

Extraordinarily Good News

Reflections for U.S. Catholics

Easter 2026

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Preface

If Easter proclaims anything, it proclaims that death never gets the final word.

That conviction sustained many of us as we crossed from Lent into the Easter season during the spring of 2026. After long, bruising months of the democratic erosion, institutional collapse, performative cruelty and moral exhaustion that characterized much of 2025 and early 2026, many Americans found themselves spiritually depleted. We had grown weary of the daily chaos, weary of the lies, weary of watching basic human dignity become negotiable in public discourse.

And yet, Easter arrived anyway.

Candles pierced darkness. Alleluias returned. The stone rolled away once more. The liturgical calendar stubbornly insisted upon resurrection, even as headlines often suggested otherwise.

I write these words at the conclusion of the Easter season of 2026, after publishing to Substack fifty daily reflections during these sacred weeks stretching from Easter Sunday to Pentecost. If Advent had taught us how to wait for light, and if Winter Ordinary Time had taught us how to persevere through political darkness, Easter demanded something even more difficult: learning how to live as resurrection people in a nation still flirting with authoritarianism, conspiracy, cruelty and fear.

Resurrection is not escapism.

Christians too often reduce Easter to sentimentality: lilies, brass fanfares, pastel clothing, children hunting eggs, and triumphant hymns briefly masking deeper realities. But the Easter season in scripture never unfolded that neatly. The resurrected Jesus still bore wounds. The disciples still struggled with fear, doubt, confusion and uncertainty. Thomas hesitated. Peter wrestled with shame. Saul violently persecuted others before experiencing a radical transformation. The early Church argued, stumbled, improvised, risked and slowly learned how to embody a radically different vision of human community.

The Acts of the Apostles, which Catholics hear throughout the Easter season, reads less like a sanitized institutional history, and more like the messy birth of a dangerous movement!

That matters enormously in this unordinary U.S. moment.

Because during Easter 2026, many of us continued witnessing assaults on democratic norms, public education, immigrant communities, LGBTQIA+ persons, reproductive freedom, scientific integrity, journalism, and the rule of law itself. We watched political leaders increasingly

normalize authoritarian rhetoric while draping themselves in religious language. We observed Christian nationalism continue attempting to baptize exclusion, domination and grievance, as though they reflected the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

They do not.

As one who spent a decade serving as a Roman Catholic priest before publicly breaking with conservative hierarchs and eventually co-founding Austin's only inclusive Catholic community, I have become deeply convinced that authentic Christianity stands perpetually in tension with empire. (In some way authentic Christianity ended when empire legitimized it. In one century you could be killed for being Christian. The next you could be killed for not being a Christian.) The resurrection narratives themselves reveal this tension. Rome publicly crucified Jesus as a warning to others. Easter became God's public refusal to allow violence, domination or empire to define ultimate reality. That truth still unsettles power.

These essays emerged from that conviction.

This fourth volume continues my attempt to help progressive and inclusive Catholics interpret current events through the lens of scripture, theology, history, ethics, psychology, spirituality and discipleship. These reflections explore everything from democracy and authoritarianism to human development, motherhood, identity formation, moral courage, spirituality, education, inclusion, grief, memory and hope.

Throughout these pages, readers will encounter philosophers, theologians, psychologists, mystics, activists, saints, political leaders, artists, and ordinary people trying to navigate this unordinary U.S. moment. Some essays openly wrestle with my own experiences: growing up in rural Ohio, life among the Conventual Franciscan Friars, ministry within immigrant communities, conflict with ecclesial authority, public service in education, my marriage, travel, aging, language-learning, and the continuing challenge of remaining hopeful without being naïve.

At times these reflections are pastoral. At times political. At times theological. At times deeply personal. Increasingly, I no longer know how to separate those categories.

The Gospel itself refuses such separation.

Jesus preached spirituality inseparable from economics, power, inclusion, justice, healing, truth-telling and community formation. He spoke not merely about private morality, but about the public shape of human relationships. He announced not simply personal salvation, but the reign of God—a radically different vision of human society rooted in compassion, rather than domination.

That proclamation remains politically disruptive. Especially now.

And yet this volume is not ultimately about Donald Trump, MAGA extremism, Christian nationalism or democratic fragility, though all frequently appear in these pages. Nor is it merely about progressive politics. At its deepest level, this book asks far older spiritual questions:

What does resurrection look like in real life?

What does it mean to become Easter people when cynicism feels easier?

What does it mean to practice hope without denying reality?

What does it mean to embody extraordinary compassion in an age rewarding cruelty?

What does it mean to remain morally awake while others numb themselves through propaganda, distraction or fear?

These reflections do not offer easy answers. They do, however, insist that discipleship still matters.

Easter people tell the truth when lies become fashionable. Easter people defend the vulnerable when exclusion becomes policy. Easter people build communities when polarization profits from division. Easter people choose hope not because optimism comes easily, but because despair ultimately serves the interests of empire.

That kind of hope requires discipline.

Though I ordinarily project a good deal of optimism and idealism, I also acknowledge that history, theology, politics and human suffering greatly complicate simplistic optimism. Fortunately, Christianity has never fundamentally been about optimism. It has always been about resurrection—the audacious belief that life can emerge from tombs, that justice can outlast oppression, that love can survive violence, and that transformation remains possible—even after catastrophic failure.

The disciples themselves certainly failed often enough. Peter denied. Thomas doubted. Paul persecuted. The early Church repeatedly fractured. And still, grace kept unfolding.

Perhaps that is why I continue writing.

Because despite everything, I still believe ordinary people quietly practicing extraordinary love can bend the arc of history toward healing. I still believe inclusive communities matter. I still believe democracy is worth defending. I still believe faith can nourish moral courage, rather than suppress it. I still believe spirituality should enlarge human compassion, rather than narrow it.

And I still believe resurrection remains humanity's most dangerous and liberating story.

My prayer is that these reflections encourage you not merely to survive this historical moment, but to courageously live within it. May they

sharpen your conscience without hardening your heart. May they deepen your compassion without diminishing your clarity. May they strengthen your resolve to resist authoritarianism, cruelty, racism, homophobia, misogyny, xenophobia, and every ideology diminishing human dignity.

Above all, may they remind you that Easter was never meant to remain inside churches. Resurrection always spills into public life.

For if Good Friday exposes the violence of empire, Easter announces that empire never possesses ultimate authority over the human story.

And that, indeed, is extraordinarily good news!

He Is Not Here – And That Changes Everything

Easter Sunday Lessons in an Unordinary Time

April 5, 2026



As a priest, as you might imagine, I find myself in some intriguing conversations. Two days ago, on Good Friday, for instance, I was speaking with a 20-year-old Catholic who brought up international news concerning the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. But the way he described it caught my attention: He called it “the church where Jesus is buried.”

I gently corrected him: “the church where Jesus *was* buried.”

He pushed back: “No, the church where Jesus *is* buried.”

Sensing a teachable moment, I said, “As Christians and Catholics, we believe that Jesus was buried, but then he rose again!”

He didn’t miss a beat: “Yes, but that’s absurd. People don’t die and rise again days later. Who believes that?”

His words ring in my ears now 36 hours later. Was I hearing generational skepticism? Or simply honest clarity? And what does it mean, on this Easter day and in this extraordinary U.S. moment, to proclaim that Christ is risen – and to actually believe it?

The Ancient Hunger for Life Beyond Death

Long before Christianity, human beings looked into the darkness of death and refused to accept it as the final word. Across cultures and centuries, stories emerged of life triumphing over death:

- **Osiris**, the Egyptian god who was dismembered then resurrected.
- **Inanna/Ishtar**, the Sumer/Babylonian goddess who visited her sister in the underworld, then returned to the world of the living.
- The Greek tale of **Persephone** returning from the underworld.
- The Syrian/Greek stories of **Adonis**, the fertility god who annually died and was resurrected, representing the change of seasons.
- The Phrygian/Roman **Attis** resurrecting and being made immortal.
- **Heracles** of Greece, who descended into Hades to free others, before being made a god on Olympus.

Even within our own tradition, we see echoes of this hope. The Israelite prophet Elijah was taken up into heaven in a fiery chariot (2Kgs. 2:11). Death does not claim him!

So when Saul/Paul of Tarsus began preaching that Jesus of Nazareth had risen (1Cor. 15), he was not speaking into a vacuum. He was stepping into a deep, ancient longing: that *somehow, some way, death does not get the last word!*

But here is what is different — what is extraordinary.

For Paul, Jesus' resurrection was not a myth or a seasonal metaphor. It was an event that changed everything. "If Christ has not been raised," he writes, "our preaching is in vain" (1Cor. 15:14).

As a result, resurrection is central to our Christian/Catholic faith.

The Evangelists Make Their Case

The early gospel writers knew how difficult this claim would be to believe. So the canonical gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John go to remarkable lengths to make their case:

- Jesus' legs are not broken (Jn. 19:33), such that there's no need to explain broken limbs.
- He is taken down from the cross — an unlikely event in Roman executions, where denial to a burial and being subject to birds of prey after death were clear deterrents to crime.
- A tomb is identified and sealed.
- Women find the tomb — purportedly guarded — empty (Mk. 16:1-8)
- The Risen Christ eats with his friends (Lk. 24:41-43), proving that his post-resurrection appearances were not a ghostly apparition.
- Thomas presumably touches the wounds of the Risen Christ (Jn. 20:27).

These are not casual details. They are apologetics in action. They are the early Church saying: *We know how this sounds. And yet...*

And perhaps that young man I spoke with on Friday is not so different from Thomas. Honest. Skeptical. Not believing in something that differs so greatly from his lived experience.

Piñatas, Cascarones, and Resurrection Surprise

Driving through Austin this morning, I will undoubtedly pass numerous vendors selling Easter bunny *piñatas* and colorful *cascarones* — colorful confetti-filled eggshells that children gleefully crack over the heads of unsuspecting family members and friends.

If you think about it, both are profoundly theological.

A *piñata* must be broken before hidden sweetness pours out.

A *cascarón* surprises us with unexpected joy.

Is that not resurrection?

What looked like defeat—death on a cross—becomes the very place where new life breaks open.

Think of *The Shawshank Redemption*, where hope slowly, stubbornly emerges from confinement. Or Claude Ely's Pentecostal tune "Ain't No Grave," declaring that no grave can hold us down. Or even *Stranger Things*, where characters repeatedly confront darkness and return transformed.

Resurrection and new life are written into the human imagination!

Resurrection in a World That Still Chooses Death

And yet, we live in a moment that often feels more Good Friday than Easter Sunday.

We see it in:

- Ongoing war and violence across the globe.
- Policies that harm the vulnerable.
- The devaluation of human dignity through political rhetoric.

When world leaders suggest that war takes precedence over caring for children or the elderly—as we heard from our U.S. President on Wednesday—we are far from the Gospel. The Risen Christ greets his friends with the words, "Peace be with you" (Jn. 20:19). Not "Win at all costs." Not "Protect power."

Peace.

If we truly believe that Christ is risen—that God's life is present in every human being—then how we treat one another becomes a matter of resurrection faith.

Extraordinary love insists that every life matters.

Extraordinary courage challenges systems that perpetuate death.

We cannot proclaim resurrection today, then ignore countless crucifixions tomorrow.

Calls for Action

- **Boldly proclaim life.** Speak up when policies or rhetoric devalue human dignity.
- **Invest in care.** Advocate for childcare, healthcare and support for the vulnerable.
- **Daily practice resurrection.** Choose hope, even when cynicism feels easier.
- **Honestly engage young people.** Fearlessly welcome their questions about faith.

- **Build communities of joy.** Let your circles of influence reflect the surprise and delight of resurrection.
- **Challenge death-dealing systems.** Actively work for justice, peace and equity.

From “Absurd” to “Amazed”

I keep returning to that young man’s word: *absurd*.

In a way, he’s right. Resurrection *is* absurd – if we are speaking strictly in terms of biology, probability, or modern categories of thought.

But faith has always lived in that tension between what is *reasonable* and what is *possible with God*.

The disciples themselves did not begin with certainty. They began with confusion, fear, even disbelief. And yet, something happened – something so powerful that it transformed them from hiding behind locked doors, to proclaiming good news to the ends of the earth.

Perhaps the invitation this Easter is not to silence the word “absurd,” but to let it open us to wonder.

Because if Christ is truly risen – if love really does conquer death – then everything changes. Even us.

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where do I struggle to believe in resurrection in my own life?
- What “tombs” feel sealed shut, beyond hope?
- How might God be inviting new life to break open in unexpected ways?
- How do I respond to skepticism – my own or others’ – with honesty and grace?
- What would it look like to live with extraordinary resurrection hope this week?

Let Us Pray

God of life, you raise what we have buried, you awaken what we have given up for dead. In this extraordinary moment, fill us with courage to believe, strength to act, and love that refuses to die. May we live as resurrection people – breaking open despair, spreading joy, and proclaiming with our lives that death does not have the final word. Amen.

Faith in a World That Has Grown Up

Hans Küng and the Church's Call
to Crucify Idols and Reclaim Its Soul

April 6, 2026



We, human beings, love our categories. Right or wrong. Good or bad. Black or white. And in the Church, we often add another layer: orthodox or heterodox (or unorthodox). As a result, seminaries steep students in the “safe” voices, while quietly sidelining the “dangerous” ones—those who ask too many questions, who refuse to baptize easy answers, who unsettle entrenched systems and long-held beliefs. For many years during my seminary studies, that was **Hans Küng** (1928-2021).

During my formation, I scarcely encountered the sidelined Swiss priest. He was labeled controversial, suspect, even disobedient. And yet now, years later, in this extraordinary and precarious moment in U.S. history, I find his words not only relevant, but prophetic. They probe. They unsettle. They illuminate. They call us back to something deeper—something truer.

And perhaps nowhere is that more urgently needed than in a moment when the language of God is invoked to justify violence, when the name of the Holy is co-opted for political domination, when a U.S. pope needs to tell a U.S. president that God does not heed the prayers of warmongers, and when the Easter message from our U.S. White House was hardly more than a brash, profane threat of war suggesting that it would be to the praise of Allah—let that sink in—if our tax dollars were used to commit the international war crime of destroying the power plants and infrastructure needed by our siblings in Iran.



Donald J. Trump 🇺🇸
@realDonaldTrump

Tuesday will be Power Plant Day, and Bridge Day, all wrapped up in one, in Iran. There will be nothing like it!!! Open the Fuckin' Strait, you crazy bastards, or you'll be living in Hell - JUST WATCH! Praise be to Allah. President DONALD J. TRUMP

Absolutely. Crazy. I know.

From the leader of the party of supposed “Christian values.”

And on Easter – when the very first word from the lips of the Risen Christ was... “peace.”

It’s one thing for the erratic, volatile, unfiltered uncle to misbehave at home; it’s quite another when he acts up in the neighborhood, let alone on the world stage.

It’s long past time for Americans to open their eyes – and their hearts – and to heed the words of the pseudonymous author of the letter to the Ephesians: “*Awake, O sleeper, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light*” (Eph. 5:14).

Küng would not be surprised by such an Easter greeting from a contrarian of so many Christian values, from one who appeals to religion as a political prop, rather than from personal conviction. But Küng would be clear: *This is precisely when Christians must rediscover and reclaim what it means to be Christian!*

The Horizon: Faith in a World That Has Grown Up

Küng understood something that many in the Church still resist: The modern world has come of age. The Enlightenment, scientific advancement, global pluralism: These are *not* threats to Christianity. They are its testing ground.

He called this the “challenge of modern humanism.” Humanity no longer passively receives truth from authority. It questions, probes, critiques. It demands coherence between belief and lived reality.

And so Küng asked: *Has Christianity lost its soul?*

When faith becomes a product – marketed, politicized, weaponized – it ceases to be Good News. It becomes ideology. It becomes, in Küng’s words in *On Being a Christian*, something hollowed out.

Scripture already warned us of this temptation:

- “*This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me*” (Mk. 7:6)
- “*You cannot serve God and wealth*” (Mt. 6:24)
- “*The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life*” (2Cor. 3:6)

Küng refused nostalgia. He rejected the fantasy that we can return to a pre-modern Church. Instead, he charted a path forward – one that embraces reason without surrendering mystery, one that honors human dignity as the very arena of divine revelation.

In a world shaped by technology, political upheaval, and global interdependence, Küng insisted that faith must not retreat. It must engage. It must risk. It must become extraordinarily honest!

A God Beyond Categories: The Hypothesis That Refuses to Die

If the modern world challenged old certainties, Küng did not respond by doubling down on rigid dogma. Instead, he reframed the question of God itself.

God, he suggested, is not an object to be proven, like a math equation. God is a “hypothesis” – not in the sense of something uncertain, but in the sense of a living possibility that makes sense of reality.

The Psalmist shared: “*Fools say in their hearts, ‘There is no God’*” (Ps. 14:1). Küng might respond: *The greater folly is pretending we fully understand God!*

Küng stood in contrast to earlier theological systems that treated God as a fixed, unquestionable concept. Similar to Karl Rahner’s notions of God as Holy Mystery or as the horizon of infinite being, for Küng, God remained mysterious, dynamic, encountered not only in doctrine, but in experience, in conscience, in the cry of the poor.

The Johannine Jesus tells us: “*The wind blows where it chooses*” (Jn. 3:8). Paul told the people of Athens: “*In God, we live and move and have our being*” (Acts 17:28). Küng’s theology deeply resonated with Rahner’s notion of “anonymous Christianity,” which acknowledges the goodness of all people of good will, regardless of their religion or lack thereof. Indeed, Küng would readily acknowledge, many non-Christians are more Christian than those who bear the name or wear silver or gold crosses!

Küng dared to say what many fear: Salvation is not confined to any visible church. *God’s grace moves far beyond our boundaries.*

In doing so, Küng did not weaken Christianity. He strengthened it. He freed it from arrogance. He opened it to dialogue. He made it credible in a pluralistic world.

Which Christ? Crucifying Our Idols in Order to Find Jesus

One of Küng’s most provocative insights is his question: *Which Christ?*

- The Christ of dogma?
- The Christ of piety?
- The Christ of the enthusiasts?
- The Christ of political power?

In our current U.S. moment, this question feels more urgent than ever.

We now see a version of Christ co-opted by God-bless-America nationalism, draped in flags, invoked to justify exclusion, even violence. Coopted, he is aligned with rulers, with domination, with fear.

Küng would call this a false Christ.

- “*Put your sword back into its place*” (Mt. 26:52).
- “*Blessed are the peacemakers*” (Mt. 5:9).
- “*My kingdom is not from this world*” (Mt. 18:36).

The historical Jesus—the one uncovered through historical-critical scholarship—stands in stark contrast to the Christ of U.S. political mythology!

And yes, there is a dangerous temptation to turn political figures into messianic figures as well, projecting onto them our hopes for a populist “liberator.” Küng recognized this impulse. He also warned against it.

Jesus stood with the *anawim* — the poor, the marginalized, the excluded. He did not threaten to bomb his enemies to smithereens. He forgave them. He would be appalled by the words we saw yesterday. As Pope Leo XIV has noted, Jesus would not stand for many of the things we see unfolding in 2026.

If we are to honestly celebrate this Easter octave, then perhaps some versions of “Christ” must indeed die. They must be buried. Only then can the true Christ rise again in our midst!

As *The Matrix* famously suggests: Sometimes we must unplug from illusion to encounter reality.

The Church: Guilty, Provisional, Necessary

Küng loved the Church enough to critique it.

He called it:

- A serving Church
- A provisional Church
- A guilty Church

That last phrase stings. But it rings true.

“Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own?” (Mt. 7:3)

The Church, Küng insisted, must never confuse itself with the Kingdom of God. The Church is *not* the destination. It is the *instrument*.

And in a moment when Christianity risks losing its soul in the distortion of the oxymoron that is “Christian nationalism,” this insight becomes crucial.

The Church must not uncritically align itself with power. It must not baptize injustice. It must not remain silent in the face of violence.

Instead, it must recover its extraordinary vocation:

- To stand with the marginalized (Lk. 4:18).
- To welcome the stranger (Mt. 25:35).
- To speak truth to power (Acts 5:29).
- To embody radical love (Jn. 13:34).

In pop culture terms, think of *The Handmaid’s Tale*—a chilling reminder of what happens when religion merges with authoritarian power. Küng would urge us: Resist that fusion at all costs!

Being Christian: Radically Human, Dangerously Free

For Küng, to be Christian is not to escape humanity. It is to *become fully human*.

“Be merciful, just as God is merciful” (Lk. 6:36).

“I came that you may have life, and have it abundantly” (Jn. 10:10).

Christian existence is not about rigid legalism. It is about freedom: freedom to love, to serve, to stand in solidarity.

Küng rejected both extremes: fanaticism and rigidity on the one hand, and relativism and indifference on the other.

Instead, he called for a faith that is:

- Critical, yet committed.
- Humble, yet courageous.
- Rooted, yet open.

This is indeed extraordinary faith. Not loud. Not coercive. But deeply transformative.

And yes, it is costly.

“Take up your cross and follow me” (Lk. 9:23).

But Küng reminds us: The cross is not about suffering for its own sake. It is about fidelity to love in a world that resists it!

Calls to Extraordinary Action

Before we move on, let’s be clear: Küng’s theology is not abstract. It demands action. Here are five invitations for us in this unordinary U.S. moment:

- **Practice courageous discernment.** Refuse to uncritically accept religious claims — especially when they justify harm or violence.
- **Reclaim the historical Jesus.** Engage Scripture with intellectual honesty and spiritual depth. Let the real Jesus challenge your assumptions.
- **Publicly stand for peace.** When leaders invoke God to justify war, respond clearly and prophetically, saying “this is not the Gospel.”
- **Build inclusive communities.** Embody a Church that reflects Küng’s vision: liberty, equality, fraternity.
- **Live extraordinarily human lives.** Show mercy, practice solidarity, forgive enemies. Make the Gospel visible!

From Categories to Courage

We began with categories — orthodox and heterodox, safe and suspect.

But Küng invites us beyond all binaries. He calls us into something riskier, something more beautiful: a faith that thinks, a faith that questions, a faith that loves.

In this Easter Octave, we celebrate resurrection not as a distant miracle, but as a present possibility.

Some things must die: false certainties, idolatrous images of Christ, complicit silence.

And some things must rise: extraordinary courage, extraordinary compassion, extraordinary truth.

Küng was silenced by the institution he loved. But his voice still speaks. Perhaps more clearly now than ever.

And perhaps, in this moment – when the name of God is so dangerously misused – we need that voice more than ever!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Which version(s) of Christ have I unconsciously embraced – and does it align with the Gospel?
- Where do I see Christianity being used to justify harm today?
- How do I respond when faith and politics become dangerously intertwined?
- What would it mean for me to live a more “radically human” Christianity?
- Where is God calling me to show extraordinary courage in this moment?

Let Us Pray

God of mystery and mercy, You who cannot be contained by our categories, You who speak in conscience, in community, in the cries of the poor, grant us the courage to seek truth, the humility to question what we have been taught, the strength to resist the misuse of your holy name. In this season of resurrection, help us to let falsehood die and let love rise again. Make us instruments of your peace, bearers of your justice, witnesses to your extraordinary grace. We ask this in the name of Jesus, who lived fully, loved deeply, and calls us still. Amen.

Unholy Alliances and Courageous Reform

Lessons from Macario Ga and Rwanda
on Dictatorship and Genocide

April 7, 2026



How many of us remember the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, when some 1.1 million people were slaughtered in roughly 100 days? I was completing my undergraduate studies at Saint Louis University. I still remember the headlines. I remember the disbelief. The horror. Neighbors turned on neighbors. Churches became killing grounds. Humanity seemed to collapse in on itself.

And perhaps what haunted me most was this: The world largely watched. No one intervened.

People still turn on people. This year alone, we have witnessed our own government turn on immigrants, on vulnerable communities, on political opponents—and now, in this very Easter Octave, we find ourselves on the latest deadline that Donald Trump set in his Easter message threatening to destroy—“praise be to Allah”—the power plants and infrastructure needed by our siblings in Iran.

Absolute. Absurdity.

Fans of *Stranger Things* understand: It feels like we’re living in the Upside-Down. Or, in liturgical terms, it feels less like Easter, and more like Good Friday.

Into this darkness, one voice from our Inclusive Catholic tradition speaks. **Macario Ga** (1913-2002) led his church through another moment when people rose up against dictatorship—and against his church’s own complicity. His witness offers us not easy answers, but an extraordinary path forward.

The Philippines: Faith Entangled with Power

To understand Macario Ga, we must understand the world he inhabited.

The Philippine Independent Church—often called the Aglipayan Church or the *Iglesia Filipina Independiente*—was born out of anti-colonial struggle at the turn of the 20th century. It represented a Filipino assertion of dignity against Spanish ecclesial domination. It was nationalist, independent, rooted in the people.

Enter Ferdinand Marcos.

Marcos was baptized into the Philippine Independent Church before later embracing the Roman Catholicism of his wife, Imelda. His regime promised order, development, national pride. For some, he appeared as a liberator. For others, he quickly became a dictator—imposing martial law, silencing dissent, consolidating power.

And here lies the tension: Both Church and state found reasons to align. Scripture warns us:

- “*You shall not follow a majority in wrongdoing*” (Ex. 23:2).
- “*Woe to those who call evil good and good evil*” (Is. 5:20).
- “*You cannot serve two masters*” (Mt. 6:24).

Yet history shows how often religious institutions drift into what we might call “unholy alliances.”

Macario Ga led the Philippine Independent Church during the 1970 First Quarter Storm, when Filipino youth took to the streets—not only against Marcos, but against the Church’s complicity. Young people refused silence. They demanded integrity.

And thank God they did.

When the Young Rise: Prophecy from the Streets

“*Out of the mouths of babes and infants, you have founded a bulwark*” (Ps. 8:2).

The youth of the Philippines became a bulwark. They exposed the gap between Gospel and practice. They embodied extraordinary courage.

Their protests were not unlike movements we see today—young people marching for racial justice, for immigrant dignity, for climate survival. Think of echoes in movements portrayed in films like *Selma* or the dystopian warnings of *The Hunger Games*.

They asked a simple question: *Whose side is the Church on?*

Macario Ga and the Philippine Independent Church did something remarkable. They listened.

Rather than doubling down on institutional defensiveness, the Church began to reform:

- It expanded lay participation.
- It established a national youth office.
- It adopted a new constitution grounded in synodality.

This was not merely structural change. It was theological conversion!

“Your young people shall see visions” (Acts 2:17).

The Church allowed itself to be led—at least in part—by those it had once ignored.

Rwanda: When the World Fails to Intervene

April 7 also marks the beginning of the Rwandan genocide in 1994. We commemorate it as **Day to Remember Rwanda Genocide Victims**.

In about 100 days, extremist forces slaughtered approximately 1.1 million people—mostly Tutsi, along with moderate Hutu. The speed, the brutality, the intimacy of the violence defy comprehension.

“Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gen. 4:9)

In Rwanda, the answer came back with devastating clarity: *We are, and we failed.*

The global community hesitated. Delayed. Rationalized. The machinery of genocide moved faster than the will to stop it.

Even the Church, in some instances, was implicated—its buildings used as sites of massacre, its leaders sometimes silent or worse. A riveting book written by a survivor of the Rwandan genocide well worth reading is *Left Behind* by Immaculée Ilibagiza. It is a difficult read, but brings to life the horror of this genocide.

And so today, we mourn. Not abstractly. But personally.

Because genocide is not ancient history. It is a warning. It occurred in our lifetime. And, knowing how human beings are, similar events may well occur again.

As *Chernobyl* reminds us in another context: “Every lie we tell incurs a debt to the truth.” Eventually, that debt is paid.

World Health Day: The Health of a Nation

April 7 is also **World Health Day**, an initiative of the World Health Organization.

This year’s focus calls us to reflect not only on physical health, but on systemic well-being—access to care, mental health, community resilience.

But let’s be honest: Health is not merely biological. It is moral. It is spiritual. It is political.

What does it mean for a society to be “healthy” when:

- Our nation’s president threatens the destruction of necessary infrastructure?
- Religious language is weaponized?
- Vulnerable populations are targeted?

“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick” (Mk. 2:17).

Our democracy is showing symptoms. So is our Church.

Macario Ga’s witness reminds us: Healing begins with truth-telling. It requires dismantling unholy alliances. It demands courageous reform.

Lessons for This Unordinary U.S. Moment

Here we are, in the Easter Octave, celebrating resurrection—yet surrounded by threats of death, even here in the U.S.

We hear rhetoric that echoes domination, not liberation. We see power wielded without humility. We watch as faith is invoked to justify violence.

It is dangerous. And surreal.

“Choose this day whom you will serve” (Jos. 24:15).

Macario Ga’s legacy presses upon us:

- Will we align with power or with people?
- Will we remain silent or speak?
- Will we protect institutions or pursue truth?

If the Philippine Independent Church could reform under pressure, if voices could rise in Rwanda’s aftermath calling for reconciliation, then perhaps there is hope for us, too.

Extraordinary hope. But only if we act.

Calls to Extraordinary Action

- **Reject unholy alliances.** Refuse to align faith with political power when it harms human dignity.
- **Listen to the young.** Take seriously the prophetic voices rising in our communities.
- **Speak against violence.** Clearly name when leaders misuse God’s name to justify harm.
- **Promote holistic health.** Advocate for systems that protect physical, mental and communal well-being.
- **Practice active remembrance.** Honor victims of genocide not only with memory, but with commitment to “never again.”

From Silence to Solidarity: An Easter People Rising

We began with horror: Rwanda, where the world watched and failed to act.

We moved through the Philippines, where young people refused silence, and a Church found the courage to change.

Now we stand here, in our own moment, facing our own choices.

Easter does not deny Good Friday. It transforms it.

The question is whether we will participate in that transformation.

Will we remain silent as threats escalate?

Will we allow faith to be distorted beyond recognition?

Or will we, like Macario Ga and those courageous Filipino youth, choose another way?

“Why do you look for the living among the dead?” (Lk. 24:5)

Resurrection is not found in fear. It is found in courage. In truth. In solidarity.

In extraordinary love.

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where do I see “unholy alliances” in my own context?
- How am I called to listen more deeply to younger voices?
- What does it mean to stand against violence in concrete ways?
- How do I contribute to the health — or illness — of my community and of our nation?
- What does “never again” require of me today?

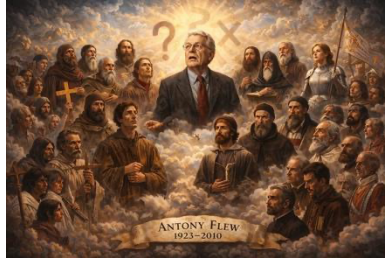
Let Us Pray

God of life and healing, You who weep with the victims of violence, You who call your people to justice and peace, break open our hearts. Disturb our complacency. Give us the courage to name what is wrong and the strength to build what is right. In this Easter season, raise us from silence to solidarity, from fear to faith, from complicity to extraordinary love. We ask this through Christ, who lives and calls us still. Amen.

From Atheism to Awe

Antony Flew and the Fragile Credibility of Faith in a Skeptical Age

April 8, 2026



As a young seminarian, I was always aghast at the stories of faithful people killed not by marauding bands, but by... their own Church! Arnold of Brescia, hanged and burned. Fra Dolcino, burned at the stake. Marguerite Porete, burned at the stake.

You start sensing a theme.

Jacques de Molay. Jan Hus. Joan of Arc. Girolamo Savonarola. William Tyndale. Étienne Dolet. Michael Servetus. Thomas Cranmer. Giordano Bruno. Cayetano Ripoll.

Add the clerics executed for the Orléans heresy. The 3,000+ victims of the Spanish Inquisition. 8,000+ massacred Waldensians. Countless indigenous individuals in the Americas, forced to choose between “cross and sword” – forced conversion or violent death.

The list is both sobering and scandalous. Thousands upon thousands silenced for daring to think differently, to question, to dissent.

Had he lived in another era, **Antony Flew** – the man we remember today – might well have faced a similar fate. For decades, he was one of the most formidable critics of belief in God. He dismantled arguments. He challenged assumptions. He refused easy answers.

And then, late in life, he did something even more radical: He changed his mind.

In a world that rewards certainty and punishes nuance, that might be the most extraordinary act of all!

The Relentless Skeptic: A Life of Questioning

Antony Flew (1923-2010) rose to prominence as one of the 20th century’s leading philosophers of religion. His essay “Theology and Falsification” became required reading in classrooms across the world.

His central challenge was deceptively simple: *What would count as evidence against God?*

If nothing could count against belief, he argued, then belief was meaningless.

He questioned:

- The coherence of God-language.
- The plausibility of life after death.
- The compatibility of evil with an all-good, all-powerful God.
- The notion of free will under divine foreknowledge.

“Fools say in their hearts, ‘There is no God’” (Ps. 14:1). Flew would respond: Perhaps the greater foolishness is believing without evidence, or worse, refusing to ask hard questions!

Flew’s intellectual posture reminds me of *Good Will Hunting*—that relentless probing, that refusal to accept inherited narratives without testing them. Or even House, where every assumption must be interrogated before a diagnosis can be trusted.

Flew was not cynical. He was rigorous. He believed truth mattered—and that it must withstand scrutiny.

Faithful Doubt and the Collapse of Certainty

Here’s the uncomfortable truth: Many people today walk a path similar to Flew’s early journey. They leave. They question. They disengage.

Roughly 13% of U.S. adults self-identify as former Catholics. In Mexico, an estimated 1,000 Catholics daily leave the Church. Let that sink in. 1,000 people. Every. Single. Day.

Why?

Because faith, as they encounter it, often feels politicized, hypocritical and/or disconnected from reality.

“By their fruits, you will know them” (Mt. 7:16).

And for many, the fruits they see—abuse scandals, exclusion, nationalism—lead not to belief, but to disbelief.

In pop culture, this crisis echoes in works like *Spotlight*, which exposed the Church’s failures, or *The Leftovers*, filmed here in Central Texas, which wrestles with absence, loss and the silence of God.

Flew’s atheism was not born of rebellion. It was born of observation.

And perhaps that is where the Church must begin again: not by condemning doubt, but by listening to it.

Following the Evidence—Wherever It Leads

Late in life, Antony Flew stunned the intellectual world.

After decades of atheism, he came to believe in an “intelligent creator.”

Not the God of dogma. Not the God of organized religion. But a rational source of the universe—something like Aristotle’s “Unmoved Mover.”

What changed?

He followed the evidence.

Advances in science—particularly in the complexity of DNA and the fine-tuning of the universe—led him to reconsider his conclusions.

“I now believe there is a God,” he said, “because it seems to me that the origin of life cannot be explained otherwise.”

This was not a conversion story in the traditional sense. There was no altar call. No dramatic emotional moment.

It was intellectual honesty.

“Test everything; hold fast to what is good” (1Thes. 5:21). Flew lived that verse—perhaps more faithfully than many believers.

And here’s the irony: The same Church that once silenced thinkers like him now desperately needs people like him—people willing to question, to revise, to grow!

The Crisis of Credibility: Faith in an Age of Absurdity

We cannot ignore the context in which we remember Flew.

We are living in an unordinary U.S. moment when faith is being distorted in ways that would drive any honest thinker toward skepticism.

When political leaders invoke God’s name to justify violence.

When religion becomes a tool of power.

When Easter messages sound more like war cries than resurrection proclamations.

Who could blame someone for walking away?

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom” (Mt. 7:21).

Flew’s life becomes a mirror, forcing us to ask:

- *What kind of God are we presenting?*
- *What kind of Church are we embodying?*

If belief appears irrational, unethical or dangerous, then disbelief becomes reasonable, even inevitable.

As *The Truman Show* suggests, once the illusion cracks, one must decide whether to remain inside it or step into the unknown.

Flew stepped into the unknown.

The question is whether the Church will.

Extraordinary Faith: Beyond Certainty, Toward Truth

Hans Küng questioned. Anthony Flew questioned. You and I question.

And maybe that’s not a problem.

Maybe that’s the path.

“Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mk. 9:24).

That is perhaps the most honest prayer in Scripture.

Faith is not certainty. It is trust amid uncertainty.

Flew's journey—from atheism to a form of belief—reminds us that the search for truth is rarely linear. It is messy. It is evolving. It is deeply human.

And perhaps, in this Easter season, that is the point.

Resurrection does not erase doubt. It transforms it.

Think of U2's "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For"—that aching, searching, unresolved longing. That is faith for many of us.

Not arrival, but journey!

Calls to Extraordinary Action

- **Embrace honest questioning.** Create spaces where doubt is not feared, but welcomed.
- **Rebuild credibility through integrity.** Align belief with action. Let your life preach louder than your words.
- **Reject the politicization of faith.** Refuse to let religion be co-opted for power or violence.
- **Engage science and reason.** See them not as threats, but as partners in the search for truth.
- **Accompany those who struggle to believe.** Walk with them. Listen. Love without condition.

A Church That Can Withstand the Fire

We began with flames—those who were burned for thinking differently.

We remember them with grief. With righteous anger. With humble acknowledgement of the reality of human evil.

And we remember Antony Flew, who lived in a time when he could freely question—and who courageously used that freedom.

The question now is whether the Church has learned anything. The questions include:

- Will we still silence dissent?
 - Will we still fear inquiry?
 - Will we still cling to certainty at the expense of truth?
 - Or will we become a community capable of extraordinary honesty?
- "Then you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (Jn. 8:32).*

Flew sought that freedom. So must we.

Because in the end, faith that cannot withstand questioning is not faith at all. It is fear.

And Easter is about the triumph—not of fear—but of life!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where in my life do I struggle with doubt—and how do I respond to it?
- Do I allow others the freedom to question, or do I shut them down?
- What aspects of faith do I find hardest to believe—and why?
- How can I live in a way that makes belief more credible to others?
- What would it mean for me to follow the evidence—wherever it leads?

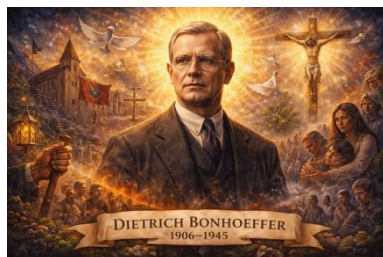
Let Us Pray

God of truth and mystery, You who meet us in both belief and doubt, You who are never threatened by our questions, give us the courage to seek honestly, the humility to admit when we are wrong, and the wisdom to recognize your presence, even in unexpected places. In this Easter season, transform our doubts into deeper faith, our questions into deeper understanding, our lives into extraordinary witnesses of your love. We ask this in the name of the One who invites us always to seek, to knock, to find. Amen.

The Cost of Discipleship in an Age of Empire

Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the extraordinary courage to resist

April 9, 2026



During my Substack scrolling over these past months, I've noticed something striking: Progressive Christian voices keep returning to one figure—again and again—as if we're circling a fire for warmth in a very cold time. That figure is **Dietrich Bonhoeffer** (1906-1945).

And I get it.

His world—shaped by nationalism, propaganda, fear, and a Church too often seduced by power—feels eerily familiar.

As we remember his death 81 years ago today, executed by the Nazi regime just weeks before the end of World War II, I find myself asking:

What Catholic perspectives might be shared on this great Protestant theologian in this very unordinary U.S. moment?

Because if Bonhoeffer were alive today, I don't think he'd be quietly preaching from a safe pulpit. I think he'd be asking us – demanding of us – whether our faith costs us anything at all.

A Life Lived on the Edge of Truth

Born in 1906 Germany, Bonhoeffer was brilliant, privileged, deeply formed in theology – and yet he refused to remain comfortable.

His most famous work, *The Cost of Discipleship*, gave us a phrase that should haunt every Christian:

“Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves... grace without discipleship, grace without the cross.”

Contrast that with Scripture:

- “If you want to be my disciple, you must deny yourself and take up your cross” (Mk. 8:34)
- “Faith without works is dead” (Jas. 2:17)
- “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake” (Mt. 5:10)

Bonhoeffer watched as much of the German Church embraced Adolf Hitler – wrapping nationalism in the language of Christianity.

Sound familiar?

He helped form the “Confessing Church,” resisting the Nazification of Christianity. Eventually, he joined a resistance movement. He was arrested. Imprisoned. Executed.

This wasn't abstract theology. This was embodied faith.

Think of *Schindler's List* – ordinary people forced to decide whether they will risk everything to save others. Or *The Handmaid's Tale*, where religion is twisted into a tool of oppression.

Bonhoeffer chose costly grace!

Cheap Grace and Christian Nationalism

Let's not soften this.

Bonhoeffer's critique of “cheap grace” lands squarely in our current moment.

Cheap grace is:

- Faith without action.
- Worship without justice.
- Religion used to bless power.

When Christianity becomes fused with nationalism, it loses its soul.

“You cannot serve God and mammon” (Mt. 6:24).

Yet we see it:

- Crosses wrapped in flags.
- Scripture weaponized for political gain.
- Leaders invoking God while threatening violence.

Bonhoeffer clearly saw this in Nazi Germany. He called it out.

Today, many progressive voices see similar patterns emerging in the United States – where loyalty to nation in many corners is eclipsing loyalty to Gospel.

Even recent Easter rhetoric from our U.S. President—invoking divine language while threatening destruction—forces us to confront an uncomfortable truth:

When faith is co-opted by power, disbelief becomes understandable.

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” (Mt. 23:13)

Bonhoeffer would not mince words. Neither should we.

A Church for Others: Standing with the Vulnerable

One of Bonhoeffer’s most powerful ideas was this: The Church exists for others.

Not for itself. Not for institutional preservation. Not for comfort.

For others.

“The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the stranger as yourself” (Lev. 19:34).

“I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Mt. 25:35).

In my own ministry here in Austin, particularly among Mexican and Mexican-American communities, I’ve seen this Gospel lived with extraordinary beauty – and also threatened by political forces that seek to divide.

Bonhoeffer would ask us:

- Are we standing with immigrants?
- Are we defending the marginalized?
- Are we risking anything for justice?

Think of *Selma* or the prophetic storytelling of *Roma*. These narratives remind us: Justice is never abstract. It is always embodied!

Extraordinary love always has a cost!

Religionless Christianity: Faith in a “World Come of Age”

Bonhoeffer spoke of a “religionless Christianity”—a phrase that unsettles many.

He didn’t mean abandoning God. He meant stripping away the layers, the garments, the cultural baggage that obscure God.

He asked: **What does faith look like in a world that no longer needs religion as a crutch?**

"For we walk by faith, not by sight" (2Cor. 5:7).

In a world of science, skepticism, pluralism, Bonhoeffer envisioned a faith that:

- Engages reality, not escapes it.
- Takes responsibility for the world.
- Finds God in the midst of suffering.

It's a bit like *Everything Everywhere All at Once*—chaotic, complex, overwhelming—and yet, at its core, about choosing love and responsibility in the midst of it all.

Or even *Fix You*, where brokenness becomes the very place of healing. This is not comfortable faith. It is *real* faith!

Religionless Christianity: Faith in a "World Come of Age"

Let's be honest: Many of us feel the tension.

We see:

- Authoritarian tendencies.
- Attacks on vulnerable communities.
- Religion entangled with political power.

And we wonder: **What do we do?**

Bonhoeffer answers: **Act!**

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

He calls us to what we might name today as *extraordinary courage*:

- To speak when silence is safer.
- To act when apathy is easier.
- To love when fear is louder.

This is not theoretical. This is discipleship.

Calls to Extraordinary Action

- **Reject cheap grace.** Let your faith cost you something—time, comfort, reputation.
- **Resist Christian nationalism.** Keep the Gospel free from political co-option.
- **Stand with the vulnerable.** Prioritize the marginalized over institutional security.
- **Honestly engage the world.** Practice a faith that confronts reality, not escapes it.
- **Build authentic community.** Create spaces of truth, courage and solidarity. Watch the movie *Bonhoeffer* with a group and discuss how it relates to our own time.

From Comfortable Faith to Costly Love

We began with Bonhoeffer, a man whose name echoes through social media, sermons and conversations, because something in us recognizes the urgency of his witness.

His world was burning.

So is ours, in different ways.

The question is *not* whether we admire him. The question is whether we will *follow* him.

Will we settle for cheap grace? Will we align with power? Will we remain silent? Or will we choose costly discipleship?

“Take up your cross and follow me” (Lk. 9:23)

In the Easter Octave, we proclaim resurrection.

But resurrection only comes after the cross.

Bonhoeffer knew that.

The question is whether we do.

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where in my life am I tempted toward “cheap grace”?
- How do I respond when faith is used to justify harm?
- Who are the vulnerable people I am called to stand with today?
- What “garments” of faith might I need to shed?
- What would costly discipleship look like in my life right now?

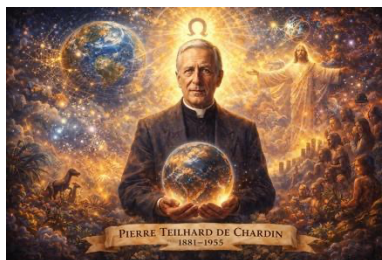
Let Us Pray

God of courage and truth, You who call us beyond comfort,
 You who stand with the oppressed, give us the strength to resist what is wrong, the wisdom to discern what is right, and the courage to act, even when it costs us. In this Easter season, transform our fear into faith, our complacency into conviction, our lives into extraordinary witnesses of your love. We ask this through Christ, who bore the cross and conquered death. Amen.

Toward the Omega Point

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin on Faith, Evolution and Extraordinary Hope

April 10, 2026



When I joined the Conventual Franciscan Friars at age 18, I had no idea the world of thought that would soon open before me. Some of that world came alive through a classmate, Scott Davidson, whose enthusiasm for Teilhard proved contagious. I remember sitting with *The Divine Milieu*, underlining passages, scribbling notes in the margins, trying to grasp what felt like a cosmic vision of God!

Decades later, I return to those same pages, now with more life experience behind me—and perhaps more questions, too. In a moment when our nation feels less like it is evolving toward unity and more like it is unraveling into division, Teilhard’s voice whispers—no, insists—that evolution is not chaos. It is convergence. It is Christ.

And so today, as we celebrate Teilhard’s life, we ask: *Are we still moving toward the Omega Point? Or have we lost our way?*

A Jesuit with a Cosmic Imagination

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) was no ordinary priest. A Jesuit, a paleontologist, a philosopher, he spent his life bridging worlds that many believed could never meet: science and faith, evolution and theology, matter and spirit. While studying fossils in China and writing theological reflections often censored by Church authorities, Teilhard envisioned the universe not as static, but as dynamic—always moving, always becoming. For him, evolution was not merely biological. It was spiritual.

Vladimir Vernadsky articulated the idea of the *noosphere*—a sphere of human thought enveloping the earth—and Teilhard took it further. He imagined all consciousness converging toward a final point of unity: the *Omega Point*, which he identified with Christ.

“I am the Alpha and the Omega” (Rev. 22:13).

Not metaphor. Not poetry. But reality.

The Divine Milieu: God in All Things

Teilhard's *The Divine Milieu* offers a radical claim: Everything—our work, our struggles, our suffering—participates in God. Everything.

- “Whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God” (1Cor. 10:31).
- “In God, we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).
- “All things work together for good” (Rom. 8:28).

Teilhard rejected the idea that only explicitly “religious” acts matter. Instead, he proclaimed that all *human endeavor*, when oriented toward love and growth, contributes to the unfolding of Christ in the universe!

This deeply resonates with those of us who have lived outside traditional ecclesial structures. When I left the Roman Church after my break with a conservative appointee of Papa Ratzinger, I had to rediscover where God lived. Teilhard would unequivocally say: *Everywhere!*

In living rooms. In classrooms. In boardrooms. In advocacy. In marriage. Even at the gym on a random Friday morning.

God is not confined. God is unfolding!

Evolution or Devolution? Naming Our Moment

And yet... here we are, in a moment when our U.S. political climate feels less like ascent and more like collapse. When an Easter greeting reads as a profane threat of war. When bridges—literal and figurative—become targets, rather than symbols of connection.

Teilhard believed in progress—not naïve optimism, but a deep trust that history bends toward unity in Christ.

But what do we do when history feels like it's bending backward?

- “How long, O Lord?” (Ps. 13:1)
- “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mk. 15:34)
- “The whole creation has been groaning in labor pains” (Rom. 8:22)

Teilhard never denied suffering. In fact, he profoundly wrote about what he called the “passivities of diminishment”—loss, failure, death. Yet he insisted that even these are caught up in divine transformation.

Which raises a haunting question: **Is what we are experiencing now part of the “labor pains”... or a resistance to evolution itself?**

The Omega Point vs. the Abyss

Teilhard's Omega Point stands in stark contrast to what we might call our present abyss.

Pop culture captures this tension well:

- In *Avengers Endgame*, the universe teeters between annihilation and restoration.
- In *Black Mirror*, technology evolves, but humanity often devolves.

- In *The Matrix*, reality itself becomes a battleground for truth.
- Taylor Swift sings of navigating chaos and identity in a fractured world.
- Beyoncé proclaims resilience and transformation in the face of oppression.

Teilhard would ask: **Are we evolving technologically faster than we are spiritually?**

Because if so, the noosphere becomes not a sphere of unity—but of noise.

Extraordinary Action in an Evolutionary Faith

If Teilhard is right, then we are not passive observers of history. We are co-creators within it!

What might this demand of us today?

- **Actively resist dehumanization in all its forms**, remembering “whatever you did for the least of these... you did for me” (Mt. 25:40).
- **Integrate faith and work**, seeing your daily labor as participation in God’s unfolding creation.
- **Advocate for policies that promote unity, not division**—healthcare, education, environmental care.
- **Commit to intellectual humility and curiosity**, engaging science and faith as partners, not enemies.
- **Build communities of extraordinary love**, where diversity becomes strength, not threat.
- **Name and confront misuse of religion in politics**, especially when it justifies violence or exclusion.
- **Cultivate hope as a discipline, not a feeling**, trusting that resurrection often looks like resistance before it looks like victory.

Returning to the Abyss—and the Light

I think back to that young seminarian, sitting with *The Divine Milieu*, peering into what Teilhard called the “deep abyss” within himself.

Today, I still peer into that abyss—personally, politically, spiritually. But I also see something else.

Light.

Not blinding. Not overpowering. But persistent.

Teilhard teaches us that evolution is not a straight line. It is messy, painful, uncertain. But it is also *directional*. It bends—slowly, stubbornly—toward Christ.

And so, even in this very unordinary U.S. moment that feels more like Good Friday than the Easter Octave, we dare to believe:

- The stone is still rolling away (Mt. 28:2).
- Death does not have the final word (1Cor. 15:55).
- The Omega Point is still ahead of us!

Not because we clearly see it.

But because we trust the One who is drawing all things toward it!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where do I see evolution—spiritual or social—happening in my own life?
- Where do I resist growth, out of fear or comfort?
- How do I reconcile moments when the world feels like it is moving backward?
- In what ways can I more intentionally participate in God's ongoing creation?
- What does it mean for me, concretely, to live toward the Omega Point today?
- How do I hold together suffering and hope without collapsing into despair or denial?

Let Us Pray

God of all creation, You who are Alpha and Omega, You who draw all things toward unity in Christ, in this moment of confusion and conflict, grant us extraordinary courage to trust your unfolding work. When we see division, make us instruments of communion. When we feel despair, root us in resurrection hope. When we grow weary, remind us that even now, Your Spirit moves through every atom, every action, every act of love. Help us to live not as spectators, but as participants in your divine milieu—co-creators of a world being drawn, even now, toward your radiant, reconciling heart. Amen.

When Power Demands the Church Choose Sides

St. Stanislaus and the Cost of Courage in an Age of Pressure

April 11, 2026



It was the kind of headline that makes you stop mid-scroll.

Reports began circulating on Wednesday that the Trump administration had summoned the Vatican’s diplomatic representative—the papal nuncio—to the Pentagon in January, delivering what many interpreted as a veiled warning: *Tone it down, and choose a side.*

In particular, the message seemed aimed at softening Pope Leo’s critiques of various stances of the Trump administration. U.S. officials interpreted the pope’s inaugural January “state of the world” address as a rebuke of Trump’s “Donroe Doctrine,” which champions U.S. dominance in the western hemisphere, bolstered by military force. The news broke on the heels of the pope’s moral critique of the escalating U.S./Israeli conflict with Iran—a conflict that is raising grave humanitarian concerns across the globe—and was followed by the news that the pope has scuttled any visit to the U.S. during the Trump administration.

To make matters worse, the January Pentagon encounter purportedly included the veiled threat that the U.S. military possesses the “power to do whatever it wants, and that the Church had better take its side”—or risk facing the possibility of another “Avignon papacy,” a not-so-subtle reference to the 14th-century events when the king of France used military force to bend the pope to his wishes.

For those of us who love the Church—not as an institution of power, but as a community of conscience—the moment felt unsettlingly familiar. When political authority pressures spiritual authority to conform, history tells us what often follows.

Which brings us, providentially, to today’s saint.

A Bishop Who Refused to Bend: Stanislaus of Szczepanów

Stanislaus of Szczepanów (1030-1079) served as Bishop of Kraków during a time of political unrest and moral corruption. His great “crime” was this: He spoke truth to power.

King Bolesław II the Bold ruled with increasing brutality—abuses of authority, violence against political opponents, and scandalous personal behavior. Stanislaus confronted him publicly, calling him to repentance.

It did not end well.

In 1079, the king’s soldiers—some accounts say the king himself—killed Stanislaus while he celebrated Mass. At the altar. During the Eucharist.

If you’ve ever seen his iconography, you know it’s not subtle: a bishop dismembered, a body broken because his conscience would not yield.

And yet, through that violence, something extraordinary emerged—not power, but witness.

As Jesus suggested: *“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends”* (Jn. 15:13).

From Kraków to St. Louis: A Legacy That Crosses Oceans

Stanislaus’ legacy did not remain in 11th-century Poland. It traveled with immigrants—especially to cities like St. Louis, Chicago, and Detroit—where Polish Catholics built vibrant communities and often named them in honor of two great Polish saints: **Stanislaus of Szczepanów**, the 11th-century bishop and martyr who is now the patron saint of Poland, and **Stanislaus Kostka**, a 16th-century Jesuit novice who died in Rome at age 18 and is a patron saint of students and novices.

One of the most notable of these is St. Stanislaus Polish Catholic Church, a Roman Catholic parish named for the latter in St. Louis, Missouri. In the early 2000s, the community famously clashed with ecclesial authority when the truly archconservative archbishop Raymond Burke excommunicated them for refusing to bend to his will. The “silver lining”: The parish, then under the leadership of Father Marek Bożek, subsequently experienced a rebirth as a much more loving and inclusive expression of our Catholic faith!

Whatever one thinks of that particular dispute, it underscores something essential: *These two Polish saints of the same name remain symbols for communities wrestling with authority, conscience, and the limits of obedience.*

This is not just ancient history. It is a story that pulses with life today.

When Faith Meets Fear: The Present Moment

Let's be honest: We are living in a moment where many institutions — religious, civic, educational — feel pressure to conform.

- Government officials signal that faith leaders should “soften” moral language.
- Public schools and universities are told they must jettison the gospel values of diversity, equity and inclusion.
- Immigration enforcement increasingly touches schools, churches, even family life.
- War rhetoric escalates faster than diplomacy — even on Easter day.

These real-life situations now raise a fundamental question: *What is the role of the Church?*

Is it to echo power?

Or to challenge it?

The prophets were clear. Amos declared, “*Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream*” (Amos 5:24).

And yet, speaking that truth carries risk.

Even today.

Think of films like *Spotlight*, where truth-telling within the Church came at great personal and institutional cost. Or *Romero*, which depicts Archbishop Óscar Romero — another bishop killed at the altar for speaking against injustice.

History is not subtle about this pattern.

Easter Courage: Resurrection Does Not Eliminate Risk

Here's the tension of the Easter Octave: We proclaim resurrection... while still living in a world that crucifies.

To be clear: The risen Christ did not *erase* wounds; he *exposed* them.

The risen Christ invited Thomas: “*Put your finger here and see my hands*” (Jn. 20:27).

The message is crystal-clear: Resurrection is not the absence of suffering, but the transformation of it!

Which means that extraordinary courage is still required of us.

Not reckless courage.

Not partisan courage.

But Gospel-rooted courage.

The kind that Stanislaus embodied.

The kind that refuses to trade conscience for comfort.

Pop Culture, Prophets, and the Power of Voice

Sometimes, even pop culture helps us name what faith demands.

When Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton* asks, "Who lives, who dies, who tells your story?" —it echoes the stakes of witness.

When Bob Dylan sings, "The times they are a-changin'," he names the urgency of moral awakening.

When Bad Bunny amplifies marginalized voices, he reminds us that culture itself can become prophetic.

And yes, even shows like *The Handmaid's Tale* warn us what happens when religious language is co-opted by political power.

Faith does not exist in a vacuum.

It speaks. Or it is silenced.

Invitations to Extraordinary Action

For those of us striving to live our faith in a very unordinary U.S. moment, we might:

- Clearly speak when policies harm the vulnerable, even when doing so feels uncomfortable.
- Support spaces and organizations that welcome dialogue, rather than demand silence.
- Teach young people how to think critically, faithfully, and courageously.
- Build bridges across political divides without sacrificing moral clarity.
- Pray not only for peace, but for the courage to pursue justice that makes peace possible.

The Altar and the Flag

We began with a contemporary scene: Power summoning the Church and urging it — subtly or not — to align, to soften, to comply.

We end at an altar in Kraków.

A bishop stands. A sword is raised. A life is taken. And yet...

The Church remembers not the king who wielded power, but the bishop who spoke truth.

That is the paradox of our faith: Apparent defeat becomes witness. And seeming weakness becomes extraordinary strength.

As we conclude this Easter octave and continue through this Easter season, may we resist the temptation to confuse comfort with resurrection.

Because resurrection does not ask us to be safe.

It calls us to be faithful!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where do I feel pressure to remain silent when I should speak?
- How do I discern the difference between prudence and fear?
- When have I witnessed extraordinary courage in my own community?
- How do I form young people to value conscience over conformity?
- In what ways is God inviting me to stand more firmly for justice today?

Let Us Pray

God of truth and courage, you raised up St. Stanislaus of Szczepanów to speak when silence would have been easier. In this extraordinary moment, grant us the grace to stand firm in conscience, to speak with clarity, to love with boldness, and to act with justice. When we are tempted to yield to pressure, strengthen us. When we are afraid, accompany us. When we fall short, renew us. May the risen Christ—still bearing his wounds—teach us that even in suffering, love is never defeated. Amen.

“Second Verse, Same as the First” When Church and State Collide

April 12, 2026



Some of my fondest memories as a young Boy Scout—long before I made my way from the cornfields of Ohio to the corn tortillas of Texas—were shaped while mentoring younger scouts as a den chief. I loved telling stories, leading songs, and filling the quiet spaces between Cub Scout camp activities with cadence calls that kept us moving forward together.

One oft-repeated call has never left me: *“Second verse, same as the first, but a little bit louder and a whole lot worse!”*

That line came rushing back this week when reports surfaced that a Pentagon official summoned the papal nuncio—the pope’s ambassador to the U.S.—to a private meeting in January, invoking the specter of another

Avignon papacy, a not-so-subtle reference to a 14th-century controversy when the king of France used military might to bend the pope's will.

History, it seems, is simply singing its second verse—"but a little bit louder and a whole lot worse!"

250 years after the beginning of the Avignon papacy, two French bishops, **Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet** and **Pierre de Langle**, stepped onto the stage and toed the line between throne and altar, the tension between conscience and control.

Let's talk about them.

Bossuet and the Temptation of Power

Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet (1627-1704) was no minor figure. He was the court preacher of Louis XIV—the Sun King himself. Imagine the grandeur of Versailles, the absolute authority of a monarch who apocryphally declared, "*L'état, c'est moi*" (I myself am the nation). There, in that orbit of power, stood a bishop tasked with navigating both divine truth and royal expectation.

Bossuet drafted what became known as the Gallican Articles—asserting that the French king was not subject to the pope in temporal matters, and that papal authority had limits outside of ecclesial contexts.

To some, this was pragmatic. To others, prophetic. To still others, including the pope and those who surrounded him, this was extremely dangerous.

Rome decisively responded by rejecting the Gallican Articles and bestowing all earthly authority on the pope.

Bossuet walked the tightrope between pope and king, between church and state. And if we're honest, so do we.

Think of *The Godfather*: Power always demands loyalty, and loyalty often demands compromise!

De Langle and the Courage to Resist

If Bossuet stood near power, Pierre de Langle (1643-1724) stood against it. The controversy in which he found himself centered on *Unigenitus*, a 1713 papal bull condemning the theology of Flemish bishop Cornelius Jansen. Many in France saw the papal condemnation as an overreach—a silencing of legitimate debate.

So, De Langle, like others, resisted. He was in his early 20s when Sister Angélique de Saint-Jean Arnauld D'Andilly was imprisoned by the archbishop of Paris in 1666 for her refusal to sign the formulary of submission demanded by *Unigenitus*.

As a bishop in northern France, at the narrowest point of the English channel, he called for an ecumenical council—an extraordinary act of

ecclesial courage—believing that the Church must collectively discern truth, and not allow a single person to unilaterally impose it.

The consequences? A riot in his diocese. Exile from his own flock. Isolation. He lived what Jesus warned:

- “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake” (Mt. 5:10)
- “A prophet is not without honor except in his own country” (Mk. 6:4)

His story feels like something out of *Andor* or *Les Misérables*—ordinary people resisting systems that demand silence.

And perhaps that’s the point: Extraordinary courage often looks like quiet defiance!

History Repeats: Echoes of Avignon in Washington

This week’s news—of pressure placed upon the Vatican—feels eerily familiar.

The Avignon papacy was not merely a relocation of the papacy to southern France. It was a moment when political authority effectively captured spiritual leadership.

Today, the dynamics are different, but the tension remains.

When governments pressure the Church to soften its voice—on war, on justice, on human dignity—we stand again at that crossroads.

Will the Church speak prophetically?

Or will it calculate politically?

Pop culture captures this tension well:

- *The Crown* explores the uneasy dance between monarchy and moral authority.
- *Spotlight* reminds us what happens when institutions protect themselves over truth.
- *This Is America* exposes systems that normalize injustice.
- *The West Wing* imagines what principled leadership could look like.

We are not living in the 14th century. But we are living in a very unordinary U.S. moment where the same questions resurface.

The Line Between Church and State—Still Blurred

So, what about the separation of church and state, the “wall of separation” thought by many to be in the First Amendment’s Establishment Clause, but actually coined by Thomas Jefferson in an 1802 letter regarding religious liberty, harkening back to Rhode Island founder Roger Williams’ separation between the “garden” of the church and the “wilderness” of the world?

Bossuet blurred it. De Langle challenged it. And we are still navigating it.

In today's United States, the temptation runs both ways:

- **Political leaders seek religious endorsement to legitimize policy.** Think the optics of the March 5 photo op in the Oval Office, of evangelical pastors praying over the president amid escalating US-Israeli military strikes against Iran during Operation Epic Fury.
- **Religious leaders seek political favor to preserve influence.** Think Roman Catholic bishop Robert Barron of Winona-Rochester skipping Holy Week obligations with his "flock" on April 1 to attend a White House lunch. Consider, also, Paula White-Cain's blasphemous comparison of the president to Jesus during that same event: "Mr. President, no one has paid the price like you have paid the price....You were betrayed and arrested and falsely accused. It's a familiar pattern that our Lord and Savior showed us."

The Gospel calls us elsewhere:

- *"My kingdom is not of this world"* (Jn. 18:36)
- *"The truth will set you free"* (Jn. 8:32)

The Church does not exist to serve power. It exists to speak truth to power—with extraordinary clarity, extraordinary courage, extraordinary love.

What This Means for Us Today

For those of us trying to faithfully live in this moment, the lessons are not abstract. They are deeply practical:

- When leaders pressure the Church, we must ask: Who benefits from silence?
- When the Church aligns too closely with power, we must ask: What is lost?
- When dissent is punished, we must ask: What truth is being suppressed?
- And, as the Epstein Hermeneutic suggests, when presidents attempt to distract us with every possible action and appointment, and when first ladies call press conferences to deny and deflect, we must ask: What are we being told to ignore?

This is not about left, right or center. It is about integrity.

As Stephen Colbert, another popular U.S. Catholic, often reminds us through satire: Truth has a way of surfacing, even when institutions try to bury it.

Calls to Extraordinary Action

Before we conclude, let's get concrete. In this very unordinary U.S. moment, we can:

- Clearly speak when political power pressures the Church.
- Support leaders who courageously uphold conscience.
- Advocate for the Church's independence from all partisan control—and for governmental/secular independence from religious control.
- Educate others on historical events like the 14th-century Avignon papacy, the 1682 Gallican Articles, and the 17th- and 18th-century formularies of submission required of clergy and religious before and after the 1713 papal bull *Unigenitus*.
- Build spaces where honest dialogue can flourish without fear.

Singing a Better Second Verse

That scouting cadence still rings in my ears: *"Second verse, same as the first, but a little bit louder and a whole lot worse!"* History does repeat itself. But faith gives us the chance to rewrite the verse.

Bossuet reminds us of the temptation to align with power. De Langle reminds us of the cost of resisting it. And the Gospel calls us—still—to choose truth.

In this Easter season, we proclaim resurrection. Not just of Christ, but of courage. Not just of hope, but of integrity.

May we sing a different second verse—one marked not by fear or compromise, but by extraordinary courage and extraordinary love!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where do I see the line between Church and state blurred today?
- When have I been tempted to remain silent, rather than speak truth?
- Do I prioritize institutional comfort over Gospel integrity?
- How can I support those who courageously dissent for the sake of justice?
- What would it look like for me to live with extraordinary courage in this moment?

Let Us Pray

God of truth and freedom, You raise up prophets in every age to challenge power and to proclaim justice. Give us the wisdom to discern where we stand, and the humility to listen for Your voice above all others. In this unordinary moment, help us to boldly speak, deeply love, and justly act. May we never trade truth for comfort, nor silence for safety. And may Your Church always reflect not the power of this world, but the light of Your Kingdom. Amen.

Chains, Courage and Conscience

Lessons from St. Hermenegild and St. Martin I in an Age of Power, Pressure and Division

April 13, 2026



Just as many children idolize their parents, I, as a boy from the cornfields of Ohio, held my father in high esteem. He overcame teenage adversity, served others, and shaped my imagination of what it meant to be a good man. For years, he volunteered as our local scoutmaster and as an emergency medical technician. He trained the altar servers at our church, and he served as Grand Knight of the Knights of Columbus.

But, considering the rural context in which he was raised, and in which he and my mother raised us, I frankly wasn't surprised by his reply when I came out to him over 30 years ago: "Your mother and I thought we raised you better than that."

Yet, years later, in 2015, he sat in the front row at my wedding in Austin, quietly embodying a different kind of courage—one that wrestled with love, loyalty and conscience, all while knowing that he would have to fly back to Ohio and explain to family, coworkers and card-playing buddies why he traveled to Texas. My father could have responded very differently. He could have chosen not to celebrate our love. Indeed, I've heard numerous stories of parents who cut off communication after their children came out to them, after their own flesh-and-blood said, in the words of *The Greatest Showman*, "This is me."

Two saints we remember today—Hermenegild and Martin I—stood at similar crossroads. Their stories reveal what happens when love, power, belief and identity collide. And they challenge us, in this unordinary U.S. moment, to ask: When pressured by family, church, or state, who do we become?

A Prince in Chains: The Cost of Conversion

In 6th-century Spain, **Hermenegild** (+585) was not simply a son; he was a political symbol. His father, King Leovigild, upheld Arian Christianity, a theological system that denied the full divinity of Christ. For the Visigoth elite, Arianism was more than belief; it was identity, power and control.

Then came love. Hermenegild married a Catholic princess, and through her witness – and perhaps through the quiet promptings of the Spirit – he converted to her religion. What followed was not a polite family disagreement. It was rebellion. It was betrayal.

Hermenegild's father didn't respond with my father's compassion or understanding.

Instead, King Leovigild imprisoned his son. Politically-aligned bishops condemned the prince. And when Hermenegild refused to receive Communion from an Arian bishop, he sealed his fate. He died by the sword, a prince in chains, lifted in iconography above the very structures that tried to break him.

Scripture echoes here: *"Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me"* (Mt. 10:37). It is a hard saying, one we would rather soften. But Hermenegild lived it.

And his witness bore fruit. His brother, Recared, later converted as well, leading an entire kingdom into Catholic unity.

Extraordinary courage rarely ends with us. It ripples!

A Pope in Prison: When the Church Turns on Its Own

If Hermenegild's story is about family, **Martin I** (+655) is about the Church itself – and how easily it can fracture under pressure.

In the 7th century, the Byzantine Empire sought unity through compromise. The doctrine of monothelitism claimed that Jesus had two natures (human and divine), but only one will – since two distinct wills could cause conflict within a person. The theological middle ground was meant to appease and bridge factions in the Eastern Roman Empire: Chalcedonian orthodoxy (two wills) and monophysitism (one nature/will).

But truth is not always found in the middle, and the Third Council of Constantinople (680-681) later rejected monothelitism, choosing instead dyothelitism – that Jesus possessed two distinct wills – a divine will and a human will – that always operated in perfect harmony, with the human will acting in obedience to the divine.

Too much theology, I know. Let's back up.

When the matter was still far from settled, Martin convened the Lateran Council (649) and condemned monothelitism. For this, Emperor Constans

He ordered his arrest. Fellow Christians complied. The pope was dragged from Rome, imprisoned, humiliated, exiled.

He died not at the hands of pagans, but because of Christians!

We hear the echoes of Holy Week:

- Judas betrays (Lk. 22:48).
- Peter denies (Lk. 22:57).
- The crowd turns (Jn. 19:15).
- Pilate washes his hands (Mt. 27:24).

Human beings, under pressure, often abandon relationships and truth for safety, belonging or power.

Martin refused.

Extraordinary courage sometimes means standing alone, even within the Church you love.

Us versus Them: Why We Turn on One Another

Why do these stories feel so familiar?

Because they are not ancient history. They are human psychology.

Social scientists call it “ingroup/outgroup bias.” Scripture calls it sin.

We draw lines. We define who belongs. We protect identity at all costs.

And when someone crosses those lines (like Hermenegild) or challenges the system (like Martin), we react.

We see it everywhere:

- In *The Hunger Games*, where power demands loyalty over truth.
- In *Star Wars*, when Anakin chooses empire over conscience.
- In *Ted Lasso*, when belonging transforms conflict into compassion.
- In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, where religion is weaponized to control.
- In *Spotlight*, where truth-tellers confront institutional betrayal.

And we see it in Scripture:

- Cain and Abel (Gen. 4).
- Joseph sold into slavery by his brothers (Gen. 37).
- The rejection of prophets (Lk. 13:34).
- The division in the early Church (Acts 15).
- Paul confronting Peter (Gal. 2:11).

The pattern is clear: When identity feels threatened, people often choose power over love!

Power, Fear and the Present Moment

We would be naïve to think this dynamic does not shape our own moment.

Across the United States, many have raised concerns about the use of governmental power to target perceived opponents—public officials, legal

professionals, and marginalized communities. Critics have described aspects of Donald Trump's political strategy as retributive, pointing to investigations, executive actions, and public rhetoric aimed at individuals and groups ranging from political leaders to immigrants and transgender persons.

Regardless of one's political perspective, the deeper question for people of faith remains: *What happens when power is used to divide, rather than to serve?*

Jesus was clear: "*You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them... It shall not be so among you*" (Mt. 20:25-26).

Hermenegild faced a father who misused power. Martin faced an emperor – and even fellow Christians – who did the same. So do we.

Extraordinary Courage in Everyday Life

Most of us will not face execution or exile. But we will face moments – quiet, ordinary, deeply personal – where conscience demands courage.

Parents must decide whether love will override fear, prejudices and control.

Teachers must decide whether truth outweighs the pressure to have students conform.

Clergy must decide whether integrity matters more than approval.

I think again of my father, sitting in that front row seat at our wedding on the south lawn of the Texas State Capitol. He did not resolve every theological question. But he chose relationship over rejection.

That, too, is extraordinary courage.

Invitations

In light of these saints and this moment, how might we respond?

- **Choose conscience over conformity** when systems demand silence.
- **Resist the temptation to dehumanize** those with whom we disagree.
- **Speak truth with love** even when it risks relationships or reputation.
- **Stand with the marginalized** – immigrants, LGBTQIA+ persons, the poor – especially when they are targeted.
- **Examine our own use of power** in families, workplaces, churches and communities.
- **Build bridges, rather than barricades**, remembering that conversion often begins with relationship.
- **Pray for those who oppose us**, as Jesus commands (Mt. 5:44).

The Courage to Stay at the Table

In the end, I return to that image: a father in the front row, a son celebrating a sacrament, a quiet act of presence that spoke louder than words.

Hermenegild refused to betray his conscience, even when it meant losing his father.

Martin I refused to compromise truth, even when it meant losing his freedom.

And yet, in my own life, I have seen another kind of courage—the courage to remain, to listen, to grow, to love beyond fear.

In this extraordinary Easter season, as we proclaim resurrection and new life, perhaps the Spirit calls us not only to heroic defiance, but also to transformative presence.

To stay at the table.

To hold tension.

To choose love.

That, too, can change the world!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- When have I experienced tension between love and belief in my own life?
- Where might I be tempted to choose belonging over truth?
- How do I respond when my identity or worldview feels threatened?
- In what ways do I hold power, and how do I use it?
- Who are the “outsiders” in my life, and how is God calling me to encounter them?
- What does extraordinary courage look like for me right now?

Let Us Pray

God of resurrection and truth, you call us to live with extraordinary courage in a world that often rewards fear and division. Give us the strength of Hermenegild to follow conscience even when it costs us. Give us the perseverance of Martin to stand for truth even when we stand alone. Soften our hearts when we are tempted to judge. Open our eyes when we fail to see your image in others. Guide us to use whatever power we hold not to dominate, but to serve. And when we struggle, as we all do, remind us that love—your love—always has the final word. Amen.

You Will Be Found

Lessons from *Dear Evan Hansen* on Despair and Deception

April 14, 2026



This weekend, my husband and I attended a community theater performance of *Dear Evan Hansen*. The story follows a socially-anxious teenager who, in a moment of panic and longing, tells a lie that spirals into an entire alternate reality—one that briefly gives him the belonging he craves, but ultimately collapses under its own weight. The initial lie follows the suicide of a classmate, and the musical follows the family's grief, as well as the tangled web of lies that quickly spreads through social media.

Here at Holy Family, the musical hit home in a deeply personal way. Our Bible study has been praying for the family of a high school student—we'll call him Beto—who recently threatened suicide. Beto's family rallied to support him, and we, in turn, have been discerning how best to be of support to him and his family. As *Dear Evan Hansen* reminds us, such actions do not happen in isolation. They ripple outward, touching parents, siblings, classmates, entire communities.

So let's talk about it—honestly, pastorally, and with the extraordinary courage this moment demands.

A Quiet Crisis: When Death Feels Like the Better Option

In a seminary course nearly 30 years ago, I learned something that has stayed with me: *People consider suicide when they lose hope – when the thought of death begins to seem preferable to the pain they are experiencing.* That thought rushes back every time I assist a family dealing with suicide—or the threat of suicide—and I'm reminded of the harsh judgment that the Roman Catholic Church passed for centuries on those who have taken their lives, suggesting that they, like Judas Iscariot, succumbed to the mortal sin of despair, and sadly denying them Christian burial beginning in the sixth century.

Fortunately, our stance has evolved, and contemporary moral theology often focuses more on mental health factors and God's mercy.

Consider these facts:

- Suicide remains a leading cause of death among young people in the U.S.
- Rates are especially high among adolescents and young adults.
- LGBTQIA+ youth, in particular, face significantly elevated risk.
- Millions report serious thoughts of suicide each year, and many engage in self-harm as a coping mechanism.

Behind every statistic is a story. A family. A “Beto.”

My own anthropology has long been quite simple in this respect: **As human beings, we always choose what appears to us to be best option in any given situation.**

- Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit because knowledge seemed better than ignorance (Gen. 3).
- A child lies about a broken lamp because avoiding punishment seems a better option than telling the truth.
- Hurting individuals contemplate death because it feels like relief from whatever they’re currently suffering.

This does not make the choice good. It makes it human.

Scripture meets us here with unflinching honesty:

- Elijah, exhausted, asked God to let him die (1Kgs. 19:4).
- The psalmist cried, “*Why are you cast down, O my soul?*” (Ps. 42:5).
- Even Jesus, in Gethsemane, wrestled with anguish, asking that the cup of suffering be taken away from him (Mt. 26:38-39).

Despair is not new. But neither is God’s response.

“Anybody Have a Map?”: Parenting in the Unknown

The first song in *Dear Evan Hansen*—“Anybody Have a Map?”—captures something every parent knows, but rarely admits: “*I’m flying blind. And I’m making this up as I go.*”

As the second of four sons, I watched my parents navigate challenges they never anticipated. They did not always get it right. None of us do. And now I see younger generations of parents trying their best to get it right.

Parenting is an act of faith.

Scripture affirms this uncertainty:

- “*Train up your children in the ways they should go...*” (Prov. 22:6)—and yet there are no guarantees.
- “*Children are like arrows in the quiver of the warrior*” (Ps. 127:4-5): Sometimes they fly straight when we let go, and sometimes the “winds” of this world carry them in other directions!

- The parents of a prodigal child, likely with great anguish, let go (Lk. 15).
- Even Mary and Joseph lost track of the 'tween Jesus for three days (Lk. 2:46)!

Yes, even Mary and Joseph experienced their moments of “flying blind.” Hence, the question: “Anybody Have a Map?” The song invites not perfection, but compassion—for parents, for children, for ourselves.

The Lies We Tell (and Why We Tell Them)

At the heart of *Dear Evan Hansen* is a lie.

Evan does not set out to deceive. He longs to belong. And when an opportunity presents itself—even if built on tragedy—he steps into it.

Why?

Because the lie offers Evan something the truth has not yet given him: connection.

We see this pattern everywhere:

- In *The Greatest Showman*, identity is curated to win acceptance.
- In *Inside Out*, emotions are suppressed to maintain appearances.
- In *Euphoria*, pain is masked through performance.
- In *Mean Girls*, narratives are constructed to secure belonging.
- In *The Matrix*, illusion becomes preferable to reality.

And yes, we see it in our national life.

When individuals—or leaders—construct alternate realities, repeat outright lies, or reshape truth to maintain control, we are witnessing the same human impulse: the desire to survive, to belong, to win.

Scripture again clearly speaks:

- “The truth will set you free” (Jn. 8:32)
- “Speak the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15)
- “You shall not bear false witness” (Ex. 20:16)

Truth is not merely moral. It is liberating.

“You Will Be Found”: The Gospel According to Belonging

If *Dear Evan Hansen* exposes despair and deception, it also offers extraordinary hope.

“You Will Be Found,” the song that concludes the first act, has become an anthem for a reason: “Even when the dark comes crashing through...when you need a friend to carry you...you will be found.”

That is Gospel.

- Jesus sought the lost sheep (Lk. 15:4)
- He ate with outcasts (Mk. 2:16)
- He told a thief, “Today you will be with me in paradise” (Lk. 23:43)

- The early Church shared everything, so no one was in need (Acts 4:34)
- Paul tells us that nothing can separate us from God's love (Rom. 8:38-39)

Belonging is not a bonus feature of Christianity. It is its core.

In a world where so many feel unseen, unheard, unloved, the Church is called to embody extraordinary presence!

To say — not just with words, but with lives: *You will be found.*

When a Musical Becomes Reality

It would be easy to keep this reflection safely within the theater.

But we cannot.

Because *Dear Evan Hansen* is playing out in real time.

We are living in a moment when narratives are constructed, amplified and believed — even when they diverge from reality. When leaders engage in rhetoric that distorts truth, targets opponents, or escalates conflict, the stakes are no longer theatrical.

They are global.

During his first four years in office, our U.S. president told a recorded 30,573 lies and misleading statements—including his hardly-forgivable championing of horse dewormer and bleach as COVID treatments and his anti-vaccine rhetoric, which contributed to 300,000+ preventable deaths among unvaccinated adults in 18 months. More recently, his social media rant against Pope Leo XIV on Sunday, followed by his self-aggrandizing portrayal as Jesus amid escalating international tensions, raise serious moral questions about truth, power and responsibility.

This is not about partisanship. It is about reality.

Because when lies take root — whether in a teenager's heart or a nation's leadership — the consequences ripple outward.

Just like in the musical.

Extraordinary Courage: What We Are Called to Do

In this very unordinary U.S. moment, what does faithful response look like?

- **Tell the truth**, even when it is uncomfortable.
- **Deeply listen** to those who are struggling, especially young people.
- **Take seriously mental health**, removing stigma and offering support.
- **Create communities of belonging** where no one feels invisible.
- **Challenge false narratives** with compassion and clarity.

- **Model vulnerability**, acknowledging that we, too, are “making it up as we go.”
- **Choose life**, in all its complexity and beauty.

Sitting in the Dark Together

As the lights came up at the end of *Dear Evan Hansen*, I found myself thinking about Beto. About his parents. About all the families quietly carrying burdens we rarely see.

And I thought about that line again:

“Anybody have a map?”

No, we don’t.

But we do have each other.

We do have faith.

And we do have a God who enters our darkness and refuses to leave us there.

In this Easter season, we proclaim that death does not have the final word. Not on a stage. Not in a teenager’s life. Not in our world.

And so we sit in the dark—together—holding onto the extraordinary hope that somehow, some way...

We will be found.

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- When have I experienced moments of despair or disconnection?
- How do I respond when others construct narratives that are not true?
- In what ways can I create spaces of belonging for young people?
- Where is God inviting me to speak truth with greater courage?
- How do I accompany those who are struggling with mental health challenges?
- What does extraordinary hope look like in my life today?

Let Us Pray

God of light in the darkness, You see us when we feel invisible, and You love us when we feel unworthy. Be near to all who are struggling today—especially young people who feel alone or overwhelmed. Give us the courage to tell the truth, the compassion to listen without judgment, and the wisdom to walk with others in their pain. Help us to build communities where no one is forgotten, no one is dismissed, and everyone knows they are loved. And when the darkness feels too heavy, remind us—again and again—that in you, we will be found. Amen.

The Stage and the Sanctuary

Lessons from Community Theater for the Extraordinary “Work of the People”

April 15, 2026



If you’ve heard me preach, you likely won’t be surprised to know that I was a high school thespian. Sporting a fake mustache, I hammed it up my senior year as Uncle Max in *The Sound of Music*. In the stage production, Uncle Max and George von Trapp’s fiancée, Elsa, sing “No Way to Stop It,”—a tune that didn’t make it into the beloved 1965 film with Julie Andrews—where they urge compromise with a rising regime. Indeed, figuring “there’s no way to stop it,” Uncle Max joined Nazi forces!

Ever since, I’ve seen theater as a mirror reflecting back to us deep truths about life, about human nature, about ourselves. And I’ve long had a soft spot for community theater. This weekend alone, I found myself immersed in *Dear Evan Hansen* on Friday and *Rent* on Saturday.

But this time, the lesson was different.

This time, the stage didn’t just reflect life. It revealed something about liturgy—“the work of the people”—and about the extraordinary responsibility we carry when we gather to worship.

Follow me now.

“The Work of the People”: From Stage to Sanctuary

In 25 years of supporting community theater here in Austin, I’ve seen it all. Performances that leave you breathless. And performances that leave you... searching for grace. Moments of harmony that lift your spirit. And moments of dissonance and cacophony that test your patience.

Sound familiar?

Because that’s liturgy.

The word itself—*leitourgia*—means “the work of the people.” Not the work of the priest alone. Not the work of the choir alone. But all of us!

And just like community theater, liturgy exists on a spectrum:

- From the soaring excellence of a well-rehearsed ensemble.
- To the awkward pauses of lectors finding their voice.
- From music that transports us.
- To moments where we quietly wonder what key we're in.

Scripture reminds us that worship is embodied, communal, imperfect:

- *"Make a joyful noise to the Lord"* (Ps. 100:1) – not necessarily a perfect one!
- The early Church gathered, broke bread and learned as they went (Acts 2:42).
- Paul reminds us that the body has many parts (1Cor. 12:12).

Liturgy, like theater, is alive. And because it is alive, it is messy. Sometimes very messy.

The Pastor as Director (and the People as Cast)

Those of us who have spent time in seminary and ministry know this truth: We are, in many ways, directors.

We work with what we have.

We cast the vision.

We encourage. We form. We gently (or sometimes not so gently) correct.

And if you've ever directed anything – whether a play, a choir, or a family dinner – you know the challenge.

How do you:

- Offer meaningful praise without inflating egos?
- Give constructive feedback without discouraging volunteers?
- Invite growth without triggering defensiveness?

Parents know this tension well.

I think of my own upbringing in the cornfields of Ohio: Four boys, each with our own personalities, struggles, gifts. My parents did not have a script. They were, like every parent, improvising.

Just like a director.

Just like a presider at liturgy.

Scripture again grounds us:

- *"Encourage one another and build each other up"* (1Thes. 5:11).
- *"Speak the truth in love"* (Eph. 4:15).
- Jesus formed disciples not through perfection, but through relationship (Mk. 3:14).

Extraordinary leadership is not about control. It is about formation.

The Groove (and the Rut)

Here's the challenge: Over time, both theater groups and liturgical communities fall into patterns.

We find a groove.

And sometimes... that groove becomes a rut.

Lectors read the same way they've always read.

Musicians sing the same way they've always sung.

Presiders preside the same way they've always presided.

Growth stalls, and, in the words of one management professor many years ago, we are reminded: "Always remember: They're doing the best they can with what they have."

In families, we say it all the time:

"That's just the way they are."

In Church, we do the same.

But the Gospel never allows us to settle:

- *"Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect"* (Mt. 5:48) — a call to growth, not perfectionism.
- *"Stir into flame the gift of God"* (2Tim. 1:6).
- The resurrection itself is a disruption of the status quo (Lk. 24)! Extraordinary faith refuses complacency.

From Rote to Real: Making Words Flesh

If we're honest, one of the greatest challenges in Catholic liturgy is not just the rut. It's the risk of becoming mechanical.

I commonly hear this advice for priests-in-training: *"Say the black, do the red."*

Say the black-font words in the Roman rite, and follow the red-font rubrics.

On one level, it's good advice. It grounds us. It preserves unity. It protects the integrity of the rite.

But left unexamined, it can also lead to something else entirely: a kind of liturgical autopilot.

We know the words so well that we no longer *pray* them. We simply recite them.

Catholics are famous for this. From a young age, we memorize the Our Father and the Hail Mary. We can parrot those words without giving them a single thought. Without feeling. Without even being fully present.

It's a temptation every time we read prayers or devotional texts: What is meant to be heartfelt prayer can easily become an exercise in reading. Eyes on the page. Voices moving. Hearts... somewhere else.

And yet, we know the difference.

We've all experienced those moments when the same familiar words suddenly *open up*—when they feel alive again, when they catch in our throat, when they actually come from the heart.

That's the difference between performance and prayer.

I'm taken back to my high school days again—to that unforgettable number in *Damn Yankees*: "*You Gotta Have Heart.*"

Because you do.

Without heart, liturgy becomes recitation.

With heart, liturgy becomes encounter.

There's a saying often posted in sacristies, attributed to Mother Teresa and her Missionaries of Charity priests: "*Say this Mass as if it's your first Mass, as if it's your last Mass, as if it's your only Mass.*"

It's not about changing the words.

It's about changing the presence.

Scripture has always warned us about this tension:

- "*This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me*" (Mt. 15:8).
- The Emmaus disciples recognize Jesus not in words alone, but in a moment that burns within them (Lk. 24:32).
- Paul reminds us that the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life (2Cor. 3:6).

The invitation is not to abandon structure. It is to inhabit it.

To let the words we've memorized become words we mean.

To let the gestures we repeat become gestures we embody.

To let the ritual we perform become a relationship we live.

Because in the end, the goal is not simply to "say the black, and do the red."

The goal is to let the Word become flesh—again—in us.

The Risk of Correction (and the Gift of Growth)

Let me be honest: I have not always gotten this right.

My eye for detail—my desire for excellence—has sometimes led me to correct in ways that discourage, rather than inspire. I have watched people step away from ministry, perhaps feeling that they did not measure up.

And yet, the alternative—never offering feedback—does not serve the community either.

Because growth requires honesty.

The tension is real:

- To correct without crushing.
- To challenge without shaming.
- To form without alienating.

And from the other side:

- To receive feedback without internalizing it as failure.
- To embrace growth without losing confidence.
- This is deeply spiritual work.

After all, as I often remind people: **God alone is perfect.**

We are all works in progress. On stage. In church. In life.

"Keeping the Ink Wet": Liturgy as Living Word

One of the most extraordinary resources I've encountered on this topic is *Keeping the Ink Wet* by Father Kevin G. Yell, an extraordinary theater director, liturgist and now priest within our Inclusive Catholic movement.

Father Kevin invites us to approach Scripture and liturgy "as if the ink is still wet" — as if the words are being spoken for the first time!

Not rote.

Not mechanical.

Not going through the motions.

But alive!

He draws on theatrical techniques — presence, embodiment, rehearsal — to remind us that liturgy is not a script to recite. It is an encounter to inhabit.

This deeply resonates with Scripture:

- "*The word of God is living and active*" (Heb. 4:12).
- Jesus reads Isaiah and declares, "*Today this scripture has been fulfilled*" (Lk. 4:21).
- The disciples recognize him in the breaking of the bread (Lk. 24:35).

Liturgy needs a body with breath.

It needs... us!

From the Sanctuary to the Streets

It would be easy to keep this conversation within the walls of the Church. But we cannot. Because the same dynamics play out in our national life.

We look at systems, leaders, patterns and say: "That's just the way things are." "That's just the way they are." And we disengage.

But here's the truth: Activists act. Directors direct.

We are not called to passive observation. We are called to participation.

St. Ignatius of Loyola is often credited with the wisdom: "Pray as if everything depends on God, and act as if everything depends on you."

In this very unordinary moment in U.S. history, we cannot afford to sit in the audience.

We are on the stage!

Extraordinary Invitations

So what might this look like?

- **Invest in formation**, helping others grow in knowledge, skills and confidence.
- **Offer feedback with compassion**, balancing honesty and encouragement.
- **Refuse complacency**, continually seeking to deepen communal worship.
- **Actively engage in public life**, rather than resigning yourself to the status quo.
- **Challenge harmful narratives**, both in Church and society.
- **Model vulnerability**, acknowledging that we, too, are learning as we go.
- **Create spaces of beauty and authenticity**, where people encounter the living God.

From Uncle Max to the Altar

I think back to that high school stage – to Uncle Max singing, “No way to stop it,” urging compromise in the face of rising darkness.

And I think about how easy it is, in our own time, to adopt that same posture.

To shrug.

To settle.

To say, “This is just how it is,” that there’s just “no way to stop it.”

But the theater taught me something different.

It taught me that every performance can improve.

That every rehearsal matters.

That every actor grows.

And liturgy – this extraordinary work of the people – is no different.

We are not passive spectators in the drama of faith.

We are participants.

We are collaborators.

We are, in some mysterious way, co-creators of the sacred moment.

And so we do not settle.

We strive.

We grow.

We offer our very selves.

Because when we do, the stage becomes sanctuary.

And the sanctuary becomes a place where the living God is truly encountered!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where have I become complacent in my life and/or in my participation in liturgy?
- How do I respond to feedback: Do I resist it or receive it as an invitation to grow?
- In what ways can I help others develop their gifts?
- Where am I tempted to say, “That’s just the way things are”?
- Where is God calling me to act, rather than simply observe?
- What would extraordinary courage look like in my community right now?

Let Us Pray

God of living word and living presence, you call us not to perfection, but to participation. Breathe life into our worship, that it may never become routine or empty. Give us the courage to grow, the humility to receive guidance, and the wisdom to lead with compassion. Help us to see that what we do together—in liturgy, in community, in the world— matters more than we know. And in this unordinary moment, teach us to act with faith, to love with boldness, and to live as your people—fully present, fully engaged, fully alive. Amen.

Rendering Unto Caesar?

Conscience, Taxes and the Cost of Our Silence

April 16, 2026



One billion sounds like a big number. A thousand millions. If many of us pooled our money, a billion dollars would still exceed what we might collectively earn in our lifetimes. But “one billion” is not theoretical to me.

When I was first elected to public office in 2012, one-billion dollars was the annual cost to operate 130 public schools with 86,000 students and 11,000 employees. By the time I left office in 2020, we were stewarding \$1.6 billion each year.

So when I hear that our nation now spends over a billion dollars per day to sustain a war of choice in Iran, I cannot help but see classrooms, children, families, teachers and school employees...

I can't help but think of the people we could feed, the healthcare we could provide, the grocery and gas prices that could be lowered...

I can't help but imagine the global challenges we could tackle...
...if such things were important to us as a nation.

And so, now that Tax Day has passed, let's talk about taxes – not just as a civic obligation, but as a moral question.

Budgets Are Moral Documents

In public life, I learned something that has never left me: **Budgets are moral documents.**

They reveal what we truly value – not what we *say* we value, but what we actually fund.

The synoptic Jesus famously suggested: “*Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's*” (Mk. 12:17, Mt. 22:21, Lk. 20:25). But what happens when Caesar funds things that violate our conscience?

Scripture is not silent about unjust systems:

- The prophets railed against those who “trample on the needy” (Amos 5:11).
- Jesus identified himself with the hungry, the imprisoned, the stranger (Mt. 25:35-40).
- The early Church shared resources so “there was no needy person among them” (Acts 4:34).

And yet today, many of us watch as our shared resources fund ICE violence, bloodshed in Gaza, and now an unjust war – according to traditional Catholic just war theory – in Iran.

We know that 13% of our federal income tax goes toward military spending, with another 1% for federal law enforcement, including ICE funding. The satirically-named “One Big Beautiful Bill Act” ballooned ICE spending from less than \$10 billion per year to now over \$85 billion, dwarfing the U.S. Marine Corps budget of \$57 billion. We also hear that an estimated 757,000 people worldwide – including over 500,000 children – have died in 15 months as a result of chainsaw cuts to USAID.

We live in an unordinary U.S. moment that demands extraordinary moral clarity!

A Long Tradition of Resistance

We are not the first to wrestle with such questions of conscience. And we are not the first to question whether we are obliged to “support” – at least through our payment of taxes – the chaos that we have witnessed during the past 15 months.

American history itself is born of tax resistance. The 1765 Stamp Act riots and the 1773 Boston Tea Party were not simply about stamps and tea; they were about conscience and representation.

Later, Henry David Thoreau refused to pay his 1846 poll tax in protest of slavery and the Mexican-American War, giving us his enduring reflection, “On Civil Disobedience.”

During the Vietnam era (1955-1975), voices like Joan Baez publicly resisted war taxes, embodying a generation’s moral protest.

Even faith communities have long wrestled with this:

- Quakers and other peace activists refused to fund World War II.
- Catholics have formed war tax resistance movements.
- Individuals have redirected portions of their taxes (e.g., a percentage equivalent to military spending) to charitable causes.
- The National War Tax Resistance Coordinating Committee continues to educate taxpayers on how their tax dollars fund weapons of war and weapons of mass destruction.

At the same time, courts have consistently rejected arguments that taxation itself is optional. That distinction matters.

This is not about denial of civic responsibility.

It is about **the tension between law and conscience**.

The Psychology of Complicity

Here’s the uncomfortable truth: Most of us do not actively support harmful policies.

But we participate in systems that do.

Why?

Because it feels easier.

Psychologists call this *diffusion of responsibility*. Scripture names it more plainly:

- Pontius Pilate washed his hands (Mt. 27:24).
- The crowd cried “Crucify him!” (Jn. 19:15).
- Peter denied Jesus three times (Lk. 22:61).

When no one claims responsibility, *everyone* becomes responsible.

We see similar dynamics today as political rhetoric escalates, as leaders – including our U.S. president – frame policies in ways that divide, inflame and justify extraordinary measures.

And yet, as Easter people, we proclaim that death-dealing systems do not get the final word.

Resurrection disrupts complacency.

What Does the Church Actually Say?

The Catholic tradition does not offer easy answers, but it does offer guiding principles.

Contemporary moral theology is instructive:

- Paying taxes is a duty for the common good (CCC 2240).
- Citizens must also follow their Spirit-enlightened consciences (CCC 1782).
- Authority loses legitimacy when it violates moral order (CCC 1903).

This creates a tension—not a contradiction.

We are called to:

- Participate in society.
- Uphold the common good.
- Resist injustice.

Sometimes, those commitments collide.

And when they do, the tradition of the Church—from martyrs to modern activists—suggests that conscience must not be silenced.

From Despair to Discernment in an Unordinary Moment

It is easy to feel powerless.

We say: “That’s just the way things are.” “What difference can I make?”

But that is not the language of resurrection.

Think of the first apostles:

- They boldly spoke (Acts 4:31).
- They shared resources (Acts 2:44).
- They resisted unjust authority, citing the need to obey God over humans (Acts 5:29).

Or, in pop culture terms:

- *The Hunger Games* reminds us that systems rely on compliance.
- *Erin Brockovich* spotlights one person confronting injustice.
- *The Handmaid’s Tale* explores the cost of silence.
- Michael Jackson’s “Man in the Mirror” calls us to begin with ourselves.
- “Glory” in *Selma* reminds us that justice is a long struggle.

The question is not whether we feel small.

The question is whether we act anyway!

Calls to Action for People of Conscience

In this very unordinary U.S. moment, extraordinary courage matters. Here are ways we might respond:

- **Educate yourself** on how federal tax dollars are allocated, and what percentage supports military and enforcement systems.
- **Prayerfully discern** how your conscience responds to that reality.
- **Support organizations** that redirect resources toward healthcare, education, food security and global aid.
- **Politically advocate** by contacting elected officials and demanding budget priorities that reflect human dignity.
- **Engage in nonviolent protest**, including marches, petitions and public witness.
- **Explore ethical financial choices**, including charitable giving that counters harmful spending.
- **Join or learn from groups** engaged in conscientious resistance, while understanding legal implications.
- **Openly speak** about the moral dimensions of public spending.

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

Counting the Cost

I began with a billion dollars.

A number that, for me, once meant classrooms, teachers, children.

Now it too often means missiles, detention centers, and terrorized communities.

But Easter insists on something else.

It insists that death does not win.

It insists that systems of violence can be transformed.

It insists that ordinary people can embody extraordinary love.

We may not control the national budget—but we do control our response.

And perhaps, just perhaps, the real question after Tax Day is not simply:
How much did we just pay?

But rather:

What are we willing to stand for?

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where do I feel tension between my civic obligations and my moral conscience?
- How do I respond when I feel complicit in systems that harm others?

- What fears keep me from more boldly speaking or acting?
- How might I better align my financial choices with my values?
- Where is God inviting me to exercise extraordinary courage right now?
- Who are the people most impacted by our national spending – and how can I listen to and assist them?

Let Us Pray

God of justice and mercy, You raised Jesus from the dead and shattered the power of fear and violence. Open our eyes to see how our world is shaped by the choices we make and the systems we sustain. Form our consciences with wisdom, courage and compassion. When we feel small, remind us of your power. When we feel afraid, fill us with extraordinary courage. When we feel complicit, guide us toward truth and action. May we live as Easter people – proclaiming life in the face of death, hope in the face of despair, and love in the face of fear. Amen.

A Discipleship of Equals

Lessons from Juana Inés de la Cruz and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza
on Extraordinary Courage, Extraordinary Intellect,
and the Church We Are Still Becoming

April 17, 2026



I recognize brilliance when I see it. My mind bends today toward Luis, the artistic director of our Spanish-language theater here in Austin, with whom I enjoyed a community theater production of *Rent* this weekend. Fifteen years ago, when we traveled the world together, we enjoyed various theatrical works, including a cabaret, in Thailand. Months later, Luis produced and directed his own breathtaking Spanish-language cabaret here in Austin. It was, in a word, brilliant.

I also recall an escape to Cancún: While waves rolled just feet away from our cabana, Luis devoured the writings of **Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz** with

palpable excitement. Within months, he transformed that enthusiasm into a moving theatrical production at our local Mexican American Cultural Center. Again, absolutely brilliant.

As we celebrate Sor Juana today, alongside another brilliant feminist mind, **Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza**, I find myself reflecting on how brilliance begets brilliance—and how extraordinary courage in one generation ignites extraordinary courage in the next!

Sor Juana: A Voice Too Bold to Silence

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648-1695) defied the suffocating expectations placed upon women by Mexican society and Church. Denied formal education, she educated herself—mastering philosophy, theology, poetry and science. In a world that barred women from universities, she built a library of 4,000 books. Let that sink in. Four-thousand books for women who were told they did not need even one!

Her critique of misogyny still sharply cuts today. In her famous poem “*Hombres necios que acusáis*” (“Foolish men who accuse”), she writes:

“You foolish men who lay the guilt on women, not seeing you’re the cause of the very thing you blame.”

That is not just poetry. That is prophetic fire!

Her relationship with Countess María Luisa de Paredes adds another layer of intrigue and beauty. The love poems that Sor Juana wrote—tender, intimate, emotionally rich—have led many to see her as a proto-feminist and even a queer icon centuries ahead of her time.

And yet, despite her brilliance, despite her holiness, despite her extraordinary witness—she was silenced. Pressured by Church authorities, she eventually ceased writing. One cannot help but wonder: Did her critique of ecclesial patriarchy cost her canonization?

Still, the Mexican people canonized Sor Juana in their own way. For four decades, her image has graced Mexico’s 100-peso bill. The Church may hesitate. God’s people do not!

Schüssler Fiorenza: Recovering What Was Lost

If Sor Juana named the problem, **Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza** (1938-), whose 88th birthday we celebrate today, has spent her life reconstructing the solution.

When I studied at the Washington Theological Union, I devoured Schüssler Fiorenza’s work the way Luis devoured Sor Juana. Her groundbreaking book, *In Memory of Her*, reshaped how I read Scripture. No longer could I ignore the silenced voices of women in the early Church!

Her central vision—*a discipleship of equals*—is rooted in the lives and words of Saul/Paul of Tarsus and Jesus of Nazareth: “There is neither Jew nor Greek... male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28).

A discipleship of equals is not a sentimental slogan. It is a radical reimagining of the Church.

Schüssler Fiorenza exposes how patriarchal structures erased women’s leadership: women apostles, house church leaders, missionaries. And she invites us to recover what was always there. To remember what was forgotten. To proclaim what was silenced.

In many ways, Schüssler Fiorenza embodies the Easter proclamation itself. Resurrection is not just about Jesus. It is about raising up buried truths!

Scripture Speaks: Women at the Center

The irony, of course, is that Scripture has always pointed us in this direction—if we have eyes to see.

- The Samaritan woman becomes an evangelist to her entire town (Jn. 4).
- Mary Magdalene becomes the apostle to the apostles (Jn. 20:18).
- Phoebe is named a deacon (Rom. 16:1).
- Junia is called “prominent among the apostles” (Rom. 16:7).

And yet, like the women at the tomb, their testimony is often dismissed as “an idle tale” (Lk. 24:11).

The Risen Christ appeared first to women. That is not accidental. That is theological.

If we are living in the Easter season, as we are now, then we must ask: *What truths are still waiting to be raised from the dead?*

Pop Culture Echoes: From Barbie to Beyoncé

Even our culture continues to wrestle with these themes.

- In Aretha Franklin’s “Respect,” we hear a timeless demand for dignity.
- In Beyoncé’s “Run the World (Girls),” we hear a defiant claim to power and presence.
- In *Hidden Figures*, we rediscover women erased from history.
- In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, we see the dystopian consequences of patriarchal control.
- In *Barbie*, we hear Gloria’s monologue about the impossible expectations placed on women.

Art reflects life. And life, as Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza remind us, still struggles toward equality!

This Moment: Rolling Back What Others Fought For

We would be naïve to think this is merely historical.

In our present U.S. context, we see rights being rolled back. Gender studies and the gospel values of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) are dismissed as “woke.” Bodily autonomy is increasingly restricted. Sadly, U.S. girls today are growing up with fewer rights than their mothers and grandmothers!

We hear echoes of the same forces that silenced Sor Juana. We see the same structures critiqued by Schüssler Fiorenza.

And so the question becomes unavoidable: *Will we remain passive observers, or will we embody extraordinary courage?*

Because resurrection is not passive. It is disruptive!

Living a Discipleship of Equals

We can respond with extraordinary love and extraordinary resolve:

- **Advocate for women’s full inclusion in leadership in church and state**, including ordination and, yes, even the highest office in our land.
- **Support organizations that empower our sisters**, like the National Organization for Women (NOW), Equality Now, Women’s Ordination Conference (WOC), Planned Parenthood, Center for Reproductive Rights, and the National Partnership for Women and Families.
- **Read and teach works by feminist writers and theologians**, including Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza.
- **Amplify women’s voices** in all your circles of influence.
- **Challenge misogynistic language and structures** wherever they appear.
- **Mentor young women and girls** in leadership and ministry.
- **Vote and advocate for policies that protect bodily autonomy and gender equality.**

Brilliance That Refuses to Die

As I think back to Luis—his brilliance, his passion, his ability to take what he loves and make it come alive—I realize something.

That same spirit lived in Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz.

And that same spirit lives in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza.

It is the spirit that refuses to be silenced.

The spirit that reads, writes, creates, proclaims.

The spirit that insists, even now, that another Church is possible.

On that beach in Cancún, with waves rolling in and books open in the sun, Luis encountered a brilliance that changed him. And through him, it changed me.

That is how transformation works.

That is how resurrection spreads.

One extraordinary life at a time!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where have I seen women's voices silenced?
- How do I respond when I encounter injustice rooted in gender inequality?
- Which voices or stories have I overlooked in Scripture or tradition?
- How might I embody the "discipleship of equals" in my daily life?
- What fears hold me back from advocating for change?

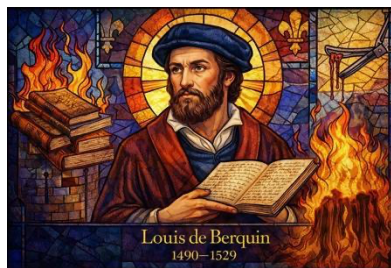
Let Us Pray

God of wisdom and fire, You spoke through prophets, poets and preachers—through women whose voices refused to be silenced. Stir within us the courage of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, the insight of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and the hope of the Risen Christ. Help us to build a Church of extraordinary love, a Church of extraordinary justice, a Church where all are truly equal in dignity and voice. May we not merely remember, but act. Amen.

Burning Words

Lessons from a Martyr of Conscience
on Truth, Power and Extraordinary Courage

April 18, 2026



History fascinates me. Especially church history. I remain captivated not only by the stories we proudly proclaim, but also by the stories we quietly bury. Today, I drag one of those buried stories back into the light.

Louis de Berquin (1490-1529) was a brilliant French lawyer and linguist, a man of intellect and conviction. He deeply loved his Church. And yet, the very Church he loved ultimately destroyed him. Church leaders burned his books. They pierced his tongue, so he could not speak. And when he refused to recant, they burned him alive.

Let that sink in.

We did not linger with his story yesterday, instead choosing to lift up two brilliant women—and rightly so. But today, let's give Berquin the stage. Because his story is not just about the past. It is about us.

A Man “Providentially Guided to the Bible”

Berquin lived in early 16th-century France, a time when the tremors of the Reformation were shaking the foundations of European Christianity. Influenced by humanist thinkers like Desiderius Erasmus and the writings of Martin Luther, Berquin turned to Scripture with fresh eyes.

What he found absolutely startled him. In his words, he discovered in scriptures “not the doctrines of Rome, but the doctrines of [Martin] Luther.” He encountered simple gospel teachings.

Berquin did not set out to be a rebel. Like many reformers, he set out to be faithful to the rich tradition of the Church.

And yet, faithfulness can be dangerous!

When an Institution Feels Threatened

The early 1500s were not a time for theological experimentation—at least not within the bounds of institutional control. The University of Paris condemned Berquin's writings. Church authorities saw in him not a seeker of truth, but a threat to order.

His books were publicly burned.

Imagine that moment. Years of intellectual labor. Pages filled with prayer, study and conviction—all reduced to ash before his eyes. It calls to mind King Jehoiakim cutting up Jeremiah's scroll and throwing it into the fire, unwilling to hear a single word that challenged his power (Jer. 36)!

But the destruction of Berquin's work was not enough.

They then arrested him. They tortured him. They pierced his tongue—a symbolic and brutal act. Silence the voice, and perhaps you silence the truth, they thought.

Except... truth has a way of speaking anyway!

The Psychology of Scapegoating

Why do communities turn on their own?

Why do institutions, even religious ones, sometimes react with such violence toward those who challenge them?

The answer, at least in part, lies in fear.

When systems feel threatened, they often seek a scapegoat. René Girard would later articulate the dynamic that we so clearly see in Scripture: the ritual scapegoat in Leviticus 16, or Caiaphas' suggestion that it is better for one person to die, than for a whole nation to perish (Jn. 11:50).

Twenty-two years after Father Martin Luther published his now-famous 95 theses, Berquin became that person.

And if we are honest, this pattern did not end in the 16th century. We see it in contemporary politics. We see it in church disputes. We see it in communities that "other" those who raise uncomfortable questions.

We even see it in pop culture. Think of *The Crucible* or its stage origins—how fear fuels accusation, and accusation fuels destruction. Or *The Handmaid's Tale*, where rigid systems crush dissent in the name of order.

Berquin's story is not distant. It is disturbingly familiar.

Pierced Tongues and Silenced Voices Today

Berquin's tongue was pierced so he could not speak.

Today, we may not use iron instruments, but we have our own methods of silencing.

We shame. We "cancel." We legislate. We intimidate.

In this very unordinary U.S. moment, many feel the pressure to remain quiet—to avoid controversy, to protect their livelihoods, to keep the peace. And yet, the Gospel continually calls us to speak!

Jesus himself declares: "*If these are silenced, the stones will cry out*" (Lk. 19:40).

And still, the temptation remains: Be quiet. Stay safe. Remain invisible. Berquin refused.

The Acts of the Apostles and the Courage to Speak

During this Easter season, we hear again and again from the Acts of the Apostles. What do we find there?

Ordinary people doing extraordinary things!

Peter and John, standing before authorities, proclaim: "*We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard*" (Acts 4:20). Those words could have been Berquin's.

The early Church was *not* built on comfort. It was built on courage.

And courage always comes at a cost.

Pop Culture Echoes of Resistance

Berquin's witness finds echoes across the cultural landscape:

- *Les Misérables*' "Do You Hear the People Sing?" is a cry of resistance against oppression.

- *Dead Poets Society* proclaims, “No matter what anybody tells you, words and ideas can change the world!”
- Lady Gaga’s “Born This Way” is an anthem of authenticity in the face of rejection.
- *Spotlight* focuses on truth-tellers confronting institutional silence.
- In *Andor*, conscience, not power, fuels rebellion.

Each, in its own way, reminds us that speaking truth is never easy – and never optional for people of conscience!

Calls to Action

If Berquin’s story unsettles us, it should. The question is what we do with that discomfort.

Here are a few invitations:

- Speak up when you see injustice, even when your voice trembles.
- Support those who are marginalized, silenced or targeted.
- Deeply study Scripture, not just passively, but allowing it to challenge you.
- Engage in courageous conversations within your circles of influence.
- Advocate for transparency and accountability in Church and society.
- Resist the urge to scapegoat those with whom you disagree.
- Practice extraordinary compassion, even toward those who oppose you – just as we see in Pope Leo XIV’s calm reply to the belligerence of our U.S. president.

From Ashes to Witness: Returning to the Fire

I return, in my mind, to that haunting image: Berquin standing before the flames that consumed his life’s work.

Ashes falling. Smoke rising. Silence imposed.

And yet, here we are, nearly 500 years later, speaking his name!

The Church tried to erase him. History tried to forget him. But truth has a way of enduring.

In a world that often rewards conformity and punishes courage, Berquin invites us to something more. Something deeper. Something extraordinary.

Not comfort. Not safety. But truth.

And perhaps, just perhaps, that is what resurrection looks like!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- When have I felt pressure to remain silent in the face of injustice?
- What fears hold me back from courageously speaking truth?
- How do I respond when my beliefs are challenged? With openness or defensiveness?
- Who are the “Berquins” in our world today, and how do I support them?
- Where is God calling me to practice extraordinary courage right now?
- How do I discern the difference between faithful dissent and destructive division?

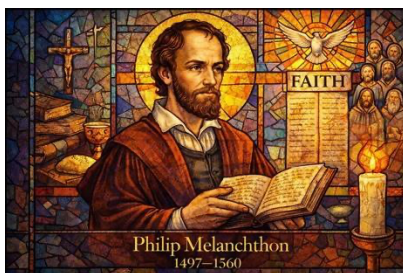
Let Us Pray

God of truth and courage, You spoke through prophets, apostles and martyrs. You spoke through those whose voices others tried to silence. Give us the grace to deeply listen, the wisdom to rightly discern, and the courage to boldly speak. When we feel the pressure to conform, strengthen us. When we fear the consequences of truth, sustain us. When we are tempted to silence others, humble us. May we live with extraordinary love, act with extraordinary courage, and proclaim your truth in word and deed. Amen.

Off Course and Found Again

Lessons from a Reformer’s Questions

April 19, 2026



Have you ever gotten lost? Taken the wrong exit? Missed a turn, only to hear that calm but persistent voice from your GPS: “Recalculating...”?

Of course, you have!

I often say, “God alone is perfect.” To err is indeed human. And yet, many of us were raised to believe that certain institutions—though

comprised of deeply human beings—somehow cannot err. Think the Roman Catholic Church.

Today, we remember **Philip Melanchthon** (1497-1560), a man whose honest engagement with Scripture and tradition led him to a startling conclusion: Perhaps his Church had, in fact, taken a wrong turn!

Before we rush to judgment, I invite you into an exercise: Let's suspend our instincts for just a moment, and let's try to see the Church—and the world—through the eyes of a 16th-century reformer who loved his faith enough to... question it.

A Gentle Scholar in a Storm of Reform

If Father Martin Luther was the thunder of the Reformation, Melanchthon was its steady, thoughtful rain.

A brilliant humanist scholar, fluent in Greek and Latin, Melanchthon helped to systematize the theology of the early Reformation. His *Augsburg Confession* remains one of the most important statements of Lutheran belief.

But here's what matters for us: Melanchthon was not a bomb-thrower. He was not interested in tearing the Church apart. He wanted reform, not rupture.

He asked questions that many, in his day, were already quietly asking:

- Had the Church's understanding of the Eucharist drifted from its early roots?
- Had the sacrament of penance become more about control than reconciliation?
- Had "works" overshadowed faith and grace in the Christian life?
- Had devotion to saints crossed a line into something resembling idolatry?

These were not the questions of a rebel. They were the questions of a believer who took seriously the admonition of Acts 17:11—to carefully examine everything.

An "Old Catholic" Before His Time

In many ways, Melanchthon was "Old Catholic" two centuries before the term existed.

Like later reform movements, he sought a return—not to novelty, but to origins. He envisioned a return to the simplicity and integrity of the early Church!

Think of Acts 2:42: a community devoted to prayer, teaching, fellowship and the breaking of bread. No elaborate systems or theologies. No hierarchies or layers of institutional complexity. Just a community of people trying to faithfully follow Jesus.

Melanchthon looked at the medieval Church and wondered: Have we drifted? And, if we have, can we find our way back?

That question still resonates today.

When the Church Strays: A Difficult Truth

Let's be honest: The Western Church has not always stayed perfectly on course.

Consider its deviations from traditional beliefs and practices:

- Its long-standing exclusion of women from ordained ministry, despite Saul/Paul of Tarsus' and Jesus of Nazareth's vision of a "discipleship of equals" and despite evidence of women in ordained ministries during the Church's first five centuries.
- Its shift by the eighth or ninth century from leavened to unleavened bread in the Eucharist.
- Its unilateral tampering with the Nicene Creed, without the approval of an ecumenical council, thus sparking its excommunication during the East-West Schism of 1054 A.D.
- Its imposition of mandatory clerical celibacy, solidified during 12th-century councils of a divided Church.

These were not small matters. They were course changes!

And yet, large institutions rarely admit error. They are, as I often say, like large sea vessels. Supertankers power on, unable to turn on a dime!

Melanchthon invites us to ask a bold question: *What if fidelity sometimes requires a bit of... course correction?*

Saints, Symbols and the Human Need for Heroes

One of Melanchthon's concerns—and one that still resonates—was what he perceived as an exaggerated cult of saints.

Let's approach this gently.

Catholics light candles. We name patron saints for everything under the sun. We pray to saints that they might intercede for us.

For many, this is deeply meaningful.

But from the outside, it can look... different.

Imagine how our non-Catholic siblings might see it. Or how someone unfamiliar with Catholicism might interpret a home altar filled with statues, candles and whispered prayers. Anthropologists, in their study of religious rituals, help us with possible vocabulary.

Five centuries ago, Melanchthon worried whether devotion had at times crossed into distraction from God.

And yet, we know something else to be true: Humans need models. We need stories. We need witnesses.

Think of *Coco*, where remembering the dead keeps them alive in a meaningful way. Or *Black Panther*, where ancestors guide the living. Even *Ted Lasso* gives us characters we want to emulate: imperfect, but inspiring.

Perhaps the question is not *whether* we honor the saints—but *how*.

Are they pointing us toward God? Or have they become ends in themselves?

Reform in an Age of Imperfection

We find ourselves, once again, in choppy waters.

Our nation is not perfect. Far from it. Our institutions—political, religious, social—are deeply human. And thus, deeply flawed.

As I learned during my years of service on the Austin school board, it's extremely difficult to introduce change into large systems, which, in the words of one management professor, are "perfectly designed for the results they get."

So, what do we do? Do we abandon ship? Do we rage against it? Or do we, like Melanchthon, patiently and persistently work for change?

Scripture offers guidance:

- "Be transformed by the renewal of your mind" (Rom. 12:2).
 - "Speak the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15).
 - "Remove the plank from your own eye" (Mt. 7:3).
 - "The truth will set you free" (Jn. 8:32)
 - The early Church itself gathered, debated and discerned (Acts 15).
- Even the apostles had to "recalculate"!

Pop Culture and the Courage to Reconsider

Melanchthon's spirit lives when we celebrate questioning and growth:

- *The Matrix* asks: What if the world is not what we think it is?
- *Good Will Hunting* suggests that growth begins when we challenge our assumptions.
- Michael Jackson's "Man in the Mirror" says change begins within.
- In *Inside Out*, complexity and emotional honesty lead to maturity.
- In *The Good Place*, growth requires constant reevaluation.

Each reminds us: Transformation is not weakness. It is wisdom!

Calls to Action

If Melanchthon teaches us anything, it is that faithful questioning is not a threat. It is a gift.

Here are a few ways we might live that out:

- Study Scripture and tradition with both reverence and curiosity.
- Engage those who disagree with humility and openness.

- Advocate for reform within systems and structures, especially regarding inclusion.
- Ensure personal devotions lead toward God, not away.
- Support communities that embody a discipleship of equals.
- Speak truth with extraordinary courage, but also always with extraordinary love.
- Practice self-reflection before critiquing others.

Recalculating: Returning to the Road

I return to that image of being lost on the road.

You take a wrong turn. You feel the frustration rising. Maybe even a bit of panic. But then comes that calm, steady voice:

“Recalculating...”

It does not shame you.

It does not condemn you.

It simply invites you to consider where you are and where you’re heading.

Melanchthon heard that voice.

He listened. He questioned. He recalculated.

And in doing so, he invites us to embrace a faith that is not brittle, but living. Not defensive, but discerning. Not static, but growing.

In this unordinary U.S. moment, may we have the extraordinary courage to admit when we are off course—and the extraordinary grace to find our way home!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- When have I discovered that something I believed needed reexamination?
- How do I respond when my faith is challenged?
- What parts of Church and society today need honest reform?
- How do my devotional practices deepen my relationship with God?
- Am I willing to listen to perspectives that differ from my own?
- How is God inviting me to grow in truth and humility?

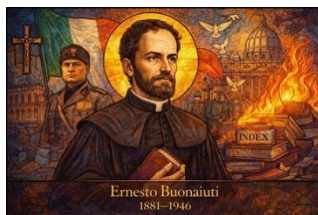
Let Us Pray

God of truth and mercy, You guide us even when we lose our way. You call us to deeper understanding, deeper love, deeper faith. Give us the humility to admit when we are wrong, the wisdom to seek what is right, and the courage to change. Help us to listen—to your Word, to one another, to the quiet movements of your Spirit. Lead us, again and again, back to you. May we live with extraordinary courage, love with extraordinary compassion, and walk always in your truth. Amen.

Faithfulness in the Face of Fascism

Lessons from Ernesto Buonaiuti on the Cost of Loyalty to Truth

April 20, 2026



One person whom I hold in high esteem at The University of Texas at Austin is Dr. Charles Martinez, Dean of the College of Education. A former school board member, he took the helm at UT in 2019, and we quickly invited him to keynote the annual conference of our Mexican American School Boards Association, which I led for nearly four years. After the pandemic, Dr. Martinez invited me to serve on the Advisory Council of his college, and I have marveled at his leadership.

Thus, as you can imagine, my heart broke earlier this year when Dr. Martinez announced that he will be stepping down at the end of the semester.

He is exactly the type of leader you would want in that position: visionary, collaborative, deeply committed to students and educators. He grew the college's enrollment by 40%, and he launched various innovative initiatives, like a teacher mentoring program and a research-practice-policy network.

But this is a difficult time for publicly-funded higher education—especially in the state of Texas, in an era when ideological litmus tests masquerade as “standards” and when words like equity, justice and the gospel values of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) are villainized. The University of Texas at Austin has signed the Trump administration’s “Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education,” which will now impose strict gender definitions (viz., male/female based on reproductive biology), as well as a 15% international student cap—xenophobia in a nation that once proudly “exported” higher education! Sycophants scream that Dr. Martinez has promoted “far-left content” with syllabi that contain such words as equity, justice and the “racial, ethnic, gender and sexual orientation diversity in education.” It is, in a word, madness.

If I were in Dr. Martinez’s shoes, I would no doubt step down as well!

But Dr. Martinez is not the first person in higher education to be persecuted for doing what is right and good. Today, a voice speaks to us from 20th-century fascist Italy. Let us heed his lessons.

A Loyal Son – Cast Out

On April 20, we remember the passing of Ernesto Buonaiuti (1881-1946), a priest, historian and philosopher of religion whose life reads like a cautionary tale about what happens when Church and empire grow too comfortable with one another.

Buonaiuti was brilliant. He immersed himself in the historical-critical study of Christianity, asking questions that many feared to ask: How had imperial politics shaped the early Church? How had power influenced doctrine? What might the Gospel look like if stripped of centuries of institutional accumulation?

These were not abstract questions. They were dangerous questions.

In fascist Italy, under Benito Mussolini, allegiance to the state was demanded with increasing ferocity. Buonaiuti refused to swear loyalty to fascism. For that refusal – for being antifascist, or “antifa,” if you prefer – he lost his academic chair at the University of Rome. At the same time, the Church – rather than protecting one of its most thoughtful sons – placed his scholarly magazines on the *Index of Forbidden Books*.

Let that sink in.

A priest studying the history of his own Church. Publishing thoughtful, rigorous work. And the institutional response? Silence him. Condemn him. Excommunicate him. Multiple times.

And yet, in his autobiography, Buonaiuti still called himself a “loyal son” of the Church.

That line stops me cold.

When Truth Threatens Power

Why would a Church silence a scholar? Why would a state punish a priest? The answer, tragically, is consistent across history: Truth threatens power when power has drifted from its moral center.

Jesus warned us as much. “*The truth will set you free*” (Jn. 8:32). But freedom unsettles systems built on control. In the Acts of the Apostles, which we hear throughout this Easter season, Peter and the apostles boldly declare: “*We must obey God, rather than humans*” (Acts 5:29). That is not a comfortable line. It is a dangerous one.

Buonaiuti lived that danger.

His work exposed how the early Church had been shaped – not only by the Spirit – but also by empire. He suggested that what we often treat as

timeless doctrine may, in part, reflect historical contingencies. That insight, while obvious to modern scholars, was explosive in his time.

It still is in some circles.

Think about it: When institutions insist on their own perfection, critique becomes heresy. When leaders confuse loyalty with silence, questions become threats. When faith becomes fused with nationalism, dissent becomes betrayal.

Sound familiar?

We see echoes of this dynamic in films like *The Two Popes*, where institutional inertia meets prophetic questioning. We hear it in songs like Hozier's "Take Me to Church," which critiques religious hypocrisy while still longing for transcendence. We recognize it in series like *The Handmaid's Tale*, where religion becomes weaponized by authoritarian power.

Buonaiuti's story is not ancient history. It is a mirror.

The Index, the Empire and the Echoes Today

There is something almost absurd about placing scholarly journals on the *Index of Forbidden Books*. The fear of ideas reveals the fragility of the systems that fears them.

And yet, is it so different today?

In our current U.S. context, we see books banned, curricula policed, and entire fields—like gender and ethnic studies—dismissed as dangerous or "woke." We see educators attacked for honestly teaching history. We see public universities and public school systems pressured to conform to ideological expectations.

We are not living in fascist Italy. But we would be naïve to ignore the echoes.

The Book of Revelation offers a haunting image: a seven-headed beast rising from the sea (Rev. 13). Empires, it suggests, often take monstrous forms when they demand unquestioning allegiance. Today, that beast does not wear a single face. It appears in policies that strip bodily autonomy. It appears in rhetoric that dehumanizes immigrants. It appears in systems that prioritize power over people.

And yet, here is the Easter truth: It does not have the final word.

The resurrection disrupts every empire. Every time.

Extraordinary Courage in Extraordinary Times

Buonaiuti could have chosen safety. He could have sworn an oath to fascism, like his colleagues. He could have softened his scholarship. He could have quietly walked away.

He did not.

He chose extraordinary courage. He chose intellectual integrity. He chose faithfulness, even when the institution he loved rejected him.

His life calls forth something in us.

It calls us to ask: Where do we remain silent out of fear? Where do we compromise truth for acceptance? Where do we mistake institutional loyalty for Gospel fidelity?

Scripture offers us a chorus of witnesses:

- Jeremiah, who could not keep silent (Jer. 20:9).
- Mary, who boldly proclaimed a revolutionary Magnificat (Lk. 1:46-55).
- Jesus, who overturned tables in the temple (Mt. 21:12).
- Paul, who declared that in Christ there is “no longer male and female” (Gal. 3:28).
- The early Church, which shared all things in common (Acts 2:44-45).

These are not safe texts. They are transformative texts.

Pop culture, too, reminds us of resistance:

- *Les Misérables* sings of those who “hear the people sing.”
- *Spotlight* exposes institutional failure and the courage to confront it.
- *Andor* explores rebellion against empire with moral complexity.
- Even Beyoncé invites us to “break my soul” – to refuse systems that crush the human spirit.

Different mediums; same call: Resist injustice, and tell the truth!

Calls to Action

- Courageously speak when exclusion and injustice appear.
- Support educators, scholars and institutions that promote critical thinking and truth.
- Read widely, including works once considered “dangerous,” and thoughtfully engage them.
- Publicly advocate for academic freedom and the protection of marginalized voices.
- Build communities that embody extraordinary love, not institutional fear.
- Intentionally pray for those who are silenced or punished for their integrity.
- Refuse to conflate nationalism with faith, and challenge others to do the same.

Standing in the Lecture Hall

I return to that image of Dr. Martinez stepping down—standing perhaps in a lecture hall, reflecting on years of service, knowing that forces beyond his control have reshaped the terrain.

I imagine Ernesto Buonaiuti standing in a similar space, centuries earlier, stripped of his position, yet unwilling to surrender his conscience.

Different times. Same story.

And here we are.

In classrooms, churches, boardrooms and public squares, we are called to choose: comfort or courage, silence or truth, compliance or conscience.

Easter people do not choose fear.

We choose resurrection. Again and again.

Even when it costs us everything!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where in my life am I tempted to remain silent, rather than speak truth?
- How do I respond when institutions I love fail to live up to the Gospel?
- What “forbidden” ideas or perspectives might I need to more openly engage?
- How can I practice extraordinary courage in small, daily ways?
- Who are the Buonaiutis of our time—and how can I support them?
- In what ways do I conflate faith with nationalism or institutional loyalty?

Let Us Pray

God of truth and courage, You raised Jesus from the dead, defying the powers of empire and fear. You called prophets, apostles and scholars to speak when silence would have been easier. We remember today your servant Ernesto Buonaiuti, a loyal son who refused to abandon truth, a faithful disciple who endured rejection with integrity. Grant us extraordinary courage in this extraordinary moment. Help us to love the Church without idolizing it, to challenge injustice without losing hope, to seek truth even when it unsettles us. May we live as Easter people—resurrected in spirit, bold in action, grounded in love. And may we, like those before us, trust that your truth will ultimately set us free. Amen.

Three Voices, One Gospel

Héloïse, Halkes and Prejean on Love, Equality and the Cost of Compassion

April 21, 2026



When I entered the seminary in 1990, the film *Stealing Heaven* had just recently been released on VHS. I still remember how we rented it one Friday night. What began with curiosity quickly became something much deeper. It was an evening that taught everyone in our friary not only about theology, but also about human love, longing, and the complicated beauty of relationship.

That film told the story of Peter Abelard—but more importantly, it introduced us to Héloïse d'Argenteuil, a woman whose voice history has too often softened or sidelined.

Today, as the Church remembers Abelard, I find myself far more interested in placing Héloïse in conversation with two other extraordinary women whose lives we honor today: Catharina Joanna Maria Halkes and Helen Prejean. Three women spanning nine centuries, but one gospel that still disrupts, still challenges, still calls us forward.

Héloïse: The Courage to Love and Think

Héloïse d'Argenteuil (1101–1164) was no mere footnote to Abelard's story. She was a scholar in her own right, fluent in Latin, Greek and Hebrew, intellectually formidable in an age that rarely allowed women to be so.

Their love affair has been romanticized, yes. But it was also costly. It led to violence, separation, and lives redirected into religious institutions not entirely by free choice. And yet, through letters that still survive, Héloïse emerges as a voice of remarkable honesty.

She refuses easy piety. She questions motivations. She names desire without shame. In a Church that often prefers tidy narratives, Héloïse insists on complexity.

Her life echoes the tension we hear in Scripture: Psalm 139's intimate knowing, the raw longing of the Song of Songs, the bold presence of Mary of Bethany in Luke 10:38-42, choosing to sit and learn at Jesus' feet.

For us today, Héloïse offers an extraordinary reminder: Faith does not require us to suppress our humanity. It invites us to integrate it. Our questions, our desires, our intellectual pursuits: They are not obstacles to holiness. They are often the very path!

Halkes: The Courage to Speak

Fast forward nearly a millennium to **Catharina Joanna Maria Halkes** (1920-2011).

In 1985, during a papal visit to the Netherlands, she was forbidden from addressing Pope John Paul II. Her "crime"? She dared to articulate a theology that centered women's full humanity and equality in the Church!

Imagine preparing to speak truth to power—only to have your voice officially silenced by the man who later gave "the Papal No" to women's ordination through the 1994 apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*.

And yet, silence did not define Halkes.

As the first professor of Feminism and Christianity at Radboud University, Halkes helped shape an entire generation of theological thought. She insisted that Galatians 3:28—"There is neither male nor female...for you are all one in Christ Jesus"—was not poetic fluff. It was a radical claim with real implications.

Her work invites us to ask uncomfortable questions:

- Why do some churches still exclude women from ordained ministry?
- Why do we spiritualize equality while structurally denying it? "All are welcome" is a phrase often used by churches. But in reality that is not the case.
- Why do we so often mistake tradition for truth?

If Héloïse teaches us to honestly think and feel, Halkes teaches us to speak—even when the institution would prefer quiet compliance.

Prejean: The Courage to Accompany

Now we turn to **Helen Prejean** (1939-), whose life many encountered through her book and the film *Dead Man Walking*.

Where Héloïse wrestled with love and Halkes with theology, Prejean walked directly into the valley of death.

She accompanied those on death row.

She stood with victims' families.

She refused to reduce anyone to their worst act.

That is not abstract theology. That is Matthew 25: “I was in prison, and you visited me.”

Her work reminds us that justice without mercy quickly becomes cruelty. And mercy without justice becomes sentimentality. She held both.

In a culture that often demands retribution, she has embodied extraordinary compassion. In a political climate that thrives on division, she has insisted on shared humanity.

And perhaps most powerfully, she does not romanticize suffering. She simply refuses to look away.

Three Women, One Challenge

What happens when we place these three women in dialogue?

Héloïse asks us to live honestly.

Halkes asks us to speak courageously.

Prejean asks us to love radically.

Together, they form a kind of resurrection witness for our Easter season—a reminder that new life rarely emerges without disruption.

In the Acts of the Apostles, we see a community constantly pushed beyond its comfort zone: Peter learning to embrace Gentiles (Acts 10), Paul challenging assumptions, women like Lydia stepping into leadership (Acts 16). The early Church was not static. It was alive!

So why do we so often act as if our world must be static?

A Word for This Moment

Let’s not pretend this is merely historical reflection.

We live in a moment when women’s voices are still dismissed, interrupted, sidelined. When leadership remains overwhelmingly male. When policies affecting women’s bodies and lives are debated without women at the table.

We have not yet elected a woman to the highest office in our land. Even now, we watch as women in leadership are scrutinized in ways their male counterparts rarely are. And when we look at the first two people dismissed from the cabinet of the current presidential administration, both are women.

The patterns persist.

And so the question becomes: Will we listen?

Pop culture, interestingly, often gets there first. Think of Beyoncé’s “Run the World (Girls),” the fierce resilience of women in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the quiet strength in *Little Women*, the defiant leadership in *Barbie* (yes, even *Barbie*), the layered storytelling of *Grey’s Anatomy*.

The world is wrestling with these questions.

The Church must not lag behind!

Calls to Action

- Intentionally amplify women's voices in all settings.
- Advocate for the full inclusion of women in all levels of leadership in church and society.
- Read and engage feminist theology, including voices like Halkes and others such as Elizabeth Johnson.
- Support organizations working to end the death penalty and promote restorative justice.
- Practice deep listening when women share their experiences, especially when those stories challenge your assumptions.
- Mentor and encourage young women who feel called to leadership.
- Examine your own language, assumptions and habits for subtle forms of exclusion.

From VHS to Vision: Seeing Clearly Now

That Friday night in seminary, gathered around an old television, watching *Stealing Heaven*, we thought we were simply watching a story about forbidden love.

We were wrong.

We were being invited—though we did not yet realize it—to see the Church through different eyes. To hear voices we had not been taught to prioritize. To wrestle with the gap between institutional ideals and lived reality.

Today, Héloïse, Halkes and Prejean sit before us like a panel of wise, unflinching teachers. They do not ask for admiration. They demand transformation.

If Easter means anything, it means that new life breaks through old systems. That stones get rolled away. That voices once silenced begin to speak again.

The question is not whether these women have something to teach us.

The question is whether we are ready to listen—and then to act with extraordinary courage, extraordinary honesty and extraordinary love!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where do I still silence or overlook women's voices in my own life?
- In what ways do I separate my humanity from my spirituality, rather than integrating them as Héloïse did?
- What fears keep me from speaking truth as Halkes did?
- How might I practice the kind of radical compassion embodied by Prejean?

- What concrete step can I take this week to promote greater equality in our world?
- How is the Risen Christ calling me beyond comfort, into transformation this Easter season?

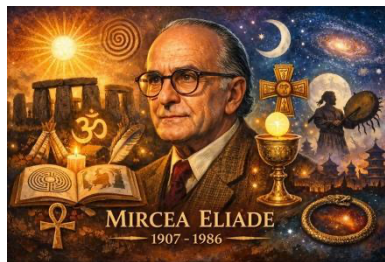
Let Us Pray

God of resurrection and renewal, You speak through voices we too often ignore. You call through lives that unsettle and challenge us. Give us the courage of Héloïse to live honestly, the boldness of Halkes to speak truth, and the compassion of Prejean to love without limits. Open our ears to hear, our hearts to receive, and our hands to act. In this unordinary U.S. moment, form in us an extraordinary people – committed to justice, rooted in love, and faithful to your ever-unfolding truth. Amen.

Myths That Open the Sacred

Mircea Eliade, Ritual Memory, and the Extraordinary Task
of Seeing the World as Charged with Meaning

April 22, 2026



I was introduced to Mircea Eliade during an undergraduate course on mythology – and now I just can’t shake him. Back then, I was a philosophy major attempting to make sense of gods, stories, symbols and the strange persistence of ritual in human life. Eliade’s idea that myth is not “false history,” but a doorway into sacred reality, lodged itself somewhere deep in me.

Later, during my graduate studies in theology, I returned to Eliade again, this time with more questions than certainty. We studied his writings on symbol, ritual and what he called hierophanies, moments when the sacred breaks into the ordinary. I remember sitting in class, wondering whether the Mass itself might be one of those ruptures in time, not an escape from reality, but its deepest unveiling.

Now, years later, I find myself returning to Eliade every April 22, when we remember his passing, asking what a Romanian historian of religion might still have to teach us in an America saturated with competing myths, collapsing rituals, and extraordinary longing for meaning.

The Scholar of Sacred Time

Mircea Eliade (1907-1986) was a Romanian novelist, philosopher and historian of religion whose work shaped the modern study of myth and ritual. He taught for decades at the University of Chicago and became one of the most influential interpreters of religious symbolism in the twentieth century.

At the heart of Eliade's thought is a simple but unsettling claim: Human beings do not merely *tell* stories about the sacred; we *enter* them. Myths are not primitive explanations of the world. They are ways of participating in a deeper reality.

Eliade distinguished between *sacred time* (the time of myth, ritual and divine encounter) and *profane time* (the ordinary flow of hours and schedules).

For Eliade, rituals do not just remind us of sacred events. *They re-enact* them. A festival is not memory alone. It is participation. A symbol is not decoration. It is a threshold!

He called these ruptures in ordinary time *hierophanies*, manifestations of the sacred in the world.

And here is where his thought becomes both beautiful and complicated. Eliade was brilliant in tracing these patterns across Hinduism, Christianity, Indigenous traditions and ancient religions. Yet scholars have also noted problematic aspects of his biography, including political entanglements in interwar Romania. Like many thinkers of his era, he carries both illumination and shadow.

Still, his central insight remains: *Humans are meaning-making creatures who live by sacred stories, whether we name them or not.*

Myth, Ritual and the American Imagination

It is impossible to read Eliade today without seeing how deeply myth and ritual still shape public life in the United States.

We may say we live in a secular age, but we still gather around sacred narratives:

- National myths of exceptionalism and destiny.
- Rituals of political allegiance and spectacle.
- Memorials that function like liturgies of grief and identity.
- Cultural "scriptures" in film, television and music.

Even our fractures are ritualized.

We see it in the endless cycle of elections as liturgical seasons. We see it in the choreography of rallies and protests. We see it in the symbolic wars over flags, statues and historical memory. We even see it in digital liturgies, where social media feeds, form a kind of daily examen of outrage, affirmation and belonging.

Eliade would say we have not escaped myth. We have multiplied it!

And in this extraordinary moment of polarization, the question is not whether we live by myth, but *which myths are shaping us toward life and which are shaping us toward fear.*

Scripture, Symbol and the Easter Imagination

In this Easter season, Eliade's insights take on a different resonance.

The Acts of the Apostles does not present the early Church as a museum of doctrine, but as a community living inside a new sacred time. "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42). That is ritual language. That is myth enacted as life!

The Gospel of John speaks of Mary Magdalene mistaking the risen Christ for the gardener (Jn. 20:15), as if resurrection itself breaks ordinary perception!

Paul writes, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation" (2Cor. 5:17). Not symbolic only. Transformative!

The Book of Revelation imagines a world where tears are wiped away and death is no more (Rev. 21:4). That is mythic language pointing beyond itself into hope!

And Jesus himself speaks in parables, those strange little stories that refuse to stay at the level of information, and instead demand participation.

Eliade helps us see that Christianity is not myth in the sense of fiction, but myth in the sense of *sacred reality disclosed through story and ritual.*

Pop Culture as Modern Mythmaking

If Eliade were teaching today, he might watch less ethnography and more streaming platforms. Because our culture is saturated with mythic imagination:

- *Star Wars* and the eternal struggle between light and dark.
- *The Matrix* and the question of waking into reality.
- Marvel's cinematic universe and its pantheon of fragile gods.
- *Harry Potter* and the formation of moral courage through chosen community.
- *The Lord of the Rings* and the burden of carrying power without being consumed by it.

- *Stranger Things* and the hidden world breaking into ordinary suburban life.
- The musical liturgy of *Hamilton*, where national origin becomes sung ritual.

Even the stadium tours of Taylor Swift and Lady Gaga function like communal rites of identity, memory and belonging!

These are not trivial entertainments. They are contemporary mythologies through which people locate meaning, suffering and hope.

The question Eliade leaves us with is simple: Do these myths open us to life, or narrow us into fear?

Living Differently Inside the Myth

In this unordinary U.S. moment, we might learn a few things from Eliade's vision:

- **Recover ritual imagination** not as empty repetition, but as encounter with the sacred in time.
- **Treat liturgy as participation**, not performance or obligation alone.
- **Critically discern cultural myths**, asking what they form in us: compassion or division.
- **Reclaim symbol as theological language**, especially in a world that reduces everything to data.
- **Embrace sacred time in ordinary life**, noticing where grace interrupts schedules and systems.
- **Build communities of meaning**, not just institutions of maintenance.
- **Resist the captivity of political mythologies** that demand absolute allegiance.

To live as people of faith today is to resist being flattened into consumers of competing narratives. It is to insist that bread, wine, water, oil, silence and song still matter.

It is to insist that extraordinary grace still breaks into ordinary time!

Returning to the Threshold

When I first encountered Eliade in a college classroom, I thought I was studying ancient stories. What I did not realize was that I was being asked to notice my own life as story.

Now, decades later, I see what he may have been pointing toward all along. Not escape from the world, but deeper entry into it. Not fantasy, but attention. Not nostalgia for mythic pasts, but recognition that every moment can become threshold.

In this extraordinary Easter season, perhaps the real question is not whether the sacred still appears.

It is whether we still have eyes to recognize it!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where in my daily life do I experience time as sacred, rather than merely scheduled?
- What cultural myths have shaped my imagination without my noticing?
- How does Eucharist reshape my understanding of participation in sacred reality?
- Where do I see “hierophanies,” moments when grace breaks into ordinary experience?
- What would it mean to live with extraordinary attentiveness to symbol and ritual today?

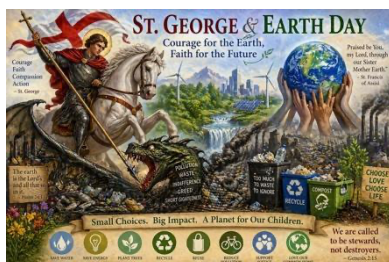
Let Us Pray

God of hidden and revealed presence, You who speak in story, silence and sacrament, open our eyes to the sacred woven through ordinary days. Free us from myths that diminish life and draw us into the extraordinary mystery of your love present in bread broken, words spoken and lives transformed. Teach us to recognize the burning ground beneath our feet and to walk gently upon it with courage and hope. May we become a people who live not only in time but in your time, where every moment is touched by grace. Amen.

Saint George and Earth Day

Dragons, Discipleship and the Extraordinary Call to Care for Our Sister, Mother Earth

April 23, 2026



When I was asked as a teenager to choose a Confirmation name, I naturally chose George. Naturally, I say, because George is a family name: My godfather and my maternal great-grandfather were both named George. Also, I was a Boy Scout, so it felt almost inevitable that I would choose the patron saint of scouting!

I have always been fascinated by **St. George** and his iconic image of slaying a dragon, a mythical beast that somehow continues to live in our imagination long after we no longer believe in dragons. And while saints like Christopher and Barbara were de-canonized—removed from the canon of saints for having been deemed legendary—George the dragon-slayer remained!

I wonder whether George and yesterday's celebration of **Earth Day** belong in the same conversation more than we usually think.

One speaks of a dragon. The other speaks of a planet under pressure. Both ask what courage looks like when something larger than us threatens what we love!

St. George and the Myth of Courage

St. George was a third-century soldier in the Roman imperial guard who refused to sacrifice to the Roman gods. For that refusal, he was tortured and executed.

His legend grew in the centuries that followed. In the most familiar version, he confronted a dragon that terrorized a city. A princess was offered as sacrifice. George intervened, defeated the beast, and liberated the people.

Like all saints wrapped in legend, the story is not meant to function as historical reportage. It functions as moral imagination.

George thus became a symbol of:

- Courage in the face of empire.
- Faithfulness under pressure.
- Resistance to destructive powers.
- Liberation of the vulnerable.
- The triumph of life over fear.

Scripture is full of similar imagery. The Psalms speak of God who “breaks the teeth of the wicked” (Ps. 3:7). The Book of Revelation imagines a dragon cast down (Rev. 12). Even Jesus speaks of binding strong people before entering their homes (Mk. 3:27).

George stands in that tradition of symbolic resistance.

He is not just a knight on horseback. He is a reminder that faith sometimes looks like refusal. Refusal to bow. Refusal to surrender conscience. Refusal to accept the world as it is when it contradicts the world as it should be.

Earth Day and the Quieter Dragons

And then there is Earth Day, which we marked yesterday.

Earth Day is not a liturgical feast in the Roman calendar, but it might as well be a moral one. It calls us to notice what is happening to what St. Francis of Assisi called “our sister, Mother Earth.”

Sometimes I think St. George’s dragon has changed form. It is no longer a creature in a cave. It is more subtle now:

- Rising temperatures that reshape coastlines.
- Plastic waste that fills oceans and landfills.
- Air that carries the residue of our consumption.
- Policies that weaken environmental protections.
- Habits of disposal we barely notice.

I confess something here that might sound small, but often feels spiritual to me. I sometimes find myself quietly frustrated in church or in public spaces when I see an empty water bottle tossed into a trash can, instead of a recycling bin. Not because I think I am better, but because I feel the weight of accumulated indifference.

It feels like watching small dragons win by accumulation!

Earth Day asks a simple question: *What kind of world are we handing to our children and grandchildren?*

Genesis says we are to “till and keep” the garden of paradise (Gen. 2:15), not exhaust it. Paul writes that creation groans in labor pains (Rom. 8:22). That is not abstract theology. That is ecological reality!

George Meets Earth Day: Courage as Stewardship

What happens when we place St. George next to Earth Day?

We begin to see that environmental care is not a “soft issue.” It is a moral battlefield shaped by courage!

George did not defeat evil by abstraction. He acted.

Likewise, environmental discipleship is not just awareness. It is practice.

We are living in a moment when environmental protections are being rolled back, when climate policy is often caught in partisan struggle, and when economic convenience is too often prioritized over long-term survival.

It can feel like we are watching the dragon grow while arguing about whether it exists!

But Catholic tradition gives us another frame. Pope Francis in *Laudato Si* reminds us that “everything is connected.” That is not sentiment. That is a diagnosis of reality.

And in this truly unordinary U.S. moment, where ecological concern is often treated as optional or ideological, the witness of faith becomes even more urgent!

Earth Day Practices We Cannot Skip

If Earth Day passed quietly for many people yesterday, it should not pass quietly in us today. Here are simple but concrete practices that form ecological discipleship:

- Audit waste in your home or another setting for one week.
- Commit to intentionally reducing single-use plastics.
- Build or strengthen recycling and composting systems in your community.
- Invite a local environmental science class to assess the environmental impact of your organizations.
- Plant trees or native plants in shared spaces.
- Reduce energy use where possible, without harming safety or dignity.
- Support local environmental advocacy rooted in justice.

These are not extraordinary in scale. But they can become extraordinary in love!

Calls to Action

- Advocate for environmental policies at local, state and national levels, rooted in the common good.
- Integrate creation care into your words and lessons.
- Partner with schools, especially in underserved communities, on ecological education.

- Examine your personal and organizational investments for environmental impact and ethical alignment.
- Support Indigenous voices who often carry deep ecological wisdom.
- Connect environmental justice to immigration, labor and racial justice work.

Faith without ecological attention risks becoming disembodied. And ecology without moral imagination risks becoming despair!

Pop Culture, Dragons and Awakening

Our imagination is already trained for this struggle, even if we do not name it that way. We see dragons everywhere:

- *Game of Thrones* taught us about fire, power and ruin.
- *The Lord of the Rings* showed us corruption through possession of a ring.
- *Avatar* framed ecological destruction as moral collapse.
- *The Matrix* asked whether we live inside systems we no longer see.
- *Frozen II* reimagined nature itself as a voice calling for justice.
- Even superhero films like *Spider-Man* and *Black Panther* wrestle with responsibility and stewardship.

Pop culture is doing what myth has always done: *It is asking us who we are in relation to the forces that shape our world.*

The question is whether we listen!

From Dragon-slayer to Earth-keeper

George on horseback and Earth Day in the calendar may seem unrelated. But both ask the same thing in different languages.

What do we do when something powerful threatens what is vulnerable?

The ancient answer was courage.

The contemporary answer must be courage too, but expanded.

Not only courage to resist persecution, like George.

But courage to change habits.

Courage to rethink systems.

Courage to live differently in a world addicted to convenience.

In that sense, Earth Day is not *yesterday's* observance. It is *today's* discipleship!

The Dragon is Nearer Than We Think

When I think back to choosing George as my Confirmation name, I realize now it was never really about a knight in shining armor. It was about imagination. A young person trying to understand what it means to face something larger than oneself and still move forward in faith.

Today the dragons are less visible, but more present. They show up in data, in weather patterns, in policy decisions, in small daily habits that accumulate into global consequence.

And yet the call remains the same. To act. To choose. To resist what diminishes life. To protect what is fragile. To believe that the world is still worth tending.

Earth Day may have passed yesterday. St. George may be remembered today. But the work of extraordinary care for creation continues tomorrow.

And that is where courage always lives!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where do I notice “quiet dragons” in my daily habits and choices?
- How does my faith shape my responsibility toward creation?
- What would ecological courage look like in my household or circles of influence?
- Where do I feel tempted toward indifference, rather than action?
- How do Scripture and sacrament deepen my sense of creation as sacred?

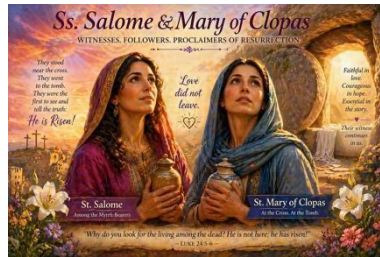
Let Us Pray

Creator God, You who formed the heavens and the earth and called them good, awaken in us reverence for all you have made. Give us the courage of St. George to confront what destroys life, and the humility of St. Francis to recognize every creature as gift. Heal what is wounded in our world, and soften what is hardened in our hearts. May we become stewards of extraordinary love in this unordinary U.S. moment for the sake of the earth you entrust to us and the generations who will come after us. Amen.

The Women Who Stayed

Salome, Mary of Clopas, and the Extraordinary Witness of Those Whom History Almost Forgot

April 24, 2026



Today my mind bends back some thirty years to my days at the Washington Theological Union, where we hosted an art exhibit on the hidden women of the Judeo-Christian scriptures. I remember walking slowly through that space, my eyes opening in ways they had not before. So many women unnamed. So many stories only partially told. “The woman with a hemorrhage.” “The daughter of Jairus.” As if they were not worthy of names!

It struck me then—and it has never left me—that history is most often written by the victors, and in ancient patriarchal societies, those victors were overwhelmingly men. Which means that the stories of countless women were not simply minimized. They were erased.

And yet today, the Church remembers two women—Salome and Mary of Clopas—whose names somehow endured. Barely mentioned. Lightly sketched. And yet, central.

Because they stayed.

The Myrrh-bearers: Witnesses at the Margins

In the Western Church, Salome and Mary of Clopas receive relatively little attention. In the Eastern tradition, however, they are honored among the “myrrh-bearers,” the women who accompanied Jesus, who stood near the cross, and who went to the tomb to anoint his body.

Scripture gives us glimpses:

- Mary of Clopas appears at the foot of the cross (Jn. 19:25).
- Salome is often identified among the women who followed Jesus and supported his ministry (Mk. 15:40-41).
- Both are connected, in various traditions, to the women who discovered the empty tomb (Mk. 16:1).

These are not minor details.

While many of the male disciples fled, these women remained. They witnessed the horror of crucifixion. They prepared bodies for burial. They encountered resurrection.

In the gospels, women are the first to proclaim the resurrection, though their testimony is dismissed as “an idle tale” (Lk. 24:11). That phrase alone tells us everything we need to know about how women’s voices were received.

And yet, without such women, there is no Easter proclamation.

Followers or Disciples? Language Matters

Traditionally, women like Salome and Mary of Clopas have often been called “followers” rather than “disciples.”

But that distinction says more about us than about them.

Our English word “disciple” comes from a Greek root that simply means learner or student. And by every gospel measure, these women learned from Jesus, traveled with him, supported his mission, and proclaimed his message.

If anything, they embody discipleship more fully than those who abandoned him!

So why the linguistic hesitation?

Because language shapes power. And for centuries, sadly, the Church has struggled to fully name the leadership, authority and witness of women within its own story.

Easter Belongs to the Women Who Stayed

We are still in the Easter season, still hearing stories of the Risen Christ appearing to his followers, still walking with the early Church in the Acts of the Apostles as they form a new kind of community.

And yet, Easter begins not with Peter preaching or Paul traveling. It begins with women at a tomb.

- “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him” (Jn. 20:2).
- “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” (Lk. 24:5).
- “Go and tell my brothers...” (Mt. 28:10).

These are not peripheral voices. They are the first witnesses. The first evangelists. The first proclaimers of resurrection.

And yet, how often have we centered their voices in our preaching, our theology, our imagination?

From Ancient Margins to Modern Realities

It would be comforting to believe that the marginalization of women is a relic of the ancient world.

It is not.

We are living in a moment in the United States where the rights of women are being rolled back in tangible ways. Where access to healthcare is restricted. Where bodily autonomy is contested. Where young girls are growing up with fewer protections than their mothers and grandmothers.

At the same time, women remain underrepresented in leadership across many sectors, including the Church.

And so the memory of Salome and Mary of Clopas becomes more than historical reflection.

It becomes moral challenge.

Will we continue to benefit from the witness of women while limiting their authority?

Will we celebrate their presence while constraining their leadership?

Or will we finally tell the story differently?

Pop Culture and the Reclamation of Women's Voices

Interestingly, our broader culture has begun to wrestle with these questions in ways that theology sometimes lags behind.

We see it in:

- *Hidden Figures*, which uncovers the overlooked contributions of Black women in NASA.
- *The Handmaid's Tale*, which warns of the consequences of patriarchal control.
- *Barbie*, which unexpectedly sparked conversations about gender roles and identity.
- Taylor Swift reclaiming her own music and narrative.
- Beyoncé's "Lemonade," centering Black womanhood and resilience.
- Even shows like *Grey's Anatomy* and *Scandal*, where women lead, decide, and redefine power.

These cultural moments are not perfect, but they signal something important. There is a hunger to recover stories that were buried.

The Church has those stories, too. We simply need to tell them.

Calls to Action

- Intentionally name and lift up women in preaching, teaching and liturgical life.
- Advocate for expanded roles for women within leadership structures in church and state.

- Support policies that protect the rights, health and dignity of women and girls.
- Educate communities about the historical contributions of women in Christianity.
- Examine language in prayer and catechesis that may unconsciously marginalize women.
- Create spaces where women's voices are not only heard, but centered.

This is not about political correctness. It is about truth!

Returning to the Unnamed

I think back now to that art exhibit at Washington Theological Union, to the faces without names, to the stories only partially told.

And I realize something I did not fully grasp then.

The women were *never* absent.

They were present at every moment that mattered.

At the cross.

At the tomb.

At the beginning of resurrection.

Salome and Mary of Clopas remind us that the gospel has always depended on those who stayed when others left, who spoke when others doubted, who believed when others dismissed.

The tragedy is *not* that they were not there.

The tragedy is that we have too often failed to see them.

In this extraordinary moment, perhaps the call is simple.

To see differently.

To name faithfully.

To honor courage wherever it appears.

And to finally tell the story as it has always been!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Whose voices have I overlooked in my understanding of the gospel?
- How do I respond when women's authority or leadership is challenged?
- Where do I see "hidden disciples" in my own community today?
- What would it mean to center women's stories more intentionally in faith life?
- How is the Spirit calling the Church to grow in justice and inclusion in this moment?

Let Us Pray

God of resurrection, You who revealed the empty tomb first to those the world overlooked, open our eyes to the witnesses among us. Give us the humility to listen, the courage to change, and the wisdom to honor every voice through which your truth is spoken. May we become a community marked by extraordinary justice, extraordinary courage, and extraordinary love. And may we never again overlook those through whom you first speak life. Amen.

The Very Human Gospel

Saint Mark, Bernard Kelly, and Two Martyrs of Love
in an Age that Prefers Myths over Truth

April 25, 2026



I'll be honest: If you were to ask me my favorite gospel, I'm not sure that I could give you a simple answer. I love each gospel for different reasons. But if you were to press me—really press me—I might quietly lean toward the Gospel of Mark. Because Mark does something the others do not quite do in the same way. He gives us a deeply human Jesus.

This is the Jesus whose family comes to restrain him because they think he has lost his mind (Mk. 3:21). This is the Jesus who sleeps through a storm (Mk. 4:38). This is the Jesus who cries out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" (Mk. 15:34).

No polished theology. No soaring prologue like the Gospel of John. No infancy narratives. No attempt to smooth the rough edges. Some call this gospel "Stark Mark." Simple and to the point.

Just a human being living, loving, suffering and trusting God in the midst of it all.

And what I love even more, now in the 21st century, is how Mark is remembered alongside other very human lives: with Bernard Philip Kelly, and with Xulhaz Mannan and Tanay Mojumdar.

Three very different stories. One shared truth.

Holiness is not about perfection. It is about courage in the middle of being human!

Mark's Gospel: No Myth, Just Flesh and Breath

Mark's Jesus does not float above reality.

He touches lepers (Mk. 1:41).

He grows frustrated with disciples (Mk. 8:17).

He feels anguish in Gethsemane (Mk. 14:33-36).

Even the resurrection ending, in its earliest form, leaves us unsettled: The women flee in fear and say nothing to anyone (Mk. 16:8). That is how the story ends.

Or, perhaps better said, that is where it begins!

Because Mark refuses to give us a tidy narrative. He gives us something closer to life.

And in an age that often prefers larger-than-life figures, that matters.

We live in a moment when political leaders are sometimes portrayed in almost messianic terms, wrapped in language of destiny and divine appointment. That should give any Christian pause.

Mark would not recognize such portrayals.

Because Mark insists that the Divine is revealed not in domination, but in vulnerability.

Bernard Kelly: Holiness in Ordinary Life

Then there is Bernard Philip Kelly (1907-1958).

Not a bishop. Not a priest. Not a public figure in the way we often define importance.

A banker. A husband. A father. A writer in the margins of his life.

For 25 years, he contributed essays and reviews to *Blackfriars*. He engaged distributism, reflected on the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, and explored how Christianity might thoughtfully engage Eastern traditions.

There is something quietly extraordinary about that.

Kelly reminds us that theology does not belong only to institutions. It belongs to people who think, who read, who wrestle, who write in the small spaces of their lives.

In a world obsessed with visibility, he models depth.

And perhaps even more importantly, he invites us to look beyond our own tradition. To engage Buddhism, Hinduism and other philosophies not with fear, but with curiosity.

That takes humility.

Xulhaz and Tanay: Love in the Face of Violence

And then we come to two names that should never be forgotten.

Xulhaz Mannan and Tanay Mojumdar.

In 2016—only ten years ago—they were brutally murdered in Bangladesh by extremists who labeled their killing a “blessed attack.” Xulhaz had worked to create space for LGBTQIA+ people in a society where such space was denied. He edited the country’s first LGBTQIA+ magazine. He tried to organize a Rainbow Rally.

For that, he was targeted.

Tanay happened to be there.

Their story is not wrapped in legend. It is raw. It is painful. It is real.

And yet, it echoes something deeply Gospel-rooted.

“Greater love has no one than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (Jn. 15:13).

They did not set out to become martyrs. They set out to live truthfully.

And in doing so, they exposed the cost of love in a world that often fears it.

Pop Culture, Humanity and the Refusal of Myth

Our culture constantly wrestles with the tension between myth and humanity.

We see it in:

- *The Last Temptation of Christ*, which dared to imagine Jesus’ inner struggle.
- *Jesus Christ Superstar*, portraying doubt and emotion in bold ways.
- *The Chosen*, emphasizing relational humanity in the Gospel story.
- *Bohemian Rhapsody*, showing the complexity of Freddie Mercury.
- *Rocketman*, revealing the vulnerability of Elton John.
- Taylor Swift’s *The Tortured Poets Department*, leaning into raw emotional honesty.

Again and again, we are drawn not to perfection, but to authenticity.

Mark understood that long before Hollywood did!

Scripture’s Consistent Witness to Human Holiness

The Bible never shies away from human complexity:

- Moses doubted his own ability (Ex. 4:10).
- David failed morally (2Sam. 11).
- Peter denied Jesus (Lk. 22:54-62).
- Thomas questioned resurrection (Jn. 20:24-29).
- Paul wrestled with his own limitations (2Cor. 12:7-10).

And yet, each becomes part of the story.

Not because they were flawless, but because they were faithful in moments that mattered!

Calls to Action

- Resist the temptation to elevate political leaders to messianic status.
- Embrace a theology that honors human complexity, rather than denying it.
- Support LGBTQIA+ individuals and communities with tangible solidarity.
- Engage other religious traditions with openness and intellectual humility.
- Value theological reflection that emerges from everyday life, not only from institutions.
- Tell stories of real people, not idealized figures, in preaching and teaching.

This is how we reclaim a Gospel that breathes!

Back to the Beginning, Back to the Human

When I return to Mark, I do not find certainty wrapped in perfection.

I find something better.

I find a story that trusts us enough to leave things unfinished.

A Jesus who feels abandonment.

A community that struggles to understand.

A resurrection that begins in fear and confusion.

And alongside that story, I now see others.

A banker writing theology in the quiet hours.

Two activists living courageously in the face of danger.

None of them mythic. All of them real.

In an extraordinary moment when so many are tempted to trade truth for spectacle, perhaps the call is this: To choose the human story again.

To believe that God still works through imperfect people.

To practice extraordinary courage in ordinary lives.

And to remember that the Gospel never needed us to be larger than life.

It only ever asked us to be faithful within it!

Questions for Reflection and Prayer

- Where am I tempted to seek perfection, rather than authenticity in faith?
- How do I respond when leaders are portrayed as beyond critique?
- What does courage look like in my own daily life?
- How am I called to stand in solidarity with marginalized communities?
- Where is God working through ordinary, imperfect people around me?

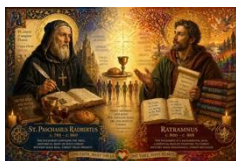
Let Us Pray

God of truth, You who chose to reveal yourself not in power, but in vulnerability, teach us to see holiness in the human. Free us from the need for perfect heroes, and draw us instead toward lives of real courage. Strengthen all who stand for love in the face of fear, all who speak truth in the face of violence, all who live faithfully in quiet, unseen ways. May we become people of extraordinary honesty, extraordinary compassion, and extraordinary courage. And may we never forget that your story has always been told through people just like us. Amen.

When Bread Becomes a Battlefield

Paschasius Radbertus, Eucharistic Imagination,
and the Courage to Disagree

April 26, 2026



Nearly 30 years ago, in a classroom at the Washington Theological Union, Sister Theresa Koernke, our professor for “Theology of the Eucharist,” handed me a recommendation that would stay with me for life: Read Edward Kilmartin’s *The Eucharist in the West*. I immediately bought the book and began what can only be described as a slow feast. This was not light reading. At all. It was the kind of text that demands re-reading, making notes in the margins, and, yes, a great deal of intellectual humility. Frankly, it was a lot like reading the works of Karl Rahner! A classmate, Dr. Jess Wormley, would often casually ask over lunch, “Are you picking up what I’m putting down?” *The Eucharist in the West* was certainly a work that challenged me to “pick up” what Kilmartin was “putting down.” In fact, I packed that book for my 30-day solemn vow retreat in New Mexico, simply to savor the work line-by-line. In those pages, I first encountered the theologian we remember today: Paschasius Radbertus.

A Eucharistic Debate That Still Matters

Paschasius Radbertus, a ninth-century abbot of Corbie, wrote the first major Western treatise on the Eucharist, *On the Body and Blood of the Lord*. His claim was bold and clear: The Eucharist is the true, historical body of Jesus Christ. Not symbol, not metaphor, but reality.

Enter his intellectual counterpart, **Ratramnus**, who wrote a work with the exact same title – and reached the opposite conclusion. For Ratramnus, the Eucharist was symbolic, spiritually real, but not physically identical to the historical Jesus.

Same title. Same faith. Radically different conclusions!

If that sounds like the beginning of a medieval “Twitter war,” you are not far off.

Yet here is what strikes me as extraordinary: The Church was large enough to hold in tension both voices. It wrestled. It debated. It did not immediately “cancel” or exile one side in favor of the other. Only later, through centuries of philosophical development—especially under the influence of Aristotelian metaphysics—did the doctrine of “transubstantiation” take hold.

But at the beginning? There was space. There was tension. There was conversation.

The Beauty and Burden of Seeing Differently

I often say that one of the great beauties—and challenges—of life in relationship is this: We love people who sometimes see the world very differently than we do! Two parents can witness the same moment in their child’s life and interpret it in entirely different ways. Neither is necessarily wrong. Both are bringing their lived experience to bear.

The same holds true in theology.

Radbertus and Ratramnus remind us that faith is not a monologue. It is a dialogue. It is not a static possession, but a living tradition.

And yet, how quickly we move today to label, dismiss or condemn!

I remember my early years as a priest, just as the Church transitioned into the papacy of Pope Benedict XVI, the successor to Pope John Paul II. “Papa Ratzinger,” brilliant as he was, strongly pushed toward unity—often experienced as uniformity. Theological diversity, especially from liberation theologians and progressive voices, was frequently curtailed.

Contrast that with the earlier moment of Radbertus and Ratramnus: Disagreement did not immediately equal disloyalty.

That is a lesson we still desperately need.

From the Altar to the Dinner Table

Let’s be honest: The polarization we experience in theology mirrors what we experience in our nation.

Thanksgiving dinners have become theological debates in disguise. One person says, “Lock them up!” Another responds, “That’s not the Gospel.” One says, “Send them back to where they came from.” Another quotes Matthew 25: “I was a stranger, and you welcomed me.”

We are no longer simply disagreeing. We are dividing.

And yet, Scripture itself holds tension:

- “Do this in memory of me” (Lk. 22:19).
- “My flesh is true food” (Jn. 6:51).
- “They devoted themselves to the breaking of the bread” (Acts 2:42).
- “Discern the body” (1Cor. 11:29).
- The Risen Christ revealed in the breaking of bread (Lk. 24:30-31).

Even the early Church did not flatten these into one tidy explanation.

Why should we?

Pop culture, too, reminds us of this tension.

- Think of *The Matrix*: Is reality what we perceive, or something deeper?
- Or *Frozen*, where love is redefined beyond traditional expectations.
- Or *Ted Lasso*, which insists that curiosity is better than judgment.
- Or *Hamilton*, where competing narratives shape history.
- Or even Beyoncé’s *Renaissance*, which reclaims identity through multiplicity and expression.

Truth, it seems, is often encountered in layers!

Calls to Extraordinary Action

Before we rush to resolve every theological tension, perhaps we are called to live within it—with extraordinary grace. Here are some suggestions.

- Practice holy curiosity. Ask questions before forming conclusions, especially with those who disagree.
- Create spaces for dialogue. Foster conversations where differing views can be expressed without fear.
- Resist gatekeeping. Avoid the temptation to decide who is “in” or “out.”
- Engage Scripture deeply. Read passages from multiple perspectives, not just the one you were taught.
- Model extraordinary humility. Admit that your understanding of God is always partial, always unfolding.

Picking Up What Is Being Put Down

As I think back to that classroom, to that dense book, to those long hours of reading and re-reading, I realize something now that I did not fully grasp then: The goal was never simply to “get the right answer.”

The goal was to learn how to listen.

Radbertus was “putting something down.” So was Ratramnus. The question was never which one to silence, but whether we were willing to pick up what each was offering.

In this very unordinary moment in our nation, perhaps that is the deeper call—not to win arguments, but to deepen understanding. Not to enforce uniformity, but to cultivate communion.

Because at the end of the day, the Eucharist is not a weapon. It is a table. And there is room for more than one voice at that table!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where do I struggle to accept differing viewpoints in certain matters?
- Do I approach theological disagreement with curiosity or defensiveness?
- How might Scripture invite me into a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the Eucharist or other topics?
- Who in my life sees the world differently than I do—and what might I learn from them?
- How can I embody extraordinary humility in conversations about faith and politics?

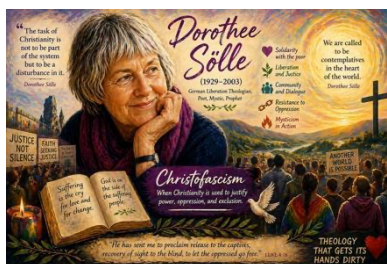
Let Us Pray

God of mystery and presence, You meet us in bread and wine, in word and silence, in certainty and in doubt. Teach us to listen as deeply as we believe. Teach us to hold difference without fear. Teach us to recognize Your presence not only in what we understand, but also in what stretches us beyond understanding. May we become a people of extraordinary love, gathered not by uniformity, but by communion. Amen.

When Faith Resists Fascism

Dorothee Sölle, Dangerous Theology, and the Call to Extraordinary Courage

April 27, 2026



Because we are accustomed to thinking of the U.S. president as “the leader of the free world,” a meme I saw last week stopped me cold. It bore that very title—but instead of the likeness of our U.S. president, it featured...our first U.S. pope. Let that sink in. In a moment when words like “fascist,” “dictator,” and “strongman” are bandied about with increasing frequency in our national discourse, and when the U.S. is increasingly viewed as an aggressor believing itself to be above international law, the thought of our current U.S. president as “the leader of the free world” has become quite laughable.

Into this mix, please join me in welcoming **Dorothee Sölle** (1929-2003), the woman we remember today. She coined the term “Christofascism,” daring us to think more deeply, more critically, and more faithfully about power, faith and resistance. Let us carefully listen to her urgent message!

A German Voice in Liberation Theology

If you’re like me, perhaps you first encountered liberation theology through Latin American voices—Gustavo Gutiérrez, Leonardo Boff, Jon Sobrino and others who insisted that God has a preferential option for the poor. Or, perhaps even through feminist voices—Mary Daly, Elizabeth Johnson, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and others who challenged us to question the patriarchal lenses through which we have viewed God and Church. But what does liberation theology look like in Germany?

For Sölle, writing in the shadow of World War II and the horrors of fascism, theology could never remain abstract. It had to confront real suffering, real injustice, real systems of oppression. Her work emerged from a context where Christianity had, at times, been co-opted to support authoritarian regimes. That history mattered. And so she asked: *What happens when religion stops liberating and starts colluding with evil?*

Naming the Unthinkable: Christofascism

Sölle coined the term “Christofascism” to describe a distorted Christianity that aligns itself with authoritarian power, demands unquestioning obedience, and baptizes injustice in the language of faith.

That is not easy language. It is not meant to be.

But consider the warning signs she identified:

- Blind loyalty to leaders framed as divinely chosen.
- Suppression of dissent in the name of unity.
- Use of religion to justify violence or exclusion.
- A theology that prioritizes power over compassion.

If that list makes you uncomfortable, it should. It makes me uncomfortable.

Because suddenly, we are not just talking about history. We are talking about our very unordinary U.S. moment today!

Suffering: Beyond “Christian Masochism”

In her landmark work *Suffering*, Sölle dismantled what she calls “Christian masochism” and “Christian sadism.”

Let’s translate that into plain language.

“Christian masochism” suggests that suffering is somehow inherently good, and that we should passively accept pain because it somehow pleases God. Think of distorted readings of Luke 9:23: “Take up your cross.” Too often, that becomes a call to endure injustice, rather than challenge it!

“Christian sadism,” on the other hand, imagines a God who demands suffering—who requires pain as payment. This distorts passages like John 3:16 into something transactional and violent.

Sölle rejected both.

Instead, she insisted that God is present in suffering—not as its author, but as its companion.

- “*I have seen the affliction of my people*” (Ex. 3:7).
- “*Whatever you did for one of the least of these, you did for me*” (Mt. 25:40).
- “*Jesus wept*” (Jn. 11:35).
- “*God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives*” (Lk. 4:18).
- The descent of the Spirit creating community, rather than enforcing power (Acts 2).

This is not passive faith. This is active, resisting, transformative faith!

Theology That Gets Its Hands Dirty

What fascinates me about Sölle is her refusal to keep theology in the classroom. She brought it into protests, into public discourse, into lived reality.

She reminds me, in some ways, of the prophets: Amos crying out for justice, Isaiah envisioning peace, Jeremiah refusing silence.

Or, in more contemporary terms, think of:

- *The Handmaid's Tale*, where religion becomes a tool of oppression.
- *Les Misérables*, where grace disrupts rigid systems of justice.
- *Barbie* (yes, really), which interrogates constructed power systems.
- *Andor* from the Star Wars universe, where rebellion emerges against empire.
- Beyoncé's *Formation*, which reclaims identity and power in the face of systemic injustice.

Sölle would say: *Theology that does not engage the real world is not theology at all!*

Our Present Moment

Let's not pretend we are immune.

We live in a nation where political rhetoric increasingly mirrors religious absolutism. Where dissent is labeled as disloyalty. Where migrants are dehumanized. Where policies harm the vulnerable and are justified in moral terms.

We hear "Christian" voices—or, better said, white nationalists—recasting our U.S. president as a divinely-appointed, messianic figure. Calls for retribution are framed as righteousness. Our nation drags our world farther from peace and stability, with sycophants suggesting that God is somehow on our side in a chosen war against the Iranian people.

And we sit at dinner tables throughout our nation where conversations fracture relationships. One voice parrots racist slurs and bigoted tropes. Another says, "Love your enemies" (Mt. 5:44).

Sölle would not let us look away.

She would ask: **Which side of the Gospel are you on?**

Calls to Extraordinary Action

If we take Sölle seriously, we cannot remain passive observers. We are called to extraordinary courage:

- **Interrogate your faith and your theology.** Does it liberate or control? Does it comfort only the comfortable?
- **Boldly name injustice.** Even when it is unpopular, even when it costs you something.

- **Stand with the marginalized.** Make Matthew 25 your daily examen.
- **Reject passive suffering.** Actively work to transform unjust systems.
- **Cultivate communities of resistance.** Build spaces where faith leads to action, not complacency.

Who Leads the Free World?

That meme I mentioned at the beginning still lingers in my mind.

Who is the leader of the free world?

Sölle might respond: The question itself is flawed.

Because true freedom is not dictated from above. It is lived from below—in communities that resist oppression, that embody compassion, that choose love over power.

The real “leaders” of the free world are those who refuse to let faith become a tool of domination.

They are the ones who quietly, persistently, courageously live the Gospel.

They are the ones who practice extraordinary love under a regime weaponizing fear.

And perhaps—just perhaps—they are people like you and me, if we dare to take Sölle seriously!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where might my understanding of God unintentionally support injustice?
- How have I confused obedience with faithfulness?
- How do I respond when religion is used to justify harm?
- Where is God calling me to move from passive belief to active resistance?
- What would extraordinary courage look like in my life this week?

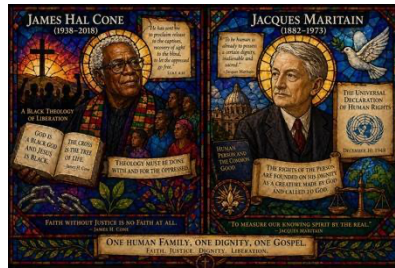
Let Us Pray

God of justice and mercy, You do not delight in suffering, but you meet us within it and call us beyond it. Break open our comfortable theologies. Disturb our silence in the face of injustice. Strengthen us to resist what is evil and to build what is good. May we become people of extraordinary courage, who refuse to let faith be twisted into fear, and who instead embody Your liberating love in every corner of this world. Amen.

The Liberating Christ and the Measure of Our Humanity

James Cone, Jacques Maritain,
and the Extraordinary Call to Dignity

April 28, 2026



Have you ever been part of a book club? I admittedly have not—except during a course on 20th-century theology at Virginia Theological Seminary, a sister institution of the Washington Theological Union, where our professor, Dr. Walter Eversley, assigned one book every week. For that reason, we called his course “the book-of-the-week club.” One of those books—*The Black Christ* by Kelly Brown Douglas—still sits with me nearly 30 years later. That text first introduced me to the work of James Hal Cone, the theologian we remember today, and it unsettled me in all the right ways. It forced me to ask not only who Christ *is*, but who Christ is *for*.

And once you start asking that question, you cannot easily stop.

The Black Christ Who Still Disturbs

James Hal Cone (1938-2018) insisted that theology is never neutral. It either liberates, or it oppresses. There is no middle ground. In a nation shaped by slavery, segregation, and ongoing racial injustice, Cone argued that Jesus must be understood as Black—not biologically, but existentially—because Jesus identifies with the oppressed. “Whatever you did for one of these least brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (Mt. 25:40). That is not metaphor. That is mandate.

Douglas’ *The Black Christ* traces this truth through history: from slaveholding Christianity that fashioned a white Christ in its own image, to enslaved persons who discovered in Jesus a suffering companion and liberator. Cone firmly stands in that tradition. His theology echoes Luke 4:18—“God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives”—and insists that any gospel divorced from liberation is no gospel at all!

And here is where it becomes uncomfortably contemporary.

When the gospel values of diversity, equity and inclusion—which Jesus of Nazareth and Saul/Paul of Tarsus proclaimed—are dismissed as

“woke,” when voting rights are curtailed through gerrymandering, when educational spaces are stripped of honest conversations about race, we are not merely debating policy. We are revealing theology. We are answering, whether we realize it or not, the question: Who is Christ *for*?

Cone would say: If your theology does not stand with the oppressed, it stands against them!

Measuring Our Humanity

And yet, today we also remember **Jacques Maritain** (1882-1973), whose work helped shape the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. If Cone presses us from the underside of history, Maritain challenges us from the philosophical heights of human dignity.

Maritain believed that human rights flow from the inherent dignity of the person, a dignity not granted by governments but recognized by them. His Thomistic vision invited us to “measure our knowing spirit by the real,” to encounter truth not as abstraction, but as lived reality.

The Universal Declaration begins with a simple yet revolutionary claim: All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.

Cone would ask: Do we actually believe that?

Because belief is not measured in words, but in systems. In schools. In prisons. In housing. In healthcare. In who gets heard and who gets silenced.

If Maritain gives us the language of dignity, Cone demands that we embody it.

Scripture, Story, and the Soundtrack of Liberation

The tension between oppression and liberation runs throughout scripture:

- “I have witnessed the affliction of my people” (Ex. 3:7).
- “Let justice roll down like waters” (Am. 5:24).
- The Samaritan who crossed boundaries to show mercy (Lk. 10:33).
- “I came that they may have life” (Jn. 10:10).
- The Spirit breaking down divisions (Acts 2).

And if scripture sings this song, so does our culture:

- *Selma* reminds us that the struggle for voting rights continues.
- *12 Years a Slave* confronts us with the brutality of history.
- *Glory* becomes a modern psalm of justice.
- *When They See Us* exposes systemic injustice.
- *This Is America* forces us to see what we often ignore.

These are not distractions from theology. They are theology in motion!

Calls to Extraordinary Action

- **Read and reflect on Cone's work**, especially *A Black Theology of Liberation*, and examine where your theology aligns or resists.
- **Revisit the Universal Declaration of Human Rights**, and assess how well our nation currently embodies its principles.
- **Advocate for equitable policies** in education, housing and voting rights.
- **Deeply listen to voices from marginalized communities** without defensiveness or dismissal.
- **Honestly examine your own assumptions** about race, privilege and power.
- **Actively support organizations** working for racial justice and equity.

The Book Club We Cannot Leave

That long-ago “book-of-the-week club” never really ended. Life itself has become the syllabus. Each headline, each policy, each encounter places another “text” in our hands.

Cone and Maritain sit side-by-side on today's reading list. One speaks from the streets, the other from the academy. One cries out from suffering, the other articulates dignity. Together, they ask us to do something extraordinarily difficult: to see clearly, to think deeply, and to act courageously!

Because the question remains the same as it was when I first opened *The Black Christ*: Who is Christ for?

And perhaps more importantly: Who are we for?

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where do I see Christ most clearly – in comfort or in struggle?
- How does my faith challenge, rather than reinforce, systems of inequality?
- When have I remained silent in the face of injustice?
- How do I respond when my assumptions about race or privilege are challenged?
- What concrete step can I take this week toward greater justice and dignity?
- How do my actions reflect – or not – the belief that all people are created equal?

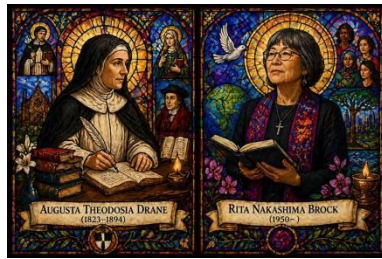
Let Us Pray

God of justice and dignity, You created each of us in your image, and you walk especially with those who suffer. Open our eyes to see Christ in the oppressed, open our minds to recognize truth in unexpected places, open our hearts to love with extraordinary courage. Give us the strength to challenge injustice, the humility to listen and learn, and the grace to build a world where dignity is not declared, but lived. We ask this in the name of the liberating Christ. Amen.

Anonymous Ink, Liberating Voices

From Hidden Authorship to Prophetic Witness
in an Unordinary U.S. Moment

April 29, 2026



We all have flights of fantasy. In one of my more playful scriptural reveries, I sometimes imagine that the Gospel of Luke—with its persistent centering of women, outsiders and the poor—might have been written by... a woman. After all, who else lingers so tenderly with Mary's voice in the *Magnificat* (Lk. 1:46-55)? Who else foregrounds Elizabeth, Anna, the widow of Nain, the women who funded Jesus' ministry (Lk. 8:1-3), and the women who remained when others fled the cross (Lk. 23:49)? Imagine it: a gospel long attributed to a man actually composed by a woman whose voice history muted!

It would not be the first time.

The Church's story, like the world's story, includes countless women whose words were published anonymously or credited to men. Which brings us to the two women we remember today—one who wrote in the shadows, another who speaks in full voice—and to the extraordinary invitation they extend to us now.

A Hidden Pen: Augusta Theodosia Drane

Augusta Theodosia Drane (1823-1894) lived and wrote in a time when women's intellectual authority was routinely questioned, curtailed or erased. An English Dominican sister, she became a careful historian, biographer and essayist, producing works on St. Dominic, St. Catherine of Siena, St. Thomas More, and the broader tradition of Christian education and scholarship. Her prose reveals a disciplined mind, a reverent heart, and a deep love for the Church's intellectual life.

And yet, one of her most striking contributions appeared anonymously—a moral essay that many readers attributed to a far more famous male theologian of her era: John Henry Newman. Why publish anonymously? Because anonymity was often the only doorway available. Women stepped through that doorway not because they lacked courage, but because the gatekeepers refused to recognize their names.

Drane's life invites us to honor the hidden labor that sustains the Church. She embodied a quiet, extraordinary fidelity—the kind Jesus praised when he said, "When you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right is doing" (Mt. 6:3). She echoed the wisdom of those unnamed women in Scripture whose actions shaped salvation history: the midwives who defied Pharaoh (Ex. 1:15-21), the woman who anointed Jesus (Mk. 14:3-9), the persistent widow who refused silence (Lk. 18:1-8).

In a culture obsessed with visibility, Drane reminds us that grace often works invisibly. And yet—let's be honest—there is a difference between chosen humility and imposed silence. Drane's anonymity calls us not to romanticize invisibility, but to correct the structures that required it.

A Prophetic Voice: Rita Nakashima Brock

If Drane represents the hidden voice, **Rita Nakashima Brock** (1950-) represents the voice that refuses to be hidden any longer. A Japanese-American theologian, feminist thinker, and nonprofit leader, Brock has spent decades pressing theology into public life. She has courageously written about trauma, war, gender, and the ways Christianity has too often sanctified suffering, rather than healed it.

Her book, *Saving Paradise*, offers a provocative thesis: that early Christianity centered beauty, community, and the flourishing of life—paradise!—before later centuries elevated the cross as a dominant symbol, often intertwined with empire and power. Brock does not deny the cross; she questions how it has been used. When theology begins to glorify suffering for its own sake, it risks turning the gospel into something Jesus never preached.

Her critique resonates with Jesus' own mission: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...to bring good news to the poor...to proclaim release to the captives...to let the oppressed go free" (Lk. 4:18-19). It resonates with Johannine theology: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (Jn. 10:10). It resonates with the resurrection stories we hear throughout the Easter season—stories not of glorified suffering, but of renewed life, restored relationships, and communities sent into the world with hope.

Brock's work also intersects with broader feminist and liberation theologies that ask hard questions: *Whose suffering is being sanctified? Who benefits when pain is spiritualized? Who is being crucified in our own time?*

From Anonymous Pages to Public Squares

Drane and Brock stand on a spectrum: One writes from within constraint, the other writes to dismantle it. Together, they form a bridge: from silence to speech, from invisibility to presence, from hidden holiness to public witness.

Their stories echo the movement of the Easter season itself. The disciples begin behind locked doors (Jn. 20:19), and they slowly emerge into bold proclamation (Acts 2). What begins in fear becomes extraordinary courage. What begins in anonymity becomes testimony.

And so we must ask: **Where do we still silence voices today?**

In our own U.S. context, we see echoes of both Drane's anonymity and Brock's prophetic urgency. We see women, immigrants, LGBTQIA+ persons, and people of color whose stories are dismissed or distorted. We see policies that undermine Matthew 25—cutting food assistance, neglecting the sick, criminalizing migrants, ignoring the imprisoned and demonizing the homeless. We see environmental degradation that poisons the very waters of creation (Gen. 2:15). We see a culture that too often rewards dominance over compassion, spectacle over substance.

If Drane calls us to recognize hidden contributions, Brock calls us to confront systems that keep people hidden.

Scripture, Screens and Soundtracks

The call of these women resonates across scripture and culture:

- Mary's *Magnificat* (Lk. 1:52-53) proclaims a God who lifts the lowly and fills the hungry. Sometimes condemned as subversive by empire.
- The Samaritan woman (Jn. 4) becomes an evangelist, despite social marginalization.
- Mary Magdalene (Jn. 20:18) becomes the apostle to the apostles.

- Paul's declaration that "there is no longer male and female" (Gal. 3:28) challenges rigid hierarchies.
- The Acts community (Acts 4:32-35) models shared life and mutual care.

And in our cultural imagination:

- *Hidden Figures* reminds us how women's brilliance has long been obscured.
- *The Handmaid's Tale* warns of systems that silence women's agency.
- *Barbie* (yes, really!) playfully yet pointedly interrogates gender expectations.
- *The Color Purple* amplifies voices long suppressed.
- Songs like Beyoncé's "Break My Soul," Taylor Swift's "The Man," and Lady Gaga's "Born This Way" echo themes of reclaiming voice and dignity.

The Spirit speaks in many registers. We just have to listen!

Calls to Extraordinary Action

These women invite us to act: to embody extraordinary love, extraordinary courage, and extraordinary justice in this very unordinary U.S. moment:

- **Actively amplify women's voices** in theology, ministry and public life—especially those historically marginalized.
- **Name and challenge systems of erasure** wherever you see them—in Church, workplace, politics and culture.
- **Read and teach feminist and liberation theologians** like Brock, alongside traditional voices.
- **Examine your own theology of suffering:** How does it heal or harm?
- **Advocate for policies that reflect Matthew 25:** feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, caring for creation.
- **Mentor younger voices**, especially those who doubt whether their voice matters.
- **Practice intentional listening**, creating spaces where stories can be told without fear.

From Hidden Ink to Living Word

I come back to that flight of fantasy—the possibility that a gospel voice we attribute to a man might have been shaped by a woman. Whether or not that speculation holds, the deeper truth remains: God has always spoken through voices we have overlooked!

Augusta Theodosia Drane faithfully wrote, even when the world did not recognize her name. Rita Nakashima Brock boldly writes so that others will never have to hide theirs. Between them stretches a sacred arc—from hidden ink to living word, from silence to proclamation, from shadow to light.

In this Easter season, we follow a risen Christ who calls people out of tombs—not only literal tombs, but the tombs of invisibility, marginalization and fear. “Lazarus, come out!” (Jn. 11:43) becomes a command—not just to one individual 2,000 years ago, but to all of us today.

The question is whether we will help roll away the stones!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where might I be benefiting from voices that remain hidden or unheard?
- Whose stories do I need to listen to more intentionally?
- How does my understanding of suffering align or conflict with the gospel’s call to abundant life?
- Where do I see “crucifixions” happening in today’s world, especially in light of Matthew 25?
- How can I more actively amplify marginalized voices in my community?
- What fears keep me from more boldly speaking truth?

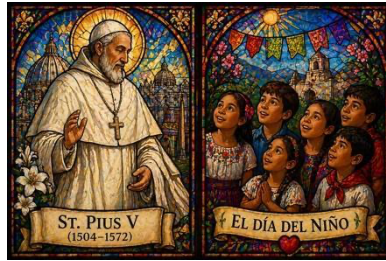
Let Us Pray

God of hidden and revealed things, You speak through the quiet and the courageous, through the anonymous and the outspoken alike. Open our ears to hear the voices we have ignored. Open our hearts to honor the gifts we have overlooked. Open our mouths to speak with extraordinary courage in the face of injustice and silence. May we follow the Risen Christ from shadow into light, from fear into witness, from silence into song. And may our lives proclaim not suffering for its own sake, but the extraordinary love that brings the world to life again. Amen.

From White Garments to Colorful Complexities

Saint Pius V, *el Día del Niño*,
and the Journey from Simplicity to Sacred Complexity

April 30, 2026



Over 25 years of priesthood, I have received more than a few humbling reminders of the way children view clergy. I remember arriving at a Thanksgiving gathering nearly 25 years ago, greeting family members one-by-one, when I met a three-year-old boy whose eyes widened with wonder. I asked, “Do you know who I am?” He immediately replied with absolute certainty: “You’re God!” I quickly laughed and turned to his parents: “What are you teaching him?” Of course, he simply associated me with “God’s house,” the place his family visited every Sunday.

Ten years later, at an All Saints celebration at the same parish, a child arrived dressed not as Our Lady of Guadalupe or St. Francis—but as... Father Jayme! Apparently, my vestments and personality had communicated to that boy something larger than life.

Such moments return to me today as the Church remembers **St. Pius V**—and as many Latino communities celebrate *el día del niño* (Children’s Day). One reminds us how appearances shape faith. The other reminds us how children interpret the world in bold, simple strokes. Together, they invite us to grow: from black-and-white certainties, into the extraordinary, colorful complexity of a mature faith!

The Pope in White: Reform and Symbol

St. Pius V (1504-1572) was no small figure in Church history. A Dominican friar turned pope, he helped implement the reforms of the Council of Trent, standardized the Roman Missal, and sought to bring order to a Church shaken by the Reformation. His reforms were not merely administrative; they were visual, liturgical and psychological.

Most notably, he retained his white Dominican habit after becoming pope. Subsequent popes followed suit, even when they were not Dominicans. What began as personal fidelity became institutional identity.

White—a color associated purity, holiness and transcendence—became the color of the papacy!

From a child's perspective, the message is immediate: White equals good, holy, set apart.

I think back to one childhood Christmas morning in rural Ohio, when my older brother, Jeff, and I unwrapped action figures. I received the Lone Ranger, clad in white and virtue. My brother got Butch Cavendish, dressed in black and villainy. No theology textbook required. We knew instantly who was good and who was bad!

We see this everywhere:

- In *Star Wars*, where light and dark literally define the moral universe.
- In *The Matrix*, where black coats signal rebellion and ambiguity.
- In *Breaking Bad*, where clothing subtly tracks moral descent.
- In *The Wizard of Oz*, where Glinda's brightness contrasts with the Wicked Witch's darkness.
- In Michael Jackson's "Man in the Mirror," where reflection invites moral clarity.

Children instinctively read these cues. And so did the Church. White vestments, elevated sanctuaries, incense rising like clouds: These were not accidents. They formed imagination!

Children's Faith: Milk Before Meat

On *el día del niño*, we celebrate the wonder, innocence and simplicity of children. Developmental psychology tells us what scripture already knew. As First Corinthians reminds us: "I fed you with milk, not solid food" (1Cor. 3:2).

Children need clarity. Categories. Black and white.

- God is good. The devil is bad.
- Heaven is up. Hell is down.
- Going to church is good. Lying is bad.
- Giving up something during Lent is good. Eating meat on a Friday of Lent is bad.

And honestly, there is something beautiful—even necessary—about such teachings during that developmental stage. They ground us. They give us moral anchors.

But faith cannot remain there.

The gospels complicate the picture:

- "Love your enemies" (Mt. 5:44).
- "Judge not" (Mt. 7:1).
- "The last will be first" (Mt. 20:16).

- “My kingdom is not of this world” (Jn. 18:36).
- “What is truth?” (Jn. 18:38).

Suddenly, categories blur. The world becomes less like a coloring book, and more like an impressionist painting: layered, textured, alive!

From Simplicity to Manipulation

And yet—here is where things get dangerous.

In our current U.S. context, some voices actively try to pull us back into that childlike simplicity—not for innocence, but for control.

- “Us” vs. “them.”
- “Good people” vs. “bad people.”
- “‘Real’ Americans” vs. “outsiders.”
- “MAGA/Trump Republicans” vs. “Republicans in Name Only” vs. “Democrats.”

It is the theology of the Lone Ranger, not the gospel of Jesus!

We see leaders dressed—literally and figuratively—as saviors. We see narratives that flatten complexity into slogans. We see policies justified through fear, rather than compassion, often contradicting the clear gospel mandate: “Whatever you did for the least of these...”

And I cannot help but think: This is *not* mature faith. This is arrested development!

Extraordinary faith does not deny complexity. It embraces it.

Extraordinary Calls

If today’s remembrance teaches us anything, it is this: *We must grow up spiritually without losing the wonder of childhood.* That is no small task.

Here are some calls to action:

- **Refuse false binaries.** Resist narratives that reduce complex realities to “good vs. evil” categories.
- **Deeply engage with scripture.** Move beyond surface readings into historical, cultural and theological depth.
- **Center the marginalized.** Let Matthew 25 guide your moral compass in public life.
- **Challenge performative holiness.** Do not confuse outward symbols—vestments, titles, rhetoric—with authentic discipleship.
- **Celebrate children—and learn from them.** Honor their clarity, but guide them toward compassion and nuance.
- **Practice extraordinary listening.** Especially with those with whom you disagree.
- **Live resurrection hope.** In this Easter season, embody a faith that transforms, rather than condemns.

From Pedestals to Presence

I think again of that little boy who called me “God,” and the child who dressed as me for All Saints Day. Children see what we present. They interpret what we model.

St. Pius V stood in white garments, pointing people toward heaven. But the risen Christ we encounter in Easter does something different. He walks through locked doors. He cooks breakfast on the shore. He meets people in their questions and confusion, not above them.

Perhaps the extraordinary invitation of this day is this: Step down from the pedestal, move beyond the cosplay, and enter into the messy, beautiful, complicated reality of human life.

Because that is where resurrection happens!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where do I still cling to black-and-white thinking in my faith or politics?
- How do I respond when others see the world differently than I do?
- In what ways do I project holiness through appearance, rather than action?
- How can I nurture both the wonder and innocence of children and the wisdom of adults?
- Where is God inviting me to embrace complexity, rather than avoid it?
- How do I embody Matthew 25 in my daily decisions?
- What does “extraordinary love” look like in this very unordinary U.S. moment?

Let Us Pray

God of light and color, You meet us in the simplicity of childhood and call us into the depth of mature faith. Help us to move beyond easy answers into courageous compassion. Free us from the need to divide the world into winners and losers, saints and sinners. Clothe us not in garments of illusion, but in lives of justice, mercy, and truth. As we celebrate the children among us, renew in us a sense of wonder — and guide us toward wisdom. In this Easter season, make us witnesses of resurrection, bearers of extraordinary love in an unordinary U.S. moment. Amen.

A Patchwork Quilt of Grace

Stitching Together Mary, Workers, Friendship, Reason,
and Multilingualism in an Unordinary Easter Season

May 1, 2026



My mind bends today toward Grandma Mathias—Agnes Josephine (Borer) Mathias—who, during those cold Ohio winters when the ground froze too hard for gardening, patiently quilted beauty out of scraps. She entered those quilts into the county fair and often brought home ribbons. More importantly, she gifted each grandchild a handmade quilt upon marriage. Each work tells a story, each stitch bears her hand, each color holds meaning.

On May 1, the Church offers us something like one of Grandma Mathias' quilts: a patchwork of Mary, a worker-saint, a medieval friendship, a skeptical theologian, and a Filipino reformer. At first glance, it feels scattered. But if you look more closely, you'll see an extraordinary pattern emerging, one that speaks directly to this unordinary U.S. moment.

A Marian Beginning: Flowers, Memory and Tender Strength

May is the month of Mary. We gather flowers, we crown her, we remember that God's most decisive "yes" came through a girl—likely some 12 to 14 years old—in a backwater town of the Roman Empire (Lk. 1:38).

Mary embodies what she proclaimed in the *Magnificat*: a God who "casts down the mighty" and "lifts up the lowly" (Lk. 1:52). That is not sentimental piety. That is revolutionary theology!

When we invite First Communicants in white to crown Mary, when we bring flowers from our gardens, we are not merely performing nostalgia. We are practicing formation. We are teaching children—and ourselves—that beauty, tenderness and justice belong together.

Think of the scene in *The Sound of Music*, when Maria teaches the children to sing amid the wonders of nature. Beauty becomes formation. Or consider Beyoncé's *Lemonade*, where imagery, ancestry and artistry form identity. Mary does something similar in the Christian imagination:

She forms us into people capable of extraordinary tenderness and extraordinary courage!

Saint Joseph the Worker: Holiness in the Everyday Grind

The Church places **Saint Joseph the Worker** before us today not as a distant patriarch, but as a laborer. A *tekton* (or handyman), more commonly translated as a carpenter. A worker whose holiness emerged not from spectacle, but from fidelity.

“Whatever you do, do from the heart” (Col. 3:23). Joseph lived that.

In a world where labor gets politicized, exploited and dismissed, Joseph quietly insists on dignity. He reminds us that the public school teacher or custodian, the nurse on a night shift, the immigrant worker harvesting crops: All participate in God’s creative work!

Bruce Springsteen’s “Working on a Dream” and Dolly Parton’s “Nine to Five” capture this same truth: *Work shapes dignity, and dignity demands justice!*

In this moment, when workers’ rights are diluted and unions are vilified, Joseph calls us back to an extraordinary reverence for labor—not as ideology, but as incarnation.

Blessed Vivaldo Stricchi: The Courage of Faithful Love

Then comes the surprising square in the quilt: **Vivaldo Stricchi** (1260-1320).

A lay Franciscan, bound in deep, holy friendship with Bartolo Buonpedoni, he chose to accompany his beloved friend into a leper hospital. Twenty years of presence. Twenty years of suffering. Twenty years of love that did not abandon.

“Greater love has no one than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (Jn. 15:13).

In churches that too often fear intimacy, police relationships, or reduce love to categories, Vivaldo offers a witness of extraordinary fidelity. His story echoes in films like *Brokeback Mountain*—a complicated meditation on love constrained by society—or in *The Last of Us*, where companionship becomes survival.

Love, when it is real, accompanies. Love stays. Love suffers.

We do well to reclaim this, knowing that holy love, even when it doesn’t neatly fit into institutional boxes, can still radiate God.

John Major: Faith That Thinks

Next, we encounter **John Major** (1467-1550), a theologian who dared to critically think.

He insisted that councils and people could stand above popes and kings. Let that sink in. This was not rebellion for its own sake; it was accountability rooted in reason.

“Test everything; retain what is good” (1Thes. 5:21).

In an era of misinformation, conspiracy theories, and ideological echo chambers, Major’s skepticism feels prophetic. He reminds us that faith without thought becomes manipulation.

Think of *The Matrix*, where Neo must question reality itself. Or *The Good Place*, where moral philosophy becomes accessible and necessary.

Extraordinary faith does not fear questions. It welcomes them!

Lope Santos: Translating the Gospel for the People

Finally, we meet **Lope Santos** (1879-1963), a man who quite literally translated language for his people. He developed a national language, translated government texts, and made meaning accessible.

At Pentecost, all the people of Jerusalem could hear the Apostles speaking in the people’s languages (Acts 2:6). That is the Church at its best!

Today, translation is not only linguistic—it is cultural, political, spiritual. How do we translate the Gospel into a world shaped by TikTok, AI, climate anxiety, and political division?

Lin-Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton* did this for American history—translating it into hip-hop and new voices. The Church must do the same with the Gospel.

Otherwise, we risk speaking truth in a language no one understands.

Stitching the Quilt in 2026

We live in a moment where many desperately search for light. Civil discourse fractures. Rights erode. Leaders get cast in messianic tones.

This May 1 “quilt” offers something different:

- Mary teaches us to pursue justice and lift the lowly.
- Joseph dignifies the work by which we support ourselves and our families.
- Vivaldo Stricchi sanctifies love.
- John Major sharpens thought.
- Lope Santos y Canseco translates meaning.

Together, they form not chaos, but coherence—a robust spirituality to face this unordinary U.S. moment.

Calls to Action

- **Crown Mary with intention.** As churches crown Mary, explicitly connect her *Magnificat* to justice movements today.
- **Concretely honor workers.** Advocate for fair wages, support unions, and recognize laborers in your community.
- **Accompany with courage.** Show up for those who suffer — LGBTQIA+ persons, migrants, the incarcerated — not abstractly, but relationally.
- **Think critically and faithfully.** Read widely, question deeply, and resist ideological simplifications of the Gospel.
- **Translate the Gospel anew.** Use art, language and media that resonate with younger generations and marginalized communities.
- **Honestly grieve.** Like Vivaldo, allow space for grief and loss, especially in communities that often suppress it.

Gathering the Quilt: From Cornfields to Communion

As I think of Grandma Mathias' quilts — stitched in the quiet of so many Ohio winters — I realize that no single square carried the whole story. Only together did they reveal beauty.

So, too, with the Church. So, too, with our lives.

From the cornfields of Ohio to the corn tortillas of Texas, I have seen faith take many forms — some institutional, some rebellious, some tender, some deeply human.

This May 1 “quilt” reminds us: God does not work in monochrome. God works in color, contrast and connection.

And perhaps, in this unordinary Easter season, the risen Christ invites us not to choose one square — but to become artisans ourselves, stitching together a Church worthy of the Gospel!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

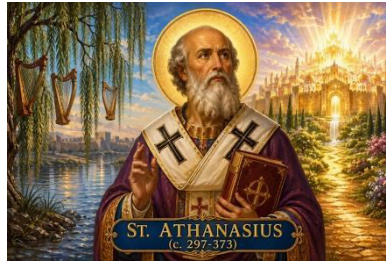
- Where do I see Mary's *Magnificat* unfolding in today's world — and where do I resist it?
- How do I honor — or fail to honor — the dignity of work in my daily life?
- Who is God calling me to accompany more deeply, even when it is costly?
- What questions about faith do I avoid — and why?
- How effectively do I “translate” the Gospel for those outside my immediate circle?
- What grief have I not yet allowed myself to feel or process?

Let Us Pray

God of many colors and countless stories, you gather us like pieces of a quilt – different, imperfect, yet full of possibility. Through Mary, teach us courage. Through Joseph, teach us dignity. Through Vivaldo Stricchi, teach us fidelity. Through John Major, teach us wisdom. Through Lope Santos y Canseco, teach us clarity. Stitch us together in love, that we may embody an extraordinary faith in this unordinary time. Amen.

Still in Babylon, Still Called to Sing Saint Athanasius, Quiet Courage, and the Faith to Endure Our Own “Babylon”

May 2, 2026



Many of us divide our lives into chapters based on where we were living at the time. I certainly do. There was my childhood chapter in the cornfields of Ohio, the St. Louis chapter of my undergraduate studies, the D.C. chapter of theological studies, and now this long, grace-filled Austin chapter that has stretched over a quarter century. As I write these words, I find myself again visiting Las Vegas, where yesterday we celebrated my mother’s birthday – eight years into her own new chapter after my father’s passing in 2017.

Our ancestors in faith did the same. From the lands of the patriarchs and matriarchs (Gen. 12), to the Promised Land (Jos. 1), to exile in Babylon (Ps. 137), and back again (Ez. 1), they located themselves through displacement and return. Today, the Church remembers a bishop whose life reads like a forced travelogue – less pilgrimage, more exile. Welcome the remarkable St. Athanasius of Alexandria!

A Bishop Who Would Not Bend

Athanasius (c. 297-373) came of age in a Church still defining itself. The questions at hand were not trivial: *Who is Jesus Christ? Fully divine? Merely a created being? Somewhere in between?*

Enter the Arian controversy.

At the First Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D., the Church declared what many of us now take for granted: that Christ is *homoousios*—of the same substance as the Father. The Greek *homoousios* was translated as “one in being” in the Roman Rite second edition (1975-2011), which many of us remember—or as “consubstantial” in the stilted, wooden translation of the Roman Rite third edition imposed on the U.S. by Papa Ratzinger (2011-).

The essential message: Jesus is God. Not a demi-god. Not a spiritual middle manager. But purely and simply God.

Athanasius would spend the rest of his life defending that truth.

And he would pay dearly for it.

Five exiles. Seventeen years away from the people he shepherded. Forty-five years as bishop, but over a third of them spent in displacement. Imagine that: Building a community, only to be ripped away from it again and again. Returning home, only to be forced out once more. Living with a suitcase perpetually packed, never knowing if stability would last.

If you have ever felt uprooted—by politics, by Church conflict, by family tension—you begin to understand something of his life.

Yet Athanasius did not merely argue doctrine. He shaped spirituality. His *Life of Anthony* introduced the wider Church to Anthony the Great, the desert monk whose radical detachment from wealth and comfort captivated imaginations across centuries.

Anthony fled to the desert not to escape the world, but to more honestly confront it. Athanasius saw in him a living critique of empire, ego and excess. In a world obsessed with power, Anthony embodied freedom.

And Athanasius told his story so the rest of us could imagine a different way of being Christian.

Truth, Power, and the Cost of Conviction

It is easy to romanticize Athanasius now. History has vindicated him. But in his own time, he was controversial, disruptive, even inconvenient.

Sound familiar?

The Gospel has always had that effect. Jesus himself warned, “You will be hated by all because of my name” (Mt. 10:22). The apostles experienced it firsthand (Acts 5:41). Paul wrote of hardship after hardship (2Cor. 11:23-28). Truth has a way of unsettling systems built on half-truths.

Athanasius refused to dilute Christ to make peace with empire. He would not trade clarity for comfort. He would not settle for a “manageable Jesus.”

And so he was exiled.

A Brief Word on Quiet Humility

On this same day, we also remember Caspar Johann Rinkel, a 19th-century Old Catholic bishop of Haarlem who initially refused episcopal consecration—not once, not twice, but three times. Where Athanasius stood firm in conflict, Rinkel hesitated before authority.

Different temperaments. Same lesson.

The Church needs both: those who boldly defend truth, and those who humbly question power.

In an age obsessed with platform and visibility, Rinkel reminds us that leadership is not always something to be grasped. Sometimes it is something to be resisted until it becomes a true calling!

Our Own Babylon

Let's be honest: Many of us feel displaced right now.

Not physically exiled, perhaps—but spiritually, culturally, politically disoriented. A country we once loved feels newly unfamiliar. Political fractures find their way into the Church. Headlines speak of deportations, book bans, environmental rollbacks, attacks on LGBTQIA+ persons, erosion of democratic norms.

We scroll. We sigh. We wonder: *Is this nation still our home?*

Like the Israelites in Babylon, we are tempted to hang up our harps (Ps. 137:2). Or to imagine escape—Canada, Europe, somewhere, anywhere else.

But here we are. Still in Babylon. Still called to sing.

Jeremiah's words echo across centuries: "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you" (Jer. 29:7). Not *after* it improves. Not *once* it aligns with your values. *Now*.

Athanasius did not wait for a better empire. He faithfully lived within a broken one.

Pop Culture, Prophets and Persistence

Our cultural imagination knows this story well. Think of *The Shawshank Redemption*, where hope quietly resists despair. Think of *Star Wars*, where a small rebellion challenges an overwhelming empire. Think of Beyoncé's *Freedom*, Kendrick Lamar's prophetic lyrics, or even Taylor Swift reclaiming her narrative.

Resistance, when rooted in truth, becomes a kind of resurrection.

Scripture echoes it too:

- The persistence of a widow (Lk. 18:1-8).
- The courage of Esther before the king (Est. 4:16).
- The defiance of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego (Dan. 3).
- The endurance of the early Church (Acts 4:19-20).
- The risen Christ breathing peace into fearful disciples (Jn. 20:19).

These are not stories of easy victories. They are stories of extraordinary courage by ordinary people!

Calls to Action in This Unordinary U.S. Moment

- Clearly speak truth, even when it costs you comfort or approval.
- Support communities and leaders who defend human dignity in tangible ways.
- Deepen your understanding of Christ, resisting simplistic or politicized portrayals.
- Inspired by Anthony, practice intentional detachment from consumerism and status.
- Build resilient communities that can endure uncertainty together.
- Advocate for policies that protect the marginalized, especially migrants and the poor.
- Consistently pray for courage, not just for change.

Singing in Babylon

I return to that image of life's chapters.

Athanasius did not choose many of his chapters. Exile chose him. Conflict chose him. Yet within those chapters, he chose fidelity. He chose truth. He chose Christ.

And so must we.

Maybe this U.S. moment is not the chapter we would have written for ourselves. Maybe it feels like exile. Maybe it feels like Babylon.

But even here—even now—we can live with extraordinary courage, extraordinary clarity, extraordinary hope.

And perhaps, like that young child at Thanksgiving—of whom I wrote earlier this week—like that child who once mistook me for God, the world is still watching us, still forming its understanding of faith based on what it sees in us.

So, let us give them something true to see!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where in my life do I feel exiled or displaced right now?
- When have I been tempted to compromise truth for comfort?
- How do I understand the divinity of Christ—and why does it matter?
- What attachments might I need to release in order to live more freely?
- How is God calling me to “sing” even in difficult circumstances?
- Who are the Athanasius figures in our world today—and how do I support them?

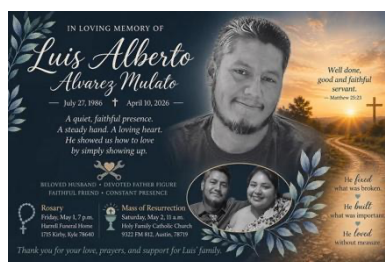
Let Us Pray

God of exile and home, You walked with your people through deserts, through foreign lands, through uncertainty and fear. You strengthened Athanasius to stand firm in truth, and you formed Anthony in the quiet of the desert. Grant us that same extraordinary courage. When we feel displaced, anchor us. When we feel silenced, embolden us. When we feel weary, renew us. Teach us to seek the good of the world in which we live, even when it feels like Babylon. And may our lives proclaim, with clarity and conviction, the truth of your Son, who lives and reigns forever and ever. Amen.

Like St. Joseph: A Life of Quiet Devotion

A Eulogy for Luis Alberto Alvarez Mulato

May 2, 2026



Today we gather with heavy hearts, but also with deep gratitude, as we remember and celebrate the life of Luis Alberto Alvarez Mulato (1986-2026).

There are some people whose lives announce themselves loudly—through words, accomplishments, or public recognition. And then there are those whose lives speak in a quieter, steadier way. Luis was one of those people.

He did not need many words to tell us who he was. He showed us.

Luis came into Amanda's life in a new chapter—one that followed loss, change, and the courage to begin again. And what a gift he became. Not only to Amanda, but to her entire family.

Like Saint Joseph in the Gospels, Luis stepped into a role he did not have to take on, and he embraced it fully. He became a steady, loving presence for Miguel, Jon Paul, Abraham, and Luke. He did not need to claim the title of father in a loud way. He simply lived it—day by day, moment by moment, through presence, care and quiet devotion.

That kind of love is extraordinary.

Luis was a mechanic, a man who could fix anything. There is something deeply spiritual about that vocation. To take what is broken and patiently restore it. To understand how things work, and to give them new life. That is not just a skill. It is a calling.

And yet, what stands out to me most is not what Luis fixed, but how he lived.

At Holy Family, Luis was a constant. He was always here, right beside Amanda. Faithful. Present. Quiet. You could count on him. And in a world where so much feels uncertain, that kind of steady presence becomes a form of grace.

I remember a moment that, for me, says everything about Luis.

A few years ago, when my mother was visiting Austin, she offered crochet lessons to members of our parish family. Amanda came one Sunday morning, bringing Abraham and Luke – and she brought Luis.

Now, I tried crocheting for a brief moment that week – just long enough to realize how difficult it really is! It requires patience, attention, and a certain kind of gentle precision.

To my knowledge, Luis had never crocheted before.

And yet there he was, quietly working, focused, unassuming. And what struck me was this: His stitches were perfect. Not rushed. Not sloppy. Careful. Intentional. Beautiful.

That was Luis.

Whether fixing a car, showing up for Mass, loving his family, or learning something entirely new – he gave himself fully to the moment. Quietly. Faithfully. With care.

In the Gospels Saint Joseph never speaks a single word. Not one. And yet his presence shapes the life of Jesus in profound ways.

I think of Luis in that same way.

He may not have been the loudest voice in the room. He may not have sought attention. But his presence mattered. His love mattered. His faithfulness mattered. And it will continue to matter. To Amanda – his partner, his companion, his love. To Miguel, Jon Paul, Abraham, and Luke – who experienced in him a steady and generous fatherly presence. To this community – who saw in him a quiet witness to what it means to show up, week after week, with faith.

We live in a world that often celebrates noise, visibility and recognition. But the Kingdom of God, Jesus tells us, is like a mustard seed. Small. Hidden. Growing in ways we do not always see.

Luis lived that kind of life. A life of quiet strength. A life of faithful love. A life that, stitch by stitch, built something beautiful.

And so today, even in our grief, we give thanks. We give thanks for his presence. We give thanks for his love. We give thanks for the way he showed us that holiness does not have to be loud to be real.

Luis, thank you. Thank you for showing us what it means to love quietly, to serve faithfully, and to be present in all the ways that matter most.

May you now rest in the peace of God, and may we carry forward the quiet, extraordinary love you gave so freely. Amen.

A Coat of Many Colors

Weaving Extraordinary Threads on May 3

May 3, 2026



Last week, I wrote of Grandma Mathias' patchwork quilts — each square a story, each stitch a memory. Today, as I complete another trip around the sun, I again find myself wrapped in a quilt of many colors. Or perhaps, as Andrew Lloyd Webber, channeling Joseph the patriarch, might say, I'm donning an "amazing technicolor dreamcoat"! Imagine how Joseph's multicolor coat came to be in the ancient world — threads dyed in indigo, madder red, saffron yellow, tyrian purple, each painstakingly woven together into something radiant and whole. That is May 3: a tapestry of saints, prophets, workers, thinkers, activists, and yes—even birthdays. And like any good garment, it asks to be worn, embodied, lived!

From "Greater" to "Lesser": A Humbling Apostolic Turn

When I entered the seminary at 18, I was asked to choose a patron saint. Given the option between James the Greater and James the Lesser, I— young, ambitious, perhaps a bit self-centered —chose the Greater, *Santiago Matamoros*, the Moor-slayer. It felt grand, dramatic, victorious.

But wisdom, like resurrection, unfolds over time.

Today, born on the feast of the Apostles Philip and James the Lesser, I recognize the quiet power of the "lesser." James, the leader of the Jerusalem

church, modeled pastoral steadiness in a fragile, diverse early community (Acts 15). Philip, meanwhile, encountered the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40), a gender-nonconforming outsider, and did not gatekeep grace. He ran toward the chariot, not away from it!

That story echoes Jesus' feeding of the five thousand (Jn. 6:5-7), where Philip initially doubted there was enough. How often do we? Not enough bread, not enough justice, not enough welcome.

And yet—God multiplies!

Think of *The Chosen*, where the apostles stumble, question, misunderstand—and still become vessels of extraordinary love. Or Beyoncé's "Break My Soul," reminding us that systems may exhaust us, but they do not define our worth. The gospel insists: There is always enough when we share!

Juana's Courage: Beyond Binaries, Toward the Divine

Then there is **Juana de la Cruz** (1481-1534)—abbess, preacher, mystic, gender-bender.

In an age that silenced women, she preached. In a world obsessed with rigid categories, she transcended them—claiming that God transformed her gender in the womb. Her theology dared to proclaim that Christ becomes what the seeker needs: mother, father, lover, friend.

That is not just poetic. It is revolutionary.

As a gay man who grew up in the cornfields of Ohio, where silence around sexuality was the norm, I recognize Juana's courage. I remember offering LGBTQIA-friendly books to my high school in rural Ohio, only to have them rejected. Juana would not have been surprised. Nor, frankly, was I.

And yet, like Lady Gaga's "Born This Way," Juana's life proclaims a deeper truth: We are not mistakes to be corrected, but mysteries to be honored!

Scripture affirms it: "There is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). Juana lived that verse centuries before we dared to preach it!

Crosses and Construction Sites: Holiness in the Built World

Serving the Latino community here in Austin since 2000, I have come to cherish *el día de la santa cruz* (Day of the Holy Cross) and *el día de los albañiles* (Bricklayer's Day), both celebrated on May 3. Today, crosses are decorated and blessed, and the hands that build our world are honored.

This is not abstract spirituality. This is faith with calloused hands.

I think of the crew that recently replaced the roof of our home after a brutal windstorm—individuals whose labor protects our homes, whose

names we may forget, but whose work shelters our lives. Many are migrants. Many are unseen. All are beloved.

Jesus himself was a builder (Mk. 6:3). And in *Les Misérables*, we see again and again how dignity emerges not from status, but from solidarity.

“Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain” (Ps. 127:1). But God *does* build – and often through those the world overlooks!

The Trinity in Daily Life: A Theologian Who Still Speaks

Some 23 years ago, I wrote my M.A. thesis on **Catherine Mowry LaCugna** (1952-1997). Her work—deeply influenced by Karl Rahner—helped me see the Trinity not as abstract doctrine, but as living relationship.

God is not a puzzle to solve, but a communion to enter.

Think of Everything *Everywhere All at Once*: chaotic, relational, interconnected. That’s closer to LaCugna’s Trinity than any stale diagram. Or consider John 17:21—“that they may all be one.” Unity not as uniformity, but as dynamic, relational love.

LaCugna’s life, cut short at 44, reminds us that theology matters most when it shapes how we live, love and build community!

Voices from the Philippines: Advocacy as Faith

My appreciation for the Philippine Independent Church has grown immensely since encountering it in Utrecht in 2019. Among its witnesses is **Gardeopatra Quijano** (1918-2003)—dentist, teacher, feminist writer, advocate for women’s education.

She wrote when women were not expected to write. She led when women were not expected to lead.

In *Hidden Figures*, we see similar courage—women claiming space in systems that denied them. Quijano did the same in Cebuano literature and church leadership.

“Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves” (Prov. 31:8). Quijano did. Will we?

Truth Under Fire: World Press Freedom Day

May 3 is also **World Press Freedom Day**—a sobering reminder in a time when truth itself feels contested.

We hear attacks on “fake media,” witness evasion of accountability, and see journalists sidelined. It would be easy to shrug, to disengage.

But truth is sacred.

As *The Daily Show* and John Oliver often remind us through satire, absurdity thrives when truth is ignored. Scripture is even more direct: “You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (Jn. 8:32).

Freedom depends on courage: journalists who ask hard questions, citizens who demand honest answers!

Another Trip Around the Sun

And yes, it's my birthday!

I confess, I often view birthdays existentially: one year closer to that which lies beyond. But I also pause to give thanks—for family, for community, for the gift of travel, for a husband who shares my journey, for friends who bring great joy.

Like Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings*, we do not choose the times in which we live. But we do choose how we live in them.

And today, I choose gratitude!

Invitations to Extraordinary Living

- **Boldly nourish.** Like Philip, trust that what you offer—even if small—can be multiplied for others.
- **Embrace holy complexity.** Like Juana, honor identities and experiences beyond rigid binaries.
- **Bless the builders.** Recognize and uplift those whose labor sustains our daily lives.
- **Live relationally.** Let the Trinity shape how you love, collaborate and build community.
- **Defend truth.** Support journalism, question power, and refuse to normalize deception.

Stitching the Coat Anew

As I wrap myself in today's many-colored coat—apostles and mystics, workers and writers, truth-tellers and theologians—I return to that image of Grandma Mathias' quilt. Each patch, on its own, tells a story. Together, they create warmth, beauty, meaning.

So, too, with our lives.

We are called to stitch together extraordinary courage, extraordinary compassion, extraordinary truth. Not perfectly. Not completely. But faithfully.

And in doing so, we just might help mend a world that feels, at times, like it is coming apart at the seams!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where do I, like Philip, doubt there is “enough”? How is God inviting me to trust abundance?
- In what ways might I more fully honor gender diversity and human complexity in my community?

- Who are the “builders” in my life whom I overlook or take for granted?
- How does the Trinity shape – not just inform – my relationships and daily decisions?
- Where am I being called to defend truth in a culture of distortion?
- What threads of my life need stitching into a more coherent, compassionate whole?

Let Us Pray

God of many colors and countless threads, You weave together saints and seekers, prophets and poets, builders and believers. Help us to embody the extraordinary love we celebrate today. Give us courage like Juana, generosity like Philip, wisdom like James. Bless those who build our world and those who speak truth within it. And as we stitch together the fragments of our lives, make of us a garment radiant with your justice and peace. Amen.

May the Force

Lessons from a Galaxy Far, Far Away on Faith, Resistance and Hope

May 4, 2026



I was five when *Star Wars* was released. I remember thinking how cool the action figures were. Imagine that: Darth Vader’s lightsaber came out of his arm! Apart from the toys of my friends and neighbors, though, I really had little acquaintance with the *Star Wars* universe as a child. We had every Fisher-Price toy, nearly every G.I. Joe action figure, heck, even almost every He-Man figure – but *Star Wars* never took hold in our rural Ohio home. It was only later, through Joseph Campbell and his work on mythology, that I began to glimpse the deeper spiritual currents running through George Lucas’ universe. As we celebrate *Star Wars* Day – “May the Fourth” – let’s explore what people of faith might learn from this sprawling saga of light, darkness and the fragile hope in between.

The Force and the Spirit: An Invisible, Living Presence

At the heart of *Star Wars* lies “the Force” – an unseen, binding energy that connects all living things. Obi-Wan Kenobi describes it as “an energy field created by all living things.”

For people of faith, that language resonates.

Scripture similarly speaks: “In God we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). The Spirit breathes where it will (Jn. 3:8). Creation groans with divine presence (Rom. 8:22-23).

The Force is not God. But it points us toward a sacramental worldview – one in which grace permeates everything.

Think of *Avatar*, or even the great “circle of life” in *The Lion King*. Or Coldplay’s “A Sky Full of Stars,” reminding us that we are never as alone as we feel.

In an extraordinary moment, when division dominates our politics and culture, we are called to recover this sense of radical interconnectedness. We do not merely coexist; we belong to one another!

The Hero’s Journey: From Cornfields to Callings

Joseph Campbell’s “hero’s journey” profoundly shaped *Star Wars*. Luke Skywalker begins as a restless farm boy on Tatooine—hardly different from a kid growing up in the cornfields of Ohio.

I recognize that restlessness.

Like Luke, many of us begin in ordinary places. Then comes the call. Sometimes we resist it. Sometimes we misunderstand it. But eventually, we must decide: Will we remain in comfort, or will we step into purpose?

“Here I am; send me!” (Is. 6:8).

In *The Matrix*, Neo must choose the red pill. In Taylor Swift’s “You’re On Your Own, Kid,” we hear the ache and courage of stepping into one’s own story.

My own vocation—from the cornfields of Ohio to the corn tortillas of Texas, from serving a large mainstream church to our founding of Austin’s only inclusive Catholic community—has not been linear. But it has been a journey!

The resurrection stories we hear in this Easter season remind us that transformation often follows disorientation. The road to Emmaus (Lk. 24:13-35) is a journey of confusion that becomes a moment of recognition.

So, too, with Luke Skywalker. So, too, with us.

The Dark Side: Power, Fear and the Seduction of Control

No reflection on *Star Wars* would be complete without the dark side.

Emperor Palpatine manipulates systems, exploits fear, and consolidates power. Anakin Skywalker, driven by fear of loss, becomes Darth Vader.

Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hatred. Hatred leads to suffering.

We hear echoes of this in our own political life: rhetoric that divides, narratives that scapegoat, leaders who thrive on chaos, rather than truth. The resemblance is actually quite frightening.

Scripture warns us: "Perfect love casts out fear" (1Jn. 4:18).

In *Breaking Bad*, Walter White's descent shows how easily justification becomes corruption. In Kendrick Lamar's "HUMBLE.," we hear a call to resist ego and power.

The dark side is not just "out there." It is within us. I know from personal experience. It emerges whenever we choose control over compassion, domination over dignity.

The question is not whether darkness exists. It is whether we will resist it!

Redemption Is Always Possible

Perhaps the most powerful theological thread in Star Wars is redemption.

Even Darth Vader—enforcer of an oppressive regime—finds his way back through love, sacrificing his life to save his son, Luke Skywalker, from the Emperor.

That is pure gospel.

Think of the Prodigal Son (Lk. 15:11-32). Think of Peter's denial and restoration (Jn. 21:15-19). Think of Paul, once a persecutor, becoming an apostle (Acts 9).

Redemption does not erase harm. But it insists that no one is beyond grace.

In *Les Misérables*, Jean Valjean's transformation begins with mercy. In Adele's "Hello," we hear the longing for reconciliation.

For Christians and Catholics, this deeply matters. We work for justice, yes, but we also believe in transformation.

Even now. Especially now!

The Rebel Alliance: Community, Resistance and Hope

The Rebel Alliance reminds us that change rarely comes from isolated individuals. It emerges from community.

Princess Leia, Han Solo, Luke Skywalker, countless unnamed fighters: They resist not because victory is guaranteed, but because it is necessary.

"Faith is the assurance of things hoped for" (Heb. 11:1).

In *Andor*, we see the cost of resistance. In *The Hunger Games*, Katniss becomes a symbol larger than herself. In Beyoncé's "Formation," we witness collective empowerment.

The early church in Acts lived this reality: sharing resources, breaking bread, challenging unjust systems.

That is our call, too.

Not to despair. Not to withdraw. But to organize, to build, to hope!

Invitations to Extraordinary Living

- **Cultivate awareness of the Spirit.** Recognize the sacred presence that binds all creation.
- **Answer your call.** Courageously step into the work that gives your life meaning.
- **Resist fear-based narratives.** Challenge rhetoric that divides and dehumanizes.
- **Believe in redemption.** Hold space for transformation, even when it feels unlikely.
- **Build community.** Invest in relationships and movements that embody justice and hope.

From Action Figures to Living Faith

As I think back to those childhood toys—those lightsabers extending from plastic arms—I smile. What once seemed like simple play now reveals deeper truths.

We all hold a kind of lightsaber: the choices we make, the love we extend, the courage we embody.

Will we wield them for domination—or for liberation?

Like Luke Skywalker gazing at twin suns, like the disciples staring into an empty tomb, we stand at a threshold. The Force—call it Spirit, grace, love, whatever you will—moves within and around us.

In this extraordinary moment, may we choose the light.

May we, in every sense, awaken to the Force!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where do I experience the “Force”—the Spirit—moving in my life today?
- What fear might be pulling me toward the “dark side,” and how do I resist it?
- How is God’s Spirit calling me beyond comfort into deeper purpose?
- Who are my companions in the struggle for justice and hope?
- Where do I need to believe more fully in the possibility of redemption?
- How might I embody extraordinary courage in this moment?

Let Us Pray

God of light and life, You move within us and among us, binding all creation in love. Free us from fear that distorts and divides. Call us beyond comfort into courage. Help us to resist injustice with steadfast hope. Teach us to believe in redemption, even when the night feels long. And may we, like the heroes of every age, choose the light again and again. Amen.

Cinco de Mayo and a Quiet Bishop

Lessons from an Underdog Victory and a Sidelined Bishop
on Faith, Resistance and Hope—even in Uneven Battles

May 5, 2026



Because I never heard of *Cinco de Mayo* until I moved to Texas, this day admittedly long struck me as little more than a marketing opportunity: Grab a beer—preferably Mexican—and celebrate... something! Over time, serving the Mexican and Mexican-American communities of Central Texas, I have come to appreciate the deeper story beneath the beer commercials. *Cinco de Mayo* is not a celebration of a war won, but of a single, improbable victory in the midst of a larger struggle. And that fascinates me. Because when I place that story alongside the life of Nicolaas Nellen—an Old Catholic bishop without a diocese, a leader without jurisdiction—I begin to see a pattern. Faithful people often find themselves fighting battles they may not win in the short term. And yet, those battles still matter!

A Victory in Puebla: When the Underdog Prevails

On May 5, 1862, the Mexican army defeated French forces at the Battle of Puebla. It was a stunning upset. France, under Napoleon III, fielded one of the most powerful militaries in the world. Mexico, led by General Ignacio Zaragoza, was outmatched in nearly every conceivable way.

And yet—on that day—the underdog prevailed!

The broader context matters. France would eventually occupy Mexico City. The war, in many respects, was lost. *Cinco de Mayo* is not Mexico's

Independence Day. In fact, it is more widely celebrated in the United States than in Mexico itself.

Why? Because in U.S. culture — especially among Mexican Americans — it has become a symbol. A reminder that **even when the odds are stacked against us, even when the larger forces seem overwhelming, resistance is not futile.**

Think of *Rocky*, going the distance against Apollo Creed. Think of *Remember the Titans*, confronting entrenched racism. Think of Gloria Estefan's "Get On Your Feet," calling us to rise again.

Scripture echoes this rhythm: David and Goliath (1Sam. 17), Gideon's tiny army (Judg. 7), the resurrection itself — a victory that emerges from apparent defeat!

Cinco de Mayo reminds us: Sometimes a single battle can sustain hope in a much longer struggle.

Nicolaas Nelleman: A Bishop Without a Seat

Enter **Nicolaas Nelleman** (1722-1805), born 140 years before the Battle of Puebla.

As the second Old Catholic bishop of Deventer, he lived much of his episcopal life without actual jurisdiction. For some 25 years, he served as a titular bishop, residing outside his see. Imagine that: a bishop without a diocese, a shepherd without a flock in any formal sense.

And yet, he did not disappear.

Alongside the archbishop of Utrecht and the bishop of Haarlem, he co-signed a letter to Roman Catholic bishop Scipione de'Ricci, engaging debates around Gallicanism and Jansenism — movements that emphasized local authority, moral rigor, and a certain independence from centralized Roman control.

The Roman Church, understandably concerned with unity — but also, if we are honest, with power — condemned these movements.

What might Nelleman have seen?

Perhaps a vision of the church that was less centralized, more accountable, more rooted in local communities. Perhaps a recovery of Saul/Paul of Tarsus' and Jesus of Nazareth's "discipleship of equals."

Like the Mexican army at Puebla, Nelleman and his colleagues did not "win" in the conventional sense. But they bore witness.

And sometimes witness is victory enough.

Wars Within the Church: Then and Now

The conflicts of Nelleman's day were theological and ecclesial. But they were also political.

Who holds authority? Who interprets tradition? Who gets to belong?

These questions have not disappeared.

In recent years, we have witnessed what some call “wafer wars” – debates over who may receive Communion. We have seen suspicion directed toward women’s leadership and bodily autonomy, resistance to LGBTQIA+ inclusion, and a continued reluctance to embrace the full dignity of all the baptized.

And yet, in inclusive Catholic communities like ours, we see something different.

We see divorced and remarried Catholics welcomed to the table.

We see women exercising ordained ministry.

We see LGBTQIA+ couples celebrating sacramental marriage.

We see, in other words, the gospel lived with extraordinary courage!

“*God shows no partiality*” (Acts 10:34).

“*There is one body and one Spirit*” (Eph. 4:4).

“*Love one another as I have loved you*” (Jn. 13:34).

The Handmaid’s Tale warns us of what happens when religious authority becomes oppressive, and inclusive communities offer a counter-witness: what the church can be at its best!

Battles in Our Own Time

It would be naïve to pretend that these dynamics are confined to church life. We are living in a moment of profound tension in the United States. Competing visions of the nation are clashing – one rooted in exclusion, fear and control; another rooted in pluralism, dignity and democratic values.

Many feel that we, who are defending democratic norms, are the underdog. Institutions that should safeguard democracy falter. Truth becomes contested. Power consolidates in troubling ways. And yet... *Cinco de Mayo!*

The Battle of Puebla reminds us that underdogs can win battles, even in the midst of larger struggles.

Recent developments in places like Hungary, where shifts in political power have opened new possibilities, offer a glimmer of hope. History is not linear. It bends, often slowly, sometimes unpredictably.

Think of *Star Wars*, where the Rebel Alliance takes on an empire. Think of *Hamilton*, where “immigrants—we get the job done.” Think of Billie Eilish’s “Everything I Wanted,” which captures both despair and resilience.

Scripture again grounds us: “Let us not grow weary in doing what is right” (Gal. 6:9).

We may not control the outcome of the war. But we can choose how we fight our battles!

Invitations to Extraordinary Living

- **Honor small victories.** Celebrate moments of justice and courage, even when the larger struggle continues.
- **Stand with the marginalized.** Align yourself with those who lack power, voice or recognition.
- **Challenge unjust authority.** Question systems that exclude or harm, both in church and society.
- **Build inclusive communities.** Create spaces that reflect the radical welcome of the gospel.
- **Persevere with hope.** Refuse cynicism, even when change feels slow or uncertain.

From Beer Ads to Battlefields: Reclaiming the Meaning

So, here we are.

What began, for me, as a somewhat superficial holiday – beer, tacos and mariachi – has become something far more profound. A story of resistance. A story of improbable courage. A story that finds an unlikely companion in a sidelined Dutch bishop who refused to quietly disappear.

Cinco de Mayo is not about pretending the war is won. It is about remembering that victories – real, hard-fought, improbable victories – do happen.

And they matter.

Like that scrappy Mexican army in Puebla. Like Nicolaas Nelleman writing letters from the margins. Like inclusive Catholic communities quietly, persistently embodying the gospel in ways that institutions sometimes resist.

We fight our battles not because victory is guaranteed, but because faith demands it.

And in this extraordinary moment, that may be the most important lesson of all!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where have I experienced a “Puebla moment” in my own life – a small but meaningful victory?
- How do I respond when I feel outmatched or overwhelmed by larger forces?
- In what ways am I called to challenge unjust systems within church or society?
- Who are today’s “Nellemans” – faithful witnesses working from the margins?
- How can I cultivate extraordinary hope in the face of uncertainty?

- What does it mean, for me, to remain faithful, even when the outcome is unclear?

Let Us Pray

God of the underdog and the overlooked, You are present in every struggle for justice and dignity. Strengthen us when we feel outnumbered. Encourage us when victories seem small. Give us courage like those who stood at Puebla, and perseverance like those who bore witness from the margins. Help us to build communities of extraordinary love and radical welcome. And in all things, keep alive within us the hope that your justice will prevail. Amen.

Silenced Voices, Sacred Echoes

Lessons from Cornelius Jansen on Power, Conscience,
and Extraordinary Courage in an Easter Church

May 6, 2026



In ten years of seminary studies and ten years of ordained ministry in the Roman Catholic Church, there was one name I never heard. Not once. Not in lectures, not in footnotes, not in hallway debates or lunch conversations. And for a reason. He was Cornelius Jansen, a 17th-century bishop, a scripture scholar, a careful reader of Augustine of Hippo – and, ultimately, a theological problem for those in power.

All these years later, pulling off the shelf Justo L. González's two-volume work, *The Story of Christianity*, the text we were assigned over two semesters of Church history, I notice something telling: My underlining runs steadily through Gallicanism, Febronianism, Josephism, even the suppression of the Jesuits... and then abruptly stops. Right where Jansenism begins.

Silence, it turns out, is sometimes the loudest form of control.

Let's pick up that history together – and examine what it might demand of us, here and now, in this unordinary U.S. moment.

The Bishop We Were Not Supposed to Meet

Jansen was no fringe figure. He served as bishop of Ypres, in present-day Belgium, taught scripture at Louvain, and devoted himself to a lifelong study of grace, freedom, and the human condition. His major work, *Augustinus*, did not attempt innovation, so much as retrieval. He asked: What if we took Augustine seriously? What if grace truly mattered? What if human beings, wounded as we are, radically depended on God?

These questions, of course, were not neutral.

In the wake of the Protestant Reformation and the Council of Trent, Catholic theology had entered a defensive posture. The Church had condemned the teachings of Martin Luther and John Calvin. Yet in doing so, some feared, it risked softening Augustine's profound insights into grace.

Enter competing camps. The Jesuits, influenced by Luis de Molina, emphasized human cooperation with grace. Dominicans, like Domingo Báñez, leaned toward divine initiative. Each side accused the other of heresy. Rome, exhausted, effectively told them to knock it off.

But in Louvain, the conversation did not end. It intensified. And decades later, Jansen systematized what he believed Augustine had taught all along.

That is when things got dangerous.

When Theology Becomes Threat

In 1643, five years after his death, Jansen's work was condemned by Pope Urban VIII. Then the real story began. His ideas spread – not merely as doctrine, but as a reform movement. At the abbey of Port-Royal des Champs, outside of Paris, under the leadership of Angélique Arnauld and with the advocacy of Jean Duvergier de Hauranne, Jansenism became a call to holiness, discipline and integrity.

It also became dangerously inconvenient.

The Jesuits, powerful both intellectually and politically, promoted a moral theology known as probabilism: If there is even a slight probability that an action is permissible, one may proceed. Jansenists saw this as moral laxity. They called instead for rigor, for seriousness, for a Church that lived what it proclaimed.

The clash was not merely theological. It was institutional, political and economic.

Enter Louis XIV of France, who had little patience for movements that could disrupt unity or challenge authority in his kingdom. Enter papal decrees. Enter suppression.

The nuns of Port-Royal were expelled. Their community dismantled. Their cemetery desecrated. The writings of philosopher Blaise Pascal – his brilliant Provincial Letters decrying the Jesuits – were condemned.

Let that sink in: A movement rooted in reform, prayer and intellectual rigor was dismantled not because it lacked depth, but because it threatened control!

The Cost of Being Right – or Simply Faithful

Scripture prepares us for this, if we are paying attention.

Jesus himself warned: “The hour is coming when those who kill you will think they are offering worship to God” (Jn. 16:2).

Peter declared, “We must obey God, rather than humans” (Acts 5:29).

The prophets Jeremiah and Amos consistently challenged religious and political authorities who confused power with righteousness.

And Jesus delivered his searing critique of religious leaders who “tie up heavy burdens” but refuse to lift a finger to help (Mt. 23).

Jansen’s story fits squarely within this biblical arc.

He was not perfect. No theologian is. But he represents something essential: the cost of conscience in a system that prioritizes uniformity over truth.

From Port-Royal to the Present

If any of this feels distant, it should not.

We have seen echoes of these dynamics in recent years: in the silencing of Latin American liberation theologians, in the targeting of U.S. nuns by the Vatican, in the attacks on theologian Sister Elizabeth Johnson by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, in so-called “wafer wars” and the policing of Eucharistic access, in the labeling of LGBTQIA+ acts as “intrinsically disordered.”

And yet, here in Austin and across the world, Inclusive Catholic communities quietly embody something extraordinary.

We create spaces where women preach and preside.

We celebrate marriages rooted in love, rather than gender norms.

We extend Eucharistic hospitality as a sign of grace, not a reward for compliance.

In doing so, we do not reject tradition. We reclaim it in a way that would likely delight Saul/Paul of Tarsus and Jesus of Nazareth.

Because if Augustine teaches anything – and Jansen insisted that he did – it is that grace is not scarce. It is abundant. It is transformative. It is for all!

An Underdog Church in an Underdog Democracy

The parallels extend beyond ecclesial life.

We currently live in a United States where power increasingly consolidates, where truth is blurred by “alternate facts,” where institutions bend under pressure. We watch as journalists are sidelined, as courts tilt, as rhetoric grows more authoritarian.

It does not take much imagination to see the resemblance to other eras when dissenting voices were suppressed in the name of unity.

Are we, the people, the underdog? Perhaps.

But history offers hope. Just as Jansenism outlived its condemnation—shaping Old Catholic thought and influencing generations—so, too, do movements rooted in justice persist.

Think of the resistance movements in films like *Star Wars*, where small bands challenge empires. Think of songs like “We Shall Overcome” or “Glory” by John Legend and Common. Think of shows like *The Handmaid’s Tale*, where resistance quietly grows beneath oppressive systems.

The pattern is familiar: Power overreaches. Voices rise. Truth endures.

What, Then, Must We Do?

If Jansen’s story teaches anything, it is that silence helps no one but those in control. Here are some invitations for this moment:

- Boldly speak when others remain silent, especially in defense of marginalized communities.
- Deeply study the traditions that institutions attempt to flatten or erase.
- Support independent and inclusive communities that embody Gospel values.
- Challenge theological and political narratives that justify exclusion or oppression.
- Practice extraordinary courage in daily acts of justice, kindness and truth-telling.
- Build bridges across communities, refusing to allow isolation to weaken movements for reform.

From Silence to Song: Stitching the Story Back Together

As I reflect on the name I never heard in seminary, I cannot help but return to that image of silence—the abrupt stop in my underlined textbook, the missing voices in my formation.

But here is the grace of it all: Silence does not have the final word.

Like the Risen Christ appearing behind locked doors (Jn. 20), truth has a way of showing up anyway. It breathes peace into fearful communities. It commissions ordinary people to do extraordinary things.

Jansen's legacy, suppressed though it was, still speaks. It echoes in every community that chooses conscience over compliance, justice over convenience, love over fear.

And perhaps that is the invitation for us in this Easter season: not merely to remember the resurrection, but to embody it—to raise up what has been buried, to give voice to what has been silenced, to live with extraordinary courage in the face of extraordinary pressure!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where do I see voices being silenced today?
- When have I chosen comfort over courage, and what might it look like to choose differently?
- How do I understand grace: as scarce or abundant?
- In what ways am I called to stand with those on the margins?
- What “forbidden” voices or ideas might I need to revisit with fresh openness?
- How can I help build a community that reflects a true discipleship of equals?

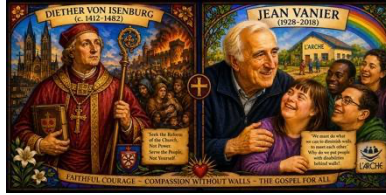
Let Us Pray

God of truth and grace, You speak in whispers and in thunder, in prophets and in those the world tries to forget. Give us ears to hear the voices that power would silence. Give us hearts to recognize your presence in the marginalized. Give us courage to stand where others sit, to speak where others remain quiet, to love where others draw lines. In this Easter season, raise us up as people of resurrection—bearers of extraordinary hope, extraordinary justice, extraordinary love. We ask this in the name of the One who was silenced and yet speaks still. Amen.

Tearing Down Walls, Defying Wolves

Two Tales of Extraordinary Courage and Compassion

May 7, 2026



During my eight years of public office here in Austin, I attended more than 130 commencement exercises, usually with graduating classes of 400 to 600 students—a far cry from my rural Ohio public high school, where 28 of us crossed the stage together. Some of the most moving ceremonies unfolded at the Rosedale School, serving students with profound needs. Year after year, hardly a dry eye remained as students—many requiring intensive support, and some medically fragile—crossed that stage and exited the program at age 21. Because I never encountered such visible, extraordinary vulnerability growing up in rural Ohio, those moments at Rosedale formed me. They reminded me who depends on us, and who reveals God to us. They come rushing back today as we remember Jean Vanier—but first, we must face a darker story: a shepherd confronted by a wolf!

A Shepherd Against a Wolf

The story of Diether von Isenburg (c. 1412-1482) reads like something out of a grim medieval drama—perhaps an episode of *Game of Thrones*, minus the dragons, but not the brutality. Elected archbishop of Mainz in the 15th century, Diether sought reform in a Church already groaning under corruption and political entanglement. For that, he paid dearly.

The pope refused to confirm his election. Instead, another archbishop—loyal to Rome—marched in, seized Mainz, killed 400 citizens, and exiled another 400, including none other than printing press inventor Johannes Gutenberg. Imagine living under such terror. Imagine watching your neighbors slaughtered, your community scattered, your future erased—because someone dared to imagine a more faithful Church!

Scripture does not shy away from such imagery. Jesus himself warned of wolves among the flock (Mt. 7:15). In John's Gospel, hired hands run when the wolves approach, while good shepherds lay down their lives (Jn. 10:11-13). Diether did not run. He endured exile. He waited. And

eventually, he returned—confirmed at last under a more reform-minded pope.

Diether's story reminds us: Reform often provokes violent resistance, and power rarely yields without a fight.

The Gentle Revolution of Jean Vanier

If Diether's story evokes wolves, Jean Vanier (1928-2018) invites us into a radically different landscape—a place not of domination, but of tenderness.

Vanier founded L'Arche, communities where people with developmental differences and their assistants live together—not in hierarchy, but in mutual relationship. In a world obsessed with productivity and perfection, Vanier insisted that those whom society sidelines often reveal the deepest truths about humanity.

"We must do what we can to diminish walls," Vanier said. And diminish walls he did!

His work echoes the ministry of Jesus, who consistently centered those pushed aside: the blind (Mk. 10:46-52), the "unclean" (Lk. 5:12-16), children (Mk. 10:13-16), and the poor (Lk. 4:18).

Whereas Diether stood against wolves, Vanier quietly dismantled walls.

And yet, both shared something essential: extraordinary courage. One confronted violent power. The other confronted cultural indifference.

From "Disabled" to "Determined"

I still think about a trip my husband and I took to the United Arab Emirates in 2019—some 18 months after the voters of Austin approved our district moving forward with building the new facility that our Rosedale students deserved. There in the UAE, parking spaces were not reserved for the "disabled," but for the determined. That shift in language changed me.

Just imagine the determination required to navigate a world not built for you.

In my years in public life—and especially at Rosedale—I daily saw that determination. I saw students who embodied resilience that most of us never need to summon. I saw family members and educators who practiced extraordinary love in ways that felt nothing short of sacred.

Vanier would have instantly recognized that holiness.

Pop culture occasionally glimpses this truth. Think of *Forrest Gump*, whose simplicity reveals profound wisdom. Or *The Peanut Butter Falcon*, where ability is redefined through relationship. Or even *Glee*, which—at its best—celebrated those who did not fit conventional molds.

Still, our culture too often builds walls.

Wolves Still Roam

We would be naïve to think that the dynamics of Diether's time have disappeared. Wolves still roam—sometimes cloaked in political rhetoric, sometimes in religious authority.

We have seen our U.S. president publicly mock individuals with developmental disabilities. We have witnessed how his policies have marginalized the vulnerable. We have lived through a coarsening of public discourse that sidelines civility and normalizes cruelty.

Scripture again plainly speaks: "Whatever you did to the least of these, you did to me" (Mt. 25:40).

And yet, resistance also rises. Communities organize. Advocates speak. Ordinary people summon extraordinary courage.

Diether and Vanier illuminate the struggle between domination and dignity, between fear and love. They call us to different, but complementary, forms of discipleship. One resisted unjust power. The other built beloved community. Both were necessary. Both were Gospel!

Calls to Action

- Actively dismantle walls—especially those that exclude those deemed "different."
- Publicly advocate for policies that protect the vulnerable, even when doing so invites criticism.
- Examine your language, replacing deficit-based terms with ones that affirm dignity and determination.
- Support inclusive ministries like L'Arche or local programs serving those with special needs.
- Challenge "wolf-like" leadership—in Church or state—when it harms the common good.
- Practice radical hospitality, ensuring that all feel seen, valued and welcomed.
- Cultivate extraordinary courage through prayer, community and sustained action.

From Graduation Stages to God's Kingdom

Those Rosedale graduations come back to me now. Students crossing the stage. Families overwhelmed with joy. Teachers cheering. A community witnessing something sacred.

No wolves. No walls. Just love.

That is the Church at its best.

Diether von Isenburg reminds us that we must sometimes fight to protect that vision. Jean Vanier shows us what that vision looks like when it comes alive.

In this unordinary U.S. moment, we cannot afford to choose between courage and compassion. We need both.

We need shepherds who stand firm against wolves.

We need builders who patiently tear down walls.

And perhaps, like those Rosedale graduates, we simply need to keep moving forward – step by determined step – into the light of God’s reign!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where do I see “wolves” on the prowl – in my community and in our world?
- How am I called to respond – with courage, with compassion, or both?
- What “walls” have I built, consciously or unconsciously, that exclude others?
- How can I better honor the dignity of those whom society overlooks?
- Where have I witnessed extraordinary love in unexpected places?
- How might I become a more faithful shepherd in my own sphere of influence?

Let Us Pray

God of the vulnerable and the valiant, You call us to stand firm against injustice and to kneel gently beside those in need. Give us the courage of Diether, that we might resist the wolves of our time. Give us the compassion of Jean, that we might dismantle walls and build communities of love. Open our eyes to the determined among us, our hearts to the suffering around us, and our lives to the work of your Kingdom. May we live with extraordinary courage, may we love with extraordinary tenderness, and may we follow Christ, our Good Shepherd, wherever he leads. Amen.

Mother Jesus and the Courage to Challenge Thrones

Lessons from Julian of Norwich and Josip Juraj Štrosmajer

May 8, 2026



On Monday evening, my husband treated me to dinner and a concert for my birthday. After an extraordinary omakase experience, we joined thousands at Austin's Moody Center for a performance by Florence + The Machine. One lyric from "King" kept echoing in my mind long after the music ended: "I am no mother, I am no bride, I am king."

Hearing a woman sing those gender-bending words with such power immediately brought to mind the medieval mystic we celebrate today: Julian of Norwich, who dared to speak of God not merely as Father, but also as Mother. In a church and world obsessed with rigid categories, Julian envisioned a God who transcended them all!

And then there is Josip Juraj Štrosmajer, the Croatian bishop who stood before the sham Vatican Council of 1869-1870 and challenged Pius IX's obsession with centralized power and unquestioned authority.

Julian challenged the Church's imagination about God. Štrosmajer challenged the Church's imagination about power. Both paid a price for their courage. Both still speak to us today.

And both raise a question that feels extraordinarily urgent in this Easter season: What happens when resurrection people refuse to live inside narrow categories?

"As Truly as God Is Our Father..."

Julian of Norwich (1342-1416) lived during an age of plague, instability, war and corruption. Sound familiar?

She survived the Black Death, political upheaval, and social fragmentation. At age thirty, gravely ill and believing herself near death, she experienced a series of mystical visions that became her extraordinary work, *Revelations of Divine Love*—the first known book in English authored by a woman.

What makes Julian so compelling is not merely that she was mystical. Plenty of mystics existed in medieval Christianity. What makes her revolutionary is the tenderness and expansiveness of her theology.

At a time when many preachers emphasized wrath, damnation and punishment, Julian emphasized love. Again and again, she returned to the assurance that “all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.”

That line alone probably deserves a place beside the words of the prophet Isaiah, beside the poetry of Taylor Swift, beside the resilience of *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, beside the defiant hope of Ted Lasso.

Julian even imagined Jesus as... mother:

“The mother can give of her milk to her suckling child, but our precious mother Jesus can feed us with himself.”

That was stunning language in the 14th century. Frankly, it still unsettles many today.

Yet Julian understood something many modern Christians still resist: If humanity reflects the image of God, then masculinity alone cannot possibly exhaust divine reality. Scripture itself repeatedly points in this direction. God gathers Jerusalem “as a hen gathers her brood” (Lk. 13:34). Isaiah depicts God as a nursing mother who cannot forget her child (Is. 49:15). Genesis teaches that humanity—male and female—is created in God’s image (Gen. 1:27).

The cat lovers among us may also enjoy knowing that Julian is often depicted with a cat because anchoresses living in enclosed cells frequently kept cats to control rodents among their books and provisions.

Still, Julian’s broader point remains profound: God is larger than our categories!

And that truth terrifies authoritarian movements.

The Bishop Who Refused to Bow

If Julian challenged the Church’s understanding of God, Josip Juraj Štrosmajer (1815-1905) challenged its understanding of authority.

Born in what is now Croatia, he became bishop of Đakovo and one of the great intellectual and pastoral leaders of 19th-century Roman Catholicism. He advocated for ecumenism, education, national self-determination and greater collaboration between Catholics and Orthodox Christians. He even promoted the use of a common Slavonic liturgy to bridge ancient divides.

Then came the sham Vatican Council of 1869-1870.

The issue consuming the council was purported papal infallibility: a 19th-century manifestation of the ancient heresy of Gnosticism, suggesting that the bishop of Rome can teach without error on matters of faith and morals under certain conditions.

Many bishops quietly feared that the doctrine went too far. Few publicly resisted it.

Štrosmajer did.

He reportedly delivered a three-hour speech warning against concentrating too much authority in one human being. Whether every detail later attributed to his speech is historically accurate almost misses the point. The symbolism matters. He became an icon of resistance against theological absolutism.

As someone shaped by Jesuit education, yet increasingly uncomfortable with rigid ecclesial power structures, I find Štrosmajer deeply compelling. At St. Louis University and later at the Washington Theological Union, I learned to ask questions. Yet the institutional Church often rewards compliance much more than curiosity and innovation.

I think back now to my own years in Roman Catholic ministry under increasingly authoritarian ecclesial leadership. I think about my public break with Bishop Joe Vásquez over the issues of immigration, women's reproductive health, and the treatment of our LGBTQIA+ siblings. I think about how many priests privately voiced concerns about the absence of women's leadership, LGBTQIA+ exclusion, clericalism and ecclesial abuse—but feared publicly saying so.

The pressure toward conformity is enormous.

The irony, of course, is that the Acts of the Apostles—the very text Catholics hear throughout the Easter season—is filled with holy disruption. Peter repeatedly breaks boundaries. Paul repeatedly challenges religious gatekeeping. The Spirit repeatedly surprises institutional leaders.

The early Church looked less like a monarchy and more like a Spirit-led movement constantly expanding outward!

The New Gnostics

One of the great ironies of modern Catholicism is that some who loudly condemn “heresy” often embrace ancient patterns of Gnosticism themselves.

Classical Gnosticism divided humanity between the enlightened few and the unenlightened masses. Today, versions of that mentality survive whenever leaders claim exclusive access to truth while dismissing the lived experiences of others.

We see it when Church officials insist they understand “natural law” and the “grave depravity” of the “intrinsically disordered” acts of LGBTQIA+ people, better than LGBTQIA+ people understand themselves. Absolute hogwash, of course.

We see it when politicians reduce trans and nonbinary people to campaign talking points. Again, pure hogwash.

We saw it vividly this week when President Trump once again elevated anti-trans rhetoric during a White House event involving children. Let that sink in. The strategy remains painfully familiar: Identify a vulnerable minority, exaggerate fears about them, and mobilize cultural panic.

The infamous 2024 ad – “Kamala is for they/them, Trump is for you” – worked precisely because it exploited discomfort with complexity. Nuance rarely fits neatly into thirty-second commercials!

Yet resurrection faith has always complicated simplistic binaries.

Paul declares: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28).

This does not erase identity. It relativizes the hierarchies attached to identity.

Julian understood this. Štrosmajer understood this. The earliest Christians understood this.

Authoritarian movements never do.

The Extraordinary Courage of Expansive Faith

Many of us feel exhausted. We are navigating political extremism, ecclesial battles, and cultural backlash all at once.

Sometimes I think of my childhood in rural Ohio, where categories felt rigid and immovable. Boys were expected to behave in certain ways, play certain sports and enjoy certain toys. Religion functioned within tight boundaries. Difference often generated suspicion.

And yet life expanded.

I moved from the cornfields of Ohio to the corn tortillas of Texas. I discovered communities larger than the ones I inherited. I learned Spanish. I encountered extraordinary immigrant families. I eventually stood on the lawn of the Texas Capitol marrying the man I love while my once less-supportive parents sat in support.

Transformation happens.

That may be the central lesson of Easter itself.

The risen Christ repeatedly appears to frightened disciples hiding behind locked doors and essentially says: Open them!

Ways We Can Respond

- Support transgender and nonbinary people in your family, workplace and community, especially young people navigating fear and rejection.
- Intentionally expand your language for God in prayer and liturgy, drawing from the rich biblical imagery of mother, shepherd, wisdom and spirit.
- Read theologians and mystics who were marginalized or silenced by institutional power structures.
- Defend academic freedom, theological inquiry, and honest questioning.
- Build churches and communities that reflect the radical hospitality of Jesus, rather than the exclusionary instincts of empire.
- Publicly speak when vulnerable communities become political scapegoats.
- Practice extraordinary tenderness toward those whose identities or experiences you do not fully understand.

“All Shall Be Well”

As I think back to that concert Monday evening, I keep returning to the image of thousands of people singing together. Some were straight; some were queer. Some likely conservative; some progressive. Some probably wrestling quietly with identities they barely understand themselves.

And there we all stood together, singing lyrics about identity, freedom and becoming.

Julian of Norwich would have understood that holy complexity.

So would Štrosmajer.

The Church’s future will not belong to those desperately trying to force humanity back into smaller boxes. Resurrection never moves backward. The risen Christ always moves outward – through locked doors, beyond rigid categories, past frightened gatekeepers, and toward wounded people longing to hear that they, too, bear the image of God.

Perhaps that is why Julian’s words still endure six centuries later: “All shall be well.”

Not because the world is simple.

Not because power always tells the truth.

Not because the Church never wounds people.

But because divine love remains larger than every empire, every ideology, and every fearful attempt to shrink God down to manageable size.

And that is extraordinarily good news!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- What images of God shaped your childhood faith, and how have those images expanded or changed over time?
- When have you experienced institutional pressure to conform or remain silent?
- How might the Church better reflect the radical inclusivity of the risen Christ?
- Which marginalized communities most need your advocacy right now?
- What fears arise within you when categories become more fluid and complex?
- How might Julian of Norwich's image of "Mother Jesus" deepen your spirituality?
- Where do you see extraordinary courage emerging in today's Church and society?

Let Us Pray

God of boundless love, You transcend every category we create and yet lovingly dwell within every human heart. In this Easter season, free us from fear, rigidity and the temptation to control others. Give us the mystical imagination of Julian of Norwich, who saw your tenderness in all things. Give us the prophetic courage of Josip Juraj Štrosmajer, who challenged the dangerous concentration of power. Help us to build communities where transgender youth are safe, where women freely lead, where LGBTQIA+ people fully belong, where questions are welcomed, and where the determined among us encounter extraordinary compassion, rather than judgment. May the risen Christ continue to move through locked doors in both Church and society, unsettling our certainties, and widening our hearts. And when the world feels fractured and fearful, remind us again that all shall be well, all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well. Amen.

The Power of a Peace-Seeking Pope

Lessons from Pope Leo XIV on Peace, Courage and Moral Leadership
amid Escalating Tensions with the Trump Administration

May 9, 2026



As one who earned his Doctor of Philosophy in the emerging field of Leadership Studies fifteen years ago, I sometimes reflect on how the world often misunderstands leadership itself. We are conditioned to imagine leaders as conquerors, dominators, strongmen, dealmakers, or kings with armies and gold-plated towers. Yet this week, the world witnessed a very different image of power: a U.S.-born pope calmly offering a peace symbol to the emissary of a U.S. president increasingly associated with war, threats and intimidation.

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio arrived at the Vatican on Thursday carrying what many observers interpreted as an olive branch from Donald Trump after days of escalating tensions between the White House and Pope Leo XIV over global conflicts, including the U.S./Israel war against Iran. During the meeting, Rubio gave the pope a small crystal football. Leo gifted Rubio an olive-wood pen, explicitly noting its tie to the olive branch, an ancient Mediterranean symbol of peace. The symbolism of both gifts practically preached the homily itself.

An olive branch and a football. Beatitudes and blitzes. Cooperation and competition. Saint Francis and Caesar. The contrast could not have been clearer.

And Catholics throughout the world should pay very close attention!

An Unafraid Pope

When Leo XIV emerged onto the balcony one year ago yesterday as the first U.S.-born pope, commentators immediately noted the geopolitical irony. For decades, Vatican observers speculated that the Church would never elect a U.S.-born pope while the United States remained the world's dominant superpower. The logic was simple: The world would never

tolerate one nation simultaneously dominating both geopolitics and global Catholicism.

Yet perhaps the election of Leo signaled something deeper: that the moral authority of the United States had already eroded.

This week's events only reinforced that perception.

Reuters noted the Vatican's unusually cautious wording after Rubio's meeting with Leo, suggesting "unprecedented tensions" between Washington and the Holy See. The Vatican emphasized peace, human dignity and diplomacy. Trump and his allies continued saber-rattling language regarding Iran. Leo responded not with escalation, but with prayer, publicly asking God to inspire world leaders "to calm tensions."

That contrast matters.

One man governs through fear. The other shepherds through conscience.

One behaves like a heat-seeking missile. The other behaves like a peace-seeking pastor.

As I watched coverage this week, I kept recalling Jesus' words: "Blessed are the peacemakers" (Mt. 5:9). Not the strongmen. Not the influencers. Not the oligarchs. Not those who dominate cable news cycles with rage and spectacle.

The peacemakers.

And Leo increasingly appears determined to embody precisely that.

Warmongering Popes of the Past

Catholics should resist romanticizing the papacy. Church history gives us no shortage of popes who resembled emperors far more than shepherds.

There were crusading popes who launched holy wars and "blessed" massacres. Think Gregory VII's "soldiers of St. Peter" and concept of "holy war," Urban II's First Crusade, Eugene III's Second Crusade, Innocent III's brutal Albigensian Crusade, and Gregory IX's establishment of papal inquisitions.

There were Renaissance popes who wielded armies like mafia bosses. Think "Borgia Boss" Alexander VI blackmailing and murdering as history's most corrupt pope, "Warrior Pope" Julius II marching in armor and commanding cannons, "Medici Warlord" Leo X using Church funds for family gain, or "Tough Pope" Sixtus V ordering mass executions and terrorizing Rome into submission.

There were inquisitorial popes who persecuted theologians, Jews, Muslims and dissenters. Think Lucius III commanding bishops to prosecute heresy, Innocent IV authorizing torture to extract inquisitorial confessions, Sixtus IV birthing the Spanish Inquisition with Ferdinand and

Isabella, or Paul IV persecuting and forcing Protestants and Jews into ghettos.

There were popes who silenced scientists and censored thinkers. Think Paul IV banning Erasmus and establishing the Index of Forbidden Books, Clement VIII ordering that Giordano Bruno be burned at the stake, Paul V condemning Copernicus, or Urban VIII silencing Galileo.

And in more recent decades, we have seen our share of ecclesiastical culture warriors.

John Paul II silenced conversations on sacramental justice and the ordination of women, and his “Rottweiler,” Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, later Benedict XVI, presided over doctrinal crackdowns that targeted liberation theologians, feminist theologians, and U.S. nuns whose ministries often more closely resembled the Gospel than the bureaucracies condemning them. I still remember the Vatican investigations of U.S. women religious and the attacks on theologians like Sister Elizabeth Johnson. I remember Leonard Blair, bishop of my home diocese of Toledo, helping lead the shameful charge against the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.

Those moments mattered. Because the Church always reveals itself most clearly in how it treats prophets. Will it crucify them? Or will it listen?

Leo seems far more interested in listening.

That is not weakness. That is extraordinary courage.

“Make Me an Instrument of Your Peace”

As a former Conventual Franciscan friar, I cannot help but interpret Leo through Franciscan lenses. Even though he chose the name Leo, his worldview feels as deeply Franciscan as his predecessor, the first pontiff to choose the name Francis.

“Where there is hatred, let me sow love.”

“Where there is injury, pardon.”

“Where there is darkness, light.”

Those words stand in almost perfect opposition to our current U.S. political climate.

Today’s politics reward humiliation, monetize cruelty, amplify outrage, and weaponize fear. One need only scroll social media for thirty seconds to see that our culture increasingly resembles The Hunger Games more than the Acts of the Apostles.

And yet Leo calmly persists in preaching peace. Not performative peace. Not shallow “thoughts and prayers” peace. But costly peace. Prophetic peace. The kind of peace that risks angering emperors. The kind of peace that gets prophets killed.

Jesus understood that kind of peace. So did Oscar Romero. So did Dorothy Day. So did Martin Luther King, Jr.

And now Leo appears willing to stand in that same tradition.

The Community Organizing Lesson Donald Forgot

Years ago, I attended a training with the Industrial Areas Foundation. One lesson permanently shaped my understanding of leadership:

Power and influence come from two sources: organized people and/or organized resources.

That insight helped propel me through eight years of elected office in Austin. It also perfectly explains this week's drama.

Donald Trump may command extraordinary governmental power, military strength, and financial influence. But Leo leads something older, broader and ultimately more durable than any administration: a global moral community of over 1.4 billion Catholics.

If you are wise, you do not casually pick fights with institutions capable of reaching hearts across every continent on Earth. Especially when your own moral credibility already appears extremely fragile.

In contrast to Leo, Donald often behaves as though wealth and resources alone create authority. The gospels repeatedly warn otherwise.

The rich man built bigger barns and died that very night (Lk. 12).

The rich man ignored Lazarus and discovered too late that comfort without compassion leads to damnation (Lk. 16).

Meanwhile, Jesus repeatedly sided with the vulnerable, the poor, the refugee and the marginalized.

Leo appears to understand that.

Stewardship Versus Possession

During our trip to Naples last December, my husband and I visited the Farnese collection. Room after room displayed the unimaginable wealth accumulated by a powerful pope—indeed, a Catholic oligarch. Paintings. Marble. Gold. Palaces. Power preserved in stone.

I remember wondering: Did Alessandro Farnese, later Paul III, ever truly understand stewardship? Or was he simply an avaricious man who confused possession with holiness?

That tension still defines our world today. Some leaders cling to institutional power. Others understand leadership as service. Pope Francis modeled the latter. Leo increasingly seems determined to continue that legacy.

This week, even the gifts exchanged at the Vatican revealed two competing visions of leadership. A crystal football. An olive-wood pen. Spectacle versus symbolism. Competition versus communion. Domination

versus dialogue. One evokes empire. The other evokes Noah's dove returning after the destruction of the flood.

The Gospel Versus Culture Wars

Of course, much of today's political tension extends beyond foreign policy. We are living through an unordinary cultural backlash against complexity itself.

This week alone, Donald again invoked transgender athletes and gender politics while appearing with children at the White House. Let that sink in. The rhetoric surrounding LGBTQIA+ people continues to intensify, particularly against trans and nonbinary Americans. The infamous "Kamala is for they/them, Trump is for you" ad from 2024 still echoes through our political discourse because it effectively reduced deeply human realities into culture-war caricatures.

But Christianity has always struggled when confronted with human complexity.

Jesus consistently shattered rigid categories. He spoke with Samaritans. He touched lepers. He praised foreigners. He elevated women. He healed on the Sabbath. He broke rules whenever rules obstructed love.

That is why conservative movements so often fear people who complicate simplistic binaries. Because complexity threatens systems built upon rigid control.

And perhaps that is why a pope preaching peace now feels threatening, too.

Pop Culture Prophets

Our culture itself increasingly recognizes the bankruptcy of domination-based leadership.

Ted Lasso teaches audiences that kindness can coexist with strength.

The Last of Us reminds us that survival without compassion becomes monstrous.

Wicked casts seemingly wicked outsiders as misunderstood truth-tellers.

Beyoncé's "Renaissance" celebrates marginalized identities with unapologetic joy.

Taylor Swift's "Anti-Hero" explores the human tendency toward ego and self-destruction.

Even *Andor*, perhaps the most political of the Star Wars stories, explores how authoritarianism thrives through fear, while rebellion grows through ordinary acts of courage.

We do well to pay attention!

People hunger for leaders who heal, rather than inflame.

Leo seems to understand that hunger.

Extraordinary Calls

As people of faith navigating this unordinary U.S. moment, perhaps we are called to:

- Publicly defend peacemaking as strength, rather than weakness.
- Resist political movements rooted in cruelty, humiliation and fear.
- Support journalists, theologians and church leaders who courageously speak truth.
- Refuse to allow nationalism to eclipse gospel values.
- Honestly study Church history, including the Church's own violence and failures.
- Build bridges across communities, rather than intensify tribalism.
- Advocate for diplomacy before militarism.
- Model compassion in our own families, workplaces and communities.
- Remember that Christ died as an executed dissenter under empire.
- Become instruments of extraordinary peace in a nation addicted to outrage.

The Olive Branch Still Matters

As I reflect on the events of this week, I keep returning to that Vatican image: the pope handing an olive-wood pen to the representative of a government increasingly associated with war, threats and escalation—an administration that could only hold a Nobel Peace Prize won by another.

An olive branch. A peace offering. A reminder that Christianity began not in palaces, but among occupied peoples longing for liberation.

Perhaps that is why Leo—my bet for a future Nobel Peace Prize—unsettles so many powerful people.

Because genuine moral authority cannot be purchased. It cannot be bullied. It cannot be fully controlled. It emerges when someone quietly but firmly insists that peace matters more than domination.

The world always knows how to recognize conquerors. But every now and then, history gives us someone brave enough to choose peace instead.

And in this unordinary Easter season—as we continue hearing in Acts about disciples building communities rooted in resurrection, rather than fear—perhaps Pope Leo XIV is reminding us what Christian leadership was supposed to look like all along.

Not a throne. Not a weapon. But an olive branch!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

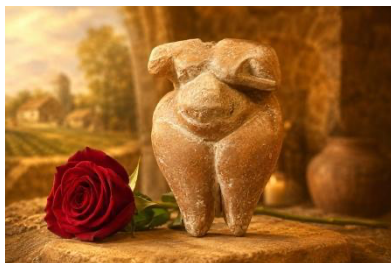
- Where do I see warmongering, cruelty or fear masquerading as leadership?
- How might Christ be calling me to become an instrument of peace?
- When have I confused dominance with strength?
- How do I respond when religious or political leaders target vulnerable communities?
- In what ways do I personally help build bridges across divisions?
- What prophets or peacemakers inspire my own faith journey?
- How might our churches better embody the Beatitudes in this political moment?

Let Us Pray

God of resurrection and reconciliation, You sent Jesus not to conquer through violence, but to transform through love. In this unordinary, troubled moment, grant us the courage to reject cruelty, the wisdom to pursue peace, and the humility to recognize Christ in those whom the world dismisses or fears. Strengthen all who labor for justice, diplomacy and truth. Protect those targeted by hatred, nationalism and fearmongering. Bless Pope Leo XIV and all leaders who choose conscience over popularity, and compassion over domination. Help us to become instruments of your peace in our families, our churches, our communities and our nation. Where there is hatred, let us sow love. Where there is darkness, let us bring light. Where there is despair, let us proclaim resurrection hope. And may we never forget that your kingdom comes not through empire, intimidation or spectacle, but through extraordinary love. Amen.

**God Our Mother, Mothers Among Us,
and the Extraordinary Love That Raises the World**
Recognizing the Women who have Carried Us through Life —
Perhaps even to Rediscover the Feminine Face of the Divine

May 10, 2026



Three years ago, while traveling through Türkiye with my husband, I wandered through the vast halls of the Istanbul Archaeological Museums. Ancient stone fragments and weathered statues surrounded us. Yet one object quietly seized my imagination: a small, headless clay figure of the Mother Goddess dating to 5,000-8,000 B.C.

Long before medieval paintings portrayed God as an old, white man seated upon a throne.

Long before patriarchal societies imagined God primarily as king, warrior, judge or ruler.

Long before the towering *Pantokrator* mosaics of Byzantine churches stared down from domes with stern masculine authority.

Human beings first imagined the sacred as... mother!

Let that sink in.

Theologian Diarmuid O'Murchu and various historians of religion have noted that prehistoric spirituality often centered feminine imagery: fertility, nurture, earth, creation, birth, wisdom, cycles of life. Before humanity developed rigid patriarchal structures, many cultures revered the Divine through maternal imagery. The holy was not first imagined as domination, conquest or hierarchy. The holy was first imagined as womb, nourishment, compassion, mystery and life itself!

And honestly, that realization changes the way I hear scripture.

"Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb?" (Is. 49:15)

"As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you." (Is. 66:13)

Jesus himself compares his longing love for Jerusalem to a mother hen gathering her chicks beneath her wings (Mt. 23:37). In Genesis, the Spirit of

God hovers over the waters like a mother bird (Gen. 1:2). The Hebrew word for Spirit—*ruach*—is grammatically feminine. In John’s Gospel during this Easter season, the Risen Christ does not return breathing vengeance, punishment, or fear upon his disciples. He breathes peace.

Peace. Tenderness. Presence.

Perhaps resurrection itself contains profoundly maternal energy!

As Catholics journeying through this Easter season, we continue to hear stories from the Acts of the Apostles about how the early Christian community cared for one another after Jesus’ ascension. They fed widows. They shared resources. They accompanied the vulnerable. They built communities of belonging. In other words, the early church survived because somebody mothered it!

The Mothers Who Raise Us

As I reflect this Mother’s Day, my thoughts drift from ancient goddesses and biblical imagery back toward the cornfields of rural Ohio where I was raised.

My mother likely never imagined her life unfolding as it did. Trained as a beautician, she laid that career aside after the birth of her first son. She raised four boys—hardly a peaceful assignment. She cooked meals, washed endless laundry, attended school events, and somehow stretched my father’s factory paychecks farther than logic should have allowed.

Like so many women of her generation, she quietly sacrificed ambitions while helping everyone else pursue theirs.

When I joke that I suffer from “middle-child syndrome,” my words point to the way in which I attempted to prove myself worthy of the extraordinary love I had received throughout my childhood.

My mother drove me to music lessons and extracurriculars. She endured endless recitals, concerts, band performances and awards ceremonies. She tolerated a son who juggled musical instruments—piano, organ, saxophone, French horn, trumpet, bugle—and who always seemed involved in another academic competition, theater production, or church activity. From my third-grade spelling bee to becoming my hometown’s first Eagle Scout, from studying philosophy and classical humanities to eventually earning seven university degrees, I never lacked maternal or paternal encouragement. Words could never adequately express my gratitude.

And yet, like many LGBTQ people of my generation raised in religious environments, I also experienced painful tensions with family over sexuality and identity. For years, acceptance came slowly and imperfectly. Still, my mother and father kept showing up. Twenty years after I first

came out, my parents attended my very public wedding to my husband on the lawn of the Texas State Capitol. Their presence then continues to shake me to my core today.

Our mothers sometimes evolve alongside us.

And perhaps that, too, is holy.

Expanding the Meaning of “Mother”

When I was young, the word mother typically meant one thing: a woman married to a man raising children in a heterosexual household. American culture presented motherhood through the tidy lenses of sitcoms like *Leave It to Beaver*, *The Brady Bunch*, or later *Full House*.

But life is far richer and more complicated than that.

Today, when I hear the word mother, I think not only of biological mothers, but also of stepmothers, adoptive mothers, grandmothers, *tías*, *madrinas*, *comadres*, teachers, mentors, coaches, nurses, nuns, neighbors, counselors, and chosen family.

I think about the nuns in seminary—Sister Dorothy and Sister Josephine—who cooked our meals and washed our clothes while we, future priests and religious, debated theology in upper rooms.

I think about women in parish communities who quietly keep churches functioning while men still disproportionately occupy pulpits and chancery offices.

I think about LGBTQIA+ elders who mothered younger generations abandoned by families and churches, particularly during the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s.

I think about women who cannot or chose not to have children, yet embody extraordinary maternal love in countless other ways.

I think about surrogates and adoptive parents. I think about same-sex couples raising beautiful children in homes overflowing with tenderness and stability. I think about immigrant mothers working multiple jobs while still helping with homework late into the night. I think about *abuelitas* whose kitchens become sanctuaries of memory, healing, tortillas, arroz, stories and love.

Perhaps motherhood is less about biology, than about creating life around us!

And if that is true, then many more people mother the world than we often acknowledge.

Mary, the Feminine Divine, and the Catholic Imagination

Catholicism itself contains extraordinary maternal imagery, even if church leadership has not always fully embraced its implications.

How fascinating that throughout Catholic history, Mary continually appears across cultures: Our Lady of Guadalupe, Our Lady of Consolation, Our Lady of Lourdes, Our Lady of Fátima, Our Lady of Aparecida – some 26 Vatican-approved apparitions, not counting so many more, like those of my “cousin,” Barbara Matthias, a Marian visionary whom I met during my novitiate in California in 1992.

Again and again, the feminine emerges.

Not in emperors, warriors or renowned theologians.

But as a mother.

And each apparition reflects the people who encounter her. Guadalupe appears as mestiza. Aparecida rises from the waters among poor Afro-Brazilian fishermen. Mary continually contextualizes herself within human suffering and human hope.

Meanwhile, many traditional male images of God emphasize judgment, hierarchy, control and power. We have all seen paintings of the stern, heavenly king keeping score from above the clouds. We have heard preachers weaponize shame and fear. We have watched religion become entangled with patriarchy, authoritarianism and now the heretical oxymoron of “Christian nationalism.”

Yet maternal imagery invites us toward different virtues: compassion, accompaniment, mercy, nourishment, intuition, protection, tenderness and relationality.

No wonder so many people wounded by rigid religion still find themselves lighting candles before Mary.

Even pop culture reflects this hunger for maternal wisdom and feminine spirituality. One hears it in Madonna’s “Like a Prayer,” sees it in Everything Everywhere All at Once, feels it in Barbie, and encounters it in the fierce maternal protection woven throughout Pose. Even Taylor Swift repeatedly explores memory, caregiving, feminine friendship, and emotional inheritance in ways that deeply resonate with younger generations.

Human beings continue searching for the sacred feminine because part of us recognizes that the world cannot heal through domination alone.

Mother's Day in a Nation That Still Undervalues Women

And yet, despite all the flowers and brunch reservations this weekend, Mother's Day can also feel bittersweet.

Women in the U.S. today still earn less than men for comparable work. Women still disproportionately shoulder caregiving responsibilities. Mothers often navigate impossible expectations: professionally excel, flawlessly raise children, remain physically youthful, emotionally available, endlessly patient, financially productive, and perpetually selfless.

Now in 2026, our political U.S. climate has grown increasingly hostile toward reproductive freedom. Misogyny, once whispered, now often shouts through microphones and social media feeds. Girls today enjoy less bodily autonomy than their mothers and grandmothers. The social sins abound.

And so Mother's Day should not merely sentimentalize women's sacrifices. It should challenge us to transform the systems that continue exploiting those sacrifices.

As Catholics, we should especially recognize the contradiction within churches that praise motherhood while still excluding women from ordination and many forms of ecclesial authority. One cannot authentically honor women while structurally silencing them!

The resurrection narratives we proclaim during this Easter season consistently reveal women as central witnesses to hope. Mary Magdalene became the apostle to the apostles. Women remained near the cross when so many male disciples fled. Women prepared bodies, carried spices, announced resurrection.

In short, the church survived because women repeatedly resurrected it!

Extraordinary Calls on This Mother's Day

- Expansively celebrate mothers and mother figures, recognizing biological mothers, adoptive mothers, stepmothers, godmothers, queer elders, teachers, mentors, abuelas, and all who nurture life around them.
- Visibly and fully include women in every possible ministry and leadership role within our communities.
- Publicly advocate for equal pay, paid family leave, affordable childcare, reproductive healthcare, and policies that honor caregiving labor.
- Support organizations serving immigrant mothers, single mothers, and families living in poverty.

- Reclaim feminine imagery for God in prayer, preaching, music and liturgy. Occasionally dare to pray to “God our Mother,” alongside “God our Father.”
- Teach children healthier models of masculinity rooted not in domination, but in compassion, vulnerability, justice and mutuality.
- Intentionally listen to women’s stories, rather than assuming we already understand their experiences.
- Honor elderly women whose invisible labor often built our families, parishes, schools, and communities.
- Challenge sexism in church structures, workplaces, politics, and daily conversation.
- Embody extraordinary tenderness in a culture increasingly addicted to cruelty.

Returning to the Ancient Mother

As I think back to that ancient clay Mother Goddess in Istanbul, I find myself strangely moved by her missing head.

Time erased her face.

Yet humanity still recognizes her.

Perhaps that says something profound.

Across thousands of years, empires rise and collapse. Theologies evolve. Languages disappear. Political movements come and go. Yet mothers—and all who embody maternal love—continue sustaining human civilization in quiet, often unrecognized ways.

Maybe resurrection itself depends upon such people.

Perhaps every warm meal prepared during grief, every bedtime story shared after exhaustion, every hand placed upon a frightened shoulder, every teacher who believes in a struggling child, every nurse who comforts the dying, every aunt who steps in during crisis, every mentor who guides with patience, every woman who keeps loving despite disappointment participates in the ongoing resurrection of the world.

And perhaps somewhere deep within the human spirit, older even than patriarchy itself, we still recognize the Divine whispering not only as Father—but also as Mother!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Which women and mother figures most profoundly shaped the person I have become?
- How have I experienced maternal love beyond biology or traditional family structures?

- When have I encountered the feminine face of God in my spiritual life?
- In what ways do church and society still undervalue women and caregiving labor?
- How might I better embody tenderness, compassion and nurturing presence in a wounded world?
- Which mothers or mother figures in my life especially need encouragement, gratitude or reconciliation right now?
- How might our faith communities more fully honor women's leadership, wisdom and gifts?

Let Us Pray

God of extraordinary tenderness, whom scripture compares to a mother who never forgets her child, we thank you for the women and mother figures who have nurtured, protected, challenged, forgiven, taught and loved us into becoming who we are. Bless our mothers living and deceased. Bless grandmothers, stepmothers, adoptive mothers, godmothers, foster mothers and chosen mothers. Bless teachers, mentors, caregivers, counselors, nurses and all who quietly sustain life around them. Bless women carrying heavy burdens that too often go unseen. Heal those for whom this day carries grief: those mourning mothers, those estranged from family, those longing for children, those wounded by broken relationships, and those whose experiences of motherhood have been painful or complicated. Teach your church and our society to value women not merely with words or flowers, but with justice, equality, dignity and shared power. And as the Risen Christ continues breathing peace upon our wounded world during this Easter season, help us embody extraordinary compassion, extraordinary tenderness, and extraordinary love. For in every act of nurturing mercy, the world rises again. Amen.

No Kings, Only Citizens

Yves René Marie Simon and the Extraordinary Work of Democracy

May 11, 2026



We live in such unordinary times.

There was something almost cinematic about watching King Charles III of the Commonwealth realms address a joint session of the U.S. Congress on April 28 during our 250th anniversary—our semi-quincentennial observance—of the Declaration of Independence. Conservatives appeared starry-eyed in the presence of an actual king. Progressives seemed stunned that a monarch sounded more committed to democratic norms than many elected American leaders.

Imagine that: A king reminding Americans about the importance of “this citadel of democracy created to represent the voice of all American people to advance sacred rights and freedoms”!

At moments, his speech sounded less ceremonial and more like a gentle but urgent lecture directed toward a nation increasingly flirting with authoritarian temptation:

“Our common ideals were not only crucial for liberty and equality, they are also the foundation of our shared prosperity. The rule of law: the certainty of stable and accessible rules, an independent judiciary resolving disputes and delivering impartial justice. These features created the conditions for centuries of unmatched economic growth in our countries.”

I expected members of Congress to nervously look at one another. They did not. Deep down, I suspect they knew the king’s words ring true.

As I listened, my mind drifted toward Yves René Marie Simon (1903-1961), whom we remember today. Simon, one of the twentieth century’s most original Catholic political philosophers, spent much of his life arguing that Catholics need not tether themselves to monarchs, strongmen or authoritarian systems. In fact, he believed democracy best reflected human dignity and the moral agency bestowed upon persons by God.

For Simon, democracy is not merely compatible with Catholicism.

Democracy is profoundly moral!

Democracy as a Moral Responsibility

Simon emerged from a French Catholic context where many believers still romanticized monarchy and hierarchical social orders. Some Catholics suspiciously viewed democracy, associating it with secularism, instability or revolutionary excess. Echoes of throne-and-altar politics lingered throughout Europe.

Yet Simon recognized something important: The Gospel repeatedly undermines authoritarian pretensions.

Jesus tells his disciples, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them... But it shall not be so among you” (Mt. 20:25-26).

That hardly sounds like an endorsement of authoritarian rule!

In the Acts of the Apostles, which Catholics continue proclaiming throughout Easter season, we encounter communities rooted not primarily in domination, but in shared responsibility, discernment, service and solidarity. The early Christians gathered, debated, distributed resources, and attempted to care for widows and the poor. Leadership existed, yes, but always ideally oriented toward service, rather than glorified power.

Simon understood that democracy requires virtue. Citizens must think critically. They must participate responsibly. They must resist propaganda, fearmongering, cults of personality, and blind obedience.

Freedom without virtue collapses into chaos.

Authority without accountability collapses into tyranny.

And perhaps that is precisely where we find ourselves today.

“No Kings”

In recent months, one of the most hopeful developments in American public life has been the emergence of “No Kings” rallies across the country. Ordinary citizens have gathered to protest authoritarian rhetoric, attacks upon democratic institutions, and the increasingly monarchical imagery surrounding American politics.

Some Americans now openly speak about our U.S. president as though he were a savior or messiah figure. Others post digitally-altered images depicting him as a monarch, emperor, or even as — wait for it — the pope.

Imagine explaining that to Benjamin Franklin, who famously warned that we possess “a republic, if you can keep it.”

Keep it.

Not automatically inherit it. Not assume it permanently exists. But keep it. That requires work.

During my eight years of elected office in Austin, I learned firsthand how fragile democratic governance can feel. Democracy is messy.

Meetings run long. People passionately disagree. Coalitions fracture. Consensus proves elusive.

Yet democracy remains extraordinary precisely because it insists that power ultimately belongs not to trustees, city council members, bishops, billionaires, kings or demagogues, but to people.

Power to the people!

Perhaps that is why authoritarian figures so often attack public education, journalism, universities, libraries, judges, and independent institutions. Whereas democracy depends upon informed citizens capable of critical thought, tyranny depends upon fear, misinformation, exhaustion and obedience.

And as someone who comes “from the cornfields of Ohio to the corn tortillas of Texas,” I increasingly recognize that rural Americans, urban Americans, immigrants, LGBTQIA+ people, working-class families, and marginalized communities all share a stake in protecting democratic structures—even when those structures frustrate us.

Because once democracy erodes, rebuilding it becomes extraordinarily difficult!

The Strange Irony of This U.S. Moment

There was profound irony in hearing a British monarch defend democratic norms while some Americans openly fantasize about authoritarian rule.

And yet, to his credit, Charles also movingly spoke about moral responsibility, interfaith solidarity, Ukraine, NATO, and the enduring need to resist violence and extremism. Echoing Isaiah’s prophetic vision, he invoked the Christian commitment to transforming swords into plowshares (Is. 2:4).

“It is my hope – my prayer – that, in these turbulent times... we can stem the beating of plowshares into swords.”

What a remarkable image for this Easter season!

The resurrection narratives proclaimed during these weeks remind Christians that fear and violence never have the final word. The Risen Christ repeatedly appears saying: “Peace be with you.”

Not “domination be with you.” Not “vengeance be with you.” Not “conquest be with you.” Peace.

Yet peace requires justice. And justice requires democratic structures capable of protecting rights, preserving accountability, and resisting concentrated power.

One hardly needs to search far for contemporary warnings. We live in a moment when political leaders mock courts, attack journalists, demean

immigrants, scapegoat LGBTQIA+ persons, and normalize authoritarian language. Public discourse increasingly resembles reality television, more than democratic deliberation.

At times, American politics now feels less like Mr. Smith Goes to Washington and more like Succession crossed with The Apprentice.

Meanwhile, pop culture itself often reflects anxieties about authoritarianism and democratic collapse. One sees it in The Hunger Games, The Handmaid's Tale, Star Wars, and even Andor, whose themes of resistance, sacrifice, surveillance and moral courage deeply resonate right now.

As Princess Leia famously reminds us in Star Wars: "The more you tighten your grip, the more star systems will slip through your fingers."

Authoritarianism ultimately devours itself!

A Church Still Struggling with Monarchical Structures

Simon's thought also challenges the church itself.

Catholicism continues operating largely through structures inherited from the Roman Empire and medieval monarchy. Bishops often function like regional princes. Decision-making remains heavily centralized. Titles, robes, hierarchies and protocols frequently obscure the Gospel's radically-communal dimensions.

As someone who served as a priest within the Roman papacy for over ten years, before eventually co-founding Austin's only inclusive Catholic community, I know firsthand how difficult reform can become within systems resistant to shared authority and transparency.

And yet, Easter reminds us that resurrection continually disrupts rigid systems.

The Holy Spirit blows where it wills!

The Acts of the Apostles portrays communities wrestling together toward discernment, not merely passive obedience to commands from above. The early church was messy, relational, adaptive and Spirit-led.

Perhaps Simon invites us to imagine not only healthier democracies, but also healthier churches.

Churches where leaders serve, rather than dominate.

Churches where women fully participate.

Churches where LGBTQIA+ people no longer live as tolerated outsiders.

Churches where conscience matters.

Churches where shared discernment replaces authoritarian decree.

That sounds far more like the reign of God than monarchy ever did!

Extraordinary Calls

- Defend democratic institutions even when doing so feels exhausting, imperfect or frustrating.
- Support public education, civic literacy, libraries and journalism as essential pillars of democracy.
- Resist political idolatry in all forms. No politician deserves unquestioning devotion.
- Challenge authoritarian tendencies within both church and society.
- Politically engage, not merely through online outrage, but through sustained civic participation: voting, organizing, attending meetings, advocating and educating.
- Promote interfaith and intercultural solidarity, rather than fear-based nationalism.
- Teach younger generations the importance of democratic norms, truth, accountability and empathy.
- Advocate for electoral reforms that strengthen participation and reduce corruption.
- Defend marginalized communities increasingly targeted by authoritarian rhetoric.
- Embody extraordinary courage and extraordinary hope in a political culture increasingly addicted to cynicism.

Returning to the King Who Warned a Republic

As I reflect again upon that surreal image of a British king reminding Americans to defend democracy, I cannot help but smile at history's irony.

Two-hundred fifty years after the Declaration of Independence, citizens of a former colony required a monarch to remind them that democracy depends upon virtue, accountability, institutions and shared sacrifice.

Perhaps Yves René Marie Simon would appreciate the irony.

Simon understood that democracy is not self-sustaining. It survives only when ordinary people commit themselves to extraordinary responsibility. Citizens must actively resist the seduction of authoritarian simplicity. They must protect truth when lies easily spread. They must defend institutions when demagogues attempt dismantling them. They must insist that no leader – no leader – stands above the law.

In this Easter season, Christians proclaim that death does not win. Empires do not win. Fear does not win.

Life wins. Truth wins. Resurrection wins.

And perhaps democracy – fragile, frustrating, unfinished democracy – remains one of humanity's clearest collective expressions of faith that ordinary people matter.

No kings. Only citizens entrusted with one another's freedom!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where do I see authoritarian tendencies emerging within church, politics or culture?
- How actively do I participate in protecting democratic institutions and norms?
- Have I ever treated political leaders with a devotion bordering upon idolatry?
- What virtues does democracy require from citizens?
- How might the Gospel challenge systems rooted primarily in domination and hierarchy?
- In what ways can Christian communities better model shared responsibility and servant leadership?
- What gives me hope amid political polarization and democratic fragility?

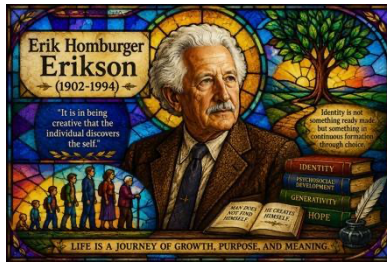
Let Us Pray

God of freedom and truth, You created every human being with dignity, conscience and moral agency. In this unordinary moment for our nation and world, strengthen our commitment to democracy, justice, compassion and peace. Protect us from the seductions of authoritarianism, fear, and political idolatry. Give us courage to defend truth when lies easily spread. Give us wisdom to recognize propaganda, manipulation and hatred. Give us humility to listen across differences without surrendering our deepest values. Bless all who labor for justice: educators, journalists, organizers, public servants, advocates and ordinary citizens who quietly keep democracy alive through daily acts of participation and courage. Renew your church as well. Transform structures rooted in domination into communities rooted in service, inclusion, accountability and love. And during this Easter season, remind us that resurrection still unfolds wherever people choose hope over fear, solidarity over division, and extraordinary courage over silence. May we never surrender our humanity to kings, emperors, strongmen or idols. For only you are holy. Only love endures forever. Amen.

“Who Am I?”

Erik Erikson, Identity Formation,
and the Extraordinary Work of Becoming Human

May 12, 2026



As one who grew up in rural Ohio before eventually making his way “from the cornfields of Ohio to the corn tortillas of Texas,” I still vividly remember my fascination with my first psychology course as an undergraduate at Saint Louis University.

Honestly, it felt like discovering an entirely new lens through which to understand humanity.

Why do people behave the way they do?

Why do families so profoundly shape us?

Why do some people flourish, while others struggle?

Why do insecurity, shame, confidence, trust, fear, compassion, prejudice, resilience and love emerge so differently among human beings?

And perhaps most importantly: Who, really, am I?

During that course, I first encountered the work of Erik Erikson (1902-1994), whom we remember today. Erikson became famous for his theory of psychosocial development and for popularizing the phrase “identity crisis.” Looking back now as someone with decades more life experience, education, pastoral ministry, leadership, and hard-earned self-awareness, his framework admittedly strikes me as somewhat overly tidy, linear, Western and reductionistic.

Still, 35 years ago, it provided me extraordinary fodder for reflection.

And if I am honest, perhaps Erikson’s stage of “Generativity vs. Stagnation” (ages 40-65) deeply resonates with where I find myself today: teaching, preaching, publishing books, mentoring younger leaders, publicly advocating, and trying in my own imperfect ways to leave this world slightly more compassionate, just, inclusive and thoughtful for future generations.

Perhaps many of us eventually arrive there.

Or at least hope to.

Erikson's Eight Stages: A Map of Human Becoming

Erikson proposed that human beings move through eight developmental stages across the lifespan, each involving a central psychological tension or crisis requiring resolution.

Trust vs. Mistrust, in infancy.

Autonomy vs. Shame, in early childhood.

Initiative vs. Guilt, around pre-school.

Industry vs. Inferiority, during early school years.

Identity vs. Role Confusion, in adolescence.

Intimacy vs. Isolation, in young adulthood.

Generativity vs. Stagnation, in midlife.

Integrity vs. Despair, in old age.

The theory suggested that how we navigate earlier stages influences later development. A child who experiences consistent love and security develops basic trust. Adolescents explore identity. Adults seek intimacy, meaning, creativity, contribution, and ultimately peace regarding the lives they have lived.

There is something deeply compelling about this framework because we intuitively recognize truth within it.

Many adults still carry childhood mistrust.

Many adolescents still wrestle with identity confusion.

Many older adults painfully wrestle with regret, isolation or despair.

And perhaps every human being, at every age, continues asking some version of the same question:

Who am I becoming?

Scripture itself often reflects developmental journeys remarkably similar to Erikson's concerns. Moses wrestled with inadequacy. Jeremiah protested that he was too young. Peter repeatedly failed before maturing into leadership. Thomas doubted. Paul radically reconstructed his identity after his conversion on the road to Damascus. A prodigal child moved from rebellion toward reconciliation and self-understanding.

Even Jesus "grew in wisdom and age and favor before God and others" (Lk. 2:52).

Growth matters. Development matters. Life and growth are dynamic, and human beings, at their best, are far from static!

More Framework Than Science

And yet, as much as I appreciate Erikson's contributions, I also remain appropriately skeptical.

His theory lacks the empirical precision that modern psychology often demands. The mechanisms driving stage "resolution" remain vague. The stages themselves can feel rigid and artificially sequential. Human growth rarely unfolds neatly. Life is messy. Trauma interrupts development. Healing sometimes happens late. Some people repeatedly revisit identity crises across decades.

Furthermore, Erikson's framework reflects strong cultural and gender biases. Much of his research centered Western, European and North American populations, often prioritizing traditionally male developmental assumptions about career, achievement and autonomy.

Women's experiences often fit awkwardly into such models. LGBTQIA+ experiences certainly received little consideration in Erikson's era.

As a gay man raised in conservative Catholic contexts during the 1970s and 1980s, I know firsthand that identity formation rarely follows clean developmental timelines. For many LGBTQIA+ persons, adolescence and young adulthood become minefields of secrecy, shame, fear, survival and delayed self-understanding.

Some of us spend years trying to become versions of ourselves that family, church or society might accept.

Some of us come out not only to others, but eventually to ourselves.

And that process often unfolds far beyond adolescence.

Thus, perhaps Erikson's model works best not as hard science, but as a descriptive developmental framework—a useful map, rather than an infallible blueprint.

Families, Culture and the Making of Personality

What still fascinates me about psychology is how profoundly our environments shape us.

I think about my own upbringing: my father training as a draftsman then working factory jobs, my mother sacrificing her career in cosmetology to raise four sons, the realities of rural Ohio, family bouts with scoliosis, the quiet expectations of masculinity within Midwestern Catholic culture.

All of that shaped me.

Being the second of four boys shaped me.

Being academically-driven shaped me.

Being encouraged to take up various musical instruments shaped me.

Joining the Conventual Franciscan Friars at eighteen shaped me.

Studying philosophy and theology shaped me.

Coming out as gay shaped me.

Being greatly empowered by my ordaining prelate shaped me.

Serving immigrant communities shaped me.

Public conflict with conservative hierarchs shaped me.

Falling in love shaped me.

Even now, with more than a half-century of life experience, I continue evolving. Perhaps we all do.

That insight feels especially important during this Easter season when Catholics weekly hear pericopes from the Acts of the Apostles. The early Christian community itself underwent identity development. The disciples slowly evolved from frightened followers hiding behind locked doors, into courageous public witnesses.

Pentecost transformed them. Experience transformed them. Community transformed them.

The resurrection narratives themselves remind us that human beings continually grow into deeper awareness, deeper courage and deeper love!

Spiritual Development Evolves, Too

Years after first studying Erikson, during my graduate theological studies, I encountered James W. Fowler and his theory of the stages of faith development.

Fowler similarly argued that spirituality developmentally evolves over time. Childhood faith tends toward literalism and external authority. Adolescent and young adult faith often becomes conformist. Mature spirituality ideally moves toward complexity, paradox, justice and universal compassion.

Whether one fully accepts such stage theories or not, they illuminate something important: Faith itself develops!

Many adults still operate spiritually with the rigid certainties of childhood religion. Others eventually embrace deeper nuance, humility, ambiguity and compassion.

One sees similar themes in the work of Richard Rohr, who speaks about moving beyond ego-driven religion, toward deeper contemplative consciousness and radical compassion.

Honestly, I suspect many believers arrive where they are not because they abandoned faith, but because they allowed their faith to mature.

The Apostle Paul himself writes: "When I was a child, I used to talk as a child... think as a child... reason as a child. When I became an adult, I put aside childish things" (1Cor. 13:11).

That sounds remarkably developmental!

Psychology in the Age of Trump

And then there is our present and very unordinary U.S. sociopolitical moment—which has provided endless material for psychologists, psychiatrists, sociologists, and anyone trying to understand human behavior.

It is difficult to watch contemporary American politics without recognizing powerful psychological dynamics at work: narcissism, fear, tribalism, projection, insecurity, grievance, authoritarianism, identity anxiety, and cult-like group attachment.

Dr. Mary L. Trump, the president's niece, has written extensively about family systems, emotional deprivation, and personality development within the Trump family environment. Her work reminds us that personality does not emerge in a vacuum.

Neither does political behavior.

Why do some people cling so fiercely to authoritarian leaders? Why do obviously false claims persist? Why does cruelty sometimes become attractive? Why do followers tolerate behaviors in some individuals that they would condemn in others?

Psychologists point toward fear, social identity, perceived threats, belonging needs, propaganda, unresolved grievances, and the human longing for certainty amid chaos.

Erikson would likely recognize identity anxiety everywhere in this unordinary U.S. moment.

Perhaps many people today feel psychologically untethered. Economic shifts, demographic changes, declining institutional trust, technological overload, social fragmentation, religious decline, and cultural polarization all contribute to profound collective instability.

And frightened people often seek simplistic answers, rigid identities, charismatic authority figures, and tribal belonging.

One sees these dynamics throughout pop culture as well: *Inside Out* beautifully explores emotional development. *Good Will Hunting* portrays trauma and identity formation. *Ted Lasso* reflects emotional healing and vulnerability. *Moonlight* explores sexuality, masculinity and identity. *The Breakfast Club* reminds us how adolescents struggle beneath labels and stereotypes. Even Michael Jackson's "Man in the Mirror" captures the lifelong challenge of self-examination and transformation.

Human beings ache to understand themselves!

Extraordinary Calls for People of Faith

- Support children and adolescents with extraordinary compassion, recognizing how formative early experiences can become.
- Advocate for expanded access to mental healthcare, counseling, and trauma-informed support systems.
- Create faith communities where LGBTQIA+ youth, questioning adolescents, and marginalized persons can safely explore identity without fear or shame.
- Encourage emotional literacy among boys and men raised within cultures discouraging vulnerability.
- Resist simplistic judgments about others' behavior, and instead cultivate deeper curiosity about human experience and development.
- Promote education, critical thinking, and psychological awareness as tools for healthier democracy and healthier relationships.
- Recognize that spiritual growth often requires questioning, evolution, and periods of uncertainty.
- Build communities rooted not in fear or rigid conformity, but in belonging, compassion, accountability and healing.
- Support parents, teachers, counselors and mentors who profoundly shape the lives of younger generations.
- Embody extraordinary patience with ourselves and others as we continue becoming who we are.

Returning to the Psychology Classroom

As I think back to that young undergraduate sitting in a psychology classroom decades ago, I smile a bit.

At the time, I could not possibly have imagined all the identities I would eventually inhabit: friar, deacon, priest, educator, administrator, elected official, executive director, author, activist, husband, consultant, runner, traveler, language learner, spiritual seeker.

Nor could I have imagined the identities I would eventually shed.

Perhaps that is part of what Erikson understood best.

Human *beings* are always... *becoming*!

And maybe resurrection itself reflects that truth.

During Easter season, Christians proclaim not merely that Jesus rose from the dead long ago, but that transformation remains possible now. Fear can become courage. Isolation can become community. Shame can become dignity. Despair can become hope.

None of us emerges fully formed.

We evolve slowly through love and loss, success and failure, belonging and rejection, trust and betrayal, faith and doubt.

And through it all, we continue asking that ancient question:

Who am I?

Or, perhaps the better question is:

Who am I still becoming?

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Which experiences most profoundly shaped my personality and sense of identity?
- Where do I still carry wounds rooted in mistrust, shame, guilt, inferiority or fear?
- How has my faith evolved across different stages of life?
- In what ways do family, culture, religion, politics or trauma continue influencing my behavior?
- How might I better support children and adolescents during critical periods of identity formation?
- What relationships or communities have most helped me grow toward authenticity and wholeness?
- Where do I sense God still inviting me toward growth, healing or transformation?

Let Us Pray

God of extraordinary wisdom and compassion, You created us not as static beings, but as people continually growing, evolving, learning and becoming. We thank you for all who help human beings better understand themselves: psychologists, counselors, teachers, spiritual directors, mentors, parents and friends. Heal the wounds we carry from childhood, family conflict, rejection, shame, fear and trauma. Strengthen all who struggle with identity confusion, anxiety, isolation, depression or despair. In a special way, protect children and adolescents navigating the difficult journey of becoming themselves in a complicated and often cruel world. Help your church become a place of healing, rather than shame; belonging, rather than exclusion; compassion, rather than judgment. During this Easter season, remind us that resurrection still unfolds within human hearts, that fear can become courage, that isolation can become intimacy, that stagnation can become generativity, that despair can become hope. And as we continue asking who we are, help us slowly become people rooted in extraordinary love, extraordinary courage, extraordinary justice, and extraordinary compassion. For we are all unfinished stories still unfolding in grace. Amen.

**Thunderstorm Miracles, Dancing Suns,
and the Mother Who Appears**
Our Lady of Fatima, Marian Apparitions,
and the Extraordinary Human Hunger for Meaning

May 13, 2026



As one raised amid the cornfields of rural Ohio, I learned early that Catholics are storytellers. In the tiny Belgian settlement of Frenchtown, where I was raised, stories floated like fireflies in the summer air. By the time of my birth, what was once a rural hamlet surrounding a bustling ethnic parish was reduced to a cluster of eight homes surrounding a church and cemetery. The schoolhouse across from the church had long since been razed. The convent beside the now-vacant lot became a family home. Our own two-story, red-brick family home had previously served as the rectory beside the church that the Diocese of Toledo ultimately destroyed in 2023. Still, the stories remain alive.

When I was young, old-timers recounted an early visit by Luxembourger bishop Amadeus Rappe of Cleveland, who was taken on a winding buggy ride, finally blessing the Belgian Catholics' desire to establish their own parish only 2.5 miles from the neighboring German church. They proudly recalled the time parishioners incurred an interdict after protesting a pastor's removal of side pews. But one story especially captivated my imagination as a child: the miraculous procession of May 24, 1875!

According to the tale, Father Joseph Gloden brought a statue of Our Lady of Consolation from his native Luxembourg, to be carried from his parish in Frenchtown to his mission church in Carey, seven miles away. Storm clouds gathered overhead. Rain reportedly fell on every side of the procession, yet no one was wet. Only after the statue safely entered the church did torrential rains descend upon everyone present! That story

deeply lodged itself within the imagination of countless Catholic children in northwest Ohio. Mine included.

Such stories come rushing back today as the Church celebrates another famous Marian apparition: Our Lady of Fatima.

A Young Seminarian in Fatima

In the summer of 1992, before I entered novitiate, I feared I might never again enjoy the freedom to travel. (Laughable now, I know!) So I purchased an airline ticket to Europe, as well as a 30-day Eurail pass. My strategy was simple: Sleep on trains at night, and awaken each morning to explore a different European city.

I was a starry-eyed Roman Catholic seminarian then, still donning theological “rose-colored glasses.” Naturally, then, my itinerary included Rome, Lourdes and Fatima.

Providentially—or coincidentally, depending upon one’s theological lens—I arrived in Fatima on June 13, precisely on the eve of the 75th anniversary of the second apparition there. I still recall rosary prayers echoing through loudspeakers while a sea of pilgrims surrounded the famed image of Our Lady of Fatima in prayer and procession.

There was something undeniably moving about it all. Human beings, gathered from every corner of the globe, searching for healing, hope, meaning, reassurance. Even now, decades later, I can still picture elderly women clutching rosaries with weathered hands, tears streaming down their cheeks as the statue passed. One need not affirm every supernatural claim to recognize the extraordinary human longing present in such moments.

And perhaps that longing is the real story.

The Story of Fatima

The events at Fatima reportedly began on May 13, 1917, when three shepherd children—Lúcia dos Santos and her cousins Francisco and Jacinta Marto—claimed that the Virgin Mary appeared to them near Fatima, Portugal. The apparitions allegedly continued monthly until October.

The lore surrounding Fatima fascinates Catholics to this day.

Mary reportedly urged prayer, repentance, and the daily rosary. She purportedly revealed three “secrets”: One involved a vision of hell, another foretold war and the spread of Russian communism, and the infamous third secret remained hidden for decades, fueling speculation worthy of an episode of *The X-Files* or *Lost*. When eventually revealed by the Vatican in 2000, Church authorities interpreted it as a symbolic vision connected to persecution and the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II.

Most famously, on October 13, 1917, thousands reportedly witnessed what became known as the “Miracle of the Sun,” in which the sun appeared to dance, spin and plunge toward the earth.

Scientifically, such an event is impossible. If the sun literally moved toward the earth, we would not be here telling the tale! So how do we explain such reports?

Psychologists, neuroscientists and sociologists offer possible explanations: mass suggestion, optical distortion caused by staring at sunlight, heightened emotional states, collective expectation, social contagion, and the remarkable human tendency to interpret ambiguous experiences through religious frameworks. We know from cognitive psychology that groups can sincerely report seeing things that objectively did not occur. Human perception is extraordinarily complex!

Yet for believers, such explanations often feel reductionistic and unsatisfying. The miracle lies not merely in optics, they might argue, but in the transformative spiritual experience itself.

And so the tension remains.

Theological Challenges and Catholic Gnosticism

As Catholics, we gently but honestly acknowledge the theological challenges that Marian apparitions present.

At times, apparitions can resemble a kind of modern Gnosticism—the ancient belief that God grants secret knowledge to certain specially-chosen individuals. Notice the patterns. Marian apparitions overwhelmingly emerge within specifically Catholic cultures. They are overwhelmingly Marian, rather than Christological. They largely cluster between the 16th and 20th centuries in Europe and in lands colonized by Europeans.

Consider Guadalupe. The apparition reportedly occurred in 1531, yet the first written account dates only to 1648—117 years later. Many theologians today understand the story less as a historical event captured by modern journalism, and more as a powerful theological narrative helping Indigenous peoples bridge their devotion to Tonantzin with Catholic Marian spirituality. In the end, the *fides populi*—the faith of the people—created meaning around the image!

Difficult questions arise. If masses of ordinary people organize around a devotion, image, or purported apparition, what should church authorities do? Reject it outright and risk alienating the faithful? Or cautiously incorporate it into Catholic spirituality?

If there are indeed two great sources of power in the world—organized people and organized resources—then the shrines that have been built around Marian apparitions often become centers of both! Yikes.

My Evening with a “Visionary”

My own encounter with a purported Marian visionary still fascinates me, both psychologically and spiritually.

During my novitiate year in Arroyo Grande, California, I met a special-needs woman named Barbara Matthias. Because we shared similar spellings of the same surname, we affectionately referred to one another as “cousin.” Barbara claimed that Mary appeared to her daily during prolonged periods of prayer.

One evening, she invited me to witness one of her apparitions.

At the appointed hour, Barbara knelt in prayer and entered what appeared to be a trance-like state. She had previously warned me that Mary sometimes appeared holding the infant Jesus. At one point, Barbara stretched out her hands, as though receiving the invisible child from Mary herself. Then she extended her hands toward me.

What happened next startled me.

My own mind genuinely believed in the moment that I was receiving something invisible into my hands.

Even now, decades later, I struggle to describe the experience. And while I don’t believe that I objectively received something supernatural, I wonder: Did I receive something psychologically? Emotionally? Symbolically? My young adult brain, primed by expectation, faith, reverence and communal ritual, absolutely experienced something.

The human mind is extraordinarily suggestible. That does not necessarily make such moments meaningless. It simply complicates them.

Mary, the Feminine Divine, and Why She Endures

Still, one should not too quickly dismiss Marian devotion altogether.

There is a reason Mary remains beloved across cultures. In a Church historically dominated by patriarchal imagery—a bearded king-God on a throne, a *Pantokrator* Christ judging the nations, male bishops ruling from cathedrals of marble and gold—Mary offers something profoundly different.

She nurtures, rather than conquers. She comforts, rather than condemns. She appears among peasants, children and the poor. She speaks not from palaces, but from fields, caves and hillsides.

Perhaps that explains why Catholics continue imagining her presence in moments of fear and uncertainty.

Scripture itself offers fertile ground for Marian reflection: Mary’s courageous “yes” in Luke 1:38, the Magnificat’s revolutionary proclamation that God “has brought down the powerful from their thrones” (Lk. 1:52), Mary faithful presence at the foot of the cross (Jn. 19),

and the contemporary reimagining of Mary as a woman clothed with the sun (Rev. 12).

And perhaps our pop culture unconsciously echoes these longings as well. Think of The Chosen portraying emotionally accessible discipleship. Think of Madonna's endless reinvention of Marian imagery. Think of Beyoncé invoking maternal power in *Lemonade*. Think of Encanto's family matriarch wrestling with generational trauma. Think of Dolly Parton's extraordinary tenderness in "Coat of Many Colors." Think of Barbie unexpectedly becoming a meditation on womanhood, humanity and vulnerability. We remain captivated by maternal figures because they symbolize protection, memory and unconditional love!

Apparitions, Politics, and the Danger of Cultic Thinking

All of this becomes especially important in our current U.S. political moment.

The human tendency toward mythmaking does not remain confined to religion.

We now live in an era in which political movements increasingly resemble personality cults. Last week's enshrinement and literal blessing of a gold-leafed statue of the U.S. president in Florida should deeply concern thoughtful believers. Some faith leaders describe political figures in messianic language. Symbols, rituals and narratives elevate ordinary politicians into quasi-divine saviors.

This is extremely dangerous terrain.

The same psychological mechanisms that allow crowds to believe the sun danced at Fatima can also allow crowds to believe authoritarian leaders alone can "save" a nation. Humans crave certainty. We crave heroes. We crave cosmic narratives that simplify complexity.

But the Gospel repeatedly warns against false messiahs. Jesus himself said that "false messiahs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders" (Mt. 24:24). The Book of Exodus warned against golden calves. First Samuel cautioned about people demanding kings. Revelation counseled against empires demanding worship.

The challenge for extraordinary believers today is not whether we are capable of mythmaking. We clearly are. The challenge is whether we can remain grounded in humility, critical thought and compassion while still allowing room for mystery.

Calls to Action for Catholics Today

- Pray the rosary or engage contemplative prayer not as magical thinking, but as a grounding spiritual practice that cultivates compassion and peace.
- Teach children and adolescents how to balance faith with critical thinking, curiosity and scientific literacy.
- Resist political movements that elevate leaders into savior figures who demand unquestioning loyalty.
- Support women's leadership in churches, workplaces and society, recognizing how often patriarchal structures still silence feminine wisdom and authority.
- Visit shrines, pilgrimage sites or sacred spaces with openness and wonder, while also bringing thoughtful theological reflection to such experiences.
- Broadly read about psychology, neuroscience and religious experience, so that faith may mature beyond superstition into extraordinary wisdom.
- Reflect upon the Magnificat (Lk.1:46-55) and its revolutionary vision of justice for the poor, marginalized and oppressed.

Returning to the Thunderstorm Miracle

When I think back now to those Ohio cornfields, to the story of a miraculous procession and a statue untouched by rain, I no longer ask the same questions I asked as a child. Then, I wanted to know whether the miracle “really happened.” Today, I find myself asking different questions: What needs did those stories fulfill? What hope did they sustain? What fears did they soothe? What extraordinary courage did they inspire among struggling immigrant farm families trying to survive harsh Midwestern winters and uncertain futures?

Perhaps that is where the deepest truth resides.

Whether in Fatima, Guadalupe, Lourdes, or rural Ohio, Marian stories reveal something enduring about humanity itself: We desperately long to believe that we are not abandoned. We long to believe that compassion still bends toward suffering humanity. We long to believe that tenderness still matters in a violent world.

And perhaps that is why Mary continues appearing – not necessarily in the sky or on hillsides, but in the aching human imagination itself, generation after generation, wherever people hunger for extraordinary comfort, extraordinary mercy, and extraordinary hope!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

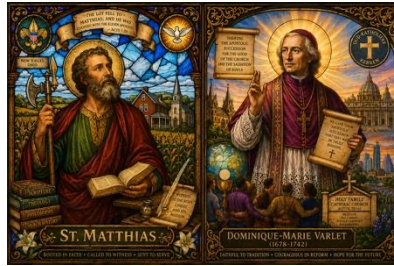
- What religious stories or symbols most shaped my childhood imagination?
- How do I distinguish between healthy spirituality and unhealthy cultic thinking?
- Where do I encounter the feminine dimensions of the Divine in my spiritual life?
- Have I ever experienced a moment that felt spiritually real, even if I could not fully explain it rationally?
- How do political movements sometimes mimic religious devotion or messianic expectation?
- In what ways can faith and critical thinking strengthen, rather than oppose, one another?
- How might Mary's Magnificat challenge the political and economic realities of our world today?

Let Us Pray

Mother of compassion, you who have been imagined in fields and shrines, in candlelight processions and whispered rosaries, teach us to seek truth without fear and mystery without superstition. Help us to resist false saviors, political idols and manipulative religion. Ground us instead in the revolutionary tenderness of the Gospel. May we become people of extraordinary wisdom, extraordinary humility and extraordinary courage. May we stand with the poor as you did. May we magnify justice as you did. May we nurture hope in darkened times as you did. And when fear, confusion or despair overwhelm us, remind us that love still walks beside humanity—sometimes quietly, sometimes mysteriously, always persistently. We ask this through your son, our Lord. Amen.

Apostolic Hands, Fragile Futures Saint Matthias, Bishop Varlet, and the Extraordinary Challenge of Succession

May 14, 2026



There is something deeply human about the fear of what comes next.

Who replaces the beloved pastor? Who inherits the family farm? Who carries the organization or movement after the founder dies? Who protects democracy when strongmen rise? Who teaches the next generation to pray, to critically think, to organize, to courageously love?

Perhaps that is why the Church's celebration of St. Matthias every May 14 always strikes me so powerfully. The Acts of the Apostles pauses after the trauma of Judas Iscariot's betrayal to tell us something almost bureaucratic: The disciples needed a replacement. The number mattered. Twelve tribes. Twelve apostles. Twelve foundations of the heavenly Jerusalem. Before Pentecost's fire could descend, before the Church could move outward into the world, the symbolic number had to be restored.

And so today, on the feast of Matthias, I cannot help but think also of another man we remember on this day: Roman Catholic bishop Dominique-Marie Varlet (1678-1742), the extraordinarily courageous bishop whose unauthorized sharing of apostolic succession with the Church of Utrecht helped birth what would become the Old Catholic movement and, eventually, the broader world of Independent and Inclusive Catholicism in which I now minister.

The irony is thick enough to spread on toast: a movement born through apostolic succession now profoundly struggles with succession itself!

Matthias and the Empty Chair

The first chapter of Acts reads almost like an ecclesial episode of HBO's Succession. Judas is dead. The leadership vacuum threatens stability. Peter steps forward. Speeches are made. Criteria are established. Names are floated. Lots are cast.

"Lord, you know everyone's heart" (Acts 1:24). Matthias wins.

Poor Matthias! One moment he is one of 120 disciples quietly gathered in prayer. The next, he inherits history's most infamous vacant seat. Imagine introducing yourself forever as "the replacement apostle." Yikes!

And yet Luke understands something important. The Church could not remain frozen in grief or scandal. Leadership had to continue. Community had to endure. The mission had to survive woundedness.

There is extraordinary wisdom there for us.

The early Church did not say, "Well, Jesus is gone, Judas failed, everything is ruined." No. They adapted. They reorganized. They discerned. They imperfectly and prayerfully chose new leadership.

Honestly, it sounds more emotionally healthy than many church structures today.

Growing up amid the cornfields of northwest Ohio, succession was everywhere around me, though we seldom used the word. Family farms passed from parent to child. Factory jobs shaped generations. Parish ladies quietly trained younger women to organize parish luncheons and to prepare the famous fried chicken that they served at parish festivals. Organists mentored other organists, and older altar servers mentored those who followed in their footsteps. Even Boy Scouts formed me through succession: older Scouts teaching younger boys how to lead.

No institution accidentally survives.

Neither does democracy.

Neither does faith.

Neither does community.

Bishop Varlet and the Birth of an "Independent" Catholicism

For a few decades now, many have referred to our movement of non-Vatican clergy and communities as "Independent Catholicism." While I personally prefer the term "Inclusive Catholicism" – because it better captures our commitment to sacramental justice – the term "Independent" inevitably calls to mind Dominique-Marie Varlet.

Varlet was a Roman Catholic bishop assigned as coadjutor bishop of Babylon. Yes, Babylon! Catholic history is sometimes quite wild.

During disputes involving the Church of Utrecht in the Netherlands, Varlet eventually consecrated four successive archbishops of Utrecht without papal approval. Rome was furious. But the sacramental lines were considered valid according to traditional Catholic sacramental theology. Through those episcopal consecrations emerged the Old Catholic Churches, beginning with the *Oud-katholieke kerken* in the Netherlands, which sought to reclaim what they understood as the faith and structures of the primitive Church.

This was no small matter.

Martin Luther and other reformers had doctrinally challenged Rome. Varlet's actions challenged Rome in deeper sacramental and institutional ways. Suddenly, Catholic apostolic succession existed outside Vatican control!

And here we encounter one of history's great theological ironies.

St. Cyprian of Carthage had emphasized that there is no bishop without a church. A bishop exists within community! Augustine's theology, however, increasingly emphasized sacramental validity itself, especially through the laying on of hands. Over centuries, Augustine's mechanical approach to apostolic succession prevailed in Roman Catholic sacramental theology.

The result?

Once apostolic succession could theoretically function solely through episcopal consecration itself, the possibility emerged for bishops without communities, miters without missions, croziers without accountability.

Thus was born the strange world of the *episcopi vagantes*: free-range bishops, often "sheepless shepherds," draped in lace and titles while leading no actual flock. Cyprian is rolling in his grave!

If you've ever fallen down the rabbit hole of Independent Catholic websites featuring more vestments and titles than parishioners, you know exactly what I mean. After ten years of ministry within the Roman Church, you can imagine my surprise when, in 2012, I went to the funeral of an Independent Catholic bishop that was attended solely by clergy – except for his successor's wife!

And yet there is also extraordinary beauty in this movement. Because many of us were pushed out precisely for taking the Gospel seriously!

Women's equality.

LGBTQIA+ inclusion.

Married clergy.

Racial justice.

Democracy within church life.

Pastoral compassion over rigid legalism.

In many ways, we see ourselves not as innovators, but as reformers attempting yet again to steer Christianity back toward its north star: the reign of God proclaimed by Jesus!

The Succession Problem We Rarely Discuss

But here is the uncomfortable truth.

Independent/Inclusive Catholicism finds itself in a succession crisis.

I think about this often. Communities rise, and communities fall. Clergy become active, and then retire or withdraw from active ministry. New jurisdictions are created all the time by eager clergy, while other jurisdictions quietly sunset.

I have spent over 14 years helping build Holy Family Catholic Church here in Austin. We have cultivated an inclusive sacramental community rooted in extraordinary love, radical welcome, and justice-centered spirituality. But if the Lord called me home tomorrow, what then?

Who succeeds me?

How will leadership transition?

Who will ensure theological continuity?

Who will maintain unity?

Who will protect the community's mission?

Who will form future clergy?

Who will safeguard finances and governance?

Who will preserve institutional memory?

Rome has an answer for succession: The Vatican now appoints bishops, who, in turn, appoint pastors and assign priests and deacons. Property ownership remains centralized. The institution survives individuals.

We do not have that machinery.

And while freedom is beautiful, fragility accompanies it.

The HBO series *Succession* brilliantly captures how succession battles expose every unresolved tension within a system: ego, insecurity, ambition, loyalty, trauma, legacy, fear. Churches are no different. Political parties are no different. Families are no different.

Jesus himself constantly prepared successors. He sent disciples out two by two (Lk. 10:1). Paul mentored Timothy and Titus. Moses prepared Joshua. Elijah prepared Elisha. Even after the resurrection, during this Easter season, the Acts of the Apostles repeatedly showed leadership multiplying outward!

Healthy communities think about succession. Unhealthy communities desperately cling to personalities.

Easter Season and the Courage to Let Go

There is something fitting about reflecting on succession during the Easter season.

The risen Christ repeatedly disappeared.

Mary Magdalene reached for him in the garden and heard: “Do not cling to me” (Jn. 20:17).

Jesus appeared on the road to Emmaus, then vanished.

He appeared in locked rooms, then departed again.

And, as we recall this weekend, he ascended.

Why?

Because mature faith requires transition.

The disciples could not remain spiritually-dependent children forever. Resurrection is not about indefinitely preserving old forms. Resurrection is about empowering communities to continue the mission themselves through the Holy Spirit!

That is terrifying.

And beautiful.

Richard Rohr often speaks of the movement from first-half-of-life spirituality toward second-half-of-life spirituality. James Fowler similarly proposed stages of faith development. Growth requires relinquishment. Systems must evolve. Communities must mature.

Even churches must learn this lesson.

Succession and the American Crisis

Which brings us, inevitably, to the present political moment in the United States.

Succession anxiety saturates our national life right now.

Republicans quietly maneuver around a looming Vance-or-Rubio post-Trump future. Democrats anxiously debate who can rebuild broad coalitions in a nation still poisoned by racism, misogyny, Christian nationalism, and disinformation. Cable News panels share possibilities and wagers not unlike those surrounding ecclesiastical conclaves. The West Wing, House of Cards, Veep, and yes, Succession, suddenly feel less like fiction, and more like documentaries.

Who inherits power?

Who inherits movements?

Who inherits democracy itself?

Benjamin Franklin famously warned that we have “a republic—if you can keep it.”

That line haunts me.

Because succession is not merely about replacing leaders. It is about transmitting values.

Do we raise children capable of empathy?

Do we form citizens capable of critical thought?

Do we cultivate churches capable of dissent?

Do we mentor younger leaders?

Do we share authority?

Do we normalize collaboration, rather than cults of personality?

Authoritarianism thrives where succession fails.

Healthy democracies depend upon peaceful transfers of power.

Healthy churches depend upon collaborative leadership.

Healthy movements depend upon empowering others.

The risen Christ did not build a personality cult.

He built a community.

That distinction matters enormously!

Calls to Action

- Intentionally mentor younger leaders. Teach others how to do what you do—before crisis arrives.
- Build institutions, not merely personalities. Communities centered entirely upon one charismatic figure rarely survive long-term.
- Practice democratic leadership within church life. Transparency, shared governance, and accountability reflect Gospel values more faithfully than authoritarian clericalism.
- Support education and formation for emerging leaders. Succession requires preparation.
- Resist political strongman culture wherever it appears. Democracy survives only when ordinary people actively protect it.
- Normalize conversations about succession—in families, churches, nonprofits and movements. Avoidance creates instability.
- Remember that resurrection itself is a succession story. The mission continues through us now.

From Frenchtown to the Future

When I think back to the tiny Belgian settlement of Frenchtown where I grew up—a cluster of homes around a church amid Ohio cornfields—I realize now that succession quietly surrounded me everywhere.

Elderly parishioners passing down stories.

Parents sacrificing for children.

Teachers shaping students.

Farmers entrusting land to new generations.

Priests baptizing infants with whom they would later share other sacraments.

Organists teaching younger musicians.

Even our faith itself arrived through succession: one generation handing stories, sacraments, songs and hopes to another.

St. Matthias reminds us that empty chairs must eventually be filled.

Bishop Varlet reminds us that institutions sometimes require courageous reform.

Easter reminds us that love survives transition.

Democracy reminds us that freedom is never self-sustaining.

And perhaps that is our extraordinary calling in this unordinary U.S. moment: not merely to preserve institutions, but to prepare people. Not merely to lament decline, but to cultivate successors. Not merely to cling nostalgically to the past, but to form communities capable of carrying light into futures we ourselves may never see.

After all, the Gospel was never meant to end with us!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Who first helped shape your faith, values or leadership?
- Whom are you intentionally mentoring or forming today?
- Where do you see unhealthy dependence upon personalities, rather than healthy institutions?
- How might our faith communities better prepare future leaders?
- What fears arise within you when you think about transition and succession?
- How does Easter challenge us to let go while still remaining faithful?
- In what ways does democracy itself require ongoing formation and succession?

Let Us Pray

Risen Christ, you entrusted fragile human beings with your extraordinary mission. You called Matthias into an empty place, you strengthened frightened disciples, and you poured your Spirit upon imperfect communities. Teach us to build churches rooted not in ego, but in service. Teach us to mentor younger generations with patience and hope. Teach us to generously share power, rather than fearfully hoard it. Teach us to courageously protect democracy, justice and truth. Teach us to form communities capable of surviving beyond personalities and passing headlines. May we never cling so tightly to our own importance that we fail to prepare others to lead. May we embody extraordinary wisdom, extraordinary humility, and extraordinary love in this unordinary moment. And when our own time of leadership passes, may we trust that your Spirit still moves through those who come after us. Amen.

The Families We Inherit and the Families We Choose
 International Day of Families, the Communion of Belonging,
 and the Extraordinary Courage to Build Community

May 15, 2026



Those of us who move far from our roots often discover the profound importance of what sociologists and LGBTQIA+ communities have long called “chosen family”: the networks of friendship, solidarity, mentorship and love that sustain us when geography, vocation, ideology, identity or circumstance separate us from those to whom we are biologically related. The term itself prominently emerged within queer communities during the late twentieth century, particularly among those who experienced rejection from biological relatives and who consequently forged deep kinship bonds with friends and companions. Yet the reality behind the term is as old as humanity itself.

On this International Day of Families, the Church’s calendar offers us a remarkable collection of people who embodied expansive visions of family. Peter Maurin built communities of solidarity around the poor. Gedeón G. Quijano widened his sense of responsibility to encompass an entire province and generations of Filipino veterans. Gloria Anzaldúa sought belonging among those who lived between worlds. Chung Hyun Kyung built intellectual and spiritual kinship across continents and traditions. And here in Texas, Mother Annie Cass Watson drives 150 miles roundtrip each Sunday to celebrate Eucharist with the chosen family she finds at Holy Family Catholic Church.

I find myself thinking of my own birthday celebration earlier this month. My husband and I gathered some sixty people at our home: friends, neighbors, parishioners, colleagues, fellow travelers and companions from various chapters of life. Looking around the room, I realized something beautiful and humbling: Many of the people most consistently present in our lives share no DNA with us whatsoever.

Yet they are family.

“Who Is My Mother? Who Are My Brothers?”

The question of family sits near the heart of the Gospel itself.

Jesus unsettled conventional assumptions when he asked, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” (Mk. 3:33-35). Looking at those gathered around him, he declared that whoever fulfilled the will of God was his family. The early Christian movement itself functioned as a sort of chosen family. During this Easter-season, we hear of believers sharing possessions, breaking bread together, and holding all things in common (Acts 2:42-47). Paul repeatedly addressed communities as “brothers and sisters” in Christ. Lydia opened her home. Priscilla and Aquila mentored Apollos. Phoebe served the church. Timothy became Paul’s spiritual child.

Christianity spread not merely through doctrine, but through networks of belonging!

For many people of faith today, especially LGBTQIA+ believers, immigrants, divorced Catholics, women called to leadership, and those marginalized by institutional religion, that theme deeply resonates. We know what it means to seek community after rejection. We understand the extraordinary courage required to create spaces where people are fully seen and loved.

And perhaps that is why today’s commemorations so beautifully fit together.

Peter Maurin and the Family of the Poor

When most Catholics hear the name Dorothy Day, they often overlook the quiet French immigrant who profoundly shaped her imagination: Peter Maurin (1877-1949).

Maurin envisioned a radically different society rooted in Gospel hospitality. His Catholic Worker farms and “houses of hospitality” were not merely charitable projects. They were intentional communities, chosen families organized around solidarity with the poor.

In many ways, Maurin challenged the hyper-individualism that increasingly dominates American life. He insisted that we belong to one another. His vision echoed Matthew 25:35-40, where Jesus identifies himself with the hungry, thirsty, stranger and imprisoned.

At a time when loneliness has become epidemic in the United States, Maurin’s witness feels remarkably contemporary. So many Americans now live isolated lives mediated through screens. We binge-watch *Ted Lasso*, *Schitt’s Creek*, and *The Bear* partly because those stories offer visions of flawed but supportive communities. We listen to songs like Bill Withers’ “Lean on Me,” Sister Sledge’s “We Are Family,” and Ben E. King’s

“Stand by Me” because they articulate our longing for dependable human connection.

Peter Maurin understood something essential: Family is not merely biology. Family is mutual responsibility!

Gedeón G. Quijano and the Family We Choose to Serve

The life of Gedeón G. Quijano (1910-1989) beautifully illustrates how vocation can expand one’s understanding of family.

Born into the Philippine Independent Church as the son of Bishop Juan P. Quijano, he inherited a faith tradition shaped by anti-colonial struggle and public responsibility. Yet he steadily widened his sense of obligation beyond biological relatives or ecclesiastical circles. As governor of Misamis Occidental for more than two decades, he effectively adopted an entire Philippine province as part of his “chosen family.”

His life of service continued beyond politics. Recruited into the U.S. Army as a physician, he later worked in a Veterans Administration hospital in North Carolina, where thousands of veterans became recipients of his healing presence and professional care. Later still, he advocated for Filipinos who fought alongside U.S. troops during World War II, many of whom had been denied benefits and recognition after the war.

There is something deeply Easter-oriented about such expansive solidarity. During this season, Acts of the Apostles repeatedly shows the early Church widening its understanding of who belongs. The Spirit continually pushes disciples beyond narrow tribalism and toward larger circles of compassion.

In many ways, Quijano’s witness challenges the hyper-individualism of contemporary U.S. culture. While society often asks, “What’s in it for me?” Quijano’s life instead asked, “Whom else must I include within my circle of care?” His example calls us toward extraordinary solidarity, extraordinary advocacy and extraordinary public compassion.

Gloria Anzaldúa and the Borderlands of Belonging

Few thinkers captured the complexity of identity and belonging more powerfully than Gloria Anzaldúa (1942-2004).

Raised in South Texas amid the tensions of race, language, gender, sexuality and religion, Anzaldúa described herself as living in “borderlands.” She understood what it meant to feel simultaneously connected to and alienated from one’s origins.

Many LGBTQIA+ persons intimately know this tension.

When I came out to my parents in 1995, our relationship entered a long and difficult season. For some twenty years, acceptance did not come easily. Eventually, grace prevailed. My parents attended my wedding to

my husband on the lawn of the Texas State Capitol in 2015. But not everyone receives such reconciliation. Many people remain estranged from biological relatives because of sexuality, politics, religion or identity.

In those moments, chosen family becomes sacred.

I suspect Gloria Anzaldúa found deep kinship among feminists, queer scholars, artists and activists who understood her lived reality. Her spirituality itself reflected chosen synthesis: folk Catholicism, indigenous spirituality, feminism and cultural hybridity woven together into something both ancient and new.

Perhaps that is why her work resonates during Easter season: Resurrection itself emerged from woundedness transformed into new life. Thomas touched wounds. Peter received forgiveness after betrayal. Saul became Paul. The risen Christ continually formed unexpected communities out of fractured humanity.

Chung Hyun Kyung and the Global Family

One of the gifts of travel is that it gradually enlarges one's sense of family.

Over the years my husband and I have traveled widely — last year alone to Japan, Spain, France, Germany, Italy, Morocco, Portugal and various Caribbean nations. Upcoming travels this year include Iceland, South Korea, China, Taiwan and Thailand. Travel destabilizes narrow assumptions. One begins to recognize how small one's original worldview truly was.

Chung Hyun Kyung (1956-) embodies that global expansiveness. Her work in feminist theology, ecofeminism and interfaith dialogue reflects a conviction that wisdom transcends borders. She found chosen family among theologians, activists and seekers across Asia, Africa and Latin America.

That vision feels especially urgent now.

Nationalism increasingly tempts Americans toward fear of the "other." Politicians caricature immigrants. Religious leaders sometimes weaponize Christianity against pluralism. Yet scripture repeatedly points toward wider belonging. John of Patmos envisioned "a great multitude from every nation, tribe, people and language" (Rev. 7:9). Pentecost celebrates multilingual understanding. Paul insisted that divisions of ethnicity, status and gender do not define ultimate identity in Christ (Gal. 3:28).

The Gospel consistently widens the circle!

Mother Annie and the Ministry of Showing Up

Each Sunday at Holy Family Catholic Church, our associate pastor, Mother Annie Cass Watson—who celebrates her 11th anniversary of

priestly ordination today – drives roughly 150 miles roundtrip to celebrate Eucharist with our community.

Think about that.

In a society increasingly shaped by convenience, she dedicates extraordinary time and energy to a chosen family that deeply loves her in return.

Her witness reminds me that chosen family requires intentionality. Community does not magically appear. It must be cultivated through countless ordinary acts: showing up, listening, checking in, cooking meals, attending birthdays, visiting hospitals, grieving losses, and celebrating victories.

The television sitcom *Friends* became iconic precisely because it captured this reality. Six young adults in New York became one another's primary support system. Likewise, shows like *Pose*, *Modern Family* and *Grace and Frankie* explore alternative visions of kinship beyond traditional nuclear structures.

Ironically, some Christians who loudly defend "family values" often fail to recognize the profound diversity of family forms already present within scripture itself: widows, adoptive relationships, celibate apostles, blended households, spiritual mentorships, and communities of shared discipleship.

The Church has always been more complicated than nostalgia admits.

Thanksgiving, Cruises and a Fractured Nation

Last month, during a cruise from Los Angeles to Puerto Vallarta, my husband and I heard an announcement for a Thanksgiving 2026 cruise specifically marketed toward people who prefer spending the holiday with chosen family, rather than biological relatives.

At first, it sounded amusing. Then it sounded heartbreaking. And then it sounded honest.

We live in an extraordinarily polarized nation. Political identities increasingly fracture families. Those of progressive bent struggle to understand how relatives can support leaders and policies they view as cruel, racist, misogynistic or authoritarian. Conservative relatives feel equally bewildered by progressive commitments around inclusion, gender and social justice.

Thanksgiving tables now often resemble cold wars.

Social psychologists note that political affiliation has increasingly become a core identity marker in the United States, shaping not merely opinions, but perceptions of morality, trust and belonging. Cable news

ecosystems reinforce these divides. Social media algorithms intensify outrage. Communities fragment into ideological tribes.

And yet the Gospel calls us toward something deeper than tribalism.

Jesus never promised easy relationships. In fact, the Lucan Jesus explicitly warned that discipleship can divide households (Lk. 12:51-53). But division itself cannot become our final destination. Christians remain called toward truth, justice, reconciliation and human dignity.

That work becomes especially difficult within families.

Easter People and Expanding Circles

During the Easter season, the Church repeatedly proclaims stories of expanding community.

The risen Christ appeared to frightened disciples behind locked doors. Philip encountered an Ethiopian eunuch. Peter baptized Cornelius. The early Church wrestled with who belongs and who does not. Time and again, the Holy Spirit disrupted attempts to narrow the circle!

Perhaps that is the deeper invitation of International Day of Families.

Not sentimental nostalgia. Not rigid idealization. But expansive belonging.

The extraordinary love of God continually creates family where society sees division. Around Eucharistic tables and neighborhood dinners, in running clubs and activist circles, in support groups and parish communities, in friendships forged across race, language, sexuality and ideology, resurrection continues unfolding!

Calls to Action

- Reach out this week to someone who may feel isolated, especially LGBTQIA+ youth, immigrants, elders, or persons estranged from family.
- Support organizations that create intentional community for vulnerable populations, including shelters, community centers, and houses of hospitality.
- Host a meal that intentionally gathers people from different backgrounds, generations or identities.
- Honestly reflect on fractured family relationships, and discern whether healing conversations might now be possible.
- Strengthen your local faith community not merely as a worship site, but as a genuine support network.
- Resist political rhetoric that dehumanizes entire groups of people.
- Mentor younger persons who may need guidance, encouragement or simply trustworthy adult presence.

- Celebrate the diversity of family structures present within your own community.
- Learn more about the loneliness epidemic and its spiritual implications.
- Practice extraordinary hospitality in both small and large ways.

Around the Table Once More

My mind returns to that birthday gathering at our home earlier this month.

Sixty people.

Some from church. Some from our running club. Some from our neighborhood. Some from entirely different chapters of life. English, Spanish and Mandarin floated through conversations. Laughter echoed through the evening. Stories crossed tables. Hugs lingered.

At one point, I quietly stepped back and simply watched.

And suddenly I thought again of that tiny cluster of homes surrounding the rural Ohio church where I was raised. I thought of the local stories that shaped my imagination. I thought of my parents, my brothers, my niece and nephews. I thought of parishioners through the years. I thought of the extraordinary people who walked beside me after my public break with the Roman Church. I thought of the super-special family that is Austin's only inclusive Catholic community. I thought of the communities my husband and I have built together.

Some were inherited. Some were chosen. All became sacred.

Perhaps that is one of Easter's deepest truths: Resurrection continually forms new family from scattered lives. The risen Christ still gathers disciples around tables. The Spirit still widens the circle. And in this fractured and lonely age, perhaps one of the most extraordinary acts of discipleship is simply this:

To help one another belong!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Who currently constitutes your "chosen family"?
- How have geography, vocation, identity or life experience shaped your understanding of family?
- Are there people from whom you have become emotionally estranged? What healing might still be possible?
- How might your faith community better embody genuine belonging?
- In what ways have you experienced extraordinary love through people biologically unrelated to you?

- Who in your life may presently feel isolated or excluded?
- How do scripture and the Easter season challenge narrow definitions of family?

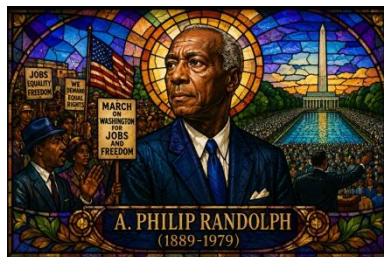
Let Us Pray

God of every household and every human heart, you created us not for isolation, but for communion. You gathered frightened disciples into community, you widened the circle of belonging, and you continually formed family from strangers and saints alike. Bless the families into which we were born. Heal wounds that linger within them. Strengthen parents, children, grandparents, caregivers and all who carry the burdens of love. Bless also the chosen families we create through friendship, solidarity, ministry and shared struggle. Bless those who have been rejected, marginalized or forgotten. Surround them with extraordinary compassion and trustworthy companions. Teach us to build communities where all people are seen, valued and safe. Help us to practice extraordinary hospitality in this extraordinary moment of division and loneliness. And may the risen Christ continually gather us around tables of mercy, justice and joy, until every lonely heart finally finds a home. Amen.

One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

A. Philip Randolph, MLK's Dream,
and America's Retreat from DEI

May 16, 2026



There is an old expression we all know well: “one step forward, two steps back.” We hear it in gyms and doctors’ offices, in marriages and workplaces, in churches and classrooms. “I finally paid off my credit card...then the transmission died.” “I worked so hard to improve my mental health...then anxiety came roaring back.” “I lost two pounds this week...then stress-eating added four back.”

To be clear, one step forward and two steps back is not progress.

And yet that increasingly feels like the story of the United States in 2026.

For decades, many Americans believed the nation was slowly, imperfectly bending toward greater justice. The civil rights movement had dismantled legal segregation. Schools slowly diversified. Universities and workplaces created programs intended to widen opportunity. Women gained greater leadership roles and finally achieved bodily autonomy. LGBTQIA+ persons achieved long-denied civil rights. Corporations, churches and public institutions began speaking the language of diversity, equity and inclusion.

The journey was incomplete. The work remained unfinished. But movement seemed possible.

Now, however, many of those gains feel under assault.

Diversity, equity and inclusion programs are being dismantled across universities, corporations and government agencies. Books by Black and LGBTQIA+ authors are being removed from libraries. Voting rights protections continue to erode. Ethnic studies programs face political attack. School curricula increasingly sanitize the brutality of slavery and racism. Refugees and immigrants are demonized for political gain. White Christian nationalism increasingly wraps itself in crosses and flags while proclaiming exclusion as virtue.

It feels less like the nation is advancing toward Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Dream," and more like powerful forces are trying to drag us backward toward a mythology of America that never truly existed.

Which brings us to the man we remember today: A. Philip Randolph.

The Man Behind the March

Most Americans know the soaring words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. Far fewer know the extraordinary organizer who helped make that moment possible.

A. Philip Randolph (1889-1979), the son of an African Methodist Episcopal minister and a seamstress, became one of the most important labor organizers and civil rights leaders of the 20th century. Long before the March on Washington in 1963, Randolph organized Black railway workers through the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. At a time when Black laborers were routinely exploited, underpaid, and denied dignity, Randolph insisted that economic justice and racial justice were inseparable.

That insight remains prophetic.

The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom did not emerge merely from abstract dreams about racial harmony. It emerged from concrete realities: poverty, discrimination, unemployment, voter suppression, and

economic exclusion. Randolph understood that civil rights without economic opportunity remains fragile.

The 1963 march represented a stunning act of public witness. More than 200,000 people gathered in Washington, D.C., nearly a century after the abolition of slavery and almost 200 years after our nation's founding, because African Americans still had not achieved equality under the law or within daily life.

Pause and sit with that.

In 1776, the Declaration of Independence proclaimed that "all men are created equal." Slavery formally ended in 1865. Yet Black Americans still needed to march *en masse* in 1963 – simply to demand equal rights!

And today, more than 60 years later, we still wrestle with many of the same demons.

The Gospel of DEI

For progressive Christians, the attack on the gospel values of diversity, equity and inclusion feels especially painful because DEI principles reflect so much of the ministry of Jesus himself.

Jesus consistently widened the circle.

He touched lepers (Mk. 1:40-45). He praised the faith of a Roman centurion (Mt. 8:5-13). He publicly spoke with a Samaritan woman (Jn. 4), crossing both ethnic and gender boundaries. He defended from public humiliation a woman caught in adultery (Jn. 8:1-11). He told the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:25-37), intentionally making the outsider the moral hero. He ate with tax collectors and sinners (Lk. 5:29-32). He proclaimed good news to the poor and liberty to the oppressed (Lk. 4:18-19).

Again and again, Jesus challenged systems that excluded people from dignity and belonging.

That is why I struggle when "Christians" – purported followers of Jesus – mock diversity efforts as "woke nonsense." The gospel itself is radically inclusive. Pentecost is fundamentally a diversity story: many languages, many cultures, many peoples gathered into one Spirit-filled community! Paul later insisted that "there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28).

The early Church did not erase difference. It learned how to hold difference together in community.

That is the extraordinary challenge before us now.

Under the Electric Sky, Recalling Another Great Gathering

As I write this, my husband and I are in Las Vegas with my mother, having just experienced our first night at the 30th anniversary of EDC—the Electric Daisy Carnival. A half-million people are expected here over three nights beneath the electric sky, from dusk to dawn, gathered around 18 stages pulsing with music, fireworks, lasers, dancers, carnival rides, elaborate costumes, and artists from around the globe.

It is remarkably easy to imagine hundreds of thousands of people gathering for the spectacle and collective joy of music festivals across our nation. Those of us in Austin know the feeling from SXSW and Austin City Limits. Yet standing amid this sea of humanity here at EDC this weekend makes me think how immensely impressive it was that a quarter-million people assembled in our nation's capital over 60 years ago—not to enjoy music, rave, or escape reality for a bit, but to demand justice, dignity, voting rights, economic opportunity and the realization of Dr. King's extraordinary dream. Imagine their dedication, sacrifice, courage, and the significant personal risk they took. And, yes, imagine the tremendous logistical planning involved in convening such a march in 1963!

Texas, Textbooks and the Politics of Memory

Because of my years of service on the Austin ISD Board of Trustees and my continued work with Texas public schools, I pay especially close attention to curriculum debates. What students learn matters. What they do not learn also matters.

And lately, some of those debates have become deeply troubling.

Recent Texas State Board of Education discussions revealed fierce arguments over how slavery and African American history should be taught to the 5.5 million students in our Texas public schools, the majority of whom are students of color. Conservative members pushed back against language that directly centers slavery as the cause of the Civil War. Proposals emerged suggesting euphemistic language like “involuntary relocation,” in place of slavery. Other proposals sought to limit discussion of the Black Power movement largely to art and fashion while minimizing its political dimensions.

That profoundly matters.

Memory shapes morality.

If you sanitize slavery, you weaken public understanding of racism. If you flatten the civil rights movement into a feel-good story with no continuing implications, you rob it of its prophetic power. If students learn only a patriotic mythology, rather than historical complexity, they become easier to politically manipulate.

The struggle over textbooks is never merely academic. It is spiritual.

George Orwell understood this in 1984: "Who controls the past controls the future."

And frankly, we are watching that struggle unfold in real time.

The Backlash Against the Dream

The current attack on diversity, equity and inclusion did not emerge in a vacuum.

Part of it reflects demographic anxiety. The United States is becoming more racially and culturally diverse. That reality excites some people and terrifies others. Politicians and media personalities exploit those fears for power.

Part of it reflects economic frustration. Working-class Americans of many racial backgrounds feel abandoned by institutions and financially squeezed. Rather than addressing systemic inequality, some leaders redirect anger toward immigrants, affirmative action, or "wokeness."

Part of it reflects religious nationalism. Certain forms of "Christian nationalism"—a veritable oxymoron, I know—increasingly portray pluralism itself as dangerous, imagining the United States as a nation divinely reserved for a narrow vision of white conservative Christianity. Absolute hogwash, of course.

And part of it reflects something older and darker: America's unfinished racial history.

James Baldwin once observed, "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced." That remains true.

We cannot heal what we refuse to acknowledge!

Pop Culture, Prophecy and Public Witness

Popular culture often perceives social tensions before institutions do.

Films like *Selma* and *Judas and the Black Messiah* revisit the sacrifices of civil rights organizers. Ava DuVernay's documentary *13th* traces the links between slavery, mass incarceration, and systemic racism. Beyoncé's "*Lemonade*" became not merely an album but a meditation on Black womanhood, memory and resilience. Kendrick Lamar's "*Alright*" emerged as an anthem of perseverance amid racial violence.

Meanwhile, television series like *Watchmen* and *Lovecraft Country* forced audiences to confront histories of racial terror often absent from textbooks.

Even Broadway joined the conversation, with *Hamilton*, for instance, challenging traditional assumptions about who gets to embody American history.

Art keeps insisting that the Dream remains unfinished!

Easter People in a Time of Backpedaling

We find ourselves in the Easter season, when Catholics hear pericopes from the Acts of the Apostles, describing the astonishing expansion of the early Christian movement. Again and again, the Spirit pushed disciples beyond fear, tribalism and exclusion.

The resurrection consistently broke open locked rooms.

That matters because fear always shrinks the human heart. Resurrection enlarges it!

Fear builds walls. Resurrection opens doors!

Fear clings to hierarchy and privilege. Resurrection creates community!

The current backlash against the gospel values of diversity, equity and inclusion is ultimately rooted in fear: fear of demographic change, fear of lost privilege, fear of complexity, fear of sharing power.

But Easter people are called to something greater.

We are called to extraordinary courage!

Calls to Action

- Support organizations that protect voting rights, immigrant rights, and equitable public education.
- Read books by African-American theologians, historians and authors whose voices are often marginalized.
- Publicly speak when curriculum revisions distort or sanitize history.
- Diversify leadership within churches, nonprofits and civic organizations.
- Build authentic relationships across racial, cultural and economic lines, rather than remaining inside ideological bubbles.
- Support educators who honestly and compassionately teach difficult truths.
- Examine how racism and exclusion may still operate within our own communities and churches.
- Pray not merely for racial harmony, but for racial justice.

Dreams Deferred, Dreams Defended

When I think about A. Philip Randolph today, I find myself imagining the enormous courage it took to organize the March on Washington in 1963. Imagine standing in a nation still deeply segregated, still violently racist, still hostile to Black political power, and believing that transformation remained possible.

That required extraordinary hope.

Growing up in the cornfields of northwest Ohio, I certainly was not taught enough about figures like Randolph. Like many white Americans, I

inherited a version of history that often celebrated sanitized heroes while muting the depth of racial injustice beneath the surface. It took years of education, ministry, travel and public service for me to better understand how profoundly race continues shaping American life.

And now, as I travel across Texas working with public schools largely serving Latinx and African American students, I worry deeply about the future we are creating.

Will our students inherit truth or mythology?

Will they inherit solidarity or suspicion?

Will they inherit democracy or grievance-fueled authoritarianism?

The answer partly depends on whether enough of us refuse to move backward!

“One step forward, two steps back” cannot become our national creed.

A. Philip Randolph marched because he believed America could become better than itself. Dr. King dreamed because he believed moral imagination could still reshape history. The gospel calls us toward that same audacious faith!

Not naïve optimism. Not denial. But resurrection-shaped hope.

And perhaps that is the extraordinary task before us now: to keep walking forward—even while others desperately try pulling our nation backward.

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where do I see racism or exclusion still operating within my own community?
- How have I benefited from systems that disadvantage others?
- Which voices or histories have been absent from my education?
- How might I better embody the inclusive nature of Jesus?
- What fears prevent our nation from embracing greater diversity, equity and inclusion?
- How can I help younger generations distinguish truth from political mythology?
- Where is God calling me toward greater solidarity and courage?

Let Us Pray

God of justice and liberation, you created every human person in your image and breathed your Spirit into every culture, language and people. Forgive us for the ways we continue to divide what you created to belong together. Strengthen all who labor for racial justice, educational truth and human dignity. Inspire us with the courage of A. Philip Randolph, the moral vision of Dr. King and the radical hospitality of Jesus Christ. When

fear tempts us toward silence, give us prophetic voices. When exhaustion tempts us toward cynicism, give us resurrection hope. When division tempts us toward hatred, give us extraordinary compassion. Help us to build communities where every person is seen, valued and loved. May we never grow comfortable with injustice disguised as tradition or exclusion disguised as patriotism. And may your Spirit continue widening the human heart until the Dream of justice and beloved community moves closer to fulfillment. Amen.

Ascending Beyond the Clouds

Lessons from the Solemnity of the Ascension
for an Age of Galaxies, Grief and Gospel Responsibility

May 17, 2026



Amid the cornfields of Ohio, where I was raised, the sky always felt enormous. Flat farmland has a way of making one deeply aware of horizons, sunsets and clouds. I recall lying in the grass as a child, imagining heaven as being literally “up there,” somewhere beyond the clouds above. Many of us inherited that cosmology from stained-glass windows and holy cards depicting the risen Christ floating upward while bewildered apostles gazed skyward beneath him.

But stories of Jesus’ resurrection created a theological problem for the early Church. Once believers proclaimed that the crucified Jesus had risen from the dead, they needed to explain what happened next. Where did he go? Why did he no longer publicly appear? How long did he remain on earth? Today, on this Sunday after the 40th day of Easter, many churches throughout the United States and the world celebrate the Solemnity of the Ascension—an ancient explanation that successfully got the risen Christ “offstage” after his resurrection.

We imagine the risen Christ going “up, up and away,” almost like Superman disappearing into the clouds, while John Williams’ soaring movie score triumphantly swells in the background. Yet perhaps the

deeper meaning of this feast has far less to do with Jesus leaving earth, and far more to do with how we are called to remain fully present within it!

The Problem of the Risen Christ

The earliest Christian writings reveal an evolving theology regarding what happened after Easter morning. Saul/Paul of Tarsus, writing before the canonical gospels existed, never describes an ascension scene. Instead, he simply proclaims that “God highly exalted him” (Phil. 2:9). But what exactly did that mean?

The first canonical evangelist, Mark, originally ended his gospel abruptly: frightened women flee the empty tomb “and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (Mk. 16:8). The end. Fade to black. Roll credits. No appearances. No final farewell speech. No ascension. It is one of the most haunting endings in world literature.

Later, likely sometime between 100-140 A.D., another hand appended additional verses to Mark’s gospel, finally supplying the explanation believers desired: “The Lord Jesus...was taken up into heaven and sat at the right hand of God” (Mk. 16:19). Aha, the risen Christ had exited stage right!

Matthew handled the problem differently. He avoided an ascension altogether, as we hear in today’s gospel (Mt. 28:16-20). Instead, Jesus gathered his followers atop a mountain in Galilee and delivered the Great Commission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Mt. 28:19). The gospel ends not with Jesus disappearing upward, but with a mission entrusted downward and outward!

Luke—the evangelist most concerned with historical sequencing and dramatic storytelling—provides Christianity’s most famous ascension narrative. At the end of Luke’s first volume, the gospel, and then again at the beginning of his second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, Jesus blessed his followers and ascended into heaven before their eyes (Lk. 24:50-53; Acts 1:9-11). The ascension became the hinge connecting Jesus’ earthly ministry with the birth of the Church!

John’s gospel? Silence. No ascension scene whatsoever.

As theology evolved, pseudonymous works written in Paul’s name and spirit further developed ascension imagery:

“When he ascended on high he led captivity captive” (Eph. 4:8).

Christ “descended into the lower parts of the earth” before ascending “far above all the heavens” (Eph. 4:9-10).

Christ was “taken up in glory” (1Tim. 3:16).

Believers are urged to seek “things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God” (Col. 3:1).

Little by little, a theological architecture emerged to explain how the risen Christ related to God, to heaven and to the Church!

Ancient Cosmology Meets Modern Astronomy

The challenge, of course, is that ancient people envisioned the universe very differently than we do today.

The biblical world largely imagined a flat earth beneath a dome-like sky – like a bowl resting upside-down on a plate – with heaven physically above, and the underworld physically below. In that cosmology, Jesus ascending upward made perfect sense. Heaven was literally “up there”!

But modern astronomy profoundly altered human understanding of the cosmos. We now know our planet circles an ordinary star within a galaxy containing perhaps 100 billion stars, one galaxy among trillions. American mythologist Joseph Campbell once quipped that even if Jesus ascended at the speed of light, he would still remain within the Milky Way galaxy 2,000 years later!

That realization forces contemporary Christians to wrestle anew with the meaning of ascension.

I still remember being in Louisville, Kentucky in 1993, while preparing for my vows with the Conventual Franciscan Friars. One evening, a few friars and I wandered into a bookstore and encountered what was then a cultural phenomenon: James Redfield’s *The Celestine Prophecy*. Like so many spiritually-curious young adults of the 1990s, I devoured it. Redfield proposed that Jesus disappeared from ordinary sight by raising his body’s vibrational energy to a higher spiritual plane already surrounding us. Indeed, another explanation for getting the risen Christ “offstage”!

The 1990s were filled with such spiritual experimentation. Shirley MacLaine appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* talking about past lives. Touched by an Angel imagined divine messengers among us. The *X-Files* explored unseen realities. Films like *Ghost* suggested that love transcends death. Even pop music reflected the era’s spiritual searching. Joan Osborne famously asked, “What if God was one of us?” while R.E.M.’s “Losing My Religion” captured the spiritual ambiguity of a generation.

Yet perhaps progressive Christians need not become trapped between literalism and dismissal. The ascension may not be about geography at all. Perhaps it is about transformation, transcendence and mission!

“Why Do You Stand Looking Up Toward Heaven?”

One of my favorite moments in the ascension story comes in Acts 1:11, which we find in today’s first reading. As the disciples stared upward into the sky, two figures asked them: “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?”

What an extraordinary question for the Church today.

Why do we keep looking upward, while injustice festers downward?

Why do we obsess over heaven, while neglecting hungry children, immigrants fearing deportation, transgender youth fearing rejection, veterans lacking healthcare, or families unable to afford housing?

The “two men” in Acts gently redirect the disciples’ attention: away from passive sky-gazing, and toward active discipleship!

The ascension does not excuse Christians from earthly responsibility. It intensifies it.

This Sunday at Holy Family Catholic Church in Austin, we’ll sing “I Am the Bread of Life,” with its repeated promise: “And I will raise you up.” I have long loved that phrase. Progressive Christians must continually ask:

Whom are we helping to raise up?

Are we raising up young leaders?

Are we raising up marginalized voices?

Are we raising up communities crushed by poverty and racism?

Are we raising up hope amid cynicism?

Perhaps the deepest meaning of ascension is not that Jesus escaped earth, but that he entrusted earth to us!

Ascension in an Age of Authoritarianism

That challenge feels especially urgent in our present and very unordinary U.S. moment.

It is tempting to become overwhelmed by the relentless cruelty and chaos surrounding us: attacks on immigrants, book bans, assaults on LGBTQIA+ dignity, the erosion of voting rights, environmental destruction, and the growing normalization of authoritarian rhetoric. Many Americans increasingly feel exhausted, demoralized, and spiritually numb.

But the ascension story refuses paralysis.

The disciples could not simply remain frozen on the Mount of Olives staring into the clouds (Acts 1:10-12). They had work to do. Communities to build. Justice to pursue. Good news to proclaim.

That remains our vocation today.

The Great Commission was never about coercive evangelization or culture wars. Jesus did not command his followers to seize political dominance. He commanded them to embody love, mercy, reconciliation and solidarity.

Perhaps we fulfill the Great Commission best not through louder preaching, but through extraordinary compassion. Through defending

democracy. Through accompanying the marginalized. Through creating communities where people experience dignity, belonging and healing.

Those words attributed to St. Francis of Assisi—whether or not he actually said them—continue to challenge us: “Preach the gospel at all times. When necessary, use words.”

Raising Up One Another

The older I become, the less interested I am in debates over whether Jesus physically levitated into outer space. Frankly, that question now feels far less important than whether we ourselves are helping to raise up the world around us.

In many ways, that has become the central spiritual question of my own life.

Growing up in rural Ohio, I inherited a faith rich in devotion and imagination. Through years of ministry, public leadership, heartbreak, conflict with Church authority, leaving Roman Catholic ministry, helping to found Austin’s only inclusive Catholic community, and publicly journeying into same-sex marriage, my understanding of resurrection and ascension steadily matured.

I no longer imagine heaven as merely “up there.” Increasingly, I experience glimpses of heaven whenever people courageously create justice, healing and love here and now!

I see ascension whenever a teacher helps a struggling child believe in herself.

Whenever immigrants find community.

Whenever LGBTQIA+ young people discover they are beloved by God.

Whenever exhausted activists refuse to surrender hope.

Whenever chosen family gathers around tables filled with laughter, tears and solidarity.

Whenever communities embody extraordinary mercy in a cruel age.

Perhaps ascension ultimately means this: Christ’s physical presence became less visible, so that Christ’s living presence might become visible through us!

Calls to Action

- Raise up younger leaders within your community, rather than clinging to power or control.
- Support organizations defending immigrants, LGBTQIA+ persons and voting rights.
- Spend less time arguing about heaven and more time building justice on earth.
- Mentor someone struggling to discover their gifts or purpose.

- Practice the Great Commission through acts of compassion, inclusion and solidarity.
- Read the Acts of the Apostles during the remaining week of this Easter season, and reflect on how the early Church organized communities of mutual care.
- Resist despair. Cynicism is not a Christian virtue.

Called Not to Escape Earth, But to Transform It

Back in those Ohio cornfields of my childhood, I used to stare upward into endless skies and wonder where heaven might be. Today, after decades of ministry and life experience, I increasingly suspect the better question is not “Where did Jesus go?” but rather “Where are we willing to bring Christ alive?”

The disciples eventually stopped staring upward. They descended the Mount of Olives. They returned to their communities. They organized. They prayed. They shared resources. They fed the hungry. They welcomed strangers. They proclaimed good news in a frightened empire.

In other words, they became the Body of Christ.

And perhaps that is the true miracle of the ascension: not that Jesus disappeared into the clouds, but that ordinary people discovered the extraordinary courage to continue his work here on earth!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- When have I found myself “looking toward heaven,” instead of confronting earthly realities?
- Who helped to “raise me up” during difficult periods of my life?
- Whom am I presently called to encourage, mentor or empower?
- How might I embody the presence of Christ within my community?
- What fears prevent me from fully embracing the mission of justice and compassion?
- How does the ascension challenge my understanding of heaven, God, and human responsibility?
- Where do I presently glimpse resurrection and transcendence in ordinary life?

Let Us Pray

Risen and ascended Christ, you continually call us beyond fear, beyond passivity, and beyond despair. When we become distracted by clouds and abstractions, draw our attention back to the suffering and beauty of this world. Raise us up to become people of extraordinary compassion, extraordinary courage, and extraordinary hope. Help us to lift others from despair, exclusion and loneliness. Teach us to embody your presence

through acts of justice, mercy and love. May we never merely stand gazing toward heaven, but instead courageously build communities that reflect heaven's values here on earth. And when our own journeys are complete, may we fully discover that your presence was never far away, but alive within us, among us, and around us all along. Amen.

Breaking the Glass Ceiling – Again and Again
 Jeannette Rankin, Misogyny, and the Unfinished Struggle
 for Women's Full Equality in Church and Society

May 18, 2026



There are moments in life that feel like gut punches. One of those moments for me occurred on November 8, 2016, the very night on which I was elected to my second four-year term of public office on the Austin ISD Board of Trustees. My husband and I attended the watch party of the Travis County Democratic Party in the ballroom of the Driskill Hotel in downtown Austin. At first, there was joy. Early returns showed that my own race was unfolding exactly as expected, resulting in a 37-point victory. I recall the tremendous support of those present. We hugged. We took photos together. Campaign volunteers smiled with relief and exhaustion.

But the mood gradually shifted.

The screens around the room began telling a different story for the race at the top of the ticket. Conversations quieted. The energy drained from the room like air escaping a punctured balloon. One by one, people began leaving. By 11:00 p.m., the space was empty. By 1:30 a.m. Central time, Hillary Clinton conceded the presidency.

I was stunned.

My husband had predicted the outcome, which I thought ludicrous. After all, how could the nation possibly choose a candidate whose rhetoric so regularly trafficked in racism, xenophobia, cruelty and misogyny? Yet it happened.

That night forced me to confront more deeply something I had long known intellectually, but perhaps not fully emotionally: Misogyny remains one of the great social sins of our nation and world.

Naming the Sin of Misogyny

Misogyny is more than simple dislike of women. It is the deeply rooted system of attitudes, assumptions and structures that consistently diminish women's voices, leadership, autonomy and humanity. It is what causes women to earn less for equal work. It is what tracks women disproportionately into caregiving professions while reserving certain positions of power for men. It is what leads people to describe assertive men as "strong" while calling assertive women "difficult." It is what still causes some people to subconsciously imagine "president," "bishop," "CEO" or "commander" as male.

And it is why today's remembrance of Jeannette Rankin (1880-1973) still matters so profoundly.

Long before women even possessed the constitutional right to vote nationwide, Rankin shattered one of the nation's highest glass ceilings by becoming the first woman elected to federal office in the United States. Elected to Congress in 1916 from Montana, she entered Washington D.C. carrying not merely her own ambitions, but the hopes of countless women excluded from public leadership for generations.

Imagine the courage that required!

Representation Changes Imagination

My generation still remembers the shockwaves that accompanied the appointment of Sandra Day O'Connor as the first woman on the U.S. Supreme Court in 1981. I was a second grader in rural northwest Ohio at the time, growing up amid cornfields where traditional gender roles often felt rigid and unquestioned. Women were teachers, secretaries, nurses, beauticians or homemakers. Men were bosses, doctors, lawyers, politicians and executives. Even as a child, I absorbed those assumptions without realizing it.

That is precisely why representation matters.

When a girl sees a woman preach, lead, govern, argue before the Supreme Court, direct a corporation, or preside at Eucharist, something extraordinary happens in her imagination: Possibilities expand!

Rankin understood that symbolic breakthroughs matter because symbols shape culture. Yet she also understood that symbols alone are insufficient. Throughout her life she advocated not merely for women's visibility, but for peace, labor protections, and human dignity. She remains famous for voting against the U.S. entry into both World War I and World

War II, even when such positions became deeply unpopular. Agree or disagree with her pacifism, one cannot deny her extraordinary moral courage.

One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

Rankin's witness calls us to honestly examine our own moment.

Because while progress has certainly occurred, we are also witnessing painful regression.

Girls today are growing up in a nation where many possess fewer reproductive rights than their mothers and grandmothers enjoyed. Gender studies programs face attacks at some public universities. Women physicians, politicians and journalists regularly endure online abuse that male counterparts seldom experience. Social media influencers preach versions of hyper-masculinity that feel like throwbacks to the 1950s. Largely-male state legislatures continue debating women's bodily autonomy with breathtaking confidence and remarkably little listening.

And the Church has hardly been immune from misogyny.

The gospels themselves consistently portray women as central disciples. Mary Magdalene became the first witness to resurrection, the "apostle to the apostles" (Jn. 20:11-18). Luke explicitly named women who financially sustained Jesus' ministry (Lk. 8:1-3). Long before the first gospel, Paul identified Phoebe as a deacon (Rom. 16:1) and called Junia "prominent among the apostles" (Rom. 16:7). The Acts of the Apostles repeatedly highlighted women exercising leadership in early Christian communities.

The Boys' Club and the Breath of the Spirit

For centuries, women served in ordained ministries of various forms within Christianity's earliest generations. Archaeological evidence and historical scholarship increasingly demonstrate the existence of women deacons, priests and liturgical leaders during the Church's first centuries. Yet over time, ecclesiastical leadership calcified into what many today would frankly call a "boys' club."

In 1994, Pope John Paul II attempted to close discussion regarding women's ordination through *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*. Later, in 1995 and 1996, Vatican authorities further reinforced that prohibition. For many Catholics, it felt less like theological discernment, and more like institutional fear.

To be fair, Pope Francis later introduced important symbolic breakthroughs by appointing women to positions of significant Vatican leadership, including leadership roles within dicasteries. He convened commissions to study women deacons. He expanded women's participation in synodal processes. Yet many Catholics still experienced

frustration when concrete structural changes failed to more fully materialize.

At Holy Family Catholic Church here in Austin, however, we regularly witness another possibility.

Mother Annie Cass Watson, a priest of the Roman Catholic Womenpriests, drives roughly 150 miles roundtrip every Sunday to celebrate Eucharist with our community. Think about that commitment for a moment. That is not ambition. That is vocation. That is love. That is someone refusing to allow institutional exclusion to extinguish her calling. Deacon Elsa Nelligan similarly reflects to parishioners and hospice patients the loving and merciful face of God.

And people respond.

Because when communities encounter women preaching with wisdom, celebrating sacraments with compassion, and leading with extraordinary pastoral sensitivity, the old arguments against women's leadership begin collapsing under the weight of lived experience.

Lessons from Public Life

In many ways, my years in public office reinforced similar lessons.

Local elections in Austin made 2018 genuinely feel like "the year of the woman." The Austin ISD Board of Trustees, historically dominated by white men, shifted that year to seven women and two men. My departure two years later marked the first time in district history that no white man served on the board. That was historically significant for a district overwhelmingly educating students of color.

And yet—even amid such progress—I carried deep skepticism into the 2024 presidential election cycle.

I absolutely worked to support Kamala Harris. But I also was not naïve. I live in the South. I have witnessed firsthand how racism and misogyny continue intertwining within our sociopolitical culture.

I vividly remember the backlash after our AISD board voted in February 2018 to rename schools honoring Confederates. Some critics angrily denounced what they called the rejection of "Southern heritage." They referred to the U.S. Civil War, in which my Ohio ancestors fought, as the "war of northern aggression." Even within progressive Austin, such rhetoric revealed how deeply some still romanticized systems built upon racial hierarchy and exclusion.

One step forward, two steps back: Sometimes that phrase painfully captures our national story.

Easter Faith and the Unfinished Dream

And yet the Easter season refuses despair.

These final days before Pentecost remind us that resurrection faith always pushes communities toward transformation. In Acts, the Spirit continually disrupted old hierarchies and expanded belonging. The early Church repeatedly discovered that God's vision proves larger than human prejudice.

Paul boldly declared: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28).

That text remains radically unfinished.

Popular culture, too, increasingly reflects this struggle. Films like *Hidden Figures* helped recover the overlooked contributions of Black women mathematicians at NASA. Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* unexpectedly sparked conversations about patriarchy, identity, and women's aspirations. Taylor Swift's "The Man" satirized double standards women face professionally. Beyoncé's "Run the World (Girls)" became an anthem of empowerment. Television series like *The Handmaid's Tale* continue resonating because they dramatize fears surrounding women's autonomy and authoritarian control.

Culture often becomes theology's mirror!

And perhaps that is why Jeannette Rankin still matters. She reminds us that breakthroughs never magically arrive. Someone must first dare to walk through the door. Someone must first absorb criticism. Someone must first risk failure.

Someone must first break the glass!

Calls to Action

- Actively support women's leadership in churches, nonprofits, schools, public office and corporate life.
- Refuse sexist language, jokes and stereotypes in everyday conversation.
- Mentor girls and young women to imagine themselves as leaders, scholars, clergy and advocates.
- Read works by women theologians, preachers and spiritual writers, especially women of color.
- Advocate for equal pay, reproductive healthcare access, and policies supporting women and families.
- Challenge ecclesial structures that continue excluding women from sacramental leadership.
- Celebrate and publicly affirm women whose gifts strengthen your community.

Raising Our Daughters Toward the Heavens

As I reflect upon Jeannette Rankin today, I find myself thinking again about that darkened ballroom in Austin on election night in 2016. I remember the grim silence. The disappointment. The sense that history had suddenly reversed direction.

But I also remember something else.

I remember the many extraordinary women with whom I served in public office. I remember women leading schools, churches and movements with intelligence and compassion. I remember my mother raising four sons during years of sacrifice. I remember women religious who taught me. Women theologians who stretched my thinking. Women colleagues who strengthened my leadership. Women friends who continue challenging me to grow.

Glass ceilings do not shatter all at once. They crack gradually through persistence, courage and collective struggle.

Jeannette Rankin swung one of the earliest hammers. Others followed. And now the task belongs to us.

For the sake of our daughters, nieces, granddaughters and future generations, we cannot stop swinging!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- When have I witnessed misogyny operating in subtle or overt ways?
- Which women have most shaped my faith, leadership, and understanding of the world?
- How do I actively support women's voices and leadership?
- What fears or assumptions still hinder full equality in church and society?
- How might the Holy Spirit be calling the Church toward greater inclusion?
- In what ways can I help younger generations imagine broader possibilities for themselves?

Let Us Pray

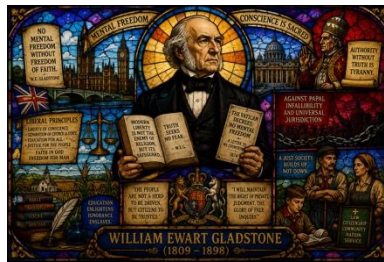
God of resurrection and renewal, you created women and men alike in your image and likeness. You called Mary Magdalene to proclaim resurrection, Phoebe to serve the Church, Junia to lead among the apostles, and countless women throughout history to teach, heal, organize and transform the world. Strengthen all who continue breaking barriers today. Comfort those discouraged by sexism, exclusion or injustice. Grant extraordinary courage to women called to leadership. Open our hearts to

recognize gifts too long ignored. And help your Church and our nation more fully embody the dignity, equality and belovedness you intend for all your children. May we continue building a world where every child can dream freely, lead boldly, and flourish fully. Amen.

Mental Freedom Amid Authoritarianism

William Ewart Gladstone, the Separation of Church and State, and the Extraordinary Courage to Freely Think

May 19, 2026



We often do not recognize how strange our childhood experiences were until we become adults and step outside the bubble in which we were raised.

As a child growing up in the cornfields of rural northwest Ohio, I unwittingly participated in a fascinating case study on the use of public funds to transport public school students to Mass and religious education. Let that sink in. At the time, New Riegel, Ohio was almost entirely Roman Catholic, so you would not have been entirely surprised to know that New Riegel Local Schools rented our elementary facility – an old Catholic school building – from the adjacent parish. The arrangement seemingly included the understanding that all students would be transported to the school by 8:00 a.m., allowing us to attend Mass or participate in Roman Catholic religious education before the official start of the school day at 8:30 a.m.

The children of the one or two non-Catholic families could quietly sit in study hall while the rest of us prayed, memorized catechism answers, and learned Bible stories. As a result, I attended C.C.D. classes – what we called religious education at the time – at my home parish on Sundays, then received another 2.5 hours of religious instruction each week – yes, before the official start of the day at our public elementary school!

At the same time, I was taught to believe that the separation of church and state was sacrosanct.

I learned this from history teachers. I heard it while earning Scouting merit badges like Citizenship in the Community and Citizenship in the Nation. I later studied it more deeply in college, graduate school, and public life. Over time, I came to understand that there is a certain genius in the separation of church and state. Such separation protects religious minorities. It safeguards personal conscience. It allows people of many faiths—and no faith at all—to fully participate in civic life.

And yet, throughout my lifetime, I have repeatedly watched religious institutions and political leaders attempt to blur the line between church and state.

This Sunday, for instance, our federal government hosted a massive prayer festival on the National Mall, dominated almost entirely by Evangelical Protestant voices. Wait, what? Here in Texas, lawmakers now require public schools to display the Ten Commandments in classrooms and increasingly pressure school districts to provide time for organized prayer during the school day. Wa-wait, what? Our president recently shared a meme portraying himself as Jesus Christ. Christian nationalism increasingly feels less like a fringe movement, and more like a rising tide.

Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, the primary architects of church/state separation, are no doubt rolling in their graves!

The man we remember today, British prime minister William Ewart Gladstone, understood these dangers remarkably well.

Gladstone and the Defense of Mental Freedom

William Ewart Gladstone (1809-1898) served four terms as prime minister of Great Britain during one of the most turbulent religious and political periods in modern European history. Though deeply religious himself, Gladstone fiercely defended liberal democracy, freedom of conscience, and the distinction between civic allegiance and ecclesiastical authority.

Ironically, Gladstone admired many aspects of Roman Catholicism. He appreciated the beauty of its liturgy, the majesty of its traditions, and the moral seriousness of many Catholics. But he grew alarmed by the increasingly authoritarian direction of the Roman Church under the longest-serving pope, Pius IX (1846-1878).

To understand Gladstone's concern, we must understand the fear gripping the Vatican in the 19th century. Europe was rapidly changing. Revolutions erupted across the continent. Monarchies collapsed. Democracy spread. Nationalism grew. Scientific discoveries challenged traditional religious assumptions. Secular governments increasingly claimed authority once exercised by churches.

Pius IX initially appeared somewhat open to reform. But after revolutionaries briefly established a Roman Republic in 1848 and forced him to flee Rome disguised as an ordinary priest, he became deeply suspicious of modern political thought. Liberalism, democracy, nationalism and secularism no longer appeared to him as possible partners of Christianity. They appeared instead as existential threats.

As a result, Pius IX increasingly centralized authority in himself and the papacy. In 1864, he issued the infamous Syllabus of Errors, condemning ideas like freedom of conscience, church/state separation, secular education, and religious pluralism. Imagine that for a moment: The Roman Church officially condemned the very principles many of us now consider essential to democratic society!

The document effectively declared war on modernity.

The “Boys Club” Declares Itself Infallible

Then came the sham Vatican Council of 1869-1870, one of the most consequential church councils in modern history.

At that council, Pius IX pushed through the doctrine of purported papal infallibility: the idea that under certain conditions the pope can teach without error on matters of faith and morals. He also strengthened claims of universal papal jurisdiction over the entire Church.

Many Catholics – including bishops, theologians and lay intellectuals – strongly opposed these developments. Among them were the people who would later form the Old Catholic movement, the broader ecclesial tradition with which our Independent/Inclusive Catholic tradition often identifies.

Gladstone watched these developments with growing alarm.

In 1874, he published a widely-read pamphlet accusing the Vatican of demanding absolute obedience from Catholics in ways incompatible with democratic citizenship. He argued that Catholics were being asked to surrender “mental freedom” to an authoritarian religious system.

His critique shocked Victorian England.

More than 150,000 copies rapidly circulated. Catholics accused Gladstone of anti-Catholic bigotry. The famous Catholic intellectual John Henry Newman thoughtfully and forcefully responded in defense of Catholic conscience. Yet Gladstone’s deeper concern still resonates today: What happens when religious authority demands unquestioning loyalty? And what happens when faith leaders discourage critical thinking, intellectual freedom, and democratic participation?

Those are not merely 19th-century questions.

They are profoundly contemporary ones.

“Do Not Lord It Over Them”

Jesus himself repeatedly warned against authoritarian religious leadership.

He contrasted oppressive rulers with servant leadership: “The rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them... It shall not be so among you” (Mt. 20:25-28). He similarly rejected hierarchical domination among his followers (Lk. 22:25-26). During the Last Supper, he knelt to wash feet, rather than demand privilege and obedience (Jn. 13).

The Acts of the Apostles during this Easter season likewise portrays early Christian communities discerning together, sharing resources, and collectively navigating conflict. Pentecost itself is radically democratic: The Spirit falls not merely upon elites, but upon everyone gathered!

Sons and daughters prophesy. Old and young dream dreams. The Spirit blows where it wills. And, yes, authoritarian systems fear such freedom!

One Step Toward Theocracy

As I write this, I admittedly feel unsettled by how rapidly authoritarian tendencies have grown in the United States during the past 16 months.

We increasingly witness efforts to fuse nationalism and religion into a singular ideological identity. Politicians invoke Christianity while demonizing immigrants, attacking LGBTQIA+ people, and undermining democratic norms. Public school curricula increasingly become battlegrounds for ideological control. Libraries are censored. Universities are attacked. Journalists are vilified. Judges are threatened.

In some circles, disagreement itself is portrayed as disloyalty.

As someone who served eight years on the Austin ISD Board of Trustees, overseeing a district of 86,000 students, I understand how public education can either cultivate democratic citizenship or suppress it. Increasingly, I fear we are moving toward the latter.

Texas now debates how slavery should even be described in textbooks. Gender studies programs are targeted. Religious nationalism increasingly shapes educational policy. Meanwhile, those who challenge such trends are often branded enemies.

History teaches us that authoritarian movements rarely announce themselves honestly. They usually arrive wrapped in patriotism, nostalgia, and religious language.

Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* did not resonate so deeply because it felt impossible. It resonated because it felt plausible.

George Orwell’s *1984* remains haunting because manipulation of truth is often politically useful.

Even *Star Wars* understood that democracies often collapse not through invasion, but through fear, applause, and the gradual surrender of norms. As Queen Padmé Amidala of the *Star Wars* universe laments, “Thus dies liberty with thunderous applause.”

The Extraordinary Courage to Freely Think

As people of faith, we are called to extraordinary courage in such moments.

That courage includes defending religious freedom for everyone – not merely ourselves. It includes protecting the rights of Muslims, Jews, Sikhs, atheists and others alike. It includes insisting that public schools remain places of inclusion, rather than religious coercion. It includes teaching our children how to critically think, rather than merely obey authority.

It also means acknowledging uncomfortable truths about our own religious traditions.

The Roman Catholic Church has often struggled with authoritarianism. The old adage for laity to “pay, pray and obey.” The silencing of theologians. The exclusion of women from ordained ministry. The long suppression of open discussion around sexuality. The centralization of authority in Rome. The clericalism and secrecy that facilitated the clergy sexual abuse crisis.

And yet the Gospel continually calls us beyond fear and domination, toward freedom and shared dignity.

“Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2Cor. 3:17).

Not coercion. Not blind obedience. But freedom.

Calls to Action

- Defend the separation of church and state as a sacred protection for all people, including religious minorities.
- Publicly speak against Christian nationalism and authoritarian religious movements.
- Support public schools, libraries and universities as places of intellectual freedom and democratic formation.
- Teach children and young adults how to critically think, ask questions, and responsibly discern truth.
- Advocate for greater democracy, transparency and inclusion in church and state.
- Resist attempts to erase history, sanitize injustice, or weaponize religion for political power.
- Practice extraordinary compassion toward those harmed by authoritarian religious systems.

The Ascension Is Not an Escape Hatch

This final week of the Easter season places us in an interesting spiritual moment. We have celebrated the Ascension. Pentecost approaches. The risen Christ seemingly disappears “offstage,” and the responsibility shifts to the community.

Perhaps that is precisely the point.

The Gospel does not call us to passively stare into heaven while authoritarianism spreads below. In Acts 1, two men effectively tell the disciples to stop looking upward and return to the work before them.

The work now belongs to us.

And perhaps that is where Gladstone’s witness still matters. He reminds us that faith and freedom need not be enemies. Indeed, authentic faith may require freedom. Love itself requires freedom. Conscience requires freedom. Human dignity requires freedom.

As a child in rural Ohio, I sat in a public school classroom learning both Catholic catechism and democratic ideals, not yet recognizing the tensions between those worlds. Decades later, after serving as a priest, educator, school board trustee, and advocate, I now better understand why those tensions matter.

Mental freedom matters. Democracy matters. The separation of church and state matters.

And in this very unordinary U.S. moment, the courage to defend those values may matter more than ever!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where do I witness authoritarian tendencies within religion, politics or culture today?
- How do I balance religious conviction with respect for the freedom and dignity of others?
- In what ways do I unconsciously equate faithfulness with unquestioning obedience?
- How might I better defend democratic values and intellectual freedom in my community?
- What fears make authoritarian movements attractive to some people?
- How does the Gospel challenge systems of domination and exclusion?

Let Us Pray

God of freedom and truth, you created human beings with minds capable of wonder, discernment, and moral courage. In this unordinary

moment of U.S. history, help us resist the temptation to surrender conscience for comfort, obedience for wisdom or fear for compassion. Raise up leaders who defend democracy, justice and human dignity. Strengthen teachers, journalists, advocates and all who courageously speak truth in difficult times. Help your Church continually reform itself according to the example of Jesus, who washed feet, rather than grasp for power. As we journey toward Pentecost, breathe your Spirit anew upon our world. May that Spirit free us from authoritarianism, fear and hatred, and lead us toward extraordinary love, extraordinary courage, and extraordinary solidarity. Amen.

Under the Electric Sky

Lessons from Raves and Music Festivals
on the Creation of Meaningful Human Experiences

May 20, 2026



My husband and I are recovering from our weekend at EDC—the Electric Daisy Carnival, which drew nearly a half-million young people to the Las Vegas Motor Speedway over three nights. I was admittedly among the oldest 3-5% of attendees at the event, largely attended by young’uns in their 20s and 30s, so I certainly bring more life experience to my reflection on such experiences. Now that I’m back home, hydrated again, and finally catching up on sleep, I find myself thinking less about the music, and more about the extraordinary human experience we witnessed there.

The church would do well to pay attention.

Because while many churches spend countless hours debating doctrine, liturgical rubrics, and institutional preservation, hundreds of thousands of

young adults willingly spent hundreds – sometimes thousands – of dollars per person to gather in such places as the Nevada desert for an experience of belonging, transcendence, joy, connection and community.

That should tell us something.

What Is a Rave, Anyway?

For many older readers, the words “rave” or “EDM festival” may conjure images of loud music, flashing lights, and exhausted young people dancing until sunrise. To be fair, that’s part of it. But it’s also far more than that.

Rave culture emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s around electronic dance music (EDM): house, techno, trance, dubstep and countless subgenres that my middle-aged brain frankly struggles to distinguish. Events like EDC, Tomorrowland and Ultra are now global phenomena. Young people save for months to attend them. General admission tickets for EDC often exceed \$600. VIP passes cost far more. Add flights, hotels, outfits, meals and transportation, and many attendees spend a few thousand dollars for a weekend experience.

And yet they joyfully come.

They arrive in glittering outfits, elaborate costumes, sequins, faux fur, neon colors, LED accessories, and platform boots that would make Elton John blush. Some dress like celestial, futuristic or psychedelic beings. Some like anime or cartoon characters. Some in bold bodysuits or trippy prints. Groups of young people often coordinate their outfits, with the Minions being a wildly-popular outfit at EDC on Friday night this year.

But beneath the spectacle lies something profoundly human.

Young people attend these events because they hunger for connection.

“All Are Welcome Here”

The first thing that struck me at EDC was not the music. It was the radical sense of welcome.

Towering over one entrance was a billboard that simply proclaimed: “All Are Welcome Here.”

Imagine that.

How many churches genuinely communicate that message to LGBTQIA+ youth? To immigrants? To doubters? To divorced Catholics? To people who look different, vote differently, or ask uncomfortable questions?

At EDC, young adults show up precisely as they are. Nobody cares whether others are gay or straight, trans or cisgender, wealthy or working class, tattooed or prim. You get the drift. They come together around joy, music, and shared humanity.

Frankly, it reminds me more of the kingdom of God, as described by Jesus, than many churches I have attended.

Jesus consistently created radically-inclusive spaces. He ate with tax collectors and sinners (Mk. 2:15-17). He welcomed women disciples in a patriarchal society (Lk. 8:1-3). He healed foreigners (Mt. 15:21-28). He praised the faith of outsiders while criticizing religious insiders (Lk. 10:25-37). Pentecost itself, which we prepare to celebrate in four days, is fundamentally a story about barriers collapsing as people of every language suddenly understood one another (Acts 2:1-11)!

At EDC, I repeatedly thought about Pentecost.

Different languages. Different races. Different nationalities. Different identities. Different stories.

One human family dancing together beneath the electric sky!

Maslow Was There, Too

While making our way through the speedway, I could not help but think about Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

Raves succeed because organizers intentionally create environments that meet human needs.

Physiological needs? Everywhere you look there are food vendors, hydration stations, restrooms, cooling tents, and places to sit or lie down. Organizers obviously understand that if people are hungry, thirsty or uncomfortable in any way, they cannot fully engage the experience.

How often do churches neglect even these basics? Many churches spend more time arguing about liturgical translations than ensuring their fellowship spaces are welcoming, their buildings accessible, or their restrooms are a better experience than many gas stations.

Safety needs? Rules are clearly communicated. Visible security is everywhere. Medical teams circulate. Young people feel safe enough to be vulnerable, expressive and joyful.

Belonging needs? This is where raves truly excel.

Young people connect. They dance together. Hug strangers. Share stories. Laugh together. Compliment outfits—yes, even my bejeweled disco hat.

I was particularly moved by the bracelet exchanges known within rave culture as “kandi trading.” Young people create colorful beaded bracelets bearing words of encouragement, humor or affirmation. Then comes a ritual exchange: fingertips touching fingertips, hands forming hearts, fingers interlocking as bracelets slide from one person to another.

It is liturgical.

Honestly, I have witnessed less warmth at the sign of peace during many Catholic liturgies.

Young people also exchange tiny sprout clips attached to hats and clothing, as well as little whimsical signs of affection and connection, like tiny ducks or babies. Random acts of delight. Sacramentals of joy.

Esteem needs? Young adults find freedom there to become who they are. Many spend their daily lives pressured by grades, careers, politics, debt, social expectations, and anxiety about the future. At EDC, they are celebrated simply for existing.

And self-actualization? Creativity explodes everywhere. Attendees fashion elaborate costumes, identities and performances. Totems rise above crowds, expressing individuality. Attendees are co-creators of the experience itself!

The church often asks: "Why are young people leaving?"

Perhaps we should instead ask: "Where are they finding transcendence, belonging and meaning?"

The Extraordinary Power of Experience

One thing became crystal clear to me during the weekend: Rave culture and modern music festivals intentionally create experiences.

Everything is immersive.

The stages themselves are architectural marvels. Lights pulse in synchronization with music. Aerial acrobats dressed as owls do somersaults above. Drones form images in the sky. Fireworks explode overhead. Carnival rides spin. Art installations invite interaction. Every detail is intentional.

There is never a dead moment.

Meanwhile, many churches still rely almost entirely upon routines designed for generations formed in a completely different cultural moment.

Now, let me be clear: I deeply love liturgy. I spent years studying sacramental theology. I still become emotional hearing songs like "Here I Am," "Take and Eat" or "I Am the Bread of Life." My grand piano at home largely exists for sacred music. There remains extraordinary power in ritual.

But many churches confuse ritual and repetition with meaning.

Young adults today inhabit a world shaped by Marvel movies, immersive gaming, TikTok storytelling, stadium concerts, and deeply-interactive digital experiences. They expect engagement. They expect authenticity. They expect beauty. They expect emotional connection.

Megachurches understand this, even if Catholics often hesitate to admit it. They carefully curate environments. Parking matters. Hospitality matters. Lighting matters. Music matters. Preaching matters. Social media matters. The experience matters.

Too often church leaders possess extraordinary theology, but profoundly mediocre execution.

We preach inclusion...while offering uninspiring experiences.

“Raise Your Hands”

Seeing tens of thousands of young people simultaneously raise their hands toward the stage while singing together beneath lasers and fireworks, I unexpectedly found myself thinking of Psalm 63:

“So I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on your name.”

Human beings have always sought transcendence through collective ritual.

Sometimes through incense and chant.

Sometimes through gospel choirs.

Sometimes through Taizé prayer.

Sometimes through Beyoncé, Taylor Swift or U2 concerts.

Sometimes through EDM festivals at 2:00 a.m. in the desert.

The longing underneath is often the same.

To feel alive. To feel connected. To feel part of something larger than ourselves.

Perhaps that is why the Acts of the Apostles repeatedly emphasizes joy among the earliest Christians (Acts 2:46-47). The resurrection was not merely an intellectual proposition. It transformed communal experience!

Too often, Christianity today feels joyless.

Jesus attended weddings (Jn. 2:1-11). Shared meals. Told stories. Walked among crowds. Gathered friends. Created experiences people remembered.

The church should not fear joy!

Young People Are Telling Us Something

The political and ecclesial systems inherited by younger generations increasingly feel broken to them.

Climate anxiety. Economic instability. Student debt. Housing costs. Gun violence. Political extremism. Attacks on LGBTQIA+ rights. The erosion of reproductive freedom. Rising authoritarianism. Loneliness.

Young people are not simply rejecting tradition. They are searching for hope, authenticity and possibility.

At EDC, I sensed young adults imagining a different world, one more accepting, expressive, joyful and communal than the one they often experience in daily life.

Honestly, I understand why.

As someone who grew up in the cornfields of rural Ohio, where rigid expectations shaped so much of community life, I found something oddly beautiful about watching young adults unapologetically become themselves beneath the electric sky.

Perhaps Pentecost still happens whenever people discover new ways to communicate love, joy and shared humanity!

What We Can Do

- Faith leaders and people of faith can learn much from the creation of meaningful experiences:
- Create radically-welcoming spaces where people truly feel safe being themselves.
- Prioritize hospitality, beauty, and emotional engagement as seriously as theology and preaching.
- Invest in music, art and storytelling that genuinely move people emotionally and spiritually.
- Rethink architecture and gathering spaces to facilitate connection, rather than passive observation.
- Foster intergenerational community where young adults feel seen, valued and empowered.
- Encourage creativity, participation and authentic self-expression within liturgical and communal life.
- Address concrete human needs—food, restrooms, accessibility, mental health, safety—with intentionality and dignity.
- Unapologetically celebrate joy as a sacred and transformative force.
- Create opportunities for genuine friendship and human connection beyond Sunday worship.
- Remember that people often encounter God first through belonging, not doctrine.

Beneath the Electric Sky

As I now sit quietly back home in Austin, far removed from the pulsing music, dazzling lasers and booming fireworks of EDC Las Vegas, I keep returning to one image.

Hundreds of thousands of young people gathered beneath the desert night sky.

Dancing. Laughing. Sharing bracelets. Holding one another. Searching for joy. Searching for connection. Searching, perhaps without even realizing it, for transcendence.

The church has often excelled at explaining God. But perhaps this generation longs instead to experience the sacred.

Not merely in sermons. Not merely in doctrines. But in communities where they are welcomed, celebrated and loved.

Under the electric sky of EDC, I witnessed extraordinary humanity.

And I could not help but wonder whether the Holy Spirit was dancing there, too!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where do I genuinely experience belonging and connection in my life?
- How welcoming are my communities to those who feel marginalized or different?
- In what ways do I foster—or inhibit—joy, beauty and emotional engagement?
- How might institutions better meet the concrete human needs of younger generations?
- Where do I encounter transcendence outside traditional religious spaces?
- What might Pentecost look like in today's world?
- How can I help create experiences of extraordinary love and acceptance for others?

Let Us Pray

God of joy and human connection, you created us not for isolation, but for community; not for fear, but for love; not for rigid conformity, but for abundant life. Open our eyes to the sacred longing within every human heart. Teach your church to welcome more generously, to listen more deeply, to celebrate more joyfully, and to love more extravagantly. As your Spirit moved among the first disciples at Pentecost, move now among us. Break down barriers that divide us. Help us create communities where all truly feel welcome, where beauty awakens wonder, and where every person discovers their sacred dignity. Beneath cathedral ceilings, beneath stained-glass windows, beneath the electric sky—may we encounter you anew. Amen.

Christ the King and the Courage to Resist

Lessons from St. Christopher Magallanes and the *Cristeros* on Faith, Authoritarianism and Extraordinary Love in Dangerous Times

May 21, 2026



Life sometimes circles back upon itself in extraordinary ways.

Having served some eight years at Cristo Rey Catholic Church in East Austin from 1995 to 2011—first as a young Conventual Franciscan Friar, then later as a deacon, priest, associate pastor, and eventually as pastor—I was profoundly shaped by that community and its history and traditions. Historically, many of the Mexican-American families who built the church were pushed from Mexico during that nation’s revolution in the 1910s and the subsequent *Cristero* War of 1926-1929. Amid restrictive anti-clerical laws and sometimes violently anti-Catholic government policies, small landowners and devout Catholics fought back, believing they were fighting for Christ the King, with their rallying cry of “¡Viva Cristo Rey!” (“Long live Christ the King!”). It was only natural, then, that they would name their new spiritual home in Austin for Christ the King, the patron who animated them during their struggles. Even recently-arrived immigrants expected the traditional cry as we concluded the Solemnity of Christ the King each November: “¡Viva Cristo Rey!”

As a younger priest, I admittedly understood that cry primarily as a devotional expression. But with age, experience, and the increasingly authoritarian tendencies we now witness in the United States and around the globe, I hear it differently. I now hear in it the cry of people refusing to surrender their humanity. I hear the voice of communities refusing to allow the state to crush conscience, dignity, compassion, and spiritual freedom.

Today, as the Church remembers St. Christopher Magallanes and the *Cristero* martyrs, I find myself reflecting not only upon long-ago witnesses in Mexico, but upon the extraordinary courage required whenever governments demand obedience at the expense of justice, mercy and truth.

A Church under Siege

The *Cristero* War emerged within the larger turmoil of post-revolutionary Mexico. Following the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1920, the government increasingly embraced aggressively-secular and anti-clerical policies. President Plutarco Elías Calles (1924-1928) strictly enforced constitutional provisions that limited the Church's influence, restricted priests, closed seminaries, seized church property, and attempted to diminish public religious life.

To many Catholics—especially rural Catholics in western Mexico—these measures felt not like healthy secular governance, but like persecution. Churches were shuttered. Priests were monitored or expelled. Public worship became dangerous. Some clergy went underground. Others fled. Some Catholics peacefully resisted. Others took up arms.

The *Cristeros* received their name from their battle cry: “¡Viva Cristo Rey!” (“Long live Christ the King!”).

As someone who spent years immersed in Mexican-American Catholic culture, I cannot overstate how deeply this history still shapes the spiritual imagination of many families in Texas. For some, these stories are not distant history. They are family memory. Grandparents and great-grandparents carried those wounds northward across the Río Bravo (or the Río Grande, if you prefer).

And yet, like most historical conflicts, the *Cristero* War was morally complicated. The Mexican government often acted repressively and violently. Some *Cristeros* displayed extraordinary courage and fidelity. Others embraced violence in ways that complicate simplistic narratives. History rarely divides neatly into saints and villains.

That complexity matters today.

Christopher Magallanes: Courage without Hatred

Christopher Magallanes (1869-1927) himself did not advocate armed rebellion. Rather, he continued ministering to his people amid increasingly dangerous circumstances. He established seminaries after official seminaries were closed, and he continued serving Catholics despite persecution.

In 1927, while traveling to celebrate Mass, he was arrested under false accusations of supporting the rebellion. Without trial, he was executed. Before his death, he reportedly gave away his possessions to his executioners, absolved them, and proclaimed: “I die innocent, and ask God that my blood may serve to unite my Mexican brethren.”

What extraordinary grace.

His witness immediately calls to mind Jesus praying from the cross: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Lk. 23:34). It recalls the martyr Stephen forgiving those who stoned him (Acts 7:60). It echoes Paul's insistence that "love never ends" (1Cor. 13:8).

Frankly, such love feels nearly impossible in our present moment.

We live in an age of outrage algorithms. Cable news outrage. Social media outrage. Political outrage. Entire industries now profit from keeping us angry. If Fox News and MSNBC share anything in common, it is this: Outrage generates ratings. Rage generates clicks.

The *Cristero* martyrs challenge us with a far more difficult path. Resist injustice? Absolutely. Speak truth? Without question. Defend the vulnerable? Unequivocally. But never surrender your humanity in the process!

That is much harder.

Toribio Romo and the Underground Church

Among the saints associated with the *Cristeros* is Toribio Romo, deeply beloved among undocumented Spanish-speaking immigrants in the United States. Stories of Toribio disguising himself as a mechanic and bicycling from village to village to secretly celebrate Mass became legendary in communities like the one I served at Cristo Rey.

For many undocumented immigrants in Texas, Toribio became more than a saint. He became a symbol of accompaniment. A reminder that God travels dangerous roads with vulnerable people.

At Cristo Rey, parishioners regularly invoked saints like Toribio and Christopher Magallanes not because they romanticized suffering, but because they recognized themselves in such stories.

People who cross deserts. People who fear authorities. People who invisibly labor. People whose dignity is denied by powerful systems.

Sound familiar?

Pentecost and the Refusal to Be Silent

We now stand in the final week of the Easter season, awaiting Pentecost. The timing feels providential.

Pentecost is fundamentally the story of frightened people becoming courageous people. The disciples hide behind locked doors in fear (Jn. 20:19). Then the Spirit arrives like wind and fire (Acts 2:1-4), and suddenly they publicly proclaim truths dangerous enough to threaten empire itself.

The *Cristero* martyrs understood this dynamic well.

So did Oscar Romero.

So did Martin Luther King, Jr.

So did Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

So did the civil rights marchers crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge.

So did the women who first accused Harvey Weinstein, Jeffrey Epstein and Donald Trump.

So did the protesters at Stonewall.

Authoritarian systems always rely upon fear. Fear silences. Fear isolates. Fear convinces ordinary people that resistance is futile.

Pentecost destroys fear.

Perhaps that is why authoritarian movements so often target education, libraries, universities, journalists, artists, immigrants, and independent religious voices. Free people are dangerous to authoritarian regimes!

The Rise of Modern-Day Martyrs

Today's martyrs rarely die before firing squads. Some do. Others die through deportation systems, preventable poverty, denial of medical care, abandonment, starvation, hate crimes, political violence, or institutional cruelty. Some are disappeared into prison systems like CECOT in El Salvador. Others lose livelihoods because they spoke inconvenient truths. Others are publicly demonized for defending democracy, immigrants, LGBTQIA+ persons, or racial justice.

And yes, we should plainly acknowledge this: Governments that normalize cruelty eventually normalize violence.

The martyrs of Mexico challenge us to ask difficult questions about our own moment:

Who is being scapegoated today?

Whose humanity is being denied?

Who benefits from fear?

What happens when nationalism becomes quasi-religious?

What happens when political leaders portray themselves as messianic figures?

Anyone paying attention knows these are no longer theoretical questions.

When politicians weaponize Christianity while simultaneously mocking the Beatitudes, we should be alarmed. Jesus never said, "Blessed are the powerful." He said, "Blessed are the merciful" (Mt. 5:7). He never said, "Whatever you do to the strongest among you..." He said, "Whatever you do to the least of these..." (Mt. 25:40).

The distinction matters.

Pop Culture, Power and Resistance

Oddly enough, pop culture often understands authoritarianism better than churches do.

The Handmaid's Tale imagines the fusion of religious extremism and state power.

Star Wars reminds us that democracies often die “with thunderous applause.”

Wicked explores how systems manufacture enemies.

Andor brilliantly portrays the slow creep of authoritarian control.

Taylor Swift’s “Only the Young” became an anthem of political disillusionment.

Beyoncé’s “Freedom” sounds almost Pentecostal in its insistence upon liberation.

Young people deeply understand these themes because many of them already feel trapped inside systems failing them economically, politically, environmentally, and spiritually.

And churches wonder why young people are disengaging.

Too many churches preach obedience while ignoring justice. Too many religious leaders condemn drag queens while remaining largely silent about cruelty toward immigrants, racism, poverty wages, book bans, or attacks on democratic institutions.

Young adults notice the hypocrisy.

What We Must Do Now

The *Cristero* martyrs call us not merely to admire courage, but to embody it. We must:

- Defend democratic institutions and the rule of law, even when politically inconvenient.
- Publicly oppose authoritarian rhetoric, Christian nationalism, and religious extremism.
- Visibly stand with immigrants, refugees, LGBTQIA+ persons, and marginalized communities.
- Teach authentic Catholic social justice, rather than culture-war reductionism.
- Protect public education, libraries, universities, and intellectual freedom.
- Support journalists, scholars and artists who courageously speak truth.
- Reject dehumanizing political language, even when directed toward ideological opponents.
- Create communities rooted in extraordinary compassion, rather than fear and exclusion.
- Encourage young people to exercise moral courage and civic responsibility.
- Pray not only for victims of oppression, but also for those who perpetuate it.

“¡Viva Cristo Rey!” Reconsidered

As I reflect upon those years at Cristo Rey Catholic Church in East Austin, I now hear that old cry differently than I once did.

“¡Viva Cristo Rey!” was never merely a slogan. At its best, it was a declaration that no earthly ruler, ideology, dictator, or political movement deserves ultimate allegiance. It was a reminder that conscience matters. That dignity matters. That mercy matters. That truth matters.

As Pentecost approaches, perhaps the Spirit is again asking ordinary people to become courageous people. Not violent people. Not hateful people. Courageous people. People willing to defend democracy, human dignity, intellectual freedom, and extraordinary love even when doing so carries cost.

Back at Cristo Rey, as hundreds of voices thundered *“¡Viva Cristo Rey!”* through that East Austin church, I admittedly did not yet grasp how deeply those words would resonate in this very unordinary U.S. moment. Now I do.

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where do I witness authoritarian tendencies in my nation, church, or community?
- How do fear and outrage shape my own relationships and political engagement?
- What would it mean for me to resist injustice without surrendering compassion?
- Whom does society presently scapegoat or dehumanize?
- How might the Holy Spirit be calling me to greater courage in this Easter season?
- In what ways can I better defend human dignity and democratic values?
- What does “Christ the King” mean in a world obsessed with domination and power?

Let Us Pray

God of extraordinary courage, you strengthened Christopher Magallanes and his companions to proclaim love amid violence, hope amid fear, and mercy amid hatred. As we journey toward Pentecost, send your Spirit upon us anew. Free us from cowardice, indifference and silence in the face of injustice. Help us to defend the vulnerable, to resist authoritarianism, and to build communities rooted in compassion, truth, and human dignity. Teach us to love without naivety, to resist without hatred, and to hope even when the world feels dark. May we proclaim

through our lives—not merely our words—that no earthly power stands above justice, mercy and love. And may we, like the martyrs before us, courageously embody your extraordinary peace in this extraordinary age. Amen.

Empire, Resistance and Hope

Lessons from Constantine, Victor Hugo,
Our Lady of Montevergine and Harvey Milk

May 22, 2026



As someone formed within Roman Catholicism, yet now standing outside its structures and strictures, I admittedly experience a certain tension every May 22. Within Independent/Inclusive Catholic circles, there are few figures viewed with greater suspicion than “bull-necked” Emperor Constantine the Great and “*Pio Nono*” Pope Pius IX. One fused Christianity with imperial power. The other centralized ecclesial power in unprecedented ways. Both profoundly reshaped Christianity from a marginalized movement centered on a crucified Galilean into a hierarchical institution frequently obsessed with authority, conformity and control.

As a child in rural Ohio—long before I studied church history or theology—I simply imagined the Church as timeless and unchanging. Priestly vestments and bishops’ miters connoted authority. Rome spoke. Catholics obeyed. Yet as I matured, studied history, and eventually experienced firsthand the crushing weight of clericalism and authoritarianism within the Roman Church, I increasingly realized that Christianity did not emerge from imperial palaces or marble cathedrals. It emerged from occupied people yearning for liberation. It emerged from fishermen, widows, laborers, outcasts and sinners gathered around tables.

Today’s fascinating convergence of commemorations invites us to reflect on power itself: Constantine, the emperor who married church and empire; Victor Hugo, the novelist who challenged ecclesial indifference to

suffering; Our Lady of Montevergine, beloved by generations of LGBTQIA+ pilgrims excluded from respectability; and Harvey Milk, whose election represented hope for a community systematically denied power and dignity.

Together, they ask us a profoundly Easter question: Will Christianity align itself with empire—or with death and resurrection?

Constantine and the Seduction of Empire

Constantine I (272-337) remains one of the most consequential figures in Christian history. Before him, Christians were a periodically-persecuted minority within the Roman Empire. After him, Christianity became irrevocably intertwined with imperial power.

To many Christians, Constantine represented divine providence. After reportedly seeing a vision of the cross before battle—"In this sign, conquer"—he legalized Christianity through the Edict of Milan in 313 and later convened the Council of Nicaea in 325. Churches were built. Bishops gained influence. Christianity acquired social legitimacy.

Yet imperial recognition came with a tremendous cost.

The Jesus who proclaimed, "Blessed are the poor" (Lk. 6:20), "Love your enemies" (Mt. 5:44) and "My kingdom is not of this world" (Jn. 18:36) became attached to imperial armies, imperial wealth and imperial coercion. The movement once persecuted increasingly learned to persecute! In some ways it was the end of authentic Christianity. One century you could be killed for being Christian. The next killed for not being Christian.

One cannot help but think of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*: "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others." Christianity, once radically egalitarian, increasingly mirrored the empire it inhabited.

Jesus repeatedly warned against precisely this dynamic. In Matthew 23, he condemned religious leaders who loved places of honor, long tassels and public recognition. He contrasted authentic discipleship grounded in service with the "rulers of the Gentiles" who "lord it over" others (Mk. 10:42-45).

Yet Constantine's fusion of empire and religion proved intoxicating.

As someone who spent years inside ecclesial leadership, I understand the temptation. Power feels efficient. Centralized authority appears orderly. Institutions crave stability. Yet whenever Christianity becomes overly entangled with political power, marginalized people almost inevitably suffer.

We see this throughout history: the Crusades, colonialism, forced conversions, anti-Jewish violence, the Inquisition, the Church's hostility toward democracy and modernism, and contemporary Christian nationalism.

Frank Herbert's *Dune* brilliantly explores this danger: Religious fervor harnessed to political power becomes extraordinarily dangerous. The same warning echoes through *Star Wars*, where Emperor Palpatine manipulates fear to consolidate authority "for a safe and secure society."

History repeatedly teaches the same lesson: Authoritarianism often cloaks itself in the language of order, morality and even religion.

Victor Hugo and the Cry of the Poor

Victor Hugo (1802-1885) spent much of his life exposing the cruelty of systems that privileged institutions over human beings. Though raised within Catholicism, Hugo increasingly criticized a Church he perceived as indifferent to the suffering of workers, women and the poor.

His masterpiece, *Les Misérables*, remains one of the greatest literary indictments of unjust power ever written.

When I first encountered *Les Misérables* as a young seminarian, I was deeply moved not merely by Jean Valjean's redemption, but by Bishop Myriel's extraordinary mercy. Rather than condemn a desperate thief, the bishop responds with compassion. "You no longer belong to evil," he tells Valjean. "I have bought your soul for God."

That scene feels profoundly Gospel-centered.

Contrast that mercy with Javert's rigid legalism. Javert worships order, rules and punishment. He cannot comprehend grace. In many ways, Javert represents authoritarian religion itself: obsessed with compliance, yet incapable of resurrection.

No wonder conservative Catholic publications viciously attacked Hugo's work. The novel exposed uncomfortable truths: The poor were suffering, workers were exploited, women were discarded, while institutions protected themselves.

The Church often condemns prophets before later celebrating them.

One hears echoes of Amos crying out: "They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals" (Am. 2:6). One hears Mary proclaiming in the *Magnificat* that God "has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly" (Lk. 1:52).

And of course, one hears the stirring anthem from the musical adaptation: "Do you hear the people sing, singing the song of angry men? It is the music of the people who will not be slaves again! When the beating

of your heart echoes the beating of the drums, there is a life about to start when tomorrow comes!"

That song resonates today because millions again feel unheard, unseen and economically crushed.

As gas and grocery prices rise, civil servants disappear from the federal workforce, immigrants are targeted, and billionaires accumulate extraordinary wealth, many Americans increasingly sense that political and religious elites inhabit an entirely different reality than ordinary people. The words of our U.S. president this week – "I don't think about Americans' financial situation, I don't think about anybody" – echo Marie Antoinette's purported sentiment – "Let them eat cake" – while the take-away from his May 13-15 visit to China was seemingly hardly more than "China has a ballroom, and so should the U.S.A.!" The parallels between the French revolution and contemporary "No Kings" rallies become more clear every day!

Our Lady of Montevergine and Holy Outsiders

Among today's commemorations, perhaps none more beautifully embodies radical inclusion than the Madonna of Montevergine.

In 1256, two men in love were attacked near Montevergine, in southern Italy, after being tied to a tree and left to die in the cold. Our Lady intervened, according to the tale, rescuing them through miraculous warmth and light. Over centuries, LGBTQIA+ pilgrims developed a deep devotion to her shrine.

Think about that for a moment.

Long before rainbow flags. Long before Pride Month. Long before legal protections. Marginalized queer people sought refuge beneath the mantle of her "who gives everything and forgives everything."

What an extraordinary image of divine tenderness!

As a gay Catholic priest who once struggled with reconciling faith and sexuality, this story deeply moves me. For years, many LGBTQIA+ Catholics internalized the message that we were "intrinsically-disordered" problems to solve, rather than beloved children of God. Yet stories like Montevergine whisper another truth: Perhaps the Spirit has always accompanied queer people, even when institutions rejected them.

The Gospels repeatedly show Jesus centering outsiders: lepers, tax collectors, women, Samaritans and sinners. He consistently scandalized respectable religious authorities by embracing those excluded from power.

One thinks of *The Wizard of Oz*, where outsiders discover that the power they externally sought already resided within them. Or *Pose*, which

beautifully depicts chosen family among LGBTQIA+ communities rejected by mainstream society.

Communities pushed to the margins often create extraordinary resilience, creativity and love!

Harvey Milk and the Politics of Visibility

Today, Californians remember Harvey Milk (1930-1978), who understood that visibility itself is power.

When Milk became one of the first openly-gay elected officials in California, countless LGBTQIA+ people suddenly saw possibility where previously there had only been shame and invisibility.

“Hope will never be silent,” he famously declared.

Those words still reverberate.

Milk’s assassination transformed him into a martyr for LGBTQIA+ dignity and human rights. Yet his deeper legacy lies in his insistence that marginalized people deserve representation, voice, and participation in public life.

Having come out in my early 20s, I know how terrifying visibility can feel. For years, I carefully navigated institutional expectations, aware that honesty could jeopardize ministry, relationships and belonging. Two decades later, my parents, who came around on the issue, attended my wedding to my husband on the lawn of the Texas Capitol.

Resurrection sometimes happens slowly.

Milk’s legacy reminds us that systems of power depend upon silence. Authoritarianism flourishes when vulnerable communities remain invisible or isolated.

That is why authoritarian movements often first target journalists, educators, immigrants, LGBTQIA+ communities and artists. Visibility threatens control.

We intensely see these dynamics today in the United States. Christian nationalism increasingly seeks to merge religion with state power. Public schools become battlegrounds for imposed religious ideology. Billionaires and political loyalists gain extraordinary access, even accompanying our U.S. president on foreign trips, while ordinary families struggle.

Meanwhile, vulnerable communities are scapegoated.

The parallels to history are indeed chilling.

Pentecost, Power and the Future of the Church

As Catholics now move toward Pentecost, today’s commemorations challenge us to ask what sort of Church the Spirit is calling forth.

Pentecost did not create uniformity. It created radical, multilingual inclusion. “Each one heard them speaking in the native language of each” (Acts 2:6). The Spirit decentralized power. Barriers collapsed.

Yet, sadly, institutional Christianity often moved in the opposite direction: toward centralization, hierarchy and exclusion.

I think often about the extraordinary young people I encountered this past weekend at EDC in Las Vegas. Many have entirely abandoned organized religion, yet they still hunger for transcendence, community, belonging and meaning. They crave authenticity. They instinctively reject hypocrisy and authoritarianism.

Frankly, many churches have lost moral credibility because they have prioritized institutional preservation over compassion, justice and truth.

The future will not belong to churches obsessed with control.

It will belong to communities embodying extraordinary love, radical hospitality, and courageous solidarity.

Calls to Extraordinary Action

People of conscience must actively resist authoritarianism wherever it emerges. In this unordinary U.S. moment, we can:

- Publicly challenge Christian nationalism and any attempt to merge sectarian religion with state power.
- Support LGBTQIA+ youth and marginalized communities increasingly targeted by political and religious extremists.
- Create radically welcoming communities where people experience genuine belonging.
- Read banned books, support artists, and amplify prophetic voices challenging unjust systems.
- Locally organize for democracy, public education, immigrant rights, and economic justice
- Refuse to normalize cruelty, corruption, or dehumanizing rhetoric.
- Support journalists, educators and public servants working to preserve democratic institutions.
- Reclaim the radically-inclusive teachings of Jesus from those weaponizing Christianity for political control.
- Build interfaith and interracial coalitions grounded in compassion and shared humanity.
- Practice extraordinary courage in speaking truth, even when institutions demand silence.

When Tomorrow Comes

As I reflect on Constantine, Victor Hugo, the Madonna of Montevergine, and Harvey Milk, I find myself returning again to that powerful anthem from *Les Misérables*:

“There is a life about to start when tomorrow comes.”

History is ultimately the story of struggles over power: who possesses it, who abuses it, and who courageously challenges it.

Constantine reminds us how easily religion can become entangled with empire. Victor Hugo reminds us that artists and prophets must speak uncomfortable truths. The Madonna of Montevergine reminds us that God often stands beside those excluded from respectability. Harvey Milk reminds us that hope itself becomes revolutionary when marginalized people dare to become visible.

And perhaps Pentecost reminds us of something even deeper: God’s Spirit refuses to remain confined within imperial palaces, gilded cathedrals, or authoritarian movements. The Spirit blows where it wills (Jn. 3:8). The Spirit speaks in many languages. The Spirit continually resurrects communities crushed by fear and exclusion.

Back in those cornfields of Ohio where I was raised, I never could have imagined the path my life would take—from Franciscan friar to Inclusive Catholic priest, from hiding parts of myself to publicly marrying my husband at the Texas Capitol, from institutional loyalty to prophetic questioning.

Yet resurrection often begins precisely when old systems lose their power over us.

The empires of history always imagine themselves eternal. They never are. Hope, though... hope keeps singing!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Where do I see unhealthy concentrations of power within religion, politics or society?
- How do I benefit from systems that marginalize others?
- In what ways am I called to practice extraordinary courage in this historical moment?
- Who are the “outsiders” whom Jesus would likely center today?
- How might the communities in which I participate more authentically embody Pentecost’s radical inclusivity?
- When have I confused institutional loyalty with Gospel fidelity?
- What gives me hope amid rising authoritarianism?

Let Us Pray

God of liberation and resurrection, you raised up prophets, poets, martyrs and visionaries to challenge the powers of this world. Through the witness of Victor Hugo, Harvey Milk, the pilgrims of Montevergine and all who courageously resisted oppression, teach us to value compassion over control, and justice over privilege. Free your Church from every temptation toward empire, domination and exclusion. Fill us anew with the fire of Pentecost, that we might speak words of healing, welcome and truth in every language and every land. Grant extraordinary courage to all who defend democracy, human dignity, and the sacred worth of marginalized people. Comfort those who suffer beneath systems of cruelty and greed. Strengthen us to build communities rooted not in fear, but in love. And when the forces of empire seem overwhelming, remind us again that resurrection still happens, hope still sings and your Spirit still moves among the people. Amen.

“Lost the Plot”?

Pentecost, Gen Z Lingo, and the Extraordinary Work
of Understanding One Another

May 23, 2026



As we prepare to celebrate Pentecost tomorrow, with its story of people hearing the apostles speaking in various languages, I’m led to think of a language to which I’ve recently been introduced. Not the Mandarin, Italian, French or German that I’ve dabbled in through Duolingo. But the slang and idioms of Gen Z – those born roughly between 1997 and 2012.

Last year, my husband and I hosted my now 20-year-old niece Esther and her friend Liberty for a weekend in Austin. I’ll never forget when Esther turned to Liberty and said, “Bruh.” I’m showing my age here, as a member of Gen X, but the thought of one young woman calling another “bro” set off alarms of cognitive dissonance in my brain. I sat there

thinking: Did she just call Liberty “bro”? Are we doing this now? Have I officially become old?

Only later did I come to understand that “bruh” is a Gen Z expression of disbelief, frustration or surprise. Aha! Or perhaps better said: Bruh!

That memory came rushing back yesterday when another member of Gen Z looked at me after I said something that he likely interpreted as mildly dramatic, and he replied, “You’ve truly lost the plot.” Wait, what? I immediately thought to myself: I bet that’s a Gen Z expression that I need to Google!

And so, on this day before Pentecost, I find myself reflecting on language, misunderstanding, and the extraordinary challenge of truly hearing one another.

From Babel to Pentecost

The Pentecost story in Acts 2 is often portrayed as a miraculous overcoming of language barriers. “Each one heard them speaking in the native language of each” (Acts 2:6). Parthians, Medes, Egyptians, Romans and Arabs suddenly understood others. It’s a beautiful image of unity amid diversity!

Yet perhaps the greater miracle was not linguistic at all. Perhaps the deeper miracle was that people who normally distrusted one another actually paused long enough to listen.

Because let’s be honest: Even when we technically speak the same language, we often completely fail to understand one another.

As a young priest nearly 25 years ago, I remember a married couple sitting in my office. They were on the brink of divorce. Both were speaking English. Both loved one another. Yet every sentence became an argument because they attached different meanings to words, gestures and expectations. One heard criticism, where the other intended concern. One offered acts of service, while the other longed for affirmation. I remember thinking then about how difficult human communication really is!

No wonder books like John Gray’s *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* and Gary Chapman’s *The Five Love Languages* became cultural phenomena back then. They recognized something deeply human: We long to connect, but we often lack the vocabulary to do so.

Frankly, churches struggle with this, too.

“No Cap”: A Small Primer on Gen Z Lingo

For those of us whose formative years involved cassette tapes, Friends, Alanis Morissette, and memorizing the lyrics to the Backstreet Boys’ “I Want It That Way,” Gen Z lingo can sometimes feel like decoding the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Here are a few expressions that I've encountered recently:

Bruh: disbelief, frustration or "seriously?"

Rizz: charisma or romantic charm

Delulu: short for "delusional," often used playfully

It's giving...: describing communicated vibe or energy

Bet: agreement or affirmation

Mid: mediocre or underwhelming

Cooked: exhausted, doomed or beyond repair

Main character energy: someone confidently centering their own story

Touch grass: disconnect from the internet and reconnect with reality

Slay: spectacularly succeed

No cap: honestly, truthfully

NPC [short for non-player character]: someone behaving without individuality or critical thought

Lost the plot: becoming irrational or disconnected from reality

Some of these expressions are humorous. Some are surprisingly insightful. Some reveal a generation exhausted by performative politics, climate anxiety, student debt, housing costs and endless online outrage.

And honestly, some of Gen Z's slang communicates emotional nuance more effectively than the formal language many of us inherited.

When a young person says someone has "main character energy," they're often describing confidence, agency and presence. When they say someone is "delulu," they may be critiquing the inability to clearly see reality. When they say a politician has "lost the plot," they're recognizing disconnection between words and lived experience.

That last one particularly struck me this morning.

The Language Gap in Church and Society

One of the great struggles of institutional religion is that churches often continue speaking languages that younger generations no longer understand.

I don't simply mean Latin or theological jargon. I mean emotional language, moral language, and experiential language.

Young adults today increasingly speak the language of authenticity, inclusion, mental health, trauma awareness, and lived experience. Yet churches often continue speaking the language of authority, obedience, hierarchy, and doctrinal precision.

To be clear, every generation has its blind spots. Gen Z sometimes struggles with resilience, attention span, and the ability to endure discomfort. But older generations often struggle with empathy toward new realities.

When I listen to younger people, I hear less interest in institutions, and more longing for meaning. Less fascination with dogma, and more desire for belonging. Less trust in authority, and more concern for integrity.

In many ways, this mirrors Jesus' own ministry.

Jesus spoke the language of ordinary people. He told stories about farmers, seeds, vineyards, fishermen, weddings and lost coins. He translated divine mystery into everyday experience. He repeatedly said, "The kingdom of God is like...." He contextualized. He adapted. He connected.

Meanwhile, the religious elites of his time often spoke in inaccessible abstractions and rigid legalisms.

No wonder Jesus repeatedly frustrated them!

Pentecost and the Extraordinary Work of Translation

Pentecost was not about forcing everyone into one language. It was about radical mutual understanding.

That matters enormously in this very unordinary U.S. moment.

Increasingly, our politics feels like a nation speaking mutually unintelligible dialects. We watch cable news, scroll TikTok, consume podcasts, and inhabit media ecosystems that reinforce entirely different realities.

Our U.S. President came to office speaking populist language about forgotten workers and ordinary Americans. Yet increasingly, amid conversations about ballrooms and monuments to himself, warmongering abroad, and the establishment of a \$1.776 billion fund benefiting allies and loyalists, many Americans understandably feel alienated from the rhetoric that once animated them.

To borrow Pope Francis' famous metaphor, some leaders increasingly smell less like their sheep and more like gilded boardrooms.

The disconnect grows when ordinary Americans struggle to pay for groceries, gas, rent and airfare, while political elites obsess over vanity projects and culture wars.

And younger generations notice.

Gen Z, perhaps more than any generation in recent memory, possesses an extraordinary ability to identify inauthenticity. Raised online, they immediately recognize branding, manipulation and performance. They may not always possess historical depth, but they possess highly developed authenticity radar!

That reality poses a challenge not only for politicians, but also for churches.

Young people today often do not reject Christianity because they reject Jesus. Many reject churches because they perceive hypocrisy, exclusion, nationalism, or performative morality. They see churches loudly condemning LGBTQIA+ people while remaining strangely silent about greed, authoritarianism, racism, or cruelty toward immigrants.

In Gen Z terms? That's giving hypocrisy.

The Church's Calling: Learn Again the Language of Love!

Tomorrow we celebrate Pentecost. Wind. Tongues of fire. Chaos. Courage. Transformation.

The apostles emerged from locked rooms and began speaking in ways people could understand.

That remains the Church's task today.

Not to awkwardly mimic Gen Z slang from the pulpit. God spare us from clergy trying too hard to sound trendy: Nothing screams "mid" more quickly than a 60-year-old priest saying "slay"!

But churches must learn once again to communicate in ways that resonate with human experience.

What if homilies actually addressed anxiety, loneliness, burnout, and economic precarity?

What if churches prioritized belonging over gatekeeping?

What if faith leaders listened more than lectured?

What if Christians became known less for culture wars, and more for extraordinary compassion?

Because beneath every generation's slang lies a deeper human longing: to be seen, understood and loved.

Taylor Swift captured this yearning in "You're On Your Own, Kid." Beyoncé proclaimed empowerment in "Break My Soul." The television series *Ted Lasso* became beloved because it centered kindness in a cynical age. Films like *Everything Everywhere All at Once* explored generational misunderstanding with extraordinary tenderness. Even Pixar's *Inside Out 2* recognizes the emotional complexity shaping younger generations.

Popular culture often preaches sermons that churches fail to hear!

Seven Invitations

As we approach Pentecost, perhaps we might intentionally commit ourselves to the extraordinary ministry of understanding:

- Learn from younger generations without immediately dismissing their language, concerns or experiences.
- Create church communities where authenticity matters more than performance.
- Listen to marginalized voices before speaking over them.

- Resist political and religious leaders who deliberately sow division and confusion.
- Prophetically speak against systems that privilege wealth and power over human dignity.
- Practice intergenerational dialogue in families, organizations and communities.
- Remember that evangelization begins with listening, not lecturing.

“Do You Understand What I Have Done for You?”

In John 13, after washing the disciples’ feet, Jesus asks a fascinating question: “Do you understand what I have done for you?”

Understanding. There’s that word again.

As I think back to Esther casually saying “bruh” to her friend, I smile a bit differently now. What initially sounded foreign and disorienting became an invitation into another generation’s world.

Perhaps that is the invitation of Pentecost itself. Not merely to speak, but to understand. Not merely to preach, but to listen. Not merely to insist on our own vocabulary, but to hear the hopes, fears and longings hidden beneath another person’s words.

Tomorrow, Catholics around the world will pray for the Holy Spirit to descend anew upon the Church. Maybe one sign of that Spirit’s presence would be our willingness to stop assuming we already understand one another. Maybe the miracle we most need today is not supernatural speech, but extraordinary empathy.

Or, to put it in Gen Z terms: The Church desperately needs rizz. No cap!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- When have I recently misunderstood someone because of generational, cultural or ideological differences?
- Do I listen to others with curiosity or with defensiveness?
- How effectively do I and my circles of influence communicate hope, belonging and compassion?
- What language do I use that may alienate—rather than invite—others?
- How might the Holy Spirit be inviting me to grow in empathy and understanding?
- Whose voice or experience have I too quickly dismissed?
- In what ways might I help bridge divides within my family, church or community?

Let Us Pray

Spirit of Pentecost, you who descended like wind and fire upon fearful disciples, teach us once again how to speak and how to listen. When we become trapped in our assumptions, expand our hearts. When we dismiss others, humble our spirits. When we cling to language that wounds, rather than heals, transform our words with extraordinary compassion. Help your Church to speak credibly again, not through power or performance, but through authenticity, justice and love. May we hear your voice in unfamiliar accents, unexpected wisdom, and even in the slang of younger generations. And may we courageously proclaim your inclusive Gospel in ways that weary hearts can finally understand. Amen.

Pentecost versus the Villainization of Gospel Values

Rediscovering Diversity, Equity and Inclusion
at the Heart of the Early Church

May 24, 2026



As I wake up this Pentecost — the celebration of the Church’s birthday! — I find myself reflecting on words that have strangely become controversial: diversity, equity and inclusion. Few developments of the last sixteen months of this very unordinary U.S. administration have grieved me more than watching politicians, pundits and culture warriors transform deeply gospel-centered values into objects of ridicule and fear.

And yet, if we’re honest with the scriptures proclaimed today, Pentecost itself is fundamentally a DEI story!

The Spirit speaks not to one people of one language in one approved way, but to a radically-diverse crowd: Parthians, Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Egypt, Libya and Rome (Acts 2:9-11). The miracle is not that everyone suddenly becomes the same. The miracle is that everyone hears and understands while remaining gloriously different!

That is diversity. That is equity. That is inclusion.

And that, my friends, is the Church at its extraordinary best!

Long before I journeyed from the cornfields of Ohio to the corn tortillas of Texas, I experienced a very homogenous community – where everyone looked alike, talked alike, worshiped alike, and, frightened by anti-abortion radicals, likely largely voted alike. There was comfort in that familiarity, to be sure. Yet over the course of my life, I’ve come to believe more deeply than ever that uniformity is not the same thing as unity.

The Spirit of Pentecost does not flatten humanity. The Spirit celebrates the best of humanity!

Diversity: The Extraordinary Beauty of Difference

The early Church was astonishingly diverse. In fact, whenever someone nostalgically invokes “the early Church,” I’m tempted to ask: Which early Church? The Church of Jerusalem? The Church of Antioch? The Church addressed by Paul in Corinth? The Johannine community? The churches of Asia Minor?

They differed in theology, leadership structures, liturgical practices, and cultural assumptions. Christianity was not originally monolithic. The attempts to impose greater uniformity would come later: the Council of Nicaea with its creed, the Council of Trent with its standardized liturgy and seminaries, and countless other efforts to define who belonged and who did not.

But at Pentecost? The Spirit moved through diversity!

Paul captures this beautifully in today’s second reading: “There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit... As a body is one, though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also Christ” (1Cor. 12:4,12).

Not everybody is an elbow. Not everybody is an eye. Not everybody is called to think, pray, vote, love or express themselves in identical ways.

The rainbow – now villainized in some circles because of its association with Pride – was long before that a biblical sign of covenant, beauty, and divine promise. In Latin America, we see that colorful symbol in celebrations of *el día de la raza* (celebrated on October 12 in Latin America), reminding us that humanity itself exists in many hues and cultures. Or, as I like to say, we’re all like M&Ms: We may appear different on the outside, but we’re all the same on the inside!

Children of God. Bearers of dignity. Recipients of grace.

And frankly, I find it extraordinary that so many who claim to believe in a creating God become uncomfortable with the breathtaking diversity of that Creator’s creation.

The Pentecost story reminds me a bit of the Mos Eisley cantina in the iconic 1977 film *Star Wars*—a dizzyingly diverse gathering of beings from every background somehow existing in shared space. Or perhaps it resembles the joyful chaos of Disney’s *Encanto*, where each member of the family possesses different gifts that together strengthen the whole.

The Body of Christ is not a factory assembly line, where everyone comes out the same. It is a mosaic. It is a stained-glass window through which God’s light shines!

Equity: Making Sure Everyone Can See Over the Fence

If diversity celebrates difference, equity ensures dignity.

Jesus consistently embodied this principle. He treated prostitutes, tax collectors and sinners with the same sacred regard he extended to religious elites. He touched lepers. He publicly spoke with women. He healed the servant of a Roman centurion. He praised the faith of outsiders. Again and again, he elevated those society pushed downward or outward.

I often think of that famous cartoon depicting children of varying heights attempting to look over a fence. Equality gives every child the same-sized box. Equity ensures every child can actually see over the fence.

The gospel consistently moves toward equity.

The *Magnificat* is a song of equity: “God has cast down the mighty from their thrones and lifted up the lowly” (Lk. 1:52).

The Acts of the Apostles describes believers sharing possessions so “there was no needy person among them” (Acts 4:34). That’s equity.

Paul chastised the Corinthians because wealthy Christians were feasting while poorer believers went hungry at the Eucharist (1Cor. 11). That condemnation is rooted in equity.

Latin American liberation theologians often speak of God’s “preferential option for the poor.” Some misunderstand that phrase, imagining God somehow loves the exploited more than everyone else. That entirely misses the point. The idea is not favoritism. The idea is balance. God lifts up those crushed by systems of inequality, so that everyone might stand with equal dignity!

The kingdom of God is repeatedly imagined as a banquet table where all are fed. Not merely billionaires. Not merely the privileged. Everyone.

As Dolly Parton famously sang in “Coat of Many Colors,” dignity does not come from wealth or status, but from love and shared humanity. Likewise, Bruce Springsteen’s “The Rising” and Beyoncé’s “Break My Soul” both echo themes of resilience, solidarity, and human worth amid oppressive systems. Pop culture often understands equity better than some pulpits!

Inclusion: The Heartbeat of Jesus' Ministry

Jesus was radically inclusive.

His birth announcement went first to shepherds—men considered ritually suspect and socially marginal. Gentile astrologers from the East later arrived at his home. Throughout his ministry, he consistently moved toward those whom others avoided.

He touched the untouchable. He ate with the excluded. He centered the marginalized.

His story of a good Samaritan scandalized listeners precisely because the hero belonged to the wrong group. The prodigal son was welcomed home before he could even finish his apology. Zacchaeus the tax collector became dinner company. Mary Magdalene became the apostle to the apostles.

Eventually, Paul plainly articulated the implications: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28).

Imagine how controversial those words sounded in an empire obsessed with hierarchy, patriarchy and class distinctions!

Inclusion is not some contemporary invention of “woke ideology.” Inclusion was the ministerial strategy of Jesus himself!

And yet here we are in 2026, watching politicians demonize inclusion as though welcoming people somehow threatens civilization. Universities lose funding for supporting DEI initiatives. Immigrants are treated with suspicion. Books are banned. School curricula are censored. LGBTQIA+ persons become convenient political punching bags. Gerrymandering dilutes the voices of communities of color.

The rhetoric becomes increasingly tribal: us versus them.

Politicians understand our reptilian brains quite well. Fear mobilizes. Suspicion rallies voters. Division consolidates power. Conservative news networks and social media algorithms know precisely how to keep people angry and afraid. It's *The Hunger Games* with cable news chyrons!

But Pentecost entirely points in another direction.

The Spirit Speaks Every Language

As I've mentioned in previous writings, my husband and I continue dabbling in languages through Duolingo. I stumbled through German before our trip to Berlin, Italian before Naples, Sicily and Rome, and now Mandarin and French to better connect with my in-laws and keep pace with my husband's own language interests. Learning another language quickly humbles you. You realize how often misunderstanding happens—even with good intentions.

Pentecost assures us that the Spirit continues translating.

The Spirit bridges differences. The Spirit creates understanding. The Spirit expands belonging.

The apostles did not demand that the crowd first learn Hebrew or Aramaic. The Spirit met people where they were!

That detail tremendously matters.

Too often churches still expect others to conform before they belong. Dress this way. Worship this way. Think this way. Love this way. Vote this way. But Pentecost reveals a God who speaks first in the language of the listener!

Perhaps that is why younger generations increasingly struggle with institutional religion. Many churches no longer sound intelligible to them. Young people hear condemnations where they long for compassion. They hear culture-war rhetoric where they long for meaning. They hear political talking points where they long for transcendence.

To borrow from Taylor Swift's "You Need to Calm Down," younger generations increasingly reject spaces that weaponize exclusion.

And honestly, I understand why.

Christian Nationalism and the Anti-Gospel of Fear

Perhaps nowhere is the betrayal of Pentecost more visible than in the rise of white (or "Christian") nationalism.

The oxymoron of "Christian nationalism" still startles me. It roots Christianity in domination. It wraps nationalism in gospel language. It uses Jesus—executed by empire—to bless authoritarianism.

Bruh.

We increasingly witness versions of Christianity more concerned with preserving cultural power than embodying Christlike love. The result resembles the religious leaders Jesus repeatedly condemned: obsessed with boundaries, purity and control.

Meanwhile, Pentecost invites us toward courage, instead of fear.

The same Peter who once denied Jesus suddenly proclaimed good news publicly and fearlessly. The same frightened disciples locked in an upper room become extraordinary witnesses to inclusion, justice, and shared humanity.

What changed? The Spirit came.

And perhaps the Spirit still longs to come among us!

Calls to Action for Pentecost People

- Openly and unapologetically speak about the gospel roots of diversity, equity and inclusion. Do not surrender these values to political caricature.

- Support schools, universities and organizations that continue creating spaces of belonging for historically-marginalized communities.
- Honestly examine your own family and circles of influence. Who remains excluded or unheard?
- Build authentic relationships across lines of race, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, and political affiliation. Pentecost happens through encounter.
- Refuse to participate in fear-based rhetoric that pits groups of people against one another for political gain.
- Publicly advocate for immigrants, LGBTQIA+ persons, people of color, and others increasingly targeted by dehumanizing policies and language.
- Create extraordinary spaces of welcome in your homes, churches and communities where people feel seen, valued and safe.

From Babel to Pentecost

The story of Pentecost is often contrasted with the tale of the Tower of Babel. At Babel, humanity fractured through pride and power. At Pentecost, humanity reconnected through humility and shared understanding.

And perhaps that is our choice today as well.

We can continue building towers of fear, nationalism, exclusion and suspicion. We can keep shouting past one another in languages of grievance and resentment. We can keep villainizing diversity while worshipping conformity. Or we can choose the Spirit.

We can choose extraordinary courage over fear. Extraordinary welcome over exclusion. Extraordinary compassion over tribalism.

As I think back to my Ohio childhood, and to the immigrant parishioners who shaped my young adult years at Cristo Rey, and to the rainbow diversity of Austin and the many communities that now fill my life, I increasingly believe this: The Church becomes most fully itself not when everyone looks the same, but when everyone finally realizes they belong at the same table!

Pentecost was never about erasing difference.

It was about making love intelligible across difference.

And that, my friends, remains the extraordinary work of the Spirit!

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

- Whom have I consciously or unconsciously excluded from my understanding of God's family?

- How do I emotionally react when I hear the words diversity, equity and inclusion?
- In what ways might fear shape my attitudes toward those who are different from me?
- Where do I see Pentecost happening in today's world?
- How can I help create communities where all people genuinely feel welcomed and valued?
- Which voices or groups does my church or community still struggle to fully include?
- How might the Holy Spirit be inviting me to greater courage during this very unordinary moment in U.S. history?

Let Us Pray

Spirit of the Living God, you descended upon a frightened and divided people, transforming them into a courageous community where every language was heard, where all people were welcomed, and where every person was valued. Break open our hardened hearts. Free us from fear of difference. Deliver us from the temptation to divide the world into "us" and "them." Help us to embody the extraordinary love of Jesus, who welcomed the excluded, lifted up the oppressed, and revealed the sacred dignity of every human person. May we become a Pentecost people: courageous in justice, extravagant in compassion, and joyful in diversity. And when the forces of fear, nationalism and exclusion grow loud around us, may we continue boldly proclaiming the gospel in every language of love. Amen.