

Articles of Interest
For
18 December 2022

Sunday, 11 December 2022, *Third Sunday of Advent*

Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation
From the Center for Action and Contemplation



Week Fifty: A Benevolent Universe

Is the Universe on Our Side?

Father Richard Rohr describes three different worldviews people adhere to:

Underneath the religious or belief systems we hold, there are often three possible worldviews: The universe is against us, the universe is for us, or the universe is neutral.

The latter says that reality is indifferent. There is no God against us or for us; we're basically on our own in the universe. Many good and even religious people subscribe to this worldview. Life has sadly convinced them that there probably is a God, and God might even be just and good, but this God is not actively involved in our lives or history. We can go through all the rites and services, follow all the rules, but if the grace of God hasn't deeply touched us—which is the full meaning of conversion—we will have no meaningful awareness of the divine.

That's the malaise of much of Western Christianity today. Many people keep up the external observance of reliance upon God, but underneath depend only on themselves. "Nothing's going to happen unless I make it happen," such people say to themselves. There is no active trust in the presence or the

reality of God, or that God makes any real difference. This form of secularism is insidious because we can't get at it. All the right words and ideas are there, but there is a foundational sense of an indifferent universe and an indifferent, distant God.

If someone stays in an indifferent universe for long, they usually move to the second worldview where reality is perceived as hostile, destructive, or judgmental. Not only is God not involved but God has to be appeased. For such people God is somehow actively *against* humanity: watching us, judging us, critiquing us, and certainly not on our side. Many Christians claim they don't believe that, but it's clear that they do from the fearful way they live.

The third worldview can only be given by grace, though it has a great head start with a loving and merciful family system. In this group the universe is not against us, nor is it sitting out there indifferent. Somehow, it's on our side! Reality can be trusted. We don't need to pull all the right strings or push all the right buttons. Grace is everywhere. It's good to be here. Life is perhaps difficult, but it is still good and trustworthy at the core.

Until we meet a benevolent God and a benevolent universe, until we realize that the foundation of all is love, we will not be at home in this world. That meeting of God, that understanding experience, cannot be communicated by words. It is a gift given through encounter with Spirit. Its inherent character is best described by three overlapping characteristics: faith, hope, and love. When we experience those virtues, allow them to transform us, and are able pass them on, we are participating in the very life of God.

Monday, 12 December 2022 — *Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe*

Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation

From the Center for Action and Contemplation



Week Fifty: A Benevolent Universe

Foundational Trust

Father Richard shares how faith, hope, and love allow our participation in the benevolent nature of the universe:

From the very beginning, faith, hope, and love are planted deep within our nature—indeed they *are* our very nature as children of God (Romans 5:1–5, 8:14–17). Yet we have to awaken, allow, and advance this core identity by saying a conscious *yes* to it and drawing upon it as a reliable and Absolute Source.

Our “yes” to such implanted faith, hope, and love plays a crucial role in the divine equation. Human freedom matters. We matter. We have to choose to trust reality and even our physicality, which is finally to trust ourselves. How can people who do not trust themselves know how to trust anyone or anything at all? Trust, like love, is of one piece.

In the practical order, we find our Original Goodness, the image of God that we are, when we can discover and own the faith, hope, and love deeply planted within us:

A trust in inner coherence itself. “It all means something!” (Faith)

A trust that this coherence is positive and going somewhere good. (Hope)

A trust that this coherence includes me and even defines me. (Love)

This is the soul’s foundation. That we are capable of such trust and surrender is the objective basis for human goodness and holiness. It almost needs to be chosen again day by day, lest we slide toward cynicism, victim playing and making, or self-pity. No philosophy or government, no law or reason, can fully promise or offer us this attitude, but the gospel can and does. Healthy religion shares a compelling and attractive foundation for human goodness and dignity and shows us ways to build on that benevolent foundation.

Being created in the image of God

(Genesis 1:26–27) gives everyone an equal and inherent dignity. However, in every age and culture, we have seen regressions toward racism, sexism, homophobia, militarism, ableism, and classism. This pattern tells me that unless we see dignity as being given universally, objectively, and from the beginning by God, we humans will constantly think it is up to us to decide. But our tragic history demonstrates that one group cannot be trusted to portion out worthiness and dignity to another. Our criteria tend to be self-referential and thus highly prejudiced, and the powerless and disadvantaged always lose out.

For the planet and for all living beings to move forward, we can rely on nothing less than *an inherent original goodness and a universally shared dignity*. Only then can we build, because the foundation is strong, and is itself good. Surely this is what Jesus meant when he told us to “dig and dig deep, and build your house on rock” (Luke 6:48). When we start with a positive vision, a resounding *yes*, we are more likely to proceed with generosity and hope, and we have a much greater chance of ending with an even bigger *yes*, which we would call “resurrection.”

Tuesday, December 13, 2022

Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation

From the Center for Action and Contemplation



Week Fifty: A Benevolent Universe

Evolution: God's Love in Action

Franciscan sister and scientist Ilia Delio finds evidence for a benevolent universe in evolutionary change driven by love:

To say “God is love” is to say that the name God refers to the divine energy of love that is dynamic, relational, personal, and unitive. God does what God is—love. Rather than seeing God as a separate being over the world, we can say that love-energy is the stuff of existence. . . . Where there is energy of attraction, union, generativity, and life, there is God. . . .

God is the name of personal divine love emerging in evolution, as consciousness complexifies and persons unite: “Where two or more are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:20). Evolution reveals a newness to God because love is always expressing itself in new patterns of relationships. . . . The dynamic fountain fullness of divine love means forever the newness of world; God is ever newness in love, and thus the world is ever new as well. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus once said that “you cannot step into the same river twice,” meaning change is inherent to life; every act bears an essential newness. . . . Divine love is not a river of stagnant water but a fountain fullness of overflowing love, love that is forever awakening to new life. [1]

Delio seeks to reconcile a good and loving God with the ever-present suffering in the world:

There is no doubt that suffering and violence abound in the crevices of life, but suffering is not a punishment of a vengeful God. God does not abandon us; we abandon God by . . . running after little gods. God lives deep within us, as the center of love, but we are often [dismissive of] this inner center and drawn by the little gods of power, success, status, and wealth, everything we create for ourselves. . . . The theodicy question is not why God allows bad things to happen to good people but why we abandon God in the face of suffering. If God is love, then our only real hope is in God, because hope is the openness of love to infinite possibilities and new life. . . . This God of love appears in Jesus of Nazareth, a God who gets radically involved in the messiness of the world to be God for us. . . .

To have faith in a God of unconditional love is to realize how intimately close God is. So close we forget God's presence. In his own day Jesus was immersed in a violent culture, a culture of conflict and anxiety. But he also knew of the deeper truth hidden beneath the surface of human judgment, namely that this broken, anxious world is oozing with God. He asked us to have faith, to believe that the reign of God is among us and within us. [2]

Wednesday, 14 December 2022

Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation

From the Center for Action and Contemplation



Week Fifty: A Benevolent Universe

Growing Benevolence

Satish Kumar, a former Jain monk, is an activist and educator who has studied both Eastern religions and Western economics and cultures. He writes that recognizing a benevolent universe helps us participate in the flow of generosity:

We live in a benevolent universe. . . .

The benevolence of the soil is endless; it helps one single seed to multiply into millions of seeds for hundreds of years, producing colourful, aromatic, juicy and delicious fruit, feeding birds, bees, humans and animals. The tree celebrates the benevolence of the soil and becomes benevolent in return, offering its fruit to whoever is in need, without condition and without judgement. . . .

The benevolence of the sun is beyond the capacity of words to describe. It burns itself to maintain life. . . . It provides conditions for photosynthesis for the whole plant kingdom to nourish itself and give nourishment to bacteria, insects, birds and animals.

The moon is benevolent. It maintains the cycle of life and cycle of time. Time and tide are sustained by its presence. . . .

Rain is benevolent. It . . . delivers itself to every farm, field, forest, mountain and

human habitat, free of charge, without needing any external supply of energy. It moistens the soil, quenches the thirst, fills rivers, ponds, lakes and wells and in partnership with the sun it feeds the world. . . .

Air is benevolent. We breathe, therefore we are. Air is related to the spirit, to inspiration, to spirituality. . . . Air is breath of Brahman, breath of the universe, breath of God. In Sanskrit air is *prana*, which means life itself. . . .

Space is benevolent. All and everything is held in space and by space. All movements, all changes and every kind of dynamism are sustained in the stillness of space. We always need to be mindful of reducing our clutter and maintaining spaciousness in order to be detached and free.

Soul is benevolent. Compassion, kindness, generosity and inner luminosity are the qualities of the soul. Mind, intelligence, and consciousness are held in and processed by soul. Soul is the seed of life. Feelings, emotions, sentiments, intuition and reason pass through soul and manifest in the world. . . . It is not only humans who have soul; animals, birds, insects and microbes have soul. Soil, trees, rocks and rivers have soul. . . .

The world is how you see it and what you make of it. If you look at the world with benevolent eyes, the world reciprocates with benevolence. If you project suspicion and self-interest, you get the same in return. Trust begets trust and fear begets fear. Recognizing the benevolence of the universe is not to deny the shadow side, but seeing nature as red in tooth and claw and people as selfish and greedy makes us respond in similar vein. If we sow seeds of malevolence, malevolence will grow; if we

sow seeds of benevolence, benevolence will grow.

Thursday, 15 December 2022

Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation

From the Center for Action and Contemplation



Week Fifty: A Benevolent Universe

A Trinitarian Universe

God for us, we call you Father. God alongside us, we call you Jesus. God within us, we call you Holy Spirit. —Richard Rohr
For Richard Rohr, the Trinity provides the foundation of a benevolent universe. Here Richard reflects on the meaning of “Father” in Trinitarian theology:

God for us is my understanding of, and code word for, the Father. It tells us that reality is foundationally benevolent. Reality is on our side. It’s not a scary universe. It tells us that God, like a good father, is for us and is protective of us. You can just as easily call God Mother, or Inherent Goodness, or Primal Love. *God within us* is my code word for the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is that inner aliveness that heals people and awakens them from their wounds. I often call the Spirit an interior homing device. For all our stupidity and mistakes, we have a deep internal intuition that we are children of God. It’s called the divine indwelling.

I understand Jesus as *God alongside us*. Jesus is the accompanying God who walks with us, especially through the mystery of death and resurrection. The paschal mystery is the summary of all of Jesus’ teaching and experience. Jesus is the manifest one who comes forth from the unmanifest and reveals

the divine pattern. The pattern that Jesus the manifest one reveals is that the divine pattern is loss and renewal, death and resurrection. There is no other way. We dare not try to define any universe where there is no death and where there is no loss.

Unfortunately, very few people really want to believe in the paschal mystery. By and large, what human beings want is resurrection without death, answers without doubt, the conclusion without the process. We don’t like Jesus in this sense, leading us through this mystery.

When trust in God as Father is missing, there is a foundational scariness and insecurity to our experience of reality. In that sense, we could say that we are living in a world without the Father. It’s not a safe universe. It’s not a benevolent universe. We think there is an enemy behind every rock and that we’ve got to protect our lives at all costs because no one else will. It’s all on us. It’s understandable why people get so paranoid and preoccupied with security systems of every form and shape. When we don’t know God as the One who most desires our goodness, safety, and growth, there is no underlying “okayness” to the world and to our own lives. There’s no sense that reality is on our side, so we of course try to save ourselves.

Engaging with this mystery of the Trinity leads us into a desperate and dangerous love affair with God. It’s a love affair that’s always going on inside of us, almost in spite of us, and all we can do is start saying *yes* and start recognizing and honoring it.

Friday, 16 December 2022

Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation

From the Center for Action and Contemplation



Week Fifty: A Benevolent Universe

Love Does No Harm

Theologian Karen Baker-Fletcher speaks to paradox—the goodness of God and creation do not cause us to avoid suffering in our world and daily life, but to seek to love even more:

How can there be so much joy, pleasure and beauty in life? How can there be so much pain, hurt, suffering, and death? Why and how have these things come to pass? What is God's intention for human life and for the rest of creation? Doesn't God will something more for us—a love that does no harm? Doesn't God will for us a compassionate and caring love, rather than a false love that strips humanity and creation of dignity? Can we experience such love in this life? Or do we have to wait until the hereafter—life after death? These are questions about the kingdom of God. They have to do with God's intention for the reign of God. They make us consider our own responsibility as participants in God's activity of a love that does no harm in the here and now, whether we are straight or gay, men or women, children or adults, laity or clergy. . . .

This life is good, valuable, and worth living. Hope is not only in the future. Hope is in the present.

From a womanist perspective, the reign of God does not have to do with a far-off,

abstract, otherworldly, alien, and alienated place. To the contrary, the promise of the fulfillment of the Spirit's healing, creating presence on earth is woven together with apocalyptic hope in the midst of the daily work and struggles of life. The reign of the Spirit is an ever-present reality. The hereafter is in the here and now. We live into it in our everyday acts. God moves as the strength of life, present in history and creation. God as the strength of life is the power of life. Given such power, whom should we fear? That which is the very strength of life transforms fear into faith, salvation, and hope. It means that we do not have to accept injustice and abuse while we wait for some better, eternal life in a world beyond the present. We can live into a love that is eternal and does no harm in the here and now. [1]

Father Richard invites us to trust the Inherent Goodness of the universe:

The goal of the spiritual journey is to discover and move toward connectedness on ever new levels. Of course, we won't become vulnerable enough to connect unless we learn to trust over and over again. We must ask ourselves, "Is the universe a friendly place or not?" The spiritual experience is about trusting that when we stop holding ourselves, Inherent Goodness will still uphold us. Many of us call that God, but it isn't necessary. It is the trusting that is important. When we fall into such Primal Love, we realize that everything is foundationally okay. [2]

Through ceremony, the Christmas tree renews us and magnifies life



(Pexels/Any Lane)



BY DAMIAN COSTELLO

10 December 2022

We might not think about buying a Christmas tree and decorating it as a ceremony. But the actions we ritually perform to carry out this annual tradition suggest otherwise: a journey to select a tree we then bring home to adorn with objects imbued with deep meaning, surrounded by people important to us. Unwritten yet "sacred" rules guide the process.

[Twenty-five to 30 million live Christmas trees](#) are purchased in the United States each year. Add to that countless artificial trees set up in homes, stores and churches. That prevalence surely makes it one of the most

widespread — if mostly unrecognized — American ceremonies.

And this ceremony is still developing and unfinished.

While the ceremony of the Christmas tree draws on centuries of sacred tree traditions [from multiple faith perspectives](#), the Christmas tree attained its incredible cultural power in the U.S. in the last century, expanding outside religious settings and into secular spaces that one might think are the furthest from sacred ceremonies.



The Rockefeller Center Christmas tree is pictured in 1970 in New York (Wikimedia Commons/Phillip Capper from Wellington, New Zealand, CC BY 2.0)

The Rockefeller Center Christmas tree tradition started in 1931. The Capitol Christmas Tree tradition began in 1964. Charlie Brown brought the Christmas tree to the center of American popular culture in "[A Charlie Brown Christmas](#)" in 1965. In turn, [Vince Guaraldi's soundtrack fills public spaces](#) to this day, bringing the Christmas tree to every corner of our communities.

Now the Indigenous traditions of North America are adding the latest stage in the Christmas tree tradition, calling us to complete the ceremony by honoring the sacrifice of the tree. By doing so, the Christmas tree will help us enter into deeper relationship with the land and see [the land's love for us](#).

The Christmas tree was an important part of the spirituality of Nicholas Black Elk, the Lakota holy man made famous by the book *Black Elk Speaks*. In a [letter the now Servant of God wrote in January 1908](#), he detailed the Christmas celebrations of a number of Pine Ridge communities, where the people "had Christmas tree." On Dec. 23, he went with one community to cut their tree.

"I went to the hill in the trees," Black Elk remembered, "and they did a great honoring of me."

The importance of the Christmas tree for Black Elk flowed from Catholic tradition and the Sun Dance, a ceremony around a cottonwood tree traditionally practiced by Plains Tribes and now by tribes across North America. During this four-day fast and dance of purification, the cottonwood tree gathers in and renews the people.

Lakota educator Dave Archambault Sr. [wrote in 2016](#) that there is "a fundamental likeness and comparison behind the meaning of a Christmas Tree and a Sundance Tree." For Archambault, "both are traditions that embody and symbolize a good way to be with one another."

The main difference between the Sun Dance and Christmas tree traditions is land. Typically, we do not harvest a Christmas tree with a ceremony that honors its sacrifice and connects us to the land.

Neva Standing Bear explained in [Lakota Texts: Narratives of Lakota Life and Culture in the Twentieth Century](#) how her community addressed that difference by honoring the Christmas tree in the same way they honored the Sun Dance tree.

Key to this approach is asking permission and making an offering. For Christmas, Standing Bear said the people went out on the land and chose the tree together, they "laid tobacco around it and they prayed." Like with the Sun Dance tree, a young girl and boy made the first cuts, then the people carried the tree together to the church without letting it touch the ground.

From a Lakota perspective, the tree is not just a symbol onto which we project meaning but a being that prays with us. At the church, people decorated the Christmas tree with traditional prayer ties, each offering specific petitions.



(Unsplash/Jonathan Borba)

"Some people say thanks, and some people want peace," Standing Bear recounted. "Or some people are sick, so they want to get better, or they suffer something, so they also put something on the tree for that reason," she continued.

When the Christmas season was over, the tree was not thrown away, but respectfully helped on its journey back to the earth. In this case, it was burned in the fire for the

Inipi, or sweat lodge, for the purification of the people.

There is a circularity to the Christmas tree tradition in the Lakota context, the bridging of the old and new, of the land and the people. In it, we see the multifaceted work of Indigenous ceremony that Robin Wall Kimmerer describes in her runaway bestseller *Braiding Sweetgrass*.

Ceremony unites people in a common vision and forges spiritual connection to land and relatives on which people depend. "Ceremonies transcend the boundaries of the individual and resonate beyond the human realm. These acts of reverence are powerfully pragmatic. These are ceremonies that magnify life," says Kimmerer.

Like for Black Elk and Standing Bear, the Christmas tree bridges the old and new for us today, only in reverse.

Contemporary, American, non-Indigenous society has a few meaningful civic ceremonies, like graduation, Kimmerer argues, but the "ceremonies that endure are not about land; they're about family and culture, values that are transportable from the old country. Ceremonies for the land no doubt existed there, but in a sense they did not survive emigration in any substantial way."

Except for the Christmas tree. The Christmas tree tradition came from "the old country" and not only survived, but expanded in importance here in Turtle Island, an Indigenous name for North America. The Christmas tree ceremonially stands in the middle of our families, communities and our nation, and like the Sun Dance, renews us — magnifying life.



The lit 2012 U.S. Capitol Christmas Tree, from the Blanco Ranger District of the White River National Forest near Meeker, Colorado, decorated with handmade ornaments, draws visitors to the Capitol grounds, shortly after being turned on, Dec. 4, 2012. (Wikimedia Commons/U.S. Department of Agriculture, CC BY 2.0)

We only need to add our ceremonial gratitude to fully participate in the circular call and response between the people and land, what Kimmerer calls a "relationship of loving respect and mutual caregiving." Something that has already happened at one of America's most important Christmas tree ceremonies.

When the Utes of southwest Colorado provided the nation with the [2012 Capitol Christmas Tree](#), they chose the "tallest and most beautiful looking tree in the forest," Bradley W. Hight, vice-chairman of the Ute Mountain Ute Tribal Council explained. They [honored it before cutting](#) with a ceremony from the Sundance Way and sent it on its journey to the U.S. Capitol to help bind the people of Turtle Island together.

"We hope this tree will bring unity," Gary Hayes, the tribal council chairman said.

Many of us already carry out a Christmas tree ceremony in our homes, whether we have thought about it in that way or not. If we follow the example of our elder sisters

and brothers on this land, we can imagine new practices informed by but not taken from them: make an offering, ask permission and honor the gift of the Christmas tree's life and the work the Christmas tree does.

"There is wisdom in regenerating [ceremonies from the old country] here, as a means to form bonds with this land," said Kimmerer. We can grow the roots of the Christmas tree tradition in a meaningful way by not only recognizing our part in the ceremony, but also the role of the tree and all to which it points during this season of renewal.

Pope enlists a willing warrior to spread the message of *Laudato Si'*

[EARTHBEAT FAITH](#)



Chief Dadá Borarí from the Maró Indigenous Lands of the Brazilian Amazon; Arouna Kandé, a climate change refugee from Senegal; U.S. scientists Robin Martin and Greg Asner; and teenage climate activist Ridhima Pandey of India participated in the making of the documentary "The Letter." They are seen inside the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican Aug. 26, 2021. The film tells the story of a journey to Rome of frontline leaders to discuss with Pope Francis his encyclical "*Laudato Si'*, on Care for

Our Common Home." (CNS/courtesy Off the Fence)

MARK PATTISON CATHOLIC NEWS SERVICE

Washington —

12 December 2022

Pope Francis is getting more non-Catholics to do his work.

The latest is Nicolas Brown, who directed "The Letter: A Message for Our Earth," a documentary on the pope's 2015 encyclical "*Laudato Si'*, on Care for Our Common Home."

The 90-minute film will air [Wednesday, Dec. 21, 8 p.m.-9:30 p.m. EST on PBS](#) (check local listings). But for those who can't wait that long, [the documentary is already on YouTube](#), which helped produce it.

"We decided to make this film and not put it behind a paywall. We purposely did not go to Netflix and put it behind the reach of anybody," Brown told Catholic News Service during a Dec. 7 video interview. Brown was speaking from Oxford, England, where he is at work on other environment-related projects.

"YouTube is a sort of spiritual place. PBS took on that spirit as well. They don't feel that they (the two services) overlap. They both feel they want to hear this message, which speaks to very different demographics inside society, which I think is a very good sign for the environment."

Brown grew up a Lutheran in Colorado. "Because of the small numbers of people at confirmation camp," he said, there was a strong presence of "evangelical Christianity, which had a very literal interpretation" of the Bible. Brown shunned both the evangelicals and his own faith tradition as a

result. "I carried this prejudice with me for 20 years," he disclosed.

He said he was skeptical when approached about making a film about the pope's encyclical, which addresses caring for creation and the interconnectivity of all life on the planet.

"I'm not Catholic, I'm not religious. I'm agnostic, let's say," Brown said. But when he read [Laudato Si'](#) in Rome, he admitted, "I was blown away. The proverbial plank was lifted from my eyes. I think I was quite prejudiced against people of faith, thinking that because they had their belief and faith, they wouldn't support my personal truth and belief."

Brown said, "As I spent more time with the cardinals and the brothers and the monks and nuns in Rome, I saw this incredible symbiotic relationship between science, faith and religion." He added, "I understand that there's always points of disagreement, but the points of agreement were so much more than what I anticipated."

From his making of "The Letter," "I learned the benefits of moral leadership," he said. "Let's face it. Scientists do not have much to say about the morality of why we should care about our planet."

Brown explained that he wants "to bring *Laudato Si'* to life not only for my people, the sort of technocrats and privileged people of the world ... but also to understand this road that the pope took and many religious people took."

The filmmaker also spoke movingly of "the favelas and to see the suffering humanity ... they were displaced by the land, which is the discovery the pope made when he made the environmental revelations he had before writing *Laudato Si'*."

"The Letter" chronicles some of the threats to the environment worldwide, including the devastating Australian fires of 2020 and the shrinking of the coral reefs in the Pacific Ocean. The show's title refers not only to Francis' encyclical, but to an invitation sent by the pope to five people — whom Brown described as "the voices of the voiceless" in their advocacy for protecting the planet — to meet with the pontiff at the Vatican.

If you think obtaining footage of Amazon rainforest clear-cutting is tough, it's simple compared to what Brown said was the hardest sequence to film: "Clearly, getting the interview with the pope was the most difficult. Even if you have the Vatican Dicastery for Human Development and the Dicastery for Communication on your side, he's notoriously said, 'I don't do interviews.'"

Brown settled for a consolation prize: "What we got was not an interview, it was a conversation (with the five climate activists). He arrived 20 minutes early and left 20 minutes late. So we had 80 minutes with the pope, which I am told is a lot," he told CNS.

"I still don't know how it actually happened. ... He really was very generous once we were able to secure that meeting."

Pope: Antisemitism shows need for Christian-Jewish understanding

[VATICAN](#)
[VATICAN NEWS](#)



Pope Francis leads an audience with members of Amitié Judéo-Chrétienne de France, a Jewish-Christian dialogue organization founded in France in 1948, at the Vatican Dec. 12, 2022. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

BY CATHOLIC NEWS SERVICE

Vatican City —

12 December 2022

Decrying what he described as "hostile times" when antisemitism and violence against Christians are on the rise, Pope Francis said a renewed commitment to Catholic-Jewish dialogue is needed.

"The path we have traveled together is considerable," but the work clearly is not done, the pope told members of the Amitié Judéo-Chrétienne de France, a dialogue and education group founded in 1948 by Jules Isaac, a French historian who worked to improve Christian-Jewish relations after World War II and met with Popes Pius XII and John XXIII.

"We must give thanks to God" for the progress, the pope said, especially "given the weight of mutual prejudices and the sometimes-painful history that must be acknowledged."

"The task is not finished, and I encourage you to persevere on the path of dialogue, fraternity and joint initiatives," the pope said. "This beautiful work, which consists in creating bonds, is fragile, always to be

resumed and consolidated, especially in these hostile times in which attitudes of closure and rejection of the other are becoming more numerous, including with the worrying reappearance of antisemitism, particularly in Europe, and of violence against Christians."

Francis praised Isaac and, particularly, his work at the 1947 Seelisberg Conference of the International Council of Christians and Jews, which came up with a 10-point list of facts Christians must keep in mind when speaking with or about their Jewish brothers and sisters. They begin with the affirmation that there is one God who "speaks to us all through the Old and the New Testaments" and with the fact that Jesus, his mother and his disciples all were Jews.

Many of the points later were incorporated into the Second Vatican Council document "Nostra Aetate" on relations with the Jews, Muslims and other non-Christians, Francis noted.

Thanking the French group for its "untiring" work, the pope said members had helped "Jews and Christians rediscover themselves as brothers and sisters, children of the same father."

New podcast looks at sacred and profane in the Gospels

[CULTURE](#)



Charleigh E. Parker as Mary Magdalene, from left, Kristen Vaughan as Mary, Dani Martineck as Almelem and Nat Cassidy as Gestas in a 2018 production of "Almelem" at the Brick Theater in Brooklyn, New York. (Photo by Deborah Alexander)

BOB SMJETANA RELIGION NEWS SERVICE

12 December 2022

The new audio drama podcast "Almelem," set in first-century Palestine, begins with a perfect plan.

A con man, a shrewd businesswoman, a would-be prophet and a true believer team up to save their country from the Roman Empire.

They gather thousands of believers and create a seamless campaign strategy.

Then Jesus shows up and ruins everything, leaving the main characters with no choice but to invent a new religion on the fly.

The resulting "biblical backstager" may sound like Monty Python's "Life of Brian," but in execution it more resembles New Testament fan fiction. Engaging, hopeful and occasionally profane, it gently reimagines the greatest story ever told.

Broken into five episodes, "Almelem" debuted in late November, with the final episode due out just before Christmas. It is

based on a 2018 play of the same name by New York writer Sean Williams. Williams is also a co-founder of the company that produces the new podcast, [Gideon Media](#), known mostly for its science fiction tales such as "[Steal the Stars](#)" and "[Give Me Away](#)."

Jordana Williams, Sean's wife, directs the show, which features their friend and playwright Mac Rogers as John the Baptist, referred to by a fictional childhood nickname, Ya-Ya.

Sean Williams got the idea for the play while attending an Easter service at [Judson Memorial Church](#) in New York, where his friend, the Rev. Micah Bucey, is an associate minister. At the service, Bucey told a story that had long circulated at the church about an old cross that had been taken down and repurposed into a Communion table.

Bucey told the congregation that the story, though a myth, was still true, making a parallel to the death of Jesus and the empty tomb inspiring early Christians to create a new community around the Communion table.

Inspired by the sermon, Williams, who grew up in a Latter-day Saints family, began to think about how Christianity began.

"Immediately, I got the idea of John the Baptist possibly being the messiah," he said. "Because it was a gig they were looking for someone to get."

Though he's not religious, Williams said he has always been intrigued by faith and by how the New Testament made its way from firsthand accounts to the stories we know today.

That led him to write the tale of a con man named Gestas and his apprentice Almelem, who teams up with power broker Mary Magdalene, on the search for a new messiah. At first, they are mostly driven by their hatred of the Romans or a desire for profits. Along the way, something changes.



Dani Martineck as Almelem, left, and Mac Rogers as John the Baptist in a 2018 production of "Almelem" at the Brick Theater in Brooklyn, New York. (Photo by Deborah Alexander)

A turning point for John the Baptist comes when he encounters the main character, Almelem, a true believer who wants to be baptized.

Before that moment, John is a bit of a con man, said Jordana Williams. He's angry at the Romans and portrays himself as an angry prophet but doesn't really believe. In admitting he's making things up as he goes along, John has a bit of a revelation.

"You almost see him grow in that moment," the director said. "There's a greater holiness to that honesty and humility than there ever was to the slightly full-of-crap self-aggrandizement."

While the character of Jesus plays a central role in the plot, he never speaks and appears only once, when he meets John the Baptist. In that moment the Baptist turns from a stammering, would-be prophet to true believer.

A promotional piece of art for the stage version features the characters re-creating part of Michelangelo's Last Supper, with Jesus missing, along with the line, "You can't have a King without Kingmakers."

There's something universal about John the Baptist, said Rogers, a longtime friend and creative partner of the Williamses at Gideon. Rogers, who plays the Baptist, said he could relate to the character, a goofy but well-intentioned guy who dreamed of being somebody.

"John the Baptist wants so badly to be the man," he said. "And then the man shows up."

The character of Almelem, who is nonbinary, is played by Dani Martineck, who identifies as nonbinary in real life. Martineck's grandfather was an Episcopal priest while their dad was raised Southern Baptist.

"I like to say sometimes that I was raised confused," Martineck said.

Playing Almelem helped Martineck, who now identifies as an atheist, to see faith as more focused on relationships among people than on doctrine. Their character Almelem witnesses the hope and the heartache inherent in the Gospel stories and decides not to give up.

"That feels like an emotional arc that a lot of people can connect with, in terms of something crashing and burning and being heartbroken," Martineck said. "And then what are you going to make of that?"

"When you are reaching for profundity, you are a little bit full of it. But when you treat people with like simple generosity, and love and kindness and honesty, that's magic."

— *Jordana Williams*

Perhaps the loveliest — and one of the funniest — moments in the podcast comes when Mary, the mother of Jesus, recounts the story of the first Christmas. Gestas, the con man who is trying to figure out how to promote this new messiah, is not impressed: "You put the baby in the manger?" he asks, incredulous.

But Mary wins them over, in part because the retelling of the story is so human. She reflects the weariness of a pregnant woman trudging all the way to Bethlehem, wanting to lie down but unable to stop because her family has to finish their journey. She is then greeted with kindness after the birth of her son.

Jordana Williams said the audio drama balances "the profane parts of sacredness and the sacred parts of the mundane."

"When you are reaching for profundity, you are a little bit full of it," she said. "But when you treat people with like simple generosity, and love and kindness and honesty, that's magic."

The podcast, like the oldest ending of the New Testament Gospel of Mark, closes at the empty tomb.

That's fitting, said Bucey, because it reflects the situation of early Christians. Their leader had been executed by an empire and all their dreams were shattered.

So they told a story that changed the world, Bucey said. The story of the Christian faith, like the story of "Almelem," is

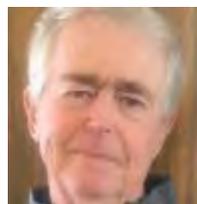
unconventional he added, in that it steps outside the status quo and imagines something better.

"They took this wooden cross — which was the symbol of execution — and said we are going to gather around this table and tell this story.

New Rome conference on Gospel nonviolence could serve as push for papal encyclical



In this 11 April 2019 file photo, Pope Francis kneels at the feet of South Sudan President Salva Kiir at the conclusion of a two-day retreat for the African nation's political leaders, at the Vatican. This event was referenced at an international conference on nonviolence and the teaching of Pope Francis, held Dec. 5-7 in Rome. (CNS/Vatican Media via Reuters)



BY TERRENCE RYNNE

13 December 2022

Seventy-five people from all over the world came together last week in Rome from Dec. 5-7 to ignite a peaceful revolution.

They were participants in [a dramatic conference](#) sponsored by the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative, a project of Pax Christi International, and the Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation Commission of the international unions of superiors of women's and men's religious orders. It was called "Pope Francis, Nonviolence and the Fullness of *Pacem in Terris*." Its goal was to understand through the sharing of stories the practical power of nonviolence to help heal our world.

Most of the participants had been suffering from violence for much of their lives — war, revolution, trafficking, oppression by dictators, devastation of their lands. Each had a story to tell about their use of nonviolent action to confront and overcome the violence assailing them.

The range of countries of origin was breathtaking: Kenya, Mexico, Romania, Guatemala, Nigeria, Bolivia, Japan, the Philippines, Congo, Indonesia, Cameroon, Brazil, Lebanon, Palestine, Uganda, the United States and Sri Lanka. In the course of two and a half days we heard exhilarating stories and realized that it is indeed a worldwide church.

Among the stories:

- Fr. Nandana Manatunga of the Human Rights Office in Sri Lanka described the recent nonviolent campaign by the united Buddhist, Muslim and Christian communities that ousted from power the three tyrannical Rajapaksa brothers who were, respectively, the president, vice president and head of the armed forces.
- Franciscan Br. Rodrigo Peret reviewed his 30 years of work with Brazilian Amazon

Indigenous people, accompanying them in their struggles for agrarian reform after centuries of being robbed of their lands.

- Sr. Maudilia López, of the Pastoral Defensoras de la Madre in Guatemala, presented her work as the leader of a women's group fighting the earth polluting practices of the Canadian mining company, Goldcorp.
- Zoughbi Zoughbi, Director of the Wi'am (Agape) Conflict Transformation Center in Bethlehem, West Bank, gave us a glimpse of his work building a nonviolent peace team in Bethlehem.

These and other stories of successful nonviolence were part of the reason that this conference prompts a revolution. The other reason was the clear kinship between participants and Pope Francis on how to deepen and spread the church's commitment to nonviolence.



Bishop John Stowe of Lexington, Kentucky, bishop president of Pax Christi USA, speaks at a meeting in Rome Dec. 6. The topic was "Pope Francis, Nonviolence and the Fullness of *Pacem in Terris* (Peace on Earth)." (CNS/Courtesy of Pax Christi International/Martin Pilgram)

For example, Bishop John Stowe, bishop president of Pax Christi in the United States, explained [in a talk](#) how this Jesuit pope brought with him a strong Franciscan spirituality —one that focused on the poor, the marginal, and the sacredness of our common home. He brought with him the

spirit of CELAM, the Latin American bishops' conference that also zeroed in on following Jesus, on a preferential option for the poor. Francis has led us in the practice of nonviolence as priest, bishop and pope.

Rose Berger, of Sojourners magazine, presented a series of 27 striking photographs of Francis practicing nonviolence. A sampling: a picture of Pope Francis in a warm embrace of two children who had grown up in a garbage dump in the Philippines, with the saying "these children are the treasures of the Church." Another picture, from 2017, depicted the pope with Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar presenting to her [his statement](#), "[Nonviolence, A Style of Politics for Peace](#)," reminding her of her duty to the minority groups of her country.

Another image showed Francis bending down to [kiss the feet](#) of the leaders of South Sudan, as they began a retreat in the Vatican designed to end the fighting there. Berger called these pictures of actions of the pope "sacraments of nonviolence" — visible signs that give grace.

What then of the ongoing request to the pope to write an encyclical on Gospel nonviolence?

The responses at this conference were many and enthusiastic in favor. If the church wants to invite the faithful to enter the fight against the many forms of violence affecting the world, the church should teach and embody the most effective way to fight violence — *with overwhelming nonviolence*. The only way to defeat hate is with love. Nonviolence is love in action in the context of conflict. Nonviolence is tough love, hard-edged, imaginative love that substitutes for and can defeat violence.

Currently there is little training in the church for nonviolence. The church is a long way

from understanding, let alone practicing effective nonviolent action. Many still confuse it with pacifism or think of it as passive or unrealistic. They have not studied the amazing case studies of effective nonviolence. They do not know the exacting research that shows nonviolent campaigns have been twice as effective as violent campaigns.

Priests for the most part do not get it. Few sermons are preached on it. Seminarians are not taught it. I personally visited two seminaries in my area, for example, offering to teach a course on peace studies/nonviolence. I have taught hundreds of Marquette University students for over a dozen years and know how enthusiastically they embrace the power and potential of nonviolent action once they are exposed to it. They understand that their whole culture is steeped in a belief in violence and that history has been taught to them as a history of wars.

Each seminary refused, saying their curriculum is tightly defined by the bishops. Not even a lecture. How can the church practice the ways to peace if their priests and seminarians do not understand the mighty levers of power contained in nonviolence — noncooperation, civil disobedience, boycotts, restorative justice practices, unarmed accompaniment and conflict resolution? How can they follow the nonviolent Jesus if they have not been introduced to him in action?

One African priest at the conference lamented the fact that nonviolence is not taught in Catholic schools around the world. No one has invited them to do so. I did not get to tell him about Peace Works, a conflict resolution program for all school levels, developed by the Center for Peacemaking at Marquette University, that has been refined and tested with great results over the last

dozen years and is now available on the internet.



Cardinal Michael Czerny, prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, celebrates Mass with participants at an international conference on nonviolence and the teaching of Pope Francis, Dec. 7 in Rome. Among the concelebrants are: at far left, Bishop John Stowe of Lexington, Kentucky; Cardinal Robert McElroy of San Diego, California, to the left of Czerny; and Archbishop John Wester of Santa Fe, New Mexico, far right. (CNS/Courtesy of Pax Christi International/Martin Pilgram)

A formal teaching from the pope would unleash a powerful chain reaction in the church. Some would say it would be better if the commitment to nonviolence came into the church from the grassroots rather than from a pronouncement on high. Those attending this conference *are* the grassroots and they are saying it would help them *greatly* if the pope issued an authoritative endorsement in the form of an encyclical.

Just as the 2015 encyclical "*Laudato Si'*", on Care for Our Common Home" has stirred many to climate change action, so probably would an encyclical on nonviolence move the church on all levels to embrace nonviolence as our Jesus-inspired way of confronting violence and oppression.

Our deliberations were enriched by the participation of some impressive bishops. Santa Fe Archbishop John Wester summarized for us his pathfinding pastoral letter on nuclear disarmament and San Diego Cardinal Robert McElroy sat intently taking in the impressive stories of nonviolent action — an important lesson of leadership.

The peaceful revolution continues to unfold.

In Vatican newspaper, academic urges Pope Francis to get beyond women stereotypes

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The front page of L'Osservatore Romano, the Vatican newspaper, from June 25, 2022. (CNS photo/L'Osservatore Romano)

CINDY WOODEN
CATHOLIC NEWS SERVICE

Vatican City — 13 December 2022

Recent popes have used the concept of a "Petrine principle" and a "Marian principle" to describe the important role women and men together play in the Catholic Church, but a biblical scholar writing in the Vatican newspaper said it is time to talk about the discriminatory and stereotypical notions behind it.

The question must be asked: "Doesn't the Marian-Petrine principle express an ideology and rhetoric of sexual and gender differentiation that has now been exposed as one of the covers for patriarchal privileges?" wrote Marinella Perroni, a retired professor of biblical theology at the Pontifical Atheneum of St. Anselm in Rome.

Her article Dec. 12 in L'Osservatore Romano, the Vatican newspaper, was in response to Pope Francis' most recent use of the dual principle in [an interview](#) with the Jesuit-run America magazine in late November.

As he has done frequently when asked about the role of women in the church and the possibility of ordaining women deacons or priests, Francis insisted that "the Marian principle, which is the principle of femininity in the church, of the woman in the church, where the church sees a mirror of herself because she is a woman and a spouse" is more important than the Petrine principle, which refers to ordained ministry in succession to St. Peter and the apostles.

"The church is more than a ministry. It is the whole people of God. The church is woman. The church is a spouse. Therefore, the dignity of women is mirrored in this way," the pope told America magazine. "Why can a woman not enter ordained ministry? It is because the Petrine principle has no place for that. Yes, one has to be in the Marian principle, which is more important."

Perroni said the Petrine-Marian principle was first formulated by the Swiss theologian Fr. Hans Urs von Balthasar in the 1970s to combat an "anti-Roman" sentiment among some Catholics and to insist that the hierarchical structure of the church and its living community of believers called to holiness and to bringing Christ to the world must go together.

Sts. Paul VI and John Paul II as well as retired Pope Benedict XVI and Francis have used the principle "to talk about the life of the church and, above all, about the participation in it of women and men," Perroni wrote.

In the formula, she said, "it is immediately intuited that Mary is the prototype of the feminine and Peter is the prototype of the masculine, and it is clear that when the popes use the formula of the 'Marian-Petrine principle,' they want to affirm that everyone, women and men, should feel at home in the church because it is a place where the relationship between masculine and feminine is one of close reciprocity."

"At the beginning of the third millennium, however, a reciprocity that assigns to women the charism of love and to men the exercise of authority should at least give us pause," she wrote.

Perroni quoted Pope Paul's 1974 document on Marian devotion where he explained that with Mary, God "has placed in his family, the church, as in every home, the figure of a woman, who in a hidden manner and in a spirit of service watches over that family and carefully looks after it until the glorious day of the Lord."

The popes, including Francis, have insisted that the Marian principle and feminine role in the church is more important than the ministerial and authoritative role of St. Peter

and his successors, Perroni wrote, even if the Marian principle characterizes the role of women as "maternal" and "domestic."

Acknowledging the church needs a more profound "theology of women," she said, Francis "struggles to free himself from the patriarchal vision" that reserves authority to men and loving to women.

Using the binary Petrine principle and Marian principle is "seductive" because it is simple, Perroni said.

But it is problematic because it stereotypes the differences between men and women and gives them a hierarchical value, she said. The feminine is presented as domestic, interior, welcoming and spiritual, while the masculine is presented as ministerial, authoritative and powerful.

However, Perroni wrote, it is "quite clear that forms of the mystical exaltation of the feminine are directly proportional to the refusal of public recognition of women's authority."

"The masculine-feminine bipolarity," she said, featured "obsessively" in Catholic theology when it was "totally androcentric and patriarchal," but it has lost credibility "since women first became the 'women's issue' and then, having shaken off this offensive expression, became full protagonists in social, political and ecclesial life."

What Catholic and Orthodox churches have to say about the war in Ukraine



BY MICHAEL SEAN WINTERS

HARTFORD, Conn. — 14
December 14, 2022

Last week, I was able to attend the second half of a two-day meeting of Roman Catholic and Orthodox scholars sponsored by the [Greenberg Center for the Study of Religion in Public Life](#) at Trinity College. The focus of the conversations was how the different theological traditions approach issues of war, and how that applies to the war in Ukraine today. The conference was on background, so I contacted the participants afterward.

"I wanted to do this because I have been interested in the two approaches," said Greenberg Center director Mark Silk. "The just war tradition, in some sense, develops a checklist of norms, of right and wrong, for both *ad bellum* and *in bello* considerations. And the Orthodox acknowledged that is a useful analytic exercise to go through."

Ad bellum refers to the justifications to go to war in the first place, and *in bello* refers to the moral norms governing military conduct during the prosecution of the war.

The Orthodox tradition, however, strikes a different note. "That line from St. Basil, that killing in war isn't murder, but that a soldier still has to wait three years before taking communion again, that focus on reintegration into society, that is mindful of something the just war tradition doesn't pay much attention to: What happens after?" Silk told me in an interview after the conference.

"The real concern there is how do you deal with the post-bellum reality? With PTSD and those who are morally afflicted? This is a central pastoral concern, and it may not help to just celebrate soldiers who fought in a 'good war.' "

Fordham University theology professor Aristotle "Telly" Papanikolaou concurred, arguing that war raises more questions than those addressed by the just war tradition.

"The ethics of war usually focus on the question of whether waging war is 'just,'" Papanikolaou said via email after the event. "But if ethics is not simply about rules but about what is possible for humans to become, then the 'ethics of war' must focus on how violence affects one's capacity for loving relationships, including one's capacity to experience a relationship of union with God. War can cause 'moral injury' insofar as our capacity to love can be deeply damaged."

The issue of war, then, is not only about ethics, but about teleology, not just about norms but about what kind of human being we want to be and our baptismal call to be united with God. And teleology can be more complicated than ethics. The Orthodox theological tradition, with its emphasis on the mystical and the pneumatological, goes deeper than issues of ethical justification.

Jesuit Fr. Thomas Massaro, also from Fordham, took up the adage that "wars rush history" and focused on six discrete areas in which the war in Ukraine has created a new sense of crisis: environmental, economic, geopolitical, humanitarian, cultural and religious. The first four are relatively straightforward, but the cultural and religious legacy of this terrible war is more complicated.

Focusing on the cultural impact, Massaro mentioned the words of French President Emmanuel Macron, during his recent [press conference](#) with President Joe Biden. Macron noted that this war is no mere struggle over real estate but entails a battle over the core values associated with western civilization at its best: freedom, popular sovereignty, principles over brute power. A Putin victory threatens our sense of values because it would represent a regression to a Hobbesian, "might makes right" world order.



U.S. President Joe Biden and French President Emmanuel Macron stand together during an official State Arrival Ceremony for Macron on the South Lawn of the White House in Washington Dec. 1. (CNS/Reuters/Elizabeth Frantz)

He polled his students about their impressions, and among their various concerns, Massaro found that, "even those who leaned toward pacifism report being persuaded that the Ukrainians are justified in defending their homeland with the use of force and standing up for their way of life. One reported that at first she had doubts about whether the defensive war measures up to the criterion of reasonable expectation of success. But by now they are all convinced of the judgment that all the criteria of the just-war theory are satisfied."

Jesuit Fr. Mark Massa, of Boston College, told me after the event, "The thing that most struck me is how Orthodox Christianity is so

tied up with nationalism, which makes the question of 'religion and nationalism' the dominant one when considering Orthodoxy." All agreed that a conference on religion and nationalism, as well as further development of *jus post-bellum* moral criteria, would be useful.

Boston College professor Cathleen Kaveny said her takeaway from the conversations was that "the Roman Catholic and Orthodox approaches to war complement each other." Kaveny understood the value of the Catholic just war tradition in examining the ethical issues involved.

"The Catholic just war tradition provides guidance for decisions about going to war," she told me via email after the conference. "It also provides firm rules about how military forces should conduct themselves in war. In the Ukrainian context, the rule that it is always wrong to target non-combatants is especially important. It also is a foundation for just action after the war is over — and just peacemaking to end the war as quickly as possible."

"The Orthodox moral tradition of *economia* takes rules seriously, but focuses equally on the brokenness of the particular situation and the harm done to the people in it," Kaveny continued. "Its notion of sin is broader than the Catholic tradition, being understood as 'missing the mark.' So it has more resources to understand and heal things like post-traumatic stress disorder in soldiers who, even if they didn't sin from a Catholic perspective, were involved in something that is not consistent with God's original plan for peace."

"The Orthodox moral tradition of economia takes rules seriously, but focuses equally on the brokenness of the particular situation and the harm done to the people in it. Its notion of sin is broader

than the Catholic tradition, being understood as 'missing the mark.' "
— Cathleen Kaveny

This insight is echoed by the Rev. Perry T. Hamalis, professor of religious studies at North Central College in Naperville, Illinois.

"From an Orthodox Christian perspective, every act of killing is an act of fratricide, thus every war is a fratricidal war. The additional fact, in the case of Ukraine, that Russia and Ukraine are nations whose citizens overwhelmingly self-identify as Christians, only amplifies the fratricidal nature of this horrific war," Hamalis explained via email after the conference. "The recent Russian-born Orthodox saint, St. Sophrony (Sakharov) the Athonite, writes, 'wars are sin par excellence' and he reiterates a broader teaching within Orthodox ethics, 'Life in the world is based on force, on violence. The Christian has the opposite aim. Force does not belong to eternal life. No act imposed by force can save us.' "

"Orthodox are much more skeptical of the ways that a 'theory' of just war can easily become either a way for states to propagandistically justify unjust wars or, perhaps more importantly, a way for soldiers to deceive themselves about the effects of war upon their hearts and minds," Hamalis continued. "Since, for the Orthodox, even a war that meets all the 'just war criteria' and that is fought according to just war principles does moral and spiritual damage to all who are involved."

Silk, the event's host, said he was pleased with the exchange of views. The general consensus, between Roman Catholic and Orthodox, but also between those more attracted to the just war tradition and those who emphasize the pacifist strain in Catholic thought, seemed to be, as Silk put it, "that

war is not a good thing, even if it's just, that the Western narrative of 'the good war,' and consequent valorization of right and wrong, doesn't help."

"There is a reason guys who fought in the Pacific and in the Battle of the Bulge tend not to talk about it," Silk said.

Eucharistic Revival seen as chance to minister with Latino Catholics



Worshippers receive Communion during a Spanish-language Mass celebrated on the eve of the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church in Staten Island, New York, Dec. 11. Our Lady of Mount Carmel-St. Benedicta-St. Mary of the Assumption Parish ministers to a large population of immigrants from Mexico. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)



BY ALEJA HERTZLER-MCCAIN

Bertelsen Editorial Fellow
14 December 2022

As the U.S. bishops undertake a three-year initiative to revive American Catholics' interest in attending Mass each week, some church leaders are renewing their focus on a particular issue: the tendency of many Latino Catholics to refrain from receiving Communion.

Bishop Andrew Cozzens of Crookston, Minnesota, the lead organizer of the [National Eucharistic Revival](#), said recently that "one of the constant desires of the heart" in his own ministry with Latino Catholics has revolved around the question: "How do we invite them to a deeply eucharistic life?"

In a press conference during the bishops' annual meeting in Baltimore in November, Cozzens framed that issue as a "great challenge" facing Catholic leaders. A 2015 Pew survey [found](#) that, in the U.S., only 21% of Hispanic Catholics receive Communion at every Mass they attend, compared to 56% of those who are white.

In interviews with NCR, theologians and experts in Latino ministry pointed to a variety of reasons members of the community often attend Mass but do not take Communion, and offered a number of suggestions for how the ongoing revival might encourage full participation in the liturgical celebration.



Hosffman Ospino (CNS/Bob Roller)

They also stressed that the mindset about the Eucharist in immigrant and Latino communities is often different than that in primarily non-Hispanic parishes.

[Hosffman Ospino](#), an associate professor of Hispanic ministry and religious education at Boston College, said that Latino immigrants approach Communion differently than their descendants. "Half of an entire congregation may as well not receive Communion" in Latin America, said Ospino, who was born in Colombia.

Timothy Matovina, a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame who focuses on Latino Catholics, said that many Latinos "almost act sometimes as if the Eucharist is reserved for the most holy. You'll hear people say, 'Well, my parents were divorced, so I can't receive Communion,' which of course is not true."

The Eucharistic Revival, which was launched in June, includes a number of diocesan- and parish-level events to promote appreciation of and participation in Communion, and will culminate in July 2024 with a National Eucharistic Congress in Indianapolis.

During the Baltimore press conference, Bishop Daniel Flores of Brownsville, Texas, a member of the bishops' advisory group for

the revival, also spoke about the lower rate at which Hispanic Catholics receive Communion. Asked by NCR about the issue, Flores said he would not characterize the gap as a problem.



Bishop Daniel Flores of Brownsville, Texas, speaks during a news conference on the National Eucharistic Congress prior to a Nov. 16 session of the fall general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore. Also pictured is Cande de Leon, chief advancement officer of the congress, and Bishop Andrew Cozzens of Crookston, Minnesota. (CNS/Bob Roller)

"It's better just to recognize that there often is a difference in how different traditions of the faith and expressions of that faith in the Eucharist show themselves," said Flores, pointing out that there is great diversity among Hispanic communities.

Flores said that instead the church should "observe" and "respect" Hispanic attitudes toward the Eucharist, and spoke particularly about the beauty of the Hispanic practice of eucharistic processions.

Said Ospino: "Latino Catholics in general have a profound love and respect for the Eucharist."

Marilyn Santos, associate director of the U.S. bishops' Secretariat of Evangelization and Catechesis, told NCR in a phone interview that the Eucharistic Revival has

invested in multiple methods of outreach and inclusion for Hispanic Catholics. As an example, Santos said [the Spanish-language version of the revival website](#) is not a direct translation of the English version, but created specifically for Hispanic Catholics.



Maria and Arturo Perez receive Communion for the first time as a couple during their convalidation ceremony at Good Shepherd Catholic Church in Alexandria, Virginia, June 24, 2017. They joined other couples blessing their civil union. (CNS/Tyler Orsburn)

One major reason that theologians cited as a possibility for why Latino Catholics might refrain from taking Communion is that they may be living in romantic relationships that do not strictly align with the church's official teachings. For example, some may be living with a partner before marriage or may have been married civilly, but not in the church.

Ospino said he did not have specific statistics on that issue, but estimated that the majority of Latino Catholics under 40 in the U.S. have not been married in the church.

Generally, he said, the rate of sacramental marriage in the U.S. has dropped "dramatically." According to [data from](#) Georgetown's Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, only 29% of all U.S. Catholics getting married in 2016 did so in the church.



Timothy Matovina (CNS/University of Notre Dame/Matt Cashore)

Matovina said reasons Latinos do not get sacramentally married can vary. He said some immigrant couples may wish to wait for a church wedding until they can be reunited with extended family members, or may struggle to pay for the costs of a wedding.

[Natalia Imperatori-Lee](#), a professor of religious studies at Manhattan College, echoed Matovina's concerns about cost. "In my home diocese of Miami, it costs hundreds of dollars to do a church wedding," she said.

Santos said revival organizers hope to spread the message that Catholic sacramental marriages are available especially to undocumented people, and to encourage parishes to adjust faith formation programs to accommodate the busy schedules of recent immigrants.

Inspired by the Eucharistic Revival, Franciscan Fr. Brian Jordan, pastor of St. Camillus Parish in Silver Spring, Maryland, decided to hold a communal wedding Mass on Dec. 11 at the 12:30 Spanish-language service.

"It's a joy to have the celebration of the sacrament of marriage, and the couples feel able to receive the body of Christ for the

first time in years, in some cases, maybe the first time ever," said Jordan.

Marco Mejia, who with his wife, Patricia, helped lead marriage preparation for the December Mass, said the majority of the couples have been civilly married for years. Many have not had sacramental marriages for financial reasons.

"Not only for me, for every Catholic, it should be very important to go to Communion," said Mejia.



Jesus Solorio carries a cross during a Eucharistic Congress procession June 17, 2017, in College Park, Georgia, in the Atlanta Archdiocese. (CNS/Georgia Bulletin/Michael Alexander)

Some Catholics are able to have sacramental weddings after being married civilly, but for other Latinos, church teaching puts them in a difficult bind.

[Eder Díaz Santillan](#), host of the podcast "[De Pueblo, Católico y Gay](#)," said the church's teaching against queer and same-sex relationships can exclude Latino Catholics from full participation in the church.

"The prohibitions on receiving Communion while cohabitating alienate LGBTQ+ Latinx individuals like myself," said Díaz via email. "As a baptized Catholic, I am part of the church, and I want to be included in all the blessings God gives us."

Díaz said that the consequences of excluding LGBTQ+ Catholics from sacramental marriage go beyond access to Communion. In talking with LGBTQ+ Latinx Catholics for the podcast, "I have found that most families who reject their children, do so by citing the church's alienation of the LGBTQ+ community as an example," Díaz wrote.

Oscar Castellanos, director for the Initiative for Parish Renewal (Renovación) at Marian University in Indianapolis, said another reason U.S. Latinos may not take Communion — beyond the issue of sacramental marriage — is because they are unfamiliar with American practices around the sacrament of reconciliation, and then see themselves as unable to celebrate Communion without first going to confession.

In Latin America, people feel free to approach a priest and ask, " 'Can you hear my confession?' And you might be walking, you might be in the park, you might be in the airport, just outside of Mass," said Castellanos, who was raised in both Mexico and the U.S.

But in the U.S., Castellanos said, "the system tells you, 'No, you go on Saturday, and you make an appointment.' "

As they evaluated the Eucharistic Revival, theologians and ministry leaders had differing perspectives on its engagement with the Latino community.



Natalia Imperatori-Lee (Courtesy of Manhattan College)

Imperatori-Lee expressed disappointment that the bishops were not placing greater emphasis on increasing accessibility to the sacraments, especially for Latino Catholics who might struggle to access sacraments financially or in their languages.

"This is a case where I don't think that the U.S. church is meeting people where they are. I think the U.S. church is trying to set the bar higher and see if people will come to it," she said.

This perspective contrasts with Pope Francis' 2016 apostolic exhortation [*Amoris Laetitia*](#) ("The Joy of Love"), said Imperatori-Lee. "[Francis] was saying that the Christian community tries within its circumstances to live as close to the rules as possible, but that the church too must meet people where they are," she said.

Other theologians and leaders agreed more with Flores' perspective of observation and respect.

"I would love to see more people receiving the Eucharist in the Latino community and in other communities," said Ospino, but "I'm also mindful that there is some wisdom among Latinos who choose not to receive the Eucharist."

Instead of creating a "master plan" from an office, Ospino invited theologians and church leaders to go and see how the Eucharist is celebrated in Latino communities.

For Imperatori-Lee though, the Eucharistic Revival left her with one question: "Why are you comfortable keeping people from the Eucharist if it is the summit and the source of the Christian life?"

2 books reach same conclusion on organized religion in America



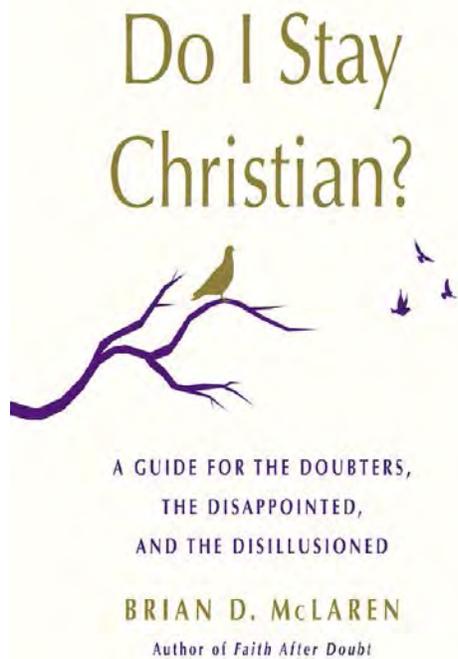
(Pixabay/ Sony Ilce-7)



BY TOM ROBERTS

15 December 2022

It was coincidental that the two books came into my view almost simultaneously, but there is nothing accidental about the dire warnings of two longtime observers and practitioners: organized religion in the United States faces several existential threats.



Do I Stay Christian? : A Guide for the Doubters, the Disappointed, and the Disillusioned

Brian D. McClaren

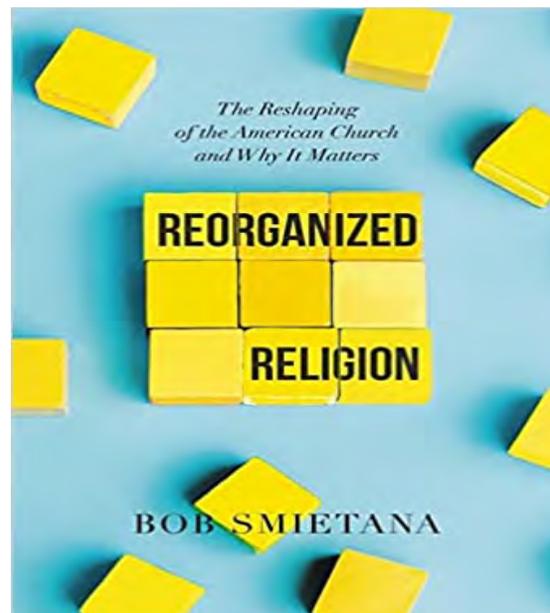
272 pages; Macmillan

\$27.99

In [*Do I Stay Christian? A Guide for the Doubters, the Disappointed, and the Disillusioned*](#), Brian D. McClaren, noted writer and former evangelical pastor, spends the first section of his book answering "no" to the question; a second segment reasoning why those who entertain the question should answer a highly nuanced "yes"; and a third outlining a mostly non-institutional path forward.

Religion journalist Bob

Smietana's [*Reorganized Religion: The Reshaping of the American Church and Why It Matters*](#) takes a more reportorial approach to the changing demographics and other forces within and beyond the boundaries of Protestant congregations large and small that threaten the very existence of religion in the United States. It is also, in some measure, an account of Smietana's personal journey and his stated hope that churches remain a vital component of U.S. culture.



Reorganized Religion: The Reshaping of the American Church and Why It Matters

Bob Smietana

256 pages; Worthy

\$27.00

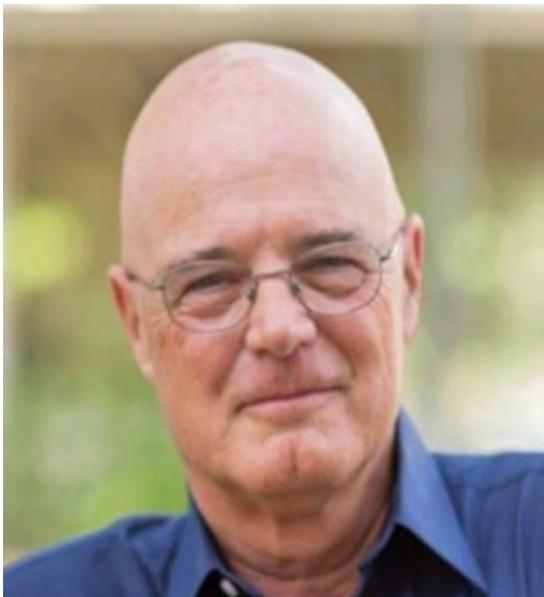
Both books describe the ecclesial equivalent of climate change. The data, the surveys, the spreadsheets and the endless stream of anecdotes have been out there for decades. The damning history, though more often than not glossed over or ignored, has been available all along to anyone interested. The forces at work have been evident for a very long time. Like a melting glacier, the evidence can remain largely out of sight and seem inconsequential — until it isn't. It can

be viewed in discrete bits that may not appear terribly threatening. Taken together, however, the forces become life altering, if not life threatening, to organized religion.

Smietana, a Religion News Service national reporter, and McClaren draw together the data and connect the dots. They surface the inconvenient truths that have become indisputable.

Threats from within

Some threats arise from within the broadly framed community itself. Religious organizations (Catholic hierarchs top the chart in this area) have demonstrated a propensity for egregious corruption. Institutions built by and for white congregations, as Smietana puts it, are of fading relevance in a culture that is turning brown. Generations of regular churchgoers are dying out and being replaced by people with far looser, if any, attachments to civic and ecclesial institutions. And the pandemic has accelerated the speed and effect of changes already underway.



Brian D. McLaren, previously a pastor for 24 years, is now an author, activist, public theologian and guest lecturer. On the faculty of

The Living School at the Center for Action and Contemplation, he sees Christianity in the U.S. as a failed project. (Hannah Davis)

McClaren, a post-evangelical, has a close association with Franciscan Fr. [Richard Rohr](#) and his [Center for Action and Contemplation](#) in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He recounts conversations he's had over decades with evangelical and mainline Protestants who are hanging on by a thread, a fingernail or have one foot out the door of organized religion.

His sympathies lie with those who are exhausted over the U.S. religion project, of what it's become, its hardened divisions, immersion into partisan politics and what he sees as a diminishment of religion into a kind of packaged behavior guide in thrall of a minimized God. In short, he [sees Christianity in the U.S. as a failed project.](#)

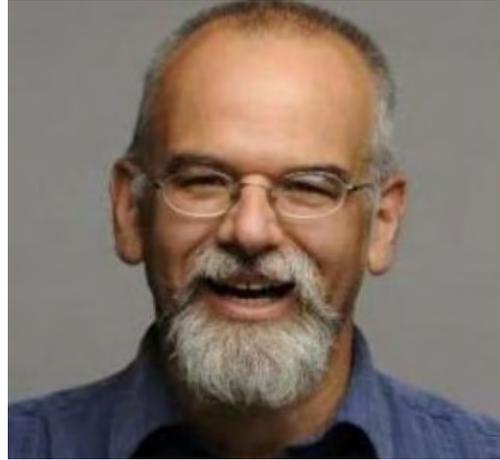
Although McClaren can imagine Christianity "as a huge ship capable of amazing voyages," he sees it today as unable to move "because its anchor is so heavy that its crew cannot pull it up. By reducing its mysteries to beliefs by codifying these beliefs in systems, and by defining itself by those belief systems, it has rendered itself a paradox: a ship that floats but doesn't sail. For most Christians I encounter today, beliefs are simply what Christianity is."

While not "against beliefs, any more than a scientist is against fact," McClaren's objection is to beliefs — especially without corresponding action — constituting the entirety of the Christian enterprise. He'd free the crew of the immobile craft to go on mission "to follow the life and example of Jesus, teaching others by their example to live by Jesus' spiritual method of radical nondiscriminatory love and courageous truth telling."

It is not difficult to see two sides of a coin in McClaren's analysis. One might nod in agreement with his assessment that Christianity in the United States has become "stuck," largely competing versions of tick lists of beliefs or firmly held "orthodoxies" in service to institutional loyalties of one sort or another.

At the same time, it is evident in the leaps he makes through millennia of some of Christianity's most serious sins — antisemitism, Christian-on-Christian violence, colonialism, white patriarchy and racism, anti-intellectualism, institutionalism — that many of those ills were, in season and in context, someone's version of "courageous truth telling." Reason enough, then, to read through the second half, though the tension between charism and order, descendent from the earliest confrontations between Peter and Paul, may be an institutional inevitability.

It is noteworthy that McClaren more than once cites positive influences found in the Catholic world. Those of his ilk, he writes at one point, "discovered resources in several Catholic orders, especially in the Franciscan, Ignatian, Benedictine, and other traditions of contemplation and action." Suffice to say that although some Catholics today would hold that the church is immutable and that any change verges on the heretical, historically we know that some of the best of the tradition flowed from such radical reformers as he references.



Bob Smietana is an award-winning reporter and Pulitzer grantee with more than two decades of experience covering religion, spirituality and ethics. Previously a senior editor at Christianity Today, Smietana is a national reporter for Religion News Service. (Courtesy of Worthy Publishing)

A new story?

If McClaren deals in broad sweeps of history and Christianity's tendency to self-aggrandizement while ignoring its deep flaws, Smietana is more tightly focused on the present. He details the hubris of celebrity preachers and its tawdry effects, the corrosive sex and money scandals that have torn at major denominations and deepening political divisions that have bared a sinister racism among some congregations and movements.

"We may have to stop believing the lies we've been told about the past in order to find a new story for the future," he writes.

That sense of search is central to both authors. The answer is also essential, Smietana believes, if the Christian community at large is to attract the next generation who have left both mainline and evangelical congregations because they don't share or believe in the story of the past.

If demography is destiny, Smietana has enough data to depress the most optimistic believer. Church leaders in the past could assume that Christianity would be the dominant religion, that people would always be attending church services and that churches would endure long into the future. That's no longer the case. Among the examples, one illustration tells a great deal: "In 1966, there were more than 3.4 million Episcopalians. By 2019, that number dropped to 1.7 million, even though the population of the United States nearly doubled from 1960 ... to 2020."

Smietana also cites membership declines for every other mainline denomination is also cited by Smietana. Not only are young people not showing up, there are fewer of them to potentially fill the pews in mainline churches, where the membership is either aging or having fewer children than previous generations.

More recently, political divisions that have riven civil society with the advent of the Trump era have invaded U.S. sanctuaries. Smietana recounts tales of people leaving former congregations, citing Trumpism and deep disagreements over issues of gender, sexuality and race as the causes. For many, the isolation and separation from in-person services caused by COVID-19 provided the space to reconsider old associations. The pandemic "hastened that decline by interrupting the habit of churchgoing for tens of millions of Americans and revealing the internal conflicts that were bubbling under the surface in many congregations, just waiting to boil over."

Tangentially, it matters, too, that the landscape is shifting perilously for the Catholic community in the United States. Smietana notes that Catholicism, because of its outreach to immigrants, is more diverse than much of Protestantism and

consequently has more stable membership numbers. Catholicism's demographic difficulties are of a different sort. If immigrants keep the numbers stable, there is still an outflow of membership at least equal to, if not surpassing, that of mainline Protestantism over recent decades.

And while the Catholic bottom line may appear healthy, its other demographic difficulty lies in the long-term decline in ordained ministers. It has had to deal with its own church mergers and, at a time when some of the Protestant world may be questioning the value of megachurches, Catholicism is building bigger to accommodate the declining number of priests.

What lies ahead is speculative, but it involves change both institutionally and personally. Any change, however, will rest on the foundation that proceeds from an honest assessment of what is. And that assessment is the most valuable contribution by McClaren and Smietana. The inconvenient truths won't disappear because we ignore them.

In the evolution of his own conception of God, McClaren notes that he had to let go of the belief in a God whose purpose was to make life easy, to get beyond his need for that "someone who would answer my questions rather than questioning my answers."

Not a bad starting point for confronting an existential threat.

**What is the real
'reason' for the
season: sin or love?**



The Nativity scene and Christmas tree decorate St. Peter's Square at the Vatican Dec. 5. (CNS/Paul Haring)



BY DANIEL P. HORAN

15 December 2022

Bumper stickers and internet memes tend to spring up this time of year, beckoning onlookers to "remember the reason for the season" or exhort readers to "keep Christ in Christmas." While undoubtedly well-meaning in their origin, these slogans have also been coopted by conservative commentators in recent years as a kind of political *cri de coeur* that signals a made-up "war on Christmas."

Even though there is no such thing as a "war on Christmas," at least not in the United States, I do find the rallying cry "remember the reason for the season" very interesting, especially because of its inadvertently theological invitation.

The question "Why did God become human?" has been the focus of theological reflection for as long as the earliest Christian community began proclaiming that the

Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us (John 1:14). The most famous consideration of this question comes in the form of a treatise by St. Anselm of Canterbury, *Cur Deus Homo?* (literally: "Why the God-Man?").

The question is one of the divine *ratio* — that is "reason," "motivation" or "logic" — for the coming of Christ into the world. Anselm begins his exploration with the presumption that human sinfulness is the biggest issue at play. Subsequently, we need to be reconciled to God, something we cannot accomplish on our own. It can only, ultimately, be achieved by one who is both divine and human; hence the Incarnation.

For Anselm, sin is the reason for the season. He believes that if humanity had not sinned, if we had continued to enjoy the rectitude and right relationship Adam and Eve are said to have enjoyed with God before the Fall, the eternal *Logos* would never have needed to become human. The Incarnation is, for Anselm, a sign of God's benevolence, but it is also entirely predicated on our disobedience, pride, sin and need for reconciliation.

This has come to be known in theological circles as the "majority opinion" about the divine reason for the Incarnation. Indeed, if you were to poll a selection of average Christians leaving church this Sunday and ask them: "Why did God become human?" the most common answer is likely to be "to save us from our sins."

Yet even as most Christians believe that the reason God became human is sin, this is hardly a theme in Christmas cards. And most secular and religious Christmas songs tend to be lovely, cheerful, and often upbeat. With a few exceptions, like the classic "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen," there is hardly acknowledgement that the popular

understanding of the "reason for the season" is human sinfulness.

With a few exceptions, like the classic "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen," there is hardly acknowledgement that the popular understanding of the "reason for the season" is human sinfulness.

I'm not suggesting we need more Lenten or Good Friday-themed Christmas songs. Rather, I think we have the whole focus on sin wrong in the first place. And I'm far from alone in that view.

The "majority opinion" about the divine *ratio* for the Incarnation is not the only view. There is a longstanding theological and spiritual tradition dating back to the New Testament itself that holds that even if we had not sinned, God would still have become human!

The technical language for this admittedly "minority opinion" (minority only because it is lesser known, not at all less true) is known as supralapsarianism. That's just a fancy word for "not occasioned by or dependent on 'the Fall'" (from *supra* meaning "above" or "apart from" and *lapsus* meaning "the Fall"). The "majority opinion" is known as infralapsarian (from *infra* meaning "dependent on").

This longstanding, perfectly orthodox, entirely sound theological view argues that the Incarnation was always part of God's plan for creation and that the Word becoming flesh was never primarily motivated by human sin or anything else outside of God's absolute freedom.

The issue here is the unfortunate conflation that many people have made over the centuries between the need for reconciliation and the need for salvation. As the second century theologian St. Irenaeus of Lyons

explained in his classic treatise *Adversus Haereses*, God's plan for creation always included God's plan for salvation, which he understood (following St. Paul) as the recapitulation of the whole of creation back to God's self.

When God created, God also willed to bring all of creation to glory through a finite share in the divine life, which is accomplished by the Incarnate Word and Holy Spirit.



Decorations illuminate the entrance to the Viennese Christmas Market at City Hall Square in Vienna Dec. 6. (CNS/Reuters/Lisa Leutner)

Our Eastern Christian siblings have maintained this tradition much better than most of us Western Christians have. But many Western Christian theologians and saints have advanced the sound doctrine that the divine reason for the Incarnation is primarily about God's love, freedom and plan for creation and salvation long ahead of any chance humanity had to sin or exercise disobedience.

Take, for example, the contemporary of Anselm, a fellow Benedictine monk named Rupert of Deutz, who wrote several treatises in which he presented a supralapsarian argument for the Incarnation in response to the classic counterfactual question: "What if humanity had not sinned?" His answer is that there is plenty of reason to believe with

confidence that God would still have become human, a position he defends with scripture and the theological tradition.

Or consider some of the greatest theologians at the nascent universities of Paris in Oxford in the early 13th century, such as the Franciscan Alexander of Hales, Dominican St. Albert the Great or the secular master Robert Grosseteste, who served as the chancellor of Oxford before becoming Bishop of Lincoln. Like Rupert before them, they each offered their own contributions to the supralapsarian position on the Incarnation.

Perhaps the most famous medieval contributor to this theological tradition is the Franciscan Blessed John Duns Scotus, the scholar who also developed the philosophical argument that would eventually become the Catholic framework for the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary.

Many modern theologians and spiritual writers, both Catholic and Protestant, have also contributed to this tradition, including Jesuit Fr. Karl Rahner, Karl Barth, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Trappist Fr. Thomas Merton, St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson, among others.

None of these historical or contemporary figures deny the reality of sin or the need we have to be reconciled to God, which is indeed accomplished by Jesus Christ through his life, death and resurrection. The issue centers on not putting the proverbial cart before the horse, confusing one of the effects of the Incarnation for the primary or exclusive reason for it.

Just because Christ accomplishes our reconciliation with God, a need originating from our sinfulness, does not mean that is

the only reason or even the primary reason God became human.

Just because Christ accomplishes our reconciliation with God, a need originating from our sinfulness, does not mean that is the only reason or even the primary reason God became human.

Love. Love is the reason God wanted to enter the world as one of us, to draw near to us in the most intimate way possible: taking on our very materiality (*sarx*), our very vulnerability (Philippians 2:6-11), our shared experience of human relationship in this world. If we humans had exercised our free will in obedience and never sinned, we wouldn't have needed redemption or reconciliation for sin, but God would still have entered the world as one of us out of love and the desire to bring us and all of creation to share in God's life in salvation.

I think the way Merton summarizes this in his book [*New Seeds of Contemplation*](#) says it best:

The Lord would not only love His creation as Father, but He would enter into His creation, emptying Himself, hiding Himself, as if He were not God but a creature. Why should he do this? Because He loved His creatures, and because He could not bear that His creatures should merely adore him as distant, remote, transcendent, and all powerful.

Again, it is divine love that is the primary motive. Not only can we give thanks that Christ has reconciled us to God because of our sin, but also and more fundamentally we can praise God at Christmas for the divine love and absolute freedom reflected in God's desire to draw close to us as one of us from all eternity.

Now that is a reason for the season worthy of Handel's "Hallelujah" chorus or "O Holy Night" or even a bumper sticker.

Wealthy conservative Catholics are the new US magisterium



(NCR illustration/National Shrine photo by Wikimedia Commons/Farragutful; money photo by Unsplash/Mackenzie Marco)



BY TOM ROBERTS

15 December 2022

Sean Fieler was once asked to name "the thinkers or donors" who have influenced how he practices his considerable philanthropy.

"There's a good network I've gotten to know over the last decade or so, through boards or shared charitable interests, who have had a big effect on me — Frank Hanna, Tim

Busch, and Leonard Leo, for sure," [he answered](#).

Fieler is not a household name in Catholic circles, but anyone interested in the future of the church in the United States should keep tabs on what he and his "good network" are up to. His reply opens the door a tiny crack on a peculiarly U.S. version of Catholicism that exploits the nonprofit phenomenon in this country. It does so in a way that gives that network far more influence than the U.S. bishops have in shaping the image and purpose of the Catholic Church in the wider culture.

Fieler, Hanna, Bush and Leo are perhaps among the most notable but hardly the entirety of Fieler's network. They have in common a few characteristics that are essential to the establishment of this new brand of Catholicism.

They are extremely conservative Catholics who either control or have access to enormous sums of money. They are closely connected to right-wing intellectuals who provide them with useful language. They have used those considerable resources and connections to fund a host of think-tanks, agencies, media outlets and even a major university department that act as both alternatives to official church structures and as the network's megaphones.

The real power brokers and the deals that harden the image of U.S. Catholicism as an ultraconservative, libertarian behemoth aren't a product of the bishops' conference.

The outfits they fund reinforce Catholic identity as equivalent with a libertarian approach to economics and politics. They amplify a vision of church in which a narrow political approach to abortion and LGBTQ issues are the litmus test for what makes a good Catholic. It is a version of the

Trump-leaning Republican Party wrapped in a highly modified Catholic apologetics.

I learned of Fieler's 2019 interview through a link contained in the [piece of superb reporting](#) by NCR national correspondent Christopher White, who details the most recent activity of that network: Catholic groups pumping millions of dollars into voter suppression initiatives. In the name of opposing abortion, some far-right Catholic groups who enjoy the largesse of the network have taken up with the big lie that Trump lost the election because of voter fraud.

The front group is the Election Transparency Initiative, "a \$5 million voting reform campaign targeting states with 'close 2020 margins and a pro-life GOP-controlled legislature,'" according to White's report. It was launched as a combined effort of the Susan B. Anthony List, which self-describes as "supporting anti-abortion politicians," and the American Principles Project, which describes itself as the "only national pro-family organization engaging directly in campaigns and elections."

Fieler, president and chief investment officer of the hedge fund Equinox Partners, is a board member of the Susan B. Anthony List and chairman of the American Principles Project.

White's reporting unravels more of the connections, board associations and alliances included in the network. However, it is a safe bet that his reporting and the considerable work NCR has done in the past to expose other connections among wealthy conservative Catholics and their funding patterns is but a small corner of that universe.

For a more extensive look at the previous coverage, see [this editorial](#), which also lists links to the reporting.

To be clear on one point: All of this reporting and analysis should not be construed as a blanket condemnation of wealth and people who hold it. It is quite apparent that people of considerable means can make wonderful things happen. NCR is one of those things.

At the same time, it would be naive to ignore the fact, given the ample evidence in our sacred texts and in human history since, that money is also quite effective as a corrupting influence. It tips the scales, opens doors that otherwise would remain closed, grants levels of authority and influence to those who, without wealth, would have no standing. It paves the way to membership in elite Catholic organizations, papal knighthoods, and it places in the donor's debt religious leaders who otherwise might be issuing critiques instead of plaudits.

While a great deal of energy is spent, understandably, trying to figure out where this divided church is headed, the real power brokers and the deals that harden the image of U.S. Catholicism as an ultraconservative, libertarian behemoth aren't a product of the bishops' conference or any of its agencies. Collectively, the U.S. episcopacy, by virtue of scandal and other forces, has largely been drained of authority and credibility.

The real deals are done out of sight, among hedge fund executives, credit card barons, luxury resort developers, those who've made fortunes protecting and strategizing to enhance the fortunes of some of the wealthiest humans inhabiting the wealthiest country in the history of the planet.

Fieler is a hedge fund executive [described by Inside Philanthropy](#) as an "ideologically

motivated funder." Hanna, CEO of the Atlanta-based Hanna Capital and a member of Regnum Christi, the lay arm of the scandal-riddled Legionaries of Christ, made a fortune [marketing subprime credit cards](#).



Maloney Hall, home of the Busch School of Business at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. (Wikimedia Commons/Farragutful)

Busch's law firm helps the ultrawealthy to protect their wealth so it can be handed on to heirs. And while those clients are still alive, his luxury resorts provide places for them to play. He also is the [principal funder](#) of the Catholic University of America business school that bears his name.

Leo, for years the executive vice president of the Federalist Society, has been the principal architect of the [conservative makeup](#) of the Supreme Court and the supply line for conservative judges appointed by the Trump administration.

It is one thing to donate to an organization or cause that you think will benefit humankind. What Fieler and his network have in mind is far different by many degrees. There may be no manifesto of intent or outline of a campaign available, but

the words of some of the principals are clear enough.

Deeper into his interview with the Philanthropy Roundtable, Fieler details his ambition. After lamenting that the Republican Party had no coherent vision for fighting the threat to religious liberty, a theme popular on the religious right, he turns to a wider vision. "We need a bigger and deeper network of social-conservative philanthropists working together," he said. "We need to build a larger community so we can avoid being isolated or marginalized, and learn from each other. ... We need much better coordination, and putting the information out there is part of an effort to do that."

Still later, he emphasized the need to be involved not only in articulating a vision but also in the politics necessary to make those ideas public policy. "By clarifying social-conservative principles in campaigns, and making those principles central to voting, we will have more success in translating our ideas into policy."

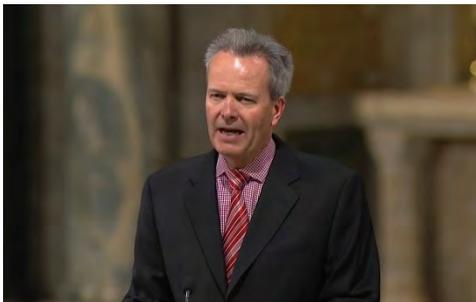
A few years ago, Busch, [speaking](#) near the conclusion of a multiday conference his Napa Institute sponsored at Catholic University, was blunt about how he viewed this brand of Catholic activism. Groups such as his Napa Institute and Legatus, a Catholic organization limited to CEOs commanding a certain level of wealth, and all of the other organizations that would make up the "good network" are the real engines behind "evangelization of our country," he said. He described them as "Catholic NGOs" and said they are "what's making a difference in the American church."

Though admitting that such groups are "tethered to the church through a bishop" and in that way "they're following the magisterium of the church," he added that

the NGOs "have access to capital that the church doesn't."

The tethers are loose. In the case of Busch's Napa Institute, the episcopal representation is a roster of some of the most conservative voices in the American hierarchy. They function less as tether than affirming cheerleaders.

It was clear at that Catholic University meeting how little regard the good network has for the church's long-established social justice teaching. After Vatican official Cardinal Peter Turkson delivered a talk delineating a litany of papal and other church statements that countered the conference's embrace of unrestricted markets, Busch counseled that "we have to listen to both sides." The good cardinal was given a slot to say what he had to say, but it was little more than window dressing.



Timothy Busch speaks at the opening Mass for a Napa Institute symposium in March 2017 at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C. (NCR screenshot/YouTube/National Shrine)

The real hero and special guest, hailed by Busch as "the refounder of America," was the other side's archlibertarian Charles Koch, worth an estimated \$47 billion, who had anted up \$10 million for Catholic University's Busch School of Business and Economics.

In introducing his special guest, Busch said the nearly \$50 million gift he and Koch had

arranged had "reenergized the Catholic University of America. We made it great again. We are the Catholic University of America and we have educated half of the bishops in this country."

"We can be the teaching pulpit for the American church, but also the teaching pulpit for the Vatican and for the global church," he continued. "We can be that. And we will be that going forward, especially on the issues and topics of business."

Koch, in his remarks, gave not even a polite nod to what Turkson had just said.

So there you have it. What Fieler, Busch, Hanna and friends are doing is not, on the face of it, illegal or immoral. No church law prevents them from doing it. They are simply using what's available to them — and it begins with access to a lot of money — to impose their vision on the institutional church and, by extension, on Catholics across the country.

They have the loudest voices. They've determined what is "nonnegotiable" for Catholics involved in politics. They've made clear who should be in or out in terms of church membership. They have rationalized fidelity to a Trumpian politics while giving voice, through the media they fund, to the loudest of those opposing Pope Francis. Their concern for the poor is subservient to a marketplace free of any restraints. They have seen clear to spend millions supporting racist voter suppression initiatives underway. And they've done it all without a word of interference from their individual bishops, the bishops in those states where their money is aiding the voter suppression cause, or from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

The "good network" is the new U.S. magisterium, the real locus of authority.

Know where our church is heading — and who's leading the way.

This Advent, churches urged to assess worship for inadvertent antisemitism



A Festival of Trees event includes a live Nativity scene at St. Anthony's Retreat in Three Rivers, California, on Nov. 17, 2016. Photo by Tommy Lee Kreger/Creative Commons

KATHRYN POST
RELIGION NEWS SERVICE

15 December 2022

This December, Christian congregations will belt “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” and priests will wax poetic about Old Testament prophecies. As they do so, a group of Jewish, Christian and Muslim educators is calling on them to examine where antisemitic ideas might be lurking undetected.

On Dec. 14, the Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations — a group of roughly 30 member institutions dedicated to mutual understanding between Jews and Christians — issued a public statement calling U.S. churches to confront the crisis of antisemitism. “We implore all churches to redouble their efforts to denounce antisemitism publicly as antithetical to the very essence of Christianity itself,” the statement said.

The group cites the blatant spread of antisemitic conspiracy theories by pop culture icons and politicians alike as reason for the statement. “The United States is facing the greatest crisis of public antisemitism in a century,” the statement claims, warning that “we may be witnessing the normalization of antisemitism in American discourse, which recalls events that happened in Germany when the Nazis rose to power in the 1930s.”

“The fact that Jews and Christians can work together on a document such as this as colleagues and friends shows how far we’ve come, and how much more we can do together to stop hate and antisemitism and build bridges of respect and understanding,” said Rabbi Eric J. Greenberg, one of the drafters and a CCJR member.

The Anti-Defamation League reported a 34% increase in antisemitic incidents in the U.S. between 2020 and 2021. A 2021 survey from the American Jewish Committee found that 60% of the general public sees antisemitism as a problem.

But CCJR’s statement asks Christians to look beyond the antisemitism happening outside their congregations to evaluate their own theologies and teachings for anti-Jewish sentiments. Much of Christian preaching today acknowledges a Jewish Jesus born into an expressly Jewish context,

but also implicitly paints a portrait of a Jesus whose arrival made Judaism obsolete.

The distinction is critical, scholars say, because framing Jesus in opposition to Judaism easily leads to envisioning Christians in opposition to Jews — a common motivating theory in white supremacist ideologies.

“One of the features that made it difficult for Christians in the Nazi period to critique Nazi antisemitism and racism was the fact that they had inherited a sense of oppositional identity. Christians were against Jews, Jews were against Christians, Jesus must have been against Jews,” said Philip Cunningham, director of the Institute for Jewish-Catholic Relations at St. Joseph’s University in Philadelphia and a co-author of the statement.

During Advent, the current liturgical season when Christians prepare spiritually for Christmas, there can be a tendency to frame Judaism as a flawed precursor to Christianity, some scholars suggest.

Daniel Joslyn-Siemiatkoski, a scholar of Jewish-Christian relations at Boston College and an Episcopal priest, noted that it’s important for Christians to be able to interpret Old Testament passages such as Isaiah’s prophecies as referring to Jesus. However, the trouble occurs when Christians claim those passages must be interpreted that way exclusively.

“To say that the meaning of sacred Scriptures are over for Jews, because Jesus has come, fuels a sense that there is no longer a reason for Jews to exist,” said Joslyn-Siemiatkoski. “That can feed into a popular antisemitism, where people can ask, ‘Why are Jews even here, if their Scriptures have been fulfilled?’”

Anti-Jewish theology can sneak into worship via beloved hymns. Growing up as a Methodist, Joslyn-Siemiatkoski loved the Advent tune “Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending,” but now he trips over the second verse: “Those who set at nought and sold him / Pierced and nailed him to the tree / Deeply wailing / Deeply wailing/ Deeply wailing/ Shall the true Messiah see.”

“Charles Wesley is repeating this long-standing Christian notion that Jews are responsible for the death of Jesus; they rejected him as the Messiah. When Jesus comes back, they will wail and will be punished for their disbelief,” said Joslyn-Siemiatkoski.

Elena Procario-Foley, professor of religious studies at Iona University in New York, told Religion News Service that “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” could also be read as hostile to Jewish people. “So Israel is captive, and the understanding is they are in exile because of their sin,” she said, referring to the first verse. “And Jesus is going to appear and solve all these problems.”

Procario-Foley said it’s unhelpful to think of Judaism as merely a frame for Christianity. “When we use darkness versus light, hell versus the Christian Messiah, when we do these zero-sum dualisms, we are adding to this polarization. And religious people should be trying to lead the way through the polarizations we find ourselves in.”

Christians should be able to celebrate their faith, Procario-Foley said, without wielding negative comparisons against Judaism.

Joslyn-Siemiatkoski and Procario-Foley also belong to CCJR organizations and were members of the statement’s drafting committee.

Joslyn-Siemiatkoski said there's no need to throw out Advent's best-known worship songs altogether — verses can be rewritten, and, Procario-Foley suggested, they could be framed by accurate historical context, even by contacting neighboring Jewish communities to see how the theology of a hymn lands.

The CCJR frames its statement as an invitation, not a condemnation — “We are certainly, by no stretch of the imagination, blaming Christianity for antisemitism, or saying Christians are antisemitic,” said Cunningham — but it's an invitation with high stakes. Words, lessons and theologies have real consequences, something that must be taken seriously at a time when anti-Jewish hate crimes are on the rise.

“We can't talk about the Prince of Peace, and not talk about him as a Jewish child who tried to bring healing to a suffering world under Roman occupation,” said Procario-Foley. “The Christmas-Easter arc should be about healing. And our world so desperately needs healing.”

Catholic conservative Napa Institute's profile grows in Washington, DC

*Recent Napa Institute events feature
US bishops' conference leaders*

[NEWS](#)



A view of the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C.
(Pixabay/JamesDeMers)



BY JOHN GEHRING

15 December 2022

Timothy Busch of the Napa Institute announced that the conservative Catholic organization — known for its high-priced conferences and networking events with bishops, Republican politicians and business leaders — will open an office in Washington blocks from the U.S. Capitol.

During a Nov. 30 gathering in California that he described as an annual "Catholic CEO men's group," Busch, the institute's co-founder, said the office will open in April and be housed in a newly renovated EWTN headquarters next to Union Station. Busch has served on the global Catholic media network's board, according to 2019 tax documents.

While the Napa Institute has a larger footprint in California — Busch owns a winery, several luxury resorts and founded two Catholic schools in the state — Napa's profile in the nation's capital is growing.

The institute has co-hosted several conferences and events in Washington in recent years, including [at the now-shuttered Trump Hotel](#) and at the Catholic University of America's business school. The school was named after [Busch](#) when his \$15 million gift to the university in 2016 became the largest donation in school history.

The Busch School of Business has emerged as a high-profile venue in Washington circles for promoting libertarian-inflected economics and has hosted Republican Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida and billionaire industrialist [Charles Koch](#). Koch's foundation has given more than \$10 million to the business school.



Timothy Busch of the Napa Institute speaks at a Nov. 30 gathering he described as an annual "Catholic CEO men's group" in California. (NCR screenshot/YouTube/Napa Institute)

Napa already has a Washington presence with its [Napa Legal Institute](#) office at the Ethics and Public Policy Center. Napa Legal provides consulting to faith-based nonprofits on corporate, tax and philanthropic issues.

The legal division launched what it calls its "flagship program," the Napa Legal League, at a 2019 event at Catholic University's business school. The league, according to the institute, seeks to become a "nationwide network of attorneys, accountants, and nonprofit professionals committed to Catholic culture-building in the 21st century."

A photo [posted](#) on the Napa Institute's [Facebook page](#) last week shows Busch dining at a restaurant in Washington with a small group of lay Catholics and clergy, including Archbishop Timothy Broglio, who was [elected president](#) of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops last month. Leonard Leo, the co-chairman of the Federalist Society, also attended the dinner. Leo advised Donald Trump on appointments to the judiciary and is viewed as a key figure in helping to orchestrate the rightward shift at the U.S Supreme Court in recent years. Leo is on the board of the Napa Legal Institute and on the board of trustees at Catholic University.

'Growing expansively'

In a [video](#) of Busch's remarks at the Catholic CEO men's group event [posted](#) on the Napa Institute's Facebook page, he described the Napa Institute as "growing expansively," and noted that 800 people attended its annual summer conference in July at his Meritage Resort and Spa. He also touted a recent eucharistic procession through the streets of New York City that the Napa Institute organized.

"Dolan was like, I've never seen anything like it since I've been here," Busch said, referring to Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York. "We had a thousand people parading into St. Patrick's Cathedral. We shut down 7th Avenue, 6th Avenue and 5th Avenue, and the police were happy to do it. Next year, we will continue to build on that until we get 10,000."

Busch also thanked John Meyer, Napa's executive director, for his work traveling "to all the Catholic fundraisers that go on in Washington, New York and even South Bend."



New York City police officers escort a eucharistic procession Oct. 11. The procession, which followed Mass at Sacred Heart of Jesus Church and traveled a mile-long route through Midtown Manhattan, concluded at St. Patrick's Cathedral, where New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan led Benediction. The liturgical events were affiliated with the Napa Institute's Principled Entrepreneurship Conference taking place in New York City Oct. 11-12. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

The reference to South Bend, Indiana, points to one of Napa's newest projects at the University of Notre Dame. Napa, along with the Charles Koch Foundation and other donors, funds the Napa Institute Forum at the university's [Center for Citizenship and Constitutional Government](#).

The center "plans to expand its focus on political leadership by bringing more national political figures to campus and hosting regular events in Washington, D.C., especially with established and aspiring Catholic politicians." The Napa forum kicked-off with an inaugural [lecture](#) from Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas at the university last fall.

NCR [reported](#) last year that the project has sparked challenges from some professors at the university who objected to Busch's criticism of the Black Lives Matter movement at Napa's summer conference. Black Lives Matter, Busch said, is "promoting racism, critical race theory, and

destroying the nuclear family." Faculty also objected to a speaker at the same conference, Republican activist L. Brent Bozell III, who described Joe Biden as "the president of the most radical leftist ideology in history." Bozell signed a letter that described Trump as "the lawful winner of the presidential election."

At the Catholic men's gathering in California last month, Busch introduced Oklahoma City Archbishop Paul Coakley, Napa's ecclesiastical adviser, as the evening speaker. The archbishop was [elected](#) secretary and chairman of the Committee on Priorities and Plans for the U.S. bishops' conference during the annual fall meeting in November.

In another sign of Napa's influence and connections with the most prominent conservative bishops, Busch announced that Broglio will be next year's speaker at his post-Thanksgiving gathering.



Archbishop Timothy Broglio of the U.S. Archdiocese for the Military Services smiles during a Nov. 15 news conference after being elected president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops during the fall general assembly of the bishops in Baltimore. (CNS/Bob Roller)

"We don't do anything that has to do with the church without his approval," Bush said about Coakley. "It doesn't matter whether I

think it's a good idea. If he doesn't think it's a good idea, we're not doing it."

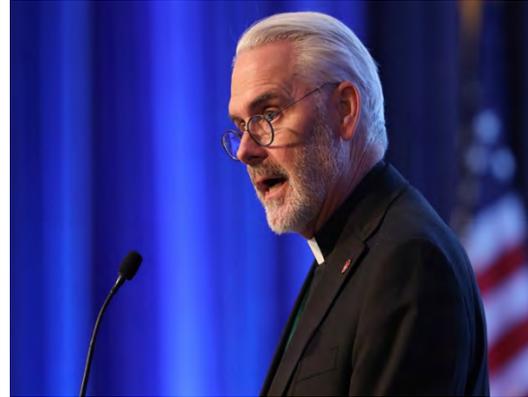
Before delivering his 45-minute remarks, titled "Transgenderism and the Eclipse of Truth," Coakley had opened a bottle of Trinitas sparkling wine from Busch's winery with a sword.

'Well-intentioned madness'

"We see the plague of relativism in nearly every aspect of life," the archbishop said. "In politics, we speak of alternative facts, in education this emphasis on equally valid perspectives, and sadly sometimes even in the church with its push to change her moral teaching, especially her sexual ethic. There is no starker proof that we live in a culture where experience and a desire eclipse the truth than the transgender movement."

The archbishop pointed to the sexual revolution, the widespread acceptance of birth control, and the 1973 Supreme Court *Roe v. Wade* decision that legalized abortion as laying the groundwork for mainstream support of LGBTQ rights.

"In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality as a category of mental illness," Coakley said. "Support for homosexuality severed the connection between sexual activity and the inherent difference between men's and women's bodies, turning sexual orientation into an individual's choice based solely on desire."



Oklahoma City Archbishop Paul Coakley speaks at a Nov. 16 session of the fall general assembly of the U.S. bishops in Baltimore. (CNS/Bob Roller)

"Gender is now determined simply by how one feels and how one identifies," he continued. "In order to avoid being labeled transphobic, these feelings must be accepted as the true indicators of gender and these feelings must be supported even to the point of inalterable gender affirmation surgeries. ... Nonbinary identities have mushroomed and their spread has gone mainstream. This transgender ideology, this transgender philosophy, is based on a false and defective and totally inadequate anthropology."

Coakley, who claimed that "the trans movement is doing great damage to society," criticized those who oppose so-called "conversion therapy" — a widely rejected practice designed to alter a person's sexual orientation or gender identity to align with heterosexual or cisgender norms. More than 20 states have some form of ban on conversion therapy. The American Medical Association and the American Psychological Association have condemned the practice. The archbishop called this opposition "well-intentioned madness."

Coakley also criticized what he described as efforts to "marginalize parents in order to protect their children's so-called gender

rights" and railed against "the injustice of men identifying as women in sports."

The church faces "growing legal threats" to its network of charitable services, Coakley argued, noting challenges to Catholic adoption agencies that prohibit same-sex parents from adopting as one example.

"New threats to the church's good works are due to the intolerance of some extremists within the political left and their marriage to the most radical forms of social movements," he said.

The Biden administration, the archbishop said, has "promoted regulations that would force doctors and hospitals to perform gender transition procedures and mandate insurance to cover these procedures."

"In the face of all these dangers from the trans movement, we are called to love and accompany every person struggling with gender dysphoria, especially because they are typically in immense pain," the archbishop said.

But he ended with a stark observation. "If the devil can confuse society about sex and gender, he obscures our understanding of God's plan for humanity at its very roots."

'Shameful pandering'

Marianne Duddy-Burke, the executive director of DignityUSA and mother of a transgender son, described Coakley's speech as "shameful pandering."

"That so many of our church's leaders are helping to make transgender and nonbinary people the target of elevated discrimination, social scorn and even violence is sin," said Duddy-Burke, who noted that at least 32 transgender people have been murdered this year. "They are failing to listen to the people

of God, and to God speaking through the reality of the transgender population."

Last month, DignityUSA launched a new [support initiative](#) for transgender and nonbinary people called "Beloved by God: A Catholic Commitment to Trans-Affirmation" in response to the growing number of states and Catholic dioceses the organization says are enacting policies that are harmful to transgender people.

Duddy-Burke found the archbishop's support for conversion therapy particularly dangerous. DignityUSA will soon release a book about the issue.

"I have been speaking with survivors of various forms of this 'treatment' and the book is dedicated to the memory of a young Catholic woman who took her life after years of conversion therapy at the direction of her pastor," she said. "The damage of trying to force someone to be who they are not is horrific."

In synod discussion of women's ordination, the diaconate is neglected



Newly ordained priests pray during a ceremony led by Pope Francis in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican on May 12, 2019. (RNS/AP/Alessandra Tarantino)



BY PHYLLIS ZAGANO

16 December 2022

The synod on synodality is exploding ideas all over the church. Some on the extreme right hope for Tridentine Masses. Some on the far left hope for changes in teachings on sex and gender. Folks in the middle just want more respect for and better recognition of women.

To no one's surprise, the working document for the synod's "continental phase" recognized women as the backbone of the church. It also admits that many women feel denigrated, neglected and misunderstood, symptomatic of narcissistic clericalism infecting clergy. Many national synod reports sent to the Vatican from bishops' conferences around the globe presented the desire for women to be present in church governance, certified as preachers and in the diaconate.

Pope Francis' recent comments about women are not helpful. Yes, on the aircraft returning from Bahrain in early November, he decried treating women as "second-class citizens." But in a Nov. 24 speech before the International Theological Commission (27 men, five women) Francis took aim at dissident Old Catholic Churches that ordain women — he did not distinguish whether as priests or as deacons — while at the same time saying he would like to increase the number of women on that very commission.

Speaking with America, the Jesuit magazine, a few days later, Francis used the theology of Swiss priest Hans Urs von Balthasar to cancel the idea of women in

ministry, while approving of women in management.

Von Balthasar, a close associate of Joseph Ratzinger (the retired Pope Benedict XVI) presented two principles that put women in their place: the "Petrine principle," which defines ministry as masculine, and the "Marian principle," which defines the church as female.

As Francis told America's interviewers: "And why can a woman not enter ordained ministry? It is because the Petrine principle has no place for that. Yes, one has to be in the Marian principle, which is more important. Woman is more, she looks more like the church, which is mother and spouse. I believe that we have too often failed in our catechesis when explaining these things."

Toward the end of his comments on women, he recommended a "third way": Increase the number of women in administrative positions, in management.

So that is that. Management, but not ministry.

Except.

The Petrine theory is the root of the so-called argument from authority against women priests: Jesus chose male apostles, and the church is bound by his choice. Only priests can have governance and jurisdiction; they are ordained "*in persona Christi capitis ecclesiae*" — in the person of Christ the head of the church. That rules out women in positions of genuine authority.

The surprise in the Marian theory is that older documents say the diaconate is and acts "in the name of the church." So, if the church is female, then ordained deacons should mirror that fact.

To complicate matters, the priesthood came about some two centuries after the diaconate. History records ordained women deacons up through the 12th century, with bishops ordaining women as deacons using liturgies often identical to those for male deacons. The bishops invoked the confirmation of the Holy Spirit and placed a stole around the ordained women's necks. Most importantly, the bishops called these ordained women deacons.

For too long, theologians battled over whether diaconal ordination was a sacrament, but that was apparently first resolved at the 16th century Council of Trent. So, women were sacramentally ordained as deacons. It will not take a third Vatican Council to reaffirm that.

Or will it? Lately, the question of ordination for women seems restricted to the growing requests for women priests. Even Francis uses that shorthand. But the tradition of ordaining women as deacons could easily be restored. Benedict XVI even changed canon law in 2009 to emphasize the fact that the diaconate is not the priesthood.

So, which is it? As the synod on synodality enters its "continental phase," the tide could be turning against women in ministry. Does the working document's call for "a diaconate of women" mean ordained women deacons, or something else? If it means something else, why? Is it because the deacon is ordained to act and to be "in the person of Christ, the servant?" Does it indicate an official teaching that women cannot image Christ?

No doubt, the theological hair-splitting is lost on the people of God. But the church is dangerously close to losing even more members when it states — or seems to state — that women cannot image Christ — that is, that women are not made in the image

and likeness of God. That is not a good stance for the Vatican. It is something papal briefers and speechwriters need to recognize, and soon.

Francis' critics continue to gut the Gospel



Pope Francis speaks to members of the International Theological Commission during a meeting Nov. 24 in the Apostolic Palace of the Vatican. (CNS/Vatican Media)



BY MICHAEL SEAN WINTERS
12 December 2022

Pope Francis' critics are at it again, not only misrepresenting what he says, but fanning the flames of alarm when no alarm is warranted, assuming the worst about the synodal process, and crossing the line between criticism and defamation.

Fr. Gerald Murray, a priest of the New York Archdiocese and regular on EWTN's "The World Over with Raymond Arroyo," has a semi-hysterical column posted at [The Catholic Thing](#). He starts by criticizing the Holy Father's [address](#) to the International Theological Commission in which the pope

commended a healthy dependence on tradition with traditionalism. The pope warned against "backward-ism," which he characterized, quoting theologian Jaroslav Pelikan, "the dead faith of the living."

Murray does not care for Pelikan's characterization. "Is a faith that remains steadfast in upholding what has always been taught from the beginning a backward faith?" he asks. "Is it somehow backward to respond to erroneous innovations that deny Catholic teaching with the simple statement: 'What you deny, the Church has always believed'?"

What is disingenuous here is that Murray fails to acknowledge that the pope differentiated between theology and catechesis, and insisted that theology push the limits of understanding while a catechist should never present material "with new doctrines that are not sure." Catechists should only present doctrinal teachings that are "solid," the pope said. If Murray had his way, the Catholic Church would still ban interest on loans as a violation of the moral injunction against usury, and still deny the value of religion liberty, two areas of moral teaching that have changed over time.

Turning his attention to the German synodal process, Murray makes a connection that the pope has not made. He cites some statements on homosexuality (why does this issue so obsess both the left and the right?) that were approved by the German Synodal Forum, and links them to the pope's address to the ITC.

"These erroneous and heretical statements are proffered by the German bishops as progressive changes that rectify the Church's earlier misunderstanding of the Gospel and the natural law," he states. "Those who oppose them would be dismissed as 'the

backward-ists' who believe that the truth cannot change over time."

If conservatives were not so busy complaining about the synodal process, they might engage it and raise their concerns with those German Catholics who recognize that the church's teaching on homosexuality is manifestly inadequate.

Instead, Murray frets about the universal synod and defames the German bishops. "The Synod on Synodality, too, is on a trajectory to put Catholic sexual morality on public trial, with the goal of getting rid of what are scorned as backward doctrines," he writes. "The fact that the German bishops have enjoyed effective immunity from the Holy See in their pursuit of heresy and immorality is a plain disaster that must be stopped before it leads to even greater confusion and error."

To predict how the synod will address these issues is anyone's guess, but to say the German bishops are pursuing heresy and immorality is to defame their intentions. Is that necessary? Can't he just say they are wrong?

If conservatives were not so busy complaining about the synodal process, they might engage it and raise their concerns with those German Catholics who recognize that the church's teaching on homosexuality is manifestly inadequate.

Murray is not alone. Francis Maier, longtime amanuensis to former Philadelphia Archbishop Charles Chaput, also continues his attacks on Francis. After describing these "disruptive times" he writes in [First Things](#), "the last thing Christians need is what this pontificate seems to encourage: more ambiguity in matters of faith. Christians need reasons for confidence in the Word of God, the teachings of their Church, and the

meaning of their lives. They need a recovery of zeal. They need clarity of mission. And they need leaders who can convincingly deliver on all of the above. They're not getting it."

What planet does he live on? On Planet Earth, the people of God need confidence that the church will not look the other way when priests abuse their children.

Nor is Maier a fan of the synodal process. "A global listening process, with modest grassroots participation, to prepare for a 2023–24 'synod on synodality' is unlikely to produce any of that," he continues. "It may have value, but it's hard to see how it serves the words of Matthew 28:19-20," referencing the great commission.

I want an evangelizing church as much as Maier, but his idea that it is wrong to listen to and accompany people for whom the teachings of the church present hurdles, not certainty, is bizarre. His is an evangelization of the converted, more likely the children of the converted and conservative.

The common theme here is not Christian but Kantian, with a dollop from Victor Hugo. Murray and Maier want a church in which norms are, as Kant thought they need be, universal and abstract, imperative and impersonal. They must be clear and, when grasped as clear and binding, it is the grasp that governs the application of the norm to concrete situations.

Our actual tradition, from the church fathers through Augustine and Aquinas, teaches us that norms are important, and they should be clear, but they are always applied.

This approach has two major problems. First, it is only a very recent part of our Catholic moral tradition: Kant lived from

1724-1804. Second, when the intellectual qualities of certitude and clarity become most important, the significance of moral gravity is lost and the need to apply the norm with prudence, the "charioteer of the virtues," is erased.

Our actual tradition, from the church fathers through Augustine and Aquinas, teaches us that norms are important, and they should be clear, but they are always applied. In the application, the norm is not diminished but other moral issues are confronted, the relative weight of competing moral claims are evaluated, a look to foreseeable consequences is entertained. The moral agent is not applying a personal quirk or an eccentric theory to the moral conundrum. She is applying a moral norm, but she is applying it, not merely repeating it, as if application was always a self-evident thing.

If this Kantian bias was not enough of a problem, Murray and Maier both add to it a moral posture akin to that shown by Monsieur Javert, the fictional anti-hero of Hugo's *Les Misérables*, a posture that first [emerged](#) at the Synods on the Family in 2014 and 2015. In the musical version, Javert sings, "Those who falter and those who fail, must pay the price." This was the stance on the divorced and remarried at those synods, and it is the stance of Murray and Maier to all those who falter and fail today. Anything in the way of solicitude is, to them, a watering down of divinely ordained norms.

In fact, it is Murray and Maier who misunderstand the tradition and do so badly. In their rush to establish norms that are unchanging, certain and self-applying, they gut the Gospel. As Francis wrote in [Amoris Laetitia](#), #319: "At times we find it hard to make room for God's unconditional love in our pastoral activity. We put so many conditions on mercy that we empty it of its

concrete meaning and real significance. That is the worst way of watering down the Gospel."

December 10, 2022



IS FORGIVENESS POSSIBLE

**A Reflection from the Interpath
Traditions
by Thomas P. Bonacci, C.P.**

Long before blood and water flowed from the wounded side of the crucified Jesus, forgiveness flowed from his lips, at least, according to the Gospel of Luke.

We often emphasize the pain and suffering of Jesus as if there is something sacred about suffering. Unfortunately, we live in a World where too many people believe it is the will of God for them to inflict pain and suffering on others. It does not matter what one's faith tradition might be, many of us know what it means to suffer rejection, persecution, and intolerance. All of us have been sinned against in one way or another. We might forget this is where healing and forgiveness begin.

Forgiveness can be disturbing. I am always amazed by people

who forgive when others want revenge. It is amazing, even inspiring, and life-changing to experience the power of forgiveness.

Think of some people in your life who suffered terribly because of betrayal, abandonment, persecution, rejection, or neglect. Often, such people as these forgive long before their wounds are healed, if ever.

As we look out upon the religious institutions, the World, and society, we are wounded by the hypocrisy, duplicity, unfaithfulness, and incompetence of many who ought to know and do better. Forgiveness and healing seem almost impossible in these situations.

Perhaps, we need to focus on the power of forgiveness. Let us first review what forgiveness is not. Forgiveness does NOT mean the evil committed was in any way reasonable, desirable, or willed by God. Forgiveness does not forget the crime or its effects. No one can or should justify wrongdoing, no matter the outcome. No one is wrong if they cannot forgive. Asking God for forgiveness does not excuse one from making amends or taking responsibility for the error of their ways.

Forgiveness may give release to the person hurt or the survivors

of a senseless
tragedy. Forgiveness accesses
the deepest aspect of what it
means to be a human
person. Forgiveness might be
the beginning of understanding
and change in the
World. Forgiveness ensures the
violence done is not the last
word. Consider the words of
Rabbi Jonathan Sacks:

*"In a world without forgiveness,
evil begets evil, harm generates
harm, and there is no way short
of exhaustion or forgetfulness of
breaking the
sequence. Forgiveness breaks
the chain. It introduces into the
logic of interpersonal encounter
the unpredictability of grace. It
represents a decision not to do
what instinct and passion urge
us to do. It answers hate with a
refusal to hate, animosity with
generosity. Few more daring
ideas have ever entered the
human situation."*

Blessings to you, Holy
Community, for all the times
you forgave. Thank you for all
the times you considered
forgiving. Blessings to you
when you accept forgiveness.
