America

DECEMBER 2024

THE JESUIT REVIEW OF FAITH AND CULTURE

POPE FRANCIS' ARGENTINA

A report from the country that shaped him

Colleen Dulle

p18

The Editors on the Synod on Synodality

p8

The Conservative Case for Fighting Climate Change

p10

M. Cathleen Kaveny on Heaven and Hell After Vatican II

p36

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Mercy and Justice the Day After the Election

It should be counted as a mercy that the results of the presidential election were clear on the morning after Election Day—and not just because this issue of the magazine had to go to press at noon on Wednesday, Nov. 6. There were many possible scenarios in which we could have been waiting on small margins in one or more swing states as mail-in ballots were slowly counted, and subsequently subjected to litigation, in order to determine which candidate had eked out the win. Americans can and should agree that the country is better off without days or weeks of uncertainty about election results, no matter what they think about the outcome.

Similarly, it could be counted as a mercy that, unlike Donald J. Trump's victory in 2016, the Electoral College and popular vote results seem likely to be in agreement in this election, and that, unlike in 2020, Kamala Harris can be reliably counted upon, as the defeated candidate, to concede her loss and, as the sitting vice president, to preside over the certification of electoral votes in January.

I expect that many readers are not ready to feel grateful for such mercies at this point. But the reason that both God's mercy and God's providence are mysterious is because God's goodness is more powerful than human sinfulness and God's design is neither dependent on our successes nor overwhelmed by our failures.

That also means, of course, that some claim about mercy and providence could be made, and would need to be made, if the election results were reversed, or if votes were still being counted as we neared Thanksgiving Day, or even if we were in an active constitutional crisis. Mercy and providence would still have the last word and would still need to be among the first words on our lips in gratitude and in supplication.

As Brother Joe Hoover, S.J., wrote in an online piece for **America** on Nov. 1, if we learn more deeply why Teresa of Ávila could say and mean "Let nothing disturb you," and apply it even to election results, then we will have more freedom to work for justice "without clinging to expectations for the political outcomes that we previously insisted God bend in our direction."

Work for justice will certainly be necessary. Mr. Trump campaigned on the promise of mass deportations, which would tear families apart and destabilize communities across the country. His running mate, JD Vance, estimated that they could aim to remove as many as one million people per year. It is impossible to imagine such a policy being carried out justly or effectively, except insofar as the effect being sought is deeper fear among immigrants and deeper division in our nation. The willfully cruel family separation policy from Mr. Trump's first presidential term offers a clear reminder of how serious this situation is. Our immigrant brothers and sisters will need voices raised up in their defense, and the Catholic Church especially must be a champion of solidarity with them.

On other fronts, while it is impossible to know at this point which of Mr. Trump's campaign threats of retribution against his enemies he may attempt to carry through, he is likely to further erode constitutional norms and work against limits to his own power, as the editors of **America** first warned in September 2020 and have repeatedly cautioned against since. While the legitimacy of Mr. Trump's victory should not be questioned, it also must not be treated as a license to ignore checks and balances. Mr. Trump's political opponents will need to rise to the occasion of opposing overreaches without turning every disagreement with him into a full-blown crisis and will need to cooperate even with his allies whenever possible to safeguard democratic norms.

Beyond the questions of justice and human dignity for immigrants and basic constitutional norms, there are an enormous number of prudential questions on which people of good will may agree or disagree with Mr. Trump's policy proposals. On those topics, the first challenge is to understand what Mr. Trump's victory at the polls means. Were people voting primarily against the Biden-Harris administration's record? Or were they voting affirmatively for Mr. Trump's policy proposals, and if so, which ones?

Regarding both economic and foreign policy, many people seem to have been voting for a return to the (pre-Covid-19) first Trump administration. But neither Mr. Trump nor anyone else has the power to simply roll the clock back, despite his claims that if he had been in office for the past four years, we would not have had inflation or the wars in Ukraine and Gaza.

Still, there is a kind of déjà vu as we look toward the start of a second Trump administration eight years after the first. The divisions in American society highlighted by Mr. Trump's first election are at least as deep today as they were then. But perhaps the strange working of mercy and providence is evident even there, keeping us attentive to the need for conversion and reconciliation. If providence works at all, then it works through both victory and defeat, through cooperation and resistance. Thus, greater unity, when we eventually reach it, may be recognized not as a triumph over an enemy but as a gift to be shared.

Sam Sawyer, S.J.

THE ISSUE

GIVE AND TAKE

6
YOUR TAKE
The gift of vegetarianism

8
OUR TAKE
After the synod

10
SHORT TAKE
Climate change threatens tradition and families
Joshua L. Sohn

DISPATCHES

12
HELENE'S RAMPAGE TEACHES THERE ARE NO SAFE HAVENS FROM EXTREME WEATHER

Father James Martin shares five takeaways from the synod's final document

Mexico turns enforcer for U.S. immigration policy

Cardinal Chow sees good news in the Vatican's renewal of an agreement on bishops with Beijing

FEATURES

18
POPE FRANCIS' ARGENTINA
Lessons for the global church from the pope's homeland
Colleen Dulle

28
THE BACKBONE OF THE PARISH
Lay volunteers are church heroes, but they need our support
Maggie Phillips

FAITH & REASON

36
MOVING FROM FEAR TO LOVE
Visions of heaven and hell in post-Vatican II Catholicism
M. Cathleen Kaveny

Pope Francis and members of the Synod of Bishops on synodality pose for a photo after the synod's final working session, on Oct. 26, in the Paul VI Audience Hall at the Vatican.

CNS photo/Vatican Media

FAITH IN FOCUS

40
WHAT I SAW AT THE BORDER
Serving migrant communities from an immigrant experience
Juan Wulff

44
Caregiving as a member of the 'sandwich generation'
LuElla D'Amico

POETRY

65
BEHOLD THE HANDMAID
Joe Hoover

IDEAS

46
GIACOMO PUCCINI AND THE TRIUMPH OF DIVINE LOVE
On the centennial of the composer's death
Christopher Sandford

52
The origins of the Christmas carol 'We Three Kings'
Maggie Van Dorn

BOOKS

54
Great Expectations; The Cemetery of Untold Stories; Small Rain; Tyranny, Inc.; Tourist Out of Time

THE WORD

64
An Advent Warning: Be Vigilant and Perceptive
Victor Cancino

LAST TAKE

66
KELLY RYAN
Opening doors all year long

Cover: A mural of Pope Francis adorns the facade of an apartment building in La Matanza, Argentina.
AP Photo/Rodrigo Abd

The gift of vegetarianism

In the November issue, Francis X. Clooney, S.J., shared his experience of being a vegetarian. "Five decades of vegetarian diet has changed me, for the better, I think: simpler, more natural, more connected to the smaller and larger life forms around me," he wrote. "For us Americans, it seems clearer and clearer: What most of us already have is more than enough." Father Clooney's reflection drew a number of thoughtful, appreciative comments.

Tip of the hat to you for being vegetarian for so long. I give up meat every Lent and it's a ride on the struggle bus (and the chicken tendies I had after Easter were the best chicken tendies). Maybe one day I'll have your strength. In the meantime, feel free to drop a recipe or two. I've been thinking about implementing no-meat Fridays.

Gwen Murtha

As a younger Catholic scholar, this very topic is forefront for me: how being vegetarian could make us all better Catholics and better people. (I have been vegetarian since my second year at Gonzaga University in 2015 and am now writing a dissertation on vegetarianism in Catholicism.)

I opted into my own vegetarianism for similar reasons that you described, though it was reading Martin Buber's *I and Thou* that really shifted and solidified a vision of reality that had been growing in my mind (and heart); like you, however, I began early on to make exceptions for similar family and social gatherings.

I also liked this question from you: "Might vegetarianism gain a kind of liturgical power in a global church seeking to recalibrate its natural and cultural frames worldwide?" That is an important point: that we see the sacramental, dare I say eucharistic elements in our daily meals where we can say, alongside Jesus, that we can reject what our culture does due to the hardness of hearts because "from the beginning it has not been this way" (Mt 19:8).

Robert McDonald

I stopped eating all meat in 1990 for two reasons: the cruel ways in which animals are harvested for food, especially on the factory farms; and the impact that it has on the environment. A book by John Robbins, *Diet for a New America*, was my wake-up call. The horrendous conditions that chickens, pigs and especially young cows raised for veal are subjected to is a violence. The effects of raising huge numbers of cattle on the environment is a violence to the earth.

While I don't try to convince people that they should be vegetarian, I strongly suggest that you know where your food comes from and how it was raised or, in the case of fruits and vegetables, how they were grown. I don't believe that plants are sentient beings, but for your own health and the health of the planet, go organic as much as you can.

These things were not issues in Jesus' day. They didn't have factory farms or chemical fertilizers, and the very health of the earth was not in peril.

Roseann Lord

Thank you so much for sharing your experience and theology of food. Sometimes we approach vegetarianism solely as an ecological value. Likewise, we Americans tend to be skeptical about fasting as a moral and spiritual practice. You have gently, cogently, taken us beyond these limits to a deeper, freer view.

Ellen Wilfong-Grush

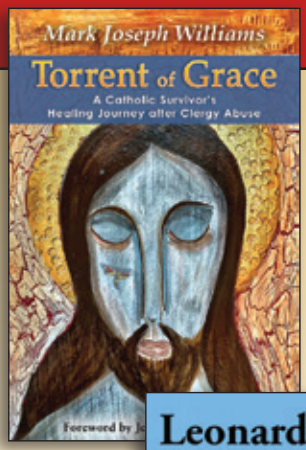
One can ask: "What did Jesus do?" He was a fish eater and as resurrected served fish to his Apostles on the shore of Lake Galilee. At the Last Supper, he and the Apostles shared in eating the paschal lamb as observant Jews.

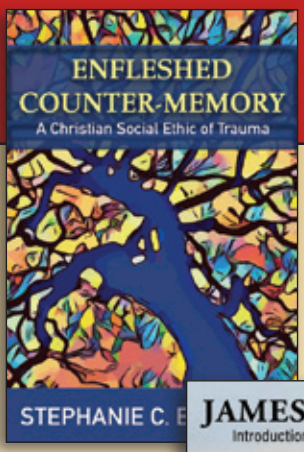
Planet Earth will eventually demand we drastically reduce consumption of red meat. I eat plant-based burgers, but I'm obligated to pay more than one-third the price of cheap beef. At age 84, my spirituality is totally unrelated to my eating habits. Lord have mercy on me.

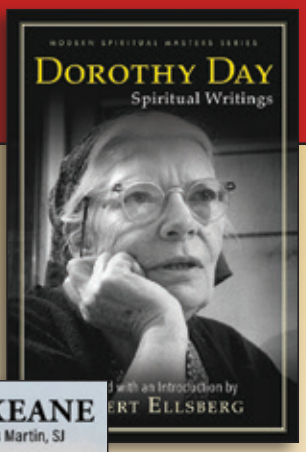
Baxter Survil

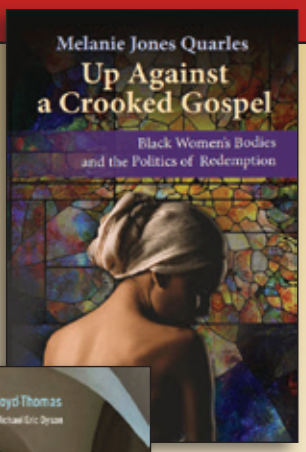
I enjoyed this autobiographical essay, and appreciate your thinking. I am trying, with my family, to become more like you in this regard.

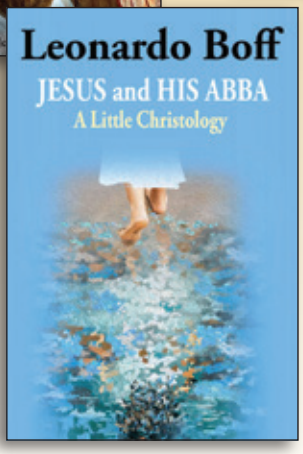
Chad Ronnander

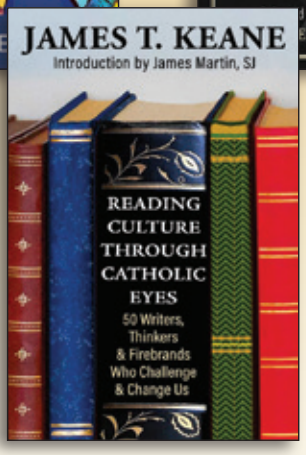


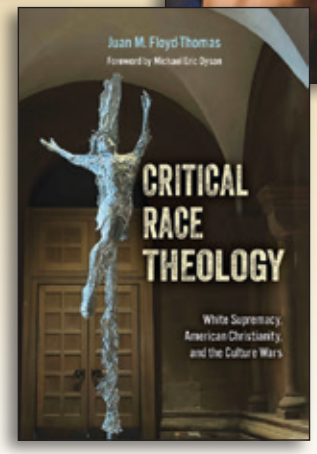












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MARK JOSEPH WILLIAMS

Foreword by JENNIFER S. WORTHAM

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The Ongoing Work of the Synod: A Church Learning to Listen

The second session of the Synod on Synodality concluded at the end of October in Rome—but the work of the synod is far from over, with its implementation phase just beginning.

"Episcopalis Communio," the 2018 apostolic constitution that updates and defines the structure of the Synod of Bishops, describes the implementation phase as necessary "to initiate the reception of the Synod's conclusions in all the local churches" (No. 7). In the case of the Synod on Synodality, this reception will involve not only reading and understanding the synod's final document but also developing and adapting norms and structures to give concrete form to its recommendations for dialogue, consultation and evaluation in the life of the church. That final document, having been approved and signed by Pope Francis, now "participates in the ordinary magisterium of the successor of Peter."

The synod's final document calls strongly for "participatory bodies" already provided for in canon law, such as diocesan synods and diocesan and parish pastoral councils, to be made "mandatory, as was requested at every state of the synodal process" because "a synodal church is based upon the existence, efficiency and effective vitality of these participatory bodies, not on the merely nominal existence of them" (No. 104).

The document also calls for these bodies to operate synodally in both their deliberations and their selection of members. The synod puts a particular focus on "greater involvement by women, young people, and those living in poverty or on the margins," as well as lay Christians who are living their faith in the secular world, not just those who are employed in the internal work of the church (No. 106). It calls for greater lay participation in significant decisions within the church, including, as one example, a "greater voice in choosing bishops" (No. 70).

The synod's attention to participation, however, is not just an update for organizational charts within the church—it is "putting into practice what the [Second Vatican] Council taught about the church as mystery and church as people of God, called to holiness through continual conversion that comes from listening to the Gospel" (No. 5). This conversion is not directed only to the internal life of the church—as an "authentic act of further reception" of Vatican II, it aims at "deepening its inspiration and reinvigorating its prophetic force for today's world."

Perhaps especially in places like the United States and Western Europe, where structures like pastoral councils are already relatively common, it is important to hear the synod's call to ensure that consultation and dialogue are effective and not merely nominal. There can be a temptation for bishops, pastors and other church leaders to point at what is already being done as sufficient, as if the synod's recommendations are aimed only at other parts of the church that need to catch up.

Even if it may have some participatory structures in place, the U.S. church's engagement in the synodal process has been uneven. In October 2021, as the diocesan phase of the synod was beginning, **America** staff contacted every diocese in the country and found that only about half had appointed local synod coordinators as called for in the synod's preparatory instructions. After the first general session of the synod, Cardinal Christophe Pierre, the papal nuncio to the United States, addressed the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops on Nov. 14, 2023, saying: "We must have the courage to listen to people's perspectives, even when those perspectives contain errors and misunderstandings." At the same meeting, Archbishop Timothy Broglio, the president of the conference, reflected on the "many synodal realities that already exist in the church in the United States" and said that new structures for consultation should "recognize and build on what is already present."

As this editorial goes to press, preparations are ongoing for the Nov. 11-14 meeting of the U.S.C.C.B., where the bishops will receive updates and reports from members who participated in the synod. Just as the work of the synod did not conclude with the closing Mass of the assembly in Rome, neither should the conference's engagement with the synod conclude with receiving reports from it. Instead, the conference should include as a recurring agenda item implementation of the synod's recommendations, especially in regard to the effectiveness of participatory bodies, on both the parish and diocesan level.

There are significant opportunities for dioceses to learn from one another in this process, and in particular from those dioceses that have had an experience of renewal through a local synod. The theologian Catherine Clifford, a synod delegate, said at a press briefing on Oct. 5 that "the majority of dioceses in the world have not yet experienced a local synod, in the 60 years since the Second Vatican Council."

All the structures and processes associated with the synod are meant

to help the church listen to one another as members of the people of God. But even that is only a means to the more fundamental task of listening to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not calling the church to self-reflection for the church's own sake but that it might be renewed for mission. As the synod's final document recalls, "Synodality and mission are intimately linked: mission illuminates synodality and synodality spurs to mission" (No. 32).

Synodal listening requires much more than just summing up a variety of inputs and taking a kind of average of them. Nor can such listening be equated with a democratic process, in which a majority or even a supermajority ultimately wins out and sees its proposals enacted. The church has been learning this through the two general assemblies of the Synod on Synodality, in which an enormous variety of cultures and experiences were in dialogue and in which controversial topics were able to be discussed but not fully resolved.

The synod's final document lays out the elements of ecclesial discernment, which involve both listening to the word of God in prayer and listening to each other, and then searching for a consensus "when 'our hearts burn within us' (cf. Lk 24:32), without hiding conflicts or searching for the lowest common denominator" (No. 84). That kind of discernment requires patience in cooperating with God, and comes as a gift of grace through the Spirit's work within the church. While discussion and debate can help prepare the way for it, they cannot produce it by themselves.

As the church continues the work of the synod, let us pray for the patience to listen to each other, and to listen together to the Holy Spirit. As Pope Francis said in his final address to the synod, "The Holy Spirit calls and supports us in this learning, which we need to understand as a process of conversion."

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Climate change is not only an environmental crisis. It threatens tradition and families.

Five years ago, a group of social conservatives penned a famous essay titled "Against the Dead Consensus" in the religious journal First Things. They argued that Reaganite free-market libertarianism had failed to support family stability, communal solidarity and other public goods. So they proposed jettisoning the "dead consensus" of libertarianism in favor of a policy framework that could better support these higher-order goods.

In the years since, social conservatives like Josh Hawley and JD Vance have taken up the baton, arguing that libertarian dogmas such as deregulation and laissez-faire economics should be reconsidered if they are resulting in social, community and family decay.

This pivot is commendable. Yet there is another issue where social conservatives still cling to the libertarian dead consensus, even as the social consequences get worse and worse. This issue is climate change.

Climate change is generally cast as an *environmental* crisis, which it is. But it also has grave implications for tradition, community, family and the other higher-order goods that social conservatives most value. We have recently seen entire communities wiped off the map by massive wildfires fueled by ever-hotter weather. There have been multiple days when my own young children could not safely play outside because the air was so foul from wildfire smoke. There is nothing pro-family or pro-social about this state of affairs. There is nothing *conservative* about this state of affairs, if conservatism is understood as protecting our traditional way of life against wrenching and destructive change.

Wildfires are a particularly violent manifestation of this change, but they are not the only one. Climate change disrupts seasonal rhythms and traditions in countless ways. Many lakes and ponds no longer freeze, making outdoor ice-skating a nostalgic memory in places that used to cherish it. Ditto for sledding, snowball fights and other traditional winter activities. A key tenet of social conservatism is that traditions matter, and climate change is literally liquefying our winter traditions.

The list goes on. Florida waters have turned into a Jacuzzi in recent years, and good luck trying to snorkel as fish flee for deeper waters and coral dies off. The iconic Georgia peach is already withering as the weather becomes too hot for it to thrive. Pick any outdoor tradition—agricultural or recreational—and you are likely to find a tradition that is imperiled by climate change.

Yet with few exceptions (more on that below), social conservatives are still embracing the libertarian dead consensus when it comes to climate change. No congressional Republicans voted for the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022, which incentivized clean energy, and there is no evidence that social conservatives pushed for them to do so. Republican politicians talk about *increasing* the use of fossil fuels and rolling back emissions regulations, and many cannot bring themselves even to admit that climate change is a problem.

Project 2025, the Heritage Foundation's well-known blueprint for a future Republican presidential administration, proposes to gut virtually every governmental program that addresses climate change. When it comes to the environment, the dead consensus of deregulation and laissez-faire economics still reigns on the right. Meanwhile, carbon dioxide levels keep rising, temperatures keep going up, and our traditional way of life becomes more and more jeopardized.

To be sure, regulations and financial incentives in the United States are no silver bullet for fighting global climate change. They will not close coal plants in China and India—not immediately, anyway. But a careful blend of carrots and sticks can certainly incentivize U.S. companies to search for the most innovative and consequential technologies to cut emissions. And once those technologies are perfected and proven, they can be exported around the globe.

The "Against the Dead Consensus" writers recognized that the government has a significant role to play in family policy, labor policy and financial policy. Why should the government be deemed feckless or counterproductive when it comes to climate policy? In other words, why have social conservatives jettisoned the libertarian dead consensus on so many other issues while clinging to it on climate?

The Malthusian Past

One reason is undoubtedly a decades-long reaction against Paul Ehrlich and the neo-Malthusians. Mr. Ehrlich is the (in)famous author of *The Population Bomb*, the 1968 book warning that population growth was poised to cause a host of environmental ills. *The Population Bomb* echoed the writings of Thomas Malthus, the Enlightenment-era demographer who linked population growth with resource depletion and human misery. But Mr. Ehrlich did Malthus one better: He proposed a raft of outrageous policies to address population growth, ranging from mandatory sterilization to punitive taxation on baby products.

The Population Bomb became

A brushfire threatens homes in Southern California.

a sensation in the nascent environmental movement of the 1970s. Given that the modern climate movement is an outgrowth of that environmental movement, it is easy to see how the macabre anti-natalism associated with Mr. Ehrlich poisoned the well against social conservative support for climate action. After all, a central tenet of social conservatism is that children are blessings, not a scourge to be suppressed.

But while a reaction against Mr. Ehrlich and the Malthusians can explain social conservatives' hostility to climate action, it can no longer justify it. For the modern climate movement has finally, mercifully broken with *The Population Bomb*. As the social conservative (and devout Catholic) Tim Carney writes in his recent book *Family Unfriendly*, climate scientists and environmental activists "keep having kids," and many now exhort others to do the same. Mr. Carney name-checks modern climate hawks like Ezra Klein, Kate Marvel and David Wallace-Wells, all of whom have disavowed the dour Malthusianism of *The Population Bomb*. Other climate hawks forcefully advocate for more children, not fewer. And, of course, Pope Francis argues for both having more children and taking aggressive action on climate change.

There is a new synergy between climate and family. In *Family Unfriendly*, for example, Mr. Carney devotes an entire chapter to the family-friendly virtues of walkable neighborhoods and to the sterile atomization of car-centric living. As Mr. Carney explains, prioritizing cars over pedestrians is a policy choice, one that does a disservice to parents and children alike. Aside from one sentence, he does not explicitly link this issue to climate change, but creating more walkable neighborhoods would certainly reduce greenhouse gas emissions. By advocating for such neighborhoods, social conservatives like Mr. Carney are backdooring their way into effective climate policy. They may resist the label, but they are being climate hawks.

Conservatives as Climate Hawks

In short, it is no longer sensible for social conservatives to reflexively oppose climate action. Not when climate change is endangering our traditions, and not when conservatives like Mr. Carney endorse policies that are pro-climate in substance if not in name. It is time for social conservatives to reject the dead consensus on climate change, recognize that a rapidly heating planet does not serve their goals and openly endorse serious climate action.

Is this unlikely? If you look closely, you can already see faint stirrings in this direction. For example, the Catholic scholar Adrian Vermeule wrote a superb essay three years ago castigating the political right for "reflexively oppos[ing] public action that protects endangered species, controls pollution and toxic substances, or mitigates the pace and effects of climate change."

Mr. Vermeule is no progressive, and moving left on climate issues would not necessarily entail giving an inch on other issues. Quite the opposite: Moving to the left on climate may be the best way to open up space for creative policies that advance socially conservative goals. As one example, consider generous child subsidies funded dollar-for-dollar by strong carbon taxes. If you want to pass socially conservative policy in a politically divided country, perhaps the best way is to move left on climate and start making deals.

Let's preserve our seasonal traditions and natural patrimony. Let's protect the very air our children breathe. Let's open up space for creative policy packages that give both social conservatives and climate hawks something they badly want. Let's end the dead consensus on climate change.

Joshua L. Sohn *is an attorney and author in Washington, D.C., who has written extensively on the intersection of climate change and social conservatism. His writings have appeared in Plough, Public Discourse, on the website of the Institute for Family Studies and in numerous law reviews.*

Learning from Hurricane Helene

No community is safe from extreme weather in era of climate change

By Kevin Clarke

Local police maintain a checkpoint into one of the harder-hit sections of Asheville, N.C., grimly advising the few drivers allowed to pass to proceed cautiously—cadaver dogs are loose and may be criss-crossing Swannanoa River Road. Just a few days ago, search-and-rescue squads were still hoping to find survivors. Today, they have been replaced by these recovery teams, working to locate the bodies of people still listed among the missing more than a week after Hurricane Helene stormed across North Carolina's Blue Ridge Mountains.

Fallen trees, downed power lines, undermined roadways and washed-out bridges make travel unsafe as a team from Catholic Charities USA begins an assessment visit, joined by **America,** on Oct. 9. Houses once sited along the usually gentle Swannanoa have been swept against poles or crushed among crazy jumbles of cars thrown together by the floodwaters.

Piles of debris from flooded basements and ground floors of the houses that survived the flood are rising higher along roadways that have been reopened. Friends and family are arriving to help the residents of Asheville and the nearby town of Swannanoa clean up and salvage what they can. It is not much.

"Welcome to my office," Kim Burgo said earlier that morning as her passengers stepped into a giant Ford Expedition rented to manage the visit to Asheville. Now she is carefully pushing the S.U.V. down Swannanoa River Road, passing under hanging power lines and navigating around upheaved sections of road. Ms. Burgo has had this drive-by perspective on storm-mangled communities many times before as vice president for disaster operations for Catholic Charities USA.

She joins local colleagues from offices in Charlotte and Asheville. Even as they solemnly view the outcome of Helene's wrath in Asheville, everyone is following the news of Hurricane Milton bearing down on Florida. With each weather update, it becomes increasingly clear that C.C.U.S.A. will have to simultaneously coordinate responses to two major hurricanes.

Milton is the fifth storm in what is becoming a busy 2024 hurricane season. Just as Helene did before it, Milton swiftly gathered strength and absorbed more water as it passed over the Gulf of Mexico, then experiencing record surface heat levels.

Ms. Burgo wonders aloud if the new storm will drag media attention, and the disaster response that typically trails such coverage, away from the calamity that has turned over North Carolina's mountain communities. Residents on the street in Asheville wonder the same thing: Will their plight be forgotten as the headlines shift to Milton's threat to Tampa Bay?

With its water and sanitation systems seriously compromised, most power still out and its hospitality, arts and tourism sectors in ruins, it will take a public attention span a lot longer than that to restore what has been lost in Asheville. Ms. Burgo says Catholic Charities is up to the job. "We're here for the long haul," she assures, explaining that Catholic Charities offices are embedded in the communities they serve.

Many of the city's newest residents had moved to North Carolina's Blue Ridge Mountains region precisely because they viewed the Asheville area as a climate-change haven, a region safe from the extreme weather events that menace coastal communities. Helene's devastation is offering a hard lesson: No community or U.S. region can consider itself safe from the extreme weather events that global

A hopeful message at the scene of the once-bustling Foundy Street in Asheville's River Arts district

warming is seeding and supercharging.

Longtime residents have seen hurricanes reach North Carolina before, but in the past those storms exhausted themselves along the coast. Sometimes they reached as far as Charlotte, but they never made it up into the mountains, says Jesse Boeckermann, the Western Region director for Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Charlotte. "This time it climbed the mountain."

Across the region, 20 to 30 inches of rain fell over 48 hours. There is nothing to compare it to in the Asheville historical record, Mr. Boeckermann says.

But Helene's unprecedented wallop was not a surprise to climate researchers, who have long predicted that fiercer storms carrying heavier loads of rainwater will become the norm because of the impact of climate change. What Helene is teaching Catholic Charities is that in the era of climate change, none of its regional offices can consider themselves immune to a weather catastrophe. And disaster response teams will not have to adapt just to the escalating ferocity of hurricanes. All kinds of weather patterns appear to be affected.

"There used to be a wildfire season," Ms. Burgo says. Now "wildfire season has changed. There used to be a tornado season. Now we're seeing tornadoes as early as February, and they go clear until December." There is no longer a quiet time on the calendar for professional and institutional respite from disaster, she says.

Kerry Alys Robinson, president and C.E.O. of Catholic Charities USA, reports that the national humanitarian provider is "100 percent" readying itself for the changing climatescape. The agency has ramped up disaster-preparedness training, and it is reinforcing the resource-sharing capacity of regional networks.

Ms. Robinson points to C.C.U.S.A.'s regional disaster academies as one critical institutional adaptation to changing conditions. "That brings local agencies in a region of the United States together," she says. "They get to know each other; they get trained together, and then we are able to deploy trained personnel from agencies that are not impacted by a calamity to the agency that is affected."

A Deluge of Disinformation

Helene is also teaching lessons about the pernicious impact of misinformation. The circulation of rumors and bad information is a phenomenon that has long accompanied natural disasters, but, like the storms themselves, the problem has become supercharged in a social media-addled era. A digital inundation of conspiracy-spinning has accompanied Helene.

Among the tallest of tales being told: that the storm itself had been geoengineered by unnamed actors to suppress votes in red states or to drive North Carolinians off the land so its lithium riches could be extracted; that officials from the Federal Emergency Management Agency were diverting resources from disaster relief to support new immigrants, or were blocking or seizing aid deliveries or withholding assistance from "Republican states"; that FEMA was limiting its assistance to storm survivors to $750.

It goes without saying that none of these claims are true, but the anxiety and anger they provoke among people desperate for help are real. On Oct. 14, FEMA officials temporarily pulled agents away from door-to-door outreach in North Carolina because of threats to its staff.

The susceptibility to disinformation is understandable under the extreme circumstances. People in the region are scared and traumatized by what they have seen or experienced. Mr. Boeckermann says his strategy has been simply to hear people out when they share, in anxiety and worry, the rumors or stories they have picked up. He then redirects them to the resources they need while advising as gently as he can that the reports they are hearing or reading on social media, or through email and text messages, are not true.

From 'Book Learning' to the Real World

Gerard Carter, the director of Catholic Charities for the Diocese of Charlotte, is one of the first beneficiaries, if one could so be described, of C.C.U.S.A.'s new emphasis on disaster preparation and response. Mr. Carter is coordinating the local response to Helene. But he is not on his own. He reports that "five or six different Catholic Charities [offices] from around the country...are sending up supplies as we speak."

He is grateful to have the national office on standby to assist. "We've gone to all the [disaster prep] trainings," he says. "We have all the book knowledge." But it has been 25 years since Charlotte faced a disaster like Helene. The national expertise has been critically important, he says, especially as Charlotte Catholic Charities confronts the long-term challenges ahead.

A little over a week after the storm, his staff is preparing to begin case management of the crisis, individualized assistance to help Helene's victims through the federal and state paperwork labyrinth for the disaster relief they may be eligible for and the job and housing assistance they will need. That transition, he says, "would be exceptionally difficult if Catholic Charities USA didn't have the professional preparation and skills" to assist his local office.

Adding a large-scale disaster response to C.C.U.S.A.'s catalog of capabilities is not as much of a stretch as it might seem, Ms. Burgo says. "All those services that a Catholic Charities agency has can translate into disaster work," Ms. Burgo points out. Local offices just need the training to learn how to "scale up" during an emergency and "pivot to a disaster response."

Big natural disasters like Helene garner all the headlines, but they come once or twice a year, Ms. Burgo says. C.C.U.S.A. also responds to scores of smaller-scale natural and human-made disasters—anything from tornadoes and hurricanes to industrial disasters and school shootings. Her office is currently managing "115 open disasters," Ms. Burgo says.

They may not be at the scale of a major storm, "but to the people that they happen to, [they are] an absolute catastrophe, so it doesn't matter the size—what matters is the attention that you give them to help them feel like they're going to get through this; they're going to make progress and they're going to be OK at the other end of it."

Kevin Clarke, *chief correspondent.*

2024: Another year of weather extremes

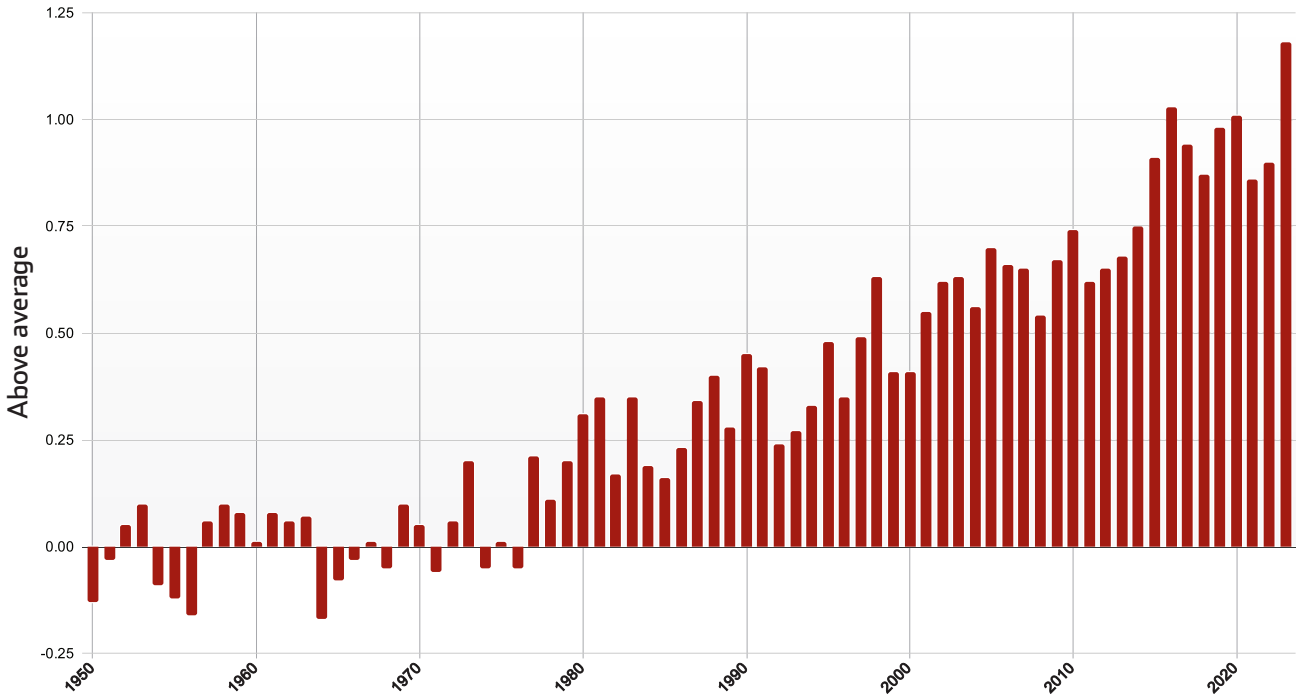
The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration has counted 24 U.S. "weather and climate event disasters" causing more than $1 billion in damage through mid-October of this year—second only to the 27 events reported by this time last year. They include four hurricanes, nine "severe weather" events, six tornado outbreaks, two winter storms, two hail events and one wildfire. In late October, meteorologists were warning that more hurricanes were likely before the official conclusion of the 2024 season on Nov. 30.

Since 1980, the United States has sustained 400 separate weather and climate disasters in which overall damages/costs reached or exceeded $1 billion. The total cost of these 400 events exceeds $2.785 trillion. (Cost estimates for Hurricanes Helene and Milton have yet to be determined and are not part of the total at this time.)

At its lowest point in 2023, the sea ice cover in the Arctic was 1.69 million square miles, the sixth smallest annual minimum in 46 years of recordkeeping. In the Antarctic last year, the sea ice cover went as low as 6.59 million square miles, the second annual minimum on record.

Much of the Sahara desert had its wettest September on record, driven by the rare passage of an extratropical cyclone on Sept. 7-8.

Average global temperature versus the 1901-2000 average (in Celsius degrees)



Source: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

Synodality—and 'controversial' issues—are here to stay

Five takeaways from the synod's final document

James Martin, S.J., served as a delegate from the United States to the Synod on Synodality.

We have completed our work as synod delegates and have, with the approval of Pope Francis, published our final document: "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission." What are the highlights of this document?

Synodality is a "constitutive dimension" of the church. The final document says that synodality, along with, for example, the concept of the magisterium or the tradition of social justice, is an essential element of the church. It is a path that enables the church to be more "participatory and missionary" and can no longer be considered a curiosity, a practice to be dabbled in or a passing fad.

Decision-making must be participatory. It would be impossible to read this document and not understand that all people should have a voice in both the church's decision-making and decision-taking processes, a recognition that the Holy Spirit is active and alive in all the people of God—not simply in cardinals, archbishops, bishops and priests. The final document also helpfully outlines procedures for listening and discernment, and includes a strong call for the people of God to have "a greater voice in choosing bishops" (Paragraph No. 70) and for transparency, accountability and evaluation at all levels of the church (No. 95).

Bishops and pastors are "obliged to listen." The call for listening and participation is central to the document. And it is bishops and pastors who are most strongly called to listen to the voices of the faithful in their dioceses and parishes. On the parish level as well, the church is encouraged to listen to all, especially to those who feel marginalized. The synod recommends that parishes consider instituting a "ministry of listening and accompaniment."

Pastoral councils, diocesan synods and other participatory assemblies should be mandatory. We delegates grappled with how best to ensure that the faithful are able to be heard and can participate in the life of the church, which is centered, in most parts of the world and for most people, in parish life. A variety of consultative bodies in both the Latin and Eastern Catholic churches are central to participation, accountability and transparency, including: diocesan synods, presbyteral councils, diocesan and parish pastoral councils, and councils for economic affairs.

These are all provided for in canon law, but they often exist only "nominally." Therefore, we delegates insisted "that they be made mandatory...and that they can fully play their role, and not just in a purely formal way..." (No. 104).


CNS photo/Vatican Media

Pope Francis shakes hands with James Martin, S.J., as Giacomo Costa, S.J., special secretary of the synod, looks on at the Vatican on Oct. 4.

Some "controversial" issues are not center stage but are included. At the beginning of the synodal process, there were high hopes among many people that the synod would resolve some controversial issues, including the ordaining of married men to the priesthood, the ordination of women to the diaconate and L.G.B.T.Q. issues. For the most part these issues were handed over to the 10 "study groups" for further discernment.

Nonetheless, many of these topics were in the background of our discussions. It is hard to talk about women's roles in the church without the topic of ordination to the diaconate arising.

We said, in a much larger section on women: "There is no reason or impediment that should prevent women from carrying out leadership roles in the Church: what comes from the Holy Spirit cannot be stopped. Additionally, the question of women's access to diaconal ministry remains open. This discernment needs to continue" (No. 60).

As for L.G.B.T.Q. issues, there was considerably greater openness to the topic this year and ease of discussion overall. In the document, the term "L.G.B.T.Q." is not used—not surprising, since it is still anathema for some delegates—but we ask the church to listen to those who "experience the pain of feeling excluded or judged, because of their marital situation, identity or sexuality" (No. 50).

It is quite a feat that 350 delegates from around the world could agree on this kind of language.

The final document is sure to delight some, disappoint others and perhaps even anger some people. But it is only the first step of a process for our church, as we journey with the risen Christ "together on the road"—which is, of course, the ancient meaning of *synod*.

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

OSV News photo/Angel Hernandez, Reuters

Migrant numbers down at the border as Mexico assumes enforcer role

While Kamala Harris and Donald Trump jousted over immigration through the end of the election season, migrant encounters along the U.S. southwestern border continued a sharp fall in fiscal year 2024. On Oct. 22, U.S. Customs and Border Protection reported a decrease of 55 percent in "encounters between ports of entry along the southwest border" in the seven weeks after heightened restrictions on entries for asylum claims were instituted in early June.

A key factor omitted in discussions of those falling numbers was the role of Mexico, where immigration officials had significantly stepped up enforcement ahead of the U.S. election on Nov. 5, detaining more than 700,000 migrants so far in 2024.

Few of those detainees have been deported from Mexico to their native countries. Most are being sent from the central and northern Mexico states where they are intercepted to the less economically developed states of Mexico's south, where job opportunities and services for migrants are scant.

"With the tightening of [migration] policies in the United States, Mexico's policies are also tightening," said Julio López, C.S., the executive secretary of migrant ministry for the Mexican bishops' conference. "The goal is to contain migration in the south" of Mexico.

An example of that containment strategy is evident in the sweltering Gulf Coast city of Villahermosa, some 800 miles from the closest U.S. border crossing, where busloads of migrants are dumped after being rounded up by Mexican immigration officials.

"Mexico detains them, [then] they come to dump them here, and the migrants have to figure out how to return to their place of origin," said Efrain Rodríguez León, director of the Tabasco Human Rights Committee in Villahermosa. He believes Mexican officials want migrants to "self-deport" to their home countries.

Farzana Ahmadi, a former police officer in Afghanistan and an ethnic Hazara, fled Afghanistan with her mother and sister after the Taliban returned to power in 2021. The family reached Mexico City but, like many other migrants, grew frustrated by the at-times-wonky CBP One app. U.S. officials urge migrants who plan to seek asylum to use the phone app, which allots 1,450 daily appointments for migrants to enter the United States at an authorized port of entry.

Ms. Ahmadi's family tried to fly to the U.S. border, only to be stopped by Mexican immigration officials and sent to Villahermosa. "We desperately need assistance," Ms. Ahmadi said in a translated text message. "We are waiting for an appointment for CBP One, but we don't know how to book an appointment or follow up."

Neither the U.S. nor Mexican governments have ever

A migrant woman feeds her child during a rest stop along a railroad track in Sayula de Aleman, Mexico, on Aug. 22.

acknowledged a deal to detain migrants headed for the U.S. border. But analysts point out that Mexico's increased enforcement began after a meeting between senior U.S. and Mexican officials at the National Palace in Mexico City in December 2023.

Brian Strassburger, S.J., regularly visits migrant shelters in the border cities of Reynosa and Matamoros, which sit on the south side of the Rio Grande opposite McAllen and Brownsville, Tex. He ends his celebrations of Mass with information sessions, recently telling a group in Reynosa not to delete their CBP One accounts—sometimes done by migrants out of frustration.

Many have been fearful that the border would shut completely, depending on the Nov. 5 election results. "The new president takes office Jan. 20.... Don't believe any rumors that we're going to have a change on Nov. 5," Father Strassburger told the migrants gathered for Mass. "President Biden continues as president until Jan. 19.... Everything continues the same."

Father Strassburger has seen the Biden administration's migration policies unfold along the Texas-Mexico border since he arrived in Brownsville three years ago. He describes it as "carrots and sticks," with the administration using big sticks lately to get migrants to use only the Border Patrol's phone app.

Father Strassburger has become more positive about CBP One over time. "CBP One is allowing about a half million people in the country every year," he said, while another program for Cubans, Haitians, Venezuelans and Nicaraguans "is letting about 300,000 people in a year."

"That's not nothing," he says, "and I'm grateful for that."

David Agren *contributes from Mexico City.*

Bishops Joseph Yang Yongqiang of Hangzhou, center right, and Vincent Zhan Silu of Funing-Mindong, center left, meet with Pope Francis at the Synod on Synodality.

Hong Kong's Jesuit cardinal has hope for Vatican-China relations

Cardinal Stephen Chow Sau-yan, S.J., the bishop of Hong Kong since 2021, was in Rome on Oct. 22 when the Holy See announced that its agreement with China regarding the appointment of bishops had been extended for four years.

The agreement, first signed in Beijing on Sept. 18, 2018, has been renewed since then at two-year intervals. Vatican observers believe that the extended length of the latest renewal suggests growing confidence between the two sides. As a result of the agreement, all of the bishops in mainland China are now in communion with the pope and the Holy See.

Cardinal Chow, 65, visiting Rome for the final session of the Synod on Synodality, said, "I think both sides are happy that this is moving forward," expressing a sense that there has been "a positive development" in relations between the Vatican and Beijing.

Pope Francis has repeatedly expressed his desire to travel to China, and Cardinal Chow believes "it is not impossible." The cardinal said he was not surprised, however, that Chinese authorities have yet to show any openness to a papal visit. "They will not do it publicly, right? They will not do so because I'm sure this will involve quite a few internal consultations before anything is decided."

A push to "sinicize religion"—make it more culturally Chinese—was introduced by President Xi Jinping in 2015. Experts see it as an attempt by the officially atheist Communist Party to bring religions under its absolute control.

But Cardinal Chow noted that "sinicization is not just for the church...but also for other parts of society like business and technology and so on.... They really want religion to be part of the positive force in building up the country. So the basic tenet is not in contradiction to our faith."

Gerard O'Connell, *Vatican correspondent.*

POPE FRANCIS' ARGENTINA

Lessons for the global church from the pope's homeland

By Colleen Dulle

Along the Illia Highway in downtown Buenos Aires, brightly colored shanty homes are stacked haphazardly three and four stories high. The cinderblock structures are crammed together, built upward by residents as more and more people move to the slum. This is Villa 31, one of many *villas miserias*—literally, "misery villages"—that have filled previously unused spaces, like this one next to a railyard, since the 1930s.

Just blocks from the city's ritzy Recoleta neighborhood, Villa 31 stands out as a symbol of the city's—and the country's—striking wealth disparity. According to 2021 statistics, the bottom 50 percent of Argentina's population holds less than 6 percent of the nation's wealth, while the top 10 percent holds 58 percent, and the top 1 percent holds more than 25 percent.

Pope Francis was raised in the city's middle-class Flores neighborhood from the mid-1930s through the '50s, a time period that saw Argentina's wealth gap grow. At the same time, so did the shantytowns, which were then often filled with European immigrant families. (Today, the villas are expanding with immigrants from Paraguay, Bolivia and Venezuela.)

As archbishop of Buenos Aires during Argentina's recession (1998–2001) and subsequent depression, Jorge Mario Bergoglio worked to increase the church's presence in the slums, moving priests into the neighborhoods in groups of two or more. Today, as President Javier Milei works to combat sky-high inflation (more than 130 percent in 2023), some of the priests then-Archbishop Bergoglio sent to work in the slums continue to offer support to the communities.

One such priest, Andres Tocalini, S.M., remains in touch with Pope Francis. "To this day, I send him three or four emails a year, and the very next day, I get an answer from him," he told me when I visited Argentina in April with the Pontifical Mission Societies USA. With a smile, he said the pope must feel obligated to respond quickly because "it's his fault we're here."

My April visit to Buenos Aires and across the northern Argentine desert revealed to me not only Francis' legacy

CNS photo/Enrique Garcia Medina, Reuters

Then-Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio washes the feet of residents of a shelter for drug users during Holy Thursday Mass in 2008 at a church in a poor neighborhood of Buenos Aires, Argentina.

here, but also the model of ministry that shaped him, which he is now working to bring to the global church—an evangelical mission characterized by closeness to those struggling that is carried out, especially in remote regions, by passionate lay ministers.

The Shantytown Priests

In Bajo Flores, about 15 minutes from where Pope Francis was born, Father Tocalini lives with three lay volunteers at Our Lady of Fatima Shrine, located between several different villas miserias. Like all of the villa parishes we visited, Our Lady of Fatima ministers to a shocking number of people given its relatively small number of volunteers: Its soup kitchen, opened during the Covid-19 pandemic, feeds around 350 families most days and 1,200 families on Sundays (100 families' meals are provided by the city government; the rest come from donations). Even more impressive is its school, housed on a sprawling campus in the neighborhood's center. It educates some 3,000 students from early childhood through post-secondary level, training students in nursing, teaching and trades like computer science and electrical engineering.

The school hosts activities from before dawn until late at night in hopes of keeping children off the streets—a generous term for the sidewalk-width dirt paths between buildings in the shantytowns, unnavigable by police or emergency vehicles. It is important to keep young people occupied, one shantytown priest explained, because he has seen children as young as 8 in this neighborhood consuming *paco*, a cocaine byproduct often called coca paste in English and frequently mixed with glue and fiberglass. It is sold in the same small bags used for candy, and for the same price.

"We try to make sure the kids don't have time to even consider drug use," Father Tocalini says, "So when they leave school, they go directly to an extra activity: soccer, volleyball, tennis, orchestra, choir, guitar lessons, school support, etc. A child who, in this neighborhood, has two hours to spare, is a child [who is] prey to drug addiction or becoming a criminal."

Some students even live on campus full time: Twelve girls and young women who have been abused or are at high risk for abuse live in communal houses where they share chores. It costs the school around $1,000 per year to house each student, a cost the school could not afford if not for donations.

Around 163,000 people lived in Buenos Aires' shantytowns as of 2020. Their overwhelming material needs are served by a hybrid of charities and government aid. For example, a portion of the meals distributed by the two soup kitchens we visited are underwritten by the government.

Meeting the communities' pastoral needs, however, has largely fallen on the shoulders of the shantytown priests, a group of Catholic clergy who, rather than driving into the slums to celebrate the sacraments, live there among the people—an exercise in solidarity that has, in the past, proven deadly.

Father Carlos Mugica, for example, was killed in 1974 by an anti-communist paramilitary group; he was part of a group called Priests of the Third World that had moved to the slums preaching liberation theology, leading to a strained relationship with the Catholic hierarchy. (The main street through Villa 31 is named for him.) Likewise, in 1976, two Jesuit priests working in the slums were kidnapped and tortured by the country's military dictatorship. Their superior was Father Bergoglio, and one blamed him for giving information on their whereabouts to the government, leading to their abduction; the other said at the time of Francis' election that this was not true.

When he became archbishop, after the dictatorship had fallen, Francis saw the need for priests to be living in the slums and increased their numbers from 10 to 20, assigning them to live in pairs or groups for safety and arranging for them to meet regularly as a group for mutual support. He famously visited the slums often himself, a fact many residents have not forgotten. As of 2019, there were around 40 priests living and ministering full-time in the slums.

Across Bajo Flores, in the shadow of the San Lorenzo stadium—famously home to Pope Francis' favorite soccer team—is Villa 10-14-17, served by the Parish of María, Madre del Pueblo ("Mary, Mother of the People"). In August of this year, its pastor, the Rev. Pedro Cannavó, was named auxiliary bishop of Buenos Aires by Francis, who had ordained him 15 years before.

María, Madre del Pueblo runs a much smaller school than Our Lady of Fatima, with around 900 students, but it operates three soup kitchens, two of which specialize in

Young people attend Mass at the Chapel of the Miraculous Medal in Monte Quemado, Argentina.

low-sodium food for elderly and diabetic residents. It also hosts a Hogar de Cristo, one of 300 drug rehabilitation centers that operate under this name across the country. The first one was founded in 2008 after Cardinal Bergoglio washed the feet of 12 drug addicts at a Good Friday liturgy in Villa 21-24 in Buenos Aires. At the time, he said the parish where the liturgy was held would be a good place for them to recover, "a Home of Christ [*Hogar de Cristo*] where everyone is welcomed."

Due to a delayed flight, I was not able to visit Villa 10-14-17, but Father Cannavó explained to my fellow travelers that there are 135 patients there, with separate facilities for men and one for women and their children.

"In Argentina, the church is an embassy for the poor, for the destitute, for those who hunger, for the mentally ill. No one else would advocate for them here in the slum," he said.

Father Cannavó hinted to my colleagues that plans were in place for Pope Francis to visit the country, saying, "A visit by Pope Francis would be the best [thing] that could happen to us.... But it all depends on his health. If he does come, it's here, these neighborhoods, where he will be most comfortable and feel the most welcome.... All of us priests who do this ministry of working and living in the slums would love to host him, but I think we have better chances, because here he could say Mass in the San Lorenzo stadium!"

Nipo Chan, a first-generation Argentine whose parents left Japan before World War II, hosts a salsa music program on the parish's radio station and remembers when the pope would visit this slum. Asked by my colleagues about a potential homecoming for the pope, his eyes welled with tears: "He came here a lot more often when he was [living in the country].... But I guess we can lend him to the world."

Father Andres Tocalini stands outside his parish, Our Lady of Fatima, in Bajo Flores, Buenos Aires.

Lay Missionaries in the Desert

Far outside the Parisian-inspired avenues and shantytown passageways of Buenos Aires, Pope Francis' vision for the church is alive in a different way: Here, in the remote desert nicknamed "The Impenetrable" that stretches across northern Argentina, lay missionaries inspired and, in some cases, empowered by the pope minister to some of the farthest reaches of Argentine society.

Our group flew from Buenos Aires to the single-gate airport of Santiago del Estero, where out the window we could see rectangles of plowed, dusty land sliced into a forest of thick desert bushes. A few thorny trees poked up through the dirt, as if to remind us how the desert got its name. From there, we drove 4.5 hours along national highways to Monte Quemado, a village of 12,000 whose economy is primarily driven by more than 40 sawmills that produce wood posts for farming and railroad ties.

A trip to Argentina reveals not only Francis' legacy here, but also the model of ministry that shaped him.

Noemi Herrera is a parishioner and the finance manager at the Chapel of the Miraculous Medal, Monte Quemado's first church, founded in 1953. She said that several of the city's sawmills have closed down recently, as their buyers, mainly from Brazil, were driven away by Argentina's unfavorable currency exchange rate. Ms. Herrera, who is in her 70s, gave her own sawmill to her children last year.

As we drive through the Canal de Dios neighborhood, the effect of the sawmill closures is apparent. Several plots have concrete and wood piles laid for future houses, but at each the construction has been abandoned. Someone in our car points out that each abandoned home represents a family's destroyed hopes.

During our first night in Monte Quemado, we attend a Saturday evening Mass at the Our Lady of Carballo Shrine, where young adults lead the music and readings, sitting in a pack in the front pews. Their joy and energy are palpable, and after the Mass, a long line forms to revere the statue of Our Lady of Carballo in the church's sanctuary. The young adult group takes us to a garage next to the rectory for dinner and *folklórico* dancing. The six people I am sitting with—five young women and a young man, all of them 20 years old—are all catechists or in training to be one.

One of them, Juliana Curtoni, who is 20 and known as Juli, has moved here from Rosario, a much larger city 600 miles south of Monte Quemado. She and another lay minister, Sabrina, who is in her 30s and is from Buenos Aires, have been sent by their dioceses to minister full-time here.

Following the Synod on the Amazon in 2019, Pope Francis made two significant changes that would affect the global church but would have particular significance in places like South America, which contains vast swaths of rural areas like the ones I visited in Argentina. First, he opened the lay ministries of lector and acolyte to women for the first time in January 2021; four months later, he also created the new lay ministry of catechist, a role that is primarily held by women. While women had held these roles previously, they were not officially commissioned to them through a rite of the church. Some Catholics wondered whether the most significant effect of these changes might

It is the Argentine reality, underscored by the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, that has shown Pope Francis the evangelizing power of laypeople.

be the creation of an official commissioning rite in the liturgy, but one Argentine catechist explained to me that the change on the ground had been much more significant, allowing catechists to be better organized and to collaborate.

The next morning, Ms. Curtoni joins our group to travel to Los Tigres, a small village outside Monte Quemado, for a faith-sharing group meeting. On the way, we stop in Canal de Dios at the home of Berta Cortez, who, with her adult sons, is making a big pot of *locro*, a traditional Argentine stew, in their yard. It smells amazing—corn, beans, three types of meat, potatoes, sweet potatoes and pumpkin, all boiled together for six hours. The family's primary income comes from selling 100 servings of the stew each Sunday for the equivalent of about $1.50 each.

When we arrive, Ms. Cortez gives a warm hug to Ms. Curtoni. Ms. Cortez explains to our group that she was raised in an orphanage that had been founded by Jorge Gottau, the first bishop of the Diocese of Añatuya, which includes Monte Quemado. She explains that Bishop Gottau is the reason this neighborhood has running water: He negotiated on behalf of the people with the country's military dictatorship government in the late 1970s and early '80s to divert water from the Salado del Norte river into what is now known as the Canal de Dios, the muddy stream just steps from Ms. Cortez's home. The water is useful, but it is not clean. Still, she remains grateful that the church stepped up at a time when the people felt powerless.

"We owe a lot to the church. Me personally, yes, but also as a community," Ms. Cortez says, adding that while she does not endorse the atrocities the dictatorship committed in larger cities, she feels it was "the last government to ever pay attention to the fact that we are here. That we are people. That we are Argentines."

The Rev. Juan Lanzotti, known as Juani, the diocesan director of the Pontifical Mission Societies in Añatuya, explained later that the federal government has almost no

Members of a faith-sharing group and a delegation from the Pontifical Mission Societies eat lunch at Hilda Catan's house in Los Tigres, Argentina.

presence here, and that the governor of Santiago del Estero is corrupt. An investigation by I.B.I. Consultants, an intelligence contractor for several U.S. government departments, found that Governor Gerardo Zamora and his wife, Claudia Ledesma Abdala, who have alternately (and questionably) managed to be elected to the province's top position since 2005, profit from protecting the illegal drug trade in the region, especially of cocaine, while the region's population overwhelmingly lives in poverty. The church does what it can to help, but the priests are spread too thinly even to provide sacraments weekly or monthly to some far-flung communities, much less to negotiate with a corrupt government to obtain material aid.

Leaving Monte Quemado, we drive several miles further into the desert, past dome-shaped brick ovens that residents of our next stop, the remote village of Los Tigres (population 161 as of 2010) use to manufacture charcoal from wood.

Colleen Dulle

Hilda Catan, a woman with nine children and 17 grandchildren, two of whom she is raising herself, welcomes us to her home. Her household is one of the best-off in the village; although the cinderblock structure has no doors, windows or running water, its location on a main road affords it a power connection. When we arrive, around 20 people are gathered in the dirt yard between the house, the outhouse, and the pig and chicken pen; this group meets each Tuesday for faith sharing, and once a month a priest comes to offer Mass for the group. (There are no opportunities for Sunday Mass in Los Tigres.)

Ms. Catan has been awake since 4 a.m. making *empanadas santiagueñas* for all of us. The group has moved its meeting to Sunday and its members have pooled their food together to serve a large lunch. First, though, is faith sharing, led by Juli, the lay missionary working in Monte Quemado. We hear the Gospel of the day, which is about the Good Shepherd, and Juli reminds the group that while each person is called to be a "shepherd" by evangelizing, we are also the sheep, at times staying with the flock and "other times we are the lost sheep.... And this is OK; we need to remember that God does not leave us just because we might fall or sin. He chooses to be by our side, and if he gave his life because he loved us, how could he not forgive our sins?"


Maggie Murray/The Pontifical Mission Societies USA

Hilda Catan adds charcoal to her stove in Los Tigres. Charcoal production is the area's primary source of income.

Roxana Gerez stands, teary-eyed, and says that she sees the Good Shepherd in Juli, whom she credits with bringing her back to the church. Behind her, a woman who has been breastfeeding her baby supplements his feed from a bottle filled with orange soda because there is no clean water to drink.

A woman named Rosa, who is there with her daughter, adds that "shepherding begins in the home, talking about Jesus to our children and with our spouse, and then going to our neighbors, and talking to them about Jesus, so that they know Jesus loves them too."

At her comment about spouses, I noticed that almost the entire group was women. Here, as in many places in the church, the Catholic faith is passed on by mothers

Pope Francis learned quickly that ministering in the slums meant that priests would have to deal with the messiness of life outside the rectory.

like Rosa and grandmothers like Hilda; and, as in many places in South America, they are taught and ministered to primarily by lay women catechists like Juli.

Missionary Families

Our journey through the desert continues with a drive three hours southeast to Presidencia Roque Sáenz Peña, the second-largest city in Chaco Province. We had intended to visit another small village even deeper in the desert, reachable only by dirt roads, but it has been struck from our agenda because rain is expected, and we cannot risk being stuck when the roads become muddy and unpassable. Instead, a priest ministering in the village comes to us in the city to share details about his ministry to the Wichí people, an Indigenous community scattered across this part of the country. On the way back, the rain comes, and he is stuck in the city for two days, staying with other priests.

From there, it is another two hours southeast to Resistencia, the largest city in Chaco. There we meet the Greatti family, a "missionary family" with three children that takes annual mission trips into the province's desert for 10 to 15 days at a time to reignite the faith of communities that are too remote to receive regular visits from priests.

Viviana Greatti, the family's matriarch, is a catechist, as is her husband, Mario, who got her involved in mission work. Because of the high risk of disease, especially the mosquito-borne dengue fever, the family primarily goes to places with electricity and drinkable water—towns where many citizens are baptized but, as Mario puts it, "only pray the Our Father once a year." There, Mario explains, most people view baptism as culturally important but do not, for example, seek Catholic marriages. In his mission work, Mario hopes he and Viviana are able to model the beauty of a sacramental marriage for people who might not have considered one.

Still, Ms. Greatti says, her family's choice to be missionaries has attracted criticism at times. She explains how

OSV News photo/Margaret Murray, courtesy Pontifical Mission Societies USA

Father Pedro Cannavó, pastor of Mary Mother of the People Parish in the suburbs of Buenos Aires, Argentina, stands outside the parish's on-site drug rehabilitation facility.

other women in her parish, St. Thérèse of Lisieux, have asked her why she would take her kids out to the missions. "It's basically the kids dragging us," she tells them.

Pilar, 14, says that her classmates, too, ask her why she goes to the missions during summer break, when the heat of the desert is so extreme. However, because of their school commitments it is the only time the children are able to go. "I love it so much that I forget I am melting in the heat," she says.

All three of the Greatti children, now teenagers and a tween, grew up as part of the Missionary Childhood Association, through which they played with children who came from the outer peripheries of the diocese to their parish to play together, learning church songs and doing crafts inspired by the Sunday readings.

Meetings and catechesis classes like the ones her children attended have benefited the most from Pope Francis' official institution of the ministry of catechist, Ms. Greatti says. Whereas catechists like her had previously been given a book to teach from and had been solely responsible for coming up with activities and teaching strategies for their classes, once the catechists were officially recognized as

People line up for a meal from Mary Mother of the People Parish's soup kitchen in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Parish volunteers provide hundreds of meals every day for needy people in the community.

ministers, their work became more structured and collaborative. Now her parish—which includes some 50 catechists spread across seven chapels, mostly women plus a handful of their husbands—hosts regular training workshops for the catechists during which they share activities, curricula and ideas for how to teach certain Gospels.

Mr. Greatti points out that Pope Francis has often spoken about catechesis as a "laboratory" and has encouraged creativity, which he sees his parish and diocese putting into practice by reaching out to other catechist groups online to exchange ideas. For Ms. Greatti's part, she has tried to introduce some of her own missionary flavor into her catechesis classes. This spring, for example, she took her students out into the neighborhoods near their chapel and had them knock on doors to invite people to Holy Week services. The result was the most crowded Triduum celebrations the parish had ever seen.

Popular Piety

As we enter Formosa Province, on the border with Paraguay, the roads are increasingly lined with billboards and signs featuring a bald man taking credit for the construction of schools, housing and other social improvements. This person, I learn, is the legendarily corrupt Formosa governor, Gildo Insfrán, who changed the provincial constitution to allow himself to be re-elected indefinitely.

We stop at several parishes in Formosa where we hear from parishioners about both their struggles under the corrupt government and, at the same time, their deeply held and widely practiced popular piety. At Cura Brochero Parish, we sit under a large metal roof without walls that someone has donated and that the men of the parish have constructed. As the rain patters on the roof and the ground around us grows muddy, we sit in folding chairs in a circle and drink maté.

The parish priest, Mario Giménez, O.C.R., explains that the church had quickly outgrown its old building, which was around 200 square feet, because the Insfrán government had demolished houses near a parish across town, citing safety concerns, and had begun moving residents into the sprawling complexes of unpainted, cinderblock duplexes with blue roofs that now stretch for half a mile in each direction. Already the congregation is too large to fit under the roof, though, the pastor explains, the population

Meeting the communities' pastoral needs has largely fallen on the shoulders of the shantytown priests.

growth has stalled temporarily because Mr. Insfrán has announced he would let the rest of the displaced people move in only after he had again been re-elected.

Across town, at the Santuario Divino Niño Jesús, a welcoming committee of five women in matching T-shirts take us around the back of the church building to see what remains of the houses that the government had suddenly torn down. The grass is full of dust and broken cinderblocks and glass, with some household items buried in the rubble. The people who had lived here, they tell us, are staying with friends and family, waiting for the new housing development to open after the election.

The dome of the enormous church towers just feet away from the destruction. Inside, it is painted with angels, the faces of which were based on the children of the parish, whom some of the women can still name, 12 years after they were painted. The parish, which began in a straw-roofed lean-to with one wall—not unlike a larger, metal version at Cura Bracero—is devoted to both the Divino Niño (Holy Child) and María Auxiliadora (Mary, Help of Christians). On the 25th of every month, to commemorate Christmas, the parish hosts massive spiritual revivals where Mass, reconciliation and baptisms are celebrated that regularly draw around 3,000 people from across the region.

A gathering of that size would be unheard of for most U.S. churches, even on Christmas and Easter, yet the Sanctuary draws such crowds every month. Pope Francis has drawn attention throughout his pontificate to examples of popular piety like these gatherings, in which local cultural expressions of faith are celebrated in lively and emotional gatherings. While some dismiss these practices as folksy or even superstitious, the pope believes they are a key component of evangelization. In Francis' first document, "The Joy of the Gospel" ("Evangelii Gaudium"), which laid out the vision for his papacy, he called popular piety "a spirituality incarnated in the culture of the lowly," saying that practices like traveling to shrines, taking one's children or friends, "is in itself an evangelizing gesture. Let us not stifle or presume to control this missionary power!" (No. 124).

This deeply held, popular faith was perhaps the greatest insight Argentina offered us into the papacy of the first Latin American pope. It explained his emphasis on inculturation and embrace of local cultures, especially Amazonian Indigenous cultures, that other prelates shy away from. His emphasis on closeness to the people is born from an experience in Buenos Aires where, in the absence of government help, the church became responsible for the poor, and he learned quickly that ministering in the slums meant that priests would have to deal with the messiness of life outside the rectory, moving agilely from sacraments to drug rehabs and schools and back many times over the course of a day.

It is this experience that leads Francis to say, at the head of a church that has long proposed a moral ideal to its adherents, that "reality is greater than ideas" and that the church must accompany people in their real lives, no matter how messy. It is the Argentine reality, underscored by the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, that has shown him the evangelizing power of laypeople, prompting him to encourage popular piety and empower lay ministers in a new way.

"It's his fault we're here," Father Tocalini told me on the streets of Villa Calacita in Bajo Flores. That is true. But it is equally the slum priests and the Catholics of Argentina who are at "fault" for forming Jorge Bergoglio into a pope who says "*Hagan lío*"—"Make a mess!"

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The Backbone of the Parish

Lay volunteers make heroic efforts to support their faith community. But they need support, too.

By Maggie Phillips

On Divine Mercy Sunday of this year, Bishop Luis Rafael Zarama of the Diocese of Raleigh visited my parish, St. Anthony of Padua, in Southern Pines, N.C. That April evening, the bishop prayed the Divine Mercy chaplet with a packed church. Afterward, he gave a brief reflection and answered parishioners' questions. It was dark by the time we left the church and headed next door into the parish hall. As if by magic, cookies, punch and matching paper napkins and plates had been arranged for us on long folding tables.

The usual suspects had worked quietly behind the scenes to bring the reception into being. The church secretary (who is also the director of religious education) asked a woman who volunteers in the parish office to assist. She in turn asked her friends to bring the refreshments.

Dottie Stalsitz was one of the women who received the call. "There is a network," she said. She has been at the parish for 25 years and active across different ministries, including the choir, religious education and the parish women's guild. It was while serving at a Lenten soup supper with the guild that she got to know the women in other ministries, the Welcome and Respect Life committees. "It all meshes," she said.

Her counterparts are likely doing the same at your parish. Some are probably well known; others shun the spotlight. All are vital—often unsung—heroes of parish life.

"The 'workforce' of the church has always been more female than male," said Mark Gray, director of Catholic polls at the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University. "First this was with sisters working in parishes and other Catholic institutions. Then we see growth in other laywomen in ministries." In 2009, the most recent year for which data is available, 80 percent of lay ecclesial ministers were women, according to CARA estimates. Mr. Gray said that keeping track is difficult, since many lay ecclesial positions are filled by volunteers.

Nonetheless, a CARA survey of Catholic adults in 2022 was able to estimate the percentage of Catholic laywomen who have been involved in parishes in certain vol-

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unteer roles. Those roles were: lay Eucharistic minister, lector, catechist, youth/campus/young adult ministry, hospitality ministry, usher, member of St. Vincent de Paul society, social outreach, visiting the homebound, catechists, altar serving and music ministry. Overall, 43 percent of adult Catholic women had been active in one of the parish ministries listed on the survey. While 51 percent of male respondents said they volunteered, three to four times as many men reported serving in the traditionally male ministries of altar serving and ushering, respectively. The trend likely is influenced by the many Catholic men born before Vatican II who grew up in an environment in which they were strongly encouraged to be altar boys but girls were prohibited from serving.

Of course, there are the little things that are not easily categorized on a survey—making sure the punch is made and the flatware is out when the bishop comes to visit, organizing the volleyball game, and handing out Popsicles to kids at the parish picnic. But the church that values doing "little things with great love," as Mother Teresa has said, also proclaims the responsibility to treat workers fairly and to be a good steward of resources. Overworked laywomen can be an indicator that a parish is working hard, but not smart. Twenty-first-century social realities inside and outside of the church may be complicating this paradigm of mostly female labor. I spoke with women in the church who recognize this challenge not as the end of an era but rather as an invitation to renewal for the entire church—leaders and laity, men and women.

Women at Work

Tiara Hatfield is the director of human resources and risk management for the Diocese of Davenport, Iowa. Working on the administrative side in the chancery, she said she relies on outside volunteers, all but one of whom are women. She also participates in ad hoc committees within the office, organizing employee potlucks and holiday parties. While these internal, morale-boosting committees might have both men and women on them, Ms. Hatfield said that the majority of employees in the chancery are women.

In some ways, the situation is a win for diversity. Ms. Hatfield said that when she first started in 2016, none of the other directors of diocesan offices were women. Now three of them are, including herself. But on another level, she sees the preponderance of women employees in the chancery as a reflection of broader societal trends. Married women with children tend to be drawn to administrative work in the church for practical reasons, she said, noting that most of the women she works with have husbands who also work. Ms. Hatfield sees that the flexibility that often is characteristic of a church workplace makes it easier to take time off if, for instance, a child is sick. This mirrors a broader trend. The April 2024 jobs report from the U.S. Department of Labor showed that nearly 80 percent of working-age women were employed, the highest since 1948, when the department began tracking that data. Many attribute this in part to the rise of flexible and remote work arrangements.

Ms. Hatfield is a former Navy mechanic, a formative

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Courtesy of Madeline Stockton

Members of Catholic Women of the Chapel volunteer at a maternity event on Fort Liberty in North Carolina.

experience that informs her view of women in the church today. She has found that leadership sets the tone when it comes to inaugurating a culture shift, and she hopes men and women will find more equal treatment in the church.

"I think it's evolving," she said, noting that "as we know, there is 'church time,'" in which change comes gradually. Ms. Hatfield's optimism is fueled by the diocese where she works, where she sees similarities to the military paradigm she experienced as a young mechanic: "They don't view males different than females when they're doing the same job."

The Volunteer Gap

By definition, however, not everyone can be a leader. What of the women doing the day-to-day work of running a parish or diocese? For one thing, they could use some help. The CARA study on ministry participation paints a picture of American parish life where less than half of adults are active participants in lay ministry. In a church where all members are baptized as priest, prophet and king, the numbers may strike some as underwhelming.

Madeline Stockman, a military spouse in North Carolina, recently created two new archdiocesan awards for Catholic women between the ages of 18 and 39 to recognize what she considered an overlooked group of quiet workers in the vineyard. When her husband was hit with what she calls "late-stage patriotism" at the age of 29 and enlisted in the Army, the couple left their established telecommunications careers in Silicon Valley behind. In their new life as a military family, Ms. Stockman felt unmoored.

Ms. Stockman searched for a community at the un-

> Good leadership creates an environment in which everyone wants to get involved in parish life.

familiar military base in central Texas where they lived. Raised in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and knowing her husband wanted to raise their future children Catholic, she checked out the Christian initiation program for adults and soon found herself attending the Catholic women's group on the installation. It was, she said, "a very personal conversion to the Catholic faith," taking place entirely within a military context, and largely the result of one-on-one mentorship by women. Those mentors took time out of their busy schedules to listen to the questions that she was nervous to ask in the class and to teach her how to pray the rosary.

"It wasn't just the knowledge that was a witness," she said, but also the women's generosity with their time and attention. "And it was not like that was something that could be plugged into, like a volunteer tracker," she said, "or planned for in a parish council meeting."

Since converting, Ms. Stockman has thrown herself into volunteering at both the parish level and the archdiocesan level, serving as the European regional coordinator for the Military Council of Catholic Women, an organization of the Archdiocese of the Military Services. She noticed that when service awards were given to volunteers within the organization, they were usually in recognition of years or decades of work.

"Sometimes women who are younger," she said, "they'll serve for periods of time in the military in these volunteer capacities," in what she describes as "an intense short burn" that doesn't garner much attention because of its brevity. "Some people don't do 20 years in the Army. People do eight, some people do four. And at that level, recognition was totally absent."

In 2022, after Ms. Stockman had joined the worldwide board for the Military Council of Catholic Women, she was able to create volunteer awards to recognize the women she was thinking about when she was a regional coordinator. Those awards, the St. Joan of Arc award for volunteer service across the military and the St. Elizabeth Ann Seton award for volunteer service on a specific military installation, were issued for the first time this year.

Ms. Stockman also redefined her own role on the board, expanding her position from "director at large for seminarian support" to "director at large for vocation support." It was, she said, "a small but very symbolic change," meant to indicate that the organization "shouldn't only just be supporting younger men who are discerning the priesthood, but should also be recognizing and supporting young women who are discerning religious life."

Ms. Stockman intends these awards to send a message to the many unrecognized women who are doing the hard work of keeping their Catholic community up and running. **"**I want every woman in the military who is busting their butt to feel seen," she said. "I want every woman who ran a ministry program and is tired to know that I know how tired they are."

Anecdotally, she hears about Catholic women in active-duty service doing things that don't always come with an official title, "like convincing their priest to have Mass at a more reasonable time" for service members' schedules, she said, or serving as lay spiritual leaders on Navy ships without assigned Catholic chaplains. "It's not something that gets written down," she said, but "a lot of our priests have a lot of support from our active duty servicewomen when they are deployed."

"I think that there are a lot of low-key Catherine of Sienas who are active duty [military]," Ms. Stockman said.

Catherine of Siena was someone who defied the gender conventions of her day to reform the church at a time of social upheaval. Today, external realities are redefining roles within the family, complicating the traditional structures and processes on which parishes have relied for decades.

Economic realities mean that families may prioritize paid work over volunteering. According to a 2023 Pew Research Center report, the middle class as a share of the total population has shrunk by 10 percentage points since the 1970s, now accounting for 51 percent of Americans. Greater growth in the proportion of upper-income Americans has contributed to this shrinkage, indicating general national economic progress. But middle-income Americans' income growth has slowed relative to higher-earning households, despite the fact that in 67 percent of families with children under the age of 18, both parents are employed.

In Ms. Hatfield's experience, women tend to rationalize overextending themselves, regardless of their employment status."'Oh, we can put this on our plate one way or another. Or, we'll find a way to get this,'" she said.

Men to the Rescue?

In addition to her volunteer roles, Ms. Stockman trains lay evangelists for the Archdiocese of the Military Services. She said she has noticed in her work as a missionary disci-

Overworked laywomen can be an indicator that a parish is working hard, but not smart.

ple trainer that "most people don't have real clarity on who they have actual influence over, versus who they're just concerned *about*." She said that with men in particular, she often observes that they have a large "circle of concern," a term that comes from *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, by Stephen Covey, and refers to the things about which you are worried, but over which you have no control. Their circle of concern "gets bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger," she said. For her part, Ms. Hatfield observed that the men she knows tend to conceive of themselves primarily as providers for their families and prioritize that responsibility over other roles. Their volunteer work tends to be more in the community than the parish, she said, performing tasks like mowing a neighbor's lawn.

Ms. Stockman said that after about six weeks working with the kind of men she described, encouraging them to be less concerned with the big issues of the day than in making a difference where they live, "people legitimately start talking about their neighbors, which is always beautiful for me to see."

Back in my own parish, Dottie Stalsitz observes that the Knights of Columbus are active in hosting a regular pancake breakfast to bring the parish together and frequently assist with hands-on parish work, including setting up for the annual women's retreat. "The men come in and help set everything up," she said. "I would say that the men work with the women."

"What is needed is a positive vision of masculinity that is compatible with gender equality," Richard V. Reeves, founder of the American Institute for Boys and Men, has written. To Mr. Reeves's point, there is evidence that the useful work of keeping the Catholic Church up and running means getting beyond the gender binary.

"Clergy and laypeople, everyone," said Bishop William A. Wack of the Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee in a phone interview, "have to recognize these women and men who do these things" in what he calls "unsung ways, quiet ways." Good leadership, he believes, creates an environment in which everyone wants to get involved in parish life, regardless of gender.

In many parishes in Bishop Wack's diocese, people get involved through an initiative called Amazing Parish. Amazing Parish bills itself as a mission-oriented approach to church governance that aims to boost lay involvement, starting with a core leadership team that advises and supports the pastor. The intended result is the cultivation of a vibrant faith culture within the parish, guided by bold, strategic vision and supported by responsible stewardship of resources.

Bishop Wack said that as a young priest and pastor, he was used to the parish council model. "It was good," he said, "but a lot of times they would look at the pastor and say, 'Okay, what should we talk about?'" In a parish where the pastor encourages the laity to see themselves as stakeholders with a co-responsibility in the mission of the parish, Bishop Wack said, the dynamic differs from this top-down paradigm. "I also need help," he said, speaking of himself as a pastor.

In the Amazing Parish communities in his diocese, the bishop said, he sees leadership teams meeting with their pastors. "You don't have to ask what's going on," he said. Instead of a deferential pastor-centric model, Bishop Wack said, "Everyone's kind of equal there." The lay leadership team and the pastor deliberate together on what they are going to do, "and you leave that room hopefully united," he said, "as a team."

The topics pastors discuss with their leadership can be anything: updating the sewage system for church buildings, reviewing finances, catechesis for the young. But what Bishop Wack sees across his diocese is an organic movement by the laity to start their own ministries and an autonomous identification of the needs in their parishes. In this context, another type of role redefinition occurs, and the pastor's job is less to issue directives and more to resource their flock, to encourage them—and then get out of the way.

Sometimes lay volunteers find themselves with too much on their plate due to an unwillingness to share the work or ask for help. "The leadership needs to talk with our groups and say, 'I know you've had the same group here for 25 years,'" said Bishop Wack, "'We all know that, and you're not going anywhere. But if you don't welcome new members today, this group is going to die.'"

There is also a possibility that some longstanding ministries have outlived their utility. The Women's Altar Society may not be attracting younger women, but there may be something else that will. "Strategy," according to Pat Lencioni, co-founder of Amazing Parish, "takes courage." Within his framework, if women are voting with their feet when it comes to certain ministries in a parish, the job of the pastor, together with his leadership team, is to find out what the women of the parish actually need and feel called to do, rather than continue to prop up flagging initiatives

OSV News photo/courtesy Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee

Bishop William A. Wack of Pensacola-Tallahassee, Fla., in Tallahassee on Oct. 12, 2023. "I think all of us in leadership," says Bishop Wack, "maybe especially bishops or pastors," must encourage the organic growth of ministries.

at the expense of parishioners' time, energy and resources.

Correspondingly, in what Mr. Lencioni calls, in an article on the Amazing Parish website, the "war on mediocrity," he believes that pastors need to encourage the efforts of the laity when and where they are succeeding. Citing the example of a woman who ran a women's Bible ministry that he describes as "the most popular, vibrant ministry there," he said that when she left the parish after a decade, "none of the parish employees, including the pastor, asked why she left." During her tenure, he writes, "parish employees took little interest in what she was doing, showed no curiosity about how they might learn from her, and limited their interaction to matters having to do with facilities and budgets."

"I think all of us in leadership," said Bishop Wack, "maybe especially bishops or pastors, we need to encourage" the organic growth of ministries, in order to address the needs within their areas of responsibility.

Rethinking Catholic Philanthropy

When it comes to lay involvement, the church is competing with the workplace and the demands of 21st-century family life, and, in some instances, dealing with aging volunteers. Where will its help come from? If pastors are going to follow Bishop Wack's advice to support the laity, they will need resources. And it may help to make some of those volunteers into employees.

Tiara Hatfield says John Deere, the manufacturer of agricultural equipment, is the biggest employer in her diocese. "[The church] can't always compete," she said, in terms of pay and benefits. "We're always going to lag the market." But while many parishes are strapped for resources, not all individual Catholics are. The world of Catholic philanthropy may offer solutions to help the church pay a just wage and fill what were formerly volunteer roles. The Catholic Extension Society, a fundraising organization, and St. Joseph Financial Services, a nonprofit, represent creative solutions for dioceses and parishes with limited resources and dwindling volunteer pools.

St. Joseph Financial Services was founded in 2018 to provide accounting services and financial analysis to Catholic schools, parishes and chanceries, so that they can efficiently and responsibly steward their resources. Meg Heller is a client service specialist there, as well as a former youth minister and director of religious education. It was in her youth ministry work, she said, that administrative duties like budgeting, retreat planning and allocating additional support staff were a hindrance. She asserts that the assistance that St. Joseph Financial Services provides to parishes keeps them from overburdening women in ministry like her. It is able to scale the cost of accounting software for its clients, for example. She said that the money that parishes save by making use of that service, rather than hiring an in-house accountant, enables them to "allocate those funds elsewhere within the church, and often alleviates the responsibilities of an office manager."

Rather than overworking volunteers and underpaying employees, help with administrative tasks—budgeting, contracts, streamlining procedures—can liberate everyone, including the pastor, to pursue the parish mission.

OSV News photo/courtesy St. Anthony Catholic Church

In this undated image, volunteers from St. Anthony Catholic Church in Davenport, Iowa, distribute pantry items as part of the parish's McAnthony Window ministry, which serves tens of thousands of clients in need each year.

Another example is the fundraising organization Catholic Extension Society, which has brought religious sisters from Latin America to the United States to fill gaps in the needs for faith formation that used to be filled by volunteers. The diocese where Ms. Hatfield works may not be able to compete with John Deere, but it is still able to minister to its growing Hispanic population through a grant from Catholic Extension, made possible by a donation from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation. For five years, the diocese will host three religious sisters from Guatemala. While living in a previously unoccupied rectory and serving two Catholic faith communities with majority-Hispanic populations, the sisters are simultaneously working toward degrees through St. Mary's University of Minnesota, which will aid them in their work when they return to their home communities in Guatemala.

Joe Boland is the chief mission officer at Catholic Extension. He describes the mission of the Latin American sister exchange program as threefold. "It gives the gift of education to the sisters of the Global South who come from communities where that's not always readily accessible to them. That's number one," Mr. Boland said. "Number two, it allows women to create ministries that reach people on the margins and then in turn raises new lay leaders to carry on that mission. And number three, it creates a mutually enriching network of all the people

‘I want every woman who ran a ministry program and is tired to know that I know how tired they are.’

who are part of this program.”

When we spoke with Mr. Boland, the sisters had just arrived at their new posting in Davenport, Iowa, but Mr. Boland pointed to the kind of outcomes previous communities have enjoyed as a result of the program. He said that a group of sisters in Arkansas, where a large immigrant community is employed in chicken processing, have inspired lay leaders to come forward to lead the ministries they began, resolved to continue them after the sisters return to their communities in Latin America.

“The most amazing thing,” Mr. Boland said, “is to see how these women religious call forth the people with multiple gifts and talents, people who didn’t realize they had gifts and talents—and that’s usually the case when you’re working with people on the margins.” These laypeople, he said, “come to discover that they actually have something to give.”

Catholic Extension also provides continued support to these lay leaders. One convening, called Mujer Valiente, is specifically for Latina laywomen in ministry. “They’re in the choir and they’re the sacristan and they’re the ones leading catechesis, and they’re the ones doing all of this work in the community,” Mr. Boland said. “And we bring them together from across dioceses and give them an opportunity for not only formation, but also mutual affirmation. It’s one of the most powerful programs.” Catholic Extension and its partners fully fund the women’s participation.

At a time when Gen Z is emerging as wealthier at this point in their lives, on average, than previous generations at the same point, there may also be new opportunities for philanthropy among young Catholics.

In its report “The Next Generation of Catholic Philanthropists,” Fadica, a Catholic philanthropic network of foundations and donors, asserts that the newest large donors are interested in giving to causes and issues, rather than to institutions. Jon Hannah, assistant director of operations for the de Nicola Center for Ethics and Culture at the University of Notre Dame, observes something similar in the college students with whom he works.

“Within helping that demographic,” he said, “there is a strong desire to address food insecurity, homelessness and any creative means to break cycles of poverty.” Giving to the bishop’s annual appeal may not appeal to a generation that tends to mistrust institutions, and higher-earning philanthropists tend to look more at big-picture issues than immediate parish needs like stocking the food pantry, Mr. Hannah said. Supporting initiatives that enable woman-friendly employment policies in the church may be a sweet spot for an issues-based young Catholic donor who is motivated by social justice concerns.

“All the roles that I’m filling in can be very overwhelming,” said Ms. Hatfield of the many hats she wears in both official and unofficial capacities at work. In one sense, she finds it rewarding to put her skills and abilities to use for her church, even for less pay than they might garner in the secular world. However, she sees the Catholic Extension Latin American sisters exchange as a possible way forward for Catholic philanthropy, for what she calls “different forms” of supporting the church—helping to pay church employees a just wage, or “to help us provide better benefits, or even support a position” at a parish or chancery that could offload extra responsibilities from employees like her.

The women serving soup and making cookies in the parish, who make things happen in the parish office and do the “second shift” when they get home, are lauded in many corners as examples of what St. John Paul II called, in his famous “Letter to Women,” “the genius of women.” But these examples may also be prophetic voices calling the rest of the church to something more than simply abstract admiration: We are being called to collaborative action.

Maggie Phillips *is the author of Tablet magazine’s “Religious Literacy in America” series.*

Album/Alamy Stock Photo

Moving From Fear to Love

Visions of heaven and hell in post-Vatican II Catholicism

By M. Cathleen Kaveny

Taken as a whole, the online Catholic world can look more like an abstract pointillist painting than a coherent landscape. To borrow the imagery of Isaiah Berlin, the internet environment encourages us to think like foxes rather than hedgehogs. Virtual discussions roam over many small things (e.g., the kerfuffle last spring over Harrison Butker's commencement address at Benedictine College) rather than one or two big things. And there is no bigger question for Catholics today than this: Why should anyone become or remain Catholic?

Before the Second Vatican Council, the answers commonly given to this question focused on individual well-being in the afterlife. As many Catholic characters in movies and novels attested, a basic reason to be Catholic was "so I won't go to hell." The Catholic faith, in their view, is the best guarantee that they will not spend eternity suffering the excruciating flames of eternal torment. Instead, they will enjoy heavenly paradise. Catholic teachings provide a roadmap of the best route to heaven, and the sacrament of penance is a sure way to correct course if you lose your way.

This position is easily caricatured in several ways. First, heaven and hell are often depicted as destinations *external* to the soul, corresponding to external rewards and punishments. The soul is the same soul in heaven or hell—but it is happy in the former and miserable in the latter. Second, sacraments and other religious devotions are portrayed as external sources of energy that are used by the soul but do not change its fundamental character. I go to Mass on Sundays in order to fill up my spiritual gas task, so that I can drive my soul-car to heaven. But it is still the same old me that is driving the soul-car.

Third, the system is presented as both predictable and arbitrary. Suppose I commit a mortal sin on Friday and intend to go to confession on Saturday. If I am hit by a car leaving church on Saturday, I go to heaven. If I am hit by a car walking into church, I go to hell. The sacramental system is depicted as an elaborate set of machinery, almost a soteriological Rube Goldberg machine. The rules are clear, even if they are not always fair.

The actual theology, however, has always been far richer than the caricatures. Catholic theologians would say that the process of moral living itself transforms you, because it is an encounter with God's grace. You adopt good habits out of fear and obedience. Then you begin to see the holiness and beauty of God, and you continue those habits, which gradually allow you to love God and want to live in God's

"The Hell" (1570), by the Flemish painter Pieter Huys (c. 1519-1584)

presence in eternity. A famous question in *The Baltimore Catechism* is "Why did God make you?" The answer is that "God made me to know Him, to love Him, and to serve Him in this world, and to be happy with Him forever in the next."

Heaven and Hell

After Vatican II, however, the more individually oriented account of the reasons to be Catholic began to be supplemented—if not supplanted—by a different view that approached questions of salvation in a somewhat different way.

One difference was the reduced emphasis on the details of eternal punishment. With the advent of mass media creating widespread exposure to the atrocities of war, people in the 20th century understood well the horrors of torture and suffering. Theologians and ordinary believers alike began to question the depictions of hell found in poets like Dante and lesser writers. How anyone with a shred of compassion could subject any creature to torture or torment, much less eternally, was beyond the grasp of many both morally and existentially. For a divine, omnipotent being to inflict such pain on any sentient creature is monstrous; such a god might reasonably be placated, but would never be worthy of worship.

Consequently, the God who became fully human in Jesus Christ could never behave in such a fashion. Even the more sophisticated notion of hell, as a state of the soul entirely separated from God, love, truth and light for all eternity, began to seem morally and existentially problematic. How could a good God, who sent his only begotten son to save us, who pursued every lost sheep, allow any of his creatures to be definitively lost?

On a more terrestrial plane, it could sometimes seem that the defenders of hell were (like Dante) too inclined to populate it with their own enemies, while reserving heaven for themselves and their friends. Pope Francis recently critiqued this danger when he wrote that heaven is for everyone ("*tutti, tutti, tutti*") and warned against imagining it as a gated community for self-proclaimed upright souls.

Building the Kingdom

After Vatican II, the chasm between heaven and hell receded from both academic theology and the popular imagination. The post-Vatican II worldview did not so much bridge the chasm as sidestep it, by reframing the issue. Drawing upon the council's "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church" ("Lumen Gentium") and the "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" ("Gaudium et Spes"), many Catholics envisioned their predominant duty to be helping to build the kingdom of God. This kingdom of God is already in our midst, inaugurated by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but it is not yet fully complete. With the grace of Christ, who is the cornerstone, our task is to cooperate with other Christians and all people of good will in bringing it to fruition.

After Vatican II, the chasm between heaven and hell receded from both academic theology and the popular imagination.

The focus on building the kingdom of God displaces the heaven-hell chasm in two ways. First, it suggests that we already *are* where we are going to be for eternity—in the emerging kingdom of God. Second, it assumes that our task is not to please God individually and alone in order to obtain divine favor, but instead to cooperate with God and one another in the necessary work of construction on the basis that we already have a secure relationship based in God's gracious love for us.

Seeing God as someone who graciously and tenderly loves us despite, in and through our episodes of confusion, weakness or abandonment, is crucial to postconciliar Catholic theology. As Pope Francis has repeatedly emphasized, this insight directs our attention to those whom God loves and who are ignored by society: the poor, the marginalized, the suffering, the excluded and the unsightly "lepers" of our society. It frees us from anxiety about our own fate in order to concentrate on these victims of our "throwaway" culture. And it affirms a non-dualistic metaphysics and anthropology by emphasizing the continuities between the world we see now and the world as it will be at the end of time.

So on this view, we don't so much "go to" heaven as help to build it, reconfiguring our world and our very selves with the help of God's grace. We become or remain Catholic because we are grateful for the opportunity to cooperate with God and one another in nurturing the deepest truths of reality with the spiritual and sacramental resources that the church gives us.

In God's Time

The adequacy of this approach has become a point of contention between more theologically conservative and more progressive Catholics in the decades after Vatican II. More specifically, theologically conservative Catholics have voiced three major worries. First, they worry that a post-Vatican II emphasis on social sin minimizes each

Is it possible to perceive God as tender, loving and awe-inspiring at the same time? I think it is.

person's own need for repentance and forgiveness. Second, they think that framing the Christian task as "building the kingdom of God" risks devolving into secular do-goodism, with the church functioning as just another nongovernmental organization. Finally, they warn that the emphasis on ameliorating the sufferings of this world risks losing a transcendent perspective. It tempts us to forget that this world, at least as it is, is passing away.

I think these points are important. But I also think they can and should be fully integrated into a post-Vatican II understanding of the church and the individual.

First, the reality of sin is both personal and social. The two are deeply connected. Sinful social structures make sinful personal choices much easier. And sinful choices, particularly by those in power, infest social structures with corruption, greed and other forms of injustice. Our own particular sinful choices may not wreck the world, but they can destroy the social ecosystems in which we live or work, particularly our families.

Second, the church cannot be said simply to be an N.G.O., because we keep caring for the poor and the sick and the needy even when there is no measurable progress in secular terms. And often there isn't. As I get older, I find myself recalling more frequently these lines from the "Salve Regina": "To thee do we cry, poor banished children of Eve. To thee do we send up our sighs, mourning and weeping in this valley of tears."

We are not "building the kingdom of God" in the predictable way a big construction company puts up a skyscraper. Very often, the best we can do is wipe away the tears. The fulfillment of God's kingdom will come in God's time, not ours. But the fact that we may not see that fulfillment with our own mortal eyes does not excuse us from the need to make our contribution.

I also think that many traditional concerns can be recast into an essential reminder to honor divine transcendence. When biblical scholars explicate the notion of the "fear of God," they do so in terms of awe, reverence and honor. Fearing God means recognizing that the divine life is ultimately beyond our comprehension. We cannot even grasp the works of creation; both the vast power of the universe and the compact energy of a single molecule are still mysteries to us. And yet these works do not begin to touch the scope of God's identity, relationships and works.

I think of the passage from the Book of Job (38:4-7) where God asks:

> *Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?*
> *Tell me, if you have understanding.*
> *Who determined its measurements—surely you know!*
> *Or who stretched the line upon it?*
> *On what were its bases sunk,*
> *or who laid its cornerstone*
> *When the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?*

Awe and Love

One task for post-Vatican II Catholics, it seems to me, is to better communicate a sense of awe at God even as we emphasize God's love. But is it possible to perceive God as tender, loving and awe-inspiring at the same time? I think it is. In fact, if we are fortunate, we can draw upon some of our own experiences as children. When we were very young, many of us saw our parents as figures entirely devoted to our quotidian well-being. They constructed the world in which we felt safe and loved. Yet at certain moments, we had an instinctive sense that they had a life beyond us, a life mysterious in its extent and scope. We snatched glimpses of that life when we saw them sitting quietly reading a thick book, leaving the house to go to work, or dressed up in glamorous clothing to go out for an evening together in places unknown.

These are limited, anthropological images, of course. But they help us to see that understanding God's love does not entail treating God as cozy, predictable and utterly and exclusively concerned with our well-being.

Abject fear and unconditional love are not compatible. But awe and love most certainly are. In fact, being in awe of God reinforces our love. To sense the awesomeness of God, while knowing that God numbers the very hairs on one's head, is to experience a sense of profound gratitude, safety and joy. This sense can give rise to energy that overcomes despair at the pain we see, because we know that our works are not ultimately futile. In the divine words of the 15th-century mystic Julian of Norwich: "All will be well, and all will be well and all manner of things will be well."

M. Cathleen Kaveny *is the Darald and Juliet Libby Professor of Law and Theology at Boston College.*

What I Saw at the Border

My passion for serving migrant communities stems from my own immigrant experience.

By Juan Wulff

It was the tents that broke my heart. The shirts, paperwork and shampoo bottles stuffed in the windows between the mosquito mesh and the polyester cover. Inside, a father, his two sons beside him, lying flat on his back on the thin padding, watching as his breathing pushed his chest and phone up and then down. Outside, his wife, crouched on a crate, breastfed their child. As we walked across the gravel, dodging the labyrinth of clotheslines, we passed hundreds of weary tents and even wearier people.

"Personally, I don't go in my tent during the day," Stephen explained to us, "If I did, I would get steamed alive." Stephen, an agricultural engineering student from Colombia, had been living at Senda de Vida 2, a tent encampment in Reynosa, Mexico, for eight months when we spoke. "The bathrooms [where we can shower] are only open a couple of hours a day, except Sundays when they open all day," he mentions as we pass the bathroom, one of four cement buildings in the shelter. The putrid odor of the 20 portable toilets, their only option when the bathrooms are closed, clung to my clothes.

In a few hours, I would leave and cross back into the United States, unlike the migrants here, who would continue to wait. Before we left, I climbed onto a mound of gravel and saw long steel beams tied together by barbed wire: the border wall. At that moment, I recalled the words from a sign on the Tijuana border wall, described to me by one of the Jesuits I met. It read: "Goodbye to the American Dream, welcome to the American Nightmare."

OSV News photo/Tom McCarthy Jr.

Children play while adults wait beneath the shade of the courtyard at Senda de Vida in Reynosa, Mexico, in May 2024.

In July 2024, I had the privilege of traveling to the U.S.-Mexico border, thanks to a grant from Boston College High School, where I am a senior. I went to capture the current reality at our nation's border, where shelters like Senda de Vida 2 can be found along the Mexican side. Currently, thousands of families and vulnerable people live in these shelters indefinitely, waiting to enter the United States by applying through the CBP One mobile app. The only legal pathway for migrants seeking asylum is to use the app to request an appointment with Border Patrol that, if granted, will offer them temporary parole and issue them a notice to appear in an immigration court.

Migrants across the entire border petition for one of the 1,450 appointments available each day. Appointments are given out in a lottery favoring those who have been waiting the longest. Between January 2023 and February 2024, more than 64 million requests were made by migrants. Wait times are nearing eight months, and many who apply have already traveled for months, sometimes on foot. Cartels, rampant in Mexico, often prey on traveling migrants.

One of the migrants I spoke to, José, told me that while coming from Ecuador, he and his family were kidnapped in Reynosa, Mexico, and spent a month in captivity. José said his family sold their home in Ecuador to pay the $15,000 ransom. The cartel robbed the family of all their belongings and documents before releasing them. Then José and his family made their way to Casa del Migrante, a shelter in Reynosa.

Shelters are often among the few safe places for migrants like José as they wait to enter the United States. A majority of these shelters are run by and served by Catholic communities. On the U.S. side, places like the Humanitarian Respite Center provide short-term shelter for migrants. The H.R.C. was founded by Sister Norma Pimental and is

> **God calls us to stand with these migrants in any way possible.**

managed by Catholic Charities. At the H.R.C., migrants have a safe place to buy tickets to their destination, eat a warm meal and get the toiletries, new clothes, and rest they might need for the remainder of their journey.

We traveled with Del Camino Jesuit Ministries to most shelters, including Senda de Vida 2 and the H.R.C. At both locations, the Jesuits celebrate Mass for migrants in Spanish. Afterward, they stay to answer legal questions or deal with concerns migrants might have. The weekly Masses—celebrated on a plastic folding table adorned with a thin tablecloth—are beautiful.

The migrants I met hold a deep faith. A great number of people attend and look forward to the Mass. Kevin, a 12-year-old Venezuelan at Casa del Migrante, serves as an altar boy. His favorite part is ringing the bell during the consecration. The Jesuits, on top of giving blessings and providing daily confession services, have baptized children at these shelters. The Mass is especially sacred for migrants who haven't received the Eucharist, sung to familiar tunes or even seen a priest during their long journey. People cry, call family members and record videos. The celebration of Mass becomes a milestone in their journey.

With this in mind, I want to share why I traveled to the border to elevate forgotten narratives like this.

My passion for serving migrant communities stems from my own immigrant experience. I immigrated from Venezuela to the United States in 2016, and my immigrant experience continues to be part of everything I do. I was lucky in my immigration journey, finding my way to the United States through my mother's hard work, which earned our family a green card. This privilege, however, is to me not something to feel guilty about but a direct opportunity to serve the immigrant community. My time at the border allowed me to step into this opportunity and, on top of that, connect with my faith, especially as I saw God in all things—or, in this case, all people.

I vividly remember my conversation with Emma, a Colombian mother traveling with her 14-year-old son, who told me that after waiting seven months, she was kidnapped by the local cartel on her way to her appointment. Afterward, she had to begin the CBP One application process again. Despite her hardship, she explained how she

Father Louis Hotop, an American Jesuit, celebrates Mass on April 7, 2022, in a camp for migrants in Reynosa, Mexico.

"loves to help" in the shelter, where she is in charge of the children's activities.

After our conversation, we turned around in our seats to see that Joe Nolla, S.J., was starting to celebrate Mass. Father Nolla later said to me in an interview, "I don't pray for suffering...but I do pray to have the faith of someone who suffers greatly."

It was this colossal testament of faith from the migrants—a belief that God was with them at every point of their journey, good or bad—that I was most moved by. Seeing such faith and discerning my time at the border, I came to a better understanding regarding our call to action as people of faith: If we want to live out the Jesuit value of being a person for and with others, we must remember that our love and service, like Christ's, must be without exception.

Although we cannot all live at the border, dedicating our lives to helping run shelters, God does call us to stand with these migrants in any way possible. Whether by dismantling false narratives, donating to and serving nonprofits, or by a mindful vote at election time, we have an unconditional call to action and justice, especially if we sit in a place of privilege. We must lead with this call to action as we work to reform our immigration system and even in the manner in which we approach immigration reform.

Solidarity with migrants is often lacking in our country today. First, we dehumanize; we close our arms and are inclined to demonize the other to justify our exclusion of them. Then we build walls, both physically and mentally. By perpetuating narratives that migrants could be nothing more than inferior—criminals, freeloaders or immoral beings—we have less and less solidarity, pushing us to build a higher and higher wall. But we are more than capable of stopping this repressive cycle.

One of the most moving parts of our visit was seeing people do exactly that at La Posada Providencia, the only long-term shelter in the Rio Grande Valley. The Sisters of Divine Providence began their sponsorship of La Posada in 1989. La Posada is quiet, located amid the fields of a small rural community. The free shelter has high-quality private housing, playgrounds, bikes, community kitchens, classes in English as a second language and staff centered around one goal: empowering the migrants.

Denise Hernández, the operations manager there, highlighted to us how the people who come to La Posada

Asylum seekers and others walk in a public square in Reynosa, Mexico, where hundreds of migrants live in tents, in June 2021.

"want to come and participate actively in this economy." Migrants usually leave La Posada after a couple of months, most with a job and a place to stay, some even with a car. They often return, once established, to express their thankfulness for La Posada, which they feel gave them a chance to succeed.

The preferential option for the poor and vulnerable is a standard that results in a vast amount of good, a standard we must hold ourselves to. La Posada is not a miracle—it is the product of solidarity, hard work and organization. We must stop approaching immigration always looking for how best to keep people out. Instead, we must approach immigration with the goal of empowering as many people as possible. We cannot, as a people who seek to uphold the God-given dignity of all people, hoard the *American* title and the American dream for those only who were born here.

Not only can we break the cycle, we *must* break the cycle. In the short term, we must advocate for much-needed charity to the people suffering in this moment. In the long term, we must strive for standards like those of La Posada, where the preferential option for the poor and vulnerable in our country is not a mere suggestion, but a lived and long-term truth.

We cannot forget. People—families, friends, brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, sons, daughters—like those I met during my visit are still traveling thousands of miles on foot, being exploited by people they encounter on their way, getting kidnapped and abused, and waiting at our border. The ultimate question is: Do we support migrants unconditionally with the human dignity they deserve; or, do we abandon migrants, turning their American dream into an American nightmare?

Juan Wulff *is a senior at Boston College High School.*

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Life in the Middle

Notes from a member of the 'sandwich generation'

By LuElla D'Amico

Earlier this fall, my daughter turned 9 years old. As I was planning her birthday party—a doll theme because Barbie can still do anything in our house—her grandfather lay in the hospital eight hours away. Doctors could not identify the exact problem that landed my father-in-law there, but they knew he was suffering a series of conditions, including pneumonia and other infections. They told us these should have been getting better, but—strangely—they weren't.

My husband and I both work at colleges. Our semesters started the same week as my daughter's birthday celebration and my father-in-law's hospitalization. Our daughter's school year started around the same time. Extracurriculars have been ramping up for her and her brother: Scouts, gymnastics, dance, Latin club. Religious education at our parish also has been added to our ever-burgeoning list of activities.

New beginnings, days bristling with excitement: This is the regular music of September for our family. But in the best of circumstances, it is still a delicate balance. So when my father-in-law became sick, and my husband left for another state to tend to him, the music took on a cacophonous tone.

It did not help that our family car broke down that week. A friend drove me to and from work for a few days. Since then, we have been renting cars to get by. Like a domino chain, everything seemed to fall apart. And this type of chaos rarely stays confined neatly to one area. A failing kitchen appliance followed the car's demise.

Yet somehow, in between increasingly dire-sounding phone calls from hospital rooms and blowing out hot pink candles atop buttercream icing, our family was supposed to remain functioning. Commemorating birth. Contemplating death. Shuttling from one activity to the next. Noticing, a few days in, a flunked social studies test. Noticing, the next day, the rising number of unread emails in my inbox. Trying our best not to notice the laundry piles we're all tripping over on the living room floor. *We'll deal with that later* has become the refrain of this new September music.

And yet, everything we are facing feels like it requires us to deal with all of it now. In fact, we're living all of it now. The prospect of death, the reminder of birth, both ever present. As I write this, my father-in-law is still in the intensive care unit in the hospital. My daughter is still waiting to enjoy our family's birthday tradition, where she gets to choose lunch at a restaurant. My husband and I are still

in the throes of working, grieving, waiting, worrying, celebrating, living, shuttling.

We are still living in the middle of it all. As a literature professor, I must offer a reminder that you, dear readers, have begun reading this snippet about my life *in medias res*—or in the middle—just like the famous epics *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* begin. But unlike these epics, there is no sweeping narrative arc or character development I am waiting to reveal, or at least not that I'm aware of yet. Instead, what I'm sharing is the middle portion of a life of a rather middling person dealing with middling problems that only feel epic to my husband and me right now.

Yet I suspect a few of you might be able to relate to this *in medias res* chaos.

Although I readily admit I've felt isolated some days, millennials like my spouse and myself are increasingly becoming part of what the Pew Research Center has termed "the sandwich generation." Like Gen X before us, many members of my generation are juggling the work of caring for both aging parents and younger children. We are the peanut butter and jelly holding it all together, tending to the very old and the very young. And let me tell you: I feel like I'm spread fairly thin right now.

I'm not writing this article to lament, even if I've had moments when, like Job, I've cried out in frustration. (OK, to be honest, I've done so often, singing off-key to Alanis Morissette in my car, during the rare instances when it's working.) Rather, I'm writing this article because, in these past two weeks, caught between life and death, I've realized that all of us humans, in some way, are always caught in the middle. We're all in the middle of God's time. All of us are waiting somewhere in between the Creation and the Second Coming. We're all dealing with what has been and what will be, living in the chaos of now.

Sometimes, it feels as if there's relative peace for a while. Life feels as if it's rolling along smoothly. James Taylor is the soundtrack. Other times, we're forced, whether or not we planned on it, to focus on that practice of *memento mori*, remembering our deaths are imminent because the realities of life and death often converge. Sometimes we, too, become ill. Our bodies aren't what they once were either. Love, angst and worry alike remind us of our mortality. This is when Alanis pops on our playlists.

For those of us who are living in the sandwich generation, sometimes it feels so much is falling apart that we don't need much reminding that we, too, will die. No, instead we need to remember that even in the middle of dealing with whatever big thing is happening now, and while barely getting to whatever little thing we can get done today, and while staring at everything piles and piles of things for us to do later: We are alive.

There are many Catholic essays and articles about *memento mori*. Yet *memento vivere*, my fellow friends in the sandwich generation, is the point of this essay.

Remember, too, that you must live. Even in the middle, my middle-aged, millennial friends, remember you, too, must live.

In 2 Cor 4:16-18, Paul, who scholars suggest was in his late 30s to early 40s when he wrote these letters to the church, offered this wisdom: "Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day."

On the surface, our bodies, our lives and everything around us often seems like it is fraying all at once. But our bodies, and our time on Earth for that matter, are always fraying, even if we notice our aches and pains and the time ticking more during some spans of our lives than others.

The reality of living in a temporal, material world is that stability is always a myth.

In his "millennial" wisdom, Paul shifts our focus to the unseen renewal happening "inwardly" and "day by day." The moments of grace—the shared laughter over birthday candles, the patience in caring for our children, the prayers whispered in hospital chapels—are not fleeting. They carry weight beyond the physical world because they speak to God's eternal work within and around us daily. They are *kairos* moments, God revealing himself to us and renewing us in his time.

This, too, is part of living. We must not forget to look for God's revelations in all the small moments, in the chatter of our children in the backseats of cars and the conversations in hallways with siblings that shift suddenly from reality shows and football to the meaning of life. We must not miss the *kairos* moments God offers us during times when the music of the season is irregular, offbeat.

Paul's wisdom resonates, but so does a meme I often see floating around social media that states: "Adulthood is saying, 'But after this week, things will slow down a bit' over and over until you die." Yet these "things" are the stuff that builds lives. They are those middle moments that remind us we are living, those moments when we might feel as if we are "losing heart," but which Paul reminds us are being "renewed day by day."

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Giacomo Puccini and the Triumph of Divine Love

By Christopher Sandford

What are we to make of the life, music and spiritual beliefs of Giacomo Puccini, the composer said to be responsible for fully one quarter of all opera performances in the United States today?

Puccini, who died a century ago on Nov. 29, 1924, has been called the world's most popular songwriter, notwithstanding his modern heirs and successors, and with good reason. In a 10-year burst of creativity at the turn of the 20th century, the Tuscan maestro turned out "Manon Lescaut," "La Bohème," "Tosca" and "Madama Butterfly," any one of which would have conclusively made his reputation.

Puccini's marriage of thrilling melodies and shamelessly sentimental climaxes, sumptuous orchestrations and universal human stories—with *dramatis personae* including poor Parisian bohemians, Wild West cowboys and Chinese princesses, among many others—has long since made him a titan of his field, with a power to move millions of ordinary men, women and children who would never normally go

Gwyneth Jones as Princess Turandot and Vladimir Popov as Calaf in "Turandot" at the Royal Opera House in London in 1993.

near a gilded opera house.

These things are necessarily subjective, but anyone doubting the merits of Puccini's claim to be the people's composer might wish to recall Luciano Pavarotti's performance of "Nessun Dorma" for spellbound audiences at the 1990 soccer World Cup. Or to revisit "Madama Butterfly," and more specifically the scene in which the title character presents the U.S. consul in Nagasaki with the love child she has borne with the faithless American naval lieutenant she has fondly believed to be her soon-to-return husband. "And this? Can he forget this as well?" she cries, brandishing the infant aloft. It's one of the most arresting moments in all opera, and a *cri de coeur* on behalf of every woman ever abandoned by a feckless man.

The lieutenant does return, albeit with a new American wife. Butterfly's greeting to her—"Under the great dome of heaven, there is no happier woman than you, and may you always be so"—is sublime, an act of forgiveness almost too deep for tears. The opera is a tragedy in anyone's terms, but one with the supremely redeeming theme of man's, or woman's, capacity for mercy, and in that sense the most spiritually uplifting moment of all Puccini's works. "Madama Butterfly" continues to arouse debate about its moral and ethical complexities in today's changed geopolitical climate, but surely its true message is that of the resilience of the human heart and our ability to display the divine spark of compassion.

Over the years, critics have interpreted Puccini's works in a Freudian key, making much of the themes of unrequited love, suffering and death that seem to follow from certain events of the composer's own life. Or, failing that, he has been placed as the central character of a still continuing debate about the rights or wrongs of cultural appropriation. The historian Alexandra Wilson has even written a well-received book titled *The Puccini Problem*, in which she explores the "wide range of extra-musical controversies concerning such issues as gender and class" provoked by his work.

Missing from all this is the surely central ingredient of Puccini's life, or for that matter of any individual responsible for a truly worthwhile piece of art—that of his own relationship with his Maker.

Touched by the Almighty

Puccini may not have been known either for his church attendance or for his overtly religious canon, but there is ample evidence that he felt God to be close at hand at critical moments of his life. The composer once said that "The Almighty touched me with his little finger and said: 'Write for the theatre—mind, only for the theatre.' And I have obeyed the supreme command."

Since Puccini wasn't as a rule one to speak of such epiphanies, we should take him at his word. Spirituality still informed his work toward the end of his life, 40 years later, in "Suor Angelica," his one-act opera set in a convent, with its consoling message of divine forgiveness and of the ultimate reunion of the living and the dead.

Or consider his earlier opera, "La Fanciulla del West"—the work Puccini himself always considered his greatest achievement as a composer—at whose climax Minnie, the local saloon owner, persuades a mob of hardened Gold

In a 10-year burst of creativity, Puccini turned out "Manon Lescaut," "La Bohème," "Tosca" and "Madama Butterfly."

Rush miners to spare the life of a captured Mexican bandit on the grounds that there is no one on the face of the earth who cannot be redeemed by the power of love. After some theological discourse on the subject, the bandit is set free by the same men who minutes earlier were eager to hang him, a reprieve he acknowledges by a heartfelt "Grazie, fratelli"—an evocation of universal brotherhood that raises the whole story above the level of a mere gangster melodrama.

Or there's "Tosca," Puccini's opera set against the backdrop of Napoleonic revolutionary fervor and the struggle for Italian independence. It's a story that's equal parts historical epic, tragic romance and musical tour de force. Puccini and his librettist, Luigi Illica, ensured that a statue of St. Michael the Archangel, one of God's principal agents in the battle fought in heaven against Lucifer and his agents, be prominently displayed on stage. Tosca herself, faced with a series of emotional crises, repeatedly addresses her Creator as "Signor," not "Dio," speaking to him as a friend as much as a deity, while at the end of the opera the candles arranged in the form of a cross around her deathbed remind us that Puccini saw the essential story not only for

its romantic and tragic aspects, but for its spiritual qualities as well.

Similarly, Puccini's unfinished 1924 masterpiece "Turandot" contains certain unmistakable biblical allusions and allegorical insights into the composer's spiritual beliefs, not least in its rousing aria "Nessun Dorma." In one of those faintly convoluted plot developments familiar from any great opera, the character Calàf has given Princess Turandot one last chance to kill him instead of marrying him if she can discover his name before morning. Turandot pursues this task fruitlessly through the night, and Calàf ends the aria by declaring both his desolation and his confidence in ultimate victory, an echo of the Lamentations service traditionally associated with Holy Saturday. For that matter, the whole narrative device of a long, nocturnal vigil prior to a journey down a perilous but unalterable track, toward a destination boldly stated, resonates with the synoptic accounts found in Mt 26:36 and Mk 14:32.

Not only do parts of "Turandot" stir the heart and soul; they also reflect the particular mysteries contained in the account of our Lord's passion. As often noted by its critics, "Turandot" may be illogical and at times hopelessly overblown. But it makes perfect linear sense as a parable of suffering and ultimate redemption. I am always struck by the harrowing words uttered by the slave girl Liù, as she refuses to divulge the name of her prince even under torture, assuring her tormentor:

You who are girdled with ice
Once conquered by so much flame
You will love Him too!
Before this dawn
I will close my weary eyes
So that He may still win!
He may still win!

The words are Puccini's own.

A Lonely Hunter

Humanity being fallen, it should come as no surprise to learn that Puccini's own life at times failed to match the pristine beauty exemplified by his music. By 1903, the already widely acclaimed and fabulously wealthy composer had for the previous 17 years been conducting a non-exclusive affair with Elvira Bonturi, the wife of an old school friend.

In due course, Elvira bore Puccini a son, but the couple were unable to marry and legitimize the boy because divorce was not possible in the Italy of the time. The situation may well have suited the composer, who then described himself as a "hunter of wild fowl, operatic librettos and attractive women," the most prominent of whom was a young schoolteacher whom he nicknamed "Corinna."

Puccini's marriage of thrilling melodies and shamelessly sentimental climaxes have made him a titan of his field.

On Feb. 25 of that year, fate took a strange turn. Puccini, by then at work on "Madama Butterfly," suffered a serious automobile accident when, near Lucca, his chauffeur-driven car plunged off the road. The composer was found pinned underneath the car, almost asphyxiated by gasoline fumes and with his right leg broken. He would clearly need someone at home to care for him.

And by another twist that seemed almost operatic in its implausibility, the very next day Elvira became a widow. Her husband Narisco died after being assaulted by the enraged husband of one of his own numerous mistresses, leaving her free to marry Puccini. This concluded matters with Corinna, who the composer discovered had strayed from the monogamous demands he placed on all his partners, while not accepting any reciprocal obligation on his part.

"What an abyss of depravity and prostitution!" he wrote to her, bringing an end to their relationship. "You are a s—, and with this I leave you to your future." Puccini and Elvira remained married for the remaining 20 years of his life.

The successive drama of the car wreck, Elvira's widowhood and the acrimonious split with Corinna may well have spurred the composer's most powerfully tragic music in the form of the last act of "Madama Butterfly." Further melodramatic developments were to follow.

In July 1909, Elvira Puccini was sentenced to five months' imprisonment. She had been found guilty of what would today be called harassment, in a case as tragic as any story her husband or his librettist might have contrived on the stage. A 23-year-old woman named Doria Manfredi had for several years worked as a maid in the Puccini household. By all accounts she was devoted to the family, but in 1908, Elvira, who was subject to wild fits of jealousy, publicly accused the woman of carrying on an affair with her husband. Despite denials on all sides, Elvira pursued the maid with letters and threats.

Although Elvira was often right to be suspicious of her husband, it later emerged that she was tragically mistaken

‘Turandot’ contains unmistakable biblical allusions and insights into the composer’s spiritual beliefs.

in this case. In January 1909, Doria, consumed with shame at the scandal surrounding her name, committed suicide by drinking poison.

Nearly a century later, documents found in the possession of one of the dead woman’s descendants, Nadia Manfredi, revealed that Puccini had actually been conducting an affair with one Giulia Manfredi, Doria’s cousin. Doria had simply been acting as a go-between, carrying letters to and from the furtive lovers.

‘So I Am Made’

Even from the start, Puccini’s ability to create music that captured the essence of the human experience, from the soaring melodies of his love duets to the wrenching arias of their despair, was what most distinguished him from his contemporaries. It does not stretch credulity to suggest that the composer’s final opera, “Turandot,” is infused with a critical ingredient that in part stemmed from the Doria Manfredi tragedy, one that would be instantly recognized by the observant Roman Catholics among his audiences—namely, a sense of guilt, but the sort of guilt that, far from denying us the prospect of redemption, encourages us to acknowledge our fallen nature and to pray for our forgiveness.

As Puccini himself said: “I have always carried with me a large bundle of melancholy. So I am made.” “Turandot” dares to shun much of the lush romanticism that had so endeared Puccini to audiences earlier in his career. It is a postmodern love story. Its unlikable twin leads go largely unfazed by the death and dislocation they instigate; when they finally share true love’s kiss, they’re standing atop a figurative pile of corpses. I would suggest that this is the work of a man assessing his prior life and finding it wanting, embracing his shame and at last willing to leave his moral comfort zone and be led to a place where he can more profoundly contemplate his own nature and, more importantly, his relationship with his Maker.

Puccini himself did not live to see his final opera’s opening night. In late October 1924, the composer had gone to Brussels to seek treatment for what he believed to be an infection, but was in fact terminal throat cancer. While there, he made the acquaintance of Cardinal Clemente Micara, the prelate who then served as papal nuncio to Belgium and later as vicar general of Rome. An immediate friendship began, and the two met every day, sometimes several times a day, for the brief remainder of Puccini’s life.

Here is how the cardinal remembered the events of Nov. 29, 1924:

> I had just finished celebrating Mass when I received an urgent message from the Mother Superior of the hospital where Puccini lay ill. She asked me to come immediately. I was moved by Giacomo’s appearance when I reached his bedside. During the night he had had a heart attack, and the doctors had informed his relatives that there was no longer any hope.
>
> I gave the maestro the comforts of religion, and his last sign of consciousness was to show that he was aware of what was happening, and was relieved by it. When the end came it was without excessive pain, quiet and serene. He died that same morning at 11.30.

Puccini was given a state funeral, paid for by the Italian government, in Brussels, before his body was borne back to be interred with full Catholic honors in Milan. The composer had taken a briefcase with him on his final journey to Belgium, and this was found to be full of notes for the climactic duet between Princess Turandot and Calàf, a scene he intended to represent “the final triumph of divine love over cruelty and death.”

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In Search of the Magi

By Maggi Van Dorn

When I was young, each year at Christmas my mom placed a light-up Nativity scene on our front lawn. Surrounding Mary and Joseph and Jesus' creche (left vacant until Christmas) were three large, glowing figures: the Magi. I loved dashing in and out of the scene, picking up and rearranging these plastic kings in new ways around the manger. It was a life-size dollhouse that made me feel included in the great pageant of Jesus' birth.

I would wager that the "three kings" have been familiar characters in your core Christmas memories as well. Perhaps you were cast to play the part of Caspar, Melchior or Balthazar in your church or school's Nativity pageant. And unlike Rudolph or the apocryphal little drummer boy, the Magi can actually be found in the Scriptures. We learn of their journey in the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 2:

> In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the east came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east and have come to pay him homage."

So when we began to plot out this season of **America**'s podcast "Hark!: The Stories Behind Our Favorite Christmas Carols," I was very excited to feature the caroling classic "We Three Kings." Besides its musical beauty and thrilling sense of wonder, the song offers a treasure trove of stories to unwrap. For instance, what can historians tell us about who these travelers from the East were? And what qualified them as wise men? As for the "star of wonder" they pursued—was it an astronomical phenomenon that scientists can trace today or was it a Christmas miracle? Finally, we could address the butt of so many jokes and figure out why showering an infant with gold, frankincense and myrrh made more sense than diapers and a Pack 'n Play.

Our deep dive into this carol and its main subjects did yield many answers, which you can hear on our first episode of "Hark!" on Nov. 29, at the America Media website or wherever you listen to podcasts. But after months of research and in-depth guest interviews, I was left with an even larger question: Did the three wise men actually exist?

I realize that, if you're anything like me, raising this question may feel blasphemous. So let me explain how I got here. The first assumption many of us make is that the Magi were kings and that there were three of them. This is, of course, a fair assumption given the popularity of our Christmas carol "We Three Kings" and the ubiquity of the image across Christian art.

Sculptures of the three wise men in Angra dos Reis, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The song "We Three Kings" is featured on this season of **America**'s podcast "Hark!: The Stories Behind Our Favorite Christmas Carols."

In fact, when I interviewed Eric Vanden Eykel, a historian and scholar of early Christian literature, he said, "the Magi are the third most represented figures in Christian art, third only to Mary and Jesus." And they've held a key place in our Christian imagination since at least the third century. We know this because, underneath and around the city of Rome, is an ancient network of some 40 catacombs. Adorning the Catacomb of Priscilla are two portraits of the Magi—one a colorful fresco that depicts three figures in red, yellow and green, their arms outstretched with gifts toward Mary, who holds the baby Jesus in her lap. The other is a slab of marble covering Severa's burial niche. It resembles the fresco, but with a few added details—a star overhead and little "Phrygian hats" on the Magi, which in Roman art was used to signify these were out-of-towners.

But nowhere in Matthew's Nativity account does he mention their number. And the Greek word he uses to name these gift-bearing figures is *magoi*, which had a multitude of meanings in antiquity—from charlatans to wise men to royal advisors. So what can we say about these mysterious figures who have played such an important role in children's pageants and Christian devotion alike?

According to Dr. Eykel, Matthew includes the Magi in his narrative in order to "validate the kingship of Jesus." He uses their proximity to kings to make it clear that Herod the Great is not the true king of the Judeans and to highlight the political struggle between Jesus and the Roman empire. And while this certainly isn't Matthew's only message, he bookends his entire Gospel with this theme of Jesus' kingship. "So the only two points in the Gospel where Jesus is called the king of the Judeans," Dr. Eykel explains, "is when the Magi come looking for him at the start and then also when he's crucified."

As a scholar of early Christian literature, Dr. Eykel isn't concerned with proving or disproving the historical existence of the Magi, but he does suspect they are most likely literary creations of Matthew. "It's one of those things," he explains, "where if something fits just really, really well with the overall story that you're telling, it's likely that you probably embellish that."

Does it matter whether the Magi were real historical figures or literary creations of Matthew? On the one hand, the Magi's existence is not a cornerstone of our faith. Catholics already understand Scripture to be a divinely inspired, though not always literal, testament to salvation history. The church recognizes that within the Bible we find a rich spread of poetry, myth and figurative story. With this appreciation of different literary genres we can say that something doesn't need to be factually true in order to convey a central truth or profound expression of faith.

After months of research, I was left with a question: Did the three wise men actually exist?

On the other hand, what a magnificent story the Magi bring to us each Christmas! Producing the "We Three Kings" episode for "Hark!' was like peeling an onion. Layers upon layers of meaning unfolded as I made a study of the Magi, the star they followed, the gifts they brought and the music they have inspired. When I spoke with Guy Consolmagno, S.J., director of the Vatican Observatory and a modern stargazer, about why the Star of Bethlehem has intrigued us for so long, he mused: "We can see the star. We can't see Jesus. We can see the star. We can't see God. We can see something in the universe that is beautiful and seemingly eternal. And to know that that's not God, but something pointing us to God, is very encouraging."

For me, the story of the Magi and the star functions like any keepsake or memento from someone we love. Although a picture or a locket cannot possibly contain the entire mystery, magic and presence of our loved one, it can remind us of the key moments and memories that made an everlasting impact on us.

And while I may not know exactly where the Magi originated, if they actually brought myrrh to a baby, and if the star they followed was a comet or a heliacal rising, there is something that journeying with the Magi has taught me. Perhaps it is not about pinning down answers but allowing ourselves to leave the old, familiar ways behind so that we might be transformed by wonder. Because "at the end of the day," Brother Consolmagno reminded me, "it's the wonder itself that tells me that God is present."

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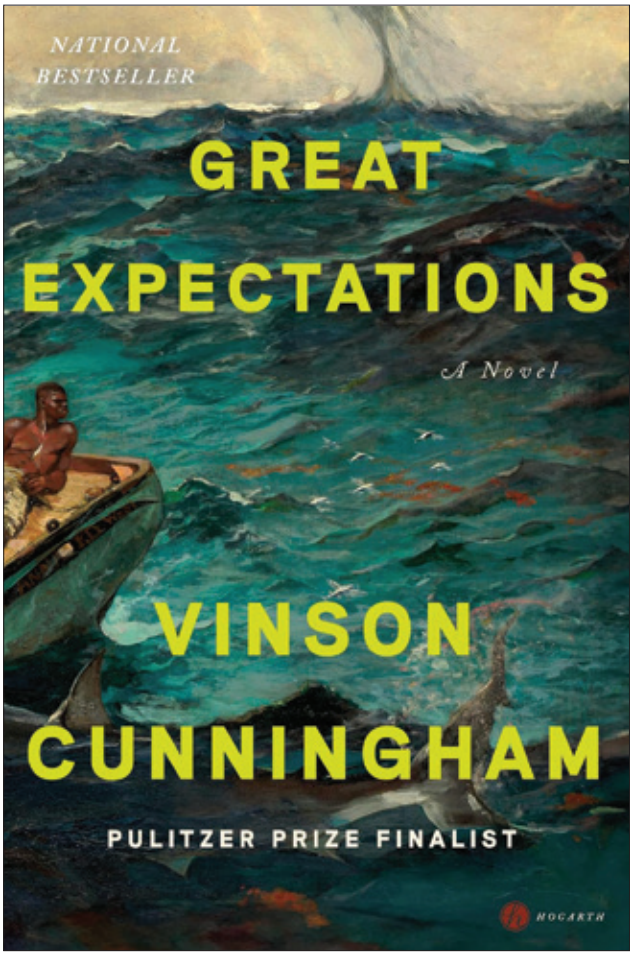
THE WILD POWER OF THE DIVINE



Hogarth / 272p $28

Vinson Cunningham is a talented writer for The New Yorker. Much of his work entails critical reviews of the arts: film, television, music and theater. Such constant application of a critical eye must have affected Cunningham's own work in composing his first novel, *Great Expectations*, especially his decision to take a title from Charles Dickens. Being a reviewer himself must have made him doubly conscious as author of his own work of fiction.

The novel tells the story of David Hammond, a young staffer working for a 2008 Democratic presidential candidate. The candidate is never named, but he also never differs from the actual 2008 nominee Barack Obama in any significant way. As the campaign motors along, impelled by a sense of providence, Hammond's own thoughts—including his own inner speech around his experience as a young Black man in the orbit of a successful presidential bid—go in a different direction from the forward, horizontal momentum of the campaign. Hammond becomes resolutely "oriented downward—down, down, down, into the core of things," things more elemental than politics.

Within the novel, there is a brief digression about book reviews encased in a larger memory from Hammond's high school days, all sparked by his witnessing of a vicious fight. The high school memory is of an awkward series of workshops intended to curb bullying and violence in schools. The workshop's rather aloof facilitator tells her student-volunteers that they should not counsel or offer solace or even extend some sort of assurance of better times to a friend who has reported an experience of being bullied. No, the empathizer should paraphrase the woe—synthesize and echo in their own words elements of the account just heard. Cunningham, writing from within the swirl of Hammond's interiority, reasons toward the following simile:

> The effect [of paraphrasing the woe]—like that of certain long book reviews, which seem only to recapitulate a book's plot and redescribe its characters but end up achieving a subtle exegesis, impossible to isolate within just one or two of its sentences—was somehow clarifying.

A sentence like that makes me self-conscious as a reviewer, in part because I found myself appreciating in Cunningham's prose many an instance of subtle Gospel exegesis that occurred at pivotal points in the novel. Note, for example, Cunningham/Hammond's insight into Paul's epistles: "Those letters seemed so obviously real: only genuine agitation could make a person write like Paul. His wild voice would rock me to sleep. *For we know in part, and we prophesy in part....*"

In his exegesis of Jesus' back-and-forth with a cautious Nicodemus, we see a comic exchange—as Hammond points out to himself and the reader—until Jesus declares, "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." Hammond writes of Jesus' response: "It's like something from a sonata—restatement by way of deepening, distortion, distention, modulation. The sentence isn't necessarily easier to understand, but it is somehow, by way of image, more precise."

The narrator continues—down, down, down:

> Born of water, I love that. The phrase comes almost pre-wrapped, calls to mind baptism and the bath, but when I hear it I see something else: a man, alone, at the center of a limitless ocean. He's treading desperately, howling whenever he gathers enough breath.... Nothing interrupts the hopelessness of the scene: no great fish, no planes, no

> bugle blasts, no buoys. The new birth is whatever comes next, a miracle or a death. Salvation, then, wouldn't be a walk across the water but a memory of the depths.

Aside from wonderful exegesis, Hammond senses a parallel between Obama's political rhetoric and that of John Winthrop: the effortless melding of God's providence and American destiny. He later seems to imply a deeper parallel between Barack Obama and John Howland, a pilgrim on an earlier boat who fell overboard in a storm during the Mayflower's crossing from England. Howland survives.

After the voyage, Howland becomes a "token of grace" and "proof of a providential God." Likewise, Obama's success becomes an outward sign of God's election. He wins. Thrust into the violent reality of racism in the United States, he somehow survives, wins primaries, becomes the nominee and eventually becomes president.

Deep into the campaign summer, at an exclusive campaign event in Los Angeles, Hammond meets a famous Pentecostal preacher whom he had watched weekly on television. After his affectionate greeting of the old preacher, Hammond asks why he had shelled out money to have a few minutes with the candidate when the preacher had worked so hard throughout his life to dismiss politics as ultimately unimportant compared to the coming kingdom of God. The preacher responds that he could see "a move of God in the campaign that couldn't be explained in purely political terms." Hammond paraphrases his thoughts:

> What everybody else saw as an effusion of national sentiment, stoked by the candidate's rare oratory talent as well as the fact of his race, he could tell was a kind of intervention by the Lord into the affairs of a nation that needed His touch. The candidate, when president, would—he could feel it—usher in some new unimaginable dispensation, an age in which miracles would become commonplace and signs and wonders would be the easy order of the day. "Something," he said, "is *shifting*, son."

Sixteen years later, we readers know the irony evident in the preacher's claim and the massively consequential countershift from that moment in 2008. In light of the continued virulent force of racism in the United States, such irony only further complicates notions of divine providence and its alignment with American destiny.

No matter how great and sincere our expectations—for God's providence, for ourselves, for those who seem infused with grace—even if our expectations are justified and supremely good, great expectations do not bring into being a future that we desire. This is a tough truth.

I found myself appreciating in Cunningham's prose many an instance of subtle Gospel exegesis.

The novel, of course, is not all dour rumination on providence. It is fun and fast. There is sex, sleek fundraising events, cold political calculations, live music, insights into relationships. There is also an extended discourse on the N.B.A. Hall of Famer Paul Pierce that unfolds at a bar in New Hampshire just before the candidate's loss in that state's primary. (One happy parallel between the novel's setting in 2008 and our moment in 2024 is that the Boston Celtics are N.B.A. champions both times.) Yet, even this discourse on Paul Pierce is shaped by expectations and Hammond's sense of self: "Pierce inspired me, I explained: he showed me a way through life as *myself*, showed me how limits—lifelong limits, irreversible except by something like a miracle—could point beyond themselves."

By the end of the novel, the candidate brims with extraordinary power. Such power is effective at a distance or in proximity. In fact, the candidate's power becomes distributive—infusing his campaign manager and other surrogates with remarkable ability to influence and impress those around them. By this point, however, Hammond realizes such power embodied in the candidate leaves him lukewarm, while the wild power of the divine—mirrored somehow in intimate experiences of human love—is actually what captivates him in his ruminations, in the down, down, down consideration of things.

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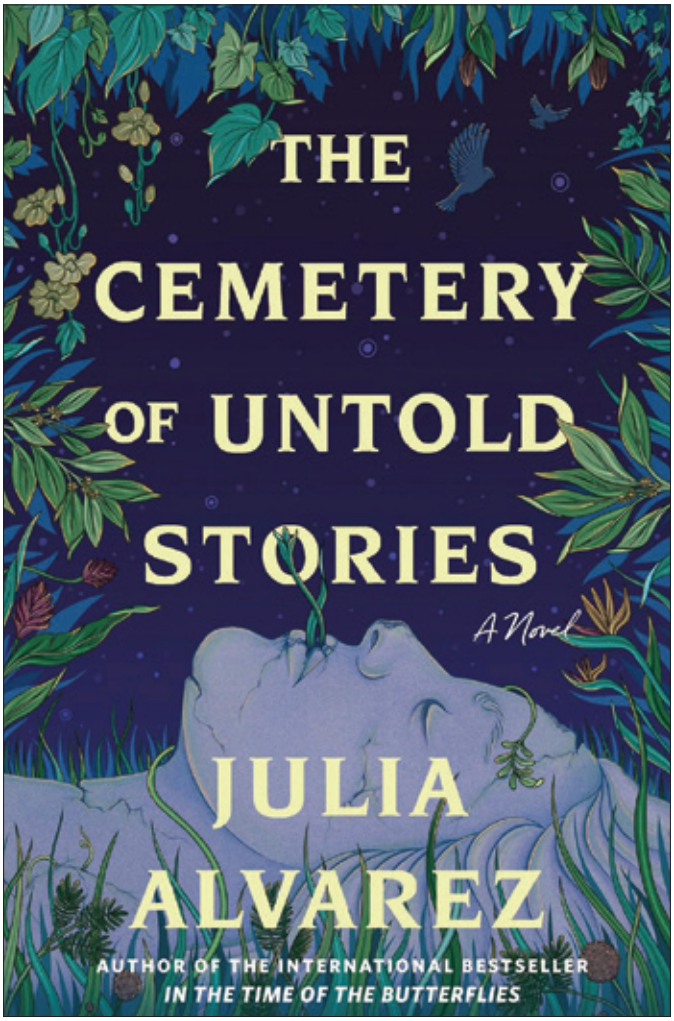

Algonquin Books / 256p $28

In *One Thousand and One Nights*, Scheherazade invites the king to listen to her stories to preserve her own life. The new wife will be beheaded in the morning unless she convinces the king to keep her alive, which she does by asking, "Do you want to hear a story?" This ninth-century premise inspires *The Cemetery of Untold Stories*, by the best-selling novelist Julia Alvarez.

The main character is a novelist, Alma Cruz, who uses Scheherazade as her pen name. She shares biographical overlap with Alvarez—they are both from the Dominican Republic; they have a plethora of sisters; and they are writers in the later years of their lives. While death does not lurk around the corner for Alma, as it does for Scheherazade, she recognizes that she does not have enough years left to write all the stories that she has received from the world. With more than 1,001 stories to tell and less than 1,001 years to tell them, Alma returns to her homeland in the Dominican Republic to bury the untold stories in a cemetery. But stories, as everyone knows, have a life of their own.

The book opens with Alvarez's rewrite of Scheherazade's command to listen: "Let's go to Alfa Calenda." The phrase "Alfa Calenda" refers to a made-up world that Alma's father created with his mother to avoid the terror of living with an abusive husband and father. It is like their own "Once upon a time," a storyland. It is also the setting of the novel itself, into which Alvarez guides readers, where so many stories from the past are interwoven with her own narrative creations.

The Bible, *Arabian Nights*, Dante, Shakespeare and most significantly Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are tangled up with the various living and dead stories of Alvarez's imagination. Alvarez even goes meta when a scholar enters the story wanting to write on *The Influence of Canonical and Classical Texts on Latinx Literature*, primarily featuring Alma Cruz.

One of the primary threads of the novel follows the life of two sisters, Perla and Filomena, whose story retells in a new way that of Ovid's Philomela and Procne. While Alvarez's Filomena physically keeps her tongue, unlike Ovid's victim, Alma confesses that she is drawn to the silenced characters, "their tongues cut off." Toward the end of the novel, Perla, who has become silenced by the violence she herself has committed, needs to read Ovid's story again and again to find her voice.

Only by reading his story aloud does Perla reclaim her tongue. The novel plays with the dissonance between "wagging tongues," mostly through Alma's garrulous sisters, and silence and listening, as carried out by the nearly saintlike Filomena. It plays with the tension between telling our stories as a way to clarify what happened to us and who we are versus shutting up and discovering "that the earth itself was storying."

Even as Alma attempts to bury the stories that will not let her go, they climb out of their graves. Alma has a seemingly magic intercom that allows only those with a story to enter: "Tell me a story." Filomena, her neighbor, is the first to gain entry. She becomes the caretaker of the cemetery of untold stories, and thus readers' medium for hearing the buried tales. Through Filomena as intermediary, readers hear from Alma's father, receiving his stories and his secrets.

We also meet Bienvenida, the second wife of Rafael Trujillo, the dictator of the Dominican Republic whom Alvarez reviled in her novel *In the Time of the Butterflies*, and whose story Alma has always desired to tell but could never get quite right. One might imagine that Alvarez herself longed to be able to write the story of Bienvenida and could not capture it, so she integrated the pieces of her attempt into this episodic novel.

Of course, Bienvenida was a real person, compelling

readers to echo Alma's sister and ask, "So it's a true story, not like you made it up?" However, Alvarez wants to move readers "beyond these binaries" between the fictional and the true. Are the stories that we create like Ovid's Philomela and Procne less true than the biography of Bienvenida because she was a real person? Or does Alvarez show us, by retelling Ovid's story in the 20th century in the Dominican Republic, that the story is so true it transcends time and place more than even that of historical persons and events?

The novel is a philosophical investigation into what stories mean and why human beings tell them. The novel asks, "If you could hear other people's stories all the time, what then? Would you understand them better?" Stories might act as methods for knowing truth more than investigations into people's facts.

A little boy's mother reads him stories like *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* to comfort him in the face of his harsh father. A woman tells herself a story about her amazing lover in order to avoid facing his deceit and cowardice. A man and a woman tell each other stories to escape their loneliness, becoming lovers as an afterthought. "Chinese curse like our fukú," one buried story says in his reflection. He continues: "May you have an interesting life. An interesting life makes for a good story." Stories are for comfort, for survival, for self-examination, for relationship; and at the end of all these purposes, stories seem to be, in Alvarez's novel, our very life.

The way the buried stories talk to one another from their graves reminded me of George Saunders's *Lincoln in the Bardo* (though the aesthetic of that book is wildly different), but in Saunders's novel, the ghosts deal with the afterlife and are forced to question what happens after one dies.

Although *The Cemetery of Untold Stories* is set in a cemetery, death is always far at the periphery. When Alma Cruz loses her friend in the opening chapter, it's like a page torn from a book, without much grief or pathos stirred for the reader. Then her mother dies, followed shortly by her father, who is then raised from the dead through his stories in the third part of the novel. Throughout the book, death is like passing behind a curtain. Death lacks the darkness, pain and finality that often accompanies it in other literature. One wonders if Alvarez is trying too hard not to write a swan song.

In the acknowledgments, Alvarez thanks her "mostly invisible and anonymous readers, without whom all [her] stories would have ended up in Alma's cemetery." She offers her readers gratitude "for the resurrections you have given and continue to give my books by reading them and using them to fertilize the ground your own creations spring from."

The Cemetery of Untold Stories is a novel made up of all the stories that Alvarez no longer wants to carry in bits and pieces in her head, so she buries them in this book, hoping her readers will be like Filomena and shake open the pages to listen to the stories talk. If you do, and if you enjoy this collection of intertwining stories, then, for Alvarez you become one more proof that we are—and need to be—story creatures.

Alvarez's novel is a philosophical investigation into what stories mean and why human beings tell them.

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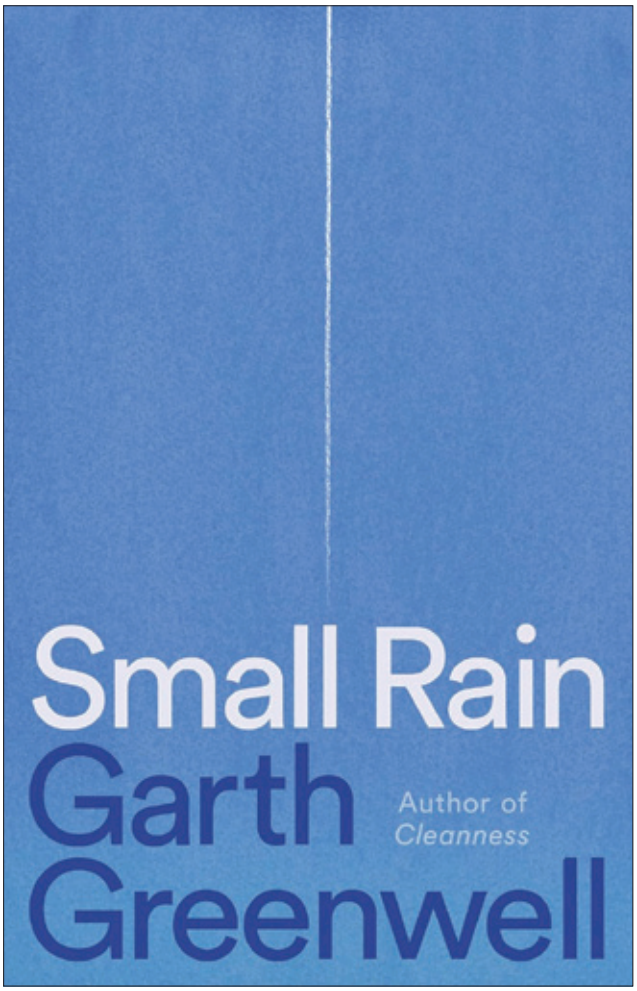

Farrar, Straus and Giroux / 320p $28

In the mystical tradition of the desert dwellers, there is a key moment—a movement, really—when the spiritual seeker withdraws from the chatter and noise of the world in order to devote attention to God and the soul. The ancient Greek word for this withdrawal is *anachoresis,* from which we get the notion of the *anchorite*, the hermit who retreats to the desert or to a cell in order to quell the distractions of the world and do battle with the flesh and the devil, all in search of divine love.

In the life of St. Ignatius Loyola, we see that such moments of anchoritic disruption are not always voluntary. Sometimes a retreat from worldly absorption is enforced by illness or injury. The cannonball that shattered Ignatius' leg required months of recuperation. The bedroom of his convalescence became a veritable desert of spiritual encounter. He entered the room as a patient; he left it as a monk.

In this sense, Garth Greenwell's *Small Rain* is a mystical novel, a story of *anachoresis* in which illness becomes an occasion for a new attention to one's life and loves. After a searing episode of inexplicable pain, the unnamed narrator enters the dire space of an American hospital, where he will spend weeks in recovery. His anger and frustration with the U.S. health care system is visceral and understandable. So many tubes and wires; so much waiting. But there is also a strange gift in being a patient.

"I felt weirdly detached," the narrator admits, "engrossed by pain and also by a strange relief, the relief of being a patient, of being passive." A patient suffers rather than acts, undergoes rather than accomplishes. But such passivity can also be a mode of receptivity. Sometimes when a life is interrupted in this way, we become open to gifts otherwise hidden by our agency, activity and accomplishment.

As the story unfolds, the malaise of the hospital is unsettled by two channels of grace: people and poetry—or, more broadly, by art and the art of caring. While there are cold, aloof doctors and disappointing (overwhelmed) nurses, the tiny world of the narrator's hospital room is a site of visitation by people who embody the art of caring—like Frank, an E.R. nurse, and Alivia, an I.C.U. nurse. All of them are drawn as marvelously human characters, with their own quirks and hopes, who give the narrator something irreducible: *recognition*. These otherwise-invisible professionals *see* him suffering, see his fear, see his loneliness, and respond with warmth and care that is humane and humanizing. To them, he is not just a "case."

Being seen becomes the condition for seeing anew, which is what our patient receives from art. The narrator of *Small Rain* is a poet and a teacher at a local college. He studied music and loves literature. There is a beautiful, touching moment early in the story when Frank, the E.R. nurse, shares a story about his jazz band playing gigs at the college. They begin trading stories about their shared love for early choral music and, when talking about his latest enthusiasm, the Renaissance composer John Taverner, Frank pulls up Taverner's "Westron Wynde Mass" to play on his phone. The scene is intimate, tender: "Frank had come close to the bed, aiming his phone at me, and he leaned toward me, too, bending his head so we could listen together. I was surprised by how well I remembered the tune; it had been so long ago that I had sung it, and I had come to think of the words free of music."

What follows is a beguiling reverie of music criticism, taking us into the narrator's memory and his incisive, critical mind, inviting us into the beautiful complexity of the poetry and music. Then we bend back to Frank:

> I heard it in a new way, listening to it with Frank, I felt my eyes fill with tears. After the tenor solo the mass proper begins, the tune in the sopranos first, with the words not of the poem but of the Gloria, Et in terra pax. Frank let it play for a moment, the

Renaissance polyphony that always sounds to me like petals opening, a rose blooming in time-lapse photography; I'm embarrassed by the image, it was something I felt as a teenager and I still feel it now.

Such meditation on art suffuses the rest of the story. In his hospital "cell," the narrator turns to the poetry he has brought with him. He describes a poem by George Oppen, "Stranger's Child," as "a prosthetic consciousness—which is something poems can be, they can create new spaces in our interiors sometimes." The poem itself is an act of patient attention, and the narrator's explication of it is like a frame-by-frame act of devotion that yields a maxim for living: that "to recognize another means to imagine them in relation, to conjure for every stranger the stranger to whom they are dear."

Art here has a moral, even spiritual function. "[T]he disciplined attention of art is a moral discipline," the narrator concludes. "Whole strata of reality are lost to us at the speed at which we live, our ability to perceive them is lost, and maybe that's the value of poetry, there are aspects of the world that are only visible at the frequency of certain poems."

Art—poetry, in this instance—is a form of attention, but we need more *anachoresis* in our lives to give ourselves over to what it offers. "Probably I wouldn't have seen Oppen's poem in this way anywhere other than that bed," the narrator admits. Here, again, is a mystical move: Sometimes you have to retreat from the world to get it all back, shining in its glory. Here, too, is a mystical, almost monastic aspect of the novel: the way art serves a spiritual function in our lives.

Greenwell's prose is enchanting—quiet, sensitive, gentle. Everything and everyone is held for attention with tender hands. The structure of the novel, even of individual paragraphs, is characterized by a kind of porous sense of time. While there is a chronological spine that takes us through his illness and recovery, time also bends—back to his childhood, meeting his partner, his schooling, a prolonged season of home renovation. Within a single paragraph, Greenwell—in the space of the narrator's mind and imagination—seamlessly takes us across time and around the globe.

This is how our minds work, isn't it? In the blink of an eye, without a jolt or hiccup of consciousness, our minds wander from zucchinis to a market in Rome to memories of a day fishing with grandpa. In a feat of craft, Greenwell gets this experience of consciousness down on the page in a way that is fluid and feels natural. Given that the narrator is from Kentucky, I couldn't help thinking of Thomas Merton's revelation on that street corner in Louisville: "There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun." But a novel like this isn't a bad way to try. *Small Rain* is its own artistic testament to the cosmos

Greenwell's prose is enchanting—quiet, sensitive, gentle.

of consciousness that is every stranger we pass, every cashier at their register, every enemy we loathe.

In this way, too, *Small Rain*, in its very form—its prose, its pacing, its quiet attention to concrete particulars, what Gerard Manley Hopkins prized as *haecceity*—invites the reader to become contemplative. To retreat from the world into this novel is its own spiritual experience.

This story embodies the way *anachoresis*, withdrawal, becomes a condition for seeing ourselves and the world—and maybe even God—anew. But the price of that illumination is suffering. The mystical path is, unavoidably, an ordeal of purgation.

"Why should only suffering be a vale of soul-making?," the narrator asks. If *anachoresis* yields a new form of attention and even, ultimately, wonder, that is because such retreat peels back the accretions and comforts that blind us because they distract and absorb us. Purgation, in the mystical tradition, is not punitive; it is liberative. Here, paradoxically, is a loss that leads not to deficiency but to an awareness of abundance. So it is not a question of whether we will suffer, but what we will do with our suffering. What can we receive in our loss?

Like St. John's *Dark Night* or St. Teresa's *Interior Castle*, *Small Rain* is, ultimately, a love story. Tuned to the frequency of care-full attention, the narrator begins to consider what feels like an Augustinian question: "Why do we love what we love, why does so much fail to move us, why does so much pass by us unloved?" The ultimate epiphany, the gift given to the patient who undergoes and suffers, is the realization that he is beloved. His partner, named simply L., is the sacramental conduit of this tender grace.

At home from the hospital, on the long road of recovery, the narrator considers "what sickness had shown me." He reflects: "Maybe it wasn't true that there were no arts of living, with L's hand in mine it seemed that maybe there were."

Small Rain might help one imagine an art of living, the art of living gratefully, letting oneself believe, at least in our best moments, that grace is everywhere.

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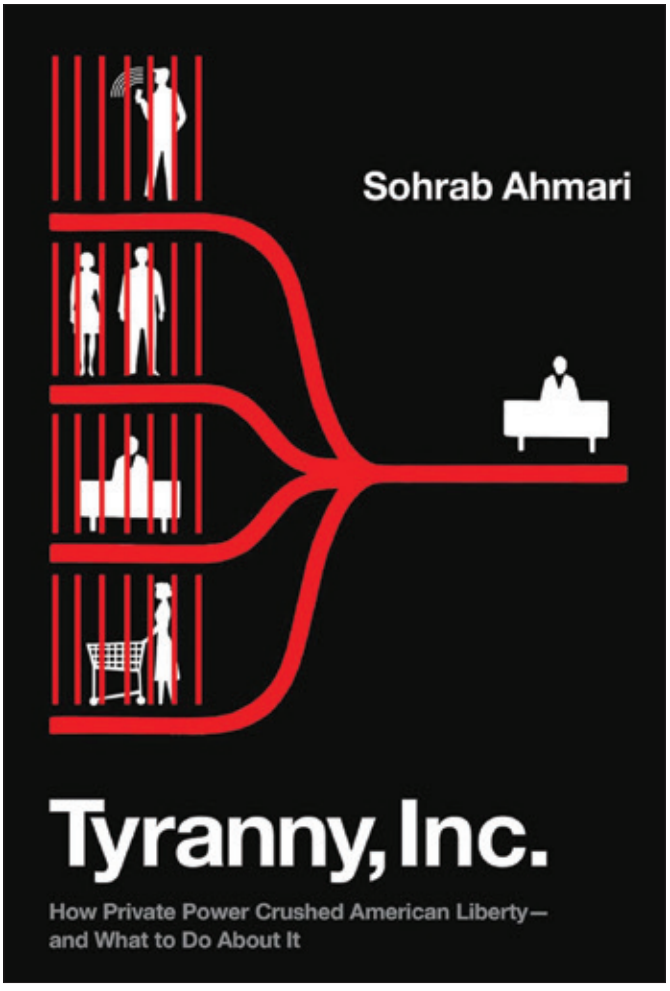


Forum Books / 288p $28

> ...a small number of very rich men have been able to lay upon the teeming masses of the laboring poor a yoke little better than that of slavery itself.
> —*Pope Leo XIII, "Rerum Novarum" (1891)*

American workers are in an increasingly precarious condition. Almost 80 percent of low-wage workers are offered no sick days by their employer. Over half of them have no retirement plan. Millions of employees cannot afford to save any money for retirement and will have to depend on a retirement income from Social Security, but it is virtually impossible to live on its meager benefits. Reports of an improving economy mean next to nothing to millions of workers and retirees. While *Tyranny, Inc* doesn't include such figures as these, Sohrab Ahmari supplies a framework and examples of what has shaped the desperate plight of a growing number of Americans.

What adds particular interest to his latest book is that Ahmari has a reputation as a conservative social critic with an extensive publishing and editing background. His support for Donald J. Trump has given way to a realization that supporting him is a dead end, as far as economic justice is concerned. As a Catholic convert, he now seems to share the values underlying the above quote from "Rerum Novarum," and indeed, he does make a passing reference to this encyclical.

Ahmari begins by pointing to examples of losses of freedoms that Americans abhor in other countries—including forcing workers to attend political speeches and secretly spying on their private emails or bank records—and then shows how those same coercive practices are commonplace in the United States. The difference is that while repressive governments elsewhere coerce their citizens and workers, "private power" sources do much the same in the United States.

In a forceful introduction, Ahmari emphasizes how "private tyranny precisely describes the world we inhabit today: a system that allows the asset-owning few to subject the asset-less many to pervasive coercions that, unlike governmental actions, can't be challenged in court or at the ballot box."

He begins with specific accounts of coercion before going on to investigate the forces responsible for them. Among the many instances: A third of America's 25 million restaurant and retail workers receive only a few days' notice of their coming week's work schedule. Such "maximizing control over labor" means "forcing workers to bear the cost of fluctuating customer demand."

The one-sidedness of employee contracts illustrates coercion from another angle. New employees in a "mid- to mega-sized firm" are given paperwork to sign that gives the "new boss a broad range of ways to surveil, coerce, or silence" them. Companies can demand the right to confiscate and inspect smartphones or personal laptops used for work, or to force workers to waive any right to take legal action against the company if injured, or to prevent them from making any disparaging remarks about the company after ending employment.

A host of such legal protections for employers have few counterbalances to protect employees—except the right to quit, which can be financially disastrous and so not a realistic option. Grievances that go into arbitration are weighted in favor of employers, especially after a 2011 Supreme Court opinion written by Justice Antonin Scalia in AT&T v. Concepcion, which Ahmari characterizes as concluding that the arbitration court "is the bosses' court."

Besides taking over corporations, hedge funds and private equity firms have been buying up public services, ranging from fire departments and ambulances to companies that provide school cafeteria workers and janitors, and even public pension funds. These now-privatized services

often try to reduce labor costs by cutting pay and discontinuing benefits, and then use employee pension funds to buy up more public companies to repeat the same process.

Bankruptcy laws have become a means of shielding private corporations from public claims. A prime example: In 2022, Johnson & Johnson avoided a huge payout to 34,000 victims of asbestos poisoning from its baby powder. In a legal maneuver widely known as "the Texas two-step," it created a second corporation into which it placed all its liabilities and which then filed for bankruptcy.

The Sackler family, the billionaire owners of Purdue Pharma, used bankruptcy to protect themselves after more than a half-million people died from addiction to the Oxycontin that the company had peddled as non-addictive. Bankruptcy becomes easier, Ahmari writes, when corporate "debtors" are able to indulge in "judge shopping," as did both Johnson & Johnson and the Sacklers, making the "corporate bankruptcy regime...an especially insidious component of our system of private tyranny."

A false faith in "market utopianism has given rise to...a society that is fast taking on the aspects of an economic *dystopia*," Ahmari goes on to argue in a surprising departure from his earlier conservative views. Market utopians extolled "perfect competition" even as monopolies were forming in the late 19th century.

Labor had little or no power against such formidable wealth, simply contributing to the "moral degeneracy" so deplored in "Rerum Novarum." The eventual success of unions that found support from President Franklin D. Roosevelt was subsequently reversed; today, only 10 percent of workers belong to unions—less than a third of the percentage of workers in the 1950s.

Drawing on the expertise of the political theorists David Harvey, Wendy Brown and others, Ahmari argues convincingly that under neoliberalism, the modern successor to laissez-faire economics, government has become "a mere appendage of market power." Along with its policy mix of "drastic privatization [and] deregulation," neoliberalism depends on "*depoliticization*...a systematic attempt to foreclose the very possibility of ordinary people using political power to get a fair shake out of the economy." Its ideology extends "economic values...into every dimension of human life." Neoliberalism abets private tyranny by "turning state and law into instruments for promoting market values everywhere."

Not surprisingly, Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher were neoliberals, but so too, Ahmari notes, were Bill Clinton and Tony Blair.

To battle this private tyranny necessitates taking back politics. Any substantial change from our present circumstances, Ahmari realizes, is especially difficult when even

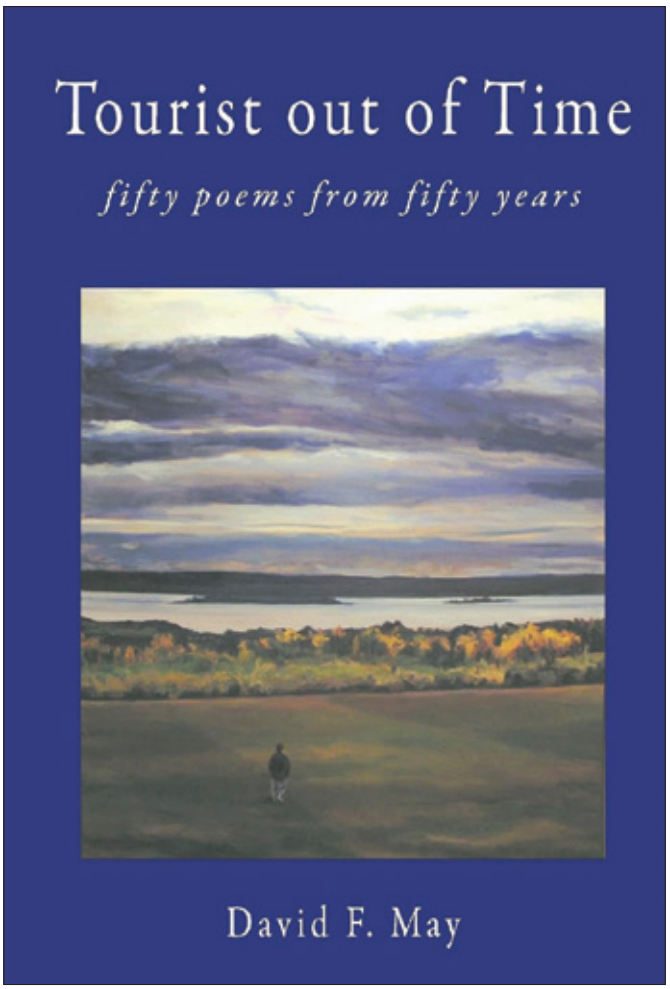
As a Catholic convert, Ahmari now seems to share the values of 'Rerum Novarum.'

progressives are satisfied with legal tweaks to the system. Tinkering won't do it. What is needed is support for the power of unionization as a means of "staunching the mindless deluge of workers' capital into private equity and hedge funds, which use it, in turn, to further erode the real economy and extend the privatization of public goods."

The declines of industrialization and labor unions, Ahmari writes, are not inevitable; they are the result of "a narrow elite [making] choices in favor of its own interests." But the Taft-Hartley Act, employer-friendly courts and misleadingly labeled right-to-work laws have made unionizing difficult in today's political and legal climate.

Ahmari argues that private tyranny has created a "political crisis and requires a political solution." But overturning such wealth and power will take some doing.

Jerome Donnelly *is a retired University of Central Florida English professor. He served several terms as a city commissioner in Winter Park, Fla.*



Madonna House / 128p $19.95

The results of any search for tourist destinations will likely include lists that offer beauty, culture and attractions for a top-tier vacation. Tourists, after all, travel for pleasure, usually in a foreign place, to experience living in a different locale. A tourist who is out of time, though, approaches the end of his trip and must return home soon.

This is how the Rev. David May describes himself through his poems, choosing this description—a tourist out of time—for the title of his collection. Containing 50 poems that span 50 years, May's collection mines the moments and memories of his time as a member of the Madonna House apostolate and what he saw, did and experienced as a tourist seeking more than simple attractions.

Before reading May's poems, it is necessary to know about the "backdrop" of his poetry, which he describes as the liturgy, nature's seasons and community life as a member of the Madonna House Apostolate. Being a member of this apostolate is the way May has lived, or the path he has walked, since he entered in 1974. A Catholic community of laymen, laywomen and priests who live out promises of poverty, chastity and obedience, its members seek to live a "hidden life" like that of the Holy Family of Nazareth.

Servant of God Catherine de Hueck Doherty (1896-1985), the community's founder, established the "Little Mandate" that guides members of Madonna House, entreating members to "Love, never counting the cost" and to "Be hidden." De Hueck Doherty was raised Orthodox in Russia, married as a teenager, worked as a nurse during the First World War and then was exiled after the Communist revolution of 1917. In 1919 she was received into the Roman Catholic Church.

She became a mother after she and her husband fled to Toronto, but the emotionally abusive marriage was later annulled. At this point, de Hueck Doherty felt a deeper call to live the Gospel more radically, which she did first in Toronto's slums, then in an interracial apostolate in Harlem. Eventually, in 1955, she and her second husband, Eddie Doherty, moved to Combermere, Ontario, where Madonna House (as it is still known today) began.

No matter where she was, she attracted others who wanted to emulate her in living a more radical form of the Gospel. David May was one of those people who joined Catherine and Eddie in Combermere. After his first visit to Madonna House in 1972, May later returned to become a full member.

His collection of poems traces the early days of his life as a poet and seeker. In his preface to the book, May says that "before I ever wrote my first poem I was already a poet by nature." He adds that "writing [poetry] has become a means of coming home not only to God but to myself." The preface also explains that, for some, a spiritual autobiography like St. Thérèse of Lisieux's *Story of a Soul*, or a novel like Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, or a journal or another form of artwork might be the way a person tries to express how the hand of God has guided their lives; for May, writing poetry is his attempt at this.

The collection starts with two early poems from May's high school days. The next section follows the "inward journey" of May's first years at Madonna House, working as a cheesemaker on the community farm. His first stop as a tourist, then, was to learn how to be away from home and the comfort of his previous life. In the poem "Jesus in Nazareth" from this section, he observes, "Nazareth affords so few distractions.[...] We falter here, fail, strain, collapse." He must become littler, like a child, he sees. As with Dante, the first step must be a descent, in a sense.

During these years, May began to hear a call to the priesthood, and was ordained in 1981. While in seminary, he served in Madonna House communities in the Canadian province of Alberta and in Arizona. Continuing his journey as a tourist and seeker, his poems from this time

present what he saw, especially in the poor he was serving.

One poem, "To the Morning Star," is directed to the Virgin Mary, imploring her as a mother to help her children struggling with addiction or difficult home lives. The poem's middle section shifts its focus from specific stories of despair to statements: "We cannot give hope but only hope./ We cannot give love but only love./ We cannot give faith but only believe." Then, turning toward Mary and including himself as one in need, the speaker begs: "Behold your children journeying still./ Pray for us at the crucial hour./ Mother, mantle us till we reach home." This recognition of one's own poverty persists in the poems throughout the rest of the collection.

Dealing with burnout after 15 years of priesthood, May was sent to the community's mission in England. In the poem "English Night," there is a sense of surrender and admission of poverty. The speaker says to God, "No more resolutions, Lord" and says he won't even offer his heart because he has seen it for what it is. All that he has left is "a cry now/ rising from parched places." What he has seen and experienced during these years leads him to seek refuge in Christ's wounds.

In a poem titled "The Open Wound," this is even more poignantly expressed. The speaker claims:

I keep to my duties still,
But underneath I am savage and naked,
Like a man torn to shreds on a beam,
Every fiber soaked crimson,
His life given freely to every taker
So great the thirst for union.

Just a few pages later (though two years later, according to the dates provided with each poem), this desire to love and to give oneself away is not less urgent but embraces a wider view. In "The Price of Sparrows," the speaker "walk[s] with Christ down country lanes" and "hike[s] with Christ in the woods," wondering about who will receive the "baby sparrows" of the next generation. He heads home as evening comes on, as "Dusky arms hold [him] now." No longer seeking to be embraced, he is the one offering embrace to others.

Yet the poems, like the spiritual life, do not settle for easy answers and recognize the seasons of desolation and consolation that are natural and necessary. A more recent poem from 2018, "Bankrupt," for example, asks, "How go deeper unless you deepen me?/ How give greater unless you greater be?/ How be poured out, new wine perpetually/ If, Eternal Love, you be not drink for me?" Again, the poems present humility and poverty that recognize the need for God so that God can "pour out" through individuals to be bread for the world.

And yet, "Daily Bread," one of the collection's final poems, meditates on lines from the Our Father and implores:

Why is your bread so subtle, so simple and so light?
For such a hunger as we bear, plaguing us without end,
Like animals we cry out in fierce desperation,
And you give us dissolving wafers and a few token
drops to drink....

The soul's hunger does not go away, even with age and experience. May has learned this from his years of "so few distractions" in the Nazareth life of Madonna House.

The tourist in these poems acutely feels that hunger and is still seeking—for what will get him through each day in a foreign land, but most of all to return home. These poems of longing, of prayer and devotion, might remind us of Job or the Psalms of David. More than that, they remind us that we are all travelers here, seeking home. And as May writes in one of his "Unclaimed Verses," which were written during years of intense work: "Poetry is no escape,/ But magnifies the real—/ Mercy for the blind."

May's poems certainly magnify the cry of every seeking soul—for home and for the Father.

Mary Grace Mangano *is a writer and educator from New Jersey. Her writing and poetry have appeared in Fare Forward, Church Life Journal, The Windhover and Ekstasis and other publications.*

An Advent Warning: Be Vigilant and Perceptive

The readings for this Advent, the beginning of year C in the church's lectionary cycle, invite us to become a people vigilant and perceptive.

One of the main prophetic books sounds the alarm on the First Sunday of Advent. Judah and Jerusalem will be safe, says Jeremiah, and these cities will cry out, "The Lord our justice" (Jer 33:16). The epithet takes on a rather heavy meaning for us this year as so many different families and tribes from the Middle East cry out for a kind of justice that will usher in peace within their war-torn communities. The church always intensifies its prayers in this season of peace, and today we pray ardently for it in the land where the Holy Family once lived and walked.

The First Sunday of Advent also provides some needed words of encouragement: "Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy.... Be vigilant at all times and pray that you have the strength" (Lk 21:34-36). Discernment does take a certain amount of effort in order to perceive in daily life where God's invitation to live in peace is speaking today.

St. Paul continues this theme on the Second Sunday of Advent. "This is my prayer," says Paul, "that your love may increase more and more in knowledge and every kind of perception, to discern what is of value" (Phil 1:9-10). During this season of expectation, is there anything of more value than the perception of God in our midst? The answer depends on who Jesus represents for our church and world. For the church, Jesus is the one who comes to help us discern the implications of the words from the Fourth Sunday in Advent: "Behold, I come to do your will, O God" (Heb 10:9). For the world, the words of the minor prophet help us to focus our perception of Jesus: "He shall be peace" (Mi 5:4). Jesus shall establish peace because he is peace.

The child of peace is the one the readings ask us to long for in every corner of struggle. A discerning prayer for light is needed in every place of violence. So let us pray: "O God, restore us; light up your face and we shall be saved" (Ps 80:4).

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT (C), DEC. 1, 2024
Be vigilant for justice

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT (C), DEC. 8, 2024
Discern what is of value

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT (C), DEC. 15, 2024
A song of praise to a people God loves

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT (C), DEC. 22, 2024
A divine light to assist our perception

FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY OF JESUS, MARY AND JOSEPH, DEC. 29, 2024
Whatever you do, give thanks to God through Jesus

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

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BEHOLD THE HANDMAID

By Joe Hoover

Even though the Annunciation happened in March around St. Patrick's Day the church reads it at Mass in December for the Immaculate Conception and Our Lady of Guadalupe and then once more at Advent so you hear it three times, if you go to Mass, you hear the near-perfect opening line in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph of the house of David and the virgin's name was Mary the lovely flow and rhythm and length of it and the kicker *the virgin's name was Mary* which placed at the end in appropriate Strunk and White fashion signifies that Mary is a meaningful term in the sentence and in what follows namely the fiat: *behold I am the handmaid of the Lord let it be done unto me according to thy word* ie: thy will be done—and the birth of Christ that came from the fiat and all the Christians that came from the Christ who came from the fiat the Christians who for the past 2,000 years day and night have been doing nothing but washing each other's feet in theory at least

So point being do go to any one of the three December Annunciation reading Masses or maybe even all three I mean why not and then wonder if maybe the angel Gabriel isn't being sent into your world right now and how the Mary of you has a chance to say yes to what Gabriel is proposing and that proposal may be simply to be a handmaid of, who knows, not getting galactically annoyed at the way an infant cries at Mass *at the very moment the priest reading the Gospel utters "I am the handmaid"* be the handmaid of that not only because Gabriel asked but because it is just an awful awful thing to be irritated at a kid who cries at Mass because I mean his parents even had the Catholicism in them enough to bring their potentially wailing kid to the manger known as Mass so cut them some slack that's a-not-bad gift to give the world being one degree less irritated during the reading of the Annunciation whether that happens at one of the three times in December or in March after St. Patrick's day or whenever because the Lord loves the hidden fiats as much as the famous ones.

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

Opening Doors

Advent and the plight of refugees

By Kelly Ryan

When my tween-age children light our Advent wreath candles, we are all focused on counting the days until Christmas. We await Christ's birth, and we anticipate his second coming. As Christians, we believe his return is certain. But for refugees, there is no certainty about the future, and often little hope.

When Pedro Arrupe, S.J., founded Jesuit Refugee Service in 1980, there were approximately 10 million forcibly displaced people in the world. Today, there are 120 million. These numbers have risen at a worrying pace.

Father Arrupe created J.R.S. in the wake of the Vietnam War and the Indochinese refugee crisis. At that time, the international community created the Orderly Departure Program, which permitted those who needed protection to seek refuge in other countries, including the United States. Vietnamese, Cambodian and Lao people got in rickety boats to make their way on the open seas toward a new life; fortunately, many were resettled within a few years. But today, the average time a refugee waits in a camp to experience one of the three long-term solutions (local integration, resettlement or safe return to their country) is *17 years*.

I joined Jesuit Refugee Service on May 1 of this year, and I soon became aware of new challenges that require our urgent attention. First, in June, the Biden administration made radical changes to the asylum system. The system does need major reform, including more asylum officers and immigration judges. But the actions of the Biden administration contravened U.S. and international laws. It instituted an approach that effectively shuts our doors to asylum seekers. Turning families away is harsh and wrong, just as it was wrong that Mary and Joseph were turned away from the inn and relegated to a manger.

Then, in July, we learned that humanitarian organizations could face significant reductions in U.S. government funding. These cuts threaten our work in some of the most troubled places in the world. For example, Sudan faces the largest displacement crisis worldwide, with about 17 million people internally displaced or taking refuge in neighboring countries. Funding cuts jeopardize our work in Ecuador, too, which for decades has been a destination for those forced to leave Colombia and Venezuela but is now seeing gang activity compromise its ability to safely host refugees.

And at the end of September came the attacks on Lebanon. Until then, J.R.S. Lebanon primarily served refugees from Syria, but with the new violence, our team moved into emergency response, helping Sri Lankan, Filipino and other migrants trapped by the lethal bombings, as well as internally displaced Lebanese.

With needs only growing, J.R.S. is called to strengthen our ability to love and serve others. In the United States, that means growing our Migrant Accompaniment Network so we can support those who have been granted asylum here and those waiting to make their asylum claims. These migrants need our protection, support and friendship. Again, I think of Mary and Joseph preparing for the birth of Jesus, waiting in anticipation and knocking on closed doors.

J.R.S. is known for going where others don't and staying after others have left. Father Arrupe's vision, which was rooted in *accompaniment, localization* and *reconciliation,* has been the guidestar. In his beautiful recent encyclical on the Sacred Heart, Pope Francis calls us in the same manner: May the Lord "continue to pour forth the streams of living water that can heal the hurt we have caused, strengthen our ability to love and serve others, and inspire us to journey together towards a just, solidary and fraternal world" ("He Loved Us" ["Dilexit Nos"], No. 220).

Around the globe, Jesuit Refugee Service opens doors and gives welcome. Dan Corrou, S.J., our regional director in the Middle East and North Africa, says migrants in need are singing "Here I Am, Lord," and comments, "The least we can do is stand with them."

As I prepare for the season of Advent with my own family, I think of the refugees I have met and worked with here in the United States and around the globe and know our work cannot wait. We are called to open our hearts and our doors.

Kelly Ryan *is president of Jesuit Refugee Service/USA and has more than 30 years' experience in refugee and asylum law, migration management, and human rights law and policy.*

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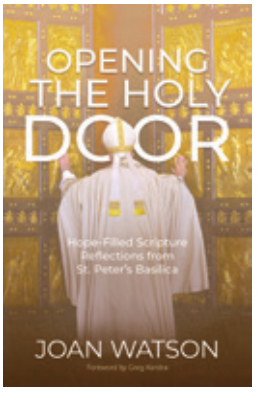

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