

Resurrection Awaits

Reflections for U.S. Catholics

Lent 2026

Hon. Rev. Dr. Jayme Mathias

Edited by
Rev. Kevin Przybylski

© 2026 Hon. Rev. Dr. Jayme Mathias

All rights reserved
including the right of reproduction
in whole or in part in any form.

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 979-8-19-902874-5

Table of Contents

Preface	i
Ashes, Ashes: Forty Days to Rise! Mortality, repentance and extraordinary love at the beginning of Lent	1
Named, Known and Unafraid Three women we remember on February 19	5
Indecent Grace Marcella Althaus-Reid and the Courage to Reimagine God	9
Detours on the Long Road to Extraordinary Courage Billy Graham, Peter Damian and Malcolm X in a Lent of Reckoning	13
The Empty Chair and the Living Church Rethinking authority, memory, and the Chair of Peter	16
Guarding the Flame St. Polycarp on protecting what truly matters — not jewels or bones, but the living fire of the Gospel!	19
Thinking at the Edge of Faith Anton Günther and the Courage to Question	23
The Love Story of Romeo and...Avertanus? Widening our love in a fearful age	27
Won't You Be My Neighbor? Extraordinary Love in an Unneighborly Time	31
Extraordinary Courage in an Authoritarian Age Félicité Robert de Lamennais, the Old Catholic Archbishops of Utrecht, and the long Catholic struggle against concentrated power	35
Martin Bucer and the Art of Extraordinary Bridgebuilding Lessons from a 16th-century reformer for healing a divided world	39
Zero Discrimination, Zero Self-Harm, Extraordinary Love From Camp Berry to Charlottesville: Learning to Be "Third" in a Wounded World	43

Oh, the Books We Will Read!

Read Across America Day in a Lent

That Needs Extraordinary Love 47

Conscience Over Conformity

Franz Heinrich Reusch and Holy Dissent 50

The Cost of Conscience

Lessons from Peter Richard Kenrick in an age of tightening control 53

Bridge-Builders and Megachurches

Lessons from Ambrose Phillipps de Lisle,
Walter Kasper and Joel Osteen on unity, leadership,
and the extraordinary work of gathering God's people 58

Servants, Saints and Sisters in Courage

Lessons on Solidarity from Perpetua, Felicity,
Hilaria Aguinaldo and Pearl Buck 63

Faith, Feeling and the Courage to Think

Antonio Fogazzaro & Daniel Goleman
on integrating faith, science and emotional wisdom 68

Of Monsters, Men, and the Measure of Leadership

Lessons from Mariano Marcos on Power,
Faith and the Courage to Be Light 73

Extraordinary Women, Extraordinary Courage

St. Frances of Rome, Carrie Chapman Catt,
and the Moral Courage to Trust Women 79

Silver in My Beard, Fire in My Heart

Gratitude for 25 Years of Priestly Ministry 84

A Journey Toward Family

Celebrating 14 Years as Austin's
Only Inclusive Catholic Community 89

From Ecstasy to Entanglement

Denis the Carthusian, Michał Heller,
and the reconciliation of faith and science 93

Power, Conscience and

the Dangerous Seduction of Church-State Alliances

Lessons from Charles de Montalembert 98

Marielle Franco and the Cry of the Disappeared On prophetic courage, state violence, and the sacred dignity of every human life	103
Beware the Ides <i>Laetare</i> Sunday, political betrayal, and the extraordinary courage Lent demands	107
Justice, Conscience, and Courage The Extraordinary Witness of Tina Beattie	112
Conscience, Culture and Community Leading Beyond Authority Remembering the Extraordinary Courage of George Augustus Stallings, Jr.	115
Faith in Exile Lessons from an ancient bishop and a new Pixar film on displacement, conscience and hope	118
St. Joseph, Realtor? What Jesus' adopted father teaches us about faith, superstition and action in an unordinary U.S. moment	122
Falling Upward at the Equinox Richard Rohr, radical joy, and t he Franciscan path in an upside-down world	127
Racial Justice Is Not Optional Vekoslav Grmič, Socialism, and Our Call to Eliminate Racial Discrimination	131
Battling Blindness Lessons from a Bizarre Independent Catholic Bishop	134
Canonization and Cancellation When heroes fall from grace – or are pushed from their pedestals	138
The Cup We Are Asked to Drink Lessons from St. Óscar Romero on courage, sacrifice and prophetic faith	143
“We Don’t Talk About Marcel, Oh No, No” Lessons from Archbishop Lefebvre on the Solemnity of the Annunciation	147

Walking Beyond Institutions	
Lessons from Two Bishops Who Challenged the Church	151
The Defender We Didn't Expect	
Friedrich zu Schwarzenberg, Robin Hood, and the Courage to Stand Close	154
Locked Behind Three Doors	
The Extraordinary Courage of Sister Angélique and the Nuns of Port-Royal	159
Fasten Your Seatbelts	
The Holy Week Roller Coaster Begins!	164
From Catechism Answers to Courageous Questions	
Growing into an Adult Faith with Karl Rahner and Charles E. Curran	169
When Symbols Shatter	
On Faith, Truth, and Human Complexity	174
April Fools and Holy Wisdom	
Finding truth, satire, and extraordinary courage during a week of paradox	178
An Hour That Changed Everything	
From the light-filled Crystal Cathedral to the dark Upper Room: Discovering true power in a world obsessed with power	183
The Trauma of Crucifixion Today	
Reflections for a somber Good Friday	187
From Tombs to Life and Light!	
Lessons on this Easter Vigil	190

Preface

Lent has a way of stripping away illusions. After the unsettled, grinding weeks of Winter Ordinary Time 2026, many of us entered Lent not with tidy resolutions, but with weary hearts. We carried into Ash Wednesday the same burdens that had accompanied us through the opening months of the year: political anxiety, communal fatigue, spiritual restlessness, and an uneasy awareness that the crises surrounding us were not receding.

If indeed we expected a gentle, introspective season, we were mistaken. Lent met us not as a retreat from reality, but as an intensification of it.

We began Lent, as always, with ashes and the stark, humbling reminder that we are dust and to dust we shall return. In 2026, those words landed differently. Mortality no longer feels distant. Institutions we once trusted show their fragility. Norms we assumed would endure now appear alarmingly contingent. The ashes did not merely remind us of personal finitude. They exposed the vulnerability of entire systems, calling into question the very structures we inhabit.

And yet, there is grace in that starkness.

Lent does not flatter us. It does not distract us. It tells the truth. Yet in essence Lent means Spring; the difficulty and challenges we face, if accepted, bring us new life.

Throughout this Lenten journey – from Ash Wednesday through Holy Saturday – we walked with a Jesus who refused to turn stones into bread for his own comfort, who rejected the seductive pull of power, who set his face toward Jerusalem knowing full well the cost. In this Year of Matthew, we heard again the call to secret almsgiving, hidden prayer, and quiet fasting – not as performative acts, but as disciplines that reorient the heart. We listened as Jesus confronted hypocrisy, overturned tables, and spoke hard truths to religious and political authorities alike.

Lent, in other words, is not passive. It is profoundly confrontational.

This volume gathers reflections written during Lent 2026. If Winter Ordinary Time asked how we remain faithful during long weeks of crisis, these reflections press a sharper question: What must we relinquish in order to remain free? What illusions must die? What habits must be unlearned? What fears must be named?

These essays are, once again, unapologetically spiritual and unapologetically political. Lent makes that integration unavoidable. When we fast, we confront systems of consumption. When we give alms, we confront economic injustice. When we pray, we confront the truth of who we are before God and neighbor. In a moment when cruelty continues to

masquerade as strength and deception as strategy, the Lenten disciplines themselves become acts of resistance.

Fasting becomes a refusal to consume what numbs us. Almsgiving becomes a redistribution of what empire hoards. Prayer becomes a re-centering of allegiance away from power and toward truth.

As one who stands at the altar week after week, proclaiming mystery in familiar words, I know how easily even sacred practices can become rote. Lent interrupts that drift. It demands intention. It demands honesty. It demands heart. It challenges us to live these days as if they matter—because they do.

These reflections accompanied readers through a very unordinary American moment during a liturgical season that is as demanding as it is necessary. Each essay sought to ground action in scripture, to root resistance in sacrament, and to remind us that the path to resurrection always passes through the cross.

And make no mistake: Lent is a journey toward the cross.

We followed Jesus as opposition intensified. We watched as betrayal took shape, as crowds shifted, as power closed in. By the time we reached Holy Week, the questions were no longer theoretical. They were immediate and piercing: Where do we stand? Whom do we follow? What are we willing to risk? The cross does not allow for comfortable distance. It draws us into the cost of love in a world that often rejects it.

If Winter Ordinary Time called us to steady, daily faithfulness, Lent calls us to courageous clarity!

This book is an invitation to transformation. It insists that in a time marked by fear and fragmentation, we can choose extraordinary honesty, extraordinary courage and extraordinary solidarity. It insists that repentance is about turning—turning away from what diminishes life and toward what restores it.

My prayer is that these reflections unsettle you where complacency has taken root, comfort you where discouragement lingers, and strengthen you where resolve is needed. May they help us to walk the Lenten path not as passive observers, but as engaged disciples. May they remind us that even as ashes mark our foreheads, they do not define our destiny.

For if Advent and Christmas proclaim that light enters the world, and Winter Ordinary Time teaches us how to tend that light, Lent dares us to follow it into the places we would rather avoid—trusting that on the other side of death itself, resurrection awaits!

Ashes, Ashes: Forty Days to Rise!

Mortality, repentance and extraordinary love
at the beginning of Lent

February 18, 2026



*"Ring around the rosie, a pocket full of posies,
ashes, ashes, we all fall down!"*

Many of us, without a second thought, sang that childhood rhyme on playgrounds. A popular theory claims it originated as a dirge concerning the Black Death—the devastating mid-14th century outbreak of the bubonic plague in Europe, Asia and North Africa: the “ring around the rosie” as the disease’s circular rash, the “pocket full of posies” as flowers warding off stench and/or serving as a talisman against sickness, and the “ashes” of cremation after “we all fall down” — dead!

Historians debate this origin story. Some dismiss it as myth layered centuries later onto folklore. Still, the imagery lingers. Rash. Posies. Falling down dead. Ashes.

Today, on Ash Wednesday, we mark our foreheads with a cross of ash. We remember that we all fall down. All of us. We remember that we are dust, and to dust we shall return (Gen. 3:19). And yet we set out on this forty-day journey not with despair, but with the hope of resurrection and new life!

Blow the Trumpet: Repentance Is Public

Today’s first reading from Joel commands: “Rend your hearts, not your garments” (Joel 2:13). And “blow the trumpet in Zion...proclaim a fast” (Joel 2:15). *Repentance in Scripture is a communal reckoning, not a private sentiment.* Joel envisions people of all ages and ways of life gathered together: elders and infants, women and men, married and single. No one is exempt!

Psalms 51 deepens the plea: “Have mercy on me, O God....Create in me a clean heart” (Ps. 51:3,12). This is not cheap grace. It is gut-level honesty.

It is the spiritual equivalent of Johnny Cash's "Hurt" or Adele's "Hello" – a confession that something is broken inside.

Paul then pleads: "Be reconciled to God" (2Cor. 5:20). Not later. Not when convenient. Now.

In an America fractured by political idolatry, racial injustice, and widening inequality, repentance must extend beyond individual piety. It must include our repentance for public complicity. It demands that we ask: *Where have we – as individuals and as a society – tolerated cruelty? Where have we benefited from systems that crush the exploited? Where have we traded truth for tribal loyalty?*

Marking ourselves with ashes makes
the hypocrisy harder to hide!

When Jesus Says "Wash Your Face!"

In today's Gospel (Mt. 6:1-6 & 16-18), Jesus outlines the three pillars of Lent: *prayer, fasting and almsgiving*. And he famously subverts religious showmanship. "When you fast, do not look gloomy....Wash your face, so that you may not appear to be fasting."

Ironically, perhaps, Catholics today walk around with ash crosses visible to everyone at the grocery store, on Zoom calls, and in the halls of Congress. And this tradition of ashes has spread to other Christian traditions.

The key is *intention*. Ashes do *not* function as virtue signals. They function as signals of our mortality. They whisper, not shout. They tell the truth about us all. Our days are numbered – then "we all fall down."

Pop culture often grasps this tension between public ritual and private transformation. In *The Shawshank Redemption*, Andy Dufresne crawls through filth toward freedom. In *The Matrix*, Neo awakens to reality's deeper layer. In *The Chosen*, disciples slowly confront their illusions. Leonard Cohen's "Anthem" reminds us, "There is a crack in everything: That's how the light gets in." U2's "40" turns Psalm 40 into aching lament.

Yes, Lent exposes the crack – through which grace pours!

Forty Days in the Desert: Beyond Candy and Soda

We often reduce Lent to "I'm giving up chocolate." Or "I'm giving up soda." Or alcohol. Or smoking. There is nothing wrong with small disciplines. But the desert Jesus entered was not about sugar intake or bodily health. It was about power, ego and allegiance (Mt. 4:1-11).

If you hadn't heard the story before, you might wonder: Will Jesus prove himself by turning stones into bread? Will he grasp political domination? Will he test God's protection?

Our temptations mirror his. We hunger for control. We crave power and control. We test God by baptizing our politics and calling them holy.

In this extraordinary American moment, perhaps our Lenten fast in 2026 must include:

- Fasting from outrage media that profits from division.
 - Fasting from dehumanizing language about immigrants, our LGBTQIA+ siblings, and, yes, even our political opponents.
 - Fasting from the cynicism that assumes nothing can change. And perhaps we must take on additional Lenten practices:
 - Sustained advocacy for voting rights and human rights.
 - Concrete solidarity with marginalized communities.
 - Courageous conversations that bridge partisan divides.
- Extraordinary love requires more than dietary tweaks!

Ashes and a Nation in Need of Reconciliation

Paul's plea—"Be reconciled to God"—loudly echoes in a country that desperately needs reconciliation with itself.

We remain divided over immigration, reproductive rights, economic policy, and the meaning of democracy itself. We scroll through headlines like scenes from *The West Wing* rewritten by the writers of *Black Mirror*. We oscillate between idealism and dystopia.

Ash Wednesday refuses both denial and despair. It insists on truth-telling. It invites humility. It dismantles illusions of permanence.

We all fall down. Empires fall, too. Political parties, as well.

But the ashes on our foreheads trace the shape of a cross that did not speak the final word!

Lenten Practices for Disciples

If you wish to truly practice extraordinary courage this Lent, consider these concrete commitments:

- **Practice daily "examen."** Spend a few minutes each evening reviewing where you cooperated with grace, and where you resisted it.
- **Commit to one justice-focused fast.** Weekly fast from something that fuels division, and donate the savings to organizations serving the exploited.
- **Deeply engage Scripture.** Slowly read one gospel across these forty days. Perhaps the very human picture of Jesus in Mark. Or the renowned teachings of Jesus in Matthew. Or the memorable and unsettling parables in Luke. Let Jesus unsettle you!

- **Publicly advocate.** Call elected officials about policies harming vulnerable communities near you. It takes time and effort but just may be the very Word that transforms country, world and even one struggling sister or brother.
- **Build unlikely relationships.** Invite someone with differing political views to coffee – and listen without caricature.
- **Locally serve.** Volunteer at a shelter, food pantry or refugee ministry.
- **Confess your shortcomings and the obstacles in your relationships with God and others.** Allow grace to meet your concrete sins.

Let Lent be a season of concrete and spiritual self-improvement!

From Playground Rhyme to Paschal Rising

“Ring around the rosie....Ashes, ashes, we all fall down!”

Whether or not that rhyme began in plague-ridden Europe, it captures a truth that Ash Wednesday boldly proclaims: We fall down. We sin. We age. We die.

But Christianity does not end with collapse. It moves *through* collapse.

On playgrounds, children laughingly fall, then quickly rise again. On this holy day, we receive ashes. In some places, we kneel to express a more penitential posture before God. In forty days, though, we will boldly stand to proclaim resurrection.

This is the paradox at the heart of our faith. We fall down, yes. But in Christ, we rise!

As we enter these forty days in the desert with Jesus, may we cultivate extraordinary humility, extraordinary repentance, and extraordinary love. May our fasting deepen compassion. May our prayer expand courage. May our almsgiving disrupt injustice.

Ashes mark our mortality, yes, but they also mark our belonging to a story that refuses to end in dust!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- What in my life most needs repentance right now?
- How have I reduced Lent to minor inconvenience – giving up candy or soda – rather than major transformation?
- Where do my community and nation most urgently need reconciliation?
- What temptation in the desert most mirrors my own: power, security or spectacle?
- How can my Lenten practices concretely benefit the exploited?

- What would extraordinary love look like in my home, workplace and community over these forty days?

Let Us Pray

Merciful God, You form us from dust and breathe into us your life. As ashes trace our foreheads, trace humility upon our hearts. Create in us clean hearts. Reconcile us to yourself and to one another. Lead us into the desert, and keep us there long enough to be changed. Teach us to fast from injustice, to pray with courage, and to give with reckless generosity. When we fall down, raise us. When we despair, steady us. When we forget, remind us that resurrection waits beyond these forty days. Amen.

Named, Known and Unafraid

Three women we remember on February 19

February 19, 2026



For far too long, women have been marginalized. Even our sacred texts sometimes leave them unnamed: the woman with a hemorrhage (Mk. 5:25-34), the Samaritan woman at the well (Jn. 4:1-42), the widow who offers two small coins (Mk. 12:41-44). Others are identified only by their relationship to men—like Moses’ mother (Ex. 2:1-10) and Peter’s mother-in-law (Mk. 1:29-31).

They comfort and heal. They preach—with and without words. They bankroll Jesus’ ministry (Lk. 8:1-3). Yet our sacred texts often withhold their names.

Today, on this second day of Lent, we speak three names aloud: three strong women who died on February 19, centuries and continents apart, but united in extraordinary courage!

Jeanne-Catherine-Agnès Arnauld: Conscience Under Fire

In 1671, Jeanne-Catherine-Agnès Arnauld —“Mother Agnes” —died after leading the Cistercian convent of Port-Royal-des-Champs through the

turbulence of the anti-Jansenist controversy. A sister to the formidable theologian Antoine Arnauld, she organized resistance to the 1665 Formulary of Submission imposed upon those who defended the teachings of St. Augustine. The Archbishop of Paris confronted her. Pressure mounted. Surveillance tightened.

Mother Agnes did not capitulate lightly.

Whether one aligns with Jansenism or not, Mother Agnes embodies a Lenten question: *What does fidelity to conscience require when church and state demand compliance?* Acts 5:29 echoes across centuries: “We must obey God rather than men”!

Mother Agnes’ life recalls the moral defiance dramatized in *A Man for All Seasons* and the fierce interiority portrayed in *Of Gods and Men*. Conscience is rarely convenient. It often proves costly.

In this extraordinary American moment, when religious language is sometimes weaponized for partisan gain, we must examine whether we resist injustice with equal clarity.

Mother Agnes whispers: Rend your hearts, not your garments!

Melchora Aquino: Hospitality as Revolution

Melchora Aquino de Ramos — more popularly known in the Philippines as “Elder Sora,” the “Grand Woman of the Revolution” and the “Mother of Balintawak” — died in 1919 at the age of 107. A mother of six, widowed young, she opened her home to Filipino revolutionaries resisting Spanish colonial rule. She fed them. She sheltered them. She listened.

Authorities arrested and deported her to Guam.

Hospitality became her protest.

Hebrews 13:2 urges, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers.” In Aquino’s life, hospitality became resistance. Her kitchen table became holy ground!

Her story resonates with the secret networks in *Hidden Figures* and the quiet defiance sung in Aretha Franklin’s “Respect.” It echoes the communal care envisioned in *Call the Midwife*.

During Lent, when we speak of almsgiving, perhaps we should imagine more than spare change. Perhaps we should imagine spare rooms, spare time, and spare courage!

Aquino teaches that extraordinary love often begins at home and can even destabilize empires!

Sylvia Rivera: Stirring the Saints of Stonewall

Sylvia Ray Rivera, who died in 2002, stands among the fiercest prophets of modern liberation movements. A veteran of the 1969 uprising at the Stonewall Inn, she co-founded STAR to support homeless drag queens, gay youth and trans women. Many credit her with igniting action at Stonewall on June 28, 1969.

Marginalized, even within marginalized communities, she insisted that the most vulnerable remain centered.

Her defiance recalls the tables so disruptively overturned by Jesus (Mt. 21:12-13). It pulses with the urgency of Bob Dylan's "The Times They Are a-Changin'," and the aching demand for dignity in Lady Gaga's "Born This Way." It finds contemporary echoes in *Pose*.

Rivera forces us to confront a piercing Lenten question: *Whom do we still exclude? Whose suffering do we politely sidestep?*

Isaiah 58 insists that the fast God desires "looses the bonds of injustice." Rivera's life embodied that fast!

Three Women, One Lenten Invitation

Mother Agnes modeled courageous conscience.

Melchora Aquino modeled revolutionary hospitality.

Sylvia Rivera modeled unapologetic advocacy for the marginalized.

Together, they challenge facile Lenten sacrifices. Giving up candy will not dismantle patriarchy. Abstaining from soda or alcohol will not shelter a refugee. Eating catfish, salmon or shrimp on Fridays will not defend a trans teenager bullied in school.

Jesus' desert confronts power, fear and identity. These women walked their own deserts.

In today's U.S. sociopolitical climate — where reproductive rights, LGBTQIA+ protections, immigration policy and voting access remain contested — extraordinary courage requires more than hashtags. It requires embodied solidarity!

We cannot allow women's names to vanish from our sacred memory. Or from our legislative priorities.

Lenten Commitments for Extraordinary Disciples

This Lent, consider these concrete calls to action:

- **Study women's history in church and society.** Host conversations that center female theologians and activists. Perhaps study the book *SHE WHO IS* by Elizabeth Johnson.
- **Advocate for policies protecting women and LGBTQIA+ persons.** Call representatives. Write op-eds. Show up.

- **Practice radical hospitality.** Support shelters for survivors of domestic violence and LGBTQIA+ youth. Support organizations like COVENANT HOUSE which serve marginalized youth.
 - **Examine organizational leadership structures.** Ask who holds authority, and who remains unheard.
 - **Mentor young women and queer youth.** Invest time, not just sentiment.
 - **Fast from misogynistic and transphobic media.** Replace it with stories that expand empathy.
 - **Publicly pray for courage.** Normalize prophetic intercession.
- Extraordinary love always costs something. Extraordinary courage always risks something. Extraordinary faith always changes something.

Speaking Their Names in the Desert

Scripture sometimes leaves women unnamed. Tradition sometimes sidelines them. Culture often commodifies them.

Today we must resist that erasure.

Jeanne-Catherine-Agnès Arnauld.

Melchora Aquino.

Sylvia Rivera.

As we enter Lent, we remember that God calls each of us by name (Is. 43:1).

As we journey these forty days toward Easter, may we refuse anonymity for those whom history might otherwise forget. May we embody extraordinary courage like Mother Agnes, extraordinary hospitality like Elder Sora, and extraordinary advocacy like Sylvia Rivera.

In an era that is anything but ordinary, may we become disciples whose love proves unmistakably bold!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Whose names have I failed to learn or honor?
- Where is my conscience asking me to resist unjust authority?
- How can my home become a site of revolutionary hospitality?
- Whom do I still struggle to affirm as fully beloved of God?
- What Lenten sacrifice would genuinely advance justice for women and LGBTQIA+ persons?
- How might extraordinary courage reshape my home, school, workplace or community this year?

A Prayer for Courageous Women

God of Miriam and Mary, God of unnamed widows and defiant daughters, we thank you for Jeanne-Catherine-Agnès Arnauld, for Melchora Aquino, for Sylvia Rivera. Plant in us their courage. Deepen in us their hospitality. Ignite in us their fire for justice. During these forty days, strip away our complacency. Strengthen our resolve. Teach us to defend the marginalized and to speak names the world forgets. May our love grow extraordinary. May our courage grow extraordinary. May our discipleship grow unmistakably bold. Amen.

Indecent Grace

Marcella Althaus-Reid and the Courage to Reimagine God

February 20, 2026



When many people hear the country Argentina, they think of *fútbol* glory, tango rhythms, and perhaps the papacy of Pope Francis. Yet another Argentinian deserves our attention today: theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid, whose work invites us to see God not only in sanctuaries, but also in slums, margins, bodies and lives often deemed “improper.” As Lent unfolds—our forty days in the desert with Jesus—Althaus-Reid’s witness calls us toward extraordinary honesty, extraordinary courage, and extraordinary love.

The Land of Silver and a Theology from the Margins

Marcella Althaus-Reid grew up amid economic struggle and later ministered among the poor in Buenos Aires. There she encountered faith lived not in tidy doctrine, but in survival, resilience, and complicated relationships. She eventually became the first woman to chair the School of Divinity at the University of Edinburgh, a milestone that itself signaled quiet transformation.

Her theology insisted that God is present in real lives—messy lives, embodied lives, marginalized lives. She refused to separate spirituality

from economics, sexuality, gender or power. In Lent, a season that strips illusions away, such honesty feels especially apt.

Her landmark works, including *Indecent Theology* and *The Queer of God*, challenged Christians to ask whether respectability sometimes becomes an idol. She urged believers to examine who gets excluded when theology prioritizes comfort over truth.

Lent asks the same question.

Scripture, Social Justice, and the Work of Reconciliation

February 20 also marks the **World Day of Social Justice**—a reminder that *our faith must confront poverty, inequality and exclusion*. Scripture repeatedly echoes this call:

- Isaiah urges us to loose the bonds of injustice (Is. 58).
- The *Magnificat* proclaims the lifting of the lowly (Lk. 1:52). It was banned in certain parts of the Roman Empire because of this.
- Jesus announces good news to the poor (Lk. 4:18).
- Paul speaks of reconciliation as our shared ministry (2Cor. 5:18-20).
- Matthew 25 identifies Christ with the hungry, imprisoned and stranger.

Althaus-Reid extended liberation theology's insight: *Oppression is never singular*. Economic injustice, sexism, homophobia, racism—these interlock. Extraordinary discipleship therefore demands intersectional compassion!

In this extraordinary American moment, where polarization fractures communities, her theology reminds us that reconciliation cannot occur without truth. Repentance without structural change remains incomplete.

Lent Beyond Respectability

Many Lenten practices remain safe: giving up sweets, eating fish on Fridays, reducing screen time, adding a prayer routine. Helpful, yes—but often insufficient.

Althaus-Reid challenges us to ask harder questions:

Who is missing from our pews or our neighborhood?

Whose stories make us uncomfortable?

What parts of ourselves do we hide from God?

Jesus' desert experience stripped away illusion. Likewise, Althaus-Reid invites us to remove theological masks.

This movement appears in pop culture too. Stories increasingly explore identity, dignity and liberation:

- The musical film *Evita* portrays Argentina's complicated relationship with power and the poor.

- The television series *Pose* centers LGBTQIA+ community, resilience and chosen family.
- Lady Gaga's "Born This Way" celebrates dignity rooted in identity.
- The film *Moonlight* explores masculinity, vulnerability and grace on society's margins.
- The series *The Handmaid's Tale* warns how religion can either liberate or oppress.

These cultural texts echo what theology proclaims: *God meets us precisely where systems fail us!*

Possible Lessons

From Marcella Althaus-Reid, we learn:

- **Embodiment matters.** Theology cannot float above lived experience.
- **Margins reveal truth.** Those excluded often most clearly perceive injustice.
- **Respectability can conceal harm.** Institutions sometimes protect comfort, rather than people.
- **Liberation is spiritual work.** Justice is not separate from prayer; it is prayer enacted!
- **Hope is stubborn.** Extraordinary hope persists even amid controversy!

Lent, therefore, becomes less about denial, and more about transformation!

Calls to Action: Practicing Extraordinary Courage

Before we conclude, here are concrete invitations for believers and all people of good will this Lent:

- Listen intentionally to voices historically excluded in your community.
- Support ministries serving LGBTQIA+ youth, migrants and people experiencing poverty.
- Study liberation and queer theology, alone and with others.
- Publicly advocate for policies that protect housing, healthcare and employment dignity.
- Examine language, imagery and leadership structures for inclusion.
- Fast from silence when marginalized people are harmed.
- Give alms not only financially, but relationally – time, presence and solidarity.

These practices transform Lent into a school of extraordinary compassion!

Ashes, Argentina, and Indecent Grace

We began with Argentina—a land of beauty, struggle and complexity. We end there, too, with a theologian who insisted that God refuses tidy boundaries.

Ashes remind us we are dust. Marcella Althaus-Reid reminds us that even dust is holy!

In the desert, Jesus confronted temptation toward power, spectacle and certainty. In her own way, Althaus-Reid confronted theology's temptations toward exclusion, respectability and silence. Both point us toward a faith that is braver, more honest, and more compassionate than we imagined.

This Lent, extraordinary love may require indecent courage—the courage to see God where we were taught or told not to look!

Questions for Prayer & Reflection

- Where does my faith feel most safe—and why?
- Whose stories challenge my theological assumptions?
- What part of myself do I still hide from God?
- How might fasting create space for deeper solidarity?
- Where is reconciliation needed in my relationships or civic life?
- What would extraordinary courage look like this week?
- How might I recognize God in places I once avoided?

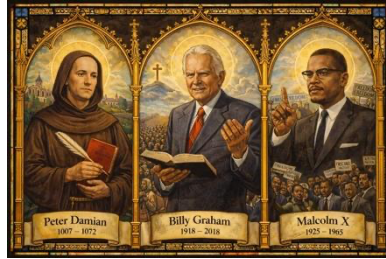
Let Us Pray

God of deserts and doorways, You meet us beyond respectability, beyond certainty, beyond fear. Strip away what prevents us from fully loving. Teach us to recognize holiness in every body, every story, every struggle. Grant us extraordinary courage to pursue justice, extraordinary tenderness to accompany the wounded, and extraordinary hope to trust that transformation is possible. As ashes mark our mortality, let love mark our lives. Amen.

Detours on the Long Road to Extraordinary Courage

Billy Graham, Peter Damian and Malcolm X in a Lent of Reckoning

February 21, 2026



Our flight out of Washington, D.C. was delayed on Tuesday evening, which meant that we missed our connection in Charlotte, North Carolina. Instead of returning home to Austin, as we had hoped, we boarded a shuttle to an airport hotel in “Queen City.” I admittedly attempt to find grace in every challenge and interruption. Our plane’s mechanical failures, after all, were not going to be solved by anyone’s frustration! Rebooking failed. And we embraced the detour.

Then came the grace.

During that late-night shuttle ride, we passed Billy Graham Parkway. The name stirred memories: my childhood admiration for Graham, whom I saw on TV and whose preaching drew millions, but also the tension as I matured and began to wrestle with theological and political positions that felt far narrower than the breadth of Jesus’ teachings. The parkway bearing his name suddenly became a metaphor.

Many of us travel a Billy Graham Parkway of faith: sincere beginnings, complicated middle chapters, then, yes, unexpected destinations!

In this extraordinary Lenten season, February 21 invites us to reflect on voices that challenge, correct and expand our discipleship.

Evangelization and Its Limits

William Franklin “Billy” Graham, Jr. (1918-2018) undeniably reshaped modern Christianity. His crusades modeled an accessible proclamation of the Gospel, encouraging converts to join local congregations, rather than remain attached to a personality. That instinct toward community remains instructive.

Yet evangelization without justice risks becoming performance. Scripture insists that proclamation and liberation belong together (Lk. 4:18). Films like *Selma* and songs such as “A Change Is Gonna Come”

remind us that faith language gains credibility when it accompanies social transformation.

The question Lent poses is simple and demanding: *Are we expanding the circle of belonging, or merely defending our corner of it?*

Reform from Within: The Courage of Peter Damian

The Church's commemoration of **St. Peter Damian** (1007-1072) brings that question closer to home. He confronted clerical corruption not from outside, but from love for the Church itself. Reform was his form of fidelity!

Progressives often inherit that same vocation. Critique becomes an act of hope when it seeks conversion, rather than collapse. Peter Damian reminds us that holiness requires courage. Prayer that does not disturb injustice becomes spiritual anesthesia.

Lenten fasting, then, is not only about food, but about power: fasting from silence, from complicity, from the comfort of disengagement.

Malcolm X and the Urgency of Justice

February 21 also marks the death of **Malcolm X** (1925-1965), whose life testifies to transformation, intellectual rigor and the fierce impatience of those denied dignity. His tension with Martin Luther King, Jr. illustrates a truth the Church still struggles to hold: Movements need both prophetic fire and pastoral patience!

Malcolm X challenges us not to domesticate justice language. The Gospel's demands sound less like polite dialogue and more like Jesus overturning tables (Jn. 2). Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* captures that same moral friction—communities wrestling with anger, responsibility and love.

Lent asks whether our spirituality can balance the patience and the fire!

Mother Languages and Belonging

Today's annual commemoration of **International Mother Language Day** widens the lens. Language carries memory, identity and power. When societies dismiss languages, they often dismiss people. I'm recalling the many stories of Mexican American elders in Austin who share sad stories of how teachers anglicized their names—from *Raúl* to "Roy," or from *Elena* to "Mary Helen"—and punished them for speaking the language of their parents at school or even on the playground.

Evangelization that honors multilingual communities mirrors Pentecost (Acts 2), where the Spirit speaks through difference, rather than erasing it. Shows like *The Chosen* resonate partly because they portray Jesus within cultural complexity, rather than abstraction.

To value mother languages is to resist fear-based nationalism and embrace the Church's global identity. In this view, almsgiving becomes not only financial generosity, but cultural humility!

Calls to Extraordinary Action

This convergence of voices suggests concrete Lenten practices:

- Expand evangelization beyond invitation to advocacy. Accompany immigrants, prisoners and the economically marginalized (Mt. 25).
- Publicly speak against individual/structural failures while remaining rooted in love for others.
- Learn and intentionally use basic phrases in a language spoken by neighbors.
- Support organizations led by communities most affected by injustice, rather than speaking over them.
- Fast from despair by limiting your doom-scrolling and increasing your direct engagement with real people.
- Create spaces for testimony – places where people can honestly tell stories, even of their doubt and anger.

These practices require more than giving up candy or soda. They require extraordinary courage!

Roads That Redirect Us

Our airport shuttle ride on Tuesday night became a parable. Faith rarely moves in straight lines, but we eventually end up where the Spirit—and the effects of our decisions—lead us! Billy Graham's parkway, Peter Damian's reform, Malcolm X's urgency, and the voices of our ancestors' languages all redirect us toward a deeper Gospel.

Lent is a detour that reveals destination. We enter the desert carrying contradictions and imagining that the journey will turn out one way. We emerge, hopefully, in quite a different place, proclaiming liberty to captives!

If we accept the detour, Easter becomes not a return to normal, but the birth of something extraordinary: a Church more courageous, more multilingual, more honest and more committed to justice than comfort!

Questions for Prayer & Reflection

- Where has my faith journey taken unexpected detours that later revealed grace?
- How do I balance proclamation of faith with commitment to justice?
- What institutional courage might God be asking of me this Lent?
- Whose voices or languages do I overlook in my daily life?
- How might urgency and patience coexist in my discipleship?

- What practice would move my Lenten observance from symbolic to transformative?

Let Us Pray

God of deserts and detours, you meet us on roads we did not choose. Give us voices that proclaim good news, hearts that hunger for justice, ears that honor every language of belonging. Lead your Church through this extraordinary season from interruption to resurrection, from fear to courage, from comfort to love that transforms the world. Amen.

The Empty Chair and the Living Church

Rethinking authority, memory, and the Chair of Peter

February 22, 2026



Standing inside St. Peter's Basilica last month, I again felt both awe and unease. Beneath the soaring dome, pilgrims gazed toward Bernini's great cathedra—a 48-foot throne meant to symbolize continuity, authority and permanence. Yet I quietly wondered: What did the early followers of Jesus actually intend when they spoke of building the church on Peter? How did a fragile community story become a global claim of authority? And what might the empty chairs of our own lives teach us about leadership, humility and extraordinary responsibility in this extraordinary U.S. moment?

Peter: A Fallible Rock

St. Peter, the man traditionally called the first pope—a comical anachronism, of course—appears in scripture not as an unshakeable monarch, but as a complicated disciple. He misunderstands Jesus. He sinks while walking on water. He denies Jesus not once, not twice, but three times.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus names Peter the “rock” —the popular English translation that leads me to often jokingly refer to Peter as “Rocky.” That declaration emerged at least four decades after Jesus' death, within a

living community wrestling with identity after trauma and persecution. The story functions as theology, more than history or biography. It speaks about trust, forgiveness and continuity, rather than provide an institutional blueprint.

That matters during Lent. In today's first reading, Adam and Eve prematurely grasp power and knowledge. In today's gospel, Jesus resists temptation in the desert. Peter embodies something in between: imperfect faith that still becomes mission. Indeed, the church that emerged from the stories of him and Jesus was not built on certainty, but on conversion!

How Rome Claimed the Story

Peter's connection to Rome likely grew gradually through memory, martyrdom traditions, and the political reality that Rome became Christianity's administrative center. By the second and third centuries, Roman bishops increasingly invoked Peter to justify their authority. Laughable, of course, not unlike so many other assertions by leaders over time seeking to polish and justify their place in church and the world.

That trajectory culminated centuries later. The sham Vatican Council of 1869-1870, under Pio Nono, Pius IX, formally defined papal primacy and universal jurisdiction. In an age of nationalism and institutional anxiety, theological claims stabilized identity!

Yet history reveals development, not inevitability. Authority emerged through argument, devotion, politics and need. Recognizing that complexity does not weaken faith. It invites extraordinary honesty.

Chairs, Memory and Impermanence

The feast of the Chair of Peter itself may echo the Roman practice of *Parentalia*, when families honored the dead by leaving an empty chair at table. The symbolism remains powerful. *A chair represents role more than person.* Someone occupies it for a time. Then another does.

I remember when Trustee Robert Schneider died during my service to the Austin ISD Board of Trustees: A wide, black ribbon around his chair spoke louder than speeches. Leadership is temporary. Responsibility is sacred. Ash Wednesday whispers the same truth: *We sit in our chairs only briefly, then someone else will occupy them after us!*

Across traditions, empty chairs signal presence through absence: Elijah's chair at Passover, memorial seats at civic gatherings, the *cathedra* in every cathedral. Indeed, the Feast of the Chair of Peter invites not triumphalism, but tremendous humility.

Why Many Inclusive Catholics Hesitate

For many Inclusive/Independent Catholic communities, today's celebration by our Roman Catholic siblings raises questions, rather than devotion. If authority becomes centralized without accountability, the chair risks overshadowing the people.

Peter's story challenges precisely that impulse. The rock is not perfection, but repentance. The church becomes credible when leaders confess limits, share power, and listen to the margins.

In a digital age flooded with misinformation and a political era inundated with lies and blatant disinformation, the rapid spread of the "Peter as institutional foundation" narrative offers a cautionary mirror. Stories shape structures. Structures shape lives. Lent asks us to examine both.

Pop culture often explores similar themes. In *The Matrix*, characters awoken to hidden systems. In *Les Misérables*, grace overturns rigid law. The series *The Chosen* portrays disciples learning leadership through failure. Authority becomes relational, not merely positional.

Extraordinary Practices for an Extraordinary Church

Before we conclude, here are a few calls to action:

- Intentionally pray for the leaders who occupy various "chairs" — especially those who struggle, doubt or resist reform.
- Fast not only from food, but from clericalism, cynicism and passive spectatorship.
- Give alms by supporting communities harmed by institutional failures.
- Create literal empty-chair rituals to honor loved ones and past leaders.
- Critically and lovingly study church history and world history, refusing both nostalgia and dismissal.
- Advocate for shared governance, transparency and inclusion.

The Chair as Invitation, Not Possession

We return to that basilica image at St. Peter's in Vatican City. A magnificent chair suspended in light. Pilgrims looking upward. Questions quietly rising.

The Chair of Peter need not symbolize unquestioned authority. It can instead represent vocation: the call to hold space, to listen, to serve briefly yet faithfully. Like Peter, we often misunderstand. Like Peter, we are still sent.

In this Lenten desert, *extraordinary courage means we sit lightly in our chairs*. We resist the temptation to control. We build communities where authority flows through love, rather than status. No empty chair threatens the church. It reminds us that Christ remains the center!

Questions for Prayer & Reflection

- Which leaders shaped my life and my faith, and how do I honor their influence today?
- Where do I cling to certainty, rather than conversion?
- How might I exercise priestly, prophetic and leadership roles more courageously this Lent?
- What “chairs” have I temporarily occupied, and how have I stewarded them?
- How can my communities practice authority that heals, rather than excludes?
- What narratives about the church do I accept without examination?

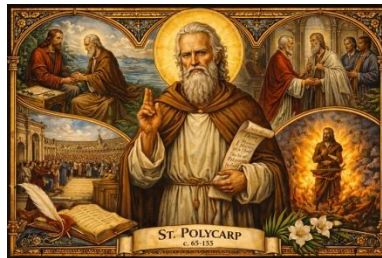
Let Us Pray

God of deserts and thresholds, you call imperfect people to extraordinary responsibility. Teach us to sit in our chairs with humility, to relinquish power when love requires, to remember those who came before us, and to prepare space for those who will follow. As we journey toward Easter, transform our understanding of authority into service, our memory into gratitude, and our questions into courage. Amen.

Guarding the Flame

St. Polycarp on protecting what truly matters —
not jewels or bones, but the living fire of the Gospel!

February 23, 2026



I was raised in St. Nicholas Catholic Church, a now-destroyed community that once served as the mother church of the Basilica and Shrine of Our Lady of Consolation in Carey, Ohio. Faithful devotees of Our

Lady there donated jewels to crown Mary and Jesus, and those crowns at times tempted thieves. I remember how, in the 1980s, someone broke into the basilica at night to steal them. Smashed remnants were found in a dumpster weeks later, and new crowns were fashioned. The response was understandable: heightened security, a transparent case with an alarm, and a renewed determination to protect sacred objects. That theft wasn't the first: Sixty years earlier, in 1927, a career criminal who purportedly robbed 7,000+ churches and set fire to 22, stole the jeweled crowns and demanded a ransom. Ah, the monetary value of some sacred objects!

Twenty-five years later, my mind bent toward those memories when I learned that a bone believed to belong to St. Polycarp had been stolen and never recovered. The international headlines stirred deeper questions: What do we truly safeguard? Are we more fixated on historical relics than contemporary witness? And, after all, who was this St. Polycarp? Today, as the Church commemorates him, we consider such questions.

A Bridge Between Generations

Polycarp (c. 65-155) stands among the great Apostolic Fathers, alongside **Clement of Rome** and **Ignatius of Antioch**. Tradition suggests that he knew the apostle **John**. Later, **Irenaeus of Lyons** remembered meeting the elderly bishop when Irenaeus was a child. Polycarp therefore embodied continuity. He carried memory. He authenticated tradition in a time when interpretations of Jesus rapidly multiplied.

Polycarp's *Epistle to the Philippians* reveals a Church still developing its structure. He wrote of presbyters and deacons, while other communities emphasized the nascent concept of bishops. Diversity did not threaten the communion of such communities. That early flexibility feels striking in our extraordinary moment, when uniformity often masquerades as virtue.

Disagreement Without Division

Polycarp's visit to Rome (c. 154) brought him into conversation with Anicetus, the bishop of Rome—or the “pope,” if we were to fall back on that obvious anachronism. They disagreed most famously about when to celebrate Easter. Yet they remained in full communion. Anicetus even invited Polycarp to preside at the Eucharist in his church. Imagine that. Disagreement did not produce exile. Difference did not produce denunciation!

In a U.S. climate where ideological purity frequently replaces relationship, Polycarp reminds us that *unity is not sameness*. The early Church knew how to hold tension. It practiced extraordinary patience. It chose communion over victory.

That witness directly speaks to a Church navigating polarization, political pressure and the temptation to reduce the Gospel to partisan identity in the form of the oxymoron that is “Christian [read *white*] nationalism.”

Martyrdom and the Courage to Refuse

Polycarp’s martyrdom remains one of Christianity’s most powerful testimonies. Ordered to burn incense to the emperor, he refused. With noted irony —*burn incense or be burned!*—it was ordered that he be roasted. Tradition tells us the flames did not immediately consume him. Whether literal or symbolic, the story communicates something essential: Systems of domination cannot easily extinguish extraordinary courage!

His martyrdom was less about death, and more about fidelity: He reportedly blessed God for judging him worthy to share Jesus’ cup of suffering (Mt. 26:39, Lk. 22:42).

Today, many people suffer different forms of persecution: migrants facing detention, communities losing civil protections, educators constrained by censorship, activists criminalized for solidarity. Polycarp’s witness invites us not toward heroics, but toward steadiness. *Faithfulness often looks like refusing small compromises that erode human dignity!*

Diversity, Heresy and the Temptation to Exclude

Polycarp lived amid theological conflict. He opposed teachings that, in his estimation, distorted the Gospel, and he reportedly called false teachers harsh names. Yet his life also demonstrates that the early Church navigated disagreement without collapsing into permanent fracture.

That nuance matters today as diversity—theological, cultural and linguistic—becomes politically contested. Current rollbacks of DEI initiatives and civil rights protections reveal how deeply our U.S. society fears difference. Polycarp’s world was messy, plural and contested. So is ours.

The question is whether we will weaponize difference, or practice communion through it. The Gospel repeatedly chooses the latter!

Relics, Theft and What We Protect

Sacred objects matter. They carry memory. Which is why Polycarp’s stolen bones in 2013 spur deeper conversation.

Relics can disappear. Witness cannot.

The early Christians treasured Polycarp not because of his bones, but because of his courage, teaching and communion across difference. In an age when churches sometimes invest more energy in preserving structures than cultivating discipleship, his life redirects our priorities.

Lent deepens that invitation. *Prayer, fasting and almsgiving protect the living tradition far better than alarmed cases protect jeweled crowns.* Extraordinary virtue, after all, is the greatest relic!

Calls to Action

- **Practice communion across disagreement.** Intentionally reach out to someone whose theological or political perspective differs from yours.
- **Protect people before institutions.** Advocate for migrants, queer youth, workers and communities losing legal protections.
- **Deepen Lenten practices beyond personal sacrifice.** Fast from cynicism. Publicly pray for justice. Support grassroots organizations.
- **Study early Church diversity.** Let history challenge simplistic narratives about uniform tradition.
- **Honor living witnesses.** Support activists, caregivers, teachers, ministers and all who embody extraordinary virtue today.
- **Speak truth in the face of exclusion.** Polycarp reminds us that fidelity and compassion must remain inseparable.

The Fire That Cannot Be Stolen

Jeweled crowns require protection. Polycarp's relics could be stolen. Yet the flame that animated his life remains beyond theft. That flame is courage rooted in communion. It is the refusal to surrender the Gospel to fear. It is the quiet insistence that *difference does not dissolve belonging*.

We return, then, to that childhood memory of alarmed cases for sacred crowns. Perhaps the deeper call is not to cage holiness, but to embody it. Polycarp walked into fire without abandoning love. In this extraordinary U.S. moment, the Church needs that same steadiness. The true treasure is not what we preserve, but what we practice!

Questions for Prayer & Reflection

- What forms of courage is God inviting me to practice this Lent?
- Where have I allowed disagreement to weaken communion?
- What "relics" – habits, structures or narratives – am I protecting, instead of living the Gospel?
- How might I more intentionally stand with people experiencing persecution today?
- What does extraordinary faithfulness look like in my daily relationships?
- How can diversity become a spiritual gift, rather than a perceived threat?

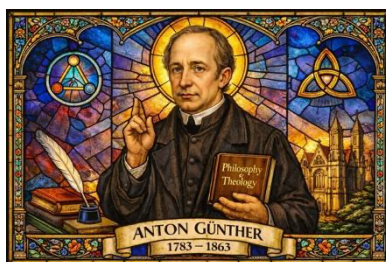
Let Us Pray

God of martyrs and memory, You called Polycarp to witness through courage, patience and extraordinary love. Teach us to protect what cannot be stolen: compassion, communion and truth. As we journey through Lent, refine our fears, strengthen our solidarity, and kindle in us a fire that serves life and love. May we emerge from the desert ready to proclaim liberty to captives, dignity to the marginalized, and hope to a weary world. Amen.

Thinking at the Edge of Faith

Anton Günther and the Courage to Question

February 24, 2026



There are Catholic theologians I never encountered in ten years of seminary formation. Often for “good” reasons: Their ideas unsettled authority, crossed disciplinary boundaries, or raised questions that institutional leaders preferred not to entertain. Today the Church remembers **Anton Günther** (1783-1863), a priest-philosopher whose work lived precisely at that edge. I only came to know him after stepping beyond the Roman fold, which speaks volumes about how memory and omission function in ecclesial life!

Theologians We Forget – and Why

In the nineteenth century, the Roman Catholic Church confronted – and often retreated from – modern philosophy, scientific discovery, democratic revolutions, and new ways of understanding the human person. The institutional response often leaned defensive. Very defensive. Suspicion replaced curiosity. Boundaries hardened.

To call someone a “liberal Catholic” in Günther’s time meant that he attempted to engage modern thought, rather than run from it. He believed theology should speak the language of its age. That conviction made him both influential and controversial.

Even as a child, I was intrigued by the stories that are told—and the stories that are suppressed. Families do this. Churches do this. Nations do this. Günther's relative obscurity reminds us that silence itself becomes a theological statement.

A “Hegelian” ...Meaning?

Günther drew heavily on the “Hegelian” philosophy of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831). The core idea is surprisingly pastoral: *Reality unfolds through relationship and tension. Truth emerges through the dialogue between opposites!*

Günther applied that insight to Christian doctrine.

He suggested that *creation* could be understood as the “non-ego” of God—not something separate and disposable, but something existing in relationship with the divine. He explored the Trinity as *dynamic communion*, rather than static formula. He tried to explain Christ not only through inherited categories, but through philosophical reflection on *consciousness and freedom*. The very definition of theology being “faith seeking understanding.”

If that sounds abstract, consider pop culture analogies. Films like *The Matrix* ask what is real. Shows like *The Good Place* wrestle with moral growth, identity and relational transformation. Günther attempted a similar project within theology: He asked how faith meaningfully speaks in a changing intellectual world.

That question remains extraordinarily relevant.

Condemnation, Legacy and the Old Catholic Turn

Günther's ideas drew criticism from scholastic theologians who feared that philosophical speculation would dilute Roman Catholic doctrine. Eventually, elements of his thought were condemned. The message felt familiar: *Innovation risks suspicion.*

After the sham Vatican Council of 1869-1870, many of his intellectual heirs gravitated toward the German Old Catholic Church, a movement birthed in the 1870s to resist papal centralization and seek broader theological conversation. Their shift illustrates an enduring pattern: *When dialogue narrows, communities form elsewhere.*

Yet even condemnation does not erase influence. Questions once deemed dangerous often later become ordinary. History repeatedly demonstrates this extraordinary paradox.

Why Günther Matters in This U.S. Moment

Our sociopolitical climate increasingly distrusts complexity. Nuance becomes weakness. Intellectual humility becomes suspect. Diversity of thought becomes framed as threat.

Günther's story challenges that instinct.

He reminds us that faith has always developed through encounter with other disciplines—philosophy, science, psychology, lived experience. He also warns that institutions sometimes react defensively when change accelerates.

My own journey—from Franciscan formation to Inclusive Catholic ministry, from Roman Catholic parish leadership to Texas public school governance, from rural Ohio to Austin's multicultural reality—echoes that tension between *belonging* and *questioning*. Lent invites precisely this work. Prayer deepens listening. Fasting creates space. Almsgiving reorients our priorities toward the common good.

Extraordinary courage often looks simply like asking better questions!

Possible Calls to Action from Günther

This Lent, we might:

- Read one theologian we were never “assigned.”
- Engage philosophy, science or literature as spiritual conversation partners.
- Create spaces for dialogue, rather than debate.
- Resist false binaries that frame faith and reason as enemies.
- Publicly defend intellectual freedom within religious spheres.
- Support scholars, pastors and educators who risk creative thinking. Speak out when universities are threatened because of open thinking and dialogue.

Giving up candy or soda rarely changes the world—but expanding imagination sometimes does!

From Silence to Conversation

I began by recalling a theologian omitted from my formation. Günther's life invites us to return to that silence and gently break it. The Church grows when it remembers the voices at its edges!

In an extraordinary U.S. moment marked by polarization, we need believers who hold together conviction and curiosity. We need communities that treat questioning not as betrayal, but as devotion. We need a spirituality that trusts the Spirit still speaks through unexpected disciplines, unexpected people, unexpected places.

Perhaps the desert characterized by Lent does not only strip away comforts. Perhaps it also clears space for ideas once ignored to finally be heard!

Questions for Prayer & Reflection

- Which voices have been absent from my formation and education—and why?
- Where do I experience tension between faith and intellectual curiosity?
- How might philosophical reflection deepen my prayer life?
- When have institutions discouraged questions that later proved fruitful?
- What extraordinary courage might God be inviting in my thinking this Lent?
- How can I create spaces where others feel safe to ask difficult questions?

Let Us Pray

God of truth and relationship, You speak through prophets and philosophers, saints and seekers. Free us from fear of complexity. Give us minds that question, hearts that listen, and courage that remains faithful even at the edge. During this Lenten journey, transform our curiosity into compassion, our study into service and our questions into deeper love. May we emerge from the desert ready to build communities where truth is pursued together and where extraordinary hope becomes possible. Amen.

The Love Story of Romeo and...Avertanus?

Widening our love in a fearful age

February 25, 2026



My husband and I remember with fondness how we were “poster boys” of same-sex marriage in Austin. When the 2015 marriage equality decision of *Obergefell v. Hodges* transformed our nation’s history, we were among the first to visit the Travis County Clerk’s office. We felt joy. We felt relief. We felt the love and support of well-wishers of all ages on the sidewalk outside, who held signs reading, “Love is love.” I also recall how some members of Holy Family, Austin’s only inclusive Catholic community, left: The thought of their priest being married to another man, when rubbed against ingrained notions, apparently caused unbearable cognitive dissonance. Love often provokes both blessing and backlash. Today, as the Church commemorates **Saint Avertanus and Blessed Romeo**—companions in life, devotion and death—I find myself thinking about pilgrimage, partnership and extraordinary love that refuses to shrink.

The Love Story History Nearly Forgot

On February 25, the Church remembers Avertanus and Romeo, 14th-century French monks whose friendship became legend. They traveled together on pilgrimage, shared ministry, and ultimately died of plague. Tradition says they were buried in the same coffin, their sarcophagus inscription declaring unity even in death—a quiet theological claim about companionship that feels startlingly modern.

“Two bodies placed together, so that these who dwell in the same house in heaven may be united in the honor of one same urn.”

Their stories circulated widely in medieval devotional culture. Pilgrims invoked them in illness. Communities told miracle stories about their intercession. In the late 20th century, some LGBTQIA+ Catholics reclaimed their memory as patron saints during the AIDS crisis—companions in suffering and companions in hope!

We celebrate Avertanus and Romeo in February, the month of Valentine's Day, yet their witness resists sentimentality. Their love looks less like romance, and more like fidelity—the daily choice to journey with another human being through the dynamism and uncertainty of life.

Scripture repeatedly honors such companionship: Ruth's vow to Naomi (Ruth 1:16), David's love for Jonathan (1Sam. 18:1), Jesus' command to love one another as he loves us (Jn. 13:34), the sending of disciples two-by-two (Lk. 10:1), and the image of shared burdens (Gal. 6:2). Holiness rarely unfolds alone!

Romeo Before Juliet: Names, Memory and Cultural Echo

Most people hear "Romeo" and immediately think of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Some voices suggest that Shakespeare consciously drew on this medieval Romeo. Regardless, the cultural resonance feels poetic: a name associated with devotion long before Verona became shorthand for tragic love!

Pop culture continues to reinterpret love stories that challenge social boundaries. Think of the tenderness in *Brokeback Mountain*. Think of the theological defiance in Lady Gaga's "Born This Way." Think of television narratives that slowly normalize queer relationships formerly framed as scandal.

The Church, too, tells stories—though sometimes selectively. Saints get remembered. Others fade. Avertanus and Romeo hover in that space between memory and discomfort, where love exceeds categories!

Plague, Ashes and the Theology of Fragility

Their death by plague inevitably calls to mind Ash Wednesday: "Remember that you are dust." Medieval Christians viscerally knew vulnerability. Disease, war and poverty shaped daily life. Six years ago, we rediscovered fragility through COVID19. Thirty years ago, we witnessed it through the AIDS epidemic. We also see it in the quiet "pandemics" of contemporary loneliness and exclusion.

Children sing, "ashes, ashes, we all fall down," echoing a truth Lent refuses to soften: Mortality haunts us all, leveling all hierarchies.

Yet scripture insists that love endures beyond death (Rom. 8:38-39). The burial of two companions in one coffin becomes sacramental imagery. Not proof of romantic relationship, perhaps, but unmistakable testimony that Christian life is relational.

From Blessing to Prohibition—and Back Toward Hope

The trajectory of Catholic teaching on same-sex relationships reveals tension, rather than simplicity. Medieval liturgical texts show that rituals

of same-sex blessings existed in some places. Categories hardened only centuries later.

Under Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI), theological language describing homosexuality as “intrinsically disordered” became widely codified. That language wounded countless believers. It shaped families. It also shaped silence.

Then came Pope Francis, whose “Who am I to judge?” did not rewrite doctrine, yet undeniably shifted pastoral messaging. Tone matters. Language shapes imagination. Imagination shapes policy. Policy shapes lives.

Today, amid fears about rollbacks of marriage equality (thank you, Justice Clarence Thomas) and broader civil rights, the witness of Avertanus and Romeo invites us to ask whether the Church will again widen its understanding of covenantal companionship.

The rainbow flag—a covenant symbol (Gen. 9)—reminds us that diversity is divine design, not social failure. At Holy Family, we say “we love all God’s children as God created them.” Tellingly, that statement remains quietly revolutionary.

Extraordinary Love in an Age of Backlash

Before marriage equality, political cartoons mocked the thought of same-sex couples being a threat to an institution already strained by staggering heterosexual divorce rates. Fear often disguises itself as moral certainty.

Bipolar reactions persist, as typified in the applause we received after receiving our marriage license and the departures from Holy Family after our wedding. Yet the Gospel consistently moves toward expansion: table fellowship across boundaries (Lk. 15), the Ethiopian eunuch welcomed without delay (Acts 8), the Spirit disrupting exclusion (Acts 10), Paul declaring radical unity (Gal. 3:28), and Revelation’s vision of every nation gathered together (Rev. 7).

Ordinary fear narrows, but extraordinary love widens!

Avertanus and Romeo walked together, as pilgrims, through stigma. Their story whispers that companionship itself can be prophetic!

Calls to Action

- **Tell forgotten stories.** Recover saints, companions and movements that expand our theological imagination.
- **Practice visible solidarity.** Display Pride symbols, attend inclusive liturgies, speak names when others erase them.
- **Deepen Lenten practice.** Fast not only from sweets, but from silence in the face of exclusion.

- **Support queer youth.** Fund organizations, mentor students, create safe spaces.
- **Engage in conversation.** Read widely across disciplines, echoing the courage of thinkers who refused intellectual isolation.
- **Protect civil rights.** Advocate locally where policy shapes real families.
- **Model relational holiness.** Celebrate friendship, partnership and chosen family as spiritual vocations.

Love That Refuses to Leave

I return to that contrast between well-wishers on the sidewalk, versus uneasy congregants, all witnessing history, but with different feelings in their hearts. Love does that. It exposes our assumptions. It invites conversion.

Two medieval pilgrims share a coffin. A modern couple shares vows. Communities wrestle with what both scenes mean. Lent asks us to sit inside that tension, rather than run from it or attempt to too quickly resolve it.

Extraordinary love does not seek to win arguments. Often it simply remains present, walking beside another and refusing abandonment.

Perhaps that is the holiness Avertanus and Romeo embody: love that stays when fear urges departure!

Questions for Prayer & Reflection

- Whose love stories have shaped my faith—and whose stories have I ignored?
- Where do I instinctively narrow the circle of belonging?
- What might a more prophetic Lent require of me this year?
- How does companionship reveal God to me?
- Where is the Spirit inviting the Church to widen love today?
- Whose suffering calls me into deeper solidarity?
- What extraordinary love and courage might fidelity require now?

Let Us Pray

God of covenant and companionship, you created us for relationship and called love very good. Bless all who walk together through joy and illness, certainty and doubt. Heal wounds inflicted by exclusion. Strengthen communities that widen belonging. During this Lenten season, teach us to practice extraordinary love—love that remains, love that listens, love that liberates. May we, like faithful pilgrims before us, journey side-by-side toward your expansive mercy. Amen.

Won't You Be My Neighbor?

Extraordinary Love in an Unneighborly Time

February 26, 2026



Many of us remember that whimsical tune that begins with a simple metallic chime, gently moves to piano, and then welcomes the soft voice of a gentle man inviting us to a new moral imagination: “It’s a beautiful day in the neighborhood.” He did not merely describe a neighborhood. He pleaded for one.

“I have always wanted to have a neighbor just like you....Would you be mine? Could you be mine? Won’t you be my neighbor? Won’t you please, won’t you please, please won’t you be my neighbor?”

As we prepare to remember tomorrow the passing of **Fred McFeely Rogers** (1918-2003), I find myself wondering how far our nation has drifted from that invitation—and what extraordinary neighborly love might look like, if we were to again accept it.

The Ministry Hidden in a Cardigan

Fred Rogers was never just a television personality. Ordained in the Presbyterian tradition, he understood media as pastoral space. Through *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*, he practiced a quiet theology of presence: slow speech, emotional honesty, radical affirmation.

In an era increasingly defined by speed and spectacle, he deliberately moved slowly. He named feelings. He created rituals. He insisted children—and therefore adults—possessed inherent dignity. His famous line, “I like you just the way you are,” echoes Psalm 139’s proclamation that we are wonderfully made. It anticipates Jesus’ own habit of seeing people before fixing them.

Mr. Rogers modeled something extraordinary: gentleness as resistance!

Remembering Neighborhoods Without Fences

I often think about how neighborhoods once felt. Growing up in rural Ohio, we did not lock doors. When we compiled our oral history of Cristo Rey Catholic Church in East Austin, elders recalled properties without

fences—physical signs of communal belonging. Neighbors crossed yards without permission because relationship assumed trust.

Fear changed that.

I remember the moment fear entered our home. News of a serial killer some fifty miles away, in Toledo, reshaped behavior. Doors locked. Curtains closed. Suspicion replaced familiarity. Today security cameras, tall fences and coded entry gates define many communities. Robert Frost's line—"Good fences make good neighbors"—now feels less poetic and more prophetic.

Mr. Rogers challenged that trajectory. He insisted that proximity without relationship is not neighborhood. Jesus said the same in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10). "Neighbor" is not defined by geography. "Neighbor" is a choice!

Scripture, Pop Culture and the Formation of Compassion

Mr. Rogers' theology lived at the intersection of Scripture and culture. Consider the resonances:

- Jesus washing feet (Jn. 13) mirrors Mr. Rogers kneeling to speak eye-to-eye with children.
- The Beatitudes (Mt. 5) echo in his affirmation of vulnerability.
- Paul's insistence that love is patient and kind (1Cor. 13) shaped Mr. Rogers' pacing.
- The Incarnation—God entering ordinary life—parallels his insistence that small moments carry sacred weight.
- The commandment to love neighbor as self (Mk. 12) became Mr. Rogers' central curriculum.

Pop culture reinforced the message. Films like *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* and *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood* reframed kindness as courage. Songs from artists like Dolly Parton, Lady Gaga and Coldplay similarly insist that belonging is spiritual practice. Even contemporary television—from *Ted Lasso* to *Abbott Elementary*—suggests audiences hunger for moral tenderness.

Kindness is not naïve. It is countercultural!

Neighborly Love in an Age of Othering

Our current political discourse often depends on fear. Leaders speak about enemies, invasions and threats, more than neighbors. Rhetoric draws lines rather than bridges. In recent national speeches, Donald Trump has repeatedly framed immigrants and political opponents through language of danger, while idolizing the likes of Charlie Kirk.

This is not simply political strategy. It is spiritual formation.

When we repeatedly hear that some people are threats, our hearts slowly close. Mr. Rogers understood this dynamic decades earlier. He taught children to name fear without surrendering compassion. He practiced what theologians might call preventative pastoral care.

Lent invites the same work. Fasting is not merely about food. It is about unlearning reflexive fear. Prayer is not escape. It is recalibration. Almsgiving is not charity alone. It is relational repair.

Extraordinary courage often looks like refusing to dehumanize!

The Spiritual Practice of Being a Neighbor

Mr. Rogers reframed neighbor as *verb*, rather than noun. To neighbor is to notice, to listen, to remain present when discomfort arises.

My own life mirrors this. From the cornfields of Ohio to the corn tortillas of Texas, my ministry has repeatedly built neighborhoods across differences of language, culture, sexuality and faith tradition. My public marriage in 2015 was itself neighbor theology: visibility as invitation. Some walked away. Others gathered with signs of love. Both responses reveal how threatening belonging can be.

Mr. Rogers would not be surprised. He knew love produces cognitive dissonance in systems built on hierarchy.

Yet he would still ask the question: *Won't you be my neighbor?*

Calls to Action

This extraordinary moment requires practice, not nostalgia. Consider the following:

- **Intentionally learn your neighbors' stories.** Ask their names and histories. Practice sacred curiosity.
- **Fast from dehumanizing language.** Notice how often media frames people as problems, rather than persons.
- **Create small rituals of presence.** Shared meals, handwritten notes, consistent check-ins.
- **Publicly advocate for those labeled outsiders.** Neighborly love includes policy.
- **Support spaces that cultivate belonging.** Inclusive communities, community schools, mutual aid networks.
- **Model emotional literacy.** Name fear, grief, anger and hope—especially with children.
- **Reclaim slowness.** Kindness requires time.

These practices form extraordinary love—the kind that quietly reshapes culture!

The Courage to Knock on the Door

Mr. Rogers' theme song still lingers. A simple question repeated like a prayer: *Won't you be my neighbor?* Mr. Rogers understood that the question indeed risks rejection. Jesus understood it, too. Every act of neighborly love involves vulnerability—the willingness to knock without the guarantee that the door will be opened from the other side.

As Lent unfolds, we stand at that door again. Our nation feels more fenced, more suspicious, more exhausted. Yet the invitation remains unchanged. Extraordinary faith does not wait for perfect conditions. It practices presence anyway.

Perhaps holiness today looks less like certainty and more like gentleness. Less like winning and more like welcoming. Less like building walls and more like learning names.

It can indeed be a beautiful day in the neighborhood—if we choose to make it so!

Questions for Prayer & Reflection

- Whom do I struggle to see as neighbor?
- What fears most shape my assumptions about others?
- Where might gentleness be more prophetic than confrontation?
- How does my Lenten practice expand—rather than shrink—love?
- What small ritual could help me embody neighborly love this week?
- When have I experienced someone liking me “just the way I am”?
- How might the Church become “neighborhood,” rather than institution?

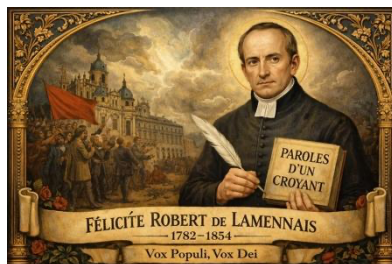
Let Us Pray

God of every neighborhood, You enter ordinary streets and ordinary lives. You teach us that love is not abstract, but embodied—in listening, in presence, in courage. Where fear builds fences, make us bridge-builders. Where rhetoric divides, make us translators of compassion. Where exhaustion tempts withdrawal, give us extraordinary tenderness. Teach us to see Christ in every doorway, every story, every stranger who might become neighbor. And when we hesitate, gently ask again in the faces of those around us: “Won't you be my neighbor?” Amen.

Extraordinary Courage in an Authoritarian Age

Félicité Robert de Lamennais, the Old Catholic Archbishops of Utrecht,
and the long Catholic struggle against concentrated power

February 27, 2026



Thirteen months into this second Trump administration, many of us have lost count of how often we have recently heard the words “authoritarian playbook.” The phrase sounds after attacks on the press, the chilling of dissent, the consolidation of power, the coopting of institutions, and the insistence that loyalty matters more than truth. Today’s remembrance of the passing of French priest and political theorist **Félicité Robert de Lamennais** and of the birthday of Old Catholic Archbishop of Utrecht **Bernd Wallet** invites us to remember that Catholics have long wrestled with the temptation of centralized authority. Their stories whisper to this extraordinary U.S. moment: *Courage, dissent and faith can coexist!*

A Restless Priest in a Restless Century

Born in revolutionary France, **Robert de Lamennais** (1782-1854) lived amid the aftershocks of monarchy, revolution and the uneasy restoration of church power. He initially defended strong papal authority as a bulwark against state interference. Yet experience changed him. He watched church leaders align themselves with monarchs and elites, while ordinary people struggled for voice and dignity.

In works such as *Paroles d'un croyant* (*Words of a Believer*), Lamennais argued that faith should liberate, rather than domesticate. He championed freedom of conscience, freedom of the press, and the right of people to self-determination. In his context, these positions were radical. They anticipated themes later echoed in Catholic social teaching: human dignity, subsidiarity and solidarity.

Scripture pulses through his instincts. “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2Cor. 3:17). “God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty” (Lk. 1:53). Like the prophets, Lamennais

insisted that faith must stand beside the marginalized, rather than the powerful.

Pop culture gives us metaphors for his stance. Think of *Star Wars*: a rebellion against empire grounded not only in politics, but in belief. Or *The Hunger Games*, where narrative exposes how power manipulates truth. Even *The Handmaid's Tale* warns how religious language can sanctify control.

Lamennais sensed this danger early.

A Warning Against Sacred Authoritarianism

To Lamennais and his contemporaries, the alliance between throne and altar looked less like stability, and more like conspiracy against the people. Papal centralization, suppression of theological exploration, and condemnation of modern political freedoms signaled what he feared: spiritual authority morphing into authoritarian habit!

When Gregory XVI condemned his work, calling it “small in size, but immense in perversity,” the message was unmistakable: *Dissent carries consequences!*

Here Scripture again speaks. “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them... It shall not be so among you” (Mt. 20:25-26). Lamennais read such words not as abstraction, but as instruction.

His critique echoes modern cultural voices. Songs like “Alright” by Kendrick Lamar or “Born This Way” by Lady Gaga remind listeners that dignity resists imposed conformity. Art often recognizes authoritarian patterns before institutions do.

Lessons From His Change of Views

Lamennais’ trajectory was complicated. Some historians see in his later life a softening toward Ultramontane positions. Others see fatigue, pastoral concern, or the human desire for belonging after conflict. Pressure from ecclesial authority, isolation from former allies, and the spiritual toll of controversy likely shaped his evolution.

Anyone who has navigated institutional tension recognizes the cost. I think about my own journey – from my Franciscan vows in 1993 and 1999, to cofounding Austin’s only inclusive Catholic community after public conflict with the Roman Church’s hierarchy in 2011. Convictions rarely change overnight. They evolve through prayer, relationship, disappointment and hope.

Lent invites that honesty. “Create in me a clean heart, O God” (Ps. 51:10). Conversion often looks less like certainty and more like wrestling!

Utrecht's Long Memory of Resistance

Today we also celebrate the 55th birthday of **Archbishop Bernd Wallet**, current leader of the Dutch Old Catholic Church—a tradition shaped by centuries of tension with Rome over authority and conscience.

The Utrecht line traces back through prelates consecrated by Roman Catholic bishop Dominique-Marie Varlet, whose consecrations in 1724 to 1739 asserted that apostolic succession did not depend on papal permission alone. Old Catholics later rejected purported papal infallibility and the universal jurisdiction of the bishop of Rome after the sham Vatican Council of 1869-1870, arguing that authority must remain accountable to the entire Church.

Archbishop Wallet embodies that heritage: synodality, dialogue and theological freedom grounded in sacramental continuity!

Tomorrow's remembrance of another Old Catholic Archbishop of Utrecht, **Willibrord van Os** (+1825), deepens the story. After his predecessor's poisoning, he resisted Napoleon Bonaparte's attempt to confiscate church revenues. Courage required confronting power from both church and state. Church historian John Mason Neale praised van Os' resolve: He withstood the iron will to which even Pope Pius VII bowed!

Extraordinary courage rarely looks dramatic. Often it looks like persistence.

Bridging Europe's Past to America's Present

We inhabit our own moment of tension between faith and power. Debates over nationalism, immigration, LGBTQIA+ dignity, racial justice and democratic norms echo earlier struggles. Catholics and indeed all Christians today face the same questions Lamennais faced, principally does faith sanctify hierarchy or empower conscience?

Our Christian scriptures offer one lens. "The truth will set you free" (Jn. 8:32). "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Mt. 5:6). "Perfect love casts out fear" (1Jn. 4:18).

Pop culture again mirrors theology. *Spotlight* reminds us that institutional accountability can be holy work. *Ted Lasso* models leadership rooted in empathy, rather than domination. Even Beyoncé's "Break My Soul" becomes an anthem of reclaiming agency.

In this extraordinary season of U.S. history, resistance against authoritarianism is itself a spiritual practice!

Calls to Action

- Practice courageous conversation. Engage disagreement without surrendering dignity or truth.
- Support independent journalism and theological scholarship. Authoritarian systems fear informed communities.
- Show up locally. Community organizations shape democracy more than headlines.
- Center marginalized voices. Lamennais insisted that theology must listen to the people. We must do the same.
- Reimagine Lenten sacrifice. Rather than giving up candy or soda this Lent, take on advocacy: Volunteer, call legislators, accompany immigrants, fund mutual aid.
- Pray for church leaders across traditions. Unity does not require uniformity.
- Cultivate extraordinary hope. Authoritarian movements rely on exhaustion. Hope interrupts their script!

Dissent as Devotion

The phrase “authoritarian playbook” now echoes daily across U.S. news, late-night monologues, conversations at the gym, and meals with family and friends. Lamennais heard a similar script nearly two centuries ago. Utrecht’s archbishops confronted it in different forms. Each generation faces its own version.

Their witness suggests that dissent can be devotion, that extraordinary love sometimes requires extraordinary courage, and that faith, when honest, refuses to confuse unity with silence.

As we enter the desert with Jesus this Lent, perhaps our call is not withdrawal, but engagement: *prayer* that fuels action, *fasting* that sharpens empathy, and *almsgiving* that redistributes power. After all, conscience, community and courage belong together.

Authoritarianism thrives on fear. In contrast, may we proclaim more loudly and boldly Jesus’ liberating gospel, which thrives on freedom!

Questions for Prayer & Reflection

- Where do I see authoritarian patterns within church or society – and how do I respond?
- When has my own thinking evolved through conflict or prayer?
- What voices remain unheard in my community and in my circles of influence?

- How might this Lent invite me to take on something prophetic, rather than give up something that won't effect transformation in our world?
- What practices help me sustain hope when institutions disappoint?
- Who are today's Lamennais figures – and how do I support them?

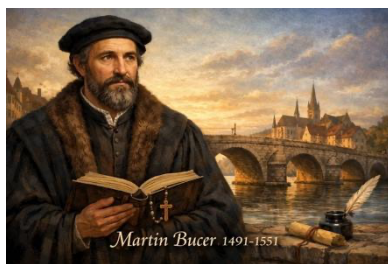
Let Us Pray

God of freedom and truth, You raised prophets who challenged rulers, theologians who questioned certainty, and pastors who stood beside the people. Grant us extraordinary courage in this extraordinary moment. Soften our hearts where fear has hardened them. Strengthen our voices where silence has become comfortable. Bless Archbishop Wallec, the Old Catholic tradition, and all who labor for a church accountable to love. As we enter Lent, teach us to fast from indifference, to pray with honesty, and to give with bold generosity. May our dissent become devotion, may our hope become habit, and may our desire for justice become our shared song. Amen.

Martin Bucer and the Art of Extraordinary Bridgebuilding

Lessons from a 16th-century reformer for healing a divided world

February 28, 2026



As Americans, we give our President the title of Commander in Chief, and with it comes the hope that this leader might also console, uplift and unify. We dream of a Consoler-in-Chief, a Healer-in-Chief, a Builder-in-Chief. Sadly, during the past decade we've come to witness the stark reality of a Divider-in-Chief. From the fractured lines of partisan politics, to social media echo chambers, division has become normalized. Journalists Peter Baker and Susan Glasser documented this in their 2022 book, *The Divider: Trump in the White House, 2017–2021*, showing how one man could sow so much division within his own staff, with international allies, and across the nation. A September 2025 commentary by Steven Roberts underscores this:

Instead of lowering the temperature, Donald Trump has forged the presidency into a tool to inflame it!

In times like these, we more than ever need bridgebuilders—extraordinary Catholics, extraordinary humans—who dare to heal, reconcile and unite. Today, on February 28, the Church remembers one such bridgebuilder: Martin Bucer.

Who Was Martin Bucer?

Martin Bucer (1491-1551) was born in the German city of Sélestat and joined the Dominican order as a young man. But his extraordinary love for the Church and desire for reform led him to renounce his vows and step into a turbulent world where faith and politics intertwined. Bucer sought reform from within, yet excommunication by the Roman Church marked him as a figure apart—a reminder that extraordinary courage often comes with cost.

Bucer's ministry was defined by dialogue and reconciliation. He worked tirelessly to bring together Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli, who clashed on Eucharistic theology: Luther affirmed the real presence of Christ in the bread and wine, while Zwingli emphasized a symbolic understanding. Bucer's extraordinary gift was to act as a *pontifex maximus*—a supreme bridgebuilder—seeking unity without demanding uniformity.

The Tetrapolitan Confession and the Wittenberg Concord

Bucer's ecumenical work culminated in two historic agreements: the 1530 Tetrapolitan Confession and the 1536 Wittenberg Concord. These documents attempted to reconcile differing reform perspectives while staying rooted in scripture. His dream extended even further: *a German national church that could harmonize Catholics and Protestants, separate from Rome*, demonstrating that extraordinary vision often requires extraordinary patience.

In many ways, Bucer's work foreshadowed later developments in national churches, such as the German Old Catholic Church birthed in the 1870s, reminding us that reform often travels through centuries before bearing full fruit!

Lessons for Americans Today

Bucer's life invites reflection in a divided world. The political and social fissures in our nation are sharp. We watch leaders who, instead of consoling, exploit grievances. We see families and communities divided by ideology. Still, our faith calls us to a different path. Scripture reminds us: "*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God*" (Mt. 5:9).

In the spirit of Bucer, extraordinary Catholics and Christians might consider ways to build bridges today:

- **Listen across divides.** Seek to understand, not simply rebut.
- **Pray for those with whom you disagree,** especially public leaders who sow division.
- **Engage in civic acts of reconciliation.** Serve alongside neighbors with differing views.
- **Model Eucharistic hospitality.** Invite those with diverse beliefs to table conversations.
- **Advocate for systemic reforms** that encourage inclusion, justice and dialogue.

Bucer's life also reminds us that extraordinary reform requires courage—sometimes even stepping beyond comfort zones, risking ostracism, and patiently working toward unity.

Bridgebuilding in Pop Culture and Daily Life

Extraordinary lessons often appear in ordinary places. Consider Fred Rogers' insistence that we "look for the helpers" in our communities, or the *Star Trek* ethos of finding common ground across species and planets. Even in music, we find echoes: John Lennon's "Imagine," Simon and Garfunkel's "Bridge Over Troubled Water," and Kendrick Lamar's "Alright" speak to hope, reconciliation and healing. Movies like *Remember the Titans*, *The Imitation Game*, and *Coco* and musicals like *Wicked* and *Les Misérables* show how empathy, dialogue and courageous action can unite unlikely allies.

We see the same call in scripture: Paul urges us: "*If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all*" (Rom. 12:18). Extraordinary bridgebuilding is not naïve; it is a deliberate, sometimes painful practice of love in action!

Calls to Action

- **Host a dialogue circle** with neighbors of differing political, religious or cultural perspectives.
- **Volunteer with organizations** that serve marginalized communities, emphasizing service over ideology.
- **Support media and journalism** that prioritize nuanced reporting over division.
- **Study church history**, like Bucer's story, to understand the power of reform and reconciliation.

- **Take on a Lenten discipline** that challenges division—fast from social media outrage, or commit to daily prayer for peacemakers in your city, state and nation.

Bucer's Vision for Today

Martin Bucer shows us that extraordinary courage and extraordinary love often go hand-in-hand. Like him, we can strive to be bridgebuilders in a world that too often rewards division. Just as Tuesday's State of the Union address reminded us of the corrosive effects of a Divider-in-Chief, Bucer reminds us that another path is possible: *the path of listening, reconciling and daring to dream of unity*. Indeed, we need more extraordinary humans willing to practice bridgebuilding in our homes, schools, workplaces and public life!

Questions for Prayer & Reflection

- Where in my life am I a bridgebuilder, and where do I resist reconciliation?
- How can I practice extraordinary patience when faced with division?
- Who are the "Luthers" and "Zwinglis" in my community, and how can I mediate between them?
- What small acts of hospitality can I offer this Lent to heal divides?
- How can my voice, actions and prayers contribute to unity in our nation and world?

Let Us Pray

O God of peace, guide me to be a bridge where there is chasm, a voice where there is discord, and a light where there is shadow. May I embody the extraordinary courage and love of Martin Bucer, working to heal divisions, foster dialogue and reconcile hearts. Teach me to live as a peacemaker in every encounter, to speak with truth tempered by love, and to see Christ in all whom I meet. Amen.

Zero Discrimination, Zero Self-Harm, Extraordinary Love

From Camp Berry to Charlottesville:
Learning to Be “Third” in a Wounded World

March 1, 2026



On Zero Discrimination Day and Self-injury Awareness Day, I recall a teenage lesson from the cornfields of Ohio: *God first, others second, self third*. In this unordinary era of U.S. history, though, loving *others* and loving *ourselves* may be among the most prophetic Lenten practices of all!

March 1 is **Zero Discrimination Day**, an opportunity to celebrate the right of everyone to live a full and productive life with dignity. March 1 is also **Self-injury Awareness Day**, an annual call to raise awareness of self-harm and to support those who suffer the emotional roller coaster of self-deprivation, relief, release, shame and guilt.

These observances carry me back to Camp Berry in Findlay, Ohio. As a Boy Scout, I spent summer after summer earning merit badges, serving as a den chief, and proving that middle-child syndrome could fuel extraordinary achievement. It was there that I first heard the legendary two-time Heisman Trophy winner Archie Griffin of The Ohio State University.

Griffin spoke of his “I am third” philosophy. After scoring a touchdown, he would raise three fingers to remind spectators and himself: *God first, others second, self third*.

Jesus said it long before Griffin ran into the end zone. When asked the greatest of the commandments, Jesus replied, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Mt. 22:37). Then he quickly added, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt. 22:39). Those two commands are indeed inseparable.

For years, I have preached that, in order to spell—and experience—joy, Jesus must come first. Others come after that. You come after others. J-O-Y: A simple word reminding us to order our love aright!

Zero Discrimination Day reminds us to love others. Self-injury Awareness Day reminds us to love ourselves. Both demand extraordinary love in an extraordinary U.S. moment!

Zero Discrimination: Naming the Sin

Discrimination remains a stubborn, structural sin.

We saw it when white supremacists marched at the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville chanting “Jews will not replace us.” We have seen firsthand the xenophobia stoked by political rhetoric that paints immigrants as criminals and invaders. We see current rollbacks in the gospel values of diversity, equity and inclusion, which once attempted to level a very uneven playing field.

I grew up in rural Ohio, where my grandmothers, whom I deeply loved, spoke about race in the ways in which they were “programmed” to think about it. Culture is powerful. Dutch sociologist Geert Hofstede famously described culture as the “software of the mind.” We are all “programmed” to think about certain people in certain ways. Fortunately, Lent invites us to debug that “software.”

Every time I see a room or photo comprised almost entirely of white men, I see vestiges of discrimination. Catholic social teaching opens our eyes, insisting on the inherent dignity of every person, as well as solidarity across lines of difference. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul dares to proclaim: “There is neither Jew nor Greek... for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). That is not pious poetry. It is a revolutionary vision for our relationship to one another!

When *Selma* dramatizes the march for voting rights, when *Pose* centers trans women of color, when *Glory* echoes through the credits, we glimpse what beloved community might look like. Art often preaches more powerfully than pulpits.

Self-injury: The Hidden Wound

Self-injury Awareness Day confronts a quieter suffering.

Researchers estimate that roughly 17% of adolescents engage in some form of non-suicidal self-injury. Among those who self-injure, studies suggest that 50-85% have a history of suicidal attempts. Cutting, burning or other forms of self-harm often function not as a desire to die, but as an attempt to regulate overwhelming emotion and to convert psychic pain into physical sensation that feels controllable.

When I was 17, a 12-year-old confided in me that she was cutting her arms to experience release. I did not understand then. Sure, I had seen physical pain, but self-inflicted pain bewildered me. I still struggle to understand now.

Psychologists explain that self-injury can temporarily reduce emotional intensity by triggering endorphins. Sadly, shame often follows relief, creating a destructive cycle. The prophet Elijah, exhausted and despairing, prayed that he might die (1Kgs. 19:4). God did not shame him. God fed him, let him sleep, and spoke in a still, small voice—a divine model for accompaniment!

In *Inside Out*, we learn that sadness is not the enemy. In “This Is Me,” shame yields to defiant dignity. In *Ted Lasso*, panic attacks become occasions for honest conversation. Popular culture increasingly names mental health as sacred terrain!

Self-injury Awareness Day does not glorify harm. It proclaims that our bodies are holy ground. As Paul reminds us, “Do you not know that you are a temple of the Holy Spirit?” (1Cor. 6:19). May such words heal those who turn pain inward!

Lent Beyond Candy and Soda

We now journey through Lent: forty days of fasting, prayer and almsgiving. Too often, we trivialize Lent into “I’m giving up candy” or “I’m giving up soda.” What if we gave up discrimination? What if we fasted from racist jokes, from transphobic comments, from dehumanizing language about migrants? What if we relinquished the inner voice that whispers, “You are not enough”?

The prophet Micah asks what the Lord requires: “to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Mic. 6:8). Justice addresses discrimination. Kindness addresses self-harm. Humility keeps us “third.”

As someone who left the Roman Church after a public break with a conservative appointee of Papa Ratzinger, and as a co-founder of Austin’s only inclusive Catholic community, I know what discrimination feels like inside ecclesial walls. As a member of the marginalized LGBTQIA+ community, I also know what it means to internalize rejection. Love of others and love of self do not compete. They complete each other!

Calls to Extraordinary Action

- **Audit your “software.”** Examine the cultural “programming” you have inherited about race, sexuality, gender, immigration and class. Confess it. “Reprogram” it through relationships and study.
- **Practice public solidarity.** Show up when antisemitism, Islamophobia, racism, misogyny, homophobia and transphobia surface in your community. Write letters. March. Speak.
- **Support mental health ministries.** Advocate and educate others on depression, anxiety and self-injury. Normalize therapy as a form of stewardship.

- **Fast from dehumanizing speech.** This Lent, refuse to share memes or posts that mock immigrants, trans youth or political opponents.
- **Quietly accompany someone.** If someone confides in you about self-harm, listen without shock. Help them connect to professional care. Stay.

Extraordinary courage rarely looks flashy. It looks like sustained, stubborn love!

“Third” on the Podium, First in Love

When I picture that teenage boy at Camp Berry listening to Archie Griffin, I see a farm kid whose mind was opening to unseen possibilities. I did not yet know that I would one day preach in Spanish, be elected to represent a district of 55,000 voters, marry my husband on the lawn of the Texas Capitol, or daily write about faith and politics in a truly unordinary American era.

For 40-plus years, Griffin’s “I am third” philosophy has shaped my thinking. Being “third” doesn’t mean self-erasure. It means *ordered love*.

Zero Discrimination Day insists that we love our neighbors as ourselves. Self-injury Awareness Day insists that we love ourselves as we love others. Lent insists that we love God above all.

In a political climate that feeds on loathing—of immigrants, of queer kids, of the other party, of ourselves—we must boldly practice extraordinary love. God first. Others second. Self third. And in that ordering, no one disappears!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Whom have I been culturally “programmed” to fear or mistrust?
- When have I participated—actively or silently—in discrimination?
- How do I speak to myself when I fail? With contempt or compassion?
- What Lenten practice could concretely reduce discrimination in my sphere of influence?
- Who in my life might be quietly struggling with self-harm or suicidal thoughts?

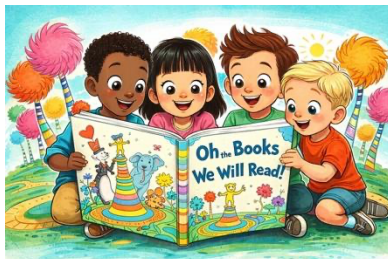
A Prayer for Ordered Love

God of extraordinary mercy, You created every person in your image and called us good. Where we discriminate, convict us. Where we self-harm, heal us. Where we hate, convert us. Teach us this Lent to love you first, to love our neighbors fiercely, and to love ourselves as temples of your Spirit. Make us instruments of justice and tenderness in this extraordinary moment. Amen.

Oh, the Books We Will Read!

Read Across America Day in a Lent That Needs Extraordinary Love

March 2, 2026



On this day of rhymes and reason, what if reading became a Lenten act of resistance, mercy and joy?

On March 2, we celebrate **Read Across America Day**, a nationwide effort launched in 1998 by the National Education Association to inspire children and adults to open books, expand minds and strengthen communities. The date intentionally coincides with the birthday of Dr. Seuss, born Theodor Seuss Geisel in 1904, whose whimsical rhymes shaped generations of readers.

I can almost hear him now:

You can read in a house.

You can read with a mouse.

You can read in a church with a steeple so tall.

You can read in a nation that's wobbling and all.

Yes, our nation wobbles. Yes, our politics groan. Yes, our headlines shout louder than Horton with a megaphone. But Lent invites us to speak something stronger: the Word!

From Sneetches to Scripture

Horton Hears a Who! insisted that “a person’s a person no matter how small.” *The Sneetches* taught us that stars upon thars do not define our worth. *The Lorax* warned of environmental greed long before climate reports filled our screens. *Green Eggs and Ham* gently nudged us to try what we fear.

Dr. Seuss was not writing theology, yet he preached parables.

Jesus did the same.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells of seeds scattered on good soil and rocky ground. In the Gospel of Luke, he reads from Isaiah and announces good news to the poor. In the Gospel of John, we hear that “In the

beginning was the Word" (Jn. 1:1). Scripture begins not with a sword, but with a sentence!

In this unordinary U.S. moment, when truth is twisted and books are banned in classrooms and libraries, reading becomes resistance. Reading becomes discipleship. Reading becomes an extraordinary act of hope!

When *Dead Poets Society* urges students to "seize the day," when *The Book Thief* portrays a girl stealing books in Nazi Germany, when *Reading Rainbow* invites children to travel through pages, we glimpse a sacred truth: Stories save!

Banned Books and Broken Truth

We live in a season when even our U.S. President is attempting to federalize elections, silence dissent and sanitize history. We witness an era that baptizes systemic racism and trumpets the oxymoron of "Christian nationalism" — as if Jesus would ever recognize or could ever be proud of such a thing. We live in a time when disinformation spreads faster than any children's rhyme.

Lent asks us not merely to give up candy or soda, but to *give up cowardice*.

The prophet Hosea declares, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge" (Hos. 4:6). Knowledge requires reading. Knowledge requires listening. Knowledge requires humility.

When *A Change Is Gonna Come* still echoes through marches, and when Selma dramatizes the struggle for voting rights, we see that literacy is not neutral. It fuels movements. It forms conscience.

Dr. Seuss once wrote, "*The more that you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you'll go.*"

In 2026 America, we must add: *The more that you read, ...the less likely you are to be manipulated!*

Read for the Child and the Neighbor

Read Across America Day is not nostalgia. It is invitation.

Read to a child who has no books at home. Volunteer at a public school. Record audiobooks for the blind. Tutor an adult learning English. Visit a nursing home and read aloud. Donate diverse books to a classroom threatened by censorship.

The Scriptures remind us to be *doers* of the Word, and not *hearers* only (James 1:22). Reading must move us to action!

I recall the sobering data that we received as trustees of a large, urban public school district—on the way in which literacy gaps predict incarceration rates and lifetime earnings. Because we were frequently invited into classrooms, I have also seen how children light up when

someone reads to them, and how bilingual students beam when stories reflect their culture.

When *Coco* celebrates memory and family, when *Sesame Street* models inclusion, when *This Land Is Your Land* reminds us of shared belonging, culture itself becomes catechism!

To read for another is to say: *You matter. Your mind matters. Your story matters.*

Lenten Actions for Extraordinary Love

- **Adopt a classroom.** Donate books that reflect racial diversity, LGBTQIA+ families and immigrant experiences.
- **Volunteer weekly.** Read aloud at a public school, library or shelter throughout Lent.
- **Fast from misinformation.** Verify sources before sharing articles or memes. Commit to intellectual honesty.
- **Support libraries.** Advocate against book bans. Publicly show up and clearly denounce attempts to stifle knowledge.
- **Slowly read Scripture.** As a Lenten practice, commit to daily *lectio divina*, meditating on a single gospel passage each morning.
- **Sponsor literacy programs.** Give alms not only to feed stomachs, but to nourish minds!

Extraordinary courage sometimes looks like a grown adult sitting in a tiny chair, holding a picture book, turning pages with reverence and igniting the imaginations of young minds!

Oh, the Places We Will Go!

Imagine a nation where children read widely and think critically. Imagine congregations that deeply study Scripture and boldly act. Imagine voters who recognize and reject propaganda and disinformation. Imagine Lent not as self-denial of sugar, but as self-discipline for justice!

On this Read Across America Day, I picture a circle of children on a library rug, eager to hear another story. I also picture congregants on the edges of their seats, absorbing the Word of God. And yes, despite indications to the contrary, I picture a nation that can still choose wisdom over fear.

Dr. Seuss might rhyme it this way:

*In houses and halls, in churches and schools,
We'll read with the wise, we'll outgrow the fools.
With pages and prophets, with courage and art,
We'll quietly, bravely re-script every heart!*

We began with rhyme. Let us end with resolve.

Remember those words: “In the beginning was the Word” (Jn. 1:1)? Every book opened in love participates in creation itself. And in this unordinary American moment, that is no small thing!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- When was the last time I read a book that challenged my assumptions?
- How do I respond when leaders distort truth or suppress history?
- What Lenten sacrifice could deepen my intellectual and spiritual life?
- Who in my community lacks access to books or literacy support?
- How might the daily practice of reading Scripture reshape my public witness?
- Do I model curiosity and humility for the young people in my life?

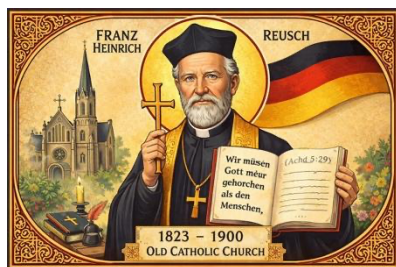
A Prayer for Readers and Prophets

God of Word and Wisdom, You spoke light into darkness and truth into chaos. Awaken in us a hunger for stories that heal and challenge. Protect our libraries, our teachers and our children. Make us bold readers of Scripture and brave defenders of truth. In this Lenten season, form in us extraordinary love, extraordinary courage and extraordinary commitment to justice. May every page we turn draw us closer to you and closer to one another. Amen.

Conscience Over Conformity

Franz Heinrich Reusch and Holy Dissent

March 3, 2026



Today we can more clearly see the absurdity of purported papal infallibility –and condemn it as the gnostic heresy that it is. 150 years ago, though, the novel doctrine raised serious questions of conscience that required believers – particularly those with a good amount of education –

to take a stance: Would they obediently submit to the Roman papacracy, or practice holy dissent?

Today we celebrate a Roman Catholic priest who refused to bend before a doctrine he could not, in good conscience, accept. **Franz Heinrich Reusch** (1823-1900) wrestled with the impossible question of whether to obey or to dissent. For Reusch, fidelity to truth—and to God—meant saying “no” to his Church’s claim of absolute authority. In his refusal, we discover extraordinary courage and a model for us today.

Early Life and Priestly Ministry

Born in 1823 in the Rhineland, Franz Heinrich Reusch was ordained at 25, dedicating himself to the Roman Catholic Church for nearly 25 years. For decades, he faithfully ministered, teaching theology, guiding seminarians, and serving communities in Germany.

Yet in 1870, as he approached 50, the sham Vatican Council of 1869-1870 solemnly proclaimed the “dogma” of purported papal infallibility—a theological assertion Reusch could not reconcile with scripture, reason or conscience. The claim, though framed as protection of truth, struck him as a dangerous overreach and a form of clerical absolutism with echoes of gnostic elitism. In rejecting it, Reusch was excommunicated—cast out not for a lack of faith, but for the extraordinary courage to faithfully think and boldly act.

Vicar General of the German Old Catholic Church

After leaving the Roman fold, Reusch joined the nascent German Old Catholic Church under Bishop Joseph Reinkens. Appointed vicar general, Reusch shaped the early theological and administrative framework of the Church. He reported on reunion conferences, guided clergy, and taught at the University of Bonn.

Interestingly, Reusch resigned his vicar generalship when the Old Catholics allowed married clergy. Though progressive in dissenting against papal infallibility, he adhered to a vision of clerical discipline that did not include married priests. This tension reminds us that extraordinary courage is not synonymous with agreement on all reforms. It is, above all, fidelity to conscience, grounded in principle.

Lessons Today

Reusch’s significance lies in his insistence that faith requires moral deliberation, not blind obedience. He demonstrated that doctrinal disagreement need not sever one from ministry, scholarship, or service to God’s people. Through his work, he ensured that the German Old Catholic

Church had theological depth, intellectual rigor, and a witness to conscience that survives today. Here are a few lessons for us today:

- **Conscience over Conformity.** Reusch teaches us that obedience must never replace discernment.
- **Courage in Dissent.** Standing against institutional pressures is a mark of extraordinary faith.
- **Service Beyond Titles.** Reusch faithfully ministered and taught, even outside the Roman hierarchy.
- **Complexity of Reform.** Progress does not mean uncritical agreement with all innovations; principles guide boundaries.
- **Integration of Faith and Reason.** Scripture, tradition and intellect work together in navigating moral questions (cf. Acts 17:11).

Calls to Action

- Critically read, reflect, and teach on church teachings, without fear of hierarchy.
- Support clergy and laypeople who act with conscience against harmful institutional directives.
- Engage in public discourse on religious and moral issues with integrity, courage and humility.
- Deeply study history and theology. Reusch modeled scholarship as faithful service.
- Advocate for marginalized communities while holding the Church accountable to its mission of love and justice.

Faith, Courage and Conscience

Reusch's life invites us to ask ourselves: *When truth and power clash, will we submit, or will we dissent?* In the cacophony of today's U.S. sociopolitical landscape – where families are torn apart by policy, voting rights are under attack, and leaders often manipulate truth – we are called to extraordinary courage: to fully love God, to boldly love neighbor, and to faithfully act even when the institutional Church or society fails.

Like Reusch, we may not agree on every reform or practice – but our commitment to conscience, justice and love unites us. His witness reminds us that we can be faithful both to God and to the moral imperatives of our time!

Questions for Prayer & Reflection

- Where in my life am I tempted to obey authority over conscience?
- How do I discern when dissent is faithful, rather than rebellious?
- In what ways can I support those marginalized by unjust systems?

- How can I integrate intellect, scripture and prayer in daily decision-making?
- Which extraordinary acts of courage in faith inspire me to act today?

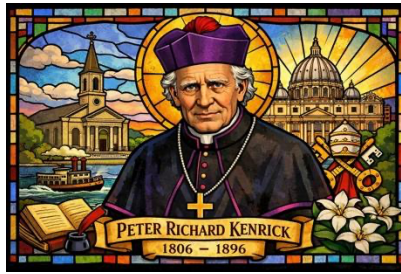
Let Us Pray

O God of truth and mercy, grant us the courage of Franz Heinrich Reusch and the discernment to love boldly. Help us stand for justice, teach with integrity, and serve with extraordinary faithfulness. Amen.

The Cost of Conscience

Lessons from Peter Richard Kenrick in an age of tightening control

March 4, 2026



When I undertook my philosophical studies at Saint Louis University, I did so alongside archdiocesan seminarians who commuted from Kenrick Seminary. Nearly 35 years later, I still remember some of their names and faces, and I often wonder what became of them. Only years after our studies together did I pause to reflect on their seminary's namesake: **Peter Richard Kenrick** (1806-1896). Especially for inclusive Catholics today, Kenrick was an extraordinary bishop and an extraordinarily prophetic voice in an increasingly authoritarian Church!

From Ireland to the Mighty Mississippi

Born in Ireland in 1806, Kenrick immigrated to the U.S. as a young priest and eventually became archbishop of St. Louis. He served a frontier church in a frontier nation. The Mississippi River was his diocesan highway. The American experiment in democracy was still young. In a Protestant-majority culture, Catholics were still very much suspect.

Kenrick was no revolutionary firebrand. He was a careful scholar, a serious pastor, and a bishop who valued Scripture and the early Church.

Yet that very seriousness would lead him into direct conflict with Rome at the sham Vatican Council of 1869-1870.

His now-famous objection still echoes: It would be “most inopportune” to define purported papal infallibility as dogma when it appears to be a novelty, lacking solid grounding in Scripture and tradition, and is contradicted by evidence.

In an era when Ultramontanism surged — a movement that centralized authority in Rome and elevated the pope’s prerogatives — Kenrick quietly but firmly dissented.

The First Vatican Council and the Courage to Dissent

At the sham Vatican Council, presided over by Pope Pius IX, momentum strongly favored defining papal infallibility, even if by the slimmest majority. Many bishops feared that failing to define it would signal weakness in the face of modernity. Europe trembled with revolution. Nationalism surged. Secularism rose. The papacy had lost the Papal States. Defining infallibility felt, to some, like stabilizing the ship!

Kenrick disagreed.

He prepared a lengthy speech opposing the definition. Council politics prevented him from delivering it on the floor. So, he published his arguments. That decision alone required extraordinary courage!

When the final vote approached, dozens of bishops who opposed the definition quietly left Rome, rather than cast a public “no” vote. Kenrick was among those who departed before the final tally. On July 18, 1870, the dogma passed overwhelmingly, with only two brave bishops formally voting against it: Bishop Aloisio Riccio of Palermo, Sicily, and Bishop Edward Fitzgerald of Little Rock, Arkansas.

Why did Kenrick leave early? Some speculate prudence. Some suggest health or political calculation. Others believe he did not wish to be seen publicly opposing the pope in a moment of high drama. We cannot know his interior calculus. We can, however, see a bishop seriously wrestling with conscience.

I sometimes imagine Kenrick pacing Roman corridors the way Atticus Finch paces the courtroom in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, knowing that moral clarity does not guarantee victory. It simply does not. Or I hear echoes of *Hamilton*: “If you stand for nothing, what’ll you fall for?” Kenrick stood — even knowing that Rome would demand that he sit down.

Then Rome Tightened the Screws

After the council, dissenting bishops quickly fell in line. Once the dogma was defined, Kenrick, too, submitted. He did not join the subsequent Old Catholic schism in Europe. He remained within the Roman fold, though now branded by hierarchs within his own fold as a “black sheep.”

Subsequent harassment and pressure reportedly led Kenrick to turn governance of his archdiocese over to his coadjutor earlier than expected. When Rome tightens the screws, even principled bishops feel the strain.

Here is where the story turns from ecclesiastical history to spiritual autobiography.

I know something about what happens when one publicly breaks with episcopal authority. When I left my service to the Roman papacracy during the “leadership” of Bishop Joe S. Vásquez – appointed to shepherd Austin by the very conservative Papa Ratzinger – I did not do so lightly. I weighed cost and consequence. I loved the Roman Church. But Ratzinger once wrote that we must obey conscience “before all else, if necessary even against the requirement of ecclesiastical authority.” Even Kenrick’s contemporary, Cardinal John Henry Newman, suggested that if you have to choose between your conscience or ecclesial authority, always – always – choose the former!

Kenrick experienced similar tensions: love of Church, loyalty to tradition, fear of division, awareness of consequence.

Lent asks us to confront that same tension. Not, “Will I give up candy or soda?” but “Where must I speak?”

War, Silence and the Present Hour

Four days ago, on February 28, Donald J. Trump – in our name and with our tax dollars – went to war with Iran. Congress did not declare it. The rationale remains unclear. Families with sons and daughters in uniform now live with dread, and a few with grief. Let that sink in.

Will we remain silent?

Kenrick’s moment concerned papal authority. Ours concerns executive overreach, democratic erosion, and the normalization of cruelty. Yet the spiritual question remains identical: *When authority stretches beyond moral legitimacy, what does conscience demand?*

Scripture refuses to let us hide.

The Hebrew midwives in Exodus 1 disobeyed Pharaoh and saved children. Nathan confronted David in 2Samuel 12. The apostles in Acts 5:29 declared, “We must obey God rather than men.” Jesus announced in Luke 4 that he brought good news to the poor and release to captives. In Matthew 5, he blessed peacemakers and those persecuted for

righteousness. In Ephesians 6, Paul urged believers to stand against principalities and powers. Are you sensing a theme?

Pop culture echoes the same drama. In Star Wars, small bands resist empire. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, silence becomes complicity. In *Les Misérables*, Jean Valjean risks everything for mercy. In *The West Wing*, conscience battles political expediency. Taylor Swift sings in "Only the Young" that the fight belongs to the next generation.

The question is not *whether* speaking costs something. It *always* does. The question is whether silence costs *more*.

Lenten Calls to Extraordinary Courage

If we honor Kenrick, we must move beyond admiration.

- **Deeply study issues.** Kenrick grounded his dissent in Scripture and tradition. As U.S. Catholics, we must ground ours in constitutional law, Catholic social teaching, and moral theology.
- **Contact elected officials.** Demand congressional oversight before wars expand. Demand protection of voting rights and civil liberties.
- **Support peacemaking organizations.** Contribute financially. Volunteer time. Practice almsgiving that resists violence.
- **Prophetically preach and teach.** Clergy must clearly name injustice. Laity must refuse spiritualized silence.
- **Build resilient communities.** Organize others to pray, study and act together. Extraordinary courage rarely grows in isolation.
- **Fast from apathy.** Replace passive scrolling with concrete action.
- **Locally protect the vulnerable.** Show up when immigrants, LGBTQIA+ neighbors or religious minorities face harassment.

Lent calls us to fasting, prayer and almsgiving. This year, let us fast from fear, pray for moral clarity, and give ourselves to costly discipleship!

From Kenrick Seminary Back to the Classroom

Thirty-five years after studying in St. Louis, I still picture those seminarians commuting from Kenrick Seminary. Young men discerning priesthood. Young men who likely wrestled with obedience and conscience in similar ways.

I wonder where they are. Parish rectories? University classrooms? Hospital chaplaincies? Happily married? Struggling with doubts they never voiced? The fact that I don't find them when I google their names suggests that they are not in public ministry.

Kenrick's name hung above their formation. His legacy whispers still. History rarely remembers the cautious. It remembers those who risk.

In this extraordinary American moment, may we refuse to confuse unity with uniformity, obedience with abdication, or patriotism with silence. May we cultivate extraordinary love, extraordinary courage and extraordinary moral clarity. And when future generations look back on 2026, may they say that believers did not easily bow to power, but instead stood, prayed and acted with conviction!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where in my life do I feel pressure to remain silent for the sake of comfort?
- How do I discern the difference between prudence and cowardice?
- What concrete action can I take this Lent that costs me something real?
- Whose voices are marginalized in my community, and how can I amplify them?
- What Scripture passages anchors my conscience when authority demands compliance?
- If I faced Kenrick's dilemma, what would I do?

Let Us Pray

God of prophets and apostles, You call us not to easy faith, but to faithful courage. When fear tempts us toward silence, steady our hearts. When power overreaches, sharpen our conscience. When speaking costs us reputation or security, remind us that you stand with those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Form in us extraordinary love, extraordinary solidarity, and extraordinary courage. May we live not as timid subjects, but as free children of God. Amen.

Bridge-Builders and Megachurches

Lessons from Ambrose Phillipps de Lisle,
Walter Kasper and Joel Osteen on unity, leadership,
and the extraordinary work of gathering God's people

March 5, 2026



In 2016, after we had celebrated the 2015 presbyteral ordinations of Father Cleofas María Cruz and Father Roy Gomez, Father Libardo Rocha and I decided to take four Sundays away from Holy Family to study the largest megachurches in Texas. We visited churches in Austin, San Antonio, Dallas and Houston. And we took notes.

What struck me first was the hospitality. From the moment one arrives in the parking lot, to the final sending forth, these communities create carefully curated experiences of welcome, preaching and music. They are extraordinarily intentional about forming community.

Some of those services also leaned heavily into emotionalism. Years earlier, one of my associate pastors at Cristo Rey, Father Facundo Medina, warned me about that dynamic when we began hosting monthly healing services modeled after those at the Basilica of San Juan del Valle in South Texas. There, the charismatic Padre Nicolao sang with his mariachi, preached with fervor, and laid hands on congregants, a number of whom were “slain in the Spirit.”

It was powerful. It was moving. It was complicated.

Today's commemoration invites us to reflect on three very different Christian leaders – **Ambrose Phillipps de Lisle, Walter Kasper and Joel Osteen**. Each in his own way raises a question that we must take seriously:

What might we learn from other churches, especially those that seem extraordinarily effective at gathering and nourishing God's people?

From Suspicion to Unity: The Courage of Ambrose Phillipps de Lisle

Ambrose Phillipps de Lisle (1809-1878) lived in a very different ecclesial world.

When he, an English Roman Catholic, began advocating for prayer and cooperation among Roman Catholics, Orthodox Catholics and Anglicans

in the 19th century, the idea sounded scandalous to many Roman hierarchs. His belief that these traditions shared “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” echoed the words of Ephesians 4:5—yet Rome condemned his efforts toward unity!

To us today, that reaction seems astonishing.

After all, Catholics now routinely pray with other Christians, participate in ecumenical dialogues, and collaborate in social ministries. Vatican II’s decree, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, effectively affirmed what de Lisle had intuited a century earlier.

Yet his story reminds us how threatening bridge-building can feel to institutions that rely on clear boundaries.

In the Gospels, Jesus constantly crossed such boundaries. In Sunday’s gospel, he spoke with the Samaritan woman (Jn. 4). He praised the faith of a Roman centurion (Mt. 8:10). He told the parable of the Good Samaritan to dismantle religious tribalism (Lk. 10:25-37).

De Lisle tried to do something similar in his time.

Like many prophets, he was ahead of the curve.

And prophets almost always get into trouble!

What a Difference a Century Makes: Walter Kasper and Ecumenical Leadership

If de Lisle represents a prophetic whisper, Cardinal Walter Kasper (1933-) represents the institutional embrace of that same vision.

As president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, Kasper spent years building relationships among Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant leaders. He helped advance dialogues that earlier generations of Catholics would have considered unthinkable.

In some ways, his work embodies Jesus’ prayer in John 17:21: “*That they may all be one.*”

Yet Kasper also reminds us that ecumenism is never simple.

Even while advocating unity, he criticized aspects of Anglican life, particularly regarding women’s ordination and same-sex marriage. That tension illustrates an ongoing challenge: *How do Christians build bridges without pretending differences do not exist?*

Anyone who has tried to mediate family arguments around a Thanksgiving table knows the difficulty.

Still, Kasper’s efforts reveal something extraordinary. Christian unity does not emerge from pretending we agree about everything. *Unity grows when people commit to relationship even amid disagreement.*

In that sense, Kasper practiced what the Apostle Paul urged in Romans 12:18: “*If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.*”

The Megachurch Question: Why Joel Osteen Draws Millions

Mention Joel Osteen (1963-) in many Catholic circles, and watch the eye-rolling begin.

Critics quickly invoke the “prosperity gospel,” celebrity culture, or shallow theology.

Yet seven million people watch his sermons each week.

That fact alone deserves reflection.

Years ago, when Father Libardo and I studied megachurches across Texas, we, of course, visited Osteen’s church, which excelled at three things: hospitality, storytelling and hope.

They knew how to welcome strangers.

They knew how to clearly communicate.

They knew how to inspire people.

There is a reason films like *Field of Dreams* resonate with audiences: “If you build it, they will come.” Megachurch leaders have taken that principle seriously.

In contrast, many Catholic parishes unintentionally communicate the opposite message: “If you can find the parking lot, stay awake during the homily, and survive a rote liturgy...well, congratulations to you.”

When judged less kindly, what many parishioners take away from our liturgies often sounds harsh. Which is why so many never return. According to a 2025 study by the Pew Research Center, 13-15% of Americans self-identify as former Roman Catholics – some of them even as “recovering Catholics.” 43-52% of them have joined a non-Roman Catholic church, and nearly half now self-identify as religiously unaffiliated. Let those numbers sink in.

Osteen also taps into something deeply human: People long for hope. Scripture is full of that theme. The prophets promised restoration (Is. 40:31). Jesus announced good news to the poor (Lk. 4:18). Paul insisted that “hope does not disappoint” (Rom. 5:5).

We rightly worry when faith becomes transactional – “give generously, and God will bless you with a Mercedes!” Yet we should also acknowledge that too much Christian preaching has focused on sin, wrath and punishment. Be honest: Do you really want to go to church to hear about fire and brimstone? Or to hear why you should be against women’s reproductive health, rather than hear a rich homily based on scripture? I cannot count the times Roman Catholic friends have shared with me that they’ve felt trapped listening to anti-abortion propaganda in the middle of a liturgy!

Such factors help to explain why millions flock to churches where the message sounds more like encouragement than condemnation.

The Power and Danger of Charismatic Leadership

Here is where things become complicated.

Religious movements often grow around charismatic personalities. That dynamic is hardly new. Martin Luther, John Wesley and Billy Graham all attracted enormous followings.

I speak cautiously here because I have seen how personality influences ministry.

When I served as pastor of Cristo Rey in Austin, our parish grew dramatically. Soon we celebrated nine Sunday Masses – six in Spanish, one in English, and two bilingual liturgies to bridge multilingual, intergenerational families. I will never forget how our first parish spring-cleaning event in 2009 attracted nearly 400 volunteers!

It was humbling.

Leadership matters.

But personality-driven movements also carry risks. When communities depend too heavily on a single figure, they can struggle when that leader leaves.

In our current political climate, we see similar dynamics. Large crowds gather around charismatic figures who inspire extraordinary loyalty. Some of those leaders use that influence to unite people around compassion and justice. Others harness it to inflame resentment and division. We clearly see this in our current U.S. President.

Jesus himself warned about false shepherds (Jn. 10:12-13). Yet he also modeled extraordinary leadership grounded in service, rather than ego.

That difference matters.

Lenten Invitations

Lent challenges us not merely to give up chocolate or soda. It calls us toward deeper conversion – toward extraordinary courage in how we live the Gospel.

If the lives of de Lisle, Kasper and Osteen teach us anything, it may be this: The Church must continually learn, adapt and grow.

Here are several Lenten invitations:

- **Practice radical hospitality.** When newcomers enter our churches, they should experience the warmth of Matthew 25:35: “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”
- **Study other Christian communities with humility, rather than envy or contempt.** There is wisdom to be learned beyond our ecclesial walls.

- **Boldly preach hope.** The Gospel is called “good news” for a reason.
- **Invest in excellent preaching, music and community building.** People encounter God through beauty, storytelling and authentic relationships.
- **Build bridges across ideological and denominational lines.** The world already contains enough division.
- **Resist personality cults.** Healthy communities must rely on shared mission, rather than charismatic individuals alone.

Lessons from the Megachurch Parking Lot

When Father Libardo and I visited those megachurches nearly a decade ago, we began each Sunday morning in enormous parking lots filled with volunteers smiling and greeting strangers.

“Welcome home,” they would say.

It was simple. It was genuine. It was effective.

Standing there, I could not help thinking about the Church that Jesus imagined—a community where strangers become neighbors, and neighbors become family.

Ambrose Phillipps de Lisle dreamed of that unity long before Rome could imagine it. Walter Kasper spent decades nurturing it through dialogue. Joel Osteen demonstrates that millions of people still hunger for faith communities that inspire hope.

Perhaps the Lenten question for us is this:

What would happen if we combined our commitment to justice with that same level of intentional hospitality, joyful proclamation, and extraordinary courage?

If we did, we might discover that the Gospel still possesses the power to gather people from every corner of society—just as it did when Jesus first proclaimed the Kingdom of God!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where have I encountered authentic Christian hospitality in my life?
- What might my faith community learn from churches outside our tradition?
- Do my words and actions build bridges or deepen divisions?
- How do I respond when charismatic leaders inspire strong devotion among others?
- During this Lenten season, what concrete step can I take to promote unity among Christians?

- Where might God be calling me to demonstrate extraordinary courage or extraordinary love?

Let Us Pray

Gracious and loving God, You call your people into one body through the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. In a world fractured by division, grant us the wisdom to seek unity without fear, and the humility to learn from others. During this Lenten season, help us practice extraordinary hospitality, extraordinary compassion and extraordinary courage. Teach us to welcome the stranger, to speak words of hope, and to build communities that reflect your kingdom. May our churches become places where every person encounters your grace, your justice, and your boundless love. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Servants, Saints and Sisters in Courage

Lessons on Solidarity from Perpetua, Felicity,
Hilaria Aguinaldo and Pearl Buck

March 6, 2026



My husband and I recently finished watching all six seasons of *Downton Abbey*. The contrast between the Crawley family's elegant life upstairs and the servants' tireless work downstairs is striking. Yet what moved me most were the moments when those two worlds met with tenderness.

I think especially of the quiet conversations between Lady Mary Crawley and her maid Anna Bates, as Anna brushed Lady Mary's hair. I also remember the complicated affection between Cora Crawley and her lady's maid Sarah O'Brien.

In those scenes, the show quietly asks a question: *What if birth had shuffled the cards differently?* What if Lady Mary had been born Anna, or Anna had been born Lady Mary?

The tender moments shared by them comes to mind today as the Church prepares to celebrate tomorrow the feast of **Saints Perpetua and Felicity** —

a noblewoman and her enslaved companion whose love for one another transcended the brutal hierarchies of the Roman world.

Today we also remember two remarkable women: **Hilaria del Rosario Aguinaldo** of the Philippines and **Pearl S. Buck** of the United States. Add to this the observance of **Employee Appreciation Day** and a pattern emerges: *Across centuries, courageous women have quietly taught us the meaning of solidarity!*

When a Noblewoman and Her Servant Became Sisters

The early third century produced one of Christianity's most extraordinary martyrdom stories. Perpetua was a young noblewoman from North Africa. Felicity was her enslaved companion.

Roman society separated them. Baptism united them.

Their story survives in *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, one of the earliest Christian texts written partly by a woman. Perpetua described visions, fears and the heartbreak of leaving behind her infant child. Felicity, pregnant while imprisoned, gave birth shortly before her execution.

In the amphitheater, the empire tried to degrade them. Instead, these two women showed extraordinary courage.

The ancient account says they faced the beasts together. They comforted one another. They died as equals.

The Gospel often dismantles hierarchies. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus reminds his followers that "*the last will be first and the first will be last*" (Mt. 20:16). In his Letter to the Galatians, Paul writes that "*there is neither slave nor free... for you are all one in Christ Jesus*" (Gal. 3:28).

Perpetua and Felicity did not merely preach that theology. They lived it.

Gratitude, Labor and the Quiet Holiness of Work

Tomorrow's feast also intersects with something more ordinary: today's celebration of Employee Appreciation Day.

Scripture consistently honors labor. The Letter of James warns against withholding workers' wages. The Gospel of Luke reminds us that "*the laborer deserves to be paid.*" Jesus himself spent most of his life as a worker in Nazareth.

Our culture still struggles to fairly value labor. Many workers remain invisible: aides who care for the elderly, farmworkers who harvest our food, those who wash the dishes in the back and never visit the restaurant's dining space. After I left active ministry to the Roman Church, a local engineer provided me an office space where I often worked late into the

night, witnessing the quiet heroes who came through after all the firm's employees had left, tidying all spaces for the next day.

Perhaps that is why those *Downton Abbey* scenes resonate so deeply: We instinctively recognize dignity when we see it honored!

Extraordinary faith calls us to see the Anna Bates and Sarah O'Brien in every workplace. It invites us to recognize the Felicity beside us.

Hilaria Aguinaldo and the Courage to Decolonize Faith

Today's commemoration of Hilaria del Rosario Aguinaldo adds another layer to this reflection.

Many Americans imagine the Philippines only through the lens of Spanish colonial Roman Catholicism. Yet after centuries of colonial control, Filipino leaders began asking a bold question: *Could Catholic faith exist without colonial domination?*

The answer became the Philippine Independent Church (PIC).

Hilaria Aguinaldo, the first First Lady of the Philippines, courageously supported that movement. While her husband led the political revolution, she organized care for wounded soldiers and their families. She helped form the Daughters of the Revolution, a precursor to the Red Cross in the Philippines.

After her husband's presidency ended, she remained active in the Women's Commission of the PIC.

That decision required extraordinary courage. She stepped away from the colonial church of her ancestors to support a Filipino expression of Catholic faith—much like the national churches of the Union of Utrecht in Germany, Switzerland and Austria, birthed 30 years before the PIC.

Faith, she believed, must serve the people, rather than empire.

Pearl Buck and the Moral Imagination

Across the Pacific, another woman challenged injustice with words.

Pearl S. Buck grew up in China as the daughter of missionaries. Her experiences there shaped her landmark novel *The Good Earth*, which introduced millions of Western readers to the dignity and struggles of Chinese farmers.

Buck later became a fierce advocate for women, Asian Americans, and children of mixed heritage, who were often abandoned or marginalized. She founded adoption agencies that welcomed those children when many others refused them.

Her activism echoed the prophetic spirit of Scripture. The Book of Isaiah commands believers to "*seek justice, rescue the oppressed.*" The Book of Micah famously asks us to "*do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.*"

Buck did not merely quote those words. She embodied them.

Women Who Lead Without Machismo

This week's U.S. bombing of Iran once again reminded us how often power expresses itself through aggression. Political leaders trade insults. Nations escalate conflicts. Strength becomes synonymous with domination.

Yet women often model another path.

Here at Holy Family Catholic Church, I see that path daily in leaders like Mother Annie Cass Watson and Deacon Elsa Y. Nelligan. Their ministry reflects tenderness, wisdom and mutuality, rather than hierarchy.

Mother Annie's work within the Association of Roman Catholic Women Priests and its "circle leaders" reminds us that leadership can be collaborative, rather than authoritarian.

One of my professors at the Washington Theological Union, Sr. Theresa Koernke, once described the vision of Vatican II with a beautiful image: Instead of the old pyramid—with the pope at the top and everyone else beneath—Vatican II imagined the Church floating together in the same waters, where no one is higher than another.

No one above. No one below. Only sisters and brothers floating together.

In a moment when young American women possess fewer rights than their mothers did prior to the 2022 overturn of *Roe v. Wade*, that vision feels especially urgent.

Women throughout history—from Felicity to Hilaria to Pearl Buck—have modeled extraordinary courage in the face of systems designed to silence them.

Ways to Practice Extraordinary Solidarity

During this Lenten season, we must remember that fasting is not only about chocolate and soda. It is about transformation.

Here are several ways we might practice extraordinary solidarity this week:

- **Publicly thank the workers around you.** Write a note to a custodian, cafeteria worker or administrative assistant whose labor often goes unseen.
- **Support women's leadership in church and society.** Read about movements such as the Roman Catholic Womenpriests (RCWP) and the Association of Roman Catholic Womenpriests (ARCWP).
- **Advocate for reproductive justice.** Call elected officials and support organizations defending bodily autonomy.

- **Learn global Catholic history.** Study the Philippine Independent Church or the Old Catholic tradition to appreciate diverse expressions of our Catholic faith.
- **Amplify marginalized voices.** Read works by authors like Pearl Buck and contemporary writers who advocate for immigrants, women and minorities.
- **Daily practice gratitude.** Offer prayer for those whose labor sustains your life.

These small acts cultivate extraordinary love!

Upstairs, Downstairs and the Kingdom of God

As I think back to those *Downton Abbey* scenes, I realize something. The show hints at a truth the Gospel proclaims openly: the upstairs and downstairs of history are slowly dissolving in the Kingdom of God.

Perpetua and Felicity already knew that truth. A noblewoman and her servant walked together into the arena and emerged forever as sisters in faith.

Hilaria Aguinaldo knew it when she dared to imagine a Filipino Catholic church free from colonial domination.

Pearl Buck knew it when she insisted that the lives of Chinese farmers deserved the attention of the world.

And perhaps we glimpse it in quieter ways. In a teacher encouraging a student. In a caregiver holding an aging parent's hand. In a worker whose labor sustains a community.

Lent invites us to more clearly see those moments. It asks us to reject the hierarchies that divide us and to embrace the extraordinary solidarity that binds us together.

The Crawleys and their servants lived on different floors of Downton Abbey.

In the Kingdom of God, there are no floors.

Only one table.

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where do I encounter "Perpetua and Felicity" relationships in my life today?
- Whose labor do I overlook or take for granted?
- How might I show extraordinary gratitude to workers in my community?
- What lessons might the Philippine Independent Church teach us about faith beyond empire?

- How can I support women whose leadership challenges unjust systems?
- During this Lent, what prophetic action—not merely sacrifice—am I willing to take?

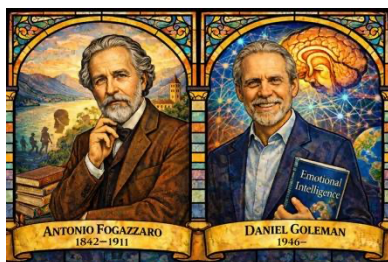
Let Us Pray

God of justice and mercy, you called Perpetua and Felicity to witness through extraordinary courage. You inspired Hilaria Aguinaldo to nurture faith in her people. You stirred Pearl Buck to defend the dignity of those the world ignored. Open our eyes to the workers beside us, the women whose leadership renews the Church, and the neighbors whose humanity mirrors our own. During this Lenten season, teach us to fast from indifference, to pray with courageous hearts, and to give ourselves generously for the sake of justice. May we practice extraordinary love until every servant is honored, every voice is heard, and every child of God sits together at your table. Amen.

Faith, Feeling and the Courage to Think

Antonio Fogazzaro & Daniel Goleman
on integrating faith, science and emotional wisdom

March 7, 2026



I first encountered the work of Daniel Goleman while serving as president of San Juan Diego Catholic High School in Austin. His groundbreaking book, *Emotional Intelligence*, helped educators rethink what it truly means to be “smart.”

In our classrooms, students often perfectly illustrated the distinction. Some possessed extraordinary academic intelligence—what psychologists call IQ. They excelled on tests, solved algebraic puzzles, and quickly grasped abstract concepts.

Other students, however, possessed something equally powerful. They sensed when a classmate felt discouraged. They mediated conflicts. They instinctively read a room and responded with kindness or humor.

Their grades sometimes lagged behind, yet their emotional intelligence—EQ—quietly transformed the lives of those around them.

Looking back, those students reminded me of something scripture repeatedly teaches: Knowledge alone never suffices. Wisdom, understanding and counsel—three of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit—shape the heart in ways that raw information never can.

On this March 7 commemoration of the Italian novelist Antonio Fogazzaro and the psychologist Daniel Goleman, we encounter two thinkers who invite believers to cultivate both intellectual honesty and emotional maturity. In an age when public discourse often rewards anger, rather than insight, their witness challenges us to practice extraordinary humility, extraordinary curiosity, and extraordinary compassion.

Knowledge Is Not the Same as Wisdom

Scripture repeatedly distinguishes between knowledge and wisdom. Knowledge accumulates facts. Wisdom interprets them with humility.

The Book of Proverbs reminds us: *“Reverence of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom”* (Prov. 9:10). The prophet Isaiah names wisdom, understanding and counsel among the gifts of the Spirit (Is. 11:2).

Jesus himself warns that intellectual brilliance alone does not guarantee spiritual insight: *“Unless you become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven”* (Mt. 18:3).

St. Paul presses the point further. *“Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up”* (1Cor. 8:1).

Modern culture often celebrates knowledge alone. We admire brilliance in fields from artificial intelligence to neuroscience. Pop culture reinforces the stereotype of the brilliant but socially clueless genius—think *The Big Bang Theory* or the emotionally stunted prodigies portrayed in films like *Good Will Hunting*.

Yet scripture consistently invites believers to something deeper: integrated intelligence. Not merely knowing the truth, but living it with empathy.

That integration lies at the heart of both Fogazzaro’s and Goleman’s legacies.

Antonio Fogazzaro: Faith That Engages Science

The Italian novelist Antonio Fogazzaro (1842-1911) spent much of his life wrestling with the relationship between Christianity and modern

science. During the late 19th century, the theory of evolution advanced by Charles Darwin sparked fierce debate within Christian circles.

Many church leaders responded defensively. Fogazzaro chose a different path.

He believed faith should dialogue with science, rather than fear it. His novels explored the tension between religious tradition and scientific discovery, and his efforts earned him seven nominations for the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Yet his openness provoked controversy. The Roman Catholic Church ultimately placed two of his works on the Index of Forbidden Books.

History often unfolds through action and reaction. After Rome's condemnation of Darwinian ideas, the Philippine Independent Church published its massive 1912 catechism. Remarkably, the 400-page text enthusiastically discussed contemporary scientific theories, including evolution. In many ways, it resembled a science textbook more than a catechism!

Fogazzaro thus reminds us that authentic faith does not fear discovery. Instead, it welcomes truth wherever it appears.

As Jesus promises: "*You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free*" (Jn. 8:32).

Daniel Goleman and the Science of Emotional Intelligence

If Fogazzaro explored the relationship between faith and science, Daniel Goleman (b. 1946) examined the inner landscape of human emotion.

His landmark 1995 book, *Emotional Intelligence*, revolutionized psychology and leadership studies. Goleman demonstrated that traits like empathy, self-awareness and emotional regulation often predict success more reliably than traditional IQ.

His research anticipated developments in neuroscience that continue to reshape our understanding of the human brain.

Interestingly, Goleman's work intersects with ancient spiritual traditions. Practices such as meditation, mindfulness and contemplative prayer cultivate precisely the forms of awareness he describes.

Few contemporary theologians have explored that intersection more deeply than Ilia Delio. I had the privilege of studying under her at the Washington Theological Union in Washington, DC.

Ironically, our relationship sometimes illustrated the very emotional dynamics Goleman describes. Had I possessed greater emotional intelligence at the time, I might have resisted critiquing her scholarship quite so aggressively. Had she possessed a bit more EQ as well, perhaps she might have welcomed the questions of a curious student, rather than

respond with the ecclesiastical equivalent of “know your place.” As a result, I left WTU with a Master of Divinity, but not with an additional Master of Arts in Systemic Theology – to which she closed the door.

Twenty-five years later, I suspect we have both grown. I know I have. Growth often arrives through precisely such awkward encounters.

Emotional Intelligence in the Workplace

Yesterday marked **Employee Appreciation Day**, a moment that invites leaders to reflect on the people who sustain our institutions.

During my years overseeing churches, schools, learning centers and nonprofits, I often remembered something a management professor once told our class at St. Edward’s University:

“They’re doing the best they can with what they have.”

That insight reflects profound emotional intelligence. Workers bring diverse experiences, traumas and talents to the workplace. Some possess extraordinary analytical ability. Others excel in relationship-building.

Organizations thrive when they nurture both.

Pop culture repeatedly explores this dynamic. Films like *Inside Out* reveal how emotions shape human decision-making. Television shows like *Ted Lasso* portray leadership grounded in empathy, rather than domination. Songs such as “Man in the Mirror” by Michael Jackson remind us that genuine change begins within.

These stories echo a biblical truth: Transformation always begins in the heart!

Faith, Science and the Crisis of Truth in America

All of this matters profoundly in our present moment.

In recent years, political leaders in the United States have repeatedly undermined scientific expertise. Their disastrous handling of the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the deadly consequences of ignoring research and public health guidance.

More recently, the second administration of Donald Trump has proposed dramatic cuts to research funding while amplifying conspiracy theories and distrust toward scientists.

Such decisions carry real consequences. Medical breakthroughs slow. Climate change accelerates. Universities lose the resources necessary to advance science and educate the next generation.

People of faith must resist such anti-intellectualism. Christianity has long affirmed the compatibility of faith and reason. From medieval universities to modern medical missions, believers have historically advanced knowledge, rather than suppressed it.

In this unordinary moment in American life, defending truth itself becomes an act of discipleship!

Calls to Action

As we continue our Lenten journey of prayer, fasting and almsgiving, consider these concrete steps:

- **Read broadly.** Explore works that bridge faith and science, including authors who challenge your assumptions.
- **Practice emotional awareness.** Pause during moments of conflict and ask what emotions shape your response.
- **Support scientific research.** Advocate for policies that fund universities, laboratories and public health institutions.
- **Cultivate empathy.** Listen deeply to coworkers, neighbors and family members whose experiences differ from your own.
- **Teach children curiosity.** Encourage young people to ask questions, rather than fear them.
- **Integrate prayer and reflection.** Allow spiritual practices to shape how you interpret new knowledge.

These practices nurture extraordinary wisdom in an age that desperately needs it!

From the Classroom Back to the Heart

When I remember those students at San Juan Diego Catholic High School, I recall more than grades and test scores. I remember the quiet leaders who comforted classmates, resolved conflicts, and lifted spirits during difficult days.

They embodied something scripture has long proclaimed: Intelligence without love ultimately falls short.

As Lent continues, the lives of Antonio Fogazzaro and Daniel Goleman remind us that authentic faith integrates mind and heart. Knowledge alone rarely transforms the world. Wisdom infused with compassion does.

Perhaps that is the extraordinary calling before us now: to cultivate minds that seek truth and hearts that practice mercy!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where in my life do I prioritize knowledge while neglecting wisdom?
- How might I grow in emotional intelligence during this Lenten season?
- When have curiosity and humility deepened my faith, rather than threatened it?

- How can I encourage young people to embrace both science and spirituality?
- What concrete actions can I take to defend truth in today's political climate?

Let Us Pray

God of wisdom and truth, You created minds capable of wonder and hearts capable of compassion. Grant us the courage to honestly seek knowledge and the humility to hold that knowledge with love. Help us grow in emotional wisdom, so that our words heal, rather than wound, and our actions reflect the mercy of Christ. During this Lenten season, teach us to practice extraordinary love, extraordinary patience, and extraordinary courage. May our faith never fear truth, but instead welcome it as a reflection of your divine light. Amen.

Of Monsters, Men, and the Measure of Leadership

Lessons from Mariano Marcos on Power,
Faith and the Courage to Be Light

March 8, 2026



Sometimes I simply laugh at the Spirit's sense of humor.

As I type these words on March 8—the day the Philippine Independent Church remembers the Independent Catholic father of dictator Ferdinand Marcos—my Apple Music playlist suddenly begins blasting the 1987 hit “Bad” by Michael Jackson.

You know the lyrics:

“You know I’m bad, I’m bad (bad, bad), you know it (really, really bad)...
And the whole world has to answer right now
Just to tell you once again – who’s bad?”

Before that, the algorithm served up a haunting track by Of Monsters and Men, the Icelandic indie folk/rock band that my husband and I recently heard in concert.

And suddenly the metaphor is unavoidable: *History repeatedly swings between monsters and men.*

Some leaders serve the common good with humility, selflessness and extraordinary compassion. Others greedily serve themselves, treating others with great cruelty. Some lift people up. Others tear them down.

The Marcos family itself illustrates the cycle. Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos were once recognized by *Guinness World Records* for the “greatest robbery of a government,” having allegedly looted \$5-10 billion from the Philippines.

Yet today’s commemoration focuses not on the dictator, but on his father, **Mariano Marcos** – a lawyer, congressman and devoted member of the Philippine Independent Catholic movement.

His life raises a fascinating question for us: *How do we judge leaders who live honorable lives, but whose descendants or successors destructively wield power?*

Independent Catholicism in the Philippines

Mariano Marcos (1897-1945) lived during a pivotal era in Filipino history.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Filipino nationalists founded the Philippine Independent Church, a Catholic body that broke away from Roman authority after centuries of Spanish colonial rule. Its first supreme bishop, Gregorio Aglipay, championed both national independence and ecclesial autonomy.

The movement quickly attracted lawyers, educators, and reform-minded politicians.

Mariano Marcos counted among them.

A lawyer and congressman, he embraced the church’s ideals and insisted on baptizing and raising his children within its tradition. He became what historians sometimes describe as a militant Aglipayan, committed to Filipino independence and national dignity.

His life ended tragically. During the Japanese occupation of the Philippines in World War II, guerrilla fighters suspected him of collaborating with occupying forces. They executed him in an excruciating manner in 1945.

History later remembered him through institutions and place names. Two universities and a town still bear his name.

But his legacy remains complicated.

The Uncomfortable Truth About Fathers and Sons

Whenever historians discuss Mariano Marcos, they inevitably confront the shadow of his son, Ferdinand Marcos.

The younger Marcos ruled the Philippines for two decades. His regime became synonymous with authoritarianism, corruption, and vast theft from the national treasury.

Psychologists sometimes speak about “daddy issues.” Political history offers plenty of examples of sons who either imitate or rebel against their fathers’ values.

That complexity reminds us to hesitate before too quickly canonizing historical figures.

Scripture itself repeatedly warns us about the corrupting power of leadership. The prophet Ezekiel condemns rulers who feed themselves instead of their people (Ez. 34:2). Jesus cautions that many who seek the highest seats of power forget their duty to serve (Mk. 10:42-45).

Leadership always reveals character.

And history always remembers.

Of Monsters and Men in My Own Ministry

When I reflect on leadership, I inevitably think about my early priesthood at Cristo Rey Catholic Church in Austin.

My first pastor, Father Larry Mattingly, loved the immigrant community with extraordinary tenderness. He treated parishioners with respect and dignity. He listened deeply. People loved and trusted him.

Then the pendulum swung.

His successor—one of the very few people I have ever described as evil—treated parishioners with contempt. He yelled at and berated people. He sent penitents crying out of the confessional after telling them he could not hear their confessions. On one infamous occasion, he even referred to Mexican parishioners during Mass as *cucarachas*—cockroaches. His “leadership” was marked by one disgusting incident after another.

Imagine the heartbreak.

When Bishop Gregory Aymond later asked me to succeed him, after the pastor’s violent murder by his live-in lover in Mexico—sometimes you just can’t make these things up—I told my new associate pastor, Father Facundo, that I had only two rules.

Never go over 60 minutes when celebrating mass [since our masses were spaced 90 minutes apart]. And more importantly: **Never, never, never talk down to God’s people.**

Jesus himself warned spiritual leaders about such arrogance: “*Whoever wants to be first must be servant of all*” (Mk. 9:35).

Of monsters and men.

The pendulum always swings.

When the Pendulum Swings in the Church

I witnessed a similar contrast among bishops.

Gregory Aymond, the bishop who ordained me 25 years ago this week, greatly empowered me as a young priest. He appointed me president of his high school, then pastor of what we grew to be the largest Spanish-language parish in the diocese at that time.

Then Papa Ratzinger sent a successor — a man whose cowardice, duplicity and deceit still astonish me years later.

Again the pendulum swung.

Some leaders inspire extraordinary hope. Others foster extraordinary disappointment.

Such experiences shape us. They teach us what leadership should look like — and what it should never become.

A Silver Jubilee Reflection

In two days, I will mark my silver jubilee as a priest — twenty-five years of ordained presbyteral ministry. Today at Holy Family, Austin's only inclusive Catholic community, we celebrate that milestone together.

Looking back, I recognize how profoundly both light and darkness have shaped my vocation.

Whenever I encountered cruelty and evil, I tried to respond with compassion. Whenever I witnessed arrogance, I tried to practice humility. Whenever power attempted to marginalize or crush people, I tried to defend them.

In physics, we learn that every action produces an equal and opposite reaction. In the spiritual life the principle often holds true as well: When we encounter darkness, God invites us to become light!

Jesus himself declared it plainly: *"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden."* (Mt. 5:14)

Our Present American Moment

That calling feels especially urgent today.

In the United States, we currently watch a political spectacle that clearly echoes the corruption of the Marcos era. The administration of Donald J. Trump increasingly appears determined to rival Ferdinand and Imelda for the title of history's greatest kleptocrats!

Meanwhile revelations about the Department of Homeland Security — including controversies surrounding former secretary Kristi Noem — suggest an agency more interested in self-promotion and self-aggrandizement than public service.

At the same time, the administration attempts to distract us through sensational actions: razing an entire wing of the White House, bombing

foreign targets, seizing foreign leaders, and burying dark truths that may lurk in the Epstein files.

The playbook feels painfully familiar. Authoritarian leaders throughout history have relied on spectacle, distraction and corruption.

The Matthean Jesus bluntly warn us that evildoers will attempt to distract us and point us in the wrong direction: *"If anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Messiah!' or, 'There he is!' do not believe it. For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even God's chosen"* (Mt. 24:23-26).

Calls to Action

As we journey through Lent—a season far deeper than simply giving up chocolate or soda—we might embrace more prophetic practices.

Consider these commitments:

- **Honestly study history.** Learn how corruption emerges—and how societies resist it.
- **Support ethical leadership.** Vote for candidates who demonstrate integrity, rather than performative outrage.
- **Practice courageous truth-telling.** Challenge disinformation and lies in political discourse and in church life.
- **Serve the vulnerable.** Volunteer with organizations assisting immigrants, refugees and the poor.
- **Cultivate extraordinary humility.** Remember that power exists to serve, not to dominate.
- **Mentor future leaders.** Help young people understand both the responsibilities and temptations of leadership.

These practices form disciples who resist both cynicism and despair.

From "Bad" to the Beatitudes

As I return to that unexpected soundtrack playing while I write this reflection, the irony still makes me smile.

Michael Jackson's *"Bad"* asks the question: *"Who's bad?"*

History repeatedly answers the question.

Yet the gospel invites us to ask a different one.

In the Beatitudes Jesus proclaims, *"Blessed are the meek... blessed are the merciful... blessed are the peacemakers"* (Mt. 5:3-9).

Those are the qualities that ultimately shape the world.

Leaders like Mariano Marcos remind us that history rarely unfolds in simple categories of heroes and villains, of monsters and men. Families, institutions and nations all live somewhere in the complicated middle.

But every generation must decide whether it will amplify darkness or cultivate light.

In this extraordinary American moment, the call could not be clearer: When we encounter darkness, we must respond with extraordinary courage, extraordinary integrity, and extraordinary light and love!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where have I witnessed both noble and destructive leadership in my own life?
- How do I respond when people in authority misuse power?
- What practices help me cultivate humility and compassion as a leader?
- In what ways might I become light in situations marked by darkness?
- How is God inviting me to practice extraordinary courage during this Lenten season?

Let Us Pray

God of justice and mercy, you raise up leaders who serve the common good and you expose those who abuse power. Grant us the wisdom to recognize truth, the courage to challenge injustice, and the humility to lead with compassion. During this Lenten season form within us hearts committed to extraordinary love, extraordinary courage, and extraordinary integrity. When we encounter darkness, help us become light. Amen.

Extraordinary Women, Extraordinary Courage

St. Frances of Rome, Carrie Chapman Catt,
and the Moral Courage to Trust Women

March 9, 2026



Twenty years ago, Pedro Kaufmann—then board chair at San Juan Diego Catholic High School—enjoyed sharing stories about his father’s involvement in the discovery, production and dissemination of the birth control pill in Mexico. One story permanently lodged in my mind.

When Pedro’s father traveled to Rome and met Paul VI—the pope who infamously condemned artificial birth control in *Humanae Vitae* (1968)—the pontiff reportedly wagged his finger and condemned the supposed “evil” of the pill. Calmly and respectfully, Pedro’s father replied with words like: *“Your Holiness, I believe I have done a great good for humanity.”*

For far too long, men in power have wagged fingers and issued condemnations—especially toward women—rather than seeking ways to empower them, increase their agency, and lift them up.

Today, in light of yesterday’s celebration of **International Women’s Day**, we remember a remarkable constellation of witnesses connected to March 9: **St. Frances of Rome**, the medieval mystic who mobilized the wealthy to care for the poor; **Carrie Chapman Catt**, the American suffragist who fought for women’s political voice; and **Josef Fuchs**, the Jesuit moral theologian who dared to think more humanely about birth control.

Each reminds us that in every generation, extraordinary courage emerges when people refuse to accept systems that diminish women!

St. Frances of Rome and the Gospel of Lenten Almsgiving

Today the Church celebrates St. Frances of Rome (1384-1440). Born to a wealthy Roman family, Frances married into privilege yet refused to live insulated from suffering. During plagues, famine and social upheaval, she organized aristocratic women to visit the sick, distribute food, and serve Rome’s poorest neighborhoods.

She took Jesus’ words seriously:

- “Whatever you did for one of these least of these, you did for me” (Mt. 25:40)
- “Sell your possessions and give alms” (Lk. 12:33)
- “Blessed are the merciful” (Mt. 5:7)

Frances did not merely write checks. She personally entered the suffering of others.

In our own unordinary moment, I sometimes imagine what she might say to today’s billionaire class. Instead of investing fortunes into political influence and the machinery of a budding kleptocracy, perhaps she would challenge them: *Visit hospitals. Walk through homeless encampments. Listen to migrants. See struggling mothers.*

Her witness echoes the spirit of Lent itself. Lent is not about giving up chocolate or soda. Lent invites us to practice extraordinary generosity — time, talent and treasure directed toward those whom society overlooks.

And Frances would probably remind us that the first step toward justice often begins with simply seeing people whom others refuse to see!

Carrie Chapman Catt and the Long Struggle for Women’s Voice

Today we also remember the passing of Carrie Chapman Catt (1859-1947).

Catt led the National American Woman Suffrage Association and helped secure passage of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, guaranteeing women the right to vote in 1920. For millennia, women had been excluded from political voice. Catt and her colleagues refused to accept that injustice.

Her movement embodied the biblical spirit of liberation:

- Deborah judging Israel (Judg. 4-5)
- Mary proclaiming the *Magnificat* — “God has lifted up the lowly” (Lk. 1:52)
- The women who first proclaimed the Resurrection (Mt. 28:1-10)

Yet the struggle continues.

Across the globe — and here in the U.S. — women still fight for equal pay, reproductive autonomy and political representation.

And sometimes the oppression takes subtler forms. History shows that systems dominated by powerful men occasionally elevate a few women not to advance justice, but to legitimize injustice.

The past weeks have offered painful reminders. We see examples of women in positions of power who appear less interested in defending the public good, than in reinforcing the political power of an out-of-control U.S. president. You know such names: Pam Bondi, Kristi Noem and Linda McMahon.

Their public performances often feel less like leadership and more like the theater of a professional wrestling match.

But we must never confuse visibility with liberation.

True liberation emerges when women exercise genuine power and agency—not when they are conscripted into defending systems that undermine others.

Josef Fuchs and the Moral Responsibility of Love

Today we also remember Josef Fuchs (1912-2005), the German Jesuit moral theologian who chaired the Vatican's Pontifical Commission on Population, Family and Birth during the 1960s.

After study, the Commission concluded that **married couples can, in good conscience, morally use means of artificial birth control**. Their recommendation was ultimately rejected when Paul VI issued his 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae*.

Countless Catholics—including theologians, pastors and ordinary families—have quietly and responsibly disagreed ever since.

I have always found the Church's rigid rejection of contraception baffling. Instead of encouraging responsible decision-making, the teaching often discourages honest conversations about sexuality and responsibility.

If parents and grandparents are honest, most would prefer for their children and grandchildren to hear something like this: *If you are going to have sex, protect yourself and protect others*. That message reflects responsibility, care and respect!

Jesus himself constantly prioritized human flourishing over rigid rule-keeping:

- "The Sabbath was made for humankind" (Mk. 2:27)
- "I desire mercy, not sacrifice" (Mt. 9:13)

Moral theology should help people live responsibly and lovingly—not burden them with guilt for having made thoughtful decisions.

In that sense, Fuchs' work remains extraordinarily prophetic.

The Samaritan Woman and the Voice of Women

Yesterday's Gospel gave us the story of the Samaritan woman at the well (Jn 4:5-42).

Jesus engaged her in a theological conversation—something rabbis rarely, if ever, did with Gentile women. He revealed his identity to her, and she became one of the first evangelists in John's Gospel!

She proclaimed, "Come, see a man who told me everything I have done!"

Her testimony brought an entire village to faith! Let that sink in. In a patriarchal society, the first evangelist to the Samaritans – according to this story – was a woman with a complicated past.

God has always chosen voices that powerful institutions overlook.

That story reminds us that women have always been central to the unfolding of God's kingdom – even when institutions tried to silence them.

The Women Who Formed My Own Life

Whenever I think about strong women, my mind immediately returns to rural Ohio.

My mother raised four sons while organizing and overseeing the religious education program at our parish, serving as a Cub Scout den leader, and shuttling us to countless music lessons, band rehearsals, and extracurriculars.

Children of the Great Depression, Grandma Reinhart embodied quiet resilience and gentleness, and Grandma Mathias organized Red Cross blood drives and became the first woman elected president of her parish council.

These women never appeared on television. They never held national office. But they modeled extraordinary courage and extraordinary love. They lived the Gospel in kitchens and living rooms, in parish halls and community centers.

Sometimes the holiest revolutions begin in those ordinary places.

Five Ways to Act

In this extraordinary moment, we cannot remain passive observers. Here are concrete ways we can act:

- **Advocate for women's leadership in Church and society.** Support women theologians, clergy and community leaders who call the Church toward greater justice (Gal. 3:28).
- **Protect reproductive health and education.** Encourage honest conversations about sexuality, responsibility and contraception. Silence and shame never create healthy families.
- **Defend public education.** Public education remains the bedrock of democracy: Fiercely support our publicly-run public schools.
- **Support organizations that globally advance women's rights.** From education initiatives to maternal health programs, these efforts embody the Gospel's commitment to human dignity.
- **Practice radical Lenten generosity.** Volunteer at shelters, support domestic violence programs, and advocate for policies that lift up struggling families.

Extraordinary faith demands extraordinary action!

From Finger-Wagging to Flourishing

Pedro Kaufmann's story returns to my mind today. A pope wagged his finger. A scientist calmly replied that he believed he had done something good for humanity.

That moment captures the tension still alive in our world: the struggle between control and compassion, between condemnation and flourishing.

The witnesses we remember today—St. Frances of Rome, Carrie Chapman Catt and Josef Fuchs—invite us to choose the path of extraordinary courage.

They remind us that when we empower women, when we trust conscience, when we lift up the marginalized, we move closer to the world Jesus envisioned: A world where the thirsty receive living water (Jn. 4:14), where the lowly are lifted up (Lk. 1:52), and where love casts out fear (1Jn 4:18).

That is the world that extraordinary faith helps create!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where have I seen women exercise extraordinary courage in my own life?
- How might I better support women's leadership in my workplace, church or community?
- What teachings or traditions might God be inviting the Church to reconsider in light of compassion and human flourishing?
- How can my Lenten practices move beyond small sacrifices, toward real acts of justice and solidarity?
- Like the Samaritan woman, how might I share with others the living water I have received?

Let Us Pray

God of living water, you spoke with the Samaritan woman and entrusted her with the Good News. Raise up women and men who speak truth with courage. Strengthen all who work for justice, dignity and equality. Guide your Church toward wisdom, compassion and humility. May we practice extraordinary love, extraordinary courage, and extraordinary generosity in this anything-but-ordinary moment. Amen.

Silver in My Beard, Fire in My Heart

Gratitude for 25 Years of Priestly Ministry

March 10, 2026



Today I celebrate my silver jubilee as a priest: twenty-five years of presbyteral ministry in the Church!

I will never forget the day. On March 10, 2001, I was ordained by Bishop Gregory M. Aymond of the Diocese of Austin, at the Basilica and National Shrine of Our Lady of Consolation in Carey, Ohio. A busload of parishioners from Cristo Rey Catholic Church traveled from Austin, Texas. Family and friends filled the pews. There was laughter, music and hope.

We were all twenty-five years younger then.

When I look in the mirror today, I see the silver in my hair and beard. Scripture reminds us that “long life is the reward of the righteous; gray hair is a glorious crown” (Prov. 16:31). History does not bear out the correlation between righteousness and long life, but the gray hair is certainly real!

So today I pause to reflect on a quarter-century of priesthood—on the extraordinary grace, unexpected curveballs, and stubborn hope that have shaped the journey.

Gratitude: The Word on My Heart

The word on my heart today is simple: gratitude.

I grew up in the cornfields of rural Ohio, now represented by the national embarrassment Jim Jordan. I was the second of four boys, a middle child who perhaps tried a little too hard to stand out.

My parents gave us everything they could. My father, a draftsman in the manufacturing industry, carried the quiet dignity of the American working class, even after opening our family business. My mother, trained as a beautician, sacrificed her career to raise four sons. My grandparents modeled resilience and civic responsibility. Teachers encouraged curiosity. Coaches, mentors and music teachers demanded discipline. Priests, friars and religious education teachers opened the doors of faith and education.

At eighteen, I joined the Conventual Franciscan Friars. They formed me intellectually and spiritually. Words could never adequately express my gratitude for such a gift.

I often say that I have a Jesuit mind and a Franciscan heart—the former shaped by Saint Louis University, the latter by the Franciscan charism of compassion and relationship with all of God’s creation.

And of course I remain grateful to Bishop Aymond, who ordained a 28-year-old friar and empowered him to serve the people of God in various ways.

Five Years In: “I Could Die a Happy Man”

When I celebrated my fifth anniversary as a priest in 2006, I publicly said something that surprised even me: I could die a happy man.

Life had thrown me a curveball: After studying for the LSAT and gaining admission to five law schools in 2003, our Franciscan community faced an \$18 million lawsuit as part of the Roman Catholic clergy sexual abuse crisis. The financial shock closed the door to law school—and my life took a different path.

At thirty-three, I found myself serving as president of San Juan Diego Catholic High School in Austin. I was teaching oral communication to graduate and doctoral students at Our Lady of the Lake University. I summarized myself then as “priest, president and professor,” and I was building relationships with students, families and colleagues.

The Spirit had quietly redirected my path. Still, life felt full.

Sometimes God writes better—though not always easier—scripts than we do. Or, in the words of Father Angelus LaFleur: “God writes straight with crooked lines!”

Ten Years: Sobered by the Church

By my tenth anniversary in 2011, I was finishing two years as pastor of Cristo Rey Catholic Church in Austin. Together we grew that parish into the city’s largest Spanish-language Catholic community, with nine Sunday masses, only one of which was in English.

Yet those years also revealed to me the human complexity of the Church.

The pontificate of Papa Ratzinger—Pope Benedict XVI—often felt heavy-handed. Institutional fear frequently overshadowed pastoral imagination. His appointee to Austin oversaw Papa Ratzinger’s 2011 imposition of the wooden, stilted translation of the *Roman Missal, Third Edition* on the diocese.

I began to see the Church not simply as the mystical body of Christ, but as a very human institution led by very human—and sometimes deeply

flawed – people. Jesus himself warned us about religious leaders who “tie up heavy burdens and lay them on people’s shoulders” (Mt 23:4). Still, I could not imagine what was about to happen.

Soon after my tenth anniversary, the Spirit allowed me to enjoy a sabbatical, to complete my doctorate and my fourth graduate degree, then led me to the greener pastures of the Inclusive/Independent Catholic tradition!

Fifteen Years: Building an Inclusive Church

By my fifteenth anniversary in 2016, I had completed four years in elected office, and I was serving as pastor of Holy Family Catholic Church, Austin’s inclusive Catholic community.

Together, we were building something extraordinary! An assembly that Jesus would more clearly recognize. A community where all are loved and welcomed just as God created them. A church that leaves matters of conscience to the (*gasp*) conscience, that doesn’t wage “wafer wars” with our LGBTQIA+ siblings or the divorced-and-remarried, and that honors the sacramental justice espoused by the early Church, which, yes, ordained and consecrated women without any difficulty at all (Rom. 16:1).

My colleagues in ministry embodied extraordinary generosity: Father Roy Gomez, Father Libardo Rocha, Father Cleofas Maria Cruz, Deacon John “Canica” Limón and Deacon Angelita Mendoza-Waterhouse.

Meanwhile, life had taken another unexpected turn. In 2015, in a very public ceremony, I married my husband on the lawn of the Texas State Capitol. The journey from Franciscan friar to married priest was something I could never have imagined, even five years before. But isn’t that how the Spirit works?

My childhood pastor, Father Herbert Graf (famous for introducing himself as “Herbert, as in sherbert, as in ice cream – and just as cool”) once warned: “Grab the tailfeathers of the Spirit and hold on. It’s a wild ride!”

Twenty Years: Ministry in the Middle of a Pandemic

I did not celebrate my twentieth anniversary in 2021.

The world was still stumbling through COVID-19. Churches opened and closed in fits and starts. The congregations that survived struggled to balance safety and sacramental life. At Holy Family, we cautiously prioritized the well-being of our flock, even when it meant financial uncertainty.

Yet even during that chaotic time, something hopeful emerged. We were no longer worshipping in a warehouse, but were nesting at Salem Lutheran Church, where our ecumenical partnership became a sign of hope amid the pandemic’s darkness.

We were building bridges. On a personal level, I was also building bridges among clergy and lay leaders in the Inclusive/Independent Catholic movement here in the U.S. Despite the darkness, life again felt whole and complete.

Twenty-Five Years: Faith in an Unordinary Political Moment

And now we arrive at twenty-five years.

I confess that I often feel astonished by the events unfolding today in the U.S., a nation of which I was once exceedingly proud.

Now I find myself writing daily reflections on current events through the lens of faith and spirituality amid the second presidential term of a man routinely described by *The Huffington Post* in 2016 as “a serial liar, rampant xenophobe, racist, misogynist and birther.” Now convicted on 34 felony accounts and found liable for sexual abuse, it does not seem that he has grown wiser with age. His conspiracy to overturn our 2020 election, with pressure on officials and false elector schemes, culminated in the disgraceful January 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol. And his attempts in recent weeks to distract attention from his purported million mentions in the Epstein files are beyond obscene.

Just last week, we saw photographs of pastors laying hands on him in the Oval Office—a carefully choreographed yet grotesque image suggesting divine anointing after his bombing of Iran days earlier. Meanwhile his vice president, J.D. Vance, publicly dismisses the leaders of his own Roman Catholic faith.

Faith should challenge power, not sanctify it. Jesus refused the temptations of political domination (Mt 4:8-10). He washed feet, rather than seek crowns or thrones (Jn 13:1-15). That example remains our guide.

In this all-but-ordinary moment, people of faith must speak honestly, courageously and compassionately.

Five Invitations

If my twenty-five years of priesthood have taught me anything, it is that **faith demands action**.

Here are a few invitations for this Lenten season:

- **Practice courageous truth-telling.** Speak clearly and compassionately when political leaders misuse religion (Eph 4:15).
- **Defend democratic institutions.** Public education, voting rights and free journalism remain the backbone of a healthy society.
- **Build inclusive communities.** Create churches where LGBTQIA+ persons, immigrants and seekers feel truly welcomed.

- **Embrace Lenten sacrifice that matters.** Instead of giving up chocolate or soda, volunteer at shelters, mentor youth, or advocate for justice.
 - **Choose hope over cynicism.** As Star Wars reminds us, rebellions—and reformations—often begin with hope!
- Extraordinary courage grows when ordinary people act together.

Silver Hair, Steadfast Hope

Twenty-five years ago, a young Franciscan friar knelt on the marble floor of the Basilica and National Shrine of Our Lady of Consolation in Carey, Ohio. Family and friends filled the pews. The future seemed wide open.

Today my hair is grayer, my beard more silver, and the trajectory of my journey, after many unexpected turns, is more clear.

One thing remains unchanged.

I still believe in the liberating—and indeed challenging—Good News of Jesus Christ.

I still believe extraordinary love and compassion can transform communities.

I still believe the Spirit continues to guide the Church—often in ways we could never imagine.

And for that, above all, I am grateful!

Questions for Reflection and Prayer

- Who are the mentors, teachers and family members who shaped your own faith journey?
- When have unexpected “curveballs” in your life become hidden blessings?
- What gives you hope when the world feels uncertain?
- Where is God calling you to show extraordinary courage in this current political moment?
- How might you practice more meaningful Lenten sacrifice this year?

Let Us Pray

God of wisdom and journey, you guide us through seasons of joy, challenge and transformation. We thank you for mentors, family and communities that nurture faith. We thank you for the courage to follow the Spirit into new paths. Grant us extraordinary love in divided times, extraordinary courage when truth feels costly and extraordinary hope when the future feels uncertain. May our lives always point toward the Gospel of justice, mercy and peace. Amen.

A Journey Toward Family

Celebrating 14 Years as Austin's Only Inclusive Catholic Community

March 11, 2026



The Judeo-Christian scriptures overflow with stories of journeys.

God calls Abram and Sarai to leave their homeland and travel into the unknown (Gen. 12:1-4). The Israelites flee slavery in Egypt and wander through the wilderness toward freedom (Ex. 13-16). Ruth journeys with Naomi into a new land (Ruth 1:16). Joseph and Mary save their infant by fleeing to Egypt (Mt. 2:13-15). The disciples walk dusty roads with Jesus toward Jerusalem, not fully understanding where the journey will lead (Lk. 9:51). After the resurrection, two disciples walk the road to Emmaus before discovering that Christ had been traveling with them all along (Lk. 24:13-35).

Stories of faith are stories of people who dare to move!

Those ancient stories come vividly to mind today as we celebrate the 14th anniversary of Holy Family Catholic Church, Austin's only inclusive Catholic community.

Fourteen years ago we set out on a journey. Like Abram and Sarai leaving Ur, we did not know exactly where the Spirit would lead us. But we trusted that the God who calls also walks beside us!

A Dinner at El Gallo: The Birth of an Identity

Every community has stories of its origin.

The story of our identity began not in a stained-glass cathedral, but around a table at El Gallo Restaurant on South Congress Avenue. Fourteen years ago, a small group of us gathered for dinner and discernment. We talked about what kind of church the Spirit might be calling us to build.

We prayed. We dreamed. We shared stories of hurt and hope.

At one point, Rita Cuevas suggested a name: Holy Family.

Instantly we knew she had captured the spirit of what we hoped to build. Not simply another church. Not another institution.

A family.

A community where people who had been pushed aside by other churches could find belonging again.

Over time, something beautiful happened. What some initially referred to as “Father Jayme’s church” gradually developed its own identity. People began to realize that the magic of Holy Family does not come from the pastor who leads it.

It comes from the extraordinary assembly that gathers!

Loving. Inclusive. Catholic. Doing It Jesus’ Way!

For more than a decade, our parish motto has been simple:

Loving. Inclusive. Catholic. Doing It Jesus’ Way!

In Austin, there are many Catholic churches. Yet they share one troubling reality: Every one of them excludes entire groups of people.

- Divorced and remarried Catholics are often barred from receiving Communion.
- Our LGBTQIA+ siblings frequently encounter rejection or are told, in the words of Papa Ratzinger – of all people – that they have an “inclination, which is objectively disordered” and that their acts are “intrinsically immoral.”
- Women remain excluded from ordained ministry in the Roman Church, despite their leadership in the early centuries of Christianity.

At Holy Family, we decided early on that we would not build our identity around exclusion.

Instead, we would look to the radical hospitality of Jesus.

After all, Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners (Mk. 2:15-17). He welcomed children when the disciples tried to turn them away (Mk. 10:13-16). He spoke publicly with the Samaritan woman when social norms said he should not (Jn. 4:7-26).

If Jesus kept widening the circle, why on earth would any Church that claims to follow him keep narrowing it?

Every year, sadly, we are the only Catholic community at Austin Pride. We wear our parish T-shirts, proudly proclaiming a simple message:

We love you just as God created you.

The Gospel really can be that simple.

The “Secret Sauce” of Holy Family

People often ask what makes Holy Family different.

Part of the answer lies in our extraordinary hospitality. Walking into our church often feels less like attending a formal service, and more like attending a family reunion. You may not know everyone in the room, but you sense immediately that we belong to the same family.

After all, we share the same Creator.

Another ingredient of our “secret sauce” is our weekly Sunday breakfast. Volunteers arrive early, cook tirelessly, and transform the parish hall into a place of heartfelt conversation and merry laughter. Breaking bread together—even after Mass—allows strangers to become friends, and friends to become family.

And then we seek to tear down the obstacles between God and God’s people.

Too many Catholic churches fall into the ancient heresy of semi-Pelagianism—making people jump through hoops and “earn” the grace of the Church’s sacraments. St. Augustine would be horrified!

Years ago, while I served as pastor of Cristo Rey Catholic Church in East Austin, one of our nuns once told me that a young boy could not receive First Communion because he had attended only eighteen months of preparation classes, instead of two years. My response was simple: “Sister, do you hear yourself?”

At Holy Family, we decided from the beginning that we would never place barriers between God and God’s people. Jesus would clearly laugh at the idea of grace being a prize for the perfect!

A Laboratory for the Spirit

Another source of pride for me is the way Holy Family models a more inclusive vision of ministry.

When some insist that women cannot be ordained, we simply point to the ministries of leaders like Mother Annie and Deacon Elsa and say, with confidence, that such claims are simply wrong. To be clear, women can be ordained. So many other churches have proven this as well.

The early Church included women leaders like Phoebe (Rom. 16:1) and Junia, whom Paul calls “prominent among the apostles” (Rom. 16:7).

In many ways, Inclusive/Independent Catholic communities function like laboratories of the Spirit. We experiment. We listen. We watch where grace leads!

A Church for a Divided Age

We celebrate this anniversary in a deeply divided moment in American life.

Political leaders increasingly profit by turning neighbor against neighbor. Television pundits shout past each other like contestants on *The Apprentice*. Social media rewards outrage more than understanding.

Yet the early Christian community described in Acts offered a different vision: Believers “held everything in common” and cared for one another’s needs (Acts 2:42-47).

In a country where millions now identify as former Catholics, inclusive communities like Holy Family offer a refuge for seekers who still love the Catholic tradition, but who no longer believe in the Roman Church's structures and strictures.

In a culture that often feels more like *The Hunger Games* than the Kingdom of God, such communities quietly model another way.

A way rooted in—you guessed it—family.

Invitations for Transformation

As we celebrate the presence and activity of God in Inclusive/Catholic community, here are a few ways you might respond:

- **Build radically-welcoming communities.** Ensure that LGBTQIA+ persons, divorced Catholics and seekers encounter genuine hospitality.
- **Challenge exclusionary theology.** Study the early Church and reclaim the inclusive traditions often suppressed by those who lead modern institutions.
- **Practice sacramental generosity.** Remove unnecessary barriers that prevent people from encountering God's grace.
- **Support women's leadership.** Courageously advocate for women's full participation in the ordained ministries of the Church.
- **Create spaces of community beyond Sunday Mass.** Meals, service projects, and shared experiences strengthen the bonds of faith.
- **Publicly live the Gospel.** Participate in events that affirm human dignity and justice.

Extraordinary courage often begins with simple acts of welcome!

Fourteen Years on the Road Together

Fourteen years ago, a handful of dreamers gathered around a dinner table at El Gallo Restaurant and wondered how the Spirit might be calling us to build something new.

Like Abram and Sarai setting out from Ur, we did not know exactly where the road would lead.

Today, it is more clear to us.

We see it in the welcome offered to newcomers.

We see it in the laughter shared over Sunday breakfast.

We see it in the extraordinary courage of women and men who minister side-by-side.

We see it in the countless stories of healing and belonging shared by parishioners over the years.

Families travel together.

And by God's grace, Holy Family continues the journey!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- When have you experienced the Church as a place of genuine welcome and belonging?
- Where might God be calling you to extend hospitality to those who feel excluded?
- What barriers within our churches prevent people from encountering grace?
- How might inclusive communities better reflect the practices of the early Church?
- In this divided moment in American life, how can faith communities model unity and compassion?

Let Us Pray

Loving Creator, you called Abram and Sarai to journey into the unknown, you guided Israel through the wilderness and you walked beside the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Continue to guide our communities today. Teach us to practice extraordinary love, extraordinary hospitality and extraordinary courage in a divided world. Bless the good people of Holy Family and all who seek a spiritual home. May our churches always reflect the welcoming heart of Christ. Amen.

From Ecstasy to Entanglement

Denis the Carthusian, Michal Heller,
and the reconciliation of faith and science

March 12, 2026



As a young Franciscan friar, I was thoroughly steeped in the theology of St. Bonaventure, the Seraphic Doctor, whose works shaped the medieval imagination about how the human soul can be mystically united with God. Though many of his greatest works were not yet translated into English at

that time, his mystical masterpiece, *The Soul's Journey into God*, helped me and my classmates better understand the classic threefold path of the medieval mystical life: purgation, illumination and union.

Today the Church commemorates **Denis the Carthusian**, a mystic who elaborated that path a century after Bonaventure. We also celebrate the birthday of **Michał Kazimierz Heller**, a priest-scientist who boldly places Christian faith in conversation with the deepest mysteries of the cosmos.

One lived in the silence of a medieval monastery. The other studies quantum physics and cosmology. Yet both call us to an extraordinary intellectual and spiritual humility: a recognition that our quest for God always unfolds alongside our search for truth!

And truth—whether revealed through mysticism or microscopes—ultimately flows from God.

The Ecstatic Doctor and the Medieval Path to Wisdom

Denis the Carthusian (1402-1471), the Ecstatic Doctor, lived during a turbulent time in European Christianity. The wounds of the Western Schism still lingered. Reform movements rippled through monasteries. Princes, bishops and theologians debated the future of the Church.

Denis entered the Carthusian monastery at Roermond, Netherlands and lived a life divided between prayer, contemplation and astonishing literary productivity. By the time he died, he had written over 150 works—commentaries on Scripture, mystical theology, spiritual manuals and philosophical reflections.

He expanded on the classic spiritual framework articulated earlier by figures like St. Bonaventure and St. Bernard of Clairvaux:

- **Purgation.** Cleansing the soul from sin and ego.
- **Illumination.** Growing in wisdom and understanding.
- **Union.** Experiencing a profound intimacy with God.

Of course, Denis' model was not rooted in psychology or anything that resembles contemporary science. Like those before him, he was simply speculating on the interior life and a possible path toward God!

Still, their insights resonate. Even today, we recognize the pattern: struggle, insight, transformation.

The psalmist expressed the longing for such transformation: "As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God" (Ps. 42:1).

In a world obsessed with speed and productivity, the contemplative wisdom of Denis reminds us that extraordinary love often grows in silence.

From Monastery to Multiverse

Fast forward six centuries.

Today we celebrate the birth of Michał Kazimierz Heller (1936-), the Polish priest, cosmologist and philosopher who won the Templeton Prize in 2008 for his work exploring the relationship between science and theology.

Heller has spent his career asking a deceptively simple question: *Why is the universe mathematically intelligible?*

Physics tells us that the cosmos obeys elegant mathematical laws. From the equations of Albert Einstein to the strange phenomena of quantum mechanics, the universe appears structured in ways the human mind is beginning to understand.

That mystery leads Heller to theology.

Among the phenomena he studies is the EPR paradox, an idea first proposed by Einstein and colleagues in 1935, describing quantum entanglement: Two particles separated by vast distances behave as if they remain mysteriously connected. Change one particle, and the other instantly responds!

It is as if the universe itself whispers: *Everything is connected.*

When I first heard about entanglement, I thought of the words of the Johannine Jesus: “That they may all be one” (Jn. 17:21).

Science reveals a cosmos of astonishing unity. Mystics sensed that unity centuries ago through contemplation. Purgation and illumination lead to—you guessed it—union!

Perhaps both paths glimpse the same extraordinary mystery.

When Faith Collides with Science

Let’s be honest: Christianity has not always welcomed science.

In 1633, the Roman Catholic Church infamously condemned Galileo Galilei for defending heliocentrism—that the earth is not the center of our solar system, let alone of our galaxy or universe. It resisted evolutionary theory after Charles Darwin’s 1859 work, *On the Origin of Species*. It continues to debate reproductive health, human anatomy, and LGBTQIA+ psychology.

Even today, scientific literacy remains dangerously low among many Christian communities. And that tension creates cognitive dissonance.

At age 13, I experienced my own theological panic after reading the apocalyptic imagery of the Book of Revelation. Imagine a seven-headed beast rising up out of the ocean! As you might imagine, I lost a good bit of sleep over that image!

Ancient authors used mythic imagery to express theological truths. As a teenager, though, I interpreted such passages quite literally.

Eventually I learned to say something that still scandalizes some believers: *The Bible is a book of theology, not a book of science.*

Scripture often functions like a rearview mirror. It helps us understand what our ancestors believed about the world they inhabited and the gods—and then the God—they worshiped. Science, meanwhile, is the entire dashboard, the windshield, the mirrors, and the instruments guiding us forward. Both matter. But they serve different purposes.

Paul famously wrote: “For now we see in a mirror dimly” (1Cor. 13:12). Medieval mystics peered through one mirror. Modern science gives us quite another mirror. Both reveal glimpses of God.

The Politics of Truth

Today this conversation feels urgent.

In the United States, we are witnessing a troubling assault on truth itself. Scientific research is defunded by partisan politics. Public health expertise is dismissed. Climate science is mocked.

We saw the consequences of the denial of science during the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead of listening to epidemiologists, politicians floated absurd ideas about bleach injections and the supposed miracle cure of a horse dewormer. Complete hogwash that would otherwise be laughable—except that so many lives were lost. Anti-vaxxers and supporters of vaccinations alike lost loved ones. Six years later, some families remain divided. Even the wearing of masks to protect others—simple epidemiological science!—became a political lightning rod and litmus test.

Meanwhile, the same divisive forces now undermine climate science, global cooperation, and public education—to name only a few.

The prophets of Israel would immediately recognize this crisis. Proto-Isaiah proclaimed: “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil” (Is. 5:20).

Truth matters.

And in this extraordinary moment of American history, defending truth may be one of the most faithful acts Christians can perform!

A Spiritual Path for an Age of Science

Perhaps we need a modern adaptation of Denis’ threefold path—one that integrates faith and science.

Purgation. We release outdated assumptions. We repent for moments when religion has suppressed knowledge.

Illumination. We welcome new discoveries about evolution, cosmology and consciousness.

Union. We recognize that scientific truth and spiritual truth ultimately emerge from the same divine mystery and should lead us closer to that mystery and to one another.

The psalmist again whispers wisdom: “The heavens declare the glory of God” (Ps. 19:1). Today the heavens speak through telescopes, satellites and particle accelerators!

Calls to Action

Christians, Catholics, and indeed all people of good will can embody extraordinary courage in this moment:

- **Defend scientific truth** in conversations with family, friends, and your circles of influence.
- **Support public education and research funding**, especially in STEM fields.
- **Read widely**—from mystics like Denis, to scientists like Heller.
- **Challenge biblical literalism** when it distorts theology or public policy.
- **Advocate for climate action**, recognizing creation as a sacred trust.
- **Cultivate contemplative silence**, because wisdom requires both data and prayer.

From Medieval Cells to Quantum Cosmos

Six centuries separated Denis the Carthusian from Michal Heller. One prayed in a stone monastery cell. The other studies galaxies and quantum equations. Yet both point toward the same extraordinary horizon: *The human mind longs to understand reality, and the human heart longs for union with God.* Maybe those longings are not separate at all.

Maybe, as quantum entanglement suggests, everything truly is connected.

And perhaps our task in this extraordinary moment is simply this: to pursue truth wherever it appears—with humility, courage and hope!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where do I currently find myself on the path of purgation, illumination or union?
- When have scientific discoveries deepened my faith, rather than threatened it?
- How do I respond when religion and science appear to conflict?
- In what ways can I defend truth in today’s polarized political climate?
- What practices help me hold together contemplation and intellectual curiosity?

Let Us Pray

God of mystery and truth, You spoke through prophets and poets, through mystics and mathematicians, through ancient scriptures and expanding galaxies. Purify our minds of fear. Illuminate our hearts with wisdom. Draw us ever closer to the unity that binds all creation. May we pursue truth with extraordinary courage, love our neighbors with extraordinary compassion, and steward your wondrous universe with extraordinary care. Amen.

Power, Conscience and the Dangerous Seduction of Church-State Alliances

Lessons from Charles de Montalembert

March 13, 2026



An old friend texted out of the blue yesterday afternoon to share that he would be passing through Austin for the night. I was driving to Austin as well, from South Texas, so my husband and I invited him for a late-evening dinner at Pappadeaux.

We had not seen each other in a few years. We once served together on our local school boards, so our conversation ranged from family and friends, to education and politics, to the dynamics of leadership in the present theater of contemporary U.S. public life.

At one point, he asked a simple but profound question: *How can people in power so flagrantly abuse power?*

We were talking about contemporary politics, of course. And all the energy expended to protect the transgressors found in the Epstein files. But the question is ancient. Kings and popes, presidents and bishops, oligarchs and televangelists: History shows that power often seduces the human heart!

As we mused together over dinner, my mind kept bending back toward the human tendency to cling to power and to use it for nefarious ends. And

strangely enough, my thoughts turned to the man whose passing the Church commemorates today: **Charles de Montalembert**.

A Count Who Believed in Freedom

Charles de Montalembert (1810-1870) was a French aristocrat, historian and politician whose life unfolded during one of Europe's most turbulent centuries. He lived in the long shadow of the French Revolution and its aftermath. Europe struggled to reconcile monarchy, democracy, nationalism, and the role of religion in public life.

Montalembert refused to accept the false choice that many Catholics embraced in the 19th century: either absolute secularism or absolute clerical power.

Instead, he championed something radical for his day: Freedom.

Freedom of the Church from state domination.

Freedom of the state from ecclesiastical domination.

Freedom of conscience.

Freedom of thought.

Freedom of education.

He passionately advocated for oppressed peoples, including the people of Ireland and Poland, whose struggles for independence captured his imagination.

Scripture itself warns about the temptation of power. When the devil showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world (Lk. 4:5-8), Jesus refused the seductive bargain of political authority purchased at the cost of integrity.

Montalembert believed Christians must do the same.

The Courage of Famous Speeches

In 1863, Montalembert delivered two famous speeches at the Catholic Congress of Malines in Belgium. His argument was straightforward but revolutionary: *The Church must support freedom of religion and freedom of thought*.

At the time, this view angered the Ultramontanists—Catholics who believed the pope should exercise nearly absolute authority in both church and society.

The conflict soon collided with the long papacy of Pope Pius IX, who presided over the sham Vatican Council of 1869-1870, which proclaimed papal infallibility and the universal jurisdiction of the bishop of Rome. To many liberal Catholics like Montalembert, these aberrations represented a dangerous concentration of power!

History shows again and again that unchecked authority easily slides toward authoritarianism.

The prophet Samuel warned ancient Israel about this very temptation — yet the people demanded a human ruler (1Sam. 8). Samuel plainly told them: Rulers will take your sons, your daughters, your fields and your freedom. Yet the people demanded a ruler anyway. Human beings often do.

When Church and State Collude

The relationship between church and state has always been fraught. Consider a few examples:

- The alliance between the medieval papacy and European monarchies.
- The establishment of the Church of England under Henry VIII.
- State churches across Scandinavia and Eastern Europe.
- Modern nationalist movements that wrap political agendas in religious language.

Even in the United States — where the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution famously protects religious liberty — the boundaries sometimes blur.

U.S. Roman Catholic bishops often demand religious freedom when defending church institutions. Yet they sometimes grow silent when the state curtails freedoms that affect immigrants, minorities or LGBTQIA+ people.

Freedom for me, but not for thee.

The prophet Amos would not be impressed. He declared: “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24).

Justice does not flow selectively.

Lent will soon ask us: *What cancers have we tolerated? What lies have we repeated? What injustices have we excused?*

Extraordinary faith demands extraordinary honesty!

A Photo Op and the Seduction of Power

Last week offered a chilling illustration of Montalembert’s concerns.

Our U.S. president staged a photo op in the Oval Office, in which church leaders laid hands on him in prayer after his bombing of Iran — as if to sanctify his display of military power!

The image quickly spread across social media.

It looked disturbingly like a scene from *The Handmaid’s Tale*, where religious language sanctifies authoritarian politics.

Or like the moment in *The Godfather* when Michael Corleone attends a baptism even as his rivals are murdered across the city.

Power cloaked in piety.

History has seen this movie before.

Even Jesus confronted religious leaders who colluded with power. He condemned those who “tie up heavy burdens” while protecting their own authority (Mt. 23).

Lent calls Christians to confront such hypocrisies — not to baptize them.

The Human Hunger for Power

Why does this keep happening? Because power intoxicates.

From *Succession* to *Star Wars*, popular culture repeatedly dramatizes the same truth: The desire to dominate others corrodes the human soul.

Yoda says it well: “Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering.”

The Scriptures say something similar. Jesus reminded his disciples: “Those who are recognized as rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them... but it shall not be so among you” (Mk. 10:42-45).

Instead, leadership must be service.

That vision remains profoundly extraordinary in a world obsessed with domination.

Lenten Calls to Action

Lent is not merely about giving up candy or soda. It is about cultivating extraordinary courage and extraordinary love.

Here are a few practices we might embrace in this extraordinary moment:

- **Defend authentic religious freedom** for all people, not just for institutions that share our views.
- **Challenge church leaders** when they seek political power, rather than prophetic witness.
- **Support the separation of church and state**, recognizing that both flourish best when neither dominates the other.
- **Speak truth to power** in local communities and public life.
- **Protect vulnerable neighbors** when religious rhetoric becomes a weapon against immigrants, LGBTQIA+ people, African Americans and other minorities.
- **Practice Lenten humility**, remembering that Jesus rejected worldly authority.

In other words: Follow the Gospel, not the empire.

Dinner Conversations and Conscience

As our dinner at Pappadeaux wound down, we returned to our earlier question: *Why do people cling so fiercely to power?*

History suggests a sobering answer. Because power offers the illusion of control.

Yet the Gospel offers something far better: freedom.

Charles de Montalembert understood that truth more than 150 years ago. He recognized that the Church betrays its mission whenever it trades prophetic courage for political influence.

And perhaps that is the extraordinary invitation of this Lenten season:

To relinquish power.

To seek truth.

To practice courage.

To live as people whose allegiance belongs not to princes or presidents — but to the reign of God!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where do I see church and state becoming dangerously entangled today?
- When have I remained silent in the face of abuses of power?
- How might I practice extraordinary courage during this Lenten season?
- What does authentic religious freedom look like in my concrete context?
- How does Jesus challenge my assumptions about authority and leadership?
- Where is God inviting me to more boldly speak truth?

Let Us Pray

God of freedom and truth, You raised up prophets who challenged rulers and saints who confronted empires. Grant us the courage of Charles de Montalembert, that we may defend freedom of conscience and resist the seductive lure of power. During this Lenten season, teach us to seek humility rather than domination, service rather than prestige, truth rather than comfort. May our lives reflect extraordinary love, extraordinary courage and extraordinary fidelity to the Gospel. Amen.

Marielle Franco and the Cry of the Disappeared

On prophetic courage, state violence,
and the sacred dignity of every human life

March 14, 2026



Have you ever heard of the *Madre de los Desaparecidos*?

When I served as a young associate pastor at Cristo Rey Catholic Church in Austin, a fellow friar gave me three icons for my office wall. One depicted the Black Christ. Another portrayed St. Juan Diego, the humble Indigenous herald of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The third icon puzzled me.

It depicted Mary as a grieving mother, with the skin tone of an indigenous woman from Latin America. She held a crown of thorns, an object of her son's torture. A crimson handprint stained the icon's surface, as if a bloody hand had violently touched the sacred image.

The icon was called *la Madre de los Desaparecidos*—the Mother of the Disappeared.

The bloody handprint symbolized the countless people who vanished during the brutal military regimes of Central and South America. The image reminded viewers that every disappeared person bore the image of God. Each life mattered.

That icon haunted me then. It haunts me even more today.

Because today we remember the assassination of **Marielle Franco**—the Brazilian activist who courageously confronted state violence and extrajudicial killings—and we are sobered by the fact that we commemorate her in an epoch when our nation is not innocent of such acts.

A Prophet from the Favelas

Marielle Franco was born in 1979 in the *Maré favela* of Rio de Janeiro. Poverty, racism and police violence shaped her early life. Yet she refused to surrender to despair.

Franco studied sociology, became a human rights activist, and eventually won election to the Rio city council in 2016. As a Black, bisexual

feminist, she represented communities that Brazilian politics had long ignored.

She spoke boldly about police brutality, extrajudicial killings, discrimination against LGBTQIA+ people, violence against women, and systemic racism.

Her advocacy reflected the prophetic tradition of Scripture. The prophet Amos once thundered, “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24).

Franco demanded exactly that.

She famously declared: *“To be a Black woman is to resist and survive all the time.”*

That was not merely rhetoric. It was a statement forged in daily struggle.

Naming the Violence

Brazil has long endured shocking levels of police violence. In poor neighborhoods, security forces frequently treated young Black men as disposable. Franco documented these abuses.

She investigated military police units accused of extrajudicial killings. She publicly criticized government policies that militarized Rio’s *favelas*.

The backlash came quickly.

On March 14, 2018, gunmen ambushed Franco’s car in downtown Rio. Four bullets struck her head. Her driver died as well.

Her murder shocked the world.

In a sense, Franco became another “disappeared one,” another victim whose life exposed the brutal machinery of state violence.

The Gospel of Matthew speaks directly to such lives: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake” (Mt. 5:10).

Franco embodied that beatitude.

When Governments Claim the Right to Kill

Franco’s story echoes painfully in today’s political climate.

Across history, governments have sometimes justified violence in the name of security. Latin America experienced this during the Dirty War in Argentina (1973-1984) and other dictatorships, where thousands disappeared.

Today we again see disturbing echoes of that logic.

Recent policies from the Trump administration have embraced militarized enforcement and extrajudicial actions. Reports describe deadly maritime strikes under Operation Southern Spear, which have killed at least 157 people on 46 vessels to date. None of us can forget the images of the brutal murders of Renee Good & Alex Pretti by federal agents earlier

this year. Even last week, our U.S. President ordered a strike on Iran that killed at least 170 students and adults at a girls school.

Such actions raise profound moral questions. We have become the ones who disappear others. The blood is now on our hands.

The fifth commandment is unambiguous: “You shall not kill” (Ex. 20:13). The prophet Isaiah similarly condemned those who “call evil good and good evil” (Is. 5:20).

When nations claim the authority to execute people without due process, the moral alarm bells of Scripture should loudly sound!

Pop Culture and the Moral Imagination

Our cultural storytelling often recognizes the danger of unchecked power.

In *Star Wars*, the Galactic Empire enforces order through overwhelming violence.

In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, religious rhetoric legitimizes authoritarian control.

In *The Hunger Games*, a powerful capital maintains dominance through terror.

Musicians also echo the prophetic cry. Bob Dylan once asked, in *Blowin’ in the Wind*: “How many deaths will it take till he knows that too many people have died?” U2 lamented political violence in *Sunday Bloody Sunday*. And Billie Holiday immortalized America’s own history of racial terror in *Strange Fruit*.

Artists often see what politicians refuse to see. They remind us that every victim has a name, a face, and a family.

The Extraordinary Courage Lent Demands

Lent invites Christians to confront injustice with extraordinary courage.

Too often we reduce this season to small sacrifices – giving up candy or soda. Yet the Gospel demands something far more demanding.

Jesus himself confronted state violence when he stood before Pontius Pilate (Jn. 18). Pilate wielded imperial power. Jesus spoke only the truth. That encounter still defines the moral challenge of Christian discipleship.

Calls to Action

If we truly honor the legacy of Marielle Franco and all who have been disappeared and/or who have died in extrajudicial killings, we must move beyond words.

During this Lenten season of repentance, we might:

- Publicly advocate for human rights and condemn extrajudicial killings wherever they occur.

- Support organizations defending immigrants and refugees, especially those targeted by militarized enforcement.
- Demand accountability from political leaders who authorize violence in the name of security.
- Educate others about Catholic social teaching on human dignity and the sanctity of life.
- Amplify marginalized voices, particularly women, LGBTQIA+ advocates and racial justice leaders.
- Practice Lenten solidarity, pairing prayer with concrete acts of justice.

In this unordinary moment, extraordinary courage becomes a spiritual discipline!

Returning to the Mother of the Disappeared

I often think back to that icon hanging in my office at Cristo Rey.

The *Madre de los Desaparecidos* still stands before us.

The bloody handprint on the icon reminds us that the suffering of disappeared people stains the conscience of nations. Violence against the vulnerable always leaves a mark.

The life of Marielle Franco invites us to see those stains more clearly. She refused to look away from injustice. She spoke truth in the face of power. She paid the ultimate price.

Yet her witness continues to call forth extraordinary love and extraordinary courage in our own extraordinary moment.

And perhaps that is the deeper Lenten invitation: To refuse silence. To defend the dignity of every human being. And to ensure that the disappeared are never forgotten!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where do I see state violence threatening human dignity today?
- How might I respond more courageously to injustice in my own community?
- Which voices are being silenced or ignored in our political discourse?
- How does the life of Marielle Franco challenge my own comfort and complacency?
- What does authentic Christian solidarity look like in this extraordinary moment?
- During this Lenten season, what sacrifices might deepen my commitment to justice?

Let Us Pray

God of justice and compassion, You raise prophets in every generation to challenge violence and defend the vulnerable. We remember today Marielle Franco, whose life proclaimed the dignity of the poor and whose courage confronted the brutality of power. Grant us extraordinary courage to resist injustice wherever it appears. Open our eyes to the suffering of the disappeared, strengthen our voices for the voiceless, and deepen our commitment to the sacred worth of every human life. May this Lenten season transform our hearts, so that we may walk more faithfully in the path of justice, mercy and truth. Amen.

Beware the Ides

Laetare Sunday, political betrayal,
and the extraordinary courage Lent demands

March 15, 2026



I still remember the day in my sophomore world history class when we first encountered the death of Julius Caesar. Our teacher told the tale of the ominous warning — “*Beware the Ides of March*” — which famously comes to us from William Shakespeare’s play, *Julius Caesar*. On March 15, 44 B.C., Caesar walked into the Roman Senate chamber. Moments later, a circle of senators surrounded and stabbed him!

The most devastating blow came not from an enemy, but from a friend: Marcus Junius Brutus. According to the legend, Caesar looked at him in shock and cried, “*Et tu, Brute?*”

You too, Brutus?

Two thousand years later, the Ides of March still echoes as a symbol of betrayal.

Yet as we come to the midpoint of March this year — and just two days after yet another superstition-filled Friday the 13th — we do well to beware *not* of unlucky days.

We should beware something far more dangerous.

Our own capacity for betrayal.
 The betrayals we tolerate.
 And the betrayals we sometimes even celebrate.

The Psychology of Betrayal: Why Brutus Still Lives Among Us

Historians continue to debate the motivations of Marcus Junius Brutus. Did he genuinely believe he was saving the Roman Republic? Did he envy Caesar's power? Did he succumb to pressure from fellow conspirators?

Human psychology offers clues.

Modern neuroscience suggests that human beings are remarkably adept at moral rationalization. *The brain's prefrontal cortex helps us justify actions that violate our ethical values, especially when loyalty to a leader or group becomes more important than loyalty to principle.*

Social psychologists call this *motivated reasoning*.

We see evidence of this dynamic everywhere:

- cult-like political movements
- corporate scandals
- religious institutions covering up abuse
- communities defending leaders long after wrongdoing becomes obvious

History repeatedly shows that *betrayal rarely feels like betrayal to the betrayer*. It often feels like loyalty. Let that sink in.

Which may explain why so many people throughout history have embraced leaders whose actions undermine the very values they claim to defend!

"I'm in Love With Judas"

This brings me to one of the more surprising homiletic references I have used over the years: Lady Gaga's song *Judas*. The refrain is haunting: "I'm in love with Judas, Judas."

The song wrestles with the strange human attraction to destructive figures. Gaga sings:

"When he calls to me, I am ready.

I'll wash his feet with my hair if he needs.

Forgive him when his tongue lies through his brain."

Biblically, the name immediately recalls Judas Iscariot, the disciple who betrayed Jesus. Yet Gaga's lyrics capture something deeply contemporary.

Why do people cling to leaders who betray them?

And why do supporters defend lies, corruption or cruelty long after the evidence becomes undeniable?

Sometimes the answer is painfully simple: *Belonging to the tribe feels more important than confronting the truth!*

The Ides of March in American Politics

For many Americans today, the symbolism of the Ides of March resonates uncomfortably with the many betrayals of our political reality.

Consider the actions of Donald Trump over the past decade.

His inciting of a mob to attack the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021 represented an unprecedented assault on democratic institutions. Speaking of Judas! But Trump was not the only betrayer whose darkness was brought to light that day.

Many of us remember another disturbing moment: the July 16, 2018 summit in Helsinki, where Trump publicly sided with Vladimir Putin over U.S. intelligence agencies regarding Russian election interference. I happened to be in Washington, D.C. that day for a retreat, so I walked to the White House that evening, where the chant of protestors still rings in my ears: “Putin’s puppet! Putin’s puppet!”

Now Friday’s Kremlin report of private, one-hour conversations between Trump and Putin—all while Russia presumably supplies Iran with intel on U.S. assets—raises questions that many Americans quietly ask.

On whose side does our president stand? Is he really on our side and on the side of our nation?

Is he defending long held national values – or undermining them?

In the Roman Senate chamber, Caesar faced the knives of conspirators. Today, our democracy faces quieter but equally dangerous—and perhaps even fatal—wounds.

Laetare Sunday: Joy in the Midst of Darkness

And yet today is not only the Ides of March.

In the liturgical calendar, this Fourth Sunday of Lent is called *Laetare* Sunday.

The Latin word *Laetare* means “to rejoice.”

Clergy wear rose-colored vestments. The Church briefly pauses in the midst of its Lenten desert, to recall that Easter joy lies just over the horizon: We’ll celebrate it in three weeks!

Today’s scriptures powerfully speak to our moment.

The prophet Samuel warns us not to judge by outward appearances. God rejects the tall, impressive candidates for kingship, and instead anoints the young, ruddy shepherd David (1Sam. 16). God sees the heart!

The psalmist reminds us: “Even though I walk through the dark valley, I fear no evil.” Psalm 23 famously challenges us to trust that God will shepherd us from darkness to light, from death to life. Such words feel eerily relevant as we now navigate political turmoil and disinformation.

The author of the Letter to the Ephesians exhorts us to “live as children of light” and to expose “the fruitless works of darkness.”

And the Johannine gospel tells the story of the man born blind. The deeper tragedy in that story is not physical blindness. It is spiritual blindness. The religious leaders refuse to see the truth, even when it stands before them!

Pop Culture Warnings About Betrayal and Power

Our culture constantly tells stories about betrayal.

In *Star Wars*, Anakin Skywalker becomes Darth Vader, betraying the Jedi in pursuit of power.

In *Game of Thrones*, alliances shift and betrayals shape the fate of kingdoms.

Even the beloved musical *Hamilton* dramatizes political betrayal in early American history.

These stories endure because they mirror the human condition: We are capable of extraordinary loyalty, but we are also capable of extraordinary betrayal.

Calls to Action

If this Lenten season is to mean anything beyond simply giving up candy or soda, then it must challenge us to live with extraordinary courage in this very unordinary U.S. moment.

Perhaps we might:

- **Publicly speak truth**, even confronting political leaders who distort reality or undermine democratic norms.
- **Defend democratic institutions**, including free elections, independent courts, and a free press.
- **Support investigative journalism** that exposes corruption and disinformation.
- **Educate others** about Catholic social teaching and the ethical demands of citizenship.
- **Resist political idolatry**, remembering that no political leader deserves blind loyalty.
- **Advocate for transparency and accountability** in government leadership.
- **Practice Lenten solidarity**, pairing prayer with concrete acts of justice.

Lent calls us to more than personal sacrifice. It calls us to prophetic witness!

Beware the Knife Within

As that sophomore history lesson taught me long ago, the tragedy of the Ides of March was not simply that Julius Caesar died. The deeper tragedy was that the knives came from people he trusted.

That is the haunting lesson of betrayal.

It rarely arrives wearing the face of an enemy. It often arrives wearing the face of a “friend.”

This *Laetare* Sunday invites us to rejoice in the coming promise of resurrection. Yet it also challenges us to examine our hearts.

Are we living as children of the light?

Or are we, like others, quietly sharpening knives that wound truth, justice and democracy?

In this unordinary moment, Lent invites us to choose extraordinary courage!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where do I see betrayal of truth or justice in my own community or nation?
- How might political tribalism tempt me to ignore wrongdoing by leaders I support?
- In what ways might I be spiritually blind to injustice around me?
- How does the story of the man born blind challenge my willingness to see difficult truths?
- What concrete steps can I take this Lent to defend truth, justice and human dignity?

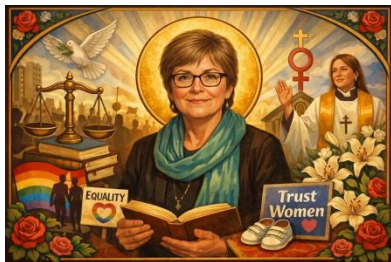
Let Us Pray

God of truth and justice, You see beyond appearances and you judge the secrets of every heart. In this Lenten season, open our eyes as you opened the eyes of the man born blind. Give us extraordinary courage to expose the works of darkness, and extraordinary love to defend the dignity of every human person. Strengthen us to resist the temptations of betrayal, to walk faithfully in the light of truth, and to build a society rooted in justice and compassion. We ask this through Christ our shepherd and our light. Amen.

Justice, Conscience, and Courage

The Extraordinary Witness of Tina Beattie

March 16, 2026



On this day, March 16, we celebrate the 1955 birth of Tina Beattie, an extraordinary English professor of Catholic Studies whose work challenges, inspires and awakens conscience. From advocating for women's ordination and same-sex marriage, to calling for a more nuanced understanding of contraception and abortion, Beattie embodies a radical faithfulness that asks us all: *How are we living out justice, mercy and courage in our own extraordinary ways?*

The Life and Work of Tina Beattie

Tina Beattie has spent decades living at the intersection of theology and social justice. Educated in the Catholic tradition, she has fearlessly addressed the issues that too often remain unspoken: the dignity of women, the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ persons, and the ethical complexities of reproductive health. Her scholarship is accessible, yet profoundly challenging. She writes not only for the academy, but for ordinary people who hunger for a Catholicism that is alive, compassionate, and engaged with the world. Beattie exemplifies prophetic courage, inviting us to see theology not as abstract doctrine, but as a lived, vibrant call to love!

Raising Awareness of Social Justice

Beattie has tirelessly championed:

- **Women's rights and ordination.** She has argued for extraordinary inclusion in a Church that often limits voices by gender, invoking a vision reminiscent of *Hidden Figures* — unsung brilliance breaking through entrenched systems.
- **Same-sex marriage.** Before it became politically mainstream, she articulated why faithful, committed same-sex relationships deserve recognition and blessing. Her advocacy recalls themes from *Love*,

Simon, where ordinary people claim their extraordinary dignity in the face of societal constraints.

- **Non-violence and equity.** Across her writings, Beattie challenges structural violence and reminds us that our faith demands courageous engagement with the marginalized.

Beattie's voice is urgent, yet gracious, blending the wisdom of Scripture with the language of contemporary culture. Like Michelle Obama's memoir, *Becoming*, Beattie reminds us that we can indeed engage culture without losing integrity!

Conscience, Contraception and Abortion

Beattie's challenge to the Church's teachings on contraception is not a rebellion, but a call to conscience. Despite the moral teachings of their church, approximately 98% of Roman Catholic women use some form of artificial birth control. Let that number sink in. Beattie asks: *Can we live faithfully while questioning such oppressive teachings?* The answer is simple: Yes. Roman Catholic moral theology states that individuals may in good conscience withhold assent, provided it is reasoned, prayerful and oriented toward love.

On early abortion, Beattie advocates for nuance: recognizing the moral gravity, yet supporting women's reproductive health. In her approach, conscience, compassion and courage converge. She invites us to wrestle with ethical complexity, rather than accept facile certainties, much like Frodo navigating the treacherous paths of Middle-earth in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Connecting Past and Present

In the current U.S. sociopolitical climate, Beattie's work resonates more than ever. We see the rollback of reproductive rights, attacks on LGBTQIA+ equality, and threats to women's leadership. These are not abstract issues. They are lived realities for millions of people in our nation alone. Beattie's extraordinary courage challenges us to act boldly, with the wisdom of both heart and mind.

Calls to Action

- **Educate Yourself and Others.** Read, study, and discuss the ethical dimensions of contraception, abortion and marriage equality. Be intentional.
- **Publicly Advocate.** Attend rallies, write letters, and vote for policies that protect marginalized communities.
- **Lift Women's Voices.** Support and amplify women's leadership at all levels and in all institutions.

- **Engage in Dialogue.** Empathetically listen to those with differing views, as Beattie models – grounded in Scripture, tradition, and extraordinary humility.
- **Consciously Live.** Make personal choices that reflect justice, compassion and love, in ways both ordinary and extraordinary.

Extraordinary Courage in Our Lives

Tina Beattie's life challenges us to see that living an extraordinary faith is rarely safe or easy. It is a faith that embraces complexity, wrestles with authority, and refuses to abandon justice. In the vibrant diversity of inclusive communities, I see Beattie's courage mirrored in extraordinary people everywhere – people willing to act in conscience and love!

As we celebrate her today, let us ask: How might our lives reflect extraordinary commitment to justice, mercy and dignity?

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- How am I listening to the voices of those who are marginalized by Church and society?
- Where do I need to exercise courage in conscience and action?
- How can I advocate for justice in ways that honor both truth and compassion?
- In what ways do I resist simplifications that obscure moral complexity?
- How might I embody extraordinary love in ordinary daily choices?

Let Us Pray

God of justice and mercy, we thank You for the witness of Tina Beattie, for her courage, insight and love. Inspire us to boldly walk in conscience and truth. May we act with extraordinary love, advocate for the vulnerable, and nurture justice in our communities. Give us discernment to navigate complexity, and courage to act with integrity. Amen.

Conscience, Culture and Community Leading Beyond Authority

Remembering the Extraordinary Courage of George Augustus Stallings, Jr.

March 17, 2026



If you haven't heard of Independent Catholicism, the vibrant movement of clergy and communities who self-identify as Catholic outside the structures and strictures of the Roman Church, I certainly do not blame you. I'm fond of saying that during ten years of seminary studies and over ten years of priestly ministry in the Roman Church, I never once heard of Independent Catholicism—though I did have two brushes with it, long before I had the vocabulary to describe what I was witnessing.

The second was in Austin, when reports reached me of a Mexican priest baptizing children in a nearby garage. I recall sending a parish staff member to covertly attend the celebration and bring back intel. I blush as I recall how we went to Spanish media to warn Catholics that such sacraments were illicit.

The first encounter, though, twelve years earlier, was during my studies at the Washington Theological Union (WTU) in D.C., when hierarchs, clergy and theologians were still processing the implications of the departure of **Father George Augustus Stallings, Jr.**, a charismatic priest whose decision eight years earlier still rippled through theological schools, the city of D.C., and the Roman Catholic Church.

Both experiences taught me that extraordinary courage can lead people along new paths of faith and justice, even when those paths diverge from authority.

Early Ministry and the Spirit of St. Teresa

Born in 1948, George Augustus Stallings, Jr. served for fifteen years as a Roman Catholic priest (1974-1989)—fourteen of them as pastor of St. Teresa of Avila Catholic Church in D.C. There, he wove African American

culture, gospel music, and spirited homilies into the liturgy, creating a Church alive with the Spirit!

When I studied at WTU, I attended St. Martin de Porres Catholic Church, where the energy of the gospel choir, the passionate preaching of the charismatic pastor, and the extraordinary hospitality of congregants filled every pew. The Sign of Peace alone lasted various minutes! Celebrating my first Mass as a deacon there in June 2000, I felt the same spirit that Stallings had helped nurture decades earlier at St. Teresa—a Spirit that can lead people closer to God, even if it takes them beyond the churches with which they once prayed and sang. His ministry reminds me of the words of the psalmist: “*You are a priest forever, in the line of Melchizedek*” (Ps. 110:4). The sacrament of Holy Orders, in the Catholic tradition, leaves an indelible mark—and still faithful action may call us to chart new courses!

Breaking with Authority: Stallings’ Bold Decisions

By the late 1980s, Stallings’ ministry drew national attention. He appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *Larry King Live*, *The Phil Donahue Show*, and *The Diane Rehm Show*. In January 1990, on *Donahue*, he announced his departure from papal authority and the Roman Church’s teachings on abortion, contraception, homosexuality and divorce. He declared abortion and contraception matters of individual conscience. He rejected the framing of homosexual activity as sinful. He welcomed divorced and remarried Christians without annulment.

In doing so, Stallings reflected extraordinary moral courage, akin to the revolutionary spirit of Martin Luther King, Jr., or the defiance of Erin Brockovich in confronting entrenched injustice. He reminded us that conscience, Scripture and compassion can guide faithful action, even when authority resists.

Founding Imani Temple: Faith and Community

Stallings went on to found the Imani Temple African-American Catholic Congregation, the first large, vibrant, autocephalous (or self-governing) Catholic community in the U.S. that centered on Black spiritual life. There, the extraordinary love of God intertwined with the richness of African American culture, gospel music and dynamic liturgy. Imani echoed the devotion of those in *Selma* or the gospel vibrancy of *Choir Boy*: faith and culture intertwined, unafraid and extraordinary!

Allegations of abuse in the 1970s, later settled by the Archdiocese, helped us see that Stallings’ community-focused ministry on faith and reconciliation likely coexisted in the midst of dark, human complexity.

Lessons Today

In an era when certain leaders demand obedience and submission, Stallings' life reminds us that extraordinary courage often means standing against authoritarianism, even in the name of faith. In current U.S. debates over reproductive rights, racial justice, and LGBTQIA+ inclusion, his story continues to inspire:

- Faithfulness sometimes means respectfully yet boldly dissenting.
- Communities thrive when they reflect the diversity and dignity of all members.
- Courage can manifest in both public ministry and quiet acts of inclusion.
- Culture and worship are inseparable: Gospel music, film, and art teach us much about the Spirit. Even in liturgical studies much was said of the inclusion of culture with the liturgy.
- Authority is not synonymous with holiness; conscience remains a sacred guide!

Calls to Action

- **Celebrate Black Catholic Leadership.** Support Black-led organizations, schools and ministries.
- **Mindfully Engage Media.** Use public platforms to advocate for justice and inclusion, following Stallings' example.
- **Support Independent/Inclusive Communities.** Explore, attend and learn how such communities attempt to retrieve the Good News of inclusivity.
- **Lift Up Marginalized Voices.** Center voices too often ignored.
- **Champion Conscience in Ethics.** Teach and model that Catholics can act faithfully while wrestling with complex issues of sexuality, reproduction and family life.

Courage, Conscience and Community

From my first brush with Independent Catholicism at WTU, to seeing the Spirit alive at St. Martin de Porres, Stallings' story illuminates for me the extraordinary power of conscience, culture and courage. His life challenges us to embrace a faith that listens, loves, and boldly acts—sometimes beyond the confines of established authority. Like communities where the Spirit flows through music, word and sacrament, extraordinary faith transforms lives!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where do I need courage to act follow my conscience?
- How am I lifting the voices of Black and marginalized communities?

- In what ways can culture and worship be integrated to deepen faith?
- How do I discern between obedience and faithful conscience?
- Which acts of extraordinary love can I take this Lent to support inclusion and justice?

Let Us Pray

God of courage and wisdom, we thank You for the witness of George Augustus Stallings, Jr. Inspire us to act with conscience, to nurture communities of love, and to champion justice in our neighborhoods and nation. May our faith be both bold and compassionate, rooted in Your Spirit and attentive to the needs of Your people. Amen.

Faith in Exile

Lessons from an ancient bishop and a new Pixar film
on displacement, conscience and hope

March 18, 2026



Since learning the term *wildland-urban interface* (WUI) last month, I find my mind turning back to the concept again and again. The phrase describes the places where human development pushes into natural ecosystems—where forests meet suburbs, and where wildlife suddenly shares space with cul-de-sacs and shopping centers. A case study in WUI occurred last January when devastating wildfires tore through neighborhoods near Los Angeles. Even during the recent Academy Awards broadcast, Conan O’Brien joked about those fires during his monologue.

While he was onstage, my husband and I were actually enjoying Pixar’s new animated film, *Hoppers*, which tells the story of animals from Grandma Tanaka’s forest glade displaced by a human construction project. Without spoiling too much, the film explores exile, survival and the hope of restoration—yes, within the context of a WUI!

Themes of exile and return struck my heart deeply. Today the Church commemorates Cyril of Jerusalem, a bishop and theologian exiled not

once, not twice, but three times for proclaiming that Jesus, as the Christ, the Anointed One, was truly divine. Like the displaced animals of *Hoppers*, Cyril's life reminds us that people are sometimes exiled from their homes – indeed, 42.5 million people on this planet are refugees! – and that extraordinary courage often grows in the “wilderness.”

Bridging the Chasm Between Humanity and Divinity

To understand Cyril's importance, we must appreciate the theological challenge he confronted. Early Christians struggled to articulate the relationship between God and humanity. Scripture proclaims that “*the Word became flesh and dwelt among us*” (Jn. 1:14). Yet how could the eternal, omnipotent God exist within the fragile life of a human being?

I often joke that believing Jesus is fully human and fully divine feels like believing an animal could simultaneously be 100% cat and 100% dog. The categories appear incompatible. Still, the likes of Cyril were bent on explaining how the human and divine can coexist—even in the same individual.

Cyril and other theologians insisted that the Gospel demanded precisely that paradox. When early evangelists told stories of Jesus calming storms (Mk. 4:39), walking on water (Mk. 6:48), or forgiving sins (Mk. 2:5), the message was unmistakable: Jesus was, in a word, extraordinary. He was not merely a prophet or moral teacher. Rather, he fully shared in the life – and divinity – of God!

Building upon the earlier work of the Council of Nicaea in 325, this theological conviction shaped the creed formalized at the First Council of Constantinople in 381. When we recite the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed every Sunday and proclaim that Jesus of Nazareth is “*God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God*” – we echo voices like Cyril's across seventeen centuries!

A Battle Against Arianism

Cyril's courage emerged during one of the Church's most intense theological conflicts: the debate over Arianism. Followers of Father Arius argued that Jesus was created by God and was therefore not fully divine.

For Cyril and other defenders of the Nicene faith, such a claim undermined the entire Gospel. If Christ were merely a creature, his role in salvation would collapse. Only God could reconcile humanity with God! To specifically combat Arianism, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed pointed out that Jesus is “begotten, not made, one in being [or “consubstantial,” if you prefer] with the Father”!

Because of his unwavering defense of Jesus' divinity, Cyril faced political and ecclesial backlash. Rival bishops accused him of misconduct, the imperial authorities intervened, and he endured exile three times.

When I think about this, I imagine the displaced animals in *Hoppers* leaving their beloved forest glade. Exile feels deeply unjust, yet sometimes exile is the price of truth.

The Sacraments: Bread, Wine, Water, Grace

Cyril's legacy extends far beyond doctrinal debates. His *Catechetical Lectures* provide some of the most beautiful reflections on Christian worship in the early Church.

Speaking about the Eucharist, he taught believers to trust Jesus' words completely:

"Do not think it mere bread and wine. According to the Lord's declaration, it is the Body and Blood of Christ."

Those words later influenced Pope Leo XIII when he named Cyril a Doctor of the Church in 1882.

Cyril also offered vivid teaching about baptism. St. Paul wrote that through baptism we are buried with Christ and raised to new life (Rom. 6:4). Cyril expanded that imagery, inviting believers to imagine themselves descending into the tomb and emerging transformed!

For Christians today, these teachings remind us that sacramental life must lead to social action. After all, Cyril once sold valuable gifts from the emperor in order to feed the poor—living out the Gospel command of Matthew 25: *"Whatever you did for the least of these, you did for me."*

Exile Then and Now

Cyril's story resonates powerfully in our current U.S. political moment.

Many Americans feel exiled within their own country—immigrants targeted by harsh policies and paramilitary forces, LGBTQIA+ people whose rights face renewed attacks, women whose freedoms shrink under renewed pressures. Project 2026 has been described as a "direct assault on women's rights," and even the recent March 9 session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women shockingly witnessed the U.S. stand as the *only* nation to vote *against* an agreement aimed at strengthening access to justice for women. The depths to which we are sinking!

At the same time, some political leaders invite citizens to treat them almost as divine figures. That temptation to "divinize" political power should make Christians deeply uneasy. Deeply. Uneasy.

One moment in *Hoppers* perfectly illustrates the danger. The scheming, cold-hearted character Titus is "hopped" into the body of Mayor Jerry

Generazzo, deceiving the citizens of Beaverton. When the mask finally falls away, everyone sees the monstrous truth.

Watching that scene, I could not help but think about our own national politics. Masks inevitably slip, and the illusion of respectability is not long possessed by those lacking integrity. At such moments, we must decide whether we will follow truth or illusion.

The Gospel offers a clear warning: “*You shall worship the Lord your God – and serve God alone*” (Mt. 4:10).

Lenten Invitations

This Lenten season calls us not merely to give up candy or soda, but to embrace more prophetic commitments. Inspired by Cyril’s extraordinary courage, we might:

- **Defend truth courageously** when leaders distort faith for political gain – as we see in the oxymoron that is “Christian nationalism.”
- **Support displaced communities**, from wildfire victims to immigrants seeking safety.
- **Practice radical generosity**, remembering Cyril who sold imperial gifts to feed the poor.
- **Protect creation**, especially vulnerable ecosystems where human expansion threatens wildlife.
- **Refuse to idolize political figures**, remembering that no president deserves the reverence owed to God alone.
- **Build inclusive communities**, ensuring that those who feel exiled find welcome and belonging.

Returning from Exile

When my husband and I left the theater after watching *Hoppers*, I kept thinking about that fragile forest glade and the animals longing to return home. Displacement hurts. Exile wounds.

Yet the Gospel continually proclaims restoration.

Cyril endured exile three times, yet his theology ultimately shaped the creed Christians still profess today. The animals of *Hoppers* struggled against human destruction, yet the story suggests that restoration remains possible.

In our extraordinary moment—politically tense and spiritually uncertain—we, too, stand in that “wildland-urban interface” where faith meets fear. Like Cyril, we must boldly speak truth. Like the animals of Grandma Tanaka’s forest glade, we must fiercely hope for restoration.

Extraordinary courage, after all, often grows precisely where exile begins!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where in my life do I feel exiled or displaced?
- How might God be inviting me to show extraordinary courage in this place?
- What idols – political or cultural – tempt me to give allegiance that belongs only to God?
- How can I better practice generosity toward those in need this Lent?
- In what ways can I help restore the “forest glades” of our world – communities, ecosystems, relationships?

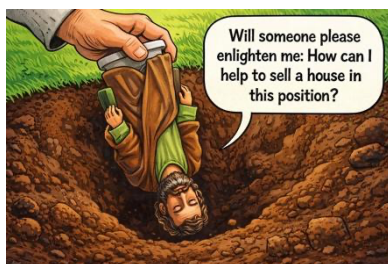
Let Us Pray

God of truth and courage, you sustained Cyril of Jerusalem through exile and struggle. Give us the wisdom to recognize truth, the humility to worship you alone, and the courage to defend justice in our own extraordinary moment. Help us care for the displaced, protect creation, and build communities where every person finds a home. Through Christ who is truly human and truly divine, we pray. Amen.

St. Joseph, Realtor?

What Jesus’ adopted father teaches us about faith, superstition and action in an unordinary U.S. moment

March 19, 2026



I like to imagine the questions I might ask people if I were to ever meet them in heaven.

Of course, I have several questions for Jesus of Nazareth. And I certainly have questions for his mother and siblings (Mk. 6:3). But today, as the Church celebrates Saint Joseph, I realize that I also have a question for him:

“Joseph, dude, I have to ask: Do you really help people sell houses?”

I suspect I’m not the only person who wants to know the answer to this question. And if you grew up Catholic, you know exactly what I mean.

During a recent visit to a Catholic bookstore, during this month in which we celebrate St. Joseph, I noticed a small box prominently displayed near the register. Inside it sat a small statue of the saint with instructions on how to bury the figure upside-down in your front yard, in order to ensure the quick sale of your home.

Google it and you can get your own “St. Joseph Home Seller Kit”! Some devout homeowners swear by them, burying the saint with quiet confidence, even before the “For Sale” sign goes up. Yes, the adopted father of Jesus could moonlight as heaven’s most successful real estate agent!

Perhaps you laugh. You might also do well to ask the important question: *When does faith become superstition?*

The Quiet Man at the Heart of Christology

Ironically, Scripture itself tells us very little about Joseph.

Joseph appears in the Matthean and Lucan infancy narratives. In Matthew, he has an angelic dream and protects the child Jesus from the purported massacre ordered by Herod the Great. To fulfill prophecies, Matthew paints Joseph as leading his family into exile in Egypt, and later bringing them safely to Nazareth.

Then Joseph, like Mary and Jesus, disappears for twelve years.

After the story of the teenager Jesus debating teachers in the temple (Lk. 2:41–52), Joseph vanishes from the biblical narrative. By the time Jesus begins his public ministry, Joseph likely has died – which is why we know him today as the patron saint of happy deaths.

Yet Joseph plays a crucial theological role: In order for Jesus to fulfill the messianic expectation that the savior would come from the House of David (2Sam. 7:12–16), someone from David’s lineage needed to claim him as son.

Joseph provided that lineage.

Even if Joseph did not biologically father Jesus, he legally and socially adopted him, making Jesus a descendant of David according to Jewish custom. *Without Joseph, then, Jesus would not be seen as the messiah – and much of the Church’s early Christology would collapse.*

Not bad for a man who never spoke a single recorded word in the Bible!

Joseph the Tekton: A Man of Compassion

We are accustomed to thinking of Joseph as a carpenter. But the Greek word used in the Gospel is *tekton*, which really means something closer to a builder, craftsman or handyman.

I, as the son of a draftsman who worked in factory environments back in the cornfields of Ohio, feel a certain kinship with that description. Like Joseph, my father was a handyman, a true “Mr. Fix-It,” even if some of his household projects went unfinished for years.

Joseph likely worked with stone, wood and whatever materials were available in small Galilean villages. Perhaps he and his adopted son even participated in the “gig economy” of their day: helping to rebuild nearby Sepphoris, a major city and Jewish administrative capital less than four miles from their hometown of Nazareth. Destroyed in 4 B.C., Sepphoris was rebuilt as the “ornament of Galilee” by Herod Antipas during Jesus’ childhood. Imagine for a moment Joseph and Jesus assisting with the construction of a nearby theater or government building. Imagine a city influencing Jesus’ upbringing and familiarity with urban life!

But Joseph’s greatest craftsmanship was not in wood or stone.

It was in mercy.

Matthew 1:19 describes Joseph as “a righteous man.” When he discovered that his wife was pregnant—with a child that was not his—he decided to quietly divorce her, rather than expose her to public shame or violence.

In a culture where adultery could lead to death by stoning, Joseph chose compassion over rigid legalism.

In other words, Joseph practiced extraordinary mercy long before his adopted son preached, “Blessed are the merciful” (Mt. 5:7).

Saints, Superstitions and the Catholic Imagination

Which brings us back to those buried statues.

Catholic culture has always possessed a wonderfully colorful imagination. Some traditions are beautiful and deeply rooted: the St. Joseph Table in Sicilian communities, the blessing of St. Joseph bread for the poor, the sharing of pasta and ravioli on the Solemnity of St. Joseph, and the towering altars built in his honor in New Orleans.

But alongside those traditions, we also find a strange collection of superstitions.

- People bury St. Joseph statues upside-down to sell houses.
- Single men steal lemons from St. Joseph altars thinking that such an action will help them find wives.
- Some Catholics carry blessed fava beans as talismans.
- Others freeze bread to ward off hurricanes.

If all of this sounds a little like religious magic, well... sometimes it is.

It reminds me of the logic behind Blaise Pascal’s famous wager: Better to believe in God...just in case God exists. Likewise, some people bury St. Joseph statues thinking, “Well, it can’t hurt!”

But eventually a healthy faith must ask deeper questions.

Faith should inspire trust, generosity and courage—not magical thinking.

When Faith Becomes Magical Thinking

Our current U.S. political moment reveals why this distinction matters.

Too many people today believe that prayer alone will fix the very unordinary crisis facing our republic. Others act as if a strongman leader could magically rescue our nation and “make America great again” – whatever they believe that to mean.

Neither belief reflects the Gospel.

The Christian tradition actually offers a better formula. Ignatius of Loyola famously advised believers:

“Pray as if everything depends on God. Act as if everything depends on you.”

Jesus himself repeatedly called his disciples to action. Indeed, he praised those who feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, and care for the sick (Mt. 25).

No statue buried in your yard, no fava bean in your pocket, and no piece of bread in your freezer will do that work.

Real disciples must.

Pop culture sometimes captures this truth better than theology textbooks. Think of the quiet courage of Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the moral stubbornness of Andy Dufresne in *The Shawshank Redemption*, or the everyday heroism celebrated in *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*. Those characters don’t rely on magic. They rely on courage, conscience and self-determination!

Joseph would certainly understand that.

Lenten Invitations

This Lenten season invites us to move beyond superstition and toward courageous action. Inspired by Joseph’s quiet strength, we might:

- **Support workers and labor rights**, remembering Joseph the patron of workers.
- **Protect immigrant families**, recalling how Joseph led Jesus and Mary into exile in Egypt.
- **Practice radical mercy**, especially toward those whom society condemns.
- **Reject authoritarian politics**, refusing to idolize leaders who demand loyalty rather than justice.
- **Share bread with the poor**, reviving the true spirit of the St. Joseph Table tradition.
- **Challenge superstition with thoughtful faith**, refusing to let magical thinking replace moral responsibility.

Extraordinary love rarely appears dramatic. Often it looks like Joseph: quiet, steady, faithful.

The Question I'll Ask Joseph

Believe me: If I meet Joseph in heaven, I'll ask him about those real estate rituals.

"Joseph, dude... do you really help people sell houses?"

I imagine he'll kindly smile and shake his head—perhaps even in disbelief.

After all, Joseph's real legacy has nothing to do with property values or real estate markets.

Joseph built something far more important: a family capable of nurturing a child who could change the world.

Perhaps that is the deeper lesson for this unordinary moment. We do not need magical solutions to fix our broken society. We need ordinary people who quietly practice extraordinary courage, extraordinary mercy, and extraordinary love.

In other words, we need more Josephs!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where in my life do I rely on superstition, rather than on courageous faith?
- How might Joseph's quiet compassion inspire my own decisions?
- Who in my community needs protection or advocacy today?
- What Lenten practice could help me more boldly act for justice?
- How might I transform cultural traditions into opportunities for generosity?

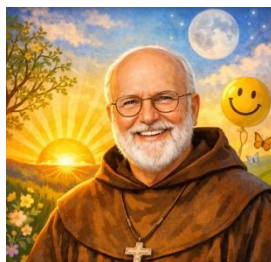
Let Us Pray

God of quiet strength, you entrusted the care of Jesus to Joseph, a humble worker who chose mercy over judgment. Help us reject superstition and magical thinking. Give us instead the courage to act for justice, the wisdom to defend the vulnerable, and the humility to serve without recognition. May we build communities of extraordinary love in this very unordinary moment. Amen.

Falling Upward at the Equinox

Richard Rohr, radical joy, and the Franciscan path in an upside-down world

March 20, 2026



As a young Franciscan friar, I found myself deeply drawn to the writings of **Richard Rohr, O.F.M.** — another son of St. Francis whose words felt, at the time, mystical, progressive, even quietly revolutionary. In the early 1990s, while I was studying, praying, and trying to make sense of my own vocation, Rohr was already inviting the Church into deeper waters — into contemplation, into justice, into what he would later call an “alternative orthodoxy.”

Today, as he completes his 83rd year of life, his public voice has softened under the weight of illness, but his witness remains as strong as ever. On this **spring equinox** and this **International Day of Happiness**, we pause — not only to honor him — but to ask what his life might still teach us in this unordinary and deeply troubled U.S. moment.

The Equinox: When the World Rebalances

March 20 marks the spring equinox, that rare and sacred hinge of time when day and night stand in near-perfect balance. The sun crosses the equator, and light begins, once again, to overtake darkness in the northern hemisphere.

The Church, in her ancient wisdom, ties Easter to this cosmic rhythm: It falls every year on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the spring equinox. Creation itself becomes liturgy!

Scripture echoes this balance:

- “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (Jn. 1:5).
- “For everything there is a season” (Eccl. 3:1).
- “Night is nearly over, day is at hand” (Rom. 13:12).

Rohr has spent a lifetime teaching us to live within such tension — to hold together light and darkness, to resist simplistic binaries, to trust that

transformation often comes not by eliminating the shadow, but by integrating it.

If Lent is a season of stripping away illusions, then the equinox reminds us that *balance*—not perfection—is the goal!

Falling Upward: The Wisdom of Letting Go

Among Rohr's many works—*Falling Upward*, *The Universal Christ*, and *Everything Belongs*—a common thread emerges: We do not grow by climbing higher, so much as by surrendering more deeply.

Like St. Francis before him, Rohr gave up the promise of worldly success for something far more elusive—and far more enduring: joy rooted in divine union.

Jesus himself models this paradox:

- “If you lose your life for my sake, you will find it” (Mt. 16:25)
- “Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain” (Jn. 12:24)

This is not the happiness sold to us by late capitalism or curated Instagram feeds. It is something closer to what Francis of Assisi discovered when he kissed the leper: a joy that emerges precisely where comfort ends.

Pop culture, too, has glimpsed this truth:

- In *Inside Out*, joy and sadness are not enemies, but partners.
- In *The Good Place*, moral growth requires failure and humility.
- In “Fix You” by Coldplay, healing begins when we admit we are broken.

Rohr would call this the movement from the “false self” to the “true self”—from who we think we are, to who we are in God.

Happiness, Franciscan Style

Today is also the International Day of Happiness—a concept that might feel almost absurd in a nation increasingly marked by violence, injustice and deep division.

And yet, Franciscan spirituality insists that happiness is not naïve. It is defiant.

Jesus blesses not the powerful, but “the poor in spirit” (Mt. 5:3), “those who mourn” (Mt. 5:4), and “the peacemakers” (Mt. 5:9).

This is not accidental. It is revolutionary.

Rohr's life echoes this same inversion. Despite cancer diagnoses, a heart attack, and now lymphoma, he has remained a steady voice of compassion and inclusion. Like Pope Francis, whom he met in 2022, he embodies a Church that is less about control and more about accompaniment.

In a culture obsessed with winning, Rohr invites us to belong!

A Franciscan Response to an Unjust World

Let's be honest: If Rohr were writing at full strength today, he would not remain silent.

In a moment when the U.S. engages in military aggression abroad, when leaders prioritize oil reserves over human dignity, when federal agents terrorize immigrant communities in our own streets—this is not merely politics. It is a spiritual crisis.

And the Franciscan response is clear: “*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.*”

Jesus commands:

- “Blessed are the peacemakers” (Mt. 5:9).
- “Put your sword back in its sheath” (Mt. 26:52).
- “Whatever you do to the least of these, you do to me” (Mt. 25:40).

Rohr has long stood on what he calls “the edge of the inside”—loving the Church enough to challenge it, remaining rooted enough to transform it.

Think of characters like:

- Ted Lasso, who leads with kindness in a cynical world.
- Jean Valjean from *Les Misérables*, who embodies mercy over law.
- Yoda, who teaches that true power lies not in domination, but in wisdom.

This is the extraordinary courage our moment demands—not louder outrage, but deeper love!

Calls to Extraordinary Action

If Rohr has taught us anything, it is that orthodoxy without orthopraxy is empty. Simply put, it is not enough to believe the right things: We have to live them! Or, as James once wrote: Faith without action is hollow (James 2:17). So what might we do?

- **Daily practice contemplative prayer**, even if only for a few minutes—silence as resistance!
- **Publicly stand with marginalized communities**, especially immigrants and LGBTQIA+ persons and African Americans.
- **Fast not only from food, but from indifference**, choosing awareness over comfort.
- **Support organizations that embody justice and compassion**, locally and globally.
- **Speak truth to power**, even when it costs you relationships or reputation.
- **Intentionally cultivate joy**, not as escape, but as spiritual discipline.

Returning to Balance: An Equinox Faith

I often joke that I come from the cornfields of Ohio to the corn tortillas of Texas. Somewhere along that journey—from ambitious Eagle Scout to young Franciscan friar, to pastor, professor and public official to, well, whatever I’m called to in the future—I have tried to hold together the many tensions of life: faith and doubt, institution and freedom, tradition and reform.

Maybe that is why Rohr’s voice resonates so deeply with me.

On this equinox, as light and darkness find their balance, I find myself wondering: *What would it mean for us to live with that same equilibrium?*

Not abandoning our faith, but also not idolizing it.

Not rejecting tradition, but also not being bound by it.

Not choosing between justice and contemplation, but embracing both.

This is the extraordinary invitation before us!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where in my life do I resist the necessary balance between light and darkness?
- What false self am I still clinging to, and what might it mean to let it go?
- How do I define happiness, and how does that differ from the Gospel?
- In what ways am I called to be a peacemaker in today’s political climate?
- What would it look like for me to live on “the edge of the inside”?
- Where is God inviting me into deeper joy this Lent?

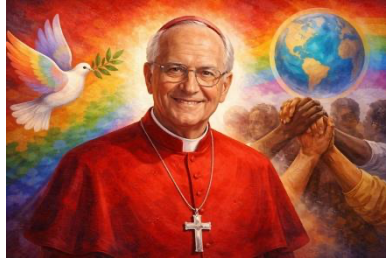
Let Us Pray

God of balance and becoming, you who set the sun on its path and hold light and darkness in sacred tension, we thank you for the life and witness of your servant Richard Rohr, for his courage to speak, for his humility to listen, for his wisdom to guide us beyond easy answers. Teach us to fall upward, to lose ourselves in love, to find joy not in dominance, but in compassion. Make us instruments of your peace in a world that has forgotten how to rest, how to listen, how to love. And as we walk this Lenten road, strip away all that is false within us, that we might rise—balanced, whole and free—into the extraordinary light of your presence. Amen.

Racial Justice Is Not Optional

Vekoslav Grmič, Socialism,
and Our Call to Eliminate Racial Discrimination

March 21, 2026



I still remember the image of Pope John Paul II that hung in the hall of our family home, right inside our front door. As boys, we passed it every morning when we came down from our upstairs bedrooms, and we passed it again every evening as we went to bed. The image seemed to lionize him, to make him seem somehow super-human or larger than life. Only after I joined the seminary did I get a very different view of him. In 1996, for instance, after I had completed my undergraduate studies, he infamously shut down conversation on the possibility of honoring the ancient practice of allowing our sisters to serve in the ordained ministries of the Church. When Bishop John McCarthy of the Austin Diocese later visited us at Cristo Rey, he regaled us with an anecdote from the pope's 1987 visit to San Antonio — the first visit by a pope to Texas. According to McCarthy, Texas bishops were enjoying lunch with the pontiff when McCarthy chimed in: "Holy Father, here in the U.S. we're talking about how lovely it would be if our sisters were to again share in the ordained ministries of the Church!" After an awkward silence, the pope effectively shut down the conversation with a few simple words: "These mashed potatoes are delicious."

The effects of such a conservative pontificate come to mind today as we remember **Vekoslav Grmič** (pronounced GAIRRmeech), the Slovenian bishop who dared to envision a Church allied with the poor, and also as we mark **World Day to Eliminate Racial Discrimination**.

Vekoslav Grmič: A Bishop of the People

Vekoslav Grmič (1923-2005) was often called "the red bishop," not as a slur, but as a recognition of his extraordinary commitment to the marginalized. In a post-World War II Europe, socialism was a political and moral statement. For a Roman Catholic bishop, openly supporting socialist

ideals meant challenging entrenched hierarchies, both secular and ecclesial.

Grmič believed the Church should stand alongside the working class, the poor, and those often ignored by society. He championed liberation theology, the belief that the Gospel is inseparable from the struggle for justice, as well as the political-religious thought of Swiss reformer Hans Küng, who argued for a global ethic rooted in human dignity. In Yugoslavia, he advocated for collaboration between the Church and socialist movements in order to redistribute resources, ensuring that goods and opportunities were equitably shared among all citizens. This was not theoretical for him—it meant engaging governments, communities and labor groups in creating practical solutions to inequality.

His stance drew ire from Rome. Pope John Paul II, believing such collaboration to be dangerously radical, removed Grmič from his bishopric—a stark reminder that extraordinary courage often comes with extraordinary risk.

From the Cornfields to Consciousness: Understanding Racial Discrimination

March 21 also marks the World Day to Eliminate Racial Discrimination, commemorating the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960 in South Africa, where police killed 69 peaceful protesters opposing Apartheid. It's a day to reflect on the deep psychological and structural roots of racism, a reality that hits close to home for me.

Human beings are surprisingly superficial. I often say we are like M&Ms: different colors on the outside, but identical on the inside. And yet, for centuries, we have allowed skin color, nationality, gender identity and sexuality to determine access to power, wealth, opportunity and dignity. The brain's natural tendency to "other" others—to quickly categorize and judge—is compounded by culture and history.

I've seen this play out in my own family. After Grandma Reinhart sold her farm and moved to the city of Tiffin, she used the N-word to describe her first sighting of an African-American man on her street. Decades later, when I brought an African-American boyfriend home to Ohio, Grandma Mathias interrupted our lunch conversation: "I don't think we've ever had a Black boy in this town before"—and then, before our shock allowed us to reply, she added, "Oh, that's right, the Boeses used to have a Black stable boy who lived out in their stables!" As human beings, we often internalize prejudice long before we understand the humanity of others.

Grmič, Racism, and the U.S. Today

Grmič's vision and our need to eliminate racial discrimination converge in the present moment. In the U.S., anti-socialist sentiment often extends to rejecting programs that advance equity: Medicaid, Obamacare, SNAP benefits, and a livable minimum wage. We see ongoing racial targeting of immigrants, attacks on the gospel values of diversity, equity and inclusion, and even the sharing of overtly racist memes by our U.S. president. These examples are not just unfortunate. They are grave sins against humanity and against our gospel values.

To be clear, *racial justice is not optional*. Faith demands that we confront the superficial judgments that divide communities, that we advocate for systemic change, and that we dismantle structures of discrimination.

Calls for Action

- Study the life and writings of Vekoslav Grmič to understand how he lived the Gospel's call for economic and social justice.
- Examine personal biases and participate in anti-racism training programs in your community.
- Advocate for equitable policies in schools, workplaces and local governments.
- Support immigrant communities and organizations fighting racial injustice.
- Use your social media, networks and platforms to amplify voices of marginalized communities.

Extraordinary Courage in Our Ordinary Lives

Vekoslav Grmič's life challenges us to embody extraordinary courage in ordinary settings. Everywhere, the call is always the same: *Do not silently accept injustice*. March 21 reminds us that faith without action is incomplete. Just as I daily passed that image of the pontiff who condemned Grmič, we are constantly surrounded by examples of leadership—both inspiring and constraining. Let us choose to walk the path of those who dare to stand for justice, equality and love, even when it costs us dearly!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- How do I respond to racial injustice in my family, workplace or community?
- In what ways do I perpetuate superficial judgments based on color, identity or social status?
- How can I practice extraordinary love for the marginalized today?
- What steps can I take to dismantle structural inequities in my local context?

- How might I embody courage in faith, even when it challenges authority or convention?

Let Us Pray

Gracious God, help us see beyond superficial differences. Grant us the courage of Vekoslav Grmič to stand with the oppressed, to love extraordinarily, and to tirelessly work for justice. May our words, actions and prayers dismantle the walls of discrimination and build bridges of equity and compassion. Amen.

Battling Blindness

Lessons from a Bizarre Independent Catholic Bishop

March 22, 2026



Let me tell you about Lowell Lebermann.

During my time as president of San Juan Diego Catholic High School, I enjoyed countless interactions with students—but some of my fondest moments also involve encounters with donors. I recall, for instance, a cardiac surgeon and his wife who, because of their children’s musical gifts, referred to their household as “the Von Trapp family.” As I followed their family through the years, their son went on to play in the NFL for 13 seasons—and to win Super Bowl XLVII.

My mind also bends today toward another San Juan Diego donor and advisor, **Lowell H. Lebermann, Jr.** (1939-2009), the owner of Centex Beverage whose environmental advocacy led him to be labeled “Green Panther” during his service on the Austin City Council. A philanthropist and supporter of the arts, he served on the boards of various banks and companies, as well as on Board of Regents of The University of Texas System. And Lowell achieved all this despite being blinded by a gunshot accident at age 12.

Lowell possessed a sharp mind and a sharper wit. I often marveled at how someone physically blind could so clearly “see.”

I think of Lowell this morning as we mark the passing of one of the most bizarre figures in Independent Catholic history: the blind Palmarian bishop **Clemente Domínguez y Gómez** (1946-2005), who claimed to be Pope Gregory XVII, and whose life offers both caution and insight for us as we navigate an extremely bizarre U.S. moment.

The Context of Apostolic Mischief

In *The Sound of Music*, the nuns of Nonnberg Abbey famously asked of a mischievous postulant: “How do you solve a problem like Maria?”

Similarly, the Roman Catholic Church has long struggled with what to do when bishops act without Vatican approval. **Dominique-Marie Varlet of France** (1724-1739), **Carlos Duarte Costa** of Brazil (1945-1948), **Pierre Martin Ngô Đình Thục** of Vietnam (1976-1981), and **Emmanuel Milingo** of Zambia (2006) all consecrated bishops outside of canonical norms.

One of their questions, echoing *The Sound of Music*, might have been: “How do you solve a problem like Ngô Đình Thục?” And, more pointedly, what do you do when the person consecrated by a Roman Catholic bishop without Vatican approval appears to be, in the words of those nuns at Nonnberg Abbey, “a flibbertigibbet, a will-o’-the-wisp, a clown”?

Catholic sacramental theology teaches that episcopal consecration leaves an indelible mark: Once consecrated, a bishop cannot be “unconsecrated.” When Ngô Đình Thục consecrated Clemente Domínguez y Gómez in 1976, then, the Vatican had a problem: a blind bishop claiming divine visions, stigmata and papal authority—a self-proclaimed “pope” who rivaled John Paul II!

The Life and Ministry of a Bizarre Bishop

Clemente Domínguez y Gómez was blind, yet he claimed to see more than most of us. A Palmarian bishop, he purportedly experienced apparitions, mystical stigmata, and even a supposed divine mandate to succeed Pope Paul VI. Taking the name Pope Gregory XVII, he reigned for only 11 fewer days than John Paul II. His tenure was marked by both fervent devotion from followers and scandalous improprieties, including sexual misconduct with priests and nuns.

His story is so strange that it inspired the Spanish film *Manuel y Clemente*, satirizing his antics. And yet, like Lowell’s blindness, his own invites reflection: *What does it mean to spiritually or morally “see”?* Today’s scriptures on this Fifth Sunday of Lent offer some guidance, reminding us that God “will put [God’s] spirit in you, that you may live” (Ez. 37:14). Paul similarly taught:

“The Spirit of God dwells in you. Whoever does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the spirit is alive because of righteousness” (Rom. 8:9-10).

Jesus himself, responding to the death of Lazarus, taught:

“If you walk during the day, you do not stumble, because you see the light of this world. But if you walk at night, you stumble, because the light is not in you” (Jn. 11:9-10).

Domínguez y Gómez’s “vision” —paired with last Sunday’s gospel on the blindness of the Pharisees versus the clear vision of the man born blind (Jn. 9:1-41)—reminds us that physical sight does not equal moral or spiritual insight, and also that those we follow can be as blind and dangerous as we can at times be.

Bizarre Times, Blind Leaders

Two decades later, Domínguez y Gómez’s story feels almost quaint. We now live in a world where leaders and influencers act bizarrely, often blinded to consequences, truth and basic human dignity.

Until yesterday, I might have said: Consider the bungled COVID response, false claims about horse dewormers and bleach injections, constant public spectacles to distract from Epstein file scrutiny, and foreign policy sins lauded by enablers at every level. Yesterday’s news, though, that our U.S. president typed the words, “Good, I’m glad he’s dead” in reference to a former FBI director, Robert Mueller, a man who stood for everything that our president is not, shows the depth of the blindness to which we have allowed our nation to sink.

This blindness is not accidental. It is systemic. And it is *our* responsibility, as people of faith, to discern light from darkness, goodness from evil, and extraordinary truth from truly extraordinary lies.

Popular culture mirrors this tension. In *The Simpsons*, Mr. Burns often fumbles in moral darkness—and the citizens of Springfield go along. In *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, blind adherence to orders without ethical reflection frequently leads to catastrophe. Music offers similar insights: Radiohead’s “No Surprises” and Beyoncé’s “Formation” highlight social blind spots, while Kendrick Lamar’s “DAMN.” exposes systemic moral failures. Movies like *The Great Dictator* and *Jojo Rabbit* satirize leaders who are blind to human suffering, much like Domínguez y Gómez was blind at times to both truth and decency.

Calls to Action

We must exercise extraordinary courage and discernment. Here are practical steps:

- **Read critically and widely:** Stay informed, and question narratives from all sources.
- **Engage morally, not merely politically:** Faith calls us to confront injustice.
- **Act locally:** Support under-resourced communities, immigrant families, and public schools.
- **Confront spiritual blind spots:** Challenge harmful teachings or behaviors within families, communities, and church structures.
- **Practice compassion and accountability:** Both for others and for leaders who may be blind or misguided.

Extraordinary Seeing: Lessons From the Blind

As I reflect on Lowell Lebermann's extraordinary clarity and leadership despite blindness, and on Clemente Domínguez y Gómez's bizarre missteps despite claimed divine visions, I see a stark contrast: extraordinary moral insight versus dangerous delusion and blindness.

The final week of Lent before Holy Week invites us to consider our own spiritual vision: *Are we walking in the light of Christ, or are we stumbling in the darkness of convenience, fear or complacency?*

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- How do I discern between spiritual experiences or teachings that lead me closer to Christ, and those that might distract or mislead me?
- In what ways can I honor faith experiences outside my own understanding while remaining rooted in Scripture and tradition?
- How do I respond to religious and political figures whose charisma draws others, yet whose teachings or actions are controversial or questionable?
- Where in my own life might the Holy Spirit be inviting me to see beyond my comfort zone, even in ways that challenge conventional wisdom?
- How can my circles of influence cultivate both openness to spiritual gifts and rigorous accountability to prevent deception or harm?

Let Us Pray

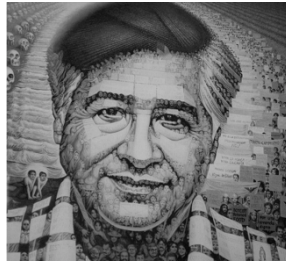
O God, who opens graves and revives spirit, grant us extraordinary discernment in an age of bizarre and blind leaders. Help us to see the needs of the marginalized and to respond with justice. Strengthen our courage to

Speak truth to power, even when unpopular. Teach us to recognize the difference between spiritual insight and spiritual delusion. Open our hearts to extraordinary love that transcends appearances, status or authority. And guide our eyes beyond the superficial, that we might have the wisdom to act in ways that bring life, justice and extraordinary love to all. Amen.

Canonization and Cancellation

When heroes fall from grace — or are pushed from their pedestals

March 23, 2026



I owe you an apology.

I truly embarrassed myself during our Sunday Masses yesterday at Holy Family. I flew back to Austin late Saturday night after visiting my mother for four days. I had unplugged: no morning news, no late-night monologues, no deep dives into the chaos of our common life. I did scroll Substack after my plane landed back in Austin, but apparently not enough.

After the first Mass, a parishioner approached me with a question that stopped me cold: "*Father, didn't you hear? César Chávez has been 'canceled.'*"

I wish I could say I had. I had not. And yet I had just announced with confidence and pastoral pride that we would celebrate him next Sunday — as we have done for fourteen years.

Yikes.

What I Missed While I Was Away

In recent days, Chávez has again been pulled into the cultural crosshairs. In the past, we heard the longstanding criticisms — some dating back decades. Critics pointed to allegations of authoritarian leadership within the United Farm Workers, the controversial Synanon-influenced practices at La Paz, his stance on undocumented immigration at certain points, and questions about how dissent within the movement was handled. But after I flew out of Austin last week, *The New York Times*

published allegations that the civil rights leader sexually abused women and girls.

Here in Texas, political leaders were quick to symbolically respond by canceling our state holiday in honor of César Chávez on March 31.

The deeper reality is this: *Chávez the symbol is now colliding with Chávez the man.*

Saints, Symbols & the Stories We Tell

When we at Holy Family joined the Independent Catholic movement fourteen years ago, we entered a tradition that boldly honors prophetic figures—sometimes long before Rome catches up. As a result, we celebrated César Chávez alongside Martin Luther King, Jr. and Óscar Romero.

We called them saints—not in the juridical sense, with drawn-out processes and “devil’s advocates,” but in the gospel sense: “By their fruits, you will know them” (Mt. 7:16).

And so, each year, on the Sunday closest to March 31, we lifted up Chávez as a model of extraordinary solidarity with the poor and working class who struggle to make ends meet.

But here’s the tension:

We humans have a tendency to quickly canonize – and to cancel just as quickly.

One day we cry “Hosanna!” (Jn. 12:13), and the next, “Crucify him!” (Lk. 23:21).

Sound familiar? It should. It’s Palm Sunday in a nutshell—and we are six days from Holy Week!

The Very Human César Chávez

Over the years, I have heard stories—real, grounded, human stories—about Chávez.

Parishioners recall his visit to Austin in the 1970s. He was hesitant to engage the Chicano struggle here—until local leaders pushed back and threatened to withdraw support from his grape boycott. Only then did he show up.

I remember, too, when his brother Paul visited Austin for our annual César Chávez parade in 2015. I told him that some in our movement considered his brother, César, a saint. He wryly replied, “My mother might beg to differ.”

That line has stayed with me.

Because it is always the family who knows.

The rest of us often know only the symbol.

“Sí Se Puede” – and Still, He Was Human

César Chávez, alongside Dolores Huerta, gave voice to farmworkers who had long been invisible. “*¡Sí se puede!*” Yes, we can!

Like Martin Luther King Jr., he became a symbol of hard-won dignity. A sacramental sign, almost, of justice breaking into history.

And yet – he was human.

Scripture never hides this truth.

- Moses murdered (Ex. 2:12).
- David grievously abused power (2Sam. 11).
- Peter denied Jesus (Lk. 22:61-62).
- Paul persecuted Christians (Acts 8:3).

And still, strangely, God worked through them. God works through human beings...like us.

If the Bible were written today, half its cast would be “canceled” before Exodus!

From Confederate Statues to Cultural Whiplash

Last week’s debacle bends my mind back to 2018, when we on the Austin ISD Board of Trustees removed Confederate names from our schools. I wholeheartedly supported the effort since those names—from Confederate generals to foot soldiers—represented a legacy of white supremacy that contradicted our district values of dignity and inclusion.

Many of those facilities, we knew, were named in honor of Confederates in 1960-1965, during the centennial of what Southern segregationists called the “War of Northern Aggression,” a despicable strategy, of course, to show disdain for the events leading up to the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

So, we renamed buildings. We spent money. We made a statement.

And yet, the very next year, when I had the opportunity to name a bus terminal in my single-member district for any esteemed member of the community, I hesitated.

Why?

Because naming is risky.

Today’s heroes risk becoming tomorrow’s headlines.

The “Southeast Bus Terminal” still bears no one’s name—not out of indecision, but out of humility.

The Deeper Issue: Flesh & Fragility

Let’s be honest.

Much of what “cancels” public figures—across generations—involves sexuality, power or both.

We are embodied beings. Complicated beings. Sinful beings.

“Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone” (Jn. 8:7). This is not an excuse for harm. It is a call to honesty.

Lent demands that we confront not just the sins of others, but our own capacity for shadow. As the prophet reminds us, “The heart is devious above all else” (Jer. 17:9).

Meanwhile... Who Do We Refuse to “Cancel”?

And here is where the hypocrisy becomes unbearable.

Absolutely. Unbearable.

In this current political moment, many who are eager to cancel Chávez show no interest in holding accountable a serial liar, a man found liable for abuse, whose words and actions routinely degrade the vulnerable and even our service members, whose assaults on human life are innumerable, and who seems intent on distracting our nation from every possible revelation that might be contained in the Epstein files.

Intriguingly, we pick and choose our outrage.

We weaponize morality when it suits us.

Jesus shared a few words on that: “You strain out a gnat, but swallow a camel!” (Mt. 23:24).

Or, in more modern terms – think of the moral contradictions in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the power games of *House of Cards*, or even the tragic unraveling in *Breaking Bad*. We know how this story goes.

Power corrupts. But selective outrage corrupts even more.

What We Can Do Right Now

So what now?

How do we respond – not just to Chávez, but to this entire pattern of cultural canonization and cancellation?

Here are some calls to action:

- **Practice critical solidarity.** Honor the good Chávez did, while honestly naming the harm. Both can be true.
- **Resist binary thinking.** Reject the lie that someone must be either saint or villain. Most of us are both.
- **Deepen Lenten examination.** Spend less time dissecting others’ sins, and more time confessing your own.
- **Center the marginalized.** Keep the focus on farmworkers, immigrants and laborers whose struggles continue today.
- **Challenge selective outrage.** Speak up when moral standards are applied unevenly – especially in politics.
- **Tell fuller stories.** Teach younger generations that history is complex, not a Marvel movie of heroes and villains.

- **Choose living witnesses.** Support today's organizers and advocates, not just yesterday's icons.

From Embarrassment to Invitation

So yes, I was embarrassed.

Standing there after Mass, realizing that I had lifted up a figure now swirling in controversy, I felt caught off-guard. Exposed, even.

But maybe that embarrassment is a gift.

Because Lent is not about getting it right. It is about being made right.

And perhaps the question is not whether we will still mention César Chávez during the days ahead.

Perhaps the question is *how*.

Will we do so naively?

Or will we do so honestly – with eyes wide open, hearts attuned to both grace and failure, and a renewed commitment to the extraordinary work of justice in our own time?

Because in the end, the scriptures do not present perfect heroes.

They share the stories of deeply imperfect disciples!

Questions for Prayer & Reflection

- When have I been quick to “cancel” someone without examining my own faults?
- Who are the figures I have placed on pedestals – and why?
- How do I respond when new information complicates my understanding of my heroes?
- Where might I be practicing selective outrage in my political or moral life?
- What does it mean for me to pursue justice with both truth and mercy this Lent?
- How is God inviting me to grow in extraordinary humility in this moment?

Let Us Pray

God of truth and mercy, You see us as we are – beautiful and broken, courageous and compromised. Strip away our illusions, our need for perfect heroes, our hunger for easy judgments. Give us the courage to seek justice without self-righteousness, to tell the truth without cruelty, to love without conditions. As we walk these final days of Lent, teach us to follow not the flawless, but the faithful. And make of us, in this extraordinary moment, people of extraordinary compassion, extraordinary integrity and extraordinary hope. Amen.

The Cup We Are Asked to Drink

Lessons from St. Óscar Romero
on courage, sacrifice and prophetic faith

March 24, 2026



Last week, while visiting my mother in Las Vegas, I stepped away for a few hours to spend time with a friend preparing to deploy to Iran.

He is 28 years old. A lieutenant colonel. Responsible for 410 soldiers. Ten years of service still ahead of him.

Suddenly, the headlines became human. The abstractions of geopolitics gave way to the weight on his shoulders — the lives entrusted to him, the decisions that could mean life or death.

I confess: I struggle to understand why we are placing troops in harm's way in Iran. The motivations feel murky, the timing suspicious, the stakes all too real. But then I remember the Epstein Hermeneutic. Ah, yes, the Epstein files!

And yet, I cannot deny this: I am deeply moved by the extraordinary courage of young people willing to give their lives for something beyond themselves.

Their witness comes to mind today as we commemorate St. Óscar Romero — a man who also gave his life, not on a battlefield, but at an altar.

A Bishop Forced to Choose

Romero did not begin as a radical.

In fact, when he was named Archbishop of San Salvador in 1977, many expected him to be safe, cautious, even conservative. But history — and the Gospel — have a way of disrupting our expectations.

El Salvador was unraveling. A military-backed government oppressed the poor, death squads terrorized communities, and voices for justice were silenced.

Romero faced a choice: Would he stand with the powerful — or with the powerless?

At first, he hesitated. Then came the assassination of his friend, Fr. Rutilio Grande. That moment changed everything.

And Romero found his voice.

Week after week, he denounced violence, named injustice, and called soldiers to disobey immoral orders. He became, in the words often attributed to him, “the voice of the voiceless.”

He embodied what liberation theology dared to proclaim: that God has a preferential option for the poor, and that faith without justice is no faith at all.

The Altar, the Chalice & the Bullet

If you have seen the film *Romero*, starring Raul Julia, you likely remember the final scene: Romero lifts the chalice—the Blood of Christ—during the consecration. A gunshot rings out. He collapses, dead.

The imagery is powerful, even if dramatized. Romero was indeed murdered while celebrating Mass at a hospital chapel on March 24, 1980—even if not during the consecration.

Still, the symbolism holds.

“Take and drink... this is my blood given up for you.”

At Holy Family, we often enjoy those words from Michael Joncas’ hymn *Take and Eat*.

Romero did not just say such words. He became them.

His blood, like Christ’s, was poured out for others.

“Can You Drink the Cup?”

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed, “Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me” (Mt. 26:39).

Earlier in their journey, he had asked his disciples, “Can you drink the cup that I drink?” (Mk. 10:38).

Romero answered that question with his life.

The “cup” is not abstract. It is suffering, risk, vulnerability. It is the cost of standing with the oppressed when it is dangerous to do so.

Romero knew the risks. The day before his assassination, he pleaded with soldiers: *Stop killing your own people!*

He drank the cup anyway.

A Saint for This Moment

Romero’s witness speaks with unsettling clarity into our present moment.

What would he say today, as U.S. immigrant communities—especially Spanish-speaking communities—live in fear of raids, detention and deportation?

Would he remain silent?

Or would he preach, as he once did, that “the Church must be the voice of the voiceless”?

I suspect we know the answer.

We have seen glimpses of that same courage in our own time.

In Minnesota, only weeks ago, ordinary people placed their bodies on the line to defend others. Pastors allowed themselves to be arrested in protest of policies that continue to terrorize their communities. Renee Good and Alex Pretti lost their lives.

This is what Romero looks like in 2026.

Not just a statue. Not just a feast day. A living call.

Blood, Bodies & the Cost of Love

There is a thread that connects Christ on the cross (Lk. 23:46), Romero at the altar, my friend preparing for deployment, and the protesters placing their bodies in harm's way.

"Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends" (Jn. 15:13).

We hear it so often that we forget how radical it is.

This is not metaphor. It is flesh and blood.

Think of films like *Saving Private Ryan*, songs like "Hero" by Mariah Carey, or even the moral dilemmas in *Grey's Anatomy*. Even Dr. Ryland Grace (Ryan Gosling) in the latest box office hit *Project Hail Mary* sacrifices himself to save a friend. We are drawn to stories of sacrifice because they reveal something true about who we are called to be.

Romero lived that story — not on a screen, but in history.

What We Can Do Right Now

As we enter the final days of Lent, Romero challenges us to move beyond symbolic faith into embodied, extraordinary action:

- **Prophetically speak.** Clearly name injustice, even when it costs you relationships or reputation.
- **Stand with the vulnerable.** Physically show up for immigrants, the poor, the marginalized.
- **Examine your silence.** Where have you chosen comfort over courage?
- **Support nonviolent resistance:** Give time, money and presence to movements rooted in dignity and peace.
- **Hold leaders accountable.** Demand moral consistency from those in power, regardless of party.
- **Embrace costly discipleship.** Take on a Lenten practice that actually disrupts your comfort.
- **Tell the truth.** Refuse to normalize lies, even when they are politically convenient.

From Nevada to San Salvador: The Weight of the Cup

I return in my mind to that conversation in Las Vegas.

A young lieutenant colonel. A quiet resolve. A burden carried with dignity.

I think of the chalice in Romero's hands. I think of the cup in Gethsemane. I think of the question Jesus asks each of us: "Can you drink the cup?"

Romero did.

The question is not whether we will be asked.

The question is: Will we answer with the same extraordinary courage?

Because in the end, faith is not proven in what we say at the altar. It is proven in what we are willing to give!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where in my life is God asking me to "drink the cup"?
- When have I avoided speaking truth out of fear?
- Who are the "voiceless" in my community – and how am I amplifying them?
- How do I respond to the suffering of immigrants, the poor and the marginalized today?
- What would it look like for me to live with extraordinary courage this week?
- How is Lent calling me beyond superficial sacrifice into real transformation?

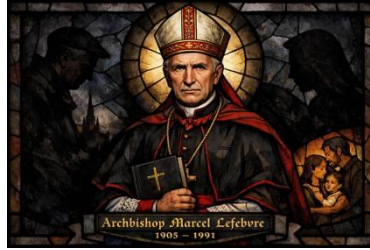
Let Us Pray

God of the poor and the prophets, You called your servant St. Oscar Romero to speak truth in a time of terror and to give his life in love. Give us that same extraordinary courage. When we are tempted to remain silent, make us bold. When we are tempted to remain comfortable, make us restless. When we are tempted to protect ourselves, teach us to pour out ourselves. As we approach Holy Week, form us into a people who do not merely remember your sacrifice, but who embody it. We ask this through Christ, whose body was broken and whose blood was poured out for the life of the world. Amen.

“We Don’t Talk About Marcel, Oh No, No”

Lessons from Archbishop Lefebvre
on the Solemnity of the Annunciation

March 25, 2026



Every family, it seems, has its share of drama—its members who don’t speak with one another, its “black sheep,” its unresolved tensions that linger just beneath the surface. I’ve written before of Preetam—not his real name—a brilliant young Indian-American whose parents cut off their support for his university studies when he came out as gay. When we caught up recently, he shared the next chapter: of time spent with his younger brother...and his brother’s boyfriend. You read that right.

I wasn’t entirely surprised. The fraternal birth order effect suggests that each older gay brother slightly increases the odds that a younger brother will be gay. But what intrigues me is not biology; it’s relationship. His younger brother, still closeted, remains close to their parents, causing us to wonder what would happen if he, too, one day says, in the words of bearded lady Lettie Lutz in *The Greatest Showman*, “This is me”? Will love hold—or fracture?

Today, as we celebrate the Solemnity of the Annunciation—that moment when a young, unwed teenage girl in first-century B.C. Nazareth risked everything to say yes—we confront a similar question with the “black sheep” and characters we know: Will we respond like Joseph, who chose love and acceptance (Mt. 1:19), or will we pick up stones?

The Annunciation: A Scandal Before It Was a Solemnity

Luke’s telling of the Annunciation (Lk. 1:26-38) reads so serenely that we forget how scandalous it truly was. A teenage girl, likely 12 to 14 years old, pregnant, not yet living with her husband, in a culture where Deuteronomy 22:13-21 still loomed large.

Let’s not sanitize this. Mary’s purported “yes”—more an etiological explanation than a historical fact—was not just pious. It was dangerous.

And Joseph? He had every legal and cultural reason to walk away—or worse. Yet he chose what the Gospel calls righteousness, which looks suspiciously like love, mercy and forgiveness. He refused spectacle. He refused violence. He chose relationship over reputation.

That is the hinge of incarnation history: not perfection, but extraordinary compassion in the face of unexpected surprises and great confusion!

And it is precisely that hinge that invites us to reconsider one of the most uncomfortable figures in our broader Catholic “family.”

The Bishop We Don’t Name

On this same day, March 25, we remember the passing of **Marcel Lefebvre** (1905-1991)—a name that, in many progressive and inclusive Catholic circles, feels a bit like Bruno in *Encanto*. We don’t talk about him. No, no, no.

Lefebvre was no minor figure. He was a French missionary bishop, the former Roman Catholic Archbishop of Dakar, and a leading conservative voice at the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). When many bishops embraced *aggiornamento*—the Church’s opening of windows to let in fresh air—Lefebvre saw danger.

Where others saw renewal, he saw rupture.

In 1970, he founded the Society of Saint Pius X (SSPX), forming priests in pre-Vatican II traditions. The breaking point came in 1988, when he consecrated four bishops without papal approval, defying Pope John Paul II. The result: excommunication, headlines, and a permanent fracture.

Where many saw Vatican II singing “Climb Every Mountain,” Lefebvre feared we had wandered into something closer to Woodstock.

And so, like many “black sheep,” he became easier to ignore, than to understand.

Family Resemblance and Estrangement

Here’s the uncomfortable truth: In the vast ecosystem of Vatican-free Catholicism—of Old Catholic, independent, inclusive, and sacramentally-creative communities, but also of less-progressive, less-inclusive and even Sedevacantist strands—we are siblings with Lefebvre and the SSPX.

We gladly name the Roman Catholic bishops—Varlet, Duarte Costa, Thục and Milingo—who broke with their church and whose legacies align more comfortably with our commitments to inclusion, justice and reform.

But Archbishop Lefebvre? His theological vision ran in the opposite direction.

And yet—he, too, stepped outside Rome. He, too, claimed fidelity to Catholic tradition. He, too, formed communities, ordained clergy, celebrated sacraments, and believed he was preserving something sacred.

We might call him and his followers the “black sheep.” But I suspect that, from their perspective, they might have names for us as well.

Estrangement, after all, is rarely one-sided!

What We Might Reluctantly Admit

If we are honest—truly honest—we must acknowledge a few things that complicate our narrative:

- Lefebvre did not leave for convenience or power. He left over theology.
- He deeply, reverently, even fiercely loved the Eucharist.
- He formed priests who seriously take discipline, sacrifice, and sacramental life.
- His movement persists, not because of nostalgia alone, but because it meets real spiritual hunger.

None of this negates the real harms of rigidity, exclusion or resistance to reform. But it does challenge us to move beyond caricature.

Jesus warns us in Matthew 7: “Why do you notice the splinter in your brother’s eye, but do not perceive the wooden beam in your own?”

It turns out that even the “black sheep” may mirror something back to us!

A Divided Church in a Divided Nation

If this all feels abstract, it shouldn’t.

We are living in a moment when division defines us. Families fracture over politics. Siblings and family members no longer feel comfortable discussing certain issues with one another. Conversations end before they begin.

The story of another family comes to mind. During COVID, one sibling slipped into conspiracy theories and anti-vaccine rhetoric, such that some of her siblings find it difficult to this day to forgive her, especially after the pandemic took the life of a dearly loved one influenced by her views. Another sibling occupies a more conservative space that makes dialogue difficult. A particularly vocal aunt delights in stories of how she agitates her neighbors with the Trump flags on the back of her golf cart.

As family, they no doubt love one another, but even love is challenged to bridge some of the divides between those who lean in different directions!

And so the question of the Annunciation becomes painfully contemporary:

Will we choose relationship, even when we do not understand?

Or will we quietly – or loudly – walk away?

The temptation toward purity – whether theological or political – is strong. But the Gospel consistently pulls us toward something harder: unity without uniformity.

That is not easy. It is, however, extraordinary.

Invitations for Extraordinary Action

As we approach Holy Week, in these final days of Lent, perhaps our fasting is meant to move beyond candy or soda and into something far more demanding:

- **Fast from caricature.** Refuse to reduce to stereotypes those with whom you disagree. Learn their actual stories.
- **Practice courageous curiosity.** Initiate one conversation this week with someone whose worldview challenges your own.
- **Pray across divides.** Intentionally include in your daily prayer – by name – those with whom you struggle.
- **Examine your own rigidity.** Where have your convictions become walls, rather than bridges?
- **Build one small bridge.** Send a message, extend an invitation, or reopen a conversation that has gone silent.
- **Deeply engage the tradition.** Read voices you normally avoid – whether conservative theologians or progressive voices.
- **Choose mercy over being right.** Let Matthew 5:7 guide you: “Blessed are the merciful.”

Saying “Yes” Again

Mary’s “yes” did not resolve tension; it created it. Joseph’s mercy did not eliminate scandal; it transformed it.

And perhaps that is where we find ourselves today: not called to eliminate division, but to respond to it differently.

Preetam’s family is still writing its story. So is that still-divided family. So is mine. So is yours. So is the Church.

We may not be ready to sing about Marcel, oh no, no. We may not be ready to agree with him.

But perhaps, on this Annunciation, we are called to stop pretending he is not part of the family.

Because the real miracle is not that God entered a perfect world.

It is that God entered a fractured one – and stayed!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where in my life am I tempted to “not talk about” someone who challenges me?
- When have I chosen being right over remaining in relationship?
- How does Joseph’s quiet love and mercy challenge my instincts?
- What fears keep me from engaging those with whom I disagree?
- Where might God be inviting me to say a risky “yes” this Lent?
- How do I distinguish between conviction and rigidity?

A Prayer for Discernment and Courage

God of annunciations and interruptions, You speak into the messiness of our lives and call us toward something greater than certainty. Give us the courage of Mary to say yes when the path ahead feels unclear. Give us the mercy of Joseph to choose compassion over condemnation. Soften our hearts where they have hardened. Open our ears where we have stopped listening. Bridge the divides we have accepted as permanent. Teach us to love – not abstractly, but concretely, not easily, but extraordinarily. And in this Lenten season, lead us ever closer to the cross – where even in division, you chose to remain. Amen.

Walking Beyond Institutions

Lessons from Two Bishops Who Challenged the Church

March 26, 2026



An email earlier this week brought to mind the Catholic Apostolic Church in North America (CACINA). It was the second jurisdiction I encountered after joining the Independent Catholic movement in 2012: I first met Archbishop Lawrence J. Harms of the American Catholic Church in the U.S. (ACCUS). When he died within two months of our acquaintance, I attended his funeral in Fredericksburg, Maryland, where a CACINA bishop came to pay his respects. Whereas so many U.S.

Independent Catholic communities are relatively young—most of them, like the ACCUS, born within the past 25 years—CACINA boasts a long, uninterrupted history here in the U.S., tracing back to the Catholic Apostolic Church of Brazil (the *Igreja Católica Apostólica do Brasil*, or ICAB, in Portuguese). It took me nearly eight years after meeting that bishop before I heard of CACINA or ICAB again. And now, 14 years after that initial encounter, I count a number of extraordinary friends and colleagues—clergy and lay leaders—who trace their lineage to one of the bishops we commemorate today: Eduard Herzog and Carlos Duarte Costa.

Eduard Herzog: Standing Firm Against Purported Dogma

Eduard Herzog (1841-1924) was a Roman Catholic priest who found himself at odds with the sham Vatican Council of 1869-1870 and its promulgation of purported papal infallibility. Herzog did not reject the faith; he rejected the mechanics and timing of the Council's declarations. He believed the dogma had been rushed, imposed without authentic theological dialogue, and enforced in a way that marginalized conscience and reason.

Herzog became the first Old Catholic bishop in Switzerland, consecrated by Joseph Reinkens of Germany, and was subsequently excommunicated by Pius IX. His story reminds us that faithful dissent is not betrayal; it is the extraordinary courage of a heart that seeks truth. Herzog's life echoes the words of Micah 6:8: *"God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"*

With respect to our present U.S. culture, Herzog might have been a huge fan of *Star Trek*—challenging rigid authority, exploring the frontier of conscience, boldly seeking truth where others hesitated!

Carlos Duarte Costa: Courage in the Midst of Injustice

Carlos Duarte Costa (1888-1961), the Brazilian bishop who died on Palm Sunday 1961, was equally extraordinary in his courage, but his battleground was more outward: societal injustice and the Roman Catholic Church's silence and complicity during the horrors of World War II. Duarte Costa condemned the collusion of church leaders with fascist and Nazi-aligned regimes, decried clerical loyalties that abandoned the poor, and promoted a prophetic witness to human dignity.

He founded the Brazilian Catholic Apostolic Church to share his apostolic lineage outside the structures and strictures of Rome. Duarte Costa's prophetic actions invite reflection on Amos 5:24: *"But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."* His life

challenges us to consider where we, too, might remain silent in the face of injustice, perhaps complicit through inaction.

Think *Schindler's List* or even *The West Wing*: extraordinary people who stood against institutional inertia and corruption, refusing to let bureaucracy eclipse morality!

Lessons for Today

Both Herzog and Duarte Costa reveal that extraordinary love and courage sometimes require leaving familiar structures to honor a higher calling. In the current U.S. context—politically polarized, socially fractured—many of us may find ourselves questioning leadership, policies, or even long-standing practices. The lesson is not cynicism; it is engagement guided by conscience, compassion and prophetic courage.

Even in our small, everyday choices—whether confronting racism, advocating for immigrants, or supporting LGBTQIA+ siblings in faith—we walk a path Herzog and Duarte Costa illuminate.

Calls to Action

- Speak truth to power within your family, among your friends and coworkers, and in your circles of influence.
- Advocate for systemic justice, even when it goes against the grain.
- Form alliances with those outside your usual circles, recognizing the extraordinary diversity of prophetic voices.
- Educate yourself on historical examples of courageous dissent, from Herzog to contemporary whistleblowers.
- Commit to at least one visible act of solidarity during this coming Holy Week: Attend, advocate, or amplify marginalized voices.

Walking Beyond Comfort

Herzog's principled dissent, Duarte Costa's prophetic outrage, and the enduring legacy of Independent Catholic communities remind us that extraordinary courage is often uncomfortable. It is the decision to stand for what is right, even when institutions fail or falter!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where am I called to courageously act during these last days before Holy Week?
- How do I discern between personal comfort and prophetic necessity?
- Which voices of dissent have shaped my understanding of faith?
- How might I follow Herzog's example of principled disagreement?
- In what ways can I echo Duarte Costa's advocacy for justice?

Let Us Pray

God of justice and truth, grant us the courage to walk beyond familiar paths, to speak against injustice, and to love extraordinarily. Help us honor the prophetic witness of Eduard Herzog and Carlos Duarte Costa. May our actions reflect Your mercy and righteousness in our families, communities and world. Amen.

The Defender We Didn't Expect

Friedrich zu Schwarzenberg, Robin Hood,
and the Courage to Stand Close

March 27, 2026



Few things surprise me. But a recent movie trailer admittedly did. The upcoming A24 film *The Death of Robin Hood* suggests that all the stories we've heard of Robin Hood since the 13th century might be... lies! An aging Robin (Hugh Jackman) confesses from the shadows: "[Robin Hood] was not a hero. He was a murderous brigand." Words flash across the screen: "The legend was a lie." The message is not subtle.

We will not know until June where that story goes, but it may upend the centuries-long hold that Robin Hood had cemented in our imagination as something else entirely: a defender of the poor, a challenger of unjust power, a protector of those exploited by elites.

Long before Friedrich zu Schwarzenberg, the Austrian cardinal we commemorate today, Robin Hood embodied a truth we still wrestle with: Who will stand with the vulnerable when it costs something?

The Defender Who Steps In Close

From medieval ballads to swashbuckling films like the 1922 *Robin Hood* starring Douglas Fairbanks, to the fox in Disney's 1973 film, Robin Hood has been imagined not merely as a clever archer, but as a *present* defender.

Early depictions often placed a *sword* in his hand. That matters.

A bow allows distance. A sword requires proximity. It requires stepping into danger, into conflict, into the messy, human space where injustice

unfolds. Robin Hood did not merely oppose oppression from afar. He drew near—to the poor, to exploited women, to communities crushed by unjust rulers, even to a kingdom threatened by usurpers.

Scripture consistently echoes this same movement toward proximity:

- “Defend the orphan, plead for the widow” (Is. 1:17).
- “Rescue the weak and the needy” (Ps. 82:4).
- “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn. 1:14).
- “I was hungry and you gave me food” (Mt. 25:35).
- “Bear one another’s burdens” (Gal. 6:2).

Defenders do not remain at a safe distance. They step in. They stand close. They risk contamination by association.

That is where today’s unlikely saintly witness enters the story.

A Prince Who Defended the Persecuted

On March 27, we remember **Friedrich zu Schwarzenberg** (1809-1885)—a prince of the Church who chose, at critical moments, to stand with those his own institution marginalized.

To grasp his courage, we must recall the world around him.

In the centuries before and during his life, Reformers—those who challenged ecclesial authority or sought theological renewal—often faced expulsion, exile or worse. Families were uprooted. Livelihoods were destroyed. Communities were fractured. To be associated with reform could cost everything!

And yet, Friedrich did something extraordinary.

He did not simply tolerate Reformers from a distance. He sympathized with their suffering. He advocated for their families. He saw their humanity when others saw only disobedience.

Even more striking, he zealously defended his own teacher, Anton Günther, whose theological writings came under suspicion in Rome. Rather than distancing himself to protect his own career—as many would—Friedrich repeatedly appealed to the Vatican to prevent condemnation.

He stepped in close.

He risked his standing to defend a man being silenced by the very Church he served.

In a hierarchical institution where obedience often meant silence, Friedrich practiced something rarer: extraordinary courage shaped by loyalty to truth and to persons.

Pop Culture’s Echo: Defenders Across Our Stories

Our cultural imagination continues to return to this same archetype—the one who steps in to defend others:

- **Atticus Finch** (*To Kill a Mockingbird*) defended a Black man in a racist legal system, knowing he would lose socially, even if he won morally.
- **Mulan** (*Mulan*) risked everything to protect her father and defy oppressive gender norms.
- **T'Challa** (*Black Panther*) rejected isolationism to stand in solidarity with oppressed peoples globally.
- **Erin Brockovich** (*Erin Brockovich*) took on corporate power to defend a poisoned community.
- **Blanca Evangelista** (*Pose*) built chosen family for trans women of color amid rejection and crisis.

And music gives us anthems of defense:

- Lady Gaga's *Born This Way*.
- Kendrick Lamar's *Alright*.
- Billie Holiday's *Strange Fruit*.

These are not just stories. They are mirrors. They ask us: *Where do you stand? And how close are you willing to get?*

Standing in the Tension of This Moment

We do not need to look far to find communities today who feel under threat.

- Immigrant families navigating fear and uncertainty.
- Women experiencing the erosion of bodily autonomy here in the U.S.
- Trans children and adults targeted by legislation and rhetoric.
- LGBTQIA+ persons who fear the rollback of hard-won rights.
- Voters who feel their access to the ballot is narrowing.
- African-Americans who feel racially profiled and targeted.

At the same time, many of our neighbors—especially in more conservative spaces—believe *they* are defending something precious: their freedoms, their faith, their country. Some feel besieged by cultural change, by shifting norms, by a world they no longer recognize.

That tension is real.

But here is where Friedrich—and the Gospel—press us further.

Jesus does not call us to defend *power*. He calls us to defend *people*.

- “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake” (Mt. 5:10).
- “Perfect love casts out fear” (1Jn. 4:18).
- “There is neither Jew nor Greek...for all are one” (Gal. 3:28).

The question is not simply who *feels* threatened. The question is: **Who is actually being harmed, excluded, silenced or denied dignity?**

And then: **Will we step close enough to matter?**

Lenten Invitations to Extraordinary Courage

As we enter these final days of Lent before Palm Sunday, we are invited beyond symbolic sacrifice into prophetic action. Not just giving up candy or soda, but taking up the cross of solidarity.

Here are some concrete invitations:

- **Publicly stand with the marginalized.** Speak up when anti-immigrant, anti-LGBTQIA+, or misogynistic rhetoric surfaces, even in uncomfortable spaces.
- **Accompany someone at risk.** Volunteer with organizations supporting immigrants, trans youth, or those facing housing insecurity.
- **Tell the truth in love.** Challenge misinformation within your own circles, especially when silence would be easier.
- **Support reformers within the Church.** Defend theologians, ministers and communities pushing for inclusion, just as Friedrich defended Günther.
- **Practice proximity.** Build real relationships across lines of difference, not abstract compassion from afar.
- **Sacrificially give.** Let Lenten almsgiving stretch you toward those whose needs are urgent and overlooked.
- **Pray with your feet.** Show up at vigils, protests or community gatherings where dignity is being defended. The No Kings rally on March 28 will take place in over 3,000 locations nationwide!

This is not comfortable Christianity. It is **extraordinary love in a very unordinary moment.**

Returning to the Legend

Perhaps that A24 film will deconstruct Robin Hood. Perhaps it will reveal shadows behind the legend.

But even if the legend proves imperfect, the longing behind it remains.

We still hunger for defenders. For those who refuse to stand at a distance. For those who draw near, sword in hand—not to destroy, but to protect. For those who risk their reputation, their comfort, even their place within powerful institutions.

Friedrich zu Schwarzenberg did not live in Sherwood Forest. He lived in the halls of ecclesial power. And yet, in defending Reformers and his teacher, he did something just as radical.

He stepped close.

In this Lenten season, as we approach the One who entered Jerusalem not with a sword, but on a donkey, and who left the city with a cross, we are invited into that same movement of extraordinary courage.

Not from afar.

But up close!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where am I tempted to remain at a safe distance, rather than stepping close to those who suffer?
- Who are the “Reformers” in my life whom I am called to defend?
- When have I prioritized institutional loyalty over human dignity?
- Which communities today most need advocates willing to risk something?
- How is God inviting me this Lent into deeper, more costly solidarity?
- What fears keep me from speaking or acting with extraordinary courage?

Let Us Pray

God of justice and mercy, you drew near to us in Jesus, not from a distance, but in flesh and vulnerability. Give us the courage of Friedrich zu Schwarzenberg, to defend those cast aside, to stand with those silenced, to risk comfort for the sake of truth. Break open our hearts this Lent, that we may move beyond easy sacrifice into extraordinary love. Teach us to walk with the vulnerable, to speak when silence tempts us, and to trust that your grace is enough. We ask this in the name of the One who stood with the least of these, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Locked Behind Three Doors

The Extraordinary Courage of Sister Angélique
and the Nuns of Port-Royal

March 28, 2026



Those who know that I'm a geek — and that I have a very soft spot in my heart for the courageous nuns of Port-Royal des Champs — will not be surprised that I'm spending some of my free time these days translating a 1664 account of these nuns being held captive... by their own church.

You can imagine it unfolding on the big screen.

The 39-year-old Sister Angélique sits with her sisters in chapter, hardly 25 miles southwest of Paris. The convent door opens. In walks the villainous archbishop, flanked by officials. His voice cuts through the room: *"You do not want to obey!"* Then, coldly, he turns to those who entered with him: *"Gentlemen, you know what you must do."*

Archers and officers flood the room, surrounding the stunned nuns.

Carriages wait outside. The nuns are scattered.

As Sister Angélique is led out, she meets her father in the doorway. She falls to her knees, asking his blessing. In her words, *"It was only reasonable that he should bless the host he was about to offer to God."*

This is not fiction.

This is... [*gulp*] the Church.

Port-Royal: When Women Show the Courage of Bishops

The nuns of Port-Royal lived a radical Gospel.

Sister Angélique de Saint-Jean Arnauld d'Andilly entered the convent at age 6, took the habit at 16, and professed vows at 19. She endured loss and buried loved ones. And then, in her early 30s, she faced a test, not of personal piety, but of institutional power.

All clergy and religious were forced by papal decree to sign a formulary of submission, condemning the writings of Flemish bishop Cornelius Jansen. The nuns had never read his book — so, they refused to condemn him.

Why?

Because conscience matters.

Because truth matters.

Because blind obedience is not the Gospel.

Years later, Sister Angélique did sign—with an explanatory note. But it was too late. The machinery of institutional control was already set in motion.

"When bishops show the timidity of women," one of her friends wrote, "women must show the courage of bishops."

This was not rebellion for rebellion's sake.

It was extraordinary courage rooted in conscience.

Scripture speaks clearly here:

- "Cry aloud, do not hold back" (Is. 58:1).
- "The truth will set you free" (Jn. 8:32).
- "We must obey God, rather than humans" (Acts 5:29).
- "God has not given us a spirit of fear" (2Tim. 1:7).
- "Speak the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15).

"A Very Narrow Prison": Faith Under Confinement

At first, Sister Angélique tried to spiritualize the experience. She called it a "ten-month retreat."

Then reality set in.

A very narrow prison.

Complete solitude.

Deprivation of all consolation.

She was locked behind three doors.

Sister Angélique likened herself to John the Baptist in prison. Then came the chilling realization: The Jesuit priests who had persecuted Bishop Jansen were the confessors in the convent!

"I was like a sheep among wolves."

Sister Angélique described Port-Royal as her "wet nurse," herself as an infant torn away and given to a governess she did not know. She wept. She despaired. She clung to Christ.

And yet, even there, grace flickered.

In the prison's chapel of the Immaculate Conception—a devotion unfamiliar to her since "we had no altar in our house dedicated to disputed opinions"—she threw herself into the arms of Mary, whom she called *Mother of Fair Love and Holy Hope*.

Though an institutional shepherd had scattered her flock, she trusted that the Good Shepherd would gather them again—and separate them from the goats!

We Know This Story: From Screen to Soul

We have seen this story before.

- **The Shawshank Redemption**, where hope flickers in the darkest prison.
- **The Handmaid's Tale**, where women are controlled by religious power structures.
- *Les Misérables*, where we feel the crushing weight of unjust systems.
- **Selma**, where people place their bodies on the line for dignity and justice.

These are not distant stories.

They are reflections.

Because if we are honest, we do not only see ourselves in Sister Angélique.

Victims, Villains, and the Complicit

Here is the uncomfortable truth.

We like to imagine ourselves as the courageous nun. The prophetic resistor. The one with extraordinary courage.

But if we carefully look into our hearts, we might also find:

- The righteous archbishop, convinced he is justified and is merely preserving unity.
- The archers and officers, "just following orders."
- The prison-guarding nuns who lock the doors and hold the keys.
- The priest-confessors who enforce silence and blind submission.

This is the psychology of harm.

People rarely wake up and choose evil. They justify. They rationalize. They obey. They fear.

Jesus knew this.

- "Father, forgive them; they know not what they do" (Lk. 23:34).
- "Woe to you...you load people with burdens hard to bear" (Lk. 11:46).
- "Whatever you did to the least of these..." (Mt. 25:40).

The two gospels that we will hear proclaimed tomorrow, on Palm Sunday, reveal this dynamic: The same crowd that shouts "Hosanna!" will soon cry "Crucify him!"

The same institution that proclaims truth can also imprison it.

Prisons Then and Now

We cannot read Sister Angélique's account without thinking of those today who are quite literally locked away.

- The 1.8+ million people currently incarcerated in the U.S. — including the African-American adults who unjustly comprise 37% of our U.S. prison population.
- The 68,000 people in ICE detention today, 74% of whom have no criminal history.
- Migrants and even U.S. citizens “disappeared” into places like CECOT in El Salvador.
- The 4,600 children separated from their parents by the U.S. government in 2017 to 2021, 30% of whom were still unaccounted for just 16 months ago.
- And all the loved ones who will go to bed tonight without answers.

People locked behind doors.

Adults and children cut off from consolation.

Children of God wondering if anyone sees them.

And here is the question that presses upon us:

Where is the Church?

And perhaps more pointedly:

On which side of the locked door do we find ourselves?

Lenten Calls to Extraordinary Solidarity

As we prepare to enter Holy Week, we are invited into more than reflection. We are invited to action.

- **Visit or advocate for the imprisoned.** Support prison ministries and immigration advocacy groups.
- **Tell the stories.** Amplify voices of those detained, disappeared or silenced.
- **Interrupt harmful narratives.** Challenge dehumanizing language about immigrants, prisoners, and marginalized communities.
- **Support reform within the Church.** Defend those calling for accountability and inclusion.
- **Practice proximity.** Move beyond abstract concern, into real relationships.
- **Fast from indifference.** Let this final day before the start of Holy Week stretch you toward costly compassion.

This is extraordinary love that refuses to remain comfortable!

From the Chapter Room to the Tomb

Tomorrow, we will hear two Gospels.

One begins with palms held high, with praise, with community—like the Abbey of Port-Royal des Champs in the height of its glory.

The other gospel ends in darkness. In a sealed tomb. In silence.

Sister Angélique knew both.

She knew the joy when she gathered with her sisters in prayer, in community, and even in chapter meetings. She also knew the agony of confinement. She knew what it meant to be carried away, locked behind doors, cut off from all she loved.

And yet, she also knew this:

The tomb is not the end.

Sister Angélique's story deepens that truth. Real courage is not always heroic in the cinematic sense. It is quieter. It is hidden. It is locked away behind doors. But it is no less extraordinary.

As we stand on the threshold of Holy Week, let us follow Christ not only into the cheers of those who shout his name, but also into the cells, the prisons, the tombs.

Not as spectators.

But as companions.

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where do I see “locked doors” in my world today?
- When have I been complicit in systems that harm others?
- Who are the modern-day “Port-Royal nuns” I am called to defend?
- What fears keep me from acting with extraordinary courage?
- How is God inviting me this Holy Week into deeper solidarity with the suffering?
- Where do I need to trust that God can bring life from sealed tombs?

Let Us Pray

God of the imprisoned and the forgotten, you were bound, judged, and sealed in a tomb. Be near to all who are locked away tonight, those separated from family, those deprived of dignity, those longing for hope. Give us the courage of Sister Angélique, to resist injustice, to speak truth, to love beyond fear. Break open the doors we have built, within our Church and within our hearts. And lead us, through the darkness of this Holy Week, into the light of resurrection. Amen.

Fasten Your Seatbelts

The Holy Week Roller Coaster Begins!

March 29, 2026



“Hey, Siri, play Palm Sunday music.”

Simple enough, right? Apparently not.

What I got instead was a playlist from an album called *Palm Sunday*—an entire list of songs that had seemingly little, if anything, to do with today’s solemnity. What *did* come through loud and clear was a heavy dose of Jesus-and-me theology and atonement language: “Now I have resurrection power.” “By his wounds, we are healed.” “He lived and died to pay my ransom.”

So I tried again: “Hey, Siri, play *Catholic* Palm Sunday music.”

The first line? “Make some Holy Ghost crazy noise!”

At that point, since I had just spoken with him during this week’s recording of “Cutting Edge Catholics” podcast, I gave up and went with: “Hey, Siri, play Roc O’Connor.” Siri responded with...Rex Orange County. Oh, Siri.

I’d like to think that I enunciate well enough when speaking with Siri. A friend told me just yesterday that I have a cartoon voiceover voice—like I belong on *Bob’s Burgers*. I’m still not sure whether that’s a compliment. But I’ve concluded something else: The Catholic celebration of Palm Sunday just isn’t a “thing” for Siri.

Which is a shame.

Because what we celebrate today—and this week—is anything but simple.

Two Gospels, One Reality Check

Since 1970, Palm Sunday has held a unique place in Catholic liturgy. It is the only Sunday of the year when we hear two Gospels.

We begin with triumph: “*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!*” (Mt. 21:9)—the words we hear in the Holy, Holy at every Mass.

And then, after the Gospel acclamation, we descend into Jesus' passion: "*Crucify him!*" (Mt. 27:22-23).

What a turn!

I was commiserating with a priest friend yesterday about how Palm Sunday is a real downer. For Catholics, it begins on such a high note...then ends in the darkness of the tomb. For many who will not return until Easter Sunday, this is the only time they hear the passion narrative.

And maybe that is precisely the point.

Because, let's be honest, we would rather skip it.

We would rather jump from palms to Easter praise without passing through the cross.

But the Gospel does not allow that.

- "Whoever wants to be my disciple must take up their cross" (Mk. 8:34).
- "Unless a grain of wheat falls and dies..." (Jn. 12:24).
- "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" (Mk. 15:34).
- "Into your hands I commend my spirit" (Lk. 23:46).
- "It is finished" (Jn. 19:30).

Palm Sunday insists that we sit with suffering.

The Holy Week Roller Coaster

I grew up in northwest Ohio: cornfields, factories, and, about an hour away, the roller coaster capital of the world: Cedar Point!

In 1989, they built the Magnum XL-200 – then the tallest, fastest, steepest coaster in the world.

I loved it.

Still do.

That slow climb. The pause at the summit. The sudden drop that steals your breath.

That, my friends, is Holy Week.

- **Palm Sunday's first gospel (a high):** Jesus is hailed as king!
- **Palm Sunday's second gospel (a low):** betrayal, denial, crucifixion. Boo.
- **Holy Thursday (another high):** servant leadership & the Eucharist (Jn. 13)!
- **Good Friday (another plunge):** Jesus' suffering and death. Argh.
- **Holy Saturday/Easter (another real high):** Resurrection and new life!

With all due respect: What a bipolar week!

Manic. Depressive. Manic. Depressive. Then, finally, manic-beyond-manic, as we'll unpack during the first weeks of the Easter season.

The only fitting words that come to mind are: *Fasten your seatbelts!*

Faith, Feelings, and the Life We Actually Live

But is this not simply life?

Yesterday, my husband and I had lunch with a cardiac nurse. He told us something striking: He is less shocked by death, than by the fact that many countries visualize their week as beginning on Monday, rather than Sunday.

Let that sink in.

When you encounter death regularly, your emotional response shifts.

In ministry, it's the same.

Just this weekend:

- A beloved community member passed away.
- A sunrise renewal of vows marked a silver jubilee.
- Baptisms welcomed new life.
- A 60th birthday celebrated joy.
- A hospital visit accompanied a woman nearing death.

From the cornfields of Ohio to the corn tortillas of Texas, I have lived enough life – and walked with enough people – to know this truth:

We are all on the roller coaster.

We celebrate.

We grieve.

We hope.

We despair.

Even our Buddhist siblings remind us: Suffering touches every life.

Palm Sunday – and the Triduum – are not anomalies.

They are mirrors.

Pop Culture Gets It, Too

The stories we tell reflect this same emotional whiplash:

- *Inside Out*. Joy and sadness intertwined.
- *The Lion King*. From playful childhood to devastating loss.
- *Encanto*. Family celebration masking deep pain.
- *Avengers: Endgame*. Triumph and sacrifice in the same breath.

And music captures it:

- Billie Eilish's *Happier Than Ever*
- Adele's *Easy On Me*
- Coldplay's *Fix You*

They all tell the same truth:

You cannot have resurrection without passing through the cross.

A Tale of Two Nations

As a nation, we are living our own Palm Sunday moment.

Some see glory.

Others see decline.

Some proclaim, "the best of times."

Others warn of "the worst of times."

Yesterday's "No Kings" rallies drew together an estimated eight million dissatisfied people. Others celebrate what they see as unprecedented prosperity and strength.

Perspective shapes reality.

But Palm Sunday reminds us:

The same fickle crowd can shout "Hosanna" one day, and "Crucify him" the next.

So we must ask:

- Who is being lifted up today?
- Who is being cast aside tomorrow?
- And where do we stand when the mood shifts?

Because it always does.

Riding with Extraordinary Courage

As we enter Holy Week, we are called not to spectate, but to participate.

Here are some invitations:

- **Stay for the whole ride.** Attend the Triduum, not just Easter Sunday.
- **Accompany the suffering.** Visit the sick, the grieving, the marginalized.
- **Tell the full story.** Resist skipping from triumph to resurrection without naming suffering.
- **Speak when the crowd turns.** Defend those scapegoated or abandoned.
- **Practice emotional honesty.** Allow yourself to feel both joy and grief.
- **Choose solidarity over comfort.** Stand with those experiencing the "Good Friday" of life.

This is extraordinary faith that refuses denial.

From Siri to Salvation

I started by asking Siri to play Palm Sunday music.

What I got instead was confusion, misinterpretation, and something I was not looking for.

In a strange way, that feels right.

Because Palm Sunday is not neat. It is not easily categorized. It resists simple playlists and tidy theology.

It is a roller coaster.

It is joy and sorrow.

Hope and despair.

Life and death.

And somewhere in that wild ride, we discover something extraordinary:

God is present in all of it.

Not just in the hosannas.

Not just in the alleluias.

But in the betrayal.

In the suffering.

In the silence of the tomb.

So, fasten your seatbelts: Holy Week has begun!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where am I experiencing “highs” and “lows” in my life right now?
- Do I try to skip past suffering too quickly?
- When have I been part of a “crowd” that turned on someone?
- Who needs my solidarity in their “Good Friday” moment?
- How is God present to me in both joy and sorrow?
- What would it mean for me to live this week with extraordinary courage?

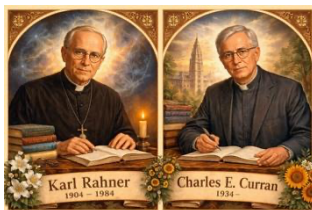
Let Us Pray

God of palms and passion, you meet us in celebration and in suffering. Walk with us this Holy Week, through every rise and fall, through every joy and every sorrow. Give us the courage to remain, when others flee, to speak, when others are silent, to love, when it costs us something. And lead us, through the cross, into the promise of resurrection. Amen.

From Catechism Answers to Courageous Questions

Growing into an Adult Faith
with Karl Rahner and Charles E. Curran

March 30, 2026



As a second-grader, I was a good little parrot.

Nowhere was this more evident than in my memorization of the 54 questions and answers of the *St. Joseph Catechism*, required for our First Communion. You may remember them:

"Who made us?"

"God made us."

"Why did God make us?"

"God made us to show God's goodness, and to make us happy with God in heaven."

"What must we do to be happy with God in heaven?"

"To be happy with God in heaven, we must know, love and serve God in this world."

Alice Jones, the second-grade CCD teacher in our public elementary school—a fascinating blur of church and state that ended in the 1990s—turned catechism into a kind of theological *Jeopardy!* And I dominated.

Life was simpler then.

And my faith was certainly much simpler.

But leaving the cornfields of Ohio at 18, entering the seminary, and spending the next decade in study—then the following 25 years in ministry—quickly taught me what St. Paul the Apostle already knew:

"I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it yet" (1Cor. 3:2).

"When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. But when I became an adult, I put the ways of childhood behind me" (1Cor. 13:11).

Today, the Church gives us two extraordinary voices who challenge us to grow up in our faith!

The God Beyond Cartoons: Rahner's Holy Mystery

Jesuit theologian **Father Karl Rahner** stretched my imagination of God in ways that shattered childhood images.

Gone was the old, white, bearded man with a crown on a cloud, Jesus at his side, a dove hovering nearby. In its place, Rahner offered:

- God as **Holy Mystery**.
- God as the **infinite horizon of being**.
- Humanity as free and transcendent **spirit in the world**.
- Grace as God's **self-communication**.

As a young theology student, I devoured his *Theological Investigations*. I studied him under Peter Phan at The Catholic University of America. I wrote my first M.A. thesis on his concept of God as self-communicative Love. I wrestled with *Time and Eternity*.

And yes — “wrestled” is the right word.

Rahner is not easy.

But neither is God.

Rahner's insight that *we stand in an asymptotic relationship with God* — always approaching, never fully grasping — rang true to my experience. Faith was no longer about memorized answers.

It became about extraordinary openness to mystery!

The Courage to Question: Curran's Witness

If Rahner expanded my mind, **Father Charles E. Curran** strengthened my conscience.

As a young seminarian, I watched in awe as he dared to ask questions many Catholics were already asking:

- About contraception.
- About divorce.
- About sexuality.
- About conscience.

After the 1968 papal encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, the Vatican's landmark condemnation of artificial birth control, Curran co-authored a response that challenged its conclusions. In 1971, he went further, suggesting that same-sex relationships rooted in love might not be morally evil.

For that — and more — he paid the price.

In 1986, under Cardinal Josef Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI), Curran was removed from his faculty position.

Let's be honest:

When 98% of Catholic women use contraception, yet are told by an all-male hierarchy that this is sinful, something is off.

Curran embodied extraordinary courage—not rebellion for its own sake, but faithful questioning rooted in conscience! He taught that there is the level of the moral precept by the church, and the level of the lived experience of the people. To shape moral theology he called for the dialogue of “precept” with “lived experience.” The official church did not like this.

Power, Truth, and the Infantilization of Faith

Throughout history, bishops and theologians have often clashed.

Why?

Because of a tension as old as the Church itself.

Authority vs. inquiry.

Control vs. conscience.

Power vs. truth.

Too often, the Church has infantilized its people: “Believe this. Why? Because I said so.”

Sound familiar?

It is the same logic used on children.

But adults ask questions.

Adults wrestle with the “truths” they were once spoon-fed.

Adults learn and grow.

Our Christian scriptures encourage this:

- *“The truth will set you free”* (Jn. 8:32).
- *“Why do you not understand what I say?”* (Jn. 8:43).
- *“Test everything; hold fast to what is good”* (1Thes. 5:21).

An adult faith is not disobedient.

It is deeply faithful!

From Milk to Meat: Growing an Adult Faith

Some of my favorite hours at Holy Family happen during our weekly Wednesday evening bible study. Adults gather. Questions fly. Faith deepens.

I can almost see roots growing—slowly, steadily, beautifully!

Too many Catholics stop learning after the CCD or RE classes of their childhood and teen years. They carry a child’s faith into adulthood.

But life demands more. Suffering demands more. Love demands more. Justice demands more.

Faith must mature.

- Think *Good Will Hunting*, when raw intelligence must grow into emotional depth.
- Or *The Matrix*, when Neo chooses the red pill—choosing truth over illusion.

- Or *The Good Place*, where moral growth unfolds over time.

Even music captures this journey:

- Taylor Swift's *Anti-Hero*
- Kendrick Lamar's *Alright*
- U2's *I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For*

Faith is not static.

It is a journey toward extraordinary depth!

Faith and the Crisis of Unquestioned Belief

We see today what happens when adults stop asking questions. In our current U.S. context:

- Some accept violence without scrutiny.
- Some believe obvious falsehoods.
- Some treat leaders as beyond critique.

Such adherence to unquestioned belief becomes, quite literally, a form of idolatry.

And yet, an estimated eight-million people showed up for Saturday's "No Kings" rallies throughout our nation.

Why?

Because mature adults recognize that no one is above the law. No one is beyond accountability. And 250 years after our breakup with our last king, we still do not want to be ruled by monarchs or despots.

Imagine if more people applied Rahner's depth and Curran's courage. To politics. To media. To religion.

How different our world would be!

Calls to Extraordinary Maturity

As adults, we are called to grow up — spiritually, intellectually, morally. Here's how we begin:

- **Read beyond the catechism.** Engage serious theology.
- **Ask hard questions.** Especially when answers seem too easy.
- **Form your conscience.** Not blindly, but prayerfully and thoughtfully.
- **Find balance:** Respect authority, but never idolize it.
- **Stand with courageous voices.** Even when they are silenced.
- **Find or create spaces for adult faith formation.** Like our Wednesday gatherings at Holy Family.
- **Refuse intellectual laziness.** Faith deserves your full mind!

This is extraordinary courage in an age of easy answers.

From Parroting to Prophecy

I began as a second-grade parrot. Reciting answers. Winning games. Knowing everything – or so I thought.

Today, I am far less certain. And far more faithful.

Because faith is not about having all the answers.

It is about asking better questions.

Karl Rahner taught me that God is mystery beyond comprehension.

Charles E. Curran taught me that conscience demands courage.

Together, they call us beyond childish faith, into something deeper: an extraordinary faith that thinks, that questions, that grows, that loves.

So, pull a book off the shelf. Wrestle with a paragraph. And let God meet you there!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where is my faith still rooted in childhood understanding?
- When was the last time I truly wrestled with a difficult theological idea?
- Do I fear questioning authority? Why?
- How well-formed is my conscience?
- Who are the courageous voices I need to listen to today?
- What would it mean for me to grow into a more mature, extraordinary faith?

Let Us Pray

God of mystery and truth, you call us beyond easy answers into deeper understanding. Give us the courage to question, the humility to learn, and the wisdom to grow. Strengthen all who seek truth, especially those who suffer for speaking it. And lead us from childish faith into the extraordinary fullness of your love. Amen.

When Symbols Shatter

On Faith, Truth, and Human Complexity

March 31, 2026



“What if the bones of Jesus were discovered tomorrow?”

That question, posed so provocatively by Father Donald Buggert, our professor of Christology at the Washington Theological Union, has never left me. If bones were found that are proven beyond doubt to belong to Jesus of Nazareth, what would become of our faith? How would our theology change? Would Christmas, Easter and/or the Ascension collapse? Or would something deeper—something mysterious—remain?

That question has felt less theoretical these past two weeks. With recent revelations about the sexual abuse perpetrated by César Chávez, many people who long held him as a moral icon now feel disoriented, even betrayed, now that we are no longer celebrating him beginning this year. The “bones” of a symbol have been unearthed. And when symbols shatter, we are forced to confront not only the figure before us—but the fragile architecture of meaning within us.

The Toppling of Those on Pedestals

There is something deeply human about our need for heroes. We elevate individuals, we canonize their stories, we build holidays, highways, streets and statues in their honor. We simplify. We sort. We declare: *good* or *bad*, *right* or *wrong*.

Psychologists call this **splitting**—a cognitive tendency to divide the world into binaries, to reduce complexity. It is a survival mechanism, perhaps, but it is also profoundly misleading.

Because the truth is much more complex.

Prior to two weeks ago, many of us knew César Chávez as a champion of farmworkers, a voice for dignity, a symbol of justice. We have now learned that he was also a very flawed human being. Both are true.

In Scripture, we encounter this tension time and time again.

- Joseph's brothers, who conspired to kill him before selling him into slavery, later became the foundational patriarchs of Israel (Gen. 37-50).
- Samson, given superhuman strength by God, was also impulsive, arrogant and driven by lust (Judges 13-16).
- King David, "a man after God's own heart" (1Sam.13:14), committed profound moral failure (2Sam. 11).
- And, as we hear during this Holy Week, even the prideful Peter — who boasted, "even if everyone else deserts you, I never will" — denied his friend Jesus not once, not twice, but three times (Mt. 26:33 & 69-75).

Reality resists our neat categories.

A Visit Across the National Mall

I still remember one day in Washington, D.C.: I spent the morning at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, and the afternoon at the National Gallery of Art.

In a span of hours, I witnessed the depths of human depravity and the heights of human creativity.

Six million lives extinguished in hatred. Breathtaking masterpieces.

We tend to separate these into different "museums" in our minds. But they often coexist within the same humanity, sometimes even within the same individuals.

I dare imagine that many individuals who colluded in Holocaust atrocities were good parents, friends and neighbors. And we know that numerous artists throughout the centuries were deeply flawed: Caravaggio, Pablo Picasso, Eric Gill, Paul Gauguin. Within our lifetimes, we saw it in Michael Jackson, whose extreme musical genius coexisted with deeply troubling allegations. Within Catholic circles, we saw it more recently when the talented liturgical composer David Haas, whose hymns we all recognize, fell from grace after allegations of sexual abuse. Sadly, even within the Church, beloved individuals and institutions have been implicated in grievous harm.

That realization unsettles us. It should.

Because it forces us to abandon the illusion that evil belongs only to "them," and goodness only to "us."

Symbols: The "Elbows" of Meaning

The English word *symbol* comes from the Greek *symbolon* — an "elbow," a point of connection. Just as the elbow connects the upper arm to the lower arm, symbols connect us to realities beyond themselves.

Jesus of Nazareth was a historical figure, yes, but the persona of Christ that he has assumed is a symbol of divine love, sacrifice and hope. In theological language, we distinguish between the “Jesus of history” (the person) and the “Christ of faith” (the theological symbol).

Similarly, César Chávez functioned for years as a symbol—of Latino empowerment, of labor rights, of nonviolent resistance.

But here is the crucial insight: symbols are never identical to the realities they signify.

When a symbol cracks, the reality it pointed to does not necessarily disappear. The struggle for justice does not end because one of its symbols falters.

Think of biblical moments. When Peter denied Jesus (Lk. 22:54-62), the mission did not end. When Judas betrayed him (Mt. 26:14-16), love did not cease. When the crowd shouted “Crucify him!” after previously crying “Hosanna!” (Lk. 23:21), truth did not evaporate.

Symbols can fail. Truth endures.

The Politics of Selective Outrage

Which brings us to our present moment.

We are witnessing the “canceling” of César Chávez in many spaces, even as other deeply flawed figures are elevated without hesitation. Here in Texas, leaders like Governor Greg Abbott critique one figure while celebrating another whose moral failings are equally, if not more, pronounced.

More than eight-million individuals gathered throughout our nation on Saturday to decry a convicted felon and perpetrator of election disinformation who shared 30,573 lies or misleading claims in four years and who—while we topple César Chávez from all pedestals—continues to be elevated in ways that border on myth-making: his name now affixed to the U.S. Institute of Peace, warships and warplanes (consider the irony), the Kennedy Center, Trump RX, Trump Accounts, Trump Gold Cards, commemorative coins, and soon (*gasp*) even our U.S. currency.

Why do human beings do this—“canceling” some while overlooking the faults of others—often without any apparent sense of contradiction?

Psychology offers insight. **Confirmation bias** leads us to embrace information that affirms our worldview and reject what challenges it. **Cognitive dissonance** allows us to hold conflicting beliefs without discomfort—so long as those beliefs serve our identity.

In other words, we do not judge consistently. We judge tribally.

Scripture warns us of this tendency: “*Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?*” (Mt. 7:3).

Good Friday: The Ultimate Collapse of a Symbol

We are in Holy Week. And if there were ever a moment when a symbol seemed to collapse, it is Good Friday.

The one hailed as king on Palm Sunday is executed as a criminal only days later. His disciples scatter. His movement appears to end.

Talk about a fall from grace! Absolutely toppled!

And yet, Christians dare to proclaim that this apparent collapse is not the end of the story. That beyond the shattering of expectation lies resurrection.

This is the pattern of our faith: not the preservation of perfect symbols, but the transformation of broken ones!

What, Then, Shall We Do?

I include here some possible calls to extraordinary action:

- **Resist simplistic binaries.** Refuse to sort people into neat categories of good or evil, right or wrong. Embrace complexity, even when it unsettles.
- **Loosely hold symbols.** Appreciate what symbols point to, but do not confuse them with reality or truth.
- **Commit to truth-telling.** Honestly name harm, even when it disrupts cherished narratives.
- **Extend consistent moral standards.** Evaluate all leaders – political, religious, cultural – through the same ethical lens.
- **Center the marginalized.** Let the stories of victims, not the reputations of heroes, guide your moral compass.
- **Stay rooted in community.** In moments of disillusionment, do not isolate; seek out spaces of shared reflection and growth.
- **Practice extraordinary humility.** Recognize your own capacity for both good and, yes, harm.

When the Bones Are Found

So let us return to that haunting question from Father Donald Buggert: *What if the bones of Jesus were discovered tomorrow?*

Perhaps the better question is this: *What is our faith actually built upon?*

If it rests on perfect heroes, it will always be fragile. If it rests on symbols that must never crack, it will always be anxious.

But if it rests on the extraordinary mystery of a God who works through flawed humanity, who brings life out of death, who refuses to abandon us even when our symbols fail – then perhaps it is stronger than we imagine!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- When have I been tempted to see the world in overly simplistic “good vs. bad” terms?
- How do I respond when those I admire are revealed to be flawed?
- What symbols shape my faith, and how tightly do I hold onto them?
- Where might I be applying inconsistent moral standards in my judgments of others?
- How is God inviting me to embrace complexity, rather than avoid it?
- What does Holy Week teach me about failure, loss and transformation?

Let Us Pray

God of mystery and truth, You meet us not in perfection, but in the messiness of human life. When our symbols shatter and our heroes fall, steady our hearts. Help us to seek truth without fear, to extend mercy without excuse, and to live with extraordinary courage in a world of complexity. Teach us to follow not idols, but your Spirit—a Spirit that leads us through suffering into hope, through confusion into wisdom, through death into life. We ask this in the name of the One who was lifted up, cast down, and raised again. Amen.

April Fools and Holy Wisdom

Finding truth, satire, and extraordinary courage
during a week of paradox

April 1, 2026



“Your shoe’s untied.... April Fools!”

Yep, it’s that day when the trickster in each of us is tempted to emerge, even if only for a moment. Perhaps you’ve played a harmless prank, or been the unsuspecting victim of one. Some stunts have become legendary—Google’s annual April Fool’s “announcements,” the BBC’s famous 1957 “spaghetti tree” hoax, even fast-food chains unveiling fake menu items that somehow seem just plausible enough to fool us.

But here we are, in the middle of Holy Week, a time when Christians contemplate betrayal, suffering, death—and the strange, audacious claim that death does not get the last word. And so the question presses itself upon us: *What might April Fool's Day possibly have to teach us during this Holy Week?*

More than we might expect!

A Day for Fools: A Brief History

Many historians trace April Fool's Day to 16th-century Europe, when the shift from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar moved New Year's Day from late March to January 1. Those who continued celebrating the old date became the butt of jokes—"April fools"!

Across cultures, similar traditions emerge. In France, *poisson d'avril* (April fish). In Scotland, *Hunt the Gowk*. In Mexico and across Latin America, *el día de los santos inocentes* on December 28—when pranksters cry out, *¡inocente palomita!*—innocent dove!

It seems that across time and place, we humans need a day to laugh at ourselves, to puncture our pretensions, to remind ourselves that we are not quite as clever, controlled or certain as we imagine.

And that, perhaps, is where Holy Week quietly nods in recognition.

The Cosmic "April Fool": When Death Doesn't Win

If April Fool's Day is about reversals—about upended expectations—then Holy Week may be the ultimate divine prank.

Think about it.

On Palm Sunday, Jesus is hailed as king (Lk. 19:38). By Good Friday, he is mocked, beaten and executed (Mk. 15:16-20). His followers scatter (Mt. 26:56). His mission appears to collapse.

Game over.

Except... it isn't.

Early Christian theology even imagined a kind of cosmic reversal: that in the crucifixion, evil thought it had won. Satan, in this mythic framework, had outmaneuvered God. Yet in the *Harrowing of Hell*, Christ descends into the realm of the dead and liberates those held captive (cf. 1Pet. 3:19). The hunter becomes the hunted. The joke turns!

If we were to translate that into April Fool's language, we might say: "Death wins... April Fools!"

Paul puts it more theologically—and more powerfully:

"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" (1Cor. 15:55)

The resurrection is not merely a happy ending. It is a reversal so profound that it reframes everything that came before it. It exposes the limits of violence, the fragility of power, the illusion of finality.

In other words, it reveals that much of what we take as ultimate... is not.

Revenge, Retribution, and the Way of Jesus

Let's be honest: When someone pranks us, we immediately think, *How do I get them back?*

It's almost instinctive. Newton's third law of motion feels alive in our relationships: Every action demands an equal and opposite reaction!

Yet Holy Week interrupts that instinct.

When betrayed, Jesus did not retaliate (Lk. 22:48).

When denied, he did not shame (Lk. 22:61-62).

When crucified, he did not curse, but instead said, "Father, forgive them" (Lk. 23:34).

If April Fool's Day tempts us toward clever retaliation, Holy Week invites us toward something far more difficult—and far more extraordinary: nonviolence, restraint, mercy and forgiveness.

Not because injustice does not matter, but because cycles of vengeance ultimately imprison us all. In the words attributed to Gandhi, "An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind."

Even in the face of profound wrong, Jesus refused to "get even." And in doing so, he exposed revenge itself as a kind of illusion—a trap we willingly enter.

Holy Fools in Scripture, History and Pop Culture

Scripture is not without its own "fools."

- Paul boldly declared, "We are fools for Christ's sake" (1Cor. 4:10).
- The prophets often acted in bizarre, symbolic ways. Think of Ezekiel lying on his side for days (Ez. 4:4-6).
- The Beatitudes blessed the meek, the poor, the persecuted (Mt. 5:3-12)—a worldview that still sounds foolish to many.

Church history, too, is filled with countless "holy fools"—those who disrupted norms to reveal deeper truths.

And pop culture? It thrives on the archetype:

- The court jester in medieval tales speaks truth to power.
- The Joker in *The Dark Knight* exposes societal hypocrisy.
- Even late-night comedians use humor to critique systems that might otherwise go unquestioned.

Humor disarms. Satire reveals. Foolishness, paradoxically, can become a vehicle for truth!

Not Fools After All: Faith and Resistance Today

This past weekend, millions gathered for “No Kings” rallies across the United States. Signs were witty. Costumes were satirical. Humor flowed freely.

It looked, at times, like a national April Fool’s performance!

But beneath the humor lay something deeper: a refusal to be fooled.

A refusal to accept unchecked power.

A refusal to remain silent.

A refusal to pretend that injustice is normal.

In many ways, participants stepped into the ancient archetype of the fool or jester—the one who dares to laugh at the king, to expose the absurdity of power, to speak truth cloaked in humor.

And yes, there is risk in that.

Historically, jesters sometimes lost more than their jobs!

Yet this is where Holy Week strengthens our resolve. Because the one we follow also stood before power, also spoke truth, also faced the consequences.

If we are “fools,” then perhaps we are in very good company!

Calls to Extraordinary Action

As we journey through this week of paradox, we might consider these concrete actions:

- **Embrace holy humor.** Use satire and creativity to reveal truth without dehumanizing others.
- **Reject cycles of revenge.** Choose mercy and justice over retaliation in personal and public life.
- **Speak truth with courage.** Even when it feels risky, even when it feels foolish.
- **Interrogate power.** Ask hard questions of leaders, systems and even ourselves.
- **Live resurrection now.** Act as if love, justice and dignity truly have the final word.

From Foolishness to Wisdom

“Your shoe’s untied.”

We laugh. We roll our eyes. We move on.

Yet Holy Week gently whispers: Much of what we think we know is similarly untied.

Power is not always what we think it is.

Victory does not always look like domination.

Losing isn’t always truly losing.

And the cross—the ultimate symbol of defeat—may just be a doorway to life.

April Fool's Day reminds us that we can be deceived. Holy Week reminds us that we often are.

But these celebrations also offer extraordinary hope: that even when the world seems most certain, most settled, most final, God may still be preparing the greatest reversal of all.

And when that happens, we may hear, echoing through the empty tombs of our lives:

“April Fools!”

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where in my life have I mistaken illusion for truth?
- How do I typically respond when I feel wronged: Do I seek revenge or reconciliation?
- What “foolish” acts of courage might God be inviting me to embrace?
- How do humor and satire function in my understanding of justice and truth?
- Where do I need to trust that apparent defeat may still hold the seeds of resurrection?

Let Us Pray

God of mystery and reversal, you confound our expectations and overturn our certainties. In a world that often mistakes power for truth and vengeance for justice, teach us the deeper wisdom of your ways. Give us the courage to be fools for love, the strength to resist cycles of harm, and the humility to laugh at ourselves. As we walk through this Holy Week, help us to trust that even in darkness, you are at work—turning endings into beginnings, and death into life. We ask this in hope, in faith, and in extraordinary love. Amen.

An Hour That Changed Everything

From the light-filled Crystal Cathedral to the dark Upper Room:
Discovering true power in a world obsessed with power

Apr 2, 2026



Every April 2, the Church gives us a constellation of witnesses—some bold, some quiet, some controversial—inviting us to reflect on holiness in its many forms:

- **Theodosia of Tyre:** a teenage martyr who embodied extraordinary courage.
- **Francis of Paola:** a contemplative who modeled extraordinary discipline.
- **Cuthbert Butler:** a scholar who revealed the depths of tradition.
- **Brocard Sewell:** a dissenter who followed conscience at great cost.

But for many of us of a certain age, this date also recalls **Dr. Robert H. Schuller**, who died in 2015—the man who beamed his weekly *Hour of Power* into living rooms across America from his Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California.

Schuller preached possibility. He preached positivity. He preached what he famously called the “Be-attitudes” — not just blessings to admire, but ways *to be*.

And thinking of him today bends my mind toward another “Hour of Power” — one far quieter, far more dangerous, far more transformative: the night Jesus gathered his friends in an upper room, knelt with a towel, broke bread, poured wine, and changed the meaning of power forever!

From Crystal Cathedral to Upper Room

Schuller understood something that many religious leaders miss: People are starving for hope. His message—“God loves you just as you are”—echoes the radical hospitality of Jesus, who in Luke 15 ate with sinners, who in John 4 spoke with a Samaritan woman, and who in Mark 2 healed before he lectured.

Yet the *Hour of Power* we commemorate during Holy Thursday goes deeper still.

In his first extant letter to the Corinthians (11:23-26), Paul recalled what he “received from the Lord”: bread broken, wine shared, memory made sacrament. In the Johannine gospel (13:1-15), Jesus did something even more shocking—he knelt down, and he washed feet.

Not metaphorically. Not merely symbolically. But in the flesh.

The one whom Christians call Lord and Teacher took off his outer garment, picked up a towel, and performed the work of a slave!

This was definitely not the world’s version of power. It was something far more extraordinary.

The Longest “Hour” in History

We’re accustomed to thinking of Mass within the confines of sixty minutes. Today, though, we initiate the Easter Triduum, the Catholic tradition’s only three-day liturgy.

Holy Thursday begins a single, continuous act of worship that stretches across three days: from the opening sign of the cross tonight, through the stark silence of Good Friday, into the fire and light, water and rebirth of the Easter Vigil.

One liturgy. Three days. One story.

Tonight we’ll hear of the Passover meal: lamb, blood, liberation (Ex. 12:1-14). Psalm 116 will ask us: “How shall I repay the Lord?” In the Upper Room, Jesus answers—not with repayment, but with remembrance.

“Do this in memory of me.”

And then, after Communion, we’ll process to the altar of repose—a space often adorned like the Garden of Gethsemane. There, in dim light, we keep watch, like Jesus praying in agony (Mt. 26:36-46), asking that the cup of suffering might pass us by, but also willing to surrender to love.

This is the true “Hour of Power”: not domination, but surrender. Not control, but trust. Not victory as the world defines it, but fidelity unto death.

Power, Politics and the Price of Integrity

We live in a world obsessed with power.

Not the power of service. Not the power of love. But the power to win, to dominate, to remain in control at all costs.

Political theorists have long observed that those in power will often do anything necessary to remain there. We see it globally in authoritarian regimes. We see it nationally in gerrymandering and attempts to undermine democratic processes. We see it at all levels when leaders bow to monied interests, rather than to the common good.

I lived a version of that tension during my eight years in elected office. At a certain point, I had to decide: Would I serve the students, families and community entrusted to me—or would I serve the interests that funded campaigns and demanded loyalty?

The choice was clear. The consequences were real. And I chose my fate. And yet, I do not regret that choice for a moment.

Because Holy Thursday reminds us that true power is not about holding onto position. It is about pouring ourselves out for as long as we are in such positions of service.

Judas clung to silver. Jesus broke bread.

Pilate clung to authority. Jesus embraced the cross.

The contrast could not be sharper.

Foot-Washing in a Cynical Age

In a culture shaped by cynicism, today's rite of foot-washing feels almost absurd.

And yet, that is precisely the point.

When Jesus says, "So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you, too, should wash one another's feet" (Jn. 13:14-15), he is not offering a quaint ritual. He is issuing a radical call to reimagine human relationships.

Imagine if:

CEOs washed the feet of their employees.

Politicians served without calculating electoral advantage.

Religious leaders prioritized people over power.

This is not naïve. It is revolutionary.

It is what Martin Luther King, Jr. meant when he spoke of "power at its best," as love implementing justice.

It is what Jesus embodied when he chose a towel over a throne.

Pop Culture Echoes of True Power

Even beyond scripture, this inversion of power echoes throughout culture:

- In *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, power is relinquished, not grasped.
- In *The West Wing*, leadership at its best serves the common good.
- In *Les Misérables*, grace transforms more than law.
- In "Man in the Mirror," change begins within.
- In "Hero," strength is reframed as inner resilience.

These cultural touchpoints remind us that we instinctively recognize authentic power when we see it.

We just struggle to live it!

Calls to Extraordinary Action

As we enter this sacred Triduum, let us commit to extraordinary courage, extraordinary humility, extraordinary love:

- **Serve concretely.** Perform one hidden act of service this week, without recognition.
- **Choose integrity.** Resist pressures to compromise your values for approval or gain.
- **Practice presence.** Sit in silence, even briefly, in your own “Garden of Gethsemane.”
- **Challenge power.** Speak truth to systems that prioritize control over compassion.
- **Embody Eucharist.** Become what you receive—broken and shared for others.

The Power of the Towel

Holy Week reveals just how deeply our world misunderstands power. We chase crowns. Jesus chose a towel.

We grasp for control. Jesus poured out his life.

We measure success by victory. Jesus redefined it through love unto death.

And so we return to that upper room, to that table, to that quiet, world-altering “hour of power.”

Not flashy. Not triumphant. Not loud.

But extraordinary.

Because in that hour, power itself was redefined!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where do I seek power in ways that contradict the Gospel?
- When have I chosen integrity over advancement—and what did it cost me?
- Whose “feet” am I being called to wash in this season of my life?
- How do I respond when I feel powerless: Do I grasp, or do I trust?
- What would it mean for me to live eucharistically this week?

Let Us Pray

God of the Upper Room, You reveal your power not in domination, but in love, not in control, but in surrender. Kneel beside us in our pride, wash away our fear, and teach us the courage of service. In a world hungry for power, make us vessels of your extraordinary compassion. May we break ourselves open for others, as Christ has broken himself for us. And may we never forget that the smallest acts of love carry the greatest power of all. Amen.

The Trauma of Crucifixion Today

Reflections for a somber Good Friday

April 3, 2026



We carry our traumas with us, sometimes for decades. On Saturday, I baptized a three-year-old girl who was visibly terrified by the rite. From the moment her parents and godparents held her over the baptismal font, she screamed bloody murder until the ritual ended. Later, when her parents suggested that I hold her for a photo, the girl glared at me and shouted, “He splashed me!” I fear she will carry that trauma for decades. That baptism, and today’s commemoration of Good Friday, bend my mind to a childhood trauma of my own: my first visit to the Basilica and Shrine of Our Lady of Consolation in Carey, Ohio. I was probably three, kneeling—or rather refusing to kneel—before the image of the entombed Christ in the lower basilica. Everyone kissed the image with reverence. I did not, likely to my parents’ chagrin. I did not understand the ritual, and I certainly was not ready to kiss the dead man under the altar!

Various episodes in Jesus’ life were punctuated by suffering—from his family fleeing Herod’s murderous decree, to being left behind in Jerusalem at age twelve, to betrayal and denial by friends as an adult. But today, Good Friday, we confront the greatest trauma he faced: his passion, torture and death by crucifixion.

The Faces of Suffering

Two other images of suffering and death come to mind today.

- **Cornelius van Steenoven** (1661–1725), whom we remember every April 3, served as the seventh archbishop of Utrecht. Consecrated in 1724, after a 20-year vacancy in the Dutch see, he died less than six months later. His manifesto appealed to a future general council for judgment on his principles. The only image I have found of van Steenoven depicts him dead, dressed in episcopal vestments—not unlike depictions of Jesus in the tomb.
- I concelebrated my only papal mass on July 31, 2002, when **John Paul II** visited the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City for

the canonization of St. Juan Diego. He was near the end of life, weary from illness and his visit to Toronto for World Youth Day, hardly able to sit upright in his chair, his miter almost parallel to the floor. It was a sad but empowering sight: Rather than resign, like his successor, he often spoke of how he united his suffering with Christ on the cross, as a model for living despite pain.

We live in a world where suffering is unavoidable. Trauma, illness, betrayal and injustice touch all of us. Extraordinary courage does not make suffering disappear; it makes living with it meaningful.

Good Friday Scriptures and Liturgical Reflections

The Church gives us powerful texts today:

- **Isaiah 52:13–53:12.** We hear of God’s suffering servant.
- **Psalms 31.** We pray with Jesus, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (cf. Lk 23:46).
- **Hebrews 4:14-16 & 5:7-9.** Jesus learned obedience from suffering.
- **John 18:1-19:42.** We reflect on the Johannine passion narrative.

Our veneration of the cross, central to the Good Friday liturgy, invites us to confront suffering without softening it. We tame it when we wear silver or gold crosses on our necks, or tattoo it on our bodies—but the cross itself remains a symbol of torture, of death, of injustice.

Pop culture reminds us of this unflinching reality. Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* shocked audiences with its graphic portrayal of suffering. Films like *Schindler’s List* or *Twelve Years a Slave*, and songs like “Hurt” by Nine Inch Nails and “Everybody Hurts” by R.E.M. confront us with human pain that resonates with the cross. Even television can remind us: Think of *Breaking Bad*’s Walter White slowly crushed by his own choices, or Elizabeth II in *The Crown*, navigating the burdens of her crown.

Living Crosses in Today’s World

On this day, we recognize that people in our world still crucify others.

- As of January, nearly 760,000 people had died worldwide as a result of the Trump Administration’s defunding of USAID in 2025.
- Immigrant communities and communities of color continue to face systemic persecution.
- The rollback of reproductive rights and the attacks on transgender people are nothing less than modern forms of crucifixion.
- Everyday cruelty—our words, neglect, silence—can crucify others, too.

We must see the cross in these injustices and ask: *How will we bear the burden? And how will we respond with extraordinary love?*

Calls for Action

Our devotion today cannot lead to inaction. Here are some Good Friday challenges:

- **Advocate for the vulnerable.** Support policies that protect the exploited, immigrants, women, and LGBTQ+ communities.
- **Witness to justice.** Stand against systemic inequality in your workplace, school and community.
- **Practice radical empathy.** Listen to stories of suffering without judgment or interruption.
- **Offer tangible support.** Volunteer, donate or mentor those enduring hardship.
- **Examine personal complicity.** Reflect on ways your words or actions have contributed to the suffering of others.

From Carey to Today

My three-year-old self in Carey, Ohio refused to participate in a ritual I did not understand. Jesus' suffering invites us to hold space for that kind of vulnerability and honesty. Like John Paul II, like van Steenoven, and like the young girl at Saturday's baptism, we live in a world marked by suffering. Good Friday reminds us that extraordinary courage is not about avoiding suffering, but embracing it with love, witness and justice!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where do I see the cross in today's world?
- How have I caused suffering, knowingly or unknowingly?
- What extraordinary courage can I muster in the face of injustice?
- How can I unite my own pain with the suffering of Christ so as to bring healing?
- In what ways can I celebrate life while standing with the crucified?

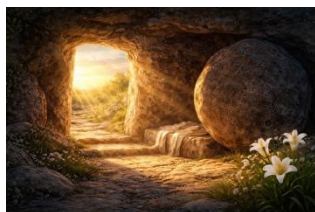
Let Us Pray

Lord, on this Good Friday, open our eyes to suffering, our hearts to compassion, and our hands to justice. Help us bear the crosses of others with extraordinary love, and transform our own pain into witness. May we never forget that, through your death, life and hope are born. Amen.

From Tombs to Life and Light!

Lessons on this Easter Vigil

April 4, 2026



Today, our minds and hearts bend toward Jerusalem – not only because we celebrate the birthday of **Patriarch Theophilus III of Jerusalem** (of the Eastern Orthodox Church), but because of the events that unfolded in and around that city some 2,000 years ago. Jesus of Nazareth was led outside its walls and executed. And then—if we take the Gospel of Matthew literally – holy, divine disruption broke loose! We heard the story during our Palm Sunday passion narrative: After we knelt to observe the passing of Jesus, we rose to hear that tombs were opened, the dead were raised, and those who had previously died... paraded back into Jerusalem (Mt. 27:51-53)!

Call it, if you will, the Bible’s version of a “zombie apocalypse.”

Those of us who have watched *The Walking Dead* can almost picture it – except that God’s “holy ones” were now fully alive again! But before we let our imaginations run wild, we remember: The Bible is not a book of history; it is a book of theology. It tells us what our ancestors believed about God. And here is what they believed: that our God is so extraordinarily powerful that even death does not get the final word!

When the Dead Refuse to Stay Dead

Most passion narratives end in darkness. The stone is rolled into place. The story seems finished.

But in the Matthean gospel, the story spills over. The Temple veil tears. The earth quakes. Rocks split. Tombs open. And the dead rise.

It is chaotic. It is unsettling. It is, frankly, a bit cinematic – more *Night of the Living Dead* than Sunday school.

And yet, this is not horror. It is proclamation.

The God revealed in Jesus does not simply comfort the living. God resurrects what we thought was gone forever. We see echoes of this throughout the Gospels:

- Jesus raises Jairus’ daughter (Mk. 5:21-43).

- In Nain, a widow's son is brought back to life (Lk. 7:11-17).
- Lazarus walks out of the tomb (Jn. 11:1-44).

Tonight's celebration of the Easter Vigil announces that resurrection is not an isolated miracle. It is the very character of God!

The "Living Dead" Among Us

In my free time as a seminarian, I devoured the writings of Og Mandino. In *The Greatest Miracle in the World*, he spoke of another kind of "walking dead."

Not corpses emerging from tombs, but people who have quietly surrendered their lives:

- People who have buried their dreams.
- People who have accepted mediocrity.
- People who complain more than they hope.

Mandino called them the "living dead" or the "walking dead."

And if I am honest, I have met them everywhere: in board rooms, chancery offices and moments of pastoral counseling, in classrooms and churches, sometimes, even in the mirror.

Our Easter Vigil liturgy confronts us with sobering questions: *How alive are we? Or, are we simply being?*

Resurrection is not only about what happens after death. It is about what happens before it, when we allow God to resurrect our courage, our compassion, our imagination, and our extraordinary capacity to love!

Fire in the Darkness: The Vigil Liturgy

Tonight's liturgy is unlike any other.

We begin in darkness. Then, fire is kindled, the paschal candle is lit, and light spreads from person to person.

The symbolism is ancient and unmistakable: *Light does not eliminate darkness by force. It quietly, persistently transforms it.*

Our scriptures this evening share the story of salvation history, from creation (Gen. 1:1-2:2) and liberation (Ex. 14:15-15:1), through the prophets and the promise of new hearts (Ez. 36:16-28). Then we arrive at the Matthean gospel (28:1-10), where we find the empty tomb.

The liturgy continues: Water is blessed, we renew our baptismal vows, and the elect are baptized.

What was dead lives again!

If Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* forced us to confront suffering, tonight's celebration of the Easter Vigil insists that suffering is not the end of the story.

And if songs like "Rise Up" or "Glorious" stir something in us, they echo what the Church proclaims tonight: *Rise. Begin again. Live!*

Resurrection Power in an Extraordinary Moment

We live in a time when many are left to conclude, “That’s just the way things are.”

- Inequities and inequality persist.
- Rights are rolled back.
- Communities are targeted.
- Truth itself feels fragile.

But the Easter Vigil refuses resignation.

Mary sang it first in the Magnificat (Lk. 1:46-55): *God casts down the mighty and lifts up the lowly.*

Jesus lived it: Good news for the poor (Lk. 4:18), freedom for captives, sight for the blind.

“Like mother, like son,” I like to say.

Resurrection is not passive. It is disruptive. It is political in the deepest sense – not partisan, but transformative.

Extraordinary love refuses to accept that injustice is permanent.

Extraordinary courage insists that new life is possible.

But we are not called to *admire* resurrection. We are called to *participate* in it!

Calls for Action

- **Refuse cynicism.** Challenge the narrative that nothing can change.
- **Resurrect hope in others.** Encourage those who feel defeated or invisible.
- **Stand with the marginalized.** Be agents of new life for the exploited, for immigrants, for the poor, and for our LGBTQIA+ siblings.
- **Boldly speak truth.** Even when it costs you comfort or approval.
- **Live with intention.** Do not drift into being one of Mandino’s “living dead.”
- **Build communities of light.** Cultivate organizations and spaces that embody justice and compassion.

Rolling Away the Stone

I return, in my mind, to Jerusalem—to sealed tombs, but also to the trembling, startled folks who encountered God’s “holy ones” as they walked through the streets and blinked in the sunlight, bewildered but alive.

And I wonder:

What tombs still hold us?

What stones still need to be rolled away?

The story did not end in death on Good Friday.

It never ends with death.

And if we dare to believe it—and if we dare to *live* it—we might yet become people of extraordinary resurrection in an unordinary time that desperately needs new life!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where in my life have I settled into being one of the “living dead”?
- What “stone” is God inviting me to roll away today?
- How can I bring resurrection to someone who feels buried or forgotten
- Where do I see signs of new life in a broken world?
- What extraordinary act of courage is God calling me to embrace?

Let Us Pray

God of fire and light, you shatter tombs and awaken the dead. Kindle in us the flame of extraordinary love, that we may bring hope where there is despair, life where there is death, and justice where there is oppression. Raise us up, O God, not only at the end of time, but here and now—that we may fully live, boldly love, and never again settle for anything less than resurrection. Amen.