Extraordinary Courage

Reflections for U.S. Catholics

Winter Ordinary Time 2026

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Preface

An optimist, I am not so naïve as to suggest: "Things can't get any worse." After the bruising darkness of 2025, many of us crossed the threshold into 2026 hoping the worst was behind us. During the first eleven months of a second Trump administration, we had watched democratic norms bend, fracture, and, in some cases, shatter. We had seen fear weaponized and cruelty normalized. Surely, we told ourselves, the fever would break.

If indeed we believed that, we were naïve.

Much happened during the first six weeks of 2026 alone. In a stunning escalation of executive overreach, we witnessed the U.S. seize both the president and oil reserves of Venezuela. We saw federal agents brutally terrorize communities. We beheld coordinated attacks on voting rights and brazen attempts to federalize elections in ways that threaten to hollow out local control and undermine democratic participation. We listened as division and lies freely flowed from the White House podium and social media feeds.

We are not merely living through political turbulence. We are living in the midst of an attempted totalitarian takeover of our nation.

Those words are not hyperbole. They are the sober conclusion of someone who has spent years in public service and has worked alongside elected officials across Texas. I understand how fragile democratic institutions can be when ambition outruns conscience.

I write these words at the end of Winter Ordinary Time 2026. There is something almost ironic about that liturgical label: Nothing about this moment in American history seems ordinary!

And yet, there is grace in the ordinary.

Winter Ordinary Time does not dazzle like Christmas or sear like Good Friday. It stretches quietly before us, week after week, dark green vestments and steady Gospel readings. It forms disciples not through spectacle, but through repetition. Jesus calls fishermen. Jesus quietly heals. In this Year of Matthew, Jesus began sharing his famed Sermon on the Mount. In the slow rhythm of Ordinary Time, we learn that faithfulness is rarely dramatic. It is daily. It is disciplined. It is stubborn.

This second volume of reflections gathers together essays written during these early winter weeks of 2026. If my first collection wrestled with Advent longing and Christmas light breaking into darkness, this one lingers in the long middle. It asks: *How do we live when the crisis does not pass? How do we remain engaged when exhaustion tempts us toward*

numbness? How do we practice extraordinary courage when authoritarian impulses parade as strength?

These essays are unapologetically spiritual and unapologetically political. I no longer believe those categories can be cleanly separated. When families are torn apart, when voting rights are curtailed, when federal agents terrorize communities, when truth is casually discarded, silence becomes spiritual malpractice! The prophets did not whisper. Jesus did not avoid public consequence. The early Church did not survive by flattering empire.

As one who once served as a Roman Catholic priest then publicly broke with a conservative bishop in order to co-found Austin's only inclusive Catholic community, I know that discipleship carries a cost. I also know that hope must be chosen again and again.

I write for those I often call "Extraordinary Catholics"—progressive, inclusive believers who refuse to cede the language of faith to those who weaponize it. These reflections aim to ground action in scripture, to root resistance in sacrament, and to frame political engagement as an expression of discipleship. Each entry offers theological reflection, concrete calls to action, questions for reflection, and a concluding prayer—because activism without contemplation grows brittle, and contemplation without justice grows hollow.

Winter Ordinary Time reminds us that transformation rarely comes in a single dramatic sweep. It comes through daily choices: to tell the truth, to defend the vulnerable, to show up, to pray, to vote, to organize, to forgive, to persist. It comes through communities that refuse to bow to lies. It comes through believers who quietly embody the reign of God in classrooms, courtrooms, boardrooms and kitchen tables.

If 2025 shattered illusions, 2026 demands maturity.

This book is not an exercise in despair. It is an act of defiance against it. It insists that even in the shadow of authoritarian ambition, we can cultivate extraordinary love, extraordinary solidarity, and extraordinary moral clarity. It insists that Ordinary Time is anything but ordinary when disciples take Jesus seriously.

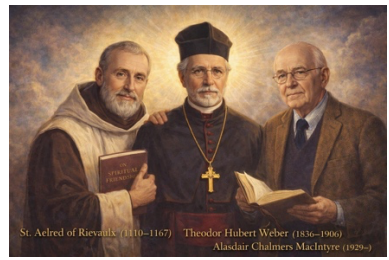
My prayer is that these reflections steady your heart, sharpen your conscience, and strengthen your resolve. May they help us live not as frightened subjects of a would-be strongman, but as free children of God. May they remind us that history bends not only through sweeping movements, but through daily faithfulness.

For if Advent and Christmas proclaim that light enters the world, Winter Ordinary Time teaches us how to keep that light burning when the headlines grow dark!

Cleaving, Choosing and Becoming

Lessons from Three Ordinary Time Teachers

January 12, 2026



With the glow of Christmas lights now behind us and our Christmas creches packed away, the Church now settles into the quieter rhythm of Winter Ordinary Time. These five weeks, stretching from yesterday's celebration of the Baptism of the Lord to Ash Wednesday on February 18, can feel spiritually anticlimactic, especially after Advent's urgency and Christmas' wonder. Yet Ordinary Time has always been the Church's great school of formation. It is where holiness is learned, not through spectacle, but through patience, habit and fidelity. On this first day of Winter Ordinary Time, January 12, three very different figures invite us to rediscover friendship, conscience and virtue as the building blocks of a faithful life.

St. Aelred of Rievaulx: Friendship as a School of Holiness

St. Aelred of Rievaulx, the 12th-century Cistercian abbot best known for his work, *On Spiritual Friendship*, understood something that modern Christianity often forgets: *Faith matures in relationship*. "Friend cleaves to friend in the spirit of Christ," he wrote, insisting that spiritual friendship is not a distraction from holiness, but one of its deepest expressions.

For many LGBTQIA+ Catholics today, Aelred has become a quiet patron, not because he offered modern categories, but because he articulated intimacy without fear. He refused to reduce love to suspicion. In an ecclesial culture that still often treats same-sex affection as something to be managed rather than celebrated, Aelred reminds us that deep, faithful friendship can mediate grace.

His wisdom resonates with contemporary audiences shaped by shows like *Ted Lasso*, where vulnerability, loyalty and chosen family slowly transform hardened hearts. Aelred would immediately recognize that "locker-room theology." Winter Ordinary Time invites us to ask not only what we believe, but who walks with us as we believe it!

Theodor Hubert Weber: Conscience at the Margins of the Church

On January 12, we also remember Theodor Hubert Weber, a 19th-century German theologian and bishop in the Old Catholic Church, a community that broke from Rome after the sham Vatican Council's 1870 novelties of purported papal infallibility and the universal jurisdiction of the pope. Weber's intellectual fidelity to Anton Günther placed him at odds with ecclesial authorities, yet he remained convinced that faith and reason belong together.

Weber's life reminds us that theological courage often emerges at the margins. The Old Catholic movement insisted that tradition must remain accountable to conscience, scholarship and history. That insistence feels newly relevant in a Church still struggling to address abuse, exclusion and centralized power.

In a time when many Catholics quietly drift away, rather than engage conflict, Weber challenges us to stay, to think and to reform. His witness echoes contemporary debates within Catholicism, where theologians, pastors and lay leaders risk misunderstanding in order to speak truthfully. Winter Ordinary Time is precisely when such patient, unspectacular fidelity is formed!

Alasdair MacIntyre: Virtue Before Rules

January 12 also marks the birth of Alasdair MacIntyre, whose work in virtue ethics reshaped moral philosophy. MacIntyre argued that *good judgment flows from good character*, not merely from rule-following. One does not become holy by checking boxes, but by becoming a certain kind of person. These lessons are increasingly important as we witness the widespread lack of character by a variety of governmental leaders here in the United States, whose judgment, decisions and actions reflect their sincere lack of character.

MacIntyre's observation that people do not choose their religious traditions, but are chosen by them, rings especially true for many Catholics. Few of us arrived here by accident: We were baptized into this faith and shaped by stories, sacraments, failures and hopes long before we could name them. MacIntyre helps us see Winter Ordinary Time not as filler, but as formation, the slow cultivation of habits that sustain justice and mercy.

Popular culture increasingly echoes this insight. Films like *Everything Everywhere All at Once* suggest that small, repeated acts of kindness matter more than heroic gestures. MacIntyre would nod in agreement. Virtue grows quietly, especially when no one is watching.

Calls to Action

- Reach out intentionally this week to a spiritual friend and name the grace they bring into your life.
- Read or revisit a short passage from *On Spiritual Friendship* and reflect on how various friendships have shaped your faith.
- Learn about the Old Catholic Church and the Inclusive Catholic movement, and pray for communities that faithfully live beyond Rome's structures and strictures.
- Examine your conscience around intellectual humility: Where might fear be limiting your theological curiosity?
- Commit to one small, concrete practice during Winter Ordinary Time that cultivates virtue rather than visibility.
- Support theologians, artists and ministers who risk speaking honestly for the good of the Church.

Ordinary Time, Extraordinary Formation

Winter Ordinary Time reminds us that holiness rarely announces itself. It develops slowly, through friendships that endure, consciences that remain awake, and virtues that are practiced long before they are perfected. Aelred, Weber and MacIntyre each testify that faith matures not in dramatic moments, but in sustained commitments. As the Church now walks toward Lent, these weeks offer not emptiness, but opportunity: a chance to become the kind of people whose lives quietly reveal the Gospel!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Which spiritual friends bolster and nourish my faith?
- Where am I being invited to trust conscience more deeply, even when it unsettles me?
- What virtues do I consistently practice, and which ones do I avoid?
- How has Catholic tradition shaped me, even when I have resisted?
- What would a faithful Winter Ordinary Time look like if I embraced its slowness?

Let Us Pray

God of seasons and souls, you meet us not only in holy days, but in ordinary ones. Teach us to cherish the friendships that sustain us, the consciences that guide us, and the virtues that form us. As we walk these winter weeks toward Lent, shape us quietly into people of courage, tenderness and truth. May our ordinary days bear extraordinary fruit. Amen.

James Joyce and the Sacramental Imagination of a Lapsed Believer

What Catholics Might Learn from a Writer
Who Loved the Church Too Much to Lie About It

January 13, 2026

On January 13, as the Church settles into the quieter rhythms of Winter Ordinary Time, we remember the passing of James Joyce (1882–1941). Christmas lights and carols have faded, and now Joyce invites us into a different kind of contemplation: one that wrestles, resists, remembers and refuses to let go. Lapsed Catholic though he was, Joyce never truly escaped the Church. Instead, he carried it with him into exile, into language, and into some of the most influential literature of the modern world.

A Thoroughly Catholic Imagination

James Joyce was an Irish novelist, short story writer and poet, best known for *Dubliners, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. He revolutionized modern literature through his experimental use of language, interior monologue, and stream-of-consciousness narration. Yet for all his literary innovation, Joyce remained deeply formed by a thoroughly Catholic imagination.

Raised in late 19th-century Ireland, Joyce received a rigorous Jesuit education. He absorbed Catholic theology, sacramental symbolism and moral reasoning so deeply that even his rebellion bore unmistakably Catholic contours. His work consistently returns to themes of sin and grace, exile and belonging, incarnation and resurrection, confession and absolution—even when the institutional Church appears as suffocating, hypocritical or cruel.

Joyce's War with the Church

Joyce famously wrote, "Now I make open war upon [my church] by what I write and say and do." His break with the Roman Catholic Church

was real and costly. He rejected clerical authority, nationalist Catholic pieties, and what he experienced as the Church's stifling grip on Irish culture and conscience.

Yet Joyce did not simply discard Catholicism. Instead, he transposed it. His quarrel was not with mystery, ritual or transcendence, but with control, fear and repression. Like many of the 9% of Americans who self-identify as former Catholics—or who sometimes wittingly self-identify as "recovering Catholics"—Joyce remained haunted and helped by the faith that shaped him. His critique was born not of indifference, but of intimacy.

Joyce and the Church: Mutual Influence

The Church profoundly shaped Joyce, even as Joyce unsettled the Church. He forced Catholic readers to confront uncomfortable truths about power, sexuality, colonialism and conscience. At the same time, he preserved Catholic patterns of thought in a secularizing world, translating them into literature that continues to provoke, console and reveal.

When Joyce died in 1941, a Roman Catholic priest offered to celebrate his funeral. His wife declined, saying, "I couldn't do that to him." The moment captures the unresolved tension of Joyce's life: a man claimed by a tradition he could neither fully embrace, nor entirely escape.

Lessons Today

- **Honor complex faith journeys**. Not every holy life fits neatly within ecclesial boundaries.
- **Tell the truth about harm**. Joyce reminds us that critique can be an act of love.
- **Trust the sacramental power of ordinary life**. Grace appears in kitchens, conversations and city streets.
- **Make room for exile and return.** Some leave the Church physically, but carry it spiritually for life.
- **Protect conscience as sacred ground**. Authentic faith cannot survive coercion.
- **Engage art as theology**. Novels and poems often preach where pulpits fail.

Fidelity Without Falsehood

As we move through these quieter weeks after the Advent/Christmas season, Joyce invites us to attend carefully to the everyday. Ordinary Time, like *Ulysses*, insists that holiness unfolds not only in feast days and fasts, but in walking, working, doubting and loving. In a culture

obsessed with certainty, Joyce offers something more Catholic than certainty: fidelity to mystery!

James Joyce teaches us that faith does not require dishonesty. We need not pretend the Church has not wounded us, nor must we abandon the beauty that once gave us life. Joyce models a fierce integrity that refuses cheap reconciliation, while remaining open to grace wherever it appears. His life suggests that *sometimes the most Catholic thing we can do is to speak truthfully, love deeply, and trust that God can work even through exile.*

Questions for Prayer & Reflection

- Where do I carry both love and anger toward the Church?
- How has Catholic imagery or ritual shaped me, even in times of doubt?
- What truths am I afraid to name aloud about my faith experience?
- Where do I encounter grace in ordinary, unspectacular moments?
- How might art, literature or music deepen my spiritual life this year?
- What would fidelity look like for me if it were grounded in honesty, rather than fear?

Let Us Pray

God of truth and tenderness, You dwell not only in sanctuaries, but in stories, not only in certainty, but in searching hearts. Bless all who love the Church imperfectly, all who stay, all who leave, and all who linger at the edges. Teach us to speak honestly, to love courageously, and to trust that your grace exceeds every boundary we draw. May our ordinary days become places of quiet revelation. Amen.

When Conscience Refuses to Bow

Johann Joseph Ignaz von Döllinger and the Cost of Catholic Integrity

January 14, 2026

In nearly ten years of seminary studies and more than a decade of ordained ministry in the Roman Catholic Church, I learned the names of many Catholic theologians. Many. Since stepping outside the Roman papacracy, though, I have learned just how many bright lights the Church kept from me and my classmates! Today, in the quiet stretch of Winter Ordinary Time, we remember one of those lights—villainized by his own Church, yet faithful to its deepest memory: Johann Joseph Ignaz von Döllinger (1799-1890).

A Priest Formed by History, Not Nostalgia

Johann Joseph Ignaz von Döllinger was born in 1799 in Bamberg, Germany, into a Catholic culture still reeling from Enlightenment critique and Napoleonic upheaval. Ordained a priest in 1822, Döllinger quickly distinguished himself not as a provocateur, but as a painstaking scholar. He believed that the Church could only truthfully know herself by knowing her own history—warts, debates and all.

As a professor of theology and church history in Munich, Döllinger devoted his life to studying the early councils, the development of doctrine, and the evolving relationship between episcopal authority and the papacy. He was not interested in tearing down the Church. He was committed to defending her against what he believed were theological shortcuts and historical amnesia.

Faithful Dissent and the First Millennium

By the time of the sham Vatican Council (1869–1870), Döllinger was widely respected across Europe. Yet his scholarship led him to a deeply unsettling conclusion: *The proposed dogma of purported papal infallibility—intended to heal the division created by an 1854 papal proclamation—had no credible grounding in the faith, practice or ecclesiology of the early Church.*

For Döllinger, the issue was not whether the pope mattered. It was whether the Church had the authority to declare as timeless dogma something that contradicted her own historical witness. He argued that the early Church operated through conciliar discernment, and not through gnostic, unilateral papal decree. To claim otherwise, he insisted, was to sever continuity with the apostolic tradition the Council claimed to defend.

When papal infallibility was proclaimed, Döllinger did not leave the priesthood. He did not start a rival church. He simply refused to assent. In Munich, he convened 44 professors who issued a declaration resisting the Council's resolutions. For this act of conscience, he was excommunicated.

Excommunication Without Apostasy

What makes Döllinger especially compelling for Catholics is what he did not do. He did not renounce Catholicism. He did not declare the Church corrupt beyond hope. He continued to live, pray and teach as a Catholic priest, convinced that fidelity sometimes requires standing still while the institution rushes ahead.

Though he greatly influenced the formation and development of the German Old Catholic Church—a church birthed not by clergy, but by theologians and faithful lay leaders—Döllinger himself refused to formally join it. He did not want schism. He wanted reform rooted in memory. His excommunication was imposed, not chosen.

One might think here of a familiar U.S. cultural trope: the whistleblower who loves the institution enough to risk everything for its integrity. Think of *Erin Brockovich* or *Spotlight*. Döllinger was not anti-Church. He was anti-forgetting.

Lessons Today

- **Take history seriously**. Doctrine does not drop from heaven fully formed. It develops through prayer, conflict and communal discernment. Knowing our past protects us from absolutizing the present.
- **Practice faithful resistance**. Döllinger shows that dissent need not be cynical or performative. It can be reverent, informed and rooted in love for the Church.
- **Trust conscience, even when it costs you**. Excommunication did not make Döllinger bitter. It clarified his vocation. Catholics can learn to act from conscience without abandoning community.

- **Resist false binaries**. Döllinger annoyed liberals and antagonized Ultramontanes. He reminds us that truth often refuses our ideological categories.
- **Reclaim Ordinary Time as a formative season**. Winter Ordinary Time invites slow, patient growth. Döllinger's life teaches us that long obedience to truth matters more than ecclesial victories.

A Church Remembered Is a Church Renewed

Döllinger never lived to see reconciliation. Yet his legacy endures wherever we refuse to confuse loyalty with silence, or tradition with stagnation. In an era when authority is often defended by narrowing the conversation, Döllinger trusted that the Holy Spirit works through history, scholarship and even conflict. The Church does not lose herself by remembering too much. She loses herself by remembering too little!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- How well do I know the actual history of my Church, beyond slogans and summaries?
- Where might I be confusing obedience with avoidance of conflict?
- When has conscience required me to stand apart, even while remaining faithful?
- What voices or theologians might I have been discouraged from reading—and why?
- How might Winter Ordinary Time invite me into deeper patience with truth?

Let Us Pray

God of memory and hope, You called your Church into being through many voices, many councils, and many contested paths. Bless all who seek your truth with humility and courage. Give us the grace to love the Church enough to tell her the truth, to trust the Spirit enough to wait through conflict, and to remain faithful even when fidelity is misunderstood. May we, like Johann Joseph Ignaz von Döllinger, serve the Church, not as she flatters herself to be, but as you are patiently calling her to become. Amen.

Living the Life of Mary When the Church Says No

Lessons from the Mariavite Church

January 15, 2026

After nearly a decade of Roman Catholic seminary studies, I left with a long reading list of theologians, mystics and reformers. And yet I never once heard the word Mariavite. Today's commemoration—the 84th birthday of German Mariavite bishop Maria Norbert Szuwart—invites a gentle but pointed question: *What other courageous experiments in Catholic faithfulness were kept from our view, perhaps because they dared to live the Gospel too fully, too soon?*

An Ordinary Time Invitation

Winter Ordinary Time has a way of lowering the volume after Christmas. The lights dim. The music softens. And the Church quietly asks us how we intend to live now that the angels have departed and the magi have gone home. January 15 offers just such a question through the witness of the Mariavite Church, a movement born not from academic theology or episcopal planning, but from lived spirituality, mystical experience, and a radical commitment to the *vita Mariae*—the life of Mary—and to those *qui Mariae vitam imitantur*, who imitate her life.

This is a story about faithfulness without permission, reform without safety nets, and a Church that learned—sometimes painfully—what it means to take holiness seriously.

Mariavitism: A Spirituality Before a Structure

Mariavitism emerged in late 19th-century Poland, then under Russian rule, through the religious experiences of **Sister Feliksa Kozłowska** (1862–1921), a noblewoman and nun. She reported a series of mystical visions calling for moral renewal of the clergy, frequent reception of the Eucharist, and deep devotion to Mary as the model disciple.

At its heart, Mariavitism was not initially a new church, but a movement of spiritual renewal within Roman Catholicism. Its core conviction was simple and unsettling: *Mary's life of humility, obedience and*

radical trust in God was not meant to be admired from afar, but imitated concretely and communally!

This insistence—that holiness must be lived and not merely venerated—quickly brought Mariavites into conflict with church authorities who viewed Kozłowska's revelations with suspicion and discomfort.

Jan Maria Michał Kowalski and a Church Takes Shape

Enter **Father Jan Maria Michał Kowalski** (1871–1942), a Roman Catholic priest who became the movement's most visible and controversial leader. He defended Kozłowska's experiences, organized Mariavite communities, and eventually sought apostolic continuity outside Rome.

In 1909, Kowalski was consecrated a bishop by the Old Catholic Archbishop of Utrecht, placing the Mariavite Church within the broader Old Catholic movement that had rejected the sham Vatican Council's 1870 definition of purported papal infallibility. This act followed Rome's formal excommunication of the Mariavites in 1906, a moment that transformed a reform movement into a distinct ecclesial body.

For a time, the Mariavite Church flourished. It gained recognition from the Union of Utrecht, expanded rapidly, and implemented reforms that many Roman Catholics would not see realized until decades later—if at all.

A Church Ahead of Its Time

The Mariavites were nothing if not bold.

- They embraced married clergy in 1922-1924.
- In 1922, they shared with laity Communion under both species—the Body *and* Blood of Christ.
- In 1929, they ordained women.

Each of these decisions flowed logically from their theology of shared holiness and sacramental life. And yet each also pushed the boundaries of what other Old Catholics could accept at the time.

It is fair to ask whether the 1929 ordination of women contributed to later fractures. The evidence suggests that it did play a role—not so much as the sole cause, but as part of a broader pattern of rapid, charismatic and sometimes unilateral decision-making under Kowalski's leadership. In 1935, the Mariavite Church split. Kowalski and his loyalists were expelled, resulting in two distinct Mariavite churches that still exist today.

Catholics may wince at this history, recognizing a familiar tension: how to balance prophetic reform with communal discernment and accountability.

Maria Norbert Szuwart and Faithfulness After the Spotlight

Bishop Maria Norbert Szuwart, born in 1942, represents a quieter chapter of Mariavite life. His ministry reminds us that movements shaped by controversy must eventually mature into communities sustained by prayer, pastoral care and perseverance. Not every reformer stands at the barricades. Some keep the lamps burning long after the crowds disperse.

Why We Were Never Taught This

So, why did I never hear about Mariavitism in ten years of Roman Catholic seminary studies?

Perhaps because it exposes uncomfortable truths: that women have exercised profound theological authority, that Eucharistic devotion can threaten clerical control, that reform sometimes comes not from councils but from mystics, and that being "too progressive" is often another way of being prematurely faithful!

Calls to Action

- Recover suppressed histories, especially those involving women, mystics and marginalized churches.
- Study the Old Catholic and Independent/Inclusive Catholic movements as laboratories of ecclesial courage.
- Revisit Marian spirituality—not sentimentally, but ethically and incarnationally.
- Support married and women clergy, recognizing the long, costly witness behind today's debates.
- Practice patient reform, holding together prophetic urgency and communal discernment.
- Pray for churches born of schism, that wounds may become wisdom.

When Fidelity Looks Like Disobedience

The Mariavite Church asks a question that Ordinary Time refuses to let us dodge: *What if faithfulness to Christ sometimes requires disobedience to ecclesial comfort*? Feliksa Kozłowska did not seek a new church. Jan Kowalski did not intend to fracture communion. And yet history unfolded as it did because they chose lived holiness over institutional approval.

We do well to sit with this discomfort. Not every reform succeeds. Not every prophet wisely governs. But the Spirit has never promised safety—only presence.

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Which Marian virtues am I willing to imitate, not just admire?
- Where have I confused obedience with holiness?
- Whose spiritual experiences do I instinctively distrust, and why?
- How do I respond when reform moves faster than consensus?
- Where might the Church still fear being "too faithful"?

Let Us Pray

Holy God, You called Mary to say yes without guarantees, and you called others to follow her life, rather than merely praise it. Give us courage to live the Gospel when it unsettles us, wisdom to reform without destroying, and humility to trust that your Spirit works even through broken histories. As we walk through this Ordinary Time, teach us to be quietly extraordinary in love. Amen.

A Firebrand Between Rome and Reform

Lessons from Charles Chiniquy

January 16, 2026

As a former Roman Catholic priest who largely left the Roman papacy over its mistreatment of immigrants and its inability to stand with women, I found a welcomed companion on my journey when I discovered another former Roman Catholic priest whose firebrand preaching sparked fervor and fear. His name? Charles Chiniquy—pronounced *shin-i-kee*.

From Montreal to Chicago: A Life of Conviction

Born in 1809 in Saint-Athanase, Quebec, Chiniquy was ordained as a Roman Catholic priest in 1832. Early in his career, he ministered to

French Canadian immigrants in Illinois, often defending their rights against exploitation by the clergy and laity alike. He believed strongly that the institutional Church had a responsibility to care for the marginalized—a concern that resonates with modern voices advocating for immigrant communities.

In Chicago, Chiniquy faced a clash with the local bishop over what he saw as corruption and neglect. His advocacy for parishioners brought him into open conflict with Church hierarchy, culminating in his excommunication.

Author, Evangelist, and Public Firebrand

Chiniquy was a remarkable communicator. His *Fifty Years in the Church of Rome* and *The Priest, the Woman and the Confessional* became Canadian bestsellers, exposing perceived abuses within the Church and warning of the dangers he associated with Roman Catholic practices. He traveled widely, and he preached with energy and zeal comparable to modern televangelists—or even to characters in films like *Dead Poets Society*, who challenge authority while inspiring others to critically think.

His rhetoric was extreme at times, but it underscores the power of courage in the face of institutional inertia. Chiniquy's story reminds us: *Challenging authority requires both conviction and the willingness to endure personal cost.*

Influence Beyond Denominations

Chiniquy's legacy extended to his young mentee, Joseph Rene Vilatte, the first recorded Independent Catholic bishop in the United States. Vilatte carried forward Chiniquy's spirit of questioning centralized authority while maintaining the sacraments and a model of conscience-driven faith that anticipates modern conversations about our Catholic faith and spirituality.

Through a pop culture lens, Chiniquy's impact could be likened to figures like Tony Stark in the Marvel films—flawed, outspoken, sometimes brash, but relentlessly committed to reform and innovation, even when others resist.

Understanding the Fire

What drove Chiniquy's fierce critique of Rome? Scholars suggest a combination of personal woundedness, keen moral conscience, and empathy for marginalized populations. He was neither villain nor saint, but a human being navigating pain, principle and purpose. For us, this is a lesson in engaging with difficult personalities and controversial

histories: *Our heroes and our critics alike can illuminate paths toward justice and integrity!*

Calls for Action

- **Engage in Honest Critique**. We can acknowledge the Church's flaws while staying rooted in Christ's mission, just as Chiniquy challenged abuses without abandoning faith itself.
- **Read Widely Across Perspectives**. Explore texts by reformers, dissenters and marginalized voices to broaden understanding of Catholic history.
- **Locally Stand for Justice**. Advocate for communities neglected or harmed by institutional decisions, drawing inspiration from Chiniquy's defense of French Canadians.
- **Nurture Conscience-Driven Faith**. Prioritize personal discernment and moral integrity over adherence to hierarchy.
- **Bridge Denominational Gaps**. Celebrate collaboration across traditions, echoing Vilatte's ecumenical openness.

Chiniquy and the Fire of Winter Ordinary Time

Even in this first week of Winter Ordinary Time, when liturgy turns more routine, Chiniquy reminds us that faith need not be passive. Winter is a season of reflection and preparation. We are called to examine our own convictions, confront injustices, and speak boldly for truth and compassion—without abandoning our roots in the Church!

Questions for Prayer & Reflection

- Where do I feel called to speak boldly, even when it risks conflict?
- How do I balance critique of Church structures with my love for Christ's mission?
- Which historical or contemporary voices have I overlooked that could deepen my understanding of justice and faith?
- In what ways might my own wounds or experiences shape my perception of those in authority?
- How can I build bridges across communities, denominations or traditions while staying true to my conscience?

Let Us Pray

God of justice and mercy, grant us the courage to speak truth with love, to challenge injustice without losing hope, and to follow You faithfully through seasons of doubt and conviction. May our hearts burn with the fire of Your Spirit as we pursue reform, compassion, and understanding in our communities. Amen.

Theology of Liberation and Listening

Juan Luis Segundo and the Cost of Our Deafness Today

January 17, 2026

For last week's recording of our *Cutting Edge Catholics* podcast, I found myself in holy company: Rev. Trish Sullivan Vanni, Ph.D. of Charis Ecumenical Catholic Community in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, and Rev. Doug Pagitt of Solomon's Porch in Minneapolis—two pastors ministering at the epicenter of a moral crisis unfolding in real time. Minnesota has become ground zero for the Gestapo-like tactics of a surging and increasingly violent ICE force, one that has terrorized immigrant communities and people of color, culminating last week in the killing of Renee Good.

What struck me most was not only the brutality of what is happening, but the clarity with which these faith leaders are responding. They are not deaf. They are listening—to terrified families, to students afraid to go to school, to worshipers who now need accompaniment to synagogues and mosques, to neighbors who no longer feel safe leaving their homes to buy groceries. They are documenting abuses, organizing meals, escorting the vulnerable, and visibly standing between state violence and human dignity.

And throughout their communities, a sound has begun to rise: whistles blown by ordinary people to warn one another of ICE presence. It is practical and profoundly symbolic—a form of "whistleblowing" that names injustice and refuses silence!

As I listened to them speak of the terror that is being visited on our friends in Minnesota, I could not help but think of Juan Luis Segundo.

A Life Forged by Listening: From Medicine to Liberation Theology

Juan Luis Segundo (1925–1996), the Uruguayan Jesuit theologian we remember on January 17, understood something the Church still struggles to learn: Theology that does not begin with listening to the oppressed is *not* Christian theology at all!

Segundo began his professional life as a physician, a vocation that trained him to attend carefully to bodies, wounds, symptoms and pain. That attentiveness followed him into the Society of Jesus and into his theological work. He refused to treat suffering as an abstraction. Poverty, repression and violence were not ideas to be debated, but realities to be confronted.

In works such as *The Liberation of Theology, Theology of Faith,* and *The Kingdom of God and the Poor*, Segundo became an unrelenting critic of the Church's deafness—its willful refusal to hear the cries of those crushed by unjust social, political and economic systems. He challenged both ecclesial and political ideologies that baptized inequality and excused violence, insisting that faith severed from justice inevitably sides with the powerful.

Segundo did not ask whether the Church spoke about the poor. He asked whether it *listened*—and whether it allowed what it heard to change everything.

Deafness as Sin: When Silence Enables Terror

Segundo's critique lands with devastating force in the U.S. today.

The terrorization of communities by federal agents in Minnesota is not an aberration. It is the fruit of a long-standing moral deafness: Americans who do not hear the fear in immigrant neighborhoods, Christians who do not hear the terror in children's voices, Catholics who do not hear the Gospel crying out from detention centers, courtrooms and bloodstained streets.

Renee Good's death was not inevitable. It was the result of policies hardened by ideology, enforced by militarized agents, and enabled by a public trained not to listen. ICE's escalating violence depends on this deafness. So does its continued expansion.

Segundo warned that when theology stops listening to the oppressed, it begins to justify oppression. When Christians stop listening, they start explaining away cruelty. When the Church goes deaf, it risks becoming chaplain to empire, rather than companion to the crucified.

Whistles, Witness, and the Work of Liberation

In Minnesota, the whistles matter.

They are practical alarms, yes—but they are also a theological protest. They announce: *We see you. We hear each other. We will not normalize terror.*

This is liberation theology lived, not footnoted. It is Segundo's insistence that faith must become embodied solidarity. Theology, he taught, is always done from somewhere. The question is whether it is done from the safety of privilege or from proximity to pain.

Segundo would recognize the ministry unfolding in Minnesota. He would recognize pastors escorting families, documenting abuses, standing in public witness. He would recognize communities refusing silence. And he would recognize, with sorrow, the Church leaders and ordinary believers who remain unmoved, unbothered and unheard.

What Juan Luis Segundo Asks of Us Now

Segundo's theology presses us with uncomfortable questions:

- Whose cries have we learned not to hear?
- Which ideologies have trained us to mistake cruelty for order?
- How often do we spiritualize injustice, rather than confront it?
- Who benefits from our silence?

For Segundo, faith demanded what is happening in Minnesota right now: accompaniment, disruption and courage. Not charity alone, but resistance. Not pious words, but risky love!

Calls to Action

- **Practice Dangerous Listening**. Seek out the stories of immigrants, undocumented families, and communities targeted by ICE—and allow what you hear to unsettle you.
- **Accompany the Vulnerable**. Support or join efforts that escort students, worshipers and families who fear leaving their homes.
- **Document and Witness**. Use your voice, platforms and presence to expose abuses and resist normalization of state violence.
- **Challenge Church Silence**. Demand that bishops, pastors and institutions clearly speak against terror masquerading as policy.
- **Turn Theology into Action**. Let prayer, Scripture and sacrament propel you toward justice, not away from it.

Winter Ordinary Time Is Anything but Ordinary

Winter Ordinary Time tempts us toward routine and religious anesthesia. Juan Luis Segundo will not allow it. He reminds us that faith without listening becomes dangerous, and that silence in the face of oppression is never neutral.

In a season that feels cold and bleak, Segundo calls us to sharpen our hearing. To notice the whistles. To attend to the cries. To refuse the comfort of deafness.

For where we choose to listen is where we choose to stand.

Questions for Prayer & Reflection

- Where have I grown deaf to suffering that makes me uncomfortable?
- Whose voices am I least likely to hear—and why?
- How have fear or ideology shaped my moral hearing?
- What concrete acts of accompaniment am I being called to this week?
- How might God be speaking through the cries I most want to avoid?

Let Us Pray

God of the oppressed and the listening heart, unstop our ears and soften what has grown calloused within us. Deliver us from the sin of silence and the comfort of distance. Give us the courage to hear cries that demand change and the faith to respond with our bodies, our voices and our lives. May we never grow deaf to You speaking in the suffering of Your people. Amen.

That All Might Be One

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity
in an America Addicted to Division

January 18, 2026

I studied theology at the Washington Theological Union in Washington, D.C., a place where ecumenism was not an elective, but the air we breathed. I recall with fondness a friend who was a postulant with the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement—the Greymoor Friars—who took atonement seriously enough to break the word apart for us: *at-one-ment*. They returned us again and again to Jesus' prayer in the Gospel of John, "that they may all be one" (Jn. 17:21).

That formation returns to me powerfully as we begin today the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. In this dark and disorienting chapter of

U.S. history—marked by cruelty toward immigrants, raids that terrorize families, and political leaders who profit from fear and silence—one of the most luminous signs of grace has been watching pastors and faith leaders stand together across traditions. In Portland. In Chicago. In Minneapolis. Clergy praying, singing, linking arms, being pepper-sprayed, documenting abuses, and accompanying immigrants to school, worship and court.

How tragically sad are the events that have brought us together. And yet, how achingly beautiful. A true silver lining breaking through heavy clouds!

And those clouds are not only domestic.

This week, we heard what once would have sounded unthinkable: a sitting U.S. president threatening military aggression against Denmark—a NATO ally—over control of Greenland. One United Nations member openly floating violence against another. The very notion would have been dismissed as ludicrous only a few years ago. Now it hovers, disturbingly, within the realm of possibility.

The United Nations was founded in the aftermath of unspeakable global violence, its very name an act of hope: *nations united*. Its fragile promise was that power would be restrained by cooperation, that sovereignty would be tempered by shared responsibility, and that war would be replaced—however imperfectly—by dialogue. To watch that promise mocked, eroded and casually threatened is to witness the unraveling of a moral consensus the world once swore it would never abandon again.

It is against this backdrop that Christian unity matters. Not as a nicety. Not as an internal Church project. But as a counter-witness to a world increasingly comfortable with domination.

At-one-ment: Unity as Gospel, Not Slogan

The word "unity" comes from the Latin *unus*, meaning one. From that same root we get union, communion, community, unanimous and unanimity. None of these words suggests sameness. All of them suggest relationship.

Jesus' prayer in John 17:22–23 is not a call to uniformity, but to shared belonging: "that they may be one, as we are one…so that the world may know." Unity, in the Christian sense, is missional. It exists for the sake of the world, especially the wounded world.

The early Church understood this. Acts tells us that the earliest disciples were "of one accord" (Acts 2:46), holding possessions in common, breaking bread together, refusing to let scarcity or fear define

them. Ecclesiastes reminds us why this matters: "A cord of three strands is not easily broken" (Eccl. 4:12). Strength multiplies when we stand together.

Unity Is Hard—and Scripture Knows That

The Bible never romanticizes unity. Paul's letters to the Corinthians read like minutes from a dysfunctional parish council meeting. "I belong to Paul." "I belong to Cephas." "I belong to Apollos." "I belong to Christ" (1Cor 1:12). Paul does not deny disagreement. He confronts it, insisting that love, not ego, must govern the body.

True unity requires truth-telling. It requires naming harm. It requires choosing solidarity over comfort. This is why today's ecumenical witness matters so much. Pastors are not gathering because it is trendy or safe. They are gathering because human dignity is under assault, and silence would be sin.

Pop culture sometimes understands this better than the Church. Think of the Avengers finally assembling not because they agree, but because the threat is too great to face alone. Or the closing scene of *Selma*, where many streams of faith and conscience converge on one bridge. Or Kendrick Lamar's insistence that survival is communal, not individual. Unity is often forged under pressure.

Songs of One Body in a Broken Nation

The Church has always sung its theology. We sing what we struggle to live:

- "We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord" (from "They'll Know We Are Christians by Our Love"), words that feel aspirational and indicting at the same time.
- Marty Haugen's "We Are Many Parts," which refuses to ignore suffering and pain in the Body of Christ, even as it proclaims belonging.
- "One Bread, One Body," with its insistent repetition of "one," sung in a Church still fractured by race, class, gender and ideology.

These hymns are not nostalgic. They are protest songs in vestments. Sung honestly, they expose how far we still have to go!

Unity Beyond Christianity: Walking One Another Home

January 18 is also World Religion Day, a reminder that Christianity does not hold a monopoly on compassion or courage. Many traditions speak of life as a shared journey up the same mountain, approached by different paths.

Rev. Doug Pagitt's phrase from our *Cutting Edge Catholics* podcast last week stays with me: "We are all walking one another home." That includes Muslims opening mosques to frightened neighbors, Jews standing guard outside synagogues, secular organizers providing food and transportation, atheists showing up because conscience demands it.

Jesus praised this kind of faith-in-action in outsiders. The Good Samaritan did not share theology with the wounded man. He shared mercy. And Jesus said, "Go and do likewise" (Lk. 10:37).

Winter Ordinary Time in an Anything-But-Ordinary America

We find ourselves in Winter Ordinary Time, though nothing about this American moment feels ordinary. Authoritarianism is normalized. Cruelty is televised. Division is monetized. Even international aggression is spoken of casually, as though history has taught us nothing.

This is precisely why the Church must recover its extraordinary vocation. Unity is not politeness. Unity is resistance. Unity is pastors showing up at ICE facilities. Unity is Catholics praying with Protestants, Jews, Muslims and the religiously unaffiliated because bodies and lives are on the line.

As John Pavlovitz reminds us with prophetic clarity: Neutrality always sides with the oppressor. And unity that avoids justice is not Christian unity at all.

Calls to Action

- Pray publicly and privately for Christian unity that leads to concrete solidarity, not vague niceness.
- Show up ecumenically. Attend a prayer vigil, protest or forum led by another tradition. Bring your collar, your rosary, your voice.
- Challenge divisive rhetoric in your community, family and online spaces, especially when it masquerades as "faithfulness."
- Support immigrant accompaniment efforts financially or through volunteering. Unity costs something.
- Intentionally sing songs of unity, letting their words shape your conscience and actions.
- Hold religious, political and digital leaders accountable for the ways in which they profit from fear and fragmentation.

***At-one-ment* as Holy Resistance**

I return, full-circle, to those Greymoor Friars and their insistence that atonement means *at-one-ment*. In this stormy season, pastors locking arms across traditions feel like a living sacrament—an outward sign of an inward grace that our nation and our world desperately need.

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is not an escape from the world's pain. It is an invitation to meet it together. In the snow. In the streets. In the Spirit. That all might be one—and that the world might finally believe in the values we profess and live!

Questions for Prayer & Reflection

- Where do I resist unity because it feels uncomfortable or risky?
- Whose voices and traditions do I still dismiss or fear?
- How does my faith call me to public solidarity right now?
- In what ways do I benefit from systems that divide and exclude?
- What would it look like for my circles of influence to become visible signs of at-one-ment?

Let Us Pray

God of many names and one love, break down the walls we have built between us. Unbind us from fear, ego and the lies that keep us apart. Make us one—not in sameness, but in shared courage. As winter settles in and injustice hardens hearts, teach us to walk one another home. Through Christ, who prayed that we might all be one. Amen.

Dr. King and the Measure of Our Souls

Why MLK Exposes the Poverty of Our Present Leadership

January 19, 2026

This weekend, the world witnessed a grotesque spectacle: a Nobel Peace Prize laureate bending the knee to an autocrat and handing her medal to him. A prize meant to honor the labor of peace, justice and human dignity reduced to a trinket of flattery, bestowed upon a man who traffics in cruelty, grievance and division. Alfred Nobel, who established this prize to honor those who best foster "fraternity between nations, the abolition or reduction of standing armies, and the promotion of peace" is absolutely rolling in his grave!

And so today, with bitter irony and moral clarity, we celebrate a *real* Nobel Peace Prize winner: Martin Luther King, Jr.

Each year, we gather to honor Dr. King, but increasingly this day is less about remembering a man, than about revealing who we are. MLK Day has become a moral stress test. In an America that once invoked King as a prophet and now seeks to neutralize him, distort him, or quietly erase him, the question is no longer: What did *King* say? The key question, as we celebrate him this year, is: Who are *we* becoming?

As Catholics entering Winter Ordinary Time in a nation that is anything but ordinary, we must ask: What does King's witness expose about our leaders, our institutions, and ourselves, at a moment when the presidency itself has been hollowed out into spectacle, vengeance and authoritarian fantasy?

A True Nobel Laureate—and a Study in Contrasts

Martin Luther King, Jr. and Donald J. Trump represent two utterly incompatible visions of leadership for Christians and Catholics.

King was a *transformational* leader. Rooted in faith, disciplined by nonviolence, and animated by moral imagination, he labored tirelessly to summon forth the best in individuals and nations alike. He worked to dismantle the structures that divide us, even when doing so endangered his life. He stood as a light to the nations, to borrow Isaiah's image in yesterday's first reading (Is. 49:3-6), and, like John the Baptist in yesterday's gospel (Jn. 1:29-34), he consistently pointed beyond himself to something greater: the liberty, justice and equality that characterize the reign of God!

Trump, by contrast, is a *transactional* leader. A man-child haunted by unhealed wounds, he brings out the worst in some people, governing through grievance, intimidation and spectacle. He has subverted democratic norms, degraded public discourse, hollowed out institutions, and molded the Department of Justice into a personal weapon of retribution. He believes himself above the law. He continually vilifies others, setting people against people, nation against nation.

Where King sought to heal the moral fabric of the nation, Trump deliberately tears at it. Where King called us to higher ground, Trump appeals to our lowest instincts. Where King absorbed suffering without retaliating, Trump inflicts suffering as a political strategy.

One labored for peace and justice and paid for it with his life. The other openly flirts with violence—most recently through ICE terror in Minnesota, reckless threats to seize Greenland by force, and now suggesting to Reuters that "when you think of it, we shouldn't even have

[a midterm] election"—all while distracting from the grave misdeeds that would otherwise demand accountability, including the administration's aggressive efforts to ensure that Epstein-related truths never fully see the light of day.

King proved himself a child of light and peace. Trump and his enablers increasingly reveal themselves as agents of darkness and chaos—spitting at every gospel value. The contrast could not be more clear.

A Flawed Prophet—and a Dangerous Memory

Martin Luther King, Jr. was not a plaster saint. He was deeply flawed, as prophets usually are. But the danger we face today is not acknowledging King's imperfections. It is domesticating his legacy.

King himself warned against the creation of a "Santa Clausized" version of his witness: safe, sentimental and stripped of its radical demand for justice. That is precisely the version of King preferred by those who benefit from the status quo.

The fact that MLK Day itself now feels politically fragile should alarm us. *Do we honor King's dream, or do we fear it?*

In 1967, King named the "giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism and militarism." In 2026, those triplets have not retired. They have been emboldened, rebranded and handed megaphones.

Scripture knows this pattern well. Jesus was hailed with hosannas one day, and executed days later (Mt. 21:9; Mt. 26-27). Prophets are beloved only when they stop speaking!

"Injustice Anywhere": King's Gospel, Our Crisis

King's most quoted line—"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere"—lands today with renewed force. As ICE agents terrorize immigrant communities, as families are deliberately destabilized, as fear is cultivated for political gain, injustice is not accidental. It is strategic. It is policy.

Matthew 25 should haunt us: Jesus identifying himself with the stranger, the imprisoned and the afraid. Amos should unsettle us: "Let justice roll down like waters" (Amos 5:24). Mary's *Magnificat* should disturb us: The powerful cast down, the lowly lifted up (Lk. 1:52).

King understood that peace without justice is a lie. He called it "the absence of tension," not reconciliation. He would recognize today's rollback of the gospel values of diversity, equity and inclusion; the silencing of universities; and the policing of language for what they are: attempts to control memory, shrink moral imagination, and secure power through enforced amnesia.

Othering, Neuroscience and the Oldest Sin

Modern neuroscience confirms what theology has long proclaimed: Fear shuts down empathy. When the brain's amygdala dominates, people become symbols instead of souls. Immigrants become "invaders." Student views become "ideologies." Educators become "threats."

King named this sin when he warned against "thingifying" people. Scripture names it, too. The Good Samaritan shattered tribal logic (Lk. 10). Paul insisted that divisions cannot survive in Christ (Gal. 3:28).

Pop culture often grasps this more honestly than the Church: *Selma. Just Mercy. American History X*. Sam Cooke's "A Change Is Gonna Come." Kendrick Lamar's "Alright." Even *Zootopia*. King would urge us not merely to consume these stories, but to allow them to convert us!

If King Were Alive Today

If Martin Luther King, Jr. were celebrating his 97th birthday today, he would not be vague. He would not trade truth for civility. He would not pretend that authoritarianism deserves patience.

Indeed, he would no doubt be arrested again. And again. He would stand with pastors confronting ICE. He would challenge Christians and Catholics who hide behind sacramental piety while ignoring sacramental injustice. He would remind us, as he did from a Birmingham jail cell, that the greatest obstacle to justice is not the extremist, but the moderate more devoted to order than to righteousness.

And he would ask us plainly: *Who benefits from our silence? Whose suffering do we excuse? Which gospel are we actually living?*

Calls to Action

- **Reject Sanitized Memory**. Read King's speeches in full, especially those on militarism and economic justice. Widely share them.
- **Stand with the Targeted**. Accompany immigrant families. Attend court hearings. Support rapid-response networks.
- **Defend Truth-Telling Institutions**. Speak out when schools and universities are pressured to erase history.
- **Practice Disruptive Love**. Challenge dehumanizing language, even at family tables and community gatherings.
- **Unite Prayer and Protest**. Let liturgy fuel action, not replace it. The Eucharist commits us to one another.
- **Pray for Leaders—and Resist Them When Necessary**. Intercession does not mean compliance. Democracy requires vigilance!

The Dream Still Demands Us

King once said that the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice—but only because people bend it. On this MLK Day, as autocrats are flattered and truth is cheapened, we must decide whether King's legacy will be a monument we admire, or a mission we embody.

Winter Ordinary Time calls for steady faithfulness. King calls for courageous faithfulness. Together, they summon us to live the Gospel not as nostalgia, but as resistance!

Questions for Prayer & Reflection

- Where have I grown comfortable with injustice that I once found intolerable?
- Whose suffering do I rationalize, rather than confront?
- How does my faith challenge my political loyalties?
- What fear keeps me silent when conscience urges me to speak?
- How is God calling me to bend the arc this year?

Let Us Pray

God of justice and mercy, you spoke through prophets who were inconvenient and brave. Give us ears to hear truth, hearts to resist fear, and courage to love beyond comfort. May we honor Martin Luther King Jr. not with sanitized memories or hollow praise, but with lives poured out for justice, until your kingdom comes, on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

Pierced by Arrows, Resilient in Spirit

Lessons from St. Sebastian in an "Upside-Down" America

January 20, 2026

On January 20, we remember St. Sebastian, the iconic martyr shot with arrows then later clubbed to death, a holy figure whose suffering continues to resonate in our own troubled times. Today, his story

illuminates the human impulse to harm, the courage to resist oppression, and the extraordinary call for justice in a society where those entrusted with power sometimes aim arrows at the most vulnerable.

Beyond the Arrows: Rethinking St. Sebastian

Most of us know the legendary image of St. Sebastian: nearly nude, pierced with arrows, a symbol of suffering endured with quiet dignity. But the arrows are not the end of his story. He survived that execution attempt, only to be clubbed to death later, after courageously warning Emperor Diocletian of his sins.

As a graduate student at the Washington Theological Union, I interned with Georgetown University's campus ministry. The university chaplain, Father Adam Bunnell, O.F.M.Conv., offered me opportunities I will never forget. One moment that has stuck with me was the controversy ignited that year by the Knights of Columbus on campus, who insisted that every classroom of the Catholic university should display a crucifix—a debate eerily prescient of Texas legislators mandating today that the Ten Commandments be displayed in our public school classrooms. Non-Catholic Christians argued: "Jesus is risen! Why keep him on the cross?" Yet the Catholic tradition honors suffering, giving oppressed people figures with whom to identify as they "offer it up." Indeed, Jesus and Sebastian are two persons whose bodily suffering, at least in sacred images, has been made eternal!

This year, Sebastian's story invites us to look past the body under attack, to those inflicting the harm. I wonder: Who draws the arrows, and why? And what drives humans to attack, demonize and terrorize others?

The Psychology of Arrows: Why Humans Hurt Each Other

Science offers insight: Humans are wired for both empathy and aggression. Social psychologists note that fear, insecurity and the desire for control often trigger destructive behaviors. Cognitive neuroscience reveals the amygdala's role in "fight or flight" responses, while cultural conditioning shapes which targets receive "arrows" first—often the most vulnerable.

Today in the U.S., we witness a systemic example: leaders who should be protectors have weaponized fear. A U.S. President attacks citizens. A purportedly-Catholic Vice President demonizes innocents. ICE agents terrorize communities. We live in an "upside-down" reality where those once trusted as good are now selfish, self-serving and ready to launch arrows without apparent consequence to themselves.

Arrows and Clubs: Courage in the Face of Oppression

Sebastian's death reminds us that the first attack is not always the last. The arrows he endured were temporary; the club that ended his life came after he courageously spoke truth to power. In contemporary America, courageous voices—journalists, activists, whistleblowers, faith leaders and ordinary citizens exposing injustice—continue to risk "clubs" while absorbing the "arrows."

Pop culture offers parallels. In *The Hunger Games*, Katniss Everdeen takes literal arrows to shield her community. In *Star Trek: Picard*, Admiral Picard confronts abuses of power, enduring social and political backlash. In *The Mandalorian*, Din Djarin protects the Child despite overwhelming danger, showing the cost of moral courage.

Contemporary Saints: Living Like Sebastian

Sebastian's legacy extends beyond martyrdom. He has been considered the world's first gay icon and a patron of soldiers, athletes, archers and those seeking protection from plagues. Today, we might see him as a model for confronting systems of harm while sustaining faith, hope and courage.

Scripture reminds us: "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 5:10). And yet, we are called to more than passive endurance: We are called to act, to intervene, to heal the broken, and to resist complicity.

Images of Resistance: What Arrows Might Teach Us Today

As I reflect on Sebastian, my gaze shifts from his pierced body to the hands drawing the arrows on the bowstring, the people and systems producing harm. Today, we see arrows drawn in social media attacks, legislation, and public rhetoric, yet we also see the possibility of intervention: courageous voices, faith communities, and moral action reaching for the arrows before they pierce the vulnerable.

Pop culture again echoes this: *Black Panther* challenges historical and ongoing exploitation; *Schitt's Creek* celebrates radical acceptance; Taylor Swift's lyrics often highlight survival against social cruelty. All remind us to pay attention, act boldly, and protect those at risk.

Calls to Action

- Educate yourself on the human psychology behind aggression; share your insights with family and friends.
- Support journalists, whistleblowers and public servants who risk attacks for truth-telling. Donate, write and testify in solidarity.

- Use your social media platforms responsibly to defend the voiceless and amplify the marginalized.
- Identify a local or national policy that harms marginalized groups and advocate for its reform. Write letters, attend meetings, engage legislatively.
- Mentor or support someone facing persecution, bullying or systemic oppression; be a living embodiment of solidarity.

Standing Among Arrows

St. Sebastian's life is a mirror for us in Winter Ordinary Time. The iconic image of his body pierced by arrows reminds us of the suffering daily endured in our communities, the courage needed to resist systemic harm, and the call to rise above attacks with faith and integrity.

In America today, arrows fly, clubs await, and systems remain unjust—but we are not powerless. By acting with courage, speaking truth, protecting the vulnerable, and offering hope, we live as extraordinary Catholics in truly extraordinary times.

Questions for Prayer & Reflection

- Who in my life or community is enduring metaphorical arrows, and how can I offer support?
- In what ways am I complicit in harming others through silence or inaction?
- How does the example of St. Sebastian challenge my understanding of courage and faith?
- Which policies or leaders in my city, state or nation aim "arrows" at vulnerable communities, and how might I better respond?
- How can my creative, professional or spiritual gifts become instruments of healing and justice in an "upside-down" society?

Let Us Pray

O God of justice and courage, grant us the strength to endure arrows without bitterness, the wisdom to confront the clubs of injustice, and the courage to stand with those who suffer. Inspire us with the example of St. Sebastian, who faced violence with faith, warnings with truth, and hatred with love. May we embody extraordinary compassion, unflinching hope, and unwavering commitment to justice in our communities, nation and world. Amen.

Saint Agnes and the Power of Small Voices

A Reflection on Age, Agency and Justice in Today's World

January 21, 2026

I'm thinking today of Grandma Mathias, who would have turned 105 this year. She lived a very fruitful life: raising six children, tending her farm and garden, hosting her grandchildren for summer stays, exercising leadership in her parish and community—all with extraordinary love and courage for 30 years after the death of her husband. But the one thing I always wondered about was her name: *Agnes*. As a child, it struck me as an old-lady name, akin to Gertrude, Mabel, Edna, Ethel and Thelma, names very rarely given to newborns today. Yet, exactly because of her name, Grandma Mathias became my flesh-and-blood connection to her matron saint whom we celebrate today.

Saint Agnes: Girl, Saint, Witness

On January 21, the Church celebrates Saint Agnes (c. 291 - c. 304), martyred at age 12 for refusing to marry a prefect's son. Let that sink in. Twelve. A child. In our own time, 650 million girls worldwide have been married as children, victims of poverty, tradition or insecurity. Agnes' story forces us to confront not only the past, but the present.

During our Bible study last week, a participant asked how old Mary was when she became pregnant with Jesus. Scholars suggest she was very young. In patriarchal societies, it was not uncommon for girls, after reaching menstruation, to be bartered or married to much older men. Much older men. Such relationships were, by their very nature, a power imbalance.

In our contemporary society, where adulthood begins at 18, "the age of consent" in most U.S. states, the thought of Agnes being married at 12 jolts our hearts and sensibilities. We tend to imagine biblical women as fully-grown adults, but many of them, at least when betrothed, were children.

Power Imbalances: Then and Now

Agnes' story is a window into power imbalances that persist. Agnes, a girl forced into marriage, had no agency. Her elders wielded authority without accountability. Today, these dynamics surface in many forms:

- ICE agents terrorizing immigrants and communities of color.
- Politicians using paternalistic language to justify oppression.
- CEOs exploiting workers while deflecting responsibility.

President Trump's current approach to governance is steeped in the same mentality: "I am the strong man here: I can bully you to give me *anything* I want—even your dignity as a Nobel Peace Prize laureate or your autonomous territory of Greenland!" Vice President Vance adds his own paternalistic gloss to authoritarianism. These figures, in their arrogance, mirror the societal structures that condemned Agnes.

Reflections from My Past

I'll never forget, as a young associate pastor, a visit from a family whose 14-year-old daughter wanted to marry her 16-year-old boyfriend. I don't recall the circumstances now. But I do recall my question: Could the Church *really* allow this? I remembered how, when I studied Roman Catholic canon law, we were taught that the age of consent for the sacrament of Marriage at the time was 14 for girls and 16 for boys. Fortunately, wisdom has taught us to prioritize discernment and consent. Needless to say, this was one wedding I did *not* celebrate. Their story lingers in my mind, a reminder that child marriage is not a relic of the past, but a persistent injustice for the girls and women who cannot share their full and free consent.

Power is intimate, personal, and often hidden in our daily lives. We have all played roles in imbalanced relationships: as the overpowered or the overpowering. In iconography, Saint Agnes is often depicted with a young sheep, since her name resembles the Latin word *agnus* (lamb): We all have wisdom we could share with respect to the wolf-and-lamb relationships—or the leopard-and-goat or lion-and-calf relationships—in our lives (Is. 11:6)!

Agnes and Modern Witness

Saint Agnes teaches courage at a young age, yes, but also ethical clarity, compassion and courage for all ages. Pop culture can illuminate this:

- In *Moana*, the young heroine asserts agency against elders' expectations.
- In *Stranger Things*, Eleven resists adults who exploit her power.

- Beyoncé's "Lemonade" echoes themes of resistance, self-assertion and justice.
- Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton* reminds us that history is made by young voices.
- And in *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, Midge asserts herself in a male-dominated world.

Scripture, too, echoes this: "Let the little children come to me" (Mt. 19:14)—and yet the world often silences them. Agnes reminds us that the small and the young can embody extraordinary courage, justice and witness.

From Child Martyr to Extraordinary Saint

Agnes' martyrdom is a reminder that extraordinary courage sometimes comes in small, unexpected packages. In today's America, where injustice seems systemic—from the halls of power to the streets of our cities—we need that courage. Each of us, in small and radical ways, can resist exploitation, challenge authoritarianism, and nurture justice. Grandma Mathias, Saint Agnes' earthly namesake, reminds us that ordinary lives can embody extraordinary witness!

Calls to Action

- Visit girlsnotbrides.org, learn about child marriage in today's world, and advocate for policies that protect girls. Contact your representatives, support girls' education, and amplify the voices of those affected.
- Identify power imbalances in your community. Stand with those overpowered, from undocumented families to underpaid workers. Challenge authority when it harms the vulnerable.
- Examine your personal life. Are there relationships where you hold excessive power? Are there ways you can redistribute authority, listen more, and empower others?
- Amplify young voices in your community—support youth advocacy, education, and leadership programs.
- Use your gifts for justice today. Volunteer, write, protest, educate, vote. Be a small but steady force in challenging the injustices of our time!

Ordinary Saints, Extraordinary Lives

Looking back at Grandma Mathias, I see the quiet heroism of Saint Agnes mirrored in her daily acts of love and service. Both remind us that sanctity is not always public spectacle; it is often private courage,

steadfast integrity and the ability to resist evil in subtle but profound ways. Today, in the midst of Winter Ordinary Time, we are called to extraordinary witness: Ordinary Catholics with extraordinary courage!

Questions for Prayer & Reflection

- Where in my life have I exerted power over others, knowingly or unknowingly?
- Who are the children, the marginalized, and the powerless whose voices I can uplift today?
- In what ways can I resist structures that exploit or silence others?
- How does my faith challenge me to more boldly act in public?
- What daily, ordinary acts of courage and love can I commit to this week?

Let Us Pray

God of the small and mighty, give us courage to stand with the powerless, wisdom to discern the imbalances in our world, and steadfast hearts to resist injustice, that, like Saint Agnes and Grandma Mathias, our lives might witness to Your love, our actions be shaped by Your justice, and our voices proclaim hope where despair reigns. Amen.

Pro-Life, or Just Anti-Abortion?

A Day of Prayer That Exposes Our Moral Incoherence

January 22, 2026

Today, I am recalling the one and only time that I, as a young Roman Catholic priest, was reported to my bishop for my preaching.

President George W. Bush had just initiated the Iraq War under the now-discredited claim that Iraq possessed "weapons of mass destruction." In my homily that weekend, I dared to name the hypocrisy of those who loudly claimed to be "pro-life" while blessing and even enthusiastically supporting war, capital punishment, and a military-

industrial complex built on death. You likely recall Vice President Dick Cheney's refusal to disclose communications with his former company, Halliburton, which would go on to earn tens of billions of dollars from federal contracts in Iraq. Blood money has always preferred silence.

My essential message was simple: *Please do not pretend to be "pro-life" if you support policies that systematically steal life and dignity from the most vulnerable among us!*

For that, I was reported to the bishop—an invaluable lesson for me as a young priest.

So today, as the Roman Catholic Church marks January 22 as the **Day of Prayer for the Legal Protection of Unborn Children**, I find myself praying not only for unborn life, but for the moral integrity of a Church that has too often confused a single issue with the Gospel itself.

A Day of Prayer, and a Pastoral Minefield

I presume the Roman Catholic Church's intent today to be pastoral and sincere. We are called to pray. We are called to protect life. We are called to reverence the mystery of human becoming.

Let me be clear: Many Catholics embrace a sincere, expansive, womb-to-tomb ethic of life. They earnestly pray. They honestly wrestle. They recognize that women and men sometimes find themselves in agonizing circumstances and under duress, making decisions that they believe, inspired by conscience and Spirit, to be the least harmful options available to them. The Gospel response to such suffering is not condemnation, but accompaniment, healing and mercy.

The pastoral challenge of this day is not prayer. The pastoral challenge is hypocrisy.

Too often, January 22 functions less as a day of prayer and more as a loyalty test. Compassion is narrowed. Complexity is denied. Women's bodies become battlegrounds, while the lives of immigrants, prisoners, the poor and victims of war are quietly deemed expendable.

Jesus had a word for this. Several, actually. He named those who loved moral posturing more than actual people.

- "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" (Mt. 23:27)
- "You strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!" (Mt. 23:24)
- "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." (Hos. 6:6, echoed in Mt. 9:13)

Prayer divorced from mercy becomes theater. And theater never saves lives!

If today's prayers do not include women stripped of bodily autonomy, immigrants hunted by ICE, children killed by gun violence, prisoners executed by the state, the unhoused freezing in our cities, students

abandoned by defunded public schools, and families crushed by medical debt, then today's prayers are dangerously incomplete.

Pro-Life, But Not for Immigrants?

Today, ICE agents are once again terrorizing immigrant communities in Minneapolis. Families are afraid to go to work, to school, to worship. Children are absorbing trauma that will shape their nervous systems for life.

If we truly believe that every life is sacred, today might just as well be called the ***Day of Prayer for the Legal Protection of Immigrants.***

Scripture could not be clearer:

- "You shall love the stranger, for you were once strangers." (Dt. 10:19)
- "I was a stranger and you welcomed me." (Mt. 25:35)

Many who shout loudest about abortion remain conspicuously silent about gun massacres. They grow strangely quiet when brown bodies are caged, deported, or buried in unmarked graves. They oppose food assistance. They gut healthcare. They cheer executions. They criminalize poverty. They sabotage public education. They demand forced birth, then abandon mother and child the moment the umbilical cord is cut.

Put most simply, *they are complicit*.

Pop culture has named this contradiction more honestly than the Church at times. *The Handmaid's Tale* exposes how "pro-life" rhetoric can mask authoritarian control. *Selma* reminds us that laws can be legal and still profoundly immoral. *Orange Is the New Black* reminds us how easily we disappear people once we label them criminals. *The Wire* exposes how institutions fail the poor while congratulating themselves. Even *Zootopia* teaches children how fear-based narratives turn neighbors into threats.

If our pro-life ethic ends at the border, it is not pro-life. It is tribalism baptized.

James anticipated this farce: "Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (Jas. 2:17). *A pro-life ethic that does not confront systems of death is not faith. It is branding.*

Pro-Life, But Not for Women?

Living in Texas, I know firsthand how women's rights have been systematically stripped away. Young women now enjoy fewer legal protections over their own bodies than their mothers and grandmothers did. Doctors are afraid to practice medicine. Women are forced to carry non-viable pregnancies. Maternal mortality rises. Trauma multiplies.

Perhaps today should be called the ***Day of Prayer for the Legal Protection of Women.***

It is *not* an oxymoron to be a pro-choice Catholic. It is an act of *solidarity*. It is standing with our sisters, our daughters and our granddaughters in a nation that increasingly treats them as incubators, rather than moral agents.

Jesus consistently trusted women with moral authority:

- The Samaritan woman became an evangelist (Jn. 4).
- Mary of Bethany chose theological learning (Lk. 10).
- Mary Magdalene became the apostle to the apostles (Jn. 20)!

Control masquerading as holiness is still control. And Jesus never sanctified it.

Standing with women, daughters and granddaughters in a nation where they now possess fewer rights than their mothers did is not betrayal. It is *fidelity*. Catholic moral theology has always honored conscience as sacred ground. Vatican II named it clearly: Conscience is where we stand alone with God.

Organizations like Catholics for Choice remind us that conscience is not the enemy of faith. It is its engine.

To be pro-choice is not to celebrate abortion. It is to *refuse the lie that coercion equals morality*. It is to *trust women as moral agents*, not incubators. It is to *insist that complex human realities cannot be legislated by men who will never bear the consequences*.

Organizations like Catholics for Choice continue this long, faithful tradition, even as they are anathematized by bishops more concerned with political alliances than pastoral care.

Pro-Life, But Not for the Living?

So, to be clear, please do not pretend to be "pro-life" if you do not support:

- Gun control
- Abolition of the death penalty
- Affordable housing
- Universal healthcare
- Food security
- Humane incarceration
- Fully-funded public education

These are all pro-life issues, affecting more lives than we could count. As a result, *today could just as easily be called the* ***Day of Prayer for the Legal***

***Protection of Public Education**, or **of People of Color**, or **of the Poor**, or **of the Incarcerated**!*

The prophets would have immediately recognized our selective outrage.

- "Is this not the fast that I choose… to let the oppressed go free?" (Is. 58:6)
- "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly?" (Mic. 6:8)

Jesus did not die for a single issue. He lived, taught and died for the fullness of life (Jn. 10:10)!

Yet the Church Chose Power Over Pastoral Care

Since the 1980s, the U.S. Roman Catholic Church has been increasingly co-opted by the religious right, reducing a rich moral tradition to a political weapon. The result has been "wafer wars," Communion as coercion, and bishops more eager to appease monied conservatives than to protect women.

This is not theoretical for me. It is personal.

In 2011, my bishop, Joe S. Vasquez, refused to stand with Texas women and instead demanded that we disinvite U.S. Congressman Luis Gutiérrez from speaking on comprehensive immigration reform at Cristo Rey, an immigrant parish—all because of the Congressman's voting record on women's reproductive health. For Vasquez, immigration justice was negotiable. But his abortion absolutism, apparently, was not.

That moment revealed everything.

Jesus warned us: "You cannot serve God and mammon" (Mt. 6:24).

Too often, we choose mammon and call it morality.

Jesus overturned tables for less.

Calls to Action

- Refuse the lie that abortion is the only life issue. Publicly say so.
- Refuse single-issue morality. Advocate for a truly consistent ethic of life.
- Widen your prayer today to include women, immigrants, prisoners and the poor.
- Support Catholics for Choice, Planned Parenthood and organizations that protect women's agency and health.
- Speak publicly against ICE violence, capital punishment and gun idolatry.
- Challenge "pro-life" rhetoric that ignores living, breathing human beings.

- Advocate for gun reform, abolition of the death penalty and universal healthcare.
- Defend public education as a sacred pro-life commitment.
- Educate yourself using resources from Catholics for Choice and liberation theologians.
- Challenge bishops and clergy who weaponize Communion while ignoring injustice.
- Vote, donate and organize as if lives actually depend on it—because they do.
- Pray expansively, naming every life endangered by policy, profit and indifference.

Life Worth Defending: All of It

I return, full-circle, to that young priest preaching during the Iraq War, daring to say that life cannot be selectively defended. I still believe that. And I would preach it again. Louder now. Clearer now. With names attached.

Winter Ordinary Time calls us to steady faithfulness. This American moment demands extraordinary courage. If we pray today for unborn life while ignoring the suffering of those already born, our prayer rings hollow.

Anything less is not Gospel. It is theater. Like what we see unfolding in D.C. this morning.

The Gospel does not ask us to be "anti-abortion."

It asks us to be relentlessly, inconveniently, unapologetically pro-life.

All of it. Or none of it.

Questions for Prayer & Reflection

- Where has my understanding of "pro-life" been too narrow?
- Whose lives do I unconsciously rank as expendable or less worthy of protection?
- How do fear and politics shape my moral imagination and moral theology?
- What truth have I avoided because it might cost me comfort or belonging?
- What would a truly womb-to-tomb faith demand of me right now?
- Where is God calling me to widen my circle of concern?

Let Us Pray

God of life in all its fragile forms, strip away our hypocrisy, half-truths and selective outrage. Heal those who have suffered impossible choices.

Strengthen those whose bodies and dignity are under assault. Convert our hearts from ideology to integrity. Widen our compassion beyond slogans and soundbites. Give us the courage to defend life wherever it is threatened, especially when doing so costs us power, privilege or approval. Make us extraordinary Catholics in an anything-but-ordinary time, faithful not only in prayer, but in justice, mercy and truth. Teach us to defend life boldly, consistently and without condition, until your justice takes flesh among us. Amen.

Otfrid's Rhyme and Our Resistance

Lessons from a Ninth-Century Monk for a Dangerous Republic

November 22, 2025

Once, long ago, a monk chose rhyme instead of rule,
Trusting people's own language more than clerical tool.
Otfrid of Weissenburg, cloistered yet culturally-bold,
Refused Latin's lockbox where power kept truth cold.

He sang the Gospel plainly, in couplets clear and tight,
Believing Christ belonged to peasants as much as to might.
Today, when faith gets weaponized, baptized in control,
His rhyme still asks: Who owns the Word? Who guards the soul?

Otfrid's Holy Disobedience

Otfrid wrote Scripture not for rulers alone,
But for farmers, mothers, children, flesh and bone.
In a church where Latin policed who could belong,
He trusted Christ could survive in a common tongue.

"Let anyone with ears hear," Jesus dared to say,
Not "only the credentialed" or "those who already pray."
Otfrid believed incarnation meant more than creed,
It meant meeting people where they actually read.

Extraordinary Catholics should hear this clearly now,
When gatekeepers still decide who's worthy, somehow.
If the Gospel sounds safe to empire or throne,
Then it likely has lost the voice Otfrid had known.

Rhyme as Resistance, Then and Now
Rhyme remembers what prose forgets in fear,
It lodges truth deep where propaganda can't steer.
Otfrid's couplets carried memory across generations,
Like protest songs sung under occupation.

Think Dylan asking how many roads must we roam,
Or Kendrick Lamar naming truths systems disown.
Think Springsteen's workers, Beyoncé's rage,
Taylor Swift teaching girls to reclaim the page.

Jesus also preached in rhythm, image and line,
Seeds and vineyards, lost coins and wine.
Today's Catholics should notice this art,
Truth sung aloud reaches head and heart.
When leaders lie loudly, often and proud,
Rhyme still slips past the manufactured crowd.

Gospel in the Vernacular, Faith in the Streets
Otfrid's Gospel walked barefoot through village and field,
Not armored in dogma, nor polished to shield.
That same Gospel now wanders through borders and bars,
Through shelters and classrooms, through streets scarred by scars.

Jesus still flips tables where money decides,
Who eats, who breathes, who safely resides.
"Woe to you," he warns, not whispering calm,
To leaders who profit while reciting a psalm.

Today, as Catholics, we must hear the rebuke,
When faith blesses cruelty with theological fluke.
A Gospel that never disturbs those in charge,
Has likely been shrunk, not made extra-large!

Winter Ordinary Time, Extraordinary Demands
This is Ordinary Time by calendar and green,
Yet nothing is ordinary in what we've seen.
Cages at borders, books under fire,
Votes suppressed, truth drowned by liar.

Otfrid wrote as empires rose and decayed,
Knowing Christ outlasts every power parade.
So, too, must we write, speak, march and sing,
Naming the cost of the idols we bring.

Extraordinary Catholics cannot play nice,
When democracy bleeds from a thousand small cuts precise.
Faith that fears conflict more than injustice's reign,
Has already surrendered its prophetic domain.

Calls to Action: Rhyme Must Become Flesh
Pray beyond slogans and single-issue fear,
Defend all life boldly, year after year.
Support artists and prophets who name what's at stake,
From poets to teachers refusing to fake.

Stand with the silenced, the shamed, the erased,
Immigrants, women, trans kids displaced.
Refuse wafer wars, policing who's pure,
While billionaires plunder and call it secure.

Read Scripture aloud with neighbors and friends,
Let vernacular truth break partisan ends.
Vote like the poor and the future both matter,
Not like comfort deserves to grow fatter.
Become extraordinary Christians, risky and clear,
Who love truth more than applause or fear.

When Rhyme Refuses to Be Quiet
Otfrid trusted rhyme to carry Christ through time,
Not as museum relic, but as living sign.
He chose people over purity tests refined,
And left us a Gospel with teeth and a mind.

Today, as democracy frays thread by thread,
We, too, must decide how the Word will be read.
Will it prop up the powerful, soothe every wrong,
Or be sung by the brave in an extraordinary song?

The rhyme still echoes, asking us to choose,
Whether faith comforts lies, or tells inconvenient truths!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where has my faith grown fluent in power's language?
- Whose voices do I unconsciously exclude from the Gospel?
- What truths do I avoid because they rhyme with responsibility?
- How might my prayer life and actions become more extraordinary and less safe?
- Where is Christ asking me to risk clarity over comfort today?

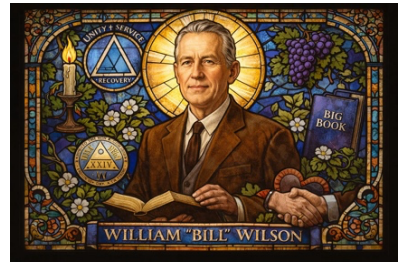
Let Us Pray

God of Word made flesh and sound, Who meets us where we stand on ground, teach us to speak with courage clear, to rhyme with love, instead of fear. Make us extraordinary in this time: faithful, fierce and unconfined. May our lives become the verse we send, until your justice is the final end. Amen.

One Day at a Time

Grace, Recovery and Holy Humility

January 24, 2026



While in Naples recently, I lifted my eyes heavenward on the 105th birthday of Grandma Reinhart, who went to her heavenly reward thirty years ago. The oldest of four surviving sisters, Marie was found pregnant at age 21 and forced into a "shotgun marriage" with Albert, seven years her senior, on Thanksgiving Day 1942. Seven months later, they welcomed their first son.

Albert was an alcoholic.

His younger, beloved brother, Andrew, was drafted in 1942—an event likely tied to my uncle's conception months later. Within five weeks of the storming of Normandy, Andrew died while trying to push Nazi

forces eastward toward Nantes. I certainly don't blame Albert for decisions made during a season of deep grief.

But Marie, it seems, never fully forgave him, at least while he was alive.

According to family stories, Albert worked hard and played hard. After the brutal work of thrashing wheat, he partied and drank—and drank and drank—until he was absolutely drunk. One family legend tells how Grandma Reinhart drove herself to the hospital to give birth to my mother, because her husband was too intoxicated to help.

He died at age 36, of pneumonia complicated by cirrhosis of the liver. His addiction scarred my grandmother and shaped my mother and her brothers.

If you hadn't known this story, you might be surprised to learn that I grew up in a household with no alcohol. Or coffee. My parents, it seems, quietly committed themselves to ending substance addiction in our family. They chose healing over denial. They chose sobriety over sentimentality.

Such events shaped my life more than I knew.

Bill Wilson and the Birth of Sacred Recovery

On January 24, we remember William "Bill" Wilson (1895-1971), co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous. Along with Dr. Bob Smith and countless unnamed companions, Bill helped birth a movement that has saved millions of lives without fanfare, profit or political ambition.

AA emerged in the 1930s, during economic collapse and social despair. Sound familiar?

It offered no easy fixes. No miracle cures. No prosperity gospel. Only honesty, humility and community.

"Hi, I'm ___, and I'm an alcoholic."

Those words contain more theology than many sermons.

- They echo Psalm 51: *"A broken and humbled heart, O God, you will not despise."*
- They echo Romans 7: *"I do not do the good I want."*
- They echo Jesus' Beatitude: *"Blessed are the poor in spirit"* (Mt. 5:3).

Extraordinary faith begins with truth!

Addiction, Brain Science and the Call to Compassion

Addiction is *not* moral weakness. It is a *disease*.

Neuroscience shows how substances and behaviors hijack dopamine systems, impair impulse control, and rewire reward pathways. Trauma, poverty, isolation and stress intensify vulnerability. The brain quite literally learns to survive through dependency.

Which means addiction is as biological as diabetes, and as psychological as depression.

Yet our culture still moralizes it.

- We incarcerate rather than rehabilitate.
- We shame rather than accompany.
- We moralize rather than heal.

Jesus never did this.

He healed the possessed. He restored the broken. He refused to reduce people to their wounds (Jn. 9:1-3). He saw sufferers, not sinners.

Pop culture keeps trying to teach us this, too: *Beautiful Boy, The Bear, Euphoria, A Star Is Born, When a Man Loves a Woman*. These stories plead: Look deeper!

Many Addictions, One Human Longing

As a young student of psychology, I learned about AA. Then Al-Anon and Alateen. Then Narcotics Anonymous. Then Sexaholics Anonymous and S-Anon. Later, Gamblers Anonymous. Only last week, I learned about Gaming Addicts Anonymous.

Every addiction tells the same story: someone trying to soothe pain, numb fear, escape shame, or feel alive.

Some use alcohol.
Some use opioids.
Some use porn.
Some use gambling.
Some use computer or phone screens.
Some use power.

Yes, power is addictive, too. We live in a nation currently addicted to dominance, consumption and distraction. We elect leaders who embody addiction to ego and cruelty. We reward dysfunction with applause.

It seems St. Augustine was right: "Our hearts are restless, O Lord, until they rest in you!"

Addiction is misplaced longing.

The Spiritual Genius of the Twelve Steps

AA's genius is spiritual realism.

It begins with surrender.

It centers on humility.

It requires confession.

It demands repair.

It insists on community.

It trusts grace.

Step One echoes the Psalms.

Step Four mirrors traditional examinations of conscience.

Step Five is sacramental confession in street clothes.

Steps Eight and Nine embody Matthew 5:23-24.

Step Twelve is evangelization without coercion.

"We made a searching and fearless moral inventory." Imagine if our Church did this. Instead of blaming "culture," "wokeness," or "secularism," what if we examined ourselves?

Extraordinary spirituality tells the truth and trusts mercy!

Ministry at the Edge of Grace

In twenty-five years of priestly ministry, some of my proudest and most tender moments have been presenting at AA and NA gatherings. I always feel two things at once: Immense admiration for participants' courage. And deep reverence for their vulnerability.

They live Paul's "thorn in the flesh" (2Cor. 12:7-10).

They embody Jesus' "the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Mt. 26:41).

They daily practice perseverance.

I remember with fondness an elected official who came to me 25 years ago, after a DUI arrest. He asked for prayer before heading to a press conference. That moment shaped me as a young priest. I promised myself then that I would never risk harming others through recklessness. As a result, during eight years in elected office myself, I never drank if I would be driving later. Not from piety, but from reverence for life. But I'm also quite cognizant of St. Augustine's wisdom: "There but for the grace of God go I."

That is AA theology.

Calls to Action

- Learn about recovery ministries in your community. Find a way to support them.
- Speak about addiction without stigma. Change the language.
- Advocate for treatment, not incarceration.
- Volunteer with recovery and mental health programs.
- Practice radical listening with those who struggle.
- Challenge leaders who exploit addiction, rather than address it.
- Honestly examine your own dependencies.

One Day at a Time

Winter Ordinary Time teaches slow faith. AA teaches the same.
No shortcuts. No triumphalism. No pretending.
Just today.
Today I will not drink.
Today I will tell the truth.
Today I will make amends.
Today I will trust grace.

As I stood in Naples, thinking of Grandma Reinhart on her birthday, of her strength, her wounds, her silence, her perseverance, I realized something: Recovery is not only for addicts. It is for families, churches and nations.

America needs recovery.
The Church needs recovery.
We need recovery.
We walk that path together, one honest day at a time!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where do I still confuse addiction with moral failure?
- Whom do I judge, rather than accompany?
- What habits or dependencies limit my freedom?
- How do I participate in systems that profit from addiction?
- Where is God inviting me into deeper humility and healing?

Let Us Pray

God of mercy and restoration, you meet us in broken rooms and honest circles. You speak through trembling voices and shared stories. Heal what we hide. Strengthen what is weak. Restore what has been fractured. Teach us to walk with one another, one day at a time, in extraordinary courage, extraordinary compassion and extraordinary hope. Through Christ, our healer and friend. Amen.

Uncomfortable Truths, Extraordinary Faith
Richard McBrien and the Courage to Think Catholicly

January 25, 2026

I recall my eagerness as an undergraduate student of philosophy and classical humanities to open the pages of the *National Catholic Reporter* and flip immediately to the essays of columnist Fr. Richard McBrien (1936-2015). My young mind, formed in the cornfields of conservative Ohio, found his words mind-blowingly prophetic. I couldn't wait to return to his columns again and again, to drink in his wisdom and insight, to feel my faith stretch and breathe and grow.

In an era when many voices in Church and nation insist that we stop thinking, stop questioning, and stop listening, McBrien dared us to believe that mature faith requires exactly the opposite!

A Young Reader in a Small Church

Long before podcasts, Substack and Twitter threads, McBrien preached through print, presence and patient prose. Like a spiritual *Dead Poets Society*, he whispered, "Think for yourself," inviting Catholics to stand on desks of conscience and see farther! He reminded us that faith is not frozen in amber, and that tradition is a river, not a museum display. Like St. Paul arguing in Athens (Acts 17), he met culture where it stood, not where he wished it were.

I read McBrien like others read Springsteen lyrics or Maya Angelou poems, searching for language that named my restlessness and hope. He taught me that *loving the Church means loving it enough to challenge it*, like Jesus cleansing—and not abandoning—the Temple (Jn. 2:13-22).

Call to Action: Read one theologian this year who unsettles you. Let your faith grow calluses and compassion!

***Catholicism* and the Gift of a Big Tent**

McBrien's *magnum opus*, his 1980 work *Catholicism*, was not a weapon. It was a window, a wide-angle lens on sacrament, Scripture and social teaching, on saints and sinners and seekers alike. While some wanted narrow gates and rigid fences, he preached the banquet of Isaiah 25 and Luke 14. "Come," he seemed to say, "There is room here!" Like *Star Wars'* Jedi wrestling with light and shadow, like *The West Wing's* Bartlett balancing idealism and power, McBrien refused simplistic scripts. He knew that doubt is not the enemy of faith. Apathy is.

Call to Action: Support those who promote honest inquiry, not ideological echo chambers.

Single-Issue Politics and a Whole Gospel

McBrien's critique of "single-issue Catholics" still stings, because truth often feels like salt in an open wound. He knew that the seamless garment of life (cf. Jn. 19:23) cannot be torn into convenient political patches. He asked uncomfortable questions:

- How can we defend unborn life and ignore migrant children in cages (Mt. 25:35)?
- How can we oppose abortion while shrugging at gun violence and mass incarceration (Is. 1:16-17)?
- How can we preach "family values" and abandon poor families to medical bankruptcy?

Like the prophets before him, McBrien refused selective morality. In an age of MAGA crosses and nationalist rosaries, his words sound like Amos 5:24 roaring again: "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream!"

Call to Action: Examine your political loyalties in light of the full Gospel. Repent where your ideology outruns your compassion.

Ecclesiastical Hardliners and Yesterday's Golden Age

In 1991, McBrien warned of a "slow-motion coup" to reverse progress made by the Church. Today, the clawing back of progress in our nation is no longer slow. It is loud and cruel and televised. We see it in national news day after day: The nostalgia for a mythical past, the worship of "strongmen," the suspicion of mercy. Like *The Handmaid's Tale* or *V for Vendetta*, we are watching what happens when fear masquerades as faith. Jesus warned us: "You leave God's commandment and hold fast to human tradition" (Mk. 7:8). From bishops obsessed with power, to politicians flirting with authoritarianism, McBrien's diagnosis feels eerily accurate.

Call to Action: Speak publicly when Church leaders or politicians distort the Gospel for power. Silence is complicity!

Ordinary Time, Extraordinary Courage

We find ourselves in Winter Ordinary Time, when liturgical green meets political gray. Nothing feels ordinary. Everything feels fragile. Yet McBrien reminds us: This is precisely when extraordinary courage matters most. Like Frodo carrying the Ring, like Katniss volunteering as tribute, like Rosa Parks refusing her seat, faithfulness is rarely convenient!

Today's Scriptures call us to conversion and courage, to trust that God works through fragile vessels (2Cor. 4:7), to follow Jesus beyond comfort zones (Lk. 9:23). In this season, extraordinary love means staying engaged, extraordinary humility means admitting mistakes, and extraordinary hope means refusing despair.

Call to Action: Commit this week to one concrete act of justice, education or accompaniment in your community.

"Back to the Pages": Returning to Prophetic Wisdom

I still picture that young seminarian flipping through newspapers with holy impatience, hunting for McBrien's column like manna in newsprint. Today, we scroll instead of flip, swipe instead of linger. But the hunger remains.

We need voices who remind us that faith is bigger than party, that truth is bigger than tribe, that love is bigger than fear.

Like a well-worn book returned to again and again, McBrien's legacy invites us back to courage, conscience and community. Not backward to fantasy "glory days," but forward into God's unfinished future (Phil. 3:13-14)!

Let us return, then, to those pages and that posture: open-hearted, intellectually honest, spiritually restless. In a time when shouting replaces listening, when certainty replaces compassion, when power replaces prophecy, Richard McBrien still whispers: "Think. Pray. Act. Love." Like that young seminarian, like each of us in our own searching seasons, may we keep turning pages, keep asking questions, keep choosing extraordinary courage in this anything-but-ordinary hour!

Questions for Prayer & Reflection

- Where have I confused political loyalty with Gospel fidelity?
- Whose voices have I stopped listening to because they challenge me?

- How do I respond when Church teaching feels complex or uncomfortable?
- In what ways am I tempted by nostalgia, rather than hope?
- How can I practice extraordinary love in my family, school, workplace or community this week?
- Where is God inviting me to deeper intellectual and spiritual honesty?
- What fear most limits my public witness as a Christian today?

Let Us Pray

God of truth and tenderness, You called Father Richard McBrien to serve You with mind and heart and voice. Inspire us with his courage. Free us from shallow faith and fearful silence. Teach us to love Your Church enough to help reform it. Grant us extraordinary love and hope in this troubled and beautiful time. May we follow Jesus not backward into fantasy, but forward into mercy and courage and truth. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Extraordinary Truth-telling in an Age of Sacred Cowardice

Katharine Bushnell and the Courage to Know Where We Stand

January 26, 2026

On January 26, the Church celebrates Saints Timothy and Titus, Paul's close collaborators who reveal a fascinating contrast: Paul circumcised Timothy so that he would be accepted by Jewish Christians, yet he refused to circumcise Titus once he became convinced that the Gospel had freed Gentiles from the Law. Adaptation on one hand. Defiance on the other. Prudence and prophetic clarity in constant tension!

Their story invites us to ask uncomfortable questions: *When do we accommodate, and when do we resist? When do we bend, and when do we stand?*

Today, we remember a woman who knew precisely where she stood—especially when it came to Scripture, justice and gender equality. Katharine Bushnell refused to let patriarchy masquerade as piety. She refused to let mistranslation pass as divine will. She refused to let women be spiritually erased!

In a nation and a Church that still struggle to tell women the truth about their worth, Bushnell's voice remains extraordinarily necessary.

A Scholar in Missionary Boots: Who Was Katharine Bushnell?

I confess: Until recently, I did not know much about Katharine Bushnell. And that ignorance says more about our ecclesial culture, than about her importance.

Bushnell was a medical doctor. A missionary. A social reformer. A biblical scholar. A fierce advocate for exploited women. A forerunner of feminist theology before the term even existed.

She served in China. She investigated sex trafficking. She fought against the sexual exploitation of women in military camps. She studied Hebrew and Greek so she could challenge the ways Scripture had been distorted to justify male dominance.

Her most famous work, *God's Word to Women*, remains a masterpiece of courageous scholarship, exposing how the Bible was turned into a weapon against women. In it, she painstakingly exposes distranslations—"*dis*translations," I say, because I presume the same distinction here as between misinformation and disinformation.

She reminded the Church of what Genesis actually says: "God created humankind in God's image…male and female" (Gen. 1:27). Not hierarchy. Not domination. But God's image and likeness.

Bushnell took seriously Paul's declaration: "There is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). Not metaphor. Not exaggeration. But Jesus' and Paul's discipleship of equals.

Bushnell lived what Psalm 119 proclaims: "Your word is a lamp for my feet" (Ps. 119:105)—and she insisted that lamp must not be shaded by prejudice!

Call to Action: Read Bushnell's *God's Word to Women*. Study it. Share it. Let it unsettle you.

When Scripture Is Used as a Cage

Bushnell understood something many Christians still resist: Scripture does not oppress. People do.

She demonstrated how passages had been distranslated to make women appear weaker, more sinful, more submissive than the original

texts ever intended. She challenged readings of Eve, of Mary Magdalene, of Phoebe, of Junia, of Priscilla.

She exposed how "wives be submissive" (Eph. 5:22) had been ripped from "Be subject to one another" (Eph. 5:21). Mutuality erased. Power preserved.

She showed how Proverbs' "worthy woman" (Prov. 31) was never meant to be a domestic cage, but a portrait of entrepreneurial, public leadership.

Her work reminds me of *Hidden Figures*, where brilliant Black women did NASA's calculations while White men took the credit. Or *The Handmaid's Tale*, where Scripture becomes a tool of terror. Or *Barbie*, surprisingly prophetic, exposing how systems reshape women's self-understanding.

Like Billie Eilish singing "What Was I Made For?" Bushnell asked: *What were women created for? Service or sovereignty? Silence or speech? Obedience or holiness?*

Jesus' answer was clear: "I no longer call you servants… I have called you friends" (Jn. 15:15). Not subordinates. But friends.

Call to Action: Challenge sexist interpretations when you hear them in homilies and everyday conversations.

Women, Power, and the Politics of Fear

Our moment makes Bushnell's witness painfully relevant.

This month alone, we have watched women vilified, arrested, silenced and endangered. From the murder and villainization of Renee Good, to the arrest of Nekima Levy Armstrong for leading a protest against a church whose pastor is an ICE official, to communities terrorized by mostly-male ICE officers, the imbalance of power is on full display.

We hear echoes of Pharaoh's fear (Ex. 1:8-10). Of Herod's paranoia (Mt. 2:3). Of rulers who know their authority rests on controlling bodies.

Last week, on our "Cutting Edge Catholics" podcast, Rev. Dr. Trish Sullivan Vanni and I spoke with Jamie Manson, the former executive director of Catholics for Choice, about women's leadership and bodily autonomy. The conversation laid bare what Bushnell already knew: Patriarchy thrives when religion baptizes control!

Today's political climate echoes Richard McBrien's warning of a "slow-motion coup," except now it feels more like a sprint. Policies targeting reproductive freedom. Attacks on educators. The policing of gender. The criminalization of compassion.

Isaiah warned us: "Woe to those who make unjust laws" (Is. 10:1). He was not speaking metaphorically.

Bushnell would not be silent today. Neither should we.

Call to Action: Support organizations defending women's legal and bodily autonomy. Donate. Volunteer. Advocate.

From Katharine to Claudette: Refusing to Move

Earlier this month, we mourned Claudette Colvin, who, at age 15, refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus. Nine months before Rosa Parks. Less celebrated. No less courageous.

Bushnell shared that spirit.

Both women said no.

No to injustice.

No to invisibility.

No to the lie that obedience equals holiness.

Their courage echoes the *Magnificat*: "God has brought down the powerful from their thrones" (Lk. 1:52). Not someday. Now!

Their witness reminds us of *Selma*, of *Erin Brockovich*, of *Norma Rae*, of *The Color Purple*, of Beyoncé's "Run the World (Girls)." Art keeps telling the truth when institutions hesitate.

Extraordinary courage rarely looks polite. It looks persistent. It looks inconvenient. It looks like Jesus flipping tables (Mt. 21:12)!

Call to Action: Mentor young women and girls in your community. Prepare them for leadership.

Ordinary Time, Extraordinary Witness

We are in Winter Ordinary Time. Liturgically quiet. Politically chaotic. Morally demanding.

Yet nothing feels ordinary.

Bushnell teaches us that extraordinary faith is not loud for its own sake. It is grounded. Studied. Prayerful. Relentless.

She embodied Micah's command: "Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly" (Mic. 6:8). Not selectively. Completely.

She lived James' warning: "Be doers of the word" (Jam. 1:22). Not commentators. But doers!

In an era when some Christians long for imaginary "glory days," Bushnell reminds us that the Gospel never points backward. It always presses forward!

Call to Action: Examine your circles of influence. Who is missing from leadership? Who is unheard? Work to change it!

Circumcision, Conscience, and the Cost of Clarity: Choosing When to Bend and When to Stand

Paul bent for Timothy. He stood firm for Titus.

Katharine Bushnell understood that rhythm. She knew when to listen. When to study. When to wait. And when to speak.

Like my younger self flipping eagerly to Richard McBrien's column, many of us still hunger for voices that tell the truth without fear. Bushnell was one of those voices. She still is.

She teaches us that extraordinary love refuses domination. Extraordinary faith resists distortion. Extraordinary courage names injustice. Extraordinary hope refuses despair.

In this American winter of shrinking compassion and swelling cruelty, we must decide: Will we accommodate injustice, or will we confront it?

Bushnell already chose. Now it is our turn.

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where have I unconsciously accepted sexist interpretations of Scripture?
- When have I remained silent in the face of injustice toward women?
- Whose voices do I privilege in my spiritual life, and whose do I ignore?
- What fears keep me from prophetically speaking?
- How is God inviting me to practice extraordinary courage this year?
- Where must I bend with humility, and where must I stand with conviction?
- Who are today's "Bushnells" that I need to support?

Let Us Pray

God of Wisdom and Justice, You created all people in Your image, not for hierarchy, not for domination, but for communion. We thank You for Katharine Bushnell, for her mind that studied, her heart that burned, her voice that refused silence. Give us her clarity. Give us her courage. Give us her extraordinary love for truth. When fear tempts us to compromise, steady our feet. When power tempts us to control, soften our hearts. When injustice tempts us to look away, open our eyes. Make us, in this unordinary time, bearers of Your extraordinary justice, Your extraordinary mercy, Your extraordinary hope. We ask this through Christ, who broke every chain. Amen.

"Never Again" Is Not a Slogan

World Holocaust Remembrance Day
and the Moral Cost of Our Silence

January 27, 2026

From Torchlight to Trauma, Then and Now

I still remember my absolute disbelief in August 2017 when I saw footage from Charlottesville, West Virginia: white men carrying torches, marching through the night, chanting, "Jews will not replace us!"

Absolute. Disbelief.

Such flagrant antisemitism. In America. In the twenty-first century.

Yet here it was, in high definition.

That moment powerfully returned to me while watching last week's episode of *The Pitt*, where Jewish physician Michael "Robby" Robinavitch assisted a Jewish woman still traumatized by the 2018 Tree of Life Synagogue shooting—an antisemitic attack—in Pittsburgh.

January 27, **World Holocaust Victims Remembrance Day**, marks the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau. It is a day when we remember six million Jewish lives extinguished, along with millions of others targeted by Nazi terror. It is also a day when we must ask: *What are we doing now to ensure that "never again" is more than just a hollow phrase?*

As people formed by Scripture, sacrament and social teaching, we cannot avoid that question, especially since the Holocaust was orchestrated by so many *Schutzstaffel* (SS) officers born into Catholic and Protestant families—and Pope Pius XII infamously maintained a policy of public neutrality in the face of atrocities.

Six Million Lives: When Numbers Become Names

Six million.

We say the number so often that it risks becoming abstract. But six million is roughly the population of Los Angeles. It is Chicago and Houston combined. It is every person in an entire major city wiped off the map.

Each of those six million had a name, a voice, a laugh, a family, a prayer, a favorite song. They were children who loved to play, parents who worked hard, elders who told stories. They were rabbis, teachers, bakers, musicians, doctors, artists. The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum solemnly seeks to honor them.

Scripture insists that every human being bears God's image (Gen. 1:27). Jesus tells us that even the hairs of our heads are counted (Lk. 12:7). The Psalmist proclaims that God knits each of us together in secret (Ps. 139:13).

The Holocaust represents not only mass murder. It represents the systematic denial of divine dignity.

Pop culture has helped us grasp this reality: *Schindler's List, The Pianist, Life Is Beautiful, Shoah, Band of Brothers, Hunters, The Tattooist of Auschwitz*. Each attempts, imperfectly, to restore faces to statistics.

We watch. We weep. Then we risk forgetting.

Anne Frank's House and the Cost of Hiding

In the summer of 2024, I visited Anne Frank's house in Amsterdam. Walking through those narrow rooms, climbing steep stairs, standing in cramped hiding spaces, I felt physically unsettled.

Imagine having to hide your entire family to survive.

Imagine whispering for years.

Imagine fearing every footstep.

Imagine knowing that discovery meant death.

Anne's diary reminds us that faith and hope can persist even in terror. "In spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart," she wrote. Her words echo Jesus' own stubborn hope in humanity (Mt. 5-7), even as he confronted violence and betrayal.

Yet Anne was betrayed.

So were millions.

Which forces us to ask: *How many people knew? How many looked away? How many quietly cooperated? How many convinced themselves that it was "not their problem"?*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who resisted Hitler, warned that silence in the face of evil is itself evil. Scripture agrees: "Whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for them it is sin" (Jas. 4:17).

In April 1945, at age 39, Bonhoeffer, a German theologian and anti-Nazi dissident, was executed at the Flossenbürg concentration camp.

Just one of six million lives lost to grave human evil at that dark moment in history.

Complicity, Accountability and the Courage to Resist

The Holocaust was not carried out by monsters alone. It was enabled by ordinary people doing ordinary jobs.

Train conductors. Clerks. Police officers. Bureaucrats. Doctors. Teachers. Neighbors.

Hannah Arendt famously described "the banality of evil." Evil often looks boring, procedural, routine.

After the war, the Nuremberg Trials attempted to hold perpetrators accountable. "I was just following orders" was rejected as a moral excuse.

Scripture rejects it, too. The prophets repeatedly condemn those who "trample the poor" while claiming innocence (Amos 5). Jesus confronts leaders who hide behind rules while neglecting mercy (Mt. 23).

Today, accountability still matters.

When systems dehumanize, when leaders lie, when institutions punish truth-tellers, *people of faith must choose: collude or resist.*

There is no neutral ground.

Echoes of the Past in Our Present Moment

We do not live in Nazi Germany. But we would be dangerously naive to ignore historical echoes.

Here in a nation that once made us proud, we see:

- The rise of personality cults
- The demonizing of immigrants
- The weaponizing of fear
- The attack on journalists and scholars
- The erosion of democratic norms
- The glorification of violence

We even hear phrases like "modern-day Gestapo" used to describe ICE raids. Last week's images of Border Patrol official Greg Bovino wearing a Nazi-style coat, engaging in what looked like Nazi cosplay, should chill every conscience.

Meanwhile, on his first day back in office, our lawless President released 1,500+ January 6 insurrectionists, subverting justice and rewarding sedition. The same day, Elon Musk disgraced himself by making a Nazi salute. As John Pavlovitz insightfully notes, the 2021 insurrection did not fail; it was merely delayed by five years.

Jesus warned that false messiahs would arise (Mt. 24:24). The Book of Revelation warns about seductive empires. History shows us what happens when crowds confuse power with righteousness.

Extraordinary courage is required when authoritarianism wears patriotic clothing.

Complicity, Accountability and the Courage to Resist

Catholic faith is built on memory: "*Do this in memory of me*" (Lk. 22:19). We thus remember suffering, death and resurrection not to romanticize pain, but to transform it into commitment.

Holocaust remembrance functions similarly. It is sacred memory. Dangerous memory. Memory that disrupts complacency.

In this Winter Ordinary Time, when the liturgical calendar appears calm, our political and moral landscape is anything but ordinary. This extraordinary U.S. moment calls for extraordinary love, extraordinary truth-telling, extraordinary solidarity.

We cannot outsource this work.

Pop culture reminds us again and again: *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Andor*, *V for Vendetta*, *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*, *The Hunger Games*. Every generation retells the same story: Power corrupts, resistance matters, courage costs something.

The Gospel tells that story, too.

Calls to Action

- **Intentionally educate**. Read survivor testimonies. Watch documentaries. Honestly teach children. Refuse historical amnesia.
- **Directly confront antisemitism**. In families, social media, classrooms, workplaces, communities. Silence protects hatred.
- **Support Jewish communities**. Show up at interfaith events. Advocate for security and justice. Build relationships.
- **Defend democratic institutions**. Vote. Organize. Speak. Resist authoritarian drift.
- **Practice daily moral courage**. Tell the truth. Protect the vulnerable. Interrupt cruelty. Choose conscience over comfort.
- **Challenge Church complicity**. Demand transparency about Catholic failures during the Holocaust and today.
- **Pray publicly and privately**. Prayer must fuel action, not replace it.

From Torchlight to True Light: Choosing Memory Over Madness

The present chapter of our national darkness includes torches in Charleston and trauma in Pittsburgh. May it end with light.

Torches can be used to intimidate. Candles can be lit in vigil. Memory can be weaponized. But it can also heal.

On World Holocaust Remembrance Day, we choose which light we will follow.

Will we follow the glare of strongmen and slogans? Or the quiet, stubborn light of truth and compassion?

Jesus tells us, "You are the light of the world" (Mt. 5:14). Not when it is safe. Not when it is popular. Especially when it is dangerous.

Extraordinary love does not wait for consensus. Extraordinary courage does not wait for permission. Extraordinary faith refuses to forget.

In this extraordinary season of American history, may we choose memory over madness, conscience over cowardice, and light over darkness!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- When have I remained silent in the face of prejudice or injustice? Why?
- How am I educating myself and others about the Holocaust and antisemitism?
- Where do I see dangerous echoes of authoritarianism today?
- What would extraordinary courage look like in my own life now?
- How does my faith shape my response to political power?
- Who are the "Anne Franks" of our time, hiding in fear?
- What concrete action is God inviting me to take this week?

Let Us Pray

God of Abraham and Sarah, God of Isaac and Rebekah, God of Jacob, Leah, Rachel, Zilpah and Bilhah, God of Miriam, Aaron and Moses, God of Mary, Joseph and Jesus, God of memory and mercy, God who hears the cries of the oppressed, we remember today the six million lives stolen by hatred. We grieve the violence that still wounds your children. We confess our silence and our fear. Strengthen us with extraordinary courage. Fill us with extraordinary love. Guard us from forgetting. Deliver us from complicity. Make us builders of justice and guardians of truth. May we never grow accustomed to cruelty. May we never excuse lies. May we never abandon the vulnerable. In this extraordinary time, make us faithful witnesses to your light. Amen.

The Dangerous Dance of Church and State

A Reflection on Charlemagne and Christmas Crowns

January 28, 2026

My travels to Italy earlier this month were, in many ways, breathtaking. The art. The ruins. The food. The layers of history stacked like sediment beneath every *piazza* and cathedral. Yet they were also deeply sobering. Again and again, I found myself standing in churches where bishops once crowned kings on Christmas Day, sanctifying political power with sacred oil and holy words.

In Sicily, especially, the fusion of altar and throne felt unmistakable. Faith and force. Gospel and empire. Christ and Caesar intertwined.

Those images followed me home.

And they come to mind today, January 28, the day on which the Church remembers Charlemagne, crowned Holy Roman Emperor on Christmas Day in the year 800. Another ruler crowned by another bishop. Another moment when religion wrapped political ambition in divine language.

And once again, we are invited to ask: *What happens when the Church forgets its prophetic voice and instead chooses proximity to power?*

What We Learned in School… and What We Rarely Learned After

Most of us first encountered Charlemagne in high school or college history courses. We learned the basics:

He united much of Western Europe.
He promoted learning.
He supported monasteries and schools.
He presided over what scholars call the Carolingian Renaissance.
He was crowned by Pope Leo III on Christmas Day, 800 A.D.

In textbooks, he often appears as a kind of medieval superhero, the "Father of Europe," riding across the continent with sword in one hand and Scripture in the other!

Yet real history is always more complicated.

Charlemagne ruled through military conquest. He forcibly converted pagan peoples. He crushed dissent. He blurred the line between evangelization and domination. He presided over massacres, including the brutal execution of thousands of Saxons in 782.

Jesus said, "Those who live by the sword will perish by the sword" (Mt. 26:52). Charlemagne lived by the sword—and, yes, he baptized it. Few of us learned that part.

We learned about "Christian civilization," but not about coerced faith. We learned about "unity," but not about violence. We learned about "order," but not about trauma.

As in so many periods of Church history, extraordinary rhetoric masked ordinary cruelty.

And the Church often blessed it.

Rome, Constantinople and the Long Road to Schism

Charlemagne's coronation did not merely create an empire. It reshaped Christianity.

By crowning him "Emperor of the Romans," Pope Leo III effectively declared that true Christian authority now rested in the West. This move implicitly dismissed the legitimacy of Empress Irene in Constantinople. It also deepened the rift between Rome and the Eastern Churches.

The East did not recognize Charlemagne's title. Nor did it forget Rome's arrogance.

Over the next centuries, tensions grew:

- The West added the *filioque* to the Nicene Creed.
- The West insisted on clerical celibacy.
- The West required unleavened bread.
- The East resisted these innovations.

Behind these theological disputes stood politics, pride and power.

Paul warned, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" (1Cor. 8:1).

Too often, doctrine becomes a weapon, rather than a bridge.

Charlemagne's empire helped re-center Christianity in Rome. It strengthened papal authority. It accelerated the divergence between Eastern and Western Christianity. By 1054, mutual excommunications merely formalized a separation centuries in the making.

One cannot help wondering: *What if history had unfolded differently? What if Christianity had remained more decentralized? What if Constantinople had retained greater influence? What if humility had guided leadership, instead of ambition?*

We would indeed be living in a very different ecclesial world!

Why Christmas Day Matters: Crowning Power in Christ's Name

Why Christmas Day? Why did Charlemagne, and so many rulers after him, choose December 25?

- Because Christmas proclaims that God enters the world as one like us.
- Because Christmas celebrates the divine-made-flesh.
- Because Christmas announces peace on earth.
- And because Christmas offers unmatched symbolic power.

To be crowned on Christmas Day is to claim divine endorsement. It is to implicitly say, "My rule flows from God's will!"

Throughout Christian history, rulers followed this pattern. Medieval kings. Holy Roman Emperors. Monarchs in Sicily. Monarchs in France. Monarchs in England.

Outside Christendom, other cultures have also sacralized leadership. Pharaohs claimed divinity. Roman emperors demanded worship. Japanese emperors traced descent from the sun goddess. Power everywhere seeks spiritual justification.

Yet Jesus was born in a stable, not a palace. He fled as a refugee, not as a prince. He washed feet, not hands in royal basins (Jn. 13:1-17).

"Foxes have holes, birds have nests, but the Son of God has nowhere to lay his head" (Lk. 9:58).

Christmas crowns should have reminded rulers of *humility*.

Instead, they often became costumes for *domination*.

The Pope, the Emperor and the Shadows of History

Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne after being assaulted and politically weakened. He needed protection. Charlemagne needed legitimacy.

It was a *transaction*. The Church received security. The emperor received sacred authority. Neither side was innocent.

Charlemagne controlled bishops. He convened councils. He influenced theology. He treated Christianity as an instrument of governance. Leo III traded prophetic independence for survival.

Jesus warned, *"You cannot serve God and mammon" (Mt. 6:24).* Yet Church leaders have repeatedly tried. From medieval popes to Renaissance princes to modern televangelists, the pattern repeats: *Fear leads to compromise, compromise leads to corruption.*

- We see it in *The Godfather*, where baptisms coincide with executions.
- We see it in *Game of Thrones*, where religious authorities legitimize tyrants.

- We see it in *The Handmaid's Tale*, where Scripture becomes a tool of terror.
- We see it in *Star Wars*, when "order" replaces justice.
- We see it in *The Crown*, where ceremony masks dysfunction.
- And we see it in real life.

The Gospel is diminished when faith becomes a stage prop.

From Aachen to America: Crowning Trump Without a Crown

Charlemagne wore a physical crown. Donald J. Trump does not. Yet many religious leaders have symbolically placed one on his head.

- They have anointed him "God's chosen."
- They have excused cruelty as "strength."
- They have baptized his thousands of lies as "truth."
- They have praised authoritarianism as "order."

Like Pope Leo III, they sought protection. Like medieval bishops, they feared losing influence. And so they traded integrity for access.

Isaiah cried, *"Woe to those who call evil good and good evil"* (Is. 5:20). That woe echoes today. We have watched churches drape flags in sanctuaries. We have watched pastors excuse cruelty. We have watched Scripture weaponized against immigrants, LGBTQ+ people, women and the poor. And we have watched a supposed "war on Christmas" become a campaign rally cry.

Charlemagne's story warns us: When the Church crowns strongmen, it eventually loses its soul.

Calls to Action

- **Practice Extraordinary Truth-Telling**. Commit yourself to resisting propaganda, misinformation and theological distortion. Read widely. Verify claims. Speak honestly, even when uncomfortable.
- **Cultivate Extraordinary Ecumenism**. Learn from Eastern Christianity. Study Orthodox spirituality. Pray for unity rooted in humility, rather than dominance.
- **Model Extraordinary Civic Courage**. Vote. Organize. Advocate. Protest when necessary. Remember that faith without justice is hollow (Jas. 2:17).
- **Support Extraordinary Prophetic Voices**. Amplify journalists, theologians and pastors who speak truth to power, even when they are attacked.

- **Live Extraordinary Economic Solidarity**. Support labor rights, fair housing, public education, universal healthcare and food security. Refuse to spiritualize away poverty.
- **Practice Extraordinary Spiritual Resistance**. Pray daily for discernment. Fast from outrage media. Meditate on the Beatitudes that we'll hear proclaimed next Sunday (Mt. 5:1-12).
- **Build Extraordinary Communities of Care**. Create networks and small groups where people feel safe, affirmed and empowered to serve.

From Cathedrals to Consciences: Where Authority Truly Lives

Standing in the cathedrals of Italy and Sicily, I kept seeing ghosts of Christmas coronations: bishops lifting crowns, rulers kneeling, incense rising, choirs singing, power being sanctified.

Those images return now.

They remind us that Christianity's greatest temptation is *not* atheism. It is *accommodation*.

Jesus did not die for access. He did not rise for influence. He did not commission disciples to manage empires. He commissioned them to love.

"By this everyone will know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn. 13:35).

In this Winter Ordinary Time, in an American season that is anything but ordinary, we are being summoned to extraordinary courage, extraordinary compassion and extraordinary integrity.

We do not need more crowned rulers. We need more cruciform disciples. No more crowns in the sanctuary. No more altars to ambition. No more Christmas baptisms of cruelty. Only the quiet, stubborn, revolutionary love of Christ!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where has faith been used to justify, rather than challenge, power?
- In what ways do I benefit—even unintentionally—from unjust systems?
- How do I respond when religious leaders promote political falsehoods?
- What fears tempt me toward silence or compromise?
- How can I embody extraordinary courage in my daily life?
- Where is God inviting me to choose conscience over comfort?
- What "crowns" am I tempted to place on unworthy leaders?

Let Us Pray

Loving God, You entered our world not in splendor, but in vulnerability. You chose a manger over a throne, a cross over a crown, love over power. Deliver us from the seduction of influence. Free us from the fear that leads to compromise. Strengthen us to speak truth with grace, to resist injustice with courage, to serve with humility. In this extraordinary moment, form us into people of extraordinary love, extraordinary wisdom and extraordinary faithfulness. May we never confuse empire with Gospel, or authority with holiness. We ask this through Jesus, our servant-king and suffering Savior. Amen.

When Women Refuse to Be Silent

Lessons from the Nuns of Port-Royal
on Courage, Conscience and Extraordinary Faith

January 29, 2026

Since leaving the Roman Catholic Church, I have come to know so many brave women. Women whose voices were hidden from me for years. Women whose spiritual authority was quietly dismissed. Women whose histories were minimized, distorted or erased. Women whose faith burned fiercely, even when institutions tried to extinguish it.

History, after all, is almost always written by those in power. And power rarely tells the whole truth.

One of the most haunting lines to come from the women of Port-Royal-des-Champs captures this reality perfectly: *"When bishops show the timidity of women, women must show the courage of bishops."* That line still crackles with prophetic fire.

On January 29, we remember **Angélique de Saint Jean Arnauld d'Andilly** (1624-1684) and the brave nuns of Port-Royal, women who refused to trade conscience for comfort and who dearly paid for their faithfulness. Their story poignantly speaks to this extraordinary American moment.

Port-Royal: A Community of Prayer, Study and Dangerous Integrity

Port-Royal-des-Champs began in the early 1200s as a modest Cistercian convent outside Paris. By the 17th century, under the leadership of reform-minded abbesses like Mère Angélique Arnauld, it had become a center of spiritual renewal, intellectual rigor and moral seriousness.

The nuns emphasized deep prayer, rigorous self-examination, scriptural study, moral integrity, and personal responsibility before God. They were influenced by Jansenist theology, which stressed human dependence on divine grace and resisted superficial religiosity.

At Port-Royal, faith was not sentimental. It was disciplined. It was demanding. It was honest.

Think of it as a 17th-century version of a spiritually-serious community that refused to water down the Gospel for social acceptance.

Jesus said, "You will know the truth and the truth will set you free" (Jn. 8:32). Port-Royal took that seriously. And that made them dangerous.

"We Will Not Sign": The Courage of Conscience

In the mid-1600s, Church authorities demanded that Jansenist Catholics sign the Formulary of Submission, affirming that certain condemned teachings were contained in Jansen's writings.

Many knew the document was dishonest. Many knew it distorted reality. Many knew it demanded intellectual submission, rather than spiritual integrity. Most signed anyway.

The nuns of Port-Royal did not.

Angélique de Saint Jean and her sisters refused to lie.

They practiced what Peter proclaimed: "We must obey God, rather than human authority" (Acts 5:29).

Their refusal was not loud. It was not theatrical. It was not self-promotional. It was quiet, steady and extraordinarily brave. Like Rosa Parks staying seated. Like Katniss Everdeen volunteering as tribute. Like Erin Brockovich refusing to back down. Like the women of *Hidden Figures* insisting on being seen. Like the journalists in *Spotlight* telling uncomfortable truths.

They understood that obedience without conscience is not holiness. It is complicity.

Punished by Their Own Church: Arrest, Exile and Erasure

The response was swift and brutal.

Angélique de Saint Jean was arrested and imprisoned at the Annonciades convent. Other nuns were exiled. Visitors were banned. Confessors were removed. The community was isolated.

Later, under Louis XIV, the convent was suppressed. The buildings were demolished. The convent cemetery was dug up and desecrated. The sisters were scattered. Their spiritual home was erased from the landscape. It was state power and church power working hand-in-glove!

Psalm 118:22 says, "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." Port-Royal's stones were literally destroyed.

Yet their witness remains.

Think of *Les Misérables*, where the law crushes mercy.

Think of *Andor*, where empire punishes conscience.

Think of *The Hunger Games*, where dissent is criminalized.

Think of *Selma*, where faith confronts violence.

Think of *Schindler's List*, where moral courage stands alone.

The nuns learned what so many prophets learn: **Persecution often comes from inside religious institutions, not outside them**.

The Wisdom of Angélique: Writing Resistance Into History

During her imprisonment, Angélique de Saint Jean wrote. She recorded her suffering. She reflected on faith under pressure. She preserved the memory of her sisters. She refused to let their story vanish. Though much of her work remains untranslated, scholars describe her writings as marked by clarity, humility and fierce trust in God.

She understood what the psalmist prayed: "Put your hope in the Lord" (Ps. 146:5), not in princes, popes or kings.

By writing, she resisted erasure. In a world that silences women, she documented truth. Like Anne Frank. Like Ida B. Wells. Like Dorothy Day. Like Malala. Like Amanda Gorman. She reminds us that storytelling is a form of spiritual resistance!

From Port-Royal to Minnesota: When Power Sends Its Soldiers

Today, we see similar patterns in our own country.

In Minnesota and across the nation, ordinary people are standing up to extraordinary abuses of power. They are refusing blind obedience. They are defending immigrants. They are protecting neighbors. They are risking arrest and retaliation.

And now, with yet another death involving ICE agents, we are watching militarized authority once again enter communities with fear and force.

The parallels are chilling.

Louis XIV sent troops to crush Port-Royal.

Today's political leaders send armed agents again.

Then: Obedience was demanded. Now: Compliance is enforced.

Then: Dissent was criminalized. Now: Compassion is politicized.

Isaiah warned: "Learn to do good. Seek justice. Rescue the oppressed" (Is. 1:17).

Yet power prefers submission to justice.

The nuns of Port-Royal show us what faithful resistance looks like.

Calls to Action

- **Practice Extraordinary Conscience**. Refuse—even when pressured—to endorse policies, leaders or church teachings that violate human dignity.
- **Cultivate Extraordinary Memory**. Learn suppressed histories. Teach them. Share them. Resist institutional amnesia.
- **Show Extraordinary Solidarity**. Publicly stand with immigrants, workers, LGBTQ+ people and all targeted communities.
- **Exercise Extraordinary Discernment**. Question authority. Pray critically. Read widely. Resist propaganda.
- **Write Your Witness**. Journal, blog, testify, document injustice. Your story matters.
- **Support Extraordinary Civil Resistance**. Donate to legal defense funds. Accompany vulnerable neighbors. Participate in peaceful protest.
- **Build Extraordinary Communities of Courage**. Create spaces where dissent rooted in love is honored, not punished.

"Their Courage Still Burns": Hidden Women, Unhidden Fire

For years, I did not know Sister Angélique and the brave nuns of Port-Royal-des-Champs.

Their names were missing from textbooks.

Their stories were absent from histories.

Their witness was buried under institutional silence.

Like so many brave women, they were hidden in plain sight.

And yet their fire never went out.

It flickers in every person who refuses to sign falsehood.

It glows in every conscience that will not be bought.

It shines in every community that chooses love over fear.

In this Winter Ordinary Time, when America is anything but ordinary, we are being summoned to that same extraordinary courage.

Like the women of Port-Royal, we are called to truthfully live, boldly love and faithfully resist.

Their voices were nearly erased.

But their witness still speaks.

May our witness speak as loudly!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where am I tempted to choose safety over integrity?
- When have I remained silent to avoid conflict?
- Whose stories have I ignored or forgotten?
- How do I respond when religious leaders misuse authority?
- What risks am I willing to take for justice?
- Where is God calling me to resist, rather than comply?
- How can I preserve and share the truth of this moment?

Let Us Pray

Faithful God, You speak through prophets, through prisoners, through hidden women, through trembling voices that refuse to lie. Give us the courage of Angélique and the sisters of Port-Royal. Free us from fearful obedience. Deliver us from comfortable silence. Strengthen us to choose conscience over convenience. In this extraordinary time, form us into people of extraordinary love, extraordinary truth and extraordinary solidarity. May we never betray your justice for institutional approval. We ask this through Jesus, who stood before power and did not bow. Amen.

Two Lights in the Darkness

Lessons from Gandhi and Coretta Scott King
on Courage, Nonviolence, and Extraordinary Love

January 30, 2026

In recent weeks, I have spoken with many people who are quietly exhausted, spiritually disoriented, and searching for meaning in the midst of what feels like an unrelenting flood of dark national news. So many in the U.S. today are thirsting to understand how to faithfully respond when cruelty is normalized, truth is distorted, and fear is weaponized.

During Winter Ordinary Time, when the Church invites us into steadiness and reflection, our current national moment feels anything but ordinary.

And providentially, today gives us two extraordinary guides!

Nearly sixty years apart, **Mohandas "Mahatma" Gandhi** (1869-1948) and **Coretta Scott King** (1927-2006) both went to their heavenly reward on this day. Two lives rooted in nonviolence. Two voices formed by suffering. Two witnesses who refused to surrender their souls to hatred.

They remind us: *When history grows dark, God still raises up lights!*

What We Think We Know: Gandhi and "I Have a Dream"

Most people can offer a few basic facts.

- Gandhi led India to independence through nonviolent resistance.
- Martin Luther King Jr. gave the "I Have a Dream" speech.
- Coretta Scott King stood beside him.

But this simplified version hides the depth, cost and discipline of their commitments.

Gandhi was repeatedly jailed. He fasted nearly to death. He watched his nation violently fracture along religious lines. Still, he insisted: *"Nonviolence is the greatest force at the disposal of mankind."*

Coretta Scott King buried her 38-year-old husband. She received death threats. She raised four children in public grief. She continued organizing for decades. She once said: *"Freedom and justice cannot be parceled out in pieces to suit political convenience."*

Neither treated nonviolence as a personality trait. They practiced it as spiritual warfare.

As Jesus taught, "Put your sword back into its place" (Mt. 26:52).

As Paul insisted, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom. 12:21).

This was not passivity. It was disciplined moral resistance.

Gandhi: Truth, Suffering, and Sacred Resistance

Gandhi rooted his activism in *satyagraha*: "holding fast to truth." Truth, for him, was not merely factual accuracy. It was moral integrity.

He drew deeply from Hinduism, Christianity, Buddhism and Islam. He daily read the Sermon on the Mount. He profoundly admired Jesus, even as he rejected institutional Christianity's entanglement with empire.

He wrote:

- *"An eye for an eye will only make the whole world blind."*
- *"The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others."*

Gandhi taught that suffering, freely embraced for justice, exposes the violence of oppressors. It unmasks lies. It awakens consciences.

We see echoes of this in Isaiah's Suffering Servant (Is. 53), in Jesus' passion (Jn. 18-19), in the Beatitudes (Mt. 5:3-12).

Pop culture has tried to capture this in films like *Gandhi*, *Selma*, and even in shows like *Andor*, where quiet resistance proves more powerful than brute force.

Gandhi reminds extraordinary people in ordinary seasons:

You do not need weapons to shake an empire.

You need courage, discipline and truth!

Coretta Scott King: The Long Arc of Faithful Advocacy

For too long, Coretta Scott King was presented merely as "the widow." In reality, she was a strategist, organizer, theologian and prophet.

After 1968, she expanded her husband's vision. She fought apartheid in South Africa. She advocated for LGBTQIA+ dignity long before it was safe. She championed economic justice. She opposed war. She insisted that civil rights are incomplete without human rights.

She said: "*Struggle is a never-ending process. Freedom is never really won.*"

She embodied Luke's *Magnificat*: "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones" (Lk. 1:52).

She lived Micah's mandate: "Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God" (Mic. 6:8).

In an era of celebrity activism and viral outrage, Coretta modeled sustained, unglamorous fidelity. No Netflix special. No applause cycle. Just decades of work.

She understood what Taylor Swift sings in "Only the Young," what Kendrick Lamar raps in "Alright," what *The Wire* and *The Crown* portray: Systems rarely change without persistent pressure.

Extraordinary courage is usually quiet.

Minnesota, Nonviolence and Moral Imagination Today

Today, in Minnesota and across the nation, we see people rising in nonviolent protest against policies that terrorize families, criminalize migrants, and fracture communities. We see teachers, clergy, nurses, students and grandparents standing in streets and courthouses. Not with weapons. With prayers. With signs. With songs. With bodies.

Gandhi would recognize them.

Coretta would stand beside them.

Jesus would, too.

When ICE terrorizes communities, when voting rights erode, when truth is mocked, when courts are politicized, when compassion is labeled weakness, neutrality becomes complicity!

History is watching.

Our children and grandchildren are watching.

And we are summoned to extraordinary love!

Calls to Action

- **Practice disciplined nonviolence**. Study it. Train in it. Live it. Refuse reactive rage.
- **Physically show up**. Attend vigils, protests, court hearings, school board meetings. Presence matters.
- **Protect vulnerable neighbors**. Offer accompaniment to immigrants, LGBTQIA+ youth, the unhoused, the elderly.
- **Disrupt unjust narratives**. Challenge lies in media, social media, families, workplaces and churches.
- **Spiritually sustain yourself**. Pray daily. Read Scripture. Rest intentionally. Burnout serves injustice.
- **Invest in community**. Build coalitions across faiths, races and ideologies.
- **Relentlessly organize and vote**. Democracy is a spiritual practice now!

Extraordinary times require extraordinary commitment!

Coming Full Circle: Lights in the Night

We began by naming the darkness many feel.

Confusion. Fear. Fatigue. Moral vertigo.

Gandhi and Coretta Scott King did not eliminate darkness.

They refused to let it define them.

They chose, again and again, to become lights.

Jesus promised: "No one lights a lamp and hides it" (Lk. 11:33).

They believed him.

In this Winter Ordinary Time, when routines can lull us into spiritual sleep, their lives whisper urgently:

Stay awake.

Stay tender.

Stay brave.

Be extraordinary in love.

Be extraordinary in truth.

Be extraordinary in courage!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where am I tempted to choose comfort over conscience?
- How do I react when I feel afraid or overwhelmed by the news?
- Who in my community most needs my public solidarity?
- What practices help me remain nonviolent in spirit and speech?
- How am I forming the next generation for justice?
- Where is God inviting me to greater moral risk?
- What would extraordinary love look like in my daily life?

Let Us Pray

God of justice and mercy, You raised Gandhi and Coretta Scott King in seasons of violence and fear. You filled them with extraordinary courage, extraordinary patience, extraordinary love. Form our hearts in that same Spirit. When we are tempted to withdraw, draw us outward. When we are tempted to hate, teach us to resist with compassion. When we are tempted to despair, rekindle our hope. Make us faithful lights in this darkened hour, bearing Your light until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. We ask this through Christ our Peace. Amen.

Are We Still "Friends of Youth"?

St. John Bosco, Extraordinary Courage,
and the Moral Failure of Our Nation

January 31, 2026

I have been invited to serve on various advisory boards throughout the years, but few have touched my heart like *The Child-Friendly Faith Project*, an organization dedicated to helping faith communities become places where children are protected, honored and empowered to flourish. At that time, nearly 15 years ago, I recall our desire to tackle the issue of the physical, sexual and emotional abuse perpetrated by churches and clergy, but also the great passion that other advisors

brought to confronting religious trauma, dismantling cultures of fear, and helping children escape controlling individuals, cults and beliefs. Today, as the Church celebrates **St. John Bosco** (1815-1888), "the Friend of Youth," we do well to pause and ask ourselves: *How child-friendly are our homes, our communities, our states, and our nation—especially under the present Trump Administration?*

What Are Our Children Absorbing at Home?

Children are spiritual and emotional sponges. They absorb our tone, our politics, our prejudices, our habits, and our fears—long before they understand them. Scripture reminds us: "These words… you shall teach them diligently to your children" (Dt. 6:6-7). The question is: *What words and values are we actually teaching?*

In homes saturated with cable news outrage, social media cruelty, and partisan rage, children learn that power matters more than compassion. In households dominated by screens, late nights, poor nutrition, and constant distraction, children learn that self-regulation and reverence are optional.

St. John Bosco insisted that formation begins with relationship, play, patience and presence. He understood that extraordinary love begins at home!

When Policy Undermines Childhood

In Texas and many other states, policies increasingly undermine children's well-being. We see underfunded public schools, book bans, attacks on mental health services, restrictions on nutrition programs, and legislation targeting vulnerable families.

Isaiah warned of leaders who "make unjust laws" and "deprive the poor of their rights" (Is. 10:1-2). Today, those words echo loudly in state capitols.

Pop culture has captured this reality. In *Abbott Elementary*, teachers heroically compensate for systemic neglect. In *Friday Night Lights*, we see how community investment shapes young lives. Even in *The Hunger Games*, young people bear the consequences of adult political cruelty.

Extraordinary courage requires clearly naming these injustices!

Moral Indictment of the Trump Administration

Now that the Trump Administration has returned to power, our children again live under policies shaped by cruelty, nationalism and indifference to human dignity.

We see:

- The dismantling of the U.S. Department of Education, the underfunding of public education, and a rise in vouchers and the dueling system of charter schools.
- Increased fear of attending school due to mass shootings and the present terror of immigration enforcement.
- Rollbacks on vaccination programs and the return of measles.
- The gutting of USAID, contributing to the deaths of over 400,000 children worldwide to date—in less than a year.
- Hostile rhetoric toward immigrants and refugees that traumatizes young minds.

Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me…for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these" (Mk. 10:14). Yet our nation now treats children as expendable collateral.

In *Stranger Things*, adults fail to protect kids from threats. In *Harry Potter*, corrupt authorities ignore danger until children suffer. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the state literally claims children as property. These are warnings, not entertainment.

A Modern Parable: Liam Conejo Ramos and the Politics of Exploitation

Last week's case of Liam Conejo Ramos in Minnesota—an innocent five-year-old in a bunny hat and Spider-Man backpack—should haunt our collective conscience. Used as leverage, as bait, as collateral, he became a pawn in a system that has forgotten the sacredness of childhood.

In biblical times, children were often treated as property. Jesus shattered that worldview: "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me" (Mt. 18:5). Yet today, some leaders seem intent on reversing that moral revolution.

Like the children in *Les Misérables*, like Grogu in *The Mandalorian*, like Eleven in *Stranger Things*, vulnerable children are exploited by powerful systems. Only extraordinary courage interrupts that cycle.

St. John Bosco's Prophetic Challenge to Our Time

St. John Bosco would not be impressed by our rhetoric. He would ask: Where are the playgrounds? Where are the mentors? Where are the safe spaces? Where are the meals? Where is the joy?

He would remind us that holiness is measured not by ideology, but by proximity to suffering.

Like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, Bosco knew that courage is not bravado. Like Mr. Rogers, he believed love is a public ethic. Like Atticus Finch, he stood against unjust systems, even when it cost him.

As extraordinary Catholics and Christians, we are not called to neutrality. We are called to prophetic fidelity.

Calls to Action

- Conduct an honest audit of your household's emotional and digital climate. Reduce toxic media intake and unhealthy habits, and intentionally cultivate spaces of prayer, rest and healthy conversation.
- Attend at least one school board or legislative hearing this year and publicly advocate for child-centered policies.
- Support organizations that defend immigrant, refugee and marginalized children through sustained giving and advocacy.
- Directly write to your federal representatives demanding humane immigration policies that protect children from psychological harm.
- Commit to sustained involvement with one youth-serving ministry, shelter or advocacy group this year.

From Advisory Boards to Public Witness: Becoming Truly Child-Friendly

As I reflect on my years with the Child-Friendly Faith Project, I remember passionate people who refused to accept "that's just how things are." They believed faith should liberate children, not traumatize them.

St. John Bosco invites us to recover that moral clarity.

In this extraordinary American moment, surrounded by manufactured fear and political cruelty, we must become extraordinary witnesses. We must insist that children are not tools, not votes, not liabilities, not props. They are icons of God's presence among us.

Winter Ordinary Time reminds us: God works quietly, persistently, faithfully. So must we!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- How do my political loyalties shape my concern for children's well-being?
- Where have I remained silent when children were harmed?
- What would St. John Bosco challenge me to change this year?
- How am I modeling extraordinary courage for young people?

- Whose children am I failing to see as my responsibility?
- What fear prevents me from speaking more boldly?

Let Us Pray

God of every child, You entrusted the smallest and most vulnerable to our care. Forgive us when we traded compassion for comfort, and justice for convenience. Grant us the spirit of St. John Bosco: extraordinary love, extraordinary courage, extraordinary fidelity. Make us defenders of dignity, builders of safe spaces, and witnesses to your kingdom. May our faith become shelter, our voices become protection, and our lives become blessings for every child you love. Amen.

When Conscience Refuses to Be Silent

Ernst Melzer, Forgotten Minds,
and the Extraordinary Courage to Think Faithfully

February 1, 2026

Over the past weeks, we have watched ordinary people choose conscience over convenience in extraordinary circumstances. In Minnesota. In cities throughout our nation. At ICE detention centers. At hotels where ICE and CBP agents are attempting to get some rest inside, while concerned citizens outside bring attention to issues of injustice with drums, pots, pans and vuvuzelas.

I have watched teachers, clergy, parents and students decide that silence is no longer spiritually possible. Here, in one Texas town, over 1,000 students walked out of their high school last week, to show their solidarity with one another and with all who are suffering.

Their actions have stirred memories of figures I once barely knew existed. People whose names were quietly erased because they asked very inconvenient questions. People who followed their Spirit-enlightened consciences, even when it dearly cost them.

One of them is Ernst Melzer.

Meeting Ernst Melzer: A Voice from the Margins

Most of us never learned his name.

Ernst Melzer (1835-1899) was a German philosopher and educator, formed in the Catholic intellectual world of 19th-century Europe. He loved the Church. He seriously studied her traditions. He believed faith and reason belonged together.

And yet, he grew increasingly disillusioned.

He watched as Rome centralized power and condemned modernity.

He watched as bishops silenced scholars and fell in line with an autocratic pope.

He watched as honest questions by God's people were labeled dangerous.

The sham Vatican Council of 1869-1870 declared purported papal infallibility in a way that many theologians considered historically and theologically indefensible. For Melzer and others, this was not merely a doctrinal dispute. It was a spiritual crisis.

Acts 5:29 echoed in their hearts: "We must obey God rather than human authority."

Like Jeremiah, Melzer discovered that truth-telling often leads to isolation (Jer. 20:7-9). Like the prophets, he could no longer pretend that institutional unity mattered more than integrity.

So, he chose to follow his conscience.

Old Catholicism: When Scholars and Laity Said "No"

After Vatican I, resistance emerged across Europe.

In Germany, Switzerland and Austria, professors, pastors and lay leaders convened what became known as the Old Catholic Congresses. These annual gatherings rejected papal infallibility and reaffirmed earlier ecclesial models of conciliar leadership, married clergy, vernacular liturgy, and democratic governance. Together, they created new, national, non-Vatican Catholic churches—the *Katholisches Bistum der Alt-Katholiken in Deutschland* (German Old Catholic Church), the *Christkatholische Kirche der Schweiz* (Christian Catholic Church of Switzerland), and the *Altkatholische Kirche Österreichs* (Austrian Old Catholic Church)!

This was not rebellion for rebellion's sake. It was theological protest rooted in history, Scripture and pastoral concern.

Old Catholics were saying, in effect:

We love the Church too much to lie about her past.

We love the Gospel too much to reduce it to rigid hierarchy.

We love God too much to confuse authority with holiness or piety.

Think of *Spotlight*. Think of *The Crown*. Think of *Andor*. Think of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Think of *Selma*. All remind us: Institutions often protect themselves first. Old Catholics instead chose extraordinary honesty!

Güntherianism and the Courage to Deeply Think

Melzer was deeply influenced by Anton Günther (1783-1863), whose philosophical theology sought to integrate modern reason with Christian revelation.

Günther rejected shallow expressions of faith. He insisted that faith could withstand intellectual scrutiny. He believed God invited inquiry, not fear.

Rome condemned him.

His works were placed on the Index of Forbidden Books.

His students were marginalized and forced to take sides.

His reputation was irreparably tarnished.

Yet his core conviction remained deeply biblical:

- "Come, let us reason together" (Is. 1:18).
- "Test everything; hold fast to what is good" (1Thes. 5:21).
- "Love God with all your mind" (Mt. 22:37).

Melzer inherited this Güntherian spirit!

He believed that suppressing thought weakens faith. He understood that unquestioned authority results in cultlike discipleship.

Indeed, extraordinary faith requires extraordinary intellectual courage!

Remembering Johann Baptist Baltzer: Preserving Buried Light

One of Melzer's major contributions was his biography of Johann Baptist Baltzer (1803-1871), another marginalized theologian.

Why write about someone Rome wanted to erase?

Because Melzer understood how history works.

The victors write it.

Dissenters are suppressed.

All uncomfortable voices are silenced.

Writing Baltzer's life was an act of resistance.

It was like the women preserving Jesus' memory at the tomb (Lk. 24). Like the psalmist recording suffering (Ps. 22). Like Maya Angelou insisting, "You may kill me with your hatefulness, but still, like air, I'll rise!"

Melzer believed memory itself is a spiritual practice.

To remember is to resist!

Conscience in Minneapolis, Austin and Other Places

Today, Melzer's legacy lives on.

It lives in Minnesotans who refuse to normalize terror.

It lives in Austinites gathering outside hotels with drums, pots and pans.

It lives in protesters at ICE and CBP detention centers.

They are doing what Melzer did.

They are listening.

They are prayerfully discerning.

They are publicly acting.

They are saying: "This is *not* who we are."

Like Peter and John before the Sanhedrin (Acts 4), they refuse to be quiet. Like Esther, they recognize that silence itself becomes sin (Est. 4:14).

And yes, their public acts make some people uncomfortable.

So did Jesus.

Calls to Action

- **Study forgotten voices**. Seek theologians and saints erased by power.
- **Protect intellectual freedom**. Defend scholars, teachers and all people who ask hard questions.
- **Support nonviolent resistance**. Donate, attend and accompany.
- **Daily practice moral courage**. Speak truth at work, in your family, and in your community.
- **Refuse spiritual gaslighting**. Do not let anyone convince you that following your conscience is an act of disobedience.
- **Build alternative communities**. Create spaces where honesty is safeguarded.
- Document injustice. Write. Record. Preserve stories.

Extraordinary love requires extraordinary clarity!

When the Drums Become Prayer

Here in Austin and elsewhere, we hear the drums, pots and vuvuzelas outside the hotels where ICE and CBP agents sleep. Noise in hotel parking lots. Noise outside detention centers. Noise in quiet towns.

To some, it sounds disruptive. To God, it sounds like Psalm 150.

It is praise in the key of justice. It is lament shaped into courage. It is prayer made audible.

Ernst Melzer would recognize that spirit. Conscience refusing to be silent. Faith refusing to be domesticated. Hope refusing to die.

In this Winter Ordinary Time, when routine tempts us toward complacency, Melzer reminds us: *Extraordinary faith is never quiet when lives are at stake!*

Questions for Reflection and Prayer

- Where am I tempted to suppress my own questions?
- Who taught me that obedience matters more than truth?
- When have I remained silent out of fear?
- Whose voices have I failed to listen to?
- What risks is God inviting me to take now?
- How do I nurture my intellectual and spiritual life?
- What would extraordinary courage look like for me this month?

Let Us Pray

God of wisdom and truth, You formed Ernst Melzer with a restless mind and a faithful heart. Teach us to love You with courage and clarity. When institutions confuse power with holiness, give us discernment. When silence feels safer than truth, give us strength. When conscience becomes costly, give us perseverance. Make us extraordinary in love, extraordinary in honesty, extraordinary in hope. In this anything-but-ordinary season, form us into witnesses of Your justice. Through Christ our Teacher and Liberator. Amen.

Christmas Light Returns in a Dark Season

Candlemass, *el Día de la Candelaria*, and the Courage to Stay Awake in Troubled Times

February 2, 2026

Christmas 2025 seems far in the past. Forty days have passed since we sang "Silent Night," arranged our crèches, and whispered prayers of hope beneath twinkling lights. Since then, our nation has been shaken by relentless headlines, corrosive rhetoric, and renewed assaults on human

dignity. Anxiety has grown. Weariness has settled in. The glow of Bethlehem has dimmed.

And yet, today, on February 2, the Church gently insists: *The spirit of Christmas does not end!*

On this Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, or Candlemass, the light returns. Candles are lifted. Christ is held high. In Latino communities, *tamales* and *atole* are shared. The Christ Child is placed upright on home altars. And suddenly, joy, memory and mission converge.

There is so much more here than nostalgia. There is an invitation to extraordinary courage!

Forty Days Later: Bringing the Light Back Out

Luke tells us that Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the Temple "to present him to the Lord" (Lk. 2:22). They obeyed the law. They followed tradition. But in doing so, they also made a public declaration: This child belongs to God and to the world!

Candlemass developed from that moment.

For centuries, Christians have brought candles to church on this day to be blessed. The symbolism is simple and profound: Christ is the Light of the World (Jn. 8:12), and we are called to carry that light into dark places!

In an age of spiritual shortcuts and shallow optimism, Candlemass reminds us that light must be tended. It must be protected. It must be shared.

Think of Beyoncé's "Halo." Think of U2's "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For." Think of the quiet persistence of characters like Leslie Knope in *Parks and Recreation* or Ted Lasso's stubborn hope. They all echo this truth: Light does not eliminate struggle. It accompanies it. Pause and let that sink in.

In Winter Ordinary Time, when routines return and headlines exhaust us, the Church gives us candles and says: Keep going!

Simeon, Anna, and the Gift of Clear-Eyed Faith

In the Temple, Mary and Joseph encounter two elders: Simeon and Anna.

Simeon blesses Jesus and then speaks words that are often softened in homilies: "This child is destined for the rise and fall of many…and you yourself a sword will pierce" (Lk. 2:34-35).

Anna, a widow who has prayed for decades, recognizes redemption when she sees it (Lk. 2:36–38).

Neither of them is naïve.

They are not intoxicated by easy religion. They do not confuse faith with comfort. They see both promise and pain.

They remind me of characters like Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings*, Professor McGonagall in *Harry Potter*, or even the late Queen Ramonda in *Black Panther*—elders who understand that hope costs something.

In our present moment, when propaganda thrives and truth is routinely distorted, we need the faith of Simeon and Anna: spiritually alert, historically aware, morally anchored.

Extraordinary disciples do not look away.

***El Día de la Candelaria*: A Living, Breathing Gospel**

In Latino cultures, February 2 is *el día de la candelaria.*

Families bring to church their *Niño Dios*—their Christmas creche image of the Christ Child. Candles are blessed. Once home, the *Niño Dios* is placed upright on the home altar, and *tamales* and *atole* are shared in joyful communion.

This is theology in *masa* and corn husks. This is doctrine with dignity. This is faith embodied in kitchens, living rooms and neighborhood gatherings.

The Child who once lay quietly in a manger now sits upright, eyes open, blessing all who look to Him!

What a powerful image for this moment.

Jesus is no longer sleeping through history. He is watching. He is listening. He is paying attention to how we treat immigrants, the poor, the vulnerable, the targeted, the forgotten.

As James Baldwin once wrote, "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."

El día de la candelaria teaches us to face reality with faith and flavor!

From Ritual to Resistance: Candles in a Time of Crisis

Candlemass is not sentimental. It is subversive.

A small family brings a poor person's offering (Lk. 2:24). Two elders proclaim inconvenient truth. A vulnerable child is presented to an empire's religious system.

Sound familiar?

Jesus enters public life as a disruption.

Today, we light candles while authoritarian impulses grow, voting rights erode, immigrants are demonized, truth is relativized, and cruelty is often baptized as "strength."

Like the prophets, like social activist Dorothy Day, like defender of the poor Oscar Romero, like women's rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer, faith refuses to cooperate with injustice!

As Bruce Springsteen sings, "We take care of our own." As Taylor Swift might insist to those who weaponize hate: "You need to calm down." As *The Handmaid's Tale* warns, religion can be twisted when conscience sleeps.

Candlemass shouts: Stay awake!

Extraordinary Practices for Extraordinary Times

Here are concrete ways to live Candlemass faith this year:

- **Intentionally bless your home**. Light a candle and pray for compassion and truth in your household.
- **Publicly defend vulnerable neighbors**. Attend vigils, support sanctuary efforts, and refuse silence when dignity is attacked.
- **Support Latino-led ministries and organizations**. Move beyond symbolic inclusion to structural solidarity.
- **Practice media discernment**. Limit exposure to fear-based messaging and prioritize trustworthy journalism.
- **Invest in young leaders**. Mentor, fund and encourage those forming consciences in hostile environments.
- **Actively honor consecrated life**. Advocate for religious communities who prophetically speak.
- **Vote, organize and educate**. Democracy is a spiritual practice.

Extraordinary love requires extraordinary commitment!

"Still Standing with Our Candles Lit"

The images linger. Candles glowing in winter darkness. The Christ Child sitting upright, blessing families. *Tamales* steaming on kitchen tables. Hands lifted in prayer.

Forty days after Christmas, we realize that joy is not seasonal. It is vocational.

We will rock the Christ Child to sleep again on December 24. We will lay him down in the manger once more. We pray that by then, our nation will be more peaceful, more honest, more humane.

Until then, Jesus is awake.

He is watching what we do with our power.

He is noticing how we love.

He is asking whether we will carry his light beyond church walls.

In this anything-but-ordinary American winter, Candlemass calls us to extraordinary courage, extraordinary clarity and extraordinary compassion.

May we not disappoint him!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where do I see light breaking through darkness in my life?
- What fears tempt me to retreat, rather than engage?
- How am I protecting or neglecting the vulnerable in my community?
- What illusions do I need to release this year?
- How can my home become more intentionally prayerful?
- Where is God inviting me to greater moral courage?
- What would Simeon or Anna say to me today?

Let Us Pray

God of light and life, You placed the Christ Child in fragile hands and trusted him to imperfect people. Teach us to carry Your flame with reverence. Give us clarity when lies confuse. Give us courage when justice costs. Give us tenderness when cruelty tempts. In this unordinary moment, form us into people of extraordinary love, extraordinary truth, and extraordinary hope. May we walk as children of light until every shadow yields to Your love and mercy. Through Christ our Light. Amen.

Truth on Trial

Cornelius Loos, Witch Hunts,
and the Courage to Refuse Collective Cruelty

February 3, 2026

I was in the fifth grade when the reality of the Salem Witch Trials first nestled in my mind. That same year, I also learned about the history of slavery in the United States. I still remember the images in books. African Americans chained, whipped and sold as property. Women bound and executed for allegedly practicing witchcraft. Communities whipped into hysteria through fear and superstition.

Even as a "tween," I found such ideas unfathomable. *How could so many people participate in such cruel acts? How could religious leaders bless such violence? How could neighbors turn on neighbors so quickly?*

Slavery and witch trials sound absurd now in the twenty-first century—until we realize that the same human dynamics that fueled those atrocities are still, sadly, very much alive.

A History Written in Blood and Silence

Between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, an estimated 40,000 to 60,000 people—mostly women—were accused of witchcraft and executed across Europe. Let that number sink in. Many more were imprisoned, tortured, humiliated and socially erased.

This was not fringe fanaticism. It was institutionalized fear.

Church leaders, civil authorities, scholars and clergy collaborated in constructing elaborate theological and legal systems to justify persecution. Manuals like Heinrich Kramer's 1487 treatise *Malleus Maleficarum*—The Hammer of Witches!—provided "instructions" for identifying and prosecuting witches.

Women who were outspoken. Women who were poor. Women who were elderly. Women who were widowed. Women who were different. They all became convenient scapegoats!

Jesus had warned, *"They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God"* (Jn. 16:2).

Sadly, the witch hunts proved Jesus right.

The Man Who Said "This Is Evil"

Into this madness stepped Cornelius Loos (1546-1595). A priest. A theologian. A loyal son of the Church. And a man with an extraordinary conscience.

In the late sixteenth century, as trials intensified in Germany, Loos began writing against them. He argued that alleged confessions were coerced. That torture produced lies. That superstition was being baptized as doctrine. That innocent people were being destroyed.

He dared to publicly say what many privately whispered: This is evil.

His book, *De vera et falsa magia* (On True and False Magic), dismantled the theological foundations of the trials. For this, he was arrested, imprisoned, interrogated and forced to recant. His manuscript was confiscated and suppressed. His voice was silenced. The defender became the defendant.

As Isaiah lamented, *"Truth has stumbled in the public square"* (Is. 59:14), Loos knew that truth could be jailed.

Recantation: When Institutions Demand Your Soul

Imagine what it means to recant. To stand before authorities you respect. To publicly deny what you know is true. To sign away your integrity. To watch your work disappear.

Loos did not recant because he was wrong. He recanted because he was imprisoned, isolated and broken.

He joins a long line:

- The Judean mother and her seven sons pressured to abandon conscience (2Macc. 7:1-42).
- Joan of Arc, condemned and murdered by her church for—you guessed it—witchcraft.
- Galileo Galilei, forced by his church to deny science.
- Jan Hus, burned by his own church as a heretic.
- Whistleblowers, activists, journalists today, punished for telling the truth.

Tragically, institutions often prefer obedient silence to courageous honesty.

Taylor Swift sings, "They got their cages, they got their boxes." For far too long, the church helped build them!

Buried and Resurrected: The Return of Loos' Voice

Loos' manuscript vanished for three centuries—hidden, preserved, protected, waiting—until it was rediscovered in the 19th century. His voice returned from its enforced silence!

It was indeed a small resurrection, a reminder that truth can be delayed, but rarely destroyed.

Jesus promised, "*Nothing is hidden that will not be revealed*" (Lk. 8:17).

Loos never lived to see his vindication. But his courage outlasted his persecutors.

Extraordinary integrity ages well!

From Witch Hunts to Modern Scapegoating

We like to imagine we are more enlightened now. We are not. We still:

- Shame women for their bodies and choices
- Doubt survivors
- Judge female leaders more harshly
- Exclude women from ordained ministry in some churches
- Punish assertive women as "difficult"
- Reward compliant silence

We still live in a nation that has never elected a woman president.

We live under a regime that retraumatizes Epstein survivors (some who were minors) by exposing their identities, while allowing powerful enablers to hide in the shadows.

We are part of a larger Catholic tradition that still largely bars women from sacramental leadership based on their chromosomes.

We still watch powerful men fail upward.

We still tolerate cruelty when it targets "acceptable" victims.

The dynamics of witch hunts never disappeared. They just learned new language!

Think of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Think of *Spotlight*. Think of *Erin Brockovich*. Think of *Hidden Figures*. Think of *Barbie's* surprising feminist turn, embracing human imperfection over patriarchy, plastic "perfection," and the impossible standards faced by women.

The story repeats: Women are blamed, silenced, doubted, erased.

And people of conscience must decide whether, like Loos, they will speak.

February, Purification, and Moral Housecleaning

The word "February" comes from *februa*, Latin for "purification." In ancient Rome, it was a month for ritual cleansing. Indeed, how fitting!

As Lent approaches, with Ash Wednesday on February 18, we are invited to participate in some spiritual housecleaning. Not cosmetic repentance. But structural repentance.

As Psalm 51 pleads, "Create in me a clean heart, O God."

Loos reminds us that purification begins with naming injustice, even when it is sanctified.

Extraordinary Actions for Extraordinary Times

In Loos' spirit, we are called to:

- **Amplify marginalized voices**. Read, share and defend women theologians, activists and leaders.
- **Challenge sexist theology**. Refuse interpretations that limit God's call based on gender.
- **Publicly support survivors**. Believe. Carefully listen. Fiercely advocate.
- **Practice institutional accountability**. Demand transparency from church leadership.
- **Educate relentlessly**. Teach accurate history about persecution and power.

- **Protect whistleblowers**. Stand with those who speak inconvenient truths.
- **Examine personal bias**. Repent of internalized sexism and fear.

Extraordinary justice requires extraordinary vigilance!

From Fifth-grade Shock to Grown-Up Responsibility

I think back to that fifth-grade classroom. To those black-and-white images of enslaved bodies and condemned women. To my childhood confusion. How could this happen?

Now I know.

It happens when fear is weaponized. When institutions protect themselves. When people choose comfort over conscience.

Cornelius Loos refused. He paid dearly. But he left us a map.

In this anything-but-ordinary American winter, as lies spread and cruelty is normalized, we are asked the same questions:

- *Will we speak?*
- *Will we stand?*
- *Will we risk something?*

May we answer with extraordinary courage!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- When have I stayed silent out of fear?
- Whose voices do I unconsciously dismiss?
- Where is God inviting me to greater honesty?
- How do I respond when institutions fail?
- What truths am I afraid to name?
- How am I daily forming my conscience?
- What does courageous faith look like for me now?

Let Us Pray

God of justice and mercy, You raised prophets in dark times and sustained them in suffering. Give us Loos' courage, Simeon's clarity, Anna's persistence, Mary's trust. Cleanse our hearts of fear. Purge our institutions of cruelty. Refine our love into action. As Lent approaches, prepare us not for ashes alone, but for transformation. Make us people of extraordinary truth, extraordinary compassion, and extraordinary faithfulness. Through Christ, who was condemned by power and raised by love. Amen.

A Diagnosis for a Nation

World Cancer Day, Extraordinary Courage,
and the Cost of Telling the Truth

February 4, 2026

I can only imagine what it must be like to hear the words: "*You have cancer*."

The shock. The horror. The unknowing. The sudden collapse of what once felt stable. The close bristling with human mortality.

Two experiences, though, come to mind that feel disturbingly similar.

In 2016, in my fourth year of elected office here in Austin, our national sense of morality abruptly changed when Donald J. Trump stepped out of the shadows and announced his run for President. I readily admit that I did not take him seriously. The *Huffington Post* routinely warned us: "Donald Trump regularly incites political violence and is a serial liar, rampant xenophobe, racist, misogynist and birther." Meditate for a moment on those prescient words. I joked: How could anyone—*anyone*—vote for such a person, unless "blessed," of course, by Catholic hierarchs and evangelical Christians?

His first election was a gut punch. It remains the closest thing I know to a diagnosis of cancer. Pure shock. Dismay. The necessity to summon courage for an unknown future.

I saw it firsthand: His lack of civility quickly metastasized and unmistakably trickled down to the local level, manifesting so many other symptoms contrary to gospel values. During the next four years, for instance, the *Washington Post* documented his false and misleading claims—30,573 in four years—illuminating how his disinformation spread through our body politic like a malignant tumor. Truth caved to "alternate facts." Trust collapsed. Cruelty normalized. Democracy thinned.

Now, unfathomably having received a second "diagnosis," our nation is no longer "in remission." The cancer metastasizes more quickly than before. It grows. It spreads. It worsens.

Like former ally nations looking on, I find that my reactions have varied during these past twelve months, from deep sadness to outright shock and horror at the depths of moral depravity to which we have plummeted.

Certainly our present American moment casts new light on this "world cancer" day.

Sitting at Bedsides: Learning from Those Who Carry the Weight

On World Cancer Day, we first and always center those who carry this disease in their bodies.

Through the years, I have accompanied dozens of people through diagnoses, surgeries, radiation, chemotherapy, remission, relapse and death. I have witnessed their courage as they stand up in church and share the news with congregants. I have watched spouses age overnight. I have seen children learn vocabulary no child should know. I have witnessed extraordinary courage whispered through nausea and pain.

Cancer is not abstract. It is intensely personal.

Scripture knows this language of vulnerability:

- *"My flesh and my heart may fail"* (Ps. 73:26)
- *"Lord, the one you love is ill"* (Jn. 11:3)
- *"We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed"* (2Cor. 4:8)
- *"He took up our infirmities and bore our diseases"* (Mt. 8:17)
- *"Nothing can separate us from the love of God"* (Rom. 8:39)

Like Job scraping his sores (Job 2:8) or Hezekiah turning his face to the wall after being diagnosed with a terminal illness (2Kgs 20:2), cancer patients stand in holy territory. They teach us how to live honestly. They teach us how to hope without denial. They teach us how to pray without pretending.

In films like *Terms of Endearment*, *The Fault in Our Stars, 50/50, My Sister's Keeper* and *Wit*, we see what real courage looks like: not bravado, but tenderness. Not denial, but presence.

These stories remind us that healing is not always cure. Sometimes healing is learning how to love well until the end.

When a Nation Gets Sick: Naming Our Collective Illness

Scripture repeatedly warns that societies can fall ill.

Isaiah tells Israel": "Your whole head is injured, your whole heart afflicted" (Is. 1:5).

Jeremiah laments wounds that refuse healing (Jer. 8:22).

Jesus weeps over a city that "did not recognize the time of God's coming" (Lk. 19:44).

Today, our nation shows symptoms everywhere.

We live with:

- White nationalism baptized in Christian language and masquerading as faith.
- The erosion of civility.
- The weaponization of courts.
- The militarization of public life.
- The normalization of lies and incivility.
- The punishment of journalists and truth-tellers.
- The reward of cruelty.

Like untreated cancer, these forces spread quietly at first. Then suddenly they dominate.

Pastor John Pavlovitz regularly reminds us that moral neutrality is *not* holiness. Silence is *not* spirituality. Comfort is *not* discipleship.

Pop culture has named this decay, too. In *The Hunger Games*, power feeds on fear. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, religion becomes a weapon. In *Breaking Bad*, compromise becomes corruption. In *Chernobyl*, lies become lethal. In *Don't Look Up*, denial becomes disaster. We are now living *inside* these stories.

And too many Christians have mistaken loyalty for faithfulness.

"February": The Month of Cleansing and Honest Reckoning

The word *February* comes from the Latin root *februa*, meaning "purification." In ancient Rome, February was a time of ritual cleansing.

How extraordinary that World Cancer Day falls in February!

As Catholics in Winter Ordinary Time, we inhabit an American moment that is anything but ordinary. We prepare for Lent. We prepare for ashes. We prepare to hear again: "*Remember you are dust*."

Personal purification matters. So does national purification.

Jesus consistently challenged systems that harmed the vulnerable. He overturned tables (Mt. 21:12). He confronted hypocrisy (Mt. 23). He protected the accused (Jn. 8:1-11). He sided with the marginalized (Lk. 4:18). He warned against blind loyalty to power (Mk. 8:36).

Lent will soon ask us: *What cancers have we tolerated? What lies have we repeated? What injustices have we excused?*

Extraordinary faith demands extraordinary honesty!

Refusing Denial: Hope without Illusion

Cancer survivors often say the same thing: Life never feels the same afterward.

Neither does democracy after trauma.

We will never forget this dark, dark chapter. Like survivors, we will carry scars. We will carry grief. We will carry vigilance. Hopefully, we will carry wisdom.

Hope is not pretending everything is fine. Hope is choosing faithfulness anyway.

The prophets never offered cheap optimism. Neither did Jesus. In *Rocky*, perseverance matters. In *Ted Lasso*, kindness becomes resistance. In *The Shawshank Redemption*, hope becomes defiance. In *Star Wars*, light persists in darkness. In *Encanto*, healing requires truth.

Christian hope works the same way. It refuses denial. It chooses courage. It practices memory.

Calls to Action

Moving from reflection to responsibility, here are five concrete commitments for extraordinary living in a very unordinary moment:

- **Practice relentless truth-telling**. Verify sources. Challenge misinformation. Speak gently, but firmly. Refuse convenient lies.
- **Publicly protect the vulnerable**. Advocate for immigrants, LGBTQIA+ youth, the poor, the disabled and the sick. When possible, physically show up.
- **Support whistleblowers and ethical journalism**. Subscribe. Responsibly share. Defend those who expose corruption.
- **Engage politically as a moral practice**. Consistently vote. Monitor representatives. Write letters. Attend forums. Pray before acting, and act after praying.
- **Cultivate communities of resistance and care**. Build small groups for prayer, study and mutual support. Do not try to survive alone.

Extraordinary courage grows in community!

From Diagnosis to Determination: Choosing Life Together

We began with the image of diagnosis: A patient hears devastating news. Everything changes.

Our nation has received its diagnosis. We can deny it. We can numb ourselves. We can flee. Or we can fight for healing.

Cancer patients teach us this: Treatment is exhausting. Recovery is uneven. Hope requires discipline.

Yet people choose life every day. Every. Single. Day.

So must we.

As Lent approaches, ashes will mark our foreheads. They will not mark us as defeated. They will mark us as honest, mortal and committed.

We will hear again: "*Repent and believe the Good News*."

Not tomorrow.

Now.

Extraordinary love.

Extraordinary courage.

Extraordinary persistence.

This is the vocation of extraordinary Catholics in an unordinary time!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where have I personally experienced fear similar to a "diagnosis" moment in my faith or civic life?
- What social "cancers" do I most often avoid naming? Why?
- How do I usually respond to uncomfortable truths: with defensiveness, silence or conversion?
- Who in my life embodies extraordinary courage amid suffering?
- What specific practice might help purify my heart and my public witness?
- Where am I being invited to move from compassion to action?
- How does Jesus challenge my understanding of loyalty and faithfulness today?

Let Us Pray

God of life and healing, You walk beside every hospital bed, every anxious family, every weary soul. We lift before You all who live with cancer, all who fear test results, all who mourn losses, all who keep hoping against odds. Heal our bodies. Heal our churches. Heal our nation. Purge us of lies. Cleanse us of cruelty. Strengthen us for truth. As we approach Lent, teach us repentance without despair, courage without arrogance, hope without illusion. Make us instruments of Your extraordinary love in this fragile and wounded world. We ask this through Christ our healer, our companion, our truth. Amen.

St. Agatha and the Cost of Saying No

Confronting Power and Patriarchy in Church and Society

February 5, 2026

Five weeks ago, when I was in Catania, Sicily, in the shadow of Mount Etna, I found myself surrounded by images I will never forget.

Images of St. Agatha. Not gentle. Not sentimental. Not softened. Images of a young woman holding her severed breasts on a platter. Let that sink in.

This is not metaphor. This is not poetry. This is how her story has been told and retold for nearly eighteen centuries. Tortured. Stretched. Burned. Whipped. Mutilated. Executed. All because she dared to say no to a powerful man.

Standing at the ruins of the ancient Roman amphitheater outside the Church of St. Agatha in Prison, where metal images of her wounded body crown the fence, I suddenly felt something shift inside me.

For the first time, I did not see a "holy-card saint."

I saw a warning.

A Young Woman, A Powerful Man & an Ancient Power Imbalance

Agatha lived in third-century Sicily, during a time of state-sponsored persecution of Christians. She was young, beautiful and devout.

And she caught the attention of Quintianus, the Roman governor.

He wanted her.

She refused him.

The power differential could not have been more extreme.

He controlled courts, armies, prisons, wealth and reputation. He decided life and death.

She controlled only her conscience.

When persuasion failed, coercion followed. When coercion failed, violence escalated.

This is not ancient history.

It echoes through the Epstein files.

Through Hollywood scandals.

Through corporate boardrooms.

Through church sexual abuse reports.

Through dorm rooms and detention centers.

It echoes whenever powerful men assume entitlement to women's bodies.

Jesus warned, "Those who exercise authority over you lord it over you" (Mk. 10:42). Agatha lived inside that warning.

And she refused to surrender.

Canonized as Warning or Witness?

Here is where my discomfort begins.

Why did the Church so energetically preserve and promote Agatha's mutilation?

Why were generations encouraged to venerate her wounds?

Why were little girls taught to admire her suffering?

Feminist liberation theologians have long suggested that many female saints were canonized not primarily to empower women, but to discipline them.

Be obedient. Be silent. Be pure. Be willing to suffer. Or else.

Seen this way, Agatha becomes a sacred caution sign: *This is what happens when you challenge patriarchy!*

Even her popular pastries, *Minne di Sant'Agata*, cherry-topped buns shaped like breasts, trouble me. What are we teaching when we turn trauma into dessert?

Is this reverence? Or the normalization of violence? Jesus said, "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (Jn. 8:32). We dishonor Agatha when we romanticize what should horrify us!

Resistance, Not Submission

And yet, that is not the whole story.

Agatha did not submit. She did not comply. She did not "make peace" with abuse. She chose integrity over safety, faith over survival, and conscience over comfort.

Like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego (Dan. 3), she refused to bow. Like the Maccabean martyrs (2Macc. 7), she trusted God more than tyrants. Like Mary at the Annunciation (Lk. 1:26-38), she claimed her agency before power.

Her reputed prayer—"I am your sheep: Make me worthy to overcome the devil"—sounds meek. But in context, it is defiant.

She knew exactly who her enemy was.

Not flesh and blood alone, but systems of domination (Eph. 6:12).

That is extraordinary courage.

From Etna to America: Fire, Fear and Feminine Bodies

One year after Agatha's death, her intercession was credited with halting an eruption of Mount Etna. Since then, people have prayed to her against fire, earthquakes and disaster.

Today, the fire looks different. It burns through reproductive rights. Through healthcare access. Through protections against sexual violence. Through workplace equity. Through immigration courts. Through voting laws.

Women's bodies remain battlegrounds. Renee Good. Ruby Freeman. Letitia James. E. Jean Carroll. Stormy Daniels. Epstein victims. So many unnamed women in detention centers. So many silenced survivors.

Like Agatha, many face state-sponsored cruelty.

Isaiah's cry still stands: "Woe to those who make unjust laws" (Is. 10:1). We are living inside that woe!

Calls to Action

Here are concrete ways to honor Agatha today:

- Pray Eucharistic Prayer I with renewed attention to Agatha's name.
- Educate yourself and others about sexual violence, trafficking and abuse within church and society.
- Support organizations that provide medical, legal and spiritual care to survivors.
- Speak out when sexist theology or rhetoric appears in various spaces.
- Publicly advocate for policies that protect women's healthcare and bodily autonomy.
- Mentor young people in consent, respect and healthy relationships.
- Refuse to participate in cultures that trivialize trauma.

These can be acts of extraordinary solidarity!

Winter Ordinary Time and Dangerous Normalization

We are in Winter Ordinary Time. The calendar tells us: Nothing special. But our world tells us: Everything is on fire!

When injustice becomes routine, when cruelty becomes policy, when misogyny becomes normalized, we enter dangerous territory.

Agatha refuses to let us settle. She stands, wounded but unbroken, asking: *What are you willing to risk for dignity?*

From Warning to Witness

When I think again of those metal fence toppers circling the amphitheater ruins in Catania, I see them differently now.

Yes, they are warnings.

But not to women.

To systems.

They warn every empire, every church, every governor: You can wound bodies—but you *cannot* conquer conscience!

Agatha's mutilated image has survived because her courage outlived her torturers.

In an era when women are still punished for saying no, still doubted, still silenced, still blamed, her witness remains urgent.

She calls us to extraordinary clarity, extraordinary resistance, and extraordinary love!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where do I see modern versions of Agatha's story today?
- How have I benefited from systems that harm women?
- When have I stayed silent out of comfort?
- How do I respond to stories of survivors?
- What traditions need reexamining in light of justice?
- Where is God calling me to greater courage?
- How can I amplify marginalized voices?

Let Us Pray

God of the wounded and the brave, You stood with Agatha in her prison and you stand with every violated body today. Heal what has been broken. Expose what has been hidden. Convert what has been corrupted. Give us eyes to see injustice, hearts to resist it, and voices to name it. Make us people of extraordinary tenderness, extraordinary courage, and extraordinary truth. In this anything-but-ordinary time, form us into witnesses of your liberating love. Through Christ, who was wounded yet victorious. Amen.

Catholics Without Permission

Felipe Buencamino, Emilio Aguinaldo,
and the Courage to Build a Church Beyond Empire

February 6, 2026

In ten years of seminary studies and more than ten years as a Roman Catholic priest, I never once heard the words "Philippine Independent Church." Not once. No professor mentioned it. No syllabus included it. No theology course explored it. And yet, this non-Vatican expression of Catholicism claims between six and eight million members.

You can thus imagine my surprise during my first visit to Utrecht in 2019, when I found myself in conversation with Bishop Antonio Ablon and Father Franz Foerster of the PIC—or the IFI, as it's known in Spanish (the *Iglesia Filipina Independiente*). Suddenly, an entire ecclesial universe opened before me.

A church born of resistance, of nationalism, of conscience, of extraordinary courage—so compelling, in fact, that I have since published six books on it!

Today, we remember two of its architects: **Felipe Buencamino, Sr**. and **Emilio Aguinaldo y Famy**.

When Empire and Altar Walk Hand-in-Hand

To understand Buencamino and Aguinaldo, we must first understand empire.

For more than three centuries, Spain ruled the Philippines, marrying colonial power to Roman Catholic authority. Church and crown reinforced one another. Theology justified domination. Sacraments sanctified submission.

When Spain fell, the United States stepped in: new empire, same logic.

Filipinos learned early what Jesus warned about: "You cannot serve God and mammon" (Mt. 6:24). Too often, the institutional church tried to serve both!

The Philippine Independent Church was born in protest.

It asked: *Must faith always kneel before foreign power? Must Catholicism always require Roman permission?*

Their answer was a resounding "no!"

Felipe Buencamino: Architect of Conscience

Felipe Buencamino, Sr. was a polymath: composer, lawyer, politician, theologian and revolutionary—literally. He helped write the Malolos Constitution, the first republican constitution in Asia. He believed governance should reflect justice, participation and dignity.

But he also understood something deeper: Political independence without spiritual independence is incomplete.

Buencamino helped co-found the PIC because he believed Filipinos deserved a church that spoke their language, honored their culture, and defended their people.

Like Moses before Pharaoh (Ex. 5), he confronted systems that profited from subjugation.

He reminds us: Faith is never neutral!

Emilio Aguinaldo: Leadership Without Roman Sanction

Emilio Aguinaldo became the first president of the Philippines at age 29. Twenty-nine. He led a revolution against Spain and resisted American domination. He supported the PIC not as a fringe movement, but as a national necessity: He knew that religious independence strengthens political courage! Aguinaldo and his fellow *Caviteño* generals cleared space for an alternative Catholicism. They proved that fidelity does not require submission to Rome.

Today, when many assume that "Catholic" means "Vatican-aligned," this witness disrupts that narrative.

Jesus said, "The Spirit blows where it chooses" (Jn. 3:8). Aguinaldo and Buencamino trusted that!

Persecution Then and Now

PIC clergy have paid dearly for their truth-telling. Even in recent decades, Bishop Antonio Ablon was exiled for challenging authoritarian rule. Priests and bishops have been surveilled, threatened, marginalized.

Sound familiar?

We once looked at dictator Rodrigo Duterte's regime with horror. Now we watch militarized forces in our own U.S. streets. We see protesters criminalized and killed. Journalists discredited. Immigrants terrorized. Isaiah's warning echoes: "Justice is turned back" (Is. 59:14).

Empires always punish prophets!

Catholics Who Marched to a Different Drum

One of the most striking facts about Philippine history is this: Many of its greatest leaders were *not* Roman Catholic. They were *Independent* Catholic.

They refused to confuse institutional loyalty with spiritual integrity. They practiced what Peter declared: "We must obey God, rather than human authority" (Acts 5:29).

In a culture obsessed with ecclesial "validity" and "recognition," they chose freedom.

That is extraordinary.

Calls to Action

In honor of Buencamino and Aguinaldo:

- Learn about non-Roman traditions within Catholicism.
- Support churches and leaders resisting authoritarianism.
- Challenge colonial theology.
- Advocate for immigrant communities from the Global South.
- Refuse nationalist Christianity in all its forms.
- Read theology from marginalized contexts.
- Protect religious freedom that includes dissent.

These are acts of extraordinary solidarity!

Winter Ordinary Time and Decolonizing Faith

We are in Winter Ordinary Time—but nothing about this season is ordinary. We are watching the reemergence of Christian nationalism, religious authoritarianism, and imperial nostalgia here in these United States of America.

Buencamino and Aguinaldo remind us: *Faith must be repeatedly decolonized.*

Jesus overturned tables (Matthew 21:12).

Sometimes, that work never ends!

A Church Without Chains

When I think back to that encounter in Utrecht, I realize what unsettled me. No marble palaces. No Vatican insignia. No imperial trappings. Just faithful people building church together!

Buencamino and Aguinaldo dreamed of a Catholicism without chains. Without foreign masters. Without theological permission slips. They believed extraordinary courage could birth extraordinary community.

In this American moment of fear and conformity, their witness asks: *Who owns your faith?*

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where have I confused institutional loyalty with discipleship?
- What voices have I ignored because they were "outside"?
- How does empire shape my theology?
- When have I remained silent to preserve comfort?
- What would a decolonized faith look like in my life?
- Whose leadership do I undervalue?
- How can I practice courageous independence?

Let Us Pray

God of exodus and renewal, You called your people out of bondage and into freedom. Bless all who build church without chains. Strengthen those who resist empire. Protect those who speak truth. Give us extraordinary courage to follow conscience over comfort, justice over privilege, love over fear. In this anything-but-ordinary time, make us architects of your reign. Through Christ our liberator. Amen.

A Bishop Who Would Not Be Silent

Emmanuel Milingo, Apostolic Courage, and the Cost of Conscience

February 7, 2026

History is filled with Roman Catholic hierarchs who dared to consecrate other bishops without papal permission. Most of them feel like distant figures from dusty textbooks: **Dominique Marie Varlet of France** (1678–1742), **Carlos Duarte Costa** of Brazil (1888–1961), **Pierre Martin Ngô Đình Thục** of Vietnam (1897–1984).

They lived in other centuries. Other crises. Other church conflicts.

But one such bishop belongs to our own time. He walked among us. He appeared on television. He challenged Rome in public. He married. He refused to quietly disappear. He died only five years ago today.

His name was **Emmanuel Milingo**. And his extraordinary courage still unsettles comfortable Catholics today.

From Zambia to the World: A Life Rooted in the Margins

Emmanuel Milingo was born in 1930 in Zambia, then under British colonial rule. From the beginning, his faith was shaped not by European privilege, but by African resilience, communal spirituality and lived suffering.

Ordained a priest in 1958 and consecrated a bishop in 1969, he eventually became Archbishop of Lusaka. He gained international attention for his ministry of healing and deliverance, praying with people suffering from trauma, illness and spiritual oppression.

Like Jesus in Mark 1:32-34, he touched what polite religion often avoids. Like Paul, he embodied the "foolishness" that confounds institutional wisdom (1Cor. 1:27). Yet Rome grew uneasy.

His pastoral style did not neatly fit into bureaucratic categories. His African spirituality unsettled Western theological control. His popularity exceeded Vatican comfort.

Already, the seeds of conflict were being sown!

When Obedience Becomes a Weapon

Milingo's relationship with the Vatican deteriorated in the 1980s. He was summoned to Rome, removed from his archdiocese, and effectively sidelined. Eventually, he was forbidden from exercising public ministry.

Silence was expected. Submission was demanded. Compliance was framed as holiness.

We have seen this pattern before:

- Jeremiah thrown into a cistern (Jer. 38).
- Jesus silenced by authorities (Mk. 14).
- Paul imprisoned (Acts 16).
- Joan of Arc condemned.
- Jan Hus burned.
- Oscar Romero marginalized before being martyred.

Institutions often confuse control with faithfulness. Milingo did not.

Love, Marriage and the Scandal of Humanity

In 2001, Milingo shocked the Catholic world by marrying Maria Sung, affiliated with the Unification Church. The images were everywhere. Headlines screamed. Commentators mocked. *"How could a Roman Catholic bishop do this?"*

But behind the scandal were deeper questions:

- *Why must love and ministry be mutually exclusive?*
- *Why must intimacy be sacrificed to serve God?*
- *Why must celibacy be enforced, rather than freely chosen?*

St. Peter had a mother-in-law (Mk. 1:30). Many early clergy were married. For centuries. Eastern Catholic priests still marry.

Yet, strangely, even after decades of clergy sexual abuse, Rome still insists on universal clerical celibacy. Milingo exposed the human cost of that policy.

He reminded us that clergy are not angels. They are people.

Like Leonard Cohen sang, "*There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.*" Milingo let in the light!

Apostolic Succession Beyond Rome

In the 2000s, Milingo consecrated several bishops without papal approval, sharing valid lines of apostolic succession outside Roman control. Among them was George Augustus Stallings, Jr., a Roman Catholic priest who famously renounced his church and its teachings on *The Phil Donahue Show* and founded Imani Temple in Washington, D.C. Another, Peter Paul Brennan, later assumed leadership of Married Priests Now, which Milingo established in 2006.

Through these consecrations, Milingo became an important figure in contemporary U.S. Independent Catholicism, particularly among progressive and inclusive communities.

For many Roman Catholics, he is controversial. For Independent Catholics, he is a lifeline. He ensured that sacraments would continue where Rome refuses to go: with LGBTQ+ Catholics, with divorced and remarried persons, with married clergy, with women preparing for ministry, with wounded believers abandoned by hierarchy.

Like Philip baptizing the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8), Milingo widened the circle!

Scandal or Prophet? Depends on Who's Watching

Some Catholics see Milingo as a disgrace. Others of us see him as a pioneer. Jesus faced the same divide: "*By what authority are you doing these things?*" (Mt. 21:23)

The establishment always asks that question. Milingo answered with his life.

Yes, he made mistakes. Yes, his associations were sometimes questionable. Yes, his path was messy. So was Peter's. So was David's. So was Paul's. God has always written straight with crooked lines!

In our own U.S. moment, when authoritarianism grows bolder, when Christian nationalism distorts faith, when loyalty is prized over conscience, Milingo stands as a warning and an invitation.

He chose conscience. He chose courage. He chose extraordinary faithfulness over comfortable obedience!

Calls to Action

Here are concrete ways to honor Emmanuel Milingo today:

- Support Independent Catholic communities that welcome those excluded by Rome.
- Publicly advocate for married clergy and optional clerical celibacy.
- Study apostolic succession beyond Vatican narratives.
- Refuse to equate institutional loyalty with holiness.
- Speak up when church leaders enable injustice.
- Protect whistleblowers and prophetic voices in your community.
- Fund ministries serving marginalized Catholics.
- Write, publish and share progressive Catholic theology.
- Practice extraordinary courage when silence is safer.

Faith without action is dead (James 2:17)!

When Courage Outlives Control

Milingo's story began in Zambia. It traveled through Rome. It crossed oceans. It reached America. It now lives in countless independent communities.

He refused to vanish. He refused to be erased. He refused to pretend that obedience mattered more than love. Like other distant, courageous bishops, he now belongs to history.

But unlike many, he still speaks. He whispers to us in this unordinary winter of American democracy: *Do not confuse fear with faith. Do not confuse silence with holiness. Do not confuse control with Christ.*

Extraordinary discipleship always carries a cost.

Milingo paid it. Will we?

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- When have I chosen safety over truth?
- Where might God be calling me to more boldly speak?
- How do I react when church leaders disappoint me?
- In what ways have I equated obedience with virtue?
- Who has preserved my faith when institutions failed me?
- How do I respond to "scandal"? With condemnation or curiosity?
- Where is apostolic courage needed in my life today?
- How do I support marginalized Catholics?
- What fears keep me silent?
- What would extraordinary faithfulness look like for me right now?

A Prayer for Courage, Compassion and Change

God of prophets and pilgrims, God of rebels and reformers, God of bishops and outcasts, we thank you for Emmanuel Milingo, for his courage, his contradictions, his compassion, for his refusal to abandon your people. Free us from fearful obedience. Save us from comfortable silence. Teach us extraordinary love, extraordinary truth, extraordinary courage. As Lent approaches, strip away our illusions. As winter lingers, kindle our fire. Make us faithful not to power, but to your Gospel. We ask this through Christ, who challenged every empire and still walks with the brave. Amen.

Salt and Light

Learning to "Taste and See" God's Goodness

February 8, 2026

When I was a young priest, one of the nicknames parishioners gave me was "Father Show-and-Tell." I deserved it.

Years before, when I studied neurolinguistic programming, I learned that a majority of people—like me—are visual learners. Largely as a result of being a visual learner, I do not recall a single homily from the first eighteen years of my life. (How sad is that?) Spoken homilies, for me, often go "in one ear and out the other"!

But *show* visual learners something, and we'll likely remember it!

So when I began preaching, I almost always held an object in my hand. I offered "object lessons." Now 25 years later, I still have people who come up to me and say, "I remember that homily when you were holding an apple," or "I remember when you showed us a sloth!" So long as they can still connect that image to a message, I trust the Spirit is at work!

Every three years, when today's gospel returns, I reach again for the same two objects for my homily: a salt shaker and a candle or light bulb.

Salt.

Light.

And always, I remind listeners that these two objects remind us, in the words of the Psalmist, to "*taste* and *see* the goodness of the Lord" (Ps. 34:8)!

In this exceptionally dark American moment, Jesus' simple images have never been more urgent.

When Justice Becomes Light: Isaiah's Prophetic Challenge

Our first reading today from Trito-Isaiah (Is. 58:7-10) is anything but sentimental. It does not spiritualize faith. It does not reduce religion to private comfort. It names concrete justice:

- Sharing bread with the hungry
- Sheltering the oppressed
- Clothing the naked
- Not turning away from our own

Only then, Isaiah insists, will our light "break forth like the dawn."

Not *before*. Not *instead of*. *After*.

Scripture here echoes Amos' cry: "Let justice roll down like waters" (Amos 5:24). It harmonizes with Micah's demand: "Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly" (Mic. 6:8). It anticipates Jesus' words in Matthew 25 about the hungry, the stranger, the imprisoned.

Light, in Scripture, is not a mood. It is moral courage.

And in a nation where migrants are now hunted, universities are now muzzled, truth is now mocked, and cruelty is now applauded, Isaiah's words burn like fire!

Light in the Darkness: Psalm 112 and Quiet Heroism

Psalm 112 offers another image: "*Light shines through the darkness for the upright*."

Notice: It does not say "darkness disappears." It says light persists.

This psalm honors people who practice steady goodness. Not flashy holiness. Not performative outrage. But faithful, daily righteousness.

Think of teachers who refuse to distort history. Medical professionals who protect vulnerable patients. Clergy who defend LGBTQIA+ youth. Neighbors who shelter immigrants. Parents who raise compassionate children. They are not trending on social media. They are not praised by pundits. But *they* are light.

Like the "hidden saints" of Hebrews 11, they practice extraordinary love in ordinary places!

Not the Wisdom of This World: Paul and Spiritual Discernment

In his first extant letter to the Corinthians (1Cor. 2:1-5), Paul reminds us that Christian wisdom does not come from power, prestige or propaganda. It comes from the Spirit: "*The Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.*" Paul's words challenge our addiction to talking points, cable news outrage, and algorithmic echo chambers. They call us back to discernment.

Today, many Christians confuse loudness with truth, loyalty with faith, and dominance with discipleship. Paul insists: God's wisdom looks like weakness. Like service. Like the cross!

Salt and Light: Jesus' Dangerous Simplicity

In the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5:13-16), Jesus offers two images that are deceptively gentle.

Salt preserves. Salt gives flavor. Salt prevents decay.

Light reveals. Light guides. Light exposes injustice.

But in Jesus' world, salt was not decorative. It was essential. Before refrigeration, salt kept food from rotting. Without salt, communities starved. Without salt, corruption spread.

To "be salt," then, is to slow moral decay. It is to resist rot. It is to interrupt systems that normalize cruelty, lies and exploitation.

To be salt today means:

- Refusing to let racism, misogyny and xenophobia become "normal."
- Challenging lies, even when they are popular.
- Defending truth when silence feels safer.
- Insisting that human dignity matters more than profit.
- Standing between the vulnerable and the powerful.
- Preserving compassion in cultures addicted to outrage.
- "Flavoring" public life with mercy, rather than resentment

Salt stings when poured into wounds. It tells the truth about what is broken. It cleans even as it hurts.

So when Christians confront abuse, corruption, white supremacy, authoritarianism and economic injustice, we are not being "divisive." We are being… "salty"! When we refuse to baptize cruelty with Bible verses, we are being salty. When we resist Christian nationalism, we are being salty. When we protect immigrants, trans youth, and the exploited, we are being salty. When we name sin in high places, we are being salty.

Jesus does not say, "You *should become* salt and light."

He says, "You *are*."

If we are *not* preserving goodness, resisting decay, revealing truth and confronting injustice, we are betraying our identity!

"Taste and see" (Ps. 34:8) thus becomes a spiritual exam:

When people encounter us:

- *Do they taste compassion?*
- *Do they experience courage?*
- *Do they encounter integrity?*
- *Do they feel protected?*
- *Or, do they taste bitterness?*
- *Do they smell rot?*
- *Do they sense fear?*
- *Do they experience exclusion?*

In an era when the oxymoron of "Christian nationalism"—read "white nationalism"—is associated with cruelty, authoritarianism and conspiracy theories, such questions are unavoidable.

Salt without courage is useless.

Light without truth is decoration.

Jesus calls us to both!

A Light in Darkness: Our Present American Night

I reflected on the theme of light in my recent book *A Light in Darkness: Reflections for U.S. Catholics*. In those essays for Advent and Christmas, I hoped and prayed that some shadows might soon lift.

They have not.

Instead:

- Threats against democratic institutions continue.
- Epstein revelations are deflected and buried.
- Universities are pressured into ideological conformity.
- DEI initiatives are dismantled.
- ICE terrorizes communities.
- Families are separated.
- Fear is normalized.

This is not "politics." This is moral crisis.

It resembles the tension between bishops and theologians, between power and truth, between preservation of privilege and fidelity to the Gospel.

We stand at a decisive pivot point: *Either we embody extraordinary courage, or we surrender to comfortable silence.*

There is no neutral ground in darkness.

Calls to Action for Extraordinary Disciples

Being salt and light demands concrete commitments:

- Practice daily truth-telling, even when it costs you socially.
- Publicly and financially support immigrant and refugee ministries.
- Defend academic freedom and critical thinking.
- Accompany those targeted by unjust policies.
- Refuse to consume media that profits from dehumanization.
- Mentor younger activists.
- Write, speak and vote with conscience.
- Pray before reacting online.
- Build local communities of resistance and hope.
- Model extraordinary love in hostile environments.

Salt and Light: Returning to the Essentials

Every three years, I hold high that salt shaker and candle. They are small. They are fragile. They are ordinary. Yet they carry enormous significance.

In a culture obsessed with spectacle, Jesus entrusts us with simplicity. *Preserve goodness. Reveal truth. Radiate love.* That is how revolutions of the Spirit begin. Not with armies. But with light. Not with threats. But with taste. Not with dominance. But with extraordinary fidelity!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- How am I currently hiding my light?
- How has fear muted my prophetic voice?
- Who recently has been "salt" in my life?
- What bitterness do I need to release?
- How am I responding to current injustices in my community, state, nation and world?
- Where is the Spirit inviting greater courage?
- What objects best symbolize my discipleship today?
- How do others "taste" my faith?
- What darkness am I called to confront?
- How will I prepare for Lent as a season of deeper light?

Let Us Pray

God of light and truth, You formed us in love and called us to shine. When fear tempts us to hide, strengthen us. When lies surround us, ground us in truth. When darkness presses in, kindle our courage. Make us salt in decaying places. Make us light in forgotten corners. Make us signs of extraordinary hope in this anything-but-ordinary time. As we

journey toward Lent, purify our hearts, sharpen our conscience, deepen our compassion. May others taste and see Your goodness through our lives. We ask this through Jesus, Light of the world and Salt of the earth, who lives and reigns forever. Amen.

Jesus: Be Salt Against the ICE!

Extraordinary Moral Clarity in an Era of Extraordinary Cruelty

February 8, 2026

At 11:57 a.m. this morning, three minutes before our noon Spanish Mass, I was still trusting in the Spirit, as I so often do, to bring clarity where my own homily preparation felt unfinished. In those final moments, a cascade of thoughts rushed through my mind.

Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth." *What is salt used for? We use salt to remove ice. We need to remove ICE from the places where it is terrorizing communities. Perhaps Jesus was right: We need to be…salt!*

Sometimes the Spirit speaks not in thunderclaps, but in quiet, ordinary metaphors that suddenly become extraordinary revelations!

Light We Understand; Salt Takes Work

Most of us instinctively resonate with today's imagery of light.

Trito-Isaiah proclaims, "Your light shall break forth like the dawn" (Is. 58:8). The psalmist sings, "The just are a light in darkness" (Ps. 112:4). Jesus declares, "You are the light of the world" (Mt. 5:14).

We understand light. We know what it means to shine. We see it in movies like *The Shawshank Redemption*, where hope refuses to die in darkness. We hear it in Beyoncé's "Halo." We recognize it in *Ted Lasso's* stubborn optimism. Light comforts us. Light inspires us. Light feels safe.

Salt, however, feels stranger.

Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth" (Mt. 5:13).

In the ancient world, salt preserved food. It prevented decay. It protected against corruption. It gave flavor to what might otherwise be

bland and lifeless. Roman soldiers were sometimes paid in salt. Covenants were sealed with salt (Lev. 2:13). Salt meant survival.

To be salt is not merely to glow. It is to resist rot. It is to confront breakdown. It is to interfere with destruction.

Light can be admired from a distance. Salt must make contact.

Extraordinary faith requires both!

Why We Spread Salt on Ice

Earlier this week, I traveled through north Texas, where remnants of a winter storm still lingered. Nine days later, snow clung to shaded roads and sidewalks. Some doors reportedly remained frozen shut. Churches and schools had only recently reopened after a week of closure.

Under my feet, I felt the crunch of salt. On the roads, salt dusted the asphalt like ashes of resilience. There is a reason for this.

Scientifically speaking, salt lowers the freezing point of water. When sodium chloride dissolves, it disrupts the formation of ice crystals. It weakens ice from within. It breaks its grip. It turns solid danger into manageable slush.

Salt does not shout at ice. It does not negotiate with it. It does not admire it. It simply changes the conditions that allow ice to dominate.

Salt works quietly. Persistently. Relentlessly.

And suddenly, I realized: *This is exactly what Jesus was talking about!*

Stopping ICE: From Metaphor to Moral Mandate

Three minutes before Mass, the metaphor crystallized.

If salt stops ice, and Jesus says we are salt, then discipleship demands that we…stop ICE!

Across the country, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has operated with increasing militarization, secrecy and impunity. In Oregon, we saw families separated in pre-dawn raids. In Chicago, we witnessed workplaces stormed. In Minnesota, recent encounters have resulted in the deaths of U.S. citizens. Communities now live under constant surveillance and fear. All due to the presence of ICE.

This is not law enforcement. This is terror dressed in cosplay.

These are not abstract headlines. At our quarterly meeting of Central Texas clergy after Mass this afternoon, Deacon Elsa shared a chilling story. Her friend was confronted by ICE agents. They demanded proof of citizenship. When she questioned them, she was injured. Her wrist was broken. She was given 24 hours to "prove herself" as a legal resident.

To be clear: *No one in this nation is required to carry papers.* This is America, not apartheid South Africa. Not Nazi Germany. Not Stalinist

Russia. And yet, here we are in this extremely sobering moment of U.S. history.

As clergy, we sat in stunned silence, shaking our heads, knowing how fragile our assumptions about safety have become.

Then I shared another story.

An immigrant fourth-grader I mentor told me on Friday that his father has been arrested: A child now carrying adult fear in a backpack too heavy for his shoulders.

It is only a matter of time before this rogue, state-sponsored force of terror touches every person, every family, every neighborhood in our nation.

Every single one.

And all of it is funded by our tax dollars.

ICE's budget now exceeds that of many national militaries around the world. While schools struggle. While healthcare collapses. While housing remains unaffordable.

The prophet Amos warned, "Let justice roll down like waters" (Amos 5:24). Instead, we are watching cruelty roll down like floodwaters.

Salt does not remain neutral when ice spreads. Neither can we.

Salt, Scripture and the Cost of Discipleship

Jesus never promised that being salt would be comfortable. He said, "Take up your cross" (Lk. 9:23). He said, "Whatever you did for the least of these, you did for me" (Mt. 25:40). He said, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness" (Mt. 5:10).

The early Church understood this. So did Oscar Romero. So did Dorothy Day. So did Martin Luther King Jr.—who reminded us that "the church must be the conscience of the state."

Pop culture gets it, too.

- In *The Hunger Games*, Katniss becomes dangerous not because she is violent, but because she refuses to play by unjust rules.
- In *Star Wars*, the Rebel Alliance looks foolish until it topples an empire.
- In Bruce Springsteen's "The Rising," grief becomes resistance.
- In *Selma*, ordinary people dismantle extraordinary injustice.

Salt is rarely glamorous. Salt stings in wounds. Salt irritates power. Salt exposes rot. This is why authoritarian regimes fear churches that practice extraordinary courage. Not polite churches. Not compliant churches. Not flag-waving churches. But communities rooted in extraordinary love, extraordinary truth and extraordinary moral clarity!

From Belief to Action: Becoming Salt in Public

Let's move from reflection to resistance. Here are concrete ways we can embody extraordinary discipleship in this moment:

- **Educate Yourself and Those You Love**. Learn how ICE is operating in your region. Invite immigrant rights groups to speak. Host forums. Share verified information. Ignorance is ICE's greatest ally.
- **Accompany Immigrant Families**. Volunteer with accompaniment programs. Show up to court hearings. Offer transportation. Provide childcare. Presence saves lives.
- **Use Your Voice Politically**. Call representatives. Write letters. Attend town halls. Demand defunding and accountability. Silence is consent.
- **Offer Sanctuary and Support**. Support organizations that provide sanctuary. Help fund legal defense. Organize emergency response teams. Turn buildings into havens.
- **Redirect Resources**. Advocate for budgets that support immigrant communities. Extraordinary stewardship requires moral priorities.
- **Practice Public Witness**. Participate in vigils, marches and prayer services. Wear your faith in the streets, not just in pews.
- **Tell the Stories**. Share testimonies. Amplify voices. Write. Post. Preach. Truth melts propaganda.

Salt must be applied intentionally. Otherwise, ice wins!

Becoming What We Sprinkle

Three minutes before Mass, I thought about salt on sidewalks. Now I know it was never just about sidewalks. It was about souls. It was about whether we will allow fear to freeze compassion. It was about whether we will remain decorative believers or become disruptive disciples.

Jesus did *not* say, "You are the *scented candle of the earth*." He said, "You are the *salt*." Salt that dissolves itself for others. Salt that disappears so others may walk in safety. Salt that refuses to preserve injustice.

In this extraordinary moment in American history, ordinary Christianity is not enough. We are being invited into extraordinary love. Extraordinary courage. Extraordinary resistance. Extraordinary hope.

May we become what we sprinkle!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where have I chosen comfort over courage in the face of injustice?
- Who are the immigrant families in my own community whose stories I have not yet heard?
- How am I using my citizenship, my vote, and my voice as instruments of discipleship?
- In what ways is God inviting me to be salt, and not merely light?
- What would extraordinary love look like in my daily routine?

Let Us Pray

God of exodus and exile, God of bread and salt, God who walks with refugees and prisoners, You call us to be light in darkness and salt against decay. Forgive us when we choose safety over solidarity. Forgive us when we spiritualize what you mean to politicize. Forgive us when we pray, instead of act. Strengthen our hearts. Sharpen our consciences. Soften our fears. Make us instruments of extraordinary love in an age of unordinary cruelty. Teach us to melt the ice of indifference, to disrupt the systems of violence, to stand where Jesus stands. Until every child is safe, every family is whole, and every border bows to mercy. We ask this in the name of Christ, who crossed every boundary for us. Amen.

Warts and Witness

Charles Loyson, Gerard Gul, and the Cost of Conscience

February 9, 2026

When I was younger, I imagined church heroes as flawless. Over time, my acquaintance with history and church leadership cured me of that illusion.

But Scripture cured me first. Abraham lied. Moses doubted. David sinned. Peter denied Jesus. Paul persecuted Christians. Yet God still worked through them.

History is rarely neat. The saints of our traditions are seldom made of plaster. More often, they are complicated human beings who wrestled with God, institutions and their own limits. Today, we remember two towering figures in the Old Catholic movement—**Charles Hyacinthe Loyson** (1827-1912) and **Gerard Gul** (1847-1920)—whose lives remind us that extraordinary courage often comes wrapped in ambiguity, controversy and risk.

Today, as we commemorate Loyson and Gul, let us resist the temptation to turn them into either villains or saints. Instead, let us receive them as fellow pilgrims—trying, failing, risking and trusting in an era not unlike our own: anxious, polarized, authoritarian-curious, and hungry for certainty.

In our anything-but-ordinary American moment, their witness feels uncannily relevant!

Charles Loyson and the Courage to Confront Power

Charles Hyacinthe Loyson lived under the long shadow of Pope Pius IX, whose reign culminated in the sham Vatican Council of 1869-1870 and its declarations of purported papal infallibility and universal papal jurisdiction. It was also the era of the *Syllabus of Errors*, which condemned modern philosophy, democracy, religious freedom and scientific inquiry.

In other words: *Rome was circling the wagons.* Loyson refused to. He preached that Catholicism was part of a wider religious family that included Judaism and Protestantism. He insisted that faith and modern thought were not enemies. He criticized clerical abuses. He questioned centralized authority. For this, he was excommunicated.

Jesus had warned: *"Blessed are you when they insult you…because of me"* (Mt. 5:11). Loyson embodied that beatitude.

Like Jeremiah, who lamented, "The word of the Lord has brought me reproach" (Jer. 20:8), Loyson spoke, knowing the cost. Like Jesus cleansing the Temple (Jn. 2:13-17), he disrupted systems that profited from silence. He chose conscience over comfort. Truth over status. Faith over fear.

In an age when many clergy today choose institutional protection over moral clarity, Loyson stands as an extraordinary reminder that obedience to God sometimes requires holy disobedience to power!

National Churches and the Dream of Shared Authority

Loyson did more than protest. He imagined alternatives.

He championed national churches championing the ideals of the early (or "old") Church, united in a global confederation—what would

become the Union of Utrecht of Old Catholic Churches. His vision echoed Acts 15, where the early Church discerned together, rather than defer to a single authority.

This was synodality before the word became fashionable.

Paul's image of the Church as one body with many members (1Cor. 12) animated Loyson's ecclesiology. Authority was shared. Voices mattered. Contexts were honored.

More recently, Pope Francis gestured toward this model. And many bishops resisted it. Loyson reminds us: *Reform is always resisted before it is recognized.*

Think of *Les Misérables*, where Valjean's mercy unsettles Javert's legalism. Think of *Star Wars*, where decentralized rebellion confronts imperial control. Think of *Andor*, where ordinary people risk everything for freedom. The Gospel always sides with those who decentralize domination!

Gerard Gul and the Tragedy of Mixed Legacies

Gerard Gul's legacy is more complex. On the one hand, he helped establish the Polish National Catholic Church, giving immigrant Catholics dignity, language and sacramental access. That was Gospel work.

- "Welcome one another" (Rom. 15:7).
- "Do not neglect hospitality" (Heb. 13:2).

On the other hand, Gul consecrated Arnold Harris Mathew, whose break from Utrecht spawned a proliferation of *episcopi vagantes*—wandering bishops—often poorly trained, unaccountable and deeply divided.

What began as liberation became great fragmentation.

We see this dynamic everywhere: In politics. In social movements. In church life.

The Book of Proverbs warns: "Without counsel, plans fail" (Prov. 20:18). Had Gul exercised greater discernment, might Independent Catholicism today be more united? More credible? More coordinated?

We cannot know.

But Scripture reminds us: Even good leaders make consequential mistakes.

David's census.

Peter's exclusion of Gentiles.

Paul's conflict with Barnabas.

Grace does not erase responsibility. It redeems it.

Conscience, Community and the Spirit's Quiet Voice

Both Loyson and Gul wrestled with authority.

Paul writes: "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2Cor. 3:17). Not chaos. Not ego. Not isolation. Freedom in communion.

Today, many Christians confuse authoritarian certainty with spiritual maturity. They equate loyalty to leaders, with loyalty to Christ. They baptize cruelty as "orthodoxy."

Jesus says otherwise: "You will know them by their fruits" (Mt. 7:16). Do they produce justice? Compassion? Truth? Humility? Or fear? Scapegoating? Silence?

In an America flirting again with autocracy, weaponized religion and cultural amnesia, discernment is not optional. It is survival.

Extraordinary Calls to Action in an Age of Moral Confusion

If we are to faithfully honor Loyson and Gul, we must act. Being extraordinary disciples requires more than admiration. It requires imitation. Here are concrete commitments:

- Form your conscience through Scripture, scholarship and lived experience.
- Financially and publicly support independent and progressive pastors and ministries.
- Challenge clericalism whenever it silences marginalized voices.
- Demand transparency and accountability from church leaders.
- Study church history to resist simplistic narratives.
- Build coalitions across denominations and movements.
- Mentor emerging leaders with integrity.
- Resist cults of personality in religious spaces.
- Practice communal discernment before major decisions.
- Model extraordinary humility in disagreement.

Faith without courage becomes decoration!

From Warts to Witness: God's Grace in Imperfect Lives

Loyson and Gul were not plaster saints. They were pilgrims. They stumbled. They struggled. They trusted. Like Jacob wrestling with God (Gen. 32), they limped forward, wounded but blessed.

In pop culture terms, they are less like flawless superheroes, and more like Rocky, Katniss Everdeen, or Ted Lasso: resilient, flawed, learning as they go. Their stories remind us: *God does not wait for perfection before calling us.* God waits for *availability*. Isaiah said, "Here I am" (Is. 6:8). So did Loyson. So did Gul. So must we!

Choosing Courage in Complicated Times

We began by admitting that history is messy. So is discipleship.

In a culture that prefers simple villains and spotless heroes, Loyson and Gul invite us into holy complexity.

They ask us: *Will we choose conscience over convenience? Community over celebrity? Truth over tribalism?*

In this anything-but-ordinary American moment, neutrality is illusion. Silence is consent. Comfort is complicity.

Like them, we will be judged not by our intentions, but by our faithfulness. Not by our popularity, but by our courage. Not by our orthodoxy alone, but by our love.

May we, too, leave behind lives that—even with warts—bear witness to extraordinary grace!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where am I avoiding difficult truths in order to preserve comfort?
- How do I respond when conscience conflicts with authority?
- Whose voices do I silence, consciously or unconsciously?
- What risks is the Spirit inviting me to take?
- How do I practice accountability in my life and ministry?
- Where have I confused loyalty with discipleship?
- Who has modeled courageous faith for me?
- What reforms am I resisting?
- What would extraordinary courage look like in my life today?

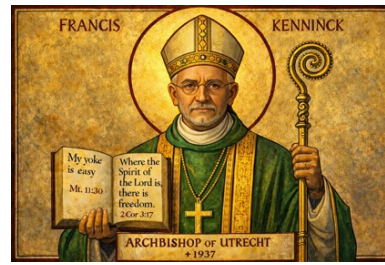
Let Us Pray

Faithful God of prophets and pilgrims, You call imperfect people to bear extraordinary witness. When fear tempts us to compromise, strengthen our conscience. When power seduces us, anchor us in humility. When complexity confuses us, gift us with discernment. Make us builders of unity, guardians of truth, servants of justice. As we journey toward Lent, purify our motives, clarify our vision, deepen our courage. May our lives, like those we remember today, speak of Your mercy even through our weakness. We ask this through Christ, who walked faithfully through conflict and cross into resurrection life. Amen.

Francis Kenninck and the Courage to Freely Love

Celibacy, Conscience and Communion in an Age of Control

February 10, 2026



As you might imagine, I have experienced several retreats in my life. Few, though, have impacted me as deeply as one I attended more than thirty years ago at the Pallottine Retreat Center in Florissant, Missouri. Our retreat master was a Capuchin Franciscan priest, Father Michael Crosby, who was then preparing to publish his groundbreaking 1996 book, *Celibacy: Means of Control or Mandate of the Heart?*

Six years before the Roman Catholic sexual abuse crisis exploded into public view, Father Michael courageously named what many quietly suspected: that mandatory clerical celibacy functioned less as a spiritual charism, and more as a mechanism of institutional control. A tool of clericalism. A lever in a system of power!

Celibacy, he argued, can be holy when freely chosen. When imposed, though, it becomes toxic.

His words pierced my heart.

Only later did I realize how Father Michael's words uncannily echo the witness of the bishop we commemorate today: **Francis Kenninck**, Archbishop of Utrecht, who died in 1937 and who had already dared to imagine a freer, healthier, more human Church.

A Quiet Revolutionary

On February 10, we remember Francis Kenninck, the eighteenth Archbishop of Utrecht, leader of the Old Catholic Church during a period of profound reform and renewal.

Sadly, his birth year remains elusive in most records. Even historians have struggled to locate it with certainty. Perhaps that is fitting. Kenninck was not interested in personal glory. He was interested in ecclesial integrity!

What we do know is this:

- He abolished compulsory clerical celibacy.
- He strengthened democratic governance in the Church.
- He helped restore communion with Anglicanism.
- He resisted Roman centralization.
- He prioritized conscience over compliance.

Kenninck belonged to a lineage of pastors who took seriously Jesus' warning: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them… It shall not be so among you" (Mt. 20:25-26). He understood that domination has no place in the Gospel. His leadership embodied extraordinary humility and extraordinary courage.

Celibacy: Gift or Weapon?

From the earliest centuries, the Church knew married clergy. Peter had a mother-in-law (Mk. 1:30). Paul praised celibacy, but never mandated it (1Cor. 7:6-7). Eastern Catholic and Orthodox traditions still ordain married priests.

Mandatory celibacy is *not* apostolic. It is *institutional*.

Kenninck recognized what Father Michael would later so powerfully articulate: when celibacy is imposed, it becomes a means of control.

It creates emotional isolation, dependency on hierarchy, psychological repression, secrecy, and clerical caste systems. And too often, it incubates dysfunction.

Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for humanity, not humanity for the Sabbath" (Mk. 2:27). The same is true of discipline. When rules crush human flourishing, they betray their purpose!

In pop culture terms, it resembles *The Handmaid's Tale*: systems that weaponize bodies in the name of "holiness." Or *Spotlight*, which exposed how institutional loyalty eclipsed human dignity. Or *The Crown*, where duty often suffocates authentic life.

Kenninck chose another way. He trusted that freely-chosen love honors God more than coerced obedience!

Building Bridges: Communion Over Control

One of Kenninck's greatest legacies was helping to restore communion between the Union of Utrecht and the Anglican Communion. In a fractured Christian landscape, he chose unity over uniformity.

Jesus prayed, "That they may all be one" (Jn. 17:21). Not "that they may all submit." Not "that they may all agree." But that they may *love*.

This communion remains one of the great gifts of Old Catholicism. It models what ecumenism looks like when ego gives way to Gospel!

It also reminds us of an uncomfortable truth: From Utrecht's perspective, there are no "Old Catholics" in the United States—outside the Episcopal/Anglican Church, which is in full communion with Utrecht. Many Independent Catholic clergy and communities, however sincere, misuse the term "Old Catholic." We are no more Old Catholic than we are Roman Catholic!

Truth matters. Integrity matters. Yes, extraordinary faith requires honesty about who we are.

Authoritarianism Then and Now: Submission Is Not Holiness

Kenninck's reforms did not occur in a vacuum. They arose in resistance to authoritarian theology and centralized control. Sound familiar?

Today, we see similar dynamics:

- Political loyalty replacing moral discernment.
- Strongman rhetoric baptized as "faith."
- Obedience exalted over conscience.
- Cruelty reframed as "order."
- Patriarchy defended as "tradition."

Jesus never asked for blind submission. He asked for courageous love. *"Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom"* (2Cor. 3:17).

Yet many churches today mirror autocratic politics, more than prophetic witness. Like characters in *The Hunger Games*, some leaders prefer compliant citizens to awakened disciples.

Kenninck reminds us: Reform is fidelity. And resistance is sometimes obedience!

Extraordinary Discipleship in an Unfree World

Francis Kenninck was not dismantling tradition. He was reclaiming it. He looked back to the early Church—and forward to a more just one. Like Dorothy Day. Like Oscar Romero. Like Martin Luther King, Jr. Like John Pavlovitz today. Like countless unnamed prophets.

They all knew: *Institutions exist for people, not the other way around.*

Extraordinary courage does not shout. It persists.

Extraordinary love does not dominate. It liberates.

Extraordinary faith does not cling to power. It shares it.

Calls to Action for Extraordinary Disciples

In the spirit of Archbishop Francis Kenninck, we are invited to act!

- Advocate for voluntary celibacy in all church contexts.
- Support clergy and ministers in healthy relationships.
- Challenge clericalism in all its forms and manifestations.
- Defend conscience rights in church and society.
- Promote women's leadership and ordination.
- Study early Church history.
- Resist authoritarian theology.
- Build ecumenical partnerships.
- Protect survivors of abuse.
- Model transparent leadership.

Being salt and light today means reforming systems, not just comforting souls!

From Control to Communion: Returning to the Heart

More than thirty years ago, at that retreat in Missouri, I sensed something shifting inside me. Father Michael named what I had felt but could not articulate: Holiness is never coerced. Ever.

Today, Francis Kenninck stands beside him as a quiet witness.

Both remind us: God does not desire compliant bodies. God desires courageous hearts. Not managed lives. But liberated love.

As we move toward Lent, may we strip away every false idol of power and return to the simplicity of Christ.

"*Come to me, all you who labor…and I will give you rest*" (Mt. 11:28).

Rest from fear. Rest from control. Rest in freedom!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where have I confused obedience with holiness?
- How have I benefited from unhealthy systems?
- What reforms am I resisting out of fear?
- Who has modeled courageous conscience for me?
- Where is God inviting me into greater freedom?
- How do I use power in my relationships?
- What traditions need re-examination?
- How do I support healthy ministry?
- What does communion mean in my life?

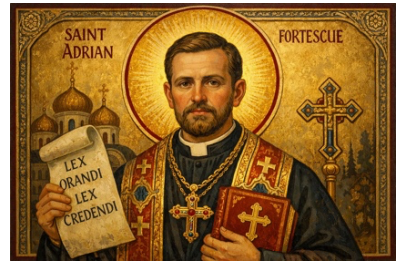
Let Us Pray

God of freedom and truth, You created us for love, not fear; for communion, not control. You raised up prophets in every age to challenge injustice and heal broken systems. Through the witness of Francis Kenninck, teach us to honor conscience, protect dignity, and cherish authentic vocation. When institutions betray Your Gospel, give us courage to reform them. When rules eclipse mercy, restore our vision. As we journey toward Lent, purify our intentions, strengthen our resolve, deepen our compassion. Make us signs of extraordinary love in this anything-but-ordinary time. We ask this through Jesus, who sets captives free and reigns in love forever. Amen.

Organized People, Organized Truth, and Forgotten Churches

Lessons from Adrian Fortescue and the "Lesser Eastern Churches"

February 11, 2026



When I was the young Roman Catholic pastor of Cristo Rey Catholic Church in Austin, Texas, I founded a lay formation program called CRISTO—the Cristo Rey Institute of Spirituality, Theology and Organizational Leadership. One of our most popular mini-courses focused on community organizing. More than 200 adults gathered on weekday evenings to reflect on material I had brought back from a training with the Industrial Areas Foundation.

One insight from that training has stayed with me for decades: *Power and influence come from two sources: organized people and/or organized resources.* That simple truth laid the foundation for my election to two terms of public office. It also became a lens through which I have often interpreted church history.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the Great Schism of 1054 A.D. The Orthodox (or "right-worshiping") Church excommunicated the heretical patriarch of Rome, who led a theologically and historically "weaker" church at the time. His was the "lesser" church—the church

merely of Rome—in error for having unilaterally tampered with the Church's ancient creed and introducing such novelties as mandatory clerical celibacy and unleavened bread. Yet, as history would turn out, Rome emerged "victorious," largely because it learned how to organize *people*—largely through fear, guilt and obligation—and how to organize resources through tithes, indulgences, major gifts and institutional control.

Sadly, history, as they say, is most often written by the victors.

Today, on February 11, as we remember **Adrian Fortescue**, we are challenged to reconsider whose stories we have inherited, whose voices we have ignored, and what extraordinary truths might be waiting in forgotten places.

Adrian Fortescue: A Scholar Who Looked East

Adrian Fortescue (1874-1923) was an English Roman Catholic priest of astonishing breadth. He was a liturgist, composer, calligrapher, historian and theologian. A linguist, he fluently spoke numerous languages. He studied ancient rites with reverence. He approached unfamiliar traditions with humility.

His most enduring contribution may be his 1913 work, *The Lesser Eastern Churches*, a careful study of small, often-overlooked Catholic communities of the East.

Fortescue did something unusual for his time: He paid attention.

At a moment when Roman Catholicism often viewed itself as the sole legitimate expression of Christianity, Fortescue insisted on taking seriously the churches that do not neatly fit into Western categories.

He studied them not as curiosities. Not as "defective Catholics." Not as missionary projects in faraway lands. But as authentic heirs of apostolic faith. That, in itself, took extraordinary courage!

The "Lesser" Churches and the Greater Tradition

The phrase "lesser Eastern churches" tells us more about Western bias than Eastern reality.

These communities include:

- The Syriac Orthodox Church
- The Armenian Apostolic Church
- The Coptic Orthodox Church
- The Assyrian Church of the East
- The Melkite, Maronite, and Chaldean Churches
- Various Eastern Catholic and Orthodox bodies

Many of these churches trace their origins directly to the apostles. Some preserve liturgies older than anything in the Roman rite. Some still pray in languages close to Aramaic, the language of Jesus.

They remained faithful to ancient traditions:

- They did not unilaterally alter the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed with the novel addition of *filioque*.
- They retained the ancient tradition of married clergy.
- They preserved the use of leavened bread in the Eucharist.
- They maintained synodal governance.
- They resisted centralized papal control.

In many ways, they look more like the early Church than the medieval papacracy ever did! And yet, because they lacked organized political power and imperial backing, they were marginalized.

"Lesser" is a political term, not a theological one.

Jesus warned us: "The rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them" (Mt. 20:25). History shows how often the Church has ignored that warning!

What "Catholic" Really Means

The word *catholic* comes from the Greek *katholikos*, meaning "according to the whole," "universal," or "embracing all." (The thought of a *catholic* church excluding anyone—anyone!—drips with irony.)

The word *catholic* was never meant to be synonymous with "Roman Catholic." And the Roman Church has no monopoly on the word *catholic*. Period.

Catholic, in its original sense, meant wide enough for diversity, deep enough for mystery, strong enough for disagreement, and humble enough for dialogue.

Paul reminds us: "There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit" (1Cor. 12:4). The Book of Revelation, too, envisioned "a great multitude from every nation, race, people and tongue" (Rev. 7:9).

The early Church was gloriously *diverse*. Uniformity came later. Much later. And often through coercion.

Fortescue's work quietly dismantled *the myth that catholicity equals conformity*. He showed that many churches, different in language, governance and liturgy, could still fully embody the Gospel. In our polarized age, this lesson feels urgent!

Ecumenism, Vatican II and Long-Awaited Encounters

For nearly a thousand years after 1054, Rome and Constantinople barely spoke. It was not until the 20th century that real reconciliation began.

- Vatican II embraced ecumenism.
- Pope Paul VI met Patriarch Athenagoras in 1964.
- John Paul II publicly prayed with Eastern Rite patriarchs at his Assisi gatherings, modeling interreligious humility.
- Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis frequently met with Eastern Rite patriarchs to foster ecumenical dialogue and strengthen communion.
- Pope Leo XIV invited Orthodox and Old Catholic leaders to his installation as pope.

In light of the history of division, these moments were revolutionary, embodying Jesus' prayer: *"That they may all be one"* (Jn. 17:21).

Yet remnants of triumphalism remain. The old slogan *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*—outside the [Roman] Church there is no salvation—still echoes in subtle ways, and many unknowing Roman Catholics still believe they possess a monopoly on the word catholic.

Fortescue anticipated a better way. *Unity without erasure. Communion without domination. Faithfulness without fear.* His was extraordinary wisdom!

Power, Narrative and Our Current American Moment

We live in an era of manufactured history. Facts are distorted. Institutions are weaponized. Minority voices are silenced. Lies are monetized.

We see it in politics at every level. We see it in the coopting of PK-12 and higher education. We see it in the kowtowing of mainstream media. We see it in the bending of knee by mainline religions.

Like Rome after 1054 A.D., powerful interests today organize people and resources through fear and resentment.

The Gospel warns us: "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (Jn. 8:32)—and yet the truth is now repelled by many as a threat!

The fate of the "lesser churches" reminds us what happens when power controls narrative.

Fortescue's scholarship stood as a form of resistance.

So must ours.

Calls to Action for Extraordinary Disciples

If we take Fortescue seriously, our discipleship must become more intentional:

- Study Catholics traditions beyond Rome.
- Support ecumenical and interfaith initiatives.
- Resist theological nationalism.
- Challenge institutional arrogance.
- Defend marginalized faith communities.
- Read widely and critically.
- Fund justice-centered ministries.
- Build bridges across difference.
- Refuse fear-based religion.
- Practice extraordinary humility.

Being *catholic* means loving the *whole* Body of Christ—and not just the parts that look like us!

Seeing with New Eyes

I often return to that maxim of the Industrial Areas Foundation: *Power and influence flow from organized people and organized resources.* Rome mastered that.

Adrian Fortescue, though, reminds us that faithfulness is not measured by size, wealth or influence. It is measured by *integrity*.

The "lesser churches" were never lesser in God's eyes. Neither are today's marginalized communities. Neither are whistleblowers. Neither are scholars. Neither are peacemakers. Neither are bridge-builders.

Let us commit to organizing not around fear, but around the gospel values of love, mercy and truth—for that is how the Church is renewed!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Whose voices within Christianity and Catholicism have I ignored?
- Where have I confused power with faithfulness?
- How do I, in my heart, define "catholic"?
- What traditions from other expressions of Catholicism might deepen my discipleship?
- Where am I being invited into dialogue?
- How do I respond to distorted narratives?
- What "lesser" stories need my attention?
- How am I forming my conscience?
- What fears limit my openness?
- How might Lent stretch my spiritual imagination?

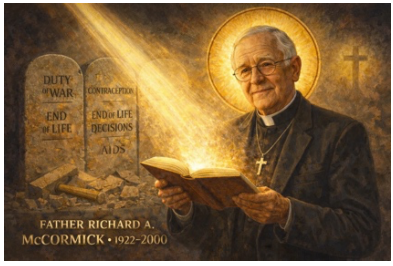
Let Us Pray

God of every nation and every language, You gathered Your Church from many peoples and many paths. Free us from narrowness. Heal us of arrogance. Deliver us from fear. Teach us to honor every branch of Your living vine. Give us extraordinary humility, extraordinary curiosity, extraordinary courage. May we seek unity without domination, truth without cruelty, faith without walls. As we walk toward Lent, purify our vision, soften our hearts, and widen our love. May others glimpse Your goodness through our openness. We ask this through Christ, who gathers all things into One. Amen.

Truth Over Tribalism

Richard McCormick and the Courage to Think

February 12, 2026



I often joke that I come from the cornfields of Ohio to the corn tortillas of Texas. I sometimes joke as well that there are two types of people in Austin, Texas: those who were born here—and those of us who got here as quickly as we could!

Should you wonder why I'm so happy to be here in Austin (though not always so happy to be here in Texas), I can summarize it in a single sentence: I was born and raised in the U.S. House District currently represented by MAGA shill Jim Jordan.

That sentence has less to do with Jordan as a person, and more to do with the ecosystem in those cornfields that keeps producing and protecting figures like him. The religio-political brainwashing in those parts runs deep. Extremely deep. Since the 1970s, when the religious right coopted mainstream Christianity with its agenda against women's bodily autonomy, cynically rebranding the issue as "pro-life," the messaging has not stopped. Parish festival booths. Highway billboards. Yard signs. Youth organizations. Bully pulpits. All telling people that salvation depends on a single issue of conscience. Absolute hogwash!

When I escaped those cornfields and began reading publications that valued critical thinking over conformity, I breathed fresh air for the first time. One of those "fresh air" voices belonged to a Jesuit from northwest Ohio: Father Richard A. McCormick.

Meeting McCormick in the Margins

As a young seminarian, I first came to know Father McCormick through the pages of the *National Catholic Reporter*. Those pages opened windows that conservative Catholic culture had carefully boarded shut.

Through the NCR, I encountered discussions about sexuality, war, conscience, feminism, end-of-life care and ecclesial authority. I learned that theology was not a museum of frozen doctrines. It was a living, breathing conversation about real human suffering!

McCormick understood theology as "public art"—to coin a phrase from *America* magazine. He believed that moral theology belonged not only in ivory towers, but also in hospital rooms, prison cells and family kitchens.

In that sense, he lived out Jesus' words: "The truth will make you free" (Jn. 8:32). The truth will not make you comfortable. It will not be popular. But it will make you free.

Like Timothy in the pseudo-Pauline epistles, McCormick refused to "fan into flame" inherited fears (2Tim. 1:6-7). Instead, he cultivated courage. Extraordinary courage.

A Buckeye with a Backbone

I always felt a particular kinship with McCormick. He was a fellow Buckeye. Raised in northwest Ohio. Formed in conservative Catholic culture. Once steeped in "certainty."

And then he grew.

He allowed experience, scholarship and human stories to reshape his theology. He listened to women. He listened to physicians. He listened to LGBTQIA+ Catholics. He listened to those living at the edges of Church approval.

Like Peter in Acts who declared, "God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean" (Acts 10:28), McCormick let revelation continue!

His growth came at a cost.

Rightwing Catholic media targeted him. EWTN caricatured him. Ideologues accused him of betrayal. Some treated him as if he were Judas, rather than as the faithful Jesuit he was.

But McCormick chose conscience over applause.

In pop culture terms, he was less like a superhero chasing fame, and more like Atticus Finch quietly standing in the courtroom when everyone else wanted to leave. Or like Princess Leia refusing to bow to an empire. Or like Frodo carrying a burden no one else wanted.

He embodied extraordinary integrity!

Wrestling with Moral Complexity

McCormick is perhaps best known for his work in medical ethics and for his role in developing a nuanced Catholic position on abortion in U.S. law in the 1960s. That nuance horrified absolutists.

But McCormick understood something many activists still refuse to grasp: *Moral theology is not bumper-sticker theology.*

He wrote courageously about:

- Physician-assisted dying
- AIDS ethics
- Reproductive health
- Warfare and violence
- Feminism
- End-of-life decisions

He recognized that real people live in tragic circumstances. He refused to flatten their stories into slogans.

When *Humanae vitae* silenced debate on artificial birth control in 1968, McCormick named the damage. He warned that suppressing honest discussion created "a debilitating malaise" that undermined the credibility of the Church.

In biblical terms, he refused to "whitewash tombs" (Mt. 23:27). He named decay when he saw it.

Like the psalmist who cried, "How long, O Lord?" (Ps. 13:1), McCormick dared to question.

And in a Church that often confuses obedience with holiness, that questioning was extraordinary.

Theology in a Time of Propaganda

We now live in a media ecosystem that rewards outrage and punishes nuance. Conservative influencers monetize fear. Politicians weaponize faith. Lies multiply faster than loaves and fishes.

Jesus warned us: "Beware of false prophets" (Mt. 7:15). He might have added, "and beware of empires built on resentment."

McCormick's approach feels almost revolutionary today.

He believed that theology must serve truth, not power. People, not parties. Conscience, not cults.

In an age of "Fox News Catholicism" and culture-war catechisms, he reminds us that *discipleship requires intellectual honesty.*

Think of him as the Church's version of Mr. Rogers: gentle, principled and quietly subversive. Or like Ted Lasso, reminding us that curiosity beats judgment. Or like Beyoncé, singing "Freedom" in a system built on control.

Extraordinary faith does not fear complexity!

Practicing McCormick's Courage

We honor Richard McCormick not with nostalgia, but with practice. Here are some concrete calls to action:

- **Read Widely and Bravely**. Commit to regularly reading at least one progressive Catholic publication: *National Catholic Reporter*, *America*, *Commonweal*. Feed your mind, not just your tribe.
- **Defend Theological Dissent**. Speak up when theologians are attacked for honest scholarship. Silence is complicity.
- **Support Ethical Healthcare**. Advocate for accessible reproductive care, hospice care and mental health services. Moral theology means nothing without real-world compassion.
- **Challenge Single-Issue Politics**. Refuse to reduce faith to abortion ballots. Speak publicly about poverty, racism, climate change, gun violence, public education, immigration and other truly pro-life issues.
- **Accompany the Marginalized**. Walk with LGBTQIA+ Catholics, divorced Catholics, questioning Catholics and wounded Catholics. Jesus did.
- **Teach Critical Thinking**. Model how to think with faith, rather than surrender it.
- **Vote Consciously**. Reject Christian nationalism. Vote for policies that protect the vulnerable.

In such an extraordinary season of our nation's history, such practices require extraordinary perseverance!

Returning to the Cornfields

A few years ago, I called the librarian at the school where I was raised. I offered to donate LGBTQIA+ friendly books for the students now growing up amid the same confusing messages that shaped me in those cornfields.

My offer was declined. The door remained closed.

That moment reminded me how deeply the conservative messaging still runs in such places. How fear still masquerades as faith. How

curiosity still gets punished. And yet, I cling to hope—because Richard McCormick came from that same "neck of the woods." He emerged with courage. He chose conscience. He chose conversation over condemnation.

He proved that even in hardened soil, extraordinary faith can grow. Like the seed in Jesus' parable (Mt. 13), some falls on rocky ground. Some gets choked by weeds. But some bears fruit!

McCormick bore fruit. Now it is *our* turn!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where in my life do I avoid complexity because it feels uncomfortable?
- Whose voices have I been taught to ignore or distrust?
- How do I respond when my faith is challenged by new information?
- Do I seek truth or merely confirmation?
- Where is God inviting me to greater moral courage?
- How do I participate in systems that harm others?
- What would extraordinary integrity look like in my daily life?

Let Us Pray

God of wisdom and conscience, You called Richard McCormick to speak truth in difficult times. You strengthened him when he was criticized. You sustained him when he was misunderstood. Grant us the same extraordinary courage. Teach us to love truth more than approval. Teach us to honor conscience more than comfort. Teach us to serve people more than ideologies. As we walk through this Winter Ordinary Time and approach the desert of Lent, strip away our fears, soften our certainties, and deepen our compassion. May we become instruments of Your justice, Your mercy and Your hope in this anything-but-ordinary moment. We ask this through Christ, who questioned, healed, welcomed and loved without limit. Amen.

Many Gospels, Many Voices, One Courageous Truth-Teller

Elaine Pagels, Forgotten Scriptures,
and the Extraordinary Call to Listen

February 13, 2026

As a boy, I learned that there are four gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. That was that. End of story. Closed canon.

You can thus imagine my surprise when, in the seminary, I encountered a far longer list—of nearly thirty known gospels! The Protogospel of James. The Gospel of Thomas. Texts attributed to Mary, Peter, Mary Magdalene and Judas. Stories that once circulated freely among early Christians. Scriptures that inspired prayer, preaching and discipleship. Voices that once mattered.

And yet, most of them never "made the cut" for inclusion in the Bible.

As I began exploring these non-canonical works, I kept encountering one name: Elaine Pagels. First through her work *Reading Judas*, and later through *The Gnostic Gospels* and *The Origin of Satan*. I was intrigued. Then unsettled. Then transformed.

Pagels taught me that Christianity did not emerge as a neat package of doctrines handed down from heaven. It emerged through argument, struggle, exclusion and power. She illuminated how faith has always been contested. And that extraordinary courage is required to tell the truth about that.

Today, as we commemorate Pagels' birth in 1943, we do well to sit again at her feet.

The Many Voices That Didn't "Make the Cut"

The New Testament itself hints at diversity. Paul and Peter disagreed (Gal. 2:11-14). Communities argued over circumcision (Acts 15). John's Christology sharply differed from Mark's (Mk. 8:29; Jn. 1:1).

From the beginning, Christianity was plural.

Following Walter Bauer's groundbreaking work, Pagels reminds us that what later became "orthodoxy" was once just one voice among many. Early Christians debated:

- Was salvation gained through secret knowledge or public proclamation?
- Was Jesus human, divine or both?
- Could women lead and preach?
- Was authority hierarchical or communal?

The Gospel of Thomas emphasizes interior enlightenment: "The kingdom is inside you" (cf. Lk. 17:21).

The Gospel of Mary portrays Mary Magdalene as a teacher silenced by male leaders.

The Gospel of Judas reframes betrayal as tragic obedience.

These texts were not fringe curiosities. They were cherished by real communities!

They disappeared not because they lacked spiritual power, but because they threatened emerging systems of control.

In every age, some voices get amplified. Others get buried.

Sound familiar?

Gnosticism: More Than a "Heresy" Label

Thanks largely to Pagels' 1979 bestseller *The Gnostic Gospels*, many Christians first learned that "Gnosticism" was not a single cult, but a constellation of movements.

At its heart, Gnosticism emphasized:

- Direct encounter with God
- Interior transformation
- Spiritual equality
- Resistance to rigid hierarchy
- The divine spark within every person

Yes, some Gnostic groups drifted into dualism. Yes, some rejected the goodness of creation. The early Church had legitimate concerns.

But Pagels shows that "heresy" often became a political label before it became a theological one.

Gnostics asked dangerous questions:

- Who controls interpretation?
- Who speaks for God?
- Who gets to decide who belongs?

Jesus himself asked similar questions (Mk. 2:7; Mt. 23:8-10; Jn. 8:32).

Today's Church still struggles with them.

Women, Authority and Sacred Leadership

One of Pagels' most important contributions concerns women. According to her research, many Gnostic communities allowed women to teach, prophesy, lead worship, and interpret Scripture. This was not radical feminism. It was early Christianity!

Scripture supports this:

- Phoebe was a deacon (Rom. 16:1).
- Junia was an apostle (Rom. 16:7).
- Priscilla taught (Acts 18:26).
- Mary Magdalene became "the apostle to the apostles" (Jn. 20:18).

Yet, sadly, institutional Christianity gradually erased much of their leadership. Power narrowed. Voices diminished. Authority hardened.

Pagels exposes how theology became gendered. God became increasingly male, authority increasingly clerical, and interpretation increasingly controlled.

In an age when women still cannot be ordained in some churches, her work remains quietly revolutionary.

Extraordinary courage still requires naming this injustice.

Satan, Scapegoats and Political Religion

In *The Origin of Satan*, Pagels traces how early Christians began using "Satan" language to demonize opponents: Jews, pagans, rival Christians. The devil became a theological weapon! Those who disagreed were not just wrong. They were evil. Sound familiar?

Today, political leaders demonize immigrants, journalists, teachers, LGBTQIA+ people, protestors, Muslims, Jews and anyone who resists authoritarianism.

We see it in rhetoric. We see it in memes. We see it in policies. We see it in violence.

- When a president shares racist imagery.
- When migrants are treated as criminals.
- When dissent is labeled treason.
- When truth is called "fake news" or is opposed by "alternate facts."

That is not Christianity. That is political idolatry.

Jesus warned us: "You will know them by their fruits" (Mt. 7:16).

Pagels helps us see how easily faith becomes a tool of oppression.

And how urgently it must be reclaimed.

Faith, Scholarship and the Path Not Taken

I confess: Having earned my second undergraduate degree in Classical Humanities, with several hours in Latin and Greek, I sometimes imagine a different path. What if I had pursued the study of Scripture more deeply? What if I had followed the trail blazed by scholars like Pagels? Yet my vocation has been different: translating scholarship into preaching, pastoral care and public witness.

Pagels models what faithful scholarship looks like. It is rigorous, humble, honest, courageous and compassionate. She refuses easy answers. She resists ideological capture. She honors complexity. In an age of TikTok theology and bumper-sticker Christianity, that is truly extraordinary.

A Call to Extraordinary Action

Before Lent begins in five days, let us commit ourselves to concrete practices:

- **Read Beyond the Canon**. Study one non-canonical gospel this month. Let it stretch your imagination.
- **Amplify Silenced Voices**. Share the work of women theologians, scholars of color, and marginalized pastors.
- **Challenge Demonizing Language**. Refuse rhetoric that labels whole groups as "evil," "invaders," "terrorists" or "vermin."
- **Defend Academic Freedom**. Support scholars and educators who tell uncomfortable truths.
- **Practice Holy Curiosity**. In all aspects of life, ask better questions.
- **Link Faith to Justice**. Let scholarship fuel advocacy for migrants, the poor and the persecuted.

Extraordinary faith requires extraordinary effort!

From Four Gospels to Courageous Faith

When I first learned as a boy that there were only four gospels, I thought faith was simple. Now I know better. Faith is layered. Contested. Risky. Beautiful.

Elaine Pagels has spent her life reminding us that Christianity has always been bigger than any institution's comfort zone. That the Spirit has always moved beyond approved boundaries. That God has always spoken through unexpected voices.

In this unordinary American moment, marked by authoritarian drift, racial cruelty, economic injustice and moral exhaustion, we need Pagels' witness more than ever. We need extraordinary honesty. Extraordinary listening. Extraordinary courage. Extraordinary love.

As Winter Ordinary Time gives way to Lent, may we resist spiritual hibernation. May we refuse easy answers. May we embrace difficult truths.

May we, like Pagels, dare to listen where others refuse!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Whose voices have most deeply shaped my faith? Whose have I ignored?
- When have I confused tradition with control?
- How do I respond when my beliefs are challenged?
- Where have I used "orthodoxy" to avoid compassion?
- Who are the "heretics" of our time, and what might they be teaching us?
- How do I confront demonizing language in my own circles?
- What would extraordinary courage look like for me right now?

Let Us Pray

God of many voices and endless wisdom, You spoke through prophets, poets, scholars and saints. You breathed through texts accepted and rejected, through women and men, through seekers and doubters. We thank you for Elaine Pagels and for all who refuse shallow faith. Give us minds that seek truth, hearts that resist fear, and courage that challenges injustice. As we approach Lent, strip away our complacency. Renew our hunger for wisdom. Strengthen our commitment to love. Make us extraordinary witnesses in this unordinary time. Through Christ our teacher and companion. Amen.

Will You Be Their Valentine?

St. Valentine and an America That Has Forgotten Love of Neighbor

February 14, 2026

Red hearts. Winged cupids. Kissing lips. Roses. Chocolates. By mid-February, the world turns pink and saccharine. Store aisles overflow with plush bears holding embroidered hearts. Hallmark offers sentimental scripts. Restaurants offer *prix-fixe* romance.

But beneath the glitter and commerce stands a third-century Roman priest who risked prison and execution because he believed love mattered more than imperial decree.

St. Valentine did not sell chocolates and teddy bears.

He defied the state!

Perhaps before we ask someone, "Will you be my Valentine?" we might first ask harder questions:

- *Will I be your Valentine, your protector?*
- *Will I love you when others forbid it?*
- *Will I choose neighbor over nationalism?*
- *Will I choose Christ over Caesar?*

Hearts, Cupids and Other Distractions

Consider this: Our modern "heart-shaped" symbol does not resemble the human heart at all. Scholars suggest it may derive from the ancient silphium plant of North Africa, whose seedpod resembled the stylized shape and was associated with fertility. Over time, biology gave way to metaphor, and the human heart was imagined as the seat of love.

Cupid, that winged archer, descends from Eros, the mischievous Greek god who shot arrows that inflamed desire. The Romans adopted him, medieval artists softened him, and greeting card companies domesticated him.

Kissing lips evoke intimacy and covenant. Roses, especially red ones, recall both passion and martyrdom. Chocolate stimulates pleasure. Each symbol gestures toward affection, longing and vulnerability.

Yet we rarely ask about the man, St. Valentine.

For centuries, the Church has commemorated St. Valentine, likely a Roman priest who ministered during the reign of Emperor Claudius II. One popular legend claims that Claudius forbade young men to marry because he believed single men made better soldiers. Let that sink in. Valentine reportedly performed marriages in secret. For this, he was arrested and executed around 269 A.D.

Fact and fiction mingle. We do not know precisely which stories are historical. We do know that early Christians venerated a martyr named Valentine. We know that Geoffrey Chaucer, in the 14th century, associated Valentine's Day with romantic love during an era of courtly love. We know that handwritten Valentine cards appeared in the 15th century. And we know that capitalism later baptized it all.

But before Chaucer, before Hallmark, before Godiva, there was a priest who put love over law!

Lupercalia, Juno and the Baptism of a Festival

February 13-15 once marked *Lupercalia*, a Roman festival honoring Faunus, a goat-legged god of fertility. After purification rites in honor of Juno Februa (Juno the Purifier), the matchmaking began. After the 391 A.D. banning of non-Christian festivals, Christians often reinterpreted pagan rites, rather than abolish them outright. As a result, Valentine's feast became associated with romantic pairing!

The Church did not invent the human desire for love. It merely baptized it.

In Latin America, February 14 is widely celebrated as *el día del amor y la amistad*—the Day of Love and Friendship. The circle widens. Friends exchange gifts. Communities affirm bonds. Love transcends romance. That widening feels profoundly Christian.

Jesus did not limit love to eros. He commanded *agape*—the highest form of selfless, unconditional love: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mk. 12:31). He further radicalized it: "Love your enemies" (Mt. 5:44). He embodied it in table fellowship with tax collectors and sinners (Lk. 5:29-32). He defined it in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:33-37). He sealed it at the Last Supper: "Love one another as I have loved you" (Jn. 13:34).

When viewed through the lens of the highest form of love, Valentine's Day should unsettle us. Especially now.

Love Over Law

Valentine allegedly broke imperial law to bless couples. If the legend holds, he believed sacramental love outweighed military strategy. That is a dangerous theology. Because once you say love outranks law, you must ask: *How should I respond when our laws crush the vulnerable and fail to embody love?*

In the first six weeks of 2026 alone, we have watched:

- Racist and sexist tropes parroted by a sitting president.
- Political leaders invoking God while mocking the *imago Dei*.
- Venezuelan leaders and oil seized through imperial ambition.
- Peaceful protesters in Minnesota killed by federal agents.
- Immigrant families and communities terrorized by ICE raids.
- Trans children scapegoated by lawmakers.
- DEI protections dismantled.

Yes, we hear the refrains: *"They don't belong here!" "It's the law!" "That's against natural law!" "They deserved that!"*

The same Jesus who said "give to Caesar" (Mk. 12:17) also broke Sabbath rules to heal those in need (Mk. 3:1-6). The same apostles who told us to respect authority (Rom. 13) also declared, "We must obey God, rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

When law contradicts love, Christians face a choice.

St. Valentine chose love.

Where Is the Love?

The song looping in my mind today is not Elvis' "Can't Help Falling in Love" nor Los Kumbia Kings' "*Sabes a chocolate*" (You Taste Like Chocolate). It is The Black Eyed Peas asking, "Where Is the Love?"

> *"People killin', people dyin'. Children hurt and you hear them cryin' …*
> *People got me, got me questioning: Where is the love?"*

The lyrics sting more now than when they were released ten years ago. We still witness police brutality. We still see racism. We still drop bombs. We still prioritize profit over people.

> *"If you never know truth, then you never know love.*
> *Where's the love, y'all?"*

Truth and love cannot be separated. 1John 4:20 makes it plain: "Whoever does not love a brother or sister, who can be seen, cannot love God, who is unseen."

Yet in this unordinary American moment, love has become partisan. Compassion has become suspect. Mercy has become weakness.

Winter Ordinary Time invites quiet faithfulness. But our era is anything but ordinary. It demands extraordinary courage!

A Call to Extraordinary Action

As Lent approaches in four short days, we must move beyond schmaltzy sentiment.

Here are some concrete commitments:

- **Publicly Defend Immigrant Families**. Accompany those targeted by unjust enforcement. Show up at hearings. Donate to legal defense funds.
- **Refuse Dehumanizing Language**. Challenge racist jokes, anti-trans rhetoric, and xenophobic tropes in your own circles.
- **Support LGBTQIA+ Couples**. Bless love wherever it flourishes. Advocate for marriage equality protections.
- **Practice Economic Justice**. Support fair wages and worker protections for those exploited by the very systems that criminalize them.
- **Boldly Preach Love**. Refuse safe words and nuanced responses. Name injustice.
- **Expand Your Circle**. Celebrate *el día del amor y la amistad.* Honor friendship as holy.
- **Prepare for Lenten Resistance**. Fast not only from chocolate, but from apathy. Pray not only privately, but prophetically.

Extraordinary love requires extraordinary risk!

From Red Hearts to Real Courage

Those cartoon hearts in store windows bear little resemblance to the muscle that pumps blood through our veins. Real hearts strain. Real hearts ache. Real hearts metaphorically break.

St. Valentine's heart likely stopped beating in a prison cell. Nearly 1,800 years later, his witness still pulses.

If we strip away the cupids and chocolates, we find a priest who risked everything to proclaim: *Love is sacred. Love cannot be bound by law. Love is of God!*

So this February 14, I ask you—and myself:

Will you choose to love others, even when it costs you?

Will you defend others when laws fail them?

Will you be their Valentine, their protector?

Will you embody extraordinary love in this anything-but-ordinary American moment?

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- When have I hidden behind the law to avoid boldly loving?
- Where have I allowed politics to shrink my compassion?
- How does Jesus' command to love enemies challenge me?
- As I reflect on St. Valentine, how might I grow in civil courage?
- If St. Valentine visited my city, whose wedding would he bless?
- Do my public words reflect the love I profess in prayer?

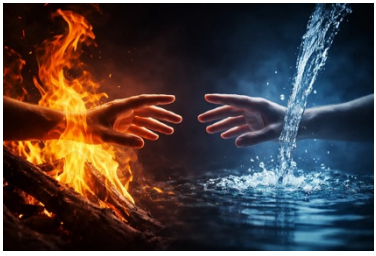
A Prayer for Courageous Conscience

Beloved God, You whose heart beats through creation, You who loved us first, before law, before empire, before fear. Teach us to love dangerously. Teach us to love expansively. Teach us to love inconveniently. Break our stony hearts, and make them flesh again. Let our love outgrow our borders. Let our mercy outrun our laws. Let our courage embarrass our caution. In this extraordinary hour, make us vessels of extraordinary love. Be our Valentine, O God. And help us finally be Yours. Amen.

Fire or Water

Choosing life, truth and extraordinary courage
in an unholy American winter

February 15, 2026



On this last Sunday of Winter Ordinary Time, today's scriptures refuse to let us drift. We must choose. Fire or water. Life or death. Yes or no. In this extraordinary American moment, neutrality is not holiness. It is surrender!

Fire or Water

The author of the Book of Sirach does not mince words: *"Before you are life and death, good and evil, whichever you choose shall be given you" (Sir. 15:17).* Stretch out your hand, Sirach says. Choose!

Never have those words rung in my ears like they do now. We inhabit a nation convulsing with cruelty, deception, and raw vengeance. We watch leaders lie without blinking. We see policies that harm immigrants, our LGBTQIA+ children and grandchildren, and the poor. We witness public rage normalized and baptized as strength.

In such a moment, Scripture does not invite us to polite piety. It demands a decision. Fire or water. Destructive anger or life-giving mercy. Scapegoating or solidarity. Authoritarian bluster or gospel humility.

In an iconic line in his 1963 protest song, "Blowin' in the Wind," Bob Dylan asks: "How many deaths will it take till [we know] that too many people have died?" Sirach would recognize that question. So would Jesus.

Are We Following God's Way—or Someone Else's?

In response to Sirach, the Psalmist notes: *"Blessed are they who follow the law of the Lord… who seek God with all their heart."* (Ps. 119:1)

Do we follow the Lord and seek God with all our heart? Or do we follow false prophets? Party loyalty? Social media algorithms? "Strongmen" who dominate and oppress?

When we hear the name Donald Trump, many of us feel either devotion or disgust. That polarization alone should sober us. No politician deserves the loyalty that belongs to God. No party platform replaces Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

The psalmist prays, "*Give me discernment, that I may observe your law and keep it with all my heart."* Discernment is not passive. It is not timid. It requires that we ask hard questions about the voices we amplify and the injustices we excuse.

Faith without moral courage is not faith at all. At best, it is branding.

A Wisdom Not of This Age

In their first extant letter to the Corinthians, Paul and Sosthenes speak of "a wisdom…not of this age, nor of the rulers of this age who are passing away."

Let that sink in: "Passing away."

Every empire imagines itself eternal. Persia did. Rome did. The Mongol Empire and Qing Dynasty did. The empires of Britain and Spain did. So did every regime that crucified truth-tellers. Paul reminds us that rulers who crucified "the Lord of glory" mistook brutality for strength.

We must ask ourselves: *Where do we see the crucifixion of Christ continuing today?*

Hold the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other, obvious answers emerge: Christ is crucified in the detained migrant. In the trans teen targeted by hateful legislation. In the journalist vilified for telling inconvenient truths. In communities destabilized by reckless political theater.

Whenever leaders—whether Attorney General Pam Bondi in her embarrassing public hearing this week, or anyone else in any time or place—defend policies that erode human dignity, Christians must evaluate them not by partisan loyalty, but by cruciform wisdom.

God's wisdom is *not* the "wisdom of this age" (1Cor. 2:6). Pursuing it is costly. And extraordinary.

Let Your "Yes" Mean Yes

In today's gospel, Jesus intensifies the Law. No murder. No rage. No lust. No casual divorce. Reconcile quickly. Let your "yes" mean yes.

Jesus does not lower the bar. Indeed, he raises it! He warns that anger can "kill." He insists that reconciliation precedes worship. He strips away loopholes and legalisms.

I'm reminded of a joke: If you've read the Scriptures, you know the most flagrant lawbreaker in Scripture. Not Adam and Eve. Not King David. Not Saul before he became Paul. It was Moses. Moses broke all Ten Commandments at once!

Exodus 32:19 tells us that Moses smashed the tablets in fury. We smirk (or roll our eyes) at the holy humor. Then we recognize ourselves in that punchline. We shatter commandments all the time. Through our rage, our silence, our complicity.

In a culture hooked on outrage and the pounding of gospel values—think *Succession, House of Cards* or even the tribal theatrics of professional wrestling—Jesus quietly demands integrity!

Calls to Extraordinary Action

As we approach Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent in just three days, we must refuse spiritual anesthesia. Here are five concrete invitations:

- **Practice public truth-telling**. When leaders distort reality, correct the record—calmly, factually, persistently—particularly for family members and friends who may be susceptible.
- **Visibly stand with the vulnerable**. Show up for immigrants, queer youth and targeted communities when policies threaten them.
- **Refuse dehumanizing language**. Do not share memes or jokes that degrade people—not even when they degrade you.

- **Engage holy discernment**. Rather than give up candy or soda, consider fasting from outrage media during Lent. Immerse yourself in the Gospels instead.
- **Reconcile, where possible**. If someone has something against you, initiate healing. Model alternatives to vengeance.

This nation does not need more performative outrage. It needs the best of our faith traditions: extraordinary love, extraordinary courage and extraordinary integrity!

Ashes on the Horizon

Winter Ordinary Time is quickly ending—at a time when our political climate feels anything but ordinary. The Church, in her quiet wisdom, now leads us toward ashes.

Ashes remind us that empires crumble. Strongmen fade. Even our fiercest cultural battles will pass.

But the choices we make—fire or water, life or death, good or evil—shape souls.

Sirach began with an image of hands extended toward life or death. As Lent approaches, we again stretch out our hands. Will we grasp the torch of rage? Or will we cup the cool waters of mercy? The choice is not abstract. It is immediate. It is personal. It is now American.

And it is extraordinary.

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where in my life am I choosing "fire" instead of "water"?
- Which voices shape my moral imagination more than the Gospel?
- How have I allowed anger to masquerade as righteousness or nicety?
- What specific acts of public courage is God inviting from me now?
- As Lent approaches, what must I relinquish to more faithfully follow Christ?
- Where do I see Christ crucified in my community today?

A Prayer for Discernment and Courage

God of wisdom not bound to any age, You set before us fire and water, life and death, good and evil. Grant us discernment, that we may follow your law with our whole heart. Deliver us from rage that destroys and from fear that silences. Make us agents of reconciliation in a divided land. As we approach Lent, mark us not only with ashes, but with extraordinary love. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Francis Hodur and the Courage to Break the Spell

Scranton, sovereignty and the extraordinary faith of immigrants

February 16, 2026

During the previous presidential administration, every time I heard the expression "Scranton Joe," my mind did not drift first to President Joseph R. Biden. Instead the very mention of the city directed my thoughts to another Scranton son: Francis Hodur (1866-1953). I thought about the Polish Catholics in that coal-streaked Pennsylvania city who dared to "buck" the Roman papacracy and its largely Irish episcopate in the late 19th-century United States. They deeply loved their Catholic tradition. They simply refused to believe that fidelity required submission to the hierarchical, absolute and centralized elective monarchy of the Church of Rome. With Spirit-inspired courage , they birthed a distinctly American expression of Vatican-free Catholicism—similar to Europe's Old Catholic movements, but forged with immigrant sweat and struggle on American soil!

An Immigrant Priest in an Immigrant Church

Franciszek Hodur was born in 1866 in what was then Austrian-ruled Poland. He immigrated to the United States as a young man and studied for the priesthood in the Roman Catholic Church. After his 1893 ordination, he ministered among Polish immigrants who labored in coal mines and steel mills, many of them economically exploited and ecclesially marginalized.

Life for Polish Catholics in the 19th century was rarely easy. They endured anti-immigrant prejudice, anti-Slavic bias, and suspicion from Protestant America. Within the Roman Church, tensions simmered between immigrant groups. Irish-American bishops often controlled diocesan structures. Parish property disputes erupted. Language mattered. Culture mattered. Dignity mattered.

When Hodur founded St. Stanislaus Catholic Church in Scranton in 1897, he did something quietly revolutionary: He celebrated Mass in

Polish. In an era when Latin dominated liturgy and when ethnic communities struggled for recognition, that act signaled something extraordinary: It declared that God speaks the language of the people!

One hears echoes of Acts 2—"each one heard them speaking in the native language of each"—and perhaps also the longing of Psalm 137: "How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" Hodur insisted that Polish Catholics could pray and sing in their own tongue!

Infallibility, Jurisdiction and the Breaking Point

The sham Vatican Council of 1869-1870 resulted in the novelties of papal infallibility and universal papal jurisdiction. Hodur was four years old when those doctrines were declared. He did not grow up resisting them. He grew up in a Church that increasingly presented them as essential to a new Catholic identity.

So why did he reject them?

The answer likely involves more than abstract theology. Parish property disputes in Scranton escalated when diocesan authorities refused Polish demands for greater lay control and financial transparency. Ethnic marginalization deepened the conflict. Hodur's community believed Rome's centralized authority protected episcopal overreach, rather than local dignity.

In 1898, Rome excommunicated Hodur. Yet for his followers, the rupture did not feel like abandonment of Catholicism. It felt like a reclamation of a more ancient tradition!

In that moment, Hodur resembled figures from European Old Catholic movements in the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland and Austria—communities that rejected the Vatican Council's novelties while maintaining apostolic succession. His story also parallels the struggles at St. Stanislaus Polish Catholic Church in St. Louis, Missouri, where Polish Catholics in our own lifetime resisted episcopal control in 2005 and declared their own independent Catholic community.

One hears in Hodur's defiance Jesus' condemnation in Matthew 23 of religious leaders who "tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear." One also hears Galatians 5: "For freedom Christ has set us free."

And yes, perhaps one hears a faint echo of Lady Gaga's "Born This Way"—not as theology, but as cultural resonance: a declaration of dignity against imposed shame!

The Blessing of Utrecht

In 1907, Hodur traveled to Europe and received episcopal consecration from Gerard Gul, the Old Catholic Archbishop of Utrecht. That consecration linked the nascent Polish National Catholic Church

(PNCC) to the apostolic succession recognized by the Union of Utrecht of Old Catholic Churches.

This mattered enormously. It signaled that the PNCC was not a rogue sect, but part of a broader Catholic communion independent of Rome. Its sacramental life continued. Apostolic continuity remained intact. The Church did not collapse because Rome withdrew its recognition.

In a cinematic sense, one might compare the scene to "The Shawshank Redemption"—not in narrative detail, but in tone: A man passes through institutional walls and emerges with dignity intact. Grace flows through cracks in the system!

Within a decade, the PNCC rapidly expanded, eventually reaching nearly 250 parishes in the U.S. and Poland. Hodur became its first Prime Bishop and served until his death in 1953.

The PNCC has since experienced contraction and is now a smaller body, numbering in the tens of thousands, rather than hundreds of thousands. It maintains apostolic succession, celebrates liturgy in the vernacular, and participates in ecumenical dialogue. It stands as a reminder that Catholicism has never been monolithic. Ever. Not even after the great strain toward standardization by the Counter-Reformation Council of Trent (1545-1563).

Immigrants Then, Immigrants Now

Hodur's story unfolded in coal towns and parish halls. The story of contemporary U.S. immigrants now unfolds amid federal raids, border walls, and cable-news cruelty.

We live in an American era that is anything but ordinary. During a 2024 presidential debate, one candidate peddled anti-immigrant tropes by falsely claimed that immigrants in Springfield, Ohio were eating cats and dogs. Reuters is reporting that courts have ruled 4,400 times that ICE has illegally jailed people. Let that number sink in. Here in Texas, I saw a billboard the other day for a "MAGA Trump Republican"—a term I hadn't heard before—proudly commanding: "Send illegals home!" The cruelty is not subtle. The autocracy is not coy. It's as if such efforts were an attempt to deflect from the fact that our president's name is, according to U.S. Representative Jamie Raskin, contained over a million times in the Epstein files!

When I think about Hodur and Scranton, I think about immigrants demonized as un-American. I think about people accused of disloyalty for demanding dignity. I think about Jesus in Matthew 25: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me." I think about the Holy Family of Jesus,

Mary and Joseph fleeing to Egypt in Matthew 2. I think about Exodus 22: "You shall not oppress the foreigners among you."

I also think about pop culture that refuses erasure. *The Handmaid's Tale* warns us about theocracy fused with nationalism. *Selma* reminds us that federal power often must be confronted by ordinary people with extraordinary courage.

Winter Ordinary Time invites reflection. Yet nothing about this political winter feels ordinary. Lent begins in two days. Ashes will mark our foreheads: "Remember that you are dust." Hodur's life whispers another reminder: Remember that you are not owned!

Calls to Extraordinary Action

- **Stand publicly with immigrant communities**. More than ever, they're counting on us!
- **Challenge ecclesial authoritarianism**. Demand financial transparency, lay voice, and pastoral accountability.
- Honestly teach church history. Offer adult education on the sham Vatican Council of 1869-1870, Old Catholic movements, and alternative Catholic expressions. Knowledge disrupts fear.
- **Speak boldly**. Name white nationalism, xenophobia and presidential corruption. Help speed the realization of Amos 5: "Let justice roll down like the waters!"
- **Practice economic solidarity**. Support immigrant-owned businesses. Divest from corporations profiting from detention centers.
- **Cultivate extraordinary love**. Visit those targeted. Write letters to detainees. Embody 1John 4: "Perfect love casts out fear."

This is not the time to remain politely pious. Extraordinary faith demands extraordinary courage!

Scranton, Ashes and Refusal

Every time someone says "Scranton," I still picture coal dust and Polish hymns. I picture a priest who would not surrender his conscience to centralized power. I picture immigrants risking excommunication to preserve dignity. I picture a local church that insisted "catholic" does not mean captive.

As we approach Ash Wednesday, ashes will remind us that empires crumble. Coal turns to dust. Presidencies pass. But extraordinary courage endures!

Francis Hodur's life invites conscience. It invites us to ask whether fidelity to Christ sometimes requires holy resistance to empire—ecclesial or political.

Yes, Scranton whispers still!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where do I see immigrant communities demonized today, and how do I respond?
- What ecclesial structures in my life demand obedience, rather than invite collaboration?
- How might Matthew 25 reshape my political priorities this Lent?
- When have I confused institutional loyalty with faithfulness to Christ?
- What would extraordinary courage look like in my life this Lent?
- How might I practice solidarity that costs me something real?

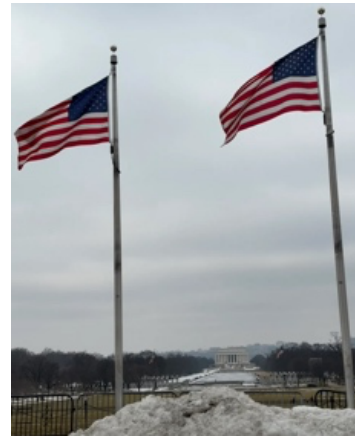
A Prayer for Extraordinary Courage

God of exiles and coal towns, You spoke in Polish hymns and miner's prayers. You accompanied Francis Hodur through rupture and risk. As ashes approach and winter lingers, kindle in us extraordinary love, extraordinary courage and extraordinary truth. Protect immigrants hunted by lies and laws. Convert hearts hardened by fear. Disrupt empires that mock Your justice. Make us faithful not to power but to Christ, who was crucified outside the city gate and who still walks with the stranger on the road. Amen.

"Love, Queen": Resurrection City and the Accumulation of Hope

Adam Pendleton, MLK's unfinished dream, and the extraordinary courage this moment demands

February 16, 2026



This morning, as I stood at the Washington Monument and looked west toward the Lincoln Memorial, my mind bent toward Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his soaring "I Have a Dream" speech delivered on that sacred ground during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on August 28, 1963. In an instant, I felt the sweep of history.

What I did not yet recognize in the moment was what awaited my husband and me just down the National Mall at the Hirshhorn Museum of the Smithsonian Institute. There, in Adam Pendleton's exhibit, "*Love, Queen*," we encountered a floor-to-ceiling projection centering on Resurrection City—the encampment on the National Mall erected during MLK's 1968 Poor People's Campaign.

It was a stark reminder that *collective history, like a painting, emerges from an accumulation of individual gestures, fragments and actions.*

On this last day of Winter Ordinary Time—before Lent begins tomorrow—Pendleton's art felt like both reckoning and invitation.

Adam Pendleton and the "Complex Real"

Adam Pendleton, born in 1984, has long described his work as an exploration of what he calls the "complex real." Through gesture, fragment, text and image, he recontextualizes histories of painting, abstraction, Blackness, and the historical *avant-garde*.

Pendleton begins on paper. He layers paint, spray paint, ink and watercolor. He integrates fragmentary text and geometric forms through stenciling. He photographs the works, then layers them through screen-printing. The result feels simultaneously expressionistic and minimal, stark and subtle.

Watching his nine-minute projection—archival footage of Resurrection City intercut with abstract forms—I heard echoes of Ecclesiastes: "For everything there is a season" (Eccl. 3:1). Yet I also sensed Paul's insistence that we "see in a mirror dimly" (1Cor. 13:12). Pendleton's blurred boundaries between painting, photography and drawing mirror the blurred boundaries of our civic life!

His work reminds me of *A Change Is Gonna Come* and Kendrick Lamar's "Alright"—laments and declarations woven together. It evokes the layered moral universes of *Do the Right Thing* and *The Wire*. We inhabit complexity. We inhabit contradiction. We inhabit what he calls the "complex real."

MLK's Poor People's Campaign: Beyond the Dream

We often freeze MLK in 1963, and we rarely hear of 1968 Resurrection City. The Poor People's Campaign sought economic justice for Black Americans, white Appalachians, Latino farmworkers and Native communities. It pressed the nation to confront poverty, militarism and systemic inequality.

Scripture pulsed beneath that movement. Mary's *Magnificat* proclaimed that God "has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty" (Lk. 1:53). Jesus announced good news to the poor (Lk. 4:18). The prophet Amos demanded, "Let justice roll down like waters" (Amos 5:24).

King's later ministry echoed these texts. He challenged not only segregation, but also economic exploitation and war. He embodied extraordinary courage in an anything-but-ordinary American era.

Resurrection City: Mud, Hope and Memory

Resurrection City rose in the spring of 1968 on the National Mall—wooden shacks on muddy ground, fragile structures in the shadow of marble monuments! Rain fell. Morale wavered. The nation seemed distracted. Yet those residents proclaimed that poverty itself demanded resurrection.

Pendleton's projection overlays that archival footage with abstract gestures. The effect unsettles and awakens. It suggests that *history does not arrive polished, like the Lincoln Memorial. It arrives muddy, layered, incomplete!*

I thought of *Selma* and Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit." I thought of U2's "Pride (In the Name of Love)." Memory refuses to remain silent.

As Hebrews reminds us, we are "surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses" (Heb. 12:1). Resurrection City stands among them!

Bridging to This Present Hour

These past thirteen months have tested our nation's moral imagination. Rights have been curtailed. Immigrants and people of color have been targeted. LGBTQIA+ neighbors have been scapegoated. Economic disparities have widened. On this second-last day of Winter Ordinary Time, before Lent's ashes mark our foreheads, we confess that this American moment feels anything but ordinary.

Pendleton's art insists that *meaning emerges from accumulated marks*. Likewise, *justice emerges from accumulated actions*. No single brushstroke redeems a canvas—and no single march redeems a nation!

Jesus tells us, "You are the light of the world" (Mt. 5:14). Light does not erase complexity. Light reveals it.

In this moment, we need extraordinary love. We need extraordinary patience. We need extraordinary resolve.

Calls to Extraordinary Action

- **Recommit to economic justice**. Study Catholic social teaching. Welcome conversations on poverty, wages and housing.
- **Publicly stand with marginalized communities**. Attend peaceful demonstrations. Write legislators. Protect voting rights.
- **Amplify suppressed histories**. Watch *Selma* with family or friends. Discuss King's later writings.
- **Practice Lent as civic formation**. Fast not only from food, but from apathy. Give alms not only to charity, but to advocacy.
- **Build coalitions beyond comfort**. Support Black churches, immigrant congregations, and interfaith networks.

Extraordinary virtue rarely blooms in isolation. It grows in community!

From Monument, to Mud and Mercy

This morning, as I gazed from the Washington Monument toward the Lincoln Memorial, I felt the grandeur of American promise, even if dimmed by current events. This afternoon, after encountering Adam Pendleton's layered canvases and the muddy memory of Resurrection City, I feel the fragility of that promise.

Marble monuments tell one story. Muddy encampments tell another. The Gospel tells us both matter.

On this final day before Lent, perhaps we must descend from monument to mud. Perhaps we must allow ashes to mingle with coal dust, with rain, with paint. *Perhaps we must accumulate small acts of mercy until they form a canvas of justice!*

In this extraordinary hour, God calls forth extraordinary courage—not abstract, not distant, but embodied in daily marks of love!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- How have I frozen MLK in 1963, rather than follow him to 1968?
- What "muddy" realities do I avoid because they unsettle me?
- How might Lent become a season of public as well as personal repentance?
- Whose rights have been infringed in these past months, and how have I responded?
- What small mark can I make this week that contributes to a larger canvas of justice?
- Where do I see resurrection emerging from apparent failure?

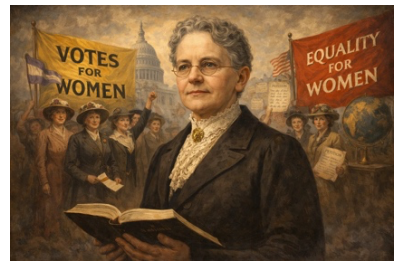
Let Us Pray

God of monuments and mud, God of canvases layered with grief and hope, God who raised Jesus from the tomb and calls the poor blessed, as we stand on the threshold of Lent, strip away our complacency. Accumulate in us acts of mercy, courage and solidarity. Teach us to see the complex real without despair. Grant us extraordinary love for those whose rights have been denied. Form in us a people who move from marble to mud to mercy. Amen.

Frances Willard and the Scripture of Equality

Temperance, suffrage and extraordinary courage on the eve of Lent

February 17, 2026



Here in Washington, D.C. yesterday, we walked by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, where a large banner in honor of our nation's 2026 semiquincentennial proclaims: "250 Years of Freedom."

My husband asked: "*250 years of freedom for whom?*"

Certainly *not* 250 years of freedom for our African-American siblings who remained enslaved through 1863, didn't receive civil rights until 1964, and now suffer the effects of DEI rollbacks under the current presidential administration.

And certainly *not* 250 years of freedom for women who received the right to vote only in 1920 in a nation where, under the current presidential administration, girls are now growing up with fewer rights and less bodily autonomy than their mothers and grandmothers.

The banner contained the obvious answer, with its images of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln: *Ah, yes, 250 years of freedom for wealthy, privileged, white men!*

Sadly, women in this nation have not enjoyed the same freedoms and privileges as men. Instead, they have had to fight for the rights they do enjoy—and for those that have been stripped from them—which is why it is important for us to remember courageous women like **Frances Willard** (1839-1898), a suffragette who used scripture to call for the equality of women.

On this final day of Winter Ordinary Time, before Lent begins tomorrow, her life calls us toward extraordinary courage in an American era that is anything but ordinary.

A Woman Who Refused to Stay in Her Place

Frances Willard was born in 1839 in upstate New York and raised in a devout Methodist household. She became an educator, eventually serving as president of Evanston College for Ladies. At a time when

women could not vote, hold most public offices, or exercise legal control over their own wages and property, she insisted that women belonged in public life.

Imagine the United States before 1920. Women organized, marched and petitioned for their rights. They endured ridicule, arrest and caricature. Suffragettes chained themselves to fences, staged parades, published pamphlets, and held prayer meetings. They were mocked as hysterical and dangerous. And yes, they were told Scripture demanded silence.

Willard did not quietly accept that reading of Scripture.

Wrestling the Bible from Patriarchy

Certain biblical texts have long been used to subordinate women. "Wives, be subject to your husbands" (Eph. 5:22). "Women should be silent in the churches" (1Cor. 14:34). "I permit no woman to teach" (1Tim. 2:12). "Women must cover their heads while praying" (1Cor. 11:5).

These words sharply contrast with Paul's proclamation in Galatians 3:28: "There is no longer male and female…for you are all one in Christ Jesus." In Romans 16, Paul names women apostles and deacons. In Acts 2, Peter quotes Joel: "Your sons *and your daughters* shall prophesy."

Willard viewed Scripture through that emancipatory lens. She insisted that Jesus treated women as disciples, not dependents. She lifted up Luke 8, where women financially sustained Jesus' ministry. She read John 20, where Mary Magdalene became "the apostle to the apostles." She saw in Genesis 1:27 that both male and female bear the divine image.

In our own moment, when dystopian warnings like *The Handmaid's Tale* feel less fictional and more cautionary, her hermeneutic matters!

The Woman's Christian Temperance Union

Willard served as president of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), which initially organized around alcohol reform, convinced that alcohol abuse fueled domestic violence, poverty and exploitation. But under Willard's leadership, it dramatically expanded its mission.

Her motto was simple: "Do Everything."

As a result, the WCTU advocated for women's suffrage, labor reform, prison reform and public health. It pushed for the eight-hour workday. It lobbied to raise the age of sexual consent in many states, from as low as ten or twelve years old, to sixteen and eighteen. That reform alone protected countless girls from predatory marriages and legalized assault.

Willard understood that temperance without political power was fragile. So she connected prohibition to suffrage. Women needed the vote to protect their homes and families!

Willard's activism helped build the coalition that eventually secured the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution—though she died in 1898, decades before their ratification.

She labored without seeing the harvest. There is something profoundly Lenten about that.

Global Vision, Local Resistance

Willard traveled internationally and fostered global networks of reform. She believed women's rights were not an American luxury, but a human mandate. She corresponded with activists abroad. She helped establish WCTU chapters worldwide.

She also faced criticism. Some historians note that she sometimes employed racialized rhetoric when appealing to Southern audiences. Her legacy is complex. Yet complexity does not erase courage. It invites honesty.

As contemporary believers, we hold complexity well. After all, saints are rarely simple.

After Roe, Before Lent

In 2022, the U.S. Supreme Court dismantled Roe v. Wade. As a result, girls in many states enjoy fewer reproductive rights today than their mothers and grandmothers. Bodily autonomy has narrowed. Healthcare has been politicized. And yes, the rhetoric of "protection" often masks control.

Margaret Atwood's dystopia no longer feels remote. Pop culture sounds the alarm: Aretha Franklin's "Respect" demands dignity. Beyoncé's "Run the World (Girls)" celebrates agency. *Selma* reminds us that rights require organizing. *Barbie* slyly exposes patriarchy's absurdities.

Scripture, too, calls us forward. "Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly" (Mic. 6:8). Jesus proclaimed release to captives (Lk. 4:18). Hebrew midwives defied Pharaoh's death decree (Ex. 1:15-21). They practiced holy civil disobedience!

Winter Ordinary Time ends today. Tomorrow ashes will mark our foreheads. In an America that feels anything but ordinary, Lent invites extraordinary courage!

Calls to Extraordinary Action

- **Teach liberating Scripture**. Study women in the Bible and the historical context of restrictive passages.
- **Advocate for bodily autonomy**. Support legislation that protects reproductive healthcare and maternal wellbeing.
- **Publicly raise your voice**. Write op-eds, speak boldly, contact legislators, and clearly name injustice.
- **Support survivors**. Fund local shelters, crisis centers and legal aid for women escaping violence.
- **Mentor young women**. Cultivate leadership in the organizations in which you participate.
- **Examine church structures**. Ask how patriarchy persists, and how shared governance might expand.

Extraordinary love must become public policy, and extraordinary courage must become daily practice!

Extraordinary Perseverance

Today is a day rich in remembrance. Our Chinese siblings welcome the Year of the Horse. Roman Catholics honor the Seven Holy Founders of the Servite Order. Jesuits recall Juan de Mariana, who dared to challenge monarchy and helped plant the seeds for popular sovereignty. Our Filipino siblings commemorate GomBurZa, the three priests whose 1872 execution fueled Filipino nationalism. Biblical scholars tip their hats to John Dominic Crossan, who controversially suggested that Jesus' divinity is metaphorical and that the second coming of Christ is a late corruption of Jesus' message.

On this last day before Lent, I like to imagine Willard among that cloud of witnesses. She never voted in a national election. She never saw the 19th Amendment ratified. Yet she faithfully labored. She believed Scripture could liberate, rather than bind. She practiced extraordinary perseverance in an unordinary age.

Tomorrow ashes will remind us that we are dust. But dust, when breathed upon by God, becomes life.

May we breathe extraordinary courage into the dust of this moment!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- How do I interpret Scripture when it appears to limit women's dignity?
- Where do I see modern forms of subjugation disguised as morality?
- What rights do I take for granted that others fought to secure?

- How will Lent call me beyond private piety, to public advocacy?
- What extraordinary love might I practice in defense of women and girls today?
- Where must I repent of complicity in patriarchal systems?

A Prayer for Extraordinary Courage

God of Deborah and Mary Magdalene, God of midwives and suffragettes, You call daughters and sons to prophesy. On this final day of Winter Ordinary Time, as ashes await our foreheads, ignite in us extraordinary courage. Where Scripture has been twisted, straighten it with truth. Where bodies have been controlled, restore dignity. Where fear has silenced voices, loosen tongues. Make us faithful not to patriarchy but to Christ, who welcomed women as disciples and friends. In this extraordinary hour, form in us extraordinary love. Amen.

When a Voice Is Muted

James Talarico, free speech, and
the extraordinary courage this moment demands

February 17, 2026

With just over eight months until the 2026 midterm elections, we should expect, based on the track record of this presidential administration, to see escalating attacks on free speech and voting rights. I write from our nation's capital today, within sight of the Capitol dome, where news spread this morning that my own Texas state representative, James Talarico, did not appear last night, as scheduled, on *The Late Show* with Stephen Colbert, due to concerns reportedly raised by the Federal Communications Commission about airing the pre-taped interview.

The interview is not scandalous. It will not leave you saying, "How dare he?!" In fact, it is deeply Christian and deeply democratic in the best sense of the word.

On this last day of Winter Ordinary Time—before ashes mark our foreheads tomorrow—the silencing of a public servant feels unordinary.

A Representative Who Speaks from Faith

James Talarico represents my district in Texas. I am one of his constituents. I have watched him speak with unusual clarity in support of public education, voting rights and economic justice. He does so not only as a legislator, but also as a seminarian, someone who openly frames policy debates through the lens of the Gospel.

He speaks often about loving one's neighbor, about the dignity of the marginalized, and about what Jesus meant when he proclaimed good news to the poor (Lk. 4:18). He invokes the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5-7), not as pious ornament, but as public ethic. He reminds Texans that faith should expand compassion, not shrink it.

When such a voice is muted—whether through bureaucratic caution or political pressure—we should pause.

The Hebrew prophets were often silenced. Jeremiah was imprisoned (Jer. 37). Amos was told to flee (Amos 7:12-13). John the Baptist literally lost his head (Mk. 6:27). Jesus himself was arrested at night, interrogated in haste, and executed as a threat to public order (Mk. 15).

Power has never been comfortable with prophetic clarity!

Late Night and the Public Square

Late-night television may seem trivial. Yet programs like *The Late Show* have become a civic commons. Satire often reveals what formal debate conceals. Think of *The Daily Show* during the Iraq War years. Think of *Last Week Tonight* with John Oliver dissecting net neutrality. Humor becomes moral scalpel!

Pop culture frequently narrates the silencing of inconvenient truth-tellers. In *Good Night, and Good Luck*, Edward R. Murrow challenges McCarthyism. In *V for Vendetta*, authoritarian control tightens around speech. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Scripture becomes weaponized by the state. Bruce Springsteen's "The Rising" and Bob Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind" remind us that questions of justice persist.

When concerns about "regulatory compliance" result in a canceled interview, we must carefully examine motive and precedent. Democracies do not erode overnight. They erode gradually, bureaucratically, almost politely.

Paul reminds us, "For freedom Christ has set us free" (Gal. 5:1). Freedom requires vigilance!

Echoes from Other Eras

History teaches sobering lessons. Totalitarian regimes rarely begin with mass arrests. They often begin with controlling narrative. They regulate who may speak, where, and how. They cloak suppression in technical language.

We saw state control of media in 20th-century fascist regimes. We witnessed censorship by Soviet communism. We have observed modern crackdowns on journalists in various nations across the globe. In each case, prophets first are dismissed, then sidelined, then silenced.

Jesus tells Pilate, "For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth" (Jn. 18:37). Pilate responds with weary cynicism: "What is truth?" (Jn. 18:38). When public institutions begin to waver on truth-telling, disciples must not!

This Anything-but-Ordinary American Moment

Over these past thirteen months, we have seen renewed efforts to restrict voting access, to marginalize LGBTQIA+ neighbors, to vilify immigrants, and to reshape public education through ideological litmus tests. We now witness a state representative who openly speaks about faith-based justice apparently sidelined from a national platform.

On the eve of Lent, we must examine our complicity. Silence can be convenient. Silence can be strategic. Silence can also be sinful.

Jesus warns that if his followers remain quiet, "the stones will shout out" (Lk. 19:40). In this extraordinary hour, we cannot outsource courage to late-night comedians or politicians. We must embody extraordinary love and extraordinary resolve ourselves!

Practices of Extraordinary Courage

- **Educate yourself and others**. Read the prophets. Study Catholic social teaching. Discuss contemporary threats to democratic norms.
- **Practice public witness**. Peacefully demonstrate, advocate for transparent media policy, and resist selective outrage.
- **Protect voting rights**. Volunteer as a poll worker, support nonpartisan voter education, and challenge suppression tactics.
- **Support prophetic leaders**. Write to networks, stations and representatives when voices of conscience are sidelined.
- **Engage Lent as civic repentance**. Fast from apathy. Pray daily for those whose speech is constrained. Give alms to organizations defending civil liberties.
- **Consistently defend free speech**. Write op-eds, speak at public meetings with clarity and charity.

Extraordinary virtue rarely appears dramatic. It steadily accumulates through disciplined action!

Between Dome and Dust

As I looked at the U.S. Capitol dome this morning, I felt both pride and unease. The dome towers. Yet beneath it, human frailty governs, sometimes under the shadow of grave evil.

This afternoon, I think about a canceled late-night interview. It seems small. It may prove minor. Or it may signal something deeper. Democracies often reveal their health in small moments.

On this final day of Winter Ordinary Time, before ashes trace a cross upon our brows, we stand between dome and dust. Between speech and silence. Between comfort and courage.

When prophets are muted, will we speak? When truth is hedged, will we insist? When fear tightens its grip, will we practice extraordinary love and courage?

The Gospel compels us not toward panic, but toward perseverance. The same Jesus who was silenced through death shattered that silence through resurrection.

In this anything-but-ordinary American moment, may we become people who carefully listen, boldly speak, and steadfastly love!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- When have I chosen comfort over courageous speech?
- How do I discern between prudence and fear?
- Where do I see subtle erosions of democratic norms in my own community?
- What does Jesus' trial before Pilate teach me about truth and power?
- How might Lent form me into a braver public disciple?
- Whose voice in my district needs amplification right now?

Let Us Pray

God of prophets and poets, God of late-night monologues and courtroom trials, God who raised Jesus after power tried to silence him, grant us clear eyes and steady hearts. Guard our nation from the slow erosion of freedom. Strengthen those who speak for justice. Convert those who fear dissent. Form in us extraordinary courage, extraordinary patience and extraordinary love. As ashes approach, remind us that dust cannot silence resurrection. Amen.