

“Think Tank”



Commentaries

by

REV. THOMAS DAILEY, O.S.F.S.

***The John Cardinal Foley Chair of Homiletics & Social Communications
@ Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary***

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By now the Christmas decorations have been put away. But I still await one present – a new book coming from across the pond.

I look forward to reading “What is man?” – not only because I am one, but because assumptions in answer of that question lie at the base of virtually every debate in society today (and, for that matter, in any day).

“What is man? An Itinerary of Biblical Anthropology” is a book-length study by the Pontifical Biblical Commission. Published in Italian last December, the four-chapter report, [according to the commission’s secretary](#), “is not intended to give answers to every possible question, but to provide foundational principles ‘for a discernment of the sense of man in history’.”



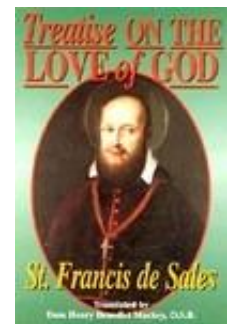
Discerning that sense continues to be a challenge. Reproductive technologies, biomedical advances, artificial intelligences, along with globalized economies and ecological catastrophes – these and other contemporary developments raise again the fundamental question the commission attempts to answer.

Not surprisingly, the new book has already received harsh reviews, as, [for example](#), the one that characterizes it as a “trojan horse” and labels it “the latest outrage by misguided churchmen.” The vehemence of such criticism appears to be singularly focused on the nine-page section on the Bible’s treatment of homosexuality.

I suspect there a [misreading](#) based on selective quotations that fail to appreciate the full context and intended purpose of the report. But it would be a further mistake on my part to defend the book or critique its critics before actually reading the complete text!

Instead, let me pose an answer to the question from another angle and another time. Actually, this one comes from a saint whose feast we celebrate this month – FRANCIS DE SALES (1567-1622).

In his magisterial *Treatise on the Love of God*, the Doctor of the Church maps out an itinerary of human life that begins and ends with God. And the GPS for this journey is the human heart.



As did humanist philosophers before him, Francis de Sales sees in our hearts the central axis of human life, the distinguishing element that sets us apart from the rest of creation. For him, the heart is home not only to our emotions (the passions) but also to our reasoning and our decision-making. These coalesce in the movement of our heart toward what we consider worthwhile in life: we enjoy doing what we like and are happiest when we do what we love.

But as a Christian humanist, Francis recognized that the human heart opens the way to much more when it comes to figuring out what is man.

We know from experience that our hearts (really, our whole selves) seek happiness. As rational creatures, that inclination steers us toward a “meaningful” or “purposeful” life.

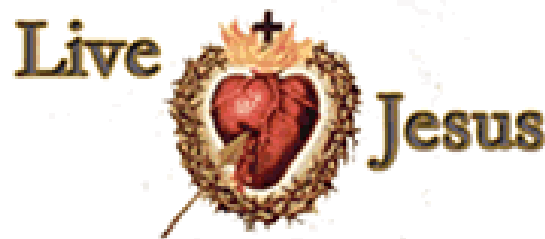
But our journey comes to no end in this life. As St. Augustine famously put it, we live a “restless” existence.

For Francis de Sales, the “inner anxiety and constant unrest” that comes from man’s search for meaning should be understood positively. It discloses the spiritual dimension unique to being human, because it opens us up to a sense of the transcendent, a sense of something absolute that points us beyond ourselves. Put simply: it gives us a sense of God, who alone can fulfill the longings of the human heart.

In Salesian thought, this is what the biblical anthropology signifies by its affirmation that human beings are created in the “image and likeness” of God. What is man? The one created by God and for God. The one whose heart ultimately seeks God. The one whose longings are fulfilled when the human is united with the divine.

In his *Treatise* (book 10, chapter 1), Francis de Sales summarizes this anthropological itinerary in poetic terms that describe the ascent of all human life: “Man is the perfection of the universe; the spirit is the perfection of man; love, that of the spirit; and charity, that of love. For this reason, love of God is the end, the perfection, and the excellence of the universe.”

That excellence comes to perfection in the love of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Fully human and fully divine, His heart is made flesh at Christmas, is pierced open for us on Good Friday, and comes alive eternally at Easter.



In this [jubilee year](#) celebrating the centenary of the canonization of St. Margaret Mary Alacoque, the “Apostle of the Sacred Heart,” we are invited to look there again to find the best answer to the question of what man is.



In the meantime, I’ll still be looking for my book!

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Among the countless articles and books I've read during my academic career, one title still stands out – “Life: A Story in Search of a Narrator.” In this philosophical work, [Paul Ricoeur](#) dismantles the commonsense belief that stories are told and not lived, while life is lived and not told.

To the contrary, he theorizes about how life is really told by living our own stories. We plot the significance of life when we configure the singular story of “me” from the multiple circumstances and events that make up the days of our lives. We discover meaning in life when we forge a new perspective, when we learn to see a unifying whole amid so many disparate and seemingly unrelated occurrences (what Ricoeur calls “concord over discord”).



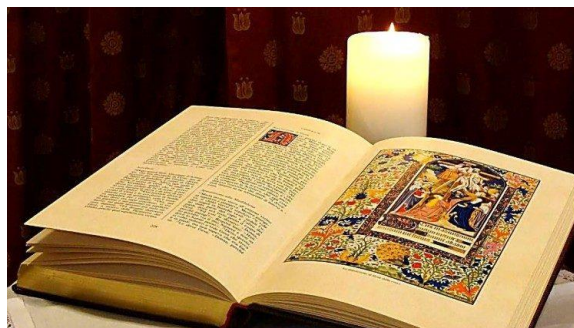
This “narrative identity” means that life is neither absolute nor completely random. Who I am is not something stuck in the past (despite the desire of social media trolls). It is not constrained in the present by what happens to me or around me. It is not predetermined by the fates of the future. No, I am who I become, in the continual process of narrating the story of a unique person who emerges from the past, dwells in the present, and lives toward the future.

Put more simply, my identity is not pre-determined. Rather, I shape (or narrate) the meaning of me by coming to understand all that happens within the framework of a larger story, a story not yet fully told. Every day, with knowledge gained from experience, I turn the page to read (and live out) the next chapter.

This narrative intelligence underscores both the [“Word of God” Sunday](#) proclaimed by Pope Francis and his papal message for this year’s [World Communications Day](#).

In a message whose title (“Life Becomes History”) is reminiscent of Ricoeur’s philosophy, Pope Francis describes the powerful effect that stories have as they “influence our lives ... leave their mark on us ... shape our convictions and our behavior ... (and) help us understand and communicate who we are.” And who we are takes shape “by immersing ourselves in stories, (where) we can find reasons to heroically face the challenges of life.”

In particular, the pope defines the biblical Word of God as “a Story of stories” that narrates “the great love story between God and humanity.” In the episodes of Sacred Scripture, we read histories and mysteries, romances and soap operas, along with a host of other tales that weave together the divine story of human salvation.



To paraphrase Ricoeur, the Bible gives a narrative intelligence to our lives. It enables us to see that “God has become personally woven into our humanity, and so has given us a new way of weaving our stories.”

In particular, the stories that Jesus tells – the parables – disclose to us the possibility of personal transformation. As Pope Francis puts it, “At this point life becomes story and then, for the listener, story becomes life; the story becomes part of the life of those who listen to it, and it changes them.”

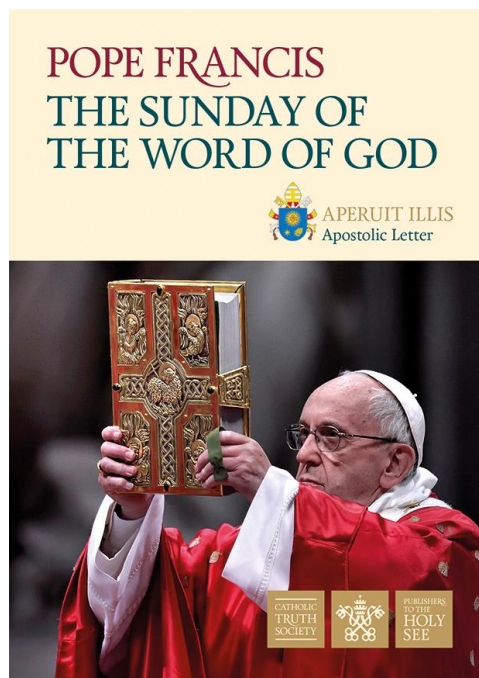
As a result, the inspired Word of God offers to us the overarching story of our lives and a key to our own narrative identity.

That divine story has already been told, when the God who “was so deeply concerned ... for our flesh and our history ... became man, flesh and history” to redeem us by his death and resurrection. Baptized into this very story, we can emerge from being entangled in the discord of our suffering and sin by letting the Good News of God’s mercy become the guiding narrative of our lives.

In that sense, the sacred story has yet to be told. We are called to become its narrators in and through the stories of our lives. Formed by the Word of God, ours is now the task of “remembering who and what we are in God’s eyes, bearing witness to what the Spirit writes in our hearts and revealing to everyone that his or her story contains marvellous things.”

Amid the many, often conflicting, stories that we hear via today’s media, it becomes all the more important for us to know, to remember, to recount, and to share with others this “Story of stories.” When we engage in that kind of storytelling, and factor faith into our own narrative intelligence, then our lives will be reconfigured by the divine Word so that we may, indeed, live “happily ever after.”

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VIRTUAL CHURCH, REAL PEOPLE OF GOD

(March 13, 2020)

While not without parallel, the scope, reach, and speed of the current health crisis has hit home and school and work in unprecedented ways. Now it also impacts the Church.

At present, in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia and throughout Pennsylvania, the [bishops have dispensed the faithful from the obligation to attend Mass](#). Elsewhere, some dioceses have suspended the public celebration of Mass altogether. And in some parts of the world, churches have been closed and shuttered completely.

These are drastic measures taken with the good intention of loving one's neighbor by collaborating in the social effort to halt the spread of a pandemic. This way of living as Church is not the norm, nor do these efforts suggest it should or will be.

Still, many people think that we need more Church activity, not less. Rightly do they champion the power of prayer and call for more of it. Nevertheless, the notion that "true believers" will brave the dangers and double down on the effort needed to go to Mass contradicts the very notion of the liturgical action. The Mass is not our sacrifice; it is Christ's. What we do is worship, adoring God the Father, through Christ, the Son, in the Holy Spirit. The grace conferred in and by this worship is efficacious by virtue of the divine, not as a result of human effort.

In this respect, the choice not to go to Mass because of disease can rightly be considered an act of charity toward others. On the one hand, people who are or may be sick should not risk infecting others. On the other hand, those not sick may not want to take the risk, if it is legitimate, of becoming infected, especially if they are responsible for others (e.g., their family).

Experts in healthcare are tasked with determining the level of risk. How we respond is the conscientious choice we must make. What the bishops have done in deciding to dispense with the obligation or even suspend the liturgical celebrations, they have done out of an abundance of caution and concern for all. What the faithful will do as a result should likewise be governed by that same charity.

One possible response proposed during this time of crisis is to "participate" in Mass online. In this mode, the priest would be celebrating Mass that is simultaneously broadcast to anyone able to see and hear it via some sort of screen (television, computers, etc.). In what respect is this digital worship legitimate?



As a medium of communication, the digital can never replace in-person worship in Church. Given the actual reality of sacraments, an "incarnational" dimension is essential to them (i.e., the fact that they involve real, tactile matter). For this reason, sacraments cannot "happen" virtually.

Nevertheless, the digital medium does allow people to participate in worship *to the extent possible*, given the reality of some situations. If, on the one hand, someone is sick or otherwise unable physically to go to Church, this is one way of bringing Church to them. If, on the other hand, circumstances make the physical reality of a church impossible or imprudent to go to (e.g., due to natural disasters, terrorism or a pandemic), this medium makes some form of worship still possible.

Admittedly, there are flaws in this way of worshipping. Worshippers would not be in the presence of each other, thereby lessening the sense of community. Worship would not happen in dialogue with one another. And worshipping “at home” risks becoming banal, with comfort and convenience replacing the reverence that should be the hallmark of a sacred celebration.

In this respect, digital worship can restrict the “full, conscious, and active participation” called for in the celebration of Mass. A screen feels quite small compared to a church and, thus, is not a very “full” experience. With a screen in-between, it’s easy to be distracted rather than be consciously attentive to what’s going on. And watching worship on a screen is clearly more passive than active.

Then again, none of these qualities of liturgical participation is guaranteed simply by being in a building; churchgoers can also be unfocused, distracted, and passive even while being physically present “at” Mass.

Celebrating the Mass by way of digital devices calls forth a more deliberate type of participation on the part of the faithful. In this mode, attending does not suffice; attentiveness is required. In this mode, fulfilling a moral obligation is not the point; carrying out a spiritual intention is at stake.

In this respect, digital worship can offer some benefits, at least potentially. It may offer the opportunity to experience the Mass in a “smaller” way, as for example in the gathering of a family, while still recognizing the universal dignity and importance of the Mass. It may engender an appreciation for others who, through various circumstances, lack the opportunity to participate regularly in Mass. And it may serve as a reminder that the Mass and sacraments are a gift that we should not take for granted.

At the very least, participating in Mass in a digital way, *when this is necessitated by circumstances beyond one’s control*, is better than no worship at all. Through the digital medium, the Word of God is still proclaimed, the people’s responses can still be spoken, prayer is still made, and thanks still given.

Receiving Holy Communion is not possible, unless some other sort of provision is made (as is done, for example, in large-scale liturgies such as those celebrated by the pope). But this does not invalidate the Mass. In fact, the practice of “[spiritual communion](#)” – what St. Thomas Aquinas describes as “an ardent desire to receive Jesus in the most holy sacrament and lovingly embrace him” – remains praiseworthy.

Will virtual worship become the wave of the future? No, at least not as long as we value community along with Communion. In the future, circumstances such as the diminishing number of priests and the geographic distances among people may challenge our experience of worshipping together in one place. But the convenience of “stay-at-home” church can never substitute for the full experience of worship rightly owed to the divine. And the isolation that it can facilitate runs counter to the reality of Church as a community of disciples. The Church – the “ekklesia” – will always be those “called together” in worship.

And there lies the essential that we must always keep in mind, even when we can only worship online. The celebration may be virtual, when necessary, but the People of God are always real.

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AS DEVOTION GOES DIGITAL, CHURCH OF THE PRESENT EMERGES

(March 26, 2020)

The pandemic perdures. With it, devotion has gone digital.

The metrics are still being measured, but anyone with a Facebook feed can see that online liturgical actions have proliferated.

Kudos to the clergy and the curators. The pastoral creativity of the former and the technological prowess of the latter have combined to proclaim the Gospel anew via the means of social communications.



Masses are livestreamed from various chapels, churches, and cathedrals. Some are filmed with professional expertise; most are “home-made” by a pastor, perhaps with the help of younger generations on staff. Given the significance of what is being broadcast, its [production quality](#) matters greatly. Without it, [humorous filters](#) might mistakenly intrude!

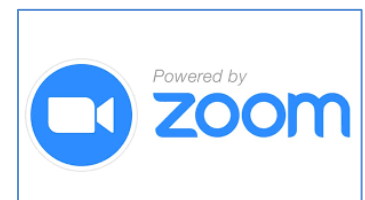
[Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament](#) is taking place in church parking lots. With a monstrance gone mobile, blessings from that same Blessed Sacrament have been delivered at busy [intersections](#), in walks around the neighborhood, on a drive-through of the parish, and even from a helicopter [fly-over](#) of an entire diocese.

Confession continues, despite the need for social distancing, thanks to an innovative [drive-through](#). One canon lawyer even suggests that the grace of this sacrament, so greatly sought in a time of crisis, could be [conferred over the phone](#). More typically, it would happen via the [direct line to God](#) in an act of perfect contrition or, if warranted and approved, by way of [general absolution](#).

Other liturgical devotions, like the Stations of the Cross, can also be accessed online. So, too, the faithful rally around the rosary thanks to video feeds or podcasts; in [one parish](#), participants pray it together by tuning into a local FM radio frequency which can only be heard near the Catholic school.

But digital devotion doesn’t work for all the sacraments. No one has been (or can be) baptized online! Lifetime commitments, in ordination or matrimony, aren’t decisions made on devices.

Still, the power of digital communications renders activity as normal as can be in trying times. Fast becoming a buzzword in countless parishes, [ZOOM](#) refers to a video communications platform through which anyone with a digital device can “meet” and chat online. Spiritual conferences, choir sing-alongs, staff meetings, and other parish gatherings can still take place, while avoiding the community spread of a disease.



Pope Francis, too, has entered this new realm for spiritual good, now that he [overlooks an empty St. Peter’s Square](#). Through digital communications, he mobilizes the faithful to prayer, as witnessed by the [global recitation of the “Our Father”](#) on the solemnity of the Annunciation. He also plans to offer an [extraordinary “Urbi et Orbi” blessing](#) via social media.

Is this the Church of the future? Not entirely.

But it is the Church of the present, at least as long as we suffer the circumstances contributing to a public health crisis. In some parishes, in fact, more people are “participating” in one Sunday Mass online than usually do, collectively, in multiple Masses on-site.

Reasonable arguments can be made not to let the [dominion of death](#) and the power of fear control our lives. But loving concern for our neighbor, in the church community and beyond, now takes shape in social distancing. Sacrificial for sure, this is how we are being called to show our love for God in the present moment.

In this moment, digital devotion does more than highlight the wonders of communications technology. It provides a real, though imperfect, means to satisfy the needs of the soul.

Threats to personal well-being naturally lead people to grow anxious about their present condition and future state. The phenomenon of turning to God in these circumstances, whether out of devotion or desperation, symptomizes the human restlessness that only divine grace can cure.

Thanks to the Holy Spirit, which “blows where it wills” (John 3:8), that grace is not limited to material ministration or localized distribution. We experience that grace, and share it with the community of believers, whenever we gather together for prayer in Jesus’s name (Matt 18:20).

Rightly do we long for the celebration of the sacraments, and especially reception of the Eucharist, within a community of believers geographically joined in worship. But beyond the limits of space and time, we remain united by faith in the mystical Body of Christ.



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Until this pandemic passes, we can also join one another through the many and varied forms of digital devotion. Who knows, perhaps the means of social communications may even draw wayward souls now hungering for divine sustenance back to church once the doors re-open.

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PONDERING THE “UNCERTAINTY” OF THIS GOOD FRIDAY

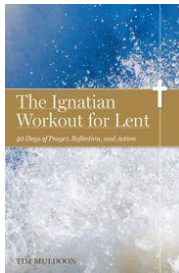
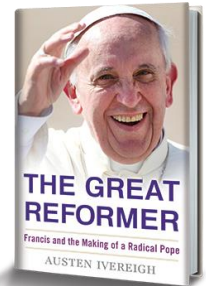
(April 10, 2020)

Pope Francis recently led an extraordinary moment of prayer, one spectacular in its [imagery](#), profound in its [preaching](#), earnest in its [supplication](#), and powerful through its [blessing](#) of the city and the world (“Urbi et Orbi”).



Now, the pope shares his thoughts on “[A Time of Uncertainty](#)” with Austin Ivereigh. Conducted in Spanish but published in English, the interview is fairly brief and the format easily readable. But words alone don’t do justice to what the pope is communicating.

In each response to six questions posed by Ivereigh, Pope Francis takes up his own adage about preaching. In [Evangelii Gaudium](#) (no. 157), he states: “A good homily ... should have ‘an idea, a sentiment, (and) an image’.”



Sometimes his own, sometimes drawn from literature, the imaginative corollaries to the pope’s comments express differently his musings on the questions asked. As [Tim Muldoon](#) points out, the pope’s Jesuit formation informs this pictorial way of thinking.

But I suspect there’s something more. By responding with images, Pope Francis invites his interlocutors to engage with his thinking and, thus, to ponder the potential meaning for themselves.

Consider, for example, the image in his first response. Asked about his own experience of being locked down, Pope Francis admits that he is praying more, out of concern for people. Then he says, “Thinking of people anoints me, it does me good, it takes me out of my self-preoccupation.”

Of course, the notion of thinking about people pertains to the pope’s job as pastor the world. His Jesuit confrere, [Fr. Antonio Spadaro](#), suggests that Pope Francis is “profoundly disturbed and pained by so much suffering and sacrifice.” In such a state, the thought of people “confirms and reinvigorates” the pope in his pastoral mission.



But thought that “anoints” someone is an odd image. It suggests the workings of the mind and heart made into oil and put upon a person through a personal touch. There’s a texture to it, a scent in it, a flowing movement, a permanent residue.

It's a sacramental image, as we use oil to confirm, to heal, and even to ordain. Somehow, then, thinking of others strengthens, comforts, and even commissions. Such concern touches one with the grace of God. The thought enables one to accompany another along this perilous way.

On Good Friday, we might say, the Lord “anoints” the world from the Cross and accompanies us there. That’s a strange image, since He is the one crucified, not the rest of us. But thinking through the paschal story, we see the divine “anointing” at work.

Anticipating the Cross on Holy Thursday, the Lord accompanies us through the Eucharist, anointing, as it were, the bread and wine with His real presence.

On Calvary, He accompanies the two others crucified along with Him, anointing the repentant one with the promise of his being in paradise this very day.

There, too, He accompanies all who question the reason for suffering, anointing their doubts with his own plaintive cry, “My God, My God, why have you abandoned me?”

The crucified Lord promises also to accompany the Church, anointing the Blessed Virgin and His beloved disciple with the mutual care of mother and son.

Jesus accompanies all of us on this Good Friday. The potential for infection and possible death occasioned by the spread of a novel coronavirus is agitating the world with real fear. Compounded further by the cognizance of our own sins, that fear grows worse by having to be “socially distanced” from those we love.



In all this, Jesus accompanies us from the Cross. There He takes upon Himself the sin and suffering that distances humanity from the eternal happiness for which we have been created. There His own respirations cease when He breathes forth his last. There His Sacred Heart is pierced open for us, and we are “anointed” with the blood and water that flows from it to sanctify us.

When Easter comes, the risen Jesus vanquishes the power of death, thereby releasing us from the chains of mortal existence (and the attendant anxiety produced by a pandemic). At Pentecost, the ascended Jesus will “anoint” those who believe in Him with the Holy Spirit, pouring into their minds and hearts the truth of God’s steadfast love.

To be sure, uncertainty characterizes today’s trying times. Images, too, remain uncertain in as much as each can be “seen” differently.

But pondering the papal image of being anointed with the thought of others, may give us some certainty about what Good Friday means. In turn, seeing the Cross anew can help us best respond to the global crisis in which we are living.

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ARISING TO THE “NEW NORMAL” IN PARISH LIFE

(April 24, 2020)

Talk of a “new normal” is now commonplace. When extraordinary conditions last beyond the onset of some upheaval, how we respond turns into what we ordinarily do moving forward.

So it will be with a post-COVID-19 society. That includes how we live in and as the church.

For Christians, the idea of a “new normal” shouldn’t really be new. After all, the Easter season celebrates the most significant upheaval of all time – when the crucified Lord arose to new life. The Resurrection changed everything! Christian life ever since is predicated on this new reality.

Pope Francis recently pondered how our Resurrection faith affects our approach to the current global health crisis. In his reflection, the pope presents a “[plan for rising again](#)” founded on Easter hope (which “cannot become infected”), realized in the community of disciples (because “no one is saved alone”), and leading toward an “alternative civilization of love.”



The pope’s lofty meditation inspires a “new normal” in terms of how we think about our common human existence. But can we translate this vision into the reality of church life? What might the “new normal” of a parish look like after the pandemic passes?

The extraordinary events of that first Easter can shed light on how we emerge from this twenty-first century crisis. To restore pastoral life, we need to re-engage our faith in the Resurrection to appreciate what our “new normal” will be. In terms of parish planning, what might this mean?

The biblical narratives relate numerous appearances of the risen Jesus to His disciples. Key to those encounters is a sense experience. They see Him, they hear him, they touch Him, they even dine with Him. Parishes may consider designing sense-experiences for the faithful to signal the change in our current state of quarantine. Lighting up parish buildings, ringing church bells, hosting musical concerts, offering “give-aways” of some sort – anything that can communicate a sense of “joy” at arising out of the crisis will draw parishioners together, even if they still have to distance themselves socially.

Tales of Easter turn on the disciples' recognition of the risen Lord, and His transformed presence inspires a newfound appreciation of all that He had previously said and done. Parishes might plan Masses or other celebrations to recognize particular groupings of the faithful, with prayers for those impacted by the crisis (the deceased or those still sick) and gratitude for those contributing to the common good during it (e.g., healthcare professionals or public safety personnel).

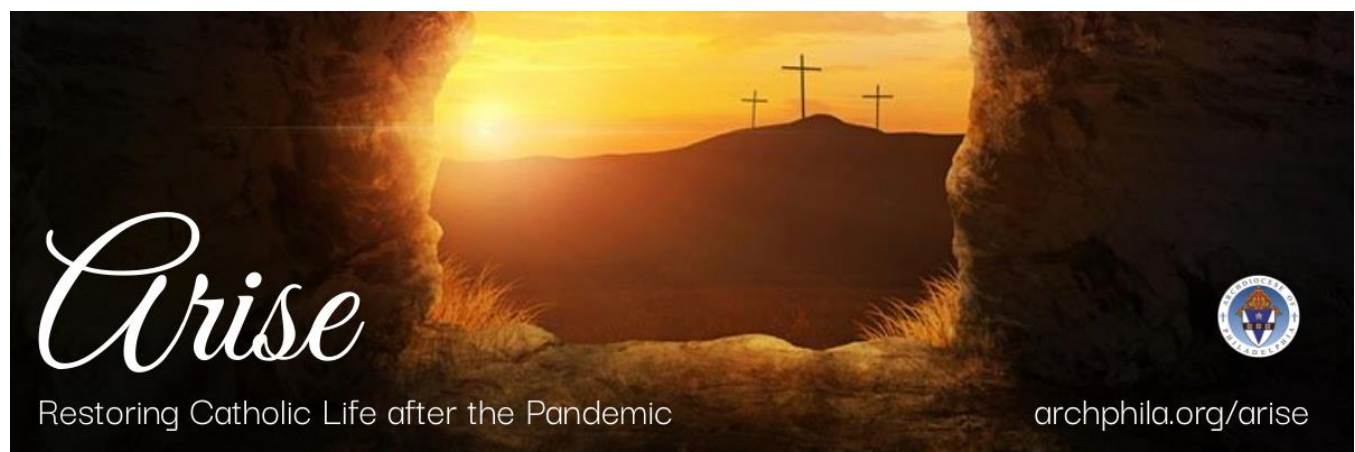
In the Gospel stories, the miracle of the Resurrection is often linked to a meal. In the breaking of bread at Emmaus, or at breakfast on the shore with the fishermen, the disciples encounter the risen Jesus when gathered together in His midst. So, too, the parish community will again be able to gather in-person to encounter Jesus present in the sacraments. Parishes need to [strategize](#) about how this will take place given probable restrictions on the size of the congregation, necessary procedures for ensuring safe spaces, and ritual changes to account for social distancing.

In their final gathering in Galilee, the risen Lord commissions His disciples to “go and make disciples of all nations.” That mission continues! Church buildings may have been closed, but doors to the church were opened even wider via social media. Capitalizing on the innovative ways they reached out to people during the crisis, parishes must consider how to advance their evangelizing efforts with technology. So many more people were “present” in parishes electronically than had been physically that continuing to “go out” to them represents a missionary opportunity not to be lost. Engaging in robust digital communications to make disciples may be the most decisive feature of a parish’s “new normal.”

Finally, the first disciples' experience of the Resurrection led to the formation of a “community of believers (that) was of one heart and mind” (Acts 4:32). In the “new normal” of the post-pandemic parish, the entire parish community will need to share responsibility. Patience and support will surely be required! Parishes should seize this opportunity, [as Katherine Kersten writes](#), to see themselves as more than producers/consumers of spiritual services and to become a vital spiritual community that bears witness to the Resurrection.

In Pope Francis's meditation, the image of the stone rolled away from the tomb at Easter invites us to contemplate the painful reality of the current pandemic with a renewed outlook. With intentional planning, that outlook will inform the “new normal” arising in parish life - where believers, sort-of believers, and even non-believers may once again rejoice.

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A RENEWED FAITH FOR TROUBLED HEARTS

(May 11, 2020)

The timing could not be better! In the opening verse of last Sunday's Gospel, we hear Jesus calmly saying, "Do not let your hearts be troubled" (John 14:1a).

Our world is anything but calm. Our hearts have been troubled by the barrage of data indicating the toll of suffering and death wrought by COVID-19. Our hearts will be troubled by distancing measures that may make us suspiciously wary of one another when our social routines resume.

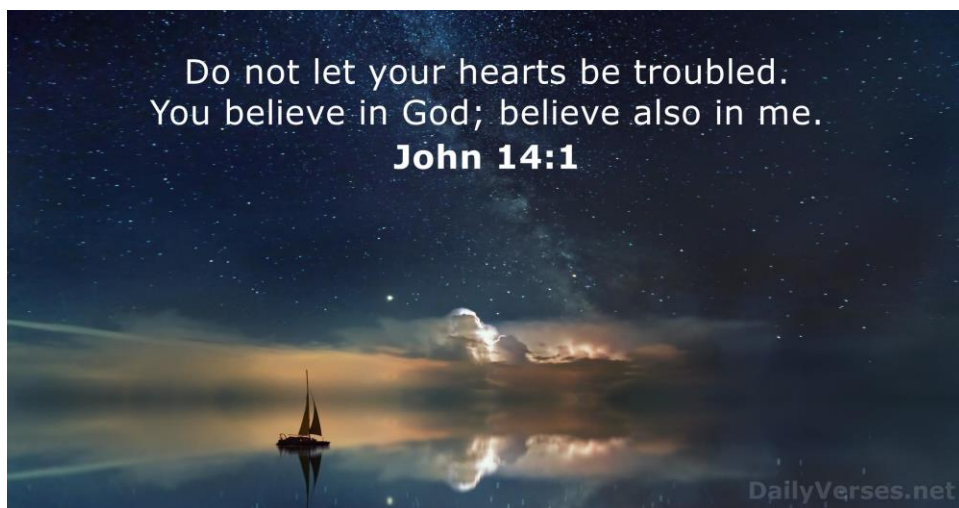
Jesus's counsel, however, focuses inwardly, on troubles of the heart. His call for calm is not concerned with the bodily organ and the troubles it undergoes through a heart attack or heart disease. Nor does he address purely emotional troubles, as in the sorrow of heartache or the loss that comes with heartbreak.

Rather, the biblical reference to the "heart" points to the whole person, as the very axis of who we are. There the powers of thinking, feeling, and decision-making reside, all of which are integrated in the "me" whose heart possesses each of these distinctly human abilities.

In this sense, the heart also serves as a sacred space. As St. Francis de Sales explains in his masterful *Treatise on the Love of God*, there the natural inclination we have toward happiness finds an affinity with the God who alone can satisfy the deepest longings of human life.

Troubled hearts, like those of the two disciples in the Gospel, experience impediments to happiness. Thomas is disturbed about the future as he admits to not knowing where Jesus is going or how He will get there; he seems to fear that the band of followers may also get lost along the way. Philip wonders aloud where God is and wishes that the Master would simply show them the Father; he just cannot grasp that Jesus is God, one with the Father who dwells in Him.

We need not be astonished by the apostles' comments; their queries are legitimate, even logical. Prior to the Resurrection, how could they fully understand who Jesus is? Faced with the impending departure of their leader, how could they not be disheartened? Their livelihood looks lost, their lives in danger – not unlike the troubles that currently afflict our world.



But Jesus offers them (and us) a way out: “You believe in God; believe also in me” (John 14:1b). Although we might expect such encouragement from a rabbi, the invitation comes with a subtle twist, as Jesus proposes a different sense of faith for them (and us).

Like the disciples (“you believe in God”), we tend to conceive of faith in propositional terms. We believe that God exists. From divine revelation, we derive an understanding of what God is and what God does. Based on this knowledge, we strive to live out our faith by following divine dictates.

For Jesus, though, faith is more relational than notional. Fundamentally, it entails being in a personal relationship with Him, believing “also in me.” Faith in this sense comes from the heart, not the head.

A relationship transcends time and space – as this one will endure even after the Master goes away from His disciples. A relationship produces a bond – as this one will reflect the union of Father and Son. A relationship cultivates communion – as this one will when those who believe come to experience the same divine Spirit that animates the Risen Lord.

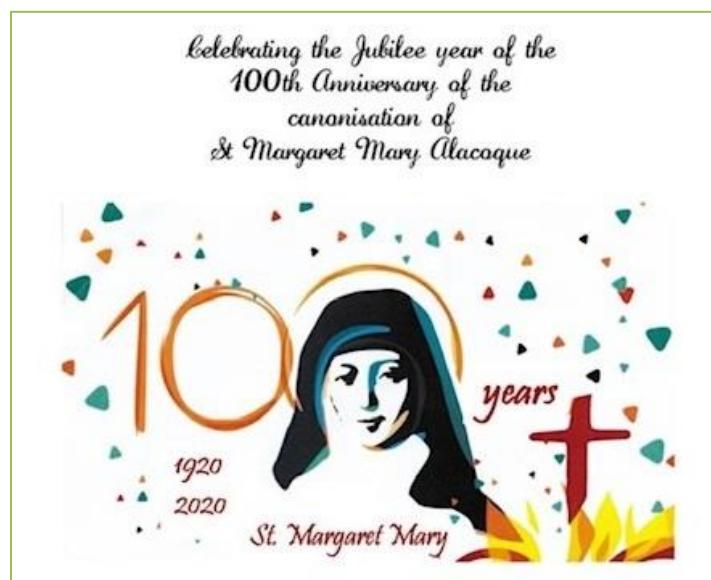
The current days of our lives are marked by confusion, doubt, and questions regarding the spread of a novel coronavirus. The potential for troubled hearts persists. Medical science cannot alleviate that.

The current days of our faith are marked by the celebration of Easter. Believing in the Resurrection of Jesus invites us to go beyond a miraculous idea and deepen our relationship with Him who overcame the greatest trouble imaginable. Thomas, Philip, and the other apostles did just this. Their faith gave rise to the Church that continues in our midst.

Christians cultivate that faith experience, that believing relationship, through prayer, especially prayer to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. This spiritual calling of hearts-to-hearts was revealed, in an exceptional way, to [St. Margaret Mary Alacoque](#), a seventeenth-century nun in [the Visitation of Holy Mary](#) who was canonized one hundred years ago on May 13.

Through His words to her, Jesus invites the world to “behold this heart which has so loved the world that it is nothing but love and mercy.” Seeing the Sacred Heart is believing – with a renewed faith that does not let our hearts be troubled, even by a pandemic.

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A COLLECTIVE CALL TO CONVERSION

(July 27, 2020)

Talk of “conversion” sounds familiar. Believers know they need it, even while struggling to accomplish it.

Now we hear that entire parishes also need it! A [new Vatican document](#) calls for “The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community in the Service of the Evangelizing Mission of the Church.”

The impetus for this derives from the new reality in which parishes exist. [Cardinal Beniamino Stella](#) points out that the Church now labors under a scarcity of priests, that territorial boundaries of parishes have changed or “disappeared” altogether, and that increased mobility and digital dependence have redefined our cultural sense of space and time.

The instruction delineates the Church’s response. [According to Msgr. Andrea Ripa](#), “this involves a certain reorganization in the way the pastoral care of the faithful is exercised, so as to foster a greater co-responsibility and collaboration among all the baptized.”

The document appears to focus much more on the former than the latter. Approximately two-thirds of it deals with organizational matters, of interest more to diocesan officials than to people in the pews. Specific mention of co-responsibility appears only twice, with reference to a parish’s finance council (n. 106) and its pastoral council (n. 113). (Ironically, the latter is not canonically required in parishes, despite Pope Francis’s exclamation of their necessity [n. 108].)

But real conversion first requires a change in mentality – on the part of clergy and laity alike.

Generally speaking, parishes today are no longer primary gathering places (no. 15); they have lost their “existential” space in the local community (no. 16). They seem now to be perceived as merely a site for religious events and services (no. 34), whose activities are directed primarily, if not entirely, by the clergy (no. 38). Consequently, they risk becoming “self-referential and fossilized,” thereby stifling the “spiritual dynamic of evangelization” that is a parish’s real mission (no. 17).

To counter these trends, pastoral conversion looks to engage “the whole community, and not simply the hierarchy, (as) the responsible agent of mission” in the parish, “since the Church is identified as the entire People of God” (no. 38).

Pastoral conversion for the clergy entails the (renewed) recognition that they remain “at the service of the Parish, and not the other way around” (no. 69). Identified as a fundamental reference point (no. 62) and also the legal representative of a parish (no. 67), pastors are now challenged to discern and direct the dynamic of co-responsibility, whereby “each member of the community feels responsible and directly involved in caring for the needs of the Church in a variety of ways and in a spirit of solidarity” (no. 40).

Meeting that challenge begins with a seminary formation that inculcates the distinctiveness of the priestly vocation within the context of the common vocation of all the baptized. As [Dr. John Cavadini recently explained](#), “the priesthood of the ordained is a share in Christ’s priesthood different in kind, not in degree, from that of the baptized.”

Learning that distinction also impacts the laity, for whom a pastoral conversion is likewise challenging.

For generations, believers have considered themselves, some quite proudly, as “members” of their parish. This outlook views the local church as merely an association of the like-minded, owing to family or neighborhood ties. In this mind-set, parishioners become “receivers” of the programs and services offered there. Even where some laity lead parish activities, the majority of the faithful still sense they “belong to” rather than “are” the parish.

Changing that mentality also requires education in ecclesiology. Even more, pastoral conversion calls for new action.

For the laity, this means choosing to step up and get involved. Complaining that “the church” or “the parish” should do things differently, without responsibly acting to help bring about change, only highlights the mentality that mistakes membership for communion.

For the clergy, fostering that communion means more than simply enlisting lay volunteers. Generating active participation and investment in parish life requires sharing not only responsibility but authority, thereby enabling and ennobling the faithful to do what they do best.

Bringing about this necessary pastoral conversion will be a collective challenge. Yet it is who we are called to be and what we are called to do. The parish of the past will not serve the Church of the future.

Rather, as the instruction concludes, intentional collaboration and real co-responsibility among clergy and laity “will orient (the parish) effectively toward an evangelising mission, the task of the entire People of God, that walks through history as the ‘family of God’ and that, in the synergy of its diverse members, labours for the growth of the entire ecclesial body” (no. 123).

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“CO-RESPONSIBILITY”

for the Church’s Being & Action in Parish Life



The Cardinals’ Forum

to inaugurate the new year of formation
@ Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary

August 25, 2020 @ 7:00 pm

in the **Vianney Hall Auditorium**

featuring:

ARCHBISHOP NELSON PÉREZ

DR. JOHN HAAS

FR. THOMAS DAILEY, OSFS

DR. NATHAN KNUTSON

livestreaming on

<https://www.facebook.com/StCharlesSem>

<https://vimeo.com/event/234747>

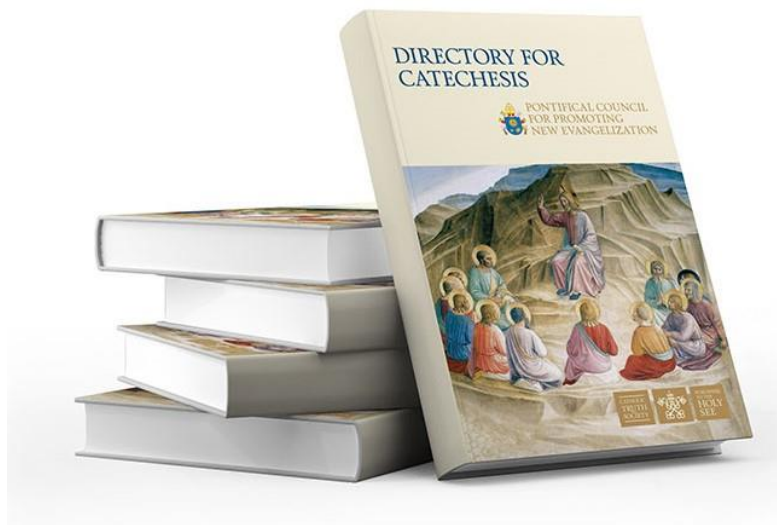
TEACH THE FAITH WITH DIGITALLY ENHANCED STORYTELLING

(September 11, 2020)

“Back to school” just doesn’t have the same ring to it this year. Going “back” involves no change of place if schools are only offering online learning. Going “to” need not refer to a school building but only an [access center](#). And how will “school” paralyzed by a pandemic function? At least those who go back to work there this year can get some [free coffee](#)!

The return to the ABC’s and the three R’s this week also marks a return to religious education. That work faces a challenge greater than dealing with a coronavirus. Catechesis will crumble if it fails to adapt to the digital environment in which we live and learn.

The Vatican’s new “[Directory for Catechesis](#)” published this summer, recognizes this in a new analysis of religious education in a digital culture (nn. 359-372). There we find four factors calling for attention if we are to succeed at sharing the faith with present and future generations.



The first is the realization, not yet commonly shared among church leaders, that “the *digital* ... is not only part of the existing cultures, but is asserting itself as a new culture.” As its own culture, it exercises a profound effect on how people live – and, consequently, on how we teach and learn – by “changing language, shaping mentalities, and restructuring value hierarchies.” This transformation has been so influential that it appears quite natural.

There’s no denying or ignoring it. Digital communications in parish life, and in the catechesis that shapes its future, can no longer be considered merely a technological tool or a pedagogical plaything. Intentional investment, in terms of material and human resources, is needed to save our religious education from falling into irrelevance and insignificance in this new ecology.

That may sound melodramatic. But before dismissing the demand, consider two further principles in the Directory that focus on how people think and believe in a digital world.

On the one hand, life has become data-driven, governed by “ever more sophisticated algorithms and software.” Even, or especially, in this environment, people continue to think about the big questions of life. But where do they turn for answers?

In earlier days it may have been to parents or pastors or teachers. But in a digital world, devices have displaced traditional sources of trust and authority. Google now has all the godly answers, which its search engines generate in mere seconds, and bloggers hold sway over belief, with people in the pews becoming more and more divided in their religious allegiances.

On the other hand, stories of faith have not lost their appeal. As the Directory puts it, “the language that has the greatest hold on the digital generation is that of the story, rather than that of argumentation.” Granted, people still need to learn how to decipher what is believable amidst the morass of information proffered in and by the media. But “the art of *storytelling* ... is considered by the young as more convincing and compelling than the traditional forms of discourse.”

Consequently, catechesis that commands assent, or learning by way of memorization, will no longer persuade the digital generation. Fortunately, religious educators have a pre-eminent source at their disposal – the “story of stories” that is Sacred Scripture, along with the lives of saints who embody that story. In and through these sacred tales, as Pope Francis reminds us, “[life becomes history](#).” Stories told and lived shape our identities. [Stories preached and practiced](#) will form the faith in future generations, especially among digital natives who, sadly, see few public models of meaning elsewhere.

Catechesis can be enhanced exponentially by the audio and video capabilities of today’s technologies. From Netflix to networks, from YouTube to user-generated content, the digital environment thrives on the interactivity that helps to form the human and the church community.

But, as its final principle, the Directory rightly concludes that “in the process of proclaiming the Gospel, the real question is not how to use the new technologies to evangelize, but how to become an *evangelizing presence on the digital continent*.” Becoming that presence is our shared task as believers.

That presence may be different online, but it is no less personal if we realize that even via social media, a human encounter still takes place between people seeking the truth in love. For parish catechesis, that search now warrants a greater investment in digital communications, so that the power of being present to each other in the faith can make going “back to school” the meaningful adventure it has always been.

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MYSTIC VISION OF CENTURY-OLD SAINT SHINES FOR OUR TIME

(October 7, 2020)

Every October 16th, the Church celebrates St. Margaret Mary Alacoque (1647-1690). This year's feast closes [a Jubilee Year](#) marking the centenary of her canonization.



Also this month, Pope Francis issued a [new encyclical](#) – “Fratelli tutti” – exhorting us to “a fraternal openness that allows us to acknowledge, appreciate and love each person, regardless of physical proximity, regardless of where he or she was born or lives.” The life of St. Margaret Mary, the “apostle of the Sacred Heart,” discloses the eternal source of that boundless fraternity.

Her story centers around her spiritual experience in the Visitation monastery at Paray-le-Monial, France. There the Lord revealed directly to her the passion of God’s love for all persons. Three apparitions stand out vividly.

The first occurred on December 27, 1673 – the feast of the beloved disciple who reclined his head on the Lord’s chest at the Last Supper. Similarly, she says, “He made me rest for a long time on His divine breast, where He discovered to me the wonders of His love and the inexplicable secrets of His Sacred Heart ... in a way so real, so sensible, that it left me no room to doubt.”

In this contemplative encounter, the Lord revealed the depth of His affection, saying: “My Divine Heart is so passionately in love with men that it can no longer contain within itself the flames of its ardent charity.” Then, through a mystical “exchange of hearts,” He empowered her to make known that divine love. As Wendy Wright explains, she underwent “an experience of radical experiential participation in the Christ event as it is focused on the heart of the crucified and the experience of loving conformity to or union with his suffering life.”

The second apparition came in June of 1674. “He was brilliant with glory; His five wounds shone like five suns. Flames darted forth from all parts of His sacred humanity, but especially from His adorable breast, which resembled a furnace, and which, opening, displayed to me His loving and amiable Heart, the living source of these flames.”

The Lord showed Margaret Mary “the inexplicable wonders of His pure love, and to what an excess He had carried it for the love of men, from whom He had received only ingratitude.” Then He said: “If men rendered Me some return of love, I should esteem little all I have done for them, and should wish, if such could be, to suffer it over again.”

The Lord instructed her to receive Holy Communion on the first Friday of every month and to spend an hour in prayer the night before. Later becoming defining elements of the Sacred Heart devotion, these pious exercises would make amends for the lackluster way in which humanity has received the revelation of divine Love.

A year later – on June 16, 1675 – the final encounter happened. This time, the Lord appeared and said: “Behold ... this heart which has so loved men that it has spared nothing, even to exhausting and consuming itself, in order to testify its love.” He then requested a special feast to celebrate the Sacred Heart, for which He promised: “My Heart shall dilate to pour out abundantly the influences of its love on all that will render it this honor.”



Such supernatural experiences may seem rather odd, even bizarre. But they remain in concert with the theology of the Incarnation – God’s taking on flesh and becoming human. St. Margaret Mary’s contemplative visions represent an “embodied mysticism.” She truly experienced the presence of Jesus. She became so vividly conscious of Him, and of participating intimately in the redemption wrought by His Sacred Heart, that she was physically and spiritually transformed by her experience.

Today we may not share such extraordinary encounters, but we can still benefit from the spiritual experience they convey. That experience originates in the bountiful love of God for His people – then, now, and always. We encounter that divine love, which continually flows out of itself for our sake, through worship of the Blessed Sacrament and devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

On May 13, 1920, Margaret Mary was canonized “as witness to a spirituality that encompasses every existence and enriches the person penetrated by the grace of God.” In her we find an embodiment of [Salesian spirituality](#), with its understanding that all human life progresses toward the interconnection of human and divine hearts.

That lifelong quest, carried out through fraternity and social friendship, is the subject of the Holy Father’s encyclical. Its impetus comes from the life of St. Francis of Assisi. But the grace to fulfill it comes from the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

In this extraordinary year, we need that grace more than ever. With St. Margaret Mary Alacoque, we need again to “behold this heart that has so loved the world.”

CAN CLARITY COME FROM CONFUSION IN POPE'S REMARKS?

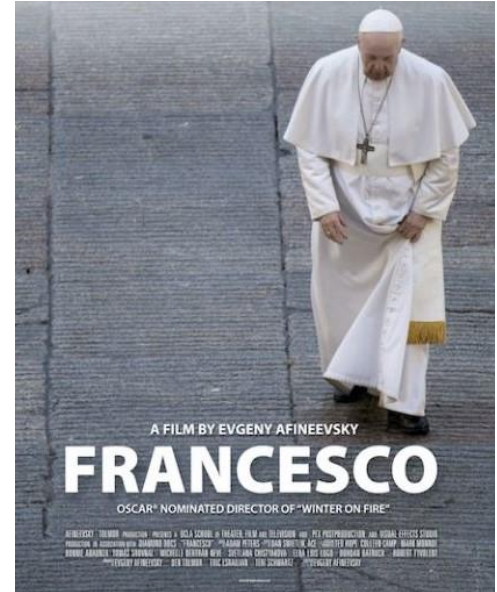
(October 30, 2020)

Pope Francis's recent comments on "civil unions" have led to widespread confusion, even controversy. ([Ryan Anderson](#) and [Robert George](#) offer a superbly reasoned response with a plausible interpretation.)

Added consternation centers on the lack of official clarification. For [John Allen](#), "Francis and his team know full well what most people think he said and haven't done anything to correct it, which means, as things stand, they own the impression." [Christopher Altieri](#) suggests that the Vatican may be happy not to change the narrative.

But I wonder whether the disturbance derives from different ways of communicating. Do ambiguous words left unclarified serve a (good) purpose?

Clearly, this pope expresses himself in ways to which we are not accustomed. Some may question its appropriateness and effectiveness, but Pope Francis's [brand of communication](#) accords with "what you see is what you get" – which can be both invigorating and exasperating!



Heritors of a scientific worldview, we are accustomed to thought that proceeds logically and speech that expresses it precisely. We prefer clarity communicated "in" a statement – which is why we often cite Church documents and quote saintly sayings.

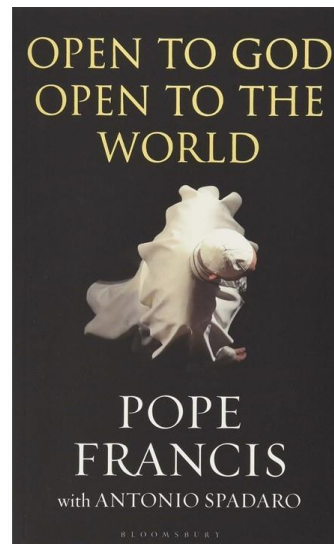
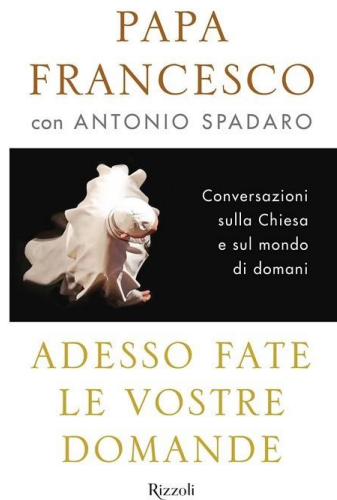
Pope Francis approaches informal conversations differently. His comments push people toward a clarity more emergent than stated, one that comes "from" or "out of" things said (eventually, hopefully). His homespun stories and images use idiomatic language and familiar pictures, rather than logical propositions, to suggest understanding.

That way of communicating invites people to think and talk more, to consider further, to ponder possibilities. It's an engaging communication "out of" which emerges not a new or changed teaching but a greater understanding that reflects time-honored truth in the fuller context of "where we are" now. That's what his recent encyclical (["Fratelli Tutti"](#)) proposes.

Consider how Pope Francis told [young people in South America](#) they should "make a ruckus! ... a ruckus that brings a free heart ... that brings solidarity ... that brings us hope, a ruckus that comes from knowing Jesus and knowing that God, once I know him, is my strength." Out of the mess they make (and which, he adds, they should help to clean up!) will come a greater clarity regarding themselves and their future.

Pope Francis often calls for boldness in speech. [Kevin Brown](#) explains this "parrhesia" as inviting courage in the face of opposition and fervor in view of moving forward. A truly "bold" approach neither hides the speaker's intention nor seeks to manipulate the hearer's understanding. It is communication coming from charity and intended to discern a response to the Spirit active in today's world.

In the [preface](#) to a book of interviews, Pope Francis admits favoring this approach. "I try to answer spontaneously in a conversation that I intend to be easily comprehensible, and not using rigid formulas. I also use simple, colloquial language. For me, interviews are a dialogue, not a lesson."



Why does he prefer to dialogue with journalists through mass media? “I want a Church that is able to find its way into conversation between people, a Church that knows how to engage in dialogue. It is the Church of Emmaus, in which the Lord ‘interviews’ the disciples who have become discouraged. For me, the interview is part of that conversation between the Church and the people of today.”

Nevertheless, the pope does acknowledge the potential problem. He laments being taken out of context, but adds, “just as I mustn’t lose my prudence, I mustn’t lose my trust either. I know that this can make me vulnerable, but it’s a risk I’m willing to take.”

The latest kerfuffle may make us wonder whether he should take that risk.

Seeking clarity in what emerges from dialogue presumes that the subject matter is unclear or unsettled. But Church teaching on marriage is definitive and clear, as [Tim Gray](#) wisely assures us.

A documentary may not be the best place for papal dialogue. Mass media does give a broad reach to Church teaching, with a “new genre of papal language” that Francis Rocca suggests gives the pope an influence inversely proportional to the official character of his words! Still, the Holy Father must know by now that his person-to-person conversations are never simply that, but always worldwide news.

Does the commotion coming from the pope’s words have any real benefit for the faithful? I think that Pope Francis thinks it does.

Even if clarity does not emerge as quickly as the news cycle demands, and even though “[popesplaining](#)” is often awkward and occasionally tiring, the shared work of sorting out meaning and coming to a deeper appreciation of the truth is what “faith seeking understanding” is all about. Developing a mature faith is difficult. But it can also give real significance to what we believe amid the important challenges we face in today’s world.

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OF OMENS AND AMENS

(November 11, 2020)

Friday the thirteenth—the most feared day and date in history.

The fateful Friday can create a real panic. Some 20 million people in the U.S. suffer from [paraskevidekatriaphobia](#), specifically, or [triskaidekaphobia](#), more generally. This year, given the state of affairs arising from the coronavirus pandemic, the dread may be exacerbated this year.

But that first number among the teens has always conjured concern. Hotel elevators skip the thirteenth floor. Airlines have no thirteenth aisle. When it falls on a Friday, businesses reportedly lose \$800-900 million.

No doubt, social media will raise numerous qualms, with posts and pics fueling the superstitions that prey on otherwise sensible people. No one will want to see a black cat.

Some suggest that this fear can be linked to the Last Supper, supposing that Judas, the betrayer, was the thirteenth person to sit at the table. Others seek to connect it to lunar cults, Babylonian codes, Mayan calendars, or the Knights Templar. No one really knows the origin.

But that's how omens work. They play on the imagination of forces beyond our control. Compounded by the confluence of simple coincidences, they suggest that some supernatural power has it out for us. Prophets of doom then proclaim our powerlessness and warn of impending consequences.



Even without that transcendental dimension, recourse to omens reflects the wavering spirit endemic to being human. Amid the ups and downs of life, we can easily fixate on fate to explain why things don't go our way. Contriving a "reason" to worry affords some sense of manageability. Knowing what to avoid on that dreadful date supposedly keeps us safe.

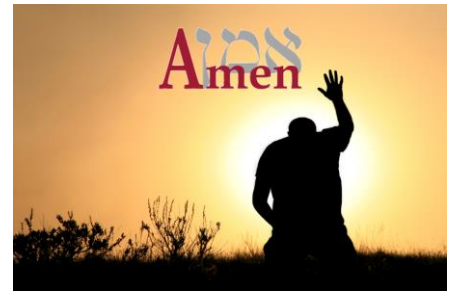
Notwithstanding the mythological menace of omens like Friday the thirteenth, they do suggest something true about our lives. They remind us that, try as we might, we are not the masters of our universe.

Recognizing this basic spiritual truth, people of faith respond differently. Instead of pointing to an omen, they respond with an "amen." Instead of fearing supernatural power, they embrace it.

Prevalent in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim worship, “amen” affirms and confirms religious belief. Most often used as a conclusion to prayer, “amen” is usually left untranslated, thereby conveying a verbal sacrality upon the soulful utterance to God – “may it be so.”

An “amen” functions rather differently compared to an omen. Bad omens evoke a passive sense of resignation before cosmic powers perceived to be beyond our control. On a Friday the thirteenth, unable to avoid the coincidence of the calendar, we are left to fend off the bad luck that inevitably awaits us.

The “amen,” by contrast, is both proclamation and affirmation. Giving voice to the choice of the person saying it, “amen” actively pronounces a personal faith in divine providence, in the recognition that things beyond human control nevertheless remain within the control of the God into whose saving hands believers commend their lives.



Though rarely, if ever, speaking the word in conversation, Catholics make this affirmation quite often. Whether said or sung, “amen” rings out in Catholic churches eight times every Sunday.

“Amen” is the congregation’s first word, in response to making the sign of the cross at the beginning of Mass, and its next to last response when that same sign is invoked as a blessing at the end of Mass.

An “amen” affirms what is spoken by the celebrant in the orations that “collect” the prayers of the congregation in the introductory rite, after preparing the gifts, and following the Communion rite.

A “great amen” culminates the memorializing of salvation history in the performative language of the Eucharistic Prayer.

Another “amen” confirms what is said by all in the Lord’s Prayer, as this leads into a divine doxology and plea for peace.

And “amen” is the proper response each person makes to the reception of the Body and Blood of Christ in Holy Communion.

In each instance, “amen” affirms a central dimension of Christian faith: the sign of the cross, the work of the Trinity, the narrative of salvation, the power of prayer, and the real presence of Jesus.

In turn, “amen” confirms each believer’s decision to entrust this topsy-turvy existence of ours into the good hands of a merciful God above.

So, be not afraid this Friday or any day of the week. Even if the unexpected happens, or bad luck seems to prevail, “amen” offers an eternal antidote to the fear of omens.

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RE-IMAGINING JOHN THE BAPTIST

(December 9, 2020)

John the Baptist has now come onto the liturgical scene.

The Second Sunday of Advent introduced John as the precursor of Him whose arrival we await. Our picture of this enigmatic religious figure is likely shaped by that Gospel passage.

John appeared “in the desert” - hardly a comfortable place in which to dwell.

He was “clothed in camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist”-- in stark contrast to the finery and formality of the attire typical of the religious establishment.

He “fed on locusts and wild honey” -- foodstuffs that [symbolically](#) align the Baptist with prophets who preceded him.

The composite picture we get is that of a rugged individual, living on the outskirts, whose own example rails against the common ways of the world. Add to that his proclamation of “repentance” and we imagine a fire-and-brimstone preacher calling people to change their ways or face the doom of destruction at the coming of the Mighty One.



Anton Raphael Mengs 1728-1779

Perhaps it’s time to re-think the fulminating figure that seems to be John the Baptist.

Mark’s Gospel links John to a familiar reference from the prophet Isaiah. The Baptist assumes the mantle of the “messenger” sent ahead of the Messiah, the “voice of one crying in the desert,” whose message is to “prepare the way of the Lord.”

Notwithstanding the misplaced modifier (in Isaiah, the desert is where the way is prepared, not where the voice cries out), the short quotation misses out on the prophet's fuller message.

Isaiah does cry out, but with an oracle meant to bring "comfort" in "speak(ing) tenderly" to God's people. Moreover, the words that follow his proclamation of the Lord's coming revelation make it clear that this message conveys "glad tidings" and "good news."

What is that message? "Here is your God!" says Isaiah, a God who "comes with power" and "rules by his strong arm." But a close reading teaches what this God will do with that powerful, strong arm. "he gathers the lambs, carrying them in his bosom, and leading the ewes with care."

Linking Isaiah to John, as the Gospel does, we can see the Baptist's proclamation as less the ranting and raving of a strange ascetic and more a call to repentance that indicates also what such repentance entails.

On the one hand, John proclaims the need for humility. He personally acknowledges, "I am not worthy" in comparison to the "mightier" One who "is coming after me." In truth, none of us is.

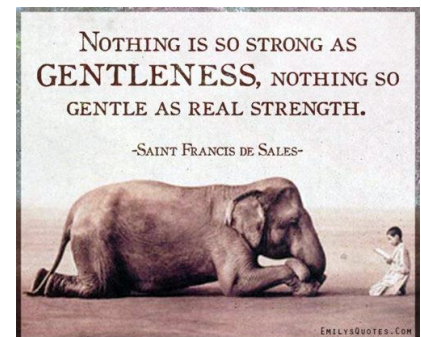
On the other hand, John points out who that One is. "Here is your God!" -- the one foretold by Isaiah -- recognizable in Jesus, the one whose coming public ministry will demonstrate the "power" of God's mercy and whose Passion will bring the reward of redemption to all when he stretches out His "strong arm(s)" on the Cross. "It is the Lord" whom the disciples will later recognize when they see Him risen from the dead.

For we who have been living in a wilderness of sorts -- with endless COVID restrictions, continued bellowing about election results, and a steady stream of news about violence in the streets -- John the Baptist's proclamation echoes the "glad tidings" and "good news" of Isaiah: Here is your God!

That message includes no cry for greater religious zealotry. It beckons no claim for harsher penitential discipline. It seeks not to induce fear in the face of impending damnation.

Rather, the twinned message of Isaiah and John announces what St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622) purportedly wrote in a popular maxim: "Nothing is so strong as gentleness, nothing so gentle as real strength." Nothing is so strong as God's gentle mercy; nothing so gentle as God's real strength in caring for us.

To prepare for God's coming in Jesus, Advent invites us to hear John the Baptist and to acknowledge, as he did, that we are not worthy, by confessing that we are sinners.



But Advent also calls us to listen to Isaiah, in the recognition that the Messiah who is coming is, indeed, already here. He comes in meekness, as a newborn child at Christmas. He comes with gentle power, in the outstretched arms of God's steadfast kindness. This, indeed, is the glad tidings of this sacred season.

It's also a call to conversion. Living humbly and gently is not the usual way in today's world. But it does offer an effective antidote to the outrage around us and within us, because it enables us to experience God-with-us, the very Emmanuel whose coming gives joy to our Advent.

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