

Articles of Interest
For
27 March 2022



Sunday, 20 March 2022 — *Spring Equinox*

Richard Rohr's Daily Meditations

From the Center for Action and Contemplation
Week Twelve: Paul: The Misunderstood Mystic

An Enlightening Experience

In this week's Daily Meditations, Father Richard Rohr focuses on Saint Paul as a mystic, beginning with Paul's transformative encounter with the Risen Christ:

Paul is probably one of the most misunderstood and disliked teachers in the Church. I think this is largely because we have tried to understand a nondual mystic with our simplistic, dualistic minds.

It starts with Paul's amazing conversion experience, described three times in the Book of Acts (chapters 9, 22, and 26). Scholars assume that Luke wrote Acts around 85 CE, about twenty years after

Paul's ministry. Paul's own account is in his letter to the Galatians: "The Gospel which I preach . . . came through the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1:11–12). Paul never doubts this revelation. The Christ that he met was not exactly identical to the historical Jesus; it was the risen Christ, the Christ who remains with us now in Spirit as the Universal Christ.

In Galatians, Paul describes his pre-conversion life as an orthodox Jew, a Pharisee with status in the Judean governmental board called the Sanhedrin. The Temple police delegated him to go out and squelch this new sect of Judaism called "The Way"—not yet named Christianity. Saul (Paul's Hebrew name) was breathing threats to slaughter Jesus' disciples (see Acts 9:1–2). He says, "I tried to destroy it. And I advanced beyond my contemporaries in my own nation. I was more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers than anybody else" (Galatians 1:13–14). At that point, Paul was a dualistic thinker, dividing the world into entirely good and entirely bad people.

The Acts account of Paul's conversion continues: "Suddenly, while traveling to Damascus, just before he reached the city, there came a light from heaven all around him. He fell to the ground, and he heard a voice saying, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' He asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The voice answered, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting'" (Acts 9:3–5).

Paul must have wondered: "Why does he say 'me' when I'm persecuting these other people?" This choice of words is pivotal. Paul gradually comes to his understanding of the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12–13) as an organic, ontological union between Christ and those whom Christ loves—which Paul eventually realizes is everyone and

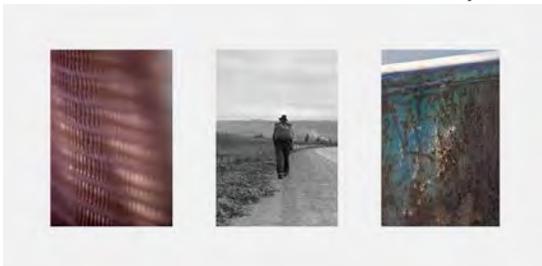
everything. This is why Paul becomes “the apostle to the nations” (or “Gentiles”).

This enlightening experience taught Paul *nondual consciousness*, the same mystical mind that allowed Jesus to say things like “Whatever you do to these least ones, you do to me” (Matthew 25:40). Until grace achieves the same victory in our minds and hearts, we cannot really comprehend most of Jesus and Paul’s teachings—in any practical way. It will remain distant theological dogma. Before conversion, we tend to think of God as “out there.” After transformation, as Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582) wrote, “The soul . . . never doubts: God was in her; she was in God.” [1]

Monday, 21 March 2022

Richard Rohr's Daily Meditations

From the Center for Action and Contemplation



Week Twelve: Paul: The Misunderstood Mystic
A Tug-of-War with Truth

Father Richard describes the paradoxical impact that Paul’s revelation of Christ had for him. His way of thinking and being changed completely:

Meeting the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus changed everything for Paul. He experienced the great paradox that the crucified Jesus was in fact alive! And he, Paul, a “sinner,” was in fact chosen and beloved. This pushed Paul from the usual either/or, dualistic thinking to both/and, mystical thinking.

The truth in paradoxical language lies neither in the affirmation nor in the denial of either side, but precisely in the resolution of the tug-of-war between the two. The human mind usually works on the logical principle of contradiction, according to which something cannot be both true and false at the same time. Yet that is exactly what higher truths invariably undo (for example, God is both one and three; Jesus is both human and divine; bread and wine are both matter and Spirit). Unfortunately, since the Reformation and the Enlightenment, we Western, educated people have lost touch with paradoxical, mystical, or contemplative thinking. We’ve wasted five centuries taking sides—which is so evident in our culture today!

Not only was Paul’s way of thinking changed by his mystical experience, his way of being in the world was also transformed. Suddenly the persecutor—and possibly murderer—of Christians is Christ’s “chosen vessel,” sent “to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel” (Acts 9:15). This dissolves the strict line between good and bad, between in-group “Jews” and out-group “Gentiles.” The paradox has been overcome in Paul’s very person. He now knows that he is both sinner and saint, and we too must trust the same. These two seeming contradictions don’t cancel one another. Once the conflict has been overcome in you, you realize you are a living paradox and so is everyone else. You begin to see life in a truly spiritual way.

Perhaps this is why Paul loves to teach dialectically. He presents two seemingly opposing ideas, such as weakness and strength, flesh and spirit, law and grace, faith and works, Jew and Greek, male and female. Dualistic thinking usually takes one side, dismisses the other, and stops there. Paul doesn’t do that. He forces us onto the

horns of the dilemma and invites us to wrestle with the paradox. If we stay with him in the full struggle, we'll realize that he eventually brings reconciliation on a higher level, beyond the essential struggle where almost all of us start.

Paul is the first clear successor to Jesus as a nondual teacher. He creates the mystical foundations for Christianity. It's a mystery of participation in Christ. It's not something that we achieve by performance. It's something that we're already participating in, and often we just don't know it. We are all already flowing in this Christ consciousness, this Trinitarian flow of life and love moving in and around and through everything; we just don't realize it.

Tuesday, 22 March 2022

Richard Rohr's Daily Meditations

From the Center for Action and Contemplation



Week Twelve: Paul: The Misunderstood Mystic

Nondual Faith

Today Father Richard examines a specific example of Paul's nondual, "both-and" thinking. Paul saw Christ's cross as a third way beyond the cultural-religious conflicts of his time.

One of the dialectics that Paul presents is the perennial conflict that today we call conservative and liberal. In his writings, Paul's own people, the Jews, became the stand-in for pious, law-abiding conservatives; the Greeks provided his metaphor for intellectuals, cultural critics, and people we would call liberals. Paul sees the Jews trying to create order in the world by obedience to law, tradition, and kinship

ties. The Greeks try to create order by reason, understanding, logic, and education.

Paul insists that neither of them can finally succeed because they do not have the ability to "incorporate the negative," which will always be present. He recognizes that *the greatest enemy of ordinary daily goodness and joy is not imperfection, but the demand for some supposed perfection or order*. There seems to be a shadow side to almost everything; all things are subject to "the powers and principalities" (Ephesians 6:12). Only the unitive or nondual mind can accept this and not panic, but, in fact, grow because of it and grow beyond it.

Neither the liberal pattern nor the conservative pattern can deal with disorder and misery. Paul believes that Jesus has revealed the only response that works. The revelation of the cross, he says, makes us indestructible, because it says there is a way through all absurdity and tragedy. *That way is precisely through accepting and even using absurdity and tragedy as part of God's unfathomable agenda*. If we can internalize the mystery of the cross, we won't fall into cynicism, failure, bitterness, or skepticism. The cross gives us a precise and profound way through the shadow side of life and through all disappointments.

Paul allows both conservatives and liberals to define wisdom in their own ways, yet he dares to call both inadequate and finally wrong. He believes that such worldviews will eventually fail people. "God has shown up human wisdom as folly" on the cross (1 Corinthians 1:21), and this is "an obstacle that the Jews cannot get over," and which the Gentiles or pagans think is simple "foolishness" (1:23).

For Paul, the code words for nondual thinking, or true wisdom, are "foolishness" and "folly." He says, in effect, "My thinking

is foolishness to you, isn't it?" Admittedly, it does not make sense unless we have confronted the mystery of the cross. Suffering, the "folly of the cross," breaks down the dualistic mind. Why? Because on the cross, God took the worst thing, the killing of the God-human, and made it into the best thing, the very redemption of the world. The compassionate holding of essential meaninglessness or tragedy, as Jesus does on the cross, is the final and triumphant resolution of all the dualisms and dichotomies that we face in our own lives. We are thus "saved by the cross"! Does that now make ultimate sense?

Wednesday, 23 March 2022

Richard Rohr's Daily Meditations

From the Center for Action and Contemplation



Week Twelve: Paul: The Misunderstood Mystic

Living in Christ

Theologian Ursula King sees Paul as a forerunner of the Christian mystics. Here she summarizes his key mystical themes:

Paul's great mystical experience on the road to Damascus, which changed him from an enemy into an ardent supporter of the early Christians, made him into one of the strongest witnesses to the power of the spirit of Christ, "in whom we live, move and have our being" [Acts 17:28]. While the Gospels describe Christ's life, his death and resurrection, the Pauline Epistles bear witness to an intense and deeply transforming faith, rooted both in powerful personal experience and in the community

of the early disciples, which later became the Christian Church.

Paul describes himself as "a man in Christ," affirming a deep union with the Divine which does not negate his own identity but enables him to live within the divine nature itself: "I live, now not I; but Christ lives within me" [Galatians 2:20]. He also sings the praises of active love, of charity, inspired by the fire of divine love and outlines a vision of the cosmic Christ, the Christ who "is all, and is in all" [Colossians 3:11]. [1]

Jesuit scholar Harvey Egan likewise views Paul as a mystic who gave himself fully to the love of God in Christ, and who believed others could do likewise:

From the very depths of his being, Paul experienced and surrendered to the love of God in Christ. For him the Lord was the Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:17). Pauline mysticism is emphatically Christ-directed; "to live," for Paul, "is Christ" (Philippians 1:21).

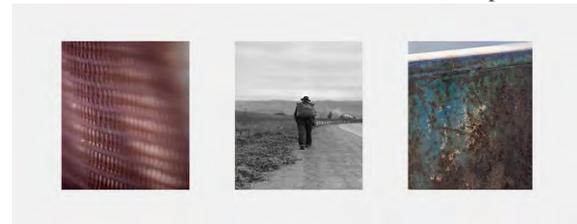
Paul considered it almost self-evident that all Christians, because of Christ and his Spirit, had relatively easy access to an experience of God in their lives. Although he spoke of the "mature" in faith (1 Corinthians 2:6) and the "spiritual" (1 Corinthians 2:15), he expected mature faith of all Christians. The Holy Spirit granted all Christians a "surpassing knowledge" (Ephesians 3:19), the "fullness of knowledge" (Ephesians 1:17), and in this way proved to us that we are "[children] of God" (Romans 8:14) who can also call God, "Abba, Father" (Romans 8:15). Christ's Spirit would pray in us "with sighs too deep for words" (Romans 8:26).

Linked intimately to a loving knowledge of the crucified and risen Christ is a “secret and hidden wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 2:7), a peace beyond all understanding (Philippians 4:7), and a supreme consolation (2 Corinthians 1:5). Those living in Christ’s Spirit experience a richer way of life (Ephesians 1:8–9) filled with love, joy, peace, self-control, gentleness, patience, and kindness (Galatians 5:22) that enables them to bear each other’s burdens (Galatians 6:2). As Paul said: “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the [human] heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him, God has revealed to us through the Spirit” (1 Corinthians 2:9–10). . . . Time and again, Paul spoke of being “in Christ.” For him, moreover, “it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). [2]

Thursday, 24 March 2022 — Feast of St. Oscar Romero of El Salvador

Richard Rohr's Daily Meditations

From the Center for Action and Contemplation



Week Twelve: Paul: The Misunderstood Mystic

An Identity Transplant

Scholars Marcus J. Borg (1942–2015) and John Dominic Crossan refer to Paul as a “Jewish Christ mystic,” and explore what the phrase “in Christ” meant to Paul:

He was a *Jewish* Christ mystic because . . . Paul was a Jew and in his own mind never ceased being one. He was a *Jewish Christ* mystic because the content of his mystical experiences was Jesus as risen Christ and Lord. Afterward, Paul’s identity became an identity “in Christ.” And as a

Christ mystic, he saw Judaism anew in the light of Jesus. . . .

Paul’s transformation involved an “identity transplant”—his old identity was replaced by a new identity “in Christ.” . . . We have in mind an analogy to modern medicine’s heart transplant, in which an old heart is replaced by a new heart. In Paul’s case, his spirit—the old Paul—had been replaced by the Spirit of Christ.

Borg and Crossan view Paul’s mystical teaching on the gifts of the Spirit, from 1 Corinthians 12–14, as an extension of his identity transplant “in Christ.” Here they reflect on the implications of Paul’s reflections on love, “And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love” (13:13):

The love of which Paul speaks is a spiritual gift, not simply an act of will, not something we decide to do, not simply good advice for couples and others. Rather, as a spiritual gift, love is the most important result (and evidence) of a Spirit transplant. As the primary fruit of the Spirit, it is also the criterion by which the other gifts are evaluated. . . .

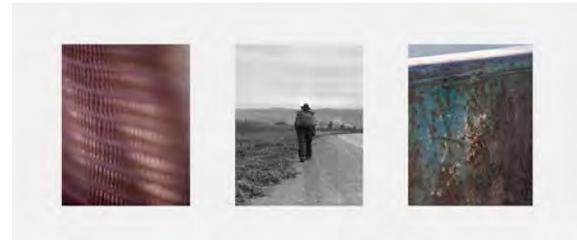
For Paul, love in this text is radical shorthand for what life “in Christ” is like—life in the “new creation,” life “in the Spirit,” life animated by a Spirit transplant. As the primary fruit of a Spirit-filled life, love is about more than our relationships with individuals. For Paul, it had (for want of a better word) a *social* meaning as well. The social form of love for Paul was distributive justice and nonviolence, bread and peace. Paul’s vision of life “in Christ,” life in the “new creation,” did not mean, “Accept the imperial way of life with its oppression and violence, but practice love in your personal relationships.”

To make the same point differently, people like Jesus and Paul were not executed for saying, “Love one another.” They were killed because their understanding of love meant more than being compassionate toward individuals, although it did include that. It also meant standing against the domination systems that ruled their world, and collaborating with the Spirit in the creation of a new way of life that stood in contrast to the normalcy of the wisdom of the world. Love and justice go together. Justice without love can be brutal, and love without justice can be banal. Love is the heart of justice, and justice is the social form of love.

Friday, 25 March 2022

Richard Rohr's Daily Meditations

From the Center for Action and Contemplation



Week Twelve: Paul: The Misunderstood Mystic

Strength in All Things

For Evelyn Underhill (1875–1941), the renowned writer on mysticism, the impact of Paul’s mystical experience was an all-pervading belief that Christ’s love was with him in all things, especially suffering:

We misunderstand St. Paul’s mysticism if we confuse it with its more sensational expressions. As his spiritual life matured his conviction of union with the Spirit of Christ became deeper and more stable. . . . Its keynote is struck in the great saying of his last authentic letter: “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me” (Philippians 4:13). This statement has long ago been diluted to the pious level, and we

have ceased to realize how startling it was and is. But St. Paul used it in the most practical sense, in a letter written from prison after twelve years of superhuman toil, privation, and ill-usage, accompanied by chronic ill-health; years which had included scourgings, stonings, shipwreck, imprisonments, “in journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness” (2 Corinthians 11:26–27). These, and not his spiritual activities and successes alone, are among the memories which would be present in St. Paul’s consciousness when he declared his ability “to do *all* things.” [1]

Author and professor Julia Gatta describes the heart of the apostle Paul’s ministry as holding the paradox of suffering and new life, Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection, together:

Suffering and death are everywhere, from roadkill to mass shootings to tsunamis: “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now, and not only creation, but we ourselves . . .” (Romans 8:22–23). Paul’s metaphor of “labor pains” implies that suffering is woven into the process of creation from the very start, and it continues through the birth of the new creation. . . .

We experience resurrection, as St. Paul did, embedded in travail itself: “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies” (2 Corinthians

4:8–10). Without the resurrection to enliven his experience of suffering, Paul would have been both afflicted and crushed, perplexed and driven to despair, struck down and destroyed. But he is not. The Risen Christ illumines everything. . . . According to the gospel accounts, the risen Jesus repeatedly displays his wounds: they are not left behind. Christ is both crucified and risen, and baptism is immersion into both sides of this paschal mystery. The resurrection irradiates present affliction with hope streaming to us from the glory yet to be revealed. [2]

Martyrs of El Salvador are closer to canonization

21 March 2022

by [Alejandra Molina](#), [Religion News Service](#)



A poster depicting the Rev. Rutilio Grande, Franciscan priest Cosme Spessotto, Nelson Lemus and Manuel Solorzano, all victims of right-wing death squads during El Salvador's civil war, is displayed during their beatification ceremony Jan. 22 in San Salvador. (AP photo/Salvador Melendez)

LOS ANGELES — Forty-five years after a right-wing death squad gunned down the Rev. Rutilio Grande along with two Catholic laymen, Manuel Solórzano and Nelson Lemus, in El Salvador, Jesús Aguilar still vividly remembers the sadness and dread of that day.

But as the sun went down on March 12, 1977, Aguilar also remembers thinking life was about to get a lot more difficult.

"It was a moment of complete sadness, not just because of their deaths, but you could foresee a situation of persecution much more complicated than what was happening at the moment," said Aguilar, 65. He remembers rushing the few blocks from his home in Aguilares to the church and seeing the bodies near the altar.

Aguilar recently relived his memories of that day when he traveled in January to El Salvador from his Los Angeles home for the beatification of Grande, Solórzano, Lemus and the Rev. Cosme Spessotto, an Italian friar shot dead by Salvadoran soldiers in 1980 as he prayed in his parish church. The ceremony represents the first step toward sainthood for the men, who were proclaimed martyrs last year, paving the way for their beatification without miracles being attributed to their intercession.



Jesús Aguilar, 65, sits for a portrait in his Los Angeles home, in front of an image of St. Oscar Romero. (RNS photo/Alejandra Molina)

"On one hand, I felt happy about the beatification because it was a way to recognize how committed the church was to its communities," Aguilar said. "But at the same time, it was a moment where bad memories resurfaced."

Salvadorans in the United States hope the beatifications will inspire the church to honor the memory of Grande and Spessotto by focusing on the poor and marginalized as they did. Some also see the four as stand-ins for the 75,000 Salvadorans who died at the hands of government forces during their country's 12-year civil war. About 20 priests, four nuns and hundreds of catechists were killed during the conflict, [according to Vatican News](#). About [half a million Salvadorans](#) fled to the U.S. in the 1980s.

"This recognition is the validation of the suffering we experienced," said Amanda Romero who migrated from El Salvador in the early 1980s.



Amanda Romero (RNS/Photo courtesy of Romero)

In El Salvador, Romero was immersed in Catholic church life, inspired by then-Archbishop Oscar Romero, a bold critic of the country's dictatorship. Being young and a Catholic "was a motive for persecution,"

she said. When Oscar Romero (no relation to Amanda) was assassinated in 1980, the violence of the '70s shifted into full-scale civil war. Romero, fearing for her life, fled to the U.S. soon afterward.

Many like Romero already regard the four martyred men as saints even if the church hasn't officially recognized them as such. Through their martyrdom, she said, "people outside El Salvador were able to learn of the level of violence and repression in El Salvador." She recalled the U.S. churches, of several denominations, that sheltered and advocated for Central American migrants as part of the sanctuary movement. This history of faith and martyrdom inspired Amanda Romero to be of service to immigrant families and unaccompanied minors.

Grande, who was born in a small town in El Salvador in 1928, is revered for organizing the poor, making enemies of landowners who found his ministry threatening as he formed local Christian base communities and equipped laypeople as pastoral agents. [His Jesuit formation](#) took him to Quito, Ecuador; Panama; and Spain. As a priest, he worked hard to ensure that the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, which called on Catholics to care for the marginalized, were accepted by the Salvadoran church.

These messages were thought as political by the military, the wealthy elite and conservative bishops who decided against advancing the social teachings of the Second Vatican Council.

St. Oscar Romero — a close friend of Grande's who was made a saint in 2018 — was deeply impacted by Grande's murder, igniting his opposition to the government.

At the Jan. 22 beatification, celebrated outdoors, attendees held portraits of the four martyrs, and relics of Grande and Spessotto,

including a white handkerchief stained with blood that Grande carried on the day he was killed, were on display.

Cardinal Gregorio Rosa Chávez, a friend of Oscar Romero's and the first Salvadoran to be elevated to cardinal, presided over the ceremony. The four martyrs, he said, "give name to all the innocent victims sacrificed on the altars of power, pleasure and money."



José Ortiz, 53, holds an image of the Rev. Rutilio Grande and St. Oscar Romero March 8 at his Los Angeles home while sitting for a portrait. (RNS photo/Alejandra Molina)

Chávez challenged the church to wake up: "We are a church of martyrdom, but we are quite passive. We are not fully aware of the treasure that we carry in clay pots."

José Ortiz, 53, streamed the beatification ceremony from his LA home.

"It gave me goosebumps," he said. "Justice is happening in heaven and on earth. These Christian martyrs gave their life, not just for what they believed, but for what they believed was right for the community."

In the 1970s, Ortiz's parents formed small faith communities and, as followers of Romero and Grande, faced persecution, he said.

"We were on the blacklist to get killed because we just didn't want to be part of a church as an institution, but we wanted to put faith into action," he said.

Ortiz said he admires Spessotto because, despite not being Salvadoran, "he came to a rural area and dedicated his whole life, to not just accompany his community, but he became part of the community." Ortiz said he had sought to "continue my struggle in El Salvador," but fled with his older brother, who had been previously kidnapped by the Salvadoran military.

He said the beatification served as a reminder that the church "should be more rooted in the community."

"Basically what the Vatican II Council was meant to be, but unfortunately it didn't happen. Those who tried to implement [it] were killed," he said. "I think the church should have more interest in the needs of the most poor people worldwide instead of things that are superficial."



An image of St. Oscar Romero hangs on José Ortiz's living room wall. (RNS photo/Alejandra Molina)

It isn't lost on Ana Grande, Rutilio Grande's niece, that her uncle's beatification comes at the expense of a war that tore families apart and left many bearing that trauma. Her

father fled El Salvador upon receiving death threats. He settled in LA, where Ana Grande was born.

Although Ana Grande never met her uncle, she was introduced to his life at an early age through family stories. She was taught that his ministry was "all about ethics." Ana Grande now serves as associate executive director for the nonprofit Bresee Foundation, which seeks to battle poverty in LA.



Ana Grande, niece of the Rev. Rutilio Grande, outside the Bresee Foundation, where she serves as the nonprofit's associate executive director (RNS photo/Alejandra Molina)

The beatification opened old wounds, she said, but she hopes it signals a new chapter for the church in El Salvador and across the world. "For the first time in many, many years some of our family members started sharing what we had witnessed during the war and it was very healing in many ways," she said.

She was inspired by youth at the beatification ceremony, recalling a conversation with a young man whom she asked: "Who are you here for? Who do you admire?" He named Spessotto and spoke fondly of the Franciscan values of life, she said.

"We're not just looking at the Old Testament and the do's and the don'ts, but we look at it from a new lens of liberation, of breaking the shackles of ignorance," she said. "That's what the pope talks about all the time. It

doesn't matter what you've done, what you do, who you love. It's a matter of, if you're human, I am going to love you, regardless. I think that's finally falling into place, and hopefully it will continue."

After 9 years, Francis reorganizes Vatican with focus on evangelization, roles for laypeople

19 March 2022

by [Christopher White](#)

Vatican



The dome of St. Peter's Basilica is pictured at the Vatican July 12, 2019. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

ROME — Pope Francis has overhauled the Vatican's central bureaucracy for the first time in over 30 years, dramatically expanding the number of top leadership roles lay men and women can hold and reorganizing Vatican departments under the central priority of evangelization.

The 54-page text of the new Apostolic Constitution was released on March 19 — 9 years to the day of Francis' inauguration as pope in 2013 — and fulfills a top priority of the College of Cardinals, who made clear

their desire to improve and decentralize church governance when they gathered in Rome to name a successor to the then-recently retired Pope Benedict XVI.

Under the title of *Praedicate Evangelium* ("Preach the Gospel"), the new document stresses that evangelization is the central task of the church.

"The reform of the Roman Curia is also placed in the context of the missionary nature of the church," states the preamble to the text.

The new constitution, currently [only available in Italian](#), will take effect June 5, replacing Pope John Paul II's 1988 constitution, *Pastor Bonus* ("The Good Shepherd").

Overhaul of old and existing Vatican offices

Under the new constitution, the Vatican's Secretariat of State — which is broadly responsible for helping the pope manage the Vatican and for conducting the Holy See's international relations — remains the highest office, followed by 16 different Vatican departments.

The new structure eliminates previous distinctions between Vatican congregations and councils, with the newly streamlined title of "dicastery."

Most notably, the document states that "any member of the faithful can preside over a dicastery," an update to the 1988 constitution, which [specifically stated](#) that Vatican dicasteries are headed by a "cardinal prefect or the presiding archbishop."

Among the 16 dicasteries, the newly constructed Dicastery for Evangelization is given top listing, just ahead of the newly reformed Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, the oldest and, for centuries, arguably

the most powerful office of the Roman curia.

As a sign of the office's significance, the dicastery for evangelization will be headed directly by the pope — a parallel to how the Roman pontiff directly headed the doctrinal office until 1968.

The new office is responsible for the church's evangelical efforts around the world, including supporting new churches, and is divided into two sections: one responsible for fundamental questions surrounding evangelization and the other tasked with overseeing places of "first evangelization."

The section on fundamental questions is tasked specifically with "reflection on the history of evangelization and mission, especially in their relations with the political, social and cultural events that have marked and conditioned the preaching of the Gospel."

In addition, that section will be expected to support local churches in the "process of inculturating the Good News of Jesus Christ in different cultures and ethnic groups, and helping their evangelization, with particular attention to expressions of popular piety."

The reformed Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, which is listed second among the departments, follows the restructuring of that office set in motion [in February](#), with autonomous doctrinal and discipline sections that will be coordinated by separate secretaries, both of whom will report to the prefect of the dicastery.

The constitution also now relocates the pope's clergy abuse commission, known formally as the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, within the Vatican's doctrinal office. The restructuring

marks a change from [earlier draft versions](#) of the constitution, which had confirmed the commission as an "independent institution connected to the Holy See, with an advisory function at the service of the Holy Father."

The new constitution says the commission will remain composed of a president, a secretary and members appointed by the pope, and will continue to operate according to its own statutes.

The current president of the commission, Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley, immediately praised the new structuring, saying in a statement that "for the first time, Pope Francis has made safeguarding and the protection of minors a fundamental part of the structure of the Church's central government: the Roman Curia."

While O'Malley said that the reorganization would ensure safeguarding is a priority throughout the curia, former commission member Marie Collins, an Irish clergy abuse survivor who resigned from the group in frustration [in 2017](#), immediately [took to social media](#) to express concern, saying it has lost its independence.

Among other shifts indicated by the new constitution:

- The Pontifical Council for Culture and the Congregation for Catholic Education have been merged into one body: the Dicastery for Culture and Education;
- The current office of the papal almoner, responsible for the pope's charitable giving and representing the pope in disaster areas around the globe, has evolved into the Dicastery for the Service of Charity; and,
- The Dicastery for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, which has been the subject of a number of [recent](#)

[liturgical reforms](#) implemented by Francis over the last years, is given the specific mandate of promoting "the sacred liturgy according to the renewal undertaken by the Second Vatican Council."

A complete list of the 16 newly reformed dicasteries is:

- Dicastery for Evangelization
- Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith
- Dicastery for the Service of Charity
- Dicastery for the Eastern Churches
- Dicastery for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments
- Dicastery for the Causes of Saints
- Dicastery for Bishops
- Dicastery for the Clergy
- Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life
- Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life
- Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity
- Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue
- Dicastery for Culture and Education
- Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development
- Dicastery for Legislative Texts
- Dicastery for Communication

The heads of each dicastery, under the new constitution, will serve five-year terms, renewable once. No personnel changes were announced upon the publication of the constitution, but they are widely expected in the coming months, with many of the current prefects having served beyond the five-year limit.

Long road to reform and co-responsibility

Over the nine years of Francis' pontificate, a group of cardinal advisers from around the globe have met regularly in Rome, on average of four times a year, with the primary task of drafting the new constitution.

According to the new text, the constitution aims to promote a "spirit of healthy decentralization" to maximize the roles in which local dioceses and bishops' conferences can execute their work, sharing in a "co-responsibility" with the church's central offices in Rome.

All Roman curia personnel, according to the constitution, serve first and foremost to further the "mission of the Roman pontiff and of the bishops in their respective responsibilities towards the universal Church."

"This service must be animated and carried out with the highest sense of collaboration, co-responsibility and respect for the competence of others," the text states.



[Christopher White](#)

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Vatican reforms hailed as breakthrough for laity, despite open questions

22 March 2022

by [Christopher White](#)

[Vatican](#)



St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican is seen from a street in Rome. (Unsplash/Shai Pal)

ROME — Pope Francis' [newly released](#) apostolic constitution, which is intended to reform the Vatican's central bureaucracy, has been praised as a breakthrough by church leaders and theologians for expanding the roles laypeople can exercise in the Catholic Church, even while it remains unclear how the shift in church governance will take place.

At a March 21 Vatican press conference two days after the publication of the new constitution, Jesuit Fr. Gianfranco Ghirlanda, a distinguished canon lawyer and former rector of the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, said that in the new document, the "power of governance in the church does not come from the Sacrament of

[Holy] Orders," meaning ordination, but instead, from "canonical mission."

The constitution's new structure of Vatican offices eliminates previous distinctions between Vatican congregations and councils, with the newly streamlined title of "dicastery."

The change in nomenclature, said Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago, signals substantive changes ahead.

While the title of "congregation" meant that Vatican offices heads would be prelates, "the word dicastery allows an opening where laypeople can be involved in decision-making and have deliberative authority in the life of the church," Cupich told NCR.

[Natalia Imperatori-Lee](#), a professor of religious studies at Manhattan College, said this could mean a "redefinition of the theology of the priesthood that laypeople have been calling for since Vatican II."

'Even though we've been clamoring for this for a long time, it is going to be a messy transition.'
—Natalia Imperatori-Lee

"To separate out governance or administration from orders means that orders is primarily a sacramental ministry and that governance then belongs to the whole people of God, which is as it should be," she said.

Similarly, [Christian Weisner](#) of the German church reform organization We Are Church, praised the expansion of potential lay leadership roles as representing a "substantial shift" for the Catholic Church.

This, in his estimation, "could and should be a model for the whole church" to split

organizational leadership, which he noted needs certain professional qualifications, from "spiritual leadership by ordained male and female persons," he told NCR.

While Weisner said the new constitution also means greater opportunities for women religious, he said that whenever possible, it should also include "fathers and mothers with experience in family life."

"A real modern and adequate reform of the Curia presupposes, quite in principle, a basic ecclesiastical law, which has been successfully prevented since Vatican II," he said.

Weisner also noted that under the new reforms, the Pontifical Commission for Child Protection will now be located under the newly reorganized Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith.

He noted this will give the group "more authority," but said actual effectiveness will depend on the extent to which child protection is prioritized throughout the entire Roman Curia. A former commission member has already [expressed concern](#) that the body has lost its independence.

Kerry Robinson, a partner of the Leadership Roundtable, told NCR via email that she believes the new reforms provide "the opportunity for the church to benefit from the co-responsibility of women and men — ordained, religious and lay — at the highest levels in the Vatican," and that it makes concrete what Pope Francis has been calling for throughout his papacy: "true synodal and servant leadership."

Leadership Roundtable, which was founded in the wake of the abuse crisis in the United States, has spent much of the last two decades working with dioceses to promote a model of co-responsibility between ordained

and lay people as a best practice for church governance.

"We are encouraged that the church is listening," said Robinson of the new constitution.

Yet despite the enthusiasm from multiple corners of the global Catholic Church, Imperatori-Lee offered a warning: "Even though we've been clamoring for this for a long time, it is going to be a messy transition."

Already the rollout of the document has been the source of some consternation from both Vatican watchers and lay men and women. Despite the global composition of the world's 1.3 billion Catholics, the constitution was only released in Italian and without a clear timeline as to when other translations will be made available.

Moreover, "the church," said Imperatori-Lee, "has relied on underpaid labor for a really long time," primarily because clerics have been responsible for running many of its institutions, where health insurance costs and retirement benefits were provided by a religious community or a diocese.

If the Vatican wants to recruit highly trained lay men and women to come work in the Vatican, she said, "it's going to get very expensive."

This means the Vatican will become even more dependent on philanthropy, she predicted, and warned that it will have to be especially on guard against catering to ideological preferences of church donors to avoid outside influence or mission creep.

Cupich said the new constitution makes clear that in every Vatican department — and for those who work in them — the "role

of evangelization, of being missionary, is the nature of the church."

"I think all of these dicasteries are going to have to have an internal examination of how they see their work as being evangelical," he said.



Pope Francis talks with Chicago Cardinal Blase Cupich at the Vatican Dec. 12, 2019. (CNS/Vatican Media)

That examination includes the Congregation — now Dicastery — for Bishops, the influential Vatican department that advises the pope on which Catholic priests to appoint as bishops across the world. Cupich has served as a member of the Congregation for Bishops for the last five years, and, he told NCR, has now been appointed for another five-year term on the dicastery. He said the decision-making process for the appointment of new bishops, the creation of new dioceses and the ongoing formation of bishops must be reevaluated to answer "how evangelization is furthered in that work."

The new constitution, he added, also makes clear that "we're not just having clerics involved in the selection of bishops, but we're involving laypeople."

He also observed that the constitutional reforms have particular resonance for national episcopal conferences, which he says must now play a "greater role" in the selection of bishops, dealing with problems locally and intervening in cases when a bishop acts in a way that "breaks communion" with the pope.

"The episcopal conference has a role of stepping in and doing something before the Holy See becomes involved," said Cupich, who noted that he hopes the U.S. bishops' conference will have discussions of their own practices in light of the new constitution.

While the reforms will take effect on June 5, Cupich said the potential effects of the document are already noticeable — and will be felt for some time to come.

"I think that this is the most significant document from Rome that has to deal with the implementation of the [Second Vatican] Council," he told NCR. "I would even go as far to say there is a possibility in the future that people will speak about the 'Franciscan reform' of the church and the Roman Curia. It is that significant of a document."



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After meeting with Pope Francis, college students watch for 'more than business as usual' in church

22 March 2022

by [Miguel H. Díaz](#)



Pope Francis meets with students from North, Central and South America, as well as the Caribbean, during a Feb. 24 virtual dialogue as part of the Synod of Bishops on synodality. (Vatican Media)

The historic Feb. 24 encounter between Pope Francis and college students from across the Americas was part of a larger continental experience of synodality that involved 58 universities in 21 countries. For two months [university students across seven regions in the Americas](#) gathered virtually in a synodal process exploring the root causes of migration and dreaming together just resolutions.

The [initiative](#) was born from a collaboration between Argentinian theologian [Emilce Cuda](#) and Loyola University Chicago, my

home institution. Cuda, the first female secretary of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America, or PCAL, was instrumental in orchestrating the pope's participation.

The powerful public meeting between Francis and university students was mutually rewarding. Afrikaan Sahra, a refugee from Somalia, described the process as life changing. He observed how the pope "was tenderhearted and very open-minded to differences." A number of students were touched by the fact that the pope listened to them, took notes during the Zoom meeting, and commented on their ideas and proposals to tackle the root causes of migration. Cuda commented that Francis "is still caught up in joy, delighting in the moment that he shared with them."

Many have now begun to ask what comes next. These students want more than business as usual in the church. They want conversation to evolve into concrete actions, and they want marginalized people to be recognized as agents of change. As these students dream of [a new beginning in the church](#), they are ready to take the lead in this innovative educational and synodal initiative to address the salient [signs of the times](#) within and beyond our American continent.

"The synod is meant for the entire Church and not just for theologians or clerics."
— Emilce Cuda

Throughout our conversations, student participants consistently saw themselves as indispensable agents of change willing to exercise their intellectual abilities in solidarity with those most in need. Their reflections were articulated in what [Francis calls](#) "the language of the mind, the language of the heart and the language of the hands." They resonated with the pope's [observations](#) that, "Education in

general, but university education in particular, is not only about filling the head with concepts." For these change agents their education is about making a difference. Their research is about seeking concrete solutions to real-life challenges. Their solidarity across borders and with those who are marginalized is about what participant Lorena Delgado-Márquez of Denver called "collaborative justice."

Cuda wholeheartedly concurs with [students' dreams to pave a better future](#). During our conversations debriefing the entire experience, from regional meetings through the students' encounter with the pope, she observed, "These students must be so pleased that they have become protagonists in several ways: First and foremost, Pope Francis welcomed them as protagonists of the synodal process itself, for the synod is meant for the entire Church and not just for theologians or clerics." She hoped that they are now catalysts for a process that will engage students from other parts of the world and other universities en nuestra América.

Welcoming new minds, hearts and hands lies at the heart of a synodal church. As Pope Francis mentioned in his conversation with the students, this means that the church, as people of God, must be willing "to open its doors and exit from its temples to meet Jesus in the streets."

To become this synodal presence in the world is to embrace the mind, the heart and the hands of Jesus and seek to encounter and serve him preferentially among the poor and marginalized. The students who participated in this synodal process expressed deep commitments to become this synodal presence in the world, especially by placing themselves, their studies and their talents in service to re-incorporating those that have been disenfranchised from church and

society, marginalized and oppressed by ecclesial and socioeconomic realities.

Francisco Estrada Ortíz, a representative from El Salvador, explained, “My dream is that our group of students becomes a catalyst that enables us to work toward a more just society with greater solidarity, so that our siblings who live in the social peripheries can be incorporated without the need to leave their places of origin.”

On a personal note, as one of the educators involved in organizing this synodal process and in accompanying students through their thoughtful deliberations on the complexity of migrations, I, too, was moved by their dreaming and exhilarated by our papal encounter and dialogue.

As a Cuban exile, I resonated with the migration stories told by many of the students, shared in their pain of leaving one’s homeland, experienced similar feelings of cultural displacement and estrangement. As a former ambassador to the Holy See, I found hope in a new generation who prioritized the need to cross borders and engage in [bridge-building conversations](#), a priority of my own time in diplomatic service.

Like Leonardo Girón from Honduras I, too, see in this bridge-building initiative an opportunity to animate many young persons throughout our continent to “support their neighbors, offer hope, and manifest love in concrete ways.”

Tragically, the conversation between Pope Francis and the students from the Americas took place the day after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, which also set in motion the largest displacement of people within Europe since World War II. This latest wave of violence unleashes unnecessary loss of life, fears of nuclear destruction, global insecurity and

threats to our common home, underscoring yet again our broken world’s desperate need to [build bridges through nonviolent actions](#).

As Alejandro Palacio Puerta from Costa Rica confirmed, the time has come for “a new hour for the church, when we can become conscious of the need to walk together regardless of where we live in this continent or what language we speak, placing our resources, education, abilities and human efforts as the basis to build a new culture where all can partake of basic human needs and live a dignified life.”

Whatever comes next needs to recognize the agency of the young in ways that make them active in planning and organizing those immediate and future steps, that acknowledges them as partners in identifying the pressing themes that need addressing, that respects their wisdom in determining the actions to resolve concerns — globally, regionally, locally.

Going forward, a Vatican commitment to develop and build bridges will work best when students are welcomed and fully invested in further synodal encounters, dialogues and actions. The momentum and enthusiasm generated through this hemispheric synodal process cannot be wasted, cannot devolve into what Pope Francis calls “[useless and unproductive discussions](#).” According to Jesús (Paco) Estrada, an aspiring immigration attorney from Los Angeles, this dreaming together is a promising move, an “essential dialogue to form the world that we want to live in.”



Miguel H. Díaz

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Fossil fuels were always dangerous. Now they're fueling war on my doorstep.

22 March 2022

by [Svitlana Romanko](#)



A woman reacts in front of destroyed apartment buildings March 17 in Mariupol, Ukraine. (CNS/Reuters/Alexander Ermochenko)

UKRAINE — Ukrainian people continue to resolutely and boldly resist Russia's incessant and atrocious attacks in a war fueled by Russian oil, gas and coal. Among the dreadfully bombarded is the Ukrainian city of Mariupol — "[a city of martyrs in the terrible war ravaging Ukraine](#)," as Pope Francis recalled at the conclusion of the Sunday Angelus on March 13, joining his voice to that of the common people who implore an end to the war.

Irrefutably, fossil fuels have become a weapon of mass destruction, both for war in

Ukraine and in the climate crisis. Still, we must continue believing that we can overcome not only a war in Ukraine and conflicts in other regions of the world but also our dependency on oil, gas and coal, now and forever.

"For some time we've been speaking on the Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty. It will address most of our crises — climate crisis, biodiversity loss, ecological crisis in general and a question of peace," Fr. Joshtrom Isaac Kureethadam, coordinator of ecology and creation at the Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, pointed out during [a Laudato Si' Movement webinar](#) on March 10.

The brutal attack by Russia on Ukraine in combination with speculative price increases and the rebound in demand for oil and gas has led to soaring food and energy prices and market uncertainty across the globe. But at its roots, this is a conflict that has been bankrolled by the coal, oil and gas industries, industries that account for [40% of Russia's federal budget and 60% of Russia's exports](#).



Smoke rises above buildings near the Lviv airport, as Russia's invasion of Ukraine continues, March 18 in Lviv, Ukraine. (CNS/Reuters/Roman Baluk)

[According to Todd Paglia](#), executive director of Stand.earth, "The conflict clearly

shows how dangerous our dependence on a fossil fuel system is, especially one that concentrates power in the hands of someone like Putin."

Any moves by governments around the world to build more fossil fuel infrastructure or failings by governments to enact sanctions on Russian oil and gas imports now would dig us further into conflict, vulnerability and instability — all of which will only worsen the climate crisis. As noted by the United Nations' Secretary-General António Guterres, "[Fossil fuels are a dead end — for our planet, for humanity, and yes, for economies](#)," and we must "[end all new fossil fuel exploration and production](#)." Ukrainian scientist and Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change member Svitlana Krakovska echoes this, saying, "[The money that's invested in fossil fuels, they're using against us. Against freedom. Against humanity](#)."

For too long, government action has been devastatingly slow and catered to reckless and deceptive fossil fuel corporations, preventing meaningful and timely climate legislation. As [highlighted in a letter](#) by faith leaders who are calling for a fossil fuel non-proliferation treaty, "there is a glaring disconnect between countries' approvals for continued fossil fuel expansion and their rhetoric" on climate leadership and commitment to science. Meanwhile the urgency of timely action for a livable planet is increasingly clear.

Fossil fuels are threatening our ability to protect livelihoods, security and the planet. Burning coal, oil and gas is responsible for 86% of carbon dioxide emissions in the past decade. It is the largest driver of the climate crisis, topping the World Economic Forum's annual Global Risks Report consistently for the past several years and named an

equivalent if not greater risk to humanity than weapons of mass destruction in 2020.

Russia's war in Ukraine and the rising price of fossil fuels underscore the need for new bold proposals like the Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty to phase out oil, gas and coal and rapidly transition the world to cleaner, safer and distributed energy solutions.

The world has used treaties in the past to manage, restrict and phase out dangerous things like nuclear weapons and land mines. But existing climate treaties do not address fossil fuel production proliferation risk. The Paris Agreement fails to mention the words coal, oil, gas or fossil fuels even once, which shows the need for a complementary mechanism to address fossil fuels and the fossil fuel industry head-on.



A sign protesting fossil fuels on the lawn outside of the U.S. Capitol during a protest Oct. 18, 2019, in Washington. (CNS/Reuters/Sarah Silbiger)

Faith institutions have led the way previously on divesting finances from fossil fuels; now they can play a crucial role in building support and momentum by making the moral case for a Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty — one commensurate with the scale of the crisis the world is

facing. [Hundreds of faith-based organizations and faith leaders](#) have already endorsed this call and the cohort continues to grow by the day.

As a faith community, we are called to seek the common good, work toward peace and help those who suffer. This echoes the words of Ukrainian Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk of Kyiv-Halych, whose statement on the attack stresses that this should be a cause of concern for the world, especially for those "[who care for the environment, those who care for the ecological awareness of humanity.](#)"

The past several weeks have been a whirlwind of processing this new reality: one where I lament the utter devastation hitting my home and one where I am utterly grateful for the camaraderie and eagerness [to stand with Ukraine](#) that I've experienced in the most unexpected places.

There is a desperate need and a profound hunger for change — change that starts by adding bold ideas like the Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty to our toolbox so we may be good caretakers of our common home.



Svitlana Romanko

Svitlana Romanko is zero fossil fuels campaign manager for the Laudato Si' Movement and based in Ukraine. She has been an environmental lawyer for over 20 years and holds a Ph.D. in environmental, natural resources, land and agrarian law, and a doctorate on climate change law, climate governance and climate policy. She also worked for 350.org, and campaigned for a

Just Green Recovery and Green Deal in Eastern Europe.

With Pope Francis' reform of the Roman Curia, nine years of work is coming to fruition



Gerard O'Connell

19 March 2022



The dome of St. Peter's Basilica in is seen at the Vatican in this 2020 file photo. On March 19, 2022, Pope Francis promulgated the long-awaited constitution reorganizing the Roman Curia. (CNS photo/Guglielmo Mangiapane, Reuters)

Pope Francis' long awaited Constitution for the Reform of the Roman Curia—"Praedicate Evangelium" ("Preach the Gospel")—was released by the Vatican today. It offers a strong missionary direction for the Roman Curia and introduces significant changes from the constitution promulgated by John Paul II—"Pastor Bonus" (The Good Shepherd)—in June

1988, which it will replace when it comes into force on June 5.

It puts the preaching of the Gospel and the missionary nature of the church as the top priority of the Roman Curia. Significantly, it allows for “the involvement of lay men and women also in the role of government and responsibility in the church” and it assigns the safeguarding and protection of minors a central place in the curia’s structure. It emphasizes the importance of synodality for the life of the church in the 21st century and it promotes decentralization in church governance, in part by strongly affirming the important role of national and continental bishops’ conferences.

The Vatican surprised everyone, including officials in the Roman Curia, when it released the 54-page constitution “*Praedicate Evangelium*” on March 19, the feast of St. Joseph, as Francis began the 10th year of his pontificate. At present, the text is only available in Italian, but translations in English and other languages are expected to come soon. One source suggested to **America** that it was released today to prevent it being leaked in advance of the official presentation on Monday.

“*Praedicate Evangelium*” allows for greater involvement of lay men and women in church governance and assigns the protection of minors a central place in the Curia’s structure.

The reform of the Roman Curia was requested by the cardinals in the pre-conclave meetings in March 2013, and Francis began work on this enormous task immediately after taking office. As he notes in the preamble to the constitution, it is only the fifth time in 500 years that such a task has been undertaken. Sixtus V reformed the curia in 1588, Pius X did so in 1908, Paul VI reformed it after the Second Vatican Council

in 1967, and John Paul II introduced the last reform in 1988.

Francis presented his reform as being in continuity with those last two. But while there is continuity there are also significant differences not only in the change of names and the number of Roman Curia offices, but also in the emphasis on “the missionary conversion” of the church and the curia and on synodality.

The constitution states that the Roman Curia “is the institution which the Roman Pontiff ordinarily makes use of in the exercise of his supreme pastoral office and his universal mission in the world.” It emphasizes that “the Roman Curia is not placed between the pope and the bishops, rather it is at the service of both according to the modalities that are proper to each.”

Furthermore, Francis, in the constitution, affirms the role of national and continental bishops conferences and the patriarchates by emphasizing their potential to serve the bishops, without making them an obstacle to the relationship of the pope with the individual bishop. It explains that the aim is “to express the collegial dimension of the episcopal ministry and, indirectly, to strengthen ecclesial communion.”

Whereas in the past 500 years the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith was the number one ranking dicastery in the Roman Curia, under Francis’ reform it is relegated to second place.

By the time Francis became pope the Roman Curia was composed of two sections of the Secretariat of State, nine congregations, 12 pontifical councils, three tribunals as well as a few other offices.

Francis has not only made structural changes, through incorporating several

offices into one (as with the Dicastery for the Service of Integral Human Development, and the Dicastery for Communication), he has also established a third section of the Secretariat of State to care for the diplomatic personnel of the Holy See, in addition to the existing two: for the General Affairs of the Church, and for Relations with States. He also refers to the Secretariat of State as “the papal secretariat,” reviving an earlier title.

He not only changed the nomenclature by replacing the terms “congregation” and “council” with the word “dicastery,” he also reduced the number of these offices. Under the new constitution there are 16 dicasteries, seemingly with equal juridical status.

“*Praedicate Evangelium*” puts the preaching of the Gospel and the missionary nature of the church as the top priority of the Roman Curia.

Whereas in the past 500 years the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (though under different names) was the number one ranking dicastery in the Roman Curia (because the pope was its head until 1967), under Francis’ reform it is relegated to second place. The first in ranking is “The Dicastery for Evangelization” to emphasize the missionary nature of the Roman Curia and the church. Significantly, the pope becomes the head of this dicastery, which now has two sections: one for the fundamental questions of evangelization in the world, the other for the first evangelization, and each will have a pro-prefect.

The Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, also has two sections with a secretary for each section and a prefect to oversee them. Significantly, the new constitution places the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors within this dicastery. Commenting on this, Cardinal Sean O’Malley [told](#)

[Catholic News Service](#), “For the first time, Pope Francis has made safeguarding and the protection of minors a fundamental part of the structure of the church’s central government.” This represents, he said, “a significant move forward in upgrading the place and mandate of the commission, which can only lead to a stronger culture of safeguarding throughout the curia and the entire church.”

Throughout his pontificate, Francis has given a central place to the poor in the life of the church, and, in his reform, he reaffirmed this by upgrading the office of papal almoner to that of “The Dicastery for the Service of Charity” and ranked it number 3. With these three significant changes he has imposed his own personal imprint on the Roman Curia, something that Cardinal Oswald Gracias told me, in [an interview last December](#), was something that Francis very much wanted to do.

Throughout his pontificate, Francis has given a central place to the poor in the life of the church, and, in his reform, he reaffirmed this.

Another major concern of the cardinals in their pre-conclave meetings was the need to reform Vatican finances. The new constitution incorporates all the significant reforms that have been made with the establishment of a council for the economy and the Secretariat of the Economy. It underlines that the Secretariat for the Economy carries out the function of the Papal Secretariat for economic and financial matters. It exercises control and supervision in administrative, economic and financial matters over the various dicasteries, offices and institutions connected with the Holy See and “it exercises a special control over the Pence of St. Peter and over the other papal funds.” It describes the role of the auditor

general and of the administration of the patrimony of the Apostolic See.

The new constitution lists a new dicastery that has yet to be established, “The Dicastery for Culture and for Education.” It comes about through the incorporation of the Pontifical Council for Culture with the Congregation for Catholic Education. Like the dicasteries for evangelization and for the doctrine of the faith, this new dicastery will also have two sections: one for culture (which is very broad) and one for education, each with a secretary as its head, under a prefect for the whole dicastery.

Francis has devoted much of his pontificate to working for the unity of Christians and for dialogue with other religions, and it is therefore interesting to note that he has designated the two former “councils” for the Promotion of Christian Unity and for interreligious dialogue as separate “dicasteries” and upgraded their heads from ‘presidents’ to ‘prefects.’”

Furthermore, whereas under John Paul II’s constitution “Pastor Bonus” a dicastery was to be headed by a cardinal or archbishop, Francis appears to open the possibility for lay people to hold senior positions by envisaging “the involvement of lay women and men, also in the role of government and responsibility.”



Pope Francis is drawing on Vatican II to radically change how the Catholic Church is governed

In the new constitution, Francis emphasizes the importance of the international recruitment of clergy, religious and laity to work in the Roman Curia, “as an expression of Catholicity.” It says, “those who serve in the curia are to be chosen from among bishops, priests, deacons, members of the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life and lay people who are distinguished by spiritual life, good pastoral experience, sobriety of life, love for the poor, a spirit of communion and service, competence in the matters entrusted to them, ability to discern the signs of the times.” For this reason, it emphasizes the need “to devote careful attention to the selection and training of personnel” and insists that recruitment be for a five-year term, which could be renewed once. It restates the retirement age (75) and says all positions are to be abandoned at the age of 80.

The constitution emphasizes the need for good coordination and communication within the Roman Curia, and for intra-dicasterial and inter-dicasterial meetings on a regular basis, as well as the promotion of communion among those working in the Vatican.

Francis, in the constitution, says the reform will be realized “if it blossoms from an interior reform, by which we make our own the paradigm of the spirituality of the Council, expressed by the ancient story of the Good Samaritan.” He emphasized that “the reform is not an end in itself, but a means to give a strong Christian witness, to foster a more effective evangelization, promote a greater ecumenical spirit, and encourage constructive dialogue among all.”



Gerard O'Connell

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As pandemic eases, will the Communion cup ever make a comeback?

23 March 2022
by [Brian Roewe](#)

[Coronavirus](#) [Parish](#)



Operations at Cribari Vineyards in Fresno, California, came to "a dead halt" as COVID-19 shutdowns spread across the U.S. With only priests primarily consuming the consecrated wine, the need for greater quantities

disappeared, and many churches relied on in-house inventory. (Courtesy of Cribari Vineyards)

2022 was supposed to be a big year at O-Neh-Da and Eagle Crest Vineyards.

The winery, tucked in the hills and valleys of upstate New York's Finger Lakes region, is preparing to mark its 150th anniversary, a milestone reached by few vineyards nationwide under its original name. A further distinction, it's one of the few vintners of sacramental wine in the U.S., and perhaps the only one with production of the grapes that become the Precious Blood as its core business.

"This was going to be a big year for us," said Will Ouweleen, who runs O-Neh-Da with his wife, Lisa. Celebrations were planned, and momentum was at their backs as, businesswise, "we had our best year in 2019, ever."

"And then the pandemic struck."

In the days after the World Health Organization declared the SARS-CoV-2 virus a pandemic on March 11, 2020, Catholic parishes and churches across the country and around the world closed their doors and temporarily ceased in-person celebrations of the Mass in lieu of virtual liturgies. When churches reopened, in most cases the communal Communion cup did not come back.

For cultivators of sacramental wine, it represented a worst-case scenario. And as concerns remain about how to conduct communal consumption of the Precious Blood amid a highly contagious virus, so too winemakers worry about what those decisions will mean for their future business.



"We had our best year in 2019, ever. And then the pandemic struck," said Will Ouweleen, vintner in Conesus, New York, at O-Neh-Da Vineyard, which had produced sacramental wine for 150 years. (Courtesy of O-Neh-Da Vineyard)

"Even if the church returns to the common chalice being distributed, I don't think a lot of people are going to take it up," Ouweleen said.

"I don't even know if it'll ever come back again," said John Cribari, president of Cribari Vineyards in Fresno, California. "I don't know. Would you do it?"

Sales down 90%

Operations at Cribari came to "a dead halt" as COVID-19 shutdowns spread across the U.S.

The vineyard, located in California's Central Valley, the top grape-growing region in the state, had just scheduled a large packing order to prepare for Easter — along with Christmas, one of the biggest business days, as churches anticipate more people filling the pews.

"When we saw what was coming, we just threw a huge wrench into the schedule of production and cut it substantially," Cribari said.

With only priests primarily consuming the consecrated wine, the need for greater

quantities disappeared, and many churches relied on in-house inventory.

A similar scene played out nearly 300 miles south at Joseph Filippi Winery and Vineyards in Southern California. Sacramental wine sales in the region, which normally make up around 35% of purchases, plummeted.

"I don't bother looking at those numbers, because it's just disheartening," Joseph Paul Filippi, president and fourth-generation winemaker, said. "I'm busy trying to get business back and make more business."

In late February 2020, Archbishop Leonard Blair, chair of the Committee on Divine Worship for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, sent a memo to all bishops outlining health precautions to curb the spread of the novel coronavirus. Among the guidelines in the memo, a copy of which NCR obtained, was suspending the distribution of holy Communion to the congregation via the chalice.

Another set of recommendations, issued April 30 that year, stated as churches looked to begin reopening, distribution of the Precious Blood should remain paused, "nor should the faithful receive the Eucharist by intinction" — dipping the host into the consecrated wine. Nearly every diocese in the U.S. adopted the measures, and the communal cups were mothballed.

'Even if the church returns to the common chalice being distributed, I don't think a lot of people are going to take it up.'

—Will Ouweleen

Respiratory viruses can transmit from one person to the next as germs are spread through the air, by touch and on surfaces, said Enbal Shacham, a professor of public health at the St. Louis University College for

Public Health and Social Justice, the country's only accredited Catholic school of public health.

With COVID-19 far more contagious and deadly than the flu or common cold, the risk of transmission is greater, spurring public health officials to recommend preventative measures like sanitizing surfaces, limiting large gatherings, wearing masks and avoiding shared items, including a cup.

"The major point of contact, from one mouth to the next mouth, it doesn't get very much more intimate than that," Shacham said.

Along with sacramental wine vineyards, wholesalers of church supplies and goods also saw business dry up fast, not just for sacramental wine but other items like hosts and candles. Patrick Baker & Sons, which primarily distributes Mont La Salle altar wines in New England, saw its overall sales cut in half. At the Church Supply Warehouse, based in Wheaton, Illinois, sacramental wine sales made up 10% of sales pre-pandemic, and have shrunk to roughly 1-2% of total revenues.



A promotional photo for Mont La Salle Altar Wines produced in Napa, California (CNS/Courtesy of Mont La Salle Altar Wines)

For Cribari, which began making altar wines during Prohibition and sells throughout the country, its drop in sales halted altar wine

production in 2020. It resumed the next year, but mainly for customers in Europe.

As the pandemic roiled on, both California wineries faced other challenges, too, including labor shortages or heat waves and droughts exacerbated by climate change. Still, what helped buoy business were their table wines, which make up the bulk of sales. Industrywide, retail sale of wine, beer and liquor [jumped 20%](#) during the pandemic's first seven months.

"If we had to live off the altar wine program, it would be very difficult," Cribari said.

But that's the case at O-Neh-Da.

For the New York winery, founded by Rochester Bishop Bernard McQuaid, altar wine sales are roughly 90% of its business, selling directly to about 2,000 churches in New York and Pennsylvania. It used to be 100%, until the Ouweleens, who took ownership in 2007, began producing a line of table wines. But even in the best years, like 2019, those made up no more than 10% of total business.

That October, Ouweleen had harvested 40 acres of grapes when he watched a virology conference that mentioned a potential worldwide pandemic. The news was compelling enough he decided not to order \$250,000 in glass he would typically use to bottle in the spring. That move helped save his business, as it went from its best year to its worst with sales down 90%.



When the COVID-19 pandemic was declared in March 2020, the bottling line at O-Neh-Da Vineyard, in New York's Finger Lakes region, grinded to a halt as church demand for sacramental wine dried up as distribution of the Communion cup has paused. (Courtesy of O-Neh-Da Vineyard)

O-Neh-Da did not harvest in 2020 or 2021, and the 30,000 gallons of wine from 2019 continues to sit in chilled stainless tanks. As Ouweleen and the wine wait, he has drawn some hope from the vineyard's long history, having survived past global calamities like the 1917 Spanish flu outbreak, Prohibition, the Great Depression and two world wars. "The grace of God will carry us through, and that's my operating premise," he said.

Theological concerns

The situation facing the fate of the Communion cup is one Catholics haven't really faced before.

In the Catholic Church, the laity sharing from the chalice is only a recently resurrected experience. While early Christians consumed both species — the body and blood of Christ — at the Eucharist, the practice stopped in the late Middle Ages, primarily over concerns with spilling, said Susan Ross, an emerita theologian at Loyola University Chicago. Restoring the cup to the laity became a focus of Martin Luther and

the Reformation, which Protestants ultimately did in 1558.

"But it was really not until Vatican II that the practice changed [in Catholicism] and then people began receiving under both the bread and the cup," Ross said.

At the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s, church fathers addressed the Precious Blood in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. Ross said there was an emphasis "to return to the roots of liturgy," including people receiving the Eucharist through both consecrated species. The expression represented a pivot from a priest making the sacrifice for the people to a more shared, communal experience of the sacrament.



Pope Francis elevates the Eucharist as he celebrates Mass at the GSP Stadium in Nicosia, Cyprus, Dec. 3, 2021. (CNS/Paul Haring)

"By restoring the cup to the people, it helps to promote that full, conscious and active participation and gives us a fuller sense of celebration as the Mass is intended to be," said Jesuit Fr. Thomas Scirghi, a theologian at Fordham University who specializes in liturgy and sacraments.

Fr. Dustin Dought, associate director in the U.S. bishops' Secretariat of Divine Worship, said that since Vatican II the church has emphasized that while the distribution of both host and wine "more fully expresses

Christ's gift of himself at the Last Supper," the fullness of sacramental grace is present in each species.

"When it comes to the sign, the sign is less full, the expression is less full. But when it comes to grace, there's no deprivation of grace," he said.

The availability of the consecrated wine is especially important for people unable to receive the host, for example due to a gluten intolerance. Ross called it "a prudential decision" to withhold the cup during the pandemic. At the same time, it can still feel like something is missing from the Mass.

'Not being able to receive the eucharistic wine, I think, does feel like a loss for people, because it is one less palpable symbol of the real presence of Christ.'

—Susan Ross

"Not being able to receive the eucharistic wine, I think, does feel like a loss for people, because it is one less palpable symbol of the real presence of Christ," she said. "But it's a recognition, of course, that we have to deal with reality as it is."

Suspensions of the Precious Blood are not new for sacramental winemakers. Such suspensions have occurred every few years when a particularly contagious flu virus emerges. In the divine worship committee's February 2020 memo, Blair noted similar advice was offered in 2009 related to the H1N1 "swine flu" pandemic.

What has made COVID-19 worse than past pauses has been its endurance, as the pandemic recently surpassed its two-year mark and has eclipsed 6 million deaths worldwide. With that longevity has come uncertainty.

Even as COVID-19 cases have [dropped](#) in recent weeks across the U.S., and more and

more states have lifted restrictions and mask mandates aimed at limiting spread of the virus, churches are moving cautiously in how they approach the Communion cup.

A majority of Catholic dioceses remain in a wait-and-see period, and the cup continues to be suspended indefinitely in most places. That's the case in the archdioceses of New York, Los Angeles and Chicago, as well as dioceses of Sacramento, California — just east of Napa Valley — and Rochester, New York, where O-Neh-Da is located. Both the Chicago and L.A. archdioceses told NCR they have begun discussions about reintroducing the Precious Blood to lay Catholics at Mass.



Bishop David Talley raises the host during his installation Mass at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Memphis, Tennessee, April 2, 2019. (CNS/Courtesy of Memphis Diocese/Gragg Higginbotham)

On Feb. 28, Bishop David Talley of the Diocese of Memphis, Tennessee, [announced](#) he will lift COVID-related restrictions, including withholding the Communion cup, beginning April 14, Holy Thursday. Talley said it would be up to each priest to decide when to bring it back. The diocese did not respond to an interview request about the decision.

Dought told NCR the divine worship committee hasn't had discussions about when or how to bring back the cup and that it is not planning at this time to issue further guidance to dioceses, saying the decision is for each bishop to discern.

The question isn't just whether the cup will return, but if people will feel comfortable sipping from it.

Shacham, the St. Louis University public health professor, noted that the coronavirus pandemic has led people and communities to think more critically about infection control generally and to reassess long-standing behaviors.

"This is an opportunity for us to reevaluate how risk-averse or risk-accepting are we in different settings," she said.

One option that could become more prevalent, and that some priests during concelebrations have turned to during the pandemic, is intinction, a practice more common in other countries where it is culturally taboo to share the same cup.

"As diocesan bishops are discerning the distribution of Communion and what that looks like, I think that's going to be part of their discernment," Dought said.

One idea likely off the table? Individual cups.

While common in some Protestant churches, the theologians who spoke with NCR said it was less a fit for Catholics. First, the more cups there are, the greater chance of spilling the Precious Blood. Then there's the question that Indiana Jones famously faced: What's a worthy vessel? But above all, they say it's a matter of symbol of what the Eucharist represents.

"The community becomes one by sharing in the one chalice. And to have individual chalices diminishes the sign of unity, of communion, I think," Dought said.



Fr. Chinthaka Perera gives the Communion cup to a woman during Mass at St. Boniface Martyr Church in Sea Cliff, New York, April 25, 2019. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

He added that the reception of both species at holy Communion will be "a big part" of the bishops' [forthcoming National Eucharistic Revival](#), in terms of highlighting the importance of the wine as much as the host.

Will people take the wine?

As bishops and parish priests discern the future of the Communion cup, makers of sacramental wine are anxiously waiting. The return of the cup is only one part of the equation, they say. The other is whether people will come back to church in the same numbers as before the pandemic, and even if they do, how many will opt to receive the chalice with health concerns more prominently in mind?

"I think that's even a greater challenge for the churches that we serve, is getting people to return to Mass," Ouweleen said.

It's a question so far without an answer, as [data remains scant](#) on Mass attendance, partly because not all churches have fully

reopened and partly because the pandemic isn't over.

Count Scirghi among those worrying about how the church will transition back to in-person liturgies. The convenience of attending Mass by Zoom has allowed people to connect with their faith during a time of social distancing, but it also makes the Eucharist inaccessible.

"I see some definitely coming back and many want to come back gradually. But the churches are not as full as they were before," Scirghi said.

How, and how many, people return to Mass is of major consequence for the vineyards producing sacramental wine.



O-Neh-Da Vineyard has produced sacramental wine for 150 years in New York's Finger Lakes region. (Courtesy of O-Neh-Da Vineyard)

At Cribari Vineyards, the pandemic has more or less put a halt to their larger, four-liter jugs, which are more popular with churches with large congregations.

"We're just currently selling the bottles, because that's all people are buying," Cribari said, adding that if Communion under both species resumes they'll look to selling jugs again.

At this point, Cribari, which distributes primarily through Catholic retail stores, sales are about half of pre-pandemic purchases. As churches have reopened, and

people slowly coming back, orders have slowly bounced back for church goods wholesalers, too, but sacramental wine continues to sag behind.

Sacramental winemakers have asked their church customers about when the communal cup might return, in order to make harvesting plans and ordering materials, as prices for glass and labels have skyrocketed in the supply chain crunch.

In the months after the pandemic was declared, Ouweleen sent letters to bishops in New York and Pennsylvania, two of O-Neh-Da's main markets, as well as the bishops' conference to try to get a sense of when full Communion may come back. The responses he received carried the same refrain: not for the foreseeable future.



In recent years, O-Neh-Da Vineyard, which runs on solar power, expanded its business in New York's Finger Lakes region to offer table wines, welcome campers and host events. (Courtesy of O-Neh-Da Vineyard)

In the time since, he's looked for ways to make do, dubbing 2022 "the great pivot."

Taking advantage of his scenic location on Hemlock Lake, he's opened glamping — "glamorous camping" — at the vineyard and rents out a guesthouse on Airbnb.

Ouweleen is also looking for his altar and table wines, all produced through natural

and sustainable processes, to capitalize on consumer trends toward organic goods and buying local, whether for parishes or wine parties.

And the plans for the 150th year celebration continue, including music events and a sustainable farming symposium.

Beleaguered by the pandemic, the Ouweleens are ready to turn the page. Guided by their motto for the year, "Love wins," they hope their wines can be a part of a more positive energy in the country that brings people together again.

Whether at their vineyard, or in the Communion line.

"I remain faithful and hopeful," Ouweleen said. "And beyond Communion, I just hope our world can get back to a more loving, unified place."



[Brian Roewe](#)

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Lent: A season to transform in love and fraternity

23 March 2022

by [Robancy A. Helen](#)

[Spirituality](#) [Social Justice](#)

This article appears in the [Lent](#) and [War in Ukraine](#) feature series.



"Jesus and Saint Veronica," attributed to Hieronymus Francken III (Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons)

We began the season of Lent with a heaviness of hearts as we watched the war between Russia and Ukraine. People from across the globe expressed their dismay to try to stop the war. They protested against war and welcomed peace and harmony between the nations.

Pope Francis gave a [universal call](#) to make Ash Wednesday a day of fasting and prayer to stand with the people of Ukraine. He says his heart aches over the situation and calls for action. He [visited](#) the Russian Embassy in the Vatican to show his concern and [called](#) Volodymyr Zelensky, president of Ukraine.

Christianity, though born out of bloodshed and pain, embraces peace and fraternity, hope and harmony. It shows concern for others, reaches out to the needy.

A friend of mine called me from Terni, Italy, asking me to pray for Ukraine and asking that priests, nuns, and other Catholics have adoration in their churches to do the same. She texted priests and others in India and elsewhere to ask them for this favor.

"I am unable to sleep and think of nothing else but praying for these people of Russia and Ukraine," she said.

She does not worry about her sister-in-law, who is in a coma, but her heart reaches out to the cry of the people of Ukraine.

Isn't it beautiful? This is a fine example of empathy and caring for those people who need our prayers and support the most. We know love by this — that Jesus laid down his life for us —and we ought to lay down our lives for one another ([1 John 3:16](#)).

A person who reaches out to others will have the experience of the risen Jesus. Imitating Jesus in our lives is a challenge, but we do it with love, just as he loves us unconditionally with great mercy and compassion.

Loving one another regardless of differences of any kind is what the world needs today, as we face challenges and problems like inequality, conflicts, migration, poverty, unemployment, exploitation and injustice, to name a few.

Jesus suffers when he sees us acting against the will of God, but his passion and cross are glorified when we deny ourselves and take up the cross for someone else with a sense of fraternity, understanding and solidarity.

The Earth keeps going around because we can love and can resemble Christ through our words and deeds with sincere hearts and minds.

"My heart melts whenever I see the withered crop" is a quote attributed to Thiruvartuprakasa Vallalār Chidambaram [Ramalingam](#) (1823-1874), one of the most famous Tamil Hindu saints and one of the greatest Tamil [poets](#) of 19th-century India.

We all need to have a heart that can feel for others and do something for others, getting us out of our comfort zones, indifference and even pessimism. Each of us has lots of human capital within us. That capability should be used for others as an instrument of love, service and hope. It can also provide the opportunity to put our faith in action, as Jesus has mandated us to do through his example and precepts.

Christianity is not a mere individual enterprise. It is communitarian in its dynamism and core. Based on this, we have to reach out to others in whatever way we can, not only during Lent but beyond — every day of our Christian faith and vocation as disciples of Christ.

Above all, Jesus reached out to the needy, marginalized and vulnerable people: the poor, the sick, and the sinners. He knew people needed to be loved and cared for. Even his touch healed many. His gaze transformed sinners to saints and tax collectors to fishers of men.

As we start this season of Lent, we are called once again to go to Calvary and reflect with great compassion on our mission and commitment to the people.

We are called to heal people who are sick in body or mind. The needs are plenty, but the

workers are few. Our invitation is to become the reason for someone to be happy, someone to be alive, someone to be important, and someone to be loved.

This call requires dedication, magnanimity and focus. As Mother Mary stood by the cross until the end, we need to be with Jesus to build up his kingdom with a singular devotion to God's power and grace.

In Lent, this season of grace, let us spend our time with Jesus in orphans, the poor, the needy, and others who need our helping hand to make our lives meaningful and holy, and we will make a difference in them with a ray of hope.



Robancy A. Helen

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Will Francis' reform of the Curia take root?

23 March 2022

by [Michael Sean Winters](#)



Pope Francis leads a meeting of his Council of Cardinals at the Vatican Feb. 21. On March 19, Pope Francis promulgated the long-awaited constitution reorganizing the Roman Curia. (CNS/Vatican Media)

"We plant the seeds that one day will grow," the [Romero Prayer](#) intones. "We water the seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities."

With the promulgation of *Praedicate Evangelium*, ("Preach the Gospel"), the long-awaited apostolic constitution reforming the Roman curia, Pope Francis has planted some important seeds. If his programmatic apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, invited all Catholics to find ways to preach the Gospel with renewed fervor, this text invites the Roman curia, the central administrative body of the universal church, to do the same. It marks a major milestone in the reception of the Second Vatican Council.

Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley issued a [statement](#) calling attention to the changes affecting the church's response to sex abuse. "For the first time, Pope Francis has made safeguarding and the protection of minors a fundamental part of the structure of the Church's central government: the Roman Curia," said the cardinal.

This curse of clergy sex abuse, destroying young lives and breaking the bonds of communion every time the crime was covered up, brought to light many of the ways the ecclesial culture had become sclerotic, inward-looking, defensive.

Everything about the new apostolic constitution is outward-looking. Indeed, the primacy of the call to evangelize as the essential mission of the church is evident on almost every page. The church Francis envisions is a missionary church, one whose primary mission and goal is to preach the Gospel.

O'Malley said that the "unifying theme of the reforms is evangelization. The Church exists to evangelize and so the curia must exist to evangelize." He also called attention to the fact that the reforms open almost all offices in the curia to lay people and also establishes a "new section of the Secretariat of State to care for personnel at the Vatican. That shows the pope's pastoral concern, even in what is a bureaucratic reform."

The second theme articulated in the preamble, the church as a mystery of communion, is closely linked to this missionary impulse. Quoting St. Pope John Paul II's apostolic exhortation *Christifidelis laici*, Francis writes: "For the reform of the Roman Curia it is important to keep in mind and value another aspect of the mystery of the Church: in it the mission is so closely linked to communion that it is possible to say that the purpose of the mission is precisely that of "making known and living to all the 'new' communion which in the Son of God made man has entered the history of the world."

The conception of the church as a mystery of communion is drawn from the Second Vatican Council, and before that from the church fathers, but the linkage with the

missionary impulse is pure [Pope Paul VI](#). Once again, Francis shows his indebtedness to Papa Montini.

The relativization of ordained ministry vis-à-vis the decision-making bodies of the curia will surely be the most obvious change wrought by the constitution. Among the most distinctive themes of Vatican II was the significance of baptism. Pope Pius XII's restoration of the Easter Vigil reminded the church of baptism's foundational quality, not just for the individual soul but for the church itself. But the conciliar texts were issued into a clerical culture that equated ordination with service too comprehensively.

Now Francis is betting the time is ripe to de-clericalize the culture of the curia. I do not think we will need to wait many years until a woman is named to head a Vatican dicastery. As theologian Natalia Imperatori-Lee [told](#) NCR: "To separate out governance or administration from orders means that orders is primarily a sacramental ministry and that governance then belongs to the whole people of God, which is as it should be."

Francis: If you are reading this, I am available to become prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops!

Now Francis is betting the time is ripe to de-clericalize the culture of the curia. I do not think we will need to wait many years until a woman is named to head a Vatican dicastery.



Theologian Natalia Imperatori-Lee on the curial reform: "To separate out governance or administration from orders means that orders is primarily a sacramental ministry and that governance then belongs to the whole people of God, which is as it should be." (Provided photo)

O'Malley, who has served on the Council of Cardinals that worked with Francis on the curial reforms, told NCR that "many of the reforms have already taken place." For example, the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development was created in 2016, bringing together four pontifical councils under one roof. He added: "This constitution is the culmination of several years of consultation and implementation." Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago spoke with my colleague Christopher White about the reforms that pertain to the Dicastery for Bishops, and specifically those situations when a bishop "breaks communion" with the pope and other bishops. "The episcopal conference has a role of stepping in and doing something before the Holy See becomes involved," said Cupich, who noted that he hopes the U.S. bishops' conference will have discussions of their own practices in light of the new constitution.

The recent decision to remove Bishop Daniel Fernandez Torres from the governance of the diocese of Arecibo, Puerto Rico, appears to have conformed to this new approach. In his statement objecting to his removal, Fernandez [noted](#) that while he was not accused of a canonical crime, the nuncio had told him he was being removed because he "had not been obedient to the Pope nor had he had sufficient communion with my brother bishops of Puerto Rico."

Cupich also confirmed he had been reappointed to a second five-year term on the crucially important dicastery. Note to the Vatican press office: Can you let us know when such appointments and renewals happen in real time?

Will these reforms work? Any reform of structures must be accompanied by a willingness among those who populate the structures to have an interior conversion. Just as the "internationalization" of the curia was sometimes frustrated by networks of Italian clerics, and turf wars between dicasteries are unlikely to entirely vanish, these reforms need to be engaged by all or at least most of those who work in the curia. The pope has offered the invitation. The conversion itself will require the efforts of many. And, at a time when communication at hyper-speed is taken for granted, the reforms will take time and demand patience. Long-lasting reforms, unlike a twitter rant, cannot be done in the twinkling of an eye.

Combined with the pope's desire for a more synodal church, a desire that also dovetails with this new constitution, *Praedicate Evangelium* illustrates that the reception of the Second Vatican Council is still in progress. It follows two previous post-conciliar apostolic constitutions reforming the curia, *Regimini ecclesiae universae* issued in 1967 shortly after the

close of the Council, and John Paul II's 1988 reform *Pastor Bonus*.

Now, Francis has brought to the task of curial reform the distinctive experiences and insights drawn from the post-conciliar experience of the church in Latin America. The reception of the council in Latin America was the most theologically fecund of any region, and the specifically Argentine contribution, the [theology of the people](#), seems to many as the most consonant with Vatican II.

Church historians like to say it takes 100 years to receive a council. This new document helps orient the Roman curia for the last 40 years of the reception of Vatican II. The seeds are being watered. The harvest may not come until the next papacy, or the one after that. It is given to none of us to see so far in advance. That does not detract from the significance of what Francis has done.



Michael Sean Winters

Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.

5 Christian virtues to help us learn to live in a new 'new normal'

23 March 2022

by [Daniel P. Horan](#)

[Spirituality](#)



(Photo by Joshua Earle)

The expression "new normal" has increasingly felt like a meaningless phrase. With each new shift in the experience of the novel coronavirus pandemic, what we thought we knew had to be relearned and what served as guidance or best practices often had to be re-scripted. Normalcy suggests consistency and predictability, neither of which has been experienced since March 2020.

The result has been widespread fatigue and impatience, which might explain the rise in [public outbursts](#) and [misbehavior](#) as people attempt to reintegrate into public life.

And yet, things are beginning to feel different this time as the surge of infections caused by the Omicron variant of the virus peaked and has steadily and rapidly declined across the United States. Meanwhile, some parts of Asia are now dealing with [their own Omicron outbreaks](#) and pockets of [rising cases in Europe](#) continue to remind the

world that this disease is not just going to disappear.

Nevertheless, public health officials tell us that we may be moving closer to an [endemic phase](#) of this viral nightmare, which offers the promise that COVID-19 may no longer dominate our lives in the way that it has.

On a personal level, I have noticed how things have been shifting, sometimes rapidly. Before the start of the pandemic I would often travel several times a month to lecture or lead workshops and retreats. During the first year of the pandemic I never stepped foot on an airplane, bus or subway car. For the first three months of the pandemic, I remained within a 5-mile radius of my friary, reaching that distance away only when I went running by myself.

Like millions of other people who were not categorized as frontline or essential workers, I became unwittingly cloistered, working and socializing remotely from home through Zoom and other technologies. I taught all my courses online, visited with family over Zoom, participated in "virtual happy hours" with friends and delivered dozens of lectures or workshops from the same chair in front of my computer.

Last spring, after being fully vaccinated, I boarded a plane for the first time in a year to visit my family in New York. I felt a sense of hope that perhaps the light at the end of the tunnel was in sight. But then a year of rising anti-vaccination sentiment, Delta and then Omicron waves of infections and roller-coaster-like mask mandate instructions and in-person gathering guidelines dimmed the brightness of what we had hoped could be a "new normal."

But here we are today, and something does feel different. While I am still occasionally meeting or presenting virtually, most

speaking engagements are taking place in person and with minimal or no social distancing in venues. Masking in some settings is still common, but decreasingly consistent. Larger gatherings of people are more commonplace.

For example, I just returned home from the [Los Angeles Religious Education Congress](#), which ordinarily is one of the largest Catholic gatherings in the United States with tens of thousands of participants assembled annually at the Anaheim Convention Center. While in-person attendance this year was only several thousand, which was noticeably lighter than usual, it was a joy to be with so many people in the convention rooms and exhibit hall to pray, learn and socialize. Everyone I spoke with was excited to be back and looked forward to next year's gathering, hoping that it would return to its typical size as the pandemic continued to ease up.

Experiences in recent weeks that in many ways resembled those of pre-pandemic times have me thinking about what it means to live in another "new normal," one that I pray may usher in a safer and less-stressful time for all. Adjusting to this return of regular in-person activities and more-frequent travel has given me reason to step back and reflect on what is needed in order to cope better with the world as it changes. Here are some of the things I have been thinking about.

Patience. While Thomas

Aquinas [argues](#) that the virtue of patience is not technically the "greatest" of the virtues, in the age of pandemic — and this liminal period of pandemic-toward-endemic — patience may be the most important virtue. People are tired, worn down, frightened and approaching reentry into social and public life with understandable trepidation. The hardship and suffering that this pandemic

has wrought does not justify treating other people with disrespect, but the circumstances can help explain why so many people are less tolerant and exercise less restraint on personal bad behavior.

We need to consciously remember to be patient with others and ourselves as we continue to adjust to changing circumstances. As a frequent traveler before the pandemic, I believe I cultivated a practice of forbearance and patience that served me well in the course of the many small and large inconveniences and frustrations that come with being so itinerant. However, as I've eased back into traveling more often again, I have noticed ways that I feel more easily irritable and annoyed. What was once second nature is now a virtue in need of practice and cultivation.

Working on humility means owning my limitations and acknowledging the impacts of the last two years of challenge, loss and suffering.

Humility. I need to recognize that this pandemic has and continues to exert a noticeable toll on me as it does on so many others. It is OK to do less, to take one's time, to recognize that just as it was not easy to stop the whole world in March 2020, it is not easy to restart it now. Working on humility means owning my limitations and acknowledging the impacts of the last two years of challenge, loss and suffering, while also accepting that there are long-term consequences that will manifest in various ways.

Empathy. In many ways, this characteristic flows from both patience and humility. I believe that a lot of the disrespectful behavior we have been witnessing in public arises in part from a lack of empathy. Everyone is dealing with these challenging

times differently. We have to remember that we may not know others' burdens, sorrows or suffering, and so we should treat everybody with love and understanding. Something as simple as remembering that others are also going through hardships can make a major difference.

Trust. This pandemic has made even the most trusting person suspicious of others, if only as potential vectors of COVID-19. This skepticism has combined with the conspiracy theories and nonsense of the disinformation age, resulting in widespread distrust of others in general and public authorities in particular. But in order for us to move toward a better way of living and being in the world, we need to build back our sense of trust.

Flexibility. If there's one thing that the pandemic has taught me, it is that I need to be more flexible. The luxury of sure plans and inflexible schedules is a thing of the past (if they ever existed). One thing that appears over again in the gospels is Jesus's ability to respond to whatever and whoever is before him with grace and hospitality, including during unpredictably stressful times such as when thousands needed to be fed (Matt 14:13-21, Lk 9:12-17). How are we adjusting to changing circumstances?

These virtues and characteristics are not a panacea for all that we continue to face during these challenging times, but they may help us to navigate the uncertain road ahead in a manner reflecting our shared Christian vocation.



Daniel P. Horan

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Behind the frontlines of the Vatican's Ukraine-Russia strategy

24 March 2022

by [Christopher White](#)

[Vatican
World](#)



Pope Francis walks near a flag with the national colors of Ukraine during his general audience in the Paul VI hall at the Vatican March 16. (CNS/Vatican Media)

ROME — For four weeks, the Vatican [has offered](#) to serve as a mediator between Russia and Ukraine, and for four weeks, such overtures have been ignored by Russia. As Russia's war against Ukraine rages on, Pope Francis has incrementally escalated his

rhetoric against the invasion, condemning it as an "unacceptable armed aggression," while refusing to directly name President Vladimir Putin or Russia as the aggressors.

The diplomatic tightrope has been [defended](#) as consistent with longstanding Vatican neutrality, necessary for protecting Catholics in both Ukraine and Russia and as an effort to preserve any possible role the Holy See could play in brokering a peace deal.

Others, [including those](#) generally sympathetic to Francis, have criticized the approach as a failure to use the pope's far-reaching megaphone to directly condemn Putin and prevent further aggressions, too cautious in an effort to advance ecumenical relations with the Russian Orthodox Church. Critics have also expressed [skepticism](#) of the possibility of the Vatican actually being able to serve a role in negotiating a ceasefire.

The Vatican's diplomatic corps is the oldest in the world, with a reputation for notoriously discreet and calculated approaches to geopolitical engagement.

Francis now faces one of the greatest international challenges of his nearly decadelong papacy, and the tensions over the Vatican's approach to Ukraine and Russia reveal the complex web of intra-ecclesial politics and influence of the global cast of characters who craft and compose the Holy See's role in the world stage.

As religion meets realpolitik, at stake is the Catholic church's hopes for greater unity with other Christian confessions, a desire to protect the identity of local Catholic congregations and the tremendous challenge of overcoming long-held Russian suspicions of Roman Catholicism.

Vatican-Russian relations

To understand the current moment, according to Victor Gaetan, author of [God's Diplomats: Pope Francis, Vatican Diplomacy, and America's Armageddon](#), one must return to the papacy of Pope Benedict XVI.



Victor Gaetan (CNS/Erin Scott)

Benedict, elected in 2005, and Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill, elected in 2009, are both respected theologians of their own traditions and both saw eye-to-eye on the need to fight against the rising tides of moral relativism in the West.

Soon thereafter, in 2010, the Vatican and Russia exchanged ambassadors with full diplomatic recognition, for the first time in nearly a century.

"This is the period when the relationship between the Holy See and Russia, and the Holy See and Kirill, began blossoming," Gaetan told NCR.

That relationship would help pave the way for an eventual in-person meeting in Cuba between Pope Francis and Kirill [in 2016](#), the first-ever meeting of a Roman Catholic pontiff and the Russian Orthodox patriarch.

During this time from 2009 to 2012, Gaetan noted, a Lithuanian-born Vatican diplomat,

then-Msgr. Visvaldas Kulbokas, was stationed at the Vatican embassy in Moscow, providing him a front-row seat to the complicated realities of Russia-Vatican relations.

From 2012 to 2020, Kulbokas worked at the Vatican's Secretariat of State, where he served as the translator for meetings between the pope and Putin, and, according to Gaetan, was part of the "small team" that prepared the highly sensitive meeting between Francis and Kirill in 2016, where he would again serve as translator.



Then-Msgr. Visvaldas Kulbokas, center, serves as translator as Pope Francis and Russian President Vladimir Putin exchange gifts during a private audience at the Vatican July 4, 2019. (CNS/Paul Haring)

In June 2021, Kulbokas was given a new assignment: to serve as the Vatican's ambassador in Ukraine — a country of about 44 million, with about 5 million Catholics.

According to Gaetan, the vibrant Catholic community, mostly in western Ukraine, had both a tense relationship with its Orthodox neighbors in the east, and was eager for closer relations with the West and the European Union, especially following Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014.

It fell to Kulbokas to navigate those divides.

A religious cold war?

Tamara Grdzeldze, who served as Georgia's Vatican ambassador from 2014 to 2018, told NCR that when she arrived in Rome to assume her duties, it was shortly after the Crimea annexation.

Drawing on her own experience of Russia's military attack on Georgia in 2008, she cautioned both her fellow ambassadors and Vatican officials to wake up to the threat of Russia. At one event, she recalls specifically speaking to Ukrainians and warning "what they did in 2008 in Georgia, it will be the same for you if the West fails to recognize it properly."

[Ulla Gudmundson](#), Sweden's Vatican ambassador from 2008 to 2013, told NCR she recalled Baltic representatives to the Vatican being upset when the Holy See would refer to conflict between Ukrainians and Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine as a "civil war."



Ulla Gudmundson
([ullagudmundson.se/Charlotta Smeds](http://ullagudmundson.se/Charlotta_Smeds))

"This was falsifying reality to them," Gudmundson said.

In 2021, Italian Cardinal Secretary of State Pietro Parolin [traveled](#) to Vilnius, Lithuania, for the primary purpose of ordaining Kulbokas as archbishop. Ukraine is a country, Parolin [said](#) at the ordination Mass,

that "experiences conflicts difficult to fully overcome."

Ukraine's eastern-rite Catholics are led by Major Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk, who has known Francis since Shevchuk was posted in Buenos Aires, Argentina, [in 2009](#) as the head of the diaspora community of Ukrainian Greek Catholics.

Since his 2011 election as head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, Shevchuk has not been shy about his concerns about Russia, [repeatedly warning](#) that Russia sought a return to an era of Soviet-style rule, which would have grave implications for the country and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church.

During this time, the Vatican, according to Gaetan, relied on Kulbokas to help further relations with the Orthodox in order to prevent a "religious cold war."

Yet [George Demacopoulos](#), co-director of the [Orthodox Christian Studies Center](#) at Fordham University, told NCR he questioned the sincerity of the Russian Orthodox Church's interest in ecumenical relations.

"Kirill positioned the Russian Orthodox Church as the sole defender of traditional values around the world," he said. "What hope is there for ecumenical relations if with every passing word, you're suggesting that there is no value in the West and that anyone who believes in liberal democracy, protection of minority rights and pluralistic societies are by definition satanic?"

"That's not going to win you any ecumenical friends," he said.



Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk of Kyiv-Halych, head of the Eastern-rite Ukrainian Catholic Church, is pictured during a meeting with Ukrainian refugees in Lviv, Ukraine, March 10. He was joined in the visit by Cardinal Konrad Krajewski, the papal almoner. (CNS/Courtesy of Ukrainian Catholic Church)

Beyond Francis' desire for reconciliation between the two churches, Demacopoulos said that in his estimation, one potential reason that the Vatican and the Russian Orthodox Church, which is the largest of the Eastern Orthodox churches, had found an alliance is over certain culture war fights, particularly when it comes to opposition to gay marriage and women's ordination. "The Kremlin's alliance with Kirill has been critical in instrumentalizing selective Christian principles for political gain," he said. "I can imagine that one of the reasons the Vatican, up until Putin really showed his hand, really championed some of the rhetoric that he [Kirill] uses is precisely because they themselves are aligned with some of the traditional values."

Vatican neutrality

In Rome, the tensions, sometimes real and other times perceived, between the need for unity among religious believers and preserving strong identities among local churches have played out through two

Vatican offices beyond the Vatican's Secretariat of State: the Congregation for Oriental Churches, headed by Argentine-born Cardinal Leonardo Sandri, and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, led by Swiss-born Cardinal Kurt Koch.

"You could say they offer two different perspectives of the same lands," said Gaetan.



Cardinal Leonardo Sandri, prefect of the Congregation for Eastern Churches, prays for peace in Ukraine during a prayer service at the Ukrainian Catholic Cathedral of Sts. Sergius and Bacchus in Rome March 2. (CNS/Ukrainian Catholic Excharate of Italy/Rostyslav Hadada)

Koch has prioritized relations with the Russian Orthodox and was closely involved in the pope's 2016 meeting with Kirill. Just before the outbreak of the war, Koch and others were preparing for a [second meeting](#) between Francis and Kirill that was expected to take place this summer, a possibility all but now officially crushed by the war and Kirill's continued [defense](#) of it. When Francis, on March 16, [met via video conference](#) with Kirill and rejected his framing of the Russian invasion on religious grounds, it was Koch who was by his side.

Sandri, who is known to have close relations with Francis given their shared homeland, [convened](#) a major Vatican summit of Eastern church leaders in Rome on the eve of the war in February. In an audience with Francis at the end of the conference, the pope [acknowledged](#) the "threatening winds" of conflict that confronted both the countries and the local churches.

Metropolitan-Archbishop Borys Gudziak of the Ukrainian Catholic Archeparchy of Philadelphia [told NCR](#) in February that during that meeting with the pope, he directly discussed the need for the Holy See to speak forcefully about the threats to Ukraine.

Since the invasion, both Shevchuk and Kulbokas have remained in Kyiv, with Shevchuk [releasing](#) daily video messages calling for an end to Russian aggression and Kulbokas [celebrating](#) daily Mass in the nunciature's kitchen to avoid the shelling. During his March 20 Sunday Angelus, Francis [specifically praised](#) Kulbokas for remaining in Kyiv and being present with those suffering from war.



Archbishop Visvaldas Kulbokas, apostolic nuncio to Ukraine, elevates the Eucharist in the kitchen at the apostolic nunciature in Kyiv, Ukraine, in this recent photo. During the war, Archbishop Kulbokas has been celebrating Mass

in the kitchen because it's a well-protected area. (CNS/Courtesy of Archbishop Visvaldas Kulbokas)

While Kulbokas has been cautious and limited in his public statements, in a recent interview with the Catholic news site Crux, he defended the Holy See's approach in this current crisis.

"When we hear the Holy Father talking about war, there is no neutrality: He condemns it with the strongest wording, underscoring that every war is an invention of the devil, is a satanic work," Kulbokas said.

Former ambassador Gudmundson, however, told NCR that "when human rights, respect for human lives, etc. are being violated by one party, it becomes increasingly difficult not to name the aggressor," but she added, "I suppose it's not the end of the world if the pope does not mention Russia as the aggressor, if there is a tiny chance that he can somehow work on Kirill."



Tamar Grdzeldize (Wikimedia Commons/Centro Televisivo Vaticano)

Former ambassador Grdzeldize said that she, too, "appreciated the Vatican's approach of never mentioning particular parties," but added that this stance allows the party or

parties at fault to manipulate the Vatican's position.

"Hidden negotiations don't work with Russia. The underlying policy of their diplomacy is lying," she cautioned. "The Vatican's diplomacy works with civilized countries, but not with Putin. They should talk with and to Russia directly and name things, but they don't."

The pope as peacemaker?

Both Francis and Parolin have held out hope that the Vatican's neutrality will allow it to ultimately save more lives and to be available to serve a role as peacemaker if possible. Ukrainian President Vladimir Zelensky has [expressed](#) openness to that idea in the past, but Russia has [not indicated](#) any interest.

Grdzeldze, who is also an Orthodox theologian and served for 13 years at the World Council of Churches in Geneva, said. "Kirill is 100% behind Putin's approach."

Fellow Orthodox theologian Demacopoulos concurred.

"The pope is genuinely trying to do the right thing and reach out to a church that he respects and to advocate for peace," he said, "while the institutional Russian Orthodox Church is simply taking advantage of him for their own opportunistic, Kremlin-narrative purposes."



Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, head

of external relations for the Russian Orthodox Church, participate in a video meeting with Pope Francis and Swiss Cardinal Kurt Koch, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, March 16. (CNS/Courtesy of Russian Orthodox Church)

"My own take is to name the aggressor," he said. "If you really are going to be the advocate of the oppressed, then it could be constructive to name the oppressor."

But in a [recent interview](#) in the British Catholic journal *The Tablet*, the former Vatican nuncio to Ukraine, Archbishop Claudio Gugerotti, insisted, "President Putin listens to the pope."

In 1978, the Vatican intervened in a peace negotiation between Argentina and Chile in a conflict over the Beagle Channel, successfully staving off an armed conflict, in part because the Vatican held a unique ability to influence the two deeply Catholic South American countries.

[Michael Kimmage](#), who served on the policy planning staff at the U.S. State Department from 2014 to 2016, where he was responsible for the Russia and Ukraine portfolio, said in his view it was "absolutely not possible" for the Vatican to broker a peace deal in the current war.



Michael Kimmage (Wilson Center)

There is an "old fashion narrative," Kimmage told NCR, that the Catholic Church is a "traditional enemy" of Russia. This is a "long-standing Russian frame," he said, that makes the geopolitics of the moment very difficult for the Holy See to navigate.

His assessment has been shared by a number of [other leading](#) regional experts who warn that Putin's grip on the Russian Orthodox church severely limits any role the Vatican can play.

Instead, Kimmage, who is the chair of the history department at the Catholic University of America, said that the Holy See's role should be "speaking to the conscience of other European leaders."

In recent weeks, the pope has [sent](#) two cardinal emissaries to Ukraine to express his closeness to those fleeing violence and has repeatedly spoken by phone with Ukraine's president and Catholic leaders. At the same time, both Zelensky and the mayor of Kyiv [have appealed](#) directly to Francis, asking him to visit the Ukrainian capital, saying his physical presence in the war-torn country may be one of its last opportunities for bringing about peace.

For Kimmage, the church's "moral stewardship" and vast network are needed in responding to the humanitarian crises, which, he said, "are legion and still to come" and to "help knit together Ukrainian society" after the war.

When that time will come — and what Francis and the Vatican will say or do in between then — remains to be seen.



[Christopher White](#)

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Black Catholics survey prompts need for prioritizing racial justice

24 March 2022

by [NCR Editorial Staff](#)

[Justice](#)



A family attends Mass at St. Barbara Catholic Church in Philadelphia Feb. 6. (CNS/Chaz Muth)

The report on "Black Catholics in America," released on March 15 by the [Pew Research](#)

[Center](#), is a wealth of information, providing insights into a community of more than 3 million members of the U.S. church.

Among the findings: Wide majorities of Black Catholics oppose sexism and discrimination against women (75%), are accepting of homosexuality (78%) and say immigrants strengthen society (86%).

Perhaps not surprisingly, more than three-quarters of Black Catholics say that opposition to racism is essential to being a Christian for them. And they're right: Anti-racism is essential to our Catholic faith, as Jesus' witness and teachings affirm the dignity and equality of all human beings.

So why aren't our churches talking more about racial justice?

According to the survey data, gathered in 2019-20, only two in five Black Catholics had heard a homily, lecture or group discussion at church about race relations or racial inequity in the past year. Something seen as essential to the faith was rarely mentioned.

Should we be surprised, then, that nearly half of the Black respondents who were raised Catholic no longer identify as such?

As NCR contributor Tia Noelle Pratt [wrote in her reflection](#) on the survey, "these shocking, but not surprising, numbers will add up to losing Black Catholics if we don't see our church fighting with, and for, us for racial equality."

The threat is even greater among younger Black Catholics, whose generation is already moving away from organized religion. Pew's 2021 broader study on "[Faith Among Black Americans](#)" found that nearly half of Black young adults in Gen Z seldom or never attend religious services.

What's worse is that even fewer non-Black Catholics are hearing about racism from the church. Only 29% of Hispanic Catholics and 18% of white Catholics had heard homilies or discussions about race at their parish, according to Pew.

This is especially troubling, given that other [surveys](#) have found that white Christians — including Catholics — are consistently more likely than religiously unaffiliated whites to deny the existence of structural racism. Not to mention that more than half of white Catholic voters supported Donald Trump, in spite of, or sadly perhaps because of, his racist rhetoric.

We agree with Pratt: "Concrete action must be taken now." The church must do more to proclaim its message of racial justice, in homilies and in statements from bishops and the bishops' conference. The church also must do more to prioritize racism among other social justice issues. Perhaps the bishops could actually implement "[Open Wide Our Hearts](#)," their pastoral letter against racism.

We should not address racism because a survey of Black Catholics has identified it as important, although certainly Black Catholics' voices matter on this issue. The church must address racism — in our church, in our communities and in our country — because our faith compels us to.

The call of a simple Lent: Unclutter your spiritual house

24 March 2022

by Sr. Julie A. Ferraro

Spirituality



That Lent falls during the spring is no coincidence.

This phrase leads off the description of a mini-retreat I gave in the days following Ash Wednesday called "Simplify Your (Spiritual) Life."

It might prove a bone of contention for some — the scheduling of this sacred season — with the Pagan observance of *Ostara* or *Eostar* celebrating the spring equinox.

For my purposes, though, the coincidence occurs with the practice of spring cleaning.

Julie Ferraro gives a retreat at Sophia Spirituality Center in Atchison, Kansas, March 4. (Suzanne Fitzmaurice)

In those climes with harsh winters, spring brings the chance to throw open the windows and let in much needed fresh air. Closets are relieved of clothes designed to provide warmth, in favor of lighter-weight attire. Bags and boxes are filled with items no longer needed — to be sent to a thrift store or set out for a Saturday morning garage sale.

The same need exists for the soul.

Each Lent brings with it an opportunity to reassess our faith. The challenges of the prior months — especially after so many months when, almost from day to day, it was impossible to tell if masks would be required, hospitals would be overrun with those suffering from COVID-19 variants, churches would be open or travel permitted — need to be reviewed, the impact measured and integrated.

Old concepts may need to be discarded, in light of the turmoil faced. The question asked of God since the first mention of COVID-19 on the news — "Why?" — still may have no answer. How can faith continue to grow and flourish when, at almost every turn, the future seems so uncertain?

Above and beyond COVID-19, family, work and other considerations can shake faith to the core. Lent is the perfect time to let in some fresh air, blow away the spiritual cobwebs of inaction and laxity, and renew the soul.

As with a physical spring cleaning, necessitating the need to get rid of excess "stuff," the soul also must be freed of ideas that weigh down faith.

I like to quote the late comedian George Carlin, whose [stand-up routine](#) about "stuff" still makes me laugh at its innate truth. A

house, he explains, is just a place for us to keep our stuff. As we get more stuff, we need to buy a bigger house, so we have a place to put our stuff.

On a physical level, moving to a larger house is feasible (though cluttering it with a lot of stuff not advisable). For the soul, the more practical option is to spend Lent in quiet, listening to that gentle voice that reaffirms what we believe, so we can move past outmoded ideas and unclutter our faith.

This is where my beef with some theologians enters the picture. Through my years as a journalist, I've known or interviewed quite a few: Benedictine, Franciscan, Dominican, secular. The need to pick apart the concept of God, and try to explain it using "50-cent words" that ordinary folk need a dictionary to understand, is — in my estimation — rather pointless.

That kind of theology gives in to a very human weakness: the need to control knowledge and explain everything, from the first shaft of light and the "Big Bang theory" to what happens after death.

Fact is: Each human being is on this earth for a limited amount of time. The goal for each life is to use our gifts and do the best we can to share God's love with one another.

All the rest is like trunks of old clothes discovered in the attic: nice to look at, but basically useless.

Theology on a grand scale attempts to "humanize" God, to create a relatable being with qualities similar to our own, but superior, infinite.

The very idea of God belies such a viewpoint. It is so difficult for a human brain, for instance, to wrap itself around the

notion that, for God, all time is but a moment. Authors, filmmakers and other creative sorts have tried to imagine such a scenario — often uplifting, humorous or dramatic — but, essentially, impossible to conceive.

That's why, as we try to simplify our spiritual lives this Lent, we should let go of heavy theological ideology and focus on the divine love that permeates all creation, allowing the soul to reflect that love, both in how we treat this planet on which we reside — speaking out in objection to the violation of natural resources — and how we interact with other human beings.

We can look past the nitpicking details and be vessels of compassion, caring and generosity, regardless of who we meet, where we are, or what we're doing.

Unfettered from complex aspects of theology, the soul will be free to soar, free to listen, free to love — the simplest, and most meaningful, expression of faith that will shine like a beacon for others to take to heart and bolster their own faith journey.



Julie A. Ferraro

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Pope Francis reforms the Vatican Curia. Here's hoping he's not done.

24 March, 2022

by [Thomas Reese](#), [Religion News Service](#)

[Accountability](#) [Vatican](#)



Jesuit Father Gianfranco Ghirlanda, a canon lawyer and former rector of Rome's Pontifical Gregorian University, speaks at a news conference to present Pope Francis' document, "Praedicate Evangelium" ("Preach the Gospel"), for the reform of the Roman Curia, during a news conference at the Vatican March 21, 2022. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

It takes nine months for a woman to produce a baby. It took nine years for the Vatican to birth a new document reforming the Roman Curia.

Perhaps the Vatican would act more quickly if there were more women working there.

The [new plan](#), a 54-page document issued Saturday (March 19), is titled "[Praedicate Evangelium](#)" (Preach the Gospel). It

replaces "[Pastor Bonus](#)" (Good Pastor), promulgated by St. John Paul II in 1988.

It consolidates several offices, opens major roles to laity and urges greater decentralization. "The Roman Curia," the document states, "does not stand between the pope and the bishops, but rather places itself at the service of both in ways that are proper to the nature of each."

The Vatican bureaucracy has always had a reputation for moving at a glacial pace because of bureaucratic inertia and a general opposition to change. Every Vatican bureaucrat has traditionally opposed reform, or any reduction in his responsibilities and power, citing his familiarity with the issues and the likelihood that change will cause catastrophic problems.

Curial reform is also slow because the Vatican still foolishly thinks that its organizational plan should be permanent, written in stone for the ages, rather than written in pencil so that it can be modified whenever necessary.

On the contrary, Curia reform should be seen as an incremental process that happens frequently, not a revolutionary event that happens rarely.

In fact, incremental changes have been introduced in the Curia since "Pastor Bonus" in 1988, occasioned by financial and clerical sex abuse scandals. The Congregation for Doctrine of the Faith took on the horrendous task of dealing with the latter, while Pope Benedict XVI agreed to align the Vatican bank with Moneyval's anti-money laundering rules and the Supervisory and Financial Information Authority (ASIF) was created to prevent and counter money laundering.

A new Secretariat for the Economy was also created in 2010 to supervise Vatican finances and strengthen under Pope Francis, who also ordered the Secretariat of State to give up control of its investments to APSA, the Vatican's sovereign wealth manager, two years ago.

During his papacy, Francis has also merged offices. The Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development combined four pontifical councils: Justice and Peace, Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, Pastoral Assistance to Health Care Workers and Cor Unum.

More mergers are in the latest reform, for instance, the merging of the Council for Promoting the New Evangelization with the Congregation for Evangelization of Peoples. Francis symbolically shows the importance of this combined entity by heading it himself.

One office in the new entity will continue the congregation's traditional focus on missionary territories through supervision, financial support and the appointment of bishops. But Francis wants the other office to promote evangelization throughout the world, since many traditionally Catholic countries have lost membership to the point where they look like missionary territories.

The office is to reflect on "the history of evangelization and mission, especially in their relations with the political, social and cultural events that have marked and conditioned the preaching of the Gospel." It will also help local churches in the "process of inculturating the Good News of Jesus Christ in different cultures and ethnic groups, and helping their evangelization, with particular attention to expressions of popular piety."

I doubt that the missions of these two offices, one administrative and the other creative, will fit easily together. But if the creative office can tap into the money traditionally controlled by the old congregation, it might be able to do something.

The new document also places the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors within the Congregation for Doctrine of the Faith, which deals with abusive clergy. Some survivors and their supporters fear this will muzzle the commission, but others think its placement will give it more responsibility and power.

It's not uncommon for governments and organizations to create new offices that are later merged with older departments. New entities are created to respond to issues about which a leader has special concern. As time goes on and leaders change, the need for the independent agency is questioned. That is what is happening in the Vatican.

On the other hand, the creation of the new Dicastery for the Service of Charity reflects Francis' concern for the poor.

The most visible change is that Vatican offices will no longer be called congregations or councils but will be called "dicasteries," a word going back to the ancient Greeks. The unwillingness of the Vatican to use modern terminology, like "department" or "office," reflects its insistence that the Vatican is unique and cannot learn from modern organizations.

In theory, all the dicasteries will be equal, but as in the novel "Animal Farm," some will be more equal than others. The Vatican is still a royal court where whoever has the ear of the pope will rise to the top. Under Paul VI, the Secretariat of State took charge of coordinating offices, and it still holds

sway today. Under John Paul, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith was the top dog when it came to documents. Today, Francis favors the dicasteries for evangelization and human development.

Potentially the biggest change in "Praedicate Evangelium" is its opening of top positions in the Vatican to laypeople. This could have monumental impact if truly implemented. Theoretically, the secretary of state, the highest official after the pope, could be a laywoman. A woman theologian could be prefect of the Dicastery for Doctrine of the Faith. This will upset those who believe that only the ordained can exercise the power of governance in the church.

There are other problems, however, in employing laity in the Vatican.

Having laypeople in top jobs will not magically change the church for the better. Laypeople bring their own values and baggage to their jobs. As parishioners know, lay ministers can be just as clerical and authoritarian as priests.

The second issue is money. How is the Vatican going to pay for qualified lay specialists and executives?

I once complimented a journalist by telling him that if I were pope, I would put him in charge of the press office. He laughed and said, "They can't afford me."

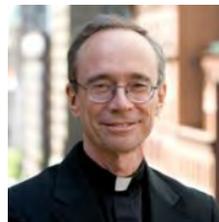
While low-level Vatican employees are well compensated, the church cannot compete with top salaries outside the Vatican, especially in areas like finance. Even theologians can get better pay at a university. Priests and members of religious orders are simply cheaper than lay employees. If the Vatican is unwilling to pay competitive salaries, the quality of its staff will continue to suffer.

Underlying all of these changes are the values Francis has been preaching since the beginning of his papacy: his desire for a more inclusive and listening church that is missionary in outlook.

Francis wants a Curia that listens to and serves the whole church in its mission of evangelization and service to the poor. He believes that authority should be more decentralized in the church, which means that bishops' conferences should be taken seriously. If these values become inculturated in the Curia, then his reform will be a success.

"Praedicate Evangelium" is a step forward, then, but much remains to be done. The Vatican needs a department of justice to investigate financial crimes and crimes against persons. It needs a clearer separation of legislative, executive and judicial powers. It needs clearer procedures for consultation and transparency.

Francis has tried to reform the culture and organization of the Vatican, but like the church, it should be "semper reformanda" — always reforming.



Thomas Reese

Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese's column for Religion News Service, "Signs of the Times," appears regularly at National Catholic Reporter.

Ukraine shows we must reject the possibility that war can be just

25 March, 2022

by [Marie Dennis](#)



People pray for peace in Ukraine in front of the replica of the original statue of Our Lady of Fatima in the Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin in Lviv, Ukraine, March 18, amid Russia's invasion of the country. (CNS/Reuters/Pavlo Palamarchuk)

Slowly emerging from the heartbreak of death, destruction and massive displacement caused by Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine are the inspiring demonstration of diverse nonviolent strategies that are upending the logic of war, and the recognition that if we are to avoid World War III, de-escalation, diplomacy and peace-building are the only route forward.

Agreement is widespread that the stories of creative, active nonviolence in Ukraine and Russia must be told. They are stories about dogged diplomacy, civil resistance, elements of civilian-based defense, symbolic action, non-cooperation, winning over enemy

combatants, solidarity and accompaniment, music and art, acts of kindness and welcome, the use of digital tools to document war crimes and more.

They are about nonviolence — a way of life and a spectrum of realistic, effective strategies for preventing or interrupting violence, for protecting human life and the planet, for promoting a more just and peaceful world.



A girl holds artwork showing Pope Francis holding a peace flag as the pope leads the Angelus from the window of his studio overlooking St. Peter's Square at the Vatican March 13. (CNS/Paul Haring)

This is what nonviolence researcher Maria Stephan calls "a moment of profound moral clarity." The war in Ukraine is not more important than the other wars destroying human lives and the Earth, but, as the British Catholic magazine *The Tablet* [editorialized](#) on March 19, it is "history-making, game-changing, paradigm-shifting."

The perennial debate on just war criteria continues, but given the ongoing carnage and potentially catastrophic consequences, Pope Francis' assertion that "[there is no such thing as a just war](#)" rings true.

The question is not *whether* to defend against a brutal military invasion, but *how*. The nonviolent strategies being used by Ukrainians in many different locations are vitally important and illustrate powerful and [effective](#) ways to defend their communities and to break the cycles of violence. Their courageous actions point to a future when nonviolence will be the universal ethic that humans, for the sake of survival, have finally embraced.

To move in that direction, we know what we need to do. We know that we need a paradigm shift. We have been living in a context of war and preparations for war, assuming that militarized security was the only way to survive. We in the U.S. have shaped our society, and especially our economy, around that belief.

The war in Ukraine is hyper-visible and, by its too-possible link to nuclear weapons and its threat to nuclear power plants, it is über-dangerous, an existential threat to all life and our common home, planet Earth. But the unquenchable, heartbreaking violence unleashed by war in Yemen, Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Gaza, Colombia demands the same response.



Signs painted in the colors of the Ukraine flag call for peace outside the Russian Embassy in Berlin March 4. (NCR photo/Teresa Malcolm)

We know what we need to do. We need to stop accepting perpetual war and unending layers of violence as normal. Racism, imperialism, militarism, nationalism, the theft of resources to prepare for war, economies dependent on and fortunes made from trade in weapons, cultural violence, economic violence, extremes of wealth and poverty, gender-related violence all create fertile soil in which violent conflict and war percolate and spread.

We know what we need to do. We need to reject the possibility that war can be just. Period.

We know what we need to do. We need to stop dismissing nonviolence as naive, simplistic, disengaged or ineffective and to invest in a radical reset of our values, our priorities, our relationships with each other and with the planet. We need to start right now to build a new nonviolent paradigm that replaces the scarcity model and "survival of the fittest" with values that draw on the wisdom and experience of cultures and traditions committed to respect, wholeness, connectedness, mutual dependence, reciprocity, justice and life, and upon which we need to rebuild the systems and structures of our societies.

Such a complete shift may take decades: of listening to the stories and understanding the experience of the most marginalized and neglected communities; of transformative education, life-skills development and values formation; of redesigning and rebuilding political, economic, financial, social, cultural, environmental systems so that they promote socioeconomic justice, human dignity, whole Earth healing and, therefore, peace.

Every step toward a solution in Ukraine must lead toward the kind of paradigm shift that we know we have to make if we plan to

survive for much longer on this planet. For example:

- Resources should be made available for Ukraine (the government and civil society, including the churches) to engage the conflict using nonviolent strategies in a [just peace framework](#) that focuses on breaking the cycles of violence.
- Beyond an immediate cease-fire and resolution to the crisis in Ukraine, [diplomacy should pursue](#) a cooperative, demilitarized, denuclearized security relationship between Russia and the West, [a common security and economic zone](#) that brings Russia together with Ukraine as partners in a larger zone of peace and includes an urgent commitment to reduce carbon emissions and transition away from fossil fuels.
- The long-stalled reform of the United Nations, particularly the P-5 veto power in the [Security Council](#), should proceed if the U.N. is to fulfill its purpose of maintaining peace and security.
- Reinforcing the international rules-based system is crucial for holding Russia to account for violating international law in Ukraine. U.S. violations of international law and failure to join treaties that ban land mines, cluster bombs and, most recently, nuclear weapons, as well as U.S. repudiation of other major arms control treaties (the Iran nuclear deal, the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and the Open Skies Treaty) decidedly undermine international law.



A young woman holds a sign that reads "We are against war" during a protest in Moscow Feb. 27, after Russia attacked Ukraine. (CNS/Reuters/Evgenia Novozhenina)

- Sanctions can be effective, ethical, nonviolent tools for promoting peace; sanctions can also be unethical and violent. Catholic social teaching requires that sanctions "be used with great discernment and must be subjected to strict legal and ethical criteria." Sanctions on Russia [must be restructured to include](#) clear incentives for positive action and to avoid lasting harm to the Russian populace.
- Ukrainians fleeing the war, Russians fleeing repression and all refugees from violence and war must be treated with equal respect, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, religion.

Pope Francis, following Jesus, has been setting the stage for full-on Catholic engagement in this urgent paradigm shift. His visionary 2015 encyclical, "*Laudato Si'*, on Care for Our Common Home," his clarion call for ecological conversion and for a "new post-pandemic normal" point clearly in this direction.

In the 2020 encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, he said: "Every war leaves our world worse than it was before. War is a failure of politics and of humanity, a shameful capitulation, a stinging defeat before the forces of evil."

And to an [international congress of educators](#) on March 18, he said: "A war is always — always! — the defeat of humanity, always. ... There is no such thing as a just war: They do not exist!"



Marie Dennis

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Raise a toast to the 'institutional church'

25 March 2022

by [Michael Sean Winters](#)



A Ukrainian girl from Kharkiv, Ukraine, looks out a train window bound for Warsaw, Poland, March 23 with people fleeing Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine. (CNS photo/Hannah McKay, Reuters)

It is not uncommon that someone here at NCR complains about the "institutional church," most recently Jim Purcell, a member of the NCR Board and a dear friend. Discussing the board's recent "synodal listening session," he [wrote](#): "Whether or not the institutional church makes the called-for changes, participants are deeply committed to continue a journey of faith that is Gospel-oriented." I do not think a month goes by that someone does not refer in a pejorative way to the "institutional church." I have even done it myself.

Today, however, it is time to raise a toast to the institutional church. The outpouring of support for the Ukrainian refugees fleeing the war has been remarkable in every way, but none more so than in the absence of refugee camps. The TV images do not show the rows of tents we have come to expect near war zones. As Cardinal Sean O'Malley of Boston said in his [weekly blog](#), "The beautiful thing is that, unlike some other situations where refugees end up in camps, the Polish people are taking Ukrainian refugees into their homes. That's an extraordinary thing to see."

Some of this is spontaneous, or is being organized by companies that span the usually peaceful border between the two countries, as [Politico](#) detailed recently.

Much of the mobilization to aid the refugees is being organized through the very institutional Catholic Church of Poland. As of March 15, according to the [Polish Conference of Major Superiors of Women](#), 18,000 refugees are receiving aid at 924 convents across the country. Some of their ministries are helping children with special needs.

Chris Herlinger, my colleague at NCR's Global Sisters Report, went to Poland

and [wrote](#) about some ways the institutions of the church are helping the Ukrainian refugees. One of the people he interviewed was Jesuit Fr. Wojciech Mikulski, the director at the European Centre for Communications & Culture, or ECCC, in the Falenica neighborhood of Warsaw. The center usually hosts conferences and retreats but is now engaged in helping refugees. They recently hosted 40 deaf students fleeing the violence. The ECCC has a [webpage](#) where you can learn about their work helping refugees, see some pictures of them in the public rooms of the center and make a donation to help.

I met Mikulski some years ago because I help organize a seminar on Catholic social doctrine each September at the ECCC, although the last two years it was suspended due to the pandemic. I sent Herlinger's article to the theologians who have participated in the seminars, one of whom contacted Mikulski later that day to let him know that her community in Britain was prepared to receive some refugees and help coordinate their transportation. In the vast sea of human suffering, such efforts might seem small, but they don't seem small to the people who are being helped and sheltered.

There are a dozen ways my British theologian friend might have met a Polish Jesuit priest, but the way she did meet him was at a seminar funded by the [U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Aid to the Church in Central and Eastern Europe](#). Few journalists have been more critical of the bishops' conference at times than myself, but I have been involved with the work of this particular committee and they do wonderful work helping the churches in this part of the world get back on their feet after years of Soviet oppression and ongoing poverty. The fact that these networks were in place has allowed the

universal church to come to the aid of the refugees quickly and effectively.

There is a deeper level at which the phrase "institutional church" does not really work. The church is institutional because humans create institutions. What is more, the church is the body of Christ and, just so, if our great, distinctive belief in the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ is to continue in human history, we must necessarily incarnate our faith. In this life, Christ needs our hands to be his hands when he seeks to heal.

Today, in a remarkable way, those hands are Polish, Slovakian, Hungarian, Romanian and Moldovan hands. For many who are offering succor, the inspiration comes from a faith that has taught them the parable of the good Samaritan. For many, the means of expressing and incarnating solidarity are the structures and institutions of their Catholic, Jewish, Protestant and Orthodox faiths.

The wounds of humankind, too, are Jesus' wounds, and this is not a metaphor. As my great hero Msgr. Lorenzo Albacete said, if the wounds of suffering humanity are not truly the wounds of Christ, then there has been a disincarnation.

Will I and others criticize the "institutional church" in the future? Of course. As Purcell told me, "I have come to understand there are not four marks that characterize the church but rather eight: one and divided, holy and sinful, catholic and exclusionary, apostolic and unfaithful (to the apostolic tradition)."

That is another way of saying the church is human as well as divine. God never brings division, sinfulness, exclusion or infidelity. Only we do that.

We Catholics can, when needed, distinguish the "institutional church" from the church of

our hopes and dreams. Will not the latter church, the one to which we aspire, also be an institutional church? When the eschaton comes, and sacraments shall cease, then and only then will our church be purified of its human sinfulness. There is a reason we start Mass with the Confiteor.

In the meantime, and it is a very mean time in Ukraine right now, let's toast the institutional church and the heroic work it is doing to aid refugees.



Michael Sean Winters

Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.

Everyday annunciations: The art of listening to a God who never shuts up

25 March 2022

by Colleen Gibson

Spirituality



"The Annunciation" (1898) by Henry Ossawa Tanner (Philadelphia Museum of Art, www.philamuseum.org)

For years, I would buy a ticket to the Philadelphia Museum of Art for one thing and one thing only: "The Annunciation."

Ticket in hand, I would wind my way down the art-lined hallways of the museum to a gallery deep in the bowels of the American art wing. At times, it felt like I was making my way to the center of the earth, past presidential china and countless still life paintings, quilts and western landscapes, until I turned the corner into a gallery with raised ceilings and a few flat wooden benches.

And there it was: Henry Ossawa Tanner's "The Annunciation."

Sitting on the bench directly in front of the massive painting (over 6 feet tall and 7 feet wide), I would simply gaze on the glimmering canvas. On it, an adolescent girl in the humble dress of a peasant sits reservedly among the crumpled sheets of her bed. Clasping her hands, she looks at the beam of light before her. Her eyes reflect its glow, which illuminates the whole room with a gentle warmth. She has no halo, no shoes and, seemingly, no fear. This young Mary sits and looks intently. Her eyes are fixed on the light that we come to realize is

Gabriel. The moment is sacred and still, speaking volumes.

From my seat on the bench, I would scan every inch of the painting. *What, God, are you trying to say? What must she have felt, said, heard?* Instinctively my hands would come together like Mary's, my fingers intertwining with hers in prayer. *Were you scared or startled? Had you known all along there was something more meant for you? Was Gabriel's voice familiar like one you had heard a thousand times before? The light and its glow, a gentle reminder of the God who filled every day of your young life?*

Shifting my focus from the light to Mary and back again, the minutes would fade into hours as my prayers filled the sanctuary of the gallery. Before I became a sister, this sacred space could hold the questions of "what if," and after I had entered into the process, there was a clandestine comfort in being hidden away in the cloister of culture the art museum provided. The what ifs continued and, in time, transformed. "What if *this* is what I'm being called to?" I would think as I looked at the shimmering canvas. The "this" was not just religious life but encounter with God. What if that call to encounter could be found in this moment? What if the annunciation was not a past occurrence or a beautiful work of art but a daily experience of living?

For, as comforting as that gallery was, I knew that the true annunciations of life took place out on the street level. There amidst the pressing demands of work and the noise of every conceivable need in the world, God was speaking to my heart. I just needed to stop long enough to let myself listen.

So often, that is the case. We rush from place to place, moment to moment, person to person, without pausing to recognize the light right in front of us. The temptation is to

assign meaning to our doing rather than our being. I need to help one more person, encounter one more thing, accomplish one more task before the day is complete ... I don't need to stop and listen. I already know what God is saying.

Or, perhaps consciously or unconsciously, we think : If I don't stop, I won't have to listen to what God might be trying to say. If I flood my day with news and noise, I can be concerned about that rather than truly bringing those things and my heart to prayer. Then when I pray, I will clasp my hands and eyes as well as my ears and heart, keeping the light at bay and holding on to control.

Unfortunately (or fortunately), that's not how annunciations work. God never shuts up and any crack can let the light in. Thinking of Mary poised on her messy bed I think of the image Beth Knobbe offers in her book *Finding My Voice* as she talks about not trying to hide anything from God. "God is like the girlfriend who stops by unexpectedly when my apartment is a mess," she writes. "Whether I am ready for company or not, she really doesn't mind." We don't need to make a perfect setting, Knobbe insists. God will come in anyway. "God is the one who comes over and sits on the bed, while I rush around picking up clothes ... she is more concerned about the conversation at hand than the dirty dishes in the sink."

This is the God who offers us everyday annunciations. Even if we are unresponsive or preoccupied, God continues the conversation at hand, be it through the people we encounter, the words we hear ourselves say, the nagging thoughts or feelings we return to, or the sense of unease that invites us to stop and sit for a little while.

From time to time as I sat before "The Annunciation," a tour group would make its way into the gallery. "Here we have one of the greatest American paintings ever," the tour guide would declare. Drawing my attention from the painting, the tour guide would motion toward a painting directly behind me: "The Gross Clinic" by Thomas Eakins.

Soon the tour group would surround me on my bench, their backs turned on the magical realism of "The Annunciation" to take in the gruesome testament to medical history and artistic realism the tour guide pointed out. Sitting with my hands folded, I wanted to shout: "Do you see what you're missing?!" — but I couldn't. Annunciations beg our attention on their own. Like shafts of light breaking into the gruesome reality of life, they invite us to something more. They invite us to recognize that, indeed, we are on holy ground, called and blessed, met by God in this very moment, messy as it may be.

With all that is going on in the world, it is the everyday annunciations that give us pause, to stop long enough to look intently and to say yes to the God who never stops speaking (or hoping) that we might open our hearts and our lives to listen and respond accordingly.



Colleen Gibson

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