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Peter Dwyer and Therese Ratliff are pictured together. Ratliff has succeeded Dwyer as director and CEO of Liturgical Press. Dwyer retired this past spring, after 33 years of service, including 21 years as the company's director. (Courtesy of Liturgical Press)



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September 7, 2022
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When Peter Dwyer retired from Liturgical Press this past spring, the press release cited his 33 years of service, including 21 years leading the company as its director. But the publishing ministry of the Benedictines of St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, has been part of Dwyer's life for much longer than that.

You could say that Dwyer grew up in the business. His father, John Dwyer, was the business manager at Liturgical Press for 35 years, joining the company when Peter was just 1. The younger Dwyer recalls occasionally helping his dad sort bulletins on Saturdays, where he heard the staff talk about their work and began to pick up on the abbey's spirit of hospitality and collaboration that would be hallmarks of his own future career in Catholic publishing.

The senior Dwyer retired in 1986; his son joined as marketing manager two years later, after having graduated from St. John's University in Collegeville. In 2001, when Dwyer became director of the press, he was first lay person to lead the organization. (Two of Dwyer's brothers also worked for the abbey's monks: one in the high school and another in development.)

During his tenure at Liturgical Press, Dwyer worked on more than 3,000 titles, he estimates. But asking him to name his favorites is tricky. "I can tell you there is a whole bushel basket of great authors and a very small number I'd never want to work with again," he told me during a Zoom interview. "It's a very affirming and rewarding field."

Among the projects he is most proud of are:

- The 37-volume New Collegeville Bible Commentary series of scripture interpretation;
- The Wisdom Commentary series, the first scholarly feminist interpretation of every book of the Bible;

- *The Saint John's Bible*, the first handwritten, hand-illuminated Benedictine Bible in over 500 years;
- The "Living Liturgy" missals and other parish resources, which Precious Blood Sr. Joyce Ann Zimmerman worked on for two decades;
- Ritual books such as the Lectionary.

An individual title Dwyer recalls as particularly influential is Richard Gaillardetz's *By What Authority? Foundations for Understanding Authority in the Church*.

Dwyer also helped launch "Give Us This Day," a daily prayer resource that began as a monthly print publication but now is also available as an app.

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"Give Us This Day" is a "huge accomplishment," says Therese Ratliff, who is succeeding Dwyer as director and CEO of Liturgical Press. "That has been a momentous service to the people of God that goes beyond a one-time publication."

Ratliff, who most recently served as publisher of books and devotionals for the U.S. divisions of Bayard, Inc. (Twenty-Third Publications, Pflaum Publishing Group and Creative Communications for the Parish), is the first woman to lead Liturgical Press in its 96-year history.



Peter Dwyer (Courtesy of Liturgical Press)

She already is focusing on shoring up the company's digital presence. A first-ever online webinar, featuring authors Cindy Wooden and Massimo Faggioli, is scheduled for Sept. 15.

Dwyer, who has the perspective of more than three decades in the business, says change is a constant. For example RBTE, the Religious Booksellers Trade Exhibit, which Dwyer co-founded with Bob Byrns of Paulist Press, ceased after two and a half

decades of annual shows because of the declining number of Catholic bookstores.

But post-pandemic challenges are particularly acute for Catholic publishers. Although COVID-19 seemed to reverse a yearslong decline in reading among Americans, Catholics publishers, whose sales tend to be yoked to parishes, took a hit as churches paused in-person services during the pandemic.

"There are so many ways to distract ourselves," said Dwyer. "Book publishing, like any other media or entertainment form, is really in a serious competition for our time."

Catholic parishes have not yet recovered from a 20-25% drop from pre-pandemic Mass attendance, and the 75-80% return may be the "new normal," says Dwyer.

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"The priests I've been in touch with don't think people are going to come back to 100%," he said. "It reminds me of the slow realization that settled into religious communities in the 1990s and 2000s, when they realized that vocations weren't going back to the 1950s levels."



Therese Ratliff (Courtesy of Liturgical Press)

Ratliff noted that as the pandemic rules loosened, people were eager to get back to the gym and other in-person communities. So if Catholics are not equally eager to return to church communities, "we have to ask, 'What kind of community did we offer in the first place?' " she said.

"How many people do you know got used to not going to church? Or to just watching it online?" Ratliff asked, adding that a number of regular churchgoers came to the

conclusion that they were OK with not returning.

"It's a huge challenge for the church to say, 'This is why you should go back,' " she said.

Church participation levels — and the demographic realities that go along with it — are not only issues for Catholic publishers but for the entire U.S. church, which is also suffering from the polarization that plagues the wider society.

"What we're seeing in the church is a similar divide in respect for the authority and respect for one another that we see in the secular culture," Dwyer said.

Yet Dwyer, who still spends his free time reading Catholic books (most recently Anthony Annett's *Cathonomics* and Robert Ellsberg's correspondence with Sr. Wendy Beckett) remains hopeful on both fronts, both sacred and secular — even though none of his progeny are planning to follow him into the Catholic publishing business.

"I would never discount the Holy Spirit."

A version of this story appeared in the **Sept 16-29, 2022** print issue under the headline: More change ahead for Catholic publishing.