

# **A Light in Darkness**

Reflections for U.S. Catholics

Advent/Christmas 2025

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# Table of Contents

Preface	i
<b>Peace Be With You</b>	
A Catholic Response when Presidents Threaten War	1
<b>WWCD: What Would Cabrini Do?</b>	
Lessons from the Matron Saint of Immigrants	4
<b>An All-Yellow Rainbow Would Be So Boring!</b>	
Bishop Michael Kelly and the Rainbow Sash Movement	9
<b>Let the Sunshine In</b>	
A Catholic Priest Calls for the Release of the Epstein Files	12
<b>When Leaders and Loved Ones Face Cognitive Decline</b>	
Lessons from St. Albert the Great	17
<b>International Day for Tolerance</b>	
Lessons from History and Faith	20
<b>Conscience and Communion</b>	
Lessons from Two Forgotten Bishops	23
<b>Small Is Holy</b>	
Bishop Karl Prüter and the World's Smallest Cathedral	27
<b>Rethinking Manhood</b>	
Guiding Men Toward Healthy Masculinity	31
<b>Breaking the Cudgel</b>	
Father Daniel Helminiak and LGBTQIA+ Liberation	33
<b>Rites, Passage and Presence</b>	
Reimagining Milestones for Children and Youth	37
<b>Prophets of Conscience</b>	
Lacordaire, Kozłowski and the Courage to Reform the Church	40
<b>Following Aslan</b>	
Lessons from C.S. Lewis for Catholics Today	43
<b>The King We Need – and the Kings We Settle for</b>	
Christ the King in an Age of Strongmen	46
<b>The Nun Who Said “No” to Empire</b>	
Remembering Walatta Petros	50

<b>Break the Spiked Wheel</b>	
St. Catherine, the Mirabal Sisters and Violence against Women	53
<b>Seeing Clearly and Acting Justly</b>	
Lessons from Sojourner Truth and Bernard Lonergan	57
<b>Thanksgiving Light</b>	
Harvey Milk and Louie Crew Clay on Hope, Courage and Joy	60
<b>Healing from “Sword and Cross” Trauma</b>	
A Reflection on Native American Heritage Day	64
<b>True Solidarity</b>	
Showing Our Support for the Palestinian People	68
<b>Wickedness, Whiteness, and the Wizard</b>	
The Moral Parables of “Wicked for Good”	71
<b>Witnesses at the Edges</b>	
From Galilean Shores to Gas-scarred Battlefields	75
<b>The Gospel According to “Zootopia 2”</b>	
What This Sequel Might Teach Us—and the Kids We Love	78
<b>Coming Out of the Dark</b>	
A Reflection on World AIDS Day	82
<b>Conscience, Community and the Cost of Dissent</b>	
Remembering Pasquier Quesnel	85
<b>The Determined Ones</b>	
A Reflection on International Day of Persons with Disabilities	91
<b>Katniss Everdeen, Guillermo del Toro and Albus Dumbledore</b>	
Three Unlikely Saints on a Single Holy Card	96
<b>Voices of Courage, Compassion and Change</b>	
Three Lives, One Invitation	100
<b>St. Nicholas for a Fearful, Fragmented America</b>	
The Life and Legends of a Saint Urgently Needed Today	103
<b>Elizabeth Johnson: Doctor of the Church-in-the-Making</b>	
A Theologian Helping the Church Hear the Voices of Women	107
<b>“Mother! Put Down That Stone!”</b>	
Doctrine, Division and Santiago Fonacier	112



<b>Roses, Resistance and Revelation</b>	
An Indigenous Saint and the Church's Wrestling with Power	116
<b>Lessons from Two Giants</b>	
Karl Barth and Thomas Merton in Dialogue	120
<b>St. Damasus I and the Long Road to the Bible We Know</b>	
Why a Fourth-Century Pope Still Speaks to Us Today	124
<i>Madrecita, ¿dónde estás?</i>	
Guadalupe and the Decline of Mexican Catholicism	128
<b>A Bishop on the Edge of Empire</b>	
Remembering Pierre Martin Ngô Đình Thục	132
<b>Dark Nights and Blue Christmases</b>	
St. John of the Cross, Briçonnet, Melchers and Boff	137
<b>Civility, Advent and an Unlikely Bishop</b>	
Bishop John Churchill Sibley on Grace Amid Incivility	141
<b>Las Posadas, Sanctuary and the Strangers at Our Door</b>	
Latino Advent Traditions Challenge Us to Open Our Hearts	145
<i>Ero Cras</i>	
The O Antiphons and the God Who Still Comes	148
<b>When the Church Disappears</b>	
Peter Codde and the Long Advent of Utrecht	152
<b>Holding Fast to Hope in Darkening Days</b>	
Advent Wisdom for Catholics	156
<b>When the Ice Is Extremely Cold</b>	
"Religious" Reasons for Banning Pride Flags in Pro Hockey	159
<b>Two Lights in a Season of Waiting</b>	
Johann Friedrich von Schulte and Arnold Harris Mathew	162
<b>(Ir)responsibility at the Podium</b>	
Dehumanization by the White House	165
<b>Two Reformers, Two Advent Lights</b>	
Remembering Henry of Kalkar and Katharina von Bora	168
<b>Amazing Grace, Troubled Grace, Advent Grace</b>	
John Newton, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Matthew Fox	171

<b>Lighting the Way</b>	
Isaac Hecker and the Hope for an American Catholicism	175
<b>Christology, Courage and the Call to Action</b>	
An Advent Reflection on Edward Schillebeeckx	178
<b>Gems of Faith and Courage</b>	
Van Kleef, Boswell and Fitzmyer on Christmas Eve Day	180
<b>Fa La La La La</b>	
Finding Light, Joy and Peace This Christmas	183
<b>Kwanzaa and Deaconess Phoebe</b>	
The Light We Need Right Now	185
<b>Addressing Racism in the Moment</b>	
A Neapolitan Christmas Lesson	189
<b>Truth That Dwells Among Us</b>	
Michael Dummett on Immigration, Racism and Courage	192
<b>Living Beneath a Sleeping Volcano</b>	
A Joyful Neapolitan on Death, Hope and Fully Living	195
<b>An Underground Ordination, an Above-Ground Truth</b>	
The 55 <sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Ordination of Ludmila Javorová	198
<b>Catholic Oligarchs</b>	
Lessons from Naples on Power, Wealth and the Church	201
<b>Beloved Beyond Measure</b>	
David and Jonathan on Love, Power and God's Delight	205
<b>Before Bethlehem, Before Rome</b>	
Christmas Lessons from the Egyptian Collection in Naples	208
<b>God in Motion, Faith in Conversation</b>	
Lessons from Alfred North Whitehead and Huston Smith	212
<b>Sun, Sin and Self-Deception</b>	
Lessons from <i>The White Lotus</i> , Season 2	215
<b>Seeing Clearly at Year's End</b>	
John Wycliffe and the Courage of Conscience	219
<b>From Spray Cans to Sacred Signs</b>	
New Year Lessons from Acts of Vandalism and Street Art	222

<b>Between Mirror and Compass</b>	
The Mother of God and the Courage to Become Who We Are	225
<b>Crowns versus Crosiers</b>	
Lessons from Palermo's Entangled Church-State History	228
<b>One Spirit, Shared Courage</b>	
Basil the Great and Gregory Nazianzen at the Start of the Year	232
<b>Scaring Off the Monster</b>	
Firecrackers, Faith and Beginning Again After a Brutal Year	234
<b>Beyond God the Father, Beyond Old Habits</b>	
Lessons from Mary Daly at the Start of a New Year	238
<b>Stone, Glory and the God Who Chooses Mangers</b>	
Rome's Monuments Reveal Ego, Memory and Grace	240
<b>Epiphanies</b>	
Lessons from Today's Traditions	244
<b>The Day the Vatican Shrank</b>	
Epiphany, Growing Up, and Trusting a Bigger God	247
<b>Beyond Infallibility, Toward Fidelity</b>	
Joseph Reinkens on Courage, Conscience and Continuity	251
<b>A Bishop for the Hated and the Hungry</b>	
St. John Neumann on Immigration, Fear and Fidelity	254
<b>The Epstein Hermeneutic</b>	
An Epiphany About Seeing What We're Told to Ignore	257
<b>Faithful Dissent and the Courage to Think</b>	
Epiphany Lessons from David Tracy	261
<b>A Dangerous New Season</b>	
Standing at the Threshold of Escalation	265
<b>Guardians of the Ancient Light</b>	
New Year Lessons from Three Old Catholic Bishops	269
<b>Away from the Noise, Closer to the Gospel</b>	
A Roman Holiday, an American Reckoning, and the Grace of a Holy Disconnect	272
<b>Two Epiphanies, Two Paths</b>	
Lessons from Two Contrasting Witnesses	275

<b>Honk for Jesus, Save Your Soul – and Lose the Gospel</b>	
Lessons From an Unsettling In-Flight Movie	278
<b>When Words Ignite and Wisdom Heals</b>	
Four Witnesses in Epiphany Light	282
<b>When Words Fail, Lives Speak</b>	
Lessons from the Life of Mary Helen “Nena” Quintero	285
<b>From Convent to Community</b>	
Remembering an Ex-nun and Pioneering Feminist Activist	289
<b>When Catholics Stop Being Christian</b>	
J.D. Vance, Christian Nationalism, and the Lies We Keep Telling Ourselves	291
<b>Doing the Best We Can with What We Have</b>	
Lessons from Bishop Carmel Henry Carfora	295
<b>Made of Fire, Named Beloved</b>	
“Elemental,” Immigration, and the Epiphany at the Jordan	298
<b>Baptized Into Light, Sent Into Darkness</b>	
The Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord in an America Starving for Humble, Courageous Faith	301

## Preface

I am not ashamed to admit it: I am glad that 2025 is over.

For many of us, this past year felt less like a chapter in American history, and more like a prolonged spiritual trial. On January 20, 2025, the United States inaugurated for a second term a man whose first presidency had already tested the moral fiber of our nation and the integrity of our democratic institutions. To the disbelief and heartbreak of millions, he returned to power surrounded by oligarchs and enablers, buoyed not by humility or repentance, but by grievance, cruelty, and a dangerous cult of personality. What once made so many of us proud to call ourselves Americans now often left us embarrassed, grieving or simply exhausted.

As the months unfolded, the chaos deepened. Norms eroded. Truth was treated as disposable. Fear was intentionally weaponized. Immigrants were hunted, rather than welcomed. Communities of color were terrorized in the name of “law and order.” Longstanding principles of international law were openly mocked, culminating in the stunning January 3, 2026 capture of Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro by order of President Trump, a move that sent shockwaves across the hemisphere. Closer to home, the killing of Renee Good by ICE agents in Minneapolis on January 7, 2026 became, for many of us, a breaking point: a moment when the abstraction of policy gave way to a blood-stained van, and the cost of cruelty could no longer be denied.

It was into this darkness that the Church once again proclaimed the ancient Advent and Christmas promise: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light” (Is. 9:1). Every year, the scriptures return us to this audacious claim. Every year, candles are lit, hymns are sung, and we dare to say aloud that light is stronger than darkness, love more powerful than fear, and God still at work in history. But rarely has that proclamation felt as urgent, or as contested, as it did during Advent and Christmas of 2025.

By late autumn, I had discovered Substack, a platform that lifts up independent voices at a moment when much of our legacy media has capitulated to power, profit or cowardice. What began as a modest experiment quickly became a daily discipline: writing reflections that refused silence, that plainly named injustice, and that insisted our faith must mean something beyond private piety. These essays were never meant to be neutral. Jesus certainly was not. As the Gospel of John reminds us, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not

overcome it” (Jn. 1:5). But light only shines when someone is willing to strike a match!

This collection brings together those daily reflections written during the Advent/Christmas season of 2025. They are unapologetically spiritual, rooted in scripture, sacrament and prayer. They are also unapologetically contextual, because spirituality divorced from lived reality quickly becomes sentimentality. These essays wrestle with a central conviction: that following Jesus of Nazareth has public consequences, and that silence in the face of cruelty is not neutrality, but complicity.

This is a book for those whom I like to call “Extraordinary Catholics”: progressive, inclusive, independent Catholics committed to sacramental justice and to living the values Jesus preached, not merely the labels others claim. Each reflection offers theological grounding, concrete calls to action, questions for prayer and reflection, and concludes with a prayer—because action without prayer becomes brittle, and prayer without action becomes hollow.

Above all, this collection is an act of hope. Not naïve optimism, but the stubborn, Gospel-shaped hope that insists light still breaks through, even when the night feels endless. My prayer is that these reflections help us become—in the words of our parish motto at Holy Family Catholic Church—more “Loving. Inclusive. Catholic. Doing It Jesus’ Way!” May they strengthen weary hearts, sharpen moral vision, and embolden us to live as children of the light in a time that desperately needs it.

For if the Advent/Christmas season teaches us anything, it is this: The darkness never gets the final word!

## Peace Be With You

### A Catholic Response when Presidents Threaten War

November 12, 2025



During this month of gratitude, our nation paused yesterday to thank all who have bravely served in the Armed Forces. We honored their sacrifice, courage and service—and, just as importantly, their hope for peace. Before the 1954 declaration of Veteran’s Day, though, November 11 commemorated the 1918 armistice that ended World War I, the “war to end all wars.”

At the heart of our Christian faith stands the Risen Christ, who greeted his disciples: “Peace be with you” (Jn. 20:19). As Catholics, we are baptized into this greeting. That is why our Sign of Peace at every Mass is so vital: It is our weekly rehearsal of the world we long to build!

Yet nearly a century after the “war to end all wars,” our nation remains entangled in conflict through aggressive foreign policy and bellicose rhetoric. This moment challenges us anew: to respond not with fear, but as citizens, as believers, and as peacemakers.

World War I taught humanity how swiftly violence can engulf the globe. Fittingly, Armistice Day coincides with the feast of Martin of Tours (+397), a Roman soldier turned bishop who laid down his sword and devoted his life to Christ disguised in the exploited and those in need. In St. Martin, we find a bridge from soldier to saint, from war to peace. Eight centuries later, another soldier-saint, Francis of Assisi (1182-1226), stepped down from his “high horse,” gave up his armor and weapons, and became famous for the words later attributed to him: “Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.”

For Catholics, this layering of remembrance—the end of war, the honoring of veterans, the greeting of the Risen Christ, and the witness of saints—offers rich theological and moral ground for reflection.

When the Risen Christ appeared to his disciples, his first words, according to John, were: “Peace be with you” (Jn. 20:19) He repeated

those words (Jn. 20:21), breathed the Spirit upon his friends, and sent them forth as witnesses to his peace. His greeting was not a polite “hello,” but a gift of reconciliation and a commission for peacemakers. Peace, then, is not optional. It is the vocation of believers!

Catholic social teaching makes this explicit. One of its seven key themes affirms that the virtue of solidarity is at the core of the pursuit of justice and peace. The *Catechism* reminds us: “Peace is not merely the absence of war...it is the fruit of justice and charity” (CCC 2304).

Yesterday we honored veterans. Yet our country remains deeply involved in military operations and aggressive diplomacy across the world. The irony deepens when we recall that our U.S. President, who purportedly fantasizes about receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, has recently used language that contradicts the Risen Christ’s greeting of peace. In his inaugural address, he threatened to seize by force the Panama Canal. He tellingly renamed the Department of Defense the “Department of War.” He has militarized immigration enforcement, deployed troops into U.S. cities, bombed fishing boats off Venezuela, and, just last week, threatened military action against Nigeria, declaring, “If we attack, it will be fast, vicious, and sweet—just like the terrorist thugs attack our cherished Christians.” The Risen Christ is weeping!

For Catholics committed to the Gospel and Catholic social teaching, such actions are not merely policy matters; they are moral ones. When power is wielded in ways that diminish human dignity or glorify domination, Catholics are called to speak prophetically and act courageously—to claim our place as peacemakers (Mt 5:9) who “make every effort to live in peace with everyone” (Heb 12:14).

As the holidays approach, many will rewatch “It’s a Wonderful Life,” where an angel reveals what the world would be like without George Bailey: a world of despair, brokenness and unchecked violence. One life, committed to love, can redirect the arc of poverty and injustice! Similarly, Louis Armstrong’s “What a Wonderful World” celebrates the beauty of ordinary life—beauty so easily overshadowed by militarism and national bravado. Our cultural imagination reminds us that peace is not naïve idealism, but creative realism: the active building of communities where all may flourish, where power is checked by love, and where the Risen Christ’s peace takes flesh in our neighborhoods, our churches, and in public life.

So what can we do—as Catholics and as people of good will?

- **We commit ourselves to peace.** We acknowledge the human, social and spiritual costs of war and strife.



- **We consider.** We reflect on our nation's military posture, its use of force, and its rhetoric of war, especially where diplomacy should prevail.
- **We collaborate.** We join with others who stand with Christ disguised in the exploited and those who suffer from violence, war and injustice.
- **We advocate.** We engage in conversations about redirecting funds from weapons, war and deportation, toward food, housing, education and healthcare.
- **We be the light.** We model respectful dialogue, resist militarized imagery, and choose forgiveness and reconciliation over domination.
- **We engage.** We urge elected officials to put human dignity, diplomacy and solidarity above political fealty, unilateral force, and the illusion that "might makes right."

With Veteran's Day now behind us, our Catholic tradition invites reflection on the Risen Christ's greeting of peace, the lessons of warrior-saints, and the Church's insistence that peace is the fruit of justice and love.

Let us be peacemakers, not warmongers; bridge-builders, not destroyers; disciples of the Prince of Peace, whose birth we celebrate in six short weeks!

May the words "Peace be with you" be more than a liturgical exercise. May they become our vocation as aspiring warrior-saints, hoping to enflesh love and peace in our homes, workplaces, classrooms, communities and world!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- How do I personally respond when I encounter aggressive rhetoric or policies that glorify violence or domination?
- In what ways can I embody the Risen Christ's greeting, "Peace be with you," in my daily interactions – at home, at work and in public spaces?
- How does Catholic social teaching on solidarity, human dignity and the common good guide my response to war, militarization or the misuse of national power?
- Am I attentive to the ways government priorities – military spending versus social programs – impact the most vulnerable? How might I act to advocate for peace and justice?

- When have I experienced or witnessed reconciliation after conflict? How can those experiences inform my efforts to be a bridgebuilder in my community?
- What small, concrete steps can I take in my daily life to promote peace – through conversation, activism, prayer or support for humanitarian initiatives?
- How can I challenge warlike rhetoric in a way that is respectful, constructive and grounded in faith?
- How might cultural references – songs, movies, stories or literature that celebrate peace – help me and others imagine a world without violence?
- Am I willing to take risks for peace, as Christ and the saints modeled, even when it feels uncomfortable or countercultural?

### **A Prayer for Peacemakers**

Prince of Peace, You call us to stand where tempers flare and fears divide, and to sow gentleness where anger takes root. Give us voices that heal instead of harm, hearts that seek truth without losing tenderness, and courage to speak peace even when it costs us. May our words, like Yours, calm storms within and around us—until swords become plowshares, and neighbors become kin. Amen.

### **WWCD: What Would Cabrini Do?**

Lessons from the Matron Saint of Immigrants for U.S. Catholics Today

November 13, 2025



Today, November 13, Catholics celebrate the feast of St. Frances Xavier Cabrini (1850–1917) – the first American citizen to be canonized and the matron saint of U.S. immigrants. Mother Cabrini’s feast arrives this year amid a painful national reckoning with the anti-immigrant rhetoric and actions of the current U.S. administration.

It has now been a decade since Donald J. Trump's 2015 descent down his "golden" escalator, when he announced his candidacy by infamously denigrating Mexican immigrants as "criminals" and "rapists." Since that moment, xenophobia has again been mainstreamed into American politics. The militarization of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and the weaponization of fear have made the Gospel's call to "welcome the stranger" (Mt. 25:35) sound, to many ears, like a foreign language.

And yet, 108 years after her death, Mother Cabrini still speaks—and her message is as radical as ever. Her life was a holy collision between faith and public life. She crossed oceans, confronted prejudice, and created institutions of mercy that lifted immigrants from the shadows. Her story is clearly a sacred counterpoint to our own age of division and deportation!

### **So, what might we learn from Mother Cabrini today?**

We must love, even in the midst of hatred.

As Mother Cabrini said: "We must show by our deeds that we love—not in word, but in truth."

When she arrived in New York in 1889, Cabrini found a city that despised her people. Italians were mocked as lazy and criminal, unfit for "real" American life. Mother Cabrini didn't waste time debating their worth; she built schools, orphanages and hospitals that proved it. Her works were her sermon.

Today, as political leaders paint immigrants as "invaders," Cabrini's example calls us to create counter-narratives of dignity; to open our hearts, our homes, our communities; to share our time, talent and treasure. Mother Cabrini knew that love is the most subversive form of resistance!

Cabrini's quiet defiance finds an echo in the resilience of *Encanto's* Madrigal family, which rebuilds amid displacement. Her spirit is alive in Lin-Manuel Miranda's *In the Heights*, where a *barrio's* love and solidarity push back against systemic neglect. Mother Cabrini would recognize that same spirit: a community that survives by refusing to stop loving!

**When government turns its power against the vulnerable, we must stand in the gap.**

Mother Cabrini famously said: "I will go anywhere and do anything in order to communicate the love of Jesus."

Cabrini entered the docks, the tenements, and the prisons where others feared to go. She didn't wait for permission; she went where love demanded!

If Mother Cabrini were alive today, she would likely walk into border detention centers, ICE offices and migrant camps with that same fearless compassion. She would see each migrant not as a “case” or statistic, but as a soul.

As ICE raids and deportations tear at the fabric of our communities, Catholics are called to become that same protective presence—to transform fear into accompaniment, and bureaucracy into mercy. Cabrini reminds us that God’s law of love always outranks any law of exclusion.

Consider *The Handmaid’s Tale* and its haunting depiction of a government weaponizing faith for control. Mother Cabrini would stand in defiant contrast, embodying faith as liberation, and love as rebellion!

**When families are torn apart, we must act as family.**

Mother Cabrini shared: “The Heart of Jesus does not want cold and timid souls.”

Cabrini’s heart was maternal. Her orphanages embraced children who suffered as a result of poverty and migration. Today, as U.S. policies separate children from their parents, Mother Cabrini would name such cruelty for what it is: a sin against our human nature and God’s grace. But she would not stop there. She would act. She would open “Cabrini Homes” to reunite parents and children, and she would mobilize people of good will to defend them.

We, too, must embody that fierce, maternal care—supporting sanctuary movements, funding legal aid, and simply showing up for families living in fear. Mother Cabrini’s courage was never abstract; it was embodied, tender and practical.

Like the beloved immigrant mother in *Coco*, or the resilient matriarch in *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, Mother Cabrini teaches us that family transcends borders—and that love, not fear, is the true mark of strength!

**When human dignity is undermined, we must build structures of hope.**

Mother Cabrini said: “God has planted in my heart a love for every human being....I feel the duty to hasten wherever the suffering is greater.”

At a time when our government is rolling back humanitarian protections, Cabrini’s legacy challenges us not only to protest, but to build alternatives. Her 67 schools, hospitals and orphanages were her answer to indifference—an infrastructure of love.

Today, Catholics might carry that torch by supporting immigrant legal clinics, relief funds and advocacy networks that defend asylum-seekers. Mother Cabrini's lesson is clear: Compassion must be institutional, not only emotional. Love must take on structure—love that lasts!

As *The Good Place* reminded us in its clever moral parables, goodness is not about avoiding bad acts. It's about actively designing a better system for others to thrive!

### **When violence and division reign, we must be a healing heart.**

After the 1891 lynching of eleven Italian immigrants in New Orleans, Cabrini wrote of her grief—but refused to let vengeance win. Instead, she built community.

Mother Cabrini would respond the same way today: hosting multilingual prayer vigils, creating interfaith networks, and confronting hate crimes not with silence, but with solidarity. Her conviction was revolutionary: Unity is born not from uniformity, but from shared humanity.

Like Ted Lasso's unshakable optimism or Mr. Rogers' gentle insistence that everyone is a neighbor, Mother Cabrini's faith was stubbornly kind—a radical act of hope in an unkind age!

### **A Cabrinian Call to Today's Church**

Mother Cabrini's life poses an uncomfortable question: Will we stand with the immigrant—not just in words, but in action?

Her answer, written in deeds, still echoes—for she said: "We must pray well and never lose courage. God will do the rest."

Her prayer was not a refuge from action, but its fuel. If Mother Cabrini were with us today, she would tell bishops, pastors and lay Catholics alike: *Open your church doors as sanctuary. Use your voice. Risk your comfort. Defend the dignity of the stranger. The Body of Christ has no borders!*

Like the heroes of *Les Misérables*, who rise from the barricades, singing, "Do you hear the people sing?", Mother Cabrini would remind us that the song of justice is the song of faith—and that it must be sung aloud!

### **A Closing Cabrinian Challenge**

Catholics have long seen the immigrant as a sacrament of God's presence—the Christ who still knocks at our national door. Mother Cabrini would affirm that belief, but insist on action.

To honor her feast is not merely to remember her, but to continue her mission: making visible, in this divided nation, the boundless love, mercy and compassion of God.

As anti-immigrant policies multiply and militarized rhetoric grows louder, may we echo Mother Cabrini's courage—not with bitterness, but with bold, creative love. May our faith, like hers, become again what the world so desperately needs: a living bridge between the Gospel and the streets of our nation!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- How do I, in my daily life, welcome the “strangers” in my family, neighborhood, parish, or workplace—especially those who may feel marginalized or excluded?
- What small acts of hospitality, advocacy or solidarity could I take this week to reflect Mother Cabrini's love for immigrants and vulnerable communities?
- How does my faith inspire me to respond when policies or rhetoric harm human dignity? Do I act as a witness to mercy and justice?
- In what ways might I be called to cross boundaries—cultural, social or political—in the service of love, just as Mother Cabrini crossed oceans and challenged prejudice?
- How do I balance prayer, reflection and concrete action in responding to injustice? Are there opportunities to join with others in creating structures of hope and care?
- Who are the “orphans” or most vulnerable in my local community today, and how might I embody a Cabrinian presence in their lives?
- How does Mother Cabrini's example challenge me to rethink my understanding of courage and creativity in faith?
- If Mother Cabrini were alive today, what action might she take regarding contemporary crises affecting immigrants, refugees or displaced peoples? How might I follow her example in my context?
- How does gratitude—for safety, resources or community—inspire me to respond with generosity toward those in need?
- How can my home, school, workplace or community become a space where the love, dignity and hope that Mother Cabrini championed are made visible?

### **Let Us Pray**

God of journeys and open doors, You sent Mother Cabrini across oceans and borders to reveal Your boundless love for every stranger. Send us, too—to build bridges where others build walls, to meet fear with compassion, and to create spaces of welcome for all Your children. Give us hearts like hers—brave, maternal, and merciful—that our love might become a sanctuary for the world. Amen.

## **An All-Yellow Rainbow Would Be So Boring!**

### **Bishop Michael Kelly and the Rainbow Sash Movement**

November 14, 2025



As November unfolds—a month of gratitude and remembrance—Catholics are invited to recall not only the saints of our liturgical calendar, but also those contemporary prophets who, though little known, carried the Gospel into the margins of our contemporary Church. One such prophet was Michael Bernard Kelly (1954-2020), the Australian Independent Catholic bishop and co-founder of the Rainbow Sash Movement, whom progressive Catholics honor on November 14. Bishop Kelly’s life and ministry still hold wisdom for how Catholics might speak with love and integrity to a Church divided over the dignity and rights of LGBTQIA+ persons.

### **The Courage of Faithful, Queer and Catholic Bishop Kelly**

After 17 years as a Roman Catholic educator and campus minister, Michael Kelly was dismissed from his ministry in 1993, when he came out as gay. He did not leave his faith behind. Instead, he became a queer theologian who explored how spirituality and sexuality might be viewed in harmony, not opposition.

Tellingly, Kelly often said, “The grace of God does not stop at the closet door.” Through his retreats, writings and his co-founding of the Rainbow Sash Movement, he taught that LGBTQIA+ Catholics are *not* outsiders, knocking on the Church’s door. We are already inside, bearing unique gifts for the Church’s renewal!

### **The Rainbow Sash: Eucharistic Visibility and Loving Defiance**

Launched in Melbourne in 1998, the Rainbow Sash Movement quickly became a worldwide sign of faithful dissent among LGBTQIA+ Catholics and their allies. Catholics wore rainbow-colored sashes to Mass—especially on Pentecost Sunday—approaching the Eucharist as a visible reminder that LGBTQIA+ Catholics belong at the table.

When the movement spread to the U.S. in 2000, it triggered so-called “wafer wars.” Some bishops, notably Cardinal Francis George in Chicago, instructed priests not to give Communion to anyone sporting a rainbow sash. Still, sashed Catholics, through prayerful witness and reverence, modeled what Kelly called “a sacrament of courage.”

Think of pop culture’s great bridge-builders: the radical kindness of *Ted Lasso*, the joyful normalization of queer love in *Schitt’s Creek*, Lady Gaga’s anthem “Born This Way.” These cultural voices mirror what Kelly embodied in Catholic life: presence, dignity and radical inclusion without antagonism!

### **Diversity as Divine Design**

I am fond of noting that “an all-yellow rainbow would be so boring.” God’s creation delights in difference—male and female, old and young, straight and queer. The tremendously-diverse human race is indeed a rainbow!

Today, roughly one in five Gen Z adults in the U.S. self-identifies as LGBTQIA+. Let that number sink in. An increasing number of our family members, friends, neighbors, classmates and coworkers live at the margins of the Roman Catholic Church. To deny their dignity is to deny the very diversity of God’s image!

### **A Gospel and Tradition of Inclusion**

The Hebrew Scriptures proclaim that all human beings are created in the *tzelem elohim*, the image of God (Gen. 1:27). Jesus deepened that truth by welcoming those deemed unclean, foreign or unworthy—and commanding us: “Love one another as I have loved you” (Jn. 15:12).

Catholic social teaching reminds us that every human life is sacred and that human dignity is the foundation of a moral vision for society. The principle of solidarity calls us to recognize that we are one human family, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

Our Church is not static. In Germany, Roman Catholic priests are now offering public blessings for same-sex couples, a move that has sparked controversy in Rome, but also demonstrates that pastoral creativity is very much alive. Catholics in the U.S. can learn from these gestures: Accompaniment, ritual inclusion and pastoral courage can illuminate the Gospel, even when Church law or policy lags behind!



### **How to Speak About Inclusion, “the Bishop Kelly Way”**

Bishop Kelly and the Rainbow Sash Movement offer us guidance when faced by hardhearted clergy or skeptical relatives:

- **Lead with faith, not ideology.** Start with shared love of Christ and the Eucharist.
- **Tell stories.** Share real-life experiences of LGBTQIA+ Catholics in your community.
- **Affirm virtue, then expand it.** Acknowledge fidelity and commitment, and show how they flourish in same-sex couples.
- **Keep dialogue sacramental.** Approach conversation as you would approach Communion: with reverence, openness and hope.
- **Be persistent, yet gentle.** Bishop Kelly wrote, “God is bigger than our categories, more patient than our dogmas, and more faithful than our fears.”

### **Toward a Church Worthy of Its Rainbow**

The future of Catholicism will be as bright—or as dim—as our willingness to embrace diversity as divine design. Bishop Kelly’s life and the witness of those who wore rainbow sashes remind us that inclusion is not a fad. It is the beating heart of the Gospel. Because the Kingdom of God is a banquet—and “an all-yellow rainbow would be so boring”!

#### **Questions for Reflection:**

- Who in your life might need to feel that they belong at God’s table—and how can you be that bridge today?
- How do your words and actions in daily life reflect the fullness of the Gospel’s welcome?
- In what ways might you draw from Bishop Michael Kelly’s example—courageous presence, gentle witness and creative liturgy—to advocate for LGBTQIA+ inclusion among your family, friends, classmates, coworkers and faith community?
- How can you celebrate the beauty of diversity, remembering that “an all-yellow rainbow would be so boring”?

### **A Prayer Beneath the Rainbow**

Creator of colors and community, You paint the sky with promise and the world with difference. Teach us to see Your image in every shade of love, to speak truth with kindness, and to stand beside those the world too quickly judges. Let our Church be as radiant as Your covenant rainbow—each hue shining together, each heart reflecting the light of Your inclusive grace. Amen.

## **Let the Sunshine In**

A Catholic Priest Calls for the Release of the Epstein Files

November 14, 2025



When light enters a dark room, the shadows recede. Survivors of sexual exploitation and institutional cover-up often wait decades for the truth to see daylight. I write this as a Catholic priest shaped by the 2002 Roman Catholic clergy sexual abuse crisis, and now witnessing another moment of reckoning: the push to release the Jeffrey Epstein files. The question before us is not simply whether the documents should come out—but how our faith demands transparency, justice and healing when those in power betray the vulnerable. After all, our faith compels us to demand not silence, but sunlight; not cover-up, but conversion.

### **My Seminary Years: The Warning—and the Shock**

When I entered the Roman Catholic seminary at age 18, I was deeply aware—though not fully prepared—for the shadow of clerical misconduct. One priest warned us: “Never go anywhere where you can scope or be scoped.” That image, lodged in my mind, struck me with bitter irony when that same priest later took me to a gay bar—my first visit to such a place—and openly kissed another man there. Our formators preached to us of the espoused value of celibacy; meanwhile, one priest in our community was shot while soliciting sex in Knoxville, Tennessee, and one of our Franciscan brothers died in a bath house in Columbus, Ohio. One night, a visiting bishop invited me to his hotel room “for a glass of wine,” and I was admittedly too young and naïve—and too flattered by the invitation—to recognize what was happening in the moment. Such experiences forced a painful realization: Secrecy, shame and hypocrisy were woven into our very system!

The systemic secrecy weighed heavily on all of us. Many of us were sworn to silence and asked to sign non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) when it became known that a priest or religious, usually after a time of grooming, “came on” to us. The hidden corridors of power were not

abstract theological problems; they were our lived reality. Still, the newly-minted *Catholic Catechism* described homosexual acts as “inherently disordered,” and, ironically, an impending witch hunt against gay seminarians stood just outside the door—when perhaps it should have been outside the door of priest predators.

In 2001, I was ordained by Gregory Aymond, a bishop I admired and who later emerged as a national leader in sexual abuse prevention. Yet after ten glorious months of priestly ministry, the near-daily headlines of clergy sexual abuse commenced in January 2002, when the *Boston Globe* began publishing its watershed exposé of abuse in the Archdiocese of Boston. The scandal plunged not only our Church, but our own vocational imaginations, into crisis.

One year later, my Conventual Franciscan community was hit with an \$18 million lawsuit because of the abuse committed by a former pastor of my home parish. I had been accepted into five law schools and was on the verge of fulfilling a longtime dream—to be both a priest and a lawyer—but that dream was deferred when my superior informed me I could not enter law school because our community was now reeling from the financial impact of this scandal. The Roman Catholic clergy sexual abuse scandal had changed the trajectory of my life!

As young priests who were ordained around the time of the 2002 Roman Catholic clergy abuse scandal, many of us vowed that we would never find ourselves alone in a room with a minor. We resonated with Jesus’ deep respect for children (Mk. 10:16)—since kids were considered “property” in his patriarchal society—and we heard with fresh urgency Jesus’ stern warning: “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin...it would be better for him to have a great millstone hung around his neck and be drowned in the depth of the sea” (Mt. 18:6). These were not abstract teachings. They became deeply personal moral demands.

Over the years, I have spoken with hundreds of priests and religious, and heard thousands upon thousands of confessions. With wry humor, I have publicly confessed: I don’t believe I have ever met a truly celibate Roman Catholic priest. Human beings, I have learned, are sexual beings. We saw this in the sexual exploitation of children by Roman Catholic clergy, and we see it again in the sexual exploitation of children by those associated with Jeffrey Epstein.

### Why the Epstein Files Matter

The “Epstein files” refer to thousands of pages of documents connected to investigations into Jeffrey Epstein’s purported sex-trafficking of children. The release of over 30,000 pages of these documents in September 2025 has renewed calls for full transparency, and, as a result of a discharge petition this week, our U.S. House of Representatives will vote next week on the release of these documents. The *Miami Herald* found that federal prosecutors and Epstein’s lawyers covered up the scope of Epstein’s crimes, and we have yet to fully know the place of President Donald J. Trump, a onetime friend of Epstein, in these files. Though a Justice Department memo stated in July that “there was also no credible evidence found that Epstein blackmailed prominent individuals as part of his actions,” the BBC reported this week that Epstein wrote in 2018: “I am the one able to take [Trump] down.”

The Epstein files represent more than a political or criminal scandal. They’re a mirror held up to power, privilege and our communal sin.

Here’s why the release of the Epstein files matters for us—both morally and theologically—as Catholics and as citizens of a just society:

- **Visibility for Survivors.** Public disclosure affirms survivor voices and pulls secrecy into the light. As one survivor said in a recent press conference, “The days of sweeping this under the rug are over.”
- **Justice and Dignity.** Survivors deserve more than private apologies; they deserve public accountability. When records are revealed with dignity, it declares that abuse cannot be hidden or minimized.
- **Conversion, not Cover-up.** The release of the files can catalyze institutional repentance. The Church’s own history has shown that what remains secret often repeats. Transformation, on the other hand, begins with truth.
- **Institutional Accountability.** Where power, money and influence converge, justice must be unflinching. The Gospel demands that no one is above moral scrutiny.
- **A Moral Wake-up Call.** Catholic Social Teaching calls us to defend human dignity, promote the common good, and demand that institutions serve and protect the vulnerable.

## Analogies from Our Own Scandal: Learning from the Church's Darkest Hours

As Catholics who have passed through the crucible of our own clergy sexual abuse scandal, and who continue to feel its effects, we share invaluable lessons with all involved in the release of the Epstein files:

- **Sunlight as Sacrament.** Our abuse crisis taught us that “sunlight is the best disinfectant.” Only when survivors, journalists and laypeople forced disclosure did real reform begin. As Pope Francis often reminded us, *Ecclesia semper est reformanda* — the Church is always being reformed. Transparency, in this sense, becomes almost sacramental: a visible sign of inward conversion. For this reason, we say: Let the sunshine in!
- **Structures Matter.** In response to the Roman Catholic clergy sexual abuse scandal, U.S. bishops created a national review board to oversee child protection. This independent structure reminds us that lasting reform requires more than apology. It requires systems. Similarly, we need permanent oversight and survivor-led reform if society is to reckon with Epstein’s legacy.
- **Repentance and Healing Must Go Together.** Apology is not enough. In the case of our own scandal, survivors rightly demanded reparations, open processes, and real change. In the Epstein case, justice must include naming, repairing and removing systems that have shielded the powerful.
- **Moral Reckoning.** Powerful figures must answer for inaction and complicity. The resignation of Cardinal Bernard Law in Boston was a sobering lesson. Likewise, the release of Epstein’s files, in the end, may be less a scandal, and more the beginning of a similar moral reckoning.

### So, Here’s What Catholics Can Do

Many Catholics pride themselves on being “pro-life.” I include here a few ideas for ways in which Catholics and all people of good can contribute to the full flourishing of human life with respect to this issue.

- **Support the Epstein Files Transparency Act (H.R. 4405).** Call, write and lobby your representatives to back the bill, demanding the Justice Department to release all remaining unclassified records.
- **Support Survivors.** Engage with and support survivor-led organizations. Advocate for legal reforms, pastoral care, and safe spaces for healing.

- **Promote Safe, Transparent Communities.** Help build cultures where accountability, confession and honesty are more important than reputation or power.
- **Challenge Power Structures.** Where money, influence and secrecy converge, let us be voices for justice, not complicity.
- **Live a Faith of Accountability.** Our vocations call us to walk in humility, serve the vulnerable, and uphold truth—even when it is uncomfortable.

### **An Opportunity for Sacramental Grace**

As a priest formed in the crucible of the 2002 Roman Catholic sexual abuse crisis, I know how far we have come—and how much farther we must go. But more than that, I know a God who does not hide in darkness. Jesus proclaimed himself the Light of the World (Jn. 8:12), calling us out of the shadows of secrecy and into the community of truth. The release of the Epstein files is not political theater. It is *kairos*—an opportunity for sacramental grace, for genuine repentance, and for institutional conversion.

May we step into this moment with humility, courage and compassion. May our gaze shift from power to vulnerability, and from privilege to service. May the light of truth shine into every corner where harm has been done. And may our Church, our nation and our communities respond not with more silence, but with healing, justice and an unwavering commitment to protect the most vulnerable!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- How does the call for Epstein file transparency resonate with my own experiences of secrecy and power?
- In what ways have I permitted silence to shield wrongdoing, rather than truth to lead to healing?
- How can I concretely support survivors of abuse—through prayer, advocacy or financial and pastoral accompaniment?
- What does my faith teach me about repentance, justice and the dignity of the vulnerable—and how am I living that out?
- What systems of power, privilege or influence do I need to challenge for the sake of the vulnerable?
- How can I help ensure that all children and youth in my community are safe, honored and seen?

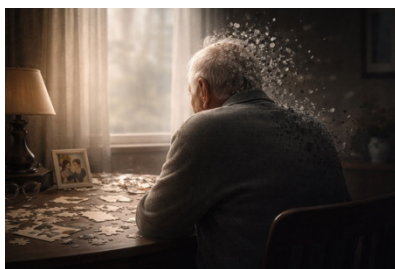
### **A Prayer for Survivors and Truth**

Merciful and Loving God, You know the wounds hidden in the shadows. You see the pain of the small and the powerless. You call us into the light of justice and truth. We lift up all who have suffered abuse at the hands of powerful people. We hold in our hearts their stories, their grief, and their healing. May their voices be heard, their dignity restored, and their healing begin. We pray for those who hold power—that they may choose humility over protection, responsibility over denial, and service over privilege. Give us courage to demand transparency. Give us wisdom to build structures of accountability. Give us grace to walk alongside survivors with compassion. Help us, Your Church, to become a refuge, not a place of fear. Help our society to become a steward of justice, not a vault of secrets. Let the sunshine in—upon our institutions, our systems and our souls—so that no one must suffer in the dark again. Through Christ our Light and our Redeemer, we pray. Amen.

### **When Leaders and Loved Ones Face Cognitive Decline**

Lessons from St. Albert the Great

November 15, 2025



On November 15, the feast of St. Albert the Great, we reflect on one of history's greatest minds—who in later years suffered memory loss—and what his story can teach us about patience, empathy and faith as we encounter cognitive decline in loved ones, neighbors and even national leaders.

Today, we recall the extraordinary intellect of St. Albert the Great, the teacher of St. Thomas Aquinas—and also the grace that this patron saint of science showed in the twilight of his life. Medieval sources suggest that in his final years, Albert experienced memory loss and diminished mental powers, a decline that today some might describe as dementia. Yet the Church honors him for his wisdom, diligence and faith, not only in moments of brilliance, but also in his humility amid vulnerability.

A reflection on Albert's cognitive decline is certainly timely: Many throughout our nation and world are openly opining on the mental changes they see in President Donald J. Trump, whose speech patterns, memory lapses, and perceived errors in judgment have led his critics to raise questions and concerns not unlike those that we face when our family members and friends experience diminished cognitive abilities.

The feast of St. Albert the Great is also an invitation for self-reflection: Our own faculties, however sharp now, are not immune to the slow changes of time. The Psalmist reminds us: "Do not cast me off in the time of old age; forsake me not when my strength is spent" (Ps. 71:9). In our frailty, we are called to trust in God, seek community, and approach both our own decline and that of others with dignity and grace.

### Lessons from St. Albert the Great

- **Dignity remains, despite decline.** St. Albert's life demonstrates that a decline in memory or mental speed does not erase our spiritual worth. Loved ones who cognitively struggle still reflect to us the image of God (Gen. 1:27) and are capable of love, prayer and meaningful presence.
- **Faith and service endure.** Even as St. Albert's faculties faded, his legacy of scholarship, teaching and devotion endured. Our elders' previous contributions—whether intellectual, spiritual or cultural—remain a gift to our communities. Never forget the way they shaped family traditions, community life or social causes!
- **Compassion over frustration.** Cognitive decline can be stressful. The world around us may feel impatient, as seen in popular culture depictions of aging characters, from Carl Fredricksen in *Up*, to the seniors discovering new purpose in *Cocoon*. Patience and empathy, not irritation or scolding, are the proper response.
- **Memory and identity are relational.** When our loved ones forget names, dates, or even recent events, we can ground them in stories, music and rituals that affirm their life history. Think of the power of music in Alzheimer's care: Familiar songs can evoke smiles and emotional memory, even when cognitive memory falters.
- **Presence is a sacrament.** Sometimes the greatest gift is simply being present—sharing a meal, a quiet prayer, a gentle conversation. In Catholic tradition, the witness of saints—St. John of God or St. Rita of Cascia—shows that love and patience in caregiving can be as holy as scholarly genius or heroic deeds.



As we honor St. Albert the Great today, then, we do well to reflect on some practical guidance for compassionate care. If you are accompanying a loved one through the dark valley of cognitive decline, perhaps you might:

- Speak slowly, gently and clearly, avoiding confrontation.
- Use rituals and reminders—favorite prayers, songs or simple routines.
- Celebrate small successes and joys, instead of lamenting lost skills.
- Maintain a sense of humor and humility: Popular culture reminds us, even in sitcoms like *The Golden Girls*, that laughter and joy sustain life when minds fade.
- Seek community support. Caregiving is a shared ministry!

St. Albert the Great's story reminds us that intellect is a gift—but that grace, patience and love define true greatness. In a world that often glorifies speed, productivity and clarity, this feast of St. Albert the Great calls us to cherish presence, compassion and community. Let us honor the dignity of all who age, all who struggle with memory, and all who teach us that holiness transcends the mind!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- How can I honor the dignity of those I love when they show signs of cognitive decline?
- In what ways might I practice patience and empathy, instead of frustration?
- How does my faith guide me to see God's image even in moments of vulnerability or confusion?
- What spiritual practices—like prayer, music or storytelling—can I share with loved ones, to strengthen connection and memory?
- How might my own humility and acceptance of aging prepare me to fully embrace life, even as my faculties change?
- What can I learn from saints like St. Albert the Great about maintaining faith and purpose, even when mental powers fade?

### **A Prayer for Wisdom in Weakness**

God of every season, You are present in our brilliance and in our forgetting. When our minds fade or our memories falter, let Your love remain steadfast within us. Grant us patience with those who struggle, and humility to accept our own frailty with grace. Teach us to find holiness in the slowing down, and to trust that, even in decline, Your light still shines. Amen.

## International Day for Tolerance

Lessons from History and Faith

November 16, 2025



On this International Day for Tolerance, we pause to consider what it truly means to respect and engage those whose beliefs, values or convictions differ from our own. From the 17<sup>th</sup>-century controversies of Pierre Nicole, to the 20<sup>th</sup>-century martyrdom of Ignacio Ellacuría and his fellow Jesuits in El Salvador, the Church's story is a tapestry woven with both cautionary tales and luminous examples. In our polarized world—where difference often breeds suspicion, and where social media algorithms amplify outrage—faith invites us to listen, learn and act with courage and compassion.

Tolerance is not a tepid politeness; it is a Gospel imperative. Scripture calls us to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Mk. 12:31) and to “make every effort to live in peace with everyone” (Heb 12:14). Tolerance challenges us to hold firm to our convictions, while refusing the easy path of domination, exclusion or demonization.

Pop culture mirrors this tension. In *The West Wing*, President Bartlet modeled spirited but civil debate. In *Ted Lasso*, kindness becomes a revolutionary act amid cynicism. And Bob Dylan's anthem “The Times They Are A-Changin'” still reminds us that openness to change is a mark of spiritual maturity, not weakness.

### Pierre Nicole and the Perils of Imagined Heresies

Pierre Nicole (1623–1695), who died on this day in 1695, was a voice for intellectual honesty in an age of theological strife. A lay theologian associated with the Jansenist movement at Port-Royal-des-Champs, Nicole became a target of the Jesuits, who accused the Jansenists of heresy regarding grace and free will. In his work *Les Imaginaires*, Nicole pushed back, arguing that many of the supposed “heretical” Jansenist positions existed only in the imaginations of the Jesuits—a brilliant early critique of what we might now call ideological projection.

The clash between Jesuits and Jansenists offers a cautionary tale about how intolerance grows—when dialogue is replaced by caricature, and when defending orthodoxy becomes more important than understanding truth. Nicole’s insight is timeless. Today, we, too, are tempted to label and dismiss, rather than listen and learn. Nicole’s challenge endures: What imaginary faults do we project onto those who disagree with us? What fears distort our vision of the “other”?

Think of today’s “culture wars”—in Church debates about gender, marriage, migration policy or women’s reproductive health, for instance. How often are people condemned not for what they believe, but for what others imagine they believe? Nicole’s witness reminds us that real dialogue begins not with accusation, but with curiosity, humility and hope!

### **Ignacio Ellacuría and the Cost of Intolerance**

On November 16, 1989—exactly 294 years after Nicole’s death—Ignacio Ellacuría, rector of the *Universidad Centroamericana* in San Salvador, was murdered alongside five Jesuit companions and two women who worked with them. Their crime: using faith and intellect to challenge systemic injustice. Ellacuría, a philosopher and liberation theologian, insisted that “the Christian faith does not exist in the abstract—it must become historical, incarnate in solidarity with the poor.”

To the Salvadoran military, such convictions were subversive. Ellacuría’s execution was meant to silence a theology that dared to connect the cross with the cries of the oppressed. Yet the blood of the San Salvadoran martyrs became seed for the Church’s ongoing witness to justice.

Their courage echoes through the ages—and even in pop culture parallels. *Selma* reminds us of the cost of moral conviction. *The Color Purple* reveals the sacred dignity of the overlooked. And Tracy Chapman’s “Talkin’ ’bout a Revolution” calls us, still, to embody love in public.

Ellacuría’s life and death challenge us to embrace a tolerance that is not passive, but prophetic. True tolerance is not the absence of belief; it is the presence of love that refuses to dehumanize even the enemy!

### Practicing Tolerance Today

For Catholics, cultivating tolerance is both a spiritual discipline and a social act of hope. Consider these concrete practices:

- **Listen First.** Approach differing views not to rebut, but to understand. As Jesus' brother, James, wrote: "Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak" (Jas. 1:19).
- **Resist Caricature.** Don't reduce others to stereotypes or "imaginary heresies," as Nicole warned.
- **Act in Solidarity.** Following Ellacuría's example, stand with those marginalized or demonized by society's intolerance.
- **Model Respectful Dialogue.** In our families, communities, workplaces and online spaces, lead with patience, humor and humility. (Ted Lasso again proves: "Be curious, not judgmental.")
- **Celebrate Diversity.** Remember how boring an all-yellow rainbow would be. It is the variety of colors — of perspectives and people — that reveals the fullness of God's image.
- **Anchor in Faith.** Tolerance does not require abandoning truth; it requires embodying truth with mercy. "By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples: If you love one another" (Jn. 13:35).

On this International Day for Tolerance, may we honor both the power of words — like Nicole's intellectual humility — and the power of witness — like Ellacuría's prophetic courage. The Spirit of God is always larger than our tribes and categories. Faith calls us to a love that listens deeply, thinks critically, and acts boldly for justice and peace.

Or as Rodney King astutely noted in 1992 — perhaps less elegantly, but no less truthfully: "Can't we all just get along?"

### Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- When have I experienced or witnessed intolerance? How did I respond?
- What "imaginary faults" might I be projecting onto those who see the world differently?
- How can I create spaces — online, at home, in my community — where dialogue and difference are welcomed?
- In what ways might the lives of Pierre Nicole and Ignacio Ellacuría inspire me to unite intellect, courage and compassion?
- How can I respond when intolerance endangers those who are marginalized or silenced?

- How might God be inviting me, personally, to expand the borders of my love?

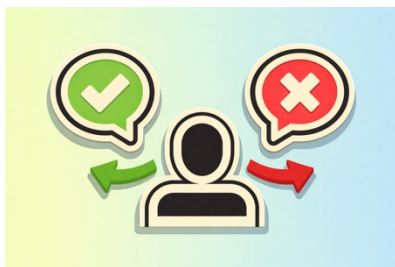
### A Prayer for Hearts Wide Open

Spirit of Understanding, You breathe through every language, culture and conviction. Open our ears to truly hear one another, and open our hearts to welcome even those who wound or worry us. When intolerance tempts us to close off or lash out, remind us of Christ's patient love – the love that listens, forgives and endures. Make us builders of bridges, that the world may see Your peace in us. Amen.

## Conscience and Communion

Lessons from Two Forgotten Bishops

November 17, 2025



In an age of “cancel culture” and algorithmic echo chambers, can we still listen to the quiet voice of conscience—especially when it challenges the powers that be? On this day, November 17, we remember two bishops, **André Dreuillet** and **Rudolph de Landas Berghes**, whose names rarely, if ever, appear in homilies or textbooks, but whose journeys can still speak to Catholics seeking faith with integrity.

### When Conscience Clashes with Control

Bishop André Dreuillet of Bayonne, France stood in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century against the papal bull *Unigenitus*—a decree condemning 101 propositions of Jansenism. Dreuillet was no heretic; he was, rather, one of four bishops who appealed for a general council of the Church, convinced that conscience and reason, not coercion, should guide theology. In doing so, he became a symbol of the enduring Catholic tension between authority and interior conviction.

Dreuillet lived in a France torn between awakening and absolutism, between the dawn of the Enlightenment and the Sun King. For Dreuillet,

loyalty to the Gospel sometimes meant dissent from hierarchy. Echoing Acts 5:29, we might imagine Dreuillet saying: “We must obey God, rather than humans.”

In a time when many Catholics fear the labels “disobedient,” “heterodox” or “unfaithful,” Dreuillet’s courage reminds us that conscience is not rebellion; it is responsibility. As St. John Henry Newman later wrote, “Conscience is the aboriginal Vicar of Christ.”

Think of the whistleblower in *The Insider*, the defiant juror in *Twelve Angry Men*, or even Taylor Swift’s “You Need to Calm Down” — all calling out the mob when truth gets buried beneath noise. Dreuillet’s faith wasn’t calm compliance; it was courageous conscience!

### **From Prince to Postulant**

Fast-forward two centuries to Rudolph de Landas Berghes, an Austrian noble born in Naples, consecrated a bishop for the Old Roman Catholic of the Old/Independent Catholic movement, and eventually exiled by controversy. He roamed from Europe to New York, consecrated successors, founded splinter jurisdictions, and finally, at age 46, gave it all up — renouncing his miter to become an Augustinian novice in the Roman Catholic Church.

Here was a man who tried on ecclesial identities — Anglican, High Church, Old/Independent Catholic, Roman Catholic — the way some try on musical genres, shifting from classical to punk to gospel to indie rock, all in search of the authentic sound of grace.

In the end, de Landas Berghes discovered that true authority isn’t institutional power, but spiritual humility. Perhaps he came to see the wisdom of the Matthean Jesus: “Whoever would be great among you must be your servant” (Mt. 20:26). His conversion from prince-bishop to postulant embodies that paradox.

The story of de Landas Berghes reads like a mashup of *The Crown* and *The Good Place*: a noble trying to navigate structures of power, only to find that salvation lies in surrender, not status.

### **The Thread that Binds Them: Conscience Meets Communion**

What unites Dreuillet and de Landas Berghes is not doctrinal alignment, but spiritual integrity. Both men confronted the limits of institutional religion and sought to reconcile faith with freedom, authority with authenticity.

Dreuillet reminds us that the Church needs reformers who dare to question. De Landas Berghes reminds us that reformers, too, must learn humility and obedience to love.

Together, they show that **Catholic conscience is not a solo act. It is a symphony.** The harmony requires tension: prophetic dissent on one note, humble communion with others on another. Lose either, and the song collapses.

Pope Francis wrote in *Fratelli Tutti*: “Dialogue is often confused with weakness, but it is actually a form of strength.” These two forgotten bishops teach us that both dialogue and conversion require tolerance, patience and an openness to being wrong!

In *Dead Poets Society*, we hear a clear *carpe diem* against institutional rigidity. In *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, chaos meets with radical kindness. *The Matrix Resurrections* highlights an awakening from illusions of control. The Beatles’ “Let It Be” encourages the gentle wisdom of surrender. Beyoncé’s “Break My Soul” calls for liberation from toxic systems. Each of these, in its own key, sings what Dreuillet and de Landas Berghes lived: faith as freedom, and freedom as fidelity!

### **Calls to Action**

As Catholics and people of good will, we might learn several lessons from Dreuillet and de Landas Berghes:

- **Listen before labeling.** Engage with those who differ – in theology, politics or spirituality. True dialogue begins with curiosity, not condemnation.
- **Read marginalized voices.** Recover figures like Dreuillet and de Landas Berghes who show that Catholic history is not a single stream, but a confluence of conscience.
- **Hold authority accountable – but with love.** Critique church and civic power where needed, while resisting cynicism. Remember: Dissent, without love, leads to destruction.
- **Find your own rhythm of humility.** Whether in daily life or online debate, practice what de Landas Berghes learned late: Authority comes from service, not self-assertion.
- **Celebrate conscience as communion.** Join or start local study circles, liturgies, or online communities that hold open space for a more progressive, inclusive faith.

Two bishops. Two centuries apart. Both reminding us to “act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God” (Mic. 6:8). On this November 17, may we remember Dreuillet’s courage to question and de Landas Berghes’ humility to surrender—for both are needed if the Church is ever to be whole again!

## **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

### **Conscience**

- When have I felt torn between loyalty to an institution, and fidelity to my conscience?
- How do I discern the difference between stubbornness and Spirit-led conviction?
- In what ways might God be calling me to gently but firmly speak truth to power?
- How do I listen to God's still, small voice (1Kgs 19:12) before reacting to the louder ones around me?

### **Communion**

- How can I hold space for dialogue with those whose beliefs sharply differ from mine?
- When have I confused unity with uniformity?
- How willing am I to belong to a Church – and a world – that includes imperfection, complexity and contradiction?
- How might I build bridges instead of echo chambers in my home, workplace, or online life?

### **Courage**

- What risks am I being invited to take for the sake of truth or compassion?
- Like André Dreuillet, what courage do I display to question what seems unjust or unmerciful, even within my own community?
- How can I nurture courage that is rooted in love, rather than anger?
- Which examples in Scripture – such as Peter before the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:1-22) or Paul and Barnabas at the “Council of Jerusalem” (Acts 15:1-2) – help me understand faithful dissent?

### **Conversion**

- Like Rudolph de Landas Berghes, what parts of my identity might God be inviting me to release?
- Am I willing to trade titles, power or prestige for deeper authenticity?
- Where might humility be the next step in my spiritual growth?
- What would “downward mobility” in imitation of Christ (Phil. 2:5-8) look like in my life right now?



### Living the Questions

- How can I help create communities where conscience and compassion coexist?
- What would it look like for our Church—and for me—to be more open to diverse expressions of faith?
- In what practical ways can I embody Dreuillet's integrity and de Landas Berghes' humility this week?

### A Prayer for Conscience and Communion

God of truth and tenderness, You have written Your law upon our hearts—a law deeper than decrees, wider than doctrines, and more enduring than any human power. Grant us, like André Dreuillet, the courage to question when conscience calls, to listen more than we argue, and to seek justice within Your mercy. Grant us, like Rudolph de Landas Berghes, the humility to walk away from titles that no longer serve love, to begin again when pride gives way to grace, and to find our home not in hierarchy, but in hope. Teach us to live between conviction and compassion, to hold truth without weaponizing it, and to build bridges where walls have long stood. May our Church, our nation, and our hearts be places where every voice can be heard, every conscience can breathe freely, and every soul can find rest in Your boundless love. Through Christ, who meets us in both courage and conversion. Amen.

### Small Is Holy

Bishop Karl Prüter and the World's Smallest Cathedral

November 18, 2025



In an age of mega-churches, viral platforms, and institutional grandeur, one Independent Catholic bishop in rural Missouri quietly preached a different gospel: that smallness—in community, in scale, in ego—can reveal something of God's own grandeur. **Bishop Karl Hugo Prüter** (1920–2007), founder of Christ Catholic Church and builder of

what the *Guinness Book of World Records* named the world's smallest cathedral, offers a lesson that feels radical today: The Kingdom of God begins in the humble, the local, and the sincere!

### **The Man Who Built the Smallest Cathedral**

Karl Prüter's life journey took him across denominations and continents—from his Lutheran seminary studies, to Congregationalist ministry, to his participation in the Free Catholic movement, to his consecration as an Independent Catholic bishop. By the time he settled in Highlandville, Missouri, Bishop Prüter had founded the Christ Catholic Church, established St. Willibrord's Press, and published extensively on mysticism, Old/Independent Catholic history, and spiritual renewal.

Yet it wasn't his publishing that caught the world's eye. It was Bishop Prüter's tiny cathedral, dedicated to Christ the Prince of Peace. Measuring 14 by 17 feet, his worship space was not a stunt to win him a place in the pages of the *Guinness Book of World Records*. It was a spiritual statement: that God dwells not in massive institutions or ornate hierarchies, but in every humble heart that welcomes peace (cf. Lk. 2:14).

Bishop Prüter's tiny cathedral stood as both sanctuary and symbol—a theology in timber and glass. In an era when churches compete for members and visibility, Bishop Prüter's cathedral whispered the countercultural truth Jesus taught: "The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed...the smallest of all the seeds, yet it becomes a great tree" (Mk. 4:30–32).

### **A Church Beyond Walls**

Bishop Prüter's life unfolded outside of Rome's official orbit, but within the wider Catholic imagination—a space where conscience, inclusivity and contemplative depth meet. He believed that one could be Catholic without being Roman, that authenticity mattered more than affiliation. His Christ Catholic Church reflected a sacramental faith open to divorced/remarried and LGBTQ+ Christians long before mainstream denominations dared speak of inclusion.

Prüter's vision anticipated Pope Francis' insistence that the Church is a field hospital, rather than a fortress. But he also anticipated something else: the move toward small faith communities—the kind you see in intentional communities, house churches, and online prayer circles today. For Bishop Prüter, intimacy wasn't weakness. It was fidelity to the early Church, when believers gathered "from house to house, breaking bread...with glad and sincere hearts" (Acts 2:46).

## Mysticism, Conscience and Quiet Revolution

A student of Christian mystics, Prüter once wrote that “the contemplative life begins wherever love listens.” He believed that the contemplative and the activist are not opposites, but allies. Mysticism without justice becomes self-absorption; justice without mysticism becomes burnout.

Bishop Prüter’s example recalls figures like St. Francis of Assisi (c. 1182-1226), who rebuilt the Church “stone by stone,” or St. Julian of Norwich (c. 1342-1416), who proclaimed in the midst of plague that “all shall be well.” In modern pop culture, we might compare Prüter’s “smallest cathedral” to the community-centered wisdom of *Parks and Recreation*, or the soulful optimism in *Little Miss Sunshine*—each reminding us that love, kindness and persistence, though humble, can quietly transform the world!

## The Prophetic Power of Smallness

Progressive Catholics often dream of grand structural reform—a “Vatican III” of sweeping policy shifts and full sacramental equality. But Prüter’s legacy nudges us to remember that the revolution begins in miniature: in the living rooms where small groups pray and dream, in the tiny faith communities that bless without permission, in the quiet consciences that choose love over rule.

Bishop Prüter’s “world’s smallest cathedral” wasn’t just a record; it was a parable. It said: “This is enough. God is here.” In an age of social media megaphones, Prüter’s humility feels almost subversive. It aligns with Jesus’ teaching: “When you pray, go into your room, close the door, and pray to your Father who is in secret” (Mt. 6:6). The God of grandeur is the God of smallness—found not in the empire’s palace, but in a manger!

Pop culture constantly nods to this truth: Think of *Paddington 2*, where small acts of kindness ripple into community-wide change, or *Coco*, where love and remembrance preserve family and culture.

## Lessons for Catholics from Bishop Prüter and His “Smallest Cathedral”

- **Value the Local and Small.** Renewal begins with relationships, not resolutions.
- **Honor Conscience and Inclusion.** Build spaces where everyone belongs, even if the space is no bigger than a “mustard seed”!
- **Integrate Mysticism and Activism.** Pray deeply. Act boldly. Don’t separate the two.

- **Create, Don't Wait.** Like Prüter, find new forms of Church when old ones fail to love.
- **Be a Church of Peace.** His cathedral was named for the Prince of Peace. What if every church made peace—not power—its mission?

As we step back from these lessons from Prüter, we are reminded that transformation—both personal and communal—rarely comes through grand gestures or swift victories. True growth often begins quietly, in our daily choices to act with integrity, to extend mercy, and to remain open to the wisdom of others. These reflections invite us to notice where our hearts are called to stretch, to listen, and to respond with courage and compassion. May we carry these insights into our own lives, allowing them to shape not only how we see the world, but how we participate in it, cultivating a life marked by purpose, grace and attentive care for those around us!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- Where do I find “the sacred small” in my own life—those humble spaces where God feels nearest?
- How might I cultivate peace and inclusion in my life and local community?
- What am I building: a “monument,” or a “mustard seed”?
- How can I integrate prayer and action, in the spirit of Bishop Prüter’s mysticism?
- How do I resist the temptation to measure success by size, visibility or influence?

### **A Prayer for Holy Smallness**

God of mustard seeds and manger-born dreams, teach us to love the little things. Bless our quiet efforts, our tiny “chapels” of peace, our whispered prayers for justice and joy. As you dwelled in Bishop Karl Prüter’s “smallest cathedral,” dwell also in our imperfect hearts. May our faith be simple, spacious and sincere—a home for all who seek Your peace. Through Christ, who sanctified the small and made it sacred. Amen.

## **Rethinking Manhood**

### Guiding Men Toward Healthy Masculinity

November 19, 2025



We easily think of days and months dedicated to honoring historically-marginalized communities—like Black History Month, Hispanic Heritage Month, and International Women’s Day. But what about men? On **International Men’s Day** (November 19), we are invited to pause and reflect—not just on men in the abstract, but on the challenges, responsibilities and opportunities of healthy manhood in a world still grappling with the long shadow of patriarchal dominance.

### **Men in Historical Context**

For millennia, men wielded power over women, children, and, yes, other men. Anthropological and historical studies reveal patterns of aggression, conquest and domination that have shaped societies, from ancient empires to modern states. Even within religious communities, male leadership was often tightly concentrated, and male authority frequently went unchallenged.

Today, these patterns persist in subtle and overt ways. The rise of the “manosphere”—online communities that sometimes valorize toxic masculinity—and the prominent role of certain men in political extremism, violence and social unrest remind us that maleness carries both opportunity and responsibility.

### **Shifting the Lens: Healthy Models of Manhood**

But masculinity is not inherently destructive. Throughout scripture and Church tradition, we find examples of men whose strength was measured not in dominance, but in courage, service, humility and compassion.

In the scriptures, we read of David’s loving service to Saul (1Sam. 16:14-23) and the deep feelings for David by Saul’s son, Jonathan (1Sam. 18:1-5). We hear how Joseph protected Mary and Jesus by spiriting them

away to Egypt (Mt. 2:13-15). We also see Jesus lift high the model of the Good Shepherd's (Jn. 10:11-15).

In Church history, we see monastic figures like St. Augustine (c. 354-430), whose journey from youthful impulsivity to mature faith reminds us that transformation is possible; St. Benedict (c. 480-547), who emphasized discipline, obedience and care for community; and St. Francis of Assisi (c. 1182-1226), who exhorted his brothers to be "mothers" to one another.

Pop culture also provides accessible models of vulnerability and growth. Think of Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, who balances courage with justice; or Samwise Gamgee in *The Lord of the Rings*, whose loyalty, humility and love for others quietly reshape the world around him.

### **Lessons for Supporting the Men Around Us**

So, how can we help the men in our lives grow into healthier, more life-giving versions of themselves? Consider these principles:

- **Encourage Emotional Literacy.** Men are often socialized to suppress emotion. Offer spaces where they can express grief, fear, joy and doubt without judgment.
- **Model Compassionate Leadership.** Whether in family, workplace or community, emphasize service over dominance.
- **Celebrate Vulnerability as Strength.** Highlight stories of men who lead through gentleness, listening and integrity.
- **Cultivate Community.** Healthy masculinity thrives in relationships grounded in accountability, mutual respect and love.

As Catholics, we are called to reimagine masculinity in the light of Christ, not as a privilege to wield over others, but as a vocation to serve, protect and nurture. International Men's Day can be a moment not for celebration alone, but for reflection: on the men in our lives, the models they follow, and the legacy of maleness we choose to pass on to future generations!

This International Men's Day, let us pray for men—not only to grow in strength and resilience, but to embody the virtues that make communities flourish: justice, humility, compassion and courage tempered by love. And let us commit to walking alongside them, challenging the harmful patterns of the past, and nurturing a future where masculinity and faith are in service to the common good!

### Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- When have I witnessed men in my life demonstrate true strength through service, humility or compassion, rather than dominance?
- Are there ways I have unconsciously supported unhealthy models of masculinity? How might I challenge those patterns?
- Which scriptural or Church figures inspire me to a healthier understanding of maleness? Why?
- How can I support the men in my family, workplace or community to grow in emotional literacy, accountability and integrity?
- In what ways can I embrace or practice vulnerability as a strength in my own life?

### A Prayer for Men and Healthy Masculinity

God of compassion and wisdom, we lift up the men in our lives—fathers, brothers, sons, friends and mentors. Grant them the courage to lead with justice, the humility to serve without pride, and the wisdom to temper strength with gentleness. Help them break free from patterns of domination and aggression, and guide them toward lives marked by integrity, empathy and love. May their hearts be open to the transformative power of Your Spirit, that they may protect the vulnerable, uplift the oppressed, and nurture communities of faith and hope. Through Christ, our model of true strength and servant leadership, we pray. Amen.

## Breaking the Cudgel

Father Daniel Helminiak and the Liberation of the LGBTQIA+ Soul

November 20, 2025



Bibliophiles effortlessly speak of the books that have changed how they see the world. As a bibliophile myself, I am surrounded by 2,000+ books here in my office, but few have touched my heart and life like Father Daniel Helminiak's work, *What the Bible Really Says About*

*Homosexuality.* As we celebrate Helminiak's 83<sup>rd</sup> birthday today, please indulge me as I share how his work shaped my own faith journey, and how it continues to offer liberation and insight for Catholics navigating questions of sexuality in light of Scripture, Church tradition, and the teachings of the Roman Catholic magisterium.

### **Discovering Liberation Between the Shelves**

Nearly thirty years ago, I was a student at the Washington Theological Union (WTU), where one of my favorite pastimes between classes was wandering the library's bookshelves. I'll never forget the day I discovered Helminiak's book. I remember exactly where it sat, and how I immediately devoured it.

Five years prior, I had come out to myself and to my closest friends, then to my parents two years later. The memory of my father's words stung for years: "I thought we had raised you better than that." Like many LGBTQIA+ Catholics, I had wrestled with the Papa Ratzinger's labeling of same-sex acts as "intrinsically immoral" and "objectively disordered." As part of an all-male community, though, I was also acutely aware of the contradictions around clerical celibacy, and I often joke that I have never met a celibate Roman Catholic priest or religious!

As you can imagine, then, Helminiak's book was a breath of fresh air. For the first time, I read a scholarly, faithful Catholic perspective that dispelled several misunderstandings I had carried, revealing the Bible not as a cudgel, but as a text requiring careful interpretation and context. I also felt an immediate connection to Helminiak, who had once been in residence at Cristo Rey Catholic Church in Austin, the very parish where I had completed a nine-month youth ministry internship prior to my studies at the WTU – and where I would later serve as a deacon, associate pastor and pastor.

### **A Faithful Integration of Theology, Psychology and Humanity**

Helminiak's work integrates psychology, theology and human development, offering a model of scholarship that is deeply Catholic, yet responsive to contemporary science. He reminds us that Scripture must be read in its historical, cultural and linguistic contexts. His insights invite LGBTQIA+ Catholics – and all Christians wrestling with questions of sexuality – to live authentically without fear, guilt or shame.

In my priestly ministry, I have shared Helminiak's book with others who seek liberation. I vividly recall certain recipients, including a young man from Mexico overwhelmed by guilt over his sexuality, and an aged mother distraught over her adult daughter's same-sex relationship. In



each case, Helminiak's clear and compassionate interpretation of Scripture offered freedom, reassurance and hope!

### **Biblical and Cultural Touchstones**

Our Judeo-Christian scriptures are replete with examples of same-sex love. We deeply feel the love shared by Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi (Ruth 1:8-17). We feel liberated when we read of how Jonathan "loved [David] as himself" (1Sam. 18:3), and how David mourned Jonathan's death: "You were very dear to me. Your love for me was wonderful, more wonderful than that of women" (2Sam. 1:26). In an intimate gesture, even "the disciple whom Jesus loved" placed his head on Jesus' breast (Jn. 13:23-25). Indeed, Jesus' radical embrace of marginalized people reminds us that God's love transcends human limitations, social hierarchies and societal taboos!

In our U.S. popular culture, Helminiak's scholarship resonates in stories like *Moonlight*, *Call Me by Your Name* and *Schitt's Creek*, where love, identity and self-acceptance triumph over societal and internalized condemnation.

### **Lessons for Catholics**

As we celebrate Helminiak's life, witness and works, we glean various lessons:

- **Faith and authenticity can coexist.** Helminiak models a life of fidelity to God while embracing personal truth.
- **Scholarship can be pastoral.** Academic rigor, when paired with compassion, can transform lives and communities.
- **Liberation requires dialogue.** Engaging Scripture, Church tradition, and human science together fosters understanding, not judgment.
- **We are called to support others.** Sharing tools of liberation—books, conversations, pastoral care—can have a profound, generational impact!

In the end, Father Helminiak's witness reminds us that liberation is not rebellion; it is revelation. It is the uncovering of the truth that God's image is reflected in every human face, in every honest love, in every faithful search for meaning. His courage and scholarship remind us that the Church's ongoing conversion depends on the voices of those once silenced, who now proclaim God's boundless grace with clarity and conviction!

Helminiak's life and work call us beyond fear and into freedom—the kind of freedom Christ proclaimed when he said, "You will know the

truth, and the truth will set you free” (Jn. 8:32). His example invites us to become builders of bridges, rather than walls, and seekers of truth, rather than guardians of dogma. When we create spaces where faith and authenticity meet, where science and spirituality speak to one another, we participate in God’s ongoing act of creation—forming a Church that mirrors the inclusive love of Jesus himself!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- How, in my experience and in the lives of the LGBTQIA+ persons I know, has Scripture been used to limit or liberate?
- Who are the mentors, authors or saints that have helped me reconcile faith with authentic selfhood?
- How might I use my gifts, influence or ministry to support the liberation and dignity of others?
- In what ways can I cultivate communities where our LGBTQIA+ siblings are encouraged to integrate faith, sexuality and personal integrity?

### **A Prayer of Gratitude**

God of wisdom and love, we thank You for the courage and insight of Father Daniel Helminiak, whose work invites us to read Your Word with justice, compassion and truth. May we honor his legacy by embracing authenticity in our own lives, advocating for the marginalized, and offering hope where fear or shame has taken hold. Bless the LGBTQIA+ community with understanding, faith and freedom, and guide all of us to live in integrity, love and fellowship. Through Christ, who redeems and liberates, we pray. Amen.

## Rites, Passage and Presence

### Reimagining Milestones for Children and Youth

November 21, 2025



November 21 invites reflection on the milestones we mark — and those we neglect — in the lives of young people. From today's celebration of the Presentation of Mary to the celebration of *quinceañeras* in the Latino culture, and from Catholic sacraments to the lack of mythopoetic rites for boys, we see a recurring tension: How might we honor growth, guide conscience, and celebrate identity, without reinforcing outdated beliefs? Today, we explore how Catholics might reimagine these passages — for girls, boys, and all children of God.

#### **The Presentation of Mary: Early Devotion and Cultural Resonance**

Though lacking scriptural basis, the Church celebrates the Presentation of Mary on November 21, often depicting her as a three-year-old in the Jerusalem Temple. In the Latino culture, this story helped inspire the *presentación de 3 años*, a ritual in which parents formally present their young children to the Church — a tender act acknowledging children as gifts of God and committing to their spiritual upbringing.

This celebration speaks powerfully to historical concerns about infant and child mortality, while honoring the innocence and dignity of children. It reminds us that faith begins early, and that community can mark milestones in ways that lift up children as sacred beings, not commodities.

#### **Quinceañeras and the Gender Gap**

In contrast, the Latino celebration of the *quinceañera* — the elaborate celebration of a girl's fifteenth birthday — reflects centuries-old patriarchal assumptions. Often costing as much as a wedding, it traditionally signals that a young woman is "ready for society" in ways that implicitly frame her worth in relational or marital terms. This rite is reflected in the "Sweet 16" of U.S. culture — and other variations on debutant balls.

In 25 years as a Catholic priest, I have celebrated hundreds of *quinceañeras* (for young ladies), but only a handful of *quinceañeros* (for 15-year-old boys). The imbalance is striking: Culture provides this public rite of passage for girls, while the transition of boys into adulthood remain largely unmarked.

### **The Mythopoetic Lens: Robert Bly and the Predicament of Boys**

November 21 also marks the passing of Robert Bly (1926–2021), the American poet, essayist and activist whose bestselling 1990 work, *Iron John*, inspired the mythopoetic men’s movement. Bly argued that boys often lack meaningful models and rites of passage to guide them through life’s stages. Without them, young men can feel adrift, leading to aggression, emotional suppression, and a disconnection from the sacred.

Bly’s insights echo the gaps in our own traditions: While girls receive rites like the *quinceañera*, boys have few structured, culturally-sanctioned passages to mark their growth—aside from Church sacraments, which often come late or are unevenly emphasized.

### **Sacraments as Rites of Passage**

The Catholic Church attempts to provide formal life markers: First Communion at the “age of reason” (ages 8–9), with Confirmation often delayed by U.S. Roman Catholic parishes until ages 15–16. These sacraments serve as important liminal moments and often succeed in getting kids to one or two years of religious education for each sacrament, but they too often fail to fully connect with the developmental and psychological needs highlighted by Bly. For both girls and boys, we might ask: *Are these rituals truly formative, or merely ceremonial?*

Catholics are uniquely positioned to ask such questions, exploring how liturgy, community and culture can work together to nurture children into thoughtful, compassionate and spiritually-grounded adults.

### **Calls to Action**

As Catholics, we might do well to engage in the following acts.

- **Rethink rites of passage for boys and girls.** Advocate for rituals that celebrate maturity, responsibility and moral courage, rather than gendered social expectations.
- **Integrate spirituality with developmental guidance.** Ensure that sacraments and church activities address emotional, psychological and moral growth—not just ritual formality.

- **Create inclusive, low-cost celebrations.** Encourage community rituals that are accessible to all young people, avoiding the financial pressures and exclusivity of traditional *quinceañeras*.
- **Model mentorship and presence.** Emulate Bly's call for adult guidance – mentors who teach life skills, emotional literacy and ethical discernment.
- **Listen to young people.** Let children participate in shaping their own milestones, acknowledging their voices as sacred contributions to the community.

From the tender Presentation of Mary to the spectacle of *quinceañeras*, and from the Church's sacraments to Bly's mythopoetic calls, November 21 reminds us that our rituals shape identity, community and conscience. Catholics are called to honor tradition while questioning its limitations: to celebrate children and adolescents with rituals that nurture faith, character and dignity for all genders. When rites are inclusive, intentional and spiritually-grounded, they transform not just individual lives, but entire communities, creating pathways for love, justice and authentic growth!

### Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- How have the rites of passage in my life and in the lives of my family members and friends shaped my understanding of gender, faith and identity?
- In what ways do our current sacraments and celebrations lift up children as sacred, whole beings – or fail to do so?
- How might I advocate for inclusive, meaningful rituals that guide children and teenagers into spiritual and ethical maturity?
- What mentoring relationships can I cultivate to support young people in navigating life's transitions with wisdom and courage?

### A Prayer for Children, Youth and Meaningful Milestones

Loving God, You call all your children into life, love and growth. We thank You for the Presentation of Mary, *quinceañeras*, and all rituals that remind us of the sacredness of childhood and adolescence. Guide us to create rites of passage that honor the dignity of every child – girls and boys alike – and prepare them to live with conscience, courage and compassion. May our communities nurture spiritual, emotional and ethical growth, and may we model for youth the love, justice and mercy of Christ. Amen.

## Prophets of Conscience

Lacordaire, Kozłowski and the Courage to Reform the Church

November 21, 2025



The Catholic Church has always depended on those courageous enough to challenge her for her own good. On November 21, progressive Catholics remember two such figures: **Jean-Baptiste Henri-Dominique Lacordaire** (1802-1861), the French Dominican who revived his Order in post-revolutionary France while defending freedom of conscience, and **Anthony Stanislas Kozłowski** (1857-1907), the pioneering Polish bishop who organized the Polish National Catholic Church in Chicago. Across time and culture, both remind us that the Church's future belongs to those who love her enough to make her uncomfortable!

### The Prophet and the Pastor

Lacordaire was a man of intellect and conviction—a priest, theologian, journalist and revolutionary spirit. After the French Revolution, when Church and state were awkwardly entangled, Lacordaire demanded freedom: freedom of conscience, freedom of the press, and freedom for the Gospel itself to breathe again. “I am free,” he once declared, “because I am a child of God.” For this, he drew criticism from Gregory XVI, who condemned the very liberties Lacordaire championed—but he persisted, arguing that the Gospel's moral authority could only flourish in a Church detached from political power and worldly privilege!

Nearly four decades later, and an ocean away, Anthony Stanislas Kozłowski carried that same reforming fire into the immigrant parishes of Chicago. Polish Catholics, often dismissed by their mostly Irish bishops, longed for priests who spoke their language and shared their struggles. Kozłowski heard their cry and organized the Polish National Catholic Church—rooted in Catholic liturgy and sacraments, yet free from the rigid hierarchy that had ignored them. His episcopal consecration in 1897 marked not rebellion, but renewal: a new expression

of Catholicism that sought inclusion, dignity and voice for the marginalized faithful!

### **Bridges of Reform and Conscience**

Despite their differences, these two men enjoyed various commonalities:

- **Reform Born from Love.** Neither Lacordaire nor Kozłowski sought schism; both sought integrity. Their reforms were born from love of the Church, not disdain for her. Each believed that faithfulness sometimes demands courageous dissent—that to preserve the Gospel’s vitality, the Church must continually return to her roots of humility, simplicity and truth.
- **Freedom and Conscience.** Both stood for freedom as an essential dimension of faith. Lacordaire’s France saw state-sponsored bishops; Kozłowski’s Chicago saw ethnic exclusion. Each challenged systems that silenced conscience and distorted the Body of Christ. They remind us that freedom of conscience is not a modern invention; it is woven into our baptismal dignity, where the Spirit writes the law of love upon every human heart (Jer. 31:33)!
- **Prophetic Discomfort.** Jesus himself unsettled both synagogue and empire. He healed on the Sabbath, spoke to women in public, and praised faith outside of Israel’s borders. The prophets before him engaged in similarly prophetic actions. Lacordaire and Kozłowski follow in that line—individuals who dared to disturb the peace for the sake of a greater peace. In their discomfort, we find fidelity: not to human approval, but to divine calling!
- **The Intellectual and the Pastoral.** Lacordaire wielded the pen; Kozłowski wielded the shepherd’s staff. One wrote treatises on liberty and truth; the other built communities of belonging and hope. Together they show that reform requires both head and heart—the scholar’s vision and the pastor’s tenderness. Faith must think deeply *and* love concretely!

Theirs is the spirit of Peter and Paul—one impulsive, one reflective—each expanding the Church’s imagination of grace. It’s the same tension that shaped Francis and Clare of Assisi, Catherine of Siena, Ignatius of Loyola, Dorothy Day and Oscar Romero. Each era births new prophets who risk misunderstanding for the sake of mercy.

U.S. pop culture offers its own parables. John Keating in *Dead Poets Society* encouraged his students to “seize the day” by thinking freely. Eleanor Shellstrop in *The Good Place* learned that ethics only matter when

love drives them. Ted Lasso displayed an unrelenting belief in people's better angels. These stories echo the same truth that Lacordaire and Kozłowski embodied: True leadership inspires conscience, not conformity—and institutions are redeemed by the integrity of those within them!

### Lessons for Catholics

As we celebrate Lacordaire and Kozłowski today, we do well to reflect on the lessons from their lives and legacies:

- **Freedom and fidelity are not opposites.** Genuine faith requires both commitment to tradition and openness to the Spirit's ongoing work.
- **Reform is an act of communion, not division.** The goal is not to leave the Church, but to help her become more like Christ.
- **Prophetic faith requires discomfort.** Truth-telling is never easy, but silence in the face of injustice is far worse.
- **Every age needs reformers.** The Spirit still stirs hearts today to renew the Church's witness in a changing world.

In their very different ways, Lacordaire and Kozłowski remind us that holiness is not passive obedience, but active fidelity—the courage to listen to God more deeply than to custom. They invite us to be bridge-builders: between intellect and compassion, institution and conscience, hierarchy and community. Their lives teach that freedom within faith is not a threat, but a grace, for it is only in freedom that love becomes real.

May we, like them, be bold enough to reform with reverence, to challenge with charity, and to love the Church into her truest self!

### Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where in my faith life is God calling me to speak or act with greater freedom or integrity?
- Have I confused obedience with silence, or fidelity with fear?
- How can I honor my conscience while remaining in communion with others?
- What bridges might I build—between tradition and innovation, faith and justice, head and heart?

### A Prayer for Freedom and Faithfulness

Loving and Liberating God, You raised up prophets and reformers in every age—those who loved Your Church enough to challenge her and lead her closer to You. We thank You for Jean-Baptiste Lacordaire and Anthony Kozłowski, for their courage, intellect, and compassion. Grant



us the same freedom of spirit and faithfulness of heart, that we might be builders of bridges, seekers of truth, and servants of justice. May our love for the Church mirror Yours—fierce, tender and always reforming. Through Christ our Redeemer and Friend. Amen.

## Following Aslan

Lessons from C.S. Lewis for Catholics Today

November 22, 2025



C.S. Lewis once wrote, “You can make anything by writing.” For me, his words and worlds did more than entertain—his writings shaped my moral imagination, nurtured my faith, and opened my young mind to the radical love of God! Today, as we remember Lewis’ passing in 1963, we reflect on how his works continue to illuminate the journey of faith for Catholics: inviting imagination, courage and mercy into our hearts and communities.

### A Childhood Encounter with Narnia

I can still see my elementary school classroom: rows of desks, with 28 wide-eyed children, and our teacher reading aloud to us from *The Chronicles of Narnia*. I remember the first time I encountered Aslan, the majestic lion who sacrificed himself, only to rise again. Even as a child, I recognized something profoundly Christlike in him. I sensed that love and courage were intertwined, that mercy could be stronger than power, and that redemption was possible even after betrayal.

It was through C.S. Lewis’ works that I first learned to imagine faith as a story larger than myself—a story that encompasses struggle, wonder and the ultimate triumph of love. Lewis’ Narnia planted early seeds in me for seeing God in imagination, for recognizing the sacred in the ordinary, and for understanding that goodness often requires sacrifice.

### **A Seminary Encounter with Rational Faith and Spiritual Insight**

Years later, as a young seminarian, I discovered Lewis' *Mere Christianity* and *The Screwtape Letters*. In *Mere Christianity*, he wrote: "Christianity, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The only thing it cannot be is moderately important." *The Screwtape Letters* offered sharp insights into temptation, moral weakness, and the subtle ways evil can twist ordinary life—a guide for anyone trying to ethically live in a complex world.

These works taught me that faith engages the mind, as well as the heart. Lewis did not suggest blind adherence; he invited reasoned reflection on God, morality and human nature.

For me, these works were liberating and challenging. They challenged a young mind to honestly wrestle with Scripture, tradition and conscience, while offering liberation from fear and guilt—a balance that Catholics continue to seek today.

### **Scripture, Tradition, Culture and the Wisdom of C.S. Lewis**

Lewis' work resonates deeply with the Bible and Christian tradition. His portrayal of Aslan mirrors Christ's self-giving love (Jn. 15:13), while his ethical reflections echo the prophetic call to justice, mercy and courage (Mic. 6:8). In *Mere Christianity*, he affirms moral law as a universal guide: "There is a Law of Human Nature, which is quite different from the laws of science." This recognition that ethics transcend culture and convention aligns with the Church's long tradition of natural law, yet Lewis made these truths accessible, relatable and even playful.

Lewis' influence extends far beyond his books. The imaginative and moral lessons of Narnia resonate in *The Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, *The Chronicles of Prydain* and even *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. Modern audiences continue to respond to stories where courage, mercy and imagination illuminate the path toward justice and human flourishing. Catholics can see these narratives as contemporary parables—ways to teach, inspire and live the Gospel in culture!

### **Lessons for Catholics Today**

Today's celebration of C.S. Lewis brings to mind various lessons:

- **Faith and reason can coexist.** Lewis demonstrates that intellectual inquiry strengthens, rather than undermines, belief.
- **Imagination is sacred.** Fantasy, myth and story can reveal truths about God, morality and human potential.
- **Courage is relational and redemptive.** Like Aslan, moral courage often requires sacrifice for the good of others.

- **Engage culture with insight.** Lewis modeled a faith that speaks to contemporary questions without abandoning tradition.
- **Love is central.** Every ethical, spiritual and imaginative choice points to God's love for the marginalized, weak and ordinary.

C.S. Lewis reminds us that faith is not only a set of doctrines; it is an imaginative, ethical and relational journey. He shows us that Christ's love, like Aslan's roar, calls us to courage and action. For Catholics today, his writings inspire us to embrace reason and wonder, to challenge injustice, and to cultivate communities of empathy and love. In every story we read, every question we wrestle with, and every act of courage we take, we walk alongside Aslan—and, ultimately, Christ himself!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- How have stories, imagination or myth shaped my understanding of God and moral responsibility?
- In what ways do I integrate reason and conscience into my faith journey?
- How might I model to others courage, mercy and creative engagement?
- Where is Christ calling me to see and act with sacrificial love today?

### **A Prayer Inspired by C.S. Lewis**

God of wisdom and wonder, we thank You for C.S. Lewis, who taught us that imagination can reveal Your truth, that reason can deepen faith, and that love is always sacrificial. Open our eyes to Your presence in story, in culture, and in everyday life. Grant us courage like Aslan's, insight like Lewis', and hearts attuned to justice, mercy and beauty. May our communities reflect Your love, and may our lives be guided by Your Spirit—ever faithful, ever bold! Through Christ, the Word made flesh, we pray. Amen.

## **The King We Need – and the Kings We Settle for**

### Christ the King in an Age of Strongmen

November 23, 2025



Some 20,000 people gathered for a recent “No Kings” rally here in Austin, Texas. As we marched from the Capitol to Vic Mathias Shores, one agitator’s shrill megaphone broke through: “Jesus is king—and Trump is your president!” His words, meant to provoke, forced me to reflect on my calling in that moment. I decided to engage him—not only to better understand and lovingly challenge him, but also to spare those who suffered his contrarian shouts.

### **When Religion is a Weapon, not a Witness**

Human beings have long used religion for nefarious purposes. Christian nationalism provides ample examples today. Our Texas Legislature recently mandated the posting of the Ten Commandments in every public school classroom. (Catholics shake their heads: The chosen translation is not the traditional Catholic version, which drops the prohibition against graven images. Bible scholars shake their heads: The list they approved actually includes eleven commands!) Jesus is no doubt weeping at such political theater—public “piety” deployed to impose conformity and uniformity, rather than cultivate the breathtaking diversity and inclusivity of God’s reign.

### **The Real King vs. the Strongman Fantasy**

Jesus’ kingship stands in stark contrast to the worldly “strong man” rulers admired by so many. He entered Jerusalem not in a chariot or on a war horse, but riding a humble donkey. His crown was not gold, but thorns. He died, as Father Donald Buggert loved to observe, “a god-damned death”—for “cursed is the one who hangs on a tree” (Dt. 21:23). His earliest disciples struggled to make sense of a king whose “coronation” looked like execution!

Catholics, Christians, and all people of good will must ask: Can we claim Jesus as “King of kings and Lord of lords” (Rev. 19:16) while

betraying the Gospel values of love, mercy and peace? If the Jesus of history returned today, I suspect he would be far more interested in our actions, than in our utterances. After all, we do not sing: “And they’ll know we are Christians by our words, by our words. Yes, they’ll know that we are Christians by our words”!

### **A King in Name Only?**

I often say that, for many, Jesus has become like the King of England: a ceremonial figurehead whose title is honored and whose portrait hangs on the wall, while real authority belongs to such “prime ministers” as ego, self-interest, self-gratification, ambition and greed. This is particularly notable in present-day personality cults surrounding political “strong men”—a dynamic that edges dangerously close to idolatry. (Remember that commandment: “Thou shalt have no other gods before me”?)

One online image this week drove home the point: an elderly man sports a red T-shirt declaring, “I don’t care if [this man’s apparent political idol] is a pedophile.” The very Jesus who warned against causing harm to “these little ones” (Mt. 18:6) would undoubtedly disagree! For such a person to claim that Jesus is king would be, in a word, farcical.

### **Angel on One Shoulder, Devil on the Other**

Today’s solemnity of Christ the King brings to mind those old cartoons, where an angel on one shoulder urges the protagonist toward gospel values, while a devil on the other whispers sweet temptations. Today, the angel reminds us to feed the hungry (Mt. 25:35), while the devil suggests that we simply be quiet when we see cuts to food aid programs that harm millions domestically and kill hundreds of thousands globally. The angel calls us to welcome the stranger (Lev. 19:34; Mt. 25:35); the devil counters, “Bow down to me as an ICE agent who terrorizes the most vulnerable among you, and all this shall be yours!” Jesus’ retort is telling: “Begone, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and God alone shall you serve’” (Mt. 4:10; Lk. 4:8).

To worship Jesus as King—or not to worship Jesus as King. That is the question.

### **Stumbling After Jesus**

Back in 2004, when he was better known for music than mayhem, Kanye West released “Jesus Walks.” I was a high-school teacher, so you can imagine the spirited conversations that erupted in my freshman New Testament class.

“We at war,” Kanye rapped. “We at war with terrorism, racism, but most of all we at war with ourselves... God show me the way because the devil’s tryna break me down.” He wasn’t arguing about theology or converting atheists. He just admitted—quite honestly—that he needed Jesus the way “school need teachers, the way Kathie Lee need Regis... The only thing that I pray is that my feet don’t fail me now.” Kanye recognized something deeply biblical: Following the real King is less about marching in line, and more about stumbling forward one faithful step at a time.

The truth is: It’s not our feet that fail us. It’s the direction we choose to walk.

### **The Church’s Own “No Kings” Moment**

Shortly after I was ordained, the Roman Catholic Church faced its own “No Kings” reckoning—the 2002 clergy sexual abuse crisis. Hierarchs had to choose between their “better angels” and their worst, ego-driven instincts. Some leaders embraced transparency; others clung to secrecy, imagining themselves “above the law.”

Many of the faithful voted with their feet, showing us that they could no longer “walk the walk” with the churches of their childhood. A recent Pew survey suggests that one in eight Americans is now a former Roman Catholic. Wherever they are, I pray they are finding “better angels.”

### **Whose Kingdom Are We Building?**

On this Solemnity of Christ the King, we are invited to reject false kings and queens—whether they sit on thrones, hold office, trend on social media, or whisper in the hidden chambers of our own hearts. To follow Christ the King is to choose humility over swagger, service over domination, truth over propaganda, mercy over malice, and love over every counterfeit power that clamors for our allegiance.

The world has plenty of kings who promise strength but deliver fear. Christ is the only King who conquers by surrender, reigns by serving, and wins through love. May we have the courage not just to say “Jesus is King,” but to live as if it were true—one brave, faithful step at a time!

### Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Who or what functions as a “king” in my daily life? What desires, fears, or loyalties most shape my choices—and do they reflect the Gospel or something else?
- Where am I tempted to choose comfort over courage? When do I remain silent in the face of injustice, exclusion or cruelty?
- How do I respond when faith is twisted for political gain? Do I react with anger or avoidance, or with engagement grounded in Christlike love?
- Whom do I overlook or dismiss—intentionally or not? How might Christ be inviting me to see His presence in the hungry, the stranger, the immigrant, the prisoner, the politically-inconvenient?
- What idols do I need to lay down? Power? Security? Partisanship? The desire to be right, rather than loving?
- Where is Jesus’ kingship already visible in my life? In moments of compassion? Courage? Humility? How might I strengthen those places of grace?
- What step—small but real—can I take this week to “walk the walk”? To act in a way that makes Christ’s reign a little more visible in the world?

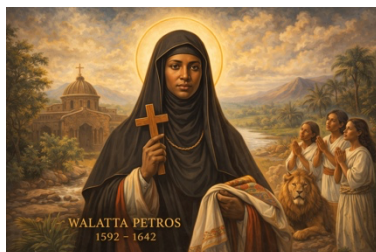
### Let Us Pray

Lord Jesus Christ, our true and humble King, in a world crowded with false rulers and noisy idols, teach us again to recognize Your voice. Calm our anxious hearts, quiet the clamor of ego and fear within us, and free us from the leaders we create in our own image. Turn our eyes toward Your way—the way of mercy, of truth, of courage, of costly love. Strengthen us to stand with the hungry, to welcome the stranger, to defend the vulnerable, and to speak the truth even when it trembles on our lips. When we are tempted to seek power instead of service, privilege instead of justice, certainty instead of compassion, call us back to You—the King who rides a donkey, wears a crown of thorns, and reigns from a cross. Make us citizens of Your Kingdom, not in word alone, but in the daily witness of our lives. And as we leave this day behind, may Your Spirit guide our feet, steady our steps, and lead us ever closer to the world You dream—where love is stronger than fear and every knee bows not to force, but to grace. Amen.

## The Nun Who Said “No” to Empire

### Remembering Walatta Petros

November 24, 2025



What does it mean to follow Christ when faith challenges power, culture, and even the Church itself? Yesterday, we remembered the passing of **Walatta Petros**—a 17<sup>th</sup>-century Ethiopian nun, leader, reformer and protector—whose fierce, joyful resistance to empire speaks directly into our own political moment.

Let’s be honest: Whether you’re watching the drama surrounding the release of the Epstein files, or observing national leaders argue like they’re auditioning for a bad spinoff of *House of Cards*, it’s not always easy to discern what faithful courage looks like!

Walatta Petros can help.

### **Walatta Petros: A Saint for Our Times**

Walatta Petros (1592–1642) was no ordinary nun. Born in Ethiopia, she endured the devastating loss of her three children, a grief that became the soil from which her call to radical discipleship grew. She shaved her head, left her husband, entered religious life, and went on to found multiple communities of women devoted to prayer, hospitality and the protection of the vulnerable.

But her holiness was not quiet. It was bold, embodied and unshakably political.

Walatta led a movement that successfully expelled Portuguese Jesuit missionaries from Ethiopia, defending both her nation’s sovereignty and its ancient Orthodox Christian traditions. She did not bow to religious or political pressure—not even when that pressure came armed with crowns, clerics or colonial soldiers. She lived the reality of Jesus’ warning: “If the world hates you, remember that it hated me first.” (Jn. 15:18-19)



Her biography, written thirty years after her death, records 27 miracles – most of them acts of protection for the marginalized, refugees, or those escaping violent rulers.

And at the heart of her life stood a deep, lifelong partnership with Eheta Kristos, who succeeded her as head of their community. Their shared life of prayer, leadership, affection and mission offers one of the earliest documented glimpses of same-sex love and companionship in sub-Saharan Africa – a love marked by friendship, devotion and shared vocation.

### **Lessons for Catholics Today**

Few Catholics on this continent are familiar with Walatta Petros. The more we learn about her, the more we see the lessons that emerge from her life:

- **Courage Against Authority.** Walatta resisted foreign religious influence that sought to remake Ethiopian Christianity in a colonial image. Today, this might look like asking why certain political movements try to baptize their agendas in Christian language that Jesus himself might not recognize. Her courage calls us back to Micah's challenge: "To act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God" (Mic. 6:8).
- **Women's Leadership Matters.** Walatta founded robust communities where women taught, governed and protected. In a Church still learning (slowly...very slowly...more slowly than any legislature) to value women's leadership, her witness gives us both challenge and hope.
- **Inclusive Love Is Radical and Necessary.** Walatta's relationship with Eheta reminds us that love – real love – defies narrow categories. St. Paul said it long before we debated it: "There is neither Jew nor Greek...male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28).
- **True Authority = Service.** Like Christ washing his disciples' feet (Jn. 13:1-17), Walatta's authority was rooted in service. Her miracles were acts of protection, not performance. Imagine if our political leaders took that seriously.
- **Faithfulness Includes Cultural Respect.** Walatta defended the treasures of Ethiopian Orthodoxy against erasure. Her example challenges us today to honor local cultures, indigenous wisdom, and marginalized voices – without letting empire (religious or political) flatten them.

### **The Wisdom of African Proverbs**

Various African proverbs and folk sayings come to mind that find an echo in Waletta's life and ministry:

- Walatta built strong, supportive communities of women, reminding us of the West African proverb: "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."
- She emphasized the power of community and collective action, calling to mind the Congolese proverb: "A single bracelet does not jingle."
- She suggested that resources and tools alone aren't enough; intention, care and leadership matter. This calls to mind the African proverb: "Even the best cooking pot will not produce food."
- She reflected the importance of shared knowledge and communal spiritual leadership, reminding us, like the Akan proverb, that "wisdom is like a baobab tree: No one individual can embrace it."

In many ways, Walatta Petros reminds us of characters who challenge corrupt power while fostering community and inclusion. Think of *Black Panther* (2018), where leadership is inseparable from service, protection and respect for culture, or *Selma* (2014), which highlights spiritual courage, activism and moral leadership in the face of systemic oppression.

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- Where is Christ calling me to say "no" to empire in my own life?
- What powers or authorities—political, religious, cultural—need to be challenged by the Gospel?
- How am I fostering, or resisting, inclusive love?
- Where can I raise up women's leadership in our world?
- What marginalized traditions or voices have I ignored or undervalued?
- Do my daily actions reflect service, or a desire for control or comfort?
- Whom is God inviting me to stand beside with courage?
- What empire—fear, prejudice, political idolatry—needs to fall within my own heart?

### **A Prayer Inspired by Walatta Petros**

God of courage, love and justice, You raised up Walatta Petros, who protected the vulnerable, defended the dignity of her people, and loved boldly with a fearless heart. Grant us her courage to challenge unjust power, her tenderness to lift up the marginalized, and her joy in building

communities of love. Make us faithful, compassionate and unafraid—like Walatta, like Christ, like all your saints who dared to say “no” to empire and “yes” to Your Kingdom. Amen.

### **Break the Spiked Wheel**

St. Catherine, the Mirabal Sisters,  
and Decrying Violence against Women

November 25, 2025



What does a brilliant young woman from 4<sup>th</sup>-century Alexandria have to say to a world where one in three women today experiences violence? More than we might expect!

### **The Woman Who Wouldn't Be Silenced**

Every November 25, the Church remembers St. Catherine of Alexandria, a mystic, scholar and martyr whose story reads like a blend of *Erin Brockovich*, *Hidden Figures*, and *The Hunger Games*—except she lived 1,700 years before Hollywood started making movies about courageous women.

According to tradition, Catherine was a young philosopher of dazzling intellect. The emperor Maxentius summoned her to debate the empire's greatest scholars, hoping to humiliate her into silence. Instead, she confounded them—and several reportedly converted to Christianity on the spot. Maxentius' response? Not admiration, not respectful disagreement, but violence. When powerful men cannot win the argument, they often pick up the sword.

Catherine was sentenced to death—first by torture on a spiked wheel, and finally by beheading when the wheel miraculously shattered. Her story became a symbol of Christian courage, intellectual integrity, and steadfastness in the face of tyrannical male power.

### **The Saint Who Was Erased – Then Restored**

Catherine's legacy faced its own martyrdom. In 1969, the Roman Catholic Church temporarily removed St. Catherine of Alexandria from the liturgical calendar, not because she was unloved, but because scholars doubted the historicity of her story. Many Catholics – especially women – felt that the Church had erased a symbol of female intellectual and spiritual authority.

Then, in 2002, after renewed study and recognition of her global devotion, Catherine was restored. The Church affirmed that, even if historical details remain debated, her witness speaks a spiritual truth: Courage, intellect and faith are not bound by gender.

Catherine's removal and restoration tell a modern parable: How often are women's stories doubted before they are believed? How often are their voices dismissed, their experiences discounted, their suffering minimized? Which brings us to November 25 for another reason.

### **A Global Cry for Justice**

The United Nations has proclaimed November 25 the World Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, commemorating the 1960 assassination of the Mirabal sisters – Patria, Minerva and María Teresa – political activists and now national heroes in the Dominican Republic.

The statistics are sobering:

- One in three women worldwide experiences physical or sexual violence.
- Most violence is committed by someone the victim knows.
- The majority of cases go unreported – silenced by fear, stigma, shame, disbelief, and too often, by religious communities that prioritize quiet reputations over loud truths.

This issue is personal for me. At age 20, my great-great-great-grandmother, Susan Hoffbauer (1845–1927), was impregnated – presumably raped – by a Roman Catholic priest 26 years older than her. DNA testing has since confirmed his identity, and our family's search for understanding has uncovered warnings ignored, harm covered by bishops, and lives impacted across generations. Susan was spirited away to birth her son, then brought him back to her farming community, where she raised him as his "Aunt Susan." Countless stories like hers – of the silencing of our sisters – have gone untold.

At Holy Family Catholic Church, we are preparing to celebrate the 80<sup>th</sup> birthday of Father Roy Gomez, whose daughter Michelle was murdered in an act of domestic violence in 1994. Considering the statistics, there is no family that is untouched by physical or sexual

violence against women – if only we were able to honor their lives, give voice to survivors, and do all within our means to ensure that our daughters and granddaughters grow up in a world that learns from and builds on the suffering of the brave women who have gone before us.

Recent movements, like #MeToo and #ChurchToo (for survivors of sexual abuse within religious institutions), as well as high-profile shows like *Big Little Lies*, *Unbelievable*, and *The Handmaid's Tale* have forced society to confront the brutal reality that many women daily live. Pop culture has become a modern prophet, calling out truths the Church should have loudly proclaimed for centuries.

If St. Catherine were alive today, she would not keep quiet. She would stand at a microphone – at the United Nations, the Capitol, a community meeting, or on TikTok – saying: “You cannot silence us. You cannot beat us into obedience. You cannot debate away our dignity!”

### **The Spiked Wheel Still Turns**

The torturous “Catherine wheel” may be a thing of the past, but the violence women endure today – physical, sexual, psychological and spiritual – is its modern equivalent.

Heartbreakingly, the Church has sometimes been part of the harm, rather than the healing. Women who report abuse are too often ignored, shamed, or told to “offer it up.” Forgiveness is demanded before protection. The sins are evident, the wounds real.

St. Catherine calls us to a different way: Break the wheel, believe women, protect the vulnerable, confront abusive power, and refuse silence.

### **Calls to Action**

On this shared feast and global day of awareness, we are invited to honor Catherine not by romanticizing her martyrdom, but by resisting the forces that still martyr women today.

This means:

- **Believe survivors.** Do not minimize, spiritualize or rationalize their pain.
- **Challenge abusive power.** In homes, workplaces, schools and churches.
- **Advocate for protections.** Support shelters, hotlines, counseling, and legal safeguards.
- **Educate communities.** From worship spaces to classrooms, and from senior adult ministries to youth groups: no more silence.

- **Examine complicity.** Have we laughed at the wrong jokes, ignored warnings, stayed quiet when we should have spoken, or believed myths instead of women?

Catherine's life is not just a story of the past. It is a mirror held up to the present.

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- Who are the women in my life – and in the world – whose voices are silenced or doubted? How can I bear witness to their truth?
- Where do I remain silent in the face of injustice, abuse, or harassment? Why?
- How do I respond when institutions or communities fail to protect the vulnerable?
- In what ways can I challenge power structures that harm women?
- How can I cultivate courage like St. Catherine to speak truth in the face of intimidation or oppression?

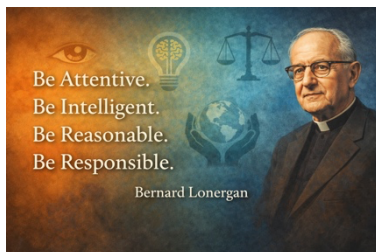
### **Let Us Pray**

Lord Jesus, our champion of the oppressed, we remember St. Catherine of Alexandria, the Mirabal sisters, and all women who have suffered violence, oppression, and injustice. Grant us courage to believe survivors, wisdom to confront abusive power, and compassion to protect the vulnerable. Break the wheels of violence in our communities, in our families, and in our hearts. Strengthen those whose stories have been silenced. Heal those whose bodies, minds and spirits have been harmed. Guide us to speak truth, act justly, and build a world where no woman lives in fear, and every voice is heard. May your Spirit ignite our hearts with the fire of justice, the courage of truth, and the mercy of Christ, so that we may honor the dignity of every woman. Amen.

## Seeing Clearly and Acting Justly

### Lessons from Sojourner Truth and Bernard Lonergan

November 26, 2025



What do a formerly-enslaved Black abolitionist woman and a Canadian Jesuit theologian have in common? More than you might think.

Today, our U.S. society remembers **Sojourner Truth**, and the Catholic Church remembers **Bernard Lonergan**. Together, these two unlikely conversation partners offer a path for Catholics today who are still trying to clearly see, truthfully speak, and do justice in a bruised and bewildered world.

#### **Sojourner Truth: The Prophet Who Refused to Be Silent**

Born enslaved in New York, Isabella Baumfree (c. 1797-1883) lived the first decades of her life under a legal system that treated her as property. She was sold at age nine to a man who daily beat her, then two years later to a tavern keeper for 18 months, then to a man who repeatedly raped her. But once she walked—literally walked—to freedom, she renounced the name given her by slaveholders, and she assumed the new name received in prayer: Sojourner Truth.

Truth didn't simply believe in God; she believed God was alive and talking. And she talked back! She preached. She traveled. She confronted the systems that treated Black Americans and women as less than fully human. In an era when religious leaders often defended slavery with Scripture, she read the Bible with a clarity many theologians lacked: If God made all people, then no person has the right to dominate another. Period.

Truth's famous "Ain't I a Woman?" speech still rings with a fire that exposes our modern hypocrisies. She challenged the notion that Christian virtue belongs to polite men and docile women. She challenged the idea that prayer means staying quiet. She understood holiness as public courage, and not merely as private piety.

Today, as new permutations of white nationalism, Christian nationalism, and gender backlash arise, and as we see the dismantling of the gospel values of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), Truth's witness isn't simply inspiring; it's indicting.

### **Bernard Lonergan: Thinking as if Truth Matters**

Bernard Lonergan (1904–1984), the Canadian Jesuit theologian, lived in a very different world. He wasn't dodging slaveholders or confronting hecklers at abolitionist rallies. He was sitting at a desk for decades, wrestling with a different kind of oppression: the tyranny of bad thinking.

Lonergan believed that the greatest crises of modern life are not simply moral, but cognitive. Humanity, he said, has developed weapons, technologies and global systems faster than we've developed wisdom. Let that sink in. His project—summed up in the deceptively simple phrase *"be attentive, be intelligent, be reasonable, be responsible"*—was to help us recover the basic operations of the human spirit.

Lonergan insisted that authenticity is not a one-time conversion, but an ongoing process of self-correcting understanding. For Lonergan, sin often begins with refusing to know what we actually know. This is especially sobering when we consider the number of U.S. adults today who refuse to acknowledge, give voice to, and act according to what they know deep down.

Lonergan's vision of the theological method continues to shape Catholic thinkers, pushing the Church toward deeper analysis, greater justice, and a more honest acknowledgment of its own failures. In a world now dominated by disinformation, conspiracy thinking, political manipulation, and ideological rigidity, Lonergan's call to intellectual conversion is as urgent as ever.

### **Where They Meet: Insight and Action**

So, what exactly binds Sojourner Truth to Bernard Lonergan—a 19<sup>th</sup>-century abolitionist mystic and a 20<sup>th</sup>-century theologian? At first glance, nothing. But look again. Both shared a relentless commitment to truth—not the truth that props up the powerful, but the truth that liberates.

Sojourner Truth fought the social lies of her era: the lie that Black people were inferior, that women were weak, that God ordained oppression (e.g., Eph. 6:5-8; Col. 3:22-23). She saw through those lies, not because she had a degree, but because she listened to a God who speaks from the margins.

Bernard Lonergan confronted the intellectual lies of modern life: the lie that feeling equals fact, that convenience equals truth, that ideology is



a substitute for discernment. He taught that spiritual maturity requires intellectual honesty.

Together, they remind us that the spiritual life is a dance between clarity and courage. Lonergan challenges us to see clearly. Truth challenges us to act boldly. One without the other is incomplete. Clarity without courage becomes detachment. Courage without clarity becomes chaos. But taken together? They offer a way forward for those who refuse to settle for superficial religion or passive hope!

### **Why Their Witness Matters Now**

On this day, Catholics can hear the voices of Truth and Lonergan rising together:

In a time of voter suppression and racialized fear, Sojourner Truth calls us to confront the systems that still devalue Black, Latino and Native American lives.

In a time of media distortion and ideological frenzy, Lonergan calls us to intellectual humility, critical reflection, and truth-telling.

In a time when many Christians cling to power, rather than gospel, both remind us that the Kingdom of God is not built on domination, but on discernment and liberation. Sojourner Truth ignites the heart. Bernard Lonergan sharpens the mind. The Gospel calls us to use both!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- Where do I sense God inviting me to see more clearly – in my assumptions, my judgments, my information sources, or my blind spots?
- Where is God challenging me to act more courageously – especially on issues of justice, race, gender or inclusion?
- What lies – personal or societal – am I being called to confront?
- How might Sojourner Truth's boldness and Lonergan's intellectual honesty shape my discipleship this week?

### **Let Us Pray**

Holy Wisdom, Friend of the oppressed, Spirit of truth – open our eyes as you opened the eyes of Sojourner Truth, that we may see injustice for what it is and refuse to be silent. Open our minds as you opened the mind of Bernard Lonergan, that we may think clearly, discern wisely, and seek truth without fear. Grant us the courage to speak, the humility to listen, and the perseverance to act – until all your children know freedom, and justice rolls down like waters, and truth makes us all free. Amen.

## Thanksgiving Light

Lessons from Harvey Milk and Louie Crew Clay  
on Hope, Courage and Joy

November 27, 2025



We pause to acknowledge on this Thanksgiving Day that many Americans feel more anxious than grateful this year. What a difference a year makes! Many Americans now enter this holiday season with hearts that are not simply heavy, but bracing. Two unexpected prophets—Harvey Milk and Louie Crew Clay, both honored on November 27—invite us to practice a deeper, more defiant kind of gratitude: the kind that keeps hope alive when the world feels dim.

### Friendsiving in a Difficult Year

Last weekend, my husband and I hosted two Friendsiving gatherings, where we invited guests to share the things for which they are grateful as we wind down 2025. What surprised me was the light that shined through their answers. Because let's be honest: This has been a rough year.

Immigrant communities are terrorized by ICE raids, deportations, and sudden disappearances.

Institutions of higher education are under siege, academic freedom is increasingly politicized, and DEI programs are dismantled, erasing hard-won gains for equity.

A cultural slide toward authoritarianism is cloaked in patriotism.

Elected officials ignore laws, courts and constitutional norms, unwilling to confront abusive power.

Young women in places like Texas enjoy fewer rights than their mothers, often facing the threat of criminalization for medical decisions their grandmothers never questioned.

Various communities—Jewish, Muslim, Sikh and LGBTQIA+—face rising harassment and threats.

Truth is cheapened, and disinformation is quickly spread, supercharged by AI tools that falsify voices, faces and memories.

Even pastors, social workers, and community organizers speak quietly about the fear that their work may be surveilled or criminalized.

And beneath it all is a growing sense that the moral floor of our public life keeps dropping.

To ask for gratitude in a year like this almost feels naïve — or cruel. Yet, maybe this is exactly the kind of year when gratitude matters most!

### **Harvey Milk: Gratitude as Resistance**

Harvey Milk — born on November 27, 1930 — lived his entire public life refusing to let despair have the final word. He ran for office multiple times and lost. He endured threats, ridicule and surveillance. And yet he kept telling his community: “You gotta give ‘em hope.” His wasn’t a vague, emotional hope. It was political, public and defiant.

Milk believed that gratitude itself was a form of resistance — gratitude for chosen family, for community organizers, for drag queens who protected queer kids, for the everyday courage of people who dared to live openly.

He understood that the smallest gestures of affirmation — lighting a candle, unlocking a storefront for a support group, showing up at a rally, putting your name on a ballot — can ripple outward in ways we never see.

In a year when so much is being taken away from vulnerable communities, Milk reminds us: Hope is not optimism. Hope is courage with its work boots on. And gratitude fuels that courage!

### **Louie Crew Clay: Thanksgiving as Radical Welcome**

On November 27, the Episcopal Church commemorates Louie Crew Clay, a poet, professor and the founder of Integrity USA. He spent his life fighting for the full inclusion of LGBTQIA+ people in the Church. He believed something that many religious institutions still struggle to grasp: *You cannot claim to worship a God of love — while excluding people God loves.*

Crew Clay fought — patiently, stubbornly, joyfully — for decades. He organized when churches slammed their doors. He wrote when bishops dismissed him. He taught when seminaries wouldn’t hire openly-queer faculty. He made room at the table for people who had never been welcomed before.

And Crew Clay did all of this with a spirit of gratitude that was almost disarming. His question, always, wasn’t “Why isn’t the Church better?” but: “What grace is already breaking in — and how can we help it grow?”

His life demonstrates what true Thanksgiving looks like: not passive contentment, but active hospitality, expanding the table until everyone has a seat!

### **Where Their Witness Meets Psalm 23**

The Psalmist did not pretend that life is easy. Psalm 23 promises that God walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death (Ps. 23:4). Harvey Milk walked through the valley of threat and violence. Louie Crew Clay walked through the valley of exclusion and dismissal. Immigrants walk through the valley of fear. LGBTQ people walk through the valley of lost rights and rising hostility. Women walk through the valley of political disregard for their bodies and their agency. People of color walk through the valley of renewed voter suppression and racialized hate.

So many people this Thanksgiving Day are journeying with faith through dark valleys!

Milk and Crew Clay refused to stop there. They believed, in their bones, that God prepares a table for us, even in the presence of danger (Ps. 23:5). They believed in the banquet Isaiah describes (Is. 25:6-9)—a feast of abundance, justice, dignity and joy.

But here's the key: Milk and Crew Clay did not wait for heaven. They started setting the table now!

And this is the heart of our Thanksgiving calling.

### **Thanksgiving Today: Setting the Table Now!**

Thanksgiving, at its best, isn't about ignoring or escaping the world's pain, but transforming it. It's not a naïve gratitude that denies suffering. It's a fierce gratitude that refuses to let suffering be the whole story. What does that look like?

- We resist despair. Despair is a luxury that the vulnerable cannot afford.
- We cultivate gratitude as fuel for justice work. Gratitude keeps movements tender enough to stay human.
- We create communities where the excluded are dignified, protected, and celebrated.
- We confront lies with truth. Especially in an age when falsehood travels faster than compassion.
- We build bigger tables—literally and metaphorically.
- We become signs of the banquet God desires for the world—as foretastes, and not far-off fantasies.

Harvey Milk lit candles. Louie Crew Clay pulled up chairs. We can do the same.

Happy Thanksgiving!

### **Questions for Reflection**

- Where have I seen “grace breaking in” this year, even in small ways?
- How might gratitude strengthen my courage in a time of political and cultural fear?
- What “table” is God inviting me to expand – at church, at work/school, in community, in my advocacy, or in my home?
- With which vulnerable neighbors is God urging me to stand more boldly during this holiday season?

### **A Thanksgiving Prayer**

Holy One, Giver of every good gift, teach us the gratitude that steadies the heart and strengthens weary hands. In a year when shadows feel long, remind us that your light still rises in every act of courage, every widening of the table, every voice that speaks for justice, every community that refuses to let fear win. Through the witness of Harvey Milk, make us bold in hope. Through the witness of Louie Crew Clay, make us generous in welcome. Bless those who live in fear today – immigrant families, LGBTQ people, women stripped of agency, voters denied their rights, communities targeted by hate. Let our gratitude become solidarity, and our Thanksgiving become action. Set your table among us now, until all your children have a place, and no one is left hungry for dignity, safety, justice or love. Amen.

## Healing from “Sword and Cross” Trauma

### A Reflection on Native American Heritage Day

November 28, 2025



Perhaps you’ve seen *Killers of the Flower Moon*, where the machinery of betrayal grinds down an entire people—the Osage Nation—while white men in suits and clergy collars willingly participate or stand by in complicit silence. In one scene, Father Schoenhardt, who frequently shares spiritual counsel with white settlers, blesses the baby of Ernest Burkhart (Leonardo DiCaprio) and his wife, Mollie (Lily Gladstone)—all while Ernest and his uncle (Robert De Niro) are murdering Mollie’s Osage family! It’s a chilling reminder of the Church’s quiet willingness to minister to colonizers, while offering little protection to the colonized. Even the “holy holies” can be seduced into becoming chaplains to injustice!

On this Native American Heritage Day, we are called not to turn away from such truths, but to walk straight into it with honesty, humility and a willingness to repent.

### **Sword and Cross: The Church’s Complicated History**

For centuries, the Catholic Church walked hand-in-hand with colonial powers, lending spiritual “legitimacy” to conquest. Sadly, the Doctrine of Discovery, a series of papal bulls beginning in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, purported to give European Christians moral license to seize lands, suppress cultures, and dominate Indigenous peoples.

The Spanish colonization of the Americas is a glaring example: Soldiers advanced with the sword, accompanied by friars holding high the cross—as if their baptisms could wash away the bloodshed they condoned! While some missionaries genuinely sought to protect Indigenous people, others collaborated with empire in ways that have forever scarred Native communities. They sought to erase cultures and languages. They actively suppressed Native religion and spirituality. With great hubris, they cast aside the Great Spirit and Creator, while

holding high the white god their ancestors had created in their image. The sad story of such colonization here in Texas is eloquently told in “*Gente de razón*,” the must-see movie that plays inside the tourist center of the San José Mission in San Antonio, Texas.

We must bravely acknowledge both truths: the saints who defended Native dignity, and the sociopolitical and religious systems that stole Native lands.

### **The Wounds of Assimilation**

We wrong our Native American siblings with our lies: That these wounds were caused centuries ago, or were limited to the Church’s collusion with Spain to conquer the “New World.” I was raised in a former rectory in Ohio, built by the Church on land seized by the U.S. Government from the Wyandot and Ottawa peoples after the 1830 “Indian Removal Act.” The last-remaining Native Americans who stewarded present-day Central Texas—let’s say their names: the Coahuiltecan, Jumanos, Tonkawa, Sana and Lipan Apache—were driven from present-day Austin less than 200 years ago. Even today, a senior member of our community at Holy Family Catholic Church was a victim of forced assimilation at a church-run Native American school where children’s Native American identities were beaten—physically, emotionally and spiritually—into silence. Recent investigations have uncovered hundreds of unmarked graves at former boarding school sites in the U.S. and Canada: Each grave is a stolen childhood, a stolen story, a stolen future. Suddenly, with the acknowledgment of such truths, “Black Friday” takes on a new meaning.

### **A Step Toward Healing: “Keeping Christ’s Sacred Promise”**

In 2024, the U.S. Conference of [Roman] Catholic Bishops issued a formal apology in “Keeping Christ’s Sacred Promise: A Pastoral Framework for Indigenous Ministry.” It acknowledges the Church’s complicity in colonization, abuse and cultural erasure, and it calls Catholics to accompany Indigenous communities—not as “saviors,” but as partners in healing.

The USCCB’s work, of course, is not the final word. But it is a beginning. Healing requires truth-telling, lament, and a conversion of hearts.

### **The Ongoing Realities Faced by Native Communities**

Native American communities continue to experience some of the deepest wounds in American society:

- High poverty rates—some of the highest of any demographic.

- Severe health disparities, including diabetes, addiction, and inadequate access to healthcare.
- A high youth suicide rate.
- Inadequate housing and underfunded schools.
- Environmental exploitation – sacred lands mined, water sources polluted, treaties ignored.
- Systemic racism and cultural erasure that persists in media, education and public policy.

If we are to honor Native American Heritage Day, we must move beyond sentiment—and into solidarity.

### **How We Can Honor Our Native American Siblings**

- **Listen – without defensiveness.** Healing begins when those with power stop talking and start listening.
- **Learn their stories.** Whose land do you live on? Which tribes were displaced? What treaties were broken?
- **Support Native-led organizations.** Prioritize groups doing work in mental health, cultural revitalization, and land protection.
- **Advocate for federal policies** that honor treaties, expand healthcare, address missing and murdered Indigenous persons, and protect sacred lands from exploitation.
- **Push the Church toward deeper accountability.** Encourage prelates to collaborate with Indigenous Catholics, support language revitalization projects, and fund trauma-informed healing initiatives.

### **Resist and Rise**

If Native American Heritage Day teaches us anything, it is that remembrance without transformation is hollow. The past is not past—not when land remains stolen, when trauma is inherited, and when graves continue to be unearthed. As Cherokee scholar Dr. Adrienne Keene reminds us, “We exist. We resist. We rise.” Lakota activist Madonna Thunder Hawk similarly says, “Our survival is our resistance.” Their witness invites us to a deeper truth: *Faith is only authentic when it refuses to bless systems of domination.*

Today, we are called – not to guilt, but to responsibility; not to shame, but to solidarity; not to performative lament, but to courageous repair. May we be brave enough to follow where the Great Spirit has been leading Indigenous peoples all along!



### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- Where have I benefitted from systems rooted in colonization and the Doctrine of Discovery?
- What emotions arise as I confront the Church's complicity in Indigenous suffering: grief, shame, anger, denial?
- Whose stories have been silenced in my community, and what would it look like to give them space?
- How might the Great Spirit be calling me to stand with Indigenous people in their fight for justice?
- What does true reconciliation require of me?

### **A Prayer for Native American Heritage Day**

Creator God, Great Spirit, You formed this land long before settlers arrived, and You entrusted its care to Indigenous peoples who walked gently, honored the sacred, and carried Your wisdom through story, ceremony and song. Today we remember the many wounds inflicted upon Native communities: lands stolen, cultures suppressed, children taken, languages silenced, and the countless lives lost to violence, disease and forced assimilation. Hold those souls in Your loving embrace. Heal the descendants who still carry trauma in their bodies, and strengthen the elders who preserve memory and identity with courage. Guide our Church toward deeper repentance, that we may renounce the sins of colonization and work for justice without hesitation or excuses. Bless Native leaders, activists, artists and elders who are rebuilding what was broken and reawakening what was nearly erased. Teach us to listen, to learn, and to walk humbly beside them. May we honor this day not with sentiment, but with solidarity, that together we may help bring forth a world where all people, all cultures, and all nations flourish in dignity, sovereignty and peace. Amen.

## True Solidarity

### Showing Our Support for the Palestinian People

November 29, 2025



As rockets and gunfire echo across Gaza, it's tempting to think humanity hasn't learned a thing in nearly 80 years, since the 1947 partition plan that proposed separate Jewish and Arab states in Palestine. After all, politicians still debate borders like it's a board game, while civilians pay the price. Families flee their homes, children are caught in the crossfire, and civilians—like so many before them—suffer the consequences of unresolved history.

On November 29, the **International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People**, we pause to remember not only the victims of ongoing violence, but also the deep historical, political and spiritual threads that tie this day to our conscience and faith.

### **The Origins of November 29: A Day of Solidarity**

The United Nations first designated November 29 as the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People in 1977, marking the anniversary of UN Resolution 181, the 1947 partition plan that proposed separate Jewish and Arab states in what we, as Christians and Catholics, tend to refer to as the Holy Land. The plan, meant to be a diplomatic solution, instead sparked decades of displacement, war and suffering. In hindsight, one might say this “divide-and-conquer” approach was less about peacemaking, and more about creating news headlines that haunt us to this day. Post-World War II geopolitics, the Holocaust's aftermath, and Cold War maneuvering left Palestinians stateless — a human tragedy that sadly remains unresolved.

### **The U.S. Context: Politics, Protest and Public Awareness**

The United States has long been a staunch ally of Israel, providing diplomatic, military and financial support to a nation that has possessed nuclear arms since the 1970s. Meanwhile, Americans who speak up for Palestinian rights sometimes feel like they've discovered a secret club

that others pretend doesn't exist. In recent decades, pro-Palestinian activism has grown on college campuses, in grassroots movements, and within faith communities. From early marches to modern protests responding to military actions, these efforts raise pressing questions:

- How do we respond when our nation's foreign policy contributes to human suffering?
- And can we engage this issue with intellectual honesty, without falling into tribalism or despair?

### **Saints and Servants: Lessons from de Hoyos and Day**

While seemingly far removed from the modern Middle East, **Bernardo Francisco de Hoyos (1711–1735)** and **Dorothy Day (1897–1980)**, whom the Church celebrates today, offer spiritual guidance.

- **Blessed Bernardo Francisco de Hoyos**, a Spanish Jesuit, promoted devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, emphasizing compassion for the marginalized. In a world that often “saves headlines, but not people,” de Hoyos reminds us to see Christ in every suffering soul—including those living under occupation today.
- **Servant of God Dorothy Day**, co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, lived a life of radical solidarity with the poor. She insisted on nonviolence, hospitality, and direct action. Day's example challenges us: Solidarity isn't a catchy hashtag; it's feeding the hungry, sheltering the displaced, and speaking truth to power—even when it's inconvenient or unpopular.

### **Calls to Action**

As Catholics and informed citizens, we might take various concrete steps today:

- **Educate Yourself and Others.** Learn the history of Palestine-Israel, and pay particular attention to the voices that have been too often ignored.
- **Foster Dialogue:** Encourage nuanced conversations that resist polarization and demonization.
- **Pray and Reflect:** Incorporate the suffering of the Palestinian people into your spiritual life.
- **Support Humanitarian Aid.** Contribute to organizations providing food, shelter and medical care to those affected.
- **Engage Politically.** Advocate for policies that respect human rights, international law, and civilian safety.

### **True Solidarity**

On this day of remembrance, let us move beyond headlines, politics and partisanship. Solidarity with the Palestinian people calls us to see Christ in every displaced family, every grieving parent, and every child whose life is threatened by conflict. Like Bernardo Francisco de Hoyos and Dorothy Day, we are invited not merely to sympathize, but to act—to embody mercy, speak truth, and advocate tirelessly for justice. True solidarity is never passive; it is a daily commitment to love, serve and protect the vulnerable—even when history seems determined to repeat its mistakes!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- In what concrete ways can I stand in solidarity with the oppressed today?
- How do I recognize my own privilege, and how can I use it to amplify the voices of those who are silenced?
- In what ways might I be complicit in systems of injustice, and how can I work to correct them?
- How do mercy, justice and nonviolence guide my response to global conflicts?
- How can I practice patience and perseverance in advocating for peace, even when progress seems impossible?
- What small, concrete acts of mercy can I perform today that honor the dignity of those in conflict zones?
- How can I cultivate empathy for people whose experiences are far removed from my own daily life?
- How might the examples of Bernardo Francisco de Hoyos and Dorothy Day inspire me to integrate faith and action in my life?

### **A Prayer for the Palestinian People:**

Good and gracious God, we lift up the Palestinian people, especially the innocent who daily suffer from violence, displacement and fear. May your justice shine in their lives. Grant courage, compassion and wisdom to those who can bring relief, and kindle in our hearts a commitment to stand with the oppressed. We ask this in the name of Jesus our Lord, who trod the roads of Israel and Palestine, and who blesses the hearts of all who live in love and peace. Amen.

## Wickedness, Whiteness, and the Wizard

### The Moral Parables of “Wicked for Good”

November 29, 2025



I just saw “Wicked for Good,” and I walked out of the theater deeply moved. Even stunned. What I expected to be a visually-dazzling blockbuster turned out to be something far more profound: a moral parable disguised in green makeup and glitter.

The world of Oz has always worked this way. As L. Frank Baum once wrote, Oz is a place where “allegory is not forced, but it is unavoidable.” From *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900), to Gregory Maguire’s *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West* (1995), to the stage musical and now this cinematic finale, Oz persistently holds up a mirror—showing us not only who its characters are, but who we are.

And seeing “Wicked for Good” only intensifies that mirror. Beneath the spectacle is a story that speaks prophetically to faith, to human psychology, and to the way we choose leaders in this very complicated moment in American life.

#### **Elphaba as a Christ Figure: The “Wicked” One Who Was Good**

From the moment she enters the story, Elphaba is marked as “other.” Green-skinned. Unwanted. Misunderstood. And like Joseph, Moses, the prophets, and Jesus himself, it is precisely in her otherness that something divine begins to unfold.

- **The Rejected Cornerstone.** Christ was “despised and rejected,” and so is Elphaba. Her greenness is as much stigma as Christ’s poverty or Nazareth origins. Goodness is rarely glamorous.
- **Solidarity With the Oppressed.** Elphaba stands with talking Animals as their rights are stripped away. She questions unjust authority. She confronts injustice. She risks everything for those with the least power—an unmistakably Christlike posture.
- **Willingness to Be Called Wicked for Doing What Is Right.** Christ healed on the Sabbath, overturned tables, crossed

boundaries. Righteousness often looks like rebellion. Elphaba chooses moral truth over public approval. She bears a false reputation so others might live.

- **Death, “Melting” and Resurrection.** Elphaba accepts a fate that looks like execution — she even orchestrates it. And then, like Christ, she rises again: alive, hidden, revealed only to one faithful friend. The “melting” is a crucifixion. The escape is a resurrection. And the message is clear: Doing the right thing may cost you everything — even your name.

### **Why Oz Villainizes Elphaba and Idolizes Glinda: The Brain Science Behind Hero Worship**

One of the unsettling truths of “Wicked for Good” is that Elphaba’s story contains far less wickedness than the society that condemns her. Oz displays all the psychological patterns human beings fall into when we’re frightened, tribal or overwhelmed.

- **Appearance Bias.** Humans instantly form snap judgments. “Green skin? Dangerous.” “Blonde and bubbly? Safe. Good.” It’s the same instinct that led people to misjudge Jesus for the company he kept!
- **In-Group / Out-Group Instincts.** Ozians value polish, poise, uniformity. Glinda reflects this ideal; Elphaba challenges it. People choose identity over truth nearly every time!
- **The Power of Fear.** The Wizard manufactures an enemy. He weaponizes propaganda. He tells Ozians who to fear — then sells them the solution. This is textbook authoritarianism. Fear shrinks the brain’s reasoning centers, and it amplifies suspicion, bias and blind obedience. The truth becomes malleable when people are afraid!
- **Confirmation Bias and Groupthink.** Once Elphaba is labeled “wicked,” everything she does confirms the stereotype. Meanwhile, Glinda’s charm and privilege protect her from scrutiny. The result? A good woman becomes a monster, and a shallow leader — the Wizard — becomes a savior. Not because of truth, but because of the stories people tell!

### **What the Wizard Teaches Us About Leadership—and About Ourselves**

I walked away from “Wicked for Good” with a heavy heart. A very heavy heart. Particularly for the way in which it left me seeing the frail, evil Wizard — a failed showman — through the lens of our present U.S.

President. I was especially struck by how easily human beings are drawn to certain kinds of leaders—especially when we are afraid or uncertain.

To keep the focus there—on human nature, rather than on any one figure in partisan politics—I base my reflection on lines and themes directly from the movie.

- **“People don’t want the truth. They want the illusion.”** The Wizard’s charisma works because he taps into our longing for certainty and comfort. Spectacle is soothing. Illusion feels safer than ambiguity.
- **“If they believe you, then it’s true.”** This line exposes a temptation in every age: to equate belief with fact, consensus with reality, and popularity with moral authority. The words of Hannah Arendt come to mind: In a fearful crowd, truth is far less powerful than a confident lie.
- **“All I ever wanted was to matter.”** Many leaders—good and bad—are driven by insecurity. The danger comes when a leader’s desire to matter outruns their commitment to the truth.
- **“Give them something to look at, and they won’t look too closely.”** Pointing us away from “that man behind the curtain,” a showy leader can distract from deeper questions: Is this right? Is this just? Is this true? Is this loving?
- **“The truth is a much harder thing.”** This may be the most important insight in the film. Truth requires humility, courage and a willingness to admit what is real—even when it is inconvenient.

The Wizard is not evil; he is human. And that is what makes his story such a warning. We follow leaders for many reasons—fear, familiarity, identity, comfort. But none of these guarantee that the leader we choose is the leader we need.

### **What “Wicked for Good” Teaches America Right Now**

The moral lessons of “Wicked for Good” land with surprising clarity today: Surface goodness is not the same as actual goodness. Showmanship is not leadership. And sometimes the one labeled “wicked” is the one telling the truth.

For Christians, this should feel familiar. We follow a Messiah who was publicly shamed, falsely accused, and executed because a crowd preferred a simpler story.

If Christ came today—would we recognize him? Or would we call him wicked, too?

### **Calls to Action**

- Stand with the marginalized—even when it costs you standing.
- Challenge propaganda wherever you find it—left or right.
- Beware leaders who rely on spectacle and scapegoats.
- Refuse to let appearance stand in for character.
- Protect truth-tellers, especially when their truth is inconvenient.
- Let Christ—not charisma—shape your politics and your discernment.

### **The Battle Between Truth and Illusion**

In the end, “Wicked for Good” reminds us that the real battle is not between good people and wicked people, but between truth and illusion—between the leaders we want and the leaders we need.

We are all susceptible to the Wizard’s curtain, the crowd’s easy narrative, and the temptation to judge by appearances. Yet we are also capable of Elphaba’s courage: seeing clearly, loving boldly, and choosing truth even when it costs us.

May we have the wisdom to discern, the humility to learn, and the courage to follow what is truly good—not just what is easy, familiar or spectacular.

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- Whom have I mislabeled as “wicked” because they challenge my assumptions?
- Where in my community are people being scapegoated—or silenced?
- Do I follow leaders because they are good, or because they are entertaining?
- Where am I being called, like Elphaba, to do the right thing even if it costs me reputation?
- How can I cultivate discernment in a world ruled by spectacle?
- What fears keep me from seeing the truth clearly?

### **Let Us Pray**

O God of Light Beyond All Illusions, grant us the courage of Elphaba, the discernment to see through the Wizard’s smoke, and the faith to follow Christ—even when goodness looks like rebellion. Break the spells of fear and falsehood that turn neighbors into enemies, and leaders into idols. Teach us to recognize holiness in the unexpected, the different, the ones the world calls “wicked.” Make us builders of truth, doers of justice, and lovers of mercy—even when the crowd demands otherwise. Amen.



## Witnesses at the Edges

From Galilean Shores, to San Francisco Streets,  
to Gas-scarred Battlefields

November 30, 2025



Some dates on the calendar seem thrown together by accident—like a cosmic grab bag. November 30 is one of them. On this day, we remember **St. Andrew**, a fisherman from Galilee who introduced his brother Peter to Jesus; **Oscar Wilde**, the brilliant, wounded wit whose name now anchors San Francisco’s Rainbow Honor Walk; and the **Day to Remember Chemical Warfare Victims**, to honor those whose suffering begs us never to forget the darkest capacities of human invention. Three observances, seemingly worlds apart—yet they converge in surprising and challenging ways!

What if today is inviting us to reflect on what it means to witness—to stand in truth, to stand with the vulnerable, and to stand where others would prefer we didn’t look?

### **St. Andrew: The Quiet Disciple Who Introduced the World to Hope**

Saint Andrew doesn’t get as much attention as his brother, Peter, but perhaps that’s precisely his gift. Before Peter became the rock on which Jesus built the Church, Andrew was the one who found Jesus first (Jn 1:40–42). He listened to John the Baptist, recognized something new in Jesus, and opened the door for his brother. Then Andrew apparently took a step back, since Jesus’ inner circle of “Peter, James and John” never includes him (Mk. 5:37, 9:2 & 14:33)!

Andrew didn’t preach grand sermons. No canonical gospels or letters were written in his name. He simply brought a brother to Jesus. And he pointed out a boy possessing five loaves and two fish (Jn. 6:8-9). And he served as a bridge for Greeks who wanted to meet Jesus (Jn. 12:20-22). Some saints change the world by proclaiming; Andrew changed the world by pointing! There’s a holiness in that kind of quiet courage—the courage of being the among the first to say, “Come and see.”

### **Oscar Wilde: A Witness to Beauty, Pain, and the Cost of Being Seen**

Oscar Wilde died on November 30, 1900, after a life marked by brilliance, scandal, imprisonment, and ultimately a kind of spiritual awakening. Today, he is known as the inaugural honoree on San Francisco's Rainbow Honor Walk, a testament to his lasting influence on LGBTQIA+ history and human dignity.

Wilde's life is a study in contradictions: A man of sparkling wit brought low by cruel laws. A lover of beauty who suffered in brutal prison cells. A public figure who paid dearly for refusing to hide who he was. He once wrote, "The truth is rarely pure and never simple." He learned that truth often requires sacrifice. And, at times, it exacts a cost that society has no right to demand.

Like St. Andrew, Wilde introduced the world to something—beauty, honesty, vulnerability—even if the world wasn't ready to receive it.

### **Day to Remember Chemical Warfare Victims: Witnesses to Humanity's Breaking Point**

Chemical weapons represent the ugliest side of human ingenuity. From the chlorine clouds of World War I, to the mustard gas of World War II, to the sarin and VX deployed in Syria as recently as 2017, these tools of war have carved scars—physical, emotional, generational—that linger long after the battlefield quiets. Here in Austin, 50 years after the Vietnam War, we still have veterans who suffer from the effects of Agent Orange, which, though not considered a chemical weapon, continues to wreak havoc on their bodies and health.

This Day to Remember Chemical Warfare Victims calls us to confront truths we prefer to avoid: That suffering is sometimes silent, invisible and slow. That victims of chemical warfare often receive little public mourning. That the world's most vulnerable peoples are disproportionately harmed.

If St. Andrew and Oscar Wilde teach us what it means to introduce, then chemical warfare victims teach us what it means to remember—to ensure that the suffering of others is not erased by political convenience or historical amnesia.

### **Where These Threads Meet: The Courage to See and Be Seen**

What does a Galilean fisherman, a flamboyant Irish playwright, and the victims of humanity's deadliest weapons have in common?

All three challenge us to see and respond.

Andrew shows us how holiness begins with noticing what others overlook.

Wilde shows us that truth-telling can be costly, especially when it unmasks injustice.

Chemical warfare victims show us that some suffering endures because the world refuses to see it fully.

To witness is not simply to observe—it is to allow what we see to change us.

### **Calls to Action**

Allow today's events to challenge you.

- **Be an Andrew.** Introduce someone today to hope, healing or community—quietly, without needing credit.
- **Honor Wilde's Legacy.** Advocate for the dignity of LGBTQIA+ persons; stand with those suffering persecution or erasure.
- **Remember the Victims.** Learn the history of chemical warfare, support survivors, and advocate for non-proliferation and peace.
- **Practice Courageous Seeing.** Ask God to open your eyes to the suffering that is easier to ignore.

### **Questions for Reflection and Prayer**

- Who introduced me to faith, justice or compassion—and how can I honor their gift by passing it on to others?
- Where am I called to speak truth, even if it costs me something?
- Whose suffering—near or far—have I avoided seeing?
- How do I respond to injustices that seem “too big” for my efforts?
- In what ways can I use my voice, my presence, or my witness to protect the vulnerable?
- How is God inviting me to the courageous honesty that Wilde embodied, and to the quiet humility that Andrew lived?

### **Let Us Pray**

God of all truth and compassion, on this day we remember St. Andrew, whose simple witness changed the world; Oscar Wilde, whose brilliance and suffering exposed the injustice of his age; and the countless victims of chemical warfare, whose pain cries out for justice and healing. Grant us eyes to see the suffering we would rather ignore, and courage to stand where love demands we stand. Make us instruments of peace, bearers of truth, and companions to the wounded. May our lives become a testimony—quiet or loud, humble or bold—to Your justice, Your mercy, and Your unending love. Amen.

## The Gospel According to “Zootopia 2”

### What This Sequel Might Teach Us—and the Kids We Love

November 30, 2025



I saw “Zootopia 2” this week. I’ll admit: It’s not a movie for everyone. Some adults will find it fluffy, too neatly resolved, or hardly more than the first movie rehashed. But what it is—or what it can be—is a remarkable conversation starter with our children and grandchildren!

Like the first film, the sequel surprised me with its moral depth. Under the vibrant colors, slapstick, and clever dialogue, I found something that sounded strangely like the prophets—and occasionally like Jesus himself. In a world where politics, fear and difference tear us apart, “Zootopia 2” offers a simple but profound truth: We were made for community—but we will never get there without courage, empathy and truth.

### **Moral Lessons from the Gospel According to “Zootopia 2”**

Even if you don’t watch the film, here are some conversation starters in the event that you’d like to say, “I understand that film is about...”

**“Are you saying that because he’s a sloth he can’t be fast? I thought in Zootopia anyone could be anything!” – Nick Wilde**

The Gospel calls us to *metanoia*, to grow, to learn, and to unlearn. Nick, the wily fox, reminds us of the power of such transformation: “I thought in Zootopia anyone could be anything!” It’s a beautiful echo of Jesus’ earliest preaching and encouragement of transformation: “Repent—change your heart—for the kingdom of God is at hand” (Mk. 1:15). *Metanoia* is the heart of the Gospel. And it’s the heart of “Zootopia 2.” Several characters must confront their own prejudice, pride or fear—especially as new species (snakes!) enter the city and old assumptions no longer hold.

This gives families a gentle way to talk about hard things:

- Race and bias
- Fear of the unfamiliar
- Recognizing our own blind spots
- The courage to admit we were wrong

Not because we are bad people, but because growth is holy.

**“Life isn’t some cartoon musical where you sing a little song and all your insipid dreams magically come true.” – Chief Bogo.**

Like the Bible’s insistence on truth-telling, one of the film’s central tensions is between realism and idealism, between truth and the lies we tell ourselves. This reminds us of Jesus’ words: “The truth will set you free” (Jn. 8:32). And also of the prophetic tradition: “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil” (Is. 5:20). Communities suffer when history is rewritten. When truth is hidden, someone always pays the price. And when the powerful preserve the story that flatters them, injustice becomes generational.

“Zootopia 2” invites us – adults and kids alike – to ask:

- Whose stories do we overlook?
- Whose pain gets ignored?
- What truths need to come into the light?

Perfect questions for a family dinner!

**“We cannot let fear divide us.” – Chief Bogo**

Fear is the great corrupter – in Scripture and in society. Bogo’s line is one of the film’s rallying cries. Fear does strange things to us: It makes us suspicious, shrinks our imagination, turns neighbors into enemies, and disguises prejudice as “safety.” Again and again in Scripture, God says: “Do not be afraid.” Not because danger isn’t real – but because fear is the birthplace of injustice.

When predators are feared, when reptiles are assumed to be threats, when differences are exaggerated, Zootopia becomes a mirror of our own world:

- Migrants feared as invaders
- Minorities feared as destabilizers
- Young people feared as rebellious
- The poor feared as burdens

Fear is the oldest political weapon in the toolbox. “Zootopia 2” gives families a disarming way to unpack it.

**“A city is strongest when every voice is heard.” – Judy Hopps**

This is St. Paul’s “one body, many parts” theology in animated form! The climax of the film brings everyone – prey, predators, reptiles, small mammals – into the same public square to confront the truth and choose unity. Paul wrote: “If one member suffers, all suffer together” (1Cor. 12:26).

Zootopia’s vision of community is inherently Catholic:

- We belong to one another.
- No one is disposable.
- Diversity is not a threat, but a blessing.

Children intuitively understand this. Adults sometimes need reminding.

**The Final Scene: Choosing Hope Over Instinct**

The conclusion of “Zootopia 2” is what resurrection feels like in social form. The film ends not with perfect harmony, but with a choice: characters choosing hope over old instincts, choosing trust over suspicion, choosing relationship over fear. This is resurrection energy! “Behold, I make all things new” (Rev. 21:5). “Perfect love casts out fear” (1Jn. 4:18).

The movie’s moral vision isn’t naïve. It simply believes what the Gospel believes: Newness is possible – but only if we dare to love!

**Calls to Action for Families of Faith**

- Talk openly about stereotypes after the movie. Ask kids which characters they misunderstood at first.
- Help them identify fear-based messages in media, school and politics.
- Read Bible stories where unlikely people – like Moses, Ruth, David, the Samaritan and Mary Magdalene – become heroes.
- Practice “holy listening.” Intentionally listen to someone different from you.
- Support inclusion in your family, school, workplace and community.
- Teach your children to look for the lonely kid at school – and sit with them.
- Model repentance. Show kids that adults can say, “I was wrong.”
- Find age-appropriate ways to tell the truth about family, national and church history.

### **Take the Next Brave Step**

At its heart, “Zootopia 2” is not asking us to solve the world’s problems in one leap. It’s asking us to take the next brave step toward one another: to see with clearer eyes, listen with humbler hearts, and love with deeper courage. In an age when fear is marketed and division is profitable, a children’s film dares to remind us of the Gospel’s oldest truth: *We become fully human only when we choose communion over exclusion, and truth over comfort.* If our children and grandchildren learn even a fraction of that, the kingdom of God will already be among us!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- Where in my life am I acting from fear, rather than love?
- Who today is labeled “dangerous” or “less than,” and how is God calling me to stand with them?
- What parts of history—mine, my community’s, my nation’s—need truth-telling and healing?
- When have I needed to say, “I was wrong,” and resisted?
- How can I help younger generations see God’s image in every person?
- What prejudices—subtle or overt—is God inviting me to release?
- How is the Holy Spirit calling me to build bridges where society builds walls?

### **Let Us Pray**

O God of Every Creature, You who fashioned foxes and rabbits, lions and lambs, teach us again the deep wisdom of Your creation. Break down the walls we build in fear, and scatter the shadows that keep us from the truth. Give us hearts wide enough to welcome difference, courage bold enough to confront injustice, and love strong enough to build community across every divide. Bless our children and grandchildren with imaginations shaped by mercy, and let them grow into peacemakers who see Your image in every neighbor. Make us a people of justice, a community of hope, and instruments of Your reconciling peace. Amen.

## Coming Out of the Dark

### A Reflection on World AIDS Day

December 1, 2025



On this World AIDS Day, as we enter this first week of Advent—a season of increasing light—we remember a community long forced to live in the shadows: those living with HIV and AIDS. Their suffering echoes ancient stories of lepers pushed outside city walls, and it invites us into the gospel work of healing, dignity and accompaniment.

#### **My First Encounters: Faces and Names That Stay With Me**

HIV/AIDS affects 1.2 million people in the U.S. — meaning that many of us know someone living with HIV/AIDS, even if we don't realize it.

Thirty-plus years ago, as a young novice in Arroyo Grande, California, I encountered AIDS for the first time. My classmates and I accompanied Father Brendan, a priest who was suffering the ravaging effects of the disease. I still remember the fatigue that overtook him, the rapid weight loss, the reddish-purple lesions spreading across his skin, and the coughing and wheezing as his immune system faltered. But I also remember his kindness, his dynamic preaching, and his sharp sense of humor. In life, Father Brendan embodied the spirit of St. Francis of Assisi. As he neared death, he embodied the lepers St. Francis embraced.

Some ten years later, after helping co-found an adult learning center in East Austin, I met a 19-year-old from central Mexico who had left school after the third grade, never having learned to read. He arrived each day eager to learn. After months of tutoring, he shared that he had been diagnosed with AIDS. I only saw him once more after that day, when he was standing at a bus stop a few months later, his body already showing the disease's toll. I still wonder what became of him. I fear I know.

For many of us, the HIV/AIDS epidemic has always had a face.



### **From Lepers to HIV/AIDS: The Old Story of Exclusion**

In the Gospels, lepers were pushed to the margins, stripped of community, feared, avoided, and reduced to stereotypes. Then, when Jesus touched them, He didn't just heal bodies—He restored belonging!

The 1980s and 1990s carried a tragically similar stigma: People with AIDS were often isolated, shamed, spoken of in hushed tones, blamed for their suffering, and rendered invisible. We began learning the names of public figures who died: Rock Hudson, Liberace, Freddie Mercury. Many of us remember the shockwave of Magic Johnson's 1991 announcement, ending his NBA career and beginning a national conversation. For too long, those with HIV/AIDS became the "lepers" of our time—spoken of as statistics, rather than souls.

### **Coming Out of the Dark: Advent Light and Pop Culture**

During that year of novitiate in California, I assisted the Spanish-speaking youth of St. Patrick Catholic Church. The parish's Advent theme that year was Gloria Estefan's 1991 hit "Coming Out of the Dark" (*Desde la oscuridad*). Somehow it felt like the perfect anthem: a hopeful, fierce emergence from darkness and suffering.

Pop culture has long named this journey.

- *Rent* taught us about chosen family.
- *The Normal Heart* forced America to confront governmental silence.
- *Pose* spotlighted HIV-positive queer and trans communities of color.
- Even Princess Diana became a secular saint of mercy, simply by holding a hand.

Advent is a season of increasing light—of coming out of the dark. And World AIDS Day reminds us how far that light has spread!

### **What Has Changed—and What Hasn't**

Forty-four years into this pandemic, 36.3 million people worldwide have died of AIDS-related illnesses—five times the number of global COVID deaths.

Still, the light grows brighter.

Medical advances continue to outpace old fears. PrEP, approved in 2012, largely prevents HIV transmission. With treatment and accompaniment, many who are diagnosed with HIV now live long, healthy, joyful lives.

And yet stigma persists—quietly in cultural attitudes, loudly in underfunded healthcare systems, and sometimes even in church pews.

Catholic social teaching reminds us that the common good and the preferential option for the poor demand we confront inequalities that make certain populations—especially LGBTQIA+ persons, people of color, migrants, and the poor—more vulnerable to HIV and less likely to receive care.

Above all, this World AIDS Day calls us to widen our circles of compassion.

### **Calls to Action for Those Who Care, but Don't Always Know How**

For those with limited contact with people living with HIV/AIDS, today invites concrete steps of mercy, justice and solidarity:

- **Unlearn harmful stereotypes.** Retire outdated ideas about transmission, morality and “deservedness.” HIV is a virus—not a verdict.
- **Form relationships across difference.** Volunteer with local service organizations. Attend World AIDS Day events. Deeply listen.
- **Support prevention and access to treatment.** Advocate for PrEP access, affordable medication, and culturally-competent care.
- **Honor the dead with active remembrance.** Visit the AIDS Memorial Quilt online. Learn names. Share stories. Pray.
- **Practice Advent hope.** Be bearers of light—especially where ignorance, shame or silence still linger.
- **Embrace Franciscan tenderness.** Move toward the wounded. Let compassion precede judgment. Let relationship precede fear.

And remember, as Whitney Houston promised: “I know that love will save the day”!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- Whose “leprosy” — whose suffering — do I avoid seeing?
- How have I unconsciously participated in stigma or silence?
- Where is God inviting me to move closer to those on the margins?
- What does it mean to be a source of Advent light for someone who feels forgotten?
- Who in my life might be quietly living with HIV — and how can I be a safer, more compassionate presence?
- How do the core principles of Catholic social teaching challenge my assumptions about disease, dignity and justice?
- How can I honor those who have died by advocating for those still living?
- In what ways can I embody St. Francis’ desire to repair what is broken in my community and in our world?

### **A Prayer for World AIDS Day**

God of compassion and healing,

On this World AIDS Day, we remember all who have died of AIDS-related illnesses—beloved children of Yours, gone too soon, too often alone. Welcome them into the fullness of Your light and peace.

We pray for all who live with HIV today: for strength in their bodies, peace in their minds, and dignity in every space they enter.

We lift up caregivers, nurses, doctors, researchers, counselors, chaplains, ministers, and community workers—the everyday saints who bind wounds, accompany the lonely, and push the boundaries of scientific discovery.

We pray for families and loved ones who carry grief or fear, and for communities still learning to shed the shadows of stigma.

We ask healing also for those who cling to misconceptions, whose fears cloud their compassion. Soften their hearts. Replace ignorance with understanding, and shame with mercy.

As we begin this season of Advent, let Your light grow in all places marked by darkness—illuminating truth, restoring hope, and gathering us into a world where no one is forgotten, no one is shunned, and all are embraced as Your own.

Through Christ, the Light of the World, who touched the untouchable and called the outcast beloved. Amen.

### **Conscience, Community and the Cost of Dissent**

Remembering Pasquier Quesnel

December 2, 2025



There are moments when faith forces a painful question: Will we obey institutional authority, or will we follow a conscience shaped by Scripture, sacrament and the suffering of our neighbors? On December 2, we remember Pasquier Quesnel (1634–1719), a French Oratorian and

theologian whose devotional commentary on the New Testament became the center of a bitter conflict culminating in the papal bull *Unigenitus* (1713) and its “formulary of submission,” which, in effect, became a litmus test of obedience to the Roman papacy. For many, Quesnel stands as a brave witness to conscience and to the spiritual life; for others, his work represents a theological error in need of correction. His story forces us to grapple with how the Church balances authority and reform, unity and prophetic critique.

### **Who Was Pasquier Quesnel?**

Born in Paris in 1634, Quesnel entered the Congregation of the Oratory and studied at the Sorbonne, France’s premier theological institution at that time. Deeply influenced by the Augustinian revival known as Jansenism—with its emphasis on God’s prevenient grace, the gravity of sin, and interior conversion—he became a leading interpreter of that spirituality through his *Réflexions morales sur le Nouveau Testament*. His verse-by-verse New Testament commentary aimed to bring Gospel spirituality to ordinary Christians. Yet the very accessibility of his work made it threatening! His commentary eventually became a lightning-rod for opponents who saw in Jansenist piety a challenge to established pastoral practice.

### **Port-Royal and the Jansenist Network**

Quesnel’s world orbited Port-Royal-des-Champs, a Cistercian women’s abbey and intellectual powerhouse associated with the Arnauld family. Antoine Arnauld, Quesnel’s mentor and friend, was expelled from the Sorbonne for critiquing Jesuit pastoral theology. In his *Provincial Letters*, Blaise Pascal defended Arnauld. Pascal also supported his sister, Jacqueline, who joined the Port-Royal convent.

As persecution intensified, Arnauld fled to the Spanish Netherlands, and Quesnel gradually emerged as the movement’s leader, helping to organize Jansenist clergy and laity. The Port-Royal community embodied a prophetic simplicity: interior reform, rigorous prayer, and resistance to what they viewed as the lax moral theology promoted by some Jesuits. When political and ecclesial authorities moved against Jansenism, Port-Royal suffered first: Its buildings were razed, its nuns scattered, and its cemetery desecrated. Quesnel would be forever linked—spiritually and politically—with this community of conscience.

### **The Politics Behind the Jesuit/Jansenist Clash**

The conflict that engulfed France was never purely theological. Jesuits—powerful in universities, royal courts and papal circles—clashed

with Jansenists over grace, free will, pastoral practice and moral casuistry (applying general moral principles to specific situations). Critics accused the Jesuits of laxism, while Jesuits countered that Jansenists tended toward fatalism and scrupulosity. Civil authorities, royal ministers and bishops all entered the fray. Into this volatile mix dropped Quesnel's *Réflexions morales*, which Jesuit-aligned interests in Rome and France denounced as containing already-condemned propositions. Yikes!

### ***Unigenitus*: The Turning Point**

On September 8, 1713, Pope Clement XI issued *Unigenitus*, condemning 101 propositions taken from Quesnel's commentary. The bull dealt a devastating blow to the Jansenist cause and demanded universal assent from clergy and religious through a "formulary of submission." Many who were ordered to condemn Quesnel's work had never read a page of it. The Port-Royal nuns openly refused, calling the demand madness. Sister Jacqueline Arnauld, who led the Port-Royal community proclaimed: "When bishops show the timidity of women, women must show the courage of bishops."

To many Jansenists, *Unigenitus* was less a pastoral document and more a political weapon: a test engineered by powerful ecclesial factions to enforce centralized obedience. Others argued the bull was necessary to defend unity and clarity of doctrine. The dispute continued for decades and reshaped French Catholicism well into the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

### **My Own *Unigenitus* Moment**

My thoughts bend toward my own brushes with institutional power and insistence on blind obedience. Ten years into my ministry as a Roman Catholic priest, for instance, I had transformed a largely Mexican and Mexican-American parish into Austin's largest Spanish-language community, with 4,000 to 5,000 people weekly drawn to our nine Sunday Masses – only one of which was in English.

When U.S. Congressman Luis Gutierrez of Chicago – Roman Catholic, pro-immigrant and politically prominent – planned a visit to Austin, I naturally welcomed him to speak with parishioners on comprehensive immigration reform. Three days before the publicized visit, I received a call from a diocesan staffer: "Did you not know, Father Jayme, that Congressman Gutierrez is not...pro-life?" I knew what she meant. He stood with our sisters and his voting record was not sufficiently anti-abortion. It seemed our new bishop, Joe Vásquez, appointed by the very conservative Papa Ratzinger, was looking to now prove his conservative *bona fides*.

The next day, the vicar general, Monsignor Michael Sis (now Bishop of San Angelo), called. His final words still ring: “Your bishop has asked that you disinvite the Congressman – and I am simply being obedient to your bishop.” The implication was clear: I was expected to obey, without hesitation, question or protest.

A lightbulb flickered on, and I recognized in that moment that I could not in good conscience align myself with such a narrow calculus – one that placed monied, conservative interests over the immigrant community I served. Much like the Port-Royal nuns, who could not condemn a book they had never read, I could not condemn a man I had never met simply to satisfy the whims of a hierarchy! It seems karma got the last word, though, and the irony that Bishop Vásquez later chaired the U.S. Bishops’ Committee on Migration was never lost on me. Ever.

### **A Brave Dissenter or a Theological Danger?**

How we read Quesnel depends on our theological, historical and pastoral sympathies. For many Catholics, he was a courageous pastor calling the Church back to Gospel simplicity and spiritual depth. Others, especially early critics, viewed his ideas as destabilizing. The historical record reveals both truths: Quesnel was sincere, pastoral and spiritually serious, yet his language could be misinterpreted – and was weaponized amid political turmoil.

### **Pop Culture Touchstones: Conscience vs. Institutional Power**

We know this drama well. It is the story of:

- the teacher who defies the school board (*Dead Poets Society*)
- the journalist confronting institutional harm (*Spotlight*) or refusing to sanitize the truth when the powerful demand silence (*The Post*)
- the icon painter refusing to flatter powerful patrons (*Andrei Rublev*)
- the truth-teller whom the establishment tries to silence (*Hidden Figures*)
- the June Osborne-style dissident who refuses the official story (*The Handmaid’s Tale*)
- the Enjolras-like rebel who won’t bend the truth to appease the establishment (*Les Misérables*)
- the Héctor figure whose inconvenient truth threatens the powerful (*Coco*).

These narratives help us grasp why a pastoral commentator like Quesnel might be loved by some and feared by others: *Reform disrupts, and institutions – for their survival – sometimes punch back*. The dance between conscience and hierarchy is a perennial Christian story.

## The Prophetic Role of Conscience

What might Quesnel and the Port-Royal witness offer Catholics now?

Catholic social teaching affirms solidarity, the common good, and the dignity of conscience. Solidarity sometimes demands dissent—especially when power shields itself from accountability. Like St. Francis of Assisi calling the Church back to Gospel simplicity, Quesnel challenged a spiritually-stagnant culture.

Scripture gives its own mandate: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness” (Mt. 5:6). “Learn to do good, seek justice, and correct oppression” (Is. 1:17). “We must obey God, rather than human beings” (Acts 5:29).

Conscience, rightly formed, is not a threat to the Church. It is the marrow of discipleship!

## Calls to Action

So, what might we do?

- **Read Quesnel for yourself.** Explore selections of his *Réflexions morales* alongside summaries of *Unigenitus*. The historical debate is richer than caricatures!
- **Defend conscience.** Support theologians, pastors and laypeople who raise uncomfortable but necessary questions.
- **Emulate Port-Royal’s care for the poor.** Serve locally; cultivate a spirituality rooted in interior conversion and social solidarity.
- **Advocate for institutional accountability.** Press for synodality, transparency and lay participation—reform grounded in love, not division.
- **Practice Cistercian humility.** Let every critique be rooted in prayer, mercy and the joy of the Gospel.

## The Courage to Think, Love and Act

Pasquier Quesnel’s life reminds us that Christianity is never a passive inheritance. It is a living, breathing call to conscience. His story is not about romanticizing dissent, but about bearing the cost of fidelity—to Scripture, to the poor, to the truth that frees. The Church needs authority, but it also needs the faithful boldness of those who, like Quesnel, refuse to let fear or power eclipse the Gospel. His witness invites us to hold authority and conscience together in creative tension—and to choose, always, the path that leads to justice, mercy and the flourishing of God’s people!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- Where is God inviting me to choose prophetic truth over institutional comfort?
- How do I balance solidarity and respect for authority with the demands of conscience?
- In what ways do I identify with Port-Royal's hunger for reform—or with the Church's need for unity?
- How am I tempted to silence my conscience for the sake of acceptance or ease?
- What prophetic voices am I avoiding—and why?
- What would it mean for me to listen again to prophetic, even uncomfortable, voices?
- Where is the Spirit asking me to stand with those pushed to the margins?

### **A Prayer for Conscience, Community and Courage**

Merciful God, You call your Church to fidelity and love. Grant us the courage of conscience and the humility of charity. Bless those who risk exclusion for the sake of Gospel truth; strengthen communities that gather the poor and the penitent; and reform structures that protect privilege over people. Make us a Church that listens—to Scripture, to the suffering, and to the reasoned witness of faithful critics. Let our debates lead not to hardness of heart, but to healing. Give us wisdom, patience and the courage to act for the common good. Through Christ, who modeled for us servant leadership. Amen.



## The Determined Ones

A Reflection on the International Day of Persons with Disabilities

December 3, 2025



Not long ago, the word “ableist” was not part of our everyday vocabulary. Now it’s everywhere—from social-media debates to Netflix scripts—revealing something deeper: We’re slowly waking up to the fact that the stories we tell about “ability” shape the dignity we extend to one another. Language forms worlds, and sometimes, the first healing miracle is simply learning to truthfully name things.

Today, on **December 3**, the **International Day of Persons with Disabilities**, the Church invites us to pause and ask: *How do we see those whom Jesus consistently sought out, blessed, listened to and healed?*

Because, let’s be honest: While our culture talks a lot about health and wholeness, Jesus talked a lot more about mercy and belonging. And maybe that’s the first lesson of the day—that holiness has never meant “perfection,” and “wholeness” has never meant sameness.

### The Lingo We’ve Inherited—and the Limits It Exposes

We’ve grown accustomed to a certain vocabulary: “disabled” people, “handicapped” parking, and the various labels that reduce people to what they “lack”: blind, deaf, mute, lame. These words emerged from an ableist worldview that assumed a “standard” body and “normal” ability, with everyone else measured by deviation.

But the Gospel begins somewhere entirely different. Again and again—in the healing of the man born blind (Jn. 9), the woman stooped over (Lk. 13), the paralytic lowered through the roof (Mk. 2), or the man with the withered hand (Mk. 3)—Jesus doesn’t ask: What’s wrong with you? He asks: What do you desire? What would you like me to do for

you? How can I help restore your dignity, your place in the community, your sense of belovedness?

And every healing is really a **restoration of relationship**, not conformity to an ideal.

It is no coincidence that in English, the words **whole** and **holy** share a root—though that connection can be used in dangerous, ableist ways. What Scripture actually shows us is that people become “whole” when barriers to relationships are removed...not when bodies are “fixed.”

Holiness is not the absence of limitation. Holiness is the presence of love.

### **A Lesson from the Middle East: The Determined Ones**

During my first visit to the United Arab Emirates in 2019, I encountered a completely different vocabulary. People we often name as “disabled” are described instead as **the determined**. The signs in parking lots read: People of Determination Parking Only. Something in me shifted. What if those we label as “impaired” or “disabled” have, in fact, cultivated more courage, creativity, and grit in doing certain daily tasks than those of us who breeze through them without thought?

Every day, we see people of all ages moving through life not as “exceptions,” but as *models of determination and perseverance*.

This was, in its own way, a tiny Advent revelation: a light shining into the language we use, inviting us to come out of the dark!

### **Father Roy Gomez: A Model of Determination**

Here at Holy Family Catholic Church, we celebrate today the 80<sup>th</sup> birthday of Father Roy Gomez, who next week marks ten years of priesthood.

Yes, you read that correctly.

After more than 20 years of very dedicated lay ministry at Cristo Rey Catholic Church, having lived nearly every expression of discipleship a lay person can live, Father Roy stepped into the call that ageists would call “too late,” “too old” or “not possible.” He was ordained at 70. At an age when many people slow down, Father Roy was just speeding up! If we were to reserve parking spots for “the determined,” Father Roy’s name would be painted on the pavement!

Father Roy has dedicated himself to the determined among us:

- **survivors of domestic violence** who are determined to rebuild,
- **senior adults** who are determined to stay connected and purposeful,

- **grieving families** determined to trust that love is stronger than death.

Father Roy's life is an Advent candle—steady, warm, insistent.

### **The Beauty of Inclusive Catholicism**

One of the gifts of Inclusive/Independent Catholicism is that we do not practice the ageism or sexism that define other Catholic expressions. Like the early Christian communities, we recognize the Spirit calls whom the Spirit will. And the Spirit rarely checks birth certificates or resumes.

This wider table allows a fuller witness to determination—to the many ways grace appears in the bodies of every age, ability and history. It also allows us to challenge ableist assumptions embedded in church structures, liturgies and expectations. Because if the Body of Christ is truly one body, then every part—every capacity, every limitation, every gift—belongs.

### **History and Pop Culture Know Something About Determination**

Think of:

- **Helen Keller.** A real-life icon, she channeled her determination into shaping rights for the determined.
- **Beethoven.** He composed some of his greatest works while losing his hearing—a historic testimony to artistic determination.
- **Selena Quintanilla.** A symbol of determination in navigating bicultural identity, industry barriers, and gender roles, she was “¡Sí se puede!” in glitter and rhythm.
- **Stephen Hawking.** He lived a full, brilliant intellectual life while navigating ALS—reshaping our understanding of the cosmos with determination stronger than his body.
- **Simone Biles.** She is courage in a leotard, determined to prioritize mental health—even when the world demanded otherwise.
- **Chirrut Îmwe in *Rogue One*.** His blindness becomes not an obstacle, but the ground of his faith (“I am one with the Force...”).
- **Miguel in *Coco*.** He was determined to honor his musical calling, despite family resistance and cultural expectations.
- **Mirabel in *Encanto*.** She was determined to love, serve and heal her family—even without a “gift.”
- **Tiana in *The Princess and the Frog*.** She works three jobs and never loses sight of the dream others think is impossible.
- **Nemo and Dory in *Finding Nemo*.** Nemo's small fin and Dory's memory challenges do not diminish their heroism.

- **Beth Harmon in *The Queen's Gambit*.** She reshaped the chess world while living with trauma, addiction and neurodiversity.
- **Max in *Stranger Things*.** Determined to confront trauma and grief, she demonstrates emotional strength as fierce as any supernatural battle.
- **Will in *Good Will Hunting*.** A working-class genius, he was determined not to be defined by trauma, class expectations, or other people's visions for him.
- **Rudy Ruettiger in *Rudy*.** His entire story is a hymn to determination – overcoming learning disabilities, class barriers and self-doubt to pursue his dream.
- **Toph Beifong in *Avatar: The Last Airbender*.** Blind from birth, Toph becomes one of the greatest earthbenders in the world – not in spite of her blindness, but through it.
- **Shuri / Princess T'Challa in *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*.** Shuri's grief doesn't paralyze her; she is determined to protect her people while rebuilding hope.
- **Frodo Baggins in *The Lord of the Rings*.** Not strong or mighty, but determined – carrying a burden overwhelming for most, yet refusing to abandon the quest.

Pop culture often sees more clearly than the Church does.

### Calls to Action

Today's observance asks more from us than awareness:

- **Audit your language.** What words do you unthinkingly use? Whom might they wound?
- **Listen.** Let people with special abilities define their own experience.
- **Embrace the spiritual gifts of the determined.** Let their resilience challenge our comfort.
- **Practice accompaniment.** Not "helping" from above, but walking with.
- **Advocate for accessibility.** Ramps, seating, website design, ASL interpretation – these are acts of justice, not charity.

The International Day of the Determined – my preferred name for this day – calls us back to the heart of the Gospel: that God's power is revealed not in polished strength, but in courageous vulnerability; that God's grace does not erase limitations, but works through them; and that the world becomes more holy not when we conform bodies to an ideal, but when we conform our hearts to love.

Those we call “disabled” are not on the margins of God’s Kingdom. They are often its architects, its prophets, and its most determined builders. And they are showing us the way!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- Where have I unconsciously absorbed ableist assumptions in my language or behavior?
- Who in my community teaches me the meaning of determination?
- Which Gospel stories of healing invite me to reconsider what “wholeness” really means?
- What obstacles—physical, social or spiritual—does my work place or faith community still place in the way of full participation?
- How is God calling me to accompany, celebrate or advocate for the determined among us?

### **A Prayer for the Determined**

God of mercy, You created every person in your image—not in the image of perfection, but in the image of love. Bless all Your determined children: those whose days require courage others do not see, whose bodies tell stories of resilience, whose perseverance is a witness to Your grace. Remove from us the blindness of prejudice. Calm the fears that keep us from relationship. Tear down the barriers—visible and invisible—that exclude Your beloved. Strengthen caregivers, advocates, therapists, teachers, and all who labor for accessibility and dignity. Let our communities become places where every body, every mind, every spirit is welcomed and valued. Make us determined, too—determined to love, determined to include, determined to build a Church where every person reflects the holiness of Your own heart. Through Christ, the One who restored dignity, healed wounds, and welcomed all. Amen.

## Katniss Everdeen, Guillermo del Toro and Albus Dumbledore

Three Unlikely Saints on a Single Holy Card

December 4, 2025



Some days in the liturgical calendar feel like carefully curated museum exhibits—orderly, thematic, tidy. December 4 is not one of them. Instead, we remember today three figures who look like they could never belong on the same holy card:

- a legendary maiden whose persecutor/father was struck by lightning,
- a monk who believed paint and wood could preach,
- and a Belgian archbishop accused of liberalism who built schools like a man possessed by the Spirit of Vatican II—before Vatican II existed.

It's as if the Holy Spirit is reminding us that the communion of saints is not a lineup of clones, but a choir full of wildly different voices singing the same Gospel in their own key!

Today's celebrations invites us to listen.

### **St. Barbara: Lethal Lightning**

*"The Lord is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear?" (Ps. 27:1)*

St. Barbara's story is part legend, part history, and all electricity. According to ancient tradition, her pagan father locked her in a tower to prevent her conversion. But Barbara professed Christ anyway. Enraged, he dragged her before the authorities, who condemned her to death. He wielded a sword and beheaded her himself—only to be struck by lightning on the way home!

Because of this, St. Barbara became the matron saint of those facing sudden or explosive danger: miners, artillery workers, firefighters, people who live between risk and courage. Her red garments blazing with defiant love, she is venerated passionately in *Santería* and other

Afro-Caribbean traditions as Orisha, the ax-wielding warrior god (*sic*) of fire, thunder and lightning.

Barbara's removal from the Roman calendar does not diminish her appeal, and she stands among the 140 colonnade saints embracing St. Peter's Square, in a quiet act of protest carved in stone.

Barbara reminds us that proclaiming Good News is often costly, especially when the powers closest to us—family, culture, nation, church—fear the freedom of the Gospel. In pop culture terms, St. Barbara possesses a bit of Katniss Everdeen—unwilling to bow to unjust power, even when the threat is intimate and lethal. Her story calls us to pray for all who risk rejection, violence or exclusion because they dare to say: "My faith is not for sale. My conscience is not for rent."

### **St. John of Damascus: When Art Becomes Theology**

*"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." (Jn. 1:14)*

If Barbara was lightning, John of Damascus (675–749) was light—disciplined, clarifying, steady. Living at the crossroads of Christian and Islamic civilizations, John served as a bridge-figure: the last of the Greek Fathers, the Church's great Defender of Icons, and one of the first Christian voices to integrate Aristotelian philosophy. When imperial authorities demanded the destruction of sacred images, John countered: Because God took on matter, matter can reveal God! To smash images, he argued, was to reject the Incarnation itself.

John declared in an age suspicious of images—some Christians feared them, many Muslims forbade them—that beauty is a doorway to the Divine, and that icons preach a Gospel the heart often understands before the mind catches up. Think of him as the Church's early Guillermo del Toro or Miyazaki: someone who believed that beauty isn't merely ornamental—it's theological! His memory invites us to ask: What art, symbol or practice mediates God's presence for me? And how might I defend beauty in a culture that often rewards spectacle over sacrament?

Perhaps today is a good day to dust a statue, light a candle before an icon, or—if you're feeling bold—enjoy a conversation on Christian art.

### **Engelbert Sterckx: The Archbishop Who Built a Future**

*"My people perish for lack of knowledge." (Hos. 4:6)*

Eleven centuries after John—and worlds apart from Barbara—we meet Engelbert Sterckx (1792–1867), a gentle intellectual and the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Mechelen, Belgium. Sterckx's consecration was delayed because Rome suspected him of being—you guessed it—too liberal. (Some things never change!)

When Belgium gained independence, Sterckx seized the moment. He reopened the long-shuttered University of Leuven, built seminaries and colleges, expanded Catholic education, and convened national Catholic Congresses to debate politics, science, culture, and the social mission of the Church. In many ways, Sterckx was the Church's own Albus Dumbledore—wise, patient, and principled—offering a steady hand, radiating moral authority amid a complex social landscape, and strategically safeguarding his institution while guiding the next generation.

Sterckx reminds us that faith is not merely private devotion. It is about forming a world that reflects God's justice—through education, political imagination, and institutions rooted in mercy and truth.

### Three Lives, One Gospel

At first glance, these figures could not be more different: Barbara, the martyr of integrity. John, the theologian of beauty. Sterckx, the architect of Catholic engagement. But together they form a single Advent parable: Discipleship requires courage, imagination and engagement.

Barbara teaches us to stand firm. John teaches us to see God everywhere. Sterckx teaches us to shape society with the Gospel. The fact that we remember them on the same day is a whispered reminder that holiness never looks just one way. It is lightning and paintbrushes and classroom chalk. It is resistance, art and institution-building. It is the Spirit multiplying paths to justice and joy!

### Calls to Action

- **Stand with today's "Barbaras."** Support those—especially women, LGBTQ+ persons, migrants and the marginalized—who face exclusion for living the truth of their identities and vocations.
- **Reclaim beauty as a spiritual practice.** In honor of St. John of Damascus, visit a museum, light a candle before an icon, create something: poetry, sketch, music, protest art.
- **Engage your civic imagination.** Like Sterckx, support education, liberation and community leadership—through voting, advocacy, tutoring or scholarship funds.
- **Enjoy a faith-and-art conversation.** Share faith objects, icons or artifacts that shape your journey.
- **Learn the stories of saints removed from the calendar.** The likes of Barbara, Philomena, Ursula, Christopher, Corona, and Catherine of Alexandria proclaim that holiness is not limited to canonical saints!



### **Heavenly Mix-Tape**

Think of today as a mix-tape from the communion of saints: Barbara drops a track about fearless witness, John spins one on beauty and truth, and Sterckx closes with a remix on political courage. All that's left is for us to dance our way into responsible, joyful discipleship.

And if your rhythm feels off? Don't worry. Every saint started on the wrong foot before learning the steps!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- Where is God calling me to be courageous, like St. Barbara?
- What “icons” in my life—art, beauty, memories, encounters—mediate God's presence?
- How might I use my gifts to help build the “schools of freedom” our world needs?
- Which voices or traditions has the Church marginalized that I am called to listen to?
- In this Advent season, how am I being invited to join God's work of renewal?

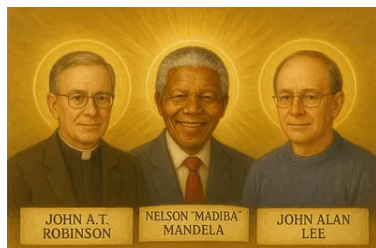
### **A Prayer for Courage, Beauty and Engagement**

God of thunder and tenderness, You raise up saints who teach us to be brave, to create beauty that heals, and to build communities rooted in justice. Through the intercession of St. Barbara, give us the courage to proclaim truth, even when it costs us. Through St. John of Damascus, open our eyes to Your presence in every image, every face, every corner of creation. Through Engelbert Sterckx, inspire us to educate, engage and transform the world You love. Make us a people of bold faith, deep imagination, and tireless commitment to the common good. This we ask through Christ, the Word made flesh and the Icon of Your mercy. Amen.

## Voices of Courage, Compassion and Change

Three Lives, One Invitation

December 5, 2025



December 5 holds a remarkable confluence of memory, reflection and action. On this day, we are invited to remember three very different figures—**John Robinson, Nelson Mandela and John Alan Lee**—whose lives challenge us to think, to love, and to act. Their stories intersect in surprising ways, offering a kind of Advent compass for Catholics: a prophetic mind, a courageous heart, and a generous love. And all of it unfolds on a day when the world also marks **International Volunteer Day**, reminding us that great change is built not only by great people, but by everyday acts of service.

### John Robinson: Rethinking Faith

The English Anglican bishop and New Testament scholar **John A.T. Robinson** (1919–1983) pushed Christianity into new territory. His groundbreaking book *Honest to God* startled many—precisely because he dared to ask aloud the questions most believers quietly carry.

He called Christians to move beyond a distant, authoritarian image of God, and instead embrace a God who is relational, present, dynamic and near. He believed that honest doubt is not the enemy of faith, but one of its most trustworthy companions.

Robinson's voice still speaks into our moment: a time of disaffiliation, deconstruction and deep spiritual hunger.

### Calls to Action

- Read (or re-read) Robinson's *Honest to God* or another work that challenges your faith to grow.
- Ask yourself: Where am I being invited to think more deeply, honestly and courageously about God?
- Start one conversation this week where you allow doubt, questioning and curiosity to be holy.

### **Nelson Mandela: Patience in the Work of Justice**

On December 5, 2013, **Nelson “Madiba” Mandela** (1918-2013) went home to God. His life remains one of the most extraordinary testimonies to justice, reconciliation and courageous endurance.

After 27 years of imprisonment, Mandela emerged not hardened by hate, but committed to building an inclusive and democratic South Africa. He showed the world that justice need not be fueled by vengeance, and that reconciliation is not weakness, but moral brilliance.

In a season when U.S. political life feels brittle and vindictive—and when global movements for justice are both necessary and exhausting—Mandela’s witness reminds us that justice is a long walk, and we are called to stay on the path.

#### **Calls to Action**

- Support or join a racial-justice or democracy-strengthening initiative in your community.
- Practice one act of reconciliation this week: a conversation, a letter, an apology, a boundary, a truth spoken in love.
- Pray for activists, organizers and peacemakers who continue Mandela’s work.

### **John Alan Lee: Loving Without Boundaries**

The Canadian writer, activist and trailblazing queer thinker John Alan Lee (1933–2013) also died on December 5. Lee is best known for his research on the psychology and sociology of love—especially his “colors of love” theory, which expanded how we understand relationships, desire and intimacy.

But Lee also challenged a deeper cultural assumption: that love must be policed, controlled or limited. His work insists that love flourishes where authenticity is welcomed, not judged—and that people deserve dignity in love as in life.

Later in life, he became an advocate for the right to die, offering honest, compassionate reflection on some of the most difficult ethical and spiritual questions of the human journey.

For Catholics seeking to build a Church where LGBTQIA+ people are cherished—not merely tolerated—Lee’s life invites us toward radical hospitality, compassionate listening, and the courage to love without fear.

### **Calls to Action**

- Support an LGBTQIA+ ministry, shelter or community program.
- Learn about Lee's "colors of love," and reflect on how your own love style shapes relationships.
- Advocate within your community for inclusive spaces and compassionate care.

### **International Volunteer Day: Sharing Time, Talent, and Heart**

December 5 is also International Volunteer Day—a global reminder that most healing in this world comes not through great speeches, but through quiet, consistent service.

The Gospel tells us the same truth: "Whatever you did for one of the least of these siblings of mine, you did for me" (Mt. 25:40).

Volunteering is not merely philanthropy; it is sacrament. It is how we consecrate our time, our skills, our presence, and our compassion.

### **Calls to Action**

- Commit to one concrete act of service this Advent—tutoring, food pantry support, visiting the sick, or environmental clean-up.
- If you already volunteer, invite a friend to join you.
- Write down one gift you have—professional or personal—that you can share intentionally with others.

### **Choosing Courage, Love and Service**

December 5 gives us three lives that answer a single question: What kind of person am I becoming? John Robinson urges us to think with honesty. Nelson Mandela calls us to act with courage. John Alan Lee invites us to love with authenticity. And International Volunteer Day reminds us that who we become is revealed in what we do.

In a world aching for justice, healing, and imagination, we are called not merely to admire courageous people, but to join them—to pray bravely, think deeply, love generously and serve faithfully. Advent is our yearly reminder that God enters the world through ordinary lives. And God may well be waiting to enter the world today through yours!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- Which of these December 5 witnesses—thought, justice or love—speaks most to the spiritual invitation I feel right now?
- Where is God calling me to deeper honesty in faith?
- How am I participating in the work of justice in my community—and where might I be called to more courage?

- How can I show greater love and acceptance, especially to those marginalized by Church or society?
- What act of service can I offer this week that would make Christ's compassion visible?

### **A Prayer for Courage, Compassion and Change**

God of Advent hope, You speak through prophets, peacemakers and lovers of truth. You call us to a faith that thinks fearlessly, to a justice that perseveres, and to a love that knows no boundaries. Stir our hearts to serve generously. Give us courage when the work is hard, compassion when the path is painful, and joy when the journey grows long. May we embody the wisdom of John Robinson, the courage of Nelson Mandela, and the expansive love taught by John Alan Lee. And may our lives—through service, justice and tenderness—prepare a place for Christ to be born again in our world. Amen.

### **St. Nicholas for a Fearful, Fragmented America**

Lessons from the Life and Legends of a Saint  
Urgently Needed in the U.S. Today

December 6, 2025



Many of my ancestors come from northern European countries where the veneration of St. Nicholas runs deep. His name echoes across villages and river towns. Thousands of churches and countless people throughout the past 1,600 years have carried his name: men, yes, but also women with such names as Nicolasa, Nicole, Nichole and Nikki! So it likely won't surprise you to know that my childhood church was named for St. Nicholas, and was originally built on land donated by a farmer named Nicholas.

Today, on the feast of St. Nicholas, I find myself thinking not only of the man from Asia Minor whose life and legends inspired so much devotion, but also of the sociopolitical and religious pressures that

shaped how the Low Countries embraced him – and what his life might teach us in a polarized, fearful and fragmented America.

### **The Man from Asia Minor who became Europe's North Star**

St. Nicholas was born in the late 3<sup>rd</sup> century in Patara, a port city in present-day Turkey. He lived amid the crumbling might of the Roman Empire, a time marked by political suspicion, persecution of Christians, and staggering economic inequality. He became bishop of Myra and was famous for his fierce advocacy for the poor, his protection of vulnerable families, and his bold, almost stubborn refusal to let political or economic power determine who was worthy of dignity. His generosity was not soft charity; it was justice in action!

Legends abound – some rooted in truth, others shaped by centuries of retelling:

- **The Three Daughters.** A father too poor to provide dowries was prepared to sell his daughters into servitude. Nicholas, hearing of their plight, dropped bags of gold through their window at night, preserving their freedom and dignity!
- **The Falsely-accused Soldiers.** When three young officers faced execution on trumped-up charges, Nicholas confronted the corrupt governor directly – publicly – until he relented!
- **The Famine at Myra.** When grain ships docked near the city, Nicholas persuaded the sailors to share their cargo. Though they feared imperial punishment, the grain was miraculously replenished when they reached Byzantium, and Myra survived the famine!

Some legends veer into the fantastical – resurrected children, calmed storms, saved sailors. Yet even these stories amplify Nicholas' core identity: protector of the vulnerable, challenger of injustice, and disruptor of systems that crush the poor.

### **Why the Low Countries Fell in Love with the Saint**

By the Middle Ages, St. Nicholas' reputation had spread across Europe, but the Low Countries – Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands – made him their saint.

Why? Because they lived in a world like his.

From the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Low Countries were a paradox, with wealthy trading hubs amid deep inequality. A once-Catholic land found its civic life now shaped by political turmoil, guilds, markets and migration. Floods, famines and wars repeatedly tested communities. St. Nicholas was their man! A saint who stood with poor families, sailors,

merchants, migrants and children. A saint who confronted power and corruption. A saint who embodied generosity during seasons of hardship

St. Nicholas fit their socio-political reality perfectly. And so:

- Guilds made him their patron.
- Merchants venerated him.
- Children celebrated him.
- Cities named churches after him.
- Every December 6 became a festival of gifts, feasting, and protection from winter's fear.

His stories taught generations that generosity was a civic responsibility, not merely a private virtue.

### **From St. Nicholas to *Sinterklaas* to Santa Claus**

Language and immigration slowly reshaped St. Nicholas. In the Low Countries, *Sanctus Nicolaus* became *Sinterklaas* – a tall, gift-giving bishop arriving by ship from Spain (in Flemish and Dutch tradition), echoing the seafaring cultures of the region. Dutch immigrants later carried *Sinterklaas* to New Amsterdam – present-day New York – where English ears softened the consonants and rounded the vowels for “Santa Claus.”

Over time, commercial culture removed the bishop's miter, trimmed his prophetic nature, and replaced his justice-oriented generosity with mass-market consumerism. Or, as one Dutch scholar put it: “We kept the gifts, but lost the Gospel.”

### **Why We Need St. Nicholas Now**

In some ways, our current U.S. moment looks alarmingly like Nicholas's Myra and the medieval Low Countries:

- Widening inequality.
- Fear-driven politics.
- Demonization of immigrants.
- Attacks on vulnerable families.
- Attempts to turn Christianity into a tool of cultural dominance, rather than compassion.

Nicholas speaks directly into this.

- **He teaches us that generosity is political.** Dropping dowries through a window was not “random kindness”; it was structural intervention for a family facing generational poverty.
- **He confronts power when it harms the innocent.** Nicholas didn't “stay in his lane.” He challenged corrupt officials, demanded

justice, and defended the falsely-accused. He reminds us that bishops – and all Christians – should protect people, not systems.

- **He reminds us that faith must disrupt fear.** Nicholas lived in an empire obsessed with control. He insisted instead that God's abundance is real – that resources are meant to be shared, not hoarded.
- **He calls us to protect children and families under threat.** Whether defending daughters from exploitation or safeguarding sailors, his consistent stance was this: No one gets thrown away.
- **He challenges us to love immigrants and newcomers.** The Dutch venerated a saint from Asia Minor – a reminder that the Church is always already global, and holiness does not come from our borders.

### **Calls to Action in Honor of St. Nicholas in 2025**

- Support immigrant and refugee families in your city through legal-aid clinics, ESL programs, and accompaniment organizations.
- Advocate for public policies that protect vulnerable children: housing stability, child tax credits, school funding, and healthcare access.
- Challenge fear-based rhetoric within your own circles – at family gatherings, in your workplace, and in your community.
- Give in ways that change systems, rather than merely soothe your conscience. Donate to organizations working on economic justice and long-term structural change.
- Teach children generosity not as “being nice,” but as participating in justice. Tell them the real stories of St. Nicholas – not just the commercial ones.

### **Holiness is Bold, Disruptive and Generous**

In every age that descends into fear, St. Nicholas reappears – not as a jolly mascot of December, but as a fierce witness to the Gospel's demand for justice, mercy and courageous love. His life reminds us that holiness is not passive. It is bold, disruptive and generous in ways that unsettle empires and heal communities.

As we navigate rising political extremism, economic division, and hostility toward the stranger, St. Nicholas stands as a patron for our moment – urging us not to retreat into nostalgia or consumerism, but to step into the public square with pockets full of courage and hands ready for justice!



### Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where am I being called to quiet, unseen forms of generosity — the kind that protects the dignity of others?
- What “corrupt governors” or unjust systems in my world need me to speak up?
- How have I benefited from fear-based narratives, and where is God inviting me to repent?
- Whom do I consider “other,” and how might St. Nicholas be leading me to surprising solidarity?
- How can I embody Nicholas’s spirit in concrete ways this Advent?

### A Prayer for the Feast of St. Nicholas

Holy Nicholas, bishop of Myra and protector of the poor, you who quieted storms and confronted injustice, teach us to be bold in mercy and relentless in love. Guard all children and vulnerable families in our nation. Strengthen those who work for justice in classrooms, courtrooms and community centers. Soften hearts hardened by fear, and kindle in us a generosity that reflects God’s own abundance. As you once dropped gold through a window to preserve a family’s dignity, drop into our hearts the courage to give, to speak, and to act until every neighbor knows the safety, dignity and hope of the Kingdom you proclaimed. Amen.

### Elizabeth Johnson: Doctor of the Church-in-the-Making

Celebrating a Theologian Who Helps the Church  
Hear the Voices of Women

December 7, 2025



As a young seminarian at the Washington Theological Union, I fell in love with the work of Sister and Doctor Elizabeth Johnson, C.S.J.—especially *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*.

For me, it was a near-mystical experience to read her luminous descriptions of a God now freed from centuries-old patriarchal cages—and to hear her challenge to “speak rightly of God.” A few years later, I was secretly envious of my classmate, Jess, who went off to Fordham to study under her. And, to be honest, I was dismayed, even disgusted, when, under Papa Ratzinger, U.S. bishops launched investigations into women’s religious communities and publicly censured Johnson’s scholarship.

But Johnson is tougher than her critics. She has spent decades helping the Catholic Church imagine God with new eyes, new metaphors, and a new sense of justice. For this reason, today, on her 84<sup>th</sup> birthday, I wish to honor one of the most important feminist theologians of our time.

### **The Woman Who Helped Us Speak of God Without Apology**

Elizabeth Johnson has been—quietly, persistently—one of the most transformative theological voices in contemporary Catholicism. For many of us, she gave us the language to articulate what we had always sensed: that the God who made heaven and earth is not simply “Father” in a narrow, gendered way, but is the fountain of life, wisdom, freedom and tenderness beyond our human categories.

Her work did not dismantle Catholic doctrine; it expanded it, purified it, set it free.

Her central conviction: *If women are made in the image of God, then women’s experiences must matter when we talk about God!* That simple truth shakes oppressive structures to their core.

### **Johnson’s Books: A Reading List for Liberating the Imagination**

If you don’t know Sister Elizabeth Johnson or her works, perhaps you might thumb through one of the following:

- ***She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*** (1992). This is Johnson’s *magnum opus*—a brilliant synthesis of classical theology, feminist critique, and mystical tradition. Johnson doesn’t reject the tradition; she mines it. She recovers biblical and patristic images of God as Sophia, as Spirit, as Wisdom—revealing that the Church had a larger imagination before it shrank the Divine into masculine language alone. If you only read one Johnson book, choose this!
- ***Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints*** (1998). A sweeping vision of the communion of saints—not as plaster figures, but as companions in struggle. Johnson elevates the stories of women, martyrs,

mystics and everyday faithful people whose lives reveal God's passionate solidarity with humanity!

- ***Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints*** (2003). A stunning Christological and Mariological masterpiece. Johnson reclaims Mary as a Jewish woman of faith—our “sister” in discipleship, not an unreachable porcelain statue. Essential reading for Catholics weary of Marian piety that feels divorced from justice!
- ***Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*** (2007). The book that triggered the most public censure. In truth, it is accessible, biblically-anchored, and pastorally brilliant. Johnson surveys global theologies of God—from Latino/a liberation perspectives, to African, Asian and ecological theologies. Her critics said she was “confusing the faithful”; her readers knew she was teaching us to breathe in the Divine!
- ***Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*** (2014). A gorgeous eco-theology integrating science, evolution and the divine delight in creation. For anyone who wants a theological response to the ecological crisis, this book is indispensable!

### **Ambrose and Biel: Surprising Sages for Today**

December 7 is not only Johnson's birthday—it is also the feast of St. Ambrose and the death anniversary of Gabriel Biel. Both, in their own ways, illuminate Johnson's legacy.

#### **St. Ambrose: The Unbaptized Catechumen Turned Bishop Who Broke the Mold**

Ambrose (+397) was a civil official, not yet baptized, when the people of Milan acclaimed him bishop. (Let that sink in.) He trusted the Spirit more than rigid process. He defended the poor against imperial authority, and he wasn't afraid to rebuke political leaders.

I like to imagine Ambrose smiling on Sister Elizabeth Johnson—the woman theologian whose work has renewed the Church despite resistance from ecclesial authorities. Like Ambrose, she trusts experience and the Spirit. Like him, she refuses to cower before empire, be it Roman or Roman Curial!

#### **Gabriel Biel: The “Monarch of Theologians” Who Formed a Council**

Gabriel Biel (+1495) was one of the most influential late-medieval scholastics, referenced repeatedly at the Council of Trent. Though often cast as the last great nominalist, Biel cared deeply about ethics, sacraments and the moral responsibility of Christians in society.

I imagine him nodding vigorously at Johnson's insistence that right worship and right theology demand right action in the world—especially for the poor and marginalized. Biel might even admire her ability to engage classical theology while pushing it toward liberation!

### **Why Elizabeth Johnson Matters**

Sister Elizabeth Johnson teaches us that:

- God is always bigger than our fear. Patriarchy shrinks God; Johnson throws open the windows!
- Women's experiences are not add-ons to theology. They are primary sources. She reminds us that theology is not neutral when the marginalized are excluded!
- Fidelity to the tradition includes naming the failures of the tradition. Johnson's critics worry about confusion; she worries about justice!
- The Church becomes more Catholic—not less—when it listens to women, people of color, scientists, and the poor!
- Hope requires imagination. Without new metaphors for God, we cannot live our faith boldly in a changing world!

### **Why the Investigations and Censures Failed**

The investigations under Benedict XVI and the condemnation led by the U.S. bishops were a painful chapter for Catholic women in the U.S., revealing deep anxiety about women's leadership and about theological inquiry that dares to imagine God beyond patriarchy.

But those efforts ultimately failed to silence Johnson. Her books still circulate. Her students still teach. Her ideas still inspire. And she remains one of the most cited Catholic theologians of our time.

History has already judged her more kindly than her inquisitors.

### **Calls to Action**

- Read (or re-read) one of Johnson's books this Advent—especially *She Who Is* or *Quest for the Living God*.
- Support women theologians. Donate to institutions, scholarship funds, and publications that elevate feminist voices.
- Host a book circle on one of Johnson's works, focusing on how our God-language shapes justice.
- Challenge gender-exclusive language, especially in church and liturgical settings.
- Mentor young women discerning theology or ordained ministry, encouraging them not to wait for permission to use their gifts.

- Encourage bishops and priests to engage – and not fear – the work of women theologians.

### **Let's Continue Johnson's Work!**

On this feast of St. Ambrose and this anniversary of Biel, we honor Sister Elizabeth Johnson – whose fierce intellect, prophetic courage and expansive imagination have changed the landscape of Catholic theology. She has helped us see God not as a distant patriarch, but as the Living One who breathes through women's stories, liberates the oppressed, and delights in creation.

If the Church is ever to find its way out of fear, clericalism, misogyny and narrow dogmatism, it will be because of theologians like her – people who refuse to shrink the Gospel to fit the anxieties of the powerful.

Today we celebrate her life. Tomorrow, let's continue her work!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- How has my image of God been shaped – or limited – by patriarchal language?
- Which women have revealed God to me, and how might I honor their wisdom?
- Where am I being invited to expand my theological imagination?
- What fears keep me from welcoming new metaphors, new voices or new scholarship?
- How might embracing Johnson's insights lead me toward deeper justice?

### **A Prayer in Honor of Sister Elizabeth Johnson**

God of Wisdom, Sophia who dances through creation, we thank You for Elizabeth Johnson – for her courage, her clarity, her fidelity to the Gospel. Stir in us the imagination she nurtured, that we might speak of You with honesty, tenderness and awe. Make us bold in naming injustice, gentle in mentoring others, and joyful in discovering You in every face. As Ambrose stood up to empire and Biel sought understanding in a confusing age, so let us stand with Johnson in our own time – seeking a Church that welcomes all, honors women's voices, and reflects Your boundless love. May her life continue to inspire us to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with You. Amen.

## “Mother! Put Down That Stone!”

### Doctrine, Division and Santiago Fonacier

December 8, 2025



There’s an old joke. Perhaps you’ve heard it. Jesus says, “Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone.” So Mary—immaculately conceived and therefore sinless—picks up a stone to wind up the pitch. And Jesus spins around and yells: “Stop! Mother! Put down that stone!”

It’s a joke that lands differently on the Feast of the **Immaculate Conception**—a day that celebrates Mary’s freedom from sin, but also reminds us of the deep division that has historically marked the Church. And it’s a day that, perhaps providentially, also marks the anniversary of the death of **Santiago Fonacier**, the second supreme bishop of the Philippine Independent Church—a leader whose own story is threaded with the splintering and healing of communities of faith.

Today invites us to reflect honestly: Why do doctrines so often deepen division? And what might Mary—and Bishop Fonacier—have to teach us about healing it?

### **The Immaculate Conception: When a Dogma Divides**

The Immaculate Conception of Mary was declared dogma on December 8, 1854, by Pius IX in his papal bull, *Ineffabilis Deus*. That declaration did not merely produce lace-and-lily devotional art; it produced division. Many bishops worried about defining something not explicitly found in Scripture. Others feared that elevating this belief to dogma would create turmoil with the Eastern Churches, who deeply revered Mary but did not share the Latin theological framework of “original sin.” And still others resented the centralizing of doctrinal authority in Rome.

So pronounced was the division caused by this purported dogma that Pius IX felt compelled, sixteen years later, to convene the Vatican Council of 1869–1870 to affirm his “infallibility.” The result? A second division—but with a twist.

The sham council declared that the pope may speak with infallibility when defining doctrine *ex cathedra*. But here's the historical irony no one mentions in Roman Catholic seminaries: *The very first "infallible" teaching in Catholic history was proclaimed 16 years before the doctrine of papal infallibility existed!* To put it plainly: Pius IX retroactively justified his first controversial proclamation by twisting the arms of bishops to support a second controversial proclamation!

Vatican I itself was deeply unpopular. The decree of purported infallibility passed only because its opponents—many bishops from France, Germany, Austria and the U.S.—were pressured, sidelined, or left Rome early to avoid being forced to sign it. A number of bishops refused to assent. Some left the council altogether in protest.

This was *not* a moment of triumphant consensus. It was a moment of wrenching division.

### **The Old Catholics: When Division Births New Life**

The backlash was so significant that many Catholics, especially in Germany and Switzerland, sought to return to what they considered the faith of the undivided, patristic, primitive (or "old") Church. They formed what became the Union of Utrecht of Old Catholic Churches, rejecting papal infallibility and the universal jurisdiction of the pope, and stressing synodality, democratic governance and shared leadership—all in line with the early Church.

A whole new communion—with valid sacraments, apostolic succession, everything—was birthed because the Roman papacy handled disagreement through consolidation of power, rather than through synodal discernment. Division, in other words, is not always destruction. Sometimes it's the refusal to be steamrolled.

### **Santiago Fonacier and the Philippine Independent Church: Division Upon Division**

And this brings us to Santiago Fonacier (1885–1977), whose death anniversary we mark today.

The Philippine Independent Church (*Iglesia Filipina Independiente*) emerged in 1902 out of a profound desire of Filipinos for freedom from both colonial rule and clerical abuse. It was, in many ways, an Old Catholic movement birthed in the Philippines! It was anti-colonial, anti-clericalist, pro-worker, and rooted in local culture and autonomy.

A brilliant organizer and a boundary-pushing leader, Fonacier was central to the church's early formation. When he became the second supreme bishop, he shepherded the IFI through turbulent years of growth, persecution and identity formation.

But Fonacier's own story mirrors the complexities of division within the Church. After internal conflicts – political, theological, personal – he eventually left and founded another independent Philippine church of similar vision and name. He himself became a symbol of the painful reality that communities born from division can, in turn, experience new fractures.

Yet shortly before his death, Fonacier was reconciled to the Philippine Independent Church he once led. His story does not end with schism, but with return – not with perfect unity, but with imperfect communion.

### **What Does This Mean for Us Today?**

Today the U.S. Catholic Church is divided over such issues as the place of women in the church, LGBTQIA+ inclusion, expressions of authoritarian ecclesial leadership, the romanticization of hierarchy and empire, and now the coopting of our faith by the oxymoron of very unchristian “Christian nationalism.”

The feast of Mary's conception and the memory of Bishop Fonacier invite us to ask:

- What if unity cannot be built on silence, submission or erasure?
- What if Mary's sinlessness is not about perfectionism, but about receptivity?
- What if Fonacier's life teaches us that reconciliation requires truth-telling, not appeasement?

Catholics today are called not to false unity, but to honest unity – unity that can withstand disagreement, power disparities, historical wounds, and prophetic correction.

### **Calls to Action**

- Read stories of division honestly. Don't sanitize the history of the Immaculate Conception, Vatican I, or the schisms in which Fonacier participated.
- Support synodality – not just in Rome, but locally – by listening to and inviting others into decision-making.
- Stand with communities historically pushed to the margins – immigrants, women religious, LGBTQIA+ Catholics, Filipino workers, Black Catholics, and others whose voices have been silenced.
- Advocate for a Church that welcomes disagreement without excommunication-by-culture-war.



- Practice reconciliation rooted in justice. Fonacier's late-life reconciliation was meaningful because it involved truth and accountability – not coerced unity.
- Let Mary be a model of courageous assent – not blind obedience, but the courageous “yes” that empowers liberation rather than domination.

### **Grace Is Not Fragile**

On this feast, the Church dares to claim that grace entered Mary from the very first moment of her existence. But grace is not fragile. Grace can withstand conflict, protest and painful truth. Mary's feast and Fonacier's anniversary remind us that the Church has always been a community wrestling with power, authority and division – and that holiness is found not in the absence of conflict, but in the courage to seek justice within it. If Mary can bear Christ into a broken world, so can we. And maybe the stone she almost threw in that oft-told joke is a reminder that even the sinless can resist the temptation to punish, rather than restore!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- Where have I witnessed division used as a weapon, rather than a catalyst for truth?
- What wounds in the Church still require honest recognition and repentance?
- How might Mary's courage inspire my own efforts toward justice and reconciliation?
- Who in my community is pushed to the margins – and how am I called to stand with them?
- What would genuine reconciliation look like in my community?
- Do I seek unity that is honest, or merely comfortable?

### **Let Us Pray**

Holy God, You who planted grace in Mary from her first breath, and who accompanied Santiago Fonacier through conflict, courage and return: Teach us to seek unity without erasure, truth without fear, and reconciliation without injustice. Heal the wounds we inherit and the ones we inflict. Grant us the boldness of the prophets, the openness of Mary, and the perseverance of all who labor for a liberating Church. Make us instruments of healing in a divided world. Amen.

## Roses, Resistance and Revelation

What an Indigenous Saint Can Teach  
a Church Still Wrestling with Power

December 9, 2025



St. Juan Diego's story has long intersected with my own. The only canonization I ever attended as a Roman Catholic priest was his – on July 31, 2002, in Mexico City. John Paul II, exhausted from World Youth Day, arrived to a greeting fit for royalty: The people of Mexico carpeted the streets with flower petals so that the tires of his popemobile wouldn't touch the stone streets outside the basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe. I was in Pátzcuaro, Michoacán that week, heard the pope was only hours away, and knew I had to go. By grace (and a bit of Mexican street providence), I scored a ticket outside the basilica and ended up concelebrating the canonization Mass beside a friend, Father Miguel Camacho Méndez from Río Verde, San Luis Potosí. It was a tremendously touching celebration!

At the time, controversy swirled. Some scholars questioned whether Juan Diego was a historical figure or a literary device in the 1648 treatise that spoke of the purported apparitions of 1531. Others argued over his age, suggesting that he was easily in his 50s or 60s during the apparitions, not the youthful figure so often depicted. Still others used the occasion to shine light on the Church's historic mistreatment of Indigenous peoples in Mexico.

I returned from Mexico and served as a teacher for two years, then as president for four years at a Catholic high school bearing the saint's name. Through it all, St. Juan Diego has remained a special saint for me – a bridge between cultures, between stories, and between wounds and hope.

### Why Juan Diego Matters – Especially Now

Whether one approaches the Guadalupe tradition as historical, symbolic or sacramental story, the devotion of the Mexican people is real.

Their faith has shaped centuries of resistance, survival and hope. To write about Juan Diego is to walk carefully and reverently, honoring not just a saint, but a people whose story is often dismissed, romanticized or misunderstood by outsiders—including Catholics in the U.S.

Juan Diego Cuauhtlatatzin—"Talking Eagle"—stands at the crossroads of Indigenous suffering and divine tenderness. A Nahua widower living in the shadow of colonial violence, he is remembered as a humble messenger chosen not for status or power, but for openness of heart.

For Catholics today, his story speaks loudly.

- **God Speaks from the Margins, Not from Palaces.** The events of the Guadalupe story take place only a decade after the fall of Tenochtitlán, when Indigenous people were reeling from forced conversions, epidemics, land seizures, and exploitation. In that context, the idea that Mary would choose a poor Indigenous widower—rather than a bishop or conquistador—is profoundly subversive.

**Lesson:** We must never forget that the divine voice often arises among those whom society (and the Church) pushes aside: Indigenous communities, migrants, women, queer Catholics, the poor. Our task is not to speak for them, but to listen—and to amplify.

- **Truth Does Not Require Erasing Indigenous Culture.** Much of the Guadalupe tradition is encoded with Indigenous imagery—flowers, song, cosmology and even the placement on Tepeyac, a hill once associated with the Indigenous mother goddess Tonantzin. This does not negate the devotion; it enriches it. The Church's worst mistakes in the colonial era came from smashing Indigenous culture in the name of Christ. The Guadalupe story, by contrast, was received because it inculturated, rather than erased.

**Lesson:** The future of Catholicism in the U.S. depends on honoring—not fearing—cultural hybridity. The Church must become a place where Mexican, Indigenous, Black, immigrant and diasporic theologies flourish without apology.

- **Holiness Is Not About Youth or Perfection—It's About Availability.** The scholarly consensus has long held that Juan Diego, if historical, was not a young man. He may have been closer to 60. But perhaps that is the point: Sanctity does not obey our cultural obsession with youth. Nor does it require clerical credentials, theological training, or social power.

**Lesson:** The Church's renewal will not come from the usual centers of power. It will come from elders, migrants, laywomen, workers, and all those whose holiness is rooted in lived experience, rather than institutional status.

- **Miracles Often Reveal Social Wounds.** In 2002, the pope's visit reignited painful questions about the Church's treatment of Indigenous peoples in Mexico—including forced labor, coerced conversions, and the erasure of language and culture. Juan Diego's canonization confronted the Church with its own shadows.

**Lesson:** Miracles are not decorations; they are calls to conversion. Catholics must be willing to see where our institutions still perpetuate harm—toward Indigenous peoples, toward migrants at the border, toward the poor exploited by economic systems—and then act decisively for justice.

- **Humility Is a Political Virtue.** The Guadalupe story unfolds as a clash between a humble messenger and a skeptical bishop. The bishop was not evil; he was cautious. But like many Church leaders, he was accustomed to receiving divine messages from other elites—not from Indigenous peasants. Juan Diego's persistence—and Mary's insistence—reveal a truth the Church still struggles to learn: Holiness is not hierarchical. Grace is democratic.

**Lesson:** A Church that sidelines laypeople, women, or Indigenous Catholics betrays its own story. The work of Catholicism is to reclaim a Church where authority is shared, accountability is real, and humility is central.

### Calls to Action

- Support Indigenous communities in your area, especially with respect to language revitalization, land rights, and environmental justice.
- Learn about the history of colonization in the Americas, including the Church's role—both harmful and healing.
- Amplify Mexican and Mexican-American Catholic voices, not as add-ons, but as central to the Catholic story in the U.S.
- Create spaces for cultural hybridity, including Indigenous symbols, devotional art, and cross-cultural leadership.
- Advocate for migrant justice, especially humane immigration policy, protection for asylum seekers, and support for mixed-status families.

- Practice humility in leadership, whether lay or ordained, remembering that some of God's most urgent messages come from unexpected people.

### **Becoming Messengers in Our Own Time**

San Juan Diego's story endures not because of historical certainties, but because of spiritual truth: God meets us in our wounds, speaks through those the world ignores, and uses the humble to heal what empires destroy. In a Church still wrestling with injustice, clericalism, racial division, and the vestiges of colonialization, Juan Diego stands as a gentle reminder that another way is possible—a way of listening, bridging, honoring and healing. If we dare to walk the path he walked, we may yet find roses blooming in winter, signs of hope where we least expect them!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- Who are the "Juan Diegos" in my own community—whose voices I may be tempted to overlook?
- What wounds in the Church or society am I being asked to carry to the heart of God?
- How does my cultural identity shape the way I encounter the sacred?
- Where am I invited to speak truth to power with humility and persistence?
- What "roses"—unexpected signs of grace—has God placed in my path recently?

### **Let Us Pray**

Holy God of Tepeyac, You who speak through the humble, the poor, the widowed, the wounded, open our ears to the voices we ignore and our hearts to the cultures we misunderstand. Through the intercession of St. Juan Diego Cuauhtlatatzín, heal our blindness, soften our pride, and teach us to walk the way of tenderness and justice. May we become messengers of hope in a world aching for compassion. Amen.

## Lessons from Two Giants

Karl Barth and Thomas Merton in Dialogue

December 10, 2025



When I joined the Conventual Franciscan Friars at age eighteen, the books of **Thomas Merton** (1915-1968) seemed to be everywhere. I devoured them: his autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain*, his essays on the inner life in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, and his reflections on racism, violence and civil rights in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. Later, when I found myself enchanted with the spiritual traditions, art and architecture of the East, I began imagining how Merton—who had traveled through Asia just before his sudden death—viewed Buddhism and other Eastern religions through his Catholic lenses. I have also stood at Merton’s grave in the quiet cemetery of Gethsemane Abbey in Kentucky. His marker is almost startling in its simplicity: a plain white cross bearing the name “Louis Merton” (his religious name), hardly distinguishable from the other grave markers, despite his global renown. I often think that he would have wanted it no other way.

Because I studied at Catholic institutions, I had little exposure to **Karl Barth** (1886-1968) — the Swiss Reformed theologian whom Pope Pius XII called “the greatest theologian since Thomas Aquinas.” Barth was often mentioned in passing, if at all. I truly discovered him only later at the Virginia Theological Seminary, an Episcopal institution, where my non-Catholic classmates quoted him as readily as I could cite Merton. Sometimes I wish I had met Barth sooner; sometimes I still wish I knew him better.

So what might Catholics learn from these two men — so different, yet oddly fitting as companions in death on December 10, 1968?

### The Courage to Confront Idolatry: Karl Barth’s “*Nein!*” and Merton’s Interior Dimension

Barth’s theology is famous — sometimes infamous — for its resistance. His “*Nein!*” to Nazi ideology, to nationalism disguised as Christianity, to

any attempt to domesticate God into a weapon of the state, remains one of the clearest theological stances in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

For Catholics today, Barth's warning against political idolatry could not be more urgent. When political movements try to baptize themselves as God's chosen instruments, when leaders invoke Christ while discarding the Sermon on the Mount, Barth would insist: Christ alone is Lord. Everything else must be measured against Him—and rejected if it is found wanting.

Merton adds an interior dimension: Idolatry is not only external. In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Merton argues that Christians can create idols of their own political purity, their activism, their public image, or even their spirituality. False selves multiply just as easily in the monastery as in the marketplace.

**Lesson:** External critique must be paired with internal honesty. Resist oppressive systems, yes—but also resist the temptation to let the ego become the center of the struggle!

### **The Primacy of Conscience: Barth's Call to Stand Before God and Merton's Interior Freedom**

Barth insisted that every person must stand before the living God with a personal, accountable conscience. No party, bishop, institution or even church tradition can substitute for the encounter with Christ.

Merton wrote that one of the first duties of a Christian is to become a truly free person: "The beginning of love is the will to let those we love be perfectly themselves." He believed conscience was the place where the Spirit's whisper arises in silence and solitude.

**Lesson:** Trust the voice of conscience, form it diligently, and defend the right of conscience for others—even when it leads to difficult conversations within the Church.

### **A Faith That Embraces the World Without Losing Its Center: Merton's Dialogue with the East and Barth's Christocentric Consistency**

Merton never abandoned Catholicism, but he sought to understand other traditions on their own terms. He saw common threads—contemplation, compassion, monasticism, the longing for union with the Divine. His writings anticipate today's interreligious dialogues.

Barth, by contrast, mistrusted attempts to blend religions. For him, revelation comes from Christ alone. But he also insisted that Christians must listen to others with humility—because the Word of God can confront us from unexpected places.

**Lesson:** Hold Christ at the center – but let compassion and curiosity drive you out into the world. Merton teaches openness; Barth teaches discernment. Both are needed.

### **Social Justice Rooted in Spiritual Depth: Barth the Resistance Theologian and Merton the Nonviolent Prophet**

Barth helped draft the Barmen Declaration, refusing to let the Church become an organ of the Nazi state. Christianity, he insisted, must remain a force for justice, especially for the vulnerable.

From racial justice to nuclear disarmament, Merton saw activism as an extension of contemplation. His correspondence with the Berrigan brothers, with Martin Luther King Jr., and with peace activists across the world reflects a faith that prays with its hands and feet.

**Lesson:** Political engagement without spiritual grounding becomes ideology. Spirituality without justice becomes escapism. The world needs a Christianity that intertwines the two.

### **Why December 10 Matters: A Shared Witness**

Merton died by accidental electrocution in Bangkok on December 10, 1968. Barth died at home in Basel, Switzerland the same day. They never met, but in God's strange calendar, their passing became a kind of joint feast: the Catholic monk and the Reformed theologian offering complementary reminders in dialogue.

Merton: Faith that listens.

Barth: Faith that speaks.

Merton: Contemplation.

Barth: Proclamation.

Merton: The universal human search for God.

Barth: The uncompromising centrality of Christ.

Together, they remind us not to choose between heart and mind, justice and contemplation, openness and conviction. The world needs both.

### **The Day They Entered Eternal Dialogue: A Call to Deeper and More Courageous Christianity**

December 10 invites us to imagine Barth and Merton walking together into the mystery of God – Barth with his thunderous insistence on God's sovereignty, Merton with his quiet, contemplative smile. Between them stretches a kind of theological bridge: one side anchored in clarity, the other in depth; one in proclamation, the other in prayer.

Today we inherit both gifts. We are called to resist idolatry and injustice, to nurture conscience, to engage the world with both humility



and courage, to root activism in contemplation, and to cherish Christ without fear of the unfamiliar. Their shared death date is a reminder that the Church needs many voices—and that God uses each differently to lead us deeper into truth!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- Where have I allowed political loyalties—left or right—to overshadow my loyalty to Christ?
- How well do I listen to my conscience? How well do I defend the conscience rights of others?
- Do my commitments to justice flow from a life of prayer, or do prayer and contemplation get crowded out by activism?
- Where is the Spirit inviting me to greater openness? To greater conviction?
- Whose voices—outside my tradition—might God be inviting me to hear more deeply?

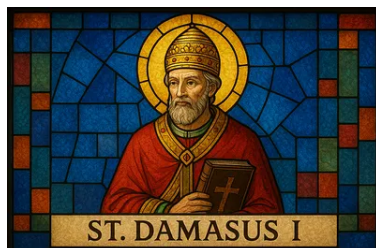
### **Let Us Pray**

God of Truth and Mercy, You raised up Karl Barth and Thomas Merton to guide your people through tumultuous times. Give us Barth's courage to confront false gods and resist injustice. Give us Merton's contemplative heart, open to your presence in every corner of creation. Make us a people rooted in Christ, yet wide-eyed with compassion for the world. Renew our conscience, deepen our prayer, and strengthen our witness, that we may reflect your love with integrity and joy. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

## St. Damasus I and the Long Road to the Bible We Know

Why a Fourth-Century Pope Still Speaks to Us Today

December 11, 2025



It was absolutely eye-opening for me, as a young seminarian, to discover the nearly thirty apocryphal gospels that didn't "make the cut" of the biblical canon. Some of them enriched our faith tradition in surprising ways—like the Protogospel of James, which first gave the Church the names of Mary's parents, Joachim and Anna, and expanded the story of Mary's childhood and birth.

Catholics are not famous for knowing the Bible, and many Catholics—including me, at the time—never learned that the early Church spent almost four centuries sorting, debating, arguing and discerning the books that would become our Scriptures. Today, on the feast of St. Damasus I, patron saint of archaeologists and the pope who commissioned St. Jerome's Vulgate translation, we remember just how messy, Spirit-led and deeply human that process was.

### **A Canon Takes Shape: Damasus and the Council of Rome (382 A.D.)**

When Pope Damasus I called the Council of Rome in 382 A.D., Christianity had only recently emerged from centuries of persecution. The Church was growing rapidly; communities stretched from Spain to North Africa to Syria—each with its own liturgical texts, local traditions, and preferred gospels. What counted as "Scripture" was not yet universal.

The Council of Rome provided the first authoritative list that matches what Catholics have today: 46 books in the Old Testament (including what non-Catholics later called the "deuterocanonical" books) and 27 books in the New Testament.

This was not exactly a moment of divine faxing from heaven. It was the Church slowly, prayerfully, sometimes contentiously discerning which books most fully expressed the apostolic faith and were already being used widely in worship.

Imagine four centuries' worth of bishops, theologians, monks, mystics and everyday Christians saying: "This book nourishes the Church. This book teaches Christ. But this one... maybe not so much!"

### **What Didn't Make the Cut: The Apocrypha and the Wild, Beautiful World of Early Christianity**

When young seminarians discover that there were dozens of gospels, infancy narratives, letters and "apocalypses" floating around in the first centuries of Christianity, the reaction is almost universal: "Wait—what?!"

Among the many excluded writings were the following apocryphal gospels:

- Gospel of Thomas (sayings attributed to Jesus)
- Gospel of Peter (used in some Syrian communities)
- Gospel of Mary Magdalene (depicting Mary Magdalene as a teacher of the apostles)
- Protogospel of James (expanding Mary's early life)
- Infancy Gospel of Thomas (stories of a mischievous young Jesus)

Other early apocryphal Christian writings included:

- Shepherd of Hermas (hugely popular in Rome)
- 1 Clement (a letter from the Bishop of Rome to Corinth around 96 A.D.)
- Didache (a first-century Christian "manual" of morals and liturgy)
- Acts of Paul and Thecla (stories of early female leadership and heroic virtue)

Many of these books were loved. Many were read in church. Some were viewed as orthodox, others as questionable, others as flat-out bizarre. (If you've never read the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, where the child Jesus turns neighborhood bullies into goats... get ready!)

The Church didn't reject these texts because they were embarrassing, feminist or too mystical—contrary to some modern myths. Often, they were excluded because:

- They weren't widely used in liturgy across the universal Church.
- They were written significantly later.
- They contained inconsistencies with the apostolic witness.
- They didn't bear the same theological coherence.

Still, these excluded works remain invaluable windows into the diversity of early Christian imagination!

## Why Aren't Catholics Known for Knowing the Bible?

This is where humor and honesty help.

**Reason #1: Catholics learned the faith through liturgy, not through personal Bible reading.** For centuries, the Mass *was* the Bible—sung, prayed, proclaimed. Catholics absorbed Scripture the way people absorb language: by immersion, not by chapter-and-verse memorization.

**Reason #2: Yes, at times, Catholics were discouraged from reading the Bible on their own.** Not because the Church was anti-Scripture, but because copying Bibles by hand was enormously expensive, translations varied widely, some heretical movements twisted Scripture to justify violence or extremist teaching, literacy was limited, and untrained interpretation caused pastoral confusion. There were periods (especially in the late medieval church and early Reformation era) when personal Bible reading was restricted without proper guidance. It wasn't universal, but it did happen.

**Reason #3: The Protestant Reformation changed everything.** Martin Luther and others insisted on translating the Bible into local languages and placing it directly into the hands of everyday believers. Printing presses made this possible. Literacy campaigns spread. Biblical knowledge exploded. And to our Catholic shame, sometimes our church responded defensively, rather than boldly. We're catching up now—thanks be to God.

### The Vulgate: Damasus' Greatest Legacy

Pope Damasus commissioned Jerome to create a reliable Latin translation of Scripture, one Bible for the whole Church. Jerome grumbled (he was famously curmudgeonly), but he did it.

The Vulgate became:

- the standard Bible for all of Western Christianity
- the version used in monasteries, universities and liturgies
- the biblical backbone of the Middle Ages
- the translation that shaped Western art, music, theology and preaching

You could argue that without Damasus and Jerome, we wouldn't have Dante, Aquinas, Augustine's later writings, the medieval hymn tradition, or the richness of Western Christian spirituality!

### **Calls to Action**

- **Read the Bible – with good study tools.** Not to replace liturgy, but to deepen it. Use a study Bible that includes historical notes and cross-references.
- **Explore an apocryphal text or two.** The Didache, the Gospel of Thomas, or the Protogospel of James can deepen understanding of early Christian diversity!
- **Learn about how the canon was formed.** This helps counter biblical literalism, fundamentalism and weaponized proof-texting.
- **Embrace the gifts of other Christian traditions.** Catholics can humbly acknowledge that Luther and the Reformers made Scripture accessible in ways we too slowly embraced.
- **Let Scripture challenge you.** Not as a weapon, but as a living Word calling us to compassion, justice, humility and the reign of God!

### **The Bible as a Living, Ongoing Invitation**

St. Damasus reminds us that the Bible did not descend fully formed from heaven. It came through centuries of struggle, prayer, debate, disagreement and discernment. The canon is not a fossil, but a testimony: the Church wrestling with the mystery of Christ, guided by the Spirit through flawed, holy, visionary people.

And the same Spirit is alive today. The Scriptures continue to speak – not to freeze us in the fourth century, but to propel us into the future Christ envisioned: a world of justice, mercy, creativity and communion. The Bible is not merely a book to be possessed; it is a story to be inhabited!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- How have I experienced Scripture in my own life – more as a mystery, a task, or an invitation?
- What books or stories have shaped my understanding of Jesus, even outside the canon?
- How open am I to discovering the richness of early Christian writings that I've never read?
- How might God be inviting me to let Scripture speak in new ways?
- What fears or assumptions about the Bible do I need to let go of?

### Let Us Pray

God of the Living Word, we thank You for the Scriptures handed down through generations, discerned through the guidance of the Spirit, and entrusted to the Church. On this feast of St. Damasus, give us the curiosity to learn, the humility to listen, and the courage to be transformed by Your Word. As we explore both the familiar and the forgotten writings of our Christian ancestors, deepen our love for Christ, who is the full revelation of Your heart. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

### *Madrecita, ¿dónde estás?*

Our Lady of Guadalupe and the Decline of Mexican Catholicism

December 12, 2025



I'll never forget the day I celebrated ten Masses in one day. It was December 12, 2009—the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe—when I pastored Cristo Rey Catholic Church in Austin and before I was assigned an associate pastor to assist me. From the singing of *Las mañanitas* at 5:30 a.m. to the final Mass at 7:30 p.m.—a long day of ministry!—I witnessed devotion from sunrise to sunset: flowers piled high and a sea of lit candles honoring Our Lady, guitars strumming, children dressed as *Juan Dieguitos*, and old women wiping away tears as they prayerfully approached the image of *La Morenita*.

When I first studied in Mexico—now 35 years ago—over 90% of Mexicans were Catholic, down from 98% in 1950. Today that number has dropped to 78%. Suddenly the lyrics of *La Guadalupana*—that “for the Mexican, to be *Guadalupano*...is something essential”—no longer ring quite as true. The “*Madrecita de los mexicanos*” is still loved, cherished and tattooed on biceps and forearms... but the religion that adopted her is no longer universally worshiped in Mexico.

And that, I suspect, tells us something.

## **A Global Story: Declining Religiosity and Mexico's Fastest-Growing Group – The "Nones"**

Mexico mirrors a worldwide trend: declining religious affiliation. Some 15 years ago, I read the research of sociologist Roberto Blancarte, who reported that *four million Mexicans left the Catholic Church between 2000 and 2010 – a stunning average of 1,000 people every single day.*

This is not simply "the rise of Protestantism," though that's part of the story. It is, more profoundly, the rise of those who say: "I believe in God...but not in the Church."

This tracks closely with U.S. trends. Today, the largest "religious" group for young adults in the United States is "nones" – the religiously unaffiliated. And among Latino youth, the shift is even more pronounced.

Biblical authors understood this dynamic. Again and again we hear the refrain: "The people abandoned the God of their ancestors" (See Judges 2, 2Kings 17).

Religions, like languages and cultures, are not automatic inheritances. They must be re-claimed in every generation. Otherwise, as the Archbishop of Canterbury noted in 2013: "The church is always one generation away from extinction." When a tradition stops speaking to people – especially the marginalized – it loses them.

### **Symbols Remain, Even When People Leave**

One of the most fascinating aspects of religious decline in Mexico is that religious symbols persist, even when formal practice dissolves. Spend any time in Texas, Chicago, California or New York, and you'll witness the phenomenon:

- A young man who hasn't attended Mass in years wears a gold Guadalupe pendant.
- Someone who cannot recall the last time they prayed sports a tattoo of *San Juditas*.
- A car whose driver no longer identifies as Catholic still bears an Our Lady of Guadalupe bumper sticker.

Why? Because *even when the institution loses relevance, the symbols still speak*. They carry identity, memory, family, origin and hope.

Our Lady of Guadalupe, in particular, speaks to a profound human hunger: the need for the maternal face of the divine. She is not unique in this. South Texans venerate Our Lady of San Juan del Valle. My Luxembourger ancestors prayed to Our Lady of Consolation. And countless Catholic cultures cling to their particular Marian matroness.

The feminine divine has always been a part of human religious expression. Our Lady of Guadalupe simply baptized it in Mexico.

### **Guadalupe Tonantzin: Syncretism Done Well (and Why the Church Needed It)**

The Church loves to pretend that the purported events of December 9-12, 1531 were a clean story: a simple apparition, a simple miracle, a simple conversion. History tells a more complex—and more beautiful—story.

The truth is that the Roman Catholic Church “baptized” what was already holy to the people:

- The hill of Tepeyac, once dedicated to Tonantzin, “Our Revered Mother” in the Nahuatl culture.
- Cuauhtlatoatzin, “Talking Eagle,” was baptized with the Christian name Juan Diego.
- Indigenous symbols are woven into Our Lady of Guadalupe’s tilma, from the celestial configurations, to her black maternity band, to her turquoise mantle of royalty.

Our Lady of Guadalupe is a case study in mission done right—that is, not erasing a culture, but partnering with it. She welcomed Indigenous people, rather than shut them out. She made it possible for millions to bring their identity—not abandon it—to Christ.

The question for the Church today is the same: *Do we want people inside... or outside?* Because if we want them inside, we must learn from Guadalupe!

### **Why Many Are Leaving: A Dinner Story**

I recently shared dinner with a second-generation immigrant whose parents came from Mexico. He grew up with Our Lady of Guadalupe everywhere—on candles, on calendars, on his grandmother’s kitchen wall and home altar, on the rear window of his uncle’s pickup truck. Yet he left the Catholic Church. Why? Because he is gay—and the Church’s stance on LGBTQIA+ people has made him feel unsafe, unwelcomed and spiritually violated.

His story is not rare. It is not even unusual. It is indicative of a much larger trend. People are not leaving because they stopped loving *La Virgen*. People are leaving because they believe the Church stopped loving them.



### **What Catholics Can Learn from *La Morenita***

- **Meet people where they actually are.** Our Lady of Guadalupe appeared not in a cathedral, but on a hillside; not to a bishop, but to an Indigenous farmer.
- **Center the marginalized in our stories, liturgies and priorities.** She chose as her messengers the poor and the colonized – not the powerful.
- **Celebrate cultural identity, rather than demanding assimilation.** Guadalupe teaches us that the Gospel is incarnational: it takes flesh in cultures, symbols, languages and songs.
- **Embrace the feminine experience of God.** People – especially those disillusioned with patriarchy – are hungry for this.
- **Build a Church where every identity is honored.** Young LGBTQIA+ Latinos should not have to flee the Church to survive.
- **Stop fearing syncretism.** So many rites and symbols, from Christmas trees and Easter eggs to *piñatas* and *posadas*, are born from the Church's ability to "baptize" and reinterpret culture. Guadalupe is one of our best examples of doing this faithfully and fruitfully!

### **The Future Is *Guadalupana*: A Church That Welcomes Will Live, While a Church That Excludes Will Die**

Our Lady of Guadalupe has survived colonization, wars, revolutions, dictatorships, poverty and pandemics because she meets people in their wounds.

In an age of declining Catholic identity – both in Mexico and the United States – *La Morenita* is reminding us what will save the Church: not purity, not rigidity, not fear, not policing, but radical welcome, cultural tenderness, and matriarchal compassion.

If Catholicism has a future in the Americas, it will be because we have learned again to do what she did on Tepeyac: embrace people as they are, speak their language, honor their dignity, and reveal a God who bends toward the poor!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- What images or stories of Our Lady of Guadalupe – or of other Marian apparitions – have shaped my own spiritual imagination?
- Whom is the Church failing to welcome today – and what would Guadalupe do?
- How do I respond to the decline in religious affiliation: with fear, or with openness?

- Where do I see the feminine face of God in my own life?
- What cultural expressions of faith have I neglected, dismissed or taken for granted?

### Let Us Pray

Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mother of the Poor, Mother of the Americas, You came to Tepeyac not with power, but with tenderness, not with condemnation, but with comfort, not with a sword, but with a song. Teach us to welcome as you welcomed, to speak hope in the language of the people, to honor every culture that seeks God, and to make room in the Church for all your children—especially those who have felt pushed out or unheard. *Madrecita*, walk with us. Heal our divisions. Make us builders of a Church that looks more like your *tilma*—woven of many threads, shining with dignity, and centered always on Christ. Amen.

### A Bishop on the Edge of Empire

Remembering Pierre Martin Ngô Đình Thục

December 13, 2025



Most Catholics have never heard of Roman Catholic Archbishop **Pierre Martin Ngô Đình Thục** (1897–1984). If they have, it's usually through whispers: Wasn't he the bishop who joined that bizarre Spanish cult? Didn't he consecrate a group of sedevacantist bishops? Wasn't he excommunicated?

And, yes, all of that is true. In fact, he was excommunicated at least twice!

But Archbishop Thục's story is far more complex than the sensational footnotes that often overshadow his life. Remembering him today offers Catholics a chance to reflect on the role of dissent, conscience, courage—and error—within a Church that professes both universality and diversity.

Thục is one of three Roman Catholic bishops of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – alongside **Carlos Duarte Costa** (Brazil) and **Emmanuel Milingo** (Zambia) – who stepped outside the Roman papacracy and continued ministry at great personal cost. Their stories diverge wildly, but all three reveal something important: *Vibrant institutions need prophets, including prophets who sometimes get things wrong.*

Today, we tell the story of Thục.

### **A Childhood Shaped by Trauma and Devotion**

Thục's family embodied both fragility and ambition. His father – once a peasant farmer – lost his entire family in anti-Catholic riots. From that moment, he never missed daily Mass again. Faith was not merely piety; it was survival.

The family eventually rose into imperial circles as advisors to the Vietnamese emperor. Thục, the third of twelve children, grew up at a crossroads of Confucian values and Catholic devotion – something he later called his “Confucian Catholic” upbringing. Respect for authority, ritual and harmony mingled uncomfortably with the centralizing Roman discipline arriving through French missionary power.

He was ordained a priest in 1925 and quickly emerged as one of the most educated clergy in Vietnam. At the Gregorian University in Rome he earned not one, not two, but three doctorates: philosophy, theology and canon law. In 1938, at only 41, he became the third Vietnamese bishop in history.

Then the world fell apart.

### **War, Empire and the Rise of the Ngô Family**

When Japan seized Vietnam in 1940, European dominance in Southeast Asia began to crumble. Thục was suddenly the papal legate in a collapsing colonial world. His eldest brother was murdered that same year, and Thục became the senior son in a family destined for political entanglements.

His younger brother, Ngô Đình Diệm, spent two years in exile in the United States – living with Maryknoll priests in New York, planning, plotting and cultivating American allies. Cardinal Francis Spellman became a powerful patron. Eventually Diệm was positioned as the anti-communist hope of Southeast Asia – Washington's “third-world strongman” of choice.

Diệm became prime minister. Then president. The Ngô regime hardened into dictatorship – censorship, secret police, torture of

dissenters. The U.S. looked the other way. Better an authoritarian ally, they believed, than a communist.

And Bishop Thục stood squarely inside the family dynasty, seen by many as its third-most powerful figure. Vietnamese youth political groups answered to him.

He established Vietnam's first Catholic university (1957). He became archbishop of the newly-created Archdiocese of Huế (1960). And because the family was in power, he amassed wealth—apartment buildings, rubber plantations, timber concessions.

Then came the coup of 1963. Diệm was assassinated. The regime collapsed. The family fell.

And Thục's life, once intertwined with empire, entered freefall.

### **The Wanderer: Exile, Alienation and Radicalization**

Rome did not treat Thục gently. Vatican officials—long wary of the family's attempt to push Thục into a cardinalate—kept him “on a short leash.” Now that his political patrons were dead, Thục found himself without a home in Vietnam and without real support in Rome. He drifted through Europe and the U.S., feeling betrayed by the Vatican and the West.

The Second Vatican Council was underway. For Thục—shaped by a hierarchical Confucian-sacramental worldview and bruised by political loss—its reforms felt like chaos. He became the only sitting Roman Catholic bishop to openly embrace the ultra-traditionalist movement that rejected the Council, the new Mass, and even the legitimacy of modern popes!

And here the story becomes strange.

### **Palmar de Troya: The Most Controversial Chapter**

In 1976, Thục traveled to Palmar de Troya in Spain, where a visionary named Clemente Domínguez y Gómez had gathered a fervent following. Thục shockingly consecrated Domínguez and four others as bishops—without papal approval—launching the Palmarian Catholic Church, one of the oddest schisms in modern Catholic history.

Thục was excommunicated.

In 1981, he performed another round of illicit episcopal consecrations, this time for sedevacantists who believed the papacy had become vacant since Vatican II. He was excommunicated again.

And yet in 1984, near death, he reconciled with Rome. He spent his final months in Carthage, Missouri, at a religious house of Vietnamese Sisters, where he quietly died that year.

### **“Diversity Is the Ornament of the Universe”**

Despite his reactionary trajectory, Thục also left behind writings that progressive Catholics may find surprisingly resonant. He criticized what he called the “Roman desire for uniformity everywhere” and insisted that all people must pray in their own way: “The Vatican invents regulations to quash whatever peculiarity....Each people possesses its own characteristics, just as respectable as those of Rome.”

He even noted differences between Roman customs (standing, shaking hands) and Vietnamese ones (kneeling, bowing), arguing that the Church stifles cultural diversity at its peril.

In one prophetic line, he wrote: “Diversity is the ornament of the universe.”

This from a man who later championed one of the most rigid traditionalist movements in the world!

Thục’s contradictions are immense. But his insistence that Catholicism must genuinely incarnate itself in every culture—not merely export European forms—is strikingly relevant today.

### **A Life That Compels Us to Ask: What Does Faithful Dissent Look Like?**

We don’t need to canonize Pierre Martin Ngô Đình Thục. In fact, we shouldn’t.

He aligned himself with dictatorship. He helped build a political machine that oppressed many. He later embraced schismatic groups that harmed countless people. His story includes arrogance, grief, trauma and great public scandal.

But it also includes:

- a genuine desire for inculturation
- intellectual brilliance
- courage in the face of political collapse
- a willingness to dissent from Rome—at enormous personal cost—when he believed Rome was wrong

Institutions do not renew themselves without dissenters. Not all dissent is holy. But a Church without dissent is a Church without oxygen.

Thục’s life forces the question: *How do we discern between destructive rebellion and Spirit-led resistance?*

And equally: *How do we welcome prophets who err, without crucifying them or creating new idols?*

### **The Gift and Danger of the Outsider**

In Thục, we see both the promise and peril of stepping outside the institution. His life is a warning about how trauma, alienation and unprocessed grief can lead a brilliant mind toward extremism. But it is also a reminder that renewal seldom comes from the center.

For Catholics, his story is not one to romanticize – but one from which we can learn.

We need courage like his, without the rigidity.

We need his hunger for cultural diversity, without his nationalism.

We need his insistence that the Church can be wrong, without falling into the trap of absolutism on the other side.

Above all, we need to remember that the Spirit often speaks through complicated people – people whose legacies are mixed, whose motives are tangled, whose lives include both light and shadow.

Just like our own!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- Where in my life is God calling me to faithful dissent – for the sake of justice, inclusion or truth?
- How do I discern whether my resistance is Spirit-led or rooted in woundedness?
- What cultural expressions of faith have been suppressed or undervalued in my own community?
- How can the Church today foster genuine diversity without losing unity?
- Who are the “outsiders” from whom I might learn – even if I disagree with them?

### **A Prayer for Courageous Conscience**

Loving God, You speak through prophets, misfits, dissenters and dreamers. You call us to a faith that is both rooted and restless, faithful to tradition, yet open to the winds of Your Spirit. Give us courage to question what harms, humility to admit when we are wrong, and wisdom to discern the difference. Heal the wounds that distort our vision. Bless those who step outside the walls to seek You. Make Your Church a home for every culture, every people, every voice. And lead us – always – into deeper truth, deeper justice and deeper love. Amen.

## Dark Nights and Blue Christmases

A Reflection on St. John of the Cross,  
Guillaume Briçonnet, Paul Melchers and Leonardo Boff

December 14, 2025



Many churches host “Blue Christmas” or “Longest Night” services—spaces carved out for those who, amid twinkling lights and endless jingles of “joy to the world,” feel anything but “tidings of comfort and joy” during this holiday season. It’s a recognition that the holidays—for many—intensify grief, struggle, loneliness, depression and fear.

This year, in Portland, Oregon, something remarkable happened: Local Presbyterian pastors and interfaith partners organized a “Blue Christmas” liturgy outside an ICE detention facility. They gathered in the cold December darkness to pray for immigrant families separated by policy, to lament the trauma inflicted in our name, and to bear witness to the hope that God draws near not only in stable-mangers, but in places of confinement and despair.

It was a service that St. John of the Cross would have deeply understood.

### St. John of the Cross: The Saint of the Dark Night

On December 14, the Church celebrates St. John of the Cross (1542–1591), the Spanish Carmelite mystic whose writings—especially *The Dark Night of the Soul*—are among the most powerful explorations of spiritual struggle in Christian history.

John endured his own literal “dark night of the soul.” When he supported St. Teresa of Ávila’s movement to reform the Carmelite Order, opponents kidnapped him, locked him in a tiny cell, beat him, starved him, and kept him in near-total darkness for months. For months! Out of that crucible came profound mystical insight:

- that God meets us when familiar lights go out,
- that the stripping away of illusions can reveal the truth,

- that the soul's darkness can be the space where divine love does the deepest work.

John's feast day invites us not to flee the darkness, but to trust that God is already there, shaping us in ways we may not yet understand.

Yet John is not the only one who endured such a night. December 14 also commemorates three Catholics whose lives—across centuries—remind us that sometimes the Church itself becomes the source of darkness, and yet grace still breaks through.

### **Guillaume Briçonnet, Sr.: A Bishop in an Age of Upheaval**

Guillaume Briçonnet (1445–1514), Bishop of Meaux, lived during the early rumblings of the Reformation. He sought to revive preaching, renew clergy, promote Scripture, and shepherd a Church that, he feared, was drifting from the Gospel's heart.

His commitment to reform attracted theologians like Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples and other early humanists who challenged ecclesial complacency. The response he received? Pressure. Accusations. Suspicion from Rome. The Church stifled his efforts, scattered his circle of supporters, and later executed some of his collaborators as heretics. His own church. Let that sink in.

Briçonnet died in relative obscurity—misunderstood by the very institution he sought to renew. His “dark night” was the painful experience of loving a Church that did not understand what he was trying to offer!

### **Paul Melchers: Choosing Prison Over Compromise**

Paul Melchers (1813–1895), Archbishop of Cologne, faced the German *Kulturkampf*, the anti-Catholic campaign of the 1870s under Chancellor Bismarck. Melchers refused to bend to state interference in Church governance. For this, he was fined, threatened, surveilled and eventually driven into hiding. After months in a secret location in the Netherlands, he was forced to resign.

Some saw him as defiant; others as heroic. For Melchers himself, it was a dark night—a time of exile, loss of his people, and a Church hemmed in by political forces. And yet, in that bleak space, his faith deepened. He later became a Jesuit, spending his final years in quiet prayer and ministry.

His story reminds us that fidelity sometimes looks like resistance—and that resistance often comes with a cost.



### **Leonardo Boff: The Theologian Silenced for Speaking of Liberation**

And then there is Leonardo Boff (1938–), one of the most influential theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and a foundational voice in Latin American liberation theology. His work insisted that Christian discipleship requires solidarity with the poor, as well as the structural critique of systems that create and sustain the exploitation that results in poverty.

For this, he was reprimanded by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, placed under “obediential silence,” and threatened with further censure. Eventually, Boff left the Franciscan Order and his active ministry as a priest, rather than accept ongoing restrictions on his conscience and ministry.

His dark night, unlike Melchers’, was not imposed by enemies of the Church, but by leaders within it—led by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI). And yet Boff has remained deeply Catholic in spirit—writing, advocating for justice, defending the Earth, and insisting that the Gospel belongs in the streets as much as in the sanctuary.

### **The “Dark Nights of the Soul” for Our Sisters**

And we must also remember—with tenderness and truth—the countless women across the centuries whose “dark nights of the soul” were never recorded in ecclesial histories or celebrated in liturgical calendars. Women who loved the Church even when the Church did not protect them; women whose vocations were constrained, whose insights were dismissed, whose gifts were questioned, and whose bodies or spirits were wounded by the very communities meant to be sanctuaries. Women religious who endured silence or suspicion; mothers navigating grief and poverty; migrant women living in fear; queer and trans women pushed to the Church’s margins; survivors carrying invisible scars; laywomen who held families, communities and social movements together without recognition.

Their dark nights were not illuminated by medieval poetry or theological treatises—but by quiet resilience, by hidden courage, by the stubborn hope that God’s justice and tenderness could be trusted even when human structures failed them. Their stories, too, belong to the communion of saints. Their endurance, too, reveals the crucified and risen Christ. Their long night is seen, and honored, by the God who has always lifted up those the world forgets.

### What Do These Lives Teach Us?

Today we remember those who have endured darkness—sometimes in exile or prison cells, sometimes in ecclesial silencing, sometimes under structures meant to protect the Church but often used to suppress needed voices, and sometimes amid the angst of daily life.

We also call to mind a truth worth pondering: *Some of the most important spiritual work happens when our institutions fail us, when our lights go out, when the path ahead disappears.*

### Calls to Action

- **Build communities where lament is welcomed.** Create space—liturgical and personal—for grief, doubt, depression and anger. The Church must be a place where darkness is not pathologized, but held in love.
- **Offer accompaniment, not answers.** Like John of the Cross, help others walk through their dark nights without trying to fix them.
- **Listen to silenced voices.** From reformers like Briçonnet to theologians like Boff, the Church's growth often comes through those once dismissed. Read them. Cite them. Teach their stories.
- **Stand with those in the shadows or who are enduring a "dark night of the soul."** Visit a detention center. Support families torn apart by deportation. Partner with those who are bringing "Blue Christmas" into places of trauma.
- **Advocate for structures of transparency and justice within the Church.** Call for pastoral leadership that listens. Support movements for synodality, accountability and inclusion.

### The Light That the Darkness Cannot Overcome

On this December 14, as Advent deepens and daylight shortens, we remember those who teach us that God is not found only in triumph, clarity, or bright-lit sanctuaries.

God is found in prison cells, in theological censure, in exile, in ICE facilities, in misunderstood reforms, and in every Blue Christmas vigil where broken hearts open beneath the winter sky.

If we have the courage to walk into the darkness—our own and our neighbor's—we may discover that the God who once chose to be born at night is still there, waiting, working, whispering hope.

### Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- What "dark night" am I experiencing now, and where might God be present within it?

- Whose suffering—immigrant, poor, imprisoned, silenced, grieving—am I being invited to accompany this season?
- What voices in the Church today resemble Briçonnet, Melchers or Boff? How am I being called to listen to them?
- How might I and my community create spaces for lament, grief and honest struggle?

### **A Prayer for Those Enduring a Dark Night**

God of the Longest Night, You entered the world not in daylight glory, but in the quiet shadows of a stable. You chose exile, misunderstanding, poverty and danger. You walked with John of the Cross in his prison cell, with Briçonnet in his disappointment, with Melchers in his exile, with Boff in his silencing, and with all who suffer in the shadows of injustice. Hold close tonight all who know grief, exhaustion, anxiety or fear. Comfort immigrants in detention, families separated by borders, activists weary from struggle, and all whose prayers feel unanswered. Teach us to walk gently with one another in darkness. Kindle in us a hope that does not deny sorrow, but transforms it. And as we wait for the coming Light, make us signs of Your compassion in a world still longing for dawn. Amen.

### **Civility, Advent and an Unlikely Bishop**

What Bishop John Churchill Sibley Teaches Us  
About Grace Amid Incivility

December 15, 2025



I still remember devouring M. Scott Peck's book, *A World Waiting to Be Born: Civility Rediscovered*, when it appeared in 1993. I was young, idealistic and only beginning to grasp how deeply the virtue of civility shapes the common good. Peck's diagnosis felt urgent—that something

in our social fabric had begun to tear and that common respect was eroding. Today, it feels prophetic.

During my eight years of elected service on the Austin Independent School District Board of Trustees (2012–2020), I watched this erosion of civility unfold in real time. My first four years on the board were, in many ways, blissful. Hard work? Absolutely. Intense public scrutiny? Of course. But people still tried to listen. They still tried to understand. Even when they fiercely disagreed, they disagreed with a certain care.

But around 2015, the national tone began to shift—sharply. By 2016, it had trickled down to our local climate, which had entirely changed. It wasn't just that political divisions had deepened; it was that cruelty had become performative. Contempt had become entertainment. And the highest office in our nation has continued normalizing this degradation. Tellingly, the recent moment when our U.S. President dismissed a reporter with the words “Quiet, piggy” was not an anomaly; it was a symptom. Words once unthinkable from public leaders now circulate freely, eroding our collective moral immune system.

Advent meets us precisely here: in a world bruised by incivility, longing for a gentler light.

### **Enter Bishop John Churchill Sibley: Grace Under Fire**

It's in this context that I've been thinking about John Churchill Sibley (1858–1939), an English organist, educator and unlikely Independent Catholic—or “Old Catholic,” as they were called then—bishop whose life embodied a civility that feels almost countercultural today.

Sibley was first and foremost a musician—a gifted organist and teacher whose vocation was to nurture harmony, both musical and human. His path to the episcopate was unconventional: Consecrated by Frederick Ebenezer Lloyd of the American Catholic Church, he later served as archbishop metropolitan of the Orthodox Catholic Church in the British Empire.

Sibley was never a household name, but he attracted enemies nonetheless. The British gutter press mercilessly mocked him. Agent provocateurs infiltrated his circles, testing his patience, provoking him, wearing down his wife and their quiet dignity. Yet even as he was caricatured, undermined, or treated as a curiosity, Sibley remained—by all accounts—a gentleman. Composed. Gracious. Patient.

And instead of retreating, he continued forward. He established the Intercollegiate University to train clergy for the growing movement of Independent Catholic communities—an early attempt at forming leaders rooted not in empire, but in pastoral conscience and spiritual freedom.

He never returned insult for insult. He never matched vitriol with vitriol. He understood, long before Peck articulated it, what incivility does to the human soul.

### What Peck Helps Us See

Peck's chapter titles in *A World Waiting to Be Born* read almost like an Advent commentary on Sibley's life:

- **"Something is seriously wrong: Toward a redefinition of civility."** Sibley lived in a time when religious innovation and independence triggered public suspicion. He became a target simply for existing outside the norm. His refusal to lash out redefined civility not as politeness, but as spiritual discipline.
- **"Salvation and suffering: The ambiguity of pain and disease."** Sibley's suffering was largely inflicted by the Church he sought to serve, and the public he hoped to bless. His pain did not purify him; his response to pain did.
- **"The hole in the mind: The lack of group consciousness."** Bishops within the Independent Catholic movements were often fragmented, suspicious of one another. Sibley sought unity – not empire or control, but shared purpose rooted in the Gospel.
- **"Enter God, stage left: Ethics and submission."** Sibley's submission was not to oppressive authority, but to the deeper call of conscience. His ethics were shaped by a belief that God is most present in humility.
- **"Yes, Virginia, there is unconditional love: Covenant."** Sibley believed in covenant community – pastoral care grounded in unconditional regard, not clerical power.
- **"How not to waste your time: Prayer (or whatever you want to call it)."** Sibley's life was grounded in prayer, not piety for show, but an interior steadiness that allowed him to withstand public ridicule without losing compassion.

In an age of escalating incivility, Sibley's quiet strength reads like an antidote.

### Lessons for Us This Advent

- **Reclaim civility as a spiritual practice, not political nicety.** Civility is the refusal to dehumanize – even when others dehumanize us.
- **Resist the seduction of outrage.** Outrage has its place, but it cannot be our default mode. Advent calls us to watchfulness, not constant reactivity.

- **Support alternative forms of ministry and vocation.** Just as Sibley trained Independent Catholic clergy, we can support movements for inclusive ministry, women's leadership, LGBTQIA+ clergy, and lay-led sacramental life.
- **Defend those targeted by incivility, especially online.** Stand beside the vulnerable when the crowd turns cruel.
- **Practice Advent hope in a cynical age.** This is not naïve optimism. It is choosing, like Sibley, a posture of gentle strength.

### **A Different Kind of Power**

As we move through Advent toward Christmas, the story we await is not one of domination, but of vulnerability: God entering the world not with insults or threats, but in the fragile body of an infant. Civility, then, is not weakness; it is Incarnation. It is the commitment to meet hostility with steadiness, fear with tenderness, cruelty with courage.

Sibley reminds us that grace is stronger than mockery, dignity is louder than derision, and the quiet work of forming compassionate leaders is more enduring than the shouts of any "strongman." Sibley's life is a small but luminous Advent candle in an age of long shadows.

May we carry that flame!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- Where have I witnessed a decline in civility—in my community and in my own habits?
- How do I respond when I am mocked, dismissed or misunderstood?
- What spiritual practices help me cultivate gentleness without becoming passive?
- Who today is treated as Sibley was—ridiculed for conscience, marginalized for their calling—and how might I stand with them?
- What does Advent ask of me in a culture addicted to outrage?

### **Let Us Pray**

God of Quiet Strength, in this Advent season of waiting and watching, teach us the civility that flows from humility, the courage that is born of compassion, and the dignity that cannot be stolen by cruelty. Through the intercession of John Churchill Sibley and all who have suffered for conscience's sake, shape us into people of gentle resilience. Let our words heal, not harm. Let our actions reveal Your tenderness. And let our waiting prepare a way for Christ, who comes not with insults or power, but with the fierce love that makes all things new. Amen.

## ***Las Posadas, Sanctuary and the Strangers at Our Door***

How a Latino Advent Tradition Challenges Us  
to Open Our Hearts—and Our Doors

December 16, 2025



I grew up in the cornfields of Ohio, where Advent was marked by dinner-table wreaths, brick-church choirs, and a distant longing for the Bethlehem captured in our Christmas creches. It wasn't until I was assigned to Cristo Rey Catholic Church, a largely immigrant parish in Austin, Texas, that I experienced the Latino tradition of *Las Posadas*. There, I fell in love with *Las Posadas*—not only for the wonderful community building, or for the tastes of traditional foods and drinks like *tamales*, *atole* and spiced punch—but for the profound way these celebrations take place in the homes of community members, rather than at churches.

During *Las Posadas*, we walk from house to house—literally from door to door—reenacting Mary and Joseph's search for lodging. We sing, we hope, we are turned away again and again. Only at the final home does the door open, and we enter together, singing with joy! This ancient reenactment is a modern parable—spiritually compelling and painfully stark—reminding us that Christ still comes knocking today, not in some distant manger, but in the faces of our neighbors who are strangers in a foreign land.

### **Hospitality and the Holy Family**

*Las Posadas*—literally “the inns”—commemorates Joseph and Mary's search for lodging in Bethlehem. Each night, from December 16 to 24, a family hosts a procession through the neighborhood, often with candles and hymns in hand, led by figures representing Mary and Joseph. Together, we ask for shelter. The common refrain, sung in Spanish, echoes the plea that went unanswered in Bethlehem: Have you any lodging for Mary and Joseph tonight?

This tradition reminds us of two fundamental Christian truths:

- **Jesus and his parents were immigrants.** Joseph and Mary were displaced persons, refugees of imperial decree—seeking asylum and a place where the Word could become flesh in the Christ Child.
- **Hospitality is not optional.** The Church has always taught that welcoming the stranger is a concrete encounter with Christ himself (cf. Mt. 25:35). *Las Posadas* makes that encounter tangible.

### ***Las Posadas and Today's Immigrant Struggles***

It is no accident that a Latino Advent devotion rooted in migrant experience flourishes in communities shaped by ongoing migration. In fact, many immigrants articulate their own journeys as a lived *posada*—a search for refuge, dignity and welcome in a land that can be both hopeful and hostile.

And yet today, our federal government's immigration policies increasingly put immigrants and asylum seekers in peril. Under the current Trump Administration, immigration enforcement has hardened. Federal data indicate that Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has detained tens of thousands of people—including many with no criminal histories—and deportations have surged. Recent reports show that nearly 75,000 migrants with no criminal record were arrested by ICE in 2025 alone, challenging the laughable suggestion that enforcement is limited to “dangerous criminals.”

Across 2025, internal U.S. government figures suggest that well over two-million undocumented immigrants have left the country—including both formal deportations and so-called “self-deportations”—a scale of removal unseen in decades.

This is not abstract policy. These are families separated, children displaced, workers forced to flee back to unstable homelands. These are mothers and fathers seeking room at an “inn” who are told, again and again, “there is no room for you here.”

### ***Piñatas as Spiritual Protest***

At the conclusion of *Las Posadas*, we break the *piñata*—traditionally a seven-pointed star whose points represent the seven capital sins: pride, envy, greed, lust, gluttony, sloth and wrath.

Blindfolded, the stick in hand, we strike. The blindfold teaches us faith. The stick is our virtue. With each strike, we battle against sin—pride among them. When the *piñata* breaks and sweets pour down, it symbolizes grace overcoming evil.



What if this year we see the *piñata* as a symbol not just of personal sin, but of collective pride—the arrogance of any nation, culture or economy that tells us that only certain lives matter? What if breaking the *piñata* becomes an act of repentance—an act that opens our eyes to the dignity of all God’s children, especially those forced to migrate?

### **Bridging Traditions and History**

In the season of Advent—a time of waiting and justice—this reflection resonates with other Church memories of courage and welcome:

- The December 16 feast of **Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego**, heroes of the LGBTQIA+ community, who challenge us to stand with the marginalized when they are persecuted by unjust powers.
- The December 16, 1777 passing of Dutch Old Catholic bishop **Johann von Stiphout**, who died proclaiming a vision of ecclesial independence and pastoral care—challenging structures that exclude.
- The December 16, 1942 passing of **Maude Peter**—the nun who courageously offered hospitality to the expelled Jesuit George Tyrell.

These stories are threads in a tapestry of Christian witness that insists on hospitality, even when it challenges power and culture!

### **Calls to Action**

During this Advent season, Catholics are called to both prayer and action:

- Support immigrant rights organizations that provide legal, material and spiritual assistance at the border and in our cities.
- Advocate for humane immigration policy that respects asylum rights, due process and family unity.
- Host or participate in *Las Posadas* in your community—making space for immigrant voices and prayerful solidarity.

### **Let’s Open Wide Our Hearts!**

As Advent deepens, *Las Posadas* invites us to step beyond nostalgia and sentimentality. It calls us to a radical hospitality rooted in the Gospel. Just as Joseph and Mary once stood outside the doors of Bethlehem, humbly asking for shelter, many still wait at the boundaries of our communities, asking for justice and welcome. May we learn not only to tell that story, but to live it—opening wide our hearts and our doors!

### Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- In what ways have I turned away strangers—in word, silence, policy or practice?
- How does Joseph and Mary's search for lodging challenge my understanding of hospitality?
- How might breaking the *piñata's* seven horns this year symbolize my own breaking of barriers that deny dignity to others?

### A Prayer for Advent Hospitality

O God of mercy and welcome, grant us hearts wide enough to embrace every pilgrim on life's journey. May we see Christ in the stranger, the refugee and the migrant. Open our eyes to the injustices that shut doors in their faces, and give us courage to act. Let our Advent preparation be more than ritual. Let it be a movement of justice, love and peace. Amen.

### *Ero Cras*

The O Antiphons and the God Who Still Comes

December 17, 2025



Each year on December 17, the Church begins praying the ancient O Antiphons, a set of seven poetic invocations addressed to Christ. For more than a millennium, these antiphons have shaped the final days of Advent, helping Christians prepare for Christmas not by sentimentality, but by crying out for God's presence in a suffering world.

For U.S. Catholics today—living through social divisions, ecological crisis and renewed struggles for justice—the O Antiphons speak with a startling relevance. They remind us that Advent is not merely about waiting for a holiday. It is about longing for liberation. It is about insisting, with Scripture and with the earliest Christians, that God still comes!

### The Origin of the O Antiphons

The O Antiphons date at least to the 8<sup>th</sup> century, though some scholars suspect they go back earlier. Monks would chant these antiphons before and after the *Magnificat* at Vespers, each antiphon invoking a different biblical title of the Messiah. Over time, they made their way into parish liturgies and became known more widely through the beloved hymn, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.”

Each antiphon begins with an exclamation — “O!” — that expresses the deep longing of humanity for healing, justice and divine nearness.

### The Seven Antiphons

Here are the traditional O Antiphons, prayed from December 17 to 23:

- **O Sapientia** — O Wisdom. You who order all things with strength and tenderness.
- **O Adonai** — O Lord and Ruler. You who liberated Israel and who still liberates today.
- **O Radix Jesse** — O Root of Jesse. You who emerge from the poor and marginalized to upend worldly power.
- **O Clavis David** — O Key of David. You who unlock prison doors — literal and spiritual.
- **O Oriens** — O Dayspring, Radiant Dawn. You who scatter darkness and expose injustice.
- **O Rex Gentium** — O Ruler of the Nations. You who gather all peoples, beyond borders or tribal loyalties.
- **O Emmanuel** — O God With Us. You who astonishingly promise to dwell not far away, but among us!

### Ero Cras: The Hidden Message

A beautiful tradition notes that if you read the first letters of the Latin titles in reverse order — *Emmanuel, Rex, Oriens, Clavis, Radix, Adonai, Sapientia* — they spell the acrostic: ERO CRAS, “I will come tomorrow!”

The ancient Church embedded within the liturgy a hopeful whisper: God is already on the way!

### “Come, Lord Jesus”: Our Cry in Crisis

The O antiphons echo a deep biblical longing for God to break into history: “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down” (Is. 64:1). The early Christian communities prayed the Aramaic plea *maranatha* — “Come, Lord Jesus.” Our own liturgy proclaims: “Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.”

Christians have always prayed for God's coming in two senses:

- **Come into this particular moment**—into injustice, war, racism, ecological devastation, political violence, crushing poverty, immigrant suffering.
- **Come at the end of time**—the hoped-for fulfillment of all things in justice and peace.

The O Antiphons sit precisely at this intersection: yearning for God's arrival today and for God's ultimate restoration of the world.

### Why December 17 Matters

December 17 brings together a surprising constellation of witnesses, each illuminating the meaning of divine arrival.

- **Lazarus of Bethany.** Once commemorated on December 17 in the old Roman Martyrology, Lazarus is the friend whom Jesus calls out of the tomb. His story is an Advent sign: God still summons us—from despair, from inactivity, from the death-dealing systems of our age!
- **St. Olympias.** A fourth-century deaconess and wealthy Roman noblewoman, Olympias used her influence to serve the poor, defend the oppressed, and stand courageously with St. John Chrysostom against imperial abuse. Her life embodies what it looks like to pray "*O Adonai*" while resisting unjust earthly powers!
- **Rumi** (died December 17, 1273). The Sufi mystic whose poetry overflows with longing for union with the Divine reminds us that the desire for God transcends traditions. His death anniversary—celebrated as his "wedding night" with God—invites us to see the O Antiphons as part of a global human yearning for the Holy!
- **Pope Francis** (born December 17, 1936). Were he celebrating his 89<sup>th</sup> birthday this year, Pope Francis would surely remind us that Emmanuel demands concrete love for immigrants, the poor, the excluded, and the earth itself. His prophetic voice called the Church to be a field hospital, a place where Christ's coming is experienced through mercy and justice!

### Calls to Action

As we pray the O Antiphons this year, let us embody their hope:

- Slowly pray each antiphon, imagining how its title speaks into today's issues—mass migration, climate crisis, political division, economic inequality.

- Support frontline ministries that open doors for immigrants, unhoused neighbors, LGBTQIA+ youth, and anyone left outside the “inn.”
- Advocate for laws that reflect the justice and compassion of Christ, especially for the vulnerable.
- Practice personal liberation—release grudges, resist apathy, break habits of consumption that harm the earth.
- Become “*O Oriens*” for someone by bringing light into a dark corner of someone’s life.

### **The God Who Comes Anyway**

The O Antiphons remind us that we do not have to manufacture hope. Hope comes to us. Light dawns, even when we are not ready. Emmanuel breaks in—through justice seekers, through movements of liberation, through quiet acts of mercy and prophetic defiance.

And even when our world feels locked from the inside, with injustice barricading the door, Christ still speaks through the liturgy: *Ero cras*—I will come tomorrow!

Our task is to be ready, to open the door, and to join the cry of generations: Come, Lord Jesus. Show us again that God is with us!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- Which of the O Antiphons speaks most deeply to my spiritual needs and the needs of our world right now?
- How do I experience in my own life the longing expressed in “Come, Lord Jesus”
- What “doors” in my heart or community need to be unlocked by the “Key of David”?
- Where is God inviting me to be a sign of dawn—*Oriens*—for others?

### **Let Us Pray**

O Wisdom, O Lord, O Root of Jesse, O Key of David, O Radiant Dawn, O Ruler of the Nations, O God With Us—Come into our world once more. Come into the places that hunger for justice. Come into the lives of those who feel forgotten. Come into our Church, our communities, our hearts. Make us bearers of your light in these final days of Advent. May our longing shape us into people of courage, compassion and joy. Emmanuel, come quickly! Amen.

## When the Church Disappears

Peter Codde and the Long Advent of Utrecht

December 18, 2025



Imagine this: One Sunday you show up to your church for Mass...and the doors are locked. Not just for one Sunday, or one month, or one year—but for twenty-one years. No bishop. No bishop-led sacraments, like confirmations or ordinations. No pastoral leadership with authority to rule and guide. Nothing. Imagine trying to raise children in the faith without the grace and rites of passage of the Church's sacraments. Imagine burying your loved ones without the Church's rites. Imagine waiting—year after year—for your Church to return.

This is not a dystopian fantasy. It happened. It happened to the Catholics of the Netherlands at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. And at the center of it stood a gentle, principled, deeply-pastoral bishop named Peter Codde.

Today, December 18, we pause to remember his life—and what it reveals about conscience, authority, and the people of God in Advent.

### **Peter Codde: A Bishop of Conscience**

Peter Codde (1648–1710) was the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Utrecht—the last Roman Catholic to hold that office before the turmoil of 1723–1724 that eventually gave birth to what we now call the Old Catholic Church.

Codde's episcopate unfolded during the height of the controversies surrounding Jansenism, a complex spiritual and theological movement emphasizing humility, personal conversion, and the absolute primacy of divine grace. The Jesuits, powerful in Rome at the time, viewed Jansenism as a dangerous rigorism. The politics were fierce. Codde was known to be sympathetic to some Jansenist concerns—especially

regarding the authoritarian overreach of the pope and the use of sweeping doctrinal formulae to demand submission without dialogue.

At issue was the formulary of submission attached to the papal constitution *Unigenitus*, which condemned 101 propositions associated with the Jansenist theologian Pasquier Quesnel. Codde was asked to sign the mandatory formula of submission. He declined – not out of rebellion, but out of conscience. Like many holy women and men through the ages, he believed one could remain loyal to the Church while respectfully questioning certain juridical methods.

He was soon suspended by Rome in 1702.

For the Catholics of the Netherlands, that suspension was not merely an administrative detail. It opened an Advent of absence – two decades of waiting for a shepherd who never returned.

### **The People Left Behind**

With Codde suspended and never replaced, the Diocese of Utrecht was effectively abandoned. For twenty-one years:

- No confirmations were celebrated.
- No candidates were ordained to the priesthood or diaconate.
- No bishop visited parishes.
- No local governance of the Dutch church occurred.

And yet the faithful remained steadfast. They prayed. They hoped. They persevered.

By 1719, the situation had become spiritually devastating. There were literally hundreds of neglected faithful who had never received the fullness of the Holy Spirit through Confirmation.

Then something unexpected happened.

### **Dominique-Marie Varlet: A Bishop on the Way to Persia**

In 1719, French bishop Dominique-Marie Varlet was traveling through Amsterdam on his way to take up missionary work in Persia. Shocked to discover that no confirmations had been celebrated since Codde's suspension 17 years earlier, he made a simple pastoral judgment: The children could not wait any longer. He conferred the Holy Spirit on 604 children, confirming them with tenderness and pastoral authority. It was a moment of profound grace—a glimpse of the Holy Spirit breaking in when official structures failed.

Varlet—later suspended for this act and also for declining to sign the mandatory formula of submission—would later play a decisive role in the eventual consecration of Cornelius van Steenoven as Codde's successor in 1724, after the Utrecht cathedral chapter's 1723 election of

van Steenoven to succeed Codde. That consecration, performed without papal approval, formally began the line of bishops that would develop into the *Oud-katholieke kerken*, the Old Catholic Church—rooted in the belief that pastoral care must not be sacrificed to political or theological coercion.

### **Why Peter Codde Matters Today**

Codde is not merely a footnote in ecclesiastical history. He stands as a witness to:

**Conscience over coercion.** Codde reminds us that unity is not achieved through forced signatures or blind obedience, but through mutual respect and dialogue.

**The primacy of pastoral care.** The 604 unconfirmed children reveal what happens when institutional politics eclipse the Gospel.

**The resilience of local churches.** The faithful of Utrecht endured decades of abandonment and still held fast to Christ.

**The Advent truth: God comes despite the Church's failures.** Where structures collapsed, grace slipped through the cracks, like light under a locked door.

### **An Advent Message for Catholics**

As we prepare for Christmas, Codde's story invites us to ask:

- Whose voices in the Church today are silenced because they challenge authoritarianism?
- Who suffers spiritually when leaders choose political battles over pastoral accompaniment?
- How do we stand in solidarity with Catholics (and all people) who are deprived of sacramental presence through exclusion, marginalization or unjust structures?

Codde calls us to advocate for a Church that listens first—a Church that makes room at the inn, rather than shutting doors to protect its image.

### **Calls to Action**

- Support communities harmed by ecclesial neglect—including divorced and remarried couples, women called to ministry, LGBTQIA+ Catholics, and immigrants denied pastoral care.
- Study and share the history of Utrecht, to understand how conscience can reform the Church from within.
- Engage discussions on authority, conscience and pastoral responsibility.



- Pray for Church leaders — that they may act with humility, compassion and courage.

### **God Comes Anyway**

Peter Codde did not set out to become a hero of conscience. He simply refused to betray the integrity of his faith. His suspension and the long ecclesial winter that followed remind us that when the Church punishes honesty, it wounds the Body of Christ itself. And when society punishes honesty, it deeply wounds our collective community.

But Advent teaches us this enduring truth: God comes anyway. Even when the Church falters. Even when the sacraments are withheld. Even when those in power forget the least among us.

Like the children Varlet confirmed, we are not abandoned. The Spirit finds a way. And the Church's future will be shaped not by fear, but by fidelity to justice, mercy and truth!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- What does Peter Codde's witness teach me about conscience in the life of the Church?
- Where in today's Church do I see spiritual needs going unmet because of politics or institutional rigidity?
- How am I called to be a source of pastoral care for those who feel abandoned or excluded?
- How might Utrecht's long Advent help me understand my own seasons of waiting, dryness or hope?

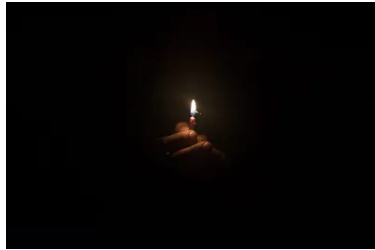
### **Let Us Pray**

God of Advent hope,  
 You come to us even when structures fail and leaders falter.  
 Give us the courage of Archbishop Codde,  
 the compassion of Bishop Varlet,  
 and the steadfast faith of the people of Utrecht.  
 Open our eyes to those who wait for Your presence today.  
 Open our hearts to act with justice, mercy and humility.  
 May this Advent strengthen our longing for the Christ who comes —  
 again and again, even when doors are locked.  
 Amen.

## Holding Fast to Hope in Darkening Days

Advent Wisdom for Catholics

December 18, 2025



Regardless of your political affiliation, I have to ask: Did anyone—or could anyone—count the number of distrusts spoken by our U.S. President during his address to our nation last evening? (Distrusts, I say, because I presume the same distinction here as between *misinformation* and *disinformation*.) I watched with two fact-checkers who struggled to keep up in real time, and I did not envy their task. Our nation looks toward tomorrow's long-awaited release of the Epstein files (if it indeed happens) and continues to brace itself against our President's penchant for never-ending distractions, including his present threat of war in South America—two details he overlooked in his remarks. Not even a year into a four-year term, many of us find it admittedly difficult to hold onto hope for the constitutional federal republic that we all once prized. Holding onto hope—a key Advent theme—can also be a considerable challenge for us in the Independent/Inclusive Catholic movement, our unique non-Vatican living of the Catholic faith.

We hear the stories so often that they begin to blur together. Independent bishops who cannot get along or “play well together,” so they fracture communion and communities as they create new and often very micro “denominations.” Bishops who yet again consecrate and ordain candidates who lack the theological formation, pastoral maturity or social-emotional skills required for ministry to God's people. Small eucharistic communities that struggle to support overworked clergy and that continue to dwindle. In moments like these, despair whispers that our movement is failing, that the problem is leadership, and that nothing will change.

Yet Advent insists that despair is never the final word.

### **Advent Hope Is Not Naïve Optimism**

Christian hope is not denial. Advent does not ask us to pretend that things are fine. The prophets did not sugarcoat reality. Isaiah spoke to a people bruised by exile and political collapse. John the Baptist preached while corruption ruled and violence threatened daily life. Hope, in the biblical sense, is stubborn trust that God still acts in history, often from the margins and rarely through the powerful.

For Independent/Inclusive Catholics, this matters deeply. *Our movement exists precisely because conscience, justice and fidelity to the Gospel sometimes require standing apart from centralized authority.* Hope does not mean waiting for perfect bishops or ideal structures. Hope means believing that the Spirit continues to breathe life even through imperfect vessels, including us!

### **Leadership, Community and Shared Responsibility**

It is tempting in this movement to place all our struggles at the feet of bishops—and, yes, a great deal of criticism is warranted. Episcopal dysfunction, after all, causes real harm, and weak leadership begets weak leadership at all levels. Yet Advent invites us to widen the lens.

Hope grows when responsibility is shared. The early Church did not flourish because leaders were flawless. It flourished because communities prayed together, argued honestly, shared resources, and refused to abandon one another when times grew hard.

### **Light Grows in Small Places**

We approach the darkest day of the year, the winter solstice. Our ancestors understood this rhythm well: When darkness peaked, they trusted that light would return! Advent honors that ancient wisdom. God rarely enters the darkness of human history with storied fireworks. Instead, we prepare to celebrate that God became flesh in a child born into poverty and military occupation.

In our own movement, light often appears quietly. It appears when a small community continues to gather to break open the Word and share bread and wine. It appears when lay leaders step forward to preach, teach and organize. It appears when bishops choose collaboration over control, and humility over titles. These moments rarely make headlines. They still matter. More than any of us will ever fully know.

### **Calls to Action**

- **Practice Advent patience.** Resist the urge to immediately fix everything.
- **Support your local community.** Lend your time, talent and resources.
- **Hold leaders accountable while refusing to dehumanize them.** Our leaders are people, too. As unprepared as they sometimes are, they are human beings doing the best they can with what they have.
- **Invest in formation, both for clergy and for lay leaders.** Our movement will only grow and become a serious reckoning force in the world when we raise the lid on our personal/communal knowledge and skills.
- **Seek collaboration, rather than competition.** We don't need more "sandboxes." Instead, we need to learn to play better together.
- **Deliberately pray for hope, especially when cynicism feels easier.** Let's hold up the light and refuse to give in to the darkness!

### **Lighting Candles in the Longest Night**

Hope is not a feeling. Hope is a practice. We choose hope when we keep showing up. We choose hope when we stay rooted in prayer and sacrament, even when numbers shrink. We choose hope when we believe that God still calls, still heals, and still sends us forth.

As Advent draws us toward the longest night of the year, we light candles not because darkness disappears, but because light persists. Independent/Inclusive Catholics do not cling to hope because success is guaranteed. We cling to hope because the Gospel demands it. God has always worked through small communities, imperfect leaders, and fragile faith. This Advent, may we trust that the same Spirit who hovered over the darkness at creation still hovers over us, whispering, "Do not be afraid: Light is coming!"

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- Where do I notice darkness tempting me toward despair?
- How has God surprised me with light in unexpected places?
- What responsibility do I carry for the health of my community?
- Whom am I being invited to support, rather than criticize?
- What would choosing hope look like for me this Advent?

### Let Us Pray

God of the longest nights and the returning dawn, when hope feels fragile and trust feels costly, steady our hearts. Teach us to wait without surrender, to act without bitterness and to love without counting the cost. As darkness deepens around us, kindle your light within us until hope becomes flesh again. Amen.

### When the Ice is Extremely Cold

On the “Religious Reasons” for Banning Pride Flags  
in Professional Hockey

December 19, 2025



The fifth episode of *Heated Rivalry* dropped last night on HBO Max in the U.S. and Australia and on Crave in Canada, and it landed with far more force than many of us expected. The series, based on Rachel Reid’s first novel by the same name, is not really about hockey, though it is saturated with it. It is about desire and fear, secrecy and courage, and the high personal cost of surviving in a culture that still treats queerness as a liability. Its timing could not be more poignant, given the National Hockey League’s ongoing discomfort with Pride symbols, including bans justified by so-called “religious reasons.”

For those unfamiliar with the story, *Heated Rivalry* follows the volatile, tender relationship between two elite NHL players: Shane Hollander, a Canadian superstar, and Ilya Rozanov, a Russian phenom. Rivals on the ice, lovers in secret, they navigate fame, nationalism, masculinity, and an unrelenting sports culture that still punishes honesty. The episode ends with a striking scene imagining Scott Hunter as the first NHL player to publicly come out as gay, on the ice, immediately after winning the Stanley Cup. The episode, like the series, is less about that singular act, than about the long, bruising road that leads to it, and about the countless players – and people – who never feel safe enough to take such a step.

That fear of coming out is not fictional.

As Andrew Sampson reported for CBC News, “As of 2025, the NHL remains the only major North American men’s sports league that’s never had an openly gay player compete in regular competition.” Never in its 108-year history. Let that sink in. In 2021, Luke Prokop became the first active player under NHL contract to come out as gay, yet he has not played in the league, remaining in the AHL with the Bakersfield Condors. Sampson rightly notes that two NHL players falling in love remains “something that is still mostly in the realm of fantasy in real life.”

Progress, when it comes, is fragile. Kurt Weaver, executive director of You Can Play, which advocates for inclusion in hockey, has emphasized that change is happening, even if unevenly. Pride jerseys once seemed unthinkable. A decade later, most players were wearing them. Yet in 2023, the NHL banned Pride-themed warmup jerseys after a handful of players refused to participate. The league later reversed its ban on rainbow-colored Pride tape on hockey sticks, but the damage had been done. Once again, inclusion was framed as optional.

Several players justified their refusals on—you guessed it—“religious grounds.” Ivan Provorov, then with the Philadelphia Flyers, cited Russian Orthodox beliefs. James Reimer of the San Jose Sharks pointed to biblical convictions. Coaches and league officials often responded by praising “respect for personal beliefs,” as though LGBTQIA+ people were not also persons deserving of respect.

**We must name what is happening here: Religion is being misused as a shield for exclusion.**

*The rainbow Pride flag is not an anti-Christian symbol.* It is a sign of covenant, echoing Genesis, and a proclamation that every diverse human being bears God’s image. Jesus of Nazareth consistently stood with those marginalized by religious gatekeepers. St. Paul proclaimed that in Christ there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female (Gal. 3:28). That radical inclusivity unsettled religious authorities then, just as it unsettles some now.

Books like Father Daniel Helminiak’s *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality* have helped Catholics distinguish faithful interpretation of scripture from its disinterpretation. (“Disinterpretation,” I say, because I presume the same distinction here as between misinformation and disinformation.) This is not a matter of competing opinions. It is the difference between honest wrestling with Scripture and weaponizing it.

*Real Christianity does not flinch at rainbows or diversity. It rejoices in them.*

Still, change takes time, especially changes of heart. The NHL’s halting steps mirror broader resistance in our culture. Under the current U.S.

Administration, the gospel values of diversity, equity and inclusion are increasingly vilified, and LGBTQIA+ rights face renewed threats. Like the ice, society is not neutral.

Yet *Heated Rivalry* dares to imagine another ending. It dares to believe that courage can ripple outward, that love can survive even in brutal systems, and that truth spoken aloud can loosen long-frozen ground. In these final days before Christmas, as we approach the winter solstice and the longest night of the year in the northern hemisphere, that hope matters.

### **Calls to Action**

- Challenge claims that exclusion is justified by faith.
- Support organizations like You Can Play that foster inclusion in sports.
- Speak openly about LGBTQIA+ dignity and belonging.
- Choose media that humanizes queer lives, rather than erasing them.
- Accompany young LGBTQIA+ athletes—indeed all young people—who feel unseen or unsafe.
- Pray publicly for courage, not comfort, in the Church and beyond.

### **Skating Toward the Gospel's Center**

Jesus was born into a world that enforced silence and conformity. He grew into a teacher who shattered both. The Gospel does not ask us to protect institutions at the expense of people. It calls us to stand where love is costly and truth is risky. Yes, even in professional hockey!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- Where have I seen religion used to exclude, rather than to heal?
- Whose courage challenges my own silence?
- What fears still keep me from public solidarity?
- How might Jesus or other religious figures I admire respond to today's Pride bans?
- Where is God inviting me to be braver this holiday season?

### **Let Us Pray**

God of light born in darkness, you entered a world afraid of difference and revealed love without condition. Free us from distorted faith that blesses fear and calls it holiness. Give courage to those who hide, soften hearts hardened by power, and teach us to follow your Son wherever dignity is denied. May your rainbow promise shine again, on ice, in our streets, in our communities and in every human heart. Amen.

## Two Lights in a Season of Waiting

### Remembering Johann Friedrich von Schulte and Arnold Harris Mathew

December 19, 2025



As Catholics journey through Advent—a season of waiting, watching and learning to perceive God’s light in imperfect places—we pause today, December 19, to remember two figures whose lives helped shape the Old/Independent Catholic movement: **Johann Friedrich von Schulte** and **Arnold Harris Mathew**. Their stories could not be more different, yet each offers an unexpected Advent lesson for those seeking to follow Christ’s liberating way.

#### **Johann Friedrich von Schulte: A Mind for Freedom, A Heart for the Church**

Johann Friedrich von Schulte (1827–1914) was a German canonist and historian who refused to bend his conscience during the sham Vatican Council of 1869-1870. When the dogma of papal infallibility was defined, von Schulte stood with those who believed that the Catholic tradition was richer, broader and more conciliar than this centralization allowed.

He became the chief architect of the canon law of the German Old Catholic Church, grounding it not in authority for authority’s sake, but in synodality, shared responsibility, and a commitment to the ancient Church. As President of the Old Catholic Congress from 1871 to 1890, he helped build a movement that was both deeply traditional and courageously reforming.

In von Schulte’s memory, we pray today for all who lead and guide Old/Independent Catholic movements at national and international levels. May those who carry his legacy continue to shape laws and structures not for control, but for service. May they resist any form of clericalism that dims Christ’s light, and may they trust the wisdom of the Spirit speaking through all the baptized!



### **Arnold Harris Mathew: A Troubled Founder, A Cautionary Light**

Arnold Harris Mathew (1852–1919)—born Arnoldo Girolamo Povoleri—presents a more complicated legacy. Once a Roman Catholic priest, Mathew lost faith in Scripture and in Christ’s divinity. Later, by convincing the Old Catholic Archbishop of Utrecht that a movement existed in England ready for episcopal leadership, he was consecrated a bishop—an act that would give him apostolic succession and a sense of mission, but also embroil him in controversy.

Mathew’s efforts to build Old Catholicism in the English-speaking world were earnest but often ineffective. His repeated consecrations of others—sometimes impulsively, sometimes in the hope of securing his own legacy—produced far more fragmentation than flourishing. He died a lonely and largely isolated man.

And yet, his flawed story still matters. Mathew reminds us that zeal without discernment can wound; that succession without formation can mislead; and that even good intentions need grounding in community, humility and accountability.

In his memory, we pray for all who struggle to lead and nourish others. Within the Old/Independent Catholic movement, we especially pray for those who feel the pressure to consecrate or ordain others before they are spiritually and pastorally equipped for the *triplex munus* of teaching, sanctifying and leading God’s people. May today’s leaders seek not legacy, but love; not titles, but transformation; not multiplication of clergy, but authentic service to God’s people!

### **Advent Lessons from Two Unlikely Teachers**

Together, von Schulte and Mathew offer a shared Advent message: *God works through the brilliant and the broken, the principled reformer and the troubled founder, the bold architect of new structures and the lonely bishop searching for purpose.*

Their lives invite us to ask:

- What kind of Church are we preparing for this Advent?
- What kind of light are we willing to become?
- What structures or habits that no longer serve the Gospel are we willing to let go—so that Christ may be born anew in our midst?

### **Calls to Action**

- **Learn your lineage.** Whether you are Old/Independent Catholic, Roman Catholic, believe in the “one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church” in other ways, or simply curious, take time to learn about your spiritual ancestry—its strengths as well as its missteps.

- **Support ethical leadership.** Encourage leaders in your community who model transparency, shared governance, and pastoral accountability.
- **Discern before acting.** If you are a member of the clergy or clergy-in-information, recommit to rigorous discernment—especially regarding ordinations and consecrations that carry lifelong responsibility.
- **Pray for unity without uniformity.** The Independent Sacramental Movement is diverse—and often fractured. Dedicate time this Advent to pray for healing across jurisdictions and communities.

### **Between Darkness and Dawn: The Church is Always Unfinished**

In this season poised between darkness and dawn, we remember von Schulte's courage and Mathew's caution. Their lives remind us that the Church—any church—is always unfinished, always yearning for reform, always aching for Christ's light to break in.

May we, too, become builders of something better: a Church whose structures are rooted in justice, whose leaders walk in humility, and whose people shine with a love that no loneliness, no fragmentation and no failure can extinguish!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- Where in my own faith life do I need courage like von Schulte's?
- Where do I need humility, caution or accountability, as Mathew's story warns?
- How is God inviting me to prepare the way for Christ during this Advent season—personally, communally or structurally?
- Are there places where I am clinging to power, titles or old forms, rather than to the Gospel itself?
- What small act of leadership, healing or reconciliation can I offer before Christmas?

### **Let Us Pray**

God of light and truth, in this holy season of waiting, shine upon us through the stories of Johann Friedrich von Schulte and Arnold Harris Mathew. Give us wisdom to discern, courage to reform, humility to serve, and love to guide every action we take in Your name. Heal our divisions, illuminate our path, and prepare our hearts to welcome Christ—not in power, but in vulnerability; not in triumph, but in tender hope. May Your Spirit make us faithful builders of a Church that reflects Your justice, mercy and inclusive love. Amen.

## (Ir)responsibility at the Podium

The Dehumanization That Results When Speechwriters  
Check Their Purported Christianity at the White House Door

December 19, 2025



So, I decided to fact-check Jen Psaki. I've never before felt that I had to do this—but this time I did. We both watched the same rambling White House address on December 17, when I am sure we would have rather watched, uninterrupted, the *Survivor* Season 49 finale. Psaki described the President's remarks as a *"micro-machine, fast-talking infomercial"* that felt *"knee-jerk, anti-immigrant, xenophobic."* It certainly seemed a speech lifted from an authoritarian playbook—so I admittedly didn't pay it much attention in the moment. But what did I miss in that barrage of words that led to Psaki's characterization as "anti-immigrant" and "xenophobic"? I rewatched the full 20 minutes and searched for the transcript. What I initially perceived to be a rant of this man's "greatest hits" was, on closer examination, a hateful invective pitting neighbor against neighbor, and triggering our amygdalas to react with fear.

Let us look carefully at what was said.

**"Our border was open and because of this, our country was being invaded by an army of 25 million people, many who came from prisons and jails, mental institutions, and insane asylums."**

Fact-checking matters. There is no credible data to support the claim that "25 million" people—let alone an "army"—entered the U.S. during the last Administration. Government statistics show encounters at the southern border, not unique individuals, and certainly not a coordinated invasion. The language itself is revealing. *People are rendered as a faceless mass, militarized, stripped of individuality and dignity.* Scripture repeatedly warns against such dehumanization. "Do not oppress the alien, for you were aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt" (Ex. 22:21). In Christian terms, describing migrants as an invading army is not only inaccurate, it is harshly unchristian.

**"They were drug dealers, gang members, and even 11,888 murderers..."**

Here, isolated criminal cases are overblown and presented as representative of an entire population. We saw this in the same man's 2015 characterization of the people of Mexico as "criminals, drug dealers and rapists" – absolute hogwash to those of us who know numerous beautiful people who hail from south of our border. Numerous studies demonstrate that *immigrants, including undocumented immigrants, commit violent crime at lower rates than native-born U.S. citizens*. To assert otherwise is to traffic in fear, not facts. Catholic social teaching insists on the primacy of human dignity, not collective guilt. Jesus did not encounter crowds and presume criminality. He saw persons.

**"For the last four years, the United States was ruled by politicians who fought only for insiders, illegal aliens, career criminals..."**

Notice the rhetorical move. "Illegal aliens" are lumped together with criminals and terrorists, collapsing moral distinctions and reinforcing suspicion. The Church, by contrast, distinguishes clearly between a person and an action. Even when laws are broken, the person remains a bearer of God's image. Calling human beings "illegal" contradicts that foundational belief and demeans all who are created in God's image.

**"A major factor in driving up housing costs was the colossal border invasion....At the same time, illegal aliens stole American jobs and flooded emergency rooms getting free healthcare and education paid for by you, the American taxpayer."**

Economists broadly agree that housing shortages are driven not primarily by migration, but by supply constraints, zoning laws, interest rates and corporate consolidation. *Blaming migrants for rising rents and strained emergency rooms follows a familiar scapegoating pattern*. From a Christian perspective, this is especially troubling. The prophets consistently denounced leaders who deflected responsibility onto the vulnerable.

### **When Speechwriters Check Their Christianity at the Door**

Yes, I know: These words were written by speechwriters. But responsibility does not disappear at the podium. The one who utters them owns them.

So, was Jen Psaki correct in her assessment? After careful review, the answer is yes. Our President's words in this White House address were harshly anti-immigrant. They were, in a word, xenophobic. And measured against the Judeo-Christian tradition, they fail to reflect any

sense of ethics or morality. I welcome any Christian or Catholic to dissent.

Catholic social teaching emphasizes solidarity, human dignity, the preferential option for the poor, and the right of people to migrate to sustain life. Advent and Christmas remind us that the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph themselves were migrants and refugees. *To weaponize fear of the stranger in the days before we celebrate Emmanuel, God-with-us, is morally perverse and a profound theological contradiction.*

### **Calls to Action**

- Fact-check political rhetoric before sharing or endorsing it.
- Speak clearly about Church teaching—or the beliefs of your religious tradition—on migration.
- Support organizations that accompany migrants and asylum seekers.
- Challenge dehumanizing language, even when it is politically popular.
- Pray publicly for leaders to choose truth over fear.

### **Choosing Light Over Fear**

As we approach the winter solstice and the darkest days of the year, the temptation is strong to surrender and resign ourselves to all that is going on around us. Yet the Gospel insists that light shines precisely in the darkness. Words matter. They can wound or heal, divide or unite. *And, yes, as Christians, we are called to hold our leaders accountable when their language betrays the values they claim to defend.*

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- How do I respond when fear is used as a political tool?
- Whose voices shape my understanding of immigrants and migration?
- Where might I have absorbed unexamined assumptions?
- How does my faith challenge the rhetoric I hear from those in power?
- What concrete act of solidarity can I practice this holiday season?

### **Let Us Pray**

God of the journey and the stranger, you led your people through deserts and across borders, and you came among us as a child without a home. Free us from fearful speech and hardened hearts. In these final days before Christmas, give us courage to speak truth, grace to see Christ in the migrant, and wisdom to choose light over darkness. Amen.

## Two Reformers, Two Advent Lights

Remembering Henry of Kalkar and Katharina von Bora

December 20, 2025



As the days of Advent draw us closer to Christmas, the Church invites us to reflect on the ways God's Spirit reforms, renews and reshapes communities across history. December 20 brings us two such reforming voices—one Catholic, one very Lutheran—whose lives remind us that genuine reform rarely comes from the center of power, but from those willing to live the Gospel with creativity, courage and compassion.

Today we remember **Henry of Kalkar**, a medieval Catholic visionary whose spirituality helped catalyze a movement of renewal long before the Reformation—and **Katharina von Bora**, the bold and capable woman who helped shape the Reformation far beyond her marriage to Martin Luther.

### Henry of Kalkar: Seeds of the *Devotio Moderna*

Henry of Kalkar (1328–1408) was a Carthusian prior, theologian, spiritual writer, and—though he would never have used the term—one of the early architects of genuine ecclesial reform.

As a young man, Henry studied alongside Geert Groote, who later founded the Brothers of the Common Life, an intentional Christian community dedicated to simplicity, education and shared devotion. Henry's gentle wisdom, his emphasis on interior prayer, and his vision for a humble, disciplined spirituality profoundly shaped Groote's imagination.

The Windesheim congregations that sprang from Groote's work widely distributed Henry's writings. These texts helped sow the seeds of *Devotio Moderna*, a movement that transformed European spirituality and eventually influenced such towering figures as Thomas à Kempis.

And remarkably, Henry's work would help prepare the soil for the Catholic Renaissance—the deep reform movements that culminated in the Council of Trent.

In a fragmented world, Henry of Kalkar invited Christians back to the heart: prayer, simplicity, study, and shared life. In an age of ecclesial turmoil, his voice whispered Advent's quiet promise: *Reform begins with conversion. Conversion begins with listening. Listening begins in the stillness where God speaks.*

### **Katharina von Bora: Courage, Community and the Reformation Household**

If Henry represents the contemplative seeds of reform, Katharina von Bora (1499–1552) embodies their earthy, practical, incarnate expression. A former Cistercian nun who found monastic life stifling, Katharina embraced the expanding reform movement—and eventually married Martin Luther, who once joked that his marriage would please his father, rile the pope, cause the angels to laugh and the devils to weep. And indeed, their marriage reshaped the landscape of Christian life!

But Katharina was far more than a reformer's spouse:

- She managed a brewery, cattle business, and extensive household economy.
- She provided hospitality for students, refugees and political visitors who streamed through the Luther home.
- She operated a hospital on-site, offering nursing care during waves of illness.
- She established a model of married clergy life that influenced Protestant households for centuries.

Katharina's life testifies that the Reformation was never merely an academic debate or a theological rupture—it was a lived transformation of how ordinary Christians understood marriage, family, work and ministry. Her leadership makes clear: *Reform is not only preached from pulpits—it is brewed in kitchens, tended in gardens, and lived in households of welcome.*

### **Advent Wisdom from Two Very Different Reformers**

Henry of Kalkar teaches us the importance of inner renewal.

Katharina von Bora shows us that structural and relational renewal must follow.

Together, they offer a profoundly Advent message: *God is reforming the Church—slowly, steadily, sometimes quietly, sometimes boldly. And God invites each of us to take our place in that work.*

As we approach Christmas, these two reformers remind us that Christ is born amid the ordinary: in a stable, in a household, in daily prayer, in

courageous decisions, in the humble work of those who believe a better Church – and a better world – is possible.

### **Calls to Action**

- **Cultivate the inner life.** Set aside five minutes each day this week for silence and listening – Henry of Kalkar-style. Let reform begin where Advent begins: in the heart!
- **Honor the labor of caregivers and household leaders.** Katharina von Bora's ministry reminds us of the holiness of domestic work, caregiving and hospitality. Reach out to someone who carries this load and thank them!
- **Support women's leadership.** Katharina broke molds in her time. Today, advocate for women's equitable leadership – ordained and lay – in every Christian tradition!
- **Study the reformers who don't fit the usual narrative.** The Church's renewal has always depended on unexpected people. Let their stories inspire new imagination!
- **Ask what form of reform God is calling you to embody this Advent.** Structural? Personal? Relational? Spiritual?

### **Quiet Hearts and Bustling Households**

As we near the manger, we remember that God's greatest act of renewal came not through a council, a bishop, or a celebrity theologian – but through a child born to a humble woman in an ordinary place.

Henry of Kalkar and Katharina von Bora, each in their own way, remind us that Christ's renewal of the Church often begins in quiet hearts and bustling households long before it appears in doctrine or decrees.

May we, too, become Advent reformers – rooted, courageous, humble, and ready to welcome the Christ who transforms everything he touches!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- Where in my life is God inviting me to deeper interior stillness and renewal?
- Where is God calling me to practical, courageous action – especially in service to my community?
- What reforms – large or small – am I resisting, and why?
- Whose hidden labor sustains the communities I belong to? How can I honor or support them?
- What would it look like for my home, my ministry, my community or my nation to become a place of welcome, healing and reform?



### Let Us Pray

God of renewal and quiet beginnings, in this sacred season of waiting, we give thanks for Henry of Kalkar's contemplative wisdom and Katharina von Bora's courageous, everyday discipleship. Stir in us the desire for deeper conversion, and grant us the strength to live our faith with integrity, hospitality and joy. As we prepare for the coming of Christ, open our hearts to the reforms Your Spirit desires—in our lives, our homes, and our Church. Make us bearers of Your light in a world longing for hope. Amen.

### Amazing Grace, Troubled Grace, Advent Grace

Celebrating John Newton, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Matthew Fox

December 21, 2025



This Advent, I've been enjoying the *a cappella* harmonies of Pentatonix—especially their soaring rendition of the beloved hymn Amazing Grace. Admittedly, I always stumble over two details in this hymn.

First, unlike the deep “we” of so many Catholic hymns—“Holy God, We Praise Thy Name,” “We Remember,” “We Are Many Parts”—Amazing Grace is deeply individualistic. “I once was lost, but now I'm found.” Beautiful, yes. But a deeply Jesus-and-me focus.

Second, that word “wretch” always gives me pause. It's a very non-Catholic theological framing: that God “saved a wretch like me.” For this reason, many Catholic hymnals sensibly replace those words with, “saved and set me free.”

Still, it's fitting that today, December 21, we remember the composer of that hymn—**John Newton**—alongside two very different figures who were themselves considered “wretches” by certain gatekeepers of church or society: **F. Scott Fitzgerald** and **Matthew Fox**.

And on this shortest day of the year, as we long for the Light that “shines in the darkness” (Jn. 1:5), their intertwined stories invite us

deeper into Advent's central theme: *Grace comes to the lost, the marginalized, the misunderstood – and then asks us to extend that grace to others.*

### **John Newton: A “Wretch” Set Free**

John Newton (1725–1807) lived the very life his hymn describes. A sailor in the Royal Navy and later a captain of slave ships, he directly participated in the trafficking, torture and death of enslaved Africans. His early adult life was saturated in cruelty and degradation.

But during a violent storm at sea in 1748 – when he thought he would die – Newton experienced a profound spiritual awakening. The man who had treated others as “property” cried out to God, and something shifted. Eventually, he became an Anglican priest and one of Britain's leading abolitionists.

He spent decades preaching, writing and supporting the abolitionist movement led by William Wilberforce. In a bittersweet grace, Newton lived long enough to see the British Parliament abolish the African slave trade – just days before he died.

Today, we remember not only Newton's transformation, but its moral demands: Grace cannot be hoarded. *Grace must dismantle the systems that enslave!*

In Newton's memory, we pray for all who are enslaved today – human trafficking victims, exploited laborers, incarcerated people caught in cycles of poverty – and for all whose blindness harms the freedom and dignity of others.

### **F. Scott Fitzgerald: A “Wretch” Marginalized in Life and in Death**

The great American writer F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896–1940) was raised Roman Catholic, educated in Catholic schools, and often haunted – artistically and spiritually – by the beauty and contradictions of Catholicism.

Yet upon his death, the Church denied his family's request that he be buried in the Fitzgerald family plot at St. Mary's Cemetery in Rockville, Maryland. For 25 years, his body rested elsewhere. Only in 1975 – long after his literary canonization – did ecclesial authorities permit his reburial in the Catholic cemetery!

Fitzgerald, who wrote so poignantly about the brokenness beneath America's glittering facades, experienced exclusion even in death. So many Catholics – divorced Catholics, racially-minoritized Catholics, queer Catholics, those estranged from the Church – intimately know that wound.

Today, in Fitzgerald's memory, we pray for all who have been rejected or marginalized by those claiming to represent God.

*Advent reminds us that Christ is born precisely among the outcast, the overlooked and the excluded.*

### **Matthew Fox: Expelled "Wretch" and Prophet of Creation**

Born on this day in 1940, Matthew Fox has spent decades calling Christians back to a spirituality rooted not in guilt, but in wonder; not in fear, but in creativity; not in anthropocentrism, but in reverence for all creation.

A Dominican for 34 years, Fox's writings on creation spirituality drew scrutiny from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Eventually, in 1993, he was expelled from the Dominican Order. Later he joined the Episcopal Church, continuing his theological work with unabashed creativity.

Fox—like Newton and Fitzgerald—was labeled a "problem," a "threat," perhaps even a "wretch" by some. Yet his contributions have helped countless believers integrate ecological urgency, scientific understanding and Christian spirituality!

This Advent, his birthday invites us to ask: *How are we honoring God's creation? What does "prepare the way of the Lord" look like in an era of ecological collapse?*

### **A Shared Advent Message**

These three December 21 figures—very different, yet strangely connected—invite us into a deeper understanding of grace:

- Grace transforms the oppressor (Newton), demanding justice.
- Grace heals the marginalized (Fitzgerald), demanding inclusion.
- Grace widens the imagination (Fox), demanding creativity and ecological care.

Or put in Advent terms:

- Grace breaks chains, opens doors, and makes all things new!
- The nights may be long, but grace is longer.  
The Church may wound, but grace is wider.  
The world may tremble, but grace is stronger.

### **Calls to Action**

- **Support modern abolition:** Donate to organizations fighting human trafficking and labor exploitation—concrete works of liberation in Newton’s honor!
- **Practice radical hospitality:** Welcome those who have been spiritually wounded or excluded, especially during this season!
- **Live creation spirituality:** Reduce waste, support ecological initiatives, plant something, bless your local watershed—embody the reverence Matthew Fox teaches!
- **Examine your language of grace:** Where do you lean toward shame rather than liberation? How might a more communal, Catholic vision of grace reshape your prayer?

### **Amazingly, Grace Still Breaks Through**

On this darkest night of the year, Advent asks us to look honestly at our world, our Church, and ourselves—and then dare to believe that grace still breaks through. John Newton, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Matthew Fox each remind us that God’s grace is never tidy, never restricted, never stingy. It finds the enslaver, the rejected, the visionary—and reshapes them for liberation, inclusion and renewal. May we carry that fierce Advent grace into a world yearning for light!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- Where do I need grace to transform something harmful in my life?
- Who has been excluded—by the Church, by society, or by me—and how am I called to welcome them?
- How is God inviting me into deeper care for creation?
- What parts of my story feel wretched, hidden or shameful—and how might God’s amazing grace reclaim them?
- How do I cultivate a more communal, less individualistic, vision of salvation?

### **Let Us Pray**

God of Liberating Grace, on this shortest day of the year, shine Your light upon all who sit in darkness—the enslaved, the marginalized, the misunderstood, and all of us who long for healing. Transform our hearts as You transformed John Newton, welcome us as You welcomed outcasts like F. Scott Fitzgerald, and awaken us to the holiness of creation, as You inspired Matthew Fox. May Your grace make us builders of justice, bearers of welcome, and stewards of Your beautiful world. Come, Lord Jesus—and teach us to bear Your light! Amen.

## Lighting the Way

Isaac Hecker and the Advent Hope for an American Catholicism

December 22, 2025



I first encountered the Paulist Fathers at the Washington Theological Union, where I studied alongside their seminarians. During my first year, I worked closely with Paulist seminarian Ernie Aguilar, an upperclassman ordained a few years before me—long before he later made the surprising and beautiful leap to our Austin public schools—to coordinate the WTU’s annual fine arts festival. Ernie’s joy, creativity and pastoral heart spoke volumes about the community that formed him.

As I came to know more about Ernie’s congregation, my respect grew—along with my admiration for the man who founded them: **Isaac Thomas Hecker**, whose witness we remember on December 22.

Today, when Catholics face daily troubling news from the Trump Administration and other leaders seemingly bent on dragging our nation backward—on civil rights, on care for the poor, on immigrant protection, and on truth itself—we need Hecker’s voice more than ever!

### The Visionary Who Believed America Had a Soul Worth Evangelizing

Isaac Hecker (1819–1888), a convert to Catholicism, priest, and founder of the Paulist Fathers, was convinced that the Catholic faith could powerfully speak to the American experiment. He believed that the American political culture of civil society, small government, property rights, and liberal democracy was not an obstacle to Catholic life—but fertile soil for it.

Where some feared modernity, Hecker saw potential. Where some clung to control, Hecker trusted the Holy Spirit working in the hearts of the faithful. Where some demanded passive obedience, Hecker called the laity to initiative, responsibility and mission.

For this, conservative critics derisively nicknamed him “the Yellow Dart.” But Hecker persisted, publishing widely, preaching extensively,

and founding a community dedicated to evangelizing a young and still-developing America.

### **Hecker's Message for a Troubled America**

Hecker lived in a nation marked by upheaval, immigration debates, widening inequality, and the growing pains of democracy. He knew well the tension between American ideals and American realities. And he believed that Catholics had a decisive role in helping the nation grow into its better angels.

What would Hecker say to us as we face a political climate in which:

- Immigrants and refugees are demonized?
- Our democratic norms are strained?
- Truth is manipulated and weaponized?
- Social programs are gutted?
- Wealth and privilege are increasingly elevated above the common good?

Hecker would remind us that American democracy is not self-sustaining. It requires virtuous citizens whose consciences are formed by truth, solidarity and a commitment to the dignity of every person.

He would challenge us to:

- Evangelize not through fear, but through integrity, witness and public engagement.
- Trust that laypeople – not only clergy – are called to transform society.
- Resist the ideological temptation to reduce religion – especially Catholicism and Christianity – to a political weapon.
- Speak boldly in public life, especially where human dignity is under attack.

Hecker believed that the Holy Spirit stirs each person toward their unique mission in the world. Our task is to listen, discern and act!

### **An Advent Word for Catholics Today**

In this season of Advent, as we await the coming of Christ, we are invited to recover hope – not a naïve optimism, but a determined belief that God is at work even in the most fragile and fractured moments of national life.

Hecker's life testifies to an Advent truth: *God can breathe renewal into a nation when its people cooperate with grace!*

Hecker saw America's potential. We must see it too – especially now.

### **Calls to Action**

- **Engage the Public Square.** Write your representatives, support voting rights, join local advocacy efforts—especially those protecting immigrants, the poor, and the planet.
- **Empower Lay Voices.** Create or join parish groups that foster dialogue, spiritual formation, and community action. Hecker believed strongly in lay initiative.
- **Stand Against Authoritarianism.** Name falsehoods when you see them. Push back against efforts to damage democratic institutions or sow division.
- **Evangelize with Compassion.** Share your faith not through arguments, but through acts of justice, mercy and solidarity.
- **Cultivate Hope.** Advent is the season of stubborn hope. Choose practices—prayer, study, service—that nurture resilience rather than cynicism.

### **Ordinary Catholics Ready to Do Extraordinary Things**

Isaac Hecker believed that both the Church and the nation could become who they were meant to be—if believers had the courage to cooperate with the Holy Spirit. On this December 22, as we prepare for Christmas, we honor his conviction that grace is stronger than fear, that democracy is stronger than demagoguery, and that the Spirit is still moving in the hearts of ordinary Catholics ready to do extraordinary things. May Hecker's legacy light our way in a moment that desperately needs courageous faith!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- Where is the Holy Spirit prompting me to engage more courageously in public life?
- What fears prevent me from trusting in the power of lay leadership and personal initiative?
- How can I help my community become a place of welcome and hope, rather than political polarization?
- In what ways is God calling me to witness to justice, especially in this political moment?
- What does hopeful, Spirit-filled American Catholicism look like in my life?

### **Let Us Pray**

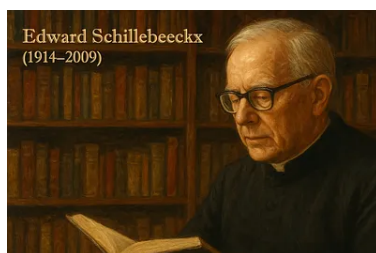
Holy Spirit of Advent, You inspired Isaac Hecker to believe that faith and democracy could enrich one another. Stir our hearts today with the

same courage, that we may defend human dignity, strengthen our nation's moral fabric, and bear witness to the Gospel with hope and clarity. As we await the birth of Christ, renew our commitment to justice, compassion, and truth. Make us bold in love, steadfast in service, and open to the mission You entrust to each of us. Amen.

## Christology, Courage and the Call to Action

An Advent Reflection on Edward Schillebeeckx

December 23, 2025



Surveying my bookshelves, you'll see that one of the thickest books on systematic theology there is Edward Schillebeeckx's *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*. I still enjoy leafing through it, my penciled underlinings and margin notes tracing my journey with his thought over the years. For those unfamiliar, Schillebeeckx (1914–2009) was a Belgian Dominican theologian whose contributions to the Second Vatican Council helped shape the Church's engagement with the modern world. His innovative attempts to rethink traditional doctrines—like moving beyond the Aristotelian categories of transubstantiation toward “transignification”—often stirred debate. Yet, he was never formally condemned, and his work continues to challenge and inspire.

In *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, Schillebeeckx invites us into a careful, narrative exploration of Jesus: not simply as a figure of history, but as the living norm and criterion for understanding the Christian story. From methodological questions and hermeneutics to the direct interpretation of the risen Christ, his work is both painstakingly academic and deeply devotional. He asks us to meet Jesus in his life, his proclamation, and his crucifixion—and then to see how the Christian story takes shape in the wake of his resurrection.



### Why Schillebeeckx Speaks to Us Today

In our current U.S. sociopolitical climate—rife with polarization, injustice and the often-venomous noise of partisanship—Schillebeeckx’s thought reminds us to return to Jesus as both parable of God and paradigm of humanity. He challenges us to discern Christ’s presence not in ideology or partisan victory, but in the marginalized, the suffering, and the peacemakers among us. Just as Schillebeeckx called for a post-critical, narrative history of Jesus, we, too, are invited to re-narrate our public and personal lives with Christ as the lens.

Schillebeeckx’s concept of transignification also offers a fresh spiritual lens for Advent: the ordinary signs of our daily lives—our meals, our conversations, our gestures of care—can become carriers of divine meaning. Just as the Word became flesh in the humble town of Bethlehem, so too can God’s love take on new “signs” in our daily encounters!

### Calls to Action

- **Engage in Narrative Reflection:** Like Schillebeeckx, take time today to trace the story of Jesus in your own life. How do your experiences of joy, struggle and hope mirror the Gospel story?
- **Witness in the World:** Seek out concrete ways to embody the Christ who challenges injustice—through advocacy, charity or simply bearing witness to truth and compassion.
- **Make Signs of Meaning:** In these final two days before Christmas, infuse ordinary actions with intention and care. Small acts of kindness, generosity and reconciliation are themselves sacramental signs!

### Encountering Jesus Anew

As Advent draws to a close, Schillebeeckx reminds us that the Christ we await is not an abstract doctrine, but a living presence calling us to transformation. We prepare not simply to celebrate an event in history, but to encounter Jesus anew, in our hearts and in the world. Let this week be a time to listen, to act, and to allow God’s meaning to shine through our lives—ordinary, yet radiant with possibility!

### Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where do I most encounter Christ in my daily life?
- How can I become a “sign” of God’s love and justice in my community?
- In what ways might I re-narrate my story with Jesus as my guide?

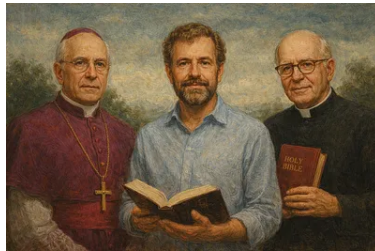
### Let Us Pray

God of promise, as we near the celebration of Christ's birth, open our hearts to the living Word. Help us see your presence in the ordinary, hear your voice in the cries for justice, and act courageously in love. Transform our lives into signs of your kingdom, and guide us to follow Jesus – parable of God, paradigm of humanity – today and always. Amen.

### Gems of Faith and Courage

Remembering Van Kleef, Boswell and Fitzmyer  
on Christmas Eve Day

December 24, 2025



After ten years of seminary formation and ten years as a Roman Catholic priest, I had never heard of Old Catholicism or the Old/Independent Catholic tradition. Thus, you can imagine my joy upon visiting Utrecht, Netherlands for the first time in 2019, discovering this little-known gem of Christianity. Today, as we prepare to celebrate Christmas, we remember not just one, but three remarkable figures whose lives illuminate faith, courage and scholarly insight: **Bastiaan van Kleef, John Boswell and Joseph Fitzmyer.**

#### **Bastiaan van Kleef: Faith Beyond Celibacy**

Bastiaan Abraham Van Kleef (1889–1965) was a theologian, seminary rector, and the first married priest of the Dutch Old Catholic Church. After declaring his intention to marry, he was released from the Haarlem diocese and served in Baden, Germany, until the mandate of clerical celibacy in Haarlem was lifted in 1923. His career spanned ecclesial and civic leadership: mayor of Egmond, professor of New Testament and pastoral theology at the Amersfoort seminary, member and later dean of the Utrecht cathedral chapter, editor of *De Oud-Katholiek* magazine and the *International Ecclesiastical Journal*, and founder of the Old Catholic Trade Union Association and the International Old Catholic Theological

Conference. Today, Pastoor van Kleefstraat Street in Egmond commemorates his enduring legacy.

Van Kleef's life reminds us that courage in faith can take many forms – not only challenging ecclesiastical norms, but also engaging with the civic world, advocating for workers' rights, and shaping theological discourse. In a U.S. Catholic context where debates over clerical celibacy, parish leadership, and inclusivity remain active, Van Kleef's witness encourages us to creatively and courageously think about what Church leadership and service can look like today!

### **John Boswell: Scholar, Advocate and “Not a Tame Lion”**

John Boswell (1947–1994), the Yale historian, broke new ground in exploring Christianity, sexuality and marginalization. An openly-gay Roman Catholic, he attended daily Mass even while disagreeing with the Church's teaching on sexuality. Boswell's research revealed that homosexuality was not condemned by the Church until the 12<sup>th</sup> century, challenging historical assumptions and opening space for dialogue. He is buried beside his lifelong partner, his headstone quoting *The Chronicles of Narnia*: “He was not a tame lion.”

In today's U.S. sociopolitical landscape, where LGBTQIA+ Catholics still negotiate belonging and affirmation within their faith communities, Boswell's example is both scholarly and prophetic. He models fidelity to God and Church while insisting on the dignity and rights of all people – showing that one can love the Church without surrendering truth or justice!

### **Joseph Fitzmyer: Devotion to Scripture and Scholarship**

Joseph Augustine Fitzmyer (1920–2016), a Jesuit priest and professor emeritus at The Catholic University of America, brought extraordinary insight to New Testament studies, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and early Jewish literature. His meticulous scholarship, rooted in deep faith, demonstrates that rigorous intellectual inquiry and devotion to God are not only compatible; they are mutually enriching.

In the current U.S. Catholic context, Fitzmyer's life encourages us to embrace informed, thoughtful engagement with Scripture and tradition, resisting the temptation toward anti-intellectualism or superficial readings of faith. He reminds us that deep study and reflection can illuminate the path for ministry, advocacy and everyday discipleship!

### **Calls to Action**

- **Learn and Explore:** Seek out lesser-known traditions within Christianity, like Old Catholicism and Independent/Inclusive Catholicism, and discover how their histories and insights can enrich your own faith.
- **Stand Courageously:** Like Van Kleeef and Boswell, find ways to authentically live your vocation, advocating for justice and inclusivity in your church and society.
- **Engage Intellectually and Spiritually:** Follow Fitzmyer's example by pairing deep study with prayerful reflection, letting scholarship deepen your discipleship.

### **Embodying Christ's Presence**

As Advent draws to a close and Christmas dawns tomorrow, let us celebrate these three "gems" of faith. Each in their own way reminds us that courage, fidelity, intellect and love for humanity are inseparable from true discipleship. Van Kleeef, Boswell, and Fitzmyer challenge us to think expansively about Church, society and our own callings—and to embody Christ's presence with wisdom, integrity and compassion!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- Where in my own life might I need courage to live faithfully, even if it challenges norms?
- How can I advocate for marginalized voices in my community and society?
- In what ways can my study, work or daily actions reflect the love of Christ?

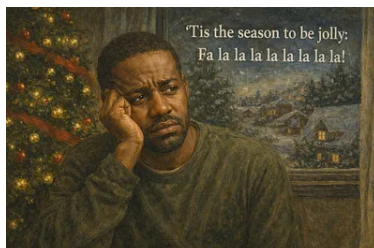
### **A Prayer for Christmas Eve Day**

God of justice, love and revelation, as we await the celebration of your Incarnation, inspire us with the courage of Van Kleeef, the integrity of Boswell, and the wisdom of Fitzmyer. Open our hearts to the marginalized, our minds to deep understanding, and our hands to acts of service. May the Light of Christ shine through us this Christmas, guiding our steps, shaping our choices, and deepening our love for all creation. Amen.

## Fa La La La La

### Finding Light, Joy and Peace This Christmas

December 25, 2025



During the days leading up to today's celebration of Christ's birth, I've sung along way too many times (and loudly!) to Pentatonix's renditions of *Deck the Halls* and *God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen*—a sight to behold, I'm sure, for the drivers I pass on the highway! I'll be honest: After the darkness that we've experienced as a nation in 2025, I'm not feeling the "tidings of comfort and joy." Joy-filled Christmas carol phrases—like "Let nothing you dismay" or "'Tis the season to be jolly: Fa la la la la la la la!"—land differently this year. Which is, frankly, why I'm grateful for a few days of escape and "unplugging" from the onslaught of news, to reclaim some space for reflection, peace and holiday hope.

But even amid the shadows, Christmas reminds us that light can break through—if we choose to notice it. This day isn't solely about a devotional image of a baby in a manger, but about the ways that the Gospel invites us to recommit to justice, compassion and love for our neighbors, even in a world that sometimes seems bleak.

### Seeing Beyond the Darkness

Despite what we hear in the news, we can catch glimpses of hope and light. They are found in the kindness of neighbors, the generosity of strangers, the courage of those who work for justice, and the small, unexpected moments that reveal God's presence in the world. As Band Aid's 1984 holiday hit *Do They Know It's Christmas?* reminds us, we can actively participate in spreading light:

- **"At Christmas time, we let in light and we banish shade."** We counter despair when we seek out stories of hope and acts of kindness, and widely share them!
- **"In our world of plenty we can spread a smile of joy."** Simple gestures—smiling, listening, checking in with someone—ripple outward in surprising ways!

- **“Throw your arms around the world at Christmas time.”** We bring light to the world when we reach out beyond our immediate circle – when we, for example, donate, volunteer or advocate for those in need during this holiday season!
- **“Say a prayer: Pray for the other ones.”** What are we doing for “the other ones”? Let’s lift up the marginalized, the suffering, and those whose voices are often silenced!
- **“Spare a thought this yuletide for the deprived.”** Let’s support the poor and vulnerable, locally and globally!
- **“Give a little help to the helpless... Feed the world.”** Let’s share our time, talents and resources in service of those struggling with hunger, poverty and injustice!

### **Calls to Action This Christmas**

- **Reconnect with Community.** Call a friend, visit a neighbor, or participate in a local outreach program.
- **Practice Gratitude.** Keep a journal of small moments of light you witness or receive today.
- **Act for Justice.** Identify one social issue weighing on your heart and take a concrete action – even small – to address it.
- **Witness to Hope.** Share stories of courage, love or generosity on social media to inspire others.
- **Pray Intentionally.** Spend a moment today praying for those suffering around the world, especially in places affected by war, poverty or climate disasters.

### **God’s Love Is Alive and Active**

This Christmas, the light we celebrate is not a fleeting seasonal glow – it is a call to live the Gospel with courage, compassion and joy. Even in dark times, we are invited to be instruments of hope: to illuminate lives with kindness, to accompany the suffering, to feed the hungry, and to proclaim, in word and deed, that God’s love is alive and active in the world. Let this day renew our commitment to gospel values – not just on this Christmas day, but in the year ahead!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- Where can I let in light and banish shadows in my own life and community?
- How might my small gestures of joy ripple outward to others in need?

- Who is crying out for justice, care or accompaniment, and what can I do to help?
- In what ways can I “throw [my] arms around the world” in solidarity and compassion?
- How does the celebration of Christmas challenge me to recommit to gospel values during the year ahead?

### **A Christmas Prayer**

God of light and love, on this holy day we celebrate the birth of Christ among us. Open our eyes to the signs of hope and joy that surround us, and strengthen our hearts to act with compassion and courage. Help us to be bearers of your love, especially to those who suffer, and to shine your light in every darkened corner of our world. May the peace and joy of Christmas inspire us to live faithfully, generously and boldly today and in the year to come. Amen.

### **Kwanzaa and Deaconess Phoebe** The Light We Need Right Now

December 26, 2025



During a recent break from listening to Christmas music—my apologies to Advent purists who insist you shouldn’t listen to Christmas music during Advent!—I asked Siri for suggestions of *Kwanzaa* music. I was delightfully surprised. What I heard wasn’t just catchy or educational; it was deeply formative. The songs wove together joy, justice, identity and hope, helping African-American children learn the values at the heart of *Kwanzaa*—values that, to my Christian ears, sounded strikingly like Gospel virtues set to music!

One song that stopped me in my tracks was on the *Kwanzaa* value of *Kujichagulia* (self-determination): “You have the power to decide now who you are. No one else could ever be you. You have something very special to do. Do that something for the world to see!”

Another *Kwanzaa* song highlighted *Ujima* (collective work and responsibility):

“*Ujima* is whenever we help each other by working together.

*Ujima* is to understand that everybody needs a hand.

*Ujima* is whenever we help each other by working together...

We’re all connected. We’re intersected. That is the spirit of community!”

During this Christmas Octave—when the Church celebrates martyrs, prophets and truth-tellers—these *Kwanzaa* values feel especially urgent!

### **What Is Kwanzaa – and Why Should Christians Care?**

*Kwanzaa* is a week-long cultural celebration (December 26 to January 1), founded in 1966 by Maulana Karenga, centered on the *Nguzo Saba*, the Seven Principles meant to strengthen community, culture and shared responsibility. While not a religious holiday, *Kwanzaa*’s values resonate deeply with Christian ethics, Catholic social teaching, and the Gospel vision of beloved community.

In other words: ***Kwanzaa* values are not foreign to Christianity. They are familiar. They are what Jesus preached and lived!**

### **The Seven Kwanzaa Values as Christian Virtues**

***Umoja* (Unity).** To strive for and maintain unity in family, community, nation and world. For Catholics, *Umoja* challenges the fragmentation of our Church and society. Unity is not uniformity; it is solidarity rooted in dignity. “That they may all be one” (Jn. 17:21) is not optional!

***Kujichagulia* (Self-Determination).** To define ourselves, name ourselves, and speak for ourselves. This value speaks powerfully to marginalized voices in the Church—especially women, LGBTQ+ Catholics, and communities of color—who refuse to let others define their call or limit their gifts!

***Ujima* (Collective Work and Responsibility).** To build and maintain our community together. No one is saved alone. This is “Acts 2” Christianity: shared responsibility, shared leadership, shared mission!

***Ujamaa* (Cooperative Economics).** To support and build our own institutions. Think Catholic Worker houses, mutual aid, ethical investing, and communities that prioritize people over profit!

***Nia* (Purpose).** To build our community in ways that restore its traditional greatness. For Christians, that purpose is clear: proclaiming the Reign of God—a reign of justice, mercy and peace!



**Kuumba (Creativity).** To leave our community more beautiful and beneficial than we inherited it. This is liturgical renewal, theological imagination, and courageous experimentation for the sake of the Gospel!

**Imani (Faith).** To believe in ourselves, our people, and the righteousness of our struggle. Faith here is not naïveté; it is holy perseverance!

### **St. Stephen, Women Deacons, and the Light We Need**

Today the Church celebrates St. Stephen, the first martyr—and the patron saint of deacons. It is therefore especially painful that earlier this month the Roman Catholic Church’s Study Commission on the Female Diaconate voted 7-1 against the possibility of women’s ordination as deacons. (Boo!)

This decision effectively ignores Deaconess Phoebe (Rom. 16:1), the clear evidence of women in ordained ministry for the Church’s first five centuries, and the historical reality that women were definitively excluded not by Jesus or the apostles—but by the boys’ club gathered at the Second Council of Orléans in 533, when male bishops declared: “Henceforth no woman may any longer receive diaconal benediction, due to [wait for it...] the frailty of her sex.” The “frailty of her sex.” One hardly knows whether to laugh, weep or... flip tables!

Here is where *Kujichagulia*, *Ujima*, and *Imani* shine particular light. When institutional structures refuse to listen, communities of faith must still discern, act and witness.

That is why Independent/Inclusive Catholic communities function as living laboratories of the Spirit—spaces where the Church remembers what it once knew and practices what it has yet to fully embrace. More succinctly, we shift the focus from St. Stephen—to Deaconess Phoebe!

At Holy Family Catholic Church here in Austin, Mother Annie and Deacon Elsa make one thing abundantly clear: When someone says, “Women can’t be priests or deacons,” the pastoral—and theological—response is simply: “Hogwash.”

The people of Holy Family love Mother Annie and Deacon Elsa. And why wouldn’t they? As women, created in the image of God, Mother Annie and Deacon Elsa bring gifts not always cultivated in all-male clerical cultures: gentleness, pastoral sensitivity, emotional intelligence, collaborative leadership, deep listening, and relational wisdom!

They don’t weaken ordained ministry. They embody it.

They live *Umoja*. They practice *Ujima*. They witness *Kujichagulia*. They minister with *Imani*.

They are *Kwanzaa* values in vestments!

### **Calls to Action: Kwanzaa Edition!**

- **Learn the History.** Read about Phoebe and early women deacons. Truth-telling is a form of discipleship!
- **Support Inclusive Communities.** Financially, prayerfully and vocally support churches that ordain women and LGBTQIA+ persons!
- **Practice *Kujichagulia*.** Name your own calling boldly, especially if others have tried to silence it!
- **Live *Ujima*.** Share ministry. Share power. Build community together!
- **Choose *Kuumba*.** Create liturgies, ministries and models of Church that leave the Body of Christ more beautiful than you found it!
- **Teach the Next Generation.** Pass on stories of courage, resistance and hope – not just compliance!

### **The Surprising, Necessary Gift of Kwanzaa**

During this Christmas Octave – when we celebrate light entering the world and martyrs who paid a price for truth – *Kwanzaa* offers Catholics a surprising and necessary gift. Its values remind us that faith without justice is hollow, that tradition without inclusion is brittle, and that unity without dignity is false peace.

The Church may move slowly. The Spirit does not.

As we look toward the New Year, may we have the courage of Stephen, the determination of Phoebe, the creativity of *Kuumba*, and the faith of *Imani*. The light is already shining – sometimes just outside official structures – but it is shining nonetheless!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- Where do I see *Kwanzaa* values already alive in my community?
- How have women shaped my own experience of Church and God?
- What does self-determination look like in my spiritual life right now?
- Where am I being called to speak truth, even at a cost?
- How can I help build a Church that future generations will thank us for?

### **Let Us Pray**

God of light and liberation, you are born again wherever courage meets compassion, where truth is spoken in love, and where communities dare to imagine something more just. Bless all who labor

for an inclusive Church. Strengthen women called to ordained ministry. Inspire us with unity, creativity, responsibility and faith. As we move toward a new year, help us carry the light we have seen—not only in song or story, but in lives committed to justice, joy and hope. Amen.

## Addressing Racism in the Moment

A Neapolitan Christmas Lesson

December 26, 2025



After setting out from London yesterday morning, with a layover in Munich, my husband and I arrived in Naples a bit tired from a Christmas Day of travel, but grateful to begin our holiday escape in Italy. After settling into our Airbnb at the *Palazzo dello Spagnolo*, we walked along the *Via Fornia* in search of one of the few restaurants open on Christmas night. It felt festive, human and warm—until it didn't.

### Christmas Night in Naples

During dinner, a Neapolitan man moved from table to table, serenading guests with Italian songs. It felt charming, even old-world. By the time we finished our *scarpariello*, he reached our section of the restaurant, where he singled out an Asian man. Speaking loudly in Italian, the singer boasted that he had once been a kung fu instructor—something we doubted as we attempted to translate for one another in real-time. He then launched into a loud, hard-strumming refrain comprised of just two phrases: Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan.

In an instant, and seemingly in jest, the diner was reduced to a stereotype, with unwanted attention drawn to him. Meanwhile, I, like others, did not fully grasp what was happening. Enjoying the novelty of a local musician performing for tourists, I even recorded a video. How insensitive of me!

Christmas often reveals beauty. Sometimes it also reveals our blindness.

### **A Simple Heuristic from Liberation Theology**

Latin American liberation theologians offer the Church a remarkably simple and durable tool for confronting injustice: **See. Judge. Act.** In order to address evil, we must first recognize it, then name it as wrong, and finally do something about it.

This incident offers a painful but instructive case study.

#### **Step One: See**

Embarrassingly, I failed at the first step. I did not truly see what was happening in the moment. My moral vision was dulled. My husband, though, immediately saw it. His lived experience sharpened his perception. Seeing is never neutral. Some of us are trained by life to notice certain wounds more quickly than others.

#### **Step Two: Judge**

My husband judged the behavior to be wrong. A nearby waiter did the same: After the musician moved on, the waiter later apologized to the man who had been targeted. Judging does not mean condemning a person. It means naming an action as unjust. This moral clarity matters, even when it arrives quietly and after the fact.

#### **Step Three: Act**

Here is where we all fell short.

I did nothing at all. My husband chose restraint and politeness, virtues that often protect dignity. The waiter's apology, while kind, did not interrupt the behavior or challenge the performer.

Because no one acted in the moment in a way that disrupted the pattern, this incident will almost certainly happen again—tonight, tomorrow or who knows when—to another tourist enjoying Naples. Injustice repeats itself when it encounters no resistance.

#### **Failing to Address the Root Cause**

More than 20 years ago, I heartily enjoyed long dinner conversations with Dr. Monica Applewhite, who at that time was applying root cause analysis to the Roman Catholic Church's recently-erupted clergy sexual abuse crisis. As an example of root cause analysis, she described sepsis deaths caused not by negligent doctors, but by a hospital's inability to ensure that certain sterile sponges were available where and when they were needed. Once administrators addressed that root cause, the deaths dropped!

Racism persists for similar reasons. We apologize. We regret. We reflect later. But we rarely interrupt the system, the joke, the

performance, or the habit in real time. Without addressing the root causes—the stereotypes, the entertainment built on humiliation, the silence of bystanders—the harm continues.

### **Hindsight and Grace**

The wisdom that “hindsight is 20/20” is a gift and a warning. Human beings are reflective creatures. We learn. We grow. And even the insights that arrive only later can still shape our future actions.

Christmas is about God entering human blindness and limitation. Grace meets us not only in our best moments, but also in our failures to see clearly, to judge wisely, and to act in timely ways.

### **Calls to Action**

I recognize that I’m speaking to myself here, but perhaps these insights and calls to action on this day after Christmas might help us all to address the wrongs we encounter!

- **Name harm gently but clearly.** A calm interruption can change a moment and prevent repetition.
- **Support those who speak up.** If someone else acts, visibly stand with them. Solidarity multiplies courage.
- **Reflect quickly, not only later.** Build habits of brief post-event examination to prepare for future action.
- **Address systems, not just moments.** Challenge venues, institutions and practices that normalize stereotyping.

### **Christmas Light for Moral Clarity**

Christmas reminds us that God’s light enters the world quietly but decisively. Applying the heuristic tool of “See, Judge, Act” from Latin American liberation theology does not require great heroics. It requires attention, honesty and courage rooted in love. If we allow even our missteps to sharpen our vision, then grace has not been wasted. Indeed, the Child born yesterday still asks us to see more clearly today!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- When have I failed to see injustice because it appeared harmless?
- Whose experiences sharpen my moral vision, and do I listen to them?
- What holds me back from acting in the moment?
- How might I respond differently when similar situations arise in the future?
- What systems in my community normalize harm without challenge?

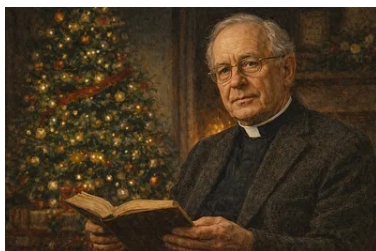
### Let Us Pray

God of light and truth, you entered our world in vulnerability and love. Sharpen our vision when we are tired or distracted. Strengthen our courage when silence feels easier. Teach us to see clearly, judge honestly and act lovingly, so that your justice may take flesh in our daily lives. Amen.

### Truth That Dwells Among Us

Michael Dummett on Immigration, Racism  
and the Courage to Love the Truth

December 27, 2025



On December 27, the Church traditionally looks to the soaring theology of St. John the Evangelist—to poetry about the Word made flesh, light shining in the darkness, and truth that sets us free. Today, though, we lift up another, much lesser-known—though no less prophetic—voice: **Sir Michael Anthony Eardley Dummett** (1925–2011), the English philosopher, Catholic convert, and tireless advocate for racial justice and the rights of migrants.

At first glance, Dummett may seem an odd companion for St. John. He was a logician, not a mystic; a philosopher of language, not a gospel writer. And yet, at heart, they share a common vocation: a fierce devotion to truth—and a refusal to allow comforting illusions to eclipse it.

### A Philosopher Who Refused to Look Away

Michael Dummett has been described as “among the most significant British philosophers of the last century,” but he himself might have preferred to be remembered as something else: a campaigner for racial tolerance and equality. In postwar Britain, as immigration from former colonies reshaped society, Dummett did not retreat into abstraction. He organized, wrote, protested and spoke out.

He argued plainly—and controversially—that opposition to immigration is largely rooted in racism, not in sober economic or social analysis. In *On Immigration and Refugees*, he laid out the demands of justice on nations with respect to the movement of people across borders. For Dummett, migration was not primarily a problem to be managed, but a moral reality to be confronted—especially by wealthy nations whose histories were entangled with empire, exploitation and extraction.

This was not fashionable work. It made him unpopular in some political and ecclesial circles. But Dummett was not interested in being fashionable. He was interested in being honest.

### **Loving the Church Enough to Tell the Truth**

Dummett's commitment to truth did not stop at church doors. A convert to Roman Catholicism, he loved the Church deeply—and therefore refused to idealize it. In 1987, he ignited controversy by writing: "From the earliest times, the Catholic Church, claiming to have a mission from God to safeguard divinely-revealed truth, has taught and insisted on the acceptance of falsehoods."

For some, this was scandalous. For others, it was liberating. Dummett was not rejecting the Church's claim to truth; he was insisting that truthfulness requires humility, repentance and historical honesty. A Church that proclaims "the way, the truth and the life" (Jn. 14:6) must also be willing to confess when it has distorted that truth—especially when those distortions have harmed the vulnerable.

Here Dummett stands very close to St. John, whose Gospel insists that light exposes what darkness would prefer to hide. "Those who do what is true come to the light" (Jn. 3:21). Truth, in John's vision, is not merely something we believe; it is something we practice!

### **Saints of Truth and Solidarity**

Dummett's witness resonates beautifully with others on this day.

- **St. Fabiola** (+399), a Roman noblewoman and one of the "colonnade saints" in the Vatican, renounced immense wealth to care for the poor and sick, founding what many consider the first hospital in the West. She did not debate suffering; she moved toward it!
- **Jon Sobrino**, born on December 27, 1938, is a Spanish Jesuit priest and Latin American liberation theologian who has spent his life insisting that Christ is found among "the crucified peoples" of history. For Sobrino, any theology that ignores the poor is not simply incomplete; it is false!

Together, St. John, St. Fabiola, Jon Sobrino, and Michael Dummett form a kind of Christmas Octave chorus, singing in harmony: Truth is incarnational, costly and inseparable from justice!

### **What Might Catholics Do?**

As we enjoy the slower rhythms of the Christmas season and glance toward the New Year, Dummett offers us bracing clarity – and practical challenge.

- **Examine Our Assumptions.** Honestly interrogate how fear, privilege or unacknowledged racism may shape our views on immigration.
- **Listen to Migrant Voices.** Read, listen to and amplify the stories of migrants and refugees themselves – not just policy debates about them.
- **Advocate Publicly.** Support humane immigration policies and organizations that defend the dignity and rights of migrants.
- **Practice Truth-Telling in the Church.** Resist nostalgia and denial. Love the Church enough to tell the truth about its failures and its possibilities.
- **Root Faith in Solidarity.** Let your theology be shaped not only by texts, but by encounters with the poor, the displaced and the excluded.
- **Link Christmas to Commitment.** Refuse to let the Incarnation remain sentimental. God crossed borders; so must our compassion!

### **Truth Is Not a Seasonal Ornament**

In the glow of Christmas lights and the quiet of these post-Christmas days, Michael Dummett reminds us that truth is not a seasonal ornament. It is a lifelong discipline. The Word who became flesh did not float above history; the Word entered it, with all its injustice, suffering and contradiction.

To follow that Word is to welcome the stranger, to name racism for what it is, and to love the Church enough to demand better of it. As we prepare to step into a new year, may we choose the harder, holier path: truth practiced in love, light that refuses to dim, and faith that crosses borders – geographical, intellectual and moral!



### Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where am I tempted to confuse comfort with truth?
- How does my faith shape my attitudes toward migrants and refugees?
- What might it mean for me to love the Church more honestly – and less defensively?
- Who are the “strangers” Christ is asking me to see more clearly?
- How can the Incarnation inform my commitments in the New Year?

### Let Us Pray

Word made flesh, you entered our world without privilege, crossing every boundary of fear and exclusion. Give us courage to seek the truth, humility to confess our failures, and love strong enough to stand with the displaced and despised. As we move toward a new year, may your light guide our minds, your justice shape our actions, and your mercy widen our hearts. Amen.

## Living Beneath a Sleeping Volcano

Lessons from a Joyful Neapolitan Tour Guide  
on Death, Hope and Fully Living

December 27, 2025



In my life, I have witnessed several tour guides in action. But I have never encountered one as relentlessly happy and enthusiastic as Gabriel – self-described, with a grin, as “the world’s best tour leader” – here in Naples, Italy. Yesterday, he led our all-day tour of the Amalfi Coast, that breathtaking stretch of southern Italian coastline where pastel villages cling to cliffs above the Tyrrhenian Sea.

### A Lesson from the Amalfi Coast

As our bus headed south from Naples, Gabriel pointed out Mount Vesuvius rising to the west. The volcano, he explained, is dormant –

“sleeping,” as he put it—but has killed thousands over centuries, most famously in the destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum in 79 A.D., and most recently in 1944 with the destruction of the villages of San Sebastiano al Vesuvio, Massa di Somma, Ottaviano, and part of San Giorgio a Cremano. Neapolitanos live with the knowledge that the mountain will erupt again. They simply do not know when.

Gabriel lingered on this fact with startling cheer. “If you see on the news that Vesuvius erupted, text me to see if I’m okay,” he joked. “And if I don’t respond, I’m dead!”

It was funny. It was unsettling. And it bent our thoughts toward something we usually avoid: the inevitability of death. Yet his laughter, his joy and his sheer delight in being alive suggest something else entirely—that knowing death is inevitable should not shrink our lives, but enlarge them.

### **None of Us Escapes Alive**

None of us escapes this earth alive—except perhaps the prophet Elijah, if the ancient stories of his flaming chariot are taken literally (2Kngs 2:11-12), or Mary of Nazareth, if the Roman Catholic Church’s 1950 proclamation of her assumption into heavenly glory is similarly literally understood. Death is not a theological hypothesis. It is a biological certainty. The real question is not *whether* we will die, but *how we will live in light of that truth*.

People of faith are often distinguished by the hope we place in what lies beyond death. Call it heaven. Call it eternal life. Call it the communion of saints. Christianity is sometimes criticized for focusing too much on the afterlife. Gabriel, by contrast, focused on this life—on savoring it fully, joyfully and without apology.

And perhaps that is where the tension lies.

### **Fear of Death or Fear of Living?**

Many of us fear death, but we also fear living. We fear loving deeply. We fear speaking honestly. We fear risking joy. Tim McGraw’s song “Live Like You Were Dying” captures this paradox perfectly. Diagnosed with cancer, the song’s protagonist finally begins to live: “I loved deeper and I spoke sweeter, and I gave forgiveness I’d been denyin’.”

If asked about his possible demise by Mount Vesuvius, Gabriel would likely say the same. The mountain’s threat does not paralyze him. It animates him!

As Catholics, we live a sort of *memento mori*, regularly praying for deliverance “at the hour of our death.” In fact, we pray those words 53

times in five decades of the rosary. Perhaps the prayer is not meant to make us anxious about dying, but to remind us not to postpone living.

### **Tips for Living Life to the Fullest**

Living fully does not require recklessness. It requires intention.

- Speak words of love now, not later.
- Offer forgiveness before it feels urgent.
- Laugh without embarrassment.
- Work with joy, not resentment.
- Rest without guilt.
- Trust that God delights in your aliveness.

Christmas celebrates not escape from humanity, but divine immersion in it!

### **Calls to Action**

- **Honestly name mortality.** Let awareness of death clarify your priorities, rather than darken your spirit.
- **Deliberately choose joy.** Refuse the lie that seriousness equals holiness.
- **Proactively forgive.** Release old grudges while there is still time.
- **Visibly love.** Say what needs to be said while voices can still be heard.
- **Sacramentally live.** Treat meals, conversations and ordinary days as holy ground.

### **Choosing Life Under the Volcano**

Living beneath a sleeping volcano is not reckless denial. It is faithful realism. Christmas proclaims that God chose life amid fragility, risk and impermanence. Gabriel reminded us that joy is not ignorance of death, but defiance of despair. As we rest in these days between Christmas and the new year, perhaps the holiest response to our mortality is not fear, but gratitude—and a renewed decision to live fully while we can!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- What fears keep me from living fully right now?
- How does awareness of death shape my daily choices?
- Where am I postponing joy, love or forgiveness?
- What would “living like I were dying” look like in the new year?
- How does the Incarnation invite me to embrace my humanity more deeply?

### Let Us Pray

God of life and light, you entered our fragile world without fear. Teach us to treasure the days we are given. Free us from anxiety that shrinks our lives. Help us love deeply, forgive freely and live joyfully, until the hour of our death and beyond. Amen.

## An Underground Ordination, an Above-Ground Truth

A Reflection on the 55<sup>th</sup> Anniversary  
of the Ordination of Ludmila Javorová

December 28, 2025



**Ludmila Javorová** (born December 28, 1932) was a central figure in the underground Church of Czechoslovakia, organizing pastoral care under a regime that criminalized Christian ministry. Roman Catholic Bishop Felix Davídek, himself imprisoned and tortured by a communist regime, concluded what many Catholics still resist admitting: *God's grace is not constrained by gender.*

Javorová was one of four or five women ordained by Davídek. She sacramentally ministered to women whom the institutional Church could not reach. This was not rebellion for rebellion's sake; it was incarnational ministry under persecution!

And it happened not in the Middle Ages, but in 1970.

Events like this shine an unflattering light on the tired claim that “women can't serve in ordained ministry.” For some, the truth is actually more uncomfortable: Women have served in the Church's ordained ministries, and they have done so with courage, competence and pastoral wisdom—often at great personal cost.

### A Church Out of Step with History—and with the Spirit

Now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the vast majority of non-Roman Catholic Christian communities ordain women. Anglican, Episcopal, Old Catholic, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, and many others have long

since recognized what lived experience has made undeniable: *The gifts of the Spirit are not distributed according to chromosomes.*

The Roman Catholic Church, meanwhile, continues to insist that exclusion is fidelity. Yet history—messy, human, grace-filled history—keeps interrupting that narrative.

Ludmila Javorová's ordination exposes not only a pastoral gap, but a theological one. If sacraments exist for the salvation of the people, then **sacramental justice demands that those called and gifted to serve be allowed to do so.** *Anything less is clericalism baptized as doctrine.*

St. Paul's declaration still waits to be fully believed: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, woman and man; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28)!

### **Kindred Spirits Remembered on December 28**

Javorová's witness stands in powerful conversation with others remembered on this day.

- **Franz Xaver Kraus** (1840–1901), a German priest and historian, distinguished between religious Catholicism and political Catholicism, exposing how power can distort faith. His critique helps us name women's exclusion for what it often is: politics, not revelation!
- **Georg Moog** (1863–1934), an Old Catholic bishop and New Testament scholar, helped bring the Old Catholic and Anglican churches into full communion. His life reminds us that unity does not require uniformity, and that reform is not betrayal!
- **Jacques Dupuis** (1923–2004), a Belgian Jesuit theologian, dared to suggest that God's saving grace was not confined to Christianity alone. Censured but not silenced, Dupuis teaches us that truth expands when fear loosens its grip!

Together with Javorová, these figures testify to a Church constantly being called beyond its self-imposed limits. Additionally, the Church also celebrates today the **Feast of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph**—an unconventional family that stretched religious norms and expectations—reminding us that faithfulness has never meant conformity to religious power structures, and that holiness has always taken diverse, surprising, and very human forms, unfolding beyond tidy institutional categories!

### What Catholics Can Do

As we savor the slower days of the Christmas Octave and look toward the New Year, the question is not whether change is possible—but whether we will cooperate with it.

- **Tell the Truth.** Share the story of Ludmila Javorová. Silence sustains injustice.
- **Advocate for Sacramental Justice.** Support movements for women's ordination and inclusive ministry.
- **Affirm Women's Calls.** Name, bless and encourage the vocations of women in your community.
- **Support Inclusive Churches.** Give time, money and voice to communities that ordain women and LGBTQIA+ persons.
- **Challenge Clericalism.** Resist the myth that authority equals holiness, or that exclusion equals fidelity.
- **Live Galatians 3:28.** Make discipleship of equals more than a slogan; make it a practice.

### The Church the Spirit Keeps Creating

The ordination of Ludmila Javorová does not belong to the margins of Church history. It belongs at its heart. It reveals a Church that emerges under pressure, guided by compassion rather than fear, and willing to trust the Spirit over custom.

As Christmas light lingers and a new year approaches, we are invited to decide which Church we will help build: one that clings to exclusion, or one that recognizes the grace already alive among us.

The Spirit has already spoken.

Women have already served.

The future has already begun!

### Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where do I see God's grace breaking through unjust structures today?
- How have women shaped my own faith and experience of Church?
- What fears might be masquerading as "tradition" in my thinking?
- How can I actively support sacramental justice in the year ahead?
- What would a Church of true discipleship-of-equals look like where I live?

### Let Us Pray

God of surprising grace, you are born wherever courage meets compassion and justice refuses to wait. Bless all who serve in hidden ways, all who risk obedience to your Spirit when institutions hesitate. Strengthen women called to ordained ministry. Heal your Church of fear and clericalism. Make us partners in the work of liberation, that your sacraments may be signs of love—not exclusion. As we step toward a new year, may we trust the future you are already creating. Amen.

### Catholic Oligarchs

Lessons from Naples on Power, Wealth and the Church

December 28, 2025



Walking through the Farnese Collection at the National Museum of Archaeology here in Naples, Italy, I encountered a pope very different from the ones I usually imagine. Not a celibate ascetic in simple dress, but a wealthy, married man with children, extended family, palaces, and a vast collection of art, gems and books! Cardinal Alessandro Farnese—later Pope Paul III (1534-1549)—invites Catholics, especially in these restful days of the Christmas season, to confront an uncomfortable truth: *The Church has long struggled with the entanglement of holiness, power and oligarchy!*

### A Very Different Pope

Like many Catholics, I instinctively picture the pope as a man set apart: celibate, modest, and intentionally detached from wealth. The Farnese Collection immediately disrupts that image.

Alessandro Farnese was wealthy, married, and the father of children long before his elevation to the papacy. He named at least two of his sons, along with two nephews, as cardinals. His family built palaces, governed territories, and curated one of the most impressive collections of antiquities in Renaissance Europe. The sculptures that once filled the *Palazzo Farnese* were not merely decorative; they communicated political authority, dynastic legitimacy and cultural dominance.

This was not an anomaly. Farnese belonged to a broader class of Catholic oligarchs—men who ruled the Church while simultaneously advancing family power, economic interests and political influence.

### The Church as a Family Enterprise

The exhibit texts here in Naples make clear that the Farnese collection grew through excavation, purchase, inheritance and confiscation. Ancient marbles moved easily from papal collections into family residences. Palaces became stages where theology, politics and art fused into a single performance of authority.

**St. Peter**, of course, was married (Mk. 1:29-31). **Pope Adrian II** (867-872) famously invited his wife and daughter to live with him at the Vatican. (Imagine the pope's kids running around the Vatican!) Then, by the Renaissance, the papacy was largely fused to the wealthiest families in Italy. **Pope Alexander VI** (of the Borgia family; 1492-1503) openly acknowledged his multiple illegitimate children through various mistresses. **Pope Julius II** (1503-1513)—a Conventual Franciscan Friar and nephew of Pope Sixtus IV—had three illegitimate children and used military force to consolidate papal territories. **Pope Leo X** (of the Medici family; 1513-1521), another product of an oligarchic family, poured Church resources into art and architecture while political corruption deepened. The Church, during this period, often functioned less like a community of disciples, and more like a ruling class. In this context, Father Martin Luther's desire to reform such a Church should surprise no one!

One museum plaque here proclaims Philip III of Spain as *rege catholico* (Catholic king), crystallizing the logic of the time: *Catholic power should rule Catholic nations, and Catholic oligarchs should safeguard that power.*



### Christmas Light, Hard Truths

It feels jarring to reflect on such excess during the Christmas octave, when the Church still lingers at the manger. Yet perhaps this is precisely the right moment. The Christ we celebrate was born not into a palace, but into precarity. The Incarnation exposes, rather than sanctifies, concentrations of wealth and power.

The Farnese Collection reminds us that the Church has often failed this test. Beauty and brilliance coexisted with exclusion and inequality. Patronage preserved extraordinary art, but it also normalized the fusion of Gospel authority with dynastic ambition.

### Bridging to Our Own Moment

It is impossible to walk through these galleries without thinking about our own U.S. context. Today, civil society in the United States increasingly bends to oligarchs—millionaires and billionaires who ingratiate themselves with a grifting president and who shape policy to protect wealth, rather than the common good.

History warns us: *When religious institutions align themselves too closely with oligarchic power, credibility erodes, and the Gospel becomes decorative rather than disruptive.* The Renaissance Church did not collapse overnight, but its moral authority cracked, paving the way for reform movements it could not control.

### Lessons for Catholics Today

The Farnese Collection teaches us that:

- The Church has always wrestled with power, not just doctrine.
- Wealth can preserve culture while simultaneously distorting mission.
- Nepotism is not merely a personal failing, but a systemic temptation.
- Beauty does not absolve injustice.
- Reform becomes urgent when oligarchy becomes normalized.
- Seeing these patterns clearly allows us to resist uncritically repeating them.

### Calls to Action

As Christmas light still fills our sanctuaries and homes, we might respond by:

- **Interrogating power.** Ask who benefits when Church or state leaders make decisions, and who is excluded as a result.

- **Resisting oligarchic theology.** Reject narratives that equate wealth with divine favor, or leadership with entitlement.
- **Supporting economic justice.** Advocate for policies that prioritize the poor, rather than protect dynastic wealth.
- **Recovering Gospel memory.** Keep the Incarnation central when evaluating Church leadership and political alliances.
- **Learning from history.** Study periods like the Farnese era to avoid repeating them.
- **Practicing institutional humility.** Remember that the Church's credibility rests on service, not splendor.

### **From Palaces Back to the Manger**

The Farnese Collection dazzles the eye, but it also sobers the soul. Its marbles and gems testify to human brilliance, ambition and excess. Christmas reminds us that God chose another path. As we move toward the New Year, may we let history sharpen our discernment. **The Church flourishes not when it mirrors oligarchs, ancient or modern, but when it returns again and again to the vulnerability of Bethlehem and the justice of the Gospel!**

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- How do I respond when I see wealth and power concentrated in religious or political leaders?
- Where might I confuse beauty, success or influence with holiness?
- What lessons from Church history challenge my assumptions about authority?
- How does the Incarnation reshape my understanding of leadership?
- Where am I being called to resist oligarchic values in my own context?
- What would a Church shaped more by the manger than the palace look like today?

### **Let Us Pray**

God of the poor and the powerful alike, you entered history without wealth or armies, yet your light still exposes our alliances and ambitions. As we remember the beauty and the failures of your Church, free us from nostalgia for power and draw us back to the humility of your Son. Teach us to seek justice over prestige, service over splendor, and faithfulness over influence, as we step into a new year under your light. Amen.

## **Beloved Beyond Measure**

### What David and Jonathan Teach Us about Love, Power and God's Delight

December 29, 2025



I was recently listening to Pentatonix's "Hallelujah," which begins, "I'd heard there was a secret chord that David played and it pleased the Lord." My imagination wandered. I like to picture not just God, but King David's dear, dear friend Jonathan, smiling at his music! The Church traditionally marks December 29 with the memory of St. Thomas Becket, the martyr who stood up to royal power. But on this third-to-last day of the year, there are other voices — biblical, poetic and contemporary — that speak powerfully to our moment, especially those celebrating LGBTQIA+ interpretations of David and Jonathan.

### **David: Hero, Sinner, Lover**

David is no sanitized saint. He was the biblical national hero: the boy who slew Goliath, the shepherd who became king of the united kingdom of Israel and Judah, the man chosen by God to lead a people. But he was also deeply human. Scripture does not hide his failings. He danced with abandon — genitals exposed, ecstatic before the Lord (2Sam. 6:14–20). He lusted for Bathsheba, arranging the death of her husband Uriah to cover his sin (2Sam. 11). He maintained a sprawling harem, juggled political alliances, and suffered the consequences of his choices.

In the midst of this messy, vividly human life, David loved Jonathan. Their story, often celebrated in LGBTQIA+ communities, traced fifteen years of loyalty, covenantal love and shared grief. Jonathan "loved [David] as his own soul" (1Sam. 18:3). When Jonathan died, David's lament was raw and unforgettable: "I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, surpassing the love of women" (2Sam. 1:26). Love and friendship remain sacred, life-giving and transformative—even for a king with great power.

### **Love, Truth and the Courage to Name It**

In the Christmas Octave, we proclaim that the Word became flesh—entered human intimacy, vulnerability and love. David and Jonathan’s story insists that deep affection, emotional intimacy, and covenantal loyalty are not threats to God’s holiness, but expressions of it. Love often defies expectation, confounds conventional categories, and emerges even in flawed human lives.

This insistence resonates with **James Martin, S.J.**, born on this day in 1960. Father Martin, known as “Stephen Colbert’s priest,” has persistently called the Church to treat LGBTQIA+ Catholics with respect, compassion and sensitivity—words not invented by progressives, but lifted straight from the Gospel! As he reminds critics, Jesus tells us we will be judged not by doctrinal tests, but by how we treated the poor, the vulnerable and those on the margins.

Here, too, we hear an echo of St. Thomas Becket, who refused to subordinate conscience to power—and paid for it with his life. Fidelity to truth has always been costly.

### **Poetry, Mystery, and the Love That Surpasses Words**

The story of David and Jonathan also resonates with **Rainer Maria Rilke**, who died on this day in 1926. Rilke wrote of love as something that both reveals and unsettles us, drawing us toward the Ineffable even as it exposes our loneliness, fear and sin. Perhaps that is why stories like David and Jonathan unsettle us still. They refuse tidy moral categories. They challenge our anxieties about gender, sexuality, power and authority. And they ask whether we are willing to trust that God delights in love wherever it is faithful and life-giving, even among deeply-flawed people.

### **Calls to Action**

As this year draws to a close, the witness of David and Jonathan calls us not just to admire love—but to defend it, celebrate it, and allow it to shape our communities.

- **Read Scripture Honestly.** Revisit biblical stories with eyes open to both human imperfection and divine blessing.
- **Listen to LGBTQIA+ Catholics.** Make space for testimonies of love, faith, rejection and hope.
- **Challenge Harmful Rhetoric.** Speak up when Scripture is used to shame or exclude.
- **Support Inclusive Ministries.** Invest time, resources and voice in communities that fully welcome LGBTQIA+ people.

- **Practice Pastoral Presence.** Choose accompaniment over argument, relationship over ideology.
- **Model Covenant Love.** Let your friendships and relationships reflect fidelity, tenderness and truth, even in messy circumstances.

### **Love That Delights God**

David was a hero and a sinner, a king and a lover, a man capable of profound joy and devastating failure. Yet in his friendship with Jonathan, we glimpse a love so deep that it surpasses conventional definitions, a love in which God delights, and a love that still challenges the Church today.

As we savor the Christmas season and prepare to step into a new year, David and Jonathan remind us: God is not impressed by perfection, hierarchy or rigid conformity. God delights in love freely given, courageously named, and faithfully lived!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- Where do I see covenantal love reflected in my own life, even amid imperfection?
- How have fear or silence shaped my understanding of LGBTQIA+ relationships?
- What lessons does the messy humanity of David teach about God's grace?
- How can I practice accompaniment, rather than judgment, in the year ahead?
- Where might God be asking me to recognize love that surpasses assumptions, categories or fears?

### **Let Us Pray**

God of love and mystery, you delight in imperfect humans and in love that defies convention. Bless all who love deeply and risk being known. Heal those wounded by rejection in your name. Give your Church courage to recognize and celebrate the love you have already blessed. As we step toward a new year, may we follow the path of love that pleases you – wide enough for all your beloved. Amen.

## **Before Bethlehem, Before Rome**

Christmas Lessons from the Egyptian Collection in Naples

December 29, 2025



As our train from Naples to Sicily hummed and swayed for over eight hours last night, I found myself unable to sleep, my mind bending back to our visit yesterday morning to the Egyptian Collection at the National Museum of Archaeology. One image, in particular, would not let me rest: an intricately- and brightly-painted coffin, its lid lifted just enough to reveal the black, mummified body within, white stone inlays staring back from the eyes. It struck me that once we look beyond the images we paint for ourselves of Christian and Catholic uniqueness—particularly during a time of increased Christian nationalism—we find ancient remnants that tie us intimately to peoples long villainized by our Israelite ancestors in the faith!

### **Seeing Beyond Our Sacred Exceptionalism**

Many Christians grow up with the subtle assumption that our religious imagination appeared almost fully formed, dropping from heaven sometime between the Garden of Eden and the empty tomb. The Egyptian Collection gently, but firmly, dismantles that illusion.

Ancient Egypt possessed a religious world astonishingly rich, complex and familiar. Hierarchies structured society and cosmos alike. Temples dominated civic and economic life. Priests guarded sacred spaces. Kings mediated between heaven and earth. Statues were not reminders of divine beings; they were divine beings, animated through ritual words. Spells, sacred texts and objects bridged the fragile gap between life and death.

Sound familiar?

### **Hierarchy, Mediation and Sacred Power**

Egyptian society revolved around rigid hierarchy, with Pharaoh at the summit, embodying political, religious and cosmic order. He mediated between gods and people, guaranteeing harmony in creation. While

Catholics might instinctively recoil, the parallels are striking: The novel, purported universal jurisdiction of the pope (since 1870) allows him to function as a near-cosmic figure, monarch of Church and state, surrounded by an army of priests—mediators between heaven and earth!

Ancient Egyptian temples, too, served as both religious and economic engines. They owned land, vineyards, bakeries and treasuries, exempt from taxes and legitimizing royal power. Christian and Catholic institutions played similar roles, shaping economies as much as souls.

Seeing these parallels does not diminish Christianity. It humanizes it.

### **Divine Families and Holy Mothers**

Egyptian religion flourished with divine triads: father, mother and child. Amun-Mut-Khonsu. Ptah-Sekhmet-Nefertum. At their center often stood the divine feminine.

The image of *Isis lactans*—Isis suckling Horus the Child—felt uncannily familiar. Long before Christian iconography developed Mary nursing the Christ Child, Egyptians contemplated divine tenderness, protection and maternal power. Isis' cult spread throughout the Roman world, offering healing, protection and hope to ordinary people!

Mary did not emerge in a vacuum. She entered a religious imagination already shaped by sacred motherhood.

### **Magic, Words and Sacramental Instincts**

Perhaps most unsettling for modern Catholics is how deeply magical Egyptian religion was—and how close that magic sits to our own practices.

Ancient Egyptians believed words carried power. Spoken formulas accompanied by ritual gestures healed bodies, protected travelers and safeguarded souls after death. Amulets with magical qualities were widespread. Horus absorbed magical spells through poured water, which was then collected for therapeutic use.

We might smile nervously, yet many Catholics quietly trust holy water, medals, scapulars, relics and blessings in remarkably similar ways. Even the Eucharistic words of consecration retain echoes of ancient verbal power: We say contemporary translations of *hoc est corpus meum* ("this is my body") and believe reality itself changes. It is not hard to hear why some non-Catholics jokingly call it a "hocus pocus" moment. (Indeed, that phrase from the world of magic—hocus pocus!—descends from those Latin words, *hoc est corpus*.)

Sacramentality and magic share a thin border.

### Death, Bodies and Resurrection Hope

Egyptian belief in the afterlife depended on preserving the body. Mummification transformed the corpse into a divine image, modeled on Osiris, whose dismembered body Isis restored to life through magic. Grave goods accompanied the dead: food, tools, cosmetics, amulets and *shabtis* to labor in the afterlife.

Many U.S. Christians and Catholics still embalm bodies, dress them carefully, and surround them with meaningful objects. We profess belief in “the resurrection of the body,” even if we rarely pause to consider what that materially means.

Our ancient Egyptian siblings remind us that hope beyond death has always been embodied, tactile and imaginative!

### Ordinary Devotion and Personal Faith

Although temple cults centered on kings and priests, ordinary Egyptians increasingly sought personal relationships with the gods. Amulets, household statuettes, magical papyri and sacred animals filled daily life. Religion moved from palace to home!

Here again, Catholic parallels abound: Home altars, candles, rosaries and statues of saints express a longing for divine closeness beyond institutional mediation. This instinct is ancient, human and persistent.

### Calls to Action

Encountering the beliefs and practices of ancient Egypt does not threaten Christian faith. It invites humility. Our tradition did not emerge *ex nihilo*. It absorbed, adapted and reimagined older religious longings! Here are some practical calls to action:

- **Practice theological humility.** Acknowledge that Christianity grew within a long continuum of human religious imagination.
- **Resist easy villain narratives.** Revisit with greater nuance how biblical texts portray Egypt and other ancient cultures.
- **Reclaim embodied faith.** Honor ritual, symbol and imagination without embarrassment or superstition-shaming.
- **Honestly name our magical thinking.** Gently reflect on how Catholics use objects and words for comfort and control.
- **Expand interreligious curiosity.** Let ancient religions deepen—not dilute—Christian wonder.
- **Teach history courageously.** Encourage faith formation that embraces complexity, rather than fearfully avoiding it.



### **Ancient Ashes, Living Faith**

The Egyptian Collection in Naples left me unsettled in the best possible way. It revealed that beneath our Christmas carols and Christian creeds lie ancient human hopes: for order in chaos, for protection, for meaning, and for life beyond death. As Catholics lingering in the Christmas octave, resting with family and anticipating a new year, we might allow these ancient echoes to soften our certainties. Faith grows not by denying our ancestors, but by recognizing ourselves among them!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- Where do I assume that my Christianity or Catholicism is wholly separate from other religious traditions?
- What ancient instincts do I still carry in my own devotional life?
- How do I feel when I discover similarities between Catholic practices and older religions?
- What does belief in the resurrection of the body mean for how I treat bodies now?
- Where might humility deepen my faith, rather than weaken it?
- How does Christmas invite me to see God at work in all of human history?

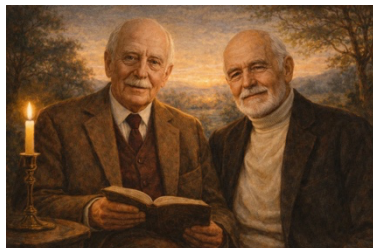
### **Let Us Pray**

God of all peoples and all ages, you stirred hope in human hearts long before we knew your name. As we behold ancient coffins and sacred texts, free us from fear of shared origins and deepen our wonder at your patient presence in history. Teach us to honor the past without clinging to illusion, to celebrate the Incarnation without denying its roots, and to walk into the new year with humility, curiosity and trust. Amen.

## God in Motion, Faith in Conversation

Lessons from Alfred North Whitehead and Huston Smith

December 30, 2025



As the year quietly winds down, the Church continues to bask in the light of Christmas, lingering with the mystery of the Word made flesh even as many of us rest, travel and begin glancing toward the New Year. This is also a moment to recognize great lights and voices who have shaped the way we think about God, truth and one another.

December 30 marks the passing of **Alfred North Whitehead** (1861-1947) and **Huston Cummings Smith** (1919-2016), two thinkers who profoundly shaped modern religious imagination. Their work took hold in my own life at different moments. I first encountered Whitehead's process philosophy more than thirty years ago as an undergraduate philosophy student at Saint Louis University. His vision of reality as dynamic, relational and unfolding seized my imagination! Then, more than twenty years ago, my path crossed with Huston Smith here in Austin, when Austin Area Interreligious Ministries (now iACT), on whose board I served at the time, invited him to address a church overflowing with people of many faiths. That experience, along with my years with AAIM, opened both my eyes and my heart to the sacred wisdom carried by the world's religions.

### God Not as King, but as Companion

Whitehead, an English mathematician turned philosopher, challenged the familiar image of God as a distant monarch who rules by decree and force. In its place, he envisioned reality itself as process, always becoming, always responding. God, in this view, does not impose divine will on the world, but lovingly lures creation toward greater beauty, depth and harmony.

Whitehead described God as "the unlimited conceptual realization of the absolute wealth of potentiality." This God is not easily confined to

religious language or institutional boundaries. Rather than standing over the world, God moves within it, affected by it and responsive to it.

This vision resonates deeply during the Christmas season. The Incarnation already subverts divine kingship. God does not arrive armored and enthroned, but is born vulnerable and dependent. Whitehead helps us take that logic seriously, reminding us that divine power shows itself not through coercion, but through relationship!

### **Many Paths, One Sacred Mystery**

Huston Smith devoted his life to helping people encounter the world's religions not as threats, but as gifts. With reverence and humility, his landmark 1958 book, *The World's Religions*, introduced generations to Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism and Indigenous traditions.

Smith insisted that no single tradition exhausts divine truth. Each religion, he argued, responds to the same ultimate Mystery, shaped by culture, history and human longing. His work did not flatten differences. It honored them.

For Catholics formed by the universality of Christmas, this matters. The light that shines in Bethlehem, the Gospel tells us, enlightens everyone. Smith helped many of us see how that light refracts through many cultures and spiritual paths, often in ways that challenge, deepen and correct our own assumptions.

### **Christmas Faith That Is Still Becoming**

Together, Whitehead and Smith invite us to a faith that remains alive, curious and humble. They resist static answers and rigid systems. They urge us to trust that God continues to speak, not only through our own tradition, but also through the unfolding world and the faith of others.

During this Christmas octave, when we proclaim that eternity enters time, their insights feel especially apt. If God truly became flesh, then history matters. Culture matters. Dialogue matters. Becoming matters.

### **Calls to Action**

As we prepare to cross the threshold into a new year, these two voices invite concrete commitments:

- Reimagine God beyond images of domination and control.
- Engage seriously with thinkers who challenge inherited assumptions.
- Read at least one sacred text from another religious tradition during the coming year.
- Support interreligious dialogue, locally and globally.
- Resist theological fear that treats questions as threats.

- Teach children and grandchildren that faith grows through encounter.
- Let Christmas shape your politics, spirituality and relationships.

### **Toward a Faith That Keeps Moving**

Alfred North Whitehead and Huston Cummings Smith remind us that faith does not honor God by standing still. A living God calls forth a living theology, one willing to evolve, listen, and risk love. As Christmas light still lingers and a new year approaches, we are invited not to anxiously cling to what feels secure, but to trust that God continues to draw creation forward, patiently and persistently.

This is not a loss of faith. It is fidelity to a God who chose movement over stasis, relationship over rule, and incarnation over isolation!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- Where have I imagined God as controlling, rather than accompanying?
- How has encounter with another religion deepened or challenged my faith?
- What questions am I currently afraid to ask about God or Church?
- How does the Incarnation reshape my understanding of divine power?
- Where might God be inviting me to grow, change or listen in the year ahead?

### **A Prayer for Year's End**

God of infinite possibility, you move within creation with patience and love. Free us from small images of you and open us to wonder, humility and holy curiosity. As this year ends and another begins, draw us toward deeper compassion, greater truth and a faith that remains alive to your becoming presence. Amen.

## Sun, Sin and Self-Deception

Lessons from “The White Lotus,” Season 2

December 30, 2025



Today, the second-last day of 2025, my husband and I wandered through Taormina, Sicily, soaking in the sun, the sea and the history. We paused, of course, at the San Domenico Palace—now world-famous as the “White Lotus Resort and Spa.” We laughed as we recalled Season 2 of “The White Lotus,” set right here, with its messy relationships, moral blindness and moments of brutal self-revelation. As we laughed—and talked about our need to rewatch a few episodes tonight while the memories of Taormina are still fresh—my mind bent, almost instinctively, toward theology and spirituality. What might Catholics learn from such elements of pop culture, especially during the Christmas season, when we proclaim that God chose to enter fully into the beauty and brokenness of human life?

### **Sicily as Sacrament: Beauty That Does Not Save by Itself**

Season 2 of “The White Lotus” luxuriates in Sicily’s beauty, yet no amount of splendor prevents moral collapse. Daphne jogs along breathtaking coastal paths while quietly revealing her strategies for surviving betrayal. Harper stands transfixed by ancient ruins even as her marriage erodes. Cameron and Ethan sip wine beneath frescoed ceilings while rehearsing patterns of competition and resentment that predate the trip itself.

The setting functions almost sacramentally. Grace is everywhere, but it is not automatic. The landscape offers revelation, not redemption.

Christmas teaches us something similar. God enters a world already beautiful, already broken. The Incarnation does not erase dysfunction. It exposes it. Sicily, like Bethlehem, awakens longing, but it does not override freedom. Beauty can stir the soul, but it cannot convert the heart without truth.

Here, we might hear a Christmas aftershock: aesthetic Christianity or Catholicism alone—gorgeous liturgies, historic churches, Instagram-worthy spirituality—cannot substitute for justice, humility or love. Like the White Lotus guests, we can stand amid breathtaking holiness and still refuse transformation!

### **Power, Privilege and the Gospel’s Uncomfortable Mirror**

From the opening episode, wealth operates as a kind of invisibility cloak. Cameron treats Lucia and Mia as entertainment. Dominic assumes money can clean up decades of harm. Bert romanticizes old-world masculinity while remaining largely oblivious to how it wounded the women in his life.

Meanwhile, Valentina, Lucia and Mia absorb the emotional labor, silence and humiliation required to keep guests comfortable. Even when the guests speak kindly, the imbalance remains intact.

The Gospel turns that same mirror toward us. “Blessed are the poor” is not sentimental. It is destabilizing. Season 2 relentlessly echoes Luke’s *Magnificat*: Who pays the price for our pleasure? Who cleans up after our excess? Who adapts, so we don’t have to? Who disappears once we board our return flights?

Watching this series during the Christmas octave sharpens the contrast. The Christ child is born among the poor, not the powerful. Yet viewers often find themselves empathizing instinctively with the wealthy guests, not the workers whose dignity remains negotiable.

### **Desire, Fidelity and the Stories We Tell Ourselves**

Few characters lie outright. Instead, they narrate themselves into innocence. Dominic frames serial infidelity as something he cannot control. Cameron calls betrayal “just how guys are.” Daphne reframes emotional survival as empowerment. Ethan insists he is morally superior, even as silence becomes its own form of deception.

Sex and desire drive the plot, but the deeper drama is narrative. Who gets to define what counts as harm? Who controls the story once damage is done?

Catholic moral theology, at its best, is not obsessed with regulating bodies. It is concerned with truth-telling. Season 2 exposes how desire corrodes relationships when it detaches from honesty, mutuality and accountability.

During Christmas, we celebrate Emmanuel—*God-with-us*—not *God-with-our-fantasies-about-ourselves*. The series presses the question gently, but relentlessly: Where do we live divided lives? Where do we curate righteousness while avoiding integrity?

## Women, Silence and Survival

Season 2 belongs, in many ways, to women navigating systems designed for male comfort. Lucia and Mia negotiate survival in a world that commodifies their bodies while condemning their choices. Harper speaks truth and is labeled difficult. Daphne learns to weaponize cheerfulness as armor. Valentina wields authority at work while remaining painfully isolated in her personal life.

The show does not romanticize any of them. It shows women adapting, manipulating, enduring and resisting – often simultaneously. None emerge untouched by patriarchy.

Catholics will recognize familiar terrain. The Church still struggles to hear women fully, trust them structurally, and honor their authority. “The White Lotus” does not offer saints. It offers survivors. That, too, is a theological category worth pondering.

Mary, whose solemnity we celebrate in two days, does not speak much in the Gospels. Yet her silence is never passivity. It is discernment. It is strength. It is agency in a world that misunderstands women’s power.

## Christmas in a World Still Waiting for Redemption

“The White Lotus” refuses tidy conclusions. Lucia escapes with money, but not necessarily safety. Ethan and Harper reconnect, but through ambiguity, rather than clarity. Valentina opens a door to intimacy, yet remains profoundly alone. Sin lingers. Harm remains.

That unsettled ending fits the Christmas season more than we might like to admit.

Christmas is not Easter. The world is not yet healed. God has come, but exploitation persists. Relationships fracture. Systems remain cruel. What changes is not everything—yet—but our responsibility to see clearly and act faithfully.

Watching this series during Christmastime reminds us that God enters reality as it is, not as we wish it were.

## Calls to Action

- **Practice moral attention.** Notice who benefits and who bears the cost in your home, workplace, community and society.
- **Resist aesthetic-only faith.** Let beauty draw you deeper, but refuse to let it distract you from justice.
- **Tell the truth about desire.** Commit yourself to honesty, accountability and mutuality in relationships.

- **Concretely stand with women.** Support leadership, preaching and decision-making by women in Church and society.
- **Examine your privilege.** Ask regularly how comfort may be dulling your compassion.
- **Watch culture theologically.** Treat film and television not as escapes, but as mirrors and invitations!

### **From Luxury Resorts to Manger Floors**

As the year ends and a new one waits at the door, “The White Lotus” reminds us that Christmas does not sanctify denial. It sanctifies presence. God chooses not a gated resort, but a vulnerable body. Not curated perfection, but truth. Catholics are called to follow that same path — away from illusions of innocence and toward honest solidarity with a world still aching for redemption!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- Where in my life — and in my faith life — do I confuse beauty with goodness?
- How does privilege shape what I notice, or fail to notice, about suffering?
- In what areas of my life do I manage appearances, rather than practice integrity?
- How do I listen to women’s experiences, especially when they unsettle me?
- What does Christmas ask of me that New Year’s resolutions often avoid?

### **Let Us Pray**

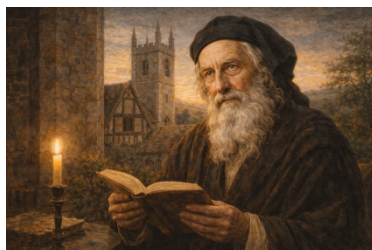
God-with-us, born into a complicated world, keep us awake to truth and tender toward suffering. Free us from self-deception and shallow comfort. As this year ends, help us to live more honestly, love more courageously, and walk more humbly with those the world prefers not to see. May Your Incarnation continue to disturb, heal and transform us. Amen.



## Seeing Clearly at Year's End

### John Wycliffe and the Courage of Conscience

December 31, 2025



As human beings, we often see people through tinted lenses, especially when those people have been vilified by individuals and institutions we love. That was certainly my experience with figures like Jan Hus, Martin Luther and John Wycliffe. During my seminary years, they were often presented as cautionary tales, troublemakers or heretics whose names were spoken with a raised eyebrow. As I have matured in my faith, however, I have come to see them as quite heroic – individuals formed by the Church, nourished by her scriptures and sacraments, and compelled, in good conscience, to ask hard questions for the Gospel.

On this final day of the year, in the stillness of the Christmas octave and on the threshold of a new calendar year, John Wycliffe offers us a challenging and consoling companion.

### **A Faithful Catholic with Serious Questions**

John Wycliffe (c. 1320s–1384) was not an outsider lobbing stones at the Church. He was a Catholic priest, philosopher and theologian deeply rooted in medieval Catholic life. He loved scripture, believed passionately in Christ, and took the Church seriously enough to question her when he believed she had strayed from her Gospel moorings.

Wycliffe translated the Gospels into the vernacular – into our languages! – not to undermine the Church, but to place the Word of God into the hands and hearts of ordinary people. He questioned monasticism when it became untethered from poverty and service. He raised concerns about transubstantiation, not to deny Christ's presence, but to challenge philosophical categories that, in his view, had hardened into unquestionable dogma. He critiqued requiem masses, the veneration of saints, caesaropapism (combining secular and religious authority), and the privileged status of clergy – all because he feared that grace had become a commodity and power a substitute for holiness.

In other words, Wycliffe loved the Church enough to object to her excesses. His dissent was not rebellion for rebellion's sake. It was the dissent of a faithful priest who believed: *Fidelity sometimes requires resistance!*

### **Catholic Reform Is Not a Modern Invention**

Wycliffe reminds us that Catholic reform did not begin in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, nor did it end with Vatican II. It is woven into our tradition. Every age has needed voices willing to say, "This practice may be a tradition, but is it Gospel?"

That same tension appears, interestingly, in two very different figures also remembered on December 31.

- **Domenico Agostini** (1825–1891), an Italian cardinal and patriarch of Venice, operated fully within the Roman hierarchy and yet secretly consecrated bishops for the Order of Corporate Reunion—thus sharing Roman Catholic lines of apostolic succession with others! Whatever one makes of the movement itself, Agostini's actions suggest a pastoral imagination that exceeded the neat boundaries of official permission. He acted quietly, perhaps even fearfully, but with a sense that unity and sacramental life sometimes demand creative fidelity.
- **Joseph Aloisius Ratzinger** (1927–2022), later Pope Benedict XVI, presents a different lesson. Early in his career, he was a bold theologian, open to non-literal interpretations of the resurrection narratives and energized by the promise of Vatican II. Over time, shaped by ecclesial conflict and cultural upheaval, he moved decisively toward doctrinal consolidation and control, earning his reputation as the "Rottweiler" of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Ratzinger's life raises an uncomfortable question: How does fear—of fragmentation, of relativism, of loss—reshape our theological imagination?

Wycliffe, Agostini and Ratzinger each reveal different responses to institutional tension. All three, in their own ways, were Catholic to the core!

### **Lessons for the Church Today**

In our current moment, when dissent is often dismissed as disloyalty and obedience is confused with silence, Wycliffe's witness speaks powerfully. He reminds us that conscience is not the enemy of communion, and that reform is not synonymous with rupture.

For U.S. Catholics navigating polarization and moral exhaustion, his life asks whether we are willing to remain rooted, even when we speak uncomfortably.

### **Calls to Action**

- Read scripture prayerfully and critically, trusting that the Word of God belongs to the whole people of God.
- Study figures like Wycliffe, Hus and Luther with historical generosity, rather than inherited suspicion.
- Name clearly when church practices serve power more than the Gospel.
- Defend the role of conscience in Catholic moral and theological life.
- Support theologians, pastors and lay leaders who ask faithful but difficult questions.
- Practice reform locally through inclusive liturgy, shared leadership, and transparent governance.

### **Faithful Dissent as a Christmas Gift**

As the year closes and the Church still sings Christmas hymns, John Wycliffe invites us to place truth alongside tenderness, and courage alongside belonging. The Incarnation itself is God's dissent against injustice, abstraction and religious complacency. To follow Christ faithfully may require us, at times, to risk misunderstanding for the sake of love. Wycliffe did not abandon the Church. He stayed, questioned, and trusted that God was not finished with her yet. Neither are we!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- Where have I inherited caricatures of "dangerous" people without revisiting the evidence?
- When has conscience gently or urgently challenged my own religious comfort?
- How do I distinguish between unity and uniformity in my understanding of the Church?
- What fears shape my response to theological or pastoral disagreement?
- How might Christ be inviting me to remain rooted while speaking honestly in the year ahead?

### **Let Us Pray**

Faithful God, You have never ceased to reform your Church through imperfect people who deeply love you. Grant us the courage of

conscience without the arrogance of certainty, the humility of tradition without the paralysis of fear. As this year ends and a new one begins, teach us to speak truth lovingly, to dissent faithfully and to trust that your Spirit still labors within your Church. Amen.

## From Spray Cans to Sacred Signs

New Year Lessons from Acts of Vandalism and Street Art

December 31, 2025



After I completed my undergraduate studies in St. Louis, Missouri more than thirty years ago, my first assignment as a young Conventual Franciscan Friar was to work with youth at Cristo Rey Catholic Church in East Austin, a neighborhood known then for its gangs, violence and the highest teen pregnancy rate in the nation. At that time, pizza chains—whose wares are a balm for schools and youth ministries—would not dare deliver to the residents of East Austin. I will never forget working with the youth there, many of whom were involved in gangs: As they gradually grew to trust me, many spoke to me of their challenges and regaled me with stories of gang life. As you can imagine, I will never forget the day an eighth-grader showed me a rock of crack cocaine the size of a marble. Recalling Saint Augustine, I thought, “There but for the grace of God go I.” Had I grown up in very different circumstances, I could just as easily have been in their shoes! As they shared with me their “tag names,” I began to recognize their signatures spraypainted all over the neighborhood. Again, I thought, “There but for the grace of God go I.”

I have found myself thinking back on those experiences here in Sicily where, far unlike anything I imagined, many buildings and public spaces are covered with vandalism.

## **A World Written on Walls**

Across cities throughout the world, walls have become contested spaces. Storefronts, bridges, church facades and abandoned buildings carry layers of paint that speak of anger, longing, humor, protest and sometimes sheer boredom. Sociologists note that tagging and graffiti flourish most where young people feel unseen, unheard or locked out of meaningful participation in civic life. Urban density, economic precarity and the anonymity of city life intensify the urge to mark space and claim presence.

From a distance, vandalism can look like nothing more than disrespect or decay. Up close, it often reveals a plea: "I am here. See me. Remember me." For those committed to human dignity, that plea deserves careful attention, rather than reflexive condemnation.

## **Why Young People Pick Up Spray Cans**

Young people engage in vandalism and street art for many reasons. For some, it is a form of belonging, a way to signal loyalty to peers or gangs when other paths to identity feel closed. For others, it is simply creative energy with nowhere safe or sanctioned to go. For still others, it is protest, an attempt to push back against systems that seem immovable and indifferent. Perhaps the most striking message that I saw here in Palermo yesterday was quite clear: "Go home, Yankee!"

Psychologically, adolescence is a season of boundary-testing. Risk-taking behaviors often increase not because young people are careless, but because they are wired to explore, to experiment, and to seek recognition beyond their families. When schools, neighborhoods and communities fail to offer channels for healthy expression, walls become canvases by default.

## **What Brain Science Can Teach Us**

Neuroscience confirms what many parents and teachers have long observed: The adolescent brain develops unevenly. The limbic system, which governs emotion and reward, matures earlier than the prefrontal cortex, which governs impulse control, planning and long-term consequences. Young people therefore intensely feel long before their brains are fully capable of clear reasoning.

Seen through this lens, vandalism is less about malice and more about immediacy. Spray paint offers instant visibility, immediate relief, and a fleeting sense of power in a world where young people often feel powerless. Understanding this does not excuse destructive behavior, but it does invite a more compassionate and pastoral response.

### **Street Art as a Cry of the Incarnation**

During the Christmas season, we proclaim a God who refuses distance and takes flesh in messy, crowded and contested spaces. The Incarnation tells us that God meets humanity not in polished sanctuaries alone, but in streets, stables and borrowed rooms.

Street art, even when illegal or unsightly, can function as a kind of secular incarnation. It brings interior struggles into public view. It insists that bodies and stories matter. We do well to ask whether we offer comparable spaces where young people can safely externalize their pain, anger and hope without fear of dismissal.

### **Walking With, Rather Than Painting Over**

If vandalism reveals unmet needs, pastoral responses must go beyond erasure. Simply painting over graffiti without engaging the people behind it can deepen alienation. Supporting young people means creating alternatives that honor their creativity, while guiding them toward responsibility and repair.

This support might include mural projects, youth art collectives, restorative justice circles or community-sponsored studios. It certainly includes listening before lecturing, and relationship-building before rule-enforcing. In this octave of Christmas, such accompaniment echoes Mary's quiet pondering and Joseph's attentive care.

### **Calls to Action**

- Create spaces for expression by sponsoring legal mural walls, art workshops or spoken-word events connected to schools and communities.
- Advocate consistently for restorative justice approaches that invite young people to repair harm, rather than carry permanent records.
- Train parents and community leaders in adolescent brain development, so that responses are informed by science.
- Intentionally partner with local artists who can mentor youth and model how creativity and discipline coexist.
- Examine walls and programs to ask whose voices are absent and whose stories remain untold.

### **From Marked Walls to Open Hearts**

As a new year begins, the Church stands at a threshold, much like the young people we often struggle to understand. Walls marked by spray paint confront us with uncomfortable questions about belonging, visibility and hope. If we dare to read those walls with the eyes of faith, we may discover not only defacement, but desire. By choosing

accompaniment over condemnation, we may find that the marks young people leave on our cities can soften the walls around our own hearts.

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- When have I been quick to judge a behavior without asking what pain or longing lies beneath it?
- Where do young people in my neighborhood and community have safe places to express themselves?
- How does the mystery of the Incarnation challenge my assumptions about sacred and profane spaces?
- What fears arise in me when confronted with anger or disorder expressed by youth?
- As we enter a new year, what concrete step might God be inviting me to take in accompaniment rather than avoidance?

### **Let Us Pray**

God of the Word made flesh, you chose to dwell among us in streets and homes, in joy and in struggle. Open our eyes to see your image in young people whose cries are written on walls and in public spaces. Soften our hearts, steady our judgments, and strengthen our courage to accompany, rather than dismiss. As a new year dawns, teach us to make room for voices long unheard and to trust that your Spirit still speaks in unexpected colors and places. Amen.

## **Between Mirror and Compass**

Mary, the Mother of God, and the Courage to Become Who We Are

January 1, 2026



Some twenty-five years ago, Giotto's fresco of Obedience in the Lower Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi captured my imagination and has never quite let go. The figure of Holy Prudence in the fresco is two-faced, like Janus, the namesake of January. One face looks backward. The other

looks forward. The figure holds a mirror in one hand, and a mathematical compass in the other. The symbolism is quietly demanding: True obedience requires that we know *who we are* (the mirror), *where we are coming from* (the backward face), and *where we are going* (the compass)!

On this first day of the New Year, many of us find ourselves doing exactly that: looking back at the year now behind us, and glancing ahead at the year unfolding before us. It is also a day of resolutions, when the distance between mirror and compass often becomes painfully clear. We see who we are. We imagine who we wish to be. And we quietly suspect that the habits we have grown comfortable with will not easily surrender.

Today's Solemnity of Mary the Mother of God holds a similar tension. It invites us to hold together our idealized images of Mary – the Mother of God! – and the far more human reality of a frightened, unmarried and pregnant teenage girl in Nazareth some 2,000 years ago.

That tension is exposed in the popular holiday song “Mary, Did You Know?”, which asks Mary whether she knew that the child she delivered and now held in her arms would one day walk on water, save our sons and daughters, and ultimately deliver her. Then comes the line that directly brushes up against today's feast: “When you kiss your little baby, you’ve kissed the face of God.”

### **How the Church Came to Call Mary “Mother of God”**

The ancient Church did not begin with a fascination for Mary. It began with a fierce concern for Jesus. By the fourth and fifth centuries, Christians were struggling to articulate who Jesus truly was. Was he fully divine? Fully human? Some combination of the two?

The title *Theotokos*, “God-bearer” or “Mother of God,” emerged as a way of protecting the confession that Jesus is truly God. At the Council of Ephesus in 431, the Church affirmed that Mary could rightly be called Mother of God, not because she generated the divine nature, but because the one she bore was truly divine.

The logic was simple, if startling: *If Jesus is God, then Mary is God's mother.*

Over time, this Christological safeguard developed into a rich Marian devotion. Yet the doctrine itself was never primarily about Mary. It was about who Jesus is.

### **Becoming, Not Being**

This matters for Catholics today. Just as theologians speak of high and low Christologies, emphasizing either Jesus' divinity or his humanity, we also inherit what might be called high Mariologies. Mary can easily



drift into an untouchable realm, frozen in perfection, and removed from human struggle.

Yet the Incarnation itself resists that move. Jesus did not arrive as God pretending to be human. He became who he was through birth, growth, suffering and love. In a similar way, Mary did not wake up one morning as the *Theotokos*. She became the Mother of God through consent, risk and trust.

In this light, Mary's obedience looks less like passive submission, and more like Giotto's demanding vision. She knew who she was. She knew where she came from. She trusted where God was leading her, even when the compass pointed toward uncertainty!

### **"Maiden and Mother, Daughter of Your Son"**

The paradox of the *Theotokos* has haunted Christian imagination for centuries. Dante memorably captured it in his *Paradiso*, where St. Bernard of Clairvaux addresses Mary as "*Vergine Madre, figlia del tuo figlio*" – maiden and mother, daughter of your own son. Those words deeply struck me more than thirty years ago as a young novice. They still do.

Mary stands at the intersection of human becoming and divine mystery. She embodies what it means to cooperate with God without fully understanding the outcome.

### **What We Can Practice Today**

On this first day of the year, Mary offers more than sentiment. She offers a path.

- Practice obedience as discernment, rather than blind compliance.
- Hold together ideals and human reality, without collapsing one into the other.
- Resist Marian devotion that erases women's fear, agency or courage.
- Embrace faith as becoming, rather than static perfection.
- Let Christology shape Mariology, rather than the reverse.
- Honor the bodies, risks and choices of women today.

### **Becoming in the New Year**

Mary does not stand above us as an unreachable icon. She stands with us, between mirror and compass, trusting that God can work with who we actually are. On this New Year's Day, the Solemnity of Mary the Mother of God invites us to release perfection and embrace fidelity. Like Mary, we are not asked to know everything in advance. We are asked to say yes with honesty, courage and hope, trusting that God meets us in the becoming!

### Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where do I experience tension between who I am and who I hope to become?
- How has my image of Mary shaped my understanding of faith or obedience?
- Where might idealized holiness be distancing me from real discipleship?
- What risks might God be inviting me to take in this new year?
- How can I practice obedience as discernment, rather than fear?

### A Prayer for the New Year

God of beginnings, You entered history through a young woman who trusted you enough to risk everything. Help us to honor our humanity without abandoning our hope. Teach us to listen deeply, choose courageously, and walk faithfully as we step into a year not yet known. Like Mary, may we become what love asks of us. Amen.

### Crowns versus Crosiers

New Year's Day Lessons from  
Palermo's Entangled Church-State History

January 1, 2026



After visiting the stunning cathedral of Palermo, Sicily this afternoon, I walked a short distance to the old palace of the emperors. At least on the outside, that palace paled in comparison. I left thinking about power. Community organizers often say that power and influence come from two sources: *organized people* and *organized resources*. For centuries, the Church mastered both: By gathering people every Sunday under pain of mortal sin and by passing a collection basket among them, it organized bodies and money with remarkable efficiency. It also cultivated wealthy patrons with promises of eternal life—or at least shortened time in Purgatory—in exchange for major gifts, endowments and chapels.

Here in Sicily, that power grew so formidable that bishops and popes could intimidate, coerce and at times openly bully civil rulers through the threat or reality of excommunication. Standing in Palermo's cathedral on New Year's Day, with the tombs of kings and emperors only steps away from the altar, I found myself wondering what we might learn from this complicated and cautionary history.

### **A Cathedral as a Political Text**

Palermo's cathedral is not merely a house of prayer. It is an archive in stone. Here lie the remains of Roger II, crowned king of Sicily on Christmas Day in 1130 before being excommunicated at least twice, and Frederick II, the so-called *Stupor Mundi* (Wonder of the World), baptized, crowned King of Sicily in 1198, crowned Holy Roman Emperor in 1220, and later condemned two to four times by the very Church that claimed him. An exhibit inside the cathedral makes plain that ecclesial and civil power did not develop in parallel, but in constant collision.

Popes excommunicated rulers. Rulers imprisoned bishops. Frederick II was excommunicated various times by Pope Gregory IX, even as he negotiated the peaceful return of Jerusalem during the Crusades! Investitures—the appointment of church leaders—were settled with swords as often as with prayers. Treaties followed sieges. Popes and bishops were not neutral pastors hovering above politics; they were political actors embedded in it!

This history unsettles any romantic notion of a Church standing serenely above power. The Church was power. It crowned kings, legitimated empires, and helped determine who ruled and who fell!

### **Organized People, Organized Resources**

Medieval ecclesiastics instinctively understood what modern organizers now explicitly name: Power flows from *organized people* and *organized resources*. The Norman Church in Sicily excelled at both. Archbishops like Gualtiero Offamilio, who oversaw the construction of Palermo's cathedral, consolidated religious authority in ways that also secured political dominance. Rivalries between Palermo and Monreale were not merely theological disputes, but battles over land, revenue and jurisdiction.

Popes alternately resisted and relied upon Norman rulers. Roger II claimed divine sanction for his kingship, even as the papacy hesitated to recognize him. Eventually Rome conceded, not out of theological clarity, but political necessity. Power here was rarely pure. It was negotiated, bartered and compromised.

### **Excommunication as a Blunt Instrument**

Few Catholics today grasp how devastating excommunication once was. To be cut off from the sacraments meant social death, as well as spiritual peril. Yet Palermo's history shows the limits of this weapon. Frederick II continued to govern, legislate and wage war—even while excommunicated. He was anathematized even as he ruled an empire that stretched across southern Italy.

When spiritual tools become political cudgels, moral authority erodes. Palermo's stones quietly testify that excommunication often hardened resistance, rather than produced conversion. The Church sometimes defended justice. More often, it defended with greater urgency its own prerogatives.

### **Pluralism, Pragmatism and Paradox**

Norman Sicily was astonishingly pluralistic by medieval standards. Greek Christians, Latin Christians, Muslims and Jews lived and worked side-by-side. Muslim administrators served in the royal court, with Arabic as a language of governance. The Cappella Palatina, only a short walk away, embodies this synthesis with Byzantine mosaics, Latin inscriptions, and an Arab-style wooden ceiling.

Yet this pluralism coexisted with brutal repression. Muslim revolts were crushed. Entire communities were eventually deported. Authority was centralized and sanctified as God's will. The same rulers who protected diversity also extinguished it when convenient. Yes, the same Church that baptized kings also blessed violence!

Palermo refuses easy moral sorting. It invites us to sit with paradox, rather than indulge nostalgia.

### **Christmas Crowns and a New Year's Reckoning**

Like many emperors, including Charlemagne in 800 A.D., Roger II was crowned on Christmas Day. *Power often cloaked itself in the language of Incarnation!* God-with-us subtly became God-with-my-regime. As we now enjoy the Christmas octave and enter a new civil year, Palermo cautions us against confusing divine presence with institutional dominance.

Mary, whose solemnity we celebrate today, sang of thrones being cast down and the lowly lifted up (Lk. 1:52). Palermo's cathedral, filled with royal tombs and imperial insignia, testifies that sadly the Church too often preferred crowning the powerful, over standing with the lowly.

### **Calls to Action**

- Examine how churches wield influence today, asking when they serve the Gospel and when they protect institutional comfort.
- Resist nostalgia for Christendom, refusing to confuse cultural dominance with faithfulness.
- Deliberately invest in organizing people for justice, not merely preserving buildings or endowments.
- Hold church leadership accountable, especially when spiritual authority is used coercively rather than pastorally.
- Recover moral credibility by practicing humility, transparency and repentance in public life.

### **Learning to Love Power Less and Justice More**

Palermo's cathedral stands as both warning and invitation. It warns us that even sacred institutions can become enamored with power. It invites us to imagine a Church that organizes people and resources not to dominate emperors, but to defend the vulnerable. As a new year begins, let us resolve not to flee power altogether, but to love justice more than influence, and faithfulness more than control!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- Where do I confuse the Church's power with God's will?
- How do I respond when spiritual authority is used to silence or coerce?
- What forms of power am I willing to relinquish for the sake of the Gospel?
- How might Mary's *Magnificat* (Lk. 1:46-55) reshape my understanding of authority?
- As a new year begins, where is God inviting me – and my church – to repentance and renewal?

### **Let Us Pray**

God of history and hope, you dwell not only in sanctuaries, but in the struggles of peoples and nations. As we stand at the threshold of a new year, free your Church from fear and from the seduction of power. Teach us to organize our lives around justice, mercy and humility. May we never crown ourselves in your name, but instead follow your Son who chose vulnerability over domination. Through Mary, Mother of God and mother of the lowly, lead us into a year of deeper faithfulness and truer freedom. Amen.

## One Spirit, Shared Courage

### Lessons from Basil the Great and Gregory Nazianzen at the Start of the Year

January 2, 2026



Some years ago, I experienced a real gut-punch when I first read the words of St. Basil the Great:

“When someone steals another’s clothes, we call him or her a thief. Should we not give the same name to one who could clothe the naked and does not? The bread in your cupboard belongs to the hungry; the coat unused in your closet belongs to the one who needs it; the shoes rotting in your closet belong to the one who has no shoes; the money which you hoard belongs to the poor.”

Challenging words, indeed! Ever since, I look differently at my closet and my pantry. Basil does not spiritualize poverty. He names it. He does not praise generosity as optional virtue. He treats it as justice!

On this second day of the New Year, still wrapped in the Christmas octave and the slower rhythm of holiday time, the Church invites us to learn from Saints Basil the Great and Gregory Nazianzen, two fourth-century Cappadocian Fathers whose theological brilliance was matched by moral urgency and deep friendship.

### **Defending Christ by Defending Humanity**

Basil and Gregory were born in the same year, 329 A.D., and lived during a period of fierce theological conflict. The Arian controversy threatened the Church’s confession that Jesus Christ is fully divine. Against this, the Cappadocians articulated language that still shapes our creeds today, insisting that the Son fully shares in the divine life.

Yet what is striking is how little their theology remains abstract. For Basil especially, defending the divinity of Christ demanded defending the dignity of the poor. If Christ is truly God, then God has irrevocably

united Godself with human flesh! To ignore the hungry, the sick or the unhoused is not merely social failure. It is theological betrayal.

Orthodoxy, for Basil, was never separable from economic justice.

### **“Two Bodies with a Single Spirit”**

Gregory Nazianzen, the more poetic of the two, wrote of his bond with Basil: that they were “two bodies with a single spirit.” Their friendship was intense, lifelong and intellectually generative. They prayed together, studied together, and dreamed of reforming both Church and society together.

Because of this language and intimacy, many in the LGBTQIA+ community today have embraced Basil and Gregory as patron saints. Whether or not such categories existed in their time, what cannot be denied is that the tradition itself holds up their relationship as holy, faithful and life-giving. Their story challenges modern anxieties about same-sex intimacy by reminding us that deep love and shared vocation have always belonged at the heart of Christian life.

Friendship, in their witness, becomes a theological force!

### **Theology That Serves Life**

Gregory, who reluctantly became a bishop and often resisted ecclesial ambition, shared Basil’s conviction that theology must serve salvation, not ego or power. He warned against empty doctrinal battles, divorced from compassion. He trusted mystery more than control, and humility more than certainty.

Together, Basil and Gregory offer a model of Church leadership sorely needed today: intellectually rigorous, socially courageous, and emotionally honest. They show us that defending truth does not require cruelty, and that intimacy need not threaten holiness.

### **Practices Today**

As a new year begins, these saints invite us to concrete commitments:

- Examine your closet, pantry and budget with Basil’s clarity.
- Treat economic justice as a matter of faith, rather than charity.
- Recover friendship as a serious spiritual vocation.
- Resist theology that ignores suffering bodies.
- Affirm holy intimacy wherever it fosters fidelity and love.
- Defend doctrine without weaponizing it.
- Link belief in Christ’s divinity to care for Christ’s people.

### **Orthodoxy with a Human Face**

Basil and Gregory remind us that the Church's greatest theological achievements emerged not from comfort, but from courage; not from isolation, but from friendship. Their witness calls us to a faith that deeply thinks, boldly loves and generously gives. As this new year unfolds, they urge us to confess Christ not only with our lips, but with our lives, allowing doctrine to become compassion – and belief to become bread!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- How do Basil's words challenge my current relationship to possessions?
- Where might I be separating correct belief from concrete justice?
- Who are the companions who shape my faith and courage?
- How do I respond to intimacy and friendship within the Church?
- What practices might help me link theology more closely to daily life this year?

### **A Prayer for the New Year**

God of truth and mercy, You revealed yourself fully in Christ and you continue to meet us in the poor, the friend, and the stranger. Teach us, like Basil, to clearly see justice and, like Gregory, to faithfully love. Form in us a faith that feeds the hungry, welcomes deep friendship, and honors the mystery of your life among us. As this new year begins, make our belief credible through love. Amen.

## **Scaring Off the Monster**

Firecrackers, Faith and Beginning Again After a Brutal Year

January 2, 2026



I love fireworks—except when I don't. There are few things more stirring than a well-choreographed display, with bursts of light timed to John Philip Sousa's "Stars and Stripes Forever" or Tchaikovsky's "1812 Overture." But what my husband and I experienced last night during



dinner in Palermo, Sicily was something else entirely. Our Arabic-Italian meal was punctuated by sudden, percussive booms. No color. No starburst. Just loud explosions echoing through narrow streets, resembling gunfire and clearly intended to startle.

I admit: After jumping at a particularly close blast, I muttered, “Thank you, China, for inventing fireworks!” My husband wryly smiled and offered a very different interpretation. The firecrackers thrown by Sicilian boys into alleys and empty squares transported him straight back to his childhood: Chinese New Year firecrackers carpet towns with red paper – and the sound is not for spectacle, but to scare away the monster of the old year.

“Wait,” I said. “Scare off the ‘monster’ of the old year?”

Suddenly, I found myself with a deep, fervent desire: Bring on the firecrackers!

Because for many of us, 2025 felt monstrous.

### **Naming the Monster Without Letting It Name Us**

The past year opened with an inauguration that many experienced not as civic celebration, but as a moral gut-punch. In the U.S., we watched a man—long described by major media outlets as one who regularly incites political violence and traffics in racism, misogyny, xenophobia and religious exclusion—return to power with renewed confidence and fewer restraints.

What followed felt predictably brutal. Cuts to U.S. foreign aid threatened food, vaccinations and maternal health programs that experts warn will cost millions upon millions of lives worldwide, particularly among children. Millions of Americans enter the new year facing higher healthcare costs, reduced protections and deepening anxiety about access to care. Hundreds of insurrectionists were immediately pardoned. Immigrants, LGBTQ+ people, women and communities of color once again find themselves spoken about as problems to be managed, rather than neighbors to be protected.

Monsters, after all, are not only mythical creatures. They are systems, policies and leaders that devour the vulnerable in the name of purported strength.

### **Israel and Its Monsters: Pharaohs, Kings and Empires**

Scripture does not shy away from naming monstrous power. Israel’s story unfolds under the shadow of Pharaohs who enslaved, kings who exploited, and empires that crushed resistance. The Exodus begins not with triumph, but with terror. Babies are thrown into the Nile. Bricks are made without straw. God hears cries long before liberation arrives!

The prophets warned that some of Israel's own kings would become monstrous.<sup>1</sup> Saul descended into paranoia.<sup>2</sup> David abused power.<sup>3</sup> Ahab and Jezebel weaponized religion and property.<sup>4</sup> The prophets did not tell the people to deny reality.<sup>5</sup> They told the truth about it, loudly and repeatedly.<sup>6</sup>

Faith, in these stories, is not optimism. It is endurance paired with protest.

### **Early Christians and the Long Memory of Fear**

The first three centuries of Christianity unfolded under recurring waves of monstrous terror. Persecutions came and went, but the threat never fully disappeared. Christians quietly buried their dead. They discreetly gathered. They lived with the knowledge that loyalty to their faith could cost them livelihood, freedom or life itself.

Year after year, they likely longed to put monsters behind them. And year after year, they returned to the same practices: telling the story again, breaking bread again, lighting candles again. The Christmas proclamation—God entering history as a vulnerable child—was not sentimental. It was defiant. To proclaim Emmanuel was to insist that monsters do not get the final word!

### **Firecrackers as Theology: Noise, Memory and Refusal**

The tradition of lighting firecrackers to scare off the old year's monster is not naive. It does not pretend the monster is unreal. It acknowledges fear, then refuses to let fear linger.

The noise matters. The communal participation matters. The shared decision to say "enough" matters.

Christmas works similarly. We do not pretend the world is healed. We place a child in a feeding trough and dare to say that love has entered history anyway. Firecrackers and faith both insist that memory must not become paralysis.

Sometimes, the holiest thing we can do is make enough noise to remind ourselves that the monster does not own the future!

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<sup>1</sup> 1Sam. 8:10-18; Eccl. 4:1.

<sup>2</sup> 1Sam. 18:8-12 & 29, 19:9-10, 22:6-19.

<sup>3</sup> 2Sam. 11:1-27, 12:1-14.

<sup>4</sup> 1Kgs. 21:1-16 & 17-26, 18:4 & 13, 16:31-33.

<sup>5</sup> Amos 5:21-24; Is. 1:10-17; Jer. 7:1-11; Mic. 3:1-4.

<sup>6</sup> Jer. 20:7-9; Ez. 2:3-7; Amos 7:10-17; Is. 58:1.

### **Calls to Action**

- **Honestly name reality.** Refuse spiritual bypassing and speak truth about harm, especially when policies endanger lives.
- **Practice communal rituals of resistance.** Gather, pray, sing, march and mark time together, especially when despair isolates.
- **Concretely protect the vulnerable.** Support organizations that serve immigrants, the poor, the sick and those targeted by hate.
- **Refuse fear-based discipleship.** Let neither nostalgia nor panic dictate faithfulness.
- **Keep telling the story.** Return again and again to Scripture's long memory of survival under monstrous power.

### **Making Noise for Hope**

Firecrackers do not defeat monsters by themselves. Neither does Christmas. What they do is remind us who we are. As this new year begins, Catholics are still singing lullabies to a child born under occupation, still daring to believe that love enters history—even when monsters strut.

So, make noise. Light candles. Tell the truth. Stubbornly love. The monster of the old year does not get to cross the threshold with us!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- What “monsters” from the past year am I still carrying into the present?
- Where have I grown numb, rather than attentive, to suffering?
- How does Christmas challenge my understanding of power and victory?
- What communal practices help me resist despair?
- Where is God inviting me to make noise for life, justice, peace and hope?

### **Let Us Pray**

God of light born into darkness, we bring before you the fear, anger and grief of the year now past. We name the monsters we have endured and the wounds they have left behind. As we step into a new year, teach us to remember without being ruled by fear. Give us courage to make holy noise, to stand with the vulnerable, and to trust that your love still enters history, quietly and relentlessly. May your Incarnation disturb what is cruel, comfort what is broken and lead us into a year of deeper courage and stubborn hope. Amen.

## **Beyond God the Father, Beyond Old Habits**

### Lessons from Mary Daly at the Start of a New Year

January 3, 2026



As the new year begins and the Christmas octave still lingers, I find myself grateful for voices that refuse to let us drift back into familiar ruts. Dr. Mary Daly (1928-2010) was one such voice. Brilliant, abrasive, uncompromising and often infuriating, Daly did not ask the Church to make small adjustments. She demanded a rethinking at the roots! For many, that demand felt like a threat. For others, especially women who had long been silenced, it felt like oxygen.

On January 3, as we look forward into a year still waiting to be shaped, Daly invites us to ask whether we are truly ready for conversion—or merely desire cosmetic change.

### **Naming the Religion of Patriarchy**

Dr. Mary Daly taught theology at Boston College for 33 years, yet she steadily grew convinced that Western Christianity, including Catholicism, had fused faith with patriarchy so tightly that the two became indistinguishable. In her landmark book, *Beyond God the Father*, she argued that naming God exclusively as male does not simply reflect culture. It reinforces domination.

Her now-famous line still stings: “If God is male, then the male is God.” Daly insisted that language shapes imagination, and imagination shapes power. A Church that prays to an all-male God, led exclusively by male authority, should not be surprised when women remain marginal, silenced or erased!

This was not, for Daly, a rejection of the sacred. It was *a refusal to confuse God with male supremacy*.

### **Why She Shocked the Church**

Daly’s decision to exclude men from her advanced Women’s Studies classes brought national attention and institutional backlash. Critics accused her of hypocrisy and discrimination. Supporters noted that men

already dominated nearly every theological space and that Daly was carving out one rare place where women could speak freely without interruption or correction.

Her stance forces an uncomfortable question: *Who gets uninterrupted space to think, to speak, and to imagine God?* Daly believed that liberation sometimes requires separation, not out of hatred, but out of necessity.

For Catholics accustomed to universal language and “both-and” solutions, Daly’s sharp edges remain unsettling. Yet she reminds us that politeness often preserves injustice.

### **Christmas Faith with Open Eyes**

Reading Daly during the Christmas season may seem odd. Yet Christmas itself proclaims that God enters history through a woman’s body, without male permission or institutional control. Daly would not romanticize Mary. She would insist that Marian devotion often becomes another way to domesticate women. Still, the Incarnation quietly affirms her core claim: *God does not need patriarchy.*

If Christ is born into the world through vulnerability, rather than domination, then faithfulness demands more than reverence. It demands transformation!

### **What We Can Practice Now**

Mary Daly challenges us not simply to affirm women verbally, but to dismantle systems that silence them.

- Examine, in your experience, how God-language shapes imagination and power.
- Interrupt patriarchal habits, rather than politely critiquing them.
- Create spaces where women speak without male oversight.
- Support feminist theology, even when it unsettles tradition.
- Question whether inclusion without power-sharing is enough.
- Resist spiritual language that masks domination.
- Treat gender justice as a theological issue, not a side concern.

### **The Courage to Go Beyond**

Mary Daly does not offer comfort. She offers clarity. She calls the Church to decide whether it truly believes in liberation, or merely tolerates it at the margins. As this new year begins, her voice asks whether we are willing to move beyond inherited images, beyond old habits, and beyond fear. Christmas proclaims that God does new things in unexpected bodies and voices. Daly insists that we believe it, not just sing it!

### Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- How does my image of God shape my understanding of authority?
- Where might I unconsciously benefit from patriarchal structures?
- Whose voices remain absent in my community?
- What discomfort might signal genuine conversion?
- How can feminist theology deepen – and not threaten – my faith?

### A Prayer for the New Year

God beyond every name, You are not confined by our language nor limited by our fears. Free us from images that shrink your mystery and systems that silence your daughters. Give us courage to unlearn what harms and imagination to birth what heals. As this new year unfolds, lead us beyond what is familiar into justice, truth and freedom. Amen.

### Stone, Glory and the God Who Chooses Mangers

What Rome's Monuments – and Our Own –  
Reveal About Ego, Memory and Grace

January 3, 2026



My husband and I arrived in Rome late yesterday afternoon and enjoyed the evening exploring the streets of the “Eternal City.” From Piazza Navona to the Pantheon, and from the Church of St. Ignatius to the Trevi Fountain, we wandered in that half-dazed way that comes with travel and awe. I was struck, as always, by the beauty. I was also struck, again, by the excess. So many resources went into these great churches and monuments. And everywhere, carved boldly in stone, are the names of popes and patrons, announcing themselves across centuries. The grandeur stirs my soul. The egoism gives me pause.

### **Why Humans Build So Big**

Humans have always built monuments that strain toward the heavens. The pyramids of Egypt. The ziggurats of Mesopotamia. The obelisks that Rome “borrowed” from Egypt and planted triumphantly in its piazzas. These are not merely feats of engineering. They are acts of anthropology.

At our best, such monuments arise from our transcendent nature. We are creatures who imagine more than what already exists. We long to exceed previous limits, including our own. We sense, even if dimly, that we are made for something larger than ourselves.

At our worst, however, monuments function like a civilizational cry of “Mommy, look at me!” Brain science and psychology tell us how deeply wired we are for recognition, memory and belonging. When those needs go unmet, they often reemerge in exaggerated form. Stone and marble become stand-ins for love and permanence. Popes and prelates, like pharaohs before them, often tried to guarantee remembrance by chiseling their names into eternity. The result is breathtaking beauty—braided tightly with egoism.

### **Christmas in the Shadow of Marble**

It matters that we are still in the Christmas season. The liturgical calendar gently insists that we interpret monuments through the manger.

The God we worship does not arrive with an obelisk or a basilica. God arrives as a child who must be remembered by stories, not stone. The Word becomes flesh, not marble. This is the scandal at the heart of Christmas, and it quietly critiques every grand structure we admire in Rome and throughout the world.

Movies like “The Two Popes” or “Conclave” (and even prestige television like “The Young Pope”) capture this tension well: the Church’s love of splendor wrestling with the Gospel’s call to humility. Rome, especially at Christmastime, embodies both impulses at once.

### **Monuments, Ego and the American Moment**

Rome also helps us interpret our own national moment. In the United States, we are watching a renewed obsession with legacy and self-commemoration: Donald J. Trump has recently renamed the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, has demolished the East Wing of the White House to construct a grand ballroom, speaks openly of building a monumental arch in our nation’s capital, and is now placing his likeness on a one-dollar coin.

The pattern is familiar. When leaders feel insecure or unseen, they often reach for stone, steel and spectacle. Psychologists might point to unmet childhood needs for attention and affirmation. The Gospel simply calls it egoism.

Rome teaches us that such strategies work, for a time. Names do endure. Faces do survive on coins and façades. But history eventually reframes them, often harshly. The monuments remain. The judgments change.

### **The Monuments We Build in Our Own Lives**

If we are honest, we do not need to look only at popes or presidents. We all build monuments.

We build them through our children and grandchildren, hoping we will live on in them. We build them through professions, publications, donations and good works. We build them through our social media accounts, curating a version of ourselves we hope will be remembered. We even build them through our tombstones and grave markers, knowing they may shape how others recall us for generations.

Like Rome's basilicas, these personal monuments require resources. They cost time, money and emotional energy. They can express generosity and vocation. They can also reveal egoism. The line between witness and self-promotion is often thin.

Pop culture gets this right more often than theology textbooks. From Coco's insistence that we die twice, once physically and once when forgotten, to Taylor Swift's ongoing meditation on legacy and authorship, our culture keeps circling the same question: *How will I be remembered, and will it be enough?*

### **What We Can Do Differently**

Rome does not demand that we reject beauty or ambition. It invites discernment. Here are a few calls to action:

- **Practice intentional humility.** Before building, posting or publishing, ask whose glory you are truly seeking.
- **Reinvest resources.** Support projects that prioritize people over permanence, especially the poor and displaced.
- **Tell truer stories.** In preaching, teaching and writing, highlight quiet faithfulness as often as visible achievement.
- **Resist cults of personality.** In Church and politics, challenge leadership styles that confuse legacy with virtue.
- **Fully celebrate Christmas.** Let the Incarnation reframe your understanding of power, memory and success.



- **Build living monuments.** Invest in relationships, reconciliation and justice – realities that endure but cannot be carved in stone!

### **Remembered by Love, Not by Stone**

As we walked past the Pantheon tonight, its massive dome opening toward the heavens, I felt again that holy ambivalence. Awe and unease can coexist. Rome teaches us that monuments can point beyond themselves or trap us within ourselves.

The Christian hope is not that our names will be etched in marble, but that they will be spoken in love. The God who chose a manger still chooses the small, the hidden and the forgotten. In the end, the only monument that matters is the one God remembers, and it is built not of stone, but of love, forgiveness and mercy!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- Where in my life do I most want to be seen and remembered?
- Which “monuments” I admire actually draw me closer to God, and which inflate my ego?
- How does the Christmas story challenge my understanding of greatness and success?
- What personal “monuments” am I currently building, and at what cost to me and to others?
- How might God be inviting me to invest more in people than in permanence?
- What might humility look like in my public, professional and spiritual life this year?

### **Let Us Pray**

Loving God, You entered our world not in splendor, but in vulnerability. As we admire beauty and question excess, teach us to seek your glory rather than our own. Free us from the fear of being forgotten, and anchor us in the promise that we are already known. May the monuments we build this year be made of justice, compassion and love. We ask this in the name of the child of Bethlehem, who lives and reigns forever. Amen.

## Epiphanies

### Lessons from Today's Traditions

January 4, 2026



Happy Solemnity of the Epiphany of Our Lord!

Today, on this tenth day of Christmas (January 4), we celebrate the storied “twelfth day of Christmas”—prepare the twelve drummers drumming!—which, since 1970, has been transferred by many Western Catholic communities to the first Sunday after January 1 (January 2-8), allowing more people to attend Mass and celebrate our Lord’s Epiphany.

Amid the corn fields of Ohio, where I was raised, Epiphany was simple and quiet. For all practical purposes, Christmas was over: Santa came on Christmas, and, by December 26, we were ready to take down the Christmas tree and resume post-holiday life. On the first Sunday of the New Year, we finally moved the magi closer to the manger in our nativity scene—then, before the next Sunday, the entire scene disappeared!

You can imagine my surprise years later, when I was assigned to serve Mexican and Mexican-American families in Texas, to discover an entirely new set of holiday traditions. Historically, for many families in Mexico, there was no Santa. Instead, the magi arrived with gifts on January 6! In preparation, children placed their shoes by the door, sometimes with straw for the magi’s camels. Senior adult immigrants from Mexico shared their childhood memories: Their Epiphany gift from the magi was often a single orange or a small handful of nuts. Sparse by American standards, yes. But joyful nevertheless!

Epiphany, I learned, is not about excess. It is about revelation.

### **A Feast with Another Name**

What many English-speaking Catholics call Epiphany is more commonly known throughout Latin America as *el día de los reyes magos*—the Day of the Magi Kings. There is no scriptural reference to them being kings, or to suggest that there were only three (Mt. 2:1-12)—but the

popular imagination is certainly accustomed to thinking about “we three kings”! The shift in name matters. “Epiphany” emphasizes an idea: God is revealed! *El día de los reyes magos* emphasizes people on a journey—seekers who cross borders, imperfectly read signs, and kneel before a poor child because they recognize holiness where they did not expect to find it.

That reframing alone is instructive: God does not wait for us in the center of power. God reveals Godself along the road!

### **A Longer, Slower Christmas**

In the U.S., Christmas trees often meet the curb on December 26. Even Catholics frequently treat Epiphany or next week’s Baptism of the Lord as a neat ending to the season. Many Latino communities, however, celebrate Christmas for forty days—from December 25 to February 2.

The Christ Child remains in the manger throughout those forty days. Then, on February 2, *el día de la candelaria* (the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord), the figure of the *Niño Dios* (Christ Child) is taken to church for a special blessing. Back home, the Child is placed upright on a small wooden chair on the family altar, where Jesus “blesses” the household until the next Christmas Eve, when he is gently laid in the manger again.

There is no packing Jesus away in a box. No rushing holiness off the calendar. Revelation lingers.

### **A More Inclusive Vision of the Magi**

Explore religious shops in Mexico, and you’ll find that the magi are often imagined there as three men of different races, each riding a different animal that symbolizes their places of origin: a camel from Asia, a horse from Europe, and an elephant from Africa. This is not historical precision. It is beautiful theological imagination!

The message is unmistakable: Christ belongs to the whole world. Contrast that with the pale, European magi who dominate so many U.S. nativity sets. Epiphany, at its best, resists a monochrome Gospel.

### **When the Magi Visit Still**

In some homes, parishes and neighborhoods, Epiphany comes alive when adults dress as the magi and visit children and families. They distribute small gifts, share the Epiphany story, and remind young people that they, too, are seen and sought by God. These visits are especially powerful in immigrant communities, where children often feel invisible or unwanted in the broader culture.

The magi do not ask for documentation. They follow a star, and they honor the young!

### **The Rosca de Reyes: Christ Hidden in Dough**

No Latino Epiphany celebration is complete without *la rosca de reyes*, a ring-shaped “king cake” whose form recalls the crown of the magi kings. Baked inside is a small figure of the Christ Child, *el Niño Dios*. The symbolism is profound: Christ is often hidden in the “dough” of other people’s lives. We may not see him at first, but he is there!

Whoever finds the image of the Christ Child assumes responsibility for hosting a feast of *tamales* and *atole* on February 2, *el día de la candelaria*, which marks the close of the Christmas season. Revelation always leads to responsibility!

### **Shared Epiphany Traditions**

Across many religious communities, Epiphany also brings two practices worth reclaiming.

The first is the house blessing, or “chalking the door”: 20 + C + B + M + 26. The numbers mark the year. The letters name the traditional magi—Caspar, Balthazar and Melchior—and also form the acronym for a prayer: *Christus mansionem benedicat*—May Christ bless this home.

The second is Epiphany extractions. After praying or singing to the Holy Spirit, participants draw—without looking—a saint’s name and sometimes a Scripture verse from a basket. The saint becomes a companion for the year ahead, a reminder that we never walk alone. The verse contains personalized “words of wisdom” to guide us in the new year!

### **Calls to Action**

- Lengthen Christmas in your home. Resist the pressure to rush past joy!
- Teach children that generosity does not depend on abundance.
- Choose nativity images that reflect a global Christ.
- Revive house blessings as acts of hope and resistance.
- Let Epiphany challenge xenophobia by honoring migrants as bearers of revelation.
- Consider preparing an Epiphany magi visit, especially for children who feel unseen.

### **Following the Star Beyond Comfort**

Epiphany is not sentimental. It is unsettling. The magi cross borders. They defy a violent ruler. They recognize God in vulnerability and leave “by another way” (Mt. 2:12). For Christians and Catholics returning to work and school by the twelfth day of Christmas this week, Epiphany

reminds us that faith does not end at the manger. It sends us back into the world differently – more attentive, more inclusive and less afraid of the long road ahead!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- Where have I noticed God revealing Godself outside my expectations?
- Whose traditions have expanded my understanding of faith?
- What borders – cultural, racial, spiritual – am I being invited to cross this year?
- Where might Christ be hidden in the “dough” of another’s life?
- Who could become a companion or mentor for me in this new year?

### **Let Us Pray**

God of many stars and many roads, you revealed your Son not in power, but in poverty, not to the settled, but to the searching. As we follow the light you place before us, stretch our patience, widen our welcome, and steady our steps. May our homes, our communities and our lives be places where strangers find joy, children find hope and your hidden presence is gently revealed. Amen.

## **The Day the Vatican Shrank**

Epiphany, Growing Up, and Trusting a God Bigger Than Any Church

January 4, 2026



I visited Vatican City yesterday, and everything felt smaller. The saints atop the colonnade did not tower the way they once did. The Sistine Chapel seemed dimmer. Even the Basilica of St. Peter no longer felt like the largest church in the world. I realized, walking through those familiar spaces, that something in me had changed. I was no longer seeing the Vatican through my youthful, idealizing eyes. I had grown up.

And with that growth came the epiphany enjoyed by so many millions before me: Sometimes we need to leave our “mother church” for a time—or forever—trusting that God is bigger than any church, and that salvation is not confined to membership in any particular belief system, church, sect or cult (Jn. 10:16).

### **When What Once Towered Over Us No Longer Does**

As children, adults loom large over us. Parents, teachers and authority figures tower over us, often mixing care with fear. They feel all-knowing, all-powerful and, at times, terrifying. As we physically grow and emotionally mature, however, the proportions shift. Those adults do not shrink. We simply grow.

What once felt absolute reveals cracks. Idealized notions fade. Authority becomes human—sometimes painfully human. This is not betrayal. It is development. Psychologists call it differentiation. The spiritual tradition calls it maturation.

Today’s celebration of the Solemnity of the Epiphany of Our Lord celebrates revelation, not comfort. The magi, outsiders to the Church, are called by God. They do not stay where they started. They leave familiar systems, travel beyond borders, and return home by another way. Growth always involves movement, and movement often involves loss.

### **Loving What Hurt Us, and Knowing When to Leave**

Mature love is honest. It loves “warts and all.” It also recognizes when proximity becomes damaging and relationships become toxic. Many of us know this in family systems. Even foundational relationships can become unsafe. Staying is not always holy. Leaving is not always betrayal.

From the Vatican, I thought yesterday of a friend. We’ll call him Preetam. A brilliant, young Indian-American studying engineering at one of the top schools in the nation, Preetam made the courageous decision to come out to his parents as gay. They disowned him. They cut off financial support. They effectively abandoned him. Preetam moved more than 1,000 miles away, worked various jobs, saved relentlessly, and eventually resumed his studies elsewhere. I am profoundly proud of him.

Leaving nearly broke him. Staying—no longer an option—might have destroyed him.

### **Those Cast Out by Their “Mother”**

From the Vatican, I also thought yesterday of an old priest who had served the Roman Catholic Church since my childhood. We’ll call him

Father John. After years of faithful service, Father John bravely stepped outside the Church. “Bravely,” I say, because he left with nothing: no money, no pension, no retirement, no safety net. Unfortunately for him and so many others, a graduate degree in Catholic theology, even from a premier Catholic university, translates poorly into economic survival!

Throughout 2025, Father John reached out to me for help. Each time, I assisted. And each time, I grew more bitter toward the “mother Church” that now offered him no care or support after a lifetime of service. Thoughts of Father John led me to another memory: of an old priest who once sat me down when I was a young priest and growled, “If you’re ever going to leave, leave now. Don’t wait until you’re my age and you can’t!” He knew what it meant to be locked in a relationship that could discard him penniless in an instant.

Don’t get me wrong. I am grateful that I can help, even in small ways, those whom my “mother” has cast out. But I also experience a mixture of feelings about the way in which “Holy Mother Church” continues to so despicably treat some of her children.

### **Outside the Boat, God Still Moves**

Seeing the Vatican “from the outside” changes everything. The entrance to the Vatican Museum winds through an exhibit on boats. For those fluent in theology, the symbolism of Peter’s Barque is unmistakable. The ancient teaching silently echoes: *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. Outside the safety of the Church’s “boat,” you’re on your own!

Yet, Epiphany tells a different story. God reveals Godself not to insiders, but to foreigners. Not to priests, but to astrologers of another religion. Not in the Temple, but in a family home. God meets seekers outside the sanctioned system and no longer demands that they first board a given boat.

From the outside, I now see how “Holy Mother Church” infantilizes so many adults. Priests and religious who faithfully serve for decades are kept in states of dependence, uniformly dressed and bound by vows of poverty, chastity and obedience that often function less like spiritual disciplines and more like means of control. “Good” children sing the Church’s song. “Obedient” children do not dare to leave.

### **Leaving Mother and Living With the Consequences**

Still, many have left. According to the Pew Research Center, *13% of Americans now self-identify as former Roman Catholics*. If we united, we would form the second-largest religion in the U.S.! Another study suggests that *more than a thousand Mexicans leave the Roman Catholic Church every single day*. Let those numbers sink in. These are not casual

decisions or departures. Leaving a “mother” who no longer nourishes you carries a mix of feelings, ranging from grief and guilt, to liberation and fuller life.

Pop culture captures this ambivalence well. From the aching love-hate relationship with home in “Lady Bird,” and the portrayal of duty as emotional captivity in “The Crown,” to Taylor Swift’s repeated insistence on “choosing myself,” our culture understands what theology often resists: Sometimes survival requires departure.

Epiphany reminds us that God travels. God migrates. God shows up beyond the borders that once held us bound.

### **What To Do With This Epiphany**

Concrete calls to action for seekers might include the following:

- **Honor people’s departures.** Resist shaming those who, for their safety or integrity, leave the Church or certain situations.
- **Support the cast-out.** Offer concrete assistance to former clergy, former Catholics and others abandoned by their families of origin.
- **Rethink salvation.** Teach and preach a God whose mercy exceeds ecclesial boundaries.
- **Tell fuller stories.** Share narratives of faith found beyond certain walls.
- **Advocate for reform.** Challenge structures that infantilize adults and punish conscience.
- **Practice Epiphany spirituality.** Look for God’s revelation in unexpected places and unfamiliar faces.

### **Following the Star, Even Far From Home**

On Epiphany, we celebrate the fact that the magi left behind certainty. They followed a star, not a system. They encountered God, not an institution. And when warned in a dream, they did not return the way they came.

My visit to the Vatican gave me an epiphany I did not expect: The Church has grown smaller—precisely because God has grown larger. The walls have receded, but grace has expanded. If we dare to trust that God is bigger than our “mother churches,” we may discover that leaving is not the end of faith, but indeed the beginning of an even deeper one!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- When did something I once idealized begin to look different to me?
- Where have I stayed—out of guilt, rather than love?



- How do I respond to those who have left their “mother church”?
- What does Epiphany reveal about where God chooses to dwell?
- Where might God be inviting me to follow the star beyond familiar boundaries?
- How can I honestly love my church and my family or origin without denying its harm?

### **Let Us Pray**

God of revelation and roadways, You led seekers beyond borders and back by another way. When our institutions and families of origin grow small and our questions grow large, teach us to trust your presence beyond the walls we know. Heal those wounded by the Church that bears your name. Bless those who stay and those who must leave. And lead us, always, by your light into deeper truth and wider love. Amen.

## **Beyond Infallibility, Toward Fidelity**

Lessons from Joseph Hubert Reinkens  
on Courage, Conscience and Catholic Continuity

January 4, 2026



In nearly ten years of seminary studies, there was one Roman Catholic priest whose name I never heard. For a reason. Then, after serving as a priest in the Roman Catholic Church for over ten years, when I finally summoned the courage to continue my ministry outside the Roman fold (Jn. 10:16), I discovered that I was not alone: There are all sorts of brave women and men who have gone before us! The Dutch Old Catholic Church was birthed in 1724 with the consecration of the first Old Catholic Archbishop of Utrecht, but Old Catholicism would not have spread throughout Europe without the priest whom we celebrate today.

### **A Scholar Formed by the Fathers**

Joseph Hubert Reinkens (1821–1896) was no fringe agitator or embittered dissident. Father Reinkens was a serious Catholic intellectual, a professor of theology, and a scholar deeply immersed in the early Church Fathers. His most famous work, *Cyprian and the Unity of the Church*, reveals much about his ecclesiology. Reinkens believed that unity in the Church emerged not from centralized power, but from communion, consensus and fidelity to the faith of the undivided early Church.

This grounding mattered. When the sham Vatican Council of 1869–1870 moved toward defining purported papal infallibility, Reinkens objected not out of rebellion, but out of historical conscience. He wrote pamphlets questioning whether such a doctrine could be reconciled with Scripture, the witness of the Church Fathers, and the lived practice of the early Church. For Reinkens, Catholic tradition was something to be received humbly, not expanded unilaterally.

### **Vatican I and the Cost of Conscience**

The 1870 definition of purported papal infallibility and universal papal jurisdiction was a watershed moment for many Catholic theologians. For Reinkens and others, it represented a rupture, rather than a development—a need for faithful Catholics to return to the ideals of the primitive (or “old”) Church. When Old Catholics formally separated from Rome in the 1870s and 1880s—culminating in the 1889 Union of Utrecht of Old Catholic Churches—they did so reluctantly and with grief, convinced that they were preserving Catholic continuity, rather than abandoning it.

Reinkens did not seek episcopal office. Yet when the Old Catholic communities of Germany needed a bishop, they chose him. His election and consecration marked a decisive moment: Old Catholicism moved from protest to pastoral reality. Under Reinkens’ leadership, the movement crystallized into an organized church, gaining legal recognition in several German states.

This was not schism for its own sake. It was, in Reinkens’ mind, obedience to truth as he understood it!

### **A Catholic Vision Broader Than Rome**

Reinkens’ catholicity was expansive. He consecrated Eduard Herzog as Old Catholic bishop of Switzerland, helping to root the movement beyond Germany. He also advocated for the recognition of Anglican orders by the Old Catholic Church of the Netherlands, long before ecumenism became a Catholic watchword. He imagined a Church

reunited not by submission, but by mutual recognition, shared sacraments, and apostolic continuity.

In this, Reinkens looks strikingly modern. He anticipated the ecumenical impulses of Vatican II while standing outside the structures that later embraced them. History, once again, complicates the tidy narratives we were taught.

### **Lessons for Us Today**

- **Take history seriously.** Deep engagement with the early Church can unsettle comfortable certainties, but it can also deepen faith.
- **Honor conscience, even when it costs.** Reinkens reminds us that obedience to God sometimes requires resistance to ecclesial authority.
- **Distinguish unity from uniformity.** The Church's oneness need not depend on centralized control.
- **Trust slow reform.** Reinkens planted seeds whose fruits would not appear until generations later.
- **Refuse caricatures of "leaving."** Some departures are acts of fidelity, not betrayal.
- **Remain catholic in spirit.** Openness to other traditions can strengthen, rather than dilute, Catholic identity.

### **Standing in a Long Line of Courage**

Joseph Hubert Reinkens stands as a quiet but formidable witness to a truth many Catholics are rediscovering: We are not the first to struggle, to question, or to step beyond familiar boundaries in order to remain faithful. On this tenth day of Christmas, as we still linger in the mystery of God-with-us and look toward the year ahead, Reinkens invites us to trust that the Spirit works not only through institutions, but also through courageous conscience. The Church is larger, older and more resilient than we were often led to believe!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- Where have I been taught a simplified version of Church history that no longer satisfies my conscience?
- When have I confused obedience with silence?
- What voices or stories was I never taught, and why?
- How do I respond when fidelity to truth feels risky?
- Where might God be calling me to step beyond fear this year?
- What does catholicity truly mean to me?

### Let Us Pray

Faithful God, you have guided your Church through centuries of conflict, reform and renewal. We thank you for witnesses like Joseph Hubert Reinkens, who loved the Church enough to challenge it and trusted the Spirit enough to follow conscience wherever it led. As we begin this new year, grant us wisdom without rigidity, courage without bitterness, and fidelity rooted in love, rather than fear. May we remain open to the breadth of your work in the world, and faithful to the truth that sets us free. Amen.

### A Bishop for the Hated and the Hungry

Lessons from St. John Neumann on Immigration, Fear and Fidelity

January 5, 2026



Those who know Austin, Texas are aware of the deeply-historical racial divide between East Austin – where African-American and Latino communities were pushed after a segregationist 1928 city master plan – and the land west of IH-35, where the city and state governments and The University of Texas at Austin reside. So you can imagine my surprise as a young seminarian to discover that a wealthy West Austin parish had been recently named for St. John Neumann. The irony was hard to miss: Neumann devoted his life to immigrants, the poor and the exploited – precisely those “East Austin communities” historically excluded by the powerful, wealthy and comfortable!

### A Saint in a Hostile Land

St. John Neumann (1811-1860) arrived in the United States as a young immigrant priest from Bohemia at a time when Roman Catholics were viewed with profound suspicion. The U.S. of Neumann’s lifetime was openly hostile to Catholics, particularly poor Irish and German immigrants. Anti-Catholic riots erupted in cities. Churches and convents were burned. The Know-Nothing movement flourished, fueled by fears

that Catholics owed allegiance to a foreign pope, rather than to American democracy. Within this context, it's not surprising that our nation did not elect a Catholic U.S. President until 1960!

More than a century before, Neumann knew this hostility firsthand. He ministered tirelessly among immigrant communities who were treated as disposable labor, cultural threats and moral inferiors. When he was appointed bishop of Philadelphia – the largest diocese in the nation at the time – he did not retreat into safety or respectability. He doubled down on proximity!

### **Shepherd of Immigrants**

Neumann walked miles to visit parishes. He founded schools so immigrant children would not be forced into institutions hostile to their faith and culture. He expanded parochial education, not as a power play, but as an act of protection. He learned languages. He listened. He clearly sided with the people whom society blamed for its anxieties.

His episcopacy was brief and exhausting. He died at 48, worn down by pastoral labor. Yet his impact reshaped American Catholicism. He did not try to make immigrants invisible or “respectable.” He insisted that the Church belong to them.

### **Then and Now**

It is impossible to read Neumann's story without hearing echoes of our own moment. Today, immigrants are once again cast as threats. White nationalism has moved from the margins to the mainstream. Xenophobic rhetoric pours out from the White House, is normalized by courts—including the Supreme Court—and is enforced through the daily actions of ICE and Border Patrol.

Families are separated. Asylum seekers are criminalized. Brown bodies are surveilled, detained and deported in the name of “order.” And too often, Christians remain silent, or worse, complicit.

Neumann offers no ambiguity. His fidelity to Christ led him directly into solidarity with immigrants. For him, this was not politics. It was the Gospel.

### **Lessons Today**

- **Stand clearly with immigrants.** Neutrality in the face of persecution is not holiness.
- **Read history honestly.** Catholics were once the feared outsiders. Memory should form conscience.
- **Reject respectability.** The Gospel does not require approval from dominant culture.

- **Invest in the marginalized.** Neumann built schools, not walls.
- **Practice embodied solidarity.** Walk neighborhoods. Learn names. Share risk.
- **Challenge complicity.** Silence in the face of state violence is a moral failure.

### **Choosing Sides in the Incarnation**

On this eleventh day of Christmas, as we return to the rhythms of school and work, St. John Neumann reminds us that the Incarnation is not abstract. God chose sides—entering history as a vulnerable body in a colonized land. Neumann followed that God into immigrant neighborhoods and hostile streets. The question before us this new year is not whether we admire his courage, but whether we will imitate it. The Church's credibility depends on where we stand when fear targets the stranger!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- When have I benefited from systems that exclude immigrants?
- Where do I see modern versions of the Know-Nothing movement today?
- How does fear shape my political or religious silence?
- What would it mean for my community to truly belong to immigrants?
- Whose suffering do I rationalize, rather than confront?
- How is Christ asking me to cross a boundary this year?

### **Let Us Pray**

God of the migrant and the refugee, you led your Son into exile and raised up shepherds like John Neumann to stand with those despised and discarded. Strip us of fear disguised as prudence and comfort mistaken for faith. Give us eyes to see your face in those the world deports, detains and denies. As this new year begins, teach us to choose solidarity over safety, and love over silence. We ask this through Christ our companion on the road. Amen.

## The Epstein Hermeneutic

An Epiphany About Seeing What We're Told to Ignore

January 5, 2026



Yesterday I visited the Borghese Gallery here in Rome and stood before Bernini's white marble "Rape of Persephone." In astonishing detail, the crowned god Pluto carries off the helpless Persephone. Her body twists. Her knees lock. She tries to push him away. Power is etched into every contorted muscle of Pluto. Violence is rendered beautiful, though certainly not excusable.

In that instant, my mind made the unexpected leap to the U.S. military's capture of a foreign head of state on Saturday morning—a dramatic, unilateral action that has dominated headlines. Why did we, as a nation, carry him off? Was it simply to remove a dictator or "bring him to law"? Or to rape his country's oil reserves? Or, as pastor and theologian John Pavlovitz suggests, was it something else entirely: another attempt to distract us from what we are not seeing?

Pavlovitz's line that caught my attention was disarmingly simple: "The thing about Venezuela is that we need to see the Epstein files."

His words birthed a true epiphany. Suddenly, I had a hermeneutic—a lens—for interpreting much of the chaos of recent months. In the swirl of headline after headline generated by our current U.S. Administration, what deeper current might be pulling our attention away from what we are not being shown?

### What Are Hermeneutics?

Hermeneutics are a theory of interpretation, first developed to read texts—especially Scripture—with attention to context, history and

meaning. Hermeneutics remind us that we never encounter words, events or images neutrally. We always interpret them, consciously or unconsciously, through a framework.

Christians rely on hermeneutics all the time:

- We read Moses striking the rock not merely as personal failure, but as part of Israel's painful formation (Num. 20:10–12).
- We read Jesus' parables not as charming stories, but as destabilizing invitations to conversion (Mk. 4:10–12).
- We hear Paul insist that "the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2Cor. 3:6), teaching us to interpret law through love, rather than weaponize legalism.

Hermeneutics can liberate us — or blind us — depending on whose lens we adopt and what questions we refuse to ask.

### Defining the "Epstein Hermeneutic"

The Epstein Hermeneutic, then, is a discipline of attention. It asks a simple but unsettling question: *When political leaders repeatedly manufacture spectacle, where might our attention not be going?*

Pavlovitz often articulates this instinct through brief, pointed observations. In response to this weekend's headlines, for instance, he wrote:

"We're not the good guys."

"I know a nation looking to have its legitimate president removed."

And most pointedly, "The thing about Venezuela is that we need to see the Epstein files."

With that final line, the "light bulb" went on: Pavlovitz invites us to moral suspicion of — you guessed it — distraction!

I know a bit about magic and showmanship: In order to convince you that I can make a handkerchief "disappear," I must first take your attention away from the hand holding it. Without words, I have to say, "Look over here!" All showmen know this. Perhaps it's the perfect metaphor for the very troubling distraction that unfolded in Venezuela this weekend.

So I began reframing recent headlines through what I now call the Epstein Hermeneutic.

Put simply: *When leaders constantly seize attention, we should ask whether the flood of breaking news is designed to keep something else safely out of view.*

In other words, the Epstein Hermeneutic insists that we attend not only to what we are told to look at, but also to what we are being trained *not* to see.



Rephrasing Pavlovitz, then:

- The thing about acetaminophen (the active ingredient in Tylenol) is that we need to see the Epstein files.
- The thing about demolishing the East Wing of the White House to build a grand ballroom is that we need to see the Epstein files.
- The thing about renaming the Kennedy Center is that we need to see the Epstein files.
- The thing about creating a farcical White House “Walk of Fame” is that we need to see the Epstein files.
- The thing about putting a president’s likeness on a coin is that we need to see the Epstein files.

You get the drift. *We cannot allow ourselves to be distracted – not even for a moment.* Not even when Pluto is carrying off Persephone!

### **Why Interpretive Frames Matter**

We live inside media ecosystems that thrive on outrage and velocity. When one story exhausts us, another is instantly manufactured. Fireworks draw the eye, while corners remain dark.

Popular culture has warned us about this for years:

- In *The Matrix*, the system pacifies people by controlling perception.
- In *Don’t Look Up*, real catastrophe is eclipsed by entertainment and branding.
- In *House of Cards*, power lies in narrative dominance, not truth.

Hermeneutics helps us discern not only *what* we are seeing, but *why* we are seeing it.

For Christians and Catholics, this deeply matters. We are not called to cynicism, but to discernment. *We read politics the way we read Scripture: with historical awareness, moral gravity and an unflinching concern for justice.*

### **Applying the Epstein Hermeneutic**

This, then, is a call to disciplined attention.

The Epstein Hermeneutic asks:

- *Are spectacles crowding out verifiable, consequential facts?*
- *Are powerful actors shaping narratives that protect themselves from accountability?*
- *Do we allow distraction to dull our moral senses?*

We see this pattern repeatedly: inflammatory events and cultural flashpoints dominate the news, while court filings, investigative records, policy changes and systemic inequities quietly proceed.

What we ignore forms us, as surely as what we consume.

### Calls to Action

- **Cultivate hermeneutical awareness.** Treat political narratives as texts to be interpreted, not realities to be passively absorbed.
- **Commit to truth-seeking.** Support independent journalism and public-interest reporting.
- **Challenge distraction politics.** Ask why certain stories appear precisely when others fade.
- **Educate your communities.** Teach others to recognize and resist spin cycles.
- **Pray for discernment.** Ask not only for clarity, but for courage to respond.
- **Refuse reductionism.** Reject simplistic binaries that excuse abuse of power.

### Where the Epstein Files Stand

The so-called Epstein files have not yet been fully released. As we await review and disclosure, no authoritative public evidence has confirmed specific claims of presidential wrongdoing. For this reason, we must resist asserting as fact what remains sealed or unverified.

We also know, though, according to recent reporting, that accused sex trafficker Jeffrey Epstein wrote in 2017 that he had met “very bad people, none as bad as Trump,” then texted in 2018: “I am the one who can take [Trump] down.” If true, it seems there is plentiful reason for a showman to distract and say “look over here!” —yes, even if that means carrying off Persephone this weekend and perhaps others in the future.

Which is why we say, together now: *We need to see the Epstein files!*

The Epstein Hermeneutic, then, does not rely on hidden, gnostic knowledge. It rests on a simple moral principle: *When those with power obstruct transparency while orchestrating distraction, the obstruction itself demands scrutiny. Profound scrutiny.*

### From Marble to Meaning: Naming Real Power

Back in the Borghese Gallery, Bernini’s “Rape of Persephone” refuses to let us look away. Beauty does not sanitize violence. Power does not justify domination.

That is the work of both art and hermeneutics. We do not stop at surface meaning. We probe beneath it.

As we begin this first full week of the new year, following yesterday’s Sunday celebration of the Solemnity of the Epiphany, may we adopt a way of seeing that resists distraction and seeks moral coherence. The

light the magi followed did not lead them to spectacle or empire, but to a vulnerable child.

May our gaze be as steady!

### Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where am I most vulnerable to distraction in my civic and spiritual life?
- When have I mistaken spectacle for substance?
- How do I distinguish fear-making and truth-telling narratives?
- Where does God invite me to sustained attention rather than reactive outrage?
- What stories am I not seeing, and who benefits from that absence?

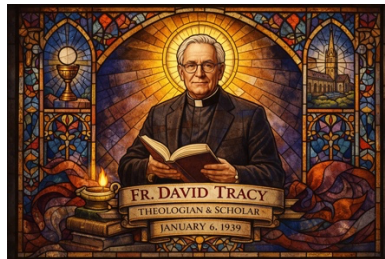
### Let Us Pray

God of truth and light, open our minds to interpret with wisdom and our hearts to act with courage. Help us attend not only to what is loud, but to what is lasting and just. Strengthen us to seek truth, love mercy, and walk humbly with you, even when distraction clamors for our gaze. May your Spirit guide us into clarity and courage in this new year. Amen.

## Faithful Dissent and the Courage to Think

Epiphany Lessons from David Tracy

January 6, 2026



When I lived in Washington, D.C. and studied at the Washington Theological Union, I learned the story of heroic professors at The Catholic University of America (CUA) from the one with whom I lived: professor emeritus Father Berard Marthaler, O.F.M.Conv., the author of *The Creed*. He delighted in telling stories of the attacks that he and his colleagues endured from their own church after 1968. And one of his favorite photos showed him standing, grinning like the Cheshire Cat, beside Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI), who

persecuted them for years as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Today, on this Solemnity of the Epiphany, we celebrate one of Father Berard's colleagues at CUA: theologian and priest David Tracy, born on this day in 1939.

### **Epiphany and the Revelation of Conscience**

Epiphany celebrates revelation: God is made known beyond boundaries, God is disclosed in unexpected places. It is a fitting day to honor David Tracy, whose life and work insist that truth is not exhausted by authority, and that conscience is not the enemy of faith. Tracy's witness reminds us that revelation does not end with an encyclical. Sometimes, revelation appears in dissent!

In 1968, Tracy was teaching systematic theology at The Catholic University of America when Pope Paul VI issued *Humanae vitae*, with its reaffirmation of the prohibition of artificial contraception. Many Catholic theologians, clergy and laypeople had expected a different outcome, especially after the work of the papal commission that studied the issue and reportedly recommended change. When the encyclical was promulgated, Tracy joined other CUA professors in publicly rejecting it as an inadequate response to the lived realities of married Catholics.

This was not rebellion for rebellion's sake. It was conscience speaking from within the Church!

### **The Price of Integrity**

Tracy was not alone. Among those who challenged *Humanae vitae* were Charles Curran, Bernard Häring and others who believed that Catholic moral theology must seriously attend to human experience, historical development and responsible discernment. They argued that faithful Catholics could, in good conscience, disagree with a non-infallible teaching.

The response from church authorities was swift and punitive. Tracy and his colleagues were tried by the faculty senate. Some were dismissed. Others were marginalized. Careers were disrupted. Reputations were attacked. The message was clear: *Obedience mattered more than inquiry.*

Yet Epiphany teaches us that truth often appears to outsiders first.

### **A Theology That Takes the World Seriously**

After leaving CUA, Tracy taught for decades at the University of Chicago Divinity School, where his influence deepened and widened. He became one of the most important Catholic systematic theologians of the late twentieth century, known especially for his works:

- *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology*,

- *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*, and
- *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope*.

Tracy insisted that theology must always be public. It must speak not only to the Church, but also to the academy and to society. He rejected closed systems and rigid certainties, arguing instead that Christian faith lives in dialogue—with culture, with other religions, with the sciences, and with the ambiguities of human existence.

Central to Tracy's theology is the analogical imagination: the conviction that God is encountered through symbols, stories and experiences that never fully capture the divine mystery. This stands in stark contrast to authoritarian theologies that claim total clarity and demand unquestioning assent. For Tracy, humility before mystery is not weakness. It is fidelity.

### **A Catholic Who Stayed at the Table**

What makes David Tracy especially compelling is that he never abandoned the Church, even when the Church abandoned him. He did not become anti-Catholic. He became more deeply Catholic. He continued to write, teach and pray from within the tradition, even as he challenged its failures.

Like the magi of Epiphany, Tracy followed the light he was given, even when it led him away from official centers of power. And like the magi, he refused to return by the same road.

His life testifies to the truth: *Dissent, when rooted in love for the tradition and concern for human dignity, can be an act of profound faith.*

### **What Tracy Teaches Us Today**

In a Church still struggling with such topics as sexuality, authority, and the role of conscience, Tracy's witness remains urgently relevant. He reminds us that Catholic theology develops through debate, not decree. He teaches that silence in the face of injustice is not obedience, and that intellectual honesty is a spiritual discipline.

As we return to work and school on this twelfth day of Christmas, Tracy invites us to carry Epiphany's light into our classrooms, workplaces and public life!

### **Calls to Action**

- Defend conscience as a sacred space where God still speaks.
- Support theologians and leaders who question unjust teachings.
- Read Catholic theology that engages culture, rather than fears it.
- Teach Church history honestly, including moments of repression.

- Refuse to confuse unity with uniformity.
- “Stay at the table,” even when it would be easier to walk away.

### **Epiphany Beyond Obedience**

David Tracy’s life reminds us that revelation is rarely comfortable. Epiphany does not simply confirm what we already believe. It unsettles us. It asks us to trust that God’s truth exceeds our structures and sometimes confronts them. For faithful Catholics today, Tracy stands as a sign that faithful dissent is not a betrayal of the Church, but one of the ways the Spirit keeps it alive!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- Where have I experienced tension between conscience and authority?
- What voices have been silenced that still deserve to be heard?
- How do I respond when my faith leads me into conflict?
- What risks am I willing to take for truth and integrity?
- How might Epiphany invite me to follow God “by another way” this year?

### **Let Us Pray**

God of light and mystery, you reveal yourself not only in certainty, but also in questions honestly asked and courageously lived. Bless all who seek truth with humility, who dissent with love, and who remain faithful even when the cost is high. As we step into this new year, lead us by your light, not always by familiar roads, but always toward deeper justice, mercy and truth. Amen.

## A Dangerous New Season

### Standing at the Threshold of Escalation

January 6, 2026



Last night, my husband and I attended a concert at St. Paul's Inside the Walls here in Rome. Beneath brilliantly-frescoed ceilings and shimmering mosaics depicting saints with the faces of international heroes (including U.S. Presidents Abraham Lincoln and Ulysses Grant), a sextet of strings and a harpsichord performed Vivaldi's "Four Seasons." In the course of forty minutes, we were carried from the buoyant lightness of spring to the abrasive scrape of winter, from harmony to tension and back again.

As the music echoed through the church, I found myself reflecting on seasons — not only the meteorological ones Vivaldi so vividly evokes, but the seasons of human life, the seasons of institutions, and the seasons of nations. Some seasons see growth. Others witness dormancy, diminution or death.

This weekend, as the U.S. military seized a foreign head of state and as threats quickly followed that Cuba, Colombia or Panama could be next, I could not shake the feeling that our country may be crossing into a new and potentially perilous season.

### **"For Everything There Is a Season"**

Scripture takes seasons seriously. Qoheleth famously wrote: "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven" (Eccl. 3:1). The text does not romanticize seasons. Some are for planting.

Others are for uprooting. Some are for healing. Others are for tearing down.

Jesus himself read the signs of the times and rebuked those who refused to interpret them (Mt. 16:2-3). Paul reminded the Corinthian community that “the present form of this world is passing away” (1Cor. 7:31). The Book of Revelation, for all its strangeness, insists that history moves through discernible phases and that empire eventually reveals its true and often monstrous character.

The biblical witness is clear: *Ignoring seasons is not faith. It is denial.*

### **Seasons of Our Human Lives**

Developmental theorists tell us what most of us learn by living long enough: *Life unfolds in stages*. Childhood differs from adolescence. Early adulthood differs from midlife. Later years offer perspective precisely because we have survived earlier seasons.

The older we get, the more “seasons” we can name in our lives. We learn that denial during a difficult season rarely shortens it. We also learn that growth often requires plainly naming reality, even when doing so feels costly.

Spiritual maturity does not mean pretending that winter feels like spring. It means recognizing winter for what it is and preparing accordingly.

### **Seasons of Organizations and Institutions**

Organizations, too, move through seasons. Many leaders know the familiar organizational arc of “forming, storming, norming, performing.” More recently, scholars have added a fifth season that we often resist acknowledging: dissolution. Not everything lasts. Not every structure deserves preservation.

Nations follow similar patterns. Democracies can mature or corrode. Constitutions can be honored or hollowed out. Power can be stewarded or hoarded.

When institutions enter a storming or disintegrative season, escalation often replaces restraint. Rules are tested. Norms are discarded. External enemies suddenly become useful.

That is why this past weekend matters.

### **A New Season for the United States?**

The unilateral seizure of a foreign head of state by the U.S. military and subsequent rhetoric suggesting that another nation could be next do not occur in a vacuum. They emerge within a broader pattern: a president who increasingly speaks of acquiring territory, claiming



resources, absorbing nations, and asserting dominance beyond established international norms.

In his second inaugural address, he hinted at taking back the Panama Canal. Since then, he has floated the idea of taking Greenland, mocked Canada as a potential “51<sup>st</sup> state,” and acted in ways that destabilize long-standing diplomatic assumptions. Such rhetoric does not merely posture. It invites imitation. It gives adversaries moral cover. It accelerates global volatility.

Many observers believe these escalations coincide with a growing threat closer to home: the possible release of the Epstein files and what they may reveal. Whether or not those files ultimately contain evidence of presidential wrongdoing, the pattern of distraction is unmistakable. Spectacle proliferates when accountability looms.

This is what a dangerous season looks like. Not sudden collapse, but steady normalization of the unthinkable!

### **What This Season Demands of Us**

This is where the temptation to spiritualize becomes strong. As Christians or Catholics, we say we will pray. We will light candles. We will lower our voices. We will wait.

To be clear, this is *not* a season for lowering our voices and waiting. Prayer matters. Silence can be holy. But there are seasons when silence becomes complicity!

The question before us is urgent: *What can we do now to hasten a new season of accountability through the 2026 midterm elections?*

Here are concrete starting points:

- **Plainly name reality.** Refuse euphemisms that soften abuses of power. Call escalation what it is.
- **Stay civically engaged.** Support voter registration, protection and turnout efforts, especially among young and marginalized voters.
- **Resist distraction.** Do not allow spectacle to eclipse sustained attention to democratic erosion.
- **Educate relentlessly.** Share credible analysis with friends, family members and community members who feel overwhelmed or numb.
- **Support institutions under attack.** Defend journalists, civil servants, judges and educators who uphold democratic norms.
- **Vote strategically.** Treat the 2026 midterms not as routine, but as a moral referendum on accountability.

After all, these acts are not about partisan loyalty. They are about preserving the fragile architecture of a constitutional republic.

Elizabeth Willing Powel reportedly asked Benjamin Franklin: “Well, Doctor, what have we got, a republic or a monarchy?” His answer was revealing: “A republic, if you can keep it.” It now falls to us in this “season” of our republic to ensure that our children and grandchildren will enjoy the blessings that our parents and grandparents encountered here.

### **Reading the Signs of the Season**

Popular culture has been warning us for years.

- In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, tyranny arrives gradually, wrapped in reassurance.
- In *Star Wars*, the republic falls not to invasion, but to manufactured fear.
- In *Don’t Look Up*, catastrophe becomes entertainment – until it is irreversible.

These stories resonate because they mirror reality. Seasons of decline rarely announce themselves as decline. They call themselves strength. The ruins of Rome remind us: Decline does not begin with enemies at the gate, but with leaders convinced they are above consequence. The ruins are not warnings of weakness, but of unchecked confidence. And our Judeo-Christian scriptures demand that we read the signs of the seasons around us not with panic, but with courage.

### **From Vivaldi to Vigilance**

As we left St. Paul’s Inside the Walls, the final strains of Vivaldi’s “Winter” still rang in my ears—sharp, unsettling, unresolved. Vivaldi does not pretend winter is pleasant. He lets it scrape. He lets it ache. And yet, embedded in the composition is the promise that winter is not the final movement.

Christians and Catholics celebrate today the “twelfth day of Christmas,” the traditional date for the Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord—a feast about revelation, about light that exposes truth and demands response. Today we recall that the magi did not return to Herod; they chose a different road.

If this is indeed a darker season for our nation, then our faithfulness must be lived out with vigilance, engagement and moral clarity. Our faith demands that we refuse distraction. It challenges us to help our country move, deliberately and peacefully, toward a season of accountability.

Unlike our annual cycle of meteorological seasons, political “springs” never arrive on their own!

### Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- What season do I believe our nation is entering, and why?
- Where am I tempted to spiritualize, rather than act?
- How do fear and fatigue shape my civic engagement?
- What responsibility does my faith place on me in unstable times?
- What different road might God be inviting me to take now?

### Let Us Pray

God of time and history, You stand at the beginning and the end of every season. Give us eyes to read the signs of the times and hearts courageous enough to respond. Protect the vulnerable when power overreaches. Strengthen all who labor for truth, justice and accountability. Lead our nation, not through spectacle and fear, but toward responsibility, restraint and renewal. May we walk faithfully through this season until a better one is born. Amen.

### Guardians of the Ancient Light

New Year Lessons from Three Old Catholic Bishops

January 7, 2026



As we move through the final week of the Christmas season—between the first epiphany to the magi and the second epiphany at the Baptism of the Lord—we remain immersed in stories of revelation. Christ is revealed to seekers from afar, to the crowds at the Jordan River, and soon, at a wedding in Cana, through ordinary human joy. These epiphanies invite us not only to look outward, but also to look backward, asking how the Church has discerned truth and faithfulness across time.

On January 7 and 8, we remember three Old Catholic bishops—Augustin Podolák, Nikolaus Hummel and Johann Heßkamp—whose lives offer us a compelling hermeneutic for the new year: fidelity to the ancient Church, courage under pressure, and reform grounded in conscience.

### **Augustin Podolák: Faithfulness Under Persecution**

Augustin Podolák (1912–1991) led the Old Catholic Church in what was then Czechoslovakia from 1950 until his death, during decades marked by Communist repression. Churches were surveilled, clergy were harassed or imprisoned, and public expressions of faith were tightly controlled. The persecution was not only political, but spiritual: an attempt to force religious communities into silence or submission.

Podolák and others responded not with triumphalism, but with quiet perseverance. They preserved sacramental life, sustained community in private homes, and trusted that fidelity mattered more than recognition. This context also helps us understand later acts of pastoral courage in the region, such as the clandestine ministry of Bishop Felix Davídek and his ordination of Ludmila Javorová as a Roman Catholic womanpriest in 1970. When institutions collapse under pressure, conscience often becomes the final sanctuary. Podolák's witness reminds us that the Church survives not because it is protected, but because it is faithful.

### **Nikolaus Hummel: Shepherding Through Change**

Nikolaus Hummel (1924–2006) served as the fourth bishop of the Austrian Old Catholic Church for twenty years, from 1970 to 1990. His episcopate unfolded in the wake of Vatican II reforms, amid rapid social change, ecumenical openness, and growing expectations for democratic governance within the Church. Austria, long shaped by Roman Catholic dominance, was also wrestling with pluralism and secularization.

Hummel's leadership required patience and trust. He guided a small but committed church through questions of identity, ecumenical partnership and pastoral relevance. His tenure emphasized collegial leadership, theological seriousness, and a refusal to define Catholicism by obedience alone. For Catholics today, Hummel models a style of episcopacy rooted not in control, but in accompaniment.

### **Johann Heßkamp: Reform Rooted in Antiquity**

Johann Heßkamp (1824–1892), whom we'll celebrate tomorrow, served as the sixteenth archbishop of Utrecht. He stands as one of the great theological architects of modern Old Catholicism. In the wake of Vatican I, he challenged the doctrines of purported papal infallibility and universal jurisdiction, arguing that no council or bishop could claim authority divorced from the witness of the ancient Church. Writing under the pseudonym Adulfus, he insisted that Catholic truth must be measured against the consensus of the Church's earliest centuries.

Heÿkamp inherited and deepened a legacy begun by figures such as Dominique Varlet, Cornelius Steenoven and the Cathedral Chapter of Utrecht in 1723-1724. By convening and chairing the conference that produced the 1889 Declaration of Utrecht, he helped articulate a Catholicism that was both ancient and free—clearing paths toward communion with Orthodox and Anglican churches. His life challenges us to ask whether our own beliefs are rooted in novelty or in the deep soil of tradition.

### **Calls to Action**

- Reclaim the early Church as a living source, not a museum piece.
- Practice courage when institutions fail to protect conscience.
- Support small, faithful communities that reclaim the Church's earliest traditions—including the inclusion of our sisters in the ordained ministries of the Church.
- Value theological rigor alongside pastoral compassion.
- Strengthen ecumenical relationships grounded in mutual respect.
- Resist authoritarianism by cultivating shared leadership.

### **By Another Way Forward**

These three Old Catholic bishops whom we celebrate today and tomorrow remind us that reform and tradition are not enemies. In a Church often tempted by power or nostalgia, they chose fidelity to the Gospel as it was first lived and shared. As we approach the Baptism of the Lord, we are invited to hear again the voice that names belovedness—not dominance—as the heart of divine authority. The path forward for Catholics may feel uncertain, but it is not uncharted. Others have walked it before us, guided by ancient light!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- Where am I being asked to choose conscience over comfort?
- How do I understand authority in the Church?
- What practices connect me to the faith of the earliest Christians?
- Whose quiet perseverance inspires my own discipleship?
- How might I help shape a more collegial Church this year?

### **Let Us Pray**

God of the ancient and ever-new, you revealed your Son to seekers, servants and friends. Strengthen us with the courage of those who kept the faith when power oppressed and truth was costly. Root us deeply in the wisdom of the early Church, and lead us into paths of renewal. May our witness, like theirs, be faithful, hopeful and free. Amen.

## Away from the Noise, Closer to the Gospel

A Roman Holiday, an American Reckoning,  
and the Grace of a Holy Disconnect

January 7, 2026



I write from Rome’s Fiumicino Airport, watching one last sunrise over the Eternal City as my husband and I prepare to board our flight back to the United States after two weeks of holiday travel in Europe. For fifteen days, I largely disconnected from the U.S. news cycle. I did not wake to push notifications, did not doomscroll before breakfast, did not brace myself for the next reckless statement or manufactured outrage issuing from the Trump Administration. The break was brief, but the clarity it brought was bracing. Distance, I have come to believe, can function like a spiritual discipline.

### What Silence Reveals When the Noise Stops

When you step outside the U.S. media ecosystem, something startling happens: The air clears. The constant adrenaline rush of crisis, scandal and distraction falls away, and you begin to notice how unnatural that level of chaos really is. In Italy, the news cadence feels slower and more human-scaled. Politics still matter. Suffering still exists. But the tone is not one of perpetual rage.

Back home, our current U.S. Administration thrives on what Steve Bannon famously called “flooding the zone.” Outrage becomes anesthesia. Every day brings something new, so we never sit long enough with anything old. From Europe, the strategy is suddenly obvious—and frankly juvenile. It resembles less a serious government than a reality-TV writers’ room, always chasing the next cliffhanger. Think *Succession* without the self-awareness, or *The Apprentice* without the irony!

Call to action: Christians and Catholics might practice intentional news “fasting.” Not silence. Not apathy. But disciplined consumption that resists manipulation and protects our moral clarity.

### **Another American Everywhere You Look**

What struck me most in Italy was that the most visible American there is not a politician, but a prelate. Pope Leo XIV's likeness appears in gift shops and bookstores, on churches and streets and, of course, in nearly every Roman Catholic space. His words echo not through cable news, but through his homilies, encyclicals and ordinary conversations. His first book, *Peace Be With You*, is not a branding exercise. It is a pastoral piece grounded in love, mercy, forgiveness and the disarmament of the heart.

Contrast that with the language currently dominating U.S. political life: mockery, cruelty, threats and spectacle. One voice calls people to become more fully human. The other trains us to see enemies everywhere. It is no wonder that many MAGA "Christians" viscerally react to Pope Leo XIV, especially to his recent Christmas message urging welcome rather than deportation of our siblings from other nations. His language exposes theirs. His gentleness indicts their aggression.

We should honestly ask: *What would Jesus object to in the pope's words?*

And then the harder question: *What would Jesus object to in the words and actions of MAGA "Christians"?*

Call to action: Read Pope Leo XIV directly. Quote him. Share him. Let his words, not partisan outrage, shape your Christian imagination.

### **Embarrassment as a Moral Signal**

I will say it plainly: I often feel embarrassed to be an American right now. Not quietly uneasy. Not mildly concerned. Just outright embarrassed. Embarrassed by ICE raids that terrorize families. Embarrassed by our casual cruelty toward migrants. Embarrassed by the destabilization of the global order, including this weekend's unilateral capture of a foreign head of state. Embarrassed by the way power is flexed for spectacle rather than justice.

Traveling abroad sharpens this feeling because you see how closely the world is watching. Our actions ripple outward. Allies grow wary. Adversaries take notes. And the Gospel looks smaller every time we baptize nationalism as faith. The disconnect between what Jesus taught and what many American Christians defend has rarely been more visible.

Call to action: Name the embarrassment. Lament it publicly. Christians should never confuse patriotism with discipleship.

## Epiphany, Again and Again

This week the Church stands between epiphanies. We just celebrated the manifestation of Christ to the nations, represented by the magi, and we now look toward the Baptism of the Lord, when Jesus is revealed again, this time as beloved Son and servant Messiah. Epiphany is about seeing clearly. About recognizing who *God* is – and who we are *not*.

My two-week disconnect functioned as a small epiphany of its own. Away from the din, I more clearly saw how far we have drifted – and how urgently we need conversion, not of hearts alone, but of structures, policies and public witness. Prayer matters, yes. But prayer that does not lead to action becomes escapism dressed up as piety.

Call to action: Refuse spiritual bypassing. Pray deeply – and then act boldly, especially as we move toward the 2026 midterm elections.

## Choosing What We Carry Home

As I sit in this airport, I know I am carrying more than souvenirs and fond memories back to the States. I am carrying perspective. I am carrying resolve. I am carrying a renewed commitment to resist the normalization of cruelty and chaos. The question is whether I – and we – will hold onto that clarity once we re-enter the noise.

Pop culture often tells us that the hero returns home changed. Dorothy leaves Oz. Frodo leaves the Shire. Even Emily returns from Paris altered. The journey means nothing if it does not transform how we live. A holy disconnect is only holy if it sends us back more courageous, more truthful and more dangerous to injustice!

## Calls to Action

- Support independent journalism and voices that refuse distraction.
- Organize locally for immigrant justice and voter engagement.
- Challenge Christian nationalism in your family and community.
- Prepare now for sustained civic action leading into the 2026 elections.
- Speak plainly, even when it costs comfort or approval.

## Coming Home Changed

Rome has endured empires, demagogues and the slow collapse of unchecked power. Its ruins stand as quiet witnesses: Dominance always masquerades as destiny – right up until it falls. As my plane lifts off from Fiumicino, I know the noise will return soon enough. But I hope I return changed, less reactive, and more rooted in the Gospel that refuses both despair and denial. The work ahead is serious. The season is dangerous. And clarity, once gained, is a grace we dare not waste.



### Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- What have my recent news habits done to my spirit and my sense of truth?
- Where have I confused silence with faithfulness, or prayer with avoidance?
- How does Pope Leo XIV's language challenge my own speech?
- What embarrasses me about my nation, and what might that embarrassment—or lack thereof—be teaching me?
- What concrete action is God inviting me to take this new year?

### Let Us Pray

God of revelation and renewal, you meet us in silence and send us back into the world with fire. Strip away our addiction to outrage and our tolerance for cruelty. Give us eyes to see clearly, courage to speak honestly, and strength to act justly. As we return to our work, our schools and our civic lives in this new year, make us epiphanies of your peace in a season hungry for truth. Amen.

## Two Epiphanies, Two Paths

Lessons from Two Contrasting Witnesses

January 8, 2026



As we move through the final days of the Christmas season, the Church invites us to linger with revelation. We are still celebrating epiphany—not only Christ revealed to the magi, but Christ revealed at the Jordan River and, soon, at a wedding in Cana. Yet revelation is not limited to Scripture alone. It also emerges in our daily lives.

On January 8, we remember two very different figures whose paths sharply diverged: Richard John Neuhaus and Jeanne Manford. Their lives pose an uncomfortable but necessary question for Christians and Catholics at the start of a new year: When faith meets difference, do we draw lines—or do we widen circles?

### **Richard John Neuhaus: A Cautionary Tale of Exclusion**

Richard John Neuhaus (1936–2009) began his public life as a Lutheran pastor involved in civil rights and antiwar activism. Over time, however, his theology hardened. After becoming Roman Catholic, he rose to prominence as a conservative intellectual, advising President George W. Bush on bioethical issues and advocating a close alliance between church and state power.

Neuhaus is perhaps best remembered among Catholics for his vocal support of denying Communion to Catholic politicians who voted against the Roman Catholic Church's restrictive teaching on women's reproductive health. For him, the Eucharist functioned less as medicine for the wounded, and more as a boundary marker, separating the "faithful" from the suspect. His formation in the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church shaped a worldview that emphasized doctrinal purity and moral policing. It is no accident that he was named one of the most influential evangelicals in America—even as a Catholic priest.

We need not rehabilitate Neuhaus's legacy. Instead, we can learn from it. His life warns us how easily Christianity can become an instrument of exclusion, how conscience can be overridden by ideology, and how sacraments meant to unite can unfortunately be wielded to punish.

### **Jeanne Manford: Love That Became a Movement**

Jeanne Manford (1920–2013), by contrast, never sought theological influence. She was a schoolteacher and a mother. Her public witness began in 1972, when her gay son, Morty, was assaulted at a protest. Seeing how he was beaten for being his authentic self transformed her faith into action.

Manford chose love over fear. She marched beside her son in New York City's Pride parade, carrying a simple sign: "Parents of Gays Unite in Support for Our Children." That act of maternal courage sparked a movement. She co-founded Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays—PFLAG—which today includes hundreds of chapters and hundreds of thousands of members.

Jeanne Manford embodied what the Gospel looks like when it exits church doors. She did not debate abstractions. She defended a child. She practiced solidarity before it was fashionable. In doing so, she revealed Christ not through doctrine, but through fierce, faithful love.

## **A Tale of Two Epiphanies**

Neuhaus and Manford represent two ways of responding to difference. One tightens boundaries in the name of supposed “truth.” The other expands compassion in the name of love. One guards the table. The other sets more places at it.

In this last week of the Christmas season, as we contemplate Christ revealed to outsiders in vulnerability and joy, the contrast could not be clearer. Jesus does not ask first for ideological alignment. He asks for relationship. He does not ration grace. He multiplies it!

### **Calls to Action**

- Examine how we use power, language and sacraments.
- Choose accompaniment over condemnation.
- Support marginalized youth and their families in tangible ways.
- Challenge exclusionary theology with Gospel-rooted compassion.
- Learn from activists whose faith takes flesh in action.
- Make your family and community safer spaces for those long marginalized.

### **Which Epiphany Will We Live?**

The question before us is not which figures history will vindicate. It is which path we will follow. In a Church still tempted to confuse control with holiness, Jeanne Manford reminds us that love is the clearest revelation of God. As we approach the Baptism of the Lord, may we hear again the voice that names belovedness without precondition – and may we echo it in our lives!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- When have I used faith to exclude, rather than include?
- Whose witness challenges me to love more boldly?
- How do I respond when doctrine conflicts with compassion?
- Where is Christ being revealed through unexpected people?
- How might my faith become more public, more embodied?

### **Let Us Pray**

God of widening circles, you revealed your Son among the vulnerable and the brave. Soften our hearts when fear tempts us to judge. Strengthen our resolve to stand beside those under attack. May our faith be known less for the lines we draw and more for the love we live. In this season of epiphany, teach us to choose the path of life. Amen.

## Honk for Jesus, Save Your Soul – and Lose the Gospel

Lessons From an Unsettling In-Flight Movie  
on Church/State Power and Illusion

January 8, 2026



During my eleven-hour flight from London to Austin yesterday, I watched the most unsettling movie.

“Unsettling,” for me, typically means horror films or movies with gratuitous graphic violence. I tend to avoid those, opting instead for something gentle enough to lull me into sleep at 40,000 feet.

So, I chose a movie about – you guessed it – the Church.

As a result, in addition to the jet lag, I did not sleep well last night.

The film was *Honk for Jesus, Save Your Soul*, and it disturbed me more than any slasher flick ever could. Because this was not fantasy. This was theology. This was power. This was religion stripped of pretense – and shown in all its seductive, destructive clarity.

### A Church, a Camera and a Collapse

The film follows Lee-Curtis Childs (Sterling K. Brown), the disgraced former pastor of a Southern Baptist megachurch, and his wife, Trinitie Childs (Regina Hall), the congregation’s impeccably dressed “first lady.” A documentary crew shadows them as they attempt to reopen the church after a mass exodus of congregants caused by a scandal involving Lee-Curtis and several young men.

The timing matters. The story unfolds during the days leading up to Holy Week – a time when Christians recall betrayal, suffering, death and resurrection. Irony drips from every scene.

Their congregation was once a religious empire that trafficked in emotional worship. Salvation was commodified. Money flowed freely. That money built a palatial home and a luxurious wardrobe for the pastor and his first lady, and a church entrance adorned with an indoor fountain – an unmistakable symbol of excess baptized as blessing!

Now the cameras linger as the illusion cracks.

The film shows the Childs' attempts to present themselves as humble, wounded and faithful. But it also exposes their indulgence, their resentment toward former friends who have opened a new congregation, and their refusal to honestly reckon with harm done.

Underneath the bravado, Trinitie is unraveling.

### **Staying When Leaving Might Save You**

The most devastating scenes belong to Trinitie.

She is exhausted, frayed, emotionally captive. When her mother, Mama Sabina (Avis Barnes), visits the day before the reopening, Trinitie finally collapses. "It's our last shot," she admits, referring to her marriage. "I don't know if we can make it. I don't know if we're working toward the same thing."

Her mother responds with theology inherited, not examined. She recalls wanting to leave her own husband, but choosing instead to return to the Bible, to prayer, and ultimately to him. When Trinitie asks when her mother finally stopped running back to Scripture for strength, the answer lands like a gut-punch: "When I buried him, baby."

Hope, here, is endurance mistaken for faith.

The film refuses to romanticize this. It shows that people remain in toxic relationships not because they are weak, but because leaving would require dismantling an entire identity. Trinitie does not stay because she believes Lee-Curtis is innocent. She stays because leaving would mean admitting the story she sold others – and herself – was a lie.

That should sound familiar.

### **Honking for Jesus, Fleecing the Flock**

One of the film's most disturbing moments unfolds on a busy street, where Lee-Curtis and Trinitie attempt to promote their reopening by asking passersby to "honk for Jesus." Now the day before the reopening, Lee-Curtis persuades Trinitie to don whiteface for a miming stunt – an act as grotesque as it is revealing. Even then, passersby remain unmoved.

A young man stops to confront Lee-Curtis, accusing him of attempting to buy his silence with sneakers and a Camaro. His rage is unfiltered, prophetic and raw: "This city don't need you, man." Trinitie stares, complicit, a silent mime.

It is impossible not to hear echoes of our national moment.

Like Lee-Curtis, our current President remains convinced that people will keep showing up, that charisma substitutes for accountability, that blessing excuses abuse, and that power validates itself. And like Trinitie, millions silently stand beside him – not because they believe allegations are false, but because admitting the truth would shatter too much.

The parallel becomes explicit when Trinitie finally explodes. Her words could be spoken by countless disillusioned supporters of disgraced leaders everywhere:

"Before, we were there for them. We spiritually nurtured them and guided them to Christ. Now they want us to fail....Don't think for one moment that I haven't known what you were up to from the second that you stepped foot in this church. You came to show the 'big bad wolf' who ate up the 'little piggies.' Well, guess what. Those are not little piggies out there. I am. I am the victim!"

Then, after composing herself, comes the chilling confession to the documentary crew: "That is my husband, and I would sooner kill him than leave him."

Loyalty replaces truth. Survival replaces conscience. Religion becomes hostage-taking.

### **Rome, Ruins and Repeating the Same Sin**

I watched this film while flying home from Rome—a city still standing atop the ruins of ecclesial excess. The Farnese, Barberini and Medici families once bled the Church dry, amassing power and personal wealth while preaching humility. Their legacy now fills museums and basilicas, silent monuments to sanctified grift.

Lee-Curtis Childs belongs to that lineage. So does any leader—religious or political—who cloaks exploitation in divine language and calls it salvation.

Then the film ambiguously ends. Palm Sunday arrives. Five loyal congregants show up. The parking lot remains otherwise empty. Lee-Curtis beams at the camera, convinced a comeback is underway. Trinitie, impeccably dressed, stares blankly, trapped, complicit and exhausted.

The illusion remains intact.

The question is whether we will allow our illusions to remain intact, too.

### **Calls to Action**

- Refuse celebrity Christianity and political messianism in all forms.
- Clearly name abuse, even when it wears vestments or waves flags.
- Center victims, not institutions, when scandals emerge.
- Challenge loyalty that demands silence, instead of truth.
- Invest in communities of accountability, not charisma.
- Teach children the difference between faith and performance.

### **The Epiphany We Keep Avoiding**

This film unsettled me because it refuses resurrection without repentance. There is no cheap Easter here. No triumphant comeback montage. Just a question hanging in the air: *Will anything truly change?*

As the Church moves from the Solemnity of Epiphany last Sunday, toward the Baptism of the Lord this Sunday, we are reminded that Jesus did not begin his ministry by demanding applause. He began by submitting to truth.

If *Honk for Jesus, Save Your Soul* reveals anything, it is this: Churches and societies do not collapse because people stop believing. They collapse because leaders confuse belief with entitlement, and because followers confuse endurance with “holiness.”

May our own epiphanies lead us to a different and less unsettling ending!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- Where have I mistaken loyalty for faithfulness?
- Whose suffering have I minimized to preserve an institution or identity?
- What illusions about leadership am I still protecting?
- Where does repentance, not comeback, need to occur in my life or community?
- What would it cost me to tell the truth—and why am I afraid to pay it?

### **Let Us Pray**

God of truth who overturns tables and exposes lies, free us from the religion that protects power over people. Give us courage to leave what is killing our souls, clarity to see abuse even when it is baptized, and strength to build communities rooted not in spectacle, but in justice, humility and love. May we stop honking for Jesus and start following him. Amen.

## When Words Ignite and Wisdom Heals

Four Witnesses in Epiphany Light

January 9, 2026



In 1853, a fiery lecture by an Italian ex-monk in Quebec sparked riots that left ten people dead. The Gavazzi Riots remind us that religious words are never neutral. They can liberate or inflame, heal or harden.

On this January 9, we remember four very different figures—Alessandro Gavazzi, Michel de Certeau, Anscar Chupungco and Joan Baez—whose lives invite us to examine how speech, practice, worship and art shape the world we inhabit, especially as we approach the final epiphanies of this Christmas season.

### **Alessandro Gavazzi: When Prophecy Turns Perilous**

Alessandro Gavazzi (1809–1889) was an Italian Barnabite monk and gifted professor of rhetoric who left Roman Catholicism and became one of its fiercest public critics. Touring Europe and North America, he denounced the papacy with theatrical flair. In 1853, protests against his speech in Quebec escalated into violence, resulting in ten deaths.

Gavazzi's life offers a sobering lesson. Critique of ecclesial power can be necessary and even prophetic. Yet rhetoric that demonizes opponents can easily spill into real-world harm. Gavazzi later returned to Italy, founded the Free Church of Italy, and established a theological college in Rome, convinced that conscience demanded institutional rupture. His witness asks us to carefully weigh how our words bolster systems of violence or peace.

### **Michel de Certeau: God in the Ordinary**

Michel de Certeau (1925–1986), a French Jesuit priest and cultural theorist, took a very different approach to transformation. Rather than thunder from the podium, he studied the quiet, repetitive practices of everyday life. His most famous work, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, explores how ordinary people subtly resist domination through small acts—walking routes, cooking habits, storytelling and prayer.



For Catholics, de Certeau reminds us that holiness often unfolds unnoticed. Structural change matters, yet so does how we live within structures. Justice is practiced not only in protests and policies, but in kitchens, commutes and conversations. Epiphany, after all, is about revelation in unexpected places!

### **Anscar Chupungco: Liturgy That Breathes**

Anscar Chupungco (1939–2013), a Filipino Benedictine monk and liturgical theologian, dedicated his life to helping the Church pray with cultural integrity. A leading advocate for inculturation, he argued that the Catholic liturgy must genuinely take flesh in local customs, music and symbols. He resisted what he called the “reform of the reform,” warning that it risked undoing the pastoral and theological gains of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965).

Chupungco challenges us to ask whether our worship reflects the people gathered—or merely nostalgia for a frozen past. Liturgy, he insisted, is not a museum piece, but a living encounter. When prayer becomes rigid, it stops revealing Christ!

### **Joan Baez: Singing Epiphany into the Streets**

Born on January 9, 1941, Joan Baez has spent decades translating moral conviction into music. Through her folk songs and public witness, she has championed civil rights, women’s rights, LGBTQ rights, and nonviolence. Baez shows how art can function sacramentally, making justice audible and hope singable.

Her life testifies that faith does not always speak in sermons or treatises. Sometimes it strums a guitar and stands beside the marginalized. In a polarized world, Baez reminds us that beauty can still disarm cruelty.

### **Calls to Action**

- Examine how your words—online and offline—either de-escalate or inflame conflict.
- Practice awareness of God’s presence in daily routines and ordinary choices.
- Advocate for liturgies that reflect cultural diversity and living communities.
- Support artists and musicians who use their gifts for justice and peace.
- Balance prophetic critique with humility and care for human life.
- Let Epiphany expand how and where you expect God to appear.

### **Choosing Revelation over Ruin**

The Gavazzi Riots warn us that religion untethered from love can destroy. De Certeau, Chupungco and Baez show us other paths: quiet fidelity, embodied prayer and courageous beauty. As we near the Baptism of the Lord and Cana's wedding feast, Epiphany asks not only what we believe, but how we live, speak, worship and sing. The light revealed in Christ still seeks expression through us!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- How do my words contribute to peace or polarization?
- Where do I encounter God in the routines of my daily life?
- In what ways do my experiences of liturgy feel alive, or merely inherited?
- How might art or music deepen my commitment to justice?
- What kind of witness does this moment in history require of me?

### **Let Us Pray**

God of revelation and restraint, you speak through prophets and through whispers, through ritual and through song. Purify our speech, sanctify our habits and enliven our worship. As we walk these final days of Christmas light, teach us to reveal your love without harming your children. May our lives proclaim Epiphany with courage, care and compassion. Amen.

## When Words Fail, Lives Speak

Lessons from the Life and Legacy  
of Mary Helen “Nena” Quintero

January 9, 2026



Words sometimes fail us. They fail especially when we are trying to give thanks to those whom we love, those who quietly gave more of themselves than we ever noticed, those whose fidelity was not flashy, but formative. We fumble for language when gratitude feels inadequate, when the ledger of love is so lopsided that “thank you” sounds embarrassingly thin. Today, as we celebrate the Mass of Resurrection for Mary Helen “Nena” Quintero, words fail again—but her life does not.

### **The Gospel According to Ledgers and Receipts**

As Catholics, we often talk about love, mercy, forgiveness and reform—and rightly so. Yet Nena reminds us that the Church does not stand only on prophetic declarations. It stands also on spreadsheets, envelopes, checks mailed on time, taxes correctly filed, and financial records honestly kept.

For our first ten years, Nena volunteered as our bookkeeper at Holy Family Catholic Church, Austin’s only inclusive Catholic community. She made payments, logged income and expenses, paid taxes, generated reports, and did so faithfully, competently and quietly. By any reasonable estimate, she likely donated over 5,000 hours of her life to this ministry.

This was not “busy work.” This was ecclesiology. Without such labor, there is no church. Without such integrity, there is no trust. Without such attention to detail, there is no credibility—especially for a community that dares to proclaim inclusion in a Church often allergic to it.

Pop culture has taught us to admire the “loud” saviors—the Don Drapers, the Ted Lassos, the West Wing walk-and-talkers. Nena reminds

us that the Kingdom of God is also built by people more like Hidden Figures than headline-makers.

### **The Ministry of Showing Up When Death Arrives**

In addition to balancing our books, Nena actively participated in our parish's St. Francis of Assisi Joy Group. For years, she would regularly drop everything she was doing to pray funeral rosaries and accompany grieving families.

To be clear, praying funeral rosaries is not a glamorous ministry. They are most often not livestreamed. They do not earn applause. They look more like Joan Didion's *Year of Magical Thinking*, than what Instagram rewards. And yet, such ministries of presence are where resurrection faith either shows up or proves hollow.

At a time when American culture avoids death, sanitizes grief, and rushes people back to productivity, Nena chose presence. She chose to sit with sorrow. She chose to pray with people whose lives had just cracked open.

Jesus wept for his friend Lazarus before he called him back to life. Nena understood that sequence.

### **The Theology of the Crochet Hook**

Nena's presence and faithfulness are perhaps most perfectly captured in one memory I will forever cherish. My mother, who loves crocheting, was visiting Austin and agreed to host crochet lessons in our home for those interested in learning the craft. Nena came—not to learn, but to teach. She came to share her time and her talent, to empower others to do what she could effortlessly do, and to do so without drawing attention to herself.

Seeing Nena at one end of the table and my mother at the other opened my eyes in a new way. In that moment, I realized that Nena had become a true mother figure for me here in Austin—steady, generous and quietly formative. Every stitch of every afghan she donated to parish fundraisers was made in love, prayerfully woven with patience, care and a deep desire that others might be warmed, comforted and held long after her hands had finished the work.

### **Faith Without Illusions**

One of the most captivating lines from Nena's autobiographical essay in *Our Holy Family*, our parish book of reflections, is her honesty about faith itself. Nena admitted she sometimes had a hard time with organized religion. She noticed the gap between its Sunday piety and

weekday cruelty. She wondered aloud how God's people could suffer so much.

This was not doubt as scandal. This was doubt as maturity.

Nena stayed in the Church not because she was naïve, but because she was discerning. She returned because she encountered preaching that made her think, a community that made her feel seen, and a parish that refused to pretend everything was fine.

This is especially important this week as we celebrate the epiphanies of Christ. The magi were not sentimental believers; they were seekers who followed light while asking hard questions. At Jesus' Baptism, the heavens opened not for certainty, but for vocation. Nena lived squarely in that tension.

In an era when Christian nationalism markets certainty and punishes complexity, Nena's faith feels closer to *PBS Masterpiece*, than to cable news "theology."

### **The Politics of Quiet Fidelity**

Let us be blunt. The loudest voices claiming Christianity in the United States today often bear little resemblance to Jesus. They platform cruelty, excuse corruption, and baptize authoritarianism. Against that backdrop, Nena's life was quietly subversive.

She did not preach at people. She did not weaponize faith. She did not confuse dominance with discipleship. Instead, she nurtured education, loved good storytelling, supported inclusive community, and practiced service without expecting control.

That is political. Not partisan, but deeply political in the Gospel sense.

As Catholics stare down a U.S. sociopolitical reality increasingly shaped by grievance, exclusion and strongman fantasies, Nena offered a different witness. She showed us how institutions are reformed not only by protest, but by people who refuse to abandon the work when it gets tedious.

Think less *House of Cards*, more *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*—which, it turns out, was radical all along.

### **An Inclusive Church Built One Relationship at a Time**

Nena loved Holy Family because people are glad to see one another here. Because priests greet people. Because no one disappears behind vestments and titles. Because community extends beyond the hymn of sending forth.

Such details are not accidental. They are cultivated.

Holy Family exists because people like Nena believe the Church can be better—and then they invest their lives to make it so. In a global

Church still reckoning with clericalism, exclusion and abuse, her witness is not small. It is prophetic.

Nena reminds us that inclusion is not a slogan. It is a practice. It requires time, patience, humility and, yes, sometimes more spreadsheets than sermons.

### **Calls to Action**

May our celebration of Nena's life and legacy today move us to be the hands and heart of Christ in our world:

- Stop undervaluing administrative labor — and bless it as holy work.
- Recommit yourself to a ministry of accompaniment, not just advocacy.
- Consider how you are sharing your time, talent and treasure in ways that will outlive you.
- Protect spaces where faith is honest, curious and unafraid of questions.
- Resist performative righteousness, and recommit to sustained, ethical participation in community.
- Continue building alternative models of Church that embody Jesus' gospel values.

### **When Gratitude Finally Finds Its Voice**

Words admittedly fail. They still do. No words could ever adequately thank someone who gave so much, so steadily and so lovingly. Yet perhaps this is the Epiphany gift Nena leaves us: a reminder that God keeps showing up through ordinary lives that reveal extraordinary faith.

God shows up in the late-night ledger entry. God shows up at the funeral rosary. God shows up in a church where people are actually happy to see and greet one another. God shows up when a woman stays, serves and loves, even after organized religion has disappointed her.

Words fail. But lives speak. Certainly, Nena's still does.

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- Whose quiet labor has made my life possible, and how often do I thank them?
- Where am I tempted to value visibility over fidelity?
- How do I respond when faith feels complicated, rather than comforting?
- What kind of church and society am I helping to build through my daily choices?

- Where is God inviting me to show up consistently, rather than dramatically?

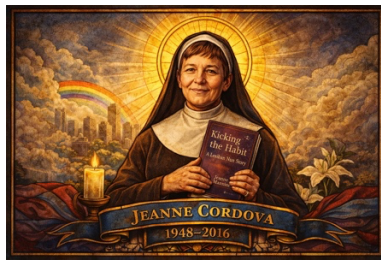
### Let Us Pray

Loving God, we thank you for the life of Mary Helen “Nena” Quintero, for her steady hands, her honest faith, her generous heart. Teach us to honor quiet holiness, to trust the power of faithful service, and to build communities where all are truly welcomed. When words fail us, may our lives still proclaim your love. Amen.

## From Convent to Community

Remembering an Ex-nun and Pioneering Feminist Activist

January 10, 2026



I sometimes joke that I don't believe that I've ever met a celibate priest or religious—which likely sounds contradictory in light of the Roman Catholic Church's insistence on celibacy and chastity for its leaders. Raised in a conservative farming community in the middle of the cornfields of Ohio, I accepted those values early. So, it seemed natural that when I decided to enter the seminary after high school, my senior research paper would examine clerical celibacy. You can imagine my surprise when I joined the seminary and discovered that celibacy and chastity, though publicly esteemed by the Church, were not necessarily lived within seminary and rectory walls. Human beings, I learned, are sexual beings—a truth the Roman Catholic clergy sexual abuse scandal tragically made undeniable 25 years ago. Amid all this, the same year I graduated from high school and entered the seminary, a remarkable—even if controversial—book appeared: Jeanne Cordova's *Kicking the Habit: A Lesbian Nun Story*.

### Remembering Jeanne Cordova

On January 10, we recall the passing of Jeanne Cordova (1948-2016), the pioneering feminist activist and ex-nun who revealed lesbian life in

the convent. She shook the world with her courage, founding *Lesbian Tide* magazine and the Gay and Lesbian Community Yellow Pages. She led protests that helped decriminalize homosexuality and protect the jobs of openly lesbian and gay teachers. Cordova's life calls us to courage, authenticity and justice, challenging us to confront the truths we might prefer to ignore.

### Lessons for the New Year

- **Name the Unspoken.** Cordova reminded us that silence often protects power, not truth. We might reflect on the truths about sexuality, gender and power we hesitate to name in our communities. Speak boldly, even when it feels risky!
- **Challenge Structures of Injustice.** From confronting discriminatory hiring practices to advocating for marginalized voices, Cordova's activism modeled direct action. Identify one area in your community where justice is lacking, and take a concrete step to address it this week.
- **Celebrate Authenticity.** Cordova lived openly as a lesbian and ex-nun, showing that authenticity transforms community. Practice honesty in your relationships and spiritual life, refusing to compartmentalize or hide your full self.
- **Support the Marginalized.** Cordova understood that liberation comes with community. Reach out to LGBTQ+ Catholics, the poor, and those on the fringes of Church life. Volunteer, mentor, advocate, or simply listen deeply to someone whose story differs from yours.
- **Lead with Courage.** True pioneers inspire through fearless action. Whether in small daily choices or bold public stands, take one courageous step that aligns with your conscience and Gospel values.

### Epiphanies and Courageous Living

As we approach the Baptism of the Lord, the final Sunday in the Christmas season, we are reminded of Christ's epiphanies: revealed to the magi, affirmed in the waters of baptism, and transforming water into wine at the wedding at Cana. Like Cordova, we are called to see God's light in unexpected places and to act boldly when called.

Cordova's story reminds us that faith and justice are inseparable. As Catholics, we are invited to live with integrity, confront injustice, and embrace our full humanity. This new year, let us embody truth, equity and compassion within our Church and beyond!



### Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- What truths in my faith community am I reluctant to name or confront?
- Where am I called to act boldly in the service of justice?
- How am I living authentically in my spiritual and personal life?
- Who in my community is marginalized or silenced, and how can I better support them?
- What small, courageous step can I take today that reflects Gospel values?

### Let Us Pray

God of courage and compassion, grant us the wisdom to speak truth, the strength to act for justice, and the grace to live authentically. May we see your light in unexpected places, embrace our full humanity, and serve our communities with courage and love. Amen.

### When Catholics Stop Being Christian

J.D. Vance, *Christian Nationalism, and the Lies We Keep Telling Ourselves*

January 10, 2026



When asked to name the most evil person who has ever walked this earth, many people understandably think of figures who committed atrocities on a massive scale—like Adolf Hitler, who orchestrated the Holocaust and the systematic murder of six million Jews and millions of others during World War II. His religion? Roman Catholic. Hitler is indeed a case study in how someone can simultaneously be culturally Catholic and profoundly un-Christian. As we read the headlines in our nation today, we do well to ask whether those who loudly claim the

labels “Christian” or “Catholic” are, in fact, living anything that resembles the way of Jesus of Nazareth.

### **What Makes Someone Christian, Anyway?**

At its core, Christianity is not a brand, a tribe, or a political identity. Christianity is a way of life shaped by the teachings, priorities and moral vision of Jesus. Love of neighbor. Care for the vulnerable. Truth-telling. Humility. Repentance. Mercy. A preferential option for the poor—long before that phrase ever entered Catholic social teaching.

One can weekly attend Mass, fluently quote Scripture, and still reject the Gospel in practice. To be clear: *A person who rejects Jesus’ gospel values is, at best, a Christian in name only.*

Jesus explicitly warned us of this. “By their fruits you will know them” (Mt. 7:16). “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 7:21). *Christianity is not what we claim. It is what we practice. It is not who we vote for. It is who we protect!*

Call to action: Stop granting automatic moral credibility to anyone simply because they claim the “Christian” or “Catholic label.”

### **J.D. Vance and the Theology of Cruelty**

Which brings us to Vice President J.D. Vance, a self-professed Roman Catholic whose words and actions this week lead any reasonable observer to ask whether he is even Christian at all. His recent statements regarding the death of Renee Nicole Good in Minneapolis—statements that reduced a human life to a political talking point—were not merely insensitive. They were morally grotesque. They reflected a worldview in which suffering is instrumentalized, women are expendable, and compassion is treated as weakness.

This is not an isolated moment. Vance has repeatedly framed cruelty and exclusion as virtue. He has openly attacked two popes—both of whom have emphasized mercy, human dignity, and care for migrants—simply because their Christianity exposes his own anemic “Catholicism.” When a politician finds himself rebuked by the Bishop of Rome twice—and still doubles down—the problem is *not* Rome.

Scripture is unambiguous here. “Whoever does not love does not know God” (1Jn. 4:8). Policies that degrade. Language that dehumanizes. Indifference to suffering. These are anti-Gospel, anti-life choices made not by children of the light.

Call to action: Refuse to excuse cruelty when it comes from someone who claims your faith.

### **Wolves, Robes and Religious Theater**

Jesus warned us about “wolves in sheep’s clothing” (Mt. 7:15). He reserved his harshest words not for sinners, but for religious leaders who weaponized God to protect power. “You tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others” (Mt. 23:4). Sound familiar?

This critique does not apply only to Vance. It extends to House Speaker Mike Johnson, whose public piety coexists, seemingly comfortably, with policies that harm children, families and the poor. It extends to President Donald Trump, who has displayed precious little religiosity or interest in the teachings of Jesus, while enthusiastically accepting the loyalty of those who claim to follow Christ.

To be clear, Christian nationalism is not flag-waving Christianity. It is an oxymoron. Strip away the cross-shaped language, and what remains looks far more like white nationalism than the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus did not found a nation-state. He formed a community bound by love, not bloodlines or borders.

Pop culture has been warning us about this for years. Think *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Think *Breaking Bad*, where moral rot hides behind family values. Think *Succession*, where power masquerades as destiny until it collapses under its own emptiness.

Call to action: Name Christian nationalism for what it is, and refuse to baptize it.

### **Epiphany and the Unmasking of False Messiahs**

We stand between epiphanies. As we heard on Sunday, the magi saw through Herod’s performance of “concern” (Mt. 2:8) and chose another road home (Mt. 2:12). When we celebrate the Baptism of the Lord tomorrow, we’ll hear how the heavens opened and Jesus was named as beloved—not powerful, not dominant, not punitive, but beloved (Mt. 3:17). Epiphany is about revelation. About clearly seeing who God is—and who God is not.

This season calls us to discernment, to recognize false messiahs who promise safety through exclusion and strength through domination, to remember that Jesus consistently aligned himself with those whom the supporters of our current Administration now dismiss or vilify.

Call to action: See through performances of “concern,” and choose a different “road home,” even when it costs you social comfort.

### **What Faith Looks Like When the Cost Is Real**

Being Christian in this moment will require more than vague disapproval. It will require resistance. Public resistance. Costly resistance. Silence now functions as consent. Polite neutrality props up injustice. Jesus was not crucified for being nice.

We do not ask whether certain political leaders are Catholic or Christian to score points. We ask because people look to them, and because these leaders' words and policies impact lives. And when Christianity becomes cover for harm, discipleship demands dissent.

### **Additional Calls to Action**

- Speak plainly when politicians misuse Christian language.
- Support organizations defending those for whom Jesus stood: migrants, women and the poor.
- Challenge religious misinformation in your family and community.
- Amplify voices harmed by policy, not those empowered by policy.
- Engage in sustained civic engagement beyond election cycles.

### **Another Road Home**

Hitler's baptism did not make him Christian. Neither does J.D. Vance's. Purported religious affiliation does not save. Fruit does—as does helping those in need (Mt. 25:35-40). As our nation stumbles through an extremely dangerous season, Epiphany invites us to clearly see and to wisely choose. Like the magi, we are called to leave behind the palace of power, to return home by another way.

A simple, urgent question clamors: *Will the Christians and Catholics in this nation remain faithful to God and the values of Christianity and Catholicism – amid the rise and fall of messiahs, false prophets, and “wolves in sheep's clothing”?*

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- Where have I confused religious language with Gospel living?
- Whose suffering am I tempted to rationalize away?
- How do Jesus' words challenge my political assumptions?
- What false messiahs am I being asked to renounce?
- What “road home” is God inviting me to take now?

### **Let Us Pray**

God of light and truth, unmask every lie that wears your name. Free us from the fear that keeps us silent and the comfort that keeps us complicit. Give us eyes to clearly see your beloved ones and courage to faithfully follow your Son, even when the cost is real. Amen.

## Doing the Best We Can with What We Have

Lessons from Bishop Carmel Henry Carfora

January 11, 2026



Independent/Inclusive Catholics know what it means to be marginalized—particularly due to our marginalization (and sometimes “excommunication”) by the Roman Catholic Church. On January 11, we honor a marginalized man—an important U.S. Independent Catholic bishop—who, in turn, consistently sided with and ministered to the marginalized. His name was Carmel Henry Carfora.

### A Priest Formed on the Margins

Carmel Henry Carfora was born in Italy in 1878 and immigrated to the U.S. as a young man, entering a Church already struggling to pastor waves of immigrants whose languages, customs and needs did not always fit comfortably within existing Roman Catholic structures. Like so many immigrant clergy, Carfora encountered a gap between pastoral ideals and institutional realities.

Rather than retreating into bitterness or clerical careerism, Carfora leaned into the needs he saw. In Youngstown, Ohio—a city shaped by steel mills, labor unrest and ethnic enclaves—he founded St. Rocco’s Independent National Catholic Church to serve former Roman Catholics who felt abandoned, ignored or actively excluded. Later consecrated by Bishop Rudolph de Landas Berghes, Carfora emerged as a central figure in what became the North American Old Roman Catholic Church, rooted in a non-papal, pre-Vatican I Roman Catholic theology and sacramental life.

His world was messy. His movement was imperfect. His leadership was sometimes contested. And yet, Carfora kept showing up.

### Epiphany on the Edges

Today, as we conclude the Christmas season with the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, we focus on the second of three great epiphanies that we recall during these days: Christ revealed to the magi (last

Sunday), Christ revealed at the Jordan (today), and Christ revealed at Cana (tomorrow).

Each epiphany happens at the edges.

The magi are foreigners.

The baptism takes place outside Jerusalem's religious center.

The first sign at Cana unfolds at a village wedding, not in the Temple.

Carfora's ministry belongs squarely in this epiphanic tradition. He believed – implicitly, if not always eloquently – that Christ continues to reveal himself beyond official centers of power, especially among people told they no longer belong.

### **A Reluctant, Relatable Hero**

Catholics sometimes hunger for spotless heroes. Carfora is not that. He worked within unstable ecclesial structures. He led communities whose canonical status was questioned. He made decisions that later generations might critique. And that is precisely why he matters.

Carfora models a holiness grounded not in perfection, but in persistence. He did his best with what he had, responding to concrete human needs, rather than abstract ecclesiology. In an era before inclusive language, lay ecclesial leadership, or formal ecumenical dialogue, he still intuited a Gospel truth many of us are only now reclaiming: *sacraments exist for people, not the other way around.*

### **Lessons for Catholics Today**

Carfora's life invites us to several uncomfortable but fruitful lessons:

- **Marginalization does not negate vocation.** Being pushed to the edges does not cancel a call to ministry; it often clarifies it.
- **Structures serve mission, not vice versa.** When institutional forms fail to mediate grace, faithful improvisation may be required.
- **Ethnic and cultural specificity matters.** Carfora understood that ministry is never generic; it is always incarnational.
- **Unity is not uniformity.** His ecclesial vision assumed shared sacramental life without centralized control.
- **Faithfulness can be provisional.** Sometimes the most Gospel-shaped response is incomplete, fragile and still worth offering.

### **Calls to Action**

As we move into a new year, Carfora challenges us to act:

- **Seek out the invisible.** Actively listen to Catholics and former Catholics who feel erased by Church structures, especially

immigrants, LGBTQIA+ people and those harmed by clerical abuse.

- **Support alternative ministries.** Learn about and materially support independent, ecumenical and grassroots Catholic communities doing sacramental work on the margins.
- **Resist nostalgia for purity.** Let go of romanticized visions of a flawless Church, and commit instead to a wounded Church that heals by proximity.
- **Recover suppressed histories.** Teach and share stories of figures like Carfora whose contributions were sidelined, but whose ministries bore real fruit.
- **Practice ecclesial humility.** Acknowledge that the Spirit often moves ahead of official recognition and sometimes outside canonical comfort zones.
- **Minister where you are authorized by love.** If you see a need, begin there—even if institutional permission comes later or not at all.

### **Epiphany Still Happens**

Carmel Henry Carfora's life reminds us that Christ continues to be revealed where we least expect it: in storefront churches, borrowed halls and communities stitched together by necessity, rather than prestige. As we close the Christmas season and contemplate Jesus stepping into the Jordan, we remember that God chooses immersion over insulation, vulnerability over control. The light revealed at Bethlehem, at the Jordan River, and at the wedding banquet in Cana still shines—often through imperfect servants doing their best, faithfully and stubbornly, with what they have!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- Where have I seen Christ revealed outside official or comfortable Church spaces?
- Whose Catholic faith have I dismissed because it did not look “legitimate” enough?
- What marginalized community is asking for my presence, rather than my approval?
- How do I respond when Church structures fail to mediate grace?
- What unfinished, imperfect work might God be asking me to begin this year?
- How does the Baptism of the Lord call me into deeper solidarity with those on the edges?

### Let Us Pray

God of unexpected epiphanies, You revealed your Son to outsiders, sinners and wedding guests. Bless us as we honor Carmel Henry Carfora and all who have labored imperfectly for your Gospel. Free us from fear of failure and nostalgia for false purity. Give us courage to serve where need is greatest, humility to trust your Spirit beyond our control and faith to do our best with what we have, until your light is fully revealed in all. Amen.

### Made of Fire, Named Beloved

“Elemental,” Immigration, and the Epiphany at the Jordan

January 11, 2026



During my transatlantic flight earlier this week, I watched the 2023 Disney animation “Elemental.” Perhaps you’ve seen it. I expected light fare—something colorful, sentimental and easy enough to drift in and out of. Instead, I found myself unexpectedly undone.

The film tells the story of Bernie and Cinder Lumen, fiery elements who migrate from Fire Land to Element City, where fire is viewed with suspicion, fear and open hostility. Their daughter, Ember, grows up navigating that hostility while carrying the weight of her parents’ sacrifices and her own explosive temper. Much of the story focuses on Ember’s relationship with Wade Ripple, a water element, but I was especially drawn to Bernie and Cinder’s migration story—their renaming, the closed doors, the longing for home, the ache of having to leave everything behind in order to survive.

At one point, Cinder explains to her daughter:

There was a reason we left Fire Land. Oh, Ember, we loved it there so much... But then a great storm came. All was lost for us. Your father understood we had to leave everything. Our home. It was the only way to create a better life. It was the last



time your father ever saw his family. That is why we came here, to build all this.

As I watched, 40,000 feet above the Atlantic, I could not shake the feeling that I was watching the Gospel collide head-on with our current American reality.

### **Prejudice as World-Building**

“Elemental” does not hide its metaphors. The city itself is designed around exclusion. Fire elements are segregated, feared and blamed. When Bernie and Cinder arrive, no one can pronounce their Fireish names. Doors close. Windows shutter. Hospitality evaporates. The “others” must adapt, assimilate or burn out.

It is hard to miss the parallels. Immigrants in our cities, towns, workplaces and schools often encounter the same suspicion and hostility bolstered by “law and order.” In the film, prejudice is normalized as infrastructure. In real life, it is codified as policy.

Jesus had little patience for such arrangements. “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Mt. 25:35). You didn’t screen me. You didn’t detain me. You didn’t deport me. You didn’t try to extinguish my flame. You welcomed me.

Call to action: Examine how your own community is designed—practically and politically—to include or exclude certain people.

### **Fire Is Not the Enemy**

One of the film’s quiet insights is that fear flows both ways. Ember’s family is understandably wary of water. Trauma hardens into prejudice. Pain calcifies into identity. This, too, rings true. Communities that have been harmed often learn to protect themselves by closing ranks.

Yet the film insists that healing begins not with domination or exclusion, but with encounter. Ember does not become less fire by loving Wade. She becomes more fully herself. Difference does not dilute her. It refines her.

Catholic social teaching affirms this vision. The dignity of the human person. Solidarity. The preferential option for the poor. The right to migrate when conditions make life untenable. These are not optional add-ons to the faith. They are constitutive of it.

Call to action: Learn and explicitly speak about Catholic social teaching, especially when it challenges popular political narratives.

### **Baptized into Belovedness**

Today the Church celebrates the Baptism of the Lord, the second of three epiphanies. Jesus steps into the Jordan not to be purified, but to be

publicly named: “This is my Son, whom I love and with whom I am well-pleased” (Mt. 3:17). Before he heals anyone, before he preaches, before he confronts empire, Jesus is named...beloved!

This matters deeply in a moment when entire communities—especially immigrants—are treated as disposable. The violence and terror currently directed at immigrant communities by the Trump Administration and its expanded ICE operations are not merely political strategies. They are theological failures. They deny belovedness.

When the state treats human beings as threats to be eliminated, the Church must respond not with vague prayers, but with embodied resistance. Anything less is complicity.

Call to action: Publicly affirm the belovedness of immigrants in your community, workplace and civic life.

### **A Nation in Need of Epiphany**

Epiphany is about clearly seeing. The magi see through Herod’s lies. At the Jordan, heaven opens and names Jesus for who he truly is.

Our nation desperately needs such an epiphany. We need eyes opened to the humanity of those we have dehumanized. We need to recognize how fear has warped our moral imagination. We need to admit that policies built on cruelty cannot yield justice.

Pop culture has been pleading this case for years. *Elemental*. *Encanto*. *Zootopia*. *The Bear*. Even Ted Lasso, preaching kindness as a form of resistance. The question is whether the Church will listen.

Call to action: Refuse narratives that frame cruelty as strength, or exclusion as virtue.

### **Additional Calls to Action**

- Publicly advocate for immigrant protections and humane policies.
- Support legal aid and accompaniment ministries for migrants.
- Challenge dehumanizing language in your family and among those you know.
- Vote with Catholic social teaching, not partisan fear.
- Teach children that difference is *not* danger.

### **Emerging from the Jordan Together**

Bernie and Cinder came forth from Fire Land to save their family. Jesus stepped from the Jordan to stand with the vulnerable. Ember stepped from inherited fear, to claim her future. Epiphany always demands movement!

As we stand between epiphanies — Bethlehem, the Jordan and Cana — we are asked to decide whom we believe belongs. Fire or water. Citizen or immigrant. Beloved or expendable.

The Gospel is clear. The question is whether we will be as clear.

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- Whose “fire” do I fear, and why?
- Where have I internalized prejudice as “common sense”?
- How does Jesus’ baptism challenge my politics?
- What epiphany is God inviting our nation to experience?
- What concrete action am I called to take now?

### **Let Us Pray**

God who names us beloved before we earn it, open our eyes to the dignity we have denied others. Drown our fear in the waters of justice, and kindle in us a fire that protects, rather than destroys. As we stand in the Jordan of this moment, give us courage to emerge with greater compassion. Amen.

## **Baptized Into Light, Sent Into Darkness**

The Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord  
in an America Starving for Humble, Courageous Faith

January 11, 2026



Today, I celebrated the Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord for the twenty-fifth time as a priest. Yet never before have the scriptures and ritual struck me with such force, urgency and unsettling clarity. In a nation convulsed by cruelty masquerading as strength, the baptismal waters of the Jordan felt less like a memory, and more like a summons — an epiphany exposing who we are as a nation, who we have become, and who we are still called to be.

### **When God Chooses Water Over Thrones**

Jesus' decision to step into the Jordan remains one of the most subversive moments in the Gospels. The sinless one submits to a ritual of repentance. The holy one stands shoulder-to-shoulder with the broken. The Beloved Son wades into muddy water, rather than mounting a platform of power.

John's humility mirrors Jesus' own. He resists self-importance. He refuses to center himself. He understands that his vocation is not domination, but participation in something greater than himself.

Contrast this with our current sociopolitical landscape. We are governed and influenced by figures who routinely confuse volume with authority, cruelty with courage, and dominance with leadership. In an era of chest-thumping nationalism and performative piety, the Jordan exposes the lie. God does not bless arrogance. God does not anoint tyranny. God chooses humility.

Pop culture has circled this truth for years. Think of Ted Lasso's insistence on servant leadership, Black Panther's critique of power divorced from compassion, or Bruce Springsteen's focus on the dignity of ordinary people. The Gospel has always been ahead of the curve!

### **"Here Is My Servant": Isaiah Against the Machinery of Cruelty**

Isaiah's first Servant Song (Is. 42:1-4, 6-7) in today's first reading could not sound more countercultural if it tried. God delights not in bluster, but in gentleness. God's servants quietly bring forth justice, not crushing the bruised reed or extinguishing the smoldering wick.

Now place that image alongside policies that terrorize immigrant families, rhetoric that dehumanizes the vulnerable, and enforcement tactics that feel chillingly reminiscent of authoritarian regimes. When children fear going to school, when migrants fear hospitals, and when communities fear uniforms, we are no longer talking about politics. We are talking about moral collapse.

Isaiah insists that God's servants become a light for the nations, opening blind eyes and freeing prisoners from darkness. Yet we are living through a moment when many prefer blindness, when darkness is justified as "law and order," and when silence is baptized as prudence.

Scripture does not allow neutrality here. Neither should the Church.

### **"God Shows No Partiality": Baptism Against Christian Nationalism**

Today's second reading (Acts 10:34-38) dismantled one of the most dangerous heresies of our time: the belief that God belongs to one nation, one party, or one people. Peter's declaration that God shows no partiality (Acts 10:34-35) is not a spiritual platitude. It is a theological rebuke.

Jesus went about doing good and healing those oppressed by evil. He did not hoard blessing. He did not rank human worth. He did not confuse empire with the Kingdom of God.

Yet Christian nationalism continues to baptize borders, weapons and exclusion. It waves flags where crosses once stood. It sings hymns to power, rather than lament suffering. It would be unrecognizable to the Jesus who emerged dripping from the Jordan.

If our faith makes us feel superior, rather than responsible, something has gone terribly wrong!

### **Renouncing Evil When Evil Winks and Smiles**

During today's renewal of baptismal promises, I asked familiar questions:

"Do you renounce sin, so as to live in the freedom of God's children?"

"Do you renounce the lure of evil, so that sin may not enslave you?"

"Do you renounce Satan, the father of sin and the prince of darkness?"

As the congregation responded, I felt an unease I could not ignore. Evil today rarely announces itself with horns and smoke. It wears suits and ties. At times it seems to don military, paramilitary or "law enforcement" uniforms. It speaks in slogans. It hides behind "legality." It efficiently and convincingly spreads fear.

When policies terrorize, rather than protect, when truth is mocked, and when lies are rewarded, baptism becomes dangerous again. To renounce evil now requires more than words. It demands resistance.

Paul's call to live as children of light (1Thes. 5:5) has never felt more urgent!

### **"Lift Up Your Face": Communion as Commission**

During Communion, we sang Michael Joncas' moving "Take and Eat," including its hope-filled fifth verse: "I am the light that came into the world. I am the light that darkness cannot hide. I am the morning star that never sets. Lift up your face: In you my light will shine!"

Communion is not a private comfort. It is a public commissioning. We receive Christ, so that we might carry Christ into places choking on despair. We consume the light, so that we might become it!

After Communion, I urged the assembly to go forth, nourished by Word and Sacrament, determined to confront the darkness presently enveloping our nation. We will all stand one day before God's judgment throne, measured as "sheep" or "goats" — as children of light or children of darkness — not by our slogans, but by whether we recognized Christ in the stranger, the migrant, the imprisoned and the despised (Mt. 25:35).

Baptism does not end at the font. It begins there!

### **Calls to Action**

- Speak publicly when policies or rhetoric dehumanize women, immigrants, LGBTQ+ persons or the poor. Silence is not neutrality.
- Support organizations providing legal aid, shelter and accompaniment to immigrant families.
- Challenge Christian nationalism when it rears its head in conversations.
- Examine personal comfort and complicity, especially where fear has replaced compassion.
- Vote, organize and advocate as people baptized into justice, not baptized into empire.

### **From the Jordan to Ordinary Time, Nothing Is Ordinary**

After today, we enter Winter Ordinary Time — though there is nothing ordinary about this American moment. The waters of baptism still cling to us. The voice from heaven still echoes. We are beloved, yes — but beloved people are entrusted with responsibility.

Like Jesus, we are sent from the water into the wilderness of the world. Like him, we must choose humility over power, light over darkness, and love over fear.

The Jordan did not make Jesus safe. It made him faithful. May it do the same for us!

### **Questions for Prayer and Reflection**

- Where am I tempted to confuse faith with comfort, or silence with wisdom?
- Whose suffering am I being asked to see more clearly?
- How do my baptismal promises challenge my political assumptions?
- Where is God calling me to bring light, even at personal cost?
- What does it mean for me to live as a child of light during these coming weeks of Winter Ordinary Time?

### **Let Us Pray**

God of the Jordan, You called your beloved Son out of the water and into the work of justice. Renew our baptismal courage. Strip us of fear. Open our eyes to suffering. Make us instruments of your light in a time of deep darkness. May we never mistake cruelty for strength, nor silence for faith. Send us forth, drenched in grace and dangerous with love. Amen.