of progress that prioritizes human flourishing. He writes in “Laudate Deum”: “Let us stop thinking, then, of human beings as autonomous, omnipotent and limitless, and begin to think of ourselves differently, in a humbler but more fruitful way” (No. 68).

“Laudato Si” and “Laudate Deum” are remarkably deft in their integration of science and theology. Pope Francis takes up the Second Vatican Council’s charge for the church to read the signs of the times and interpret them in light of the Gospel. If we are to care for our common home, we cannot stand by amid ecological dev-

astation that threatens the grandeur of God's creation and human livelihood. We must act.

During this coming election cycle, Americans (including Catholics) need to hear far more about the moral duty to protect the environment, which includes standing up to industry efforts to overturn or gut environmental regulations. We also need reminders that slogans like "America First" deny the reality Pope Francis states time and again—that all people, all of creation, are connected in one ecology. Those reminders need to come from the pulpit and the chancery too.

Pope Francis closes "Laudate Deum" by using the United States as an example of how the reality of interconnection demands particular conversion from some. Because "emissions per individual in the United States are about two times greater than those of individuals living in China, and about seven times greater than the average of the poorest countries," he writes, "we can state that a broad change in the irresponsible lifestyle connected with the Western model would have a significant long-term impact" (No. 72).

Pope Francis' choice to publish "Laudate Deum" at all is striking. If a follow-up is made to an encyclical, it is usually not done until decades later (see "Quadragesimo Anno," published 40 years after "Rerum Novarum"). For this exhortation to be published a mere eight years after "Laudato Si" underscores the pressing reality at hand: We are running out of time to act on the climate crisis.

For too long, we have paid for our lifestyle with a kind of ecological credit, watching the seas rise and the gasses accumulate in the atmosphere with the sinking feeling that soon, the bill will come due. *It is due.*

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Trauma can isolate people. A good preacher can make them feel included.

In services for homeless people, the current buzz phrase is *trauma-informed care*. When someone exhibits a disruptive behavior, instead of asking, “What’s wrong with you?,” we ask, “What happened to you?,” knowing that the behavior is most likely rooted in an unspoken trauma, such as adverse childhood experiences. Trauma-informed care affects our approach to every aspect of service, from how we word questions on an intake assessment to how staff at every level communicate with service users.

What does trauma-informed care have to do with preaching? Members of the clergy should realize that church congregations reflect levels of trauma similar to the wider population, and that many people in the pews are seeking to process their trauma through a lens of faith. According to a report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, for example, one in four women has reported surviving a rape attempt in their lifetime. As of this writing, the Gun Violence Archive has determined that over 30,000 American lives have been lost to gun violence so far this year. And in 2021, the C.D.C. recorded over 100,000 drug overdose deaths in the United States. These are among the many traumas that Catholics carry into the pews with them.

A person of faith might read Scripture passages through the lens of a traumatic experience and listen to homilies for cues on how to make sense of that experience. Trauma makes people feel isolated and marginalized, and someone may be looking for evidence that the good news of the Gospel is still meant for them and that they still belong in the body of Christ, no matter what they have suffered.

Preaching is always a privilege,

and it is a privilege I feel keenly as a layperson who occasionally has the opportunity to preach in my parish. Sunday Mass is often the only regular pastoral care that Catholics receive, so the lectionary and preaching play a major role in how Catholics understand the church and the tenets of Christian faith. Congregants extrapolate that what they hear on Sunday morning must be the way that the institution of the church thinks, and the way that God may judge their lives.

The first rule of preaching should be to “do no harm,” and if we fail to take a trauma-informed approach to preaching, we will do harm. In preparing a sermon, we must ask ourselves: How might someone who has suffered a significant trauma hear this Scripture? What is the good news that they need to hear in this text? How might this passage be misunderstood by someone processing trauma, and how can we head off that misunderstanding? How might this be heard by someone who experienced trauma within the institution of the church or at the hands of a minister?

For instance, on the 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time this year, we heard Jesus’ injunction to forgive not seven times but 77 times. That was preceded in the readings by the passage in Sirach that calls out clinging to anger as a hallmark of sinners. How might someone hear these texts if they have been victimized by a serious crime? Will they be left feeling that their ongoing struggle to forgive is a reason for condemnation? Will they conclude that they no longer belong in the Christian community, or perhaps should disengage until they can forgive?

Two weeks later, on the 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time, we heard Paul exhorting the Philippians to be “united

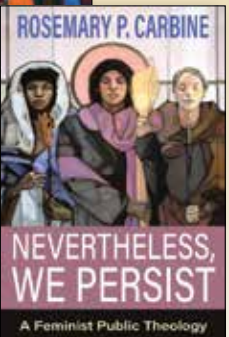
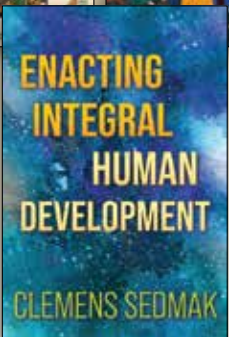
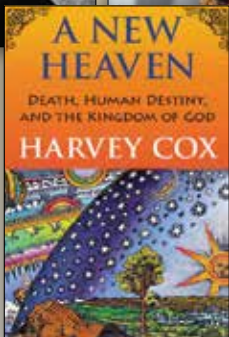
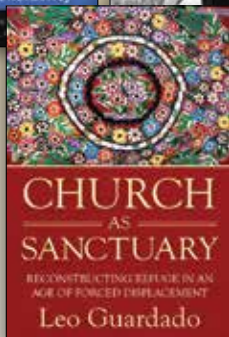
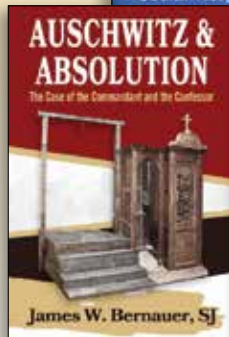
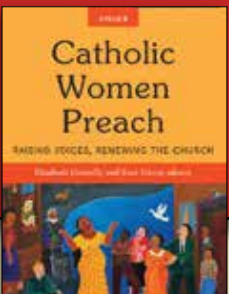
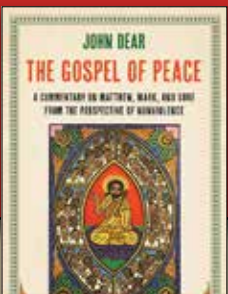
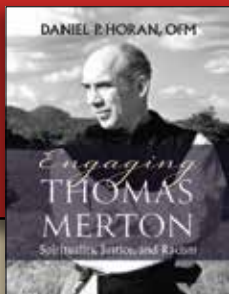
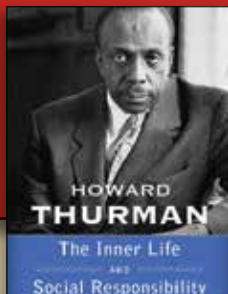
in heart” and to “humbly regard others as more important than yourselves.” This followed Ezekiel suggesting that death is meted out fairly, according to our sin or virtue. How might someone experiencing domestic violence hear these readings? Will a survivor of abuse feel obligated to keep silent in the name of promoting unity or out of fear of being accused of promoting gossip? Might someone who has been victimized feel that their suffering is a deserved punishment?

A preacher who unintentionally dismisses those who feel marginalized by these texts can risk alienating them entirely. But there are many natural ways to correct for this, such as by acknowledging upfront how a passage has been misinterpreted in the past or by being clear about what the preacher does not intend in their message. Preachers can also acknowledge groups of people who may feel overlooked or condemned in the lectionary.

We are good preachers to the extent that we have entered into the wounds of Christ and speak from those wounds to extend healing to the body of Christ. Those wounds may be personal, or they may be the wounds we feel through the pain of empathy with the people we serve. Preachers have an opportunity to be a living icon of Christ the wounded healer when we preach from a hermeneutic of trauma-informed pastoral care.

Greer Hannan works in homeless services in Louisville, Ky. She has written for *Commonweal*, *The Furrow* and *Notre Dame Magazine*, and she is the producer and host of the podcast *Femammal*.

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Pierbattista Pizzaballa, O.F.M.: A cardinal for Jerusalem and the Catholic world

By Noga Tarnopolsky

For the first time in history, Jerusalem, a city holy to the three great monotheistic faiths, has its own cardinal—the Italian-born Pierbattista Pizzaballa, O.F.M. A tall, athletic man with an easy smile and a spontaneous manner, Cardinal Pizzaballa has been part of the fabric of Jerusalem life since he arrived here as a 25-year-old priest in 1990.

He is considered close to Pope Francis, who has steadily advanced the cardinal, naming him apostolic administrator *sede vacante* of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem in 2016 and, in 2020, making him Latin patriarch of Jerusalem with responsibility for the entire Holy Land.

Energetic, resolutely modern, as comfortable with technology as with theology and deeply cosmopolitan, Cardinal Pizzaballa shares the pope's intention to restore the somewhat backwater reputation of Jerusalem in the church's constellation to its former glory.

"Since the beginning [Pope Francis] has chosen cardinals not necessarily from the main churches or dioceses and has shown that he wants to distribute these more internationally and to the periphery. It is his style to choose

Jerusalem," Cardinal Pizzaballa says.

In an exclusive interview at his office, before the consistory at which he was made cardinal on Sept. 30, the patriarch argued for Jerusalem's unique status as both the original church and as a community on the fringe of the contemporary church. "Jerusalem is both. It is an important diocese because it is the Mother Church," he said.

"Spiritually and theologically, it is the heart of the church because everything was born here," he said. "At the same time we are also kind of peripheral. As Christians we are a very small minority. We are living in a country which is in a very typical situation of conflict. It is a place where the interreligious dialogue is at stake, is always challenged and at the same time, it is also our common life. It's a kind of laboratory from the religious point of view."

"Paying attention to this portion of the church, the world, Jerusalem and the Middle East, I think was a gesture with a vision," he said of the pope's choice.

President Isaac Herzog of Israel has known Cardinal Pizzaballa for more than two decades, dating back to March

Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa speaks with residents of Jenin in the Israeli-occupied West Bank on July 10, days after the Israel Defense Forces launched air and ground attacks.

2000, when then-Cabinet Secretary Herzog coordinated Pope John Paul II's pilgrimage to Jerusalem with Cardinal Pizzaballa, then the vicar general of the Latin patriarch of Jerusalem for the pastoral care of Hebrew-speaking Catholics in Israel.

Among many other attributes, Mr. Herzog prizes Cardinal Pizzaballa's "fluid, eloquent Hebrew."

Mr. Herzog underscored the importance of Cardinal Pizzaballa's appointment for Jerusalem's international prestige. "He is a brilliant person. He is a leader knowledgeable and extremely well acquainted with the complexities of our region and enjoys the trust of all the concerned parties in Jordan, the Palestinian Territories and Israel," he said. "They respect him tremendously. His name precedes him."

Cardinal Pizzaballa was congratulated at the announcement of his elevation by the king of Jordan, the Palestinian president and numerous other dignitaries. But in Israel only the president, the titular head of state, called to congratulate the new cardinal-designate. The Israeli government and the City of Jerusalem have yet to comment.

Though neither Mr. Herzog nor Cardinal Pizzaballa agreed to discuss the matter, Israel's new, extremist government, headed by Benjamin Netanyahu, has not made life easy for either of them. Violence has sharply risen under the new government, particularly against minorities, and some of Mr. Netanyahu's ultra-Orthodox Jewish parliamentary allies have called for a ban on "Christian evangelical" activity in Israel.

Mr. Herzog has been absorbed throughout 2023 with attempts to bring Mr. Netanyahu back from the brink of attempting what critics have called a judicial coup. Cardinal Pizzaballa, in addition to his vast array of duties as top Vatican official for the Middle East, has been forced to address the alarming spike in violence directed at Christian religious personnel and symbols in Israel.

When in August followers of a radical rabbi invaded the campus of the Stella Maris Monastery in the northern Israeli city of Haifa, Mr. Herzog, his wife, Michal, and Cardinal Pizzaballa undertook a widely reported visit to the site as a display of "good faith and support from [the] head of state of the Jewish state towards the Christian world," Mr. Herzog said.

The anti-Christian violence, Cardinal Pizzaballa noted, "is consistent with what is happening to the country: a rise in violence, mistrust generally, within Israeli and Palestinian societies." Christians "are easy targets," he said.

"We are few, the difficult history among Jews and Christians of course plays a role, and the attitude of some

ultra-Orthodox, who view us as pagans. With all this, the role of moderate elements in society is disappearing, and everything has become extreme, at City Hall, in government, small and large—all of it has an influence."

"I don't think there is a specific intent against Christians," Cardinal Pizzaballa said, remarking upon his return from a visit to the devastated Syrian city of Aleppo—an ancient Christian community that has been decimated by war—that Israeli and Palestinian Christians can live and worship freely. They experience "difficulties in coexistence [with Jews in Israel and Muslims in Palestinian territories], not persecution," he said.

The cardinal said he is aware that some U.S. bishops need to learn more about his diocese but is "not frustrated" in his outreach efforts. Attitudes, he said, "are changing."

"We are in contact with the [U.S.] bishops' conference and with many other bishops, and we try to explain to them the complex reality of our land and the complexity of its politics, where things are not all black and white," he said.

"We try to help them understand that the Palestinian people are still waiting for their rights, their dignity or recognition. And when we say Palestinians, we also mean Palestinian Christians, who cannot be separated from all Palestinians, or all Christians."

The challenge, the cardinal acknowledged, is significant, because most American Catholics "have never been here and don't know anything about our reality, but [we] just have to keep working, keep talking, and never cease talking and raising our voice when necessary."

He attributes much of the world's current instability to fear. If in the past societies were more static, "now all societies are becoming multi-something." This has benefits but "also creates fear. We are losing identity. The traditional questions of identity and belonging have acquired different meaning now. My impression is that a lot of society is disoriented."

But he does not let political leaders off the hook. "There is a lack of leadership, of vision. We need people to help give orientation—not to neglect the fears but not to give fears the only space."

The cardinal quoted the American Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel, who famously argued that no religion is an island. "No one can do anything alone," Cardinal Pizzaballa said. "This is also intuitive for Francis. Since all society is shaken, we need to work together—to serve diversity, not to create uniformity, to reconsider relations between religion and laity."

He views Jerusalem, and his impending cardinalate, as the crossroad from which intra-church and interreli-

gious growth can emanate. “We know very well that for Pope Francis, Abu Dhabi was important,” he said, referring to an agreement on human fraternity and peace achieved there in 2019.

“But we cannot avoid Jerusalem. I think an authoritative voice, a cardinal, has a resonance that is different and gives me more responsibility, on one hand, but also the vision. Jerusalem is a unique point of observation, and it is important for Rome, too, to hear from Jerusalem.”

This is a view echoed by one of the cardinal’s closest associates, the Rev. Davide Meli, chancellor of the Latin patriarchate.

Cardinal Pizzaballa’s appointment, he said, reflects the fact that “Jerusalem has a universal dimension.”

“The value of Jerusalem to the world is today a bit understated because of the divisions that tear Jerusalem apart,” Father Meli said, “but in a sense that’s a reflection of the divisions that tear the world apart. The main idea is that having been in Jerusalem for more than 30 years, [Cardinal] Pizzaballa has the opportunity to see the world in Jerusalem. So perhaps more than most, he can appreciate what Jerusalem means in the world.”

Noga Tarnopolsky contributes from Jerusalem.

Overcoming an education deficit for girls in Africa and around the world



The Bakhita Partnership (see Dispatch on next page), an intervention and teacher-training program that promotes “gender responsive” best practices for school girls in Africa, warns that young girls are especially at risk when they are kept from attending school.

“Being out of school doesn’t just have devastating consequences for girls’ life opportunities—it places them at risk of teen pregnancy, child marriage, female genital mutilation and other forms of gender-based violence,” the partnership says. Education, it continues, “gives girls the skills to become leaders, innovators and change makers, and to tackle future crises.” The out-of-school population in sub-Saharan Africa reached 98 million in 2021. The female out-of-school rate is 4.2 percentage points higher than the male rate.

244 million children and youth worldwide were out of school in 2021, including **67 million children** of primary school age (6 to 11 years), **57 million adolescents** of lower secondary school age (12 to 14 years) and **121 million youth** of upper secondary school age (15 to 17 years).

9 million girls between the ages of about 6 and 11 in sub-Saharan Africa will never go to school at all, compared with six million boys.

15 million adolescent girls worldwide, aged 15 to 19 years, have experienced forced sex. Based on data from 30 countries, only **1%** have ever sought professional help.

614 million women and girls lived in conflict zones in 2022—**50% higher** than the number in 2017—and **33% of all the children and youth** unable to attend school in Africa live in a conflict zone.

380 million women and girls live amid high or critical water stress, a number projected to increase to **674 million** by 2050 due to climate change.

Only 4% of total bilateral aid is allocated to gender equality and women’s empowerment. The additional investment needed for achieving gender equality by 2030, a U.N. Sustainable Development Goal, is estimated at \$360 billion per year.

Sources: Unicef, the United Nations Children’s Fund; U.N. Women; World Bank

GOODNEWS: Church efforts lift up education for girls in Africa

Elizabeth Mbula is sitting in a dimly lit classroom in Machakos, Kenya, and her internet connection is not stable. But she is eager to speak, lighting up in front of the camera.

Her braids drape over the shoulders of her orange school uniform as her school counselor, a sister of the Sacred Heart, looks on. “I could not pay attention in school because I was being beaten by my stepfather at home,” she explains to her viewers, who are watching from Fordham University in Manhattan. “He tried to rape me, but I escaped.”

Zinchia Adhuambo Norman, a 17-year-old Kenyan schoolgirl, shares a similar story. “I survived my father’s abuse for eight years,” she said.

“I had to turn to the sisters,” Zinchia said.

“I was abused sexually by my father from 8 to 13 years old. I thought every child goes through that,” said Brenda Karimi, another abuse survivor. “I couldn’t understand that this was a grave violation of my rights.”

Elizabeth, Zinchia and Brenda shared their stories by video conference during a side event to the United Nations General Assembly gatherings during the week of Sept. 18 in New York, titled “Empowering the African Girl Child Through Transformative Education: Harnessing the Power of Catholic Education for Sustainable Change.”

Tragically, the stories shared by these African girls are not unique. Globally, 15 million adolescent girls have endured forced sex at some point in their lives, according to a report by the U.N. Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children. In sub-Saharan Africa, it is estimated that only one in 10 girls who are assaulted will report their abuse; gender-based violence is often referred to as the “silent epidemic.”

Gender-based violence is not the only deterrent to school attendance for these girls. Poverty, child marriage, cultural norms and lack of sanitary care products for menstruating girls are all barriers for over nine million girls to access an adequate education in sub-Saharan Africa, according to a 2022 report from the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women. Without an education, these girls are unable to leave their homes. Tasked with household management—water collection, cooking, cleaning—many may face continued abuse.

In response to the diminishing enrollment of girls in school during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Jesuit Justice and Ecology Network–Africa launched the Bakhita Partnership for Education in October 2020 to reinforce girls’ right to education. The partnership, supported by religious sisters from a number of different orders, offers training



St. Patrick’s Secondary School in Mazabuka, Zambia

in what has been called gender-responsive education, an approach that considers the impact of cultural and societal norms that may inhibit learning and academic performance among female students.

“Those are my girls,” said Rosemary Nyribume, S.H.S., the director of St. Monica’s Girls Tailoring Center in Gulu, Uganda. In her keynote address at this side event, held at Fordham University’s Law School, she cited the “millions of girls who are sexually abused,” highlighting especially the suffering endured by young girls who had been used as sex slaves after their abduction by the Lord’s Resistance Army, a Christian extremist group active in Northern Uganda.

Named one of Time magazine’s 100 Most Influential People in the World in 2014, Sister Nyribume has brought thousands of girls into her vocational school. It offers its female students not only a classroom education but also a marketable skill—tailoring. “We must work together to educate our girls and protect them and advocate for them,” Sister Nyribume told **America**.

But the gap between need and capacity continues to widen. Charles Chilufya, S.J., is the director of the Jesuit Justice and Ecology Network–Africa. “Without adequate financing,” he said, “we will lose these girls and lose our communities.”

“We in the Catholic Church contribute anything between 40 and 60 percent of education services, depending on the country in Africa,” said Father Chilufya. He attributed the success of the gender-responsive approach to education to the religious sisters who “help the girls grow spiritually and mentally.”

“But much more needs to be done,” said Father Chilufya. According to the United Nations, there are just under 20 million girls of primary-school age in sub-Saharan Africa who are not attending school.

Christine Lenahan is a Joseph A. O’Hare, S.J., fellow at America.



Francis calls on Europe to change migration policies—will it?

On his visit to Marseille in September, Pope Francis decried the “fanaticism of indifference” toward the plight of migrants who risk their lives—and all too often lose them—in the attempt to reach Europe across the Mediterranean Sea. Pope Francis had visited Marseille to add his perspective to the Mediterranean Meetings on immigration, a weeklong gathering from Sept. 17 to 24 of bishops, the faithful and mayors from around the Mediterranean Sea.

The gathering coincided with a new wave of migrant arrivals to the Italian island of Lampedusa. During the second week of September, some 200 small boats and 8,500 people landed, according to officials from the office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, doubling the island’s population and overwhelming its migrant reception services. In just the first half of 2023, more than 130,000 people landed in Italy—twice the number of migrants than in all of 2022.

The spectacle on Lampedusa provoked new statements of concern from European leaders, but migration analysts say they are not hearing any new ideas to address an ongoing crisis that has included the deaths of more than 28,000 people on the Mediterranean Sea since 2014.

Claudia Bonamini, a policy and advocacy coordinator for Jesuit Refugee Service-Europe, said, “I’ve lost count of the number of communications from the [European] Commission.”

Similar plans to confront the crisis are presented

nearly every year, she said. They repeat longstanding European policy, including offering financial aid to the Mediterranean region’s African states, like Libya and Tunisia, to support their efforts to deter would-be migrants from attempting the crossing.

None of these policies have worked, she said. While migrating people continue to arrive at Europe’s borders by land and sea, reception services and the asylum processing system remain overwhelmed, and returning migrants to countries of origin continues to be legally and politically problematic. All the while, more migrants perish at sea or in the Sahara Desert attempting to reach the North African coast.

Ms. Bonamini challenges the notion that the current conditions represent a true crisis. “The numbers [of arriving migrants] are high but not the highest,” she said. She argues they could be “manageable, if there [were] the political will.” Indeed, Europe absorbed some four million Ukrainian refugees who suddenly appeared at its eastern borders following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, earning broad applause for its show of solidarity.

“Everyone speaks about managing immigration, but [what they mean is] blocking immigration,” Ms. Bonamini said. Immigration is a reality that European Union leaders need to accept and practically manage, she said. In a globalized world marked by deep international inequality, she describes immigration as a geopolitical phenomenon that

Migrants wait to be transferred from Lampedusa Island on Sept. 15.

will continue.

Managing immigration properly would start, she said, with greatly expanding the European community's reception and processing capacity, as well as beginning integration efforts quickly. Whether escaping war, poverty or political persecution, migrants arrive in Europe with the desire to find work and start building a new life, but they usually end up stagnant for months, awaiting an asylum decision, "parked in reception centers, at best, if they don't end up homeless."

She argues a deeper paradigm shift at the policymaking level is also required. According to Ms. Bonamini, migrants tend to remain in Europe under dubious legal status because of how difficult and costly it is to reach Europe in the first place.

More flexibility about how to reach, live and work in Europe would encourage so-called circular migration, allowing migrants to work in Europe for a time and then return home with new skills and savings to invest. And for those who wish to remain in the long term, European states, she argued, need to address historic and chronic failures to assimilate immigrants.

Ms. Bonamini acknowledges that people coming from sub-Saharan Africa may not qualify for asylum at the rates that E.U. leaders have deemed acceptable for people fleeing Syria or Afghanistan, "but every migrant has their story," she said.

Bridget Ryder contributes from Madrid.



A memorial march marks the 50th anniversary of Bloody Sunday in Derry, Northern Ireland, on Jan. 30, 2022.

CNS photo/Clodagh Kilcoyne, Reuters

A law to smooth over a legacy of conflict in Northern Ireland only generates more

Approved by the U.K. Parliament in September, the controversial Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill proposes to radically truncate the possibility of uncovering the truth behind many violent events of the Northern Irish civil war, commonly known as "the Troubles."

The legacy bill creates a new body called the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery that will be charged with reviews of deaths and other harms inflicted during the Troubles. It will seek to recover relevant information, and, most contentiously, offer conditional amnesties to those responsible for criminal acts if they cooperate with the commission.

The British government insists that this law will "draw a line" under the Troubles and allow Northern Ireland to move on. But opposition to the law is effectively unanimous, drawing together victims' groups, human rights organizations, the European Union, the United Nations and prominent U.S. politicians.

Last year, Catholic and Protestant church leaders spoke out in unison to suggest that the law "will not achieve any of its purposes" but would disregard decades of hard work that have allowed the different communities to listen to each other.

With so many political and cultural forces arrayed against the proposal, why did Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's government press on to its passage? Kevin Meagher, a political consultant and a regular media commentator on United Kingdom and Ireland affairs, believes "the truthful account is that the British government is very worried about the progression of lots of cases that will involve the actions of British soldiers during the Troubles."

By Mr. Meagher's assessment, the U.K. government is willing to do anything to avoid the scandal of elderly veterans being convicted of atrocities or, perhaps, trials and inquiries that may uncover deep levels of collusion between the British armed forces and Loyalist paramilitaries.

Kevin Hargaden contributes from Dublin.

America VOCATION DIRECTORY

If I could have my life all over again, the one thing I would wish is that when I was graduating from college someone would have told me you don't have to do what seems safe or rational. You can follow that crazy idea that whispers deep inside you. Anything that you believe you're supposed to do, or people tell you need to do, is still going to be there a year or two years from now. Meanwhile, who knows what adventures and friendships await if you just trust your instincts? God put that desire in you, and God will see you through.

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The background of the entire page is a deep red color with a soft, ethereal texture of clouds or smoke, creating a dramatic and somewhat ominous atmosphere.

KEEPING AN EYE ON THE DEVIL

How should today's Catholic think
about the Prince of Darkness?

By Michael J. O'Loughlin

In one corner of the room sits a pile of bags. A few paper grocery bags from Whole Foods. Reusable plastic ones from Ross, Lululemon and Primark. Mundane-looking, sloppy even, but decidedly out of place in their current location.

I am standing in the sacristy of the St. Dominic Oratory, a chapel located inside a former convent on Chicago's Northwest Side. It is late summer and unseasonably cool outside. But inside, it's roasting. Beside me, Father Dominic Clemente takes a handkerchief from his pocket and wipes his brow. The windows are shut tight, and if there is air conditioning, it is definitely not turned on.

The infernal feel is a nice touch, given the topic Father Clemente and I have met to discuss: the devil.

A member of the Archdiocese of Chicago's Spiritual Healing Ministry, Father Clemente has invited me to the chapel to offer some insight into his experiences assisting the archdiocese's exorcist, who meets regularly with individuals who believe they are possessed by demons.

Young and affable, Father Clemente may not be what immediately comes to mind when picturing folks who help drive out the devil. He has a regular-guy persona. He was once featured on a local TV newscast for his embrace of social media as a way to bring young people to church, and he likes to golf and travel.

But in the chapel, he notices me looking down at the bags. Something catches my eye. Poking out from a black, Jewel-Osco bag is a framed icon of the Blessed Virgin Mary, flanked by two angels. The bag's black handle blocks the face of the baby Jesus.

"These are cursed objects," Father Clemente tells me, a bit too matter-of-factly.

Creepy, I think.

I ask Father Clemente to show me some of the objects. I have a sort of skepticism around the role of demons and exorcisms in daily life, but I have watched enough religiously tinged horror movies to know that I am not about to handle cursed objects.

There are religious knickknacks, some of them altered or damaged in subtle ways. Boxes of sage are piled next to books about the occult. I spot a golden figure, point to it and wonder aloud about it.

"Some kind of cursed reindeer?" Father Clemente guesses. A cursed beast or demonic idol, I offer. He offers an uneasy laugh.

•••

Spending weeks researching the devil and Catholic attitudes toward evil is not my idea of a good time. I am admittedly somewhat skeptical of the devil—or at least the devil I have come to know through a steady diet of Hollywood films.

But over and over again Pope Francis has reminded us that the devil is not simply a pop-culture trope. Just a few months ago, he revealed in an interview with an Italian journalist that when he was archbishop of Buenos Aires, he was approached by several people who claimed to be possessed by the devil.

Francis told the interviewer that he put those people in touch with trained exorcists, who reported back to him that many were "demonically obsessed," though two were actually experiencing demonic "possession."

The revelation should not have come as a surprise. The pope has spoken regularly about the devil since the earliest days of his papacy. I began to take note of his language about the devil when I was writing my 2015 book, *The Tweetable Pope*. I devoted an entire chapter to the topic. Just two years into his papacy, he had tweeted about the devil so much that I was able to compile a list of more than a dozen different titles he had ascribed to the devil:

1. Satan
2. Demon
3. Seducer
4. Tempter
5. Great Dragon
6. Ancient Serpent
7. Prince of This World
8. Darkness
9. Enemy
10. Evil One
11. Father of Hate
12. Father of Lies
13. Father of War
14. Accuser

One of the earliest viral moments from the Francis era was a video showing the pope laying his hands on the head of a young man in a wheelchair and his family, who were visiting from Mexico. Some Catholics saw in the video an exorcism, while



Over and over again Pope Francis has reminded us that the devil is not simply a pop-culture trope.

others saw a pope praying with someone in need. (For its part, the Vatican tried to downplay the incident, saying at the time that the pope “did not intend to perform an exorcism.”)

By 2019, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops had enough material to publish a 153-page book, *Pope Francis: Rebuking the Devil*. The book, as well as news reports chronicling the pope’s homilies, speeches and off-the-cuff remarks, reveals a few key themes.

First, Pope Francis does not allegorize Satan.

“We should not think of the devil as a myth, a representation, a symbol, a figure of speech or an idea,” he wrote in his 2018 encyclical “*Gaudete et Exultate*” (“Rejoice and Be Glad”), which contains quite a bit of demon-talk. “This mistake would lead us to let down our guard, to grow careless and end up more vulnerable.”

Next, he urges Christians not to relegate the devil to antiquity.

For example, in 2014 he warned: “Watch out, the devil exists! The devil exists even in the 21st century. And we must not be naïve. We must learn from the Gospel how to battle against him.”

Finally, Francis says that evidence of the devil’s existence is not all that difficult to spot. He put it bluntly during an audience in 2013: “Look around us—it is enough to open a newspaper, as I said—we see the presence of evil, the devil is acting.” We see this action, he has said, in things like hatred, temptation, false promises, division, gossip, war, corruption, isolation, pessimism, despair, hypocrisy and even the so-called liturgy wars.

•••

Pope Francis is not the only one for whom the devil is a favorite topic. As *Newsweek* put it earlier this year, “Satan is getting hot as hell in American pop culture.” The article points to a number of films, podcasts and music videos featuring the devil, especially the fracas following performances of the pop songs “Unholy,” by Sam Smith, and

“Montero,” by Lil Nas X, that were heavy with demonic imagery. Not to mention the conventions for Satanists, the blaming of Tom Brady’s marital troubles on the occult and even worries that artificial intelligence could be a new vehicle for the devil.

But fascination with the devil is nothing new.

“The devil has been an important character in the way Americans think for a long time,” Joseph Laycock, an associate professor of philosophy at Texas State University, told **America**. Dr. Laycock, who co-authored the new book *The Exorcist Effect*, pointed back to the colonization of North America by the Puritans, for whom the devil was “real and palpable.” The settlers saw their role as fulfilling a divine mandate, establishing a “city upon a hill” that would be committed to God’s word. In their way were other groups with claims to the land or differing ideologies, whom the settlers believed manifested evil, including, at various times, Native Americans, French Catholics and even those spreading evil among their own as alleged witches.

As immigrants drove up the Catholic population in the United States, they brought with them their own understanding of the devil, which the Protestant majority viewed as overly superstitious. By the 20th century, Catholics in the United States worried about drawing scrutiny for the supernatural elements of their faith, especially as the Puritanism of old was replaced by beliefs common in mainline Protestantism, which embraced modernity.

“The Catholic Church in America had traditionally regarded exorcism as an embarrassment because this has been a majority Protestant country,” Dr. Laycock said.

But with the success of “*The Exorcist*,” the 1973 Academy Award-winning box office hit, Dr. Laycock argues, Catholics became less bashful about that side of their faith. And, he said, Satan and his minions became helpful tools for some Catholics to argue against the reforms of the Second Vatican Council and, even today, against other modernizing trends.

During the Synod on the Family, the gathering of bishops from around the world in 2015, at least one bishop, opposed to proposals to make the church more welcoming to divorced and remarried Catholics, L.G.B.T. people and women, stated that the “smoke of Satan” had entered the church. More recently, an essay by Matthew Walther in *The New York Times*, published shortly after the death of “*The Exorcist*” director William Friedkin, argued that the film rightly condemns the “typical clergyman of the modern era,” who seems not to believe in the traditional presentation of the devil.

But the fact that popular culture was once again interested in the devil and ways to exorcize evil spirits did not





A vintage illustration from an 18th-century chapbook, *Doctor John Faustus*, shows the titular character, the subject of folk legends about making a deal with the devil.

make me late for an appointment that I allotted myself the bare minimum to make?

“Evil,” I hissed, frantically refreshing my Google maps, searching in vain for a faster route.

None of this is truly Satan’s fault, as much as I would like to blame my own bad habits on him. But the temptation to see the devil behind everyday inconveniences, annoying behaviors or even plain old oddities is rampant. And that can be as dangerous, a few priests warned me, as not believing in

the devil at all.

Hyperfocusing on the devil can lead a person to live in constant fear, always afraid that evil is out to get him or her. That kind of overzealousness can even border on idolatry, giving the devil too much potency and stature. The devil is, after all, not as powerful as God.

Besides, giving the devil too much power also challenges our freedom as human beings, a God-given gift.

“God’s grace is constantly working with human freedom,” the Rev. Louis J. Cameli, author of *The Devil You Don’t Know: Recognizing and Resisting Evil in Everyday Life*, told me. “Then the shadow side is what we’re talking about in terms of temptation and evil and destruction.”

Father Cameli, a theologian and priest in Chicago, said that because God granted human beings free will, we can make decisions that are either in accord with God’s desire for us or that ultimately harm us and others. For God to compel us to choose one way or another would make our freedom less than total, and in effect make us less than human.

But there are forces that we can choose to invite into our hearts and minds as we make those choices, he said. Sometimes that force—God’s grace, for example—may guide us toward making a just and right decision. At other times, we may find ourselves turning to something else. Evil. Temptation. The devil.

Invoking St. Thomas Aquinas, Father Cameli said most people do not willingly choose evil.

“We always choose what we *think* is good,” he said. Or at least we try to convince ourselves that what we are doing is good.

But we also get it wrong. An accountant stealing money from her client may convince herself that she works hard,

mean the church reacted quickly to this growing interest. Perhaps because of that, many people seeking spiritual healing were attracted to Pentecostal and evangelical healing ministries, a trend that became popular in the 1980s and continues today. That worries some Catholic leaders, who believe that Catholic clergy have the tools, tradition and wisdom to assist with such ministry.

“The church has been in a kind of balancing act, not wanting people to leave because they want an exorcism but not wanting to alienate people who think exorcism is ridiculous,” Dr. Laycock said.

The pope uses traditional language about the devil as a way to try to build unity in an otherwise fractured church, Dr. Laycock told me. Yes, there is evil, Francis frequently affirms. But he also says that evil manifests itself in various social ills, including the “unfettered pursuit of money,” which he called the “dung of the devil,” and illicit arms trafficking, which he described as evil.

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As I immersed myself in the study of the devil, I began to see signs of his (most people I interviewed used masculine pronouns for Satan) handiwork everywhere.

Weeds overtaking my garden and vines choking off an otherwise soaring tree?

“Demonic,” I whispered, shaking my head in disapproval at my helplessness when it comes to landscaping.

My normally serene puppy, zooming figure eights around the backyard, ripping out chunks of earth with each growling turn?

“Possessed,” I barked back, suddenly afraid my neighbors might have heard my outburst.

Gridlock on a stretch of highway that I know has been under construction for years, rows of cars threatening to



Using the devil in political and cultural fights goes back centuries.

her client will never notice, and she can use the money to help her family. A terrorist group planting a bomb that kills civilians may not see their action as evil, but rather as a dramatic way to call attention to what they perceive to be a righteous cause. A bishop quietly moving an abusive priest to another parish may believe he is protecting the privacy of the victimized family and sparing the church scandal.

From the outside, we can pretty easily see each of those actions as bad, even evil. And they certainly align with deadly sins: greed, wrath, pride. They represent a giving in to temptation. But human beings, though created good, must *choose* to cooperate with those forces. While this sounds otherworldly, Father Cameli said it happens more often than most people realize.

“People are caught up in things, and they can actually, through their own bad choices, advance these evil and destructive movements,” Father Cameli said.

Father Cameli said the devil uses what he calls “the four Ds,” especially when it comes to trying to keep people from carrying out the Gospel mandate to build up the kingdom of God: deception, division, diversion and discouragement.

A glance at the news shows that evil runs rampant. There are not only war and human trafficking and racism and homophobia, but also societal challenges, like immigration reform, health care access and responding to climate change, that should be solvable—but the solutions for which remain mired in debate and bureaucracy.

“There’s a temptation to allow ourselves to be caught up in the complexities [of an issue] in such a way that we become immobilized,” Father Cameli said. “People kind of throw up their hands, even people who want to do something positive.”

That sense of helplessness, the discouragement, can be demonic. “We just collapse in our own inability to deal with things,” he said.

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It sometimes feels as if every theological belief in the church fosters division or heated debate. So I was surprised to find, when mentioning this story to friends and clergy across

the theological spectrum, how belief in the devil seemed to transcend ideological lines. But differences in what to do with that belief did emerge.

Kathleen Beckman has assisted the healing and deliverance ministry in the Diocese of Orange, Calif., for about two decades. She said that following the murder of a loved one in 1991, she began to sense that something dark was afflicting her family. So she began to learn more about the church’s healing ministry.

Ms. Beckman studied Ignatian spirituality and eventually started a prayer group for priests. When one of the priests asked for her assistance in praying with a woman he believed to be possessed by a demon, Ms. Beckman said yes. She has been involved in exorcisms ever since.

“Possession is still very rare,” Ms. Beckman told me, but she wants Catholics to be on guard against influences of the devil, temptations of the flesh and, as Pope John Paul II put it, “the spirit of this world.” Frequenting the sacraments and developing a robust prayer life are the essential tools for Christians, she said: “People need to be prepared for spiritual battles, because even if you begin to deepen your relationship with the Lord Jesus through prayer, you’re going to battle with yourself, with things of the world that will try to distract you, and with an enemy who would rather you do anything but get closer to the Lord.”

Those themes came up in nearly every interview I conducted.

(One particularly effective method to tick off the Devil? Praying the rosary. “I’ve been present many times to hear evil spirits scream out, ‘Stop those beads! They torment us!’” Ms. Beckman said.)

But Ms. Beckman was more specific than others when I asked about where she sees demonic influences at work in the world. She pointed to abortion, debates over gender and what she called “woke culture.”

Using the devil in political and cultural fights goes back centuries.

Dr. Laycock, author of the book on “The Exorcist” mentioned earlier, said that the height of exorcism and demonological belief arrived during the Reformation. This allowed religious leaders, fighting for their faith and often for their lives, to paint their theological adversaries as demonic. “It was very political,” he said.

There are several much more recent examples.

A well-known Catholic commentator, the Rev. John Zuhlsdorf, left the Diocese of Madison, Wis. in 2021 after he conducted exorcisms on social media targeting what he called “demonic influence in the vote certification process” and praying “to protect vote counters from the temptations from the devil to commit fraud” during the contentious 2020 presidential election. A year earlier, Archbishop Sal-



Father Gabriele Amorth, a longtime exorcist for the Diocese of Rome who died in 2016, is pictured performing an exorcism in the documentary "The Devil and Father Amorth."

CNS photo/LD Entertainment



In the sacristy of the St. Dominic Oratory in Chicago, blessed salt and oil sit alongside two versions of prayerbooks used for exorcisms.

Michael J. O'Loughlin

vatore Cordileone of San Francisco performed an exorcism at a church where protestors had knocked down a statue depicting St. Junipero Serra because of his association with North American colonization. And when the state of Illinois adopted same-sex marriage in 2013, the bishop of Springfield, Thomas Paprocki, performed a public exorcism, stating that "the devil's evil influences" were at work.

Even Pope Francis has invoked the devil to castigate his opponents. In 2021, he described attacks on him and the church from ideological foes as "the work of the devil."

(Opponents of liberal politicians and policies are not the only ones invoking the supernatural. A group of self-described witches gathered regularly for years to put a spell on Donald J. Trump "so that his malignant works may fail utterly," as the group put it.)

"I see more and more cases where exorcism is used not to heal someone, but to publicly proclaim this political issue is actually a manifestation of supernatural evil," Dr. Laycock said. "And I find that troubling."

And despite Ms. Beckman's concerns about the current culture, she also is wary of people spending too much energy looking for the devil at work in the contemporary world. Videos claiming to offer proof of the devil's existence are legion on YouTube. Ms. Beckman counsels people to refrain from obsessing about the devil and to instead focus on Jesus.

"We need to be aware of our enemy, but we need to be much more aware of the Lord and his victory," she said. "When people come to me and their focus is on, 'The devil is doing this and the devil is doing that,' I say, 'Well, what is God doing in your life? When is the last time, instead of spending an hour watching a video on exorcism, you spent

an hour in adoration?"

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If Catholics of a certain age were influenced in their views on the devil by "The Exorcist" in the 1970s, younger generations may experience something similar now, as Hollywood is not shying away from demons.

This fall, "The Exorcist: Believer" hit theaters, the sixth movie in the franchise, its release marking 50 years since the release of the original. Another sequel is already planned for 2025. "The Nun II," a franchise part of the demon-filled world of "The Conjuring," came out earlier this year. Then there was "The Pope's Exorcist," which dramatized the diaries of Gabriele Amorth, S.S.P., the real-life exorcist and founder of the International Association of Exorcists. The film was co-produced by Eddie Siebert, S.J., a Jesuit priest, and grossed nearly \$76 million this spring.

The success of those movies might be a good indicator of just how religious, or at least spiritual, our society remains. "If we're truly secular, then watching a movie about demons would not be scary," Dr. Laycock said. "But if we're scared by a movie about demons, that says they still have a place in our brains, even if we're not going to church."

Barton T. Geger, S.J., knows a thing or two about how young adults view the devil. In his classes at the Boston College School of Theology and Ministry, Father Geger teaches spiritual discernment and is an expert in angelology and demonology.

Father Geger said that about a third of his students each semester express skepticism about describing the devil as personified evil. They say this is not because they don't believe in the devil, but they express worry about what focusing on that belief might lead to, such as blaming



The devil uses deception, division, diversion and discouragement.

mental illness on the devil, looking at other religious beliefs as demonic, and condoning the persecution of women.

Father Geger understands those concerns. The devil has been used, and continues to be used, to persecute and harm. But denying the devil's existence, Father Geger said, is not the right response. Belief in the devil has been an integral part of Christianity for thousands of years, he pointed out. "If a Christian denies the existence of personified evil, then they are denying the unequivocal testimony of Jesus and St. Paul, the New Testament writers, every single one of the church fathers, ecumenical councils, and countless saints and mystics," Father Geger said.

But what are modern Christians to do with that belief?

Father Geger said that looking to the example of Pope Francis can be helpful, because the reality of the devil is "an integral part of [the pope's] worldview and how he understands the role of Christians in the modern world."

If Christians take God's presence in their lives seriously, discernment is an essential tool to understand the influences and forces that compel us to act certain ways, Father Geger said. That is where the pope's Jesuit background comes in handy. Ignatius repeatedly stressed the importance of spiritual discernment.

"Discernment of spirits is simply part and parcel of [the pope's] conviction that God is present and active everywhere in creation," Father Geger said.

"Is God trying to tell me something? Or is that my own human thought?" he asked, explaining how people might go about discerning their lives. "Or is that the evil one trying to confuse me or discourage me in some way?"

Father Geger, who is working on a book about spiritual discernment, said there are three forces at work in our lives: the good spirit, meaning God and the angels; our own thoughts and desires; and the evil spirit. Each possesses "the ability to influence our interior movements." And because we face so many decisions over the course of our lives, seeking to understand which of the three spirits has a hold on us at any given moment can be helpful in

making decisions.

Even if some of our decisions are influenced by the evil spirit, that does not mean we are possessed. It's just part of being human. "Every human being has thoughts, words and desires, which are inclined toward God, inclined toward the holy," Father Geger said. "But we all have a wounded side as well."

When discerning, Father Geger said, there are several "red flags" that might show our motivations are coming not from God. Decisions that lead to isolation, secrecy and excessive control do not come from the good spirit, for example.

Another sign that something is not from God? Fear.

"The Lord says to us over and over again, 'Be not afraid,'" Father Geger said. "Fear by its very nature is from the evil spirit."

Like others I spoke to for this story, Father Geger said that belief in the devil is really an affirmation, in some ways, of the belief that God plays an active role in our lives.

"Ignatius makes a point of saying that Christ sends his angels to defend and help every human being in every place," Father Geger said. "And in the same way, the devil sends his demons to assault every person in every place."

Father Geger actually takes comfort in knowing that the devil seeks to attack human beings. "If the devil thinks we're important enough to attack, that must mean we're worth something in the eyes of God," he said.

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Back in the Chicago chapel, I still feel unsure what to make of what Father Clemente is telling me. As I glance around the sacristy, I notice a short Mason jar filled with white crystals. Next to it, a cylinder of Morton salt, the kind you might have in your kitchen cabinet. *It can't be, I think to myself. That's just in the movies, isn't it?*

"What's that?" I finally say, pointing to the salt.

Father Clemente said the salt is blessed and is used in an older rite of exorcism that is making a comeback. Next to the salt are two small plastic bottles filled with holy oil. Behind that, a drawer labeled simply "Tools."

Apparently the stuff of movies has some roots in reality.

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Dioceses generally have one priest designated by the bishop to serve as an official exorcist, usually assisted by a team of priests, religious and sometimes even laypeople.

The process for seeking an exorcism is not entirely transparent, and it may differ from diocese to diocese. In recent decades, exorcism has undergone something of a professionalization.

The Pope Leo XIII Institute in Mundelein, Ill., for example, describes itself as "a private, non-profit organization [that] has been established for the total education

& training of priests in the holy ministry of exorcism and deliverance.” While it does not undertake exorcisms, the ministry offers training and resources for those who do.

Despite that professionalization, much about the world of exorcists remains unknown to the rest of us. Priests appointed by their bishops to perform exorcisms often shy away from making their identities public, in part because of the attention they would attract. Even the Pope Leo XIII Institute states on its website that it is “unable to assist those who are doing research for any reason on the topic of exorcism, healing and deliverance.”

But some dioceses are more upfront about how to procure the help of an exorcist.

The Archdiocese of Washington offers some insight on its website. First, the person seeking the exorcism should consult with a parish priest, who will listen to the person’s story and pray with them. If the priest thinks further action is warranted, he will put the person in touch with the archdiocese’s exorcism team, who will begin an intake process and consider next steps. (For those under 18, a parent must be part of the process at all times.)

In Chicago, an intake form is published on the archdiocese’s website. A person seeking an exorcism must complete the form before meeting with mental health professionals and, perhaps, eventually, an exorcist.

The form has the feel of the endless stream of questions common in doctors’ offices, and it indeed asks for appointment availability. But the similarities end there. It asks about the person’s prayer life, if they’re devoted to any particular saints and if they attend Mass. It also asks if the person has been involved with, “or even dabbled with,” a whole list of increasingly common spiritual practices: ouija boards, horoscopes, witchcraft, astrology, Freemasonry, tarot cards, palm reading and Satanism. There are questions about past traumas and behaviors, including sexual abuse, eating disorders and financial challenges.

As we speak, Father Clemente thumbs through a couple of books. One has a black cover. He opens it and shows me prayers for exorcisms, printed in both English and Latin, as well as psalms and Gospel passages. The other one, red, is only in English; it contains prayers of a more recent provenance. There is a debate in the exorcism world, I am told, about whether the old prayers are more efficacious than the new ones—and whether praying them in Latin ticks off the demons even more.

“The devil really cares which language you use, or how you formulate the prayers?” I ask. But then I feel like I’m channeling the skeptical priest from “The Exorcist” and remember what happened to him, and I decide to back off.

Father Clemente reminds me that when it comes to the sacramental life of the church, words do matter. When con-

secrating the Eucharist, for example, a priest has to recite the prayers correctly. Baptisms have been declared invalid if the priest uses the wrong formula. Why would this be any different?

(As for the Latin versus English debate, he seems to agree that it probably does not make much of a difference. A consecrated host is not somehow more consecrated if the Eucharistic prayer is said in Latin, after all.)

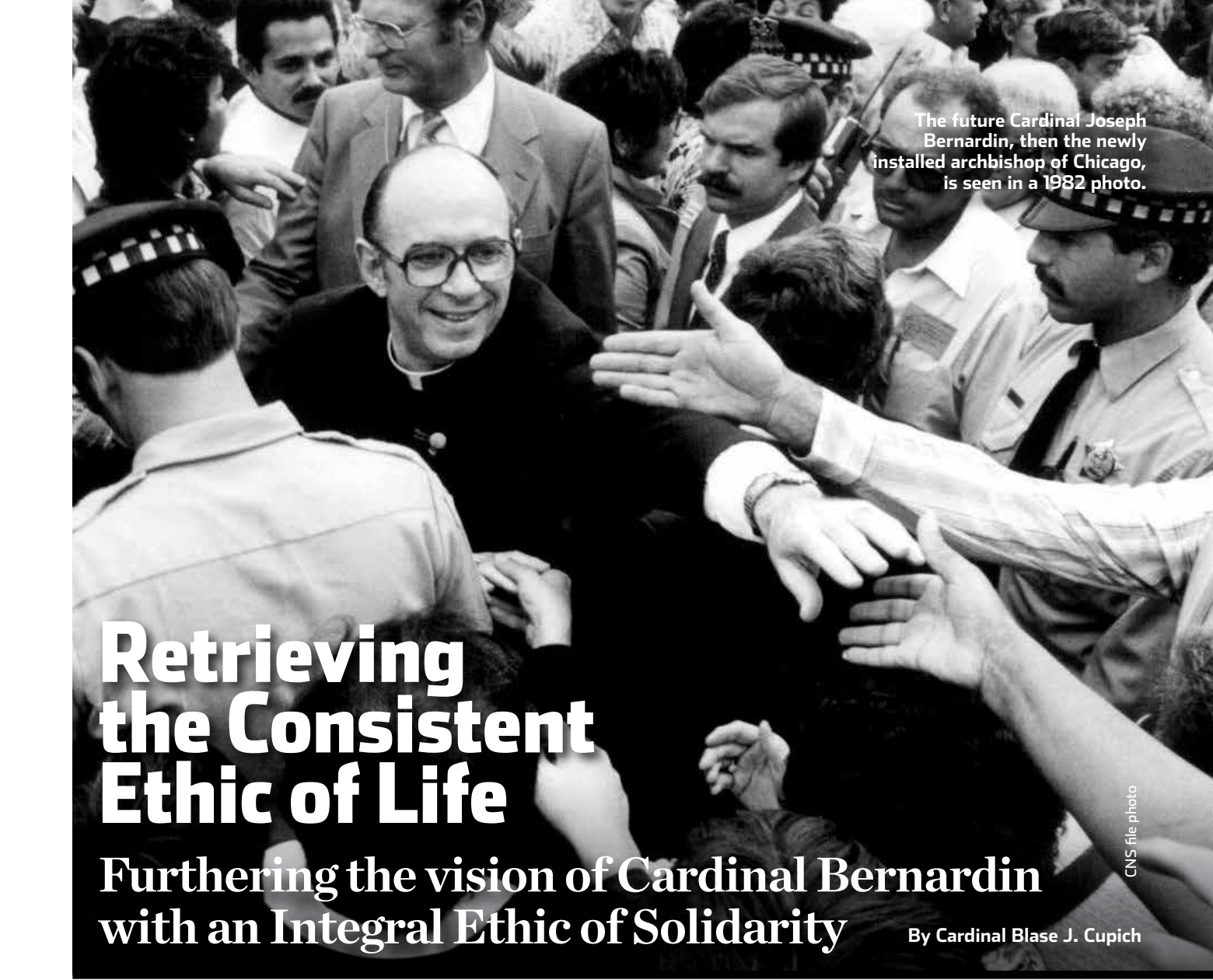
We leave the sacristy and walk into the chapel. It has recently been renovated and golden-hour light streams through the clear windows. The chapel is pretty but unremarkable: beige paint and yellow accent walls behind the wooden altar, about a half dozen pews in total. There are several statues and a handful of relics on display in the back.

Up front, against walls opposite the altar, sit two seemingly ordinary chairs with metal legs, straight backs and the cushions clad in brown vinyl. I probably wouldn’t have noticed them if Father Clemente had not pointed them out. The person seeking an exorcism would sit in one, he tells me, the exorcist in the other. Sometimes the chairs aren’t conducive for the exorcism, so a massage table will be brought out. The rest of the team—an exorcist would not be alone—might be asked to hold down a person exhibiting unusual strength.

Exorcisms take place here, I am told, on a weekly basis. People often require multiple sessions. And demand is only growing. But Father Clemente and others familiar with the church’s exorcism ministry say Catholics should not focus too much on the ancient rite.

“Sunday Mass and confession,” he said, “will do a lot more for you than an exorcism.”

Michael J. O’Loughlin is national correspondent at *America* and author of *Hidden Mercy: AIDS, Catholics, and the Untold Stories of Compassion in the Face of Fear*.



The future Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, then the newly installed archbishop of Chicago, is seen in a 1982 photo.

Retrieving the Consistent Ethic of Life

Furthering the vision of Cardinal Bernardin with an Integral Ethic of Solidarity

By Cardinal Blase J. Cupich

CNS file photo

Forty years ago this December, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin delivered a landmark address at Fordham University, one that set the course of his ministry and changed the way the church thought about life issues for years to come.

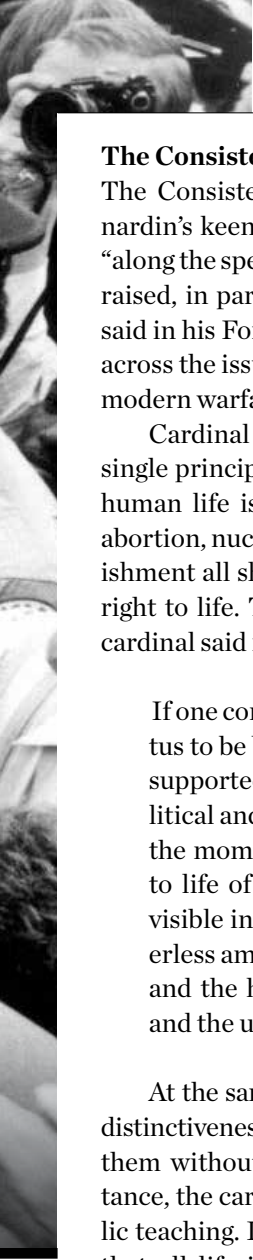
He had been asked to discuss the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' pastoral letter "The Challenge of Peace," which six months earlier had made national headlines for its opposition to the moral logic of nuclear deterrence and war. Nuclear war was on the mind of millions in 1983. Long since dormant in the American psyche, this fear came roaring back to life with the current war in Ukraine—reminding us that the Cold War may have ended, but ours is still a nuclear world.

That pastoral letter, the cardinal noted, linked the issues of nuclear war with abortion, but without really making the case. Concerned about how abortion and other social justice issues had divided the church, Cardinal Ber-

nardin designed his Fordham address to make that case, within a framework he famously called the "Consistent Ethic of Life." He would continue developing the idea until his death in 1996.

This essential insight of Cardinal Bernardin charts a path for the church today.

As a community of believers, we find ourselves beset by division, buffeted by a set of new questions about the church's relationship with the wider society and even with itself. In many ways, we need this teaching now more than ever. By retrieving and extending the Consistent Ethic of Life toward an "Integral Ethic of Solidarity," the church might offer a gift to the people of God—indeed, to all people who seek the common good. For if the church takes seriously the call of Pope Francis to incarnate a synodal church, then we must inculcate an Integral Ethic of Solidarity across all sectors of our common life together.



The Consistent Ethic of Life

The Consistent Ethic of Life grew out of Cardinal Bernardin's keen perception that a series of moral questions, "along the spectrum of life from womb to tomb," were being raised, in part by the emergence of new technologies. He said in his Fordham address: "For the spectrum of life cuts across the issues of genetics, abortion, capital punishment, modern warfare and the care of the terminally ill."

Cardinal Bernardin rooted these diverse issues in a single principle of Catholic faith: that the loss of even one human life is a momentous event. Seen in this context, abortion, nuclear war, poverty, euthanasia and capital punishment all share a common identity in their denial of the right to life. That commonality calls for consistency. The cardinal said in his Fordham address:

If one contends, as we do, that the right of every fetus to be born should be protected by civil law and supported by civil consensus, then our moral, political and economic responsibilities do not stop at the moment of birth. Those who defend the right to life of the weakest among us must be equally visible in support of the quality of life of the powerless among us: the old and the young, the hungry and the homeless, the undocumented immigrant and the unemployed worker.

At the same time, Cardinal Bernardin underscored the distinctiveness of each of these issues. Any effort to blend them without understanding their relative moral importance, the cardinal emphasized, would depart from Catholic teaching. In other words, the cardinal was not claiming that all life issues are equivalent. Instead, he forcefully argued for their distinctiveness, each requiring its own system of analysis, while emphasizing the reality of the interrelatedness of all threats to human life.

As the cardinal put it in a 1986 lecture at Seattle University: "There are distinguishing differences between abortion and war, as well as elements which radically differentiate war from decisions made about care of a terminally ill patient. The *differences* among these cases are universally acknowledged; a consistent ethic seeks to highlight the fact that differences do not destroy the elements of a *common moral challenge*." In this way, the cardinal sought to leverage the analogical character of Catholic thought to engage a whole range of moral issues, each distinctively urgent, but all inextricably linked by the fundamental value of human life.

Cardinal Bernardin knew that the church acknowledges the difference between the language one uses within a

faith community and the language one uses in a secular setting. In order to be heard by the wider culture, the church would need to bring her moral arguments into the public square using common human reason. By developing this commitment to the sanctity of human life "from womb to tomb," he argued, the church could most effectively move society further along the path to justice.

Reaction and Stratification

The effort was not well received in all quarters of the church. Indeed, Cardinal Bernardin found that his lecture, which he intended as a point of unity, had instead united critics against him, including bishops. Some critics worried that the Consistent Ethic of Life would water down Catholic teaching against abortion and provide cover for Catholics who wanted to vote for pro-choice candidates. Others had no interest in folding opposition to abortion into their advocacy on other social justice issues. We must remember that the cardinal delivered his Fordham lecture just 10 years after *Roe v. Wade* had scrambled the political map of the United States. It was a period when grassroots activists took the lead in opposing abortion, in many ways, spurring the U.S. bishops to form a comprehensive response to *Roe*.

In 1974, the U.S. bishops called for a constitutional amendment to ban abortion. It was becoming more clear that *Roe* was not going away any time soon. By 1976, Cardinal Bernardin was already warning of how *Roe* was eroding respect for life broadly. He understood that *Roe* not only posed a unique threat to unborn life, but also was leading the nation down a path of ideological stratification. When the Democratic Party announced its platform during the presidential campaign of Jimmy Carter, it included opposition to a constitutional amendment banning abortion. Republicans responded with a platform more friendly to the bishops' goals and articulated ways in which they believed the party could advance Catholic policy preferences. The great sorting had begun.

This stratification was something Cardinal Bernardin had been worrying about for some time. In a 1975 address to a meeting of Serra International, Cardinal Bernardin said, "It is my conviction that if our entire Catholic community understood correctly the real issues that are involved in the promotion of social justice, there would be less polarization and a greater desire to work collaboratively for the good of the human family both at home and abroad."

As a young priest and bishop, Cardinal Bernardin ministered through some of the most unsettled periods in American and Catholic history, including the Vietnam War, the Second Vatican Council and the civil rights movement. Throughout his ministry, the cardinal remained aware that



Without developing and embracing an Integral Ethic of Solidarity, one can scarcely see a future for humanity that does not end in tragedy.

remarkable changes were taking place—locally, nationally, globally. During the homily at his Mass of reception as an auxiliary bishop in Atlanta in 1966, he spoke of the “new spirit” that had “jolted our complacency.” He reminded the congregation of the true nature of the church: “The church, while ever remaining a society with the structures and laws common to all societies, is fundamentally the presence of God’s merciful action among men. The church, in other words, is *people*.” He continued: “Everything, therefore, which deserves the name Christian must be geared toward helping—and serving—God’s people.”

This deeply scriptural sense of the human and therefore social dimension of the church would only deepen as Cardinal Bernardin’s ministry continued. And in 1983, he found himself at another pivotal moment in history. The U.S. Catholic bishops had just issued “The Challenge of Peace,” which spoke powerfully to the “new moment” created by the existential threat of nuclear weapons. The bishops condemned the targeting of civilians and revealed the immorality of a nuclear regime that had fostered a nuclear arms race and advanced a defense posture based on mutually assured destruction.

The effect of the pastoral letter was profound. It engaged public policy leaders, activists and parishioners. It also encountered significant opposition. But it had helped transform the debate by bringing ethical discourse and the tradition of natural law to the center of the nation’s discernment.

In 1983, the church in the United States also found itself in a new moment with respect to its commitment to protect unborn children. Cardinal Bernardin had been recently elected chair of the bishops’ Committee on Pro-Life

Activities, and he wanted to develop a strategy to enhance Catholic advocacy for legal protections for the unborn. Roe had not produced a tidal shift in public opinion. Therefore, hope for the pro-life movement was well-founded, but it needed a rethinking of the strategies that bishops should adopt to broaden respect for life.

At first, Cardinal Bernardin was not quite sure how to treat issues that did not fall under the prohibition of the direct killing of innocent human life. As he said during his Fordham talk:

Consistency means we cannot have it both ways. We cannot urge a compassionate society and vigorous public policy to protect the rights of the unborn and then argue that compassion and significant public programs on behalf of the needy undermine the moral fiber of society or are beyond the proper scope of governmental responsibility.

In this way, addressing poverty, hunger, lack of health care, homelessness, and the plight of refugees and immigrants came to constitute part of the Consistent Ethic of Life. In response to critics who worried that the logic joining the issues of nuclear war and abortion was undermined by including quality-of-life issues, Cardinal Bernardin sought to ground the ethic in a wider theological framework. The Consistent Ethic would need to be rooted not only in the impermissibility of taking innocent life, but more broadly in defense of the human person. “To defend human life is to protect the human person. The Consistent Ethic cuts across the diverse fields of social ethics, medical ethics and sexual ethics,” he argued in that 1986 lecture at Seattle University. “The unifying theme behind these three areas of moral analysis is the human person, the core reality in Catholic moral thought.”

Cardinal Bernardin had come to realize what Pope Francis has continually emphasized in his approach to the social teachings of the church: that all threats to human dignity are intertwined, not simply by logical consistency, but by reality itself, as diverse threats to life tend to reinforce one another. Or, as the Holy Father has put it time and again: “Realities are more important than ideas.”

Consequently, for Cardinal Bernardin, there was a double imperative of determining both the moral correctness of a position and then the most effective way to put it into practice by persuading the general public. He spoke to this in his address to the 1984 Right-to-Life Convention in Kansas City, Mo.: “It is precisely because I am convinced that demonstrating the linkage between abortion and other issues is both morally correct and tactically necessary for

the pro-life position that I have been addressing the theme of a Consistent Ethic of Life for the church and society.”

Cardinal Bernardin was acutely aware that the Consistent Ethic of Life was designed for the neuralgic issues of 1983, that it was an approach for the “new moment” in which he was speaking. He would be very pleased, I am sure, that we are now thinking through a consistent ethic for our time. But before taking up that question, let us consider some of the changes that have taken place over the four decades since Cardinal Bernardin delivered his address. Five of them bear particular importance.

Dobbs v. Jackson

First, the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson*, which overturned *Roe v. Wade*, has removed an enormously destructive legal impediment to protecting unborn life. At the same time, the limitations of the court’s decision have become apparent. Just as *Roe* failed to resolve public tensions over abortion, *Dobbs* has not settled the matter for the American people. While many states have moved to constitutionally codify a right to abortion, others have passed restrictions. In still other states, voters have rejected ballot initiatives to restrict abortion. Just as important, the increasing availability of abortion pharmaceuticals, accessible by mail in all 50 states, could dramatically limit the impact of *Dobbs*.

We must also candidly acknowledge the problem of unintended consequences. In the year since the *Dobbs* decision came down, public support for abortion rights has only increased. According to a USA Today/Suffolk University poll released in June, nearly one-quarter of Americans say that state efforts to restrict abortion access has *increased* their support for abortion rights, versus 6 percent who say their support for abortion rights has decreased. This is one reason that major federal legislation on abortion will not likely be enacted any time soon.

Yet, the church and the pro-life movement now have an opportunity to remind the wider culture again of how important it is to provide material support to expectant and new mothers. This has always been a part of the pro-life movement. But in the face of political gridlock, the church must redouble its efforts to advocate for policies that make it easier for parents to choose to have children, and then to raise them. This includes guaranteed paid family leave, affordable child care and workplace protections for expectant mothers.

Americans live under a regime in which there is no federally guaranteed right to paid family leave. The United States is one of just six countries that lacks this basic protection. This is a scandal for any nation, let alone the

wealthiest on earth, and it is well past time for our political parties to come together on policies that support expectant and new mothers.

Climate Change

Second, climate change threatens our planet—and therefore, the future of humanity itself. We are seeing the dramatic alterations in our weather patterns taking place before our very eyes, from the recent hurricanes battering Mexico and California to the horrific wildfires on Maui and the tragic flooding in Libya. We know why this is happening. The continued use of fossil fuels and industrial practices that increase harmful emissions are trapping more and more heat in the lower atmosphere. In a particularly painful way, the Canadian wildfire smoke that choked so much of the American Midwest and the East Coast this past summer reminds us of humanity’s interconnectedness, as an environmental crisis in one part of the world can harm people many thousands of miles away.

Indeed, millions of women, children and men have become climate refugees, forced to flee their homelands because of environmental disasters. The World Health Organization has called climate change the greatest threat to global health and life in the new millennium. Every year, according to the W.H.O., about 13 million people die from environmental factors, a number that will rapidly increase if global warming continues unchecked.

The fact that climate change victims are disproportionately poor is an affront to the will of God, who offered creation as a gift to the whole human family. The biodiversity of that creation is increasingly destroyed because the high-polluting nations of the world refuse to stem the tide of devastation. If we could build national infrastructure that supports the fossil fuel industry, then we can do the same to support renewable energies. If we could curb consumption for our war efforts, then we can do so to save the very planet that sustains us. In “*Laudato Si*” and elsewhere, Pope Francis calls us to release our attachments to the status quo and imagine a new future in which humanity protects the gift of creation.

New Threats to Human Life

Third, new technologies have emerged that yield great benefits for humanity, but also bring deadly new threats to human life. Pope Francis captures this peril in “*Laudato Si*” when he teaches that “nuclear energy, biotechnology, information technologies and knowledge of our DNA have given us tremendous power. More precisely, they have given those with the knowledge, and especially the economic resources to use them, an impressive dominance over the

whole of humanity and the entire world. Never has humanity had such power over itself, yet nothing assures that it will be used wisely.”

Building on St. John Paul II’s first encyclical, “Redemptor Hominis,” Cardinal Bernardin shared this concern in his Fordham address: “The essential question in the technological challenge is this: In an age when we *can* do almost anything, how do we decide what we *ought* to do? The even more demanding question is:

In a time when we can do anything technologically, how do we decide morally what we *never should do*?” In the 40 years since the cardinal asked those questions, the risks of unexamined technological advances, especially in the areas of artificial intelligence and defense, have only increased.

The Francis Effect

Fourth, the church has experienced a decade of Pope Francis as bishop of Rome. From the beginning, the Holy Father sounded notes very much in keeping with Cardinal Bernardin’s vision for the people of God. In his first interview after being elected in the conclave of 2013, Pope Francis highlighted the importance of presenting church teaching in the proper context:

The church’s pastoral ministry cannot be obsessed with the transmission of a disjointed multitude of doctrines to be imposed insistently. Proclamation in a missionary style focuses on the essentials, on the necessary things: this is also what fascinates and attracts more, what makes the heart burn, as it did for the disciples at Emmaus.... The proposal of the Gospel must be more simple, profound, radiant. It is from this proposition that the moral consequences then flow.

Cardinal Bernardin also came to focus on what he termed “the essentials.” In his book *The Gift of Peace*, the cardinal reflected on his spiritual practice of letting go. “To close the gap between who I am and what God wants of me, I must empty myself and let Jesus come in and take over,” he wrote. “He wants me to focus on the *essentials* of his message and way of life rather than on the accidentals that needlessly occupy so much of our time and efforts.... Essentials ask us to give true witness and love others more. Nonessentials close us in on ourselves.”

This too reminds us of Pope Francis, who famously warned his brother cardinals, in advance of the conclave that would elect him pope, that the church cannot stay closed in on itself, but must go out into the world to heal

its wounds.

In so many ways, Pope Francis inherits, re-presents and adapts the ideas at the heart of the Consistent Ethic of Life. This should come as no surprise, given both its scriptural foundations and the fact that the pope comes from a part of the world that is no stranger to multiple, constant threats to life. But consider how Pope Francis has advanced Catholic teaching against the death penalty, to the degree that he has included its prohibition in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Not only does he present church teachings in their full context, but he also structures many of his teachings according to his abiding belief in the power of the Holy Spirit to bring God’s children together. This is one of the driving ideas behind his call for the church to become ever more synodal.

Polarization

This brings us to a fifth contextual consideration: the intensification of polarization in Western society. The division in civil and ecclesial life that Cardinal Bernardin warned about four decades ago arose from the fact that issues themselves were being treated in isolation. Today, our culture continues its blind march into atomization, each sorted by the digital platforms we use according to ideology, purchasing habits, even health status. It is not only the case that issues are treated in isolation, however. Today we are living in isolation from one another, and how we obtain information about others and the world tends to reinforce that great enemy of dialogue: fear.

This toxic dynamic led Cardinal Bernardin in 1996 to launch the Catholic Common Ground Initiative, a project he conceived with the late Msgr. Phil Murnion, who did so much to enrich parish and ecclesial life throughout his ministry. It was just months before the cardinal would succumb to cancer. The idea was profoundly synodal: to bring Catholics together to discuss a variety of issues with the goal of finding common ground. At the press conference announcing the effort, he said: “I have been troubled that an increasing polarization within the church and, at times, a mean-spiritedness have hindered the kind of dialogue that helps us address our mission and concerns.”

Polarization is having disastrous consequences across American culture. Racial injustice is rampant. Gun violence is terrorizing communities already struggling with poverty, as mass shootings multiply fears in settings that had always seemed safe. Poor health and nutrition kill children and the elderly. Rural communities go ignored. Urban centers are maligned as lost to crime and poverty. The demonization of migrants is especially disturbing, as we are a nation built by immigrants. Recent attacks on our dem-



ocratic norms make protecting the vulnerable even more critical and difficult. Indifference stands at the root of this suffering, but intentional efforts to exacerbate social divisions cause even more harm to a nation so blessed by the diversity God desires.

Diversity is not something best perceived from within homogenous groupings. It takes seeing, which requires proximity, and this is precisely why the Holy Father's emphasis on synodality and solidarity could not be more urgent. As Pope Francis said in March at the Minerva Dialogues: "Lack of diversity is a lack of richness, for diversity forces us to learn together from one another and thus humbly to rediscover the authentic meaning and scope of our human dignity. Let us not forget that differences stimulate creativity."

Without developing and embracing an Integral Ethic of Solidarity, one can scarcely see a future for humanity that does not end in tragedy.

Cardinal Bernardin presented the case for consistency in the language of natural law with precision and logic. But in later years he noted that such a project could not succeed in the absence of a social disposition to protect human life and dignity. Sometimes he called this an attitude. I believe another word for it is "solidarity."

An Integral Ethic of Solidarity

The Consistent Ethic of Life could serve as a logical scaffolding for our analysis of life issues. Putting them into effect in a committed way—as Cardinal Bernardin had hoped—leads to an Integral Ethic of Solidarity. That ethic grounds our respect for life both interpersonally and within the human family. Solidarity points to the interconnectedness of all human beings, to the unity that they should strive for and the responsibility for the common good that we all share. Solidarity is a moral virtue. It is a disposition of gratitude to God for the gifts he bestows upon us, and of service to those who suffer. It is never motivated by grievance or self-seeking.

As St. John Paul II, the prophet of solidarity, wrote in "Sollicitudo Rei Socialis," solidarity is not a "feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good. That is to say for the good of all." It is precisely this predisposition that can provide the path for our church and our world to build a consistent ethic for our time.

Solidarity is the virtue that calls us to unveil and transform the structures of sin that lie at the root of so much human suffering. It calls us to challenge the social structures that annihilate the moral identity of the unborn. It calls

An effective Ethic of Solidarity must be animated by the virtue of compassion.

us to see the social sin in the falsehoods and economic interests that prevent a robust response to climate change. It guards us from despair in the face of grotesque income inequalities, early deaths from poor health care, the savageries of war and the racism that tear us apart. Solidarity calls us to morally evaluate and regulate new technologies that threaten the dignity of the human person. Solidarity confirms that we live interconnectedly and therefore helps us see that structures of sin are something we can change.

Indeed, as Cardinal Bernardin observed in a 1990 talk to groups funded by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development: "The virtue of solidarity can change hearts and transform social structures. It can unleash God's power in our midst and create a more just and peaceful society!"

So, how might we sketch the elements of an Integral Ethic of Solidarity?

Reason and Revelation

First, an Integral Ethic of Solidarity must be formed through both common human reason and Scripture. Cardinal Bernardin was correct to ground the Consistent Ethic of Life in an essentially natural-law framework, making it accessible to all people in a diverse society. But natural law speaks the language of reason, not passion. And in the current cultural climate, reason is too rarely welcomed.

Instead, an Integral Ethic of Solidarity must be grounded in the foundational source for Catholic social teaching: Scripture. We see in Exodus that God is determined not only for his people to know, love and worship him, but that he wants to free them from earthly suffering as well. "I have witnessed the affliction of my people and have heard their cry against their taskmasters, so I know well what they are suffering. Therefore, I have come down to rescue them from the power of the Egyptians and lead them up from that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and



If an Integral Ethic of Solidarity is to be truly Catholic, it cannot end at our borders.

honey” (Ex 3:7-8).

God desires salvation not only for the whole of humanity, but for the whole human person. This is why authentic worship necessarily entails working for justice. We see this again and again in the Scriptures. Jesus carries on the work of the Father in his healing ministry. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus calls us to develop virtues not only so that we may be in right relationship with God, but also so that we may make things better for our neighbors. Consider how perceptive 1 John is on this point: “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ but hates his brother, he is a liar; for whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen” (1 John 4:20).

Compassion, Not Competition

Second, an effective Ethic of Solidarity must be animated by the virtue of compassion, or empathy. Fourteen years ago, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops undertook a research project funded by the Lilly Endowment. It sought to find a bridge between Catholics who were passionate about ending abortion but opposed to the church’s stance on quality-of-life issues, and Catholics who were passionate about Catholic teaching regarding the poor but opposed or neutral on the protection of the unborn.

The bridge idea that connected the two poles was compassion. This is what led women and men beyond their comfort zones to embrace human suffering in “the other camp.” It helped them to see that human suffering unites the issues of abortion, war and peace, euthanasia, the death penalty and poverty—because core elements of human dignity are under attack. Compassion frustrates the logic of team sports, which seems to govern civic life today, in which cruelty toward one’s ideological opponents has taken on a perverse form of cultural currency. It does so by replacing the logic of competition with the logic of love. When we let go of what we think we know is best, when we

give up the need to control outcomes, we make room for God. We begin to see the sufferings of others with the eyes of the Father.

Beyond Our Borders

Third, a comprehensive Ethic of Solidarity must have a deep global perspective. In “Fratelli Tutti,” Pope Francis brings this home: “In today’s world, the sense of belonging to a single human family is fading, and the dream of working together for justice and peace seems an outdated utopia. What reigns instead is a cool, comfortable and globalized indifference.”

An Ethic of Solidarity must be suffused with the sense of the global responsibilities we in the United States bear for combating threats to human life and dignity across the globe. On issues of climate change and war and peace, American actions are often determinative for the world. American aid can save lives, the unborn and the elderly alike, those suffering war and famine, those seeking better for their families as they flee persecution or violence—or we can abandon them. If an Integral Ethic of Solidarity is to be truly Catholic, it cannot end at our borders.

Synodality

Fourth, an Integral Ethic of Solidarity must be synodal. We live in a synodal church. If there is any hope of nurturing support for an Integral Ethic of Solidarity, rooted in compassion, formed by common human reason and Scripture, global in vision, dedicated to defending human life and dignity against their many threats—such a teaching cannot be imposed from above. Even if the diminished credibility of the bishops resulting from their mishandling of the sexual abuse crisis did not make this necessary, the emerging sense of collaboration within the life of the church does.

Many who participated in last year’s synodal dialogues were struck by how freely they could share their joys, sorrows and hopes in and for the church. These sessions were characterized by a mutual sense of non-judgmentalism, which happened to be the second bridging virtue that the Lilly study identified. Wouldn’t it be something if the church in the United States undertook the mission of inculcating an Integral Ethic of Solidarity using this same process of dialogue, encounter and non-judgmentalism?

For the past five decades, the church in our nation has engaged in the “Encuentro” process for forming and implementing a pastoral plan for Hispanic ministry. The process was profoundly synodal, and took place at every level of church life. It would be a great gift to our church and our nation if, after the next presidential election, we launched a similar process of dialogue, encounter and love.

Prayer, the First Dialogue

Fifth, and finally, at least for now, an Integral Ethic of Solidarity must be rooted in prayer. And here we return to the witness of Cardinal Bernardin, who spoke movingly about his own struggles with prayer at various points throughout his ministry. In the days and weeks before he died, the cardinal was working on *The Gift of Peace*, his spiritual memoir covering the last three years of his life. He begins with a powerful meditation on his spiritual journey, a chapter he called, “Letting Go,” a theme that “[rose] to the surface” as he confronted the end of his earthly life. “By letting go,” he writes, “I mean the ability to release from our grasp those things that inhibit us from developing an intimate relationship with the Lord Jesus.”

The cardinal frankly acknowledged that this was rarely easy, even, or perhaps especially, for him, given his habit of wanting to get things just right. But even from his seminary days, he began to realize one of the most important aspects of this kenotic act: prayer. It “is not a one-sided practice. Rather, prayer involves listening and speaking on both sides.” Prayer, he would elsewhere explain, makes it difficult to “separate and break apart elements which are in fact unities.”

In this way, perhaps we might think of prayer as the first dialogue. A time and space we give to the Lord for speaking, but perhaps more important, for listening. Even if we, like Cardinal Bernardin, find it difficult to sustain the practice, well, he had some advice on that too: “You should keep plugging away. And...if you do give the time, little by little you become united with the Lord throughout your life, which is very important.” The same might be said for the practice of dialogue.

A Vision for Our Common Life

Revisiting the life and teachings of Cardinal Bernardin, I am reminded of how remarkable it is that this son of Vatican II found himself in just the times and places he needed to be. The more you read about the man Joseph Bernardin, the more you get the sense of his trajectory as in some sense inevitable—which is to say, providential. The man whose immigrant parents came from the north of Italy, like Jorge Bergoglio’s, a cultural crossroads where differences have always had to be negotiated, became the minister whose time on Earth was marked by nothing so much as an ethic of reconciliation.

Cardinal Bernardin always kept a copy of the “Prayer of St. Francis” with him, sometimes reciting it to himself or before meetings. He even closed *The Gift of Peace* by inviting the reader to pray it with him. He did not talk about it much in public, but the cardinal was, in

fact, a Franciscan. He was received into the first order of the Holy Name Province of the Order of Friars Minor in May of 1972, and often visited Assisi during trips to Rome. He took this association very seriously, to the point of divesting himself of possessions, even money, beyond the bare minimum. It has been said that at one point the cardinal wanted to be buried in the Franciscan habit. He gave a powerful account of his commitment to the Franciscan way in a homily delivered in Assisi in 1975. Forgive me as I quote it at length:

The thing we need most in our highly secularized and sophisticated world is the *spirit* of St. Francis. What kind of spirit is this? It is a spirit that puts God in the very center of life.... It is a spirit that derives a great deal of joy from the simple things in life.... It is a spirit that prompts us to love our neighbor.... Finally, it is a spirit that prompts us to be truthful, open persons of integrity at all times; to approach life with a simplicity that frequently we see only in small children.... When this is done, not only do we reconcile ourselves with God, but we also reconcile ourselves with our brothers and sisters.

What a profound vision for our common life together. What a beautiful description of all that God wants for his family, the human family. What a profound gift to the church and the world was Joseph, our brother.

Cardinal Blase J. Cupich is the archbishop of Chicago. This essay is adapted from a talk given by Cardinal Cupich at Fordham University on Sept. 26. The talk was first published in English in *L'Osservatore Romano*.



CATHOLICS SHOULD CARE ABOUT CONSENT

Sex should always be unitive—never coercive

By Grace J. Wojdak

When we talk about consent in the context of sexual relationships, we are referring to the moral principle that any and all sexual contact must be freely chosen and welcomed by both partners. But isn't consent merely something that the secular world cares about? Not so. Consent is the fundamental prerequisite for sex to be unitive, just as openness to life is the fundamental prerequisite condition for sex to be procreative. And both should matter deeply to Catholics.

Despite their conspicuous absence from much of the Catholic discourse, discussions around consent should become a commonplace feature of Catholic conversations about sexual ethics. They can serve especially as a corrective to the harmful use of "marital debt" rhetoric within Catholic culture.

Consent should have a prominent place within the Catholic Church's traditional elaboration of sexual morality; implicitly, it already does. In the 1960s, the world was waiting for the church to respond to the larger cultural conversation about contraception after the development of "the pill" in the 1950s. To aid in the magisterial deliberations on this issue (which ultimately culminated in the encyclical "Humanae Vitae"), Pope Paul VI appointed a commission of bishops, cardinals and theologians (including lay participants) who considered the matter in depth and then put it to a vote. When the majority of votes were cast in favor of changing the church's teaching to allow contraception, two opposing reports were written and submitted to the pope.

As Michael Lawler recounts in *Marriage and the Catholic Church: Disputed Questions*:

The minority report, which became the controverted part of the encyclical, argued that "each and every marriage act [*quilibet matrimonii actus*] must remain open to the transmission of life." The majority report argued that it is marriage itself (*matrimonium ipsum*), not "each and every marriage act," that is to be open to the transmission of life.

The pope famously sided with the minority position and determined that the church should "not repudiate its long-standing teaching on contraception," leading to the doctrinal proclamation that the procreative dimension of sex must indeed be honored and upheld in "each and every marital act," not merely in the marriage itself. Catholic couples were therefore exhorted never to consider contraception as a viable option for spacing births within their marriages.

This ruling about "each and every marital act" has important implications for our understanding of the inherently unitive nature of sexual acts, in addition to clarifying the proper disposition toward procreation in each and every marital act. Consider this ruling in light of the theology of sex presented in "Humanae Vitae":

This particular doctrine, often expounded by the magisterium of the Church, is based on the

inseparable connection, established by God, which man on his own initiative may not break, between the unitive significance and the procreative significance which are both inherent to the marriage act.

Since there are two inseparable ends or purposes of sex (the procreative and the unitive), and since openness to the procreative end pertains to each and every marital act (not simply to the marriage in general), it follows that *each and every* marital act—and not simply the marriage as a whole or marital consent considered abstractly—ought also to be *unitive*. This means that according to church teaching, *each and every* instance of non-unitive sex (even if it occurs within the context of a loving marriage or a generally unitive sex life), ought to be condemned as sinful and wrong—just as a single instance of contraceptive sex would be considered sinful and wrong.

Sex as Reciprocal Self-giving

Could a non-consensual marital act, or sex that one or both spouses have not freely chosen, ever be a means toward greater unity between husband and wife? I would unequivocally answer in the negative. Sex without free consent could never be unitive. This conclusion becomes self-evident, especially when considering that the Pontifical Council for the Family defines the unitive end of sex as “the reciprocal self-giving of the spouses.” Freely given consent from both partners would seem to be the most basic requirement for any instance of sex to be truly unitive.

In other words, consent is a necessary (but perhaps not sufficient) condition for any instance of sex to be unitive. Therefore, joining this conclusion to the moral injunction above (regarding each and every marital act), I would contend that any instance of sex that occurs without the full and free consent of both partners is gravely sinful—an instance of marital rape.

This conclusion lends great weight to the central place of consent in any properly Catholic sexual ethic. And it inspires the conviction that we must foster a richer dialogue about the importance of sexual consent in Catholic culture.

In light of the doctrinal importance of consent, what are we to make of the confusion within Catholic culture about whether spouses’ ability to give or withhold their consent is fully retained within marriage? Part of this confusion is due to the promotion among a small but vocal minority in the church of the notion that a spouse’s free will might instead be overridden by “the marital debt.” One example occurs in a recent book entitled *Ask Your Husband: A Guide to Catholic Femininity*, in which the author, Stephanie Gordon, suggests that “according to St. Thomas, the wife assumes

mortal sin upon her soul for denying what is rightly owed to her husband” unless she has “a legitimate reason,” giving moreover no real indication of what exactly (outside serious illness), might constitute such a “legitimate reason.”

Ms. Gordon claims that married persons “made promises before God to dedicate their bodies to their spouses for the marital debt,” and she elaborates in a footnote that “marital debt, also known as conjugal debt, is the sexual obligation one spouse owes to the other.”

This kind of rhetoric is not only misleading; it is downright dangerous. And it is taken seriously by a growing ultra-conservative movement within the church. Both Ms. Gordon and her husband are published authors within this sphere. Timothy Gordon wrote a book titled *The Case for Patriarchy*. The Gordons urge Catholic couples to join the movement they represent, and to embrace their ideology on such matters as “the marital debt.”

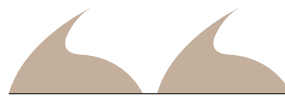
The picture they paint is one of control and entitlement within marriage, holding up a distortion as though it were the ideal. For them, a man’s wife is not seen in light of her God-given freedom and personal dignity, but rather under the degrading light of ownership, as if she were a kind of property to be invoked at will. This is dehumanizing and wrong. And it is a far cry from “the reciprocal self-giving of the spouses.”

Although proponents of this understanding of spousal relationship tout their unique fidelity to Catholic teaching, their ideology is antithetical to what is expressed in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. It is utterly incompatible with relating to one’s spouse respectfully as a moral agent on equal footing, capable of the very act of self-gift in which spouses are called to participate.

In real life, couples who practice a fertility awareness method as an alternative to contraception will choose to abstain from sex during fertile periods whenever they are not open to the possibility of procreation. What is needed, then, is simply to extend this principle to encompass the inseparable unitive end of sex as well. This would mean choosing to abstain from sex whenever full and free consent is lacking.

The marriage vows (or consent) pronounced by the couple on their wedding day are not a one-and-done pronouncement guaranteeing that the spouses will have access to each other’s bodies for sex anytime, anywhere, no matter what. As Pope Paul VI confirmed, considerations of sexual morality pertain to the essence of each individual marital act, not to the marriage in general.

And recall that *each and every* marital act must be unitive—so each instance must be weighed on its own merits and circumstances—and that without consent, unitive sex is utterly impossible.



Without consent, unitive sex is utterly impossible.

Consequently, since both spouses are morally obligated to uphold the unitive nature of sex, both spouses must truly respect each other's personal freedom to give or withhold consent *each and every time* they wish to have sex. In basic terms, this means asking first and always accepting a “no,” if that is the answer one receives.

Coercion Is a Crime

In marriage, both spouses retain their God-given right to say no to sex, and neither has the right to force the other into sex against their will. So spouses need not feel pressured to have sex whenever their partner asks. Again, from “*Humanae Vitae*”:

Men rightly observe that a conjugal act imposed on one's partner without regard to his or her condition or personal and reasonable wishes in the matter, is no true act of love, and therefore offends the moral order in its particular application to the intimate relationship of husband and wife.

Sometimes coercion is overt and obvious, as in the case of physically overpowering someone. But it can often appear in any number of more subtle forms, such as not asking for consent in the first place, ignoring someone's verbal refusals or physical resistance, making threats, pressuring, manipulating (whether emotionally or physically) or claiming false ownership over someone else's body, as if it were a possession.

This is by no means a comprehensive list of coercive tactics. Whatever its form, coercion leads to sexual contact that is unwanted or unwelcome, and it is always wrong. This fact is upheld by both the sacred and secular rule of law. If anyone ever pressures a spouse into any kind of sexual contact, whether through subtle or overt coercion, this likely constitutes sexual assault. This is serious, and it should always be taken very seriously. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches us (No. 2356):

Rape is the forcible violation of the sexual intimacy of another person. It does injury to justice and charity. Rape deeply wounds the respect, freedom, and physical and moral integrity to which every person has a right. It causes grave damage that can mark the victim for life. It is always an intrinsically evil act.

If consent is a basic prerequisite for good, unitive sex, then any violation of consent constitutes sex that is non-unitive and therefore morally wrong. In common parlance we refer to these kinds of evil acts as “sexual coercion” or “rape.” And we should do so in discussions about Catholic

morality, too. Again, juxtaposing this issue to the more commonly discussed sanctity of procreation: Just as we consider the ultimate offense against the procreative end to be abortion, the ultimate offense against the unitive end of sex is rape.

To give an illustration: If a husband insists upon sex without his wife's consent even once, he is guilty of serious sin. He sins against justice, against charity, against his wife's spiritual and bodily freedom and integrity, and against the very nature of sex and marriage. Therefore, if a husband wants sex and his wife does not, and she says no to his request but nevertheless he coerces her into a sexual experience without her consent, he is guilty of the “intrinsically evil act” of marital rape.

Lest anyone mistakenly object that I am making too much of the problem, consider the alarming incidence of marital rape in the United States: “Approximately 10 to 14 percent of married women are raped by their husbands,” and “approximately one third of women report having ‘unwanted sex’ with their partner,” according to a study in 2006 by Raquel Kennedy Bergen and Elizabeth Barnhill. Further, “women who are raped by their husbands are likely to be raped many times—often 20 or more times.”

In response to the disturbing prevalence of marital rape, the Catholic Church should make frequent use of its public voice to decry the evil of sexual coercion and treat it as an affront to the unitive end of sex. This can help to dispel any confusion about the integrity of spouses' free will, which has been unfortunately created by harmful deployment of “marital debt” language, and to explicitly and continually re-assert the absolute necessity of freely given consent in all sexual encounters—without exception.

Grace J. Wojdak is a mental health counselor specializing in work with couples as well as with clients dealing with grief and loss. She is currently writing a book about consent and unitive sex for a female Catholic audience.



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Gathering in Gratitude
Carol Mackey
Friday, November 10

St. Martin de Porres Day Celebration: "Martin de Porres: Model of Racial Healing and Reconciliation"
Reverend Martin Nutt, CSsR
Saturday, November 4
(Online and On Site)

Turning Points: Exploring Our Career Transitions Retreat
(Adults Under 45)
Multiple Presenters
Friday, Nov. 10 to 12

Heart-Centered Spirituality: A Year-Long Program at Mariandale Information Session
Liz Walz, Christina Leano, Reverend Matthew Wright
Wednesday, Nov. 8
(Online)

Christian Mindfulness: Practice of the Presence of God Retreat
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A CALL TO LOVE LIFE

What monks and college students taught me about commitment

By Christin Bothe

I had an existential headache. Having recently finished a graduate program in theology, I was trying to figure out what was next for my life. Looking for inspiration, I accepted an invitation for a weeklong retreat at Mepkin Abbey, a Trappist monastery in South Carolina.

My companions for the retreat were friends and neighbors with whom I had lived in community during school. The monks at the abbey had scheduled time to get to know us, leading us into an evening of privileged space to share thoughts and questions with one another. I posed questions about how I would use my theology degree. Others in our group discussed their relationships, the sustainability of their work, health diagnoses and the dynamics of living closely with one another in community. The monks responded with some of their own unknowns, too—in particular their dwindling numbers and rising ages.

I waited for these religious brothers to tell us about plans to attract potential novices. Instead, they were eager to tell us about opportunities where guests could, first and foremost, experience the smaller commitments of their life: silence, care for the land and prayer. The monks' focus was firmly rooted in what they could continue to give, even in a time of their own need.

For a group of people who could so easily be labeled as stuck in place, in routine and in relationship, they modeled for us a rare aura of creativity and freedom. Tucked away

in our conversation with the monks that night was a simple but profound message, one that has rung in my ears ever since: “We love our life here together, and we want to share it with others.”

Several years later, I now work as a theology teacher at a Catholic high school and am well aware of the shortage we have in religious vocations. As the global church faces this daunting reality, Catholic schools have their own, unique thread of history. When American Catholic schools really began to expand around the beginning of the 20th century, classrooms were largely staffed by religious sisters, priests and brothers. This is now far from the norm. During the time I have worked at my school, we have had an ongoing conversation about what is distinctly Catholic about the education we offer.

In the past, when schools were run by religious orders, they brought their charisms and spiritualities with them. Their commitments to the faith informed our own. In their absence, opportunities remain for us to remember their legacy, but also to become aware of both the gifts and deficits of this new chapter in our history.

When a co-worker and I found ourselves tasked with

designing a new trip for students interested in theological studies, we immediately thought of Mepkin Abbey. Both of us already had a relationship with this community, making it a natural choice. What had started as a somewhat whimsical decision, though, turned out to be much more: a seed in reimagining this relationship between Catholic schools and those in vowed religious life.

I knew the trip would appeal to those who want more religious vocations and more opportunities for students to explore these callings. As much as I want students to have the opportunity to consider such things, this is not what excited me most about the trip. I wanted my students to have the same opportunity I had—to look into the eyes of religious men whose life was marked by both commitment and uncertainty and hear them say, with frankness and sincerity, “I love my life.”

An Essential Examination

The religious vocation crisis points to something so much deeper than its surface-level questions. To be sure, it is important to encourage young adults to be open to the call to priesthood and religious life, and to consider whether a vowed celibate life is right for them. But starting here deprives us of an essential examination. To me, this crisis begs us to consider if we really believe life is meant to be loved, and if commitment is a plausible tool in seeking that desired state. In other words, is a vocation to the priesthood or religious life a trusted pathway to help us love our lives?

When I say love, I mean it in the fullest sense of the word—a love that holds both joy and sacrifice, blissful hope and morbid practicality, piercing meaning and debilitating confusion; a love that has the potential to bind us, or “contain” us. A love that can help us grow in holiness and depth.

This generation of students does not want to be pressured to do things they have watched adults around them be resentful of, or even hate. When we look at the divorce rate or the numbers of religious leaders who have abused their power and betrayed the very foundation of their calling (let alone those who are simply unhappy in their vocations of any kind, single, married or vowed), it is easy to see why many young people have questions. Our students want hope that there are people out there who genuinely find this depth of love every day in their lives. They want to see people who have found the wisdom to dismantle the overwhelming nature of commitment to its smaller yet sustaining pieces. The week I spent with the students on this retreat was hopeful to this end, to say the least.

Even before arriving, it was clear that many of our stu-

dents were drawn to the trip mostly out of curiosity. Having shown them a schedule of the prayer periods the monks attended each day, we had quite a few students wonder aloud why anyone would choose to have this much structure. Our students almost sounded sympathetic, assuming these monks must feel enchained by their life. The absurdity of it all at least had opened wide the ears of our cohort. They were eager to understand and, to my surprise, eager to experiment with what they were learning.

The first night we watched a documentary, called “In Pursuit of Silence.” Our students took this film as an introduction to something that, perhaps, felt like meeting a new friend, one whom the monks knew quite well. It gave us language to explore why silence was so hard to find and so undervalued and, as a result, so scary. It also gave us examples of people who were intentionally creating space to find stillness, quiet, rest—and greater depth in their lives.

Days later, as we drove home, one student confessed that, in response to the film, she had gone through the majority of the week without listening to music. As she put her AirPods back into her ears, she smiled and said, “Somehow it sounds better now.” She had regained an ability to relate to music as music and not merely noise.

One day we heard a monk give a talk on contemplative prayer. We then had an opportunity to practice it with him. When our students and chaperones gathered for an evening reflection later on, a student courageously pulled one of us aside to suggest that we begin with five minutes of shared silence. Words cannot describe the sacred space we found in those short minutes that followed. We sat still, listening to the crackling fire, the wind rippling off the waters, trees swaying—God’s presence was palpable. We all laughed a bit at how awkward, but worthwhile, taking these moments to pause and listen together could be.

What Do I Do With My Life?

For our last night there, I asked if the monks would be willing to join us for a time of conversation. I hoped our students would walk away with some of the same wisdom I had heard just a few years ago in a similar setting. The monks agreed, and once again, I watched a group of people choose to bravely face their unique, yet similar, unknowns together. As our trip was open only to junior and senior students, all of them had their noses pressed to the glass, wondering what awaited them beyond their time in high school. Although they found so many different ways to say it, they all seemed to be asking the same thing: How do you know what to do with your life?



The monks modeled for us a rare aura of creativity and freedom.

The monks received each question graciously, and often with a chuckle. In one set of responses, we heard a monk recount a continuous steadiness in all of his discernments. His voice sounded warm and humble and left many of us wishing we could share the sentiment. When there was a pause, another monk proudly exclaimed, “and on a different note, I wonder if I should leave this place about every other day!” Laughter erupted. This monk smiled, not showing an ounce of regret mixed in with this admission. His understanding of how daunting a commitment can be, from my vantage point, only invigorated the zeal he found in saying yes to his vocation each day.

Ultimately, the range of certainty the monks held toward their own life choice seemed to calm our students. They showed our young people that navigating uncertainty might be just as or even more important than always having clarity or the “right answer.” Simultaneously, it was clear to me that, in looking at these young faces, the monks found a renewed contentment in the calling they had followed into the monastery.

As the conversation continued, one of the monks spoke about his discernment to leave his life as a parish priest in order to enter the monastery. As he narrated his decision to leave one calling for another, he said, “I needed a container to grow deeper in.” For him, that container was the community of brothers at Mepkin.

Commitment is good; I believe that wholeheartedly. Yet, as I listen to the wisdom of those in my life who are older, I often hear laments that they lacked the personal formation to know when, how and to whom to commit. Many in our younger generations, myself included, have watched those ahead of us, at times, choose these “containers” hastily or with no attempt at creativity. Usually it has been through no fault of their own. It is hard to blame my generation for being noncommittal when we want something markedly different from what we have seen go before us. The abuses of power and constant pressure that under-

mine vocational life continue. We need to develop a way of intentionally forming people to understand and nurture the patience and fortitude essential in the daily process of choosing each of these paths.

This monk’s story about leaving parish life spoke so powerfully to us because it emphasized a healthy way of navigating the disruptions that any future promises. His story brought to life a nuance that I was eager to hear, and I think many others long for as well—a belief in the beauty of commitment with a deep trust and care in the ongoing discernment process that can lead to a major change in one’s life.

I have to hope our process of formation for young people can mirror this twofold wisdom. First, that we can cooperate with the Holy Spirit to form people who trust their conscience, a person’s most secret core (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 1776). And second, that we all might have the courage to seek out “containers” that will make us fully human, fully who God created us to be, fully aware of the gift of our life.

Perhaps it is in these communal spaces, where an 18-year-old student and a 67-year-old monk can experience friendship, that we can be reminded that God chooses and calls each one of us to help bring his kingdom closer. Discernment is not a matter of suppressing parts of who we are to fit an abstract notion of “God’s will.” It is an invitation to a place where we can say, with frankness and sincerity, “I love my life.”

Christin Bothe teaches theology at Cardinal Gibbons High School in Raleigh, N.C.

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WHAT IS YOUR IMAGE OF GOD?

And why it's okay to change your answer

By Christine Lenahan

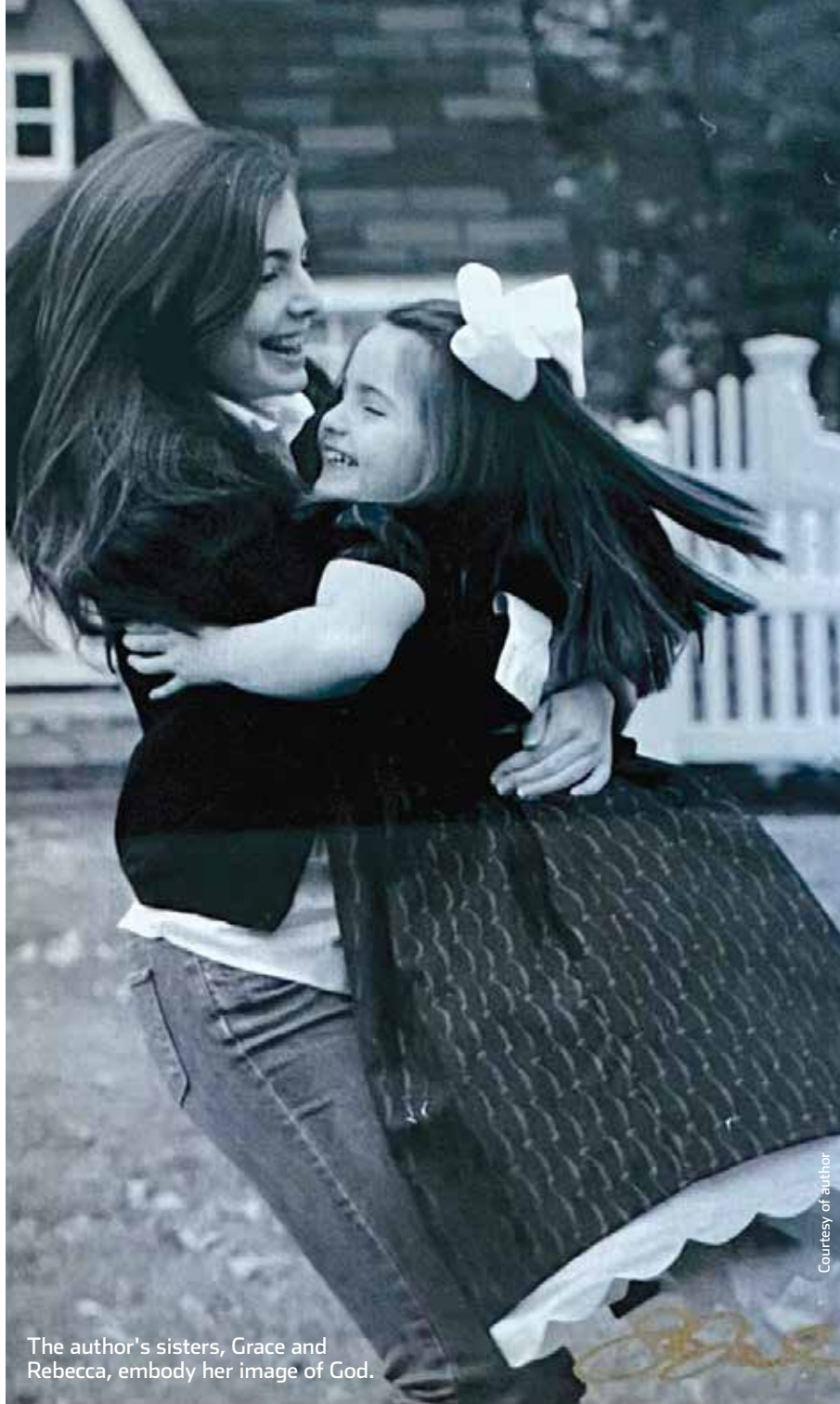
A long white beard. A golden throne among clouds. A round and rosy face.

Until I started college (yes, college) this was how I imagined God. Consciously or not, my version of God had the same descriptors a child would use to imagine Santa Claus—minus the gift-giving, plus a whole lot of moral judgment. Then one retreat program made me rethink my vision.

During my time at Boston College, I was involved in an undergraduate retreat program called Kairos. The student leaders of the program undergo eight weeks of spiritual formation in preparation for the retreat weekend. It was during those weeks of formation, as I prepared to lead the Kairos retreat during my sophomore year, that I was asked the question: What is your image of God? And for the first time, I truly thought about the answer.

While I had interrogated my relationship with God during my Jesuit high school years and in my early undergraduate studies, I had never before questioned my default image of God as the big man in the sky.

In the week leading up to my first Kairos leader formation meeting, our team received an email asking us to bring an “image of God” to the meeting for a reflective activity. Amid the Covid-19 pandemic, our first meetings took place on Zoom. I spent the week mulling this over, and on the night of the meeting, I logged on, prepared to prove my spiritual chops. I hoped to show that my notion of God was as ro-



The author's sisters, Grace and Rebecca, embody her image of God.

Courtesy of author

bust and as grand as God's white beard.

I watched as my fellow leaders showed photos of their fly fishing adventures, describing encounters with God in the colors of a rainbow trout. I was mesmerized by vivid descriptions of finding God in a final hug shared with a dying grandparent, or in witnessing a sibling's wedding. Not one person described an old white man reminiscent of Santa Claus, Poseidon or Dumbledore. Instead, they described what they saw as the purest manifestation of God: love.

Here, for the first time, I recognized that God exists in both the grand and the granular. As my turn approached, I changed my answer. I let go of that old image and presented instead a deeply personal image of God.

I snatched up a small white frame that was sitting on my desk. The black-and-white photograph of my younger sisters was my new answer to the question: “What is your image of God?” In the photo, Grace, the middle child, twirls in circles, hand in hand with Rebecca, the youngest. Sheer delight beams from their faces. My image of God is not only the joy captured in this photograph but the depth of love I feel when I look at this photo. I hear Grace’s laugh, richly and distinctively hers; I hear Rebecca’s small voice gleefully pleading for just “one more spin.”

As their older sister, the love I feel for my siblings defines the sanctity of our sisterhood. How I look at my sisters is how I imagine God looks at each one of us. Though we often fall short of showing one another the perfect love God has for us, our sisterhood is the closest thing I have to an encounter with God. It’s God in the dimples on their cheeks or the freckles that create constellations across their faces. It’s God when we make each other laugh till our sides hurt. It’s God when we thrive together, suffer together and love together. It’s God in both the grand and the granular.

From my sophomore to my senior year, this physical example of my image of God stayed the same, but my notion of God grew more intricate. Although I had learned about the academic side of God in my childhood, steeped in both the politics and the sanctity of the church, my personal understanding of God was bolstered when I read *Doing the Truth in Love*, by the late Rev. Michael J. Himes. Father Himes writes about God as mystery, something we will never be able to adequately understand or describe. God is so salient, however, that “there are some things about which nothing can be said and before which we dare not keep silent” (T. S. Eliot). To paraphrase Father Himes, we must try to craft an image of God because God is simply too paramount, too central for us not to be able to name.

This is why I must use the language of God to describe something as consuming as the love I have for my sisters. As Father Himes writes, “We have no other language to describe this experience of transcendence.” This is what my peers were grappling with when they recounted their images of God: how mystery, this thing we struggle to name, is made manifest in their lives. Gradually, something infinitely large, the love of God, was molded succinctly into my own image of God.

The Mystery at Work

My retreat experience with Kairos cultivated my faith, and I eventually became a co-director of the program during my senior year. Accompanying my peers on their own spiritual journeys during the retreat helped me to further grow my understanding of God’s work in our world.

Kairos is a Greek word that is often defined in the dictionary as “the right, critical, or opportune moment,” and by Christians as “God’s time.” For some, the Kairos retreat is a launchpad for spiritual change. Kairos offers a space to pause and to investigate how God is at work in our daily lives. It invites, welcomes and celebrates students exactly as they are: loved by God.

As co-director, I dedicated my Wednesday nights to team meetings in preparation for retreat weekends, bearing witness to the truth of how God is at work in students’ lives. The student leaders scattered across couches in the Kairos office, illuminated by holiday string lights, shared stories, photos or symbols of their raw encounters with God.

Anything from a mug of fresh coffee to a bowl filled to the brim with water holds grace. One student tells about the pink elastic band around his wrist, marking the day his sister’s cancer went into remission. Another brings out a crispy McDonald’s hash brown, part of a post-Sunday-Mass ritual between her and her mother. One shows a photo of his roommates’ wide grins, and another, a sketch of pine trees in her childhood backyard. All of these solidify the Ignatian idea of seeking or finding God in all things.

I see now that Catholics are challenged to answer the question, “What is your image of God” almost every day. Whether we recognize it or not, each of us is an *imago Dei*, made in the image of God. It becomes our goal to honor our inherent goodness and likeness of God in one another in our everyday lives. We must constantly pay attention to the glimmers of *kairos*: the opportune moments when mystery is at work.

Since my work with the Kairos program, I have asked this question of countless people. It’s my favorite icebreaker and conversation starter. (I’m not very good at small talk.) For those who are not familiar with “God” language, I tailor the question as needed: What’s your idea of hope? How do you see love in your life? These questions are great fodder for a spiritual conversation, one that hopefully deepens and strengthens a love of God and a joy for the unsung sacred around us.

Christine Lenahan is a Joseph A. O’Hare, S.J., fellow at America.



Students gather at the Families of Color Dinner at Boston College High School in May 2023.

‘SAFE, VALUED AND LOVED’

Boston College High School renames building as part of its commitment to antiracism

By Michael O’Brien

In early September, Boston College High School renamed an academic building originally named for the school’s founder, John McElroy, S.J. It is now called St. Ignatius Hall. This follows a vote to rededicate the building in April 2022 because of evidence of McElroy’s ties to slavery.

Father McElroy founded Boston College High School in March 1863 as part of Boston College, primarily for immigrant boys of Irish-Catholic descent. Findings that McElroy was involved in the recapturing of a runaway slave sparked questions about his legacy among B.C. High’s Mission and Identity Committee in 2021.

In an interview with *America*, Grace Cotter Regan, president of Boston College High School, spoke about McElroy’s complex life and why the administration believes his story still has a place at the school. (Ms. Regan serves on the board of America Media.)

“We approached this in a very reflective, discerning way because it’s Ignatian to do so, and also because we wanted to make sure that we honored the great work of Father McElroy,” Ms. Regan said.

“But he was a flawed man, and he was a man of his

time,” she continued. “We went at this whole approach in a spirit of reconciliation and recommitment to our mission, and part of our mission is to be an unapologetically anti-racist school where all students can feel safe, valued and loved.”

The renaming follows a trend in other Jesuit schools that have renamed buildings to acknowledge historical ties to slavery, including Georgetown University and the College of the Holy Cross, both of which were consulted by Boston College High in its decision-making process. At Georgetown, the Spirit of Georgetown Residential Academy was renamed for Isaac Hawkins, one of the 272 enslaved people sold by the Jesuits in 1838 to financially sustain Georgetown and other ministries. Holy Cross removed the name of Thomas Mulledy, S.J., from Brooks-Mulledy Hall, a freshman residential dorm, because Mulledy was involved in orchestrating the sale.

Both Georgetown University and the Society of Jesus in the United States have committed millions of dollars to the Descendants Truth and Reconciliation Foundation, which was created in 2021 to support the educational as-

pirations of the descendants of those held as slaves by the Jesuits and to promote racial healing and reconciliation.

McElroy Commons at Boston College is also named after Father McElroy, but the school has no plans to change the name. "John McElroy, S.J., is recognized at Boston College for the work he did in founding BC in 1863. Because of his indispensable contributions to BC's history, we are not planning to remove his name from McElroy Commons," said Jack Dunn, Boston College's associate vice president for university communications.

In its curriculum, B.C. High will seek to present Father McElroy's whole life story, including the work he did on behalf of people of color. In 1819 McElroy founded a Sunday school for Black children, who were taught to read and write as detailed in William Warner's book *At Peace With All Their Neighbors: Catholics and Catholicism in the National Capital*, in addition to serving as an army chaplain during the Mexican-American War.

B.C. High hopes to use the decision to change the building's name as an opportunity to build community while renewing its commitment to being a firmly antiracist institution.

Ms. Regan pointed to the endowment of a new center

for diversity, equity and inclusion by an alumnus, which they named the Imago Dei Center. The school also named a new D.E.I. director, Dr. Dennis Hill. "BC High has put the importance of racial equality right at the center of mission, and we're holding ourselves accountable," Ms. Regan said.

The school plans to acknowledge Father McElroy as its founder by placing a plaque outside the school's main entrance.

"As a Jesuit school, we are always learning, and what we learn often causes us to pause, take a step back, and examine our past to better inform our present and our future," Ms. Regan wrote in a letter to the school announcing the decision. "BC High is a school that respects and upholds the dignity of all people, and it is our responsibility to demonstrate these values to the faculty, staff, students, and alumni who walk through our halls each day, both now and in the future."

—
Michael O'Brien is a Joseph A. O'Hare fellow at *America*.

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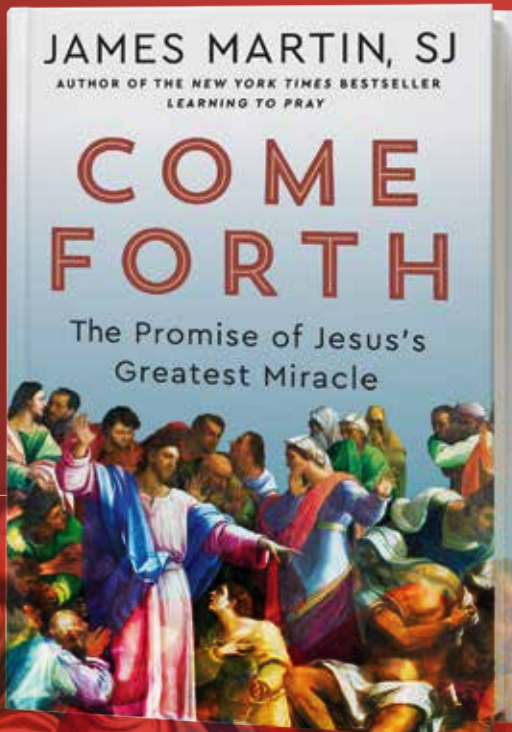


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Naming the Darkness: My Journey Into Heavy Metal

By Zane Johnson

I first lost my soul when I was 12 years old. Or so I feared, sitting in Fiddler's Green Amphitheater in Centennial, Colo., with my father and a grade school friend, waiting to be spiritually and sonically pummeled by an aging but no less searing Ronnie James Dio. Only months before, I had been confirmed as a Catholic, taking the name of St. Justin Martyr. And I was already terminal: I had contracted the severest case of metal-mania.

My first metal concert was Black Sabbath, founded by Ozzy Osbourne and reunited in the mid-2000s with the band's second singer, Mr. Dio. Not yet a teenager, I was terrified by the staticky fuzz of Tony Iommi's doomy guitar riffs, enthused by the overwhelming force of Dio's operatic vocals. I did not hear it at the time, but these tremendous sounds also carried an earnest reckoning with religious values on their distorted waves, which I would come to appreciate later in life.

What captivated me then and now is heavy metal's

power to name the darkness in the world—the injustice, the suffering, but also the numinous, which is sometimes figured to be “dark” by many spiritual traditions. This is what constitutes metal's prophetic potential and its importance for people of faith.

Growing up, I was sheltered from sociopolitical unrest and dysfunction in my middle-class suburb. But as a pre-teen with difficult emotions and a few hard life experiences already under my belt, heavy metal was a helpful resource for me to explore my inner world. Two years prior to the concert, when I was 10, I had moved states following my parents' ugly and protracted divorce. I indulged the darkness in destructive ways as I struggled with mental illness, developed problems with drugs and alcohol by my 13th year, and began sabotaging relationships with family and peers.

But in the tumult of what was a common suburban youth for my generation, marked by a quest for mind-altering substances and promiscuous sex, I always saw heavy

There is hardly a form of popular music that more explicitly appropriates traditional religious language and imagery than heavy metal.



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metal as a mooring force in my life. Indeed, my love for this music is in all likelihood bound up in an early adolescent effort at identity formation. I remember hearing the ethereal sounds of Led Zeppelin and Black Sabbath on classic rock radio in the early 2000s and watching sweaty, curly-haired guitar virtuosos on VH1 videos belt solos that soared above a chugging rhythm section. The music seemed to advertise the freedom and transcendence that came with being an outsider.

The imagery of heavy metal music, I think, gave me a healthy sense of empowerment and insulation against the unhappiness around me. And it gave me a healthy skepticism about the status quo. Listening to metal primed me to side with the underdog.

My love for this music continues, but it has changed. I came back to faith during graduate school, first through exploring contemplative prayer and eventually wandering back into the pews, after experimenting with popular spiritualities that too often sought a convenient escape from the material world and all its suffering (or else sought to con-

trol the material world for one's own gratification.) Like the modernist poet T. S. Eliot, I found meaning in Christian orthodoxy's serious reckoning with sin and death, the mortal crack in the human frame. I now see hints of that same seriousness in heavy metal's confrontation of darkness within and without.

A Pact With the Devil

The preponderance of all things “heavy” in metal music has much to do with the genre's origins in the blues of formerly enslaved African Americans. Along with its laments about disenfranchised lives, the blues also bore a dark and moody aesthetic, exemplified by the legend of Robert Johnson's pact with the devil, which has become associated with heavy metal.

Johnson's famous song “Hellhounds on My Trail,” the origin of this legend, has been interpreted as the story of a man fleeing a lynch mob through the thin allegorical veil of a sinner being chased by beasts from hell. The song is at once a witness to the horrors experienced by Black people living in the Deep South in the early 20th century and the self-conscious donning of an outsider persona.

As music genres with roots in the blues became commercially successful in the '50s with musicians like Muddy Waters and Chuck Berry, white musicians began to appropriate the sounds and textures of the music. They seized in particular upon the dissonant dominant seventh chord and the “12-bar blues” song structure that characterized so much of blues music. Curiously, the dominant seventh bears within it a spooky-sounding tritone, the “devil's interval,” the playing of which was allegedly forbidden in the Middle Ages.

The prophetic impulse of the blues would be revived at the end of the '60s in the crumbling environment of postwar Birmingham, England, when Black Sabbath—the first heavy metal band—emerged. (The band's name came from a song written by its bassist Geezer Butler, itself inspired by a Boris Karloff movie.) Black Sabbath even exploited the “devil's interval” in the title track of their eponymous debut album.

Heavy metal historian Ian Christe sets the stage in his magisterial *Sound of the Beast: The Complete Headbanging History of Heavy Metal*:

From the start Black Sabbath voiced powerful passion from beyond the perimeters of popular opinion. They were prophets bred from the downside of English society, the unemployed—people regarded as morally suspect and of negligible social worth. The four members all were born in 1948 and 1949 in Birmingham, England, a crumbling



From the start, Black Sabbath voiced powerful passion from beyond the perimeters of popular opinion," says historian Ian Christe.

factory town surviving an age when Europe no longer prided itself on industry....

Sabbath was born when Ozzy Osbourne, the child of a broken home and then a petty thief, who reportedly walked his “pet” shoe on a leash, posted an advertisement in a local music shop: “Ozzy Zig Needs Gig.” Guitarist Tony Iommi responded. Iommi worked in a steel mill at the time; the tips of his fingers were lopped off in an accident with a machine on his last day there—the day he committed to gigging in a rock band full time. With his mutilated fingers he had to tune down his guitar strings and wear thimbles while playing. With his guitar retuned to a lower pitch, it would be less painful to play, and thus was born the characteristic heavy, low and crunching guitar sound we have come to associate with heavy metal. Wrecked fingers led to wrecking-ball music.

“Wicked World,” from Sabbath’s debut album, for example, presents a world marked by the reign of injustice, set to Iommi’s dark, droning blues, Bill Ward’s furious jazz drumming and Ozzy’s ghoulish moan: “A politician’s job they say is very high/ For he has to choose who’s got to go and die/ They can put a man on the moon quite easy/ While people here on earth are dying of all diseases.”

Heavy metal is today widely known for its more commercial spinoffs in the ’80s, with bands like Poison and Mötley Crüe, whose public personas were based around sexual excess. (Poison is to many not even legitimate heavy metal, but glam or hair metal.) But Black Sabbath is where metal’s theology is anchored. Almost mind-bogglingly, Black

Sabbath is credited as the first band to pen a Christian rock song, “After Forever,” appearing on their third studio album “Master of Reality.” As the title suggests, the song is an earnest appeal to the reality of life after death:

*Could it be you’re afraid of what your friends might say
If they knew you believe in God above?
They should realize before they criticize
That God is the only way to love.*

Geezer Butler later reported that the song arose from his frustration with the ongoing violence of the Troubles in Northern Ireland at the time: “We all believed in Jesus—and yet people were killing each other over it. To me it was just ridiculous. I thought that if God could see us killing each other in his name, he’d be disgusted.”

Still, Black Sabbath was content to name the problem and withhold solutions other than “love thy neighbor,” in the words of Ian Christe.

A New Kind of Protest

By the mid-1980s, longing for a return to its original prophetic message and form against glam acts like Poison, the aggressive thrash metal scene rose up. Bands spoke plainly about their concerns over the hawkish neoconservatism of the Reagan era. They chose to forgo the Christian allegory of their predecessors in favor of direct protest.

Metallica’s magnum opus “Master of Puppets,” whose cover displays an invisible hand orchestrating terror above a field of white crosses, for instance, features songs about the



physical and mental devastation wrought upon veterans.

By the late '80s, metal reached its most extreme point with the emergence of death metal, black metal and grind-core. With its over-the-top violence, aesthetic Satanism and atonal distortions of beauty as we know it, it seems nearly impossible to extract any theological wisdom from these forms of metal: they employed extremity for extremity's sake, apparently shorn of value of any kind, spiritual or artistic.

And yet, a closer look often reveals an earnest engagement with religious values and experiences even at metal's fringes: mourning God's perceived absence in the modern world in a way that mirrors biblical lament; calling out religious hypocrisy; and creating new avenues for experiences of transcendence for those who might feel alienated by traditional religion.

Much heavy metal, both traditional and extreme, presents an anti-Christian image, it is true; and yet there is hardly a form of popular music that more explicitly appropriates traditional religious language and imagery. Through a close reading of heavy metal lyrics and aesthetics, I believe we can discern beneath the rough exterior—and genuine anger—a thirst for righteousness. Heavy metal, even its extreme forms, evokes Psalm 72: “My he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor.”

While metal bands often cry out against social injustice, they also demonstrate a genuine hunger for the transcendence and empowerment that religious experience offers. The scholar Niall Scott has described metal shows as “apophatic liturgies,” in which “the enveloping noise of heavy metal refers to silence...,” to non-being and the dissolution of the personality that is characteristic of so much mystical literature. The darkness of the human experience, especially seen through the eyes of the outsider perspective that heavy metal adopts, intuitively gives way to the darkness of spiritual experience.

There is room in Christianity for this darkness. Take the apophatic mysticism of the early fathers of the church, who speculated on the divine darkness of God—a product of his blinding brightness but also indicative of his fecundity and unspeakable awesomeness. The sixth-century theologian Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, for example, sought to discern beneath nameable attributes of God “that superessential gloom which is hidden by all the light in existing things.”

Wolves in the Throne Room, an American black metal band known for their deep ecological influences, is an interesting example: Their album “Diadem of 12 Stars,” a reference to the book of Revelation, depicts a misty Cascadian forest, a “wild” but contemplative scene. The album begins:

Heavy metal mourns God's perceived absence, calls out religious hypocrisy and creates new avenues for experiences of transcendence.

You are a daughter of heaven

12 stars circle your brow

But you do not see them and the rain pours down

Our time in this garden is past

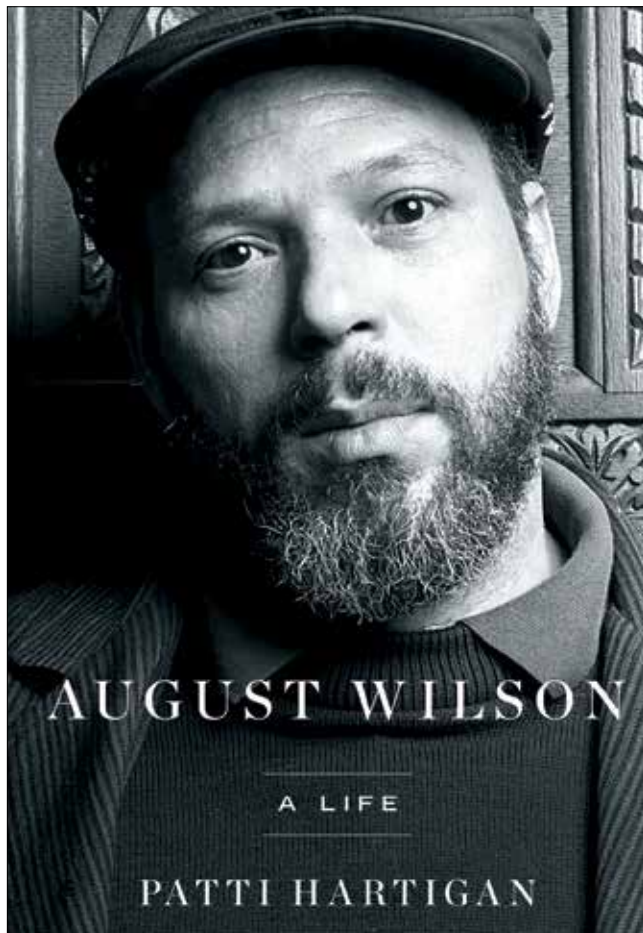
The sourcing of Christian material in this album is probably atypical of “spiritual” heavy metal. But I think its use here reflects a genuine mourning of the loss of our prelapsarian state.

In reflecting on my own complicated love of metal, I have found it worthwhile to reflect on the vocation of my patron, St. Justin Martyr. As a Platonic philosopher before his conversion, Justin sought the incarnate *logos* that lies in waiting beneath the imperfect philosophies and thoughtforms of his day. Similarly, I see in metal a confrontation with religious hypocrisy that would be familiar to the Gospel writers. Metal embraced nonconformity with the oppressive systems that the church has named the World, the Flesh and the Devil. It embodies a yearning for transcendence. All of this is life-affirming.

This is an entryway to ministry. With its festival cycles like the Maryland DeathFest or the Milwaukee Speed Metal Festival and its participatory live performances, replete with stage dives and incantatory call-and-response dialogues with the audience, heavy metal provides a parallel liturgical practice. It is a practice that is sometimes averse to Christianity but nevertheless attempts to speak to the ethical and spiritual yearning of our day.

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A PLAYWRIGHT OF MULTITUDES



Simon & Schuster / 544p \$32.50

Audiences at the Glen Hazel Recreation Center in Pittsburgh could hardly have known, as they watched the sole performance of a modest two-character play called “Recycle” one summer night in 1973, that they were witnessing the debut of one of the great American playwrights. August Wilson had not just written the play, inspired both by his bitterness over his recent divorce and by a murder at a local bar; he also appeared in it as a lovelorn man prone to flowery poetry. According to *August Wilson: A Life*, an excellent new biography by Patti Hartigan, Wilson lost his cool in the first moments of the play, slapping his female co-star in an unscripted moment of rage.

It would be nearly 10 years before Wilson’s first published play, “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom,” put him on the theatrical map, and through the 1980s and ’90s he would churn out a series of popular masterworks about the African American experience. These included “Fences,” “The Piano Lesson” and “Seven Guitars,” all of which proliferated at major regional theaters both before and after their

Broadway runs. By the time he died of liver cancer in 2005, at the untimely age of 60, he had completed a set of 10 plays, one for each decade of the 20th century.

Hartigan’s book is not just the first major biography of Wilson; it is also hard to imagine a better one. She traces the winding path that led him to his ascendance, then delves into the tumults and triumphs of his two decades at the heights of achievement. Along the way, she manages to paint indelible portraits of two distinct worlds and to monitor the fraught traffic between them. From mid-century Black life in a singular outpost of the Great Migration, Pittsburgh, Wilson drew his enduring loyalties and fiery temperament. There he found most of the characters and situations that would later inspire his plays. And as he emerged into a predominantly white theater industry—a field Hartigan, a longtime critic and journalist for *The Boston Globe*, knows intimately—Wilson experienced both extraordinary success and wrenching conflict.

The plays are the link between these worlds, of course, and Hartigan gives each due consideration (as well as offering her own critical perspectives). But it is among the strengths of her book that she can weave their complicated production histories with the ups and downs of Wilson’s busy, peripatetic life, which encompassed three marriages and at least three home bases, including not only Pittsburgh but also St. Paul, Minn., and finally Seattle.

Wilson’s true home away from home was the Eugene O’Neill Theater Center in Connecticut, an idyllic seaside writers’ retreat. It was there he not only incubated most of his great works but formed the central relationship of his career, with director Lloyd Richards. Richards, a Black man who had directed Lorraine Hansberry’s work on Broadway, wielded considerable power as head not only of the O’Neill but of Yale Repertory Theatre, and he used this power to champion Wilson’s work.

The extent to which Richards also helped shape the plays themselves eventually became a sticking point and the source of a painful rupture between the two men. But perhaps more important was Richards’s ingenious producing plan for developing Wilson’s writing: He essentially built a pipeline among regional theaters, including Yale Rep, Seattle Rep, the Goodman Theatre in Chicago and the Huntington Theatre in Boston. In these locales, Wilson’s plays could be tried out and tinkered with en route to their Broadway bows.

This sweet deal, though, came in for its share of criticism from various quarters. Robert Brustein, a white director and critic, implied that Wilson was a mediocrity benefiting from a kind of affirmative action. Some Black

colleagues felt that Wilson had been anointed as the singular talent from their ranks and that his success at white theaters did little to advance their interests (though it did create work for generations of Black performers and directors). Wilson heard and confronted these criticisms in 1966 with a blistering speech, “The Ground on Which I Stand,” delivered to an audience of theater colleagues. He indicted the industry to which he owed his career for failing to create more room for Black artists, and for treating the few Black artists allowed into their ranks as inherently lesser.

This racial gap and its discontents still roil the theater field. Yet it would probably please Wilson to know that while his work is frequently and lovingly revived (and belatedly adapted into films), he is no longer the singular Black genius, the so-called “exception.” The American theater has embraced the work of Lynn Nottage, Tarell Alvin McCraney, Dominique Morisseau, Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, James Ijames, Aleshea Harris, Katori Hall, Jackie Sibblies Drury—there are thankfully too many to list here. While few playwrights before or since have enjoyed the one-man development pipeline Wilson had, theaters still partner in co-productions to ease the lift of launching new work. And 10 years ago, the Mellon Foundation created a playwrights-in-residence program that installs full-time writers at a number of regional theaters—a deal not even Wilson had.

So, have we progressed or regressed as a culture, let alone as a nation, in the years since Wilson was making his plays? It is not a question Hartigan explicitly takes up, but it is certainly raised by a contemplation of Wilson’s oeuvre. He traces Black characters from Jim Crow to gentrification, and through the era of civil rights and Black Power, but with an emphasis less on larger political movements than on the lives, loves and work of particular people who are both shaped by and struggling to shape their own circumstances. Indeed, Wilson’s best characters are as rich and full as any ever imagined. In my book, *Turnbo*, the incorrigible gossip from “Jitney,” is as memorable a pain in the neck as Lady Bracknell or Malvolio. Harold Loomis, the anguished lead of Wilson’s masterpiece, “Joe Turner’s Come and Gone,” is as shattering a tragic figure as any conjured by the Greeks.

Though his characters were often read as symbols by white audiences, and certainly Black audiences embraced them as representations of lives they had never seen rendered onstage, it is his characters’ unshakable integrity, their full and fine-grained humanity, that is the reason his plays endure. I can think of no higher tribute to Hartigan’s biography than to say that it gives the same due to Wilson’s

own outsized, complicated character. Like another great American poet, Wilson contained multitudes, and we are the richer for it that he put some of those multitudes onstage.

Rob Weinert-Kendt, an arts journalist and editor of *American Theatre* magazine, has written for *The New York Times* and *Time Out New York*. He writes a blog called *The Wicked Stage*.

ENVY

by Justin Lacour

I’m wearing black
because I’m mourning
the success of others.

(It’s okay, no one will read this.)

But I’m grateful for the thicket
behind my in-laws’ house—
the frog pond, the plywood bridge.

When I close my eyes there,
I hear You building a home
for me not made of applause

or money,
if I’ll accept it.

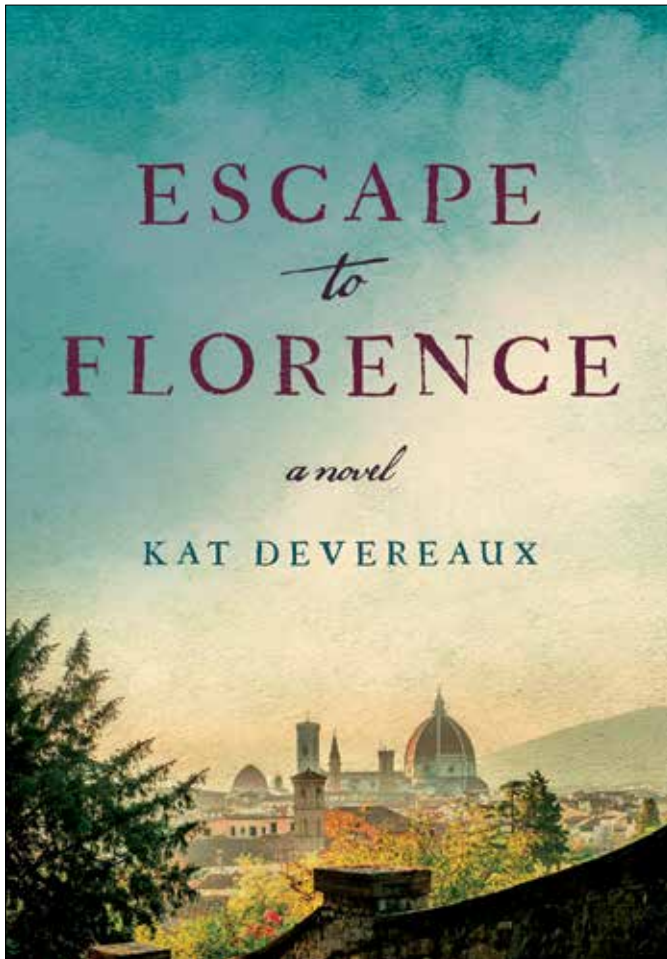
Most days, I don’t.

But when I was young and unemployable,
I cried real tears,
proclaiming *This is God loving me*,
even in defeat.

I want that faith again,
trust that outstrips understanding,
a whisper of reassurance,

on a path I know nothing about.

Justin Lacour lives in New Orleans and edits *Trampoline: A Journal of Poetry*. He is the author of four chapbooks, including *Hulk Church*, forthcoming from Belle Point Press.



Harper Paperbacks / 272p \$19

Kat Devereaux's *Escape to Florence* is a beach read with far more substance than most. In first-person narratives that draw on a great deal of historical and geographical detail, the book chronicles the professional and romantic lives of two women two generations apart, each of whom moves to Florence, Italy, in the wake of emotional abuse from family members.

Tori MacNair, a British writer in her early 30s whose story unfolds in 2019, leaves her overly critical and unloving husband, Duncan, after he hides the details of her beloved grandmother's funeral arrangements from her. With the money bequeathed to her by that grandmother, she rents a flat in Florence and struggles to stay on deadline with her first book, which is under contract with a British publisher.

Intertwined with Tori's story is that of Stella Infuriati, a World War II-era, 14-year-old partisan who ran messages for the anti-fascist resistance in the town of Romituzzo. Stella's older brother, Achille, was a partisan during the war who became a famous and beloved race car driver before

meeting an early demise in an accident. The Infuriatis love their son but resent and despise their daughter. Toward Stella, the father is all coldness; meanwhile, the mother is all criticism, making her daughter repeat chores three or four times out of sheer spite.

Tori's book project delves into the mystery of what happened to Stella after she left Romituzzo for Florence after the war. *Escape to Florence* establishes and resolves this and other romantic mysteries, as well as a few Shakespearean misunderstandings.

Devereaux wraps her multigenerational story in a less than truly suspenseful but still satisfying bow. The ending reveals less about Tori's grandmother than Tori may have been hoping to find, but more about herself than she likely bargained for.

A refreshingly apolitical piece of literature in our hyper-politicized age, Devereaux's novel stays within the bounds of its own story: the intimate and historical particulars of dual love stories, and the rich Italian backdrop against which both are set.

Although it will (as most romance novels do) appeal more to women than to men, this is a novel for all of us.

Among the universally evocative human topics about which Devereaux offers food for reflection is the importance of intergenerational relationships. Her book reminds us that such relationships are especially valuable insofar as they provide children with historical perspective and self-awareness that they might be unlikely to gain elsewhere.

Until Tori establishes a relationship with Marco, her Italian beau, the person who had known her best and loved her most is her late grandmother, with whom she traveled to Florence as a young girl. In the note that she leaves to Tori, the grandmother explains that the enclosed funds are "for you and you alone." She wishes that she could grant Tori her freedom (from her husband, it is implied) but knows she cannot.

She is making a bet, however, that the financial windfall might enable Tori to "take [that freedom] for yourself." Which—in defiance of Tori's dour husband, her exacting mother and her bossy sister—it does. The relationship that Tori has with her grandmother ends, chronologically, before *Escape to Florence* begins. Yet this great familial love across generations creates the circumstances for the rest of the young writer's life to unfold in ways that her contemporaries and near-contemporaries (sibling, parents, peers) would never have condoned, let alone initiated.

Meanwhile, the most prophetic and thematically insightful words in the book are spoken by Don Anselmo, an

elderly priest who serves as the closest thing to a Christ figure in this mostly secular novel. He is a member of the anti-fascist resistance who gives his life over to hiding Jewish refugees, arming fellow resisters and serving as a spiritual guide of his community. Don Anselmo tells Stella that “those who truly love and understand you will never insult your good character. And you may disregard those who do.”

Although the priest is ostensibly speaking here in reference to a friend of Stella’s with whom she has had an argument, Stella knows that he is really talking about the parents who neither love nor trust her. Don Anselmo does both, gifting his young protégé with kindness as well as with an accurate perspective on her loveless home.

Devereaux clearly has no political or cultural ax to grind in this book. The quiet counterculturalism of Tori’s investment in the stories and wisdom of a time gone by, as well as her emotional reliance on and investment in her grandmother, inspire in the reader some resistance to the presentism and ageism that plague us today.

Tori has a driving ambition to unravel her grandmother’s story and that of her onetime love, Achille Infuriati. Without it, Tori might have wallowed in grief for the

end of her own marriage, and in the self-doubt inflicted upon her by years of unrelenting criticism from her cruel husband. Fortunately, she has an investment in greater sorrows and a broad community of people living and dead. All of this serves to offer Tori the perspective and wisdom necessary to intuit the wisdom that Don Anselmo so eloquently offers to Stella: “Those who truly love and understand you will never insult your good character.”

In our society, same-age peers too often feed on one another’s anxieties and untutored perspectives. Parent-child relationships exist in greater isolation from wider circles of family and community now more than ever. *Escape to Florence* offers us an opportunity to think about how some of the problems attending age segregation and loneliness might be mitigated by intergenerational interactions and relationships.

True, many grandmothers can’t take their granddaughter to Florence for holidays. And few small towns in 2023 have a village priest who serves as a surrogate parent to emotionally neglected children. Nevertheless, *Escape to Florence* advocates unapologetically for the nurturing of a self-conception that is accessible only by those who know what they are talking about. In the book, as in life, such people are more likely than not to be on the older side. So for Stella and Tori, the wisdom and perspective gained through interactions with older adults—not Florence per se—constitutes the real escape.

Elizabeth Grace Matthew is a visiting fellow at Independent Women’s Forum and a contributor to *Young Voices*. Her work has appeared in various outlets including *USA Today*, *Law and Liberty*, *Deseret News* and *Real Clear Books & Culture*.

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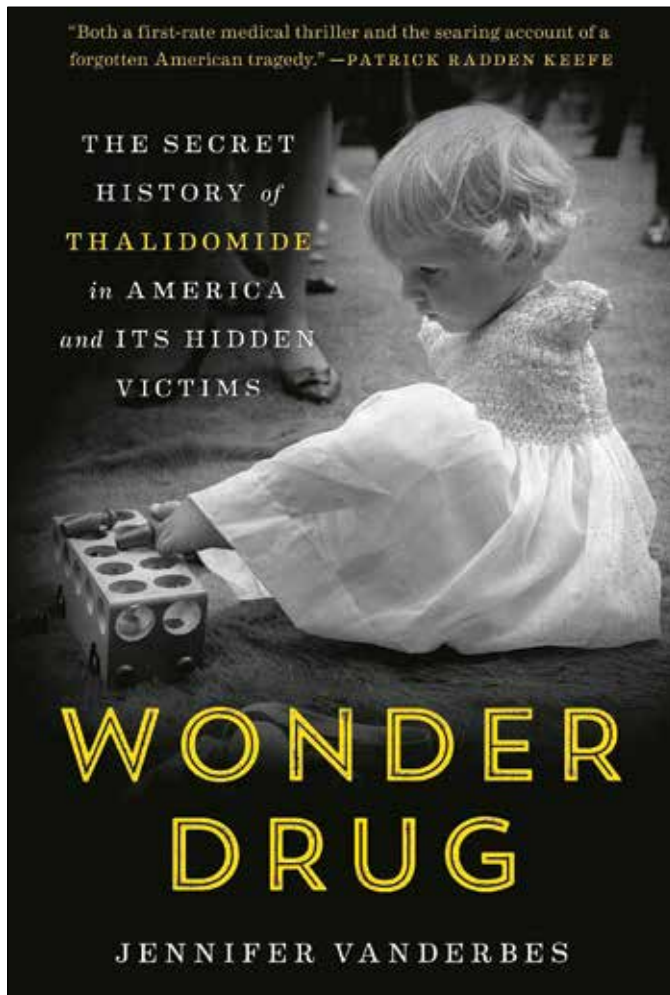
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THE WRONG DOSE



Random House / 432p \$29

It was touted as a sedative with no hangover. It was hailed as non-addictive. It was rumored to present no side effects. It was trumpeted in medical journal ads as “astonishingly safe” and “completely non-poisonous.”

In hindsight, such claims about the safety and efficacy of thalidomide were dreadfully inaccurate. The teratogenic drug has a devastating impact on fetal development, causing severe limb abnormalities and other birth defects.

Thalidomide, or the “wonder drug” that gives Jennifer Vanderbes’s terrific new book its name, was first developed in West Germany in 1954 by Chemie Grünenthal, a pharmaceutical company run by two brothers who had previously been associated with the Nazi Party. Synthesizing in-depth research and interviews with hundreds of people who took thalidomide, along with scientists, lawyers and doctors, Vanderbes’s book provides a sweeping account of the drug’s invention, its shadow distribution in the United States, where it was not legally sold, and the terrible consequences on the people who were its unwitting guinea pigs.

After it was invented in Germany, thalidomide was introduced in other countries, including Canada, Britain, New Zealand, Japan, Italy and the United States, under various brand names like Contergan, Kevadon and Distaval. Its sedative properties made it especially appealing; as Vanderbes relates, the 1950s saw a vogue for anti-anxiety meds, with the likes of Lauren Bacall and Lucille Ball praising tranquilizers like Miltown. However, it was not long before serious concerns arose about the drug—first relating to peripheral neuritis, a condition that “begins as numbness or prickling in the hands and feet” before “escalating to painful stabbing, burning, or tingling,” and later, in response to women who gave birth to babies with shortened limbs or seal-like appendages.

Karl-Hermann Schulte-Hillen, a German father whose son was born with stumps instead of arms, was one of the first parents to sound the alarm over thalidomide. When baby Jan was born in 1961, the hospital’s doctor was quick to chalk up his defects to genetics, but Schulte-Hillen was unconvinced; after all, a dozen women in their neighborhood, including Schulte-Hillen’s sister, had recently given birth to babies with similar deformities. Over several chapters, Vanderbes movingly recounts how Schulte-Hillen and his wife, Linde, resolved to raise their baby with “no shame, no guilt” while trying to unravel the cause of their son’s condition.

When an investigation by the Public Health Service was unforthcoming, Schulte-Hillen took it upon himself to “find out what had harmed his son.” He joined forces with another gumshoe named Widukind Lenz, a German pediatrician and geneticist, just as more reports about babies with phocomelia (born without arms) were making the rounds. The pair published ads in several newspapers, seeking to collect more information about mothers who gave birth to similarly afflicted babies. One thing ran through the mothers’ stories like a bright red thread: thalidomide.

The drugmaker Chemie Grünenthal was far from ignorant of thalidomide’s neurotoxic effects. As early as 1956, a doctor from Berlin noted the drug’s “absolute intolerability” in humans, only to be rebuffed (he was told that he had administered improper doses). The next year, a researcher at Edinburgh University determined that thalidomide inhibited thyroid activity and deemed it “unjustifiable” for use in the absence of “more detailed study of its long-term effects in a larger series of patients.” His research was later watered down in the British Medical Journal.

In 1958, a German doctor relayed his concerns to Grünenthal about “giddiness and balance disturbances in elderly patients”; the firm disavowed any connection be-

tween the symptoms and its drug. The following year saw more complaints about constipation and nerve damage as well as severe side effects, as reported by 20 doctors in Switzerland. Still nothing.

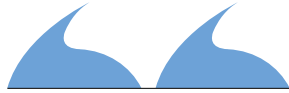
In an act of brazen disregard, Chemie Grünenthal partnered with the Cincinnati-based William S. Merrell Company in 1959 to distribute millions of samples of the drug in so-called experimental trials in the United States. “Detail men,” forerunners of pharmaceutical sales reps, tirelessly peddled thalidomide as a low-risk treatment for insomnia, headaches and morning sickness. Soon, more than a thousand obstetricians and other doctors were dispensing Kevadon, as the drug was commonly called in the United States, to their patients in unmarked envelopes. They were sowing the seeds for one of the biggest drug disasters involving children.

Even after the dangers of taking thalidomide were more widely recognized, “doctors had no obligation to alert patients to what drug they had been given,” Vanderbes writes. “Names of trial doctors, forever guarded, meant that patients might never know they’d been used as guinea pigs. On all sides, the law shielded doctors, leaving patients defenseless.”

That thalidomide was never made available for sale in the United States—that it did not reach even more people than it did through unscrupulous trial doctors—was due largely to the efforts of one indefatigable medical reviewer for the Food and Drug Administration, Frances Oldham Kelsey. As Vanderbes meticulously documents, the Canadian-American pharmacologist and physician refused to buckle under immense pressure from Merrell to approve the drug posthaste; instead, she thoroughly reviewed every aspect of the drug’s application, flagging inconsistencies, asking for more information at critical junctures, raising trenchant questions about the drug’s effect on pregnant subjects and on fetuses, and conducting her own research.

From the time that Merrell submitted its application to the F.D.A. in 1960 to sell thalidomide, Kelsey was not swayed by overheated claims of the drug’s magical properties. (One brochure boasted that it was impossible to determine thalidomide’s lethal dose, making it unprecedentedly safe.) When she learned of reports coming out of Germany that the drug might be linked to severe birth defects, her suspicions mounted.

Her decision not to approve the drug for sale was later vindicated as more news of thalidomide’s toxicity came to light. Major news outlets quickly anointed Kelsey a civic hero; a front-page tribute in *The Washington Post* by Morton Mintz began: “This is the story of how the skepticism and stubbornness of a government physician prevented



‘On all sides, the law shielded doctors, leaving patients defenseless.’

what could have been an appalling American tragedy, the birth of hundreds or indeed thousands of armless and legless children.”

For her uncompromising integrity and her championing of evidence over anecdote, Kelsey received several awards, including a President’s Award for Distinguished Federal Civilian Service in 1962. That same year saw the passage of the Kefauver-Harris Amendments to the Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act, which mandated that drugs had to be both safe and effective before they could be marketed. Her work also paved the way for the creation of institutional review boards “to approve the how, who, and where of clinical trials *before* they started.”

Kelsey’s legacy as a vigilant and conscientious regulator has had such a remarkable impact on drug approval procedures and patient safety that it has paradoxically threatened to obscure the stories of American “thalidomiders,” or children born to mothers who took the sedative. The official narrative for several years was that because thalidomide was never officially sold in the United States, the country had been spared the worst of the drug’s consequences.

One of the most chilling statistics in this book, which fairly brims with them, is that to this day, the F.D.A. recognizes only nine thalidomide babies, including two who were stillborn. “In sixty years, the agency has never amended its victim count,” Vanderbes writes. “This erasure from history seems a cruel irony for people prevented, in many ways, from fading into the background.”

Equally damning is the fact that the United States is the only developed nation that doesn’t subsidize care for thalidomide victims. Whereas countries like Britain, Spain, Denmark, Sweden, Japan and Italy have covered some of the care costs for survivors, the United States absolved the guilty-as-sin Merrell “of any criminal accountability and essentially dodges any responsibility of its own

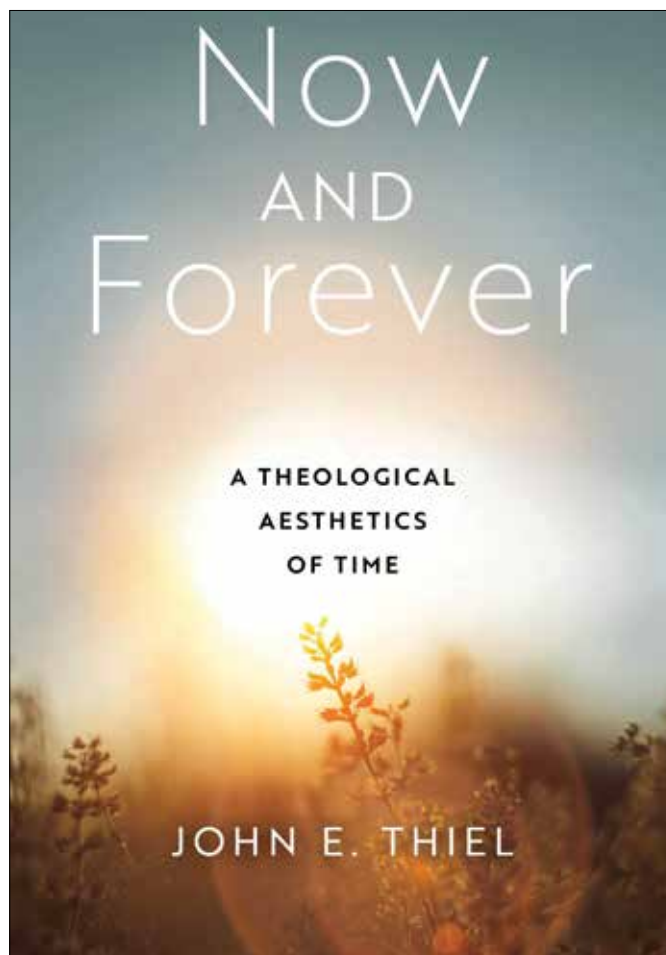
on a technicality”: that thalidomide was made freely available rather than being sold.

Perhaps the greatest contribution of this urgent and engrossing book is the space it accords to the criminally undercounted survivors: Their testimonies are interleaved between chapters like so many intervertebral disks, forming the book’s moral spine. The final section of *Wonder Drug* recounts a 2019 “survivors conference” in San Diego organized by thalidomid-ers. Many of the attendees had first found one another through a Facebook group for thalidomide survivors, which became a valuable hub for those seeking a sense of community as well as information about ongoing lawsuits against companies that distributed Kevadon.

Meeting one other face-to-face for the first time at the conference proved epiphanic. One woman, surrounded by a roomful of people with atypical limbs, tells them that seeing people who look like her has finally allowed her to abandon “the need to perform.” Yet the battle for justice continues; for a whole slew of complicated reasons having to do with statutes of limitations, costs of filing a claim, lack of drug documentation and difficulties in tracing a case to a specific clinical investigator, “the deck [is] stacked overwhelmingly against any American victims.” What it will take to turn the tide is anyone’s guess, but Vanderbes’s book is a vital contribution to that effort.

Rhoda Feng writes about theater and books for *Artforum*, *Frieze*, *NPR.org*, *The New York Times*, *The New Republic* and *The Nation*.

CONTEMPLATING ETERNITY



University of Notre Dame Press / 214p \$50

When asked by a disciple about death, Confucius replied: “We don’t even know about life. How can we know about death?” In the *Katha Upanishad*, the boy Nachiketas is granted a boon by Yama, the god of death. The child asks to know what comes after death. Yama replies: “Boy, do not ask me about matters of life and death. Even the gods are not clear on all points.”

The author of 1 John tells us, “Dear friends, we are children of God now; what we will be, has not yet been made known.” St. Paul writes to the Corinthians, “Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, mind has not conceived...the things God has prepared for those who love God” (1 Cor 2:9) and admonishes them for being “foolish” in trying to imagine the future resurrection in physical terms.

Such cautions notwithstanding, John E. Thiel of Fairfield University ventures to propose a “thick” eschatology based on the idea of a continuation of the human response to grace into an afterlife in *Now and Forever: A Theological Aesthetics of Time*. Thiel characterizes his project as a “thought experiment,” “a speculative approach to eschatology” and a contribution to a “Christian imaginary.” He also calls it a “theological aesthetic.”

Timeless eternity, for Thiel, belongs to God alone. He proposes that after the Last Judgment, humans will enter unending time. Thiel's "imaginary" runs counter to the common theological view. After death, we are told in Scripture, "time shall be no more" (Rev 10:6); existence after death is participation in God's being, an eternal present; our "divinization" begins in life; the "resurrection" means the eternal validity of the person we become in time. Every present time in life touches eternity and lives in God. For Thiel, by contrast, by resurrection we enter new time, which will go on without end.

Although his primary goal is the construction of a theological aesthetics of time, Thiel is also concerned with the aesthetics of beauty. His "Catholic imaginary" proposes an objective notion of beauty based on classical aesthetics. "The beauty of events in time [is] a reflection of the beauty of God's graceful presence to creation," he writes. He uses that term, *graceful*, numerous times, defining it as "a quality of movement that—in human judgment, of course—defines an event individuated in time." More specifically, Thiel describes *graceful* as "a quality of differentiated movements centripetally shaped into a symmetrical unity that makes for the beautiful event."

Thiel turns from beauty to a discussion of the evils that seem to undermine it. He rejects divine causality behind innocent suffering. He likewise rejects theodicy, which he sees as evil because it is morally insensitive to people's actual suffering. It assumes that "just the right words can transform evil into providence and that logic is the best medicine for a believer's troubled heart."

Thiel proposes that God "does not do death." Much suffering is caused by human sin, but Thiel pleads ignorance as to the origin of natural evils. "We have nothing to say theologically about how (causally) or why (meaningfully) this sort of deathliness besets human lives." Tragic events are not evil in themselves, he writes, but part of "creation's providential movement in time." (The reader might ask: How is this different from the "providential" response that Thiel rejects?) The proper reaction, he argues, is "proleptic waiting" for the fulfillment of God's biblical promise to destroy death.

Thiel rejects what he considers the orthodox teaching of the mainline Christian churches: that original sin makes all suffering deserved, and it is inflicted by God's retributive justice. I would argue, however, that Catholic Christianity does not teach this. Original sin does not make us personally guilty; it is called sin only by analogy. Suffering is not divine retribution. Moreover, the voluntary undergoing of undeserved suffering is crucial to both the satisfaction theory of salvation and contemporary soteriologies.

Further, in some contemporary theologies, the physi-

cal and moral evils in the world are results of evolution and the law of entropy. Theologies of the cross, especially liberation theologies, explore the meaningfulness of suffering, particularly innocent suffering. A treatment of those theologies would have been beneficial here.

On the beauty of tradition, Thiel writes: "All believers as believers judge tradition to be beautiful for what it is and for what it might be." He espouses the Catholic belief that tradition is a means of revelation alongside Scripture. Although it develops, it presents "unchanging truth."

The final chapter of the book returns to the continuity of grace with resurrected life after death. Although Thiel claims to offer a "thick" eschatology, "to speculate fulsomely" [*sic*] about heavenly time, his treatment is sparse. Thiel admits that "time is inseparable from the three coordinates of space." Yet he considers only time. But if there is a physical resurrection, it must take place in *space-time*. Where? When? In the *Avesta*, Zarathustra asks God how the resurrection can take place. God, the "Wise Spirit" (*Ahura Mazda*—yes, that's where the name of the car comes from) tells him that it will be easy for God to re-create everything. But how can a new creation be conceived in modern cosmology?

Thiel insists that "in order for creatures to remain creatures eschatologically, they must continue to be in time." He presumes that being in earthly space-time is the only way of being a creature, but could there be creatures that are not spatio-temporal? Scholastic theology thought of angels that way. For humans to remain creatures, Thiel says, they must be "eternally" what they have become in history. Doesn't that mean they are in God's omnipresent eternity what they became in life? Grace and "divinization" must preserve the distinction between God and creatures. But that distinction is unique: Aquinas says that the very *esse* of humans is "participation" in the divine *esse*. Grace raises that participation to another level.

For Thiel, the beatific vision is not reserved for the saints but is given to all. I was reminded of a different twist on this idea in Giotto's "Last Judgment in the Arena Chapel" in Padua, where the refulgence from Christ is at the same time the light of heaven and the fire of hell. The difference is in how it is received. "It is this [beatific] vision that brings judgment as the self-revelation of utter unworthiness to all, as well as the conversion of all by the irresistible power of grace," writes Thiel.

Thiel does not think that we will be idle in heaven. No rest for the wicked, but neither for the good, according to Thiel. We must forever perform virtuous acts. "The beauty of eschatological time lies in its capacity to offer an infinite horizon for resurrected persons to act in order to negotiate morally the sin they have committed."

What could it mean to “negotiate” past sin? Would this effectively be an everlasting purgatory? No; like St. Bonaventure (although he is not mentioned), Thiel supposes that endless progression in love is beatific. Thiel reminds us that “the representation of heavenly life has a solid footing in the history of Christian art and poetry.” True, but would anyone want to live *forever* the kind of existence they portray? (Excepting perhaps the vision of St. Brigid of Ireland, who imagined heaven as a lake of ale.)

Who is this book for? Non-theologians brought up in traditional Catholicism may find correctives to naïve ideas they absorbed—for example, that “the suffering that issues from natural events is divine retribution.” Those looking for a poetic approach to religion will find much by which to be edified. Thiel’s treatment of hope and waiting are valuable. But his excursions into abstruse and dated topics, his vagueness and his sometimes-convoluted prose might discourage readers.

What of professionals? Much of the book’s content is well-trodden ground, as contemporary Catholic theologians do not need to be told that grace is offered universally, or that tradition develops, or that God does not inflict evils on people. Although the book is presented as a “proposal,” scholars might be frustrated by Thiel’s lack of concern to justify his theological and aesthetic positions.

This book left me with appreciation for Thiel’s erudition, but with an increased conviction that Confucius, St. Paul and the First Letter of John are right.

The Rev. Richard Viladesau is a professor emeritus of theology at Fordham University. A priest of the diocese of Rockville Centre, he received his doctorate at the Gregorian University in Rome.

LAMENT

By Nicholas Montemarano

When I told my mother she was going to die,
she did not weep.

The virus quietly did its work
but did not weep.

The nurses had seen too much death
to weep, and the doctor said he was sorry
but did not weep
because my mother was not his mother.

My sister and I stayed awake,
our mother falling into a deep
and ever-deeper sleep,
but we did not weep
until she was gone.

Our father wept when we told him,
and we held him, but did not weep.

Though it felt wrong to sleep, I slept,
and when I woke and remembered, I wept.

Whoever called time of death did not weep
nor did the priest who gave Last Rites
nor did the man who sold us a coffin
nor did the man who sold us a plot
nor did the hands that carved the stone
nor did the sun nor the moon weep
because my mother was not their mother.

Heather, who did my mother’s hair
when my mother was alive
and one last time when she was gone—
even though my mother was not her mother,
she wept.

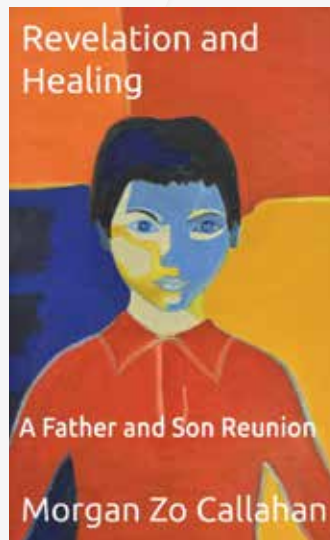
The day my mother was buried, the wind swept
our eyes into weeping,
and the earth wept upon receiving her.

Her body wept too upon her passing,
as bodies do when left behind.

Nicholas Montemarano is the author of five books, most recently the memoir in verse *If There Are Any Heavens*.

Revelation and Healing:

A Father and Son Reunion recounts the author's slow journey from an adoption that left him longing for his biological parents and wondering if he had any Black blood. He was assured he did not. Discovering, while in high school, his mother's identity, years later he found that of his biological father, Lionel Durand (1920-1961), a Black man born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Suddenly the author realized the source of his own immediate empathy as a boy with Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement he led. The author shares the often- shocking details of his adoption and the grounding therapies which facilitated self-acceptance. With filial admiration, the author traces the life of his beloved father, Lionel Durand, friends with Jean Cocteau and Picasso, an internationally acclaimed newsman and journalist, who fought in the French Resistance during World War II, twice imprisoned, twice escaped. Welcome to this reading journey and its wondrous surprises.

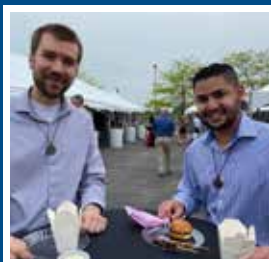


Lionel Durand's cover painting of his mixed-race daughter, Barbara. Same Black father as the author, a different White mom.



Lionel Durand broadcasting for Voice of America

BE A BROTHER TO ALL

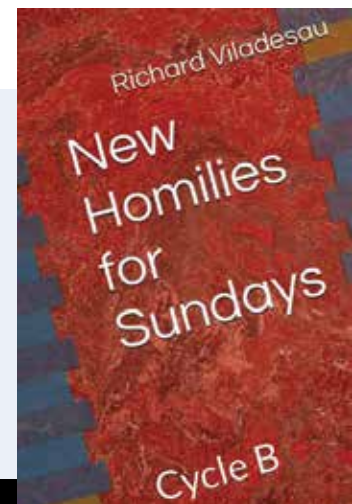


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Let Us Be Generative, O Lord

Because November brings Year A of the liturgical cycle to a close, the church spends the month reading from the last chapters of Jesus' public ministry in Matthew's Gospel. These closing parables contain kernels of wisdom, but they also display a harsh tone. Matthew presents Jesus' last statements as a reminder that a living faith ought to pull the believer "off the couch" and into the streets. Those who fail to adopt this faith-filled activism, Jesus states, may face severe consequences.

For example, take some of the parables from the Gospel readings this month. On the Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time, we read about the parable of the wise and foolish virgins, who carry oil in their lamps in anticipation of the bridegroom's arrival. There is no doubt to the final outcome for the foolish virgins who ran out of oil to light their vessels. The door is closed on them, and they remain out in the cold darkness (Mt 25:1-13). The following Sunday brings little relief as we hear the parable of the talents and the useless

servant. Here the servant who did nothing to increase his master's wealth is reprimanded: "You wicked, lazy servant!" (Mt 25:26). This pitiable fellow, like the foolish virgins, is also thrown into the darkness outside. Finally, on the last Sunday of the month, we come upon Matthew's final judgment scene, in which Jesus separates the sheep from the goats. Those "goats," who failed to live out their faith in Jesus and love for humanity, will not enter the kingdom of heaven but will go off to meet their fate.

Where, one might ask, is the "good news" in these final and severe parables? Our prayer might be better shaped if we focus on the characters who achieve positive outcomes. We can find our consolation among those who light their lamps for the bridegroom, increase the master's wealth, and serve Christ in their love for humanity. Like them, we are called to a generative faith that produces light, abundance and life within our circles of influence.

THIRTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A), NOV. 5, 2023

Practicing the Covenant of Our Fathers

THIRTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A), NOV. 12, 2023

Maintaining the Fuel of Our Faith

THIRTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A), NOV. 19, 2023

How to Work Someone Else's Wealth

THE SOLEMNITY OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST, KING OF THE UNIVERSE, NOV. 26, 2023

Love of Christ Is Love for the Nations



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



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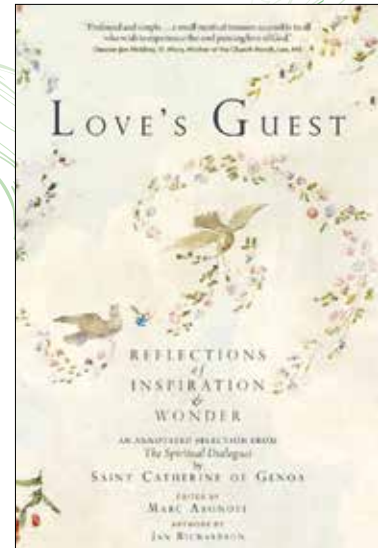
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On the Ground in Rome

Watching the synod without preconceptions | By Colleen Dulle



The Synod on Synodality, currently taking place in Rome, has the potential to be the church's most extraordinary event since the Second Vatican Council. Like that council, it is deeply rooted in the longstanding Christian tradition of communal decision-making. Because of that, it is nearly impossible to predict what exactly will result from this year's meeting or from the synod's second global gathering next year.

One thing we can predict, unfortunately, are continued efforts to undermine the synod—because, again like Vatican II, the synod threatens some Catholics' erroneous understanding of the church as a never-changing institution. Previous synods under Pope Francis foreshadowed some of the arguments against this one.

First is the argument that the synod has mounted a facade of open discussion but is destined toward predetermined outcomes. This could not be farther from the truth: In my and my colleagues' reporting, few involved in the synod have been able to provide even a general idea of what will result from this first meeting. Only in late September was it announced that the synod participants would put together a summary document at all.

To be fair, this is a criticism rooted in historical reality: In previous pontificates, synods were indeed predetermined, and discussions in the synod hall were tightly controlled. In *The Synodal Pathway: When Rhetoric Meets Reality*, editor Eamonn Conway writes that Pope Francis, then archbishop of Buenos Aires, likely chose not to attend Pope Benedict XVI's last

synod on evangelization in 2012 because of the “carefully contrived” nature of Roman synods at the time.

Although Francis has reacted strongly against this tendency, allowing instead open conversation and even encouraging disagreements, several of his cardinal-critics reportedly gave a letter to the pope on the first day of the Synod on the Family in 2015 saying the meeting “seem[ed] designed to facilitate predetermined results on important disputed questions.”

This is related to the second predictable criticism of the synod, that it is solely focused on hot-button issues. Critics in 2015 believed that meeting was an effort to weaken Catholic teaching on the indissolubility of marriage, and critics of the Synod on the Amazon in 2019 argued that it was really about ordaining women as deacons and married men as priests. So too critics of the Synod on Synodality have already denounced it as opening a “Pandora's box” of anarchy or democratic rule in the church, opening the door to women clergy, the blessing of same-sex marriages and acceptance of the idea that people can be transgender.

On the other hand, critics who desire to see more change, more quickly, point to the fact that despite even a majority vote in favor of ordaining married men in the Amazon at the 2019 synod, Pope Francis has changed very little. (And there is no shortage of invites in Rome these days to extra-synodal events that are focused on advocating for greater changes in the church.) Critics across the spectrum may fall into the trap of seeing

the synod as a sort of ideological battlefield, when in fact it is a place for listening and communal discernment, with Francis acting as a sort of discern-in-chief.

Then there are the media efforts to spin, or at worst, subvert, the synod. One need only think of the “Pachamama” incident, in which critics of the Amazon synod accused the Vatican of idolatry when Indigenous carvings of two pregnant women were placed in a display at a prayer service in the Vatican Gardens. The Vatican was caught off guard by the accusations, and was thrown off even more when a young man stole the statues and threw them into the Tiber River, as recorded in a viral video. It remains, sadly, the most memorable event of that synod, despite having nothing to do with the synod's content.

Will there be a “Pachamama” incident this time? I hope not. Yet given the open-endedness of this synod and the general difficulty of communicating what synodality itself means, I worry that such media stunts or distractions might throw off the public understanding of what is actually going on inside this momentous gathering in the life of the church.

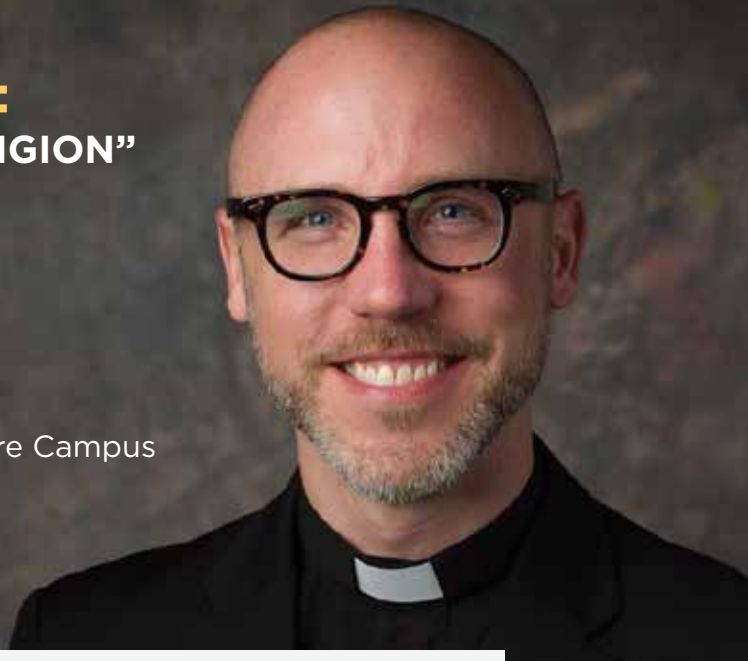
As **America's** veteran Vatican correspondent, Gerard O'Connell, has often warned me, “There is the synod that happens inside the synod hall and the one that happens outside.” We ought to keep our eyes on the real one.

Colleen Dulle is an associate editor at **America** and co-hosts the “*Inside the Vatican*” podcast.

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