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Archbishop José Gomez of Los Angeles, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, celebrates Christmas Eve Mass Dec. 24, 2020, at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles. (CNS/Victor Alemán, Angelus News)



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What will the new year bring in the life of the church in the United States? As we learned last year, we never know what unforeseen events will enlighten or becloud all else. We can discern three major themes that will largely shape the year ahead: the relationship between the United States bishops and the Biden administration, the Year of the Family, the appointments of new bishops in some significant sees, and how the church will continue to cope with COVID-19. Then, just before the end of the year, a new major theme emerged, arguably the most explosive: significant upheaval at EWTN.

We are all still trying to figure out what is going on at EWTN, the conservative Catholic media conglomerate. They cancelled Gloria Purvis' "Morning Glory" and Fr. Larry Richards' "Open Line" radio shows. Purvis was the most prominent African American at EWTN and Richards was a lonely defender of Pope Francis on the otherwise hostile network. Media organizations go through shakeups all the time, but ousting two voices of sanity, including one of the few minority voices on the network, while retaining Raymond Arroyo, who shills for President Donald Trump and leads a seminar in anti-Pope Francis conspiracy theories weekly, is strange at best. At worst, it is highly sectarian.

The network announced some new shows and I shall be keeping an eye on one in particular. "EWTN News In-Depth" will be hosted by Montserrat "Montse" Alvarado, executive director at the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty. I attended a conference with Alvarado on overcoming polarization hosted by Georgetown University's Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life, and she is certainly capable of mounting an interesting television program. I worry, however, that her time at Becket has not inoculated her from the conflation of religion and politics that is the central problem at EWTN. It was telling that the EWTN-owned Catholic News Agency's (CNA) article about the new show states that it will "will offer the Catholic perspective and analysis on the top stories of the week." That is a mistake, but a telling one. EWTN offers "a" Catholic perspective, not "the" Catholic perspective.

Just as interesting was the surprise departure of J.D. Flynn, editor, and Ed Condon, Washington bureau chief, from CNA. Flynn said he was leaving for personal and family reasons, but such departures are rarely abrupt and are usually accompanied by an announcement of a transition, none of which occurred. This week, Flynn and Condon announced they are launching a new platform, "The Pillar." Flynn spills a lot of ink explaining how they plan to be different from other journalists, recounting a conversation with an archbishop "some years ago" at the hotel in Baltimore where the bishops' conference meets. Flynn asked about the propriety of holding the meetings at such a lavish venue and the archbishop brushed it off. Flynn writes:

> *There is a kind of journalism which would use that story to paint a one-dimensional caricature of Catholic bishops, or use clericalism among bishops to diminish the veracity of their religious claims. There are commentators who would dismiss out of hand, with no research or analysis, the possibility that an expensive hotel might actually be the economical choice for bishops' meetings, stirring up anger, not answers, in an effort to get clicks and attention.*
>
> *There are also journalists who would never question the expense at all. And then there are those who might raise the question, but have no idea how to get the answer.*
>
> *We want The Pillar to be a different kind of journalism.*

Excuse me for pointing out that, before he talks about the misbegotten ways other journalists might treat the key fact here — "A waterfront Baltimore hotel might very well be the best choice for the bishops, and it might even be the most economical" — he admits that he never investigated that key fact: "I didn't know then, and I still don't know." Isn't that a strange example of good journalism?

The fact that Flynn chose such a story confirms something that will, overtime, turn this pillar into the kind of thing at which the Lord was scourged: He and Condon are not really journalists at all, they are canon lawyers, and sometimes they seem to not recognize the line between journalism and propaganda no matter how bright that line is, as Paul Moses demonstrated brilliantly at Commonweal.

Changes at a media organization, even a large and influential one, might seem like an odd thing to focus on when examining the year ahead in the Catholic Church, but EWTN is not just any media organization. According to its latest publicly available

tax filing, on its board sit both Archbishop José Gomez, Archbishop of Los Angeles and president of the U.S. bishops' conference, and Archbishop Charles Chaput, former Archbishop of Philadelphia. Why Gomez and Chaput have not been willing or able to arrest the anti-Francis tenor of some of the show's programs is an important and interesting question.



Archbishop José Gomez of Los Angeles, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, speaks Nov. 16, 2020, at the bishops' conference headquarters in Washington during the bishops' virtual fall meeting. (CNS/Bob Roller)

Which leads to the second item that will shape the year ahead: No one should be surprised that the U.S. bishops as a body would be so friendly with the Republican Party that they have lost their moral compass. Their fixation on a single issue — abortion — has led them into the camp of Republicans that is incapable of even raising their voice against the attacks on our democracy coming from President Trump. As David Gibson, director the Center on Religion & Culture at Fordham University, tweeted:

> *When even Paul Ryan can be stirred to speak it's all the more interesting that the US Bishops have (collectively) not made a peep about the threat to the Republic, which is not really a good look for a church which has not always been closely associated with liberal democracy.*

Not a "good look"? How it looks is the least of it. Throughout the 20th century, U.S. bishops led the way in reducing the Catholic Church's historic antipathy to democracy, finally overcoming it at the Second Vatican Council and in 60 years of papal teaching.

Unwilling to defend democracy in the public square and unwilling to defend the pope at the largest Catholic media outlet, the U.S. bishops' conference is nonetheless determined to bring President-elect Joe Biden to heel. The announcement at the end of this year's virtual plenary that the conference was establishing an ad hoc committee to deal with the incoming administration was tone deaf and also ridiculous. Despite the desire of some bishops for the conference to demand Biden be denied Communion, that decision rests with the new president's new pastor, Cardinal Wilton Gregory, and he has already indicated he has no plans to turn the altar rail into a partisan battleground.

Msgr. Jeffrey Burrill, associate general secretary of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops si

Msgr. Jeffrey Burrill, associate general secretary of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops since March 1, 2016, is the new general secretary, elected by the bishops Nov. 16, 2020. Burrill is pictured during a break at the conference of bishops' headquarters in Washington Nov. 17, 2020, during the bishops' virtual fall meeting. (CNS/Bob Roller)

The election of a new general secretary at the U.S. bishops' conference, Msgr. Jeffrey Burrill, bodes well. Burrill is conservative but not crazy. But staff do not drive the conference, the bishops do, and I fear a majority of them will be looking for opportunities to clash with the Biden administration. There are a host of issues on which the stance of the incoming administration is far closer to that of the Catholic Church than the outgoing one, but that will not matter. In addition to the culture warrior bishops, too many others simply do not want to risk the phone calls and emails that standing up to the right-wing base of the church entails. I know one bishop who, when he does anything he knows will ignite a firestorm among

conservatives in his diocese, brings flowers and chocolates to the secretaries who answer the phones at the chancery. It is a good idea. Conservative Catholics have, in their complicity with Trump, squandered any right to veto a bishop's actions by their hostility.

The Holy Father has said that beginning on March 19, the feast of St. Joseph, the universal church will embark upon a year of reflection on *Amoris Laetitia*, the 2016 apostolic exhortation he promulgated following the twin synods on the family. At those synods and when the document came out, much of the focus was placed on a controversial footnote that opened the door for divorced and remarried Catholics to receive the sacraments.

Jesuit Fr. James Keenan organized three conferences for bishops and theologians to discuss the text back in 2018, following a very successful three-day meeting to reflect upon the document Keenan organized with Chicago Cardinal Blase Cupich in 2017. I was fortunate enough to attend that first meeting, and it was so refreshing to engage the many issues the document raises besides communion for the divorced and remarried. It will be interesting to see if the bishops' conference takes up this opportunity for reflection the Holy Father has provided now, or if, as they did five years ago, they leave the reflection to others because it would be too divisive for the conference to engage. I fear that the subject will still be too hot to handle. As I noted last week, too many bishops do not think there is anything to discern, that there is no need for synodal discussions, that they have all the answers they need in the catechism.

It is sad but also more than sad. The pope has given his fellow bishops an explicit invitation. If they are unable or unwilling to meaningfully engage his request, what does that say? It is clear that certain fringe conservative groups like Church Militant and LifeSiteNews are de facto schismatic, but how many bishops qualify as proto-schismatic?

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Which brings us to the perennial topic of which key dioceses will receive new bishops this coming year. Bishop Michael Sheridan of Colorado Springs turned 75 last March, so his replacement could come at any time. The diocese is not large, serving only about 176,000 Catholics, but it is an important critical assignment

because Sheridan has been a leader among the most extreme abortion-only bishops, and nearby Denver is ground zero for opposition to the pope. Having a Francis-friendly bishop down the road would help create balance in the province.

The only metropolitan who turns 75 this year is Archbishop Joseph Kurtz of Louisville. Home to 200,000 Catholics, the archdiocese is not large, but the province includes all of Kentucky and Tennessee. Two of the bishops who are most in sync with Pope Francis, Bishop John Stowe of Lexington, Kentucky, and Bishop David Talley of Memphis, are among the suffragans, although it is unlikely Talley would be elevated to the metropolitan see, given that he inherited a mess in Memphis in 2019.

The bishop of one of the fastest growing cities in America, Phoenix, Bishop Thomas Olmsted, does not turn 75 until January of 2022, but the nuncio should start looking now. Some 1.2 million Catholics live in the diocese, and they have been led by one of the worst culture warrior bishops in the country. Olmsted called for a 54-day novena for the nation last year, and among the things he asked the Catholic people of Phoenix to pray for was "the rejection of all forms of collectivism." I hope he is not getting Medicare or Social Security. In any event, I am sure the metropolitan of the region, Santa Fe Archbishop John Wester, can find a suitable pastor to recommend to the nuncio.

How the church copes with COVID-19 is difficult to guess. There is so much we do not know. How soon will most of us be vaccinated? How much of a financial drain has the pandemic placed on parochial and diocesan coffers? Has the perdurance of this virus changed the cultural contours of our society such that more people will be receptive to religion? Or will people who have stopped going to church never return? These are vital questions, but I do not have a clue how they will shake out.

Those are some of the stories I will be following here at Distinctly Catholic this year. Happy Three Kings Day to one and all.