

America

FEBRUARY 2025

THE JESUIT REVIEW OF FAITH AND CULTURE

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This year's St. John Henry Newman lecturer is Dr. Abigail Favale of the McGrath Center at the University of Notre Dame. Favale's is a thoroughly 21st-century conversion, a compelling account of recovering "the startling beauty" of an ancient faith after a decade of doubt.

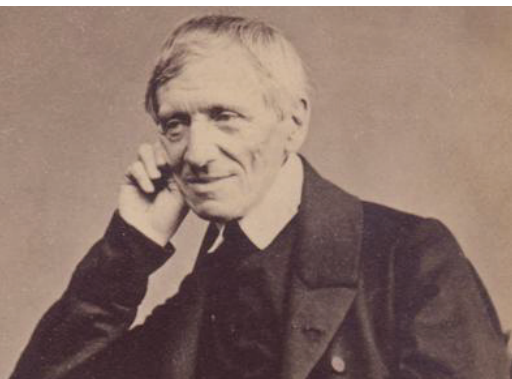
As Dr. Favale, a scholar of theology and literature, writes, "There are events in life that leave you changed forever, right down to the very roots and heart of your being, because they go 'into the deep.'"



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The Lofty Vocation of Citizenship

Last October, I gave two talks in the days just before the presidential election, weaving together themes from an essay I had written earlier on polarization and communion with Pope Francis' call for a "better kind of politics" in his 2020 encyclical, "Fratelli Tutti."

During those talks, I commented that Francis' description of politics as "a lofty vocation and one of the highest forms of charity, inasmuch as it seeks the common good" would be considered almost catastrophically stupid from the standpoint of political tactics. He calls for politicians to "be the first to make the sacrifices that foster encounter" and to "be ready to listen to other points of view." To no one's surprise, neither major presidential nominee took Pope Francis' advice (or mine), which I suppose can be construed as agreement that however beautiful such a vision of politics might be, it seems unlikely to win elections.

While I was not thinking of former President Jimmy Carter in giving those talks, as I am writing this column, the nation is preparing to lay him to rest. He is probably the best example in contemporary American history of how attempting to practice virtue in politics may be an obstacle to electoral success. But there are far more important lessons to be drawn from his practice of the "lofty vocation of politics," an endeavor that lasted far beyond his four years in the White House.

In thinking about Mr. Carter's life, I have also been remembering the cover of the June 11, 2018, print issue of *America*, which featured images of George W. Bush, Barack Obama and Donald Trump under the headline "Pay Less Attention to These Men," pointing to an article by Nathan

Schneider that argued for ending the "cult of the presidency."

It is a commonplace observation that Mr. Carter's post-presidential career was more successful than his single presidential term. From building houses with Habitat for Humanity to monitoring elections around the world to leading a remarkably successful campaign to eradicate guinea worm disease, he remained devoted to the common good long past the end of his career as a politician. One thing consistent across those various efforts was that they were not designed to put Mr. Carter front and center. He allowed us to pay less attention to him and more attention to the problems being solved—and to the people serving and being served in those efforts.

So rather than saying that he was more successful after his presidency than during it, it would be more accurate to say that Mr. Carter's identity as a public servant and as a citizen was both larger and more significant than his role as president. His embrace of the lofty vocation of politics and service to the common good was not limited to holding political office, and the whole world is better off because of it.

There are other lessons to be drawn from Mr. Carter's life. After his time in Washington, D.C., he returned to Plains, Ga., where he was born, and lived there for the rest of his life with his wife, Rosalynn. As American life becomes geographically "sorted" along ideological lines between red and blue states, his rootedness in and dedication to a specific local community offer an example to the political and cultural elite, many of whom move away from their hometowns and never look back.

Mr. Carter also lived a life of profound discipleship. His humanitarian service, of course, was animated by

his deep Christian faith, and that faith was sustained by his membership at Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, where he famously taught Sunday school for decades. As president, he opened his inaugural address by quoting from Scripture: "He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God" (Mi 6:8). At the end of that address, in listing his hopes for what people might say about the United States after his presidency, he started with the hope "that we had remembered the words of Micah and renewed our search for humility, mercy and justice."

A Jesuit friend of mine recently told me that when he prayed with the "Call of the King" meditation, in which St. Ignatius recommends that a retreatant reflect on a virtuous earthly king in order to prepare to respond to the call of Christ the king, Jimmy Carter was one of those "earthly kings" who helped him hear God's call to justice and service.

As a nation, we need to rekindle Mr. Carter's hope for remembrance of the words of Micah and renewal of our search for humility, mercy and justice. Perhaps one aid to doing so is to learn from his example that our lofty political vocations as citizens can be even more significant than the office of the presidency.

Sam Sawyer, S.J.



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*Dear Boomers: Don't sit out the next
four years*

Above: Visitors walk through the
Holy Door of the Basilica of St. Mary
Major in Rome on Jan. 1, 2025, after
its ceremonial opening.

Cover: America/iStock

A pro-life approach that's more than simply outlawing abortion

“The pro-life movement should create a society in which it is easier to choose life,” Terence Sweeney wrote on Oct. 30, a few days before the 2024 election, at americamagazine.org. He argued for a pro-life approach that goes beyond simply outlawing abortion and appealed to Catholic social teaching, calling for more robust governmental support for families and mothers: “Abortion should never feel required if a society truly acts like women and babies matter.... Our laws and social policies should not only restrain people from abortion but should lead people to choose life. Focusing on the latter will make the former possible.” **America’s** readers weighed in with a series of thoughtful comments.

Asking God to fix something that we haven’t been able to fix ourselves—for instance, “grant us peace”—is rarely, if ever, accompanied by a suggested methodology intended to help God to get started on the assignment. In fact, to do so would be irrational. But asking a state legislature to fix something—for instance, “grant us an end to abortion”—without proposing a model statute, vetted and coordinated with all the affected and interested, seems equally irrational.

Charles Erlinger

People of life scored a big victory with the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. People of good will rejoice that killing children is being limited for the first time in 50 years. To expect a sea change in public opinion overnight is wishful thinking. When slavery was abolished in 1865, it took over 100 years to bring about true equality. The same is true in war-torn countries, which often take a generation to recover from post-traumatic stress disorder.

The pro-life movement is adjusting to a brand-new reality: Life is finally being protected in many states (sadly, not all). There is a lot of work to do—a re-orientation of pro-life efforts. People should remember that in ballot initiatives, there is usually a 3-to-1 outspending by the pro-abortion side versus the pro-life side. Money makes all the difference in politics. Give this issue some time, and people will come around. In fact, most Americans are already against abortion after viability, including late-term abortions.

Nick McCauley

Dignifying abortion as a right in law is the final rejection of Catholic teaching on human sexuality. Poverty has always been with us. Choosing solutions outside of God’s plan for human flourishing cannot lead to a better world.

Maureen O’Riordan Lundy

I am 68 and grew up in Detroit. I remember when my state representative, state senator and congressional representative were all pro-life Democrats who were also staunchly pro-civil rights, pro-labor and favored more aid to the poor.

Roughly a third of all Democrats in Congress were pro-life at that time. There is nothing intrinsic to the idea that one has to choose between caring for vulnerable human life before birth or after birth. Our current political situation is the result of cold political manipulation.

Allan Ranusch

Pro-life groups and the Catholic Church should have started with the demand side of abortion, not the legal side. Starting with the legal side led to more polarization. I suggested to my bishop at the time that we have meetings together with pro-choice groups to work on the demand side. He said that was a nice idea. I asked my pastor if we could put in the bulletin every week: “Are you pregnant and need help with rent or utilities? We will help you.” He said we couldn’t afford it.

The pro-life groups should start working with the social justice groups. Why do some dioceses have these as separate offices? Why can’t we get the pro-life people to come to a meeting on the environment or the death penalty? In return, the social justice people need to figure out how to collaborate with the pro-life people. Working on helping women would be wonderful.

Rose Tresp

One proactive approach would be for parishes to create child care programs with “sliding scale” costs, so that mothers could return to work when ready, knowing their children were in a safe place. If not affordable for one parish, two to three (or as many as necessary) could fund the facility. The Knights of Columbus could be champion fundraisers. Carrots are often better than sticks in attaining desired goals.

Tim Gust

It’s easy. Huge tax breaks for companies that double the salaries of pregnant women who give birth and for working mothers.

Andrea Campana



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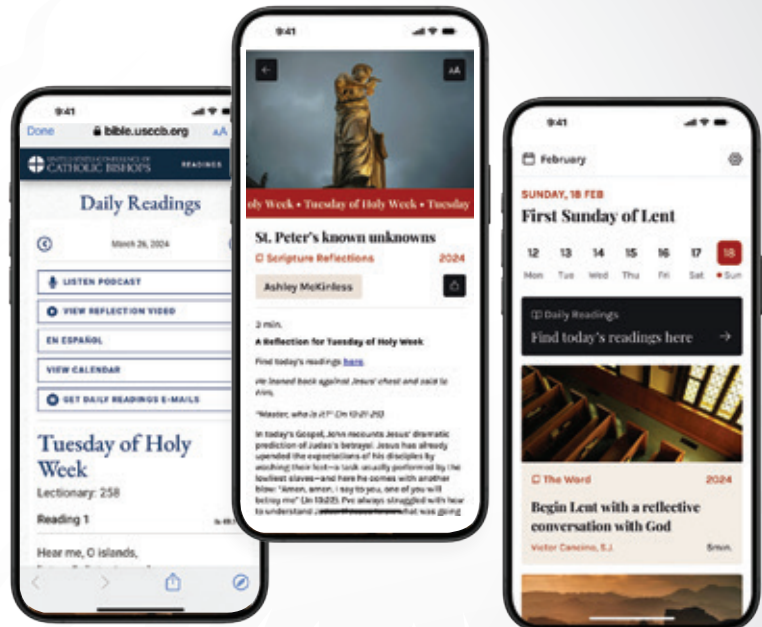


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A JESUIT MINISTRY

Hopes Ancient and New

“May the light of Christian hope illumine every man and woman, as a message of God’s love addressed to all—and may the Church bear faithful witness to this message in every part of the world.” Pope Francis spoke these words on Christmas Eve 2024, opening the Holy Door of St. Peter’s Basilica and inaugurating the 2025 Jubilee of Hope.

The Jubilee Year’s theme continues a focus on hope that Pope Francis has emphasized throughout his papacy but with increasing force since the Covid-19 pandemic. We were all forced by the pandemic, he wrote in 2022, to “experience firsthand not only the tragedy of dying alone, but also the uncertainty and fleetingness of existence” in ways that have “changed our very way of life.”

That plague may no longer be an overwhelming presence, but the realities with which we were confronted starkly remain. What is the Christian response to a world of ill omens and uncertainty? Not the naïve optimism of a Pollyanna, but also not the glum defeatism that can characterize much of the contemporary world’s political and social discourse.

A new year offers us all a chance to revisit our shared vision of hope, to seek it where it can be found and to draw strength from its presence. “Hope does not disappoint,” begins Pope Francis’ bull of indiction for the Jubilee Year, drawing on Rom 5:5. “*Spes Non Confundit*” is not just a *ferrovino* exhorting the faithful to greater fidelity or courage, but also a practical selection of particular acts and initiatives that can help us answer two questions: Where can that hope be found? How and where can we draw strength from it and share it with others?

A primary exhortation of “*Spes*

Non Confundit” might sound at first as if it came from the pen of Iggy Pop rather than Pope Francis: We should have *enthusiasm for life*. This is not a goad toward greater consumerism, of course. In fact, it is a specific condemnation of consumerism as an escape from facing real issues. Rather, enthusiasm for life entails a willingness to bring new life into the world, something that declining birth rates and the rise of anti-natalism indicate is more and more rare in the developed world.

The document identifies fear of the future, a lack of job security, the disappearance of social safety nets and the widespread embrace of a profit-first economic model as other culprits. Instead, can we build a just economy and sustainable communities, abandoning “the quest for profit rather than concern for relationships”? Can we embrace children, even when inconvenient, as God’s promise of a brighter future?

As enthusiasm for life is enkindled, Francis calls us to share it with those suffering hardships. This is more than a question of how we choose to act charitably in our own lives; it is also a question of how we orient our entire society. As our elected officials debate how and where to spend tax dollars and allocate resources, it is imperative that we not privilege the most favored issues—military expenditures, tax cuts, corporate subsidies and more—over those that have few cheerleaders.

These less popular initiatives would include aid to the unemployed or unhoused, assistance for the sick and elderly, funding for underprivileged students, the forgiveness of debts—and not just student debts—that are an essential part of any jubilee. The recipients of such care do not have four-star generals or billionaire mo-

guls trumpeting their cause, but they are, as Pope Francis notes, in dire need of hope—and of the care of a society that believes in their future.

So, too, we hear about joblessness and anomie among our young people; how can they look forward to the security that their parents and grandparents enjoyed in an economy that offered many routes to prosperity rather than rewarding the richest among us? We need to give them reasons for hope, too.

Another group suffering hardships is often made into scapegoats for our nation’s ills these days: migrants. In the aftermath of our presidential election, can we now reach out our hands to those who are literally on physical pilgrimages inspired by hope? The Trump administration’s plans for mass deportation depict migrants as a threat to American prosperity and values, but Francis calls on us “to defend the rights of those who are most vulnerable, opening wide its doors to welcome them, lest anyone ever be robbed of the hope of a better future.” We need to remember not only that migrants are equal to us in dignity, but that the United States itself has been built by people willing to undertake risky journeys in hope of better lives for themselves and their families.

Migrants in our time are not always fleeing war or poverty. Many now face the reality of climate displacement, driven from their homes by environments that have been drastically altered by climate change. Pope Francis reminds us “the goods of the earth are not destined for a privileged few, but for everyone”—including those in the Global South who bear the brunt of environmental exploitation while reaping few of its rewards.

Finally, we must consider a marginalized group that has few advocates

at any time: those behind bars. And yet caring for them—in addition to being a Gospel mandate—is also an indication of a society’s orientation toward the future or the past. Do we truly believe in rehabilitation, in second chances, in restorative justice? Or do we simply want to lock away (or execute) our prisoners? Our “land of the free” leads the world both in per capita incarceration rates and in total number of people behind bars. How can a country with hope for the future give up on these people so easily?

Such questions should be near the hearts of all who seek to “fan the flame of hope” during this jubilee year. Jubilee years are spiritual journeys, or pilgrimages. A people on pilgrimage is a people that takes what it needs for the journey, aware that the road is long and arduous but the goal is worthwhile. A pilgrim is one who lends a hand to a flagging fellow traveler, who shares from his or her abundance and who relies on others in times of need. A pilgrim is patient. A pilgrim is appreciative of the world through which he or she journeys. And, of course, a pilgrim’s eyes are focused not on where the journey began, but where it will end—itsself an essential component of hope.

“We must fan the flame of hope that has been given us and help everyone,” Pope Francis wrote in 2022, “to gain new strength and certainty by looking to the future with an open spirit, a trusting heart and a farsighted vision.”

Christians have been a people of hope from the very beginning: The Gospel story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus in the days after Jesus’ crucifixion is perhaps the first reminder of that Easter theme. “We had hoped,” the two travelers say to a fellow pilgrim, one who turns out to be the confirmation of that hope. Two millennia later, we are called to remain a people of hope, cooperating in God’s building of the kingdom and seeing the world charged with God’s grandeur and infused with new possibilities.

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How to help the homelessness: Take time to listen to them

I've been in the "homelessness business" for 40 years. This includes nine months of what I call "hardcore time" on the street, but I have spent most of the rest of the time living or working in shelters. Other than being employed in security, working with the homeless is the only job I've ever known.

That surprises people sometimes. They like to think that there's a nice, thick line separating "homeless" and "employed." There isn't. A basic misperception about homeless folks is that they are lazy, or that they are drug addicts. But in my 40 years being homeless and working with the unhoused, I have learned that there is no one major reason why people become homeless.

I have met homeless people who had college degrees and careers and all that. Often they had bad luck, or made a bad decision somewhere, or lost a family member and couldn't cope. Or they simply couldn't pay their rent and got tossed out of their living space. The challenge when you're working with the homeless is how to peel back the layers of that particular onion, so to speak, without bruising it.

In my case, alcohol dependency and some personal trauma first led me to homelessness. In 2023, I moved to Louisville after a couple of decades in Atlanta. I'd lost my job, my health was poor, and I wanted to live near family. When I got there, I went to a place for the homeless and they sent me to Ozanam Inn Men's Shelter, run by the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.

It was the first shelter I'd ever stayed in that had no curfew. You could come and go, and you'd still have a bed if you returned within 24 hours, no questions asked—as long as you were in some sober and sensible condition. Let me tell you, being treated as a person who has the freedom

to take responsibility for himself is a very powerful thing.

Giving people responsibility isn't the same as indifference, either. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul actually listens to the people they serve better than any other organization I've been involved with. They try their best to get to know the individual person and understand their struggles—again, to peel back the layers of the onion.

You say you want to help the homeless? Here's a crazy thought: Why don't you ask somebody who's homeless what they want, and listen to what they have to say? What a concept, right? But paternalism seems to be the default approach in interactions with folks who are homeless. Plenty of times I've had people who don't even know me tell me what I need or why I'm homeless. That, I think, is part of the problem.

Homeless people sometimes like to blame others for their mistakes, which is a temptation for anybody. But at some point you have to look in the mirror and say, "Well, maybe I'm the person who did that." Some people figure that out. Others spend their entire life playing the blame game. It takes a lot of motivation and hard work to get out of homelessness.

So, the no-curfew thing, combined with really being listened to—those were big for me. I was also able to take advantage of the case management and mental health services offered at the Ozanam Inn Men's Shelter. I got counseling for my post-traumatic stress disorder, which helped a lot.

I wasn't "resident of the year" at the shelter. I had my own problems like everybody else. But they worked with me within the framework of what I gave them. It wasn't long before the Society of St. Vincent de Paul invited me onto their program committee and

advisory board. I was at Ozanam Inn for nine months before moving into a place of my own, where I live today.

Scripture tells us that "when much is given, much is required." And serving on the board of directors at St. Vincent de Paul Louisville is a great honor because I want to be part of the solution—to help folks who are in the shoes I have worn myself. Some people exit homelessness and resolve never to darken the doors of a shelter again. Then there are people who are grateful and feel obligated to give back.

You've heard the saying "pull yourself up by your own bootstraps." For homeless folks, the problem with that theory is there aren't enough straps. You need help to make it—and most people who are homeless suffer from what the homelessness advocate Kevin F. Adler calls "relational poverty." They don't have family or friends. They're starving for relationships. Housing is a good first step, but they need to build stable relationships with people who care about them.

We do a terrible disservice to people in this country when we stigmatize and criminalize people who are homeless or have issues with mental health or addiction. When you meet me, I want you to see me as Bill Smith, from the board of directors of St. Vincent de Paul Louisville. Not with the stigma of "homeless man" or "alcoholic." We have to normalize the conversation around homelessness, to destigmatize it before we can treat it. I want you to know my name and define me by my character, not by my situation.

Bill Smith is a former client at the Ozanam Inn Men's Emergency Shelter, run by St. Vincent de Paul Louisville in Louisville, Ky. He now serves on its board of directors.



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From Catholic stronghold to 'New Age' haven

Quebec's remarkable religious transformation

By Miriane Demers-Lemay

In the mid-1990s, Quebec was shaken by tragic events centered around the Order of the Solar Temple, a group that blended New Age spirituality and survivalism. The group's leaders promised a spiritual enlightenment that would be dispensed off-planet on the star Sirius for survivors of a global apocalypse on Earth, but believers were told they had to begin that journey through death. The cult's teaching resulted in suicides and mass murders that in the end claimed 74 lives in Quebec, Switzerland and France.

In 2011, Quebecers were again shocked to discover that a young mother had died after being “cooked,” encased in plastic wrap and soil, as part of a so-called therapy promoted by a New Age guru.

While no similar high-profile deaths have been reported in Quebec since then, the province has played host to a number of cults and alternative religions over the years, from the Ant Hill Kids, the cruelly abused followers of Roch Thériault (known as Moïse) to the U.F.O. believers of the Raelian Church.

Other sects that have found a physical and civic space in Quebec have been the Jewish ultrafundamentalist followers of Lev Tahor; Aumists, a syncretic sect based in Hinduism, founded in France; the Society of Saint Pius X, a Catholic schismatic fraternity, founded in Switzerland; and, from the United States, the Children of God movement and the Church of Scientology.

Sociologists of religion say the emergence of new religious movements is a common phenomenon in the contemporary West, but it takes on a unique characteristic in Quebec, shaped by the province's distinctive history and sociocultural context.

A Rapid Shift

Just a few decades ago, the French-speaking-majority Canadian province was a stronghold of the Catholic faith, where the church “had absolute authority” and priests could even “instruct farmers to have more children,” according to Susan J. Palmer, a sociologist and scholar at Concordia University in Montreal.

The church's grip began to loosen during the 1960s amid widespread changes begun by the Second Vatican Council and the swift social changes encouraged by the



CNS photo/Gregory A. Sliemitz

Quiet Revolution in Quebec. That period of drastic transformation is comparable to the civil rights movement in the United States in terms of impact, but the changes set in motion by the Quiet Revolution focused mainly on secularization and modernization of society, as well as Quebec nationalism. This period also opened the door to international immigration, while a counterculture movement embraced Eastern philosophies.

“When the power of the church collapsed suddenly, it created a major culture shock,” said Ms. Palmer. “In the wake of the Catholic Church’s decline in Quebec, new religions rushed in opportunistically to fill the vacuum.”

It is difficult to estimate the number of people in Quebec who hold beliefs or engage in practices associated with new religious movements. Observers of the phenomenon, like the religious anthropologist Nicolas Boissières, acknowledge the imprecision of measurement tools like surveys of religious affiliation. But a decade-long study led by the anthropologist Deirdre Meintel,

documented in *La Pluralité Religieuse au Québec*, inventoried 230 religious and spiritual groups in Quebec.

The people of Quebec may no longer accept a dominant religion and no longer prefer Christian models of faith, said Megan Bédard, a researcher in popular culture at the Université du Québec à Montréal, but “clear spiritual needs” remain all the same. “It’s emblematic of our times. People create their own spirituality from what resonates with them, whether it’s Wicca, druidism or something else,” she said.

Years after the end of the Quiet Revolution, contemporary Catholic parishes and churches in Quebec, once at the heart of community and civic life, face closure, demolition or transformation into community spaces like libraries, gyms, dairies and distilleries. In rural Quebec, crosses and shrines and statues of the Virgin Mary remain standing, but they act merely as reminders of the church’s former influence on education, health, politics and daily life.

As Quebecers distanced themselves from the church, sociologists report, organized religion came to be seen as a symbol of oppression. Religion became a taboo subject in public spaces.

A “social invisibility” emerged around religion, ac-

ording to Ms. Meintel, as many Quebecers came to avoid discussing their faith. A growing civic antipathy toward displays of religiosity was an accompanying phenomenon that has continued for years.

In 2019 the Quebec provincial government passed the Act Respecting the Laicity of the State, which prohibits the wearing of religious symbols and clothing by public service employees, including schoolteachers. The law limits displays of crosses, Stars of David and Sikh and Muslim clothing by civic employees while performing their duties, but it does not target alternative spiritualities, often perceived as outside the structures of traditional religions.

A New Religious Landscape

In urban centers like Montreal, small churches, evangelical groups and spiritual wellness centers pop up in humble, often inconspicuous locations. But Quebec’s rural communities offer privacy and isolated gathering places for non-mainstream expressions of faith—like druids, Wiccans and New Age practitioners.

The village of Rawdon in the Lanaudière region may have only 10,000 residents, but the small community hosts nearly 60 religious groups, including Orthodox Christian and Mennonite churches, a Baha’i community—even a Catholic survivalist group. The everyday tally of such groups is not stable, however, according to cult studies. Their numbers are believed to be constantly changing, given their informal nature, rapid birth and disappearance, and the speed at which schisms arise within such groups.

Some new religious movements in Quebec maintain elements of traditional Catholic ideology. Among them are the Apostles of Infinite Love, which includes a self-proclaimed founding pope who perceives Vatican II as a “maelstrom of the great apostasy” and who calls his disciples to emulate the community life of Jesus and his apostles. Followers of the Mission of the Holy Spirit, meanwhile, believe in reincarnation, eugenics and the Hollow Earth Theory.

Other groups, distancing themselves from traditional Judeo-Christian values, develop syncretic beliefs that blend esoteric traditions, Eastern religions and pseudoscience. In Quebec, the New Age movement has gained significant popularity, combining elements like neopaganism, alternative healing and personal development as well as channeling, a supposed method of communication between humans and otherworldly entities.

“In the 1980s, there was a demand for exorcisms in Quebec,” according to Alain Bouchard, lecturer at Laval University’s Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies and coordinator of the Resource and Observation Center

for Religious Innovation. “There have been investigations into the presence of the New Age in Quebec. Many will associate these techniques with the devil, with turning people away from God’s message.”

For many, contemporary esoteric spiritual practices are tied to environmental concerns and sciences, according to Mr. Boissières, who has studied the province’s druidic community. “The druids of antiquity were scholars and judges, knowledgeable in astronomy, mathematics and medicine,” he said. “For many modern druids, spirituality is intertwined with rituals in nature.”

Most followers of the province’s new religious movements are not straying into potentially dangerous practices or expressions of new faiths that once generated disturbing headlines. They attend workshops or spiritual retreats, consult astrology or tarot content online, or buy products related to spiritual well-being, like New Age books. Serge Larivée, a professor at the University of Montreal and a researcher on human intelligence, in his book *Quand le Paranormal Manipule la Science*, reports that in some stores, works on paranormal phenomena represent more than half of all book sales.

In recent decades, distracted by other existential institutional challenges, the church has lost interest in confronting non-mainstream religious groups. “New religions have fallen down the priority list of the church,

which has been overwhelmed by scandals associated with pedophilia and residential schools,” Mr. Bouchard said. “It’s not merely a matter of the church losing members and trying to reclaim them,” he said. “It must rather address the broader issue of declining engagement within the population.”

Today, new forms of spirituality are thriving online, reaching new adherents in the Western world. A new generation coming of age in Quebec is embracing identities as feminist witches, foraging for medicinal herbs, reading tarot cards and studying their astrological charts. Many are also drawn to online communities where New Age ideas intersect with conspiracy theories, creating a new landscape of “conspirituality.”

Social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok are flooded with hashtags like #Witchtok and #Astrology, racking up millions of views. Popular tarot readers and spiritual influencers, like Emma Bossé, who has over 280,000 YouTube subscribers, have a greater following than many conventional Quebec media outlets.

While the quest for meaning remains central, the ways in which people fulfill their spiritual needs are evolving once again at a rapid pace.

—
Miriane Demers-Lemay reports from Istanbul and Quebec City.

A neo-missionary church in Quebec and Canada?

The demographic profile of the Catholic Church in Quebec and Canada makes for grim reading. Baptisms and marriages are down sharply, and hundreds of churches in Quebec have been slated for demolition or conversion into mixed-use facilities—homes, theaters and more. In 2021, Gerald Lacroix, cardinal archbishop of Quebec, called for a local church that is reoriented “more intensely [toward] missionary activity.”

The parish system that had a strong impact on French Canadian society is not sustainable and needs to evolve, he said. “We can no longer be satisfied with giving good pastoral services to the people who faithfully participate in our assemblies and movements,” the cardinal said. “These people now represent a tiny part of the population entrusted to us.”

54: The percentage of Quebecers—or **4.5 million people**—who self-described as Catholic in 2021, a sharp decline from the **75%** who did so just 10 years earlier.

14: The percentage of Canadian Catholics who report weekly Mass attendance. In Quebec, only **2%** say they attend Mass weekly, down from estimates of **90%** in 1960.

19.3 million: The number of Canadians in 2021 who reported a Christian religion, amounting to just over half of the Canadian population, or **53%**. That percentage is down from **63%** in 2011 and **77%** in 2001.

12.6 million people, more than one-third of Canada’s population, report having no religious affiliation or having a secular perspective. Their proportion of the overall population has more than doubled in 20 years, rising from **17%** in 2001 to **24%** in 2011 and to **35%** in 2021.

2,746: The number of Catholic churches in Quebec in 2003. Since then more than **700** have been closed, demolished or converted to other uses.

Sources: Statistics Canada, Quebec Religious Heritage Council, The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University, The Christian Century, The Washington Post, The University of Montreal

In South Africa, illegal mining operations exploit and endanger vulnerable laborers

In the small town of Stilfontein, some 90 miles from Johannesburg, hundreds, possibly thousands, of illegal miners—locally called *zama zamas* (which can be translated as “hustle hustle,” people who take risks to work)—remained underground in December in an abandoned mine shaft. The South African Police Service had posted officers waiting for them on the surface.

Although more than 1,000 miners have already come up and been arrested, among them some children, authorities have no idea how many miners are still in the shaft 2,000 meters underground. The bodies of dead miners were raised to the surface by rope.

At the beginning of November, South African authorities said that they would end illegal mining in an operation called Vala Umgodi (“Close the Pit”). That effort has proven to be deeply challenging for government authorities.

South African police halted the delivery of food to the miners in Stilfontein to press them to resurface. But on Nov. 16, the High Court in the country’s capital, Pretoria, handed miners a lifeline when it ordered authorities to allow delivery of food and water supplies for the starving and dehydrated miners underground.

South Africa is a mineral-rich country, and gold is still a valuable commodity, but rising mining costs—exacerbated by the country’s regular disruptions in electric service and the increasing inaccessibility of gold deposits—have made most mines in South Africa unprofitable.

Thousands of workers have been left destitute around former mining operations that are typically located in rural areas far from South African cities and towns. And when mines shut down, some mining companies do not make an adequate effort to seal off access to the abandoned site.

Laid-off miners are increasingly entering closed mines to extract remaining mineral deposits on their own. They risk their lives trying to navigate unsafe shafts by rope and pulley systems. Tunnels often collapse, and there is the danger of toxic chemical inhalation. Miners at abandoned sites typically endure extreme temperatures below ground in their effort to eke out a living.

The Rev. Peter-John Pearson, the director of the Catholic Parliamentary Liaison Office, has been following developments in the mining sector closely. “About 16 unused mine shafts in the country are being exploited for mining again,” he said.

Miners are often recruited by criminal syndicates that are able to introduce extracted minerals into international markets. Fortunes have been made by those at the top of the production chain.



Authorities survey the entrance to an abandoned mine shaft on Nov. 15, 2024, part of a police effort to bring miners to the surface.

Father Pearson said, “A troublesome and unfortunate dimension is that people from neighboring poverty-stricken countries have been [enticed] into this work by syndicates operating outside the country.” The migrant laborers believe they are coming to South Africa to perform casual labor but are delivered into the mines, where they work under “the most subhuman employment conditions,” Father Pearson reported.

The Most Rev. Sitembele Sipuka, president of the Southern African Catholic Bishops’ Conference and the South African Council of Churches, said in an interview with **America** that the situation is complex, beginning with the excesses allowed to the mining industries. Bishop Sipuka said that private-sector mine owners and operators “get away with murder in the way that they maximize profits while destroying the environment and not improving the lives of the people in the area, nor rehabilitating what they have destroyed when they move out.”

Bishop Sipuka said that the inability of the South African government to contain the power of transnational criminal syndicates is another aspect of the crisis. He said that the South African Council of Churches would continue a dialogue with all parties, including the miners themselves, to seek a resolution to the crisis in Stilfontein, but he cautioned against holding the miners as the only culpable party. “The police, who are handling the present crisis of trapped miners, who are only foot soldiers, should widen their investigations into the alleged syndicates behind all this and have them prosecuted.”

Russell Pollitt, S.J., *Johannesburg correspondent.*



OSV News photo/Shir Tozem, Reuters

What will the fall of al-Assad mean for Syria's ancient Christian community?

The abrupt collapse of the al-Assad dynasty in Syria provoked both joy and worry as members of the nation's various ethnic and religious minorities wondered what to expect from the new, rebel-led government.

Speaking from Beirut on Dec. 10, days after the fall of Damascus, Daniel Corrou, S.J., the regional director of Jesuit Refugee Service Middle East and North Africa, found some reason for hope in the conciliatory gestures made so far by Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, the leader of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. That Sunni Islamist militia and its coalition forces stormed out of rebel-held Idlib Province on Nov. 27, overcoming a Syrian army that had in the past been backstopped by Russian military and Iran-supported Hezbollah forces.

Bereft of that support, the army and the regime quickly unraveled. The rebel group's unanticipated success delivers Syria into a period of profound uncertainty and struggle.

An emergency government, led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, is attempting to restore services in cities and territories that have fallen to rebel forces. Across Syria, however, entire regions are under the control of other militias. Corraling these disparate militias and political and religious interests into a united and peaceful Syria will surely be a complex challenge. After more than five decades of a ruinous family dictatorship and nearly 14 years of civil war, the

path ahead is fraught.

According to United Nations sources, almost 17 million Syrians are in need of humanitarian aid. Former President Bashar Al-Assad's decision to brutally crush a pro-democracy movement in 2011 triggered a civil war that led to 500,000 people being killed and more than 14 million displaced.

As in other nations of the Holy Land and Middle East, the Christian community in Syria, which dates back to the earliest days of the church, has suffered a steep decline. That Christian exodus has accelerated sharply since the beginning of the civil war.

Before that conflict, Syrian Christians represented about 10 percent of the total population—1.5 million people. Though official data is hard to come by because of the confusion engendered by the conflict, and current estimates vary widely, Aid to the Church in Need believes that Christians now account for as few as 2.5 percent of the population—perhaps 300,000 people.

Now many Syrians are apprehensive about how religious minorities, particularly Shiites, Alawites and Christians, will be treated in a new political reality being established by a Sunni militia that is still listed as a terror organization by the U.S. State Department. In a small but perhaps telling gesture, Mr. al-Jolani has abandoned his

The fall of Bashar al-Assad is celebrated in Majdal Shams, a Druze village in the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights, on Dec. 9, 2024.

jihadi nom de guerre and returned to using his real name, Ahmed al-Shara.

Father Corrou noted how quickly moments of communal joy turned to ash in previous historic upheavals of the Arab Spring, recalling the celebration in Cairo's Tahrir Square after the ousting of the authoritarian Hosni Mubarak. He nevertheless sees some signs for hope.

"It may go bad quickly, but right now...the data on the ground from people that are there is that [attacks on ethnic and religious minorities are] not happening."

Another sign of hope has been the mass release of political prisoners from the Assad regime's notorious prisons. Family members long thought lost are being recovered, many after unimaginable suffering.

Bashar al-Assad's fall from power has of course not ended the state of conflict in Syria. Disparate internal forces are actively jockeying for new territory and influence. External powers, including Turkey, Israel, Iran, the United States and Russia, are seeking to take advantage of the power void to protect their interests or expand their influence.

It is a regional truism that Syria, with its rich history and colliding cultures and religions, is a barely manageable state—work that has been made more difficult because of the acrimony of its long civil war. "Governance is a lot more difficult than rebellion," Father Corrou said.

Kevin Clarke, *chief correspondent.*



Pope Francis in Mosul on March 7, 2021

Pope's visit to Iraq was historic and dangerous

Pope Francis has revealed that he escaped two assassination attempts during his visit to Iraq in March 2021. The attacks were planned to take place in Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city and the former stronghold of the Islamic State jihadist group from 2014 to 2017.

The pope shared the details in an excerpt from a new autobiography, *Spera (Hope)*, released on Dec. 17—his 88th birthday. The excerpt was published by the Italian daily *Corriere della Sera*.

"I had been advised against that trip by almost everyone, which would have been the first by a pontiff in the Middle Eastern region devastated by extremist violence and jihadist profanations," Francis recalls in the book excerpt.

"But I wanted to go all the way. I felt I had to.... I felt the need to go and visit our grandfather Abraham, the common ancestor of Jews, Christians and Muslims," the pope writes.

While in Iraq, Francis flew over Mosul in a helicopter on March 6, viewing the destruction below. "It appeared to me from above as the X-ray of hatred," he writes, calling hatred "one of the most efficient feelings of our time, because it often generates by itself the pretexts that unleash it: politics, justice, and always, in a blasphemous way, religion." In this way religion becomes "a facade, hypocritical [with] provisional motivations."

"Then," Pope Francis writes, "just like in the beautiful verses of the Polish poet Wisawa Szymborska, hatred 'runs all alone.'"

He recalls: "They warned me as soon as we landed in Baghdad the day before...of a report from the British secret services: A woman stuffed with explosives, a young suicide bomber was heading to Mosul to blow herself up during the papal visit. And a van had also left at full speed with the same intent."

Pope Francis writes, "When I asked the [Vatican] Gendarmerie the following day [March 7] what was known about the two attackers, the commander replied laconically: 'They are no longer there.' The Iraqi police had intercepted them, and blew them up."

Francis remarks, "This also struck me a lot. This too was the poisoned fruit of war."

Gerard O'Connell, *Vatican correspondent.*

Why Sunday Matters

Youth sports, Mass and the meaning of rest

By Joshua J. Whitfield

“Man, that sounds nice,” he said. I was talking about nothing, how my kids did nothing. Talking to another dad around a campfire in Oklahoma as a pack of third-grade girls loudly roamed through the woods scaring bears as far away as Arkansas, it was an instance of honesty, staring at the fire. A moment of truth, it was a confession of exhaustion, each admitting to the other how he really felt.

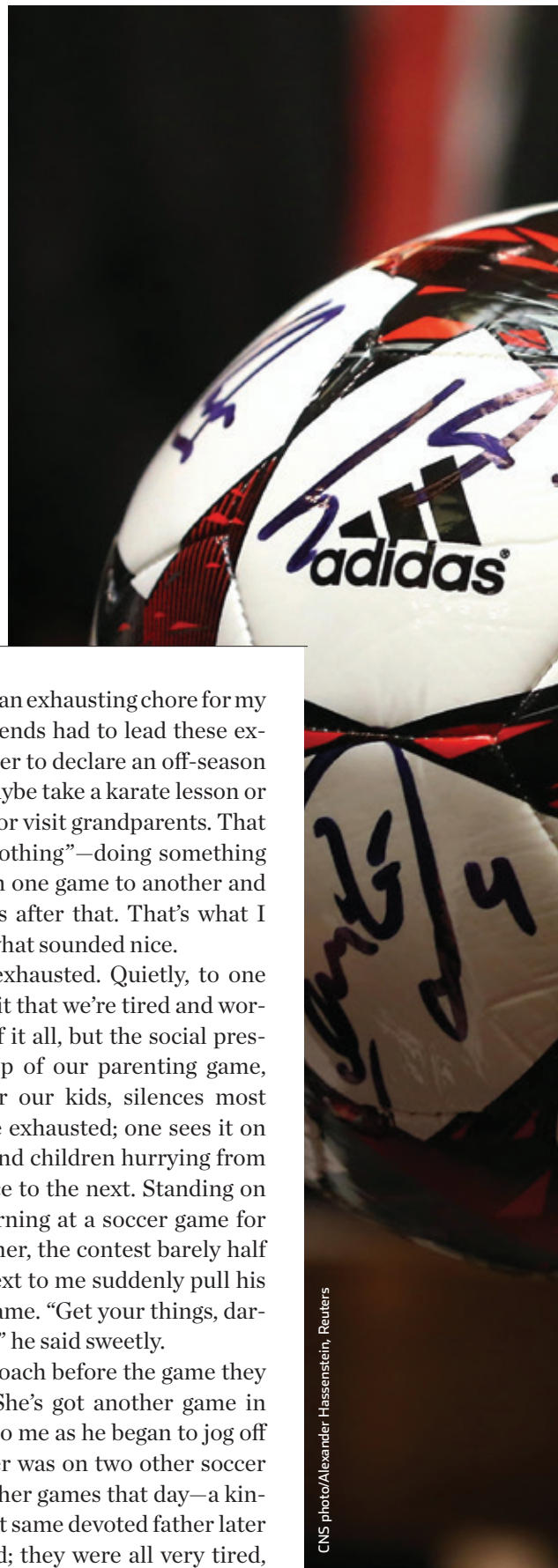
Talking about what our kids did—the sports they were in, the teams they were on, all the games they played, I told him about our family’s annual off-season, how during the winter our kids get bored, fight over the remote and spend sometimes entire Saturdays doing nothing at all. You’d think my kid had been accepted to Notre Dame or Harvard the way I bragged about it. That’s what sounded nice, this fellow dad admitted with a laugh, and a little resignation too—doing nothing.

Not that there is any virtue in what our family is doing, or rather, not doing. For us, family off-season is accidental. Our oldest kid tried basketball but didn’t like it. No one in our family is destined for the N.B.A., much less a middle school roster. Also, dragging a Catholic-sized family (with the added anomaly of me being a formerly Episcopal and now Roman Catholic priest) through one crowded gym and then an-

other quickly became an exhausting chore for my wife (who most weekends had to lead these expeditions alone). Better to declare an off-season and cut our losses, maybe take a karate lesson or two, go on a playdate or visit grandparents. That became our “doing nothing”—doing something other than going from one game to another and then two more games after that. That’s what I was bragging about, what sounded nice.

We parents are exhausted. Quietly, to one another, we may admit that we’re tired and worried about the rush of it all, but the social pressure to appear on top of our parenting game, doing what’s best for our kids, silences most of us. Yet families are exhausted; one sees it on the faces of parents and children hurrying from one game and practice to the next. Standing on the sidelines one morning at a soccer game for my then-kindergartener, the contest barely half over, I saw the dad next to me suddenly pull his daughter out of the game. “Get your things, darling. We’ve got to run,” he said sweetly.

He had told the coach before the game they had to leave early. “She’s got another game in 30 minutes,” he said to me as he began to jog off the field. His daughter was on two other soccer teams and had two other games that day—a kindergartener. I saw that same devoted father later that day. He was tired; they were all very tired,



CNS photo/Alexander Hassenstein, Reuters



Pope Francis holds an autographed football he received from the Bayern Munich soccer team on Oct. 22, 2014.



CNS photo/Batch Dill-USA TODAY Sports via Reuters

Filippo Montemurri, a player on the Vatican team Fratelli Tutti, celebrates scoring a goal during a soccer match in Formello, near Rome, on Nov. 21, 2021.

he told me. He couldn't say if it was right or wrong, good or bad. That's just what their Saturdays and Sundays looked like.

Youth sports have changed in recent decades and not for the better. David King, former athletic director at Eastern Mennonite University, describes the change he has witnessed over his 35-year career. In *Overplayed*, a book he co-authored with Margot Starbuck, he writes:

I've become increasingly concerned about the toll that current youth sports culture is taking on children, young people, and families. Families' dollars and time are stretched and stressed. Children are suffering overuse injuries and burning out at younger and younger ages. They're being asked to perform beyond appropriate developmental stages. They're failing to develop some of the intrinsic values that adults assume sports will teach them. Parents are damaging their relationships with their kids and with each other. And far too often, as we struggle to navigate this new terrain, we're driven not by love but by fear.

Fewer kids are playing sports today, and those who do play are often not served well. The negative outcomes are several, including "elite" pay-to-play exclusion and the normalizing of single sport specialization, leading to

an increased number of injuries due to year-round play. But aside from social consequences and bodily harm, and issues of inequality and injury—which are all part of the brave new world of youth sports—there are also damaging spiritual effects.

Worrying about the possible spiritual dangers of youth sports goes back a long way. Some of the fathers of the Second Vatican Council raised such concerns. They feared sports could tempt too many people away from the practice of religion.

It was not an unfounded fear. As the authors of *On the Eighth Day: A Catholic Theology of Sport* write, one could argue that "sport has gradually displaced traditional religion on a functional level." They continue, "Today, many spend their Sundays with sport rather than in church. Sport gives people the type of social connections, traditions, identity, and even meaning that is usually found in religion. To put it simply, the pews are empty, but the bleachers are full."

In their likeness to religion, however, sports often seem to offer falsely what only authentic religion truly offers, and that is the genuine experience of transcendence. In that sense, sports today, and youth sports especially, are functionally another religion proclaiming, as St. Paul would put it, "a different gospel" (Gal 1:6). As a longtime sports chaplain, Bernhard Maier, put it, sports, although meaningful in significant ways, also "can distract us from



Youth sports have changed in recent decades and not for the better.

more elevated things.”

That is, if we judge “sports” to be a religion, then it’s a bad religion, shallow at best. For all that sports can offer is limited or counterfeit transcendence, something that either doesn’t last or is false. This is why, for instance, John Thompson, the legendary former Georgetown basketball coach, kept on display in his office a deflated basketball, to remind his players not to pin everything—their sense of personal value, their understanding of meaning—on a game they will one day stop playing.

For basketball, like any sport, is not equipped to provide truly enduring meaning and value. Those things are more reliably and lastingly found in family, relationships, community and religion. Which is why the religious rhetoric of sports is ultimately problematic, because at a certain point some may think that it’s more than a metaphor. An ESPN ad for college football, for instance, calling it the “Greatest Story Ever Played,” is clearly just clever or silly advertising, undoubtedly harmless. But what about when Tom Brady and Michael Strahan helped found a media company selling the idea that “to feel the power of sport—and to truly believe—is to experience religion”?

What happens when we earnestly pretend that sports is a religion, or earnestly treat it like a religion, putting sports in people’s lives in place of faith? The answer is that the religion of sports eventually falls flat. The promised transcendence perceived and desired in superstars like Tom Brady turns out to be merely advertising, a peddled idolatry meant only to form consumers instead of believers and saints. Eventually the emptiness of the religion of sports is revealed, that all of it is destined to fade along with all the other fleeting glories of the world rather than endure as a world without end. One is eventually left with nothing.

This Christians should find troubling. It’s reminiscent of Screwtape’s words to Wormwood: “To get the man’s soul and give him nothing in return—that is what really gladdens our Father’s heart.” It’s a demonic goal to leave a person with nothing, entirely and eternally empty. But trading religion for sports is always a subtle exchange, barely noticeable. At first, it looks like time management and team commitment. But soon what is sacrificed are the habits and virtues necessary to the practice of genuine religion. For that’s a significant part of what religion is; from the Latin word *religare*, meaning “bind together,” religion is composed of those habits and practices that bind us to God.

The discipline of religion, manifest in routines and rhythms like regular Sunday worship, is replaced by practices, games and tournaments. Instead of going to Mass on Sunday, a family goes to the game, more than likely several games. And thus, in short order and as simple as that, sports functionally becomes a religion rivaling genuine religion,

eventually replacing it, no matter how much one plies one’s spirituality and random religious observance with sentimentality—or “lip service,” as Jesus called it (Mt 15:8).

It’s a harsh assessment. At first blush, it seems overblown to suggest that when sports functionally replace religion, religion dies. But that’s exactly what the high school coach Albert Zander sees. “Nothing is sacred anymore, and Sunday has become a tournament day,” he told the authors of *Overplayed*. “I have observed long enough to see that the kid grows up and has no faith of their own because the message was communicated to them through the family’s actions that sports are more important than their church, faith, or God.”


It’s not just about church attendance, missing Sunday Mass. As David King writes, it’s about “the cumulative effect and decisions about sports and church involvements that communicate to children what we value and what we hope they will value.” That matters because what we value is our relationship with Jesus Christ and the rest he gives to those who believe and live in him (Mt 11:28). Here we come to the heart of the matter: the fundamental spiritual danger posed by today’s culture of youth sports. Here we touch the spiritual wound of youth sports. Those moments in which we’re meant to encounter Christ are replaced by moments only at best fleetingly transcendent.

But what should Christian parents do? What should the church do? Youth sports is as prominent in the Catholic Church, in its schools and parochial leagues, as anywhere else. Yet too many bishops, too many pastors, too many school administrators and too many Catholic parents simply have not thought about it, have not been critical enough of the assumptions we make about the goodness of youth sports.

How should Catholics and Catholic institutions think about youth sports today?

Pure Play

The Romans went about it all wrong. If they wanted to wipe Christians off the face of the earth, they didn’t need to arrest them or try them, persecute or kill them. Better something else. Better to have made a spectacle for them than of them. Perhaps if the ancients weren’t so bloodthirsty, they



Worrying about the possible spiritual dangers of youth sports goes back a long way.

would have understood better the power of distraction over destruction. Would early Christianity have survived the cultural allure and power of today's youth sports? I'm not sure.

My assessment of the world of youth sports and other similar competitive activities, as they are widely experienced today, is harsh. Given especially that so many see nothing wrong, that I would warn of the spiritual dangers of these activities, speak of spiritual disaster, compare it to ancient Rome's persecution of Christians—I understand well that I may be easily dismissed or strongly opposed.

There are, however, plenty of parents alert to these dangers, many as concerned as I am. To speak personally from my oddly intertwined vocation as both father and priest, what worries me most is the spiritual damage I see done to our overscheduled children as they are scheduled away from both the dinner table and the altar, from meaningful relationships with family members and friends and, most of all, from a meaningful relationship with Jesus Christ. What worries me are the wounds I see on the souls of so many children and parents, wounds of an overachieving unhappiness, a spiritually dead but material flourishing.

Does that mean Christians shouldn't have anything to do with youth sports, or that Christian parents should keep their kids from activities like dance and piano? Should we revive old Puritan hatreds, declaring all of it immoral and irreligious? Not at all. On the contrary, Christians should continue to embrace these activities. In fact, more children should participate in sports. Part of the problem today, as we've seen, is that too few children play any sport at all. Christians should want to reverse that trend. The problem is not that Christians participate in youth sports and other activities, the problem is *how*.

Christians have long been involved in sports. One could argue that many of the sports we play and watch today wouldn't exist without Christianity, or at least not without the Christians who invented them. Basketball, for example, was a Christian sport, at least as the Presbyterian minister, James Naismith, first imagined it. However one interprets Paul's use of athletic imagery in the New Testament (it does

not imply, for instance, that Paul was familiar with sports or approved of them), Christians have nonetheless positively engaged in sports for a very long time. In the Middle Ages, when the churchyard was the only common land available, villagers often played their games there. Worship, rest and play were the natural elements of an ordinary Sunday. Games, athletics, even dancing have been part of Jesuit curricula since the 17th century.

The founder of the modern Olympics, Pierre de Coubertin, himself a product of Jesuit education, got the Olympics' motto—*citius, altius, fortius*—from his Dominican friend, a priest, Henri Didon. Belgian missionaries carried their love of soccer to Africa. In Italy, in the first decades of the 20th century, the church encouraged Catholic youth sports as a way to fight secularism and fascism. Pope Pius XII considered youth sports vitally important to the church's mission. The church's care for the whole person, soul and body, as well as its concern for the perfection of virtue, meant that the church was bound to care about the world of sports. Examples of Christian engagement with sports abound.

How then should Christians think about youth sports? St. John Paul II said we should think about sports with an "attitude of redemption." "Giving the Best of Yourself," the 2018 document summarizing the church's understanding of sports as it relates to its mission, published by the Vatican's Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life, leads with just such an attitude of redemption. The church must raise its voice "in the service of sport," because sport cannot interpret itself. What the church offers is a "vision of sport that is grounded in a Christian understanding of the human person and just society." That is, the church serves to remind Christians how sports fit within the larger game of life. When rooted in respect for human dignity and committed to justice and open to human destiny, sports serve what the church has always prized, the "integral development" of each person.

Sports matter to the church because sports matter to the whole person, the soul as well as the body. In the church's mind, at least, Christian parents, Catholic educators and clergy should be agents of redemption in the world of sports. But today that means, as Clark Power, the founder of Play Like a Champion, which promotes equity in youth sports, puts it, we Christians should "reclaim our prophetic tradition" in the world of sports. Again, because sport cannot interpret itself; because sports, in fact, often fall victim to other interpretations, "ideological or even amoral and inhuman." Which is precisely the crisis. The fight is for the humanity and soul of sports for the sake of the souls and humanity of our children. That may sound dramatic; after all, we're talking about youth sports. But it does in fact matter

as much as that. What's at stake isn't just a game.

We must realize that the redemption of sports begins with the redemption of play. Again, as the sociologist Hilary Levey Friedman said, pointing to the rigid hierarchies of youth sports, full-time paid coaches and year-round seasons, too many young athletes today are “young professionals.” According to the Aspen Institute's Sports & Society Program, for generations “casual play” was the “foundational experience” of America's children. “But the era of the sandlot or unstructured play, of making up games and playing with friends for hours on end, is largely gone.” And so, says the Aspen Institute, we need to “reintroduce free play where possible.” For them, this is a moral ought “given the science.”

It's science that also resonates with Christian thought, for when we begin to think about play theologically, we soon find ourselves thinking about the more primeval realities of our faith—things like contemplation, creation and God. Play is woven into just these sacred things. St. Thomas Aquinas, for instance, famously likened play to contemplation: 1) because, as the contemplation of wisdom is enjoyable, so is play; and 2) because play “has no purpose beyond itself.” This latter feature of pure play—its purposelessness—is what brings it so near the sacred, St. Thomas thought, for it replicates the play of divine wisdom.

St. Thomas in this brief text points to the Book of Proverbs: “Then I was beside him as his craftsman, and I was his delight day by day, playing before him all the while” (Pr 8:30). The analogy St. Thomas makes, using this text, is that as divine wisdom seeks nothing else but to play eternally before God, contemplation seeks nothing else in just the same way, yearning as well only for wisdom-like pleasure.

Beyond this spiritual theology of contemplation, this passage also says something about the theology of creation. That playful wisdom is also a “craftsman” suggests that creation (the universe, the world, you, me) is also in some sense play, that we are the created objects of God's play. To put it philosophically, creation is not necessary; it needn't have happened at all. Like a game, there is no purpose for which the world was made, no purpose beyond creation itself. God could just as well have not created anything, but instead he created the heavens and the earth and called it good, much like a child at play rejoices in his or her own unnecessary little world. But although unnecessary in this philosophical and playful sense, creation is still meaningful, again, as a game is meaningful with its world of rules and goals and ways to win and lose.

The Loss of Spiritual Rest

At the end of *Homo Ludens*, his classic study of play and culture, Johan Huizinga observed that as Western civili-



Campers play soccer during summer day camp at Notre Dame Church in New Hyde Park, N.Y., on July 25, 2023. Each camp day also included morning Mass and Eucharistic adoration.

zation grew more complex, pure play began to disappear. “All Europe donned the boiler-suit” at the start of the Industrial Revolution, he wrote, and hasn't changed clothes since. Play, slowly dislocated from its primeval place within culture, was eventually divorced from things like ritual and festival, war and law—all features of human culture long formed by play—as scientific and technological advances began to reshape worldviews and cultural imagination. Play no longer seemed to have any role in the serious running of the world.

Utility now governed play, no longer the primeval, mystical pleasures of contemplation. Hence the rise of modern sports, with their organization and regimentation, where for a time the “play element” found refuge but which ultimately were transformed into something they weren't previously—instrumentalized, segregated activities that one now had to make sense of as a means to an end. Play could no longer simply be fun or ritually serious, shaping culture inadvertently as it had in the past. Play now had to be for something, like training laborers or giving children a good shot at the best college. Play now served work, becoming itself a kind of work. Here began the developmental myth of youth sports and eventually their professionalization. Huizinga called it instead the profanation of play, a cultural wound.

It's also a spiritual wound. We have allowed sports to become something they weren't meant to be, an instrument to achieve lesser ends. Youth sports no longer belong to leisure, no longer to contemplation, no longer to the freeing joy of play for play's sake. Rather, play belongs to work, to the rat race, to social reproduction. Which has



The problem is not that Christians participate in youth sports and other activities, the problem is *how*.

made a thing like youth sports not only a contributor to our uniquely modern, hurried anxiety but also to the loss of the spiritual rest Christ offers (Mt 11:28).

If this then is the wound of youth sports, how is it healed? To redeem youth sports, we must recover play. Christians should grasp the deeper reasons for this, that this is a moral imperative not just “given the science” but also given the soul. Such redemption is twofold, involving first a challenge to the individual conscience and then a challenge to the “social structures” shaping youth sports today. Individually, it is a matter of vision and courage. Seeing what is at stake—the rest God gives in Christ, the good of our souls—the Christian should find the strength to stand up against a culture deceptively benign and profoundly at odds with happiness and holiness.

But what about challenging “social structures”? Here the church and organizations such as the Aspen Institute’s Sports and Society Program agree. Both seek to increase participation and inclusion in youth sports. The Aspen Institute, for instance, urges coaches to avoid cutting kids from rosters, and to add teams instead. It also calls on communities to support afterschool programs for kids, for churches and other faith communities to help create opportunities and eliminate the barriers to play that many children face, poorer children especially. It insists that organizations and teams stop using words like “elite” to describe children’s sports: “No child qualifies as elite before growing into their body.” This is in line with church teaching since Pope Pius XII.

The church wants everybody to play. The dicastery document “Giving the Best of Yourself,” calls for sports in seminaries, for example; it even calls for parishes to promote and organize sports not only for young parishioners but the elderly too. The Aspen Institute recommends that organizations and other institutions embrace a model of youth sports that doesn’t just prioritize performance, or discovering the best athletes destined for college or professional sports, but a model that offers each child the opportunity to become “physically literate by age 12.”

This fits with the church’s understanding of sports as something “aimed at the integral formation of the person,” seeing sports truly in terms of education. Youth sports are not the minor leagues of anything. They are games children play because play belongs to what it means to be human, what it means to grow and flourish in body and soul. Here the church and the best of the world of sports agree, and it is what Christian leaders and organizations should be doing, working toward a more inclusive and more human vision of youth sports. And it’s a vision that necessarily includes Sunday, that understands, cherishes and serves what Sunday is.

Here the church stands alone to offer wisdom as ancient and holy as the Sabbath itself. Speaking to athletes in the early 1950s, Pope Pius XII put it bluntly: “Do you wish to act rightly in gymnastics and sport? Then keep the Commandments.” He insisted that athletes “keep the Lord’s day holy, since sport does not excuse us from the discharge of our religious duties.” Pope Benedict XVI later talked about protecting and developing a “culture of Sunday.”

What he meant is that Christians should “preserve” Sunday as a day that frees us to remember that “our life is more a gift than an achievement.” He saw Sunday as a day we needed so as to resist the dehumanizing tyranny of totalizing work, the degradation of the rat race. The way St. John Paul II put it is that the life of sports and the spiritual and religious life, each with its obligations and discipline, should not be opposed but rather “harmonized.” One should not replace or eliminate the other; sports should not become a religion, nor should religion seek to do away with sports. Rather, what such harmonization looks like is a community of families sharing together a disciplined rhythm of worship and play, a rhythm ultimately tying the community closer together.

To be clear, this is not merely an appeal for Sunday attendance. Talking about this to a friend of mine, a monk and teacher, his response was simply, “Go to Mass!” Now practically, that is solid Catholic advice, but there is more to it than that, something deeper. What we’ve been talking about all along is the human and spiritual good of play and the human and spiritual tragedy that comes with ruined play. The reason Sunday matters in all this, the reason the church insists Mass be part of each Catholic family’s Sunday, no matter how many teams you’re on or games or tournaments you have scheduled, is that liturgy is itself a form of play. Like contemplation, liturgy is a kind of playing before God. As to any game belongs its own world—its rules and boundaries—so too for the liturgy. This was Romano Guardini’s insight in *The Spirit of the Liturgy*: The genius of the liturgy is that “it simply creates an entire spiritual world in which the soul can live according to the requirements of



A father and son enjoy a baseball game in Lake Buena Vista, Fla., on March 4, 2019.

its nature.” Liturgy is play. It constructs for the worshiper another world, a fleetingly sacramental other world.

Liturgy plays a sacramental world into brief existence, all for the sake of rest, so that God may grant his people the rest they need as they make their way to heaven. Here we see better the whole, the church’s deeper vision for things like youth sports, play and worship. The church believes that all of it approximates the rest God has always offered his people, but only when it is lived in harmony. Youth sports should serve the human person, helping each child to become someone who knows, loves and worships God because that’s what it means to be human, to flourish and to find holiness. Play and worship are those gifts of creation that not only offer the pleasantness of rest but also a foretaste of heavenly rest. Play and worship mystically mirror each other. That’s why the church doesn’t let families off the hook for Sunday Mass. The church does not forbid games on Sunday, but the church does insist upon Sunday Mass.

It should all fit together: youth sports, play and worship. Conflict is only a matter of illusion and sin. But what practically does this harmony look like? What should Christian parents and Christian organizations do or stop doing? Perhaps we should learn from our medieval ancestors who played lazily in the fields outside parish churches after Mass each Sunday or who gathered on the church porch to tell jokes and play games. Perhaps bishops and priests

should play games together at Christmas and Easter as they used to do. Maybe the church should make more space for free play. Perhaps parishes could make room for casual gatherings on occasional Sunday afternoons for no other purpose than to play, talk, laugh; to offer a space for friends and families to do nothing other than while away the time. Maybe we should also change the way we think about organized sports. Maybe Catholic schools and Catholic sports leagues should lead the way. Maybe putting a young child on an “elite” competitive travel lacrosse team is not a good idea. Maybe a child playing three soccer games in one day is a bad idea. We need to talk about this candidly, charitably. Catholic schools and parishes, parents, coaches, and clergy should talk about it and then rethink their sports programs.

What the renewal of youth sports looks like is uncertain, but it will certainly lead to youth sports that look far different than they do today. Because as humans and children of God, we need that rest. That’s why the church insists Christian parents are still called to be Christians as they parent their children through the fun but sometimes dangerous world of youth sports. Because God made them parents precisely so that they might share his divine rest with their children. Because that is a Christian parent’s most important job.

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England's 'Catholic Moment' —and Ours

What can the history of British converts tell us about American Catholics?

By James T. Keane

A few hours after he attended Easter Sunday Mass on April 10, 1966, the great English novelist Evelyn Waugh died at his home in Somerset, England. A requiem Mass was celebrated 11 days later in Westminster Cathedral. Waugh, 62, had been baptized in the Church of England but had been received into the Roman Catholic Church 36 years before.

Obituaries and later biographies noted that Waugh was not much of an enthusiast for what was going on in the Catholic Church at the time of his death. While his antipathy is often ascribed to his contempt for the Second Vatican Council and the reforms it wrought, the discontent actually began more than a decade earlier with the liturgical changes implemented by Pope Pius XII in the 1950s.

The hints of further changes to come—Mass was still in Latin at the time of his death—only increased the notoriously grumpy Waugh's rancor. "Every attendance at Mass leaves me without comfort or edification," he wrote to the archbishop of Westminster a year before his death. "I shall never, pray God, apostatize but church-going is now a bitter trial."

Waugh's move to the Roman Church in 1930 in what was a solidly Protestant nation was one of many such

events in an extraordinary period beginning around 1833, in which British Catholicism's intellectual profile was dominated by a group of scholars, writers and popular figures who had done the same. In a nation that in 10 years will recognize half a millennium since its dramatic public break from the Catholic Church, a striking majority of British Catholicism's most prominent figures in the 19th and 20th centuries had "swum the Tiber," as the saying went. Like Waugh, many did so with some misgivings and later regrets, but there was no shortage of swimmers.

The most famous were surely Cardinal John Henry Newman and Cardinal Henry Edward Manning, who were formerly priests in the Anglican Communion and prominent leaders of the Oxford Movement, a 19th-century campaign to reassert the Catholic heritage of British Christianity. But they were joined by a host of others over the 130 years, including Waugh, Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J., the Rev. Robert Hugh Benson, Graham Greene, Muriel Spark, the Rev. Ronald Knox, G. K. Chesterton, Edith Sitwell and many more.

This epoch was so extraordinary in the life of the church that the historian Patrick Allitt began his 1997 book



CNS photo/Matt Cashore, University of Notre Dame

OSV News photo/Paul Ratje, Reuters

G.K. Chesterton, left, receiving an honorary degree from Holy Cross Father Charles L. O'Donnell, then president of the University of Notre Dame, and Evelyn Waugh, above, were among the many prominent British intellectuals who “swam the Tiber” in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Catholic Converts: British and American Intellectuals Turn to Rome with a startling assertion: “Nearly all the major Catholic intellectuals writing in English between 1840 and 1960 were converts to Catholicism.” Such figures, Mr. Allitt argued, enjoyed educational advantages still largely denied to cradle Catholics in both societies, but also benefited from an intellectual adventurousness that was not common among their cradle-Catholic peers.

These converts were marked by their creative output, but also in many cases by a commitment to Catholicism as an intellectual and religious bulwark against modernity. As our own cultural moment in the United States has included some prominent conversions to Catholicism—most notably Vice President-elect JD Vance—and conjecture about the influence of tradition-minded Catholic voices in government and politics in general, what might we learn from that period in British Catholic history?

A caveat: According to all major Christian churches, it is theologically impossible to “convert” from one Christian church to another denomination; one’s baptism into any church, if done by the Trinitarian formula found in Matthew 28:19, establishes that

person as a Christian. For that reason, **America** tries to use the more technically correct language of “received into the church” when a Christian baptized in another denomination becomes Catholic, but *convert* remains the dominant casual usage in Catholic culture.

On This Side of the Pond

As in Great Britain, the Catholic Church has experienced similar periods of prominent conversions on this side of the pond over the years, and many of the most famous Catholics in U.S. history were not born as such, including Isaac Hecker, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, Catherine de Hueck Doherty, Orestes Brownson, Avery Dulles, S.J., Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day, Clare Boothe Luce, Caroline Gordon and Walker Percy. As with their counterparts on the other side, these figures made up the tiniest percentage of Roman Catholics in the United States, but all played an outsized role in the church’s religious and creative expression.

American religious expression is often more fluid than in countries like Great Britain—Orestes Brownson, for example, switched Christian denominations six times—and it is also true that a huge number of “cradle

Catholics” in the past century in the United States have gone in the other direction, embracing different Protestant denominations. The Pew Research Center has estimated that half of U.S. adults raised Catholic have left that church at some point, and if “former Catholics” who had embraced Protestant churches or become “nones” were considered a religious denomination, they would make up the second-largest such group in the United States—behind only those still Catholics.

A number of prominent cultural figures and politicians have become Catholic recently in our own American political and cultural milieu, including the aforementioned Mr. Vance, the political commentator Candace Owens and Hollywood stars like Shia LaBeouf and Russell Brand. Rumors in the fall of 2024 suggested they might be joined by the media personality Jordan Peterson. Their journey to Catholicism has been paralleled by the increasing influence of prominent Catholic religious conservatives in U.S. government, including Leonard Leo, co-chairman of the Federalist Society, who is widely believed to have handpicked all three of Donald J. Trump’s Supreme Court nominees in his first term.

Inside the Beltway, Catholic converts have also held an influence belied by their relatively small numbers for a number of years; among the American political figures who became Catholic in the 1990s and 2000s were the Supreme Court nominee Robert Bork, the columnists Larry Kudlow and Robert Novak, the publisher Alfred Regnery, former Senator Sam Brownback, former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich and the political commentator Laura Ingraham.

The influence of these and other prominent Catholic figures—and their association with Catholic groups with politically conservative ties like the Napa Institute, Opus Dei and Legatus—has given the public political face of Catholicism in the United States a distinctly Republican hue at the moment, despite a long history of American Catholic political identification with the Democratic Party and the recent tenure of Joseph R. Biden, a Democrat, as the nation’s second Catholic president.

“No one’s walking into the administration ready to mount a crusade or anything,” Rachel Bovard, vice president of programs at the Conservative Partnership Institute, told Politico last month in an article that noted the large number of Catholics in Mr. Trump’s orbit, but “there’s a very specific sort of Catholic paradigm that you may begin to see.”



OSV News photo/courtesy of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales

St. John Henry Newman, pictured in an undated painting, was canonized in October 2019.

Swimming the Tiber

With the exception of former Prime Minister Boris Johnson (a revert to Catholicism) and former Prime Minister Tony Blair (who converted to Catholicism in 2009), Catholics have played a comparatively far more subdued role in British politics than on this side of the Atlantic. That is partly because of the reality that Catholics were barred or severely restricted from many political roles for centuries after the establishment of the Church of England; not until 1829 could Catholics serve in Parliament, for example. Only recently has there been, in the words of the British scholar Peter Hennessy, “the Catholic stealth minority’s rise to influence.”

Not so in the worlds of religion, literature or the arts. What was it about Roman Catholicism that attracted—and inspired—so many English figures in these disciplines? After all, as Pauline Adams noted in *English Catholic Converts and the Oxford Movement in Mid 19th Century Britain: The Cost of Conversion*, English converts faced a certain prejudice from their cradle-Catholic brethren.

“Converts who had steeled themselves to meet the hostility of the Protestant world were often unprepared to encounter an equally violent prejudice among Catholics,” Ms. Adams wrote. A common perception was that a convert “may be a gain to the Church, and he may be a thorn in her side.” The zeal of a new convert—and the suspicion of any Johnny-come-lately—could make a new convert’s life difficult, then and now. G. K. Chesterton had a cutting



Wikimedia Commons

Muriel Spark in 1960

The Catholic Church's rules may have had an appeal in a world increasingly unmoored from tradition.

support of fellow converts Graham Greene and Waugh—that brought Spark, a recovering drug addict, to the church in 1954. “If you’re going to do a thing, you should do it thoroughly,” she later said. “If you’re going to be a Christian, you may as well be a Catholic.”

Her mentors Greene and Waugh both seemed to feel that Catholicism provided (among many other things) a rampart against their own proclivities. “I had to find a religion,” wrote Greene (who often described himself as a “Catholic agnostic”), “to measure my evil against.” Waugh took it even further, writing the following to his goddaughter Edith Sitwell on the latter’s embrace of Catholicism: “I always think to myself, ‘I know I am awful. But how much more awful I should be without the Faith.’ One of the joys of Catholic life is to recognize the little sparks of good everywhere, as well as the fire of the saints.”

Years before, Waugh had written that “[a]s in the Dark Ages the cloister offers the sanest and most civilized way of life.” It is a sentiment reflected in the British-born American Thomas Merton’s *The Seven Storey Mountain* (which Waugh edited for Merton), where the new monk wrote of his reception to the Trappist monastery at Gethsemani after a life that included periods of great dissipation that he had entered “the four walls of my newfound freedom.”

Several of the most prominent Jesuits in Great Britain in the 19th and 20th centuries were also converts to Catholicism, including the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins and the controversial theologian George Tyrrell. A Dublin-born Anglican born in 1860, Tyrrell became a Catholic in 1879 and joined the Society of Jesus a year later. He would become one of the most prominent figures in the Modernist controversies in the church at the turn of the century, and was later expelled from the Jesuits and excommunicated by Pope Pius X in 1908.

Two other prominent British converts who would later join the Jesuits became close confidantes of Waugh and Greene: C. C. Martindale, S.J., and Francis Canavan, S.J. The latter wrote a biography of Father Martindale (dedicated to Evelyn and Laura Waugh), in which he noted that Father Martindale had become perhaps the most

remark with regard to this phenomenon: “There is many a convert who has reached a stage at which no word from any Protestant or pagan could any longer hold him back. Only the word of a Catholic can keep him from Catholicism.”

It should go without saying that every conversion was supported by the conviction that what the Catholic Church teaches is true: St. Newman’s writings on how he came to Catholicism remain important and influential today for that very reason. But were there other factors that made so many prominent intellectuals convert?

No doubt there were many for whom aesthetic reasons contributed to their decision; for others, the Catholic Church’s seemingly unbending rules and practices may have had an appeal in a world increasingly unmoored from its old mores and traditions. The Catholic Church “was accustomed to making imperative demands on the lives of its members,” Ms. Adams wrote, something that surely provided a certain discipline for an artistic temperament.

While the bishops—and novelists and poets—might be the most well known among Britain’s Catholic converts in the 19th and 20th centuries, they were joined by prominent figures in other disciplines, including Augustus Pugin, an architect inspired by the Oxford Movement and Gothic architecture, who is responsible both for Big Ben and for much of Westminster Cathedral in London.

Among the novelists, Muriel Spark might be the most curious, having come to Catholicism so long after Newman and Manning that one can hardly cite them as an influence. Rather, it was the anomie of modern life—and the dogged



It is clear that high-profile conversions are rarely the lifeblood of the church.

famous apologist, preacher and spiritual writer in Great Britain—and a figure in countless stories of conversion. A resident of the famous Jesuit “House of Writers” at Farm Street in London, Father Martindale was also a major figure in the liturgical reforms that anticipated Vatican II.

Lessons for Today

What might we learn in our current moment from these histories?

The zeal and joy of every person who enters the Catholic Church should obviously be first and foremost a source of inspiration to those who grew up in the faith—as well as a rebuke. Whatever else converts to Catholicism are, they are rarely lukewarm, and seldom are they in search of the bourgeois Christianity that is characteristic of much of American religious expression, Catholic and not. Britain’s Catholic converts became the public face of the church in another century; American Catholics might well see the same happen here.

One cautionary tale from the history of Great Britain’s Catholic converts is this: Along with the many blessings these men and women brought to the church, they also brought their own baggage with them. Like the cradle Catholics they joined, they could be deeply flawed in ways that complicate the adulatory treatment they sometimes received. G. K. Chesterton is a hero to many Catholics for his clear, clever and spirited defenses of the faith (*America* ran his columns more than 60 times), but in recent years, scholars have struggled to reconcile his erudition and commitment to the faith with his embrace of an ugly antisemitism and racist attitudes. Evelyn Waugh also held patronizing—verging on white supremacist—attitudes toward other ethnicities.

We see the same today sometimes in the United States: The far-right provocateur Candace Owens became a Catholic in April 2024, calling it “a decision to come home,” but her embrace of the church was not accompanied by any obvious repudiation of her antisemitic, homophobic



JD Vance, then a Republican U.S. senator from Ohio, is seen at the National Catholic Prayer Breakfast in Washington on Feb. 8, 2024.

and Christian nationalist social media posts. Ms. Owens was fired from her position at The Daily Wire for promoting hate speech and banned from YouTube in September 2024.

In an essay for *The Lamp* in 2020, Vice President-elect JD Vance cited René Girard and St. Augustine, among others, as influences on his decision to become Catholic. In 2024 he told *The New York Post* that Catholic social teaching “certainly influences how I think about issues.” However, during the 2024 presidential campaign, his rhetoric on immigration veered radically from the church’s teaching, and when political winds shifted, he joined President Trump and the Republican Party and abandoned his public opposition to legal abortion. “Vance’s choice to join the Catholic Church,” wrote the theologian Massimo Faggioli in *La Croix International* in July 2024, “did not interfere [with] but rather accompanied his conversion to Trumpism.”

Another important lesson to remember about the influence of Catholics in politics is the law of unintended consequences. As Paul Elie noted in *The New Yorker* in July 2024, U.S. President Ronald Reagan packed his first administration in the early 1980s with politically conservative Catholics, many chosen for their anti-communist bona fides. But the policies and decisions adopted by appointees like Secretary of State Alexander Haig, C.I.A. Director William Casey and National Security Adviser William P. Clark (all of them cradle Catholics) produced disastrous effects in Latin America, including U.S. military support for murderous dictatorships and corrupt oligarchs. Many Catholic progressives still bitterly remember Mr. Haig’s vicious claim that the four “churchwomen of El Salvador” raped and murdered by Salvadoran paramilitaries in 1981 were political operatives



Shia LaBeouf as seen in the 2023 film "Padre Pio." Mr. LaBeouf received the sacrament of confirmation in 2023.

who had attempted to run a military roadblock.

The same can be said of the other side of the political aisle: When President Joseph R. Biden filled his administration with Catholic appointees in 2021, **America** joined with many other Catholics in cheering a "Catholic moment" in American politics. But Mr. Biden's administration was at odds with Catholic social teaching on many issues, including abortion and immigration.

Finally, other sets of numbers tell an important tale. In both the United States and Great Britain, it is clear that high-profile conversions—no matter how strong the boost they might give to flagging hearts—are rarely the lifeblood of the church. If they were, in both nations we would see a Catholic Church booming with new adherents rather than struggling to maintain numbers or facing the same decline as many other Christian denominations. Any Mass-going visitor to Great Britain will surely notice that from London to Liverpool and beyond, Catholic parishes are often sustained and given new life not by those who have swum the Tiber, but by those who have swum the Channel. Polish and Irish and Lithuanian families are among those in the pews most Sundays, not former Anglicans.

The same is true on this side of the pond. While Catholic pundits and journalists might muse about the dark influence of Catholic politicians and political operatives on the American political right or left, the pews are not packed with people debating integralism or questioning if the vice president has read "Rerum Novarum." Rather, our pews remain apolitical in many places, to some degree because they represent a view of Catholicism often attributed to James Joyce: "Here comes everyone."

Suburban U.S. parishes frequented by comfortable white families are often also the spiritual home of recent

Vietnamese and Mexican and Filipino migrants. Rectories and sacristies in urban and suburban America alike are vastly more likely to host a foreign-born, cradle-Catholic priest than a former Anglican who left Canterbury over a dispute about women's ordination. The music minister who wants to restore Gregorian chant? He's a convert, but the congregation knows the words and the tune to "Pescador de Hombres" and "Be Not Afraid," so guess what gets sung?

Headlines sell the story, but they don't always tell the tale. Despite his well-deserved reputation as a misanthrope on many issues, it is perhaps Evelyn Waugh, after all, whose grumpy opinions offer the most insight on the common identity of all Catholic Christians.

Waugh didn't care for Pope Paul VI a bit—he was in fact openly contemptuous of the pontiff—but he still insisted to his dying day that "Peter has spoken" remains the guarantee of orthodoxy." He also arrogated to his aristocratic self the position of "the man in the pew." Writing in 1962, Waugh had this to say:


I believe that I am typical of that middle rank of the Church, far from her leaders, much farther from her saints; distinct, too, from the doubting, defiant, despairing souls who perform so conspicuously in contemporary fiction and drama. We take little part, except where our personal sympathies are aroused, in the public life of the Church, in her countless pious and benevolent institutions.

Nevertheless, Waugh wrote:

We hold the creeds, we attempt to observe the moral law, we go to Mass on days of obligation and glance rather often at the vernacular translations of the Latin, we contribute to the support of the clergy. We seldom have any direct contact with the hierarchy. We go to some inconvenience to educate our children in our faith. We hope to die fortified by the last rites. In every age we have formed the main body of 'the faithful' and we believe that it was for us, as much as for the saints and for the notorious sinners, that the Church was founded.

Fitting, perhaps, that Britain's most high-profile convert of the 20th century—who himself certainly did "perform so conspicuously in contemporary fiction and drama"—would end up sounding like the most cradle Catholic of us all.

James T. Keane is a senior editor at **America**.



The Strength of Jesus' Sacred Heart

Reflections on Pope Francis' new encyclical, 'Dilexit Nos'

By David J. Bonnar

How do they do it?

This question often comes to mind when I look at parents raising a child in today's world. What an awesome responsibility they face every day, as parents entrusted with the formation of life—along with introducing them into a relationship with Jesus Christ in an increasingly secular world. At the baptism of their child, parents accept the charge to be the first teachers in the ways of the faith. The home becomes that first and perpetual classroom for learning, with a steady stream of lessons to be taught and learned—without the benefit of breaks or snow days. Parenting is a 24/7 reality.

One of the more foundational lessons presented by parents to their children is surely the concept of the human heart. Looking back, I am amazed how my parents impart-

ed this lesson to five children. I am equally humbled how my four siblings are teaching this lesson today to their own children.

While the heart is embedded under the skin and invisible to the human eye, its steady beat lets us know that it is there. Of course, in moments of stress, surprise or strenuous labor, the heart can skip a beat or even begin to race. We first learn that the heart is a physical organ essential for human life.

As we grow in age, our parents teach us that there is more to understand about the heart than just the physical sense. There are the feelings and desires, both heartwarming and heartbreaking, that emanate from it. What is more, we come to know that the heart has its own language that enables us to speak: thus the phrase “heart to heart.” At the



The Mosaic of the Sacré-Cœur in Montmartre, located in the Basilica of the Sacred Heart in Paris

very least, we learn that the heart is the well of love with a revolving door that receives and gives love with Christ as the source.

And yet, the Psalmist reminds us that our hearts can become dirty and poisoned when he prays, “Create a clean heart in me, O God” (Ps 51:10). Suffice it to say, the human heart is a precious but ever so fragile part of our being, one that can engender feelings good and bad. When these bad feelings (or, worse yet, feelings of indifference) emerge, it is as if we lose heart. Perhaps this idea of not losing heart amid trials and difficulties is the greatest lesson every parent must teach. No doubt, this is a lesson that demands not just repetition but genuine witness, for actions speak louder than words.

In Luke 18, Jesus tells a parable about the necessity

of praying always so as not to grow weary. In some translations, “not to grow weary” is rendered as “not to lose heart.” It is important to remember, too, that St. Paul on various occasions encouraged the ecclesial communities to whom he wrote not to lose heart. The author of Hebrews makes the same appeal: “Consider how he endured such opposition from sinners, in order that you may not grow weary and lose heart” (Heb 12:3). One of the real temptations, then and now, for any human being is to lose heart.

‘Create in Me a New Heart’

In October of this past year, Pope Francis added his voice to this chorus of encouragement inviting people not to lose heart. The Holy Father issued an encyclical on the human heart titled “Dilexit Nos,” which means “He Loved Us.”

The first hint of this affirmation of Jesus’ love for us was revealed in Pope Francis’ apostolic exhortation “*Evangelii Gaudium*” (“The Joy of the Gospel”). Early in that exhortation, Pope Francis wrote the following about newness:

The real newness is the newness which God mysteriously brings about and inspires, provokes, guides and accompanies in a thousand of ways. The life of the Church should always reveal clearly that God takes the initiative, that ‘he has loved us first’ (1 Jn 4:19) and that he alone ‘gives the growth’ (1 Cor 3:7). This conviction enables us to maintain a spirit of joy in the midst of a task so demanding and challenging that it engages our entire life. God asks everything of us, yet at the same time he offers everything to us. (No. 12)

“Dilexit Nos” gives special attention to the human and divine love of the heart of Jesus Christ. Like a loving parent, Pope Francis is inviting us to reflect on the human heart beyond the biological sense in relation to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The Holy Father wants us to know the power of the heart beyond the physical sense, and its value for the good of the world. He writes:

A society dominated by narcissism and self-centeredness will increasingly become “heartless.” This will lead in turn to the “loss of desire,” since as other persons disappear from the horizon we find ourselves trapped within walls of our own making, no longer capable of healthy relationships. As a result, we become incapable of openness to God. (No. 17)



Pope Francis is inviting us to reflect on the human heart beyond the biological sense.

Our lives as human beings are to be centered in love for God and one another. “In the deepest fiber of our being, we were made to be loved and to love,” Pope Francis writes (No. 21). The heart is the locus for this experience of being loved and loving.

Pope Francis’ reflection on the heart gives flesh and depth to “a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them” called for in “*Evangelii Gaudium*” (No. 3). An encounter is inauthentic without the heart. This is something for us to keep in mind when we meet Jesus in prayer. It is important that we bring our whole heart while opening that same heart entirely to him.

Devotion to the Sacred Heart

One of the ways we can intentionally and collectively grow in this heart-to-heart encounter with Jesus is through a deeper devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. “Devotion to the heart of Christ is not the veneration of a single organ apart from the Person of Jesus,” Pope Francis writes in “*Dilexit Nos.*” “What we contemplate and adore is the whole Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man, represented by an image that accentuates his heart. The heart of flesh is seen as the privileged sign of the inmost being of the incarnate Son and his love, both divine and human” (No. 48).

Imagine the graces that could flow if each Catholic parish or diocese made a consecration to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Such an intentional and shared act could yield a fountain overflowing with tenderness, compassion, mercy and unity. Like Jesus, we could collectively become to our families, communities and the world a love that gives itself as drink. The world is thirsting for this love. There is no more compelling way for us to respond to Christ’s love than to go forth and be that love for our brothers and sisters, especially those who find themselves thirsty and on the periphery.

On a more personal level, what if every believer were to present himself or herself consistently to the image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and behold Christ’s love for us

reflected in his heart? I remember from my time as a parish priest a parishioner who, every day following Mass, stood before a statue of the Sacred Heart and intently gazed at the heart of Jesus while at the same time giving his heart to him. Any gaze at that sacred image should, despite the crosses we may be carrying, convince us that “He loved us.” It should also encourage us to love him in our suffering and pains in that same way.

Just the same, in our conversations and encounters with others we need to present our full heart and behold the heart of those whom we are encountering. It takes courage to be a person of heart. In fact, that word *courage* itself has the Latin word for *heart* as its linguistic root.

When we behold the heart not just in ourselves but in others, even those with whom we might struggle with for one reason or another, great things can happen. We can change the world, one by one, heart by heart. “It is only by starting from the heart that our communities will succeed in uniting and reconciling differing minds and wills, so that the Spirit can guide us in unity as brothers and sisters,” Pope Francis writes in “*Dilexit Nos.*” “Reconciliation and peace are also born of the heart. The heart of Christ is ‘ecstasy,’ openness, gift and encounter. In that heart, we learn to relate to one another in wholesome and happy ways, and to build up in this world God’s kingdom of love and justice. Our hearts, united with the heart of Christ, are capable of working this social miracle” (No. 28).

Perhaps that is the lesson *par excellence* that we are to master from our parents and pass on to the next generation: namely, that when we join our heart to the Sacred Heart of Jesus as well as unite our heart to others, miracles can happen. We can transform the world.

This mission to love our brothers and sisters is not easy, nor is it something we can do on our own. Pope Francis writes: “Love for our brothers and sisters is not simply the fruit of our own efforts; it demands the transformation of our selfish hearts. This realization gives rise to the oft-repeated prayer, ‘Jesus, make our hearts more like your own’” (No. 168). And we might add one more line to this prayer: “And may we not lose heart.”

The Gospel for this year’s feast of the Holy Family references the heart of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which is known in our Catholic tradition as “the Immaculate Heart of Mary.” Having weathered a parent’s worst nightmare, the potential loss of a child, Mary and Joseph find Jesus in the temple. Like any parents, their hearts were rattled, as evidenced by Mary’s first words to Jesus: “Son, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been looking for you with great anxiety” (Lk 2:48). Jesus responds by letting his parents know that he had to be about his Father’s business.

Luke points out that Mary and Joseph did not understand what Jesus had just said. The family continues on its way. We are told, “and his mother kept all these things in her heart” (Lk 2:51). This reiterates what was already said in a previous verse, namely: “And Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart” (Lk 2:19). Obviously, Mary took what she had experienced to the depths of her being and continued to unpack to the best of her ability the mystery of it all.

Sent Forth to Love

Very soon we will begin the holy season of Lent, which adds yet another voice speaking to the heart. On Ash Wednesday, the Prophet Joel will exhort us with these words: “Yet even now, oracle of the Lord, return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, weeping, and mourning. Rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting in punishment” (Jl 2:12-13). But when we come to Jesus, he is always there to love us, and in that love, he sends us forth as missionaries of love.

As we go forth to share his heart with the hearts of others in this time of Jubilee, there is consolation in knowing that Jesus is always with us. But we must do our part. In fact, Pope Francis states, “For this friendship to mature, however, it is up to you to let him send you forth on a mission in this world, and to carry it out confidently, generously, freely, and fearlessly. If you stay trapped in your own comfort zone, you will never really find security; doubts and fears, sorrow and anxiety will always loom on the horizon” (No. 215).

However, we are graced by the ultimate source of trust: “Never forget that Jesus is at your side every step of the way. He will not cast you into the abyss or leave you to your own devices,” Francis writes. “He will always be there to encourage and accompany you” (No. 215).

In other words, he loved us and continues to love us. That said, how can we ever lose heart?

The Most Rev. David J. Bonnar *is the bishop of the Diocese of Youngstown, Ohio.*



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Our Journey With Alzheimer's

Two women religious reflect on how the disease has affected their lives

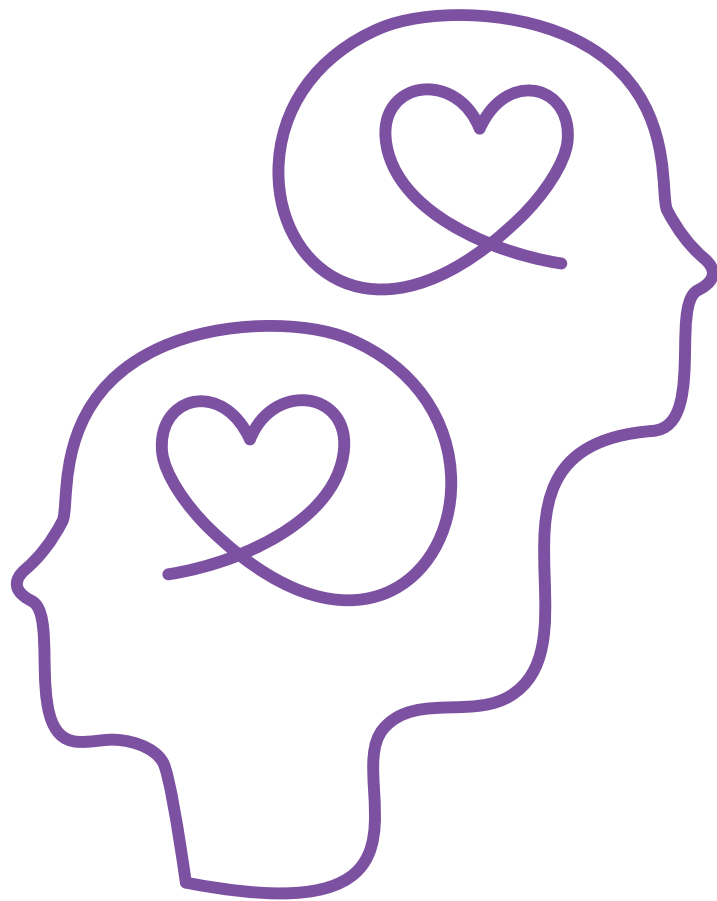
By Sheral Marshall and Maureen Sinnott

Sister Sheral: I write now with a sense of urgency. During the past few months, I have become more and more aware of how Alzheimer's has affected my behaviors and attitudes. I share my experience as a 77-year-old Franciscan sister looking forward to celebrating my 60th jubilee soon. At the same time, I am becoming more aware of my vulnerability and dreading my decline.

I was diagnosed with Alzheimer's in 2018, after four years of resisting, excusing and denying the major changes in too many of my everyday decisions and behaviors. Fortunately, Maureen Sinnott, O.S.F., the sister with whom I have been living for a long time, is a recently retired clinical psychologist. She refused to give up on her efforts to alert me to these constant behaviors that have indicated the presence of Alzheimer's since 2014.

Sister Maureen: Sister Sheral and I have been good friends for many years. She is still very articulate, joyous, positive and outgoing. She has a global heart that worries about and prays for all who live on the margins. Those who have been touched by her compassion and loving kindness include a very wide-open circle of multicultural friends. She has been a leader in our St. Francis Province of sisters and has been elected to our province leadership team, served as our vocation director for women interested in joining our community and been a member of our Marian Regional Medical Center hospital board. She has been coordinator of educational and outreach ministries for three multicultural parishes in the San Francisco Bay Area for decades and has served as leader of the vocations offices in the Sacramento and San Francisco dioceses. She has been to our border with Mexico to better understand and serve those crossing over. After Hurricane Katrina, she went to Louisiana to help the survivors find temporary housing and other assistance.

We are blessed that Sister Sheral is still able to write about the vulnerability of living with Alzheimer's and ad-



vocate for others. But there is no cure. She is experiencing a decline, which we are facing together.

Sister Sheral: I am deeply aware of the constant gift my faith in our loving God provides for me—and everyone blessed with a spiritual foundation of whatever source—as we try to navigate the everyday reminders of our diminishing awareness and abilities. I can't imagine living with the very real limitations this disease imposes on me, as well as the anguish borne by all those caring for me, without a sense of God's support and guidance through it all.

After all these years, I am finally learning to accept and live with Alzheimer's in as healthy a way as possible. We walk for 40 minutes twice a day, eat healthily, sleep well and try to avoid stress as much as possible. I have no medical background, but I know that each person's experience with this disease will differ. And each person with Alzheimer's may, of course, identify various aspects of their diminishment as particularly difficult.

Sister Maureen: We both retired from full-time ministries three years ago and moved from the Bay Area to Arroyo Grande, Calif. In truth, Sisters of St. Francis never really retire; we continue to advocate and pray for people who are underserved, disenfranchised and on the margins until our last breath—and then, God willing, in heaven. As retirees, we are blessed to have abundant time to pray, jour-

nal, share our reflections on the Gospel at a deep-down, feeling-and-healing level, and continue trying to be bearers of hope, peace, joy and loving kindness.

It took me several years to get Sister Sheral to a neurologist. Who wants to hear that they may have Alzheimer's? As a clinical psychologist, I noticed changes in Sister Sheral and started documenting them a decade ago. She was slowly declining, but because she was so articulate, she hid the signs from many others. She resisted, delayed, denied and kept repeating and minimizing my concerns by saying, "You worry too much." It was her way of focusing on me rather than focusing on the changes we both were seeing in her behavior. I was more stressed and worried about her than she was worrying about herself. And that is the beginning of the story of most caregivers: getting through the hurdles of denial, resisting, delaying and getting your loved one to agree to the care they need.

Sister Sheral: St. Ignatius' famous Suscipe prayer reads, in part: "Take, Lord, receive all my liberty, my memory, understanding, and my entire will.... Give me only your love and your grace. That is enough for me."

When I was young, it was easy to pray this prayer, but it is much more difficult for me to pray it now. I am grieving, losing so many examples of "my liberty": driving, walking without wearing an emergency call button, taking my medications by myself, using credit cards or my computer, or serving as a delegate at our provincial meeting. All of these new limitations are unchosen experiences for me. The helplessness I feel is intensified after being independent and a leader all my adult life; so many of my ordinary abilities have vanished, never to be regained. My life will continue for as long as God gives me, and the blessing of still being able to write and speak can hopefully help the many others experiencing this.

Losing "my memory" means that I have no choice over what I remember or forget. Names of people I dearly love and have spent great times with long ago are gone. Other times, I can see a recent friend's face, but the name will not come, nor will the particulars of our relationship. Someone will relate a significant conversation or experience of which I was a part, and I have no recollection of it or the other persons involved. Major community events or decisions, even if I have participated in them actively and/or recently read about them, have disappeared forever.

Lately, it feels frightening and scary to me that my memory has been so fleeting and fragile, words I have never used in this regard. I find myself hoping these moments will be rare, rather than the new normal. I wish it were the former. What I am sure of is that God will be with me, either way, as God has always been.



Sheral Marshall, O.S.F., left, who has Alzheimer's, and Maureen Sinnott, O.S.F., who serves as her caregiver, have become advocates for others who are affected by the disease.

The ability to process and gain understanding—being able to think something through completely—is also vanishing. I often need to ask someone to repeat something she or he has expressed very clearly, since I have difficulty following even a simple, logical conversation. It may seem as if I am distracted or simply not paying attention, but the reality is that my mind simply cannot take in what is being presented, no matter how clearly. We all realize that regular, significant conversations and memorable, shared experiences are vital to sustaining and deepening valued relationships. What a challenge it is and always will be to build meaningful relationships without such a foundation.

I have trouble understanding visual images and spatial relationships, which is one of the 10 warning signs of Alzheimer's, and I am experiencing it worsening. This means that my visual perception is off. I can place something of any size or shape on a flat surface and it falls off, since though my eyes see it correctly, my mind cannot process it accurately. This is embarrassing; people who are unaware of my disability could understandably wonder why I am so clumsy. I regularly run into obvious, often large objects for the same reason, often resulting in bruising on my forearms and legs. As I'm typing this article, it is evident that this limitation also causes my fingers to hit the wrong keys, thus creating a need for many corrections to the spelling

The first hurdle for most caregivers is getting your loved one to agree to the care they need.

of the simplest words. The bottom line for me is that, with this condition, I must allot extra time to accomplish almost anything I need to do.

Sister Maureen: Some of the warning signs that Sister Sheral had Alzheimer's were when she began forgetting how to do everyday, common activities. She would leave the stovetop on and burn pots and pans, forget to lock the garage or house door, and have problems paying with credit cards. She was having difficulty completing familiar tasks like how to use the TV remote, turn on the dishwasher or use her computer. She also frequently misplaced house keys, car keys and sunglasses, and was sometimes unable to retrace her steps to find them, which is another warning sign. I am now careful not to leave anything around the house that she might misplace. She is a creative cook who loves to change up recipes but has challenges planning and solving problems, and sometimes supper is an hour later than expected because she is slowing down. Of course, by then we are both hungry, and I try to pause and thank God that she can still take her turn preparing supper. Sometimes, when she repeats a story, I pause and try to listen even more closely, and I thank God that she can still tell me a story.

Driving became extremely challenging for Sister Sheral. She began having trouble understanding visual images and spatial relationships, which is another warning sign. When cars would enter our lane, she did not slow down; she saw the car enter, but her brain was unable to process that she needed to slow down. She would wait until the last minute to change lanes to leave the freeway. Of course, other drivers honked their horns, but she insisted it was their fault, which told me her previous good judgment was fading. When I would ask her to stop driving, she would respond: "It is too much for me to process now," and "I don't have enough information yet to make the decision to not drive." Eventually, we made the decision that Sister Sheral would no longer drive. Anyone who has had to get the car keys from a loved one knows that this may be the most stressful negotiation ever, be-



Sheral Marshall, O.S.F., left, and Maureen Sinnott, O.S.F., participate in an annual Walk to End Alzheimer's.

cause they are surrendering a key aspect of their identity and independence.

Sister Sheral: After much reflection and prayer, I've also experienced what I honestly consider to be gifts from living with Alzheimer's. Through many decades of work in parishes and dioceses, I've facilitated Scripture studies, given retreats and served as a spiritual director for adults, as well as helping to design and coordinate formation programs for deacon candidates and spouses. I realize now that my ongoing interaction with these committed people has taught me to share my own journey of faith and struggles, and to share the changes living with Alzheimer's have brought about and are continuing to develop within me.

I have a greater realization of the importance of each relationship, each day and each situation, since I don't know how long I will be able to enjoy these gifts. I feel gratitude for the many abilities I still have, which in the past I often took for granted, and for the energy and commitment to share them now. I also feel a deeper understanding and acceptance of the limitations of others, a sense of the whole human family as one, each with our own gifts and challenges.

Though I am an optimistic extrovert by nature, I have tended to be very private about my deeper feelings and to share them with only a very few. Now I am much more in touch with my sense of vulnerability and moments of depression and grief and am able to express them, which is deepening my relationships. Recently, I had a brief experience of depression. My feelings were connected with the recognition that we all are going to die, and that Alz-



Maureen Sinnott, O.S.F., left, and Sheral Marshall, O.S.F., in back, attend a demonstration against climate change in San Francisco.

Maureen Sinnott, O.S.F., left, and Sheral Marshall, O.S.F., cook supper for friends.

heimer's really is a fatal disease. I don't know why this occurred to me then, but it caused me to cry as I shared my feelings with Sister Maureen. I told her that I was depressed and wondering how long I might live, and then we had a comforting and fruitful conversation.

I continue to reflect and to write in my journal, as has been my daily custom. I'm grateful to still be able to write (thankfully, I was an English major) and to share my story with Sister Maureen through presentations to Alzheimer's groups. For many years we have been advocates for local and global issues by donating, going to demonstrations, and calling and writing letters to senators and representatives. Hopefully, our sharing may encourage those who read this or hear us to deepen and rely on their own faith in the One they believe in and through whose embrace they are being held and sustained.

Sister Maureen and I hold a shared commitment from our different perspectives to continue speaking and writing opportunities through the Alzheimer's Association, while I can still speak to my experience. I feel gratitude to God for my community, the Sisters of St. Francis, whose values, openness to change, continual support and work for justice and peace have shaped and guide me still. My prayer is for all of us to know the presence of the One who loves us each day until we enter the life which never ends.

Sister Maureen: I want to be a companion to Sister Sheral on this journey for as long as I have breath. She is 77, and I am 83, so God only knows which one of us will get to heaven first. Sister Sheral has given her whole life in ser-

vice to others and has even decided to donate her brain for research when the time comes. But until then, we are trying to live in the present moment, grateful to be living together, and for all our blessings of still being mobile, reasonably healthy and able to advocate for others, trusting that God will provide!

Editors' note: If you have any concerns about yourself or a loved one, find out more at the Alzheimer's Association, www.alz.org.

Sheral Marshall, O.S.F., is committed to sharing her experience of Alzheimer's through speaking and advocating for those living with the disease and the family members and caregivers who love them. She earned a master's degree in theology from University of San Francisco.

Maureen Sinnott, O.S.F., is a retired clinical psychologist and worked as a nurse-midwife in Ireland, Taiwan and Tanzania. She is currently an advocate with the Alzheimer's Association.





OSV News photo/Paul Ratje, Reuters

Migrants from Venezuela wait next to people from other countries who are in line to be processed by the U.S. Border Patrol in El Paso, Tex., on Jan. 4, 2023.

Discerning Through Troubled Times

When countless immigrants struggled to find housing in my city, my spiritual training was put to the test

By Trinidad Raj Molina

I knew we had entered a troubled time when a family with a pregnant woman called me and said they had nowhere to live. City government officials had said immigrants were welcome, but practically speaking, the resources weren't there, and what it amounted to was that the migrants were welcome to live on the street.

Twelve years ago, I read *The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times*, by Dean Brackley, S.J. He was right in thinking that in the midst of real-world social issues, there isn't always a clear answer, yet we can find freedom. This past summer, I have had to put my training in Ignatian discernment to the test like never before.

I do immigration work in Kansas City, Mo., with Advocates for Immigrant Rights and Reconciliation. We got another call one night in May. A partner group let us know there was a local church that had no idea what to do with a Venezuelan family who arrived at their door.

The church staff and the immigrant family were happy to see me, but they had the misconception that someone from a refugee resettlement group would give the family housing. I had to break the bad news: Families seeking asylum don't have refugee status. And refugee resettlement organizations usually have federal funding only for those with United Nations refugee status. Asylum seekers often are on their own in their search for housing. In Kansas City, where I live, the majority of asylum cases lose in the end, and the families get a deportation order.

The church could offer the family space only until the end of the workday. That gave me less than eight hours to work community connections to find them a temporary place. The mother, a Catholic, and I prayed together, recognizing we would need God's help on this one.

Fortunately for her family, we found them a place to stay. Unfortunately, things did not always work out for many asylum seekers this year.

The whole network of immigration organizations here in Kansas City saw countless families arrive without prior notice. Almost always it was a Venezuelan family from Denver, but sometimes families came from New York or Texas. Usually they have the same story: *The Denver government bought us a bus ticket to Kansas City. We had the*

impression someone could receive us. But when we got off the bus station here, we wandered around and realized now we were living on the streets.

Once they have been living on the streets for a few days or weeks, they sometimes are able to contact an organization and ask for help to go to a city with a migrant shelter (we have no migrant shelters in Kansas City). It's been heartbreaking to tell families that in Kansas City the government currently offers no practical support for asylum seekers. Many nonprofits here do what they can, but no one was prepared for this. One partner group spent over \$50,000 of its own money on emergency hotel rooms, but they did not have a budget in place to keep filling in for what should have been a government responsibility.

On the part of the Kansas City municipal government, public comments were made months ago inviting immigrants to come. The problem is that local government had no understanding of the reality of housing for asylum seekers. When those comments were made, there was minimal coordination with local organizations that had real experience around asylum seekers.

The practice of busing migrants somewhere else without even trying to coordinate with local organizations ahead of time (as Denver city officials have tacitly acknowledged doing) is irresponsible, at best. It is one thing to honor people's right to choose where they want to go, but based on the stories of the families I met, most people did not have the information they needed to make an informed choice.

In one of the most shocking cases I have seen, an asylum seeker called me on a Saturday morning, just 30 minutes after arriving in Kansas City. There was a group of two families. One mother was pregnant and due to deliver in two weeks. How could anyone think they were doing her a favor by busing her to another city just to live on the streets? Our network scrambled to work on an emergency plan.

I have been exhausted by seeing this situation unfold again and again. Everyone in the immigration network here says the same thing: There was no plan for this.

It is, to recall the title of Father Brackley's book, a "troubled time."

I have kept my eyes on Christ and focused on the mission. None of the setbacks of the past year have deterred me from prioritizing families. Ignatian discernment is very powerful. But by the end of May there was a point where I felt mentally exhausted beyond belief. In the middle of that troubled time, I stopped.

I prayed my midday Examen. My spiritual director taught me to focus on gratitude. And in one of the most memorable moments of my spiritual life, I found the grace to pray to God, reviewing the entire past month, with all



I found the grace to pray to God, reviewing all the injustices, and somehow, I gave thanks to God for everything.

the injustices, all the setbacks, all the heartbreaks and all the turmoil—and extraordinarily, somehow, I gave thanks to God for *everything*.

Both at work and in my personal life, so many things had gone wrong all month (a storm tore the roof off of our office, and someone hit my car, to name a few). To actually give thanks was nothing short of a spiritual grace, what the Jesuits might call that deep sense of obedience. That means a listening heart that trusts in God, and the acceptance that things are not always in our control—knowing that even in such troubled times the Spirit is at work.

Considering how many bad things had happened all month, there was nothing to feel good about, and yet grace allowed me to give real thanks to the Holy Trinity. Then I could rest my heart and keep moving forward again, in a summer that became one of the most troubled times I've seen in my career.

I wouldn't normally remember a particular daily Examen, but I'll remember that day's for the rest of my life.

It's a troubled time. The way forward is not clear. But this is clear to me: Nationally and internationally, we have the money and space; what we do not currently have is the political will to create a new way forward for those coming to our country and for our nation itself. Inviting people to live on the streets is not the answer, but mass deportations are also not the way. It's time for a *global* discernment. This starts with examining ourselves and then taking a long, hard look at the global realities and local realities we might not want to see.

Trinidad Raj Molina is the founder of the VIA Immigrant and Refugee Ministry in the Diocese of Kansas City, Mo., and currently works for Advocates for Immigrant Rights and Reconciliation. He lives at Jerusalem Farm, a Catholic intentional community in Kansas City, Mo.



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All photos by Amanda Murphy

‘They’re Open to Anyone’

Brebeuf Jesuit Prep shares the Gospel in a unique, interfaith way

By Joe Hoover

Even though I interviewed high school student Samana Hassan for about 20 minutes, I never saw what she actually looked like, concealed as she was beneath a full-body Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles outfit. It was Halloween at Brebeuf Jesuit Preparatory School, the Indianapolis high school where Samana, a junior, is known for going big with costumes on holidays and spirit days.

The culture of the school seems to invite such sartorial expression. Samana seems to be completely comfortable interacting with the faculty, staff and students at Brebeuf as a deformed, green-and-yellow martial reptile. “As a community,” she said in a 2024 interview at the school, “they’re open to anyone.”

The school’s acceptance of a free and creative spirit, a school that is “open to anyone,” relates in Samana’s case not only to her choice of costumes but also her identity as a Muslim. Among a school population that is only 40 percent Catholic, Samana is one of 11 Muslim students. She is vice president of the Muslim Student Union.

Brebeuf also has 28 Jewish students, and for years has sponsored a Jewish Student Union. The school’s heritage of educating a significant population of Jewish students led to it becoming known in Indianapolis as “the Jewish Catholic school.” Brebeuf also typically enrolls a handful of Hindu students along with adherents of other Christian denominations and a number of students who identify as agnostic or atheist.

The high school has always had a particular, niche identity among Midwestern Jesuit high schools for serving a multi-faith (or even “no faith”) population, of being “open.” In today’s religious culture, Brebeuf could also be seen as a model for other Catholic institutions for evangelization and interreligious dialogue.

For some non-Christian students at the school, learning about Christianity has helped them grow deeper in their own faith. Samana began to explore the tenets of Islam more thoroughly after engaging with the dynamics of Christian faith in class. “Brebeuf taught me to have pride in my religion,” she said. “I thought, ‘I’m learning about other people’s religion, and when they ask me about my religion I don’t want to not have an answer.’”

For senior Lexi Konev, a Jewish student, classes in Christianity helped her find similarities between Judaism and Christianity. “Even though I don’t believe in God in the same way as my peers,” she said, “we still believe in love

Students and adult leaders pray over English teacher Jen Morris on a Kairos retreat at Brebeuf Jesuit Preparatory School in Indianapolis.

and goodness and kindness in a way that fosters a positive community.”

Learning about the life of a first-century Jewish carpenter also provided a unique way into exploring her own religion. “During class when we learn about Jesus and what he lived through, I am able to reflect on the Jewish values that he lived out of,” Lexi said.

Shoring Up Catholic Identity

When it was built in 1962, Brebeuf High School was surrounded by farmland. Now the farmland is gone, and the renamed Brebeuf Jesuit Preparatory School resides on the northwest corner of the Indianapolis city limits, within walking distance of a Buffalo Wild Wings and a Walmart and close to a few affluent Indianapolis suburbs like Carmel and Zionsville. Brebeuf educates roughly 800 students, and its vast campus includes tennis courts, soccer, football and baseball fields and a cross-country course. A large statue of St. Jean de Brébeuf, the 17th-century Jesuit saint and martyr, greets the students and visitors as they drive onto campus.

Unlike other Midwestern cities with Jesuit schools, such as Milwaukee, Chicago, Detroit and Cincinnati, Indianapolis did not experience a significant influx of European Catholic immigrants in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Catholicism has never dominated the city’s culture as in those other industrial cities. Its principal, Greg VanSlambrook, said that from the get-go, Brebeuf always had to widen its net outside traditional churchgoing Catholics.

The net-widening has continued. “For a traditional Jesuit school,” he said, (namely, schools other than the Cristo Rey and Nativity model schools) “it has the smallest Catholic population of any school in the United States—or is on the edge of it.”

Over the years, Brebeuf’s understanding of its Catholic identity has evolved. In the 1980s, Mr. VanSlambrook said, Brebeuf “cultivated a hybrid—it identified itself as a Jesuit and interfaith school.” In fact, Brebeuf’s identity as “Jesuit, Catholic and Interfaith” was part of the school’s mission statement up until 2004, he said.

Over the past 20 years, Jesuit schools across the country have sponsored initiatives to shore up their Catholic and Jesuit identity. In that period, “the Jesuits felt Brebeuf had strayed too far from its core identification,” Mr. VanSlambrook said. “Brebeuf removed the identity of school as ‘interfaith’ because it couldn’t philosophically square that question about what is an interfaith school and Catholic school. You can’t be both.”



Adam DeLeon, S.J., and students on a freshman retreat at Brebeuf

While Brebeuf no longer describes itself as an “interfaith” school, it still operates in an interreligious context. “Our approach is we are going to be a Jesuit, Catholic school that welcomes students of all faiths,” Mr. VanSlambrook said. “We would rather have that than for us to be a bland, watered-down [institution] that doesn’t identify with a specific faith tradition.”

In the early 2000s, Brebeuf brought back all-school Masses, which it had not held for decades. Megan Fridell, a Brebeuf junior, said that as a Jewish student, she feels comfortable at Catholic Masses. “I love listening to the sermons and students’ speeches,” she said. “The songs are really catchy. It’s a good learning experience, and they make you comfortable even if you’re not Catholic.”

Brebeuf still honors its informal reputation as a “Jewish Catholic school” by closing the school on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement—the holiest day of the Jewish calendar. “It really shows their effort to make us feel included in this community,” Megan said. “Brebeuf cares so much about their Jewish students; they treat us like the exact same.”

A Jewish parent, Todd Maurer, noted that the school taking Yom Kippur off was “unheard of in Indianapolis.” He said that “it means a tremendous amount” in the Indianapolis Jewish community and “speaks volumes about this Jesuit, Catholic school.”

Matt Couture, the former provincial assistant for secondary education in the USA Midwest Province of the Society of Jesus, said one of the most moving things he had witnessed at Brebeuf was when a Jewish parent said that Brebeuf is “our school.” This man had gone to Brebeuf, his children had gone there, and while they all identified as Jewish, he said this Catholic school was “ours.”



Students making vision boards on a freshman retreat at Brebeuf

Muslim Student Union

The Muslim Student Union at Brebeuf was created a few years ago in the aftermath of inflammatory public comments made about the state of Israel by a Muslim student at Brebeuf. The following academic year, the school convened students and parents over several meetings on the issues of Muslim-Jewish relations. Out of this, both Muslim and Jewish students started the Muslim Student Union. At the end of the year, students organized and ran a panel discussion open to the entire community on the topic of Muslim-Jewish relations.

As Mr. Maurer put it: “That’s a special way of handling it—not ignoring it. It’s embracing the Jesuit way—let’s learn about each other. Let’s be men and women for each other and not against each other.”

In the years since the founding of the Muslim Student Union, Muslim and Jewish students have often gone to one another’s meetings, sharing food and learning about each other’s faith. During Jewish holidays, the Jewish Student Union holds a trivia game (they playfully call it “Jewpardy”) about Judaism for anyone to play and learn about the faith.

Brebeuf’s campus ministry makes an effort to reach out to non-Christian students in both small and large ways. Shaughn Phillips, the director of campus ministry, said that during a ceremony at a Kairos retreat, Christian students receive a cross, Jewish students a Star of David, Muslim students a crescent moon, Hindu students an aum

or a lotus flower, and students who identify as agnostic can choose to receive a medal of a dove.

The campus ministry office also recently opened a “contemplation room.” It is a simply appointed space for students of all faiths or no identifiable faith to pray or take time apart from school for quiet and reflection. Mr. Phillips said that in his work with students of different faiths or those with non-identifiable faith, he is inspired by the words of the 13th-century Franciscan scholar, St. Bonaventure. “We love Muslims not because they’re Catholic but because we’re Catholic.”

Diversity can also benefit Christian students, Mr. Phillips said, “I have heard Christian students say that the openness of interreligious dialogue and religious diversity has helped reaffirm their own faith and articulate what they believe.”

Additionally, Mr. Phillips said that in his four years as campus minister, at least half a dozen students have joined the Catholic Church since going to Brebeuf.

Mr. Couture described how rare it is for any Catholic diocese in the country to have a school like Brebeuf that is “a portal for people of other faith traditions to enter into [a Catholic] school. In Indianapolis, there is this portal of entry into this school that Jewish and Muslim families want.”

Evangelizing at Brebeuf

The times have caught up with Brebeuf, Mr. Couture said, not only in terms of the school’s outreach to Muslim and



Adam Deleon, S.J., gives out ashes to cafeteria workers on Ash Wednesday in 2024.

Jewish students but to marginally Christian or even nonreligious families who may float in a sea of cultural indifference to religious practice. “By bringing Catholicism to a culture which is less and less Catholic,” he said, “Brebeuf is uniquely positioned to meet those families where they are and invite them to consider [the church] for themselves.”

As Mr. VanSlambrook put it, Brebeuf serves as a privileged place to share the good news of Jesus Christ. “Most of [these students] would not have an experience of Catholic or faith-based practice without being at Brebeuf. We are working with a population on the margins as regards how faith influences their life,” he said, “and we are bringing [faith] to them.”

Whether it has anything to do with its religious culture or not, one final takeaway seems to etch in stone something significant about life at this school. While the hallways at Brebeuf are lined with lockers that students secure their things in, there is one twist: No one uses a lock.

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

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When Catholics Controlled Hollywood

By John Dougherty

In 1930, Hollywood teamed up with the Catholic Church. The result was the Production Code, a censorship document that for almost 40 years dictated what movies could and could not depict. For Hollywood, it was a desperate attempt to avoid federal regulation, but for the Catholics who conceived, wrote and enforced the code, it was a chance to marry Catholic morality to popular culture and elevate the soul of a nation.

To understand how this unlikely alliance began, we need to go back to 1921. Roughly a decade after its birth, the American film industry had become a big business, and studios were courting Wall Street investors to provide the capital they needed as they grew. But Hollywood had also gained a reputation as the American Babylon, infamous for debauchery both on and off the screen. While newspapers breathlessly covered movie star scandals, state censorship boards hacked apart offending films, resulting in fines for

studios and plummeting ticket sales when these clumsily edited versions of the films reached theaters. In 1921 alone, representatives from 37 states introduced nearly 100 bills in Congress calling for federal regulation of the film industry; that made potential investors especially skittish.

Studio heads seized on a bold strategy: self-censorship. In 1922, Hollywood created the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, the predecessor to the modern Motion Picture Association. As its first chairman, the studio moguls appointed William H. Hays, the former chairman of the Republican National Committee and postmaster general under President Warren G. Harding.

Hays made several attempts to introduce clean movie guidelines: one was a list of “Don’ts” (topics that were off-limits) and “Be Carefuls” (topics that should be treated with “special care”). He ordered studios to submit all scripts and film concepts to the M.P.P.D.A.—nicknamed the

Hays Office—for approval before production could begin.

All of his efforts failed. Studio owners might fret about Wall Street, but producers knew that edgy films sold better. Indeed, studios that cooperated with Hays found that their clean pictures couldn't compete at the box office. In 1927, Universal Pictures co-founder Carl Laemmle complained to a colleague: "Invariably they are too damn clean and [audiences] stay away on account of it" (as quoted in Leonard Leff and Jerold Simmons's *The Dame in the Kimono: Hollywood, Censorship, and the Production Code*, a major history of the period). Filmmakers balked at censorship on principle, and actors were rankled by new morality clauses in their contracts. In 1929, studios submitted only 20 percent of their films to Hays for approval.

Martin J. Quigley, the publisher of the influential film industry trade journal *The Motion Picture Herald*, followed these developments closely. Quigley was a pious Catholic from Ohio who had long used his editorial pulpit to call for cleaning up the movies. In the Hays Office, he saw a solution. He imagined a new guiding code that would set moral standards for American films, inspired by Catholic teaching but broad enough that Hollywood would accept it.

In 1929, Quigley discussed the idea with his close friend FitzGeorge Dinneen, S.J., a member of Chicago's local censorship board. Father Dinneen promoted the idea to Cardinal George Mundelein of Chicago, who, in turn, exerted his influence on the officials of Halsey, Stuart & Co., a Chicago banking firm and major Hollywood investor. The bankers were more than happy to pressure the studios into cooperating.

Now they needed someone to write the code itself. Dinneen recommended a fellow Jesuit to Quigley: Daniel A. Lord, S.J.

A Tool for Good and Evil

Born in Chicago in 1888, Father Lord was a lover of music and theater. He used that passion in his ministry, writing and producing hundreds of morally edifying plays and musicals. He worked to reinvigorate the sodality of the Blessed Virgin Mary nationwide, and became a popular figure among Catholic youth. A talented pianist, Lord provided the soundtrack when (silent) films were screened for his Jesuit community. He had also served as an advisor for Cecil B. DeMille's 1927 film on the life of Christ, "The King of Kings." Lord believed that movies could be a powerful tool for good or evil and was intrigued by the proposition of a new code.

"It was a challenge," he wrote in his memoir *Played by Ear*. "Here was a chance to tie the Ten Commandments in

with the newest and most widespread form of entertainment.... Could the code be written that would stand up before the immoralist, the amoralist, the skilled dramatist, the producer who had risen from the slums, the auditor, the audience, the films of the day and of fifty years from now? I agreed most willingly to try."

The Production Code was short and direct, opening with three general principles:

1. No picture shall be produced which will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin.
2. Correct standards of life, subject only to the requirements of drama and entertainment, shall be presented.
3. Law, natural or human, shall not be ridiculed, nor shall sympathy be created for its violation.

It went on to list various subjects that should be excluded or handled carefully in films, including crime, sexual activity and profanity. The code's prohibitions ranged from depicting nudity to making a "razzberry" noise or using the term "cripes." Most important, the code demanded that good must always be rewarded and evil punished, usually with death. Moral ambiguity was forbidden.

Although the code made no reference to Catholic teaching, its imprint was all over the text. The section on sex began: "The sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home shall be upheld." Profanity prohibitions included "God, Lord, Jesus, Christ" ("unless used reverently"). A point under "Religion" reads: "Ministers of religion... should not be used as comic characters or as villains." Lord's original copy of the document was crowned with the inscriptions A.M.D.G. (Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam, "For the Greater Glory of God") and B.V.M.H. (Beatae Mariae Virginis Honore, "To the Honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary").

In 1930, the M.P.P.D.A. adopted the code. Lord and Quigley agreed that its Catholic authorship should remain a secret; many Americans were distrustful of Catholicism, and they feared a backlash. Hays took most of the credit, and it became popularly known as the Hays Code. Studios prepared to ignore it; by this time the Great Depression had begun, and audiences turned to the movies for an escape. Studio wisdom held that sex and violence sold, so Hollywood ramped up the racy content in films (and advertising) to entice bigger crowds. But the Catholic architects of the code had a secret weapon: the people in the pews.

With support from Quigley and Lord, films were black-



Many filmmakers never truly embraced the code; they just learned how to dodge it.

listed and boycotts organized. In 1934, Cardinal Dennis Dougherty of Philadelphia forbade any Catholic in his diocese from entering a movie theater under penalty of grave sin. That same year, Archbishop John T. McNicholas, O.P., of Cincinnati organized the Catholic Legion of Decency, a group missioned to oppose “indecent and immoral motion pictures.” Members took a pledge to “remain away from all motion pictures except those which do not offend decency and Christian morality.”

Pope Pius XI lent his support to the cause in the 1936 encyclical “*Vigilanti Cura*,” which warned about the power of cinema to strengthen or corrode the moral fiber of a nation and praised the Legion of Decency for its good work. (Lord wrote the actual text of the encyclical, according to the historian Stephen A. Warner.)

Hollywood might not have cared about Catholic morals, but it did care about Catholic ticket money. Chastened by the boycotts and the renewed threat of federal regulation under the New Deal, Hays created a department within the M.P.P.D.A. dedicated to code enforcement: the Production Code Administration. As the P.C.A.’s first director he appointed his assistant, a man recommended to him by Martin Quigley: Joseph Ignatius Breen.

A Tenacious Advocate

A tough, agile-minded Philadelphia Irish-Catholic, Breen had cut his teeth as a journalist for several Catholic publications, including *America*, where he used the pseudonym “Eugene Weare” and formed a lifelong friendship with the then-editor in chief, Wilfrid Parsons, S.J. A friend of Quigley’s, Breen took part in early conversations about the code. As head of the P.C.A., he became its most tenacious defender.

Hays had let studios slide, but not Breen. They now had to submit scripts for the code’s “seal of approval” before they could begin filming, and any film without the P.C.A.’s imprimatur would be banned from theaters owned by M.P.P.D.A. members—most of the major chains. Any studio that released a film without a seal was subject to a \$25,000 fine.

Reluctantly, the studios fell in line. Harry Warner, one

of the titular Warner Brothers, wired his producers: “If Joe Breen tells you to change a picture, you do what he tells you. If any one fails to do this—and this goes for my brother—he’s fired.” From its offices on Hollywood Boulevard, the P.C.A. reviewed every film in production, from source material to final cut. The staff was solidly Catholic, to the point that a Protestant applicant was once cautioned that his denomination might make him incompatible for the job (in fact, he was hired).

Breen was very hands-on, making personal visits to film sets and doling out notes that could be hyper-specific, from mandating a higher neckline on an actress’s dress to removing a shot of a baby in diapers. He was pugnacious and unyielding, willing to fight Hollywood power players like Howard Hughes and David O. Selznick to the bitter end. Despite his professional dedication to propriety he was famous for his colorful language, which he used to earn the attention and respect of tough-talking Hollywood moguls. (Variety noted: “Hollywood is turning out cleaner pictures because of Joe Breen’s profanity.”) But he was also gregarious and charming, traits that won him friends as well as enemies among the filmmakers with whom he did battle.

One notable impact the Code had on American filmmaking was an increase of Catholic stories and characters. Films like “Boys Town” (1938), “Angels With Dirty Faces” (1938), and “Going My Way” (1944) and its sequel, “The Bells of St. Mary’s” (1945), featured Catholic clergy and religious as heroes. Hollywood leading men Spencer Tracy, Gregory Peck, Pat O’Brien and Bing Crosby all portrayed priests, and between 1943 and 1945 Catholic movies were nominated for 34 Oscars, according to Charles Morris’ *American Catholics: The Saints and Sinners Who Built America’s Most Powerful Church*. During this time, the Protestant Digest complained: “A visitor from Mars, popping into a dozen cinemas at random, would be convinced that the United States is a Catholic nation.” According to Thomas Doherty’s *Hollywood’s Censor: Joseph I. Breen and the Production Code Administration*, the preponderance of Catholic films can be attributed to a desire to attract Catholic filmgoers (a major demographic) and the fundamentally cinematic (and, at that time in America, exotic) nature of Catholic ritual. But it was also motivated by the desire to stay on Breen’s good side.

Many filmmakers never truly embraced the code; they just learned how to dodge it. “It was not easy...because they were very powerful and you had to be very smart,” the writer and director Billy Wilder recalled in 1978 at the American Film Institute. “Those days, in order to say, ‘You son of a bitch,’ you had to say, ‘If you had a mother, she’d bark.’” According to *Hollywood’s Censor*, the screenwriter Donald



The Hays Office was set up in response to violence in films like “Scarface” (1932).

Ogden Stewart once noted: “I used always to write three or four scenes which I knew would be thrown out, in order that we could bargain with Joe Breen for the retention of other really important episodes.”

The code’s power began to wane before World War II, when studios ignored code rules against criticizing foreign governments to make anti-Nazi films. The code also forbade propaganda, but once America entered the war, the Office of War Information enlisted Hollywood for exactly that purpose. In 1948, antitrust suits forced studios to give up ownership of theater chains, granting theater owners greater freedom to show films whether they had a seal of approval or not. Foreign films that weren’t bound by the code became box office competitors, which opened the door for American directors to make more challenging films. When Otto Preminger’s “The Moon is Blue” (1953) failed to receive a code seal, United Artists distributed it anyway; the film packed theaters and grossed over \$4 million.

The code’s strong Catholic support also dwindled. The Legion of Decency had faded from relevance, and with it the threat of boycotts. In his 1957 encyclical “Miranda Prorsus,” Pope Pius XII directed Catholics toward the promotion of good films rather than the condemnation of bad ones. But the greatest blow came when a weary Breen retired in 1954. After his departure, the P.C.A. never regained its former power.

When it denied code seals to Sidney Lumet’s “The Pawnbroker” (1965) and Mike Nichols’s “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?” (1966), the M.P.A.A. (as the M.P.P.D.A.

was renamed in 1945) overruled them and approved the films. In 1954, Quigley pitched the M.P.A.A. on a celebratory short film for the code’s 20th anniversary but was refused. The code had begun to feel like a relic, even to the people who enforced it.

In the end, it was another Catholic who killed the code: Jack Valenti, who became president of the M.P.A.A. in 1965. Short, gregarious and with a history in advertising, Valenti had most recently served as aide and confidante to President Lyndon B. Johnson.

“I didn’t like the Hays Code, and I was determined to throw it over the side, the sooner the better,” Valenti wrote in his memoir *This Time, This Place: My Life in War, the White House, and Hollywood*. In 1968, he replaced the code with a letter-based rating system: G for General Audiences, R for Restricted and so on. Instead of censoring filmmakers, the ratings system allowed individual moviegoers to make informed decisions for themselves and their families.

“We had to make sure the First Amendment held sway, that filmmakers could tell any story they chose to tell,” Valenti wrote. “But I also emphasized that freedom demanded responsibility.”

By this point, all of the architects of the code were gone. Lord died in 1955; shortly before, he gave an overly optimistic assessment of the code’s legacy: “The whole industry learned that good morals are good business.” Quigley died nine years later. Breen was the last, passing in 1965. Many church leaders attended his funeral, but the film industry did not send an official representative. The brief marriage of Catholicism and Hollywood was over.

Crusaders, Not Missionaries

The story of the Production Code holds lessons for today’s Catholics.

We would all like to see a world that more closely resembles the kingdom of God. Like Quigley, Lord and Breen, I believe that entertainment plays a role in that: The stories that a society tells shape that society, for better or worse. The code now feels archaic, but—especially as a Catholic parent and educator—I understand the desire for a moral standard guiding our stories.

I also understand the impulse to make our culture moral by force. That was the logic behind the code, and we hear echoes in the integralist dream of a “confessional state” where Catholic doctrine is imposed by force of law. But I believe the primary lesson to take from the history of the Production Code is this: It failed. The code was an attempt to impose Catholic teaching without first inspiring conversion; it was doomed from the start.

In his 2013 exhortation “The Joy of the Gospel” (“*Evangelii Gaudium*”), Pope Francis warns against evan-

The Jesuit Daniel Lord believed that movies could be a powerful tool for good or evil.

gelizing through moral principles alone: “We need to be realistic and not assume that our audience understands the full background to what we are saying, or is capable of relating what we say to the very heart of the Gospel which gives it meaning, beauty and attractiveness.”

To Lord and Quigley, the principles of the code were self-evidently good, and people would recognize that and assent to them. But they approached Hollywood as crusaders instead of missionaries, with tactics that forced compliance instead of inspiring cooperation. This can be a viable strategy for political change, but not evangelization. Filmmakers cooperated with the code because they had to, not because they believed in its principles; consequently, their cooperation was halfhearted and resentful, and many looked for every opportunity to subvert it.

The critic Walter Kerr made this point in a negative review of the religious epic “Quo Vadis” (1951) for *Commonweal*:

We hear a great deal about the “influence” which Catholicism has had on the American screen. We forget that this influence has been wholly of one kind: the influence of the pressure group. The Legion of Decency is an economic weapon; the production code was written under the standing fear of boycott. Neither represents an intellectual victory in the sense that an esthetic principle has been stated with such clarity and force as to bring about free assent. The only persuasiveness we have been able to whip up is the persuasiveness of the dollar.

Our goal should be to convert culture, not conquer it. When Catholics support censorship, we present our faith as reactive, frightened and unreasonable (Kerr wrote that censorship “discredits the entire Catholic intellectual tradition”). But when we have the courage to enter into dialogue with challenging art—including well-reasoned and compelling criticism—we offer our faith as something to take seriously.

The synthesis report produced by the first meeting



Ingrid Bergman and Bing Crosby in “The Bells of St. Mary’s” (1945)

of the Synod on Synodality in 2023 called the church to become a conversation “within itself and with the world, walking side by side with every human being in the style of Jesus.” Evangelization, then, should be marked by an openness to listen, not to shut out all voices but our own.

It is worth noting that many great films from the last 50 years would not have met code standards, including “The Godfather,” “Schindler’s List,” “Moonlight” and the entire filmography of Martin Scorsese. It would be ridiculous to say those films have no moral merit. I also believe films like “Goodfellas” or “The Social Network” could not make such compelling moral arguments if all of the characters behaved like angels, or were killed at the end as the wages of sin. (Though some viewers, admittedly, take the wrong lessons from these films, and they are not appropriate for all audiences.)

Of course, there are plenty of filmmakers who just want to shock, provoke or make a quick buck. But when we trust filmmakers and audiences to engage with controversial topics, we get better films and a richer culture.

John Dougherty is the director of mission and ministry at St. Joseph’s Preparatory School in Philadelphia, and the moderator and author of the Catholic Movie Club at americamagazine.org.

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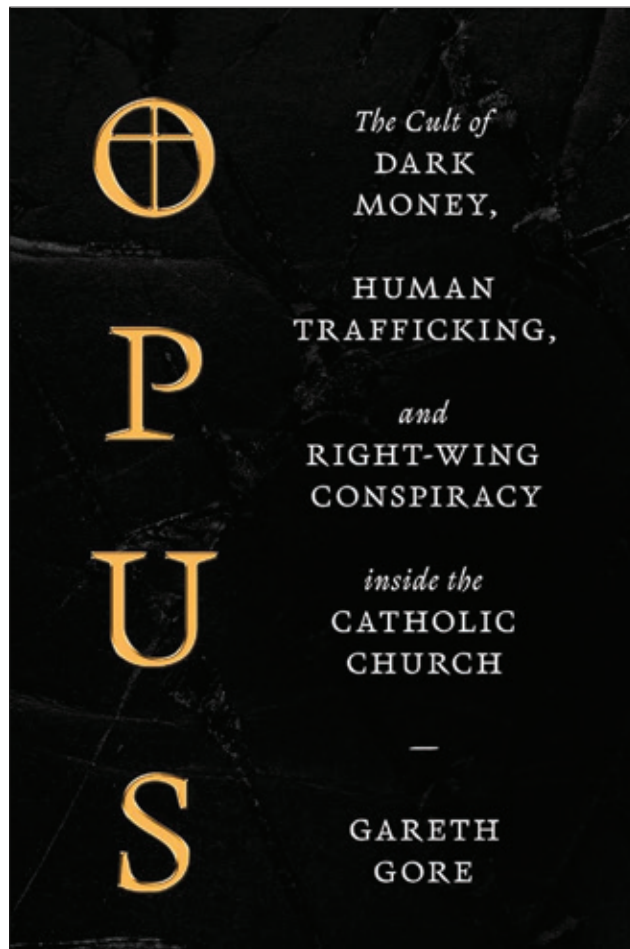
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A DEEP DIVE



Simon and Schuster / 448p \$31

Reading the pages of Gareth Gore's *Opus: The Cult of Dark Money, Human Trafficking, and Right-Wing Conspiracy Inside the Catholic Church* in the days leading up to Halloween last fall was a scary endeavor.

The reader will encounter in these pages a frenetic journey through the last near-century of the Catholic Church's only personal prelature, Opus Dei. Many will be familiar with how Opus Dei has been portrayed in popular media in the two decades since the publication of Dan Brown's best-selling novel *The Da Vinci Code*. Gareth Gore, a financial reporter who did not set out to write a book on Opus Dei, examines Brown's work along with many other seminal moments in the history of this controversial Catholic group.

The first thing to note about *Opus* is the tremendous amount of research that went into the project. This involved serious attention to many published works on the prelature, personal interviews with present and former members of Opus Dei (including significant leadership fig-

ures), and archival research materials.

Opus Dei was founded in 1928 to be an association of mostly lay Catholics who would seek holiness through their daily activities and secular jobs. Most members are supernumeraries, which means they can be married and live independently, in their own homes; others are numeraries, making a promise of celibacy and living in Opus Dei centers in community. A few thousand women are members at the rank of numerary assistants, to serve the male numeraries; there are associates who, like numeraries, are celibate, but live outside an Opus Dei residence; and, finally, there are fewer than 2,000 members of the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross, who report directly to the superior of Opus Dei.

When Gore began his research, he meant for the resulting project to be a deep dive into the Spanish bank Banco Popular, which collapsed in 2017. Through his investigation, Gore discovered a group known as "The Syndicate" that was responsible for funding Banco Popular. The dissolution of the companies that comprised The Syndicate was simultaneous with the bank's collapse, and this concurrence of events brought Gore into greater touch with the secretive world of Opus Dei. The religious organization was involved because many of the major players in Opus Dei were also major players in the bank, none more so than the Spanish financier and influential Opus Dei member Luis Valls-Taberner.

Gore structures his book around three complementary narratives: one financial, one political and one ecclesial. While there is also some history involved in this study, it almost always serves to advance one of Gore's three main trajectories. The financial account is where Gore is obviously most at home. Valls-Taberner's illness and death, the role his membership in Opus Dei played in the sidelining of his brother Javier from his role in the bank, and the details of infighting to take over the reins of the bank are all fascinating aspects of this account.

This is all new material that Gore has uncovered through painstaking research and careful tracing of otherwise vague and disjointed lines. He is to be commended for making these links, particularly between The Syndicate and Banco Popular before the bank's collapse. Gore did his homework: "Tracing the flow of money through the various layers of companies, it seemed the beneficiaries [of the bank] were charitable foundations with one thing in common—links to Opus Dei."

Gore does a fine job of discovering where the money came from, where it went and how Opus Dei was involved, always doing its part to be dissociated from the bank; though there was no paper trail that led back to Opus Dei

as an organization at any point, Gore clearly shows the connections. This is the greatest achievement of the book and a major development beyond John Allen's reporting in his 2005 work, *Opus Dei*.

The political narrative of the book can trace itself from the Spanish dictator Francisco Franco right through Donald J. Trump. The link, oddly enough, is Opus Dei's founder, Saint Josemaría (originally "José María," as Gore tells us) Escrivá. At one stage, Escrivá gave a "private, six-day retreat for [Franco] and his wife at the El Pardo palace, where they lived." Even though Escrivá insisted Opus Dei would operate above politics, he maintained a personal relationship with Franco, and the dictator was a benefactor to both Escrivá and Opus Dei.

Skip ahead a few generations, to when the U.S. political operative Leonard Leo enters the picture. In recent years, it has become clear that no history of Catholicism in the United States in the 21st century will be possible without a careful focus on Leo, whose financial resources and political connections are perhaps without compare in Washington. Leo's longtime connection with the Federalist Society alone has shaped the U.S. Supreme Court for generations to come, as President Trump appointed three judges recommended by Leo for the current court. While Gore notes that Leo is not himself a member of Opus Dei, Leo is a significant contributor to Opus Dei causes and has many financial and organizational links with the prelature.

Gore dives into the details of these backroom channels, while also tracing Leo's traditional brand of Catholicism and his links of varying degrees to other members of the first Trump administration—some of whom are members of Opus Dei, and others of whom serve on the board of the Catholic Information Center, which is always staffed by an Opus Dei chaplain and has obvious ties to the organization. As Gore concludes, "Not since the Franco regime had the movement had such direct access to political power" as it does in the United States today.

If Opus Dei has been riding high politically as of late, it has been in decline in church circles, which represents an underreported shift in Pope Francis' pontificate. Gore does well to call this shift to our attention. While there are two Opus Dei members in the College of Cardinals, both of them (Julián Herranz and Juan Luis Cipriani Thorne) have aged out of voting eligibility. Archbishop José Gómez of Los Angeles, also a member of Opus Dei, has never been made a cardinal despite leading the largest archdiocesan church in the United States.

Even more troublesome for Opus Dei in terms of its church influence is that their current leader, Monsignor Fernando Ocáriz, is the first man to hold the position of

prelate of Opus Dei (its ultimate superior) and not be an ordained bishop. This is not a clerical oversight, but an explicit decision made by Pope Francis in a 2022 *motu proprio*.

The following year, Francis published a second *motu proprio* that changed two canons concerning personal prelatures. (Created by Pope John Paul II, personal prelatures are canonical structures in the Catholic Church that operate independently of dioceses. Remember, Opus Dei is currently the only one!) These canons especially deal with the place of the laity, who comprise the overwhelming majority of Opus Dei's membership.

Tim Busch of the Napa Institute, who has been closely linked with Opus Dei, told Gore, "I think something important is happening, something not so good. I think [Francis] is tightening the noose, but I don't think he's going to have enough time." Gore explains the position of Opus Dei as more fraught now than at any other time in its history, noting that the prelature is "preparing itself for more direct [papal] intervention." Only time will tell what the future of the organization is within the church.

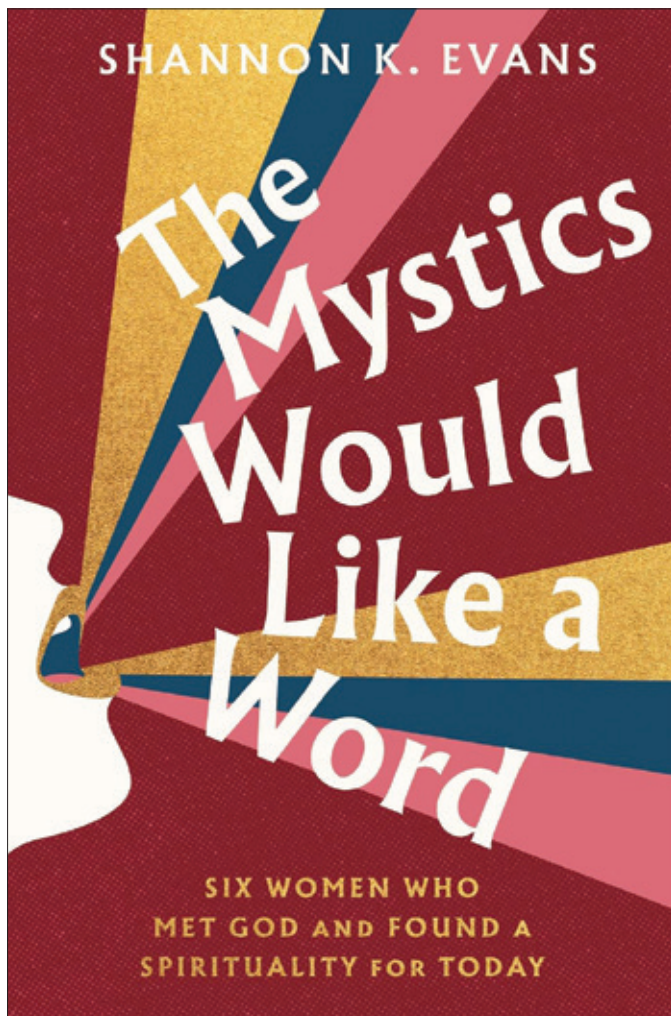
This review would not be complete without acknowledging that Opus Dei has responded to the book with a press release. They claim that Gore gained access to various members of Opus Dei under the false pretenses of writing a book about Luis Valls-Taberner. However, Gore himself has stated that the subject of the book changed as he was researching it.

Opus Dei also says that the prelature had "no role" in the events surrounding the collapse of Banco Popular. That is exactly what we would expect from the prelature after reading Gore's argument on this point. Opus Dei as an organization goes to great pains to remove itself from direct involvement in financial, political and ecclesial scandals. And yet, as Gore painstakingly shows, Opus Dei's influence is never far from such controversies and, in some cases, serious crimes.

This is not a perfect book. At times, it would have been improved had a theologian or Vatican analyst edited some of Gore's writings on the church. This misgiving notwithstanding, *Opus* has certainly become required reading on the subject of Opus Dei.

We will soon see how Opus Dei's role in the church evolves. That will then determine how it will work politically. In the meantime, follow the money. We are indebted to Gore for this reminder.

Daniel Cosacchi is vice president for mission and ministry and a lecturer in the theology department at the University of Scranton. He is the author of *Great American Prophets: Pope Francis's Models of Christian Life*.



Convergent Books / 208p \$26

This summer bloomed with images of strong women embracing their whole selves. We watched Taylor Swift sing in sequins about how much easier things would be if she were a man. Simone Biles achieved three Olympic gold medals while advocating for the importance of mental health. And Ilona Maher took the internet by storm as she dominated the rugby field, then rocked a *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit cover, all while promoting the importance and beauty of all body types. Kamala Harris ran for the highest office in our country with a campaign vibrant with the belief that women can contain multitudes.

While these current cultural examples speak volumes to women's identity, I often wonder where the images of empowered women are in the Catholic Church. After all, our perception of our foremothers in the church affects how we engage with faith and spirituality. We are consistently fed images of meek, demure women quietly living out their faith. This can be a beautiful expression, but where are the firecrackers who forged new paths?

Where are the reformers, the questioners, the women bold enough to trust themselves, who lived out a feminine spirituality?

Shannon K. Evans, a vocal proponent for women finding their voice and place within spirituality, has our answer. In her new book, *The Mystics Would Like a Word: Six Women Who Met God and Found a Spirituality for Today*, Evans beautifully articulates how the spirituality developed by these mystics still inspires and applies to us today.

Evans expertly weaves her own experiences with stories of the mystics into a tapestry of welcome for those who have felt like outsiders in the church of the well-behaved. She re-examines and revitalizes the stories of the mystics through the female gaze. As in her earlier works, *Rewilding Motherhood* and *Feminist Prayers for My Daughter*, nourishing themes like the intersectionality of Christianity, feminism and liberation reside within the pages of this book.

Written with her trademark humor and candor, *The Mystics Would Like a Word* emphasizes that mysticism is meant for all people. Using affectionate nicknames and epithets for the mystics such as “Big Sis” for Teresa of Ávila, or “the eccentric patron of self-belonging” for Margery Kempe, Evans creates the feel of community through her words.

The experience of reading pieces of Evans' story alongside the journeys of the mystics feels like encountering dear friends. This is a group of women who see all your jagged edges that other churchgoers may have balked at and say: “You are loved. Your experience matters. I have been there too.” The book leaves you with the distinct impression that you have friends alongside you on the path of feminine spirituality not only in the mystics, but also in Evans herself.

A few years ago, I was at a tender place in my faith, feeling adrift from religion in part due to the pandemic and need for quarantine. The scraps of community I found online for Catholic women felt limiting in their expression of women's experiences, a sentiment that Evans touches on early in this book.

It felt to me at the time as if identifying as a good, Christian woman meant coloring within conservative lines of meekness and submission. Reading *Rewilding Motherhood* revitalized my spirituality and opened my eyes to a path and expression of faith that finally felt authentic and in line with my beliefs. *The Mystics Would Like a Word* continues that process of self-growth and learning to live out a nurturing, feminine spirituality.

Breathing new life into the stories we thought we knew, Evans delivers an account that honors the women these mystics truly were. She does not shy away from their whole selves, addressing their struggles and the historical reali-



Evans delivers an account that honors the women these mystics truly were.

ties in which they lived. We see careful consideration and curiosity throughout Evans’s examination of the mystics’ stories as she reflects on how elements such as childhood trauma, mental health struggles, and the historical and political climate of the time influenced their lives and faith.

Jesuit Media Lab, an online community of Ignatian creators, recently hosted Evans for a workshop titled “Employing Historical Saints and Mystics in Your Creative Work.” Evans spoke to how a writer should approach the stories of real, historical individuals as a beginner: “[W]ith the curiosity with which you would want someone to look at your own life. To see not just behaviors or actions you took, but looking further into your stories for motivations.”

She went on to explain how within her research of these women, their humanity stood out as an interesting and vital component of their stories. Evans shared that these human aspects of the mystics’ lives were elements that “you don’t want to lose through the fear of not painting the pious, perfect picture. We want the full picture, the full human.”

When art and literature examine the multifaceted, human nature of these historical figures whom we have been taught to emulate and revere, the audience is provided with relatable examples of a faithful life. Thérèse of Lisieux was more than a little flower: Her writings convey powerfully feminist views and a woman of deep convictions. Hildegard of Bingen was a Renaissance woman with a broad range of interests and proficiencies living in the Middle Ages. Evans paints a picture of female mystics who struggled with their mental health but did not let that limit their ministry, who dreamed of answering the call to priesthood while still respecting and loving the church, who were mothers and pilgrims, fierce and soft, holy and messy.

These are women in whom I can see myself, whom I want to teach my daughters about, because they are more than the flawless images crafted from their stories. These women lived, they wrestled with questions, they discovered their voice, and they encountered God in ways that continue to inspire us today.

Throughout the book, readers will find encouragement to trust themselves as Teresa of Ávila did, to move past their discomfort with fragility and vulnerability like Margery Kempe, and to claim their identity as beloved like Hildegard of Bingen. We too can dare to imagine the divine feminine like Julian of Norwich, can explore our own sweet, subversive dreams like Thérèse of Lisieux, can move into contemplative action like Catherine of Siena—because we are empowered by the examples of these mystics to open ourselves to the movements of the Spirit, to ask bold questions, to bravely voice our answers and to encounter God.

When we join hands with these mystics in our pursuit of a strong feminine spirituality, we embrace the full picture of whom God created us to be. We step into a life filled with mystery, holiness, vulnerability and strength; because when we live out our multitudes, we are welcomed by a sisterhood of mystics who have paved the way for us.

—
Alli Bobzien is a freelance writer and a recent graduate of Fuller Seminary, where she achieved her master's in theology.



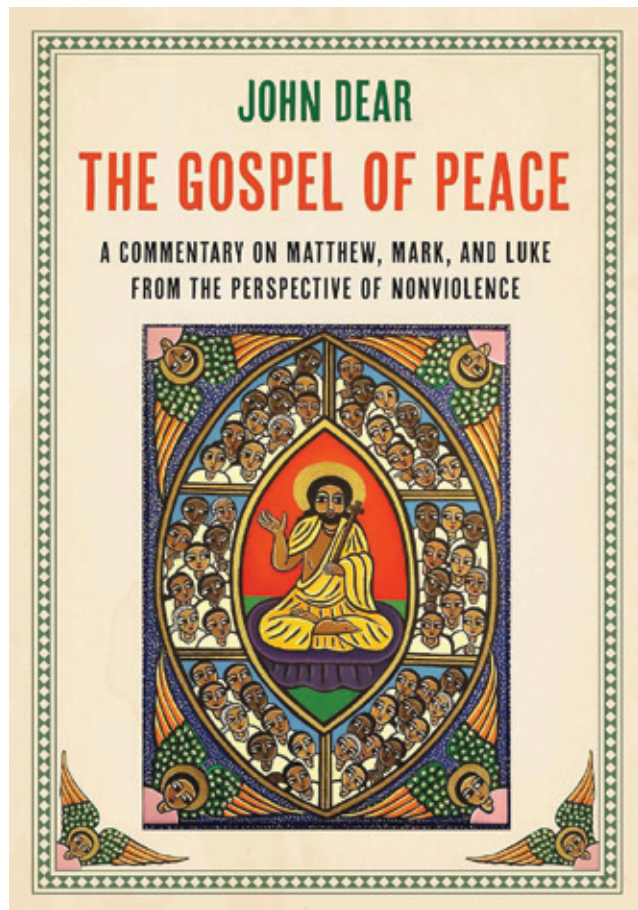
ST. VALENTINE

By Hannah Monsour

Pray the sight
back to her eyes and
free the prisoners
by judge baptized and
wed the lovers
against law’s might -
give your life
in the name of it -
call it brave,
call it saintly,
call it love -
trading candies
over martyrdom,
swapping hearts
like he did
in the name of Him.

—
Hannah Monsour is a professional typewriter poet and actress based in Brooklyn, N.Y. She writes custom, on-the-spot poems on her 1952 Smith Corona.

THE NONVIOLENT JESUS



Orbis Books / 440p \$34

After spending hundreds of hours in courthouses, enduring scores of arrests and marking time in countless jails throughout the country, the California-based Catholic priest and author John Dear knows a life of nonviolent activism is not an easy sell. Getting attacked by the public, abandoned by your friends or apprehended by law enforcement are all occupational hazards, he warns. And he wouldn't have it any other way.

A committed pacifist and widely traveled speaker, Dear has spent decades—in books, sermons and actions—promoting an image of Jesus as a nonviolent revolutionary who led an “illegal, underground campaign” of peaceful resistance against a bloodthirsty Roman state. Drawing upon the thought of fellow peace activist Kazu Haga, Dear defines nonviolence as more than an ethical argument or a political philosophy. It is a manner of living, perfectly embodied by the subversive and startlingly radical ministry of Jesus as chronicled in the Bible.

In his latest work, *The Gospel of Peace*, Dear embarks on a kind of spiritual experiment: interpreting the three synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) through the lens of nonviolent activism and uncovering connections

between first-century Judea and modern-day America. Throughout this engaging and often surprising commentary, he finds in the New Testament a suffering servant who proclaims a God of peace, rejects appeals to power, befriends outcasts and pariahs in intentional defiance of established customs, and chastises people who resort to force, even in his own defense.

Dear's primary evidence for asserting nonviolence as the foundation of Christianity stems from the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:1-12), which he describes as woefully overlooked and understudied. Here Jesus instructs his disciples to be meek, merciful and pure of heart—and that peacemakers will be named the Sons of God. “If this is Jesus's quintessential message,” he writes, “then the lack of attention to it is shocking.” Inspired by the moral leadership of Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi—both non-Catholics who understood and admired Christ—Dear encourages readers to study the Sermon on the Mount daily (as did Gandhi) and to make the Beatitudes “the basis of our lives.”

Dear also pays particular attention to the Beatitude that predicts persecution and harassment from others (Mt 5:11). “If we are not facing rejection, harassment, attack, even arrest and death threats,” he writes, “how can we claim to be followers of the nonviolent Jesus, who was harassed, rejected, arrested and executed?” When I first spoke with Dear in 2018, while I was a student at Fordham University, he nicely asked if I had been arrested yet. This was not so much a push to go spend a night in prison as a question of commitment. For Dear, we must be willing to go all the way.

There is an imaginative quality to Dear's commentary, a prophetic ability to extract Christ's opposition to violence even from unlikely or less-than-obvious passages. Beyond the Beatitudes and Christ's commandments to love your enemies and “do good” to your persecutors (Mt 5:44, Lk 6:27), Dear finds that nonviolence permeates every aspect of Jesus' public ministry.

For example, he identifies the “unforgivable sin” described in Scripture with the support of violence by any follower of Jesus (Mt 12:31, Mk 3:28-9). “That would include nationalism disguised as religion, greed disguised as service, hate disguised as love, evil disguised as goodness, warmaking disguised as peacemaking, racism and sexism disguised as democracy—but done in the name of Christ,” Dear writes.

He contrasts the entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem, on a donkey, with the entrance of the Roman governors, routinely flanked by hundreds of soldiers in a military parade. Scripture notes that Jesus sat atop the animal to “banish the war chariot from Ephraim and the warhorse from Jerusalem” (Zech 9:9-10). What about when Jesus banishes

the moneychangers from the temple area using a whip of cords? Dear writes that Christ engages in what we today would call civil disobedience, but not violence. And at the Last Supper, instead of instructing his disciples to go break the bodies of those who will come to arrest him, he offers his own flesh and blood for the salvation of the world.

During Christ's arrest in Gethsemane, when Simon Peter draws a sword and severs the right ear of the servant Malchus, Jesus offers a strong rebuke. "Put your sword back into its sheath, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword," he proclaims (Mt 26:52). Dear identifies these words as Christ's last to his disciples before they flee from him.

"After all [Jesus] has taught and shown them about the universal way of nonviolence, he now resorts to the most primal teaching: Put down the sword. Thou shalt not kill," he writes. "We are back to square one." In this passage, he echoes the sentiments of the late Daniel Berrigan, S.J., one of his mentors, during a 1981 trial in Philadelphia: "Our plight is very primitive from a Christian point of view. We are back where we started. Thou shalt not kill; we are not allowed to kill."

Dear's text includes few references to named biblical experts and, unfortunately, no footnotes that would encourage further investigation. (There is a list of recommended readings—including 14 of the author's previous works—in the back.) His volume is at times repetitive, and Dear notes as much in his introduction. "Few people read commentaries straight through," he observes, considering *The Gospel of Peace* as more of a reference work.

The book sometimes takes on the flavor of an extended encyclical rather than a biblical commentary, and perhaps it would have been stronger (and made for a slimmer book) to focus his attention on a selection of passages. But this was not the project he set out to complete, and a detailed look at how the synoptic Gospels emphasize nonviolence is a sorely needed contribution in a country and a church that blur the stark lines between Christianity and militarism.

While reading Scripture from a 21st-century activist's viewpoint encourages unique insights, it can present academic problems. Are we correctly understanding the context in which these events occurred? Are we more focused on promoting a message than investigating the text? Are we seeing what we want to see?

Dear's prose is direct, unabashedly political and often blunt. He ridicules just war theory as akin to defending "just rape," calls displaying the American flag in church blasphemous, states that the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks were "merely a sign of the greater violence to come" and identifies Satan with any imperial force—including the United States. His anti-nationalist zeal, absolutely sincere and

rooted in Christ's disobedience to the Roman Empire, will likely alienate some readers who do not imagine an inherent conflict between their Catholicism and their patriotism. Yet Dear seems less interested in winning friends than in obeying his conscience and holding fast to Christ's teachings.

Despite his focus on the violence of our times—the interminable parade of armed conflicts, the proliferation of nuclear weapons, the exploitation of the poor, the waste of trillions of dollars on weaponry—his outlook is ultimately not one of despair. He frequently lauds the spirit of tranquility and the mindfulness practices of his longtime friend Thich Nhat Hanh, the late Buddhist monk whom Martin Luther King Jr. nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1967. Dear notes that a lifelong commitment to nonviolence sets us on a path of hope and offers us a better way of being human.

"Every day is Easter Sunday for us because we are now people of resurrection," he writes, "people who practice resurrection."

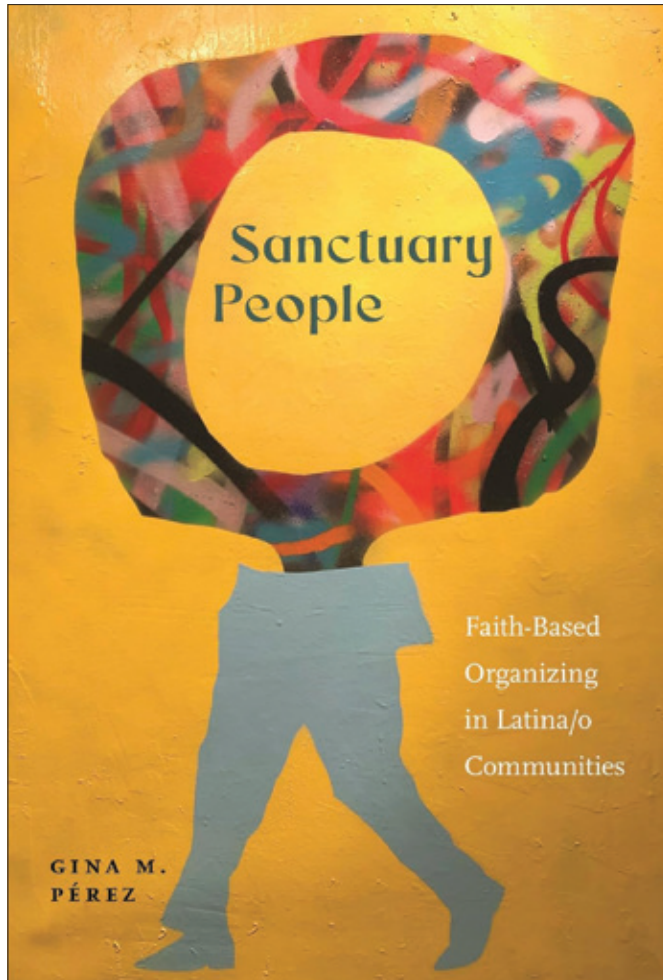
 Ryan Di Corpo is a former Joseph A. O'Hare, S.J., fellow at *America*.

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AN EXPANSIVE VIEW OF SANCTUARY



NYU Press / 223p \$30

Published before the 2024 presidential election, Gina M. Pérez's *Sanctuary People: Faith-Based Organizing in Latina/o Communities* focuses on the sanctuary movement during Donald J. Trump's first term as president (2017-21), a time of precarity and fear within the immigrant community. During his 2024 campaign, the newly elected president has again promised mass deportation and militarized border control. Therefore, Pérez's book on sanctuary—a commitment to defend and accompany vulnerable migrants—comes at a crucial political moment, elevating a power greater than states and borders and making a case for progressive, public expressions of faith.

By centering the voices and experiences of Latina/o sanctuary leaders in her research, she presents sanctuary as both a sacred and secular reality. It is both deeply rooted in faith, deriving power from its appeal to a transcendent authority, and a practical political strategy to cultivate safety, trust and belonging in all communities. It includes both physical sanctuary, where sacred space becomes a place of refuge, and a broader commitment to accompaniment and

public advocacy. It is both a bold resistance to xenophobic and exclusionary immigration policies and an intersectional movement toward decriminalization and anti-racism in solidarity with all marginalized communities.

By embracing a both/and approach to sanctuary, Pérez resists simplistic definitions that either trivialize faith or ignore its secular expressions and public significance.

An anthropologist and professor at Oberlin College, Pérez focuses on the Latino/a community in Ohio in her ethnographic research. This might not be the first place we associate with the New Sanctuary Movement; however, Pérez points out that among other states during the same period (2017-21), Ohio saw one of the highest rates of people entering physical sanctuary in religious congregations.

By highlighting the lived realities of the people—mostly Latina mothers—housed in religious congregations, she makes visible the suffering experienced in physical sanctuaries. She also points out a painful paradox. When these women take refuge in a congregation, they are separated from their children for a period of time—the very reality they sought to avoid through sanctuary.

Pérez continually highlights the agency of Latina/o sanctuary leaders in this context, avoiding paternalistic approaches to sanctuary that center the experiences of mostly white, economically secure Christians. One of the ways Latina leaders shape the sanctuary narrative is by emphasizing their identities as mothers facing the threat of family separation. In doing so, they strategically call out the hypocrisy of politicians who espouse pro-family values and support immigration policies that rely on detainment and deportation.

Pérez makes vivid the impact of family separation on immigrant communities by highlighting one of the largest workplace raids that occurred in Ohio—and the community response to protect vulnerable children whose parents were detained. This story and others in the book reveal the cross-coalitional solidarity that emerged within and beyond faith communities in response to the needs of their neighbors.

Reinforced by her interviews with faith leaders across the country, Pérez acknowledges physical sanctuary as powerful and important while also recognizing that sanctuary goes beyond the physical realities to transform immigration policies and walk with migrants navigating them. Thus, Pérez demonstrates the coherence within the history of sanctuary and the New Sanctuary Movement, which emphasizes advocacy and accompaniment—and for many, abolition involving a transformation of the criminal justice system represented in the criminalization and detention of migrants. Pérez argues that this expansive definition is “one of sanctuary’s greatest strengths” by con-

necting communities across identities in a shared struggle for liberation, belonging and safety.

While acknowledging the multi-layered expressions of sanctuary, Pérez emphasizes the importance of religious narratives and the memories of faith-driven action to sustain the sanctuary movement. She contextualizes sanctuary in anti-war activism and expressions of solidarity with Central America in the 1980s. Interviews with members of sanctuary congregations lead Pérez to lift up the importance of place, memory and story in forging sanctuary commitments. She notes that the memory of Óscar Romero and the North American church women killed in El Salvador—Ita Ford, Maura Clarke, Dorothy Kazel and Jean Donovan—are an inspiration for social justice activism.

As a scholar of Catholic social thought, I was particularly struck by Pérez’s multi-layered understanding of accompaniment as a central tenet of sanctuary. Pérez regards accompaniment as an expression of Catholic social teaching and liberation theology, from which she appropriately interprets the preferential option for the poor as a call to walk with those who are marginalized and oppressed. Here, Pérez sees what some observers of sanctuary activism miss: the centrality of faith, particularly within the Latina/o community.

At the same time, Pérez recognizes the significance of accompaniment beyond Catholic social thought, pointing to its diverse and non-religious expressions. In doing so, she affirms the public quality of Catholic social thought, which scholars such as David Hollenbach, S.J., and Kristin Heyer have articulated.

Accompaniment is widely evoked among sanctuary networks as a call to walk with migrants, respecting their personal agency and grounding any assistance or advocacy in relationship. Accompaniment also offers language preferred by some over sanctuary because of the connotations and risks associated with the word.

Pérez highlights situations in which cities, colleges and congregations avoid declaring sanctuary, either to avoid overpromising protection against federal authorities or to circumvent the risk of losing federal support because of their sanctuary status. In her understanding, efficacious sanctuary is not limited to communities that have made a formal declaration or who practice physical sanctuary. Being a “sanctuary people” is about the praxis of accompaniment that can be observed within and beyond these contexts.

In her conclusion, Pérez raises a question that readers interested in debates within public theology will appreciate: “What do we gain and what do we lose when sanctuary circulates in more capacious ways that unmoor it from its religious and spiritual foundations? Is there a danger of

secularizing sanctuary?”

Pérez takes seriously the appeal to a divine authority against human institutions as a definitive quality of sanctuary. She observes the power of religious narrative, practice and memory for sustaining sanctuary commitment. At the same time, she argues for an expansive understanding of sanctuary because it offers a way to envision a community of belonging and liberation for all.

Pérez’s book does not settle the question of whether something is lost when we secularize sanctuary, but it does point to many gains when people unite across and beyond faith communities to become a sanctuary people. Her research presents an invitation to recognize the public significance and political implications of faith, and to foster spaces of dialogue and collective action among all who believe in the sacred dignity of the person and power of accompaniment.

Erin Brigham is the director of the Joan and Ralph Lane Center for Catholic Social Thought and the Ignatian Tradition at the University of San Francisco, where she teaches in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies.

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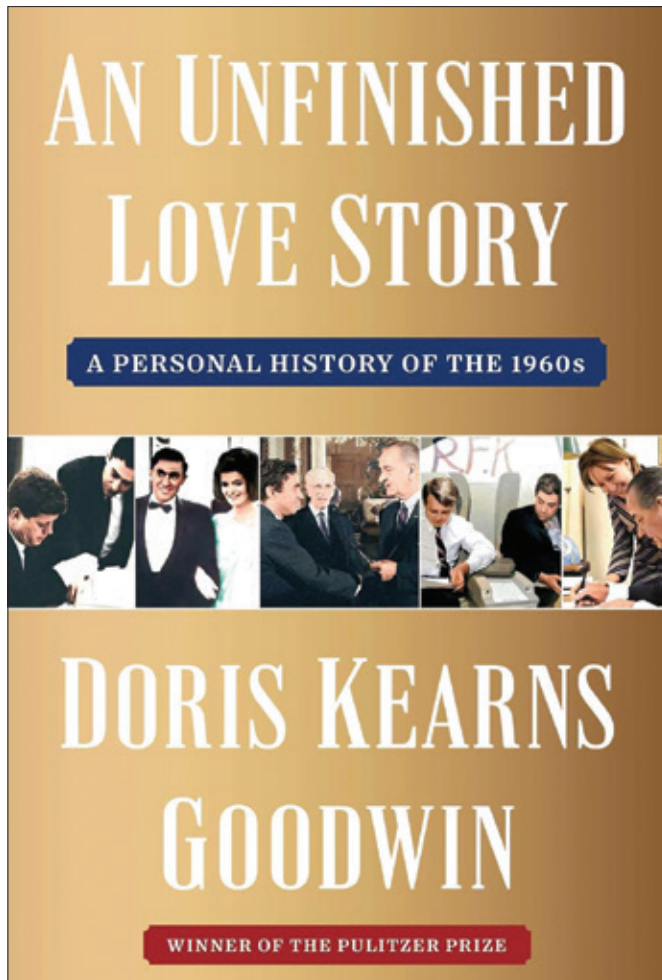
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ALL YOU NEED



Simon & Schuster / 480p \$27

The journey of discovering love in one's life is often described, oxymoronically, as "indescribable." In its cleanest sense, *love* is a construct used to describe the various affections, devotions and willingness to support and sacrifice for another. In much more real terms, it is driven by the minutiae known only to one's closest and dearest. The habits of a spouse, the quirks of a relative, the pride of a parent. And, as with all things, love runs a course—whether it be a moment or a lifetime, fleeting or forever.

In her latest book, *An Unfinished Love Story: A Personal History of the 1960s*, the historian Doris Kearns Goodwin presents something utterly unique about what it means to love and to grow in that love for someone else. Married to Richard "Dick" Goodwin (who died in 2018) for 42 years, Kearns Goodwin is at her best in sharing the story of Dick and, at the same time, offering personal vignettes and insights into the "American Century."

The book centers on the couple's project of going through Goodwin's boxes of writings and memorabilia from his five-decade career in American politics; they soon

realized that they had a unique history of the 1960s in the 300-plus boxes at hand.

Dick Goodwin was significantly involved in American political life well before he even met Doris Kearns (they married when he was 43 and she was 32). *An Unfinished Love Story* allows Kearns Goodwin to shine as a historian, presenting the historical facts she discovers about the life her late husband led. With each remembrance, it is clear that she is falling in love all over again.

The early life of Dick Goodwin reads like a Horatio Alger story. Born to a Jewish family in Boston in 1931, Goodwin graduated *summa cum laude* from Tufts University and attended Harvard Law School. At the top of his class and editor of the law review, Goodwin suddenly took a leave from Harvard and joined the U.S. Army. Returning to finish his law degree, he then clerked for Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter.

Goodwin went on to work for the U.S. House Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce, where he broke the 1958 scandal around the quiz show "Twenty-One." At age 29, Goodwin joined the John F. Kennedy presidential campaign as a speechwriter, and then the Kennedy administration as assistant special counsel and a member of the Task Force on Latin American Affairs—eventually rising to deputy secretary of state (even attempting to negotiate the lifting of the U.S. trade embargo on Cuba through conversations with Che Guevara). Arthur Schlesinger Jr. described Goodwin at that time as the "supreme generalist."

Following the Kennedy assassination, Goodwin went on to become special assistant to President Lyndon B. Johnson, drafting (alongside Bill Moyers) some of Johnson's more important addresses. After political life, Goodwin served as an editor, author, speaker, playwright and professor.

This is all well documented in *An Unfinished Love Story*. What we get from Kearns Goodwin are the details that only a spouse of 42 years could deliver. The enthusiasm with which Goodwin approached life; his waking up as some sort of "eccentric rooster" each morning; his quirks and his foibles—all of which for a traditional biography would generally be much more difficult to track down.

For example, as the couple worked together through Goodwin's memorabilia, he did everything he could to stall reviewing the boxes related to 1968—staving off the tragic memories of that year. He went so far as to read aloud Herman Melville's *The Piazza Tales*, aptly including the line: "Shadows present, foreshadowing deeper shadows to come." Who else but Kearns Goodwin could provide such a detail?

Another example: the emotionally vulnerable and candid relationship Goodwin had with Jackie Kennedy. In the period after her husband's assassination, Jackie Kennedy wrote these deeply moving and revealing letters to Good-

This is a clear capture of mid-century American history.

win, including such lines as “you are the only person I even want to tell that to—as you are kind of a lost soul too.” Now, any historian could have come across this letter, but only Kearns Goodwin can tell you what effect this had on Dick Goodwin for years to come—and the complications it caused.

A final example draws out more of the humor that so often punctuated Goodwin’s life. Kearns Goodwin discovered a telegram, seemingly from Che Guevara to Goodwin, wishing him good luck on a specific occasion. “Arthur Schlesinger!” replied Dick, immediately recognizing a decades-old joke of Schlesinger posing as Guevara.

These little moments throughout the book shift the dynamic around loving someone else. Almost always upon the death of a loved one, the love does not end, but it certainly changes. You miss certain things more. You grow in appreciation of the particularities of a relationship. In writing *An Unfinished Love Story*, Kearns Goodwin grows in love not just for the unique qualities that undergird their relationship, but for the foundations she never got to experience. This is a clear capture of mid-century American history, told by a professional, but it is also a profoundly moving love letter—and nothing is lost in combining the two.

In retelling the life of the man she loved, Kearns Goodwin shares an important, two-part message with readers. First and foremost, fall in love with something while being wholly yourself. Passionately engage the world and those around you. She relates that she once asked her husband whether or not she would have loved him in his 20s. His response: “How would I know what I was like as a young man? I was too busy being him.” Goodwin’s whole life was about being enraptured by that around you.

And this leads to Kearns Goodwin’s second point: Fall in love with America. Using her love story with Dick as a basis, *An Unfinished Love Story* is a profoundly moving invitation to love the country that has provided millions with hope and opportunity. To steal the ’60s-era mantra, and to paraphrase Kearns Goodwin, all you need is love.

Nicholas D. Sawicki is associate director of development for the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston and a frequent contributor to *America*.



LITTLE SKATE

By Lynne Viti

Shark-like, but no shark. The skate’s dead or dying.
Wings cut away by a fillet knife
the cartilaginous body washed ashore
slender tail with tiny teethlike points,
dermal denticles.

O cousin of rays and sharks
O *condrich thyes*
O skeleton not of bone but cartilage.
Thing of jaws, paired fins, paired nostrils—

Who scooped you from the ocean floor
tore you from gravel saltwater’s bottom?
Your wings excised, eye closed
though my finger pokes at it and you gaze as if
confused as to what brought you to this beach.

I dined on skate wing once, in a Paris brasserie
the *raie* fanned out on the plate tasted crisp
but tender under the buttery crust.
Capers swam in the juices.
The meat tasted sweet, like Chesapeake blue crab.

Your gray form on the sand, spiky tail informs me:
I could never make a meal of skate again
remembering you, brave wingless thing.

Lynne Viti’s fourth poetry collection is *The Walk to Cefalù*. She is a faculty member emerita in the Writing Program at Wellesley College and serves on the board of the New England Poetry Club.

Divine Aura and Earthly Integrity

Beginning with the feast of the Presentation of the Lord, the Sunday readings revolve around God's aura. "Lift up, O gates, your lintels; reach up, you ancient portals, that the king of glory may come in!" (Ps 24:7). These lintels represent an opening between a divine and earthly space. The gates are commanded to expand and rise up because God, the king of glory, is about to walk through into the space of an ancient temple. The symbolism is captured today in ancient archaeological temple sites from Syria that reveal giant footprints meant to represent a massive God where the upper torso remains in heaven while the lower half of the body sits on his earthly throne with the feet touching the ground.

On the fifth Sunday, God's aura as otherworldly is captured in the vocational call of a young Isaiah praying in the temple. The Seraphim are stationed around a lofty throne and cry out a message that Isaiah hears: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts! All the earth is filled with his glory!" (Is 6:3). The ground shakes at their sound and Isaiah, also, shakes in terror. However, it is not fear that Isaiah feels; it is

fear of the Lord in the biblical imagination that represents reverence, awe and respect within the presence of God. This is what Scripture means by God's aura.

The following two Sundays attempt to capture the aura of a God-fearing person. Such a righteous man or woman is described twice as a tree planted by streams of water. On the sixth Sunday, the Psalmist describes it: "He is like a tree planted near streams of water, that yields its fruit in season; Its leaves never wither; whatever he does prospers" (Ps 1:3). Such a person finds their strength rooted in God's word and executed with concrete action. He or she is called righteous in the language of Scripture. A better word, however, that makes sense to the modern person is the term *integrity*. The opposite of that is someone constantly divided within him or herself, like chaff that lacks substance, which the wind blows in any direction. The last Sunday of February recalls a scene with a young David who shows integrity through his actions as one who is merciful toward Saul. In the light of God's aura, may we share in that righteous presence through acts of integrity.

FEAST OF THE PRESENTATION OF THE LORD (C), FEB. 2, 2025

A king that walks into a claimed space

FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (C), FEB. 9, 2025

The call of a young Isaiah

SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (C), FEB. 16, 2025

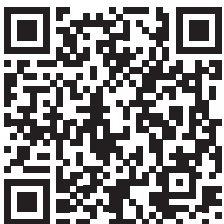
The call to be righteous through integrity

SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (C), FEB. 23, 2025

The call of a young David



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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Don't Drop Out of Politics

People of faith do not have that option

By Valerie Schultz



“The newspaper...comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable,” Finley Peter Dunne, a Chicago humorist, wrote in 1902. Until recently, I thought that these words originated from Dorothy Day—and that she was speaking about followers and lovers of Jesus, not newspapers. The statement seemed in perfect keeping with Catholic social justice tenets. It still does.

In light of the threatened policies of the incoming presidential administration, I have been confronting the comfort of my own life. I am a straight white American citizen, a privileged baby boomer. I would like to keep my Medicare, and I suspect the fury of a lot of old people who vote (like me) will keep that program off the chopping block for a while. I will not be deported, unlike many other grandmas and Dreamers. I am not a prominent enough writer to be investigated by the Department of Justice. I can probably bury my head in the sands of my comfortable circumstances and perhaps turn to gardening.

Indeed, that was my inclination on that sleepless night after the election. I have long been a political junkie, but I considered never watching the news again. I considered staying in my lovely, safe home in a small town and abandoning all concern for anyone else.

Then I remembered that I do not have that luxury. I am a Catholic.

I am called—commanded, really—to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, care for the sick, visit the prisoner and welcome the stranger. This call comes directly

from Jesus Christ. It is non-negotiable.

But here we are: We have again elected a Trump administration, this time on steroids. I am thinking of his priorities, in addition to tax cuts for the rich, from his first term. To wit: *When I was hungry*, you cut off my access to food stamps. *When I was thirsty*, you left the lead in my drinking water. *When I was naked*, you made sleeping outside illegal. *When I was sick*, you defunded my health insurance. *When I was in prison*, you sped up the schedule for federal executions. *When I was a stranger*, you separated me from my family and caged me.

I cannot be comfortable with this cruel agenda and still call myself a person of faith. I cannot withdraw from participation in protecting our common home. I have a trans adult child who is fearful of the threatened violence to their health care and to their person. I have grandkids who are counting on happy, long lives on an inhabitable planet. I have friends who rely on Medicare and Social Security to stay housed and alive. I have acquaintances who were brought to the United States as babies and who may be deported to a country they have never even seen. Even if I didn't know any of these people personally, I am still called to do everything I can to mitigate any harm that may befall anyone. I am called to comfort the afflicted.

We people of faith don't get to remove ourselves from the public square and live out our days in comfortable oblivion. “If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for

the day, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well,’ but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it?” asked St. James (2:15-17). Our living faith demands our hands and our heart, our time and our money, our prayer and our presence. I'm talking to myself.

“You're not allowed to give up,” the anti-corruption activist Alexei Navalny said before being martyred by Russia's system of injustice. We older Catholics may not be leading an international movement, but our work is clear. Our Catholic mandate is not to turn a blind eye to racism or misogyny or hatred or persecution, but to embrace the victims of those systemic injustices wherever we find them. Maybe we even have to leave our safe neighborhoods and go look for them. I'm talking to myself.

Dorothy Day would be ashamed of many of us for tolerating the harm done to the afflicted, for ignoring all the faces of Jesus among us. The election of someone who promises actions that contradict our Catholic social justice principles should spur us to reassert our mission of care and concern for humanity and creation. By the grace of God, we who are comfortable need to start afflicting.

I'm talking to myself. And perhaps to you.

Valerie Schultz is a freelance writer, a columnist for The Bakersfield Californian and the author of Till the Moon Be No More: The Grit and Grace of Growing Older.

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