"Think Tank"

Commentaries

by

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2018

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CHRISTMAS CAN CHANGE OUR FOCUS FOR THE ENTIRE YEAR

(1/5/18)

This week the Christmas season draws to its close with a leap across space and time. On the Epiphany, we celebrate the Magi adoring the newborn child in Bethlehem. Two days later, we see the adult Jesus baptized by John at the Jordan River.

While the biblical narrative skips many years in the maturation of the Messiah, people today can easily catalogue every moment of their lives. Camera features on smartphones allow us to capture all that happens with just a point and a click. And with a flip of a button, we can turn the viewfinder inward, shifting the focus to ourselves.

The "selfie" is now a staple of social communications. For some, it seems to be the only pictures they take!

Not having to get someone else to take the photo is quite convenient. Being able to capture ourselves in the moment heightens our sense of being participant, not bystanders, in life's happenings. Posting our selfies, we presume the rest of the digital world cares, too, and the accumulation of "likes" bolsters our self-esteem.

And there's the proverbial rub!

In his recent book, *Selfie: How We Became So Self-Obsessed and What It's Doing to Us* (Picador, 2017), Will Storr recounts the "quasi-religious" story of the self-esteem movement and the great con perpetrated its unwitting adherents.

According to Storr, it all began in 1980's California with a political task force that championed raising self-esteem as a way to combat social ills. Given credibility by a university report on correlation data, a falsehood which Storr debunks, the drive toward creating a "social vaccine" of "unconditional positive regard" has transformed virtually every realm of contemporary life, from politics and criminal justice to education and parenting.

The result: "a world of trophies for everyone" because "it doesn't matter what you do, but who you are."

But Christmas tells another story, with very different pictures that invite us to change our focus even beyond the holidays

There are no photographs of the Nativity, but artistic renderings of every sort put the focus squarely on the newborn child in the manger. Shepherds visit in wonder. Magi prostrate themselves in adoration. The blessed Mother gazes lovingly, perhaps perplexed but pondering all these things in her heart. Soon after, in the Temple, Simeon "took him in his arms and blessed God", while Anna "spoke about the child to all who were awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem."

The characters have no cell phones. St. Joseph took no selfies (despite a popular hipster creche). All eyes are upon the child.

More significantly, the gaze of the child shows where God looks – not to the divine self, but outward to a world in need of salvation. The positive regard for humans that God demonstrated in becoming one of us is fulfilled in his dying for us on the cross to save us from the eternal consequences of sin.

Professing faith in the Incarnation and Passion of the Christ counteracts what Storr calls "the flawed yet infectious notion that, in order to thrive, people need to be treated with unconditional positivity." It is more consistent with the ancient philosophical wisdom "know thyself" – something deeper than discovering one's inner self or photographing the outer self.

Knowing oneself to be imperfect and flawed, a sinner in need of redemption, implies no self-deprecation and requires no self-loathing. As Pope Francis said during his most recent general audience, "To measure ourselves by the fragility of the clay with which we're made is an experience that strengthens us. While making us deal with our weakness, it also opens our hearts to invoke the divine mercy that transforms and converts."

The ubiquitous selfie measures things differently. Fruit of the self-esteem movement, it misses the mark in terms of what matters most.

The adoring Magi and the deferential Baptist point us in a different direction for the new year – with a focus on Him alone who holds the power to cure our social ills and to lead us to everlasting happiness.

That's the lesson of Christmas, even after the decorations are put away. As movements go, the Nativity teaches us that self-acceptance not self-esteem is the real way to human fulfillment.

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FAKE NEWS ALSO SPREADS THROUGH EVERYDAY INTERACTIONS (2/2/18)

Himself the subject of one of the bigger "fake news" stories in 2016 and targeted again in 2017, Pope Francis dedicated his message for the 2018 World Communications Day to this growing phenomenon. He takes on the troubling topic in ways part obvious and part provocative.

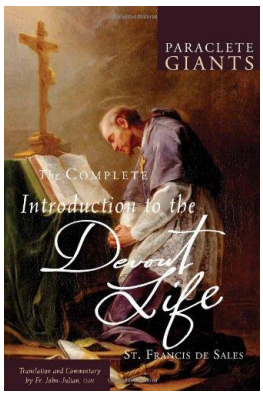
The obvious part defines what fakes news is: "the spreading of disinformation." It explains that it works by appearing to be plausible, by appealing to stereotypes, and by exploiting natural emotions. It points out the tragic results, in that fake news "discredits others, presenting them as enemies, to the point of demonizing them and fomenting conflict."

The provocative thought comes when Pope Francis theorizes about the nature of truthfulness in communications. "In Christianity," he writes, "truth is not just a conceptual reality that regards how we judge things, defining them as true or false." Rather, what is really true "carries with it the sense of support, solidity, and trust, as implied by the root *'aman*, the source of our liturgical expression *Amen*."

From this relational sense of truth, the pope draws a striking conclusion: "An impeccable argument can indeed rest on undeniable facts, but if it is used to hurt another and to discredit that person in the eyes of others, however correct it may appear, it is not truthful. We can recognize the truth of statements from their fruits: whether they provoke quarrels, foment division, encourage resignation; or, on the other hand, they promote informed and mature reflection leading to constructive dialogue and fruitful results."

Journalists, whom the pope singles out in the message as "the *protectors of news*," may quarrel with that claim. After all, as Christopher Altieri notes, "information that might damage a reputation if brought before the public may well merit public scrutiny nonetheless." As he also points out, the primary duty of professional journalism is "to frame issues fairly, not favorably."

Setting aside the worthwhile journalistic debate, the pope's analysis opens a bigger window on the subject. As much or more than a professional concern, fake news can be a prominent matter in interpersonal communications. Everyday conversations also contribute to the spread of fake news whenever we complain about, gossip with, or mock others.



St. Francis de Sales, on whose feast day the pope's message was published, addresses the virtuous character of ordinary speech in his *Introduction to the Devout Life* (part III, chapters 26-30). His advice there reflects the same relational approach to truth that informs the pope's message.

Complaining seems commonplace these days. We bemoan the positions or decisions of others because we don't agree. Were it up to us, we would choose or do differently. But when disagreement turns to denigration, truth gives way to presumption and arrogance. Even in blaming vice, says the saint, we should "spare as much as (we) can the person in whom it lies."

Gossiping appears to be a social pastime. Speaking critically of persons not present during the conversation is so easy to do. But it makes mounting a self-defense impossible. Toward our neighbors, however, charity should always prevail. Even when being critical of another, "it is essential that the criticism be beneficial either to the person *to* whom one speaks or the one *about* whom one speaks."

Mockery masks its fakeness in amusement. We poke fun at others, even when such ridicule is not so fun for them. To speak in jest can be cleverly humorous. But between mirth and meanness stands the fine line of the speaker's intention. For de Sales, "derision and mockery are never found without scorn."

Today, we refer to fake news as what we see in print or on screen. It proliferates through the manipulative powers of new media. But it begins with the one who writes or posts, in how we think and speak.

For the saint, we are its source, since "our words are the true indicators of the condition of our souls." For the pope, we are also its remedy. "The best antidotes to falsehoods are not strategies, but people: people who are not greedy but ready to listen, people who make the effort to engage in sincere dialogue so that the truth can emerge; people who are attracted by goodness and take responsibility for how they use language.

Between the two Francis's, this is truth. And it's news worth sharing.

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(World Communications Day, the only worldwide celebration called for by the Second Vatican Council, is celebrated in most countries on the Sunday before Pentecost. Though not observed throughout the United States, the day is marked by some with local events, including a day-long conference sponsored by the DeSales Media Group in the diocese of Brooklyn and a two-part symposium at Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary in the archdiocese of Philadelphia.)

BETTER SPEAKING, BETTER LISTENING.
PAPA FRANCESCO'S PLEA (3/2/18)

Lately, there's been much ado about preaching. In the past month, Pope Francis has broached the subject in public on five different occasions. The media have jumped on the bandwagon with headlines about the rights of the faithful, the necessary virtues of the preacher, and the papal plea for brevity ("no more than ten minutes, please").

(video link)

It's all true! Hymns and homilies remain the scourge of Mass-goers. The latter poses a continual challenge to priests and deacons.

But, as usual, there's more to it. Preaching may be a one-way venue for religious messaging. But for Pope Francis, it's more than a Sunday broadcast. Even if the masses remain silent (for the most part), he considers the homily a supernatural conversation along the path to personal transformation.

The pope says that "through the Gospel and the homily, God dialogues with his people, who listen to him with attention and veneration and, at the same time, recognize he is present and acting." That dialogue becomes effective when the Lord's Word, proclaimed and preached, "enters through the ears, goes to the heart and passes to the hands, to good deeds."

To guide the faithful on this path, the preacher certainly must know, and care about, what he's doing, namely, giving voice to God's word and not simply sharing his own thoughts. Sacred eloquence is not a consequence of ordination. The charism of clarity requires preparation, which necessitates devoting time to the task, in prayer and study. It also takes effort to organize one's thoughts and words, so that what is preached teaches people about God's word, convinces them it is Good News, and motivates them to convert their life accordingly.

But for any of that to happen, people have to listen! As much as the pope exhorts preachers to do their job well, he also makes it quite clear that the congregation has its part to do. Paying "proper attention" takes effort. Hearing happens if the acoustics are good. But listening takes place only when

one is intentional about it. For the pope, this means not preemptively dismissing the preacher and not giving in to the boredom that comes with listening, even to a long and labored speech.

For a homily to produce its graced effects, both preacher and people need to converge on the transmission of God's Word. Hopefully, the former will finish speaking and the latter finish listening at the same time!

But does it work? And does it matter? New research shows it can.

The Catholic Leadership Institute studies spiritual growth and parish engagement through the "Disciple Maker Index," a 75-question survey completed by parishioners throughout the U.S. and Canada. To-date, more than 330 parishes in 21 (arch)dioceses have participated in the survey, including 15 parishes here in Philadelphia. (An additional 27 parishes in this Archdiocese are currently offering the initiative.)

Based on responses from more than 82,000 participants, the data confirm that parishes do help people to grow spiritually through preaching. But the spiritual lifeline still needs to reach many more.

In Philadelphia, an average of 47% of parishioners "strongly agree" that they have grown spiritually through "homilies that connect [my] faith with [my] everyday life." Unfortunately, that's fewer than half the listeners, and the range of those responses varies widely among parishes, from 18% to 97%. Still, the average ranks the Archdiocese at the top among those who surveyed multiple parishes, and well above the continental average of 37%.

This matters significantly because the research also demonstrates that quality of preaching is a key driver in terms of promoting parish life. On the whole, cross-tabulation indicates that nearly 92% of those who strongly agree with having heard homilies that connect faith to life also strongly agree that they would recommend their parish to a friend. Those who strongly agree about recommending their parish are the "promoters" who are most likely to bring others to church. Considering the dearth of devotees actually attending church on a weekly basis - estimated in Philadelphia at about 20% - the importance of good preaching thus looms large.

Pope Francis concludes his catechesis with the hopeful proposition that "if we listen to the 'Good News', we will be converted and transformed by it, and therefore capable of changing ourselves and the world." While the early research suggests this may be happening for some, a Lenten examination of conscience by all those in pulpits and pews would be an even better indicator, for the real proof resides in our own hearts and hands when we hear God's word and act on it (Luke 11:28).

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PRACTICE THE PAUSE ON PASTORING THROUGH INTERVIEWS

(4/6/18)

By now it should be old news. But the hits keep coming whenever Pope Francis speaks.

The latest hullabaloo surfaced during Holy Week, when Eugenio Scalfari reported in *La Repubblica* on his conversation with Pope Francis about the fate of persons after death. According to Scalfari, the pope said, "Those who repent obtain God's forgiveness and join the ranks of souls who contemplate him, but those who do not repent and cannot therefore be forgiven disappear. Hell does not exist; the disappearance of sinful souls exists."

Not surprisingly, reaction was swift and scathing. Online tabloids and critical websites lit up with the supposed "news" of this papal pronouncement.

Hoping to compel calm, the Holy See's Press Office issued a formal communiqué declaring the encounter between pontiff and reporter a "private meeting" rather than an interview. It characterized the article as a "reconstruction" of their conversation, whose content should not be taken "as a faithful transcription of the words of the Holy Father."

End of story? Hardly! Analysis quickly turned to denigration, defense, and deflation.

The denigration came from those who seized upon the story as evidence of this pope's catastrophically erring ways. For some critics, Francis had crossed the line from loose-lipped communication to definitively scandalous speech. One Italian commentary raised the specter of impeaching the pope on account of heresy.

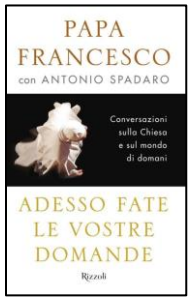
The defense mounted. Labeling the story "fake news," another columnist at *La Repubblica* posted that Scalfari conceded to being inaccurate or creative with his citations of the pope's comments. Elsewhere, an Italian priest lamented the "catholically correct" criticism that mistook friendship for an interview, the former being something between Eugenio and Jorge Mario "that cannot be caged up in any institutional interest or personal benefit."

Into the breach strode John Allen, Jr. to try to deflate the discord. With an astute analysis, this well-respected Vaticanista unpacked the surreal story by noting that Francis frequently speaks about the reality of hell, that folks in-the-know know Scalfari's reporting for what it really is, and that in Francis's approach to dialogue, especially with an elderly unbeliever, the preferred model is "friendship first, clarity later."

Clarity is also needed to appreciate, or at least understand, how Pope Francis communicates.

Many wonder why he continues to speak so off-handedly to reporters, when doing so is unnecessary and obviously fraught with the risk of his being misinterpreted. In their view, popular appeal should give way to pontifical prudence, especially given the speed with which stories spread in a digital world.

But this "safe" approach misunderstands the nature of interpersonal communications. Desirous of precision, it misses the persons.



For Pope Francis, a pastor converses with people "where they are" in life, even if that's not in an ideal place. Faith, not fear, stimulates the exchange, as he explains in his preface to a recent book about his interviews.

There he says that "interviews always have a pastoral value." He acknowledges how this medium "can render me vulnerable." But he adds, "it's a risk that I must run" because that "is a way of communicating my ministry."

These days, the Petrine ministry unfolds in a world where social communication favors brevity and rewards genuineness. There, says Francis, "I try to respond in a spontaneous way, in a conversation that I wish to be understandable, and not with rigid formulas. I even use a simple, popular language. For me the interviews are a dialogue, not a lecture."

For Pope Francis, this "direct communication with people" is a "true and real necessity" for ministry in the Church. We who collaborate in that ministry, and those who receive its benefits, profess the same faith as the pope. We would do well to keep that in mind whenever we see jarring headlines or incongruous claims about what he supposedly said. In popular parlance, we should "practice the pause."

But even when the reporting is accurate, and we are constrained to ponder the papal points more strenuously, we can benefit from the spiritual insight of another Francis. St. Francis de Sales, in his masterful *Introduction to the Devout Life*, reminds us that one way to practice the command to love your neighbor as yourself is this: "If an action has many different aspects, we must always think of the one which is the best."

In today's digital world, thinking what is best can be stymied by fake news, even in reporting about religion. But it takes more than fact-checking to know the truth, especially in matters of faith. In that realm, as St. John Paul II once explained, knowledge is grounded on trust between persons.

Perhaps we should start there when trying to make sense of thoughts and words that are hard to comprehend – even, or especially, those of a pope.

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ASCENSION THURSDAY INVITES EVERY GENERATION TO LOOK UP (5/4/18)

Some folks take birthdays very seriously. Case in point: my mother.

As the story goes, she went into labor with me in the afternoon on Ascension Thursday. When the obstetrician finally entered her room, she asked, "How long is this going to take? It's a holy day and I have to get back for evening Mass." Thankfully the physician convinced her that I was a reasonable excuse for missing that year's obligation.

Today, even without giving birth, more and more people seem to be excusing themselves from the obligation to attend Mass. According to a recent Gallup Poll, "From 2014 to 2017, an average of 39% of Catholics reported attending Church in the past seven days. This is down from an average of 45% from 2005 to 2008 and represents a steep decline from 75% in 1955." If this is true for Sunday Mass, it's easy to imagine the dearth of the devout who will be in church to fulfill that obligation on a Thursday.

Even some Catholic leaders have questioned the wisdom of that obligation. As a result, most places in the USA have transferred the solemnity to the following Sunday. Only in the ecclesiastical provinces of Boston, Harford, New York, Newark, Omaha, and Philadelphia is the celebration mandated for the Thursday that comes forty days after Easter (this year, on May 10).

That timing of the Ascension reflects biblical symbolism, designating a sustained period of testing and learning. Culturally, the number is associated with the years spanning a generation. In this respect, the forty days during which the risen Jesus appeared to His disciples represents a formative pedagogical period that leads the first generation of disciples into the new Christian reality.

Historically, that new reality begins with the completion of the Jesus story on earth. In the Gospel account, "the Lord Jesus, after he spoke to them, was taken up into heaven and took his seat at the right hand of God. But they went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the word through accompanying signs" (Mark 16:19-20).

That's a rather odd ending to the story. Space travel by way of a cloud, on which a human body appears to float away out of sight, yet remains visibly seated on a celestial throne? Such a transposition between earth and heaven simply doesn't make sense given the dualism of our contemporary consciousness.

But that conclusion to the Gospel story is not merely an ending, however supernaturally it is depicted. Theologically, the Ascension is the fulfillment of the earthy life of Jesus. Bringing the story full circle, the Son of God who came "down" from the divine heights in the Incarnation is also now the Son of Man who has gone "up" to a place of glory proper to Him.

What the Ascension really celebrates is the permanence of Easter. The effects of the Resurrection now permeate all the world. No longer is life limited by death. No longer is history hampered by time. No longer is society circumscribed by space. The whole of human existence has been forever uplifted.

If we would just look up.

Far from cosmological superstition, the surreal story of the Ascension invites us to see all things in a new light, in the conjunction between earth and heaven. It draws our gaze upward, that we might see life here below now illumined by the sight of that eternal home to which we are all called, and which has now been opened to us.

Our celebration of this solemnity bids us to look up. For people now accustomed to looking down, locked in on their hand-held devices and suffering because of it, the Ascension offers never-ending hope.

A new study indicates an alarmingly high level of loneliness among all Americans. Of even more concern is the finding that "Generation Z (adults ages 18-22) and Millennials (adults ages 23-37) are lonelier and claim to be in worse health than older generations." This survey found no direct correlation between loneliness and social media use, but other studies point to the common-sense link between reliance on digital technology and a resultant experience of isolation.

Looking up from our phones is necessary for young people to form valuable human relationships, as a viral video on YouTube poetically points out. But overcoming the existential loneliness that affects every generation requires looking up even further.

The Ascension raises our view in the right direction. Looking heavenward and "seeing" Jesus there, we come to know by faith that the Lord is always and everywhere looking down upon us. That's why our celebration on Thursday is not merely an obligation to fulfill but an enduring reason to rejoice.

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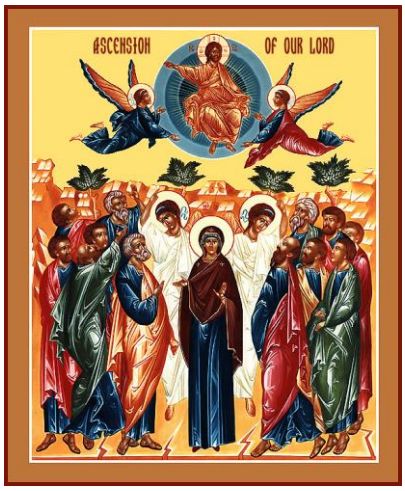
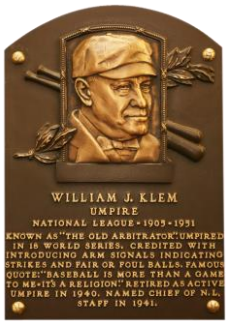


THE CHURCH CHEERS FOR THE TEAM OF HUMANITY

(6/6/18)

"Baseball is more than a game to me - it's a religion."



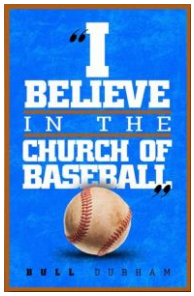
That's the call once made by the Hall of Fame umpire Bill Klem. It's not a reviewable decision!

But now the Church offers its own argument. In its first ever document on sport, the Holy See provides a Christian perspective not just on baseball but on all sports as they relate to the development of the human person.

Published on June 1 by the Dicastery for Laity, Family, and Life, "Giving the best of yourself" draws on a repeated exhortation of Pope Francis to link the search for victory and the quest for sanctity. The five-part text first explains the Church's motive for stepping onto this field, offers a genesis of the sporting phenomenon, highlights multiple areas of significance, identifies a few ethical challenges, and sets the lineup for a pastoral ministry in this arena.

It's an ambitious undertaking. Sports, after all, are played across the globe, on fields of varying size and shape, with players of all ages and abilities and aspirations, and scores of others connected in technical, financial, or supportive roles. The very notion of sport encompasses a wide range of recreational activities, competitive contests, and professional matches, the full scope of which cannot be examined in a single document.

This text, instead, attends to the "anthropological constant" exhibited in sport itself, where virtues can be fostered, boundaries overcome, and ultimate meaning witnessed. Thus, the Church "feels co-responsible for sport and for safeguarding it" and "desires to be of service to all who work in sport" by proposing the "added value" of Christianity "to help give fullness to the sporting experience."



Scholars have long explored the civic, folkloristic, mythopoetic, and even architectural connections between sport and religion. Sports reveal ideological dimensions in their myths, values, and beliefs. Sports observe cultic practices in their rituals and observances. Sports celebrate their "saints" (heroes) and revere their sacred traditions (records). Some sports, like baseball, have a distinctively religious power, as the legendary umpire stated and this author also proposed.

But the Church's approach to sport is more pastoral than philosophical. The document adopts a thoroughly humanistic game plan, as its working definition makes clear: "sports are bodily motions of individual or collective agents who, in accordance with particular rules of the game, effect ludic performances which, on the condition of equal opportunity, are compared to similar performances of others in a competition."

Sports involve people, unified in body, soul, and spirit and active individually and/or on teams. Sports develop virtue in the display of creative abilities and in the exercise of fair play. Sports exhibit an intrinsically playful ("ludic") purpose, even at a professional level. When all have the chance to play, sports reflect solidarity and engender respect. Owing to their competitive character, sports require

courage and demand sacrifice, both of which, when embraced, can lead to joy and harmony no matter what the score is.

If that sounds idyllic, it is. That's because the document seeks only to offer a perspective on what sport can and should be. It acknowledges the institutionalization, professionalization, and commercialization of today's world of sports. It calls out ethical infringements by and against those involved in sports. But its stated purpose is simply to disclose "the relationship between giving our very best in sports and in living the Christian faith."

That mutual vision, introduced by a letter from Pope Francis and enhanced by many references from his predecessors, governs the ongoing work of the dicastery's section (office) on Church and Sport. It may not resonate with barstool analysts at the local sports pub. And it likely won't get any airtime on sports talk radio.

But it does speak to those who see sports in a higher light, particularly those who play a part in athletic ministries. At the local level, Catholic Youth Organizations serve parishes and dioceses in their quest to guide youth to connect athletics and spirituality. In higher education, administrators are studying how to integrate joy, compassion, respect, enlightenment, love and balance into collegiate sports as a result of a conference on "Sport at the Service of Humanity." And even on the professional level, groups such as Catholic Athletes for Christ serve to link faith and sport with athletes, coaches, staff and employees at ballparks and stadiums around the country.

Given the global and cultural phenomenon that sport has become, the educational and evangelical tasks are enormous, but rich with potential. As the Holy Father points out, "sports can be an instrument of encounter, formation, mission, and sanctification."

On this, the ump and the pope agree – sports really are more than just games.

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Dicastery for Laity Family and Life

LISTENING TO A NEW SOUND IN THE CHURCH

(7/6/18)

With summer now in full swing, outdoor concerts and festivals draw people young and old to enjoy listening to music. But this popular pastime also portends something more, at least according to the Vatican's Synod of Bishops.

In preparation for the upcoming assembly on "Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment," the Synod recently published the *Instrumentum Laboris*, a lengthy working document of topics up for discussion. Among these is music, considered in terms of language, experience, and youth culture.

Not merely entertainment, music represents "the soundtrack of their lives" and "contributes to the formation of their identity" (no. 36). It triggers a socializing process of sights, sounds, and motions that "allow people to step outside themselves and to feel in tune with strangers" (no. 37). Listening to music connects the young to a dimension of interiority instrumental for their lives (no. 162).

Music seems an unlikely topic for a meeting of bishops, whose tastes on the subject are likely to differ greatly from those of youth! Nevertheless, the Synod's paramount concern is to connect with the younger generation.

In a chapter on "listening to young people" (nn. 64-72), we read that they "are asking the Church to reach out to them to listen to and welcome them, offering dialogue and hospitality." The document quotes one response from a bishops' conference which says, "young people want a 'less institutional and more relational' Church." From another conference we learn that "the young want to see a Church that shares their life situation in the light of the Gospel rather than preaches"!

The sound of the document is loud and clear – young people want to be heard. But, as with certain types of music, the lyrics here aren't always decipherable. What exactly do young people desire from a Church that "listens" more?

If they want to be included in discussions, involved in processes, and generally taken into consideration because they can speak to the particular realities of their state-in-life, then, yes, by all means the Church should listen. The Synod participants will gather to do just that.

But if wanting the Church to listen means to welcome viewpoints that diverge from professed beliefs, then the young are likely to be disappointed with the outcomes of the October gathering. The Church still must preach the Gospel and the faith that follows from it.

Religious listening matters most when it is attuned to the sound of the Spirit. The volume won't reach the decibel level typical of outdoor concerts; the divine song resounds in the heart and is heard in the silence of the soul. Its melody underscores the need for "discernment." Its rhythm beats with the constant call to "discipleship."

The playlist of topics for the Synod begins (no. 2) with an ode to discernment as "a way of life, a style, a fundamental attitude" of hearing the voice of the Lord. To discern is to listen; to listen is to obey (from the Latin *ob* "to" and *audire* "listen, hear").

In obedience to the Holy Spirit, discernment engenders an "openness to new things, courage to move outwards, and resistance to the temptation of reducing what is new to what we already know." It "can also become a driver for our actions, the ability to be creatively faithful to the one single mission the Church has always been entrusted with."

To fulfill that mission, the Church surely needs to engage the next generation, by attending to their distinctive gifts and genuine needs. But young people also need to listen – by following the vocation in which the Lord calls each of them to be "missionary disciples" in the world.

The working document makes only one reference to this terminology (no. 199). But that biblical image dominates Pope Francis's renewed vision of who the Church is and what it does. As he puts it, "this is what Baptism works in us: it gives us Grace and hands on the faith to us. All of us in the Church are disciples, and this we are forever, our whole lifelong; and we are all missionaries, each in the place the Lord has assigned to him or her."

Figuring out how to be disciples amid the social and cultural realities in which they find themselves is the urgent task for young people. Helping them to hear and answer their divine call is the responsibility of the rest of us.

If we all learn to listen in concert with one another, this Synod has the potential to be not just a one-time gathering, but a continuing festival of faith.

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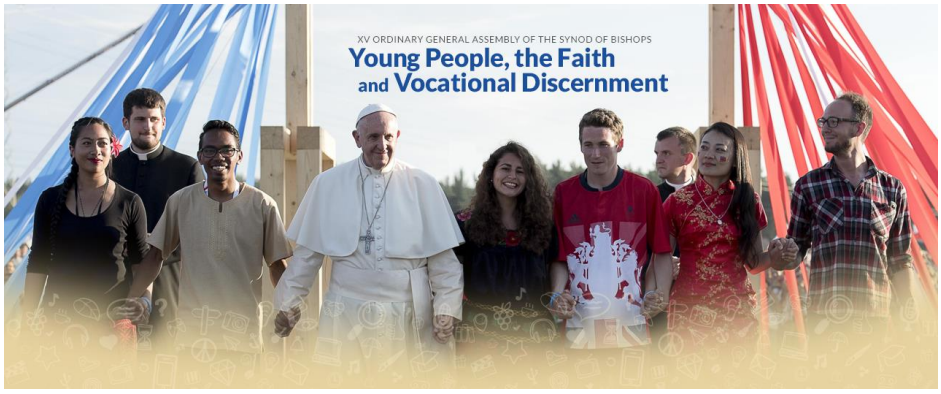

LEISURE PUTS TIME ON OUR SIDE

(8/14/18)

Life should have a speed limit. Then again, it would probably be ignored just like the one posted on the highway.

Everyone is in a hurry. Everything needs to be done by yesterday. We never seem to have enough time.

And so we rush. We think that if we drive faster, we'll get there sooner. We suppose that if we multi-task, we can get more done. Too often some people try to do both simultaneously.

Our digital environment no doubt contributes to the hurried and harried sense of contemporary life. Because of the revolutionary power of Information and Communications Technology (ICT's), we seem able to transcend the former limits of time and space like never before.

(image from pinsdaddy.com)

Digital technology enables us to be connected anywhere and everywhere. The things we have to do, the places we have to go, the people we have to see – all of these can be managed with the push of a button and the power of an app.

In the hyperconnected era of the Internet, we have come to expect things to happen speedily, as "instantly" as the messages we send. As a result, when life offline doesn't move as quickly as it does online, we try to make it happen. We speed up, we rush, and we hurry. We want to go beyond life's speed limit.

But despite our technological advances, time and space remain human limitations, inherent features of our worldly existence. This truth factors significantly into the biblical theology of creation.

In the stories that narrate the reality of human existence, we hear that space has been demarcated by the Creator through the setting of natural boundaries. For example, the sky is set between the heavens above and the earth below, and the seas are separated from the dry ground.

Still, through our human ingenuity, we have learned to transcend, somewhat, these spatial limits. We can travel on airlines that rise above the skies to get us from here to there, and NASA has figured out how to go even farther beyond. We can build damns, channel rivers, and bring "rain" upon the crops through massive water distribution systems.

(image from mormonwiki.com)

Time, on the other hand, admits of no such manipulations. Day and night follow upon each other with strict regularity. Despite our artificial reckoning of time (can daylight really be "saved"?), each day still has only twenty-four hours. We might wish we had more time, but we simply do not, and cannot.

And so we hurry, in a futile attempt to transcend the limits of time. That futility shows itself in lessened patience and shortened tempers. We've all heard the driver four cars back who sounds the horn as soon as the traffic light turns green. We've all seen the airline traveler who bemoans the time it takes to complete the screening process or yells at the ticketing agent when flight schedules go awry. Calmness and kindness fall by the wayside when people are in a rush.

That's why life should have a speed limit. Anger doesn't speed up anything, except our blood pressure! Slowing down will actually make life's travel more peaceful.

During the month of August, many folks will take a vacation. Some may even make a retreat. Contrary to appearances, these deliberate choices to spend some of our days differently, more leisurely and less hurriedly, do not "waste" time. Rather, they fulfill the limited time of our lives by giving us the freedom to attend to who we are rather than to what we do.

Free from the constraints of noise and the necessities of work, leisure can mean doing something, doing anything, or doing nothing. But its purpose goes beyond mere idleness or even self-indulgence. Leisure provides rest, invites enjoyment, spurs wonder, and inspires benevolence. In this way, recreation becomes re-creation.

image courtesy of Rev. Sean Bransfield:
Peoples Natural Gas Field, home of the Altoona Curve

The biblical theology of creation posits time as an existential limit. It also narrates rest (the "sabbath") as an existential value. Setting aside time weekly to worship and yearly to retreat or vacation is how we best manage time. Doing so enables us to transcend the frustrations that irk us so impatiently by cultivating, instead, a spirit of gratitude to our Creator for the many goods we have in life to enjoy.

In a digital world where we try to manage time through devices that remain close at hand wherever we are, taking time "off" for leisure can be a challenge. In an ICT environment that prizes efficiency and productivity, making time for leisure has become an even greater necessity.

If we just slow down, perhaps we'll understand why we don't have to hurry up.

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THE ULTIMATE IN SPORTS APPEAL

(9/7/18)

What a special time of year!

Major League Baseball offers its pennant races, and our Phillies remain in the hunt. The NFL begins another season, this time with our hometown squad as reigning Super Bowl champions. Saturdays are once again game days thanks to college football, and the Friday night frenzies have returned on the high school level. Even the PGA Tour is making a local appearance this week at Aronimink Golf Club after an eight-year hiatus.

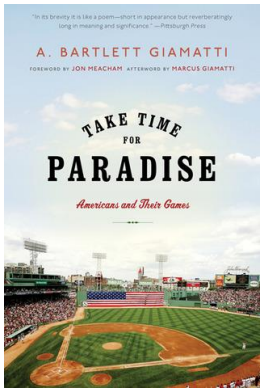
As one canon lawyer justly pronounced, this is the best two months of the year for sports fans.

But the appeal of the games goes beyond the fans. Athletics at every level occupy people's time, interest, and energy like no other activity. As a cultural phenomenon, the spectacle of sports approaches that of religion in its power to raise us above the mundane morass of life in this world and provide us with a super-natural spark that inspires joy and hope.

Sport is spiritual. As Jesuit educator Mark Bandsuch claims, athletics "offer insights into the experience of the transcendent, the excellence of human ability, the impact of beliefs on actions and morality, the benefits and responsibilities of community, the role of ritual, the importance of language, the sacredness of houses of worship, the importance of history and tradition, and the dynamics of discipleship."

Yes, all that in what appear to be just games!

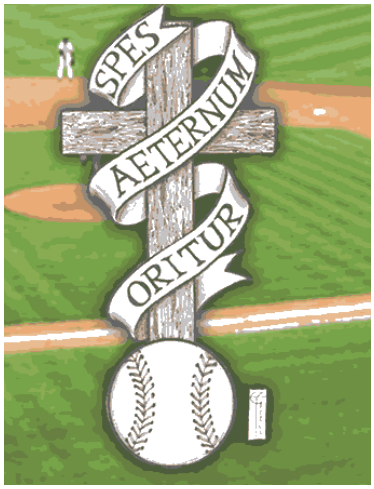
But the games we play (or enjoy watching) reveal more than mere personal interests. Leisure is the basis of culture, as Joseph Pieper wisely argues. And, as St. John Paul II astutely claims, "The heart of every culture is its approach to the greatest mystery: the mystery of God."



That approach leads many to see a real connection between sports and religion. Prayers are said before and after games, sometimes (as in NASCAR) as part of the proceedings. Scoring plays are followed by pointing credit to the heavens above. Heroic athletes are adoringly cheered as quasi-deities. And, as a quick review of the literature suggests, God is seemingly found on the gridiron (especially down South), in the corner (of boxers), or within the ballpark (an allusion to paradise). Anyone who has attempted to master the links knows the golf gods are responsible for fortune or failure there. And everyone realizes that home (plate) is where life sets out in earnest and where it finds fulfillment upon return.

Beyond the mythopoetic metaphors, however, lies a simpler truth: sports exude a mysterious, even sacred, power. Anthropologists describe that power as ideological (having distinctive values and

beliefs), cultic (evident in rituals practiced by players and fans alike), and historical (in the revered records and long-standing traditions). Psychologically, that power is enthralling in the seasonal melodrama, enchanting in the display of abilities, and ecstatic in the outcomes, whether a win or a loss.

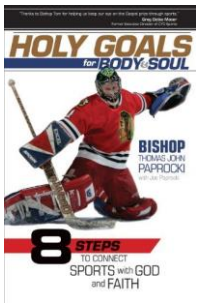


Sports also display key features of a religious sensibility. They reflect our desire for transcendence, for going beyond the limitations of mortal existence to achieve feats of glory. Thy reveal our immanence, in as much as they entail an endless quest for perfection, through the repetitive honing of techniques and skills that, of themselves, do not guarantee success. Therein, sports disclose the essential finitude of our lives, where frustration and failure are ever-present realities. Still, sports also hold out the possibility of beatitude, with hopeful aspiration for all at the start of the season, joyous fulfillment for one team at the end, and a persevering faith among the rest who confidently croon "wait 'til next year."

Perhaps this view offers too much religious romance. After all, in the final analysis sports are just games, no matter how exorbitantly financed.

But to the masses, those games mean much more. Whether as athletes or coaches, officials or staff, employees or fans, sports occupy a significant place in daily life and, thus, have the potential to influence how we view the meaning of human existence. Ultimately, that meaningfulness resides in the realm of religion.

Granted, God may not care who wins or loses. But God does care about being human, about overcoming fear and frustration, about redeeming failure, about cultivating virtue, about fostering friendship, about loving others. As a hockey-playing bishop (Most Rev. Thomas Paprocki of Springfield, IL) once wrote in *Holy Goals for Body and Soul*, those cares connect athletics and religion. For fans of faith and sports alike, they are truths that will always be in season.



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OCTOBER IS A GOOD MONTH FOR "OLD-TIME RELIGION"

(10-5-18)

More than a century ago, Southern gospel singers made "gimme that old-time religion" a popular refrain. Today, church leaders are singing a comparable tune by calling believers to take up once again some old-time devotions.

As in many dioceses around the country, Archbishop Chaput has exhorted the faithful to say the Prayer of St. Michael in all parishes. Pope Francis has suggested the same for Catholics worldwide, as a conclusion to reciting the rosary each day during October. This month and next also mark the time, especially around Philadelphia, when parishes celebrate the Forty Hours devotion.

The current state of affairs in the Church gives occasion to this sought-for revival. The call to devotional prayer seeks healing for victims, reparation for sin, and the protection of the Church against the wiles of the devil. But the actual devotions reflect a much longer religious tradition.

Pope Leo XIII penned the Prayer of St. Michael in 1884 to invoke the aid of the archangel known from Sacred Scripture as engaging in combat with demonic forces. The history of the Rosary dates as far back as the twelfth century; in the sixteen century, a universal feast was established in remembrance of the Blessed Mother's intercession on behalf of the Christian defeat of Moslem Turks at the battle of Lepanto. The tradition of forty hours of prayer in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament also harkens to that time, particularly in war-torn Milan and Rome. Its primary proponent in the USA was St. John Neumann, who introduced the practice in 1853 amid riotous anti-Catholic agitation in Philadelphia.

These devotions admit of bellicose beginnings, with violent uprisings providing the context in which added prayer was sought for the sake of sustaining the faithful from calamity. But the historical contexts disclose an even greater spiritual truth, one that resides in the reality of being human in a temporal world.

From the beginning of time, the struggle between good and evil takes place around us and within us. Concomitant to the freedom that characterizes being human, the choices we make for right or wrong shape our lives. While singular decisions do not permanently define who we are, learning to do good and avoid evil – the first principle of practical reason in the natural law – remains the pathway to becoming the best persons we can be.

Nevertheless, good and evil go beyond this world. As metaphysical realities, they mark the ultimate and opposite extremes between which everything we do falls somewhere. Likewise, the value of religious devotions also transcends the logic of this world.

Some may see these three practices as relics of a religious past. Invoking the aid of an armor-clad, sword-wielding archangel seems anachronistic in an age of laser-guided projectiles that reach their targets with stunning accuracy. Repetitiously reciting words while working a set of beads conjures a mind-numbing trance accompanied by a quasi-magical sense of spiritual power. And forty continuous hours of any one thing, let alone still and silent prayer, appears impossible given the pressing tasks and responsibilities of our increasingly hectic lives.

But there's a reason why these traditional devotions continue. They work!

They work to make us more conscious of the spiritual dimension of our lives. They raise our minds above the here and now in which we can so easily become mired. They draw our attention to the realm of eternity: to the merciful God in whom we believe, to the divine Providence in whose hands we remain, and to the supernatural grace that aids us in all our endeavors. They confirm, by way of personal disposition and intentional action, our conviction that God remains present and active in our midst.

Visions of angelic superheroes may be left to the imagination, but the spiritual combat between good and evil is no less real. Meditative prayer with rosary beads may be repetitious, but its constancy provides a user-friendly lifeline linking us ever more closely to the Gospel mysteries of salvation. And acknowledging Jesus really present in the Eucharist does demand the attention of faith, but such humble adoration enables us to experience a deeper communion with Him whose death and resurrection bring about the defeat of evil and the victory of eternal life.

Old-time religion was celebrated in song as "good enough for me." The devotions we are called to practice this month can be, too – when we celebrate them as spiritual exercises for the good of all.

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ON THE ROAD WITH YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE CHURCH

(11-2-18)

The party is over. The guests have all gone home.

The host offered them parting words and a souvenir. They took a group photo, "sent" a video letter to fellows around the world, and agreed on a text in memory of their visit.

But now that the Synod on Young People has ended, what happens next?

Those who organized the month-long dialogue certainly seek some follow-up. The Synod's final document notes that "the end of the working assemblies and the document that gathers together its fruits do not close the synodal process, but constitute one stage of it" (no. 120). It then invites a continuation of "synodality" on the national and local levels, even dictating the style ("fraternal listening and intergenerational dialogue') that should characterize it (no. 120). This, it makes clear, is the way of the Church "toward which we are called to convert ourselves" (no. 121).

The document urges that "youthful protagonism" be at the heart of the post-synod activity – not just doing something *for* them but living in communion *with* them as we "grow together in our understanding of the Gospel and in seeking out the most authentic ways of living it and giving witness to it." After all, "the responsible participation of young people in the life of the Church is not optional, but an exigency of the baptismal life and an indispensable element for the life of every community" (no. 116).

As a call to action, that's all well and good, indeed admirable. But at the national level, it will prove challenging given the already full slate of pressing matters that otherwise demand the bishops' attention. At the local level, some such efforts may be possible, but the outcome depends to a great extent on how young people, themselves, answer an age-old inquiry:

"What about you? What are you going to do?"

In 1887 Pope Leo XIII posed those pointed questions to Katharine Drexel, who as a young adult (at age 29) sought that pope's assistance with the missions that she and her sisters were financing with their family inheritance. Her answer set her on the road to sainthood, impelling her to establish and sustain a religious congregation (the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament) dedicated to the service of Native and African Americans who suffered from persecution and despair.

During his visit to the USA, the current pope reiterated that question at the cathedral that is now home to the saint's new tomb. "Those words changed Katharine's life," preached Pope Francis, "because they reminded her that, in the end, every Christian man and woman, by virtue of baptism, has received a mission. Each one of us has to respond, as best we can, to the Lord's call to build up his Body, the Church."

"What about you?" is the question now asked of young adults, who represent not just the future hope of the Church but its present mission. "By way of the holiness of young people," the Synod's final document concludes, "the Church can renew its spiritual ardor and its apostolic vigor" (no. 167).

Along the way to that renewal, the Church's "millennials, cuspers and homelanders" can look for guidance to the biblical generation, specifically those two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35). Having first walked away from the holy city, they encountered the Risen Lord, listened to Him with burning hearts, and sat with him around the table made sacred by His presence and sacramental action. Then, equipped for the journey with a newfound recognition and experience of real joy, they walked back to the place where their companions remained. There they shared the Good News with them.

We in the older generations often lament that young people are walking away from religion. But research by the Catholic Leadership Institute indicates that a majority of young people still value their connection with the Church, with 75% of respondents indicating that they attend Mass on a daily or weekly basis. Unfortunately, only 40% of those young respondents strongly agree that they experience vibrant and engaging Sunday Masses, and a mere 31% strongly agree that their parish is helping to form them as disciples of Jesus Christ.

"What are you going to do?" is therefore a question for all ages in the Church. How might we provide more positive experiences of faith formation with and for young adults? How can we engage them together in the joyful celebration and missionary proclamation of the hope we share?

The road ahead beckons our response.

WITH CHRISTMAS, FRAGILITY IS SAVED BY ETERNITY

(12-24-18)

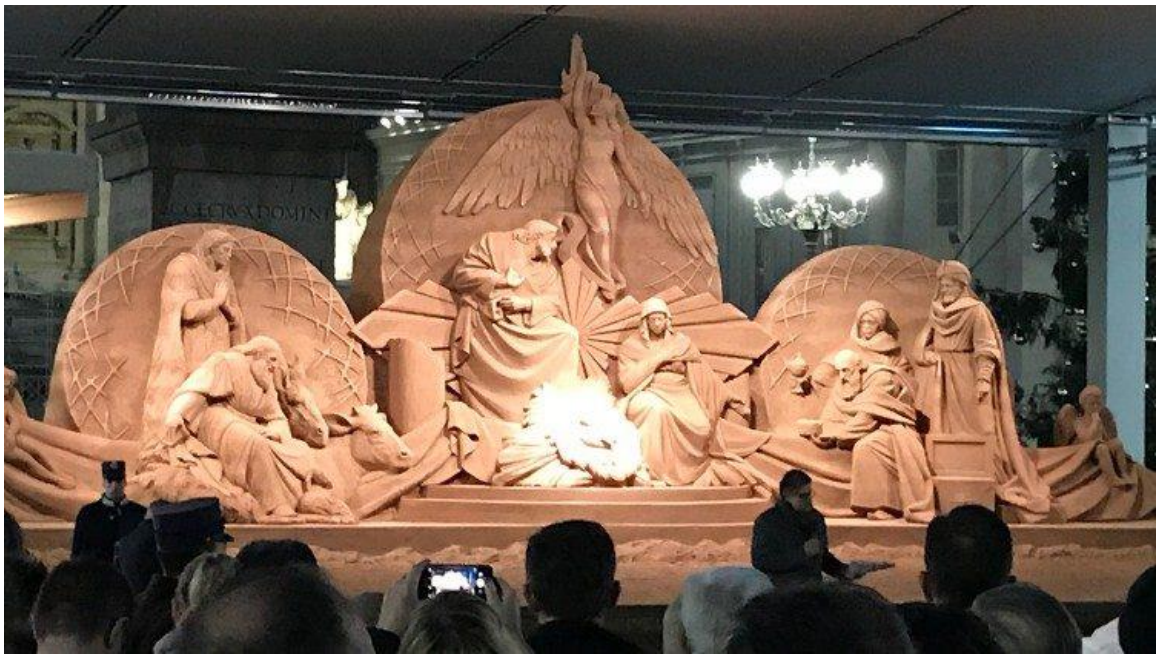
It's gravity-defying, despite its size and weight. It's weather-defying, thanks, in part, to the lighted canopy overhead. And in a not insignificant way, it's time-defying, too.

The Nativity scene gracing St. Peter's Square this year stands somewhat miraculously, given that it was sculpted from 720 tons of sand! Set against the backdrop of the Vatican's Basilica, with the requisite Christmas tree nearby, the sight of it captures what Marshall McLuhan meant by his famous dictum: "the medium is the message."

The medium, in this case, is sand. It's a rather curious choice for constructing a creche, but a brilliant symbol for this particular scene.

At its unveiling, Francesco Moraglia, the Patriarch of Venice, explained that the earthly element emphasizes the ephemeral character of our precarious human existence. As any beach-goer knows from experience, sand comes and goes with every wave. It may stand for a time, but the tides will eventually turn a child's castle back to the grains of sand from which it came.

Still, as the patriarch emphasized, "fragility can be saved." And there's the message – a proclamation that, in fact, it has been saved, in and through the enfleshment of that fragility in the child Jesus at Christmas. As Pope Francis pointed out on this same occasion, "The sand, a poor material, recalls the simplicity, the smallness and also the fragility ... with which God revealed himself through the Birth of Jesus in the precariousness of Bethlehem."



Our experience tells us, with each passing year, how fragile and precarious human life can be. Conflicts continue. Wars rage on. Political strife perpetually divides. Sin seems to know no surrender, death no end. Like the sand on the seashore, we be here in earthly castles today, gone with the new tide tomorrow.

But Christmas changes that.

The child sculpted here in such precarious smallness will grow up to become humanity's great Savior. He will heal our fragility by his words and deeds, overcome our mortality in his Passion and Resurrection, and elevate human temporality to the heavens through His Ascension. And for those who truly believe in this mystery, he makes it possible to be one with Him forever.

For most people, though, forever seems very far away.

Indeed, as Pope Francis recently noted, "one phenomenon that characterizes the present culture, in fact, is precisely (a) closure to transcendental horizons, the withdrawal into self, the almost exclusive attachment to the present, forgetting or censoring the dimensions of the past and especially of the future, perceived, particularly by young people, as dark and full of uncertainty. The future beyond death seems, in this context, inevitably even more remote, unfathomable or completely nonexistent."

Christmas changes that, too.

In the existence of this newborn child, born on that holy night, the eternal Word draws near, the one who is from the beginning with God and who is God. The fragile child depicted in sand is the one through whom all things came into being. He is the Word who became flesh and lived among us, as the Gospel of John poetically reminds us on Christmas day.

Our culture enthusiastically celebrates this special time of year. We decorate trees, sing carols, enjoy the company of family and friends, and share gifts galore. But, as Archbishop Chaput recently noted, if that's all it is, we miss the point. Christmas is not just another secular holiday.

Nativity scenes are intended to remind us where the real meaning is to be found. This year's version at the Vatican does just that in a monumental way. Passers-by will marvel at its sculpted artistry. They will be fascinated by the feat of engineering that keeps the sand sculpture from collapsing.

But what is depicted in the unique scene made of sand communicates so much more. The medium dramatically reminds us of the message that Christmas proclaims: born into this precarious human life, the eternal God is with us ("Emmanuel") to transform the time of our lives forever.

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