

Articles Of Interest For

3 July 2022

Sunday, 26 June 2022

Richard Rohr's Daily Meditations

From the Center for Action and Contemplation



Week Twenty-Six: Judaism: Hasidic Mystics

A Spiritual Renewal

For this week's Daily Meditations, we share wisdom from Hasidism, a Jewish mystical tradition that emerged several hundred years ago in what is now Ukraine. Jewish scholar Arthur Green summarizes this movement's origin and its reliance on contemplative prayer:

Hasidism [is] the great movement of religious revival that brought new spirit to the lives of Jews in the towns and villages of Poland and Ukraine toward the latter half of the eighteenth century. Here worship, particularly in the form of contemplative prayer, came to be clearly identified by a new group of religious teachers as the central focus of the Jew's religious life. Both the ecstatic outpourings of ordinary people and the highly sophisticated treatments of devotional psychology in the works of early Hasidic masters bear witness to this new and unique emphasis upon the inner life of prayer. [1]

The Polish-born rabbi and influential theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–1972) found great inspiration in this period of Jewish spirituality and history:

Then came Rabbi Israel Baal Shem (c. 1700–1760) in the eighteenth century, and brought heaven down to earth. He and his disciples, the Hasidim . . . uncovered the ineffable delight of being a Jew. God is not only the creator of earth and heaven. He is also the One “who created delight and joy.” . . . Jewishness was as though reborn. Bible verses, observances, customs, suddenly took on a flavor like that of new grain. . . . The Jews fell in love with the Lord and felt “such yearning for God that it was unbearable.”

They began to feel the infinite sweetness that comes with the fulfilling of the precept of hospitality or of wearing the tallith [prayer shawl] and tefillin. [1] What meaning is there to the life of a Jew, if it is not to acquire the ability to feel the taste of heaven? [One] who does not taste paradise in the performance of a precept in this world will not feel the taste of paradise in the world to come. And so the Jews began to feel life everlasting in a sacred melody and to absorb the Sabbath as a vivid anticipation of the life to come. [2]

One of the great themes of Father Richard's teachings is the importance of experiencing God's love and delight, and the emptiness of religion without it:

The trouble with much of civic religion and cultural Christianity is the lack of religious experience. People who haven't had a loving or intimate experience with God tend to get extremely rigid, dogmatic, and controlling about religion. They think that if they pray the right words, read the Bible daily, and go to church often enough, it will happen. But God loves us before we do the rituals. God doesn't need them, but we need them to tenderly express our childlike devotion and desire—and to get in touch with that desire. The great commandment is not “thou shalt

be right.” The great commandment is to “be in love.” [3]

Monday, 27 June 2022

Richard Rohr's Daily Meditations

From the Center for Action and Contemplation



Week Twenty-Six: Judaism: Hasidic Mystics

God Before Us Always

Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, often credited as the founder of Hasidism, is known as the Baal Shem Tov or by the acronym “Besht.” He lived in Mezhbizh (now Medzhybizh in western Ukraine). The Besht was ecstatically in love with God. Like Francis of Assisi, he began a grassroots movement of joyful love and service that appealed to ordinary people, not only to a scholarly elite. Rabbi Rami Shapiro explains this stream of Judaism:

The ancient Rabbis taught, “God desires the heart.” They themselves, however, seem to have preferred the head. Judaism has struggled through the ages to find a balance between heartfelt yearning for God and the intellectual mastery of God’s Word. Generally speaking, it was the head that won out. Yet, when things got too heady, the pendulum would swing in favor of the heart. The eighteenth-century Jewish revivalist movement called Hasidism was one of these heart swings. . . .

The concept of *d’veikus* (“clinging” or “cleaving”) is found in the Torah [the Hebrew Scriptures] where the verb *davak* signifies an extraordinary intimacy with the Divine: “To love YHVH

your God, to listen to His voice and to cleave to Him, for He is your life and the length of your days . . .” (Deuteronomy 30:20). To achieve *d’veikus* is to realize that God is your life. While later Hasidic masters spoke of *d’veikus* as a union with God requiring the dissolution of the self, this was not the original understanding. God is your life, but your life is still yours; that is, Torah speaks of *d’veikus* as an experience of feeling the fullness of God present in your self without actually erasing your sense of self. . . .

The essential message and practice of early Hasidism are simple. The message: “. . . the whole earth is full of God’s glory” (Isaiah 6:3). The practice: “. . . I place God before me always” (Psalm 16:8). Understand these and you understand Hasidism. . . .

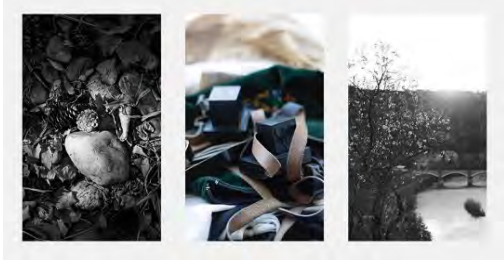
Although the Hasidim themselves do not use this analogy, the relationship of a wave to the ocean aptly captures the situation Hasidism says we are in. . . . Focus on yourself as a wave, and you are increasingly frantic and worried. Focus on yourself as the ocean, and you find tranquility and peace of mind. . . . Hasidism tries to wake the wave up to being the ocean. Awakening to your true nature is what it is to “place God before you always.” Everywhere you look you see God, not as an abstract spirit but as the True Being of all beings. . . .

The Besht believed that God was everywhere and could be found by anyone whose heart was open, simple, and pure. At a time when Judaism was focused on a scholar elite, he reached out to the masses with a Judaism rich in compassion, devotion, and hope. His inner circle of disciples took his teachings out into the larger world, creating a global movement that continues to this day.

Wednesday, 29 June 2022

Richard Rohr's Daily Meditations

From the Center for Action and Contemplation



Week Twenty-Six: Judaism: Hasidic Mystics

Shining the Light of Divine Life

The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (1878–1965) helped introduce the non-Jewish world to the passionate spirituality of nineteenth-century Hasidism. As a young boy, Buber lived with his grandparents in Lemberg, present day Lviv, Ukraine. He was impacted by his grandfather's Hasidic faith and went on to dedicate much of his scholarly life to sharing the legends, sayings, and stories of Hasidism. Much like the sayings of the Christian desert fathers and mothers, Hasidic short sayings contain wisdom beyond their words. We share several from Martin Buber's work and encourage you to read them slowly, several times, to experience their prayerful wisdom.

This first saying is reminiscent of Thomas Merton's words, "For me to be a saint means to be myself." [1] We discover our true identity in God when we no longer pretend to be anything other than who we are:

Rabbi Zusya . . . said, a short while before his death: 'In the world to come I shall not be asked: "Why were you not Moses?" I shall be asked: "Why were you not Zusya?"' [2]

The following saying captures the Hasidic emphasis that, as the biblical Jacob

discovered, "this place is the gate of heaven" (Genesis 28:17):

It is said of a certain Talmudic master that the paths of heaven were as bright to him as the streets of his native town. Hasidism inverts the order: It is a greater thing if the streets of a person's native town are as bright to them as the paths of heaven. For it is here, where we stand, that we should try to make shine the light of the hidden divine life. [3]

The final saying reminds us that, while God's presence is found in all reality, it takes an inner willingness to encounter it:

'Where is the dwelling of God?'

This is the question with which the Rabbi of Kotzk surprised a number of learned men who happened to be visiting him.

They laughed at him: 'What a thing to ask! Is not the whole world full of [God's] glory?'

Then he answered his own question:

'God dwells wherever man lets him in.' [4]

Pope gives master class in ministry at World Meeting of Families

27 June 2022

by [Michael Sean Winters](#)

[Vatican](#)



Pope Francis arrives to open the World Meeting of Families in the Paul VI hall June 22 at the Vatican. (CNS/Paul Haring)

The [World Meeting of Families](#) concluded yesterday, June 26, in Rome. This year's four-day gathering was both more modest and more ambitious than previous iterations of the event. There was less spectacle and more focus on actual ministry to families.

Pope John Paul II, who started the world meetings, liked the spectacle — the open-air Masses in large arenas, tens of thousands of people stretching down the boulevards of a Philadelphia or Denver as they hosted the meeting or World Youth Day. I remember camping out on the Mall in Washington the night before the Holy Father said Mass there in 1979. It was fun. But it is not clear what those gatherings achieved. What they made up in size seemed diminished in depth.

"We have to ask ourselves, why are we bringing people from different parts of the world instead of having a national, decentralized gathering of families in the different countries?" said Cardinal Kevin Farrell, prefect of the Dicastery for Laity, the Family and Life, in an interview last week [with America magazine](#). Farrell emphasized that this year's meeting gathered together those diocesan leaders who work in family life ministries.

One of the testimonies at the opening session came from a couple, Serena Zangla and Luigi Franco, who had lived together for 10 years before getting married, what we used to call "living in sin." They related that they had difficulty finding a parish that would accept them and their three children. Finally they found a community that welcomed them and they plan to get married soon.

Another testimony came from Zakia Seddiki, the widow of Luca Attanasio, the Italian ambassador to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, who was killed in an ambush in 2021. Seddiki, a Muslim, spoke about the way she and her husband, who was Catholic, raised their children, instructing them in both religious traditions and how the love that sustained her married life continued even after the tragedy of her husband's death. It was very powerful.

In [his talk](#), the pope invoked the parable of the good Samaritan, as he did in the 2020 encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, as the ground from which the church's ministry should spring, and the standard by which it should be guided and judged.

"I think of the parable of the good Samaritan who meets someone wounded and in need," the pope said. "He draws near to him, cares for him and helps him to resume his journey. That is what I want the church to be for all of you! A good Samaritan that draws near to you and helps you to continue your journey and to take a step forward, however small. Never forget that closeness is the 'style' of God, closeness and tender love."

The pope mentioned all the families which had offered testimonies, and gave a kind of master class for priests the world over who want to understand what accompaniment means.

In replying to Zangla and Franco, the pope first apologized that they had difficulty finding a parish that would welcome them. He went on to say:

I was greatly consoled when you explained the reason that led you to baptize your children. You said something very beautiful: "Despite our noblest human efforts, we are not sufficient unto ourselves." It is true, we can have the loveliest dreams, the loftiest ideals, but in the end, we also discover – and this is wisdom – our own limitations, which we cannot overcome by ourselves but by opening ourselves to the Father, to his love and to his grace. That is the meaning of the sacraments of baptism and of matrimony: they are the concrete helps that God gives us in order not to leave us alone, precisely because "we are not sufficient unto ourselves." It was good to hear those words: "we are not sufficient unto ourselves."

It is good to hear this. It points us past the competing reductionistic ecclesiologies of our time, those on the right which reduce the Catholic faith to a rite, and those on the left which reduce Catholicism to "a certain idea of the Church today with an emphasis on social justice," about which Villanova theologian Massimo Faggioli [recently wrote](#). Ours is a God who absconds, who transcends. You can't capture him in ritual nor activism.

Of all the varied subjects I have written about over the years, one of the most consistent concerns has been the reduction of religion to ethics: the inability of American Catholics to recognize that our Catholic ethical teachings are rooted in dogmatic and doctrinal claims. One of the most obvious points of consistency among the post-conciliar popes is the refusal to do this, and their insistence that our beliefs demand a certain anthropology which, in turn, grounds and shapes our ethics.

Matrimony and family need ethics, to be sure, but they need more than ethics. Grace abounds (cf. [Romans 5:20](#)) not in our finer moments but in our more sinful ones.

Francis, who is so attuned to human suffering, has such a knack for reminding us of God's closeness, and of the need for the Church's ministers to mimic that closeness. It is that which makes this World Meeting of Families so special.



Michael Sean Winters

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

Ignatian spirituality comes alive in prison

27 June 2022

by Jeanmarie Gribaudo

Ministry



(Unsplash/Emiliano Bar)

As a Sister of Saint Joseph, whose order was founded by a Jesuit, and working at a Jesuit

university, it's an understatement to say I have been steeped in Ignatian spirituality. Ignatian catch phrases — discernment of spirits, finding God in all things, *cura personalis*, cannonball moments, men and women for and with others — mean a lot to me and I love to see my students grapple with how these concepts come to life for them.

Couple those concepts with the Catholic social teaching principles of human dignity, solidarity and subsidiarity; add in time for reflection, and the results help me to find God in my work, my students, and my life. Usually.

I say usually because — in this Ignatian Year celebrating the 500th anniversary of Ignatius' cannonball moment — I have experienced my own cannonball moment. I am still grappling with it — discerning, trying desperately to find God in it, how to be a woman for and with others, and tend to the *cura personalis*. This cannonball moment keeps on giving; perhaps it has shattered so much that it will take the rest of my life to understand.

In January, I was asked to teach a course entitled the Examined Life to prisoners in a medium security prison. One dreary January day, I drove to the prison. Going through the security, the "trap," and locked chain-link fences were all new to me — and a bit jarring — but nothing prepared me for how to teach and be taught in the prison.

My students are men found guilty of doing some very horrible deeds and sentenced to lengthy prison terms. Do they deserve to be removed from society? Most likely. I say that because there are so many nuances to each life and story — something about which I have become acutely aware these past four months.

In this course, the students were asked to read and reflect on the life of St. Ignatius. As they read and reflected on *The Pilgrim's Story* by Jesuit Fr. Brendan Comerford, their life stories were brought to light. They, like Ignatius, came from traumatic and chaotic backgrounds. They lost parents or had little or no parenting. They joined gangs and killed people as Ignatius did. They saw in Ignatius' early life so much more than I had ever seen. I was being taught by my students.

The story of Ignatius became literal manna in the desert. These men — who yearn to be understood, who desire for people to see that they have been transformed by the pain, hurt and anguish in their own lives and the lives that they cut short — delved deeply into their own cannonball moments.

The "hole" (solitary confinement) — a place of discernment of spirits much like Manresa — made many of them face their demons. The solitary quiet made them realize they had to make choices: Could they acknowledge their traumatic experiences? Could they own the traumatic experiences they caused? The hole, their personal Manresa, often transformed their lives and helped them see a way forward. As they grappled with their own trauma, the hole gave them the choice of life, transformation or death. In the utter darkness came life, new life.

As I listened to their cannonball moments, the paschal mystery, the time on the cross and in the tomb became so much more real to me. As I listened to their stories, I was exposed to such trauma, such chaos. I heard how we as a society have failed these men. I learned that there was so much more to their story than a case number. Poverty of education, finances, employment, shelter and health care resources were all a part of their lives.

Hearing about their time as adolescents in the youth services facilities, I decided I needed to find out more. At one facility I met a 13-year-old who committed murder. How can a 13-year-old even understand the ramifications of that act? Are we as a society — who let so much violence run rampant in social media, television and movies — not in some small way part of this? How can a 13-year-old sentenced to life have any hope for transformation? So many questions; no answers.

As I continued to teach my students, I was taught about parole board hearings, lack of mental health counseling and ways these men are treated like caged animals. I learned that some parole boards try to push as many buttons as possible to cause reactions, not responses. I learned that the judicial system does not really talk to the parole system, nor do they talk to the department of corrections. I learned that it is easier to medicate prisoners than to provide mental health counselors.

I often ask my students to change lenses, to see things from another's perspective. In the case of prison education, the perspectives have been that of the victim's family, the parole board and the corrections officers. Hearing how incredibly important it is for the perpetrator to hear the pain and anguish of the victim's family was surprising. The prisoners said that they need to grapple with what they have done. They need to dig deep into that pain.

Somehow this process makes them vulnerable, human again. Prisoners also understand, to a point, the need for the parole board to push them to be prepared for life outside so that they will not return to prison. However, some further conversations are needed here to make this system better.

To my total surprise, I learned that a person who has been just released from years in prison not only needs to get a place to live, employment (and how many jobs are available for people who have been incarcerated?) and learn how to deal with society again, also needs to come up with \$80 a month to pay for parole.

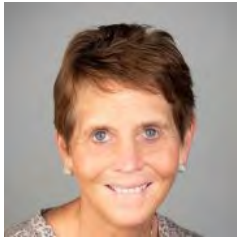
Finally, I learned about the corrections officers and their tough job. They are literally locked up each day when they come to work. Some have absolutely amazing attitudes and try to be good people. But as in every profession, there is some need for improvement. Shakedowns do not need to be so destructive of prisoners' belongings. (Seriously, a new excuse for not having your homework is that it was torn up in a shakedown. So much for the dog eating it!)

These officers need professional education to keep them from being jaded by the chaos and trauma they see and feel each day at work. These officers are the first responders; how do we help them to act humanely? How do we help the authorities to look for and reward humane actions instead of punitive ones?

So many questions, so few answers. Luckily, those "Jesuit catch phrases" have pushed me to try to grapple with all of this. I have come to understand more deeply that the God I follow became human and lived a life full of trauma and chaos: born of an unwed mother in a manger, fled to Egypt, spent his life with those most despised in society, was rejected, suffered greatly and died.

And yet, he did not let trauma and chaos have the final say but overcame it by transforming death into life. I, too, must continue to struggle to find God in all things, even our prison system. Who would have ever thought that in one short semester

a professor could be taught so much by her incarcerated students? God certainly can be found in all.



Jeanmarie Gribaudo

Jeanmarie Gribaudo is a Sister of St. Joseph of Boston. She has extensive experience working with youth in urban Boston parishes, served more than 10 years as the mayor's youth adviser and is a published author. She currently teaches theology at Boston College.

Wise abortion public policy should deal with realities as well as moralities

27 June 2022

by Christine Schenk



A demonstrator is seen near the Supreme Court in Washington, D.C., June 7. The court overruled the landmark 1973 *Roe v. Wade* abortion decision in its June 24 ruling in the *Dobbs* case. *Dobbs v. Jackson* addressed a

Mississippi law banning most abortions after 15 weeks. Justice Samuel Alito wrote the majority opinion. (CNS/Tyler Orsburn)

This is a difficult column to write. Yet given the [threat to legal abortion](#) in so many states after the Supreme Court's June 24 [Dobbs ruling](#), which overturns the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* case, this retired nurse-midwife finds herself unable to remain silent.

I worked for 17 years as a midwife to low-income families in one of the poorest cities in the United States. I met many girls and women whose fraught circumstances led them to consider terminating their pregnancies. Many chose to continue prenatal care. Others did not.

One mother of three decided to continue her pregnancy — but only after a female Catholic pastoral minister asked her what she needed to be able to do so. A washing machine, she said. Sometimes it comes down to something as simple as that.

Of those who went ahead with an abortion, most felt they had no choice. The husband of one pregnant mother of six refused to allow her to use birth control. He came home drunk one evening and raped her. She could barely feed the six children she had.

And then there is the 11-year-old who was raped by her uncle. Her grandmother brought the child to my clinic when she was six months along. This child had never had a period and had no idea what was happening to her body. It was too late to terminate the pregnancy. As a good Catholic, I abhorred abortion. But I went home that evening not at all sure what I would have done had I been that grandmother and this child's pregnancy had been early enough to terminate.

My midwifery colleagues and I followed too many 12- to 14-year-old children — of all ethnicities — who were pregnant with their abuser's baby.

For me, the most compelling consideration in developing public policy is respect for the moral agency of women.

We also saw many life-threatening complications such as ectopic pregnancies and incomplete miscarriages (also called "missed abortions" in medicalese). In the U.S., one of every 50 pregnancies is ectopic. An ectopic fetus will die long before coming to term. An untreated ectopic pregnancy can lead to uncontrollable hemorrhage and death for the mother. Anti-abortion laws in Texas are already [threatening](#) the safety of women experiencing these dangerous conditions. It is scary that the Texas law [served as a model](#) for the restrictive "trigger legislation" in many other states.

Then there are some — admittedly rare — situations in which a baby has severe anomalies incompatible with life and continuing the pregnancy would be deleterious to the mother. I remember one couple's agonizing decision to terminate such a crisis pregnancy at six months gestation. They were a Catholic couple in a Jewish hospital. They asked the nurse to baptize their child and then spent hours holding him, grieving their loss.

All these experiences tended to complicate my thinking about abortion.

Approaching abortion as a moral issue is a good thing. It is a serious matter and should never be taken lightly. Before the 1976 Hyde Amendment — which banned Medicaid funding for most abortions — I cared for some women who appeared to be using abortion as birth control. Several had undergone four or five abortions over an 18-month period. These "free" abortions tended

to diminish accountability, often to the detriment of the woman's health. I saw less of this after the Hyde Amendment became law.

While moral considerations are important in making individual decisions, a rigid moral approach has significant limitations. When considering legislation there are additional facts to consider. Public policy must deal with realities as well as moralities.

Here are some facts that have complicated this Catholic's thinking about public policy and abortion.

- Desperate women will always have abortions. No legislation will eliminate this practice. It will only drive it underground.
- [One fourth of Catholic women](#) have had abortions — the same percentage as [American women overall](#). A retired female pastoral minister recently told me that within two weeks of arriving at each of the six parishes at which she ministered, a woman would approach and ask to talk about her abortion. Other female ministers had similar experiences. Catholic women were uncomfortable processing their abortions with the parish priest.
- In nature, an estimated [50% of all fertilized eggs are lost](#) before a woman's missed menses. An exhaustive 2016 study reported that [40-60% of embryos](#) are lost from the time of fertilization to birth. Such embryos are expelled during the woman's monthly menses.
- As of 2018 [at least 29 states](#) have fetal homicide laws that apply to the earliest stages of pregnancy ("conception," "fertilization," "any state of gestation" etc.). Will we require women to bury — or baptize — their menses, most of which presumably contain fertilized eggs? What do these scientific findings suggest about

Catholic teaching on contraception? Jesus' critique of leaders who pile up unbearable burdens and "strain out a gnat and swallow a camel" — seems relevant here (Matthew 23).

- Other religious traditions — such as [Judaism](#) and [Islam](#) — follow different teachings about abortion. In Judaism, a fetus [is not considered a person](#) "and therefore does not have the same rights as one who is already alive. As such, the interests of the pregnant individual always come before that of the fetus." In Islam a fetus is not seen as a legal person before birth although abortion is forbidden after ensoulment which is thought to occur at 120 days. Is it appropriate for public policy to apply the morality of one religious tradition to people who are not of that tradition?
- In 2022, [over half of U.S. Catholics](#) (56%) said abortion should be legal in all or most cases. This compares with 61% of Americans overall. Catholics also said abortion should be legal when pregnancy is the result of rape (66%) or threatens the life of the mother (69%). In the same survey, 63% of Catholics agreed that how long a woman has been pregnant should be a factor in determining the legality of the abortion.
- Even though most Catholics said abortion should be legal, [a 2019 Pew survey](#) found that the majority (57%) also view it as morally wrong.

Wise public policy regarding abortion and reproductive health is a complex challenge. As Catholic citizens we should have a voice in developing wise policies, yet many of us recoil from even discussing the topic. A recent [online webinar](#) offered by [Catholic Organizations for Renewal](#) is addressing such taboos. It offers a safe discussion space for the majority of Catholics who value the moral issues involved but don't support making abortion illegal.

For me, the most compelling consideration in developing public policy is respect for the moral agency of women. Too often discussion focuses exclusively on the embryo or fetus — a developing human — without respecting the realities faced by the fully developed human, a woman whose life and body can be profoundly affected and put at risk.



Christine Schenk

St. Joseph Sr. Christine Schenk, an NCR board member, served urban families for 18 years as a nurse midwife before co-founding FutureChurch, where she served for 23 years. Her book *Crispina and Her Sisters: Women and Authority in Early Christianity* (Fortress, 2017) was awarded first place in History by the Catholic Press Association. She holds master's degrees in nursing and theology.

Why nonsense stories about the pope resigning keep popping up

28 June 2022

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

[Vatican](#)



Pope Francis arrives in a wheelchair to attend an audience with nuns and religious superiors in the Paul VI Hall at the Vatican May 5. The pope is known to be suffering acute knee pain that has greatly curtailed his mobility in recent months. (AP file/Alessandra Tarantino)

If I had a dollar for every story I have seen about the possibility of the pope resigning, I could take a trip to Rome to watch the pope at work.

Why are these stories so popular with journalists?

First, the stories are easy to write: Just report the latest whispers from anonymous Roman clerics who have no real information but love to gossip. Add quotes from Italian journalists whose editors are not as rigorous in demanding evidence as American editors. Presto!

There are, of course, good Italian journalists, but some lack basic journalistic ethics. John Thavis, the former bureau chief for Catholic News Service, reported how one Italian journalist in 2013 decided to have fun by writing a totally fictitious story about how the cardinals were looking at Cardinal Sean O'Malley as a candidate for pope.

This story was picked up by other outlets, causing The Boston Globe to send a team of reporters to cover the conclave. The media coverage made O'Malley so visible that one survey found that he was the first choice of

the ordinary people of Rome. In his Capuchin habit, he reminded them of Padre Pio, the popular Italian saint.

A second reason these stories proliferate is that ordinary readers eat them up. We have an appetite for rumors and gossip about famous people. Publishers know this and give us what we want.

Finally, every reporter is terrified of missing a story that ends up being true. Most reporters missed the signs of the impending resignation of Pope Benedict XVI, and they don't want to be caught off guard again. How do you explain to your editor why you missed this story?

If the pope does resign, I will end up looking like a fool for writing this column.

Still, I am willing to go out on a limb and say it: The pope is not going to resign.

True, Benedict's resignation made it easier for every subsequent pope to resign. It was always possible under canon law — in fact historians report that about 10 popes have resigned over the church's 2,000-year history. It had just been so long since the last resignation that many felt it was impossible.

Pope Paul VI, for example, said paternity cannot be resigned. He also feared setting a precedent that would subject future popes to pressure to resign. Are we seeing that today?

What made resignation not only possible but necessary is modern medicine, which can keep the body alive much longer than it is physically and mentally possible for a person to function as pope.

Even before he resigned, Benedict indicated, "If a pope clearly realizes that he is no longer physically, psychologically and spiritually capable of handling the duties of his office, then he has a right and, under

some circumstances, also an obligation to resign."

Francis shares the same view. He feels that his election was a clear sign that God wanted him to be pope and he cannot set aside this duty unless he become incapable of fulfilling his papal obligations.

As [Francis told Brazilian bishops](#) visiting the Vatican recently, "I want to live my mission as long as God allows me and that's it."



Pope Francis in a wheelchair delivers his address during an audience with members of the Italian Civil Aviation Authority in the Paul VI Hall at the Vatican May 13. (AP/Andrew Medichini)

The pope has a lot of unfinished business, and I don't see him walking away from it. Some of his reforms are just now getting started. And after setting in motion a worldwide synodal process, he will not leave it to someone else to finish.

Clearly, the pope is currently able to fulfill the most important duties of the papacy. Yes, he has a bad knee and is using a wheelchair, but there is no indication that he suffers any mental incapacity. He can think and speak clearly, he meets with people and can make prudent decisions.

Francis has been suffering from a bad knee for some time now, but he refused to use a cane despite being in great pain. This was stupid on his part. All those around him

should have told him to use a cane. Instead, he kept walking on his bad knee until he was forced into a wheelchair.

If he had still been subject to Jesuit obedience, he would have been told by his Jesuit superior and prefect of health to follow his doctor's instructions and use a cane. Whether staying off the knee will now allow it to heal on its own or whether he will require surgery remains to be seen.

What is clear is that even if he had to remain in a wheelchair for the rest of his life, he could still perform his essential papal duties as long as his mind remains clear. Remember, the United States had a wheelchair-using president who got us out of the Great Depression and led us through the Second World War.

In this day and age, to insinuate that the pope cannot continue his work in his present condition shows that even the pope is not immune to the prejudice that thousands of people with disabilities suffer on a daily basis.

There are thousands of Americans in wheelchairs functioning very well in jobs. Thousands more have bad knees. To say the pope should resign is telling all these people that their positions are also at risk. Shouldn't we rather celebrate that there are many jobs these people can successfully do, including being pope?



[Thomas Reese](#)

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

The synod: a transformative process

29 June 2022

by Nathalie Becquart,
Catholic News Service



Philadelphia Archbishop Nelson Pérez joins college students, other young adults and ministry leaders during an April 4 synodal listening session at La Salle University.
(CNS/CatholicPhilly.com/Sarah Webb)

Recently, the synod coordinator for a U.S. diocese told me: "With our diocesan synodal team, we have organized listening sessions in all our parishes according to the methodology described in the 'vademecum.' We also did it in many other places, like Catholic schools, shelters for migrants and refugees, groups of single mothers, etc. It is really transforming the people and the diocese. Now we feel that we have to continue this process and focus on discernment."

In many reports, we have begun to receive at the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, we can read these kind of comments coming from a U.S. parish: "Participants were grateful for the opportunity to share their joys, hopes,

concerns and recommendations in response to building a better church. The sessions were spirit-filled, and conversations were animated, reflective, energetic and oftentimes were characterized by strong emotions."

It is striking to hear from so many parts of the world where people had the opportunity to take part in a true synodal consultation like this, allowing them to pray together, to listen to each other, to dialogue on the fundamental question of the synod and the 10 themes, that they experience joy.

Many express gratitude. "It is the first time the Church is asking [for] my voice and it makes me realize that we are the Church, not only the priests and the bishops."

Many also witness that experiencing this type of mutual listening, they understand that the change in style of being Church, even before being a doctrinal or structural matter, is a personal conversion to which each and every baptized person is called.

The synod is already bearing fruits and we can contemplate how the Holy Spirit is leading the Church to a synodal conversion at the grassroots in local churches embracing synodality with creativity.

Of course, it is not an easy path, as it is a call for change that naturally gives rise to fears and resistance. Finding ways to truly walk together as the people of God with and through our differences of vocations, positions, ages and gender is a challenge. The Catholic Church is re-learning synodality that was the style of the early church as a fruit of the Second Vatican Council. But it is an open path, not written in advance.

The 2021-2023 synodal path is a learning process, a paschal journey for a "new birth,"

a missionary renewal to enter into a new vision of the church that is a discerning church, a relational church, an inclusive church.

In a nutshell, it's a church on the move, understanding herself as a missionary communion reflecting the mystery of the Trinity — the mystery of the Trinity in history on the road of humanity today.

"Therefore, making a Synod on Synodality does not mean doing it on a theme like so many others, but on the deeper identity of the Church as communion and mission that becomes concrete, historically incisive when it is participated by all. The Church is such, in fact, only when it is carried on its shoulders by all and shared in its heart by all, at the service of its brothers and sisters, especially beginning with the last, the discarded and the existential and spiritual peripheries of our time." — Msgr. Piero Coda, member of the Theological Commission of the Synod 2021-2023.

As many theologians expressed it after the opening of the synod in October 2021, we are living "the most important ecclesial event after the Second Vatican Council." In fact, this is the first time in 2,000 years of church history that a synod is called to involve the entire people of God as written in the first sentence of the preparatory document: "The Church of God is convoked in Synod." So everyone is called to participate, to give his or her voice, especially the poor, those from the margins, the voiceless.

The diocesan phase of the synod is almost over, but the conversion to synodality has no end. Therefore, we are invited to continue this crucial journey for the future of the church and the future of a world longing for peace, reconciliation and unity. All the baptized have a role to play for promoting

and implementing synodality at all levels of the church.

And if we believe that "synodality is the way of being the Church today according to the will of God, in a dynamic of discerning and listening together to the voice of the Holy Spirit," as stated by Pope Francis, we can be confident that we will receive the grace to answer this call of God to become a synodal church.



Nathalie Becquart

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Vatican's pro-life chief: After Roe, Catholics must also fight for gun control

29 June 2022

by Justin McLellan



Death penalty protesters are seen outside the U.S. Supreme Court building in Washington Oct. 13, 2021. With *Roe v. Wade* overturned, the president of the Pontifical Academy for Life, urges Catholics to continue fighting to protect life in all its forms, which includes advocating for tighter gun laws and ending the death penalty. (CNS/Reuters/Jonathan Ernst)

ROME — After the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, the Vatican's top pro-life official is urging Catholics to fight now to make access to guns "as complicated and rare as possible."

Italian Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia, president of the Pontifical Academy for Life, said Catholics must continue fighting to protect life in all its forms, which includes advocating for tighter gun laws and against the death penalty.

"Having too many guns at hand is a grave threat to life," Paglia said in a June 27 interview in his Vatican office, adding: "We need to fight so that the death penalty may be abolished together with abortion."

Paglia, whose academy researches and promotes the Catholic Church's pro-life ethic, added that Catholics must work so "that the lives of the disabled, of immigrants, be protected and guarded, because every human life is precious before God and before human beings."



Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia, president of the Pontifical Academy for Life, pictured here in a

Jan. 15, 2019, file photo, urges American Catholics to shift their pro-life efforts to issues including gun control and ending the death penalty. (CNS/Paul Haring)

The comments signal hope in Rome that American Catholics will begin to shift the aims of their social advocacy after the Court released its June 24 ruling in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, which abolished federal protections for abortion rights and effectively returned the issue to state legislatures. Abortion is now expected to be illegal or severely limited in about half of the 50 states.

While Pope Francis has been clear in condemning abortion on numerous occasions, the Vatican has repeatedly pushed for a pro-life message that extends to other life-related issues beyond solely ending abortion, which has been a focus for the American church.

"The conversation should be directed this way, and Pope Francis is a reference point for everyone," Paglia said.

Among those concerns are weakening families and a lack of proper care for the elderly in society, a topic that has inspired the pope's current catechesis series on old age, which the pontiff delivers in his weekly audiences in St. Peter's Square.

'I know it's very hard, but a constructive dialogue is essential.'

— Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia

In a June 24 statement published in light of the Supreme Court's decision, the Pontifical Academy for Life had also emphasized the need for "solid assistance to mothers, couples, and the unborn child that involved the whole community, encouraging the possibility for mothers in difficulty to carry

on with the pregnancy and to entrust the child to those who can guarantee the child's growth" after the Supreme Court overturned Roe.

In the interview, Paglia said that after Roe, society has an increased responsibility to "protect the rights of women, their desire for motherhood, and to promote the conditions to allow for that." Catholics in particular, he said, must work "to overcome the sometimes very serious inequalities and injustices, that favor the choice of abortion," and help create the conditions for women who want to have a child to carry their pregnancies to term.

He also called for proper sexual education that teaches each person to live out their sexuality "with the awareness of its implications."

The archbishop also urged Catholics to help form a society where "every will for abortion may be transformed into a possible desire for pregnancy."

While Catholics played a significant role in the effort that ultimately resulted in the fall of *Roe* (five of the six justices who voted in favor of *Dobbs* are Catholic), Paglia asked those celebrating the decision to not completely shut themselves off from those on the other side.

"The fact that the ruling has created such a strong debate indicates that it is about an issue that deeply touches people's consciences and the social fabric," he said, "one must return to the subject as calm and peacefully as possible. I know it's very hard, but a constructive dialogue is essential."

The archbishop said the post-*Roe* era in the United States is an inflection point for the pro-life movement worldwide: a test as to whether the enthusiasm that the American church applied to restricting abortion will

also carry over to other urgent pro-life matters, such as gun control and caring for migrants.

"If we don't defend every life, and we don't defend it in all of its expressions, I don't think we will be credible," said Paglia, "and the world needs credibility from those who love life and defend it."



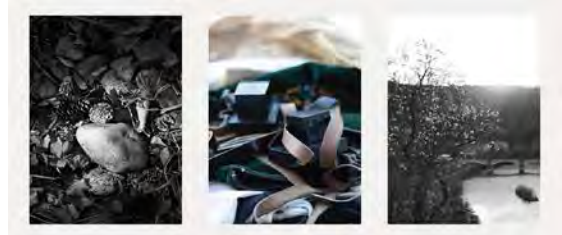
Justin McLellan

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Thursday, 30 June 2022

Richard Rohr's Daily Meditations

From the Center for Action and Contemplation



Week Twenty-Six: Judaism: Hasidic Mystics

Knowing Less, Loving More

For early Hasidic mystics, learning the Scriptures was important, but encountering God directly within the Scriptures was even more so. Jewish scholar Arthur Green translates from a collection of Hasidic teachings on contemplative prayer:

One who reads the words of prayer with great devotion may come to see the lights within the letters, even though one does not understand the meaning of the words one speaks.

Such prayer has great power;
Mistakes in reading are of no importance.

A father has a young child whom he greatly loves.
Even though the child has hardly learned to speak,
his father takes pleasure
in listening to the child's words. [1]

Another saying goes like this:

Sometimes while at prayer you may feel
that you cannot enter
the upper world at all.
Your mind remains below and you think:
“The whole earth is full of His
glory.”
But really you are nearer to God than you
know.
At such times you are like a child
who has just begun to understand
how close to God he is.
Even though your mind cannot yet transcend
this world,
God is with you in your prayer. [2]

*The Christian contemplative tradition also
prioritizes transformation over information
and a humble stance over certainty. Father
Richard writes:*

We must approach the Scriptures with
humility and patience, with our own agenda
out of the way, and allow the Spirit to stir
the deeper meaning for us. Otherwise, we
only hear what we already agree with or
what we have decided to look for! Isn't that
rather obvious? As the apostle Paul states,
“We must teach not in the way philosophy is
taught, but in the way the Spirit teaches us:
We must teach spiritual things spiritually” (1
Corinthians 2:13). This mode of teaching is
much more about transformation than
information. That changes the entire focus
and goal of our reading and study.

We need transformed people today, and not
just people with answers. As Eugène
Ionesco wrote, “Explanation separates us
from astonishment . . .”. [3] I do not want
my teachings and my too many words to
separate anyone from astonishment or to act
as a substitute for inner experience. The
marvelous anthology of books and letters
called the Bible is all for the sake of
astonishment—not “proof” or certainty! It's
for divine transformation (*theosis*), not
intellectual or “small-self” coziness. Ideas
are not a problem—but a true *inner
experience* is something else. It changes us,
and human beings do not like to change. The
biblical revelation invites us into a genuinely
new experience. The trouble is that we have
made the Bible into a bunch of ideas—about
which we can be right or wrong—rather
than an invitation to a *new set of eyes*. [4]

Here's hoping Francis, the pope of surprises, keeps surprising us

30 June 2022

by [NCR Editorial Staff](#)

[Vatican](#)



Pope Francis greets the crowd as he leads the Angelus from the window of his studio overlooking St. Peter's Square at the Vatican June 26. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Call to mind some historical figures who were in power for more than a few years, and you might notice a trend: Over time, they get a little predictable. Policy decisions begin to tend toward the moderate, initial attempts at innovation morph into efforts at consolidation, and surprises disappear, replaced by schedules that have been carefully vetted for all contingencies.

One thing you can certainly say about Pope Francis: In the 10th year of his papacy, he certainly still knows how to surprise.

One big example of that came earlier this year, when the pontiff [released his plan](#) for the dramatic overhaul of the Vatican's sprawling bureaucracy. Thanks to a new apostolic constitution, a host of once impossible things are now possible. For one, women can now lead Vatican offices.

Another example came in May. Despite there being no urgent need to name new cardinals — [there are currently 116](#) cardinal electors across the world, and the usual limit is 120 — Francis announced he would be creating 21 new cardinals, including 16 electors, this August.

What's more, one of the pope's choices would send what NCR columnist Michael Sean Winters [called](#) "an unmistakable sign" to the U.S. church. San Diego Bishop Robert McElroy — who has called for [a more welcoming approach to LGBTQ persons](#) and for the [prioritizing of environmental concerns](#) and has told NCR he is [in favor](#) of returning to the practice of ordaining women as deacons — will now soon be a cardinal.

For those more used to American cardinals hobnobbing [with the conservative Napa Institute set](#), or pining for a return to the Latin Mass, things certainly have changed.

Other examples of Francis' surprises may not be so dramatic, but they are surely quite symbolic. Take the Vatican's daily rundown of the pope's official meetings [for June 20](#). "This morning, the Holy Father Francis received in audience Fr. Richard Rohr," it said.

The [photos](#) of the encounter paint a lovely scene: Rohr, a Franciscan and globally respected [spiritual writer](#) long held at arms' length by church hierarchs for his interreligious and dialogical approach, meeting the very leader of the global church. Rohr, nearly 80, was in his brown habit, carrying a cane; Francis, 85, was in his wheelchair. Both were smiling widely.

In 2013, Rohr wrote a piece [for NCR](#) reflecting on Francis' first major interview as pope.

"He has forever changed the Catholic conversation," the priest said at the time. "We can never go completely backward."

We certainly hope so. May the pope of surprises keep surprising.

The abortion question may be decided politically. The real test is a moral one.

30 June 2022

by [Phyllis Zagano](#),
[Religion News Service](#)



Anti-abortion protesters gather outside the Supreme Court in Washington June 24. (AP/Jose Luis Magana)

The late Cardinal John O'Connor of New York often said women who had abortions were "invincibly ignorant" — they did not understand what they were doing. He blamed the bishops for not teaching convincingly.

The question of abortion may be decided politically, but the real test is if morality is taught.

The Supreme Court's decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson* changes our politics. For nearly 50 years, *Roe v. Wade* allowed abortion across the land. Now it doesn't. For nearly 150 years before that, U.S. states made their own determinations about abortion. Now they do again.

Because the court has ordered that "the authority to regulate abortion is returned to the people and their elected representatives," a pastiche of state laws will kick in, some more restrictive than others.

Ever since the May leak by Politico of the draft decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson*, pro-abortion groups pressed their positions, for example, suggesting overturning *Roe* would put in vitro fertilization at risk, even arguing that pregnancy is bad for your health. Both are key to pro-abortion strategy.

Since September 2021, a bill called the "Women's Health Protection Act of 2022" has been sitting in the Senate. The proposed legislation allows all abortions before fetal viability and those "after fetal viability where it is necessary, in the good-faith medical judgment of the treating health care professional, for the preservation of the life or health of the person who is pregnant."

Strongly supported by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, the law passed the House of Representatives by a narrow (218-211) margin. Three representatives did not vote. When it went to the Senate, the vote to proceed failed 49-51. Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia crossed the aisle to vote with the Republicans.

The Catholic Church has always allowed the "life of the mother" exception under the concept of double effect, for example, termination of an ectopic pregnancy or removal of the uterus to treat cancer of the womb.

But the "life or health of the person who is pregnant" presents possibilities for wide interpretation. On the one hand, the sentence protects the practitioner who determines the baby is dead or dying in the womb. On the other hand, it seems to allow for abortions up until the moment of birth where the mother claims a traumatic psychological condition. Or maybe she's not ill, just worried about her health.

The Catholic Church has always allowed the "life of the mother" exception under the concept of double effect, for example, termination of an ectopic pregnancy or removal of the uterus to treat cancer of the womb.

So, what now? The Catholic Communion rail controversy can only increase. A few bishops have banned Pelosi from the

sacrament in their dioceses. A few others steadfastly remain silent, about her and, perhaps more importantly, about President Joe Biden.

Biden has said he is not sure when human life begins. Before you send him a biology book, consider that he is perhaps thinking about the Catholic concept of ensoulment — not conception, implantation, quickening or viability. The church prefers to recognize the sanctity of all human life, and there is no argument that every stage is human.

The controversy will not end soon, but if the bishops address "invincible ignorance," there may be fewer Catholic politicians supporting laws allowing abortion. Maybe the bishops can redouble their efforts to teach Gospel values. Maybe they can teach that "respect life" includes Catholic social teaching, which in turn requires just wages and proper working conditions. Maybe they can expand Church efforts to assist the poor.

Politics is not the point. The point is to make abortion unnecessary.



Phyllis Zagano

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Despite row at home, Speaker Pelosi receives Communion at papal Mass, headlines Vatican events

29 June 2022

by [Christopher White](#)

[Vatican](#)



Pope Francis walks with U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-California, accompanied by her husband, Paul, during a private audience Oct. 9, 2021, at the Vatican. Pelosi, on June 29, attended the Vatican's Mass for the Feast of St. Peter and Paul, presided over by Pope Francis. (CNS/Vatican Media)

ROME — Despite a public row back at home with San Francisco's archbishop who has [barred](#) her from Communion over her support for abortion rights, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi is currently making the rounds in Rome, where in a 24-hour period, she attended a papal Mass at the Vatican where she received Communion, headlined an event at the U.S. Vatican embassy and visited one of the city's leading Catholic social service organizations.

Pelosi, on June 29, attended the Vatican's Mass for the Feast of St. Peter and Paul, presided over by Pope Francis. According to [The Associated Press](#), witnesses present said the longtime California Democrat received Holy Communion from a priest and met privately with the pope prior to the Mass.

Francis has previously met with Pelosi on several occasions, both in the United States and at the Vatican, including in a [private audience](#) last October.

In May, San Francisco Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone [publicly announced](#) he was barring Pelosi from Communion unless she publicly repudiates "support for abortion 'rights' " and goes to confession.

The Vatican has [repeatedly distanced](#) itself from such an approach, warning against focusing on any particular issue in relation to the "worthiness" to receive the sacrament. In September, Francis [told reporters](#) that he had never denied the Eucharist to anyone.

At the same time as Pelosi is in Rome, Cordileone is hosting a major liturgical conference at the Archdiocese of San Francisco's seminary, [headlined](#) by some of Pope Francis' most notorious critics.

Following Mass, Pelosi visited with four refugee families — two from Ukraine and two from Afghanistan — at the international Sant'Egidio Community, which has helped the families resettle in Italy.

At the organization's headquarters in the Roman neighborhood of Trastevere, Pelosi reflected on attending Mass with Francis and dozens of Vatican officials and ambassadors.

"In the spirit of St. Francis, which is the name of His Holiness and my city of San

Francisco, I thank you for preaching the Gospel, sometimes using words," she told leaders of the Catholic service organization, which is closely aligned with Francis.

Pelosi went on to note that she was shown a painting that morning of St. Egidio, who she remarked was known as a protector of wheat.

"How appropriate right now when wheat is so in jeopardy because of the war in Ukraine," she said. "Maybe St. Egidio will be an inspiration as we solve that problem."

Following her remarks, Pelosi joined U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See Joseph Donnelly in presenting a \$25,000 [Julia Taft Fund grant](#) to support Sant'Egidio's work in refugee assistance.

Donnelly, a former U.S. representative and then-senator, said the last time he participated in a public signing ceremony with Pelosi was when President Barack Obama signed the Affordable Care Act legislation in 2010.

"On that day, over 20 million Americans received health care for the first time," he said. "So every time we seem to sign documents together, good things happen."

In April, in one of his first official acts after [officially presenting](#) his diplomatic credentials to Francis, Donnelly visited newly arrived Ukrainian refugees at the Community of Sant'Egidio's Refugee Welcome Center.

The previous evening, Pelosi also joined Donnelly to headline a June 28 reception hosted by the U.S. Vatican embassy ahead of Independence Day, in which she praised the Catholic Church as the "greatest institution in the world" for responding to people in need.



Christopher White

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What has the demise of *Roe v. Wade* cost the Catholic Church?

1 July 2022

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



Abortion demonstrators are seen near the Supreme Court in Washington June 24 as the court overruled the landmark *Roe v. Wade* abortion decision in its ruling in the *Dobbs* case on a Mississippi law banning most abortions after 15 weeks. (CNS/Tyler Orsburn)

It is done. The decision by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* overturned *Roe v. Wade*, ending 50 years in which abortion has been a constitutional right.

Now Catholic and evangelical Christian leaders need to acknowledge the costs of

their victory. The most visible is nearly a half-century of being in bed with the Republican Party, and most recently its leader Donald Trump, a man of low morals willing to lie, cheat and, to hear the January 6 committee tell it, break the law in order to stay in office.

It also meant becoming a single-issue constituency who sacrificed nearly every social justice issue to create a Supreme Court that would reverse *Roe v. Wade*.

That court also killed state gun licensing laws in New York and other states, is making it more difficult for the executive branch to approve regulations that would protect public health and the environment and enable the United States to meet its commitments on reducing carbon emissions and other greenhouse gases.

Yes, the Republicans finally delivered on their promise to reverse *Roe*, but in every other way it is making the world less hospitable to life. To call this pro-life is absurd.

The anti-abortion coalition's cohabitation with the GOP may have been a pragmatic move, but it remains to be seen what will be the practical effect. Consider: How many abortions will actually be avoided once the dust settles?

Red states, where abortions were already becoming difficult to obtain, will continue to outlaw or restrict abortions; blue states will continue to make abortions easy. Purple states will continue to fight over the issue.

People in states where abortion is outlawed can still travel to states where it is legal or they will use abortion pills at home in the first 10 weeks of pregnancy. Even before *Dobbs*, more than half of abortions were brought on by pills. Anyone who

thinks such pills can be stopped at a state or even an international border has not been paying attention to the failed attempts to control illicit drug use in this country.

The real winner of the abortion fight is corporate America, which installed friendly justices onto the court while the religious right got the press for it. This court will stand in the way of progressive laws and regulations just as an earlier court stood against the New Deal.

In short, stuffing the U.S. Supreme Court with conservative justices has set the stage for a string of victories for corporations that do not want the government telling them what to do. Regulations governing fossil fuels, pharmaceuticals, food safety, energy conservation, civil rights, public health and every other aspect of life will be more easily challenged by corporate lawyers with this court.

In Catholic teaching, being pro-life is not just about abortion. Being pro-life means concern about all life, from the womb to the tomb. Now that the bishops and other anti-abortion Catholics have won their fight against *Roe*, will they embrace a more consistent ethic of life? Will they live up to the extensive social justice agenda they espouse on paper?

Will they reach out to Democrats who opposed them on abortion but support social programs — health care, housing, food assistance, jobs, daycare — to help mothers care for their children?

Will Democrats, angry about their defeat on abortion, be willing to partner with those who have a wider pro-life agenda?

Let's hope so.



Thomas Reese

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

Communion and culture wars: Is there a better way?

1 July 2022

by Christin Tomy

Spirituality
Social Justice



(Pixabay/Zujen)

I professed perpetual vows as a Dominican Sister of Sinsinawa just over a month ago. The liturgical, national and global events since then (feast of Corpus Christi, Pride month, and the Supreme Court's *Dobbs* ruling, to name a few) have

offered no shortage of opportunity to reflect on what I'm signing up for as a Catholic sister in a contemporary milieu. Even as I savor the joy of my *forever yes*, I am dismayed at the vitriol I have seen in Catholic circles, especially in response to the neuralgic events of the past several weeks.

This brings up some questions that have become familiar in my own spiritual life: in a church that is called to communion, how can we embrace unity without expecting uniformity? Are there legitimate limits to our communion? What does it mean to be the Body of Christ in a global reality? How can we as the church listen better, disagree better, and quite honestly, give a more credible witness in a hurting world?

As I ponder these questions, two moments rise to the top of my memory: two personal and deeply felt experiences of communion. These stories don't provide any answers, but perhaps they illuminate some simple and helpful truths.

Moment one: moon on a Nicaraguan lake

After college I served as a Jesuit Volunteer in Belize. One year during Holy Week I went to visit another Jesuit Volunteer community in Nicaragua, where we spent a few days at a Jesuit retreat house on a lake just outside Managua. Situated in the basin of an ancient volcano, the place had an ancient, distinctively sacred feel.

On Holy Thursday night, the other volunteers and I decided to go for a swim. The moon was full and just beginning to rise. The water was just warm enough to be inviting and smelled faintly of the sulfur left over from the lava that flowed here centuries ago. As I floated in on the water's calm surface, I noticed the moon's uncanny resemblance to a giant Communion host

hovering in the sky: full and flat and round. How appropriate, I thought, for this Holy Thursday eve!

Then I became aware of the moonlight's reflection on the water, a wide beam at its furthest point, which narrowed until it pointed directly to me. It looked as though the moon were pouring all its light into that one beam and pointing it my way. I glanced over at my friends floating yards away at different places on the lake and realized that they were seeing the same thing. Each of us were receiving the moonlight concentrated into a single beam shining directly toward us, yet it was all the same light. Isn't that kind of like Communion? Christ's love is poured out in its fullness for each person, and indeed for all creation. My receiving his total self-gift in no way diminishes the same gift offered to others. Do we really trust in the lavish generosity of this love? How might deepening this belief change the way we speak and act?

Moment two: Lucille and Theresa's friendship

Several years ago, I encountered Sister Theresa as we both waited for a ride at the front door of the motherhouse. Theresa began telling me that she had just gone to her friend, Sister Lucille, who was very sick and nearing death. The two met when Theresa transferred to the Dominican Sisters of Sinsinawa from a religious community based in another country. When she arrived in the Midwest, Lucille was the person appointed to pick her up from the airport. Theresa was nervous about navigating life not only in a new community, but also a new country, and Lucille's welcome gave her great comfort. Something about that airport welcome bonded them and laid the groundwork for what would become a lifelong friendship.

It was clear almost immediately that Lucille and Theresa were not on the same page about many things. Theresa liked to push boundaries; Lucille liked order. Theresa was not fond of hierarchy; Lucille's circle of friends included several bishops. Theresa liked Teilhard; Lucille preferred Aquinas. Still, despite their differences (and sometimes even because of them) they were dear and lifelong friends.

As we waited by the front door of the motherhouse, Theresa told me about the conversation she'd just had with her friend. As Lucille lay on her deathbed, Theresa asked her what was on her mind. Lucille responded, "I'm thinking about how I was the first one to welcome you when you came to this country, and how good it felt to be there for you. Now, when you reach eternity, I'll be the first one to welcome you home. And when you get there, you'll look at me and you'll say, '*Lucille, you were right.*' And I'll look at you and say, '*You were, too.*' "

I understand that the differences among us are real and complex. I don't wish to eliminate them, gloss over them, or pretend they don't have any practical or moral import. I only yearn for us to navigate them in a way that gives a better witness to the Gospel. Simply put, if the church is to have any credibility in today's world, vitriol and infighting simply cannot be part of the equation.

Catholics, are we courageous enough to step back from the culture wars and ask whether the love of Christ is really the basis for our convictions and the ways we express them? Can we let that love ground both our disagreements and our communion? Maybe then we'll have a shot at being a sign of hope in a world so desperate for healing.



[Christin Tomy](#)

Christin Tomy is a Dominican Sister of Sinsinawa who professed perpetual vows in May 2022. She is currently studying at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, where her personal and research interests include integral ecology, indigenous justice and intercultural theology.

Papal, ecumenical diplomacy appears unable to affect Russia's war in Ukraine

1 July 2022

by [Jonathan Luxmoore](#)

[Vatican](#)
[World](#)



Smoke rises from a destroyed building after A Russian military airstrike in Lysychansk, Ukraine, June 17. (CNS/Reuters/Oleksandr Ratushniak)

WARSAW, POLAND — When representatives of the World Council of Churches debated the war in Ukraine in late June, few expected the historic ecumenical organization to bow to demands for Russia's Orthodox Church to be excluded over its support of President Vladimir Putin's bloody invasion.

Yet the deep acrimonies surrounding the ruinous conflict have raised questions about interfaith ties, as well as about the realistic chances of religious mediation.

"The Ukrainian and Russian governments have themselves kept the path to negotiation open - and there's an even greater case for maintaining dialogue and not closing the channels between churches," Pallottine Fr. Slawomir Pawlowski, an ecumenism expert at Poland's Catholic University of Lublin, told NCR.

"But there's also no doubt that talks and meetings can be exploited for propaganda, so attention must be paid to this as well," he said.



Pallottine Fr. Slawomir Pawlowski (Wikimedia Commons/Artur Karbowy)

The World Council of Churches' central committee met in Geneva to set an agenda for the council's upcoming plenary

assembly, which opens in Karlsruhe, Germany, Aug. 31 under the theme "Reconciliation and Unity."

There had been calls for the Russian Orthodox Church, usually a major World Council of Churches presence, to be barred because of the pro-war stance of its leader, Patriarch Kirill.

While condemning Russia's "illegal and unjustifiable war," however, the central committee declared itself open to Russian participation. The late summer plenary will now go ahead, with [a 20-member Vatican observer group](#) headed by Cardinal Kurt Koch, head of the Vatican's Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity.

"War ... is incompatible with God's very nature and will for humanity and against our fundamental Christian and ecumenical principles," [said the committee](#), which represents 580 million Christians in 352 separate member-churches. The committee said it "rejects any misuse of religious language and authority to justify armed aggression."

"We acknowledge and welcome the commitment of the Moscow Patriarchate ... to engage in encounter and dialogue on the situation in Ukraine under the auspices" of the World Council of Churches, the committee said, adding, "Dialogue remains an obvious urgent necessity to address such a critical situation."

Meanwhile, although Pope Francis [pulled out of a planned June 14 meeting](#) with Kirill in Jerusalem, the pope [has said](#) he still hopes to meet the Russian Orthodox leader when he visits Kazakhstan Sept. 14-15 for a world congress of religious leaders.

With the patriarch facing Western sanctions for backing the war, some observers wonder

whether such top-level encounters can achieve anything, beyond fueling Moscow's ruthless disinformation machine.



A boy fleeing Russia's invasion of Ukraine sleeps at a train station in Zahony, Hungary, March 15. (CNS/Reuters/Bernadett Szabo)

"At grassroots level, in social work and care for refugees, interchurch contacts are continuing as various groups pray for peace and reconciliation," Jesuit Fr. Stephan Lipke, secretary-general of Russia's Catholic bishops' conference, told NCR.

"But with everyone's energy and time now focused on Ukraine, it's become much harder to talk to people other than those you already know well," he said. "This has removed any great impetus for Catholic-Orthodox dialogue."

Doubts about dealing with Russian Orthodox leaders are understandable.

A day before the Feb. 24 Russian invasion, Kirill [lauded](#) Putin's "high and responsible service to the people," and assured his country's armed forces that they had "chosen a very correct path."

Four days later, as Ukrainian fighters struggled to hold back attacks on several fronts, he [endorsed](#) Putin's view that Ukraine had never been a genuine country, telling a

Moscow congregation that Ukraine really formed part of "Russian land."

The patriarch's support for Putin's "special military operation" has continued.

Addressing Moscow audiences on Russia's May 9 Victory Day, Kirill [indignantly dismissed](#) claims he had made "militaristic speeches," while urging Russians to "ensure the Fatherland becomes strong and invincible."



Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill of Moscow visit an exhibition on National Unity Day in Moscow Nov. 4, 2019. (CNS/Reuters pool/Shamil Zhumatov)

On June 19, he [praised invading forces](#) for "defending Russia on the battlefield," and attributed the courage and self-sacrifice of Russian troops "not to high pay, encouragement by superiors or a wish for advancement, but to an inner moral sense nurtured through the Orthodox faith."

Orthodox theologians across the world [have condemned](#) Kirill's espousal of the notion of a Russian sphere of influence, or "Russki Mir," branding it totalitarian and heretical.

Meanwhile, the patriarch's stance has also been rejected by hundreds of Orthodox priests in Russia, who [have risked arrest](#) for criticizing the invasion, as well as by Russian Orthodox dioceses abroad and the

Moscow-linked Ukrainian Orthodox Church, whose governing Holy Synod reaffirmed its independence [in a May 27 declaration](#).

Hundreds of parishes have [switched allegiance](#) since Russia's invasion to Ukraine's smaller independent Orthodox Church, formally established in January 2019, while many of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church's 54 dioceses no longer include Kirill in their prayers.

Despite this, the pope has continued attempts at dialogue, sending Cardinal Konrad Krajewski, the Polish-born head of his charity office, to Ukraine on three separate humanitarian missions. Francis has remained in contact with Moscow through Russia's Holy See embassy.



Archbishop Paul Gallagher, Vatican foreign minister, and Dmytro Kuleba, Ukraine's foreign minister, shake hands after paying tribute to killed Ukrainian soldiers near the Wall of Remembrance in Kyiv, Ukraine, May 20. (CNS/Handout via Reuters/Ukrainian Foreign Ministry Press Service)

Visiting Kyiv and Lviv in Ukraine in late May, the Vatican's foreign minister, Archbishop Paul Gallagher, [reiterated](#) the pontiff's readiness to "aid a genuine negotiating process," if Russia and Ukraine agreed.

The pope's stance has shown signs of hardening.

In a Rome message for the church's World Day of the Poor, he [said](#) the conflict had been complicated by "direct intervention of a superpower, aimed at imposing its own will in violation of the principle of the self-determination," while "extortionate demands made by a few potentates" were "stifling the voice of a humanity that cries out for peace."

Yet attempts by Francis to appear evenhanded have also caused controversy.

In an early May interview with Italy's Corriere della Sera daily, he [suggested](#) NATO had contributed to the war by "barking at Russia's door" and questioned whether Western countries should be supplying Ukraine with weapons.

The comments were [criticized](#) by the foreign ministries of Ukraine and Poland, as well as by a prominent Italian theologian, Archbishop Bruno Forte, who compared Russia's invasion to Hitler's 1939 attack on Poland and warned against "naive pacifism."

Some church leaders, even in Ukraine, have been content to accept Rome's judgment.

"Since fighting broke out in eastern Ukraine back in 2014, Vatican diplomacy has greatly assisted us, while the pope himself has devoted great care to our problems," Bishop Jan Sobilo, an auxiliary with Ukraine's eastern Kharkiv-Zaporizhzhia Diocese, told NCR.

"The Holy Father must speak as pope for all nations — including Russia itself, where there are also many Catholics," said the bishop. "He must also build bridges, even in the harshest and most threatening situations."

Not everyone has concurred.

After touring Ukraine in late May, the president of Poland's bishops' conference criticized the Vatican's "naive and utopian" attitude to the war, and said he feared it was returning to its "old line" of the 1970s, focusing on ties with Moscow at the expense of Eastern and Central Europe.

"The Holy See is always neutral in its diplomatic activity and tries to be impartial toward warring parties — it knows Christians are often fighting on both sides, so it doesn't identify the aggressor," Poznan Archbishop Stanislaw Gadecki [told Poland's Catholic Information Agency](#).



Pope Francis meets Poznan Archbishop Stanislaw Gadecki, president of the Polish bishops' conference, during a private audience at the Vatican March 28. (CNS/Vatican Media)

"Of course, contact and dialogue are worthy goals, since Russia is great and merits respect," said Gadecki, whose country has received more than 4.1 million [Ukrainian refugees](#) in four months. "But the Holy See should also be more careful, knowing from the experience of Central and Eastern European countries that lying is second-nature to Russian diplomacy."

In Russia itself, Lipke also admits to doubts — not least as to whether the pope should be seeking a meeting with Kirill.

While Russian leaders have traditionally preferred to deal directly with Rome rather

than with their country's Catholic Church, Russia's Catholic minority is itself divided, with some priests and laypeople backing the "military operation" against Ukraine and others opposing it.

"Kirill has clearly dug himself in deeply — but Orthodox Christians here also hold contrasting opinions, depending on how the campaign is going," the Russian bishops' secretary-general told NCR.

"Although some bishops may think differently, I personally can't see any purpose in talking with the patriarch right now," said Lipke.

Pawlowski, the Polish church expert, agrees.

For now, at least, despite reservations, the contacts look set to continue.



Cardinal Konrad Krajewski prays over a mass grave near Borodyanka, Ukraine, April 15, during a humanitarian visit as a papal envoy to the country. (CNS/Vatican Media)

The World Council of Churches is organizing a "pilgrimage of justice and peace" to Kyiv and Moscow, and has braved angry Russian reactions by inviting Ukraine's independent Orthodox Church to send observers to its late summer assembly.

The late June statement affirmed the World Council of Churches' role "as a platform and safe space for encounter and dialogue" and urged "members of the ecumenical fellowship in Russia and Ukraine to make use of this platform."

The final composition of the Russian church's large delegation, unveiled in March, was thrown into doubt by the [sudden dismissal](#) on June 7 of its projected leader, Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev, the long-serving director of the church's foreign relations department — a move widely believed linked to Hilarion's lack of enthusiasm for the Ukraine war.

But observers say the Russian church is already working hard to gain support among the 200 Orthodox delegates, who will make up a quarter of the World Council of Churches assembly's participants from more than 120 countries.

In the meantime, with half a million troops engaged along a 1,900-mile front, the world's largest military confrontation since World War II looks set to continue.

In [a statement](#) ahead of a June 15 meeting of NATO defense ministers, Kyiv government officials said their forces currently needed 2,500 tanks and armored vehicles, as well as 1,000 drones and 1,300 howitzers and MLRS rocket systems "to end the war."

The United Nations put [the number](#) of Ukrainians forced to flee their homes at 14 million, almost a third of the population.

"In such circumstances, I'd be extremely surprised if the Vatican came up with some diplomatic solution acceptable to the two sides," Lipke, the Russian Catholic bishops' secretary-general, told NCR.

"As with previous papal efforts to end wars, the possibilities to use high-level encounters for propaganda seems much greater now than any possibility that the pope could be accepted as a mediator," said the priest.



[Jonathan Luxmoore](#)

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