**Why the US should accept more Afghan war refugees**

Young Catholic whose family was left behind in Vietnam argues for greater openness

**COMMENTARY**

By THERESA LA

On the Monday after Kabul fell, I came downstairs to find my mother with tears streaming as she watched the unfolding scenes of desperation and fear. My dad, a man who rarely shows his emotions, stood in the kitchen, his cup of soy milk forgotten, tears welling.

It was only 46 years ago that both were in the same position: fearful, anxious and desperate as their country was overtaken, in turmoil, and the United States helicopters were flying farther and farther away without any of them or their families on board. During the Vietnam War, my grandfather worked alongside American soldiers as their translator, a crucial part of the mission against the Viet Cong. Yet even with documentation of such work, he and his family would be one of the many that were left behind after America evacuated from Saigon on April 29, 1975.

My grandfather was arrested and sentenced to 13 years in a “reeducation camp.” He, however, was considered to be one of the luckier ones. Others were executed immediately, their bodies buried in a mass unmarked grave as a systemic massacre of the enemy.

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**Protests against language school show Northern Ireland’s post-Brexit divisions**

By SAHM VENTER

BELFAST, NORTHERN IRELAND - The announcement of Northern Ireland’s first integrated Irish language preschool was enthusiastically received and soon its 16 places were filled by among others, the children of mixed—Catholic and Protestant—marriages.

But a hate campaign against the naíscoil and its founder Linda Ervine quickly emerged on social media and on lampposts, driving her to consider moving it from the grounds of a primary school to protect the children.

Linda Ervine sits on a replica of the ancient stone chair used to inaugurate the Gaelic Chieftains of Clandeboye in Northern Ireland.

Ervine, founder of Northern Ireland’s first integrated Irish language preschool, has faced bullying and intimidation.

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**As Southern states restrict voting rights, local bishops remain largely silent**

By BRIAN FRAGA
bfraga@ncronline.org

Local Catholic bishops’ conferences in Georgia, Florida and Texas have chosen not to speak out or take positions on the “election integrity” bills that their states’ Republican-controlled legislatures passed this year to impose new voting restrictions, which civil rights organizations say target Black and minority communities.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has also declined to directly address nationwide changes to voting laws that at least 18 states enacted 30 laws to restrict access to the vote between Jan. 1 and July 14, according to the Brennan Center for Justice. Those laws make mail-in voting and early voting at drop boxes more difficult, impose stricter voter ID requirements and make faulty voter purges more likely.

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This issue was mailed on Aug. 27.
Peace activist reacts to Afghanistan withdrawal

By HEIDI SCHLUMPF
hschlumpf@ncronline.org

On Sept. 11, 2001, Kathy Kelly was in New York City, participating in a liquids-only fast against U.S. economic sanctions that were costing Iraqi children their lives. After the attack, her first question was to ask so was any anxiety that they would undertake such a heinous act. The next was to identify where the criminals were from and it wasn’t Afghanistan.

Opposed to the war in Afghanistan from the beginning, Kelly joined a group that marched from Arlington National Cemetery to the United Nations, carrying a banner that said, “Kelly joined a group that marched from Arlington National Cemetery to the United Nations, carrying a banner that said, “My life is at risk. Can we please have a fire that destroyed much of the camp.

NCR: You’ve been in touch with folks in Afghanistan. What’s your perception of what’s happening on the ground? Kelly: This has been a terrible, terrible week for the people of Afghanistan. U.S. allies, people who worked with the U.S. military, contractors or NGOs feel they are at great risk. I don’t want to see economic sanctions, which always has some of these funders and all who support NCR’s mission. For information on how you can support NCR reporting, see NCronline.org donate.

Some of the images in the news are very difficult to watch: the chaos at the Kabul airport, a baby being handed over a fence. What is your reaction? Of course, the level of anxiety is very high. And I can only imagine the panic and the alarm that people I know are feeling. I can’t help but notice that in the last week, there has probably been 20 times more coverage of Afghanistan in mainstream media than there has been in the last 20 years. The drama is certainly riveting and awful. But I wish there was also constant coverage of the fact that Afghanistan has drought in most of its provinces, that people have a hard time getting access to clean water; there are extreme dangers. Having already manifested bravery and passion under difficult surroundings, they deserve to be acknowledged. The next was to identify who was so angry that this was happening. The Taliban has been active since 2008. They now face extreme dangers. Having already manifested bravery and passion under difficult surroundings, they deserve to be acknowledged.

Kathy Kelly holds Shaba at the Chamin-E-Babak refugee camp in Kabul, Afghanistan, in January 2014, a few days after the child had been saved from a burning tent, during a fire that destroyed much of the camp.

Did you support the decision for the U.S. to leave Afghanistan? I always wanted the United States pullout. I do think that it should have been done in a way that attended to the needs of those who were working with the United States. Veterans groups have been petitioning for two years to get their allies out of the country. The Trump and Biden administrations could have accelerated the glacial pace of their allies out of the country. The Trump and Biden administrations could have accelerated the glacial pace of their allies out of the country. The Trump and Biden administrations could have accelerated the glacial pace of their allies out of the country. The Trump and Biden administrations could have accelerated the glacial pace of their allies out of the country. The Trump and Biden administrations could have accelerated the glacial pace of their allies out of the country. The Trump and Biden administrations could have accelerated the glacial pace of their allies out of the country. The Trump and Biden administrations could have accelerated the glacial pace of their allies out of the country. The Trump and Biden administrations could have accelerated the glacial pace of their allies out of the country. The Trump and Biden administrations could have accelerated the glacial pace of their allies out of the country. The Trump and Biden administrations could have accelerated the glacial pace of their allies out of the country.
Kevin Porter

Editor’s note: Over the summer, two anthropology professors — Laura Masa-

c of the Catholic University of Amer-

can Indians, D.C., and Steve Le-

Of St. Mary’s College of Maryland — led a dig on a former plantation

owned by the Jesuits: St. Inigoes, in St. Mary’s County in southern Maryland.

Several descendants of enslaved persons, including the Georgetown University

272, a list of enslaved persons the Jesuits

told that story with a frankness and

honesty that our ledgers lack.

— Kevin Porter

By KEN HOMAN, ROBIN A. PROUDIE, CLARRISA ASHTON STRIPLIN and GREG BEAMAN

Ken Homan is a Jesuit brother

of the Midwest Province. He is cur-

rently a history doctoral student at

Georgetown University.

I sat on an upside-down five-gal-

lon bucket, taking a few moments to

breathe in the brutal July heat. Even

under the cooling tent, I felt every bit

of the 105-degree heat index. I spent

that steamy July day busting sod,

peeling back the top layer of a 5-foot

square where we searched for artifacts

of the hallowed ground that was be-

coming known. I spent two days at the
dig sites. When I picked up a rusty nail from

the colonial period, or sifted through the

soil with hopes of finding a one-of-a-

kind artifact, I never let on that I could

see shadowy figures illuminating out

of the hallowed ground that was be-
ding dug up. Nobody would have be-

lieved me anyway. I traveled through the

entire experience, convincing my-

self that this was all a necessary part

of the sacred journey.

And on those nights, as I slept, I

was comforted by the seraphic voices

of the ancestors affirming that I am

“their hope and their dream.” And

in those moments to come, when I will

have no choice but to swallow anoth-

er harsh reality of their unimaginable

existence, equipped with a renewed

purpose, I will hold my head high. For

I know, but for my ancestors and the

grace of God … go I.

Clarissa Ashton Stripling, a re-

tention as the family histo-

Clara Ashston Stripling, a re-

terserves as the family histo-

rian and is active in the Unified

Committee for Afro American Con-

tributions of St. Mary’s County,

Maryland.

I recently learned I am a GU272 de-

scendant. The GU272 were enslaved

people who were sold by Georgetown

University and the Maryland Jesuits
to St. Louis, Missouri in 1838. My fam-

ily’s DNA matches six of the Aces-
trey kits managed by the Georgetown

Memory Project, which means we

match cousins we were never aware of

in Louisiana. Throughendogamy, I am

related to many other Southern Mary-

land GU272 descendants.

I am angry that my ancestors were

victims of well-documented Jesuit hu-

man trafficking. My ancestors were

bought, sold, enslaved, forced to labor;

and converted and indoctrinated into

Catholicism. Families were broken up

and sold off, never to be seen again, all

in the name of Jesus.

I was heartbroken to learn that sin-
gle, white, female Catholics aspiring to

become nuns brought their slaves as
dowries, or when I read the names and
descriptions of my ancestors from the

manifest of the Katherine Jackson or

the Tweed slave ships, or to see people

identified as cargo.

Despair takes hold of me when I re-

alize I may never find my ancestors.

Non-direct line descendants spend

countless hours researching and col-

lecting through grassroots descen-
dant work groups. These same

descendants spend money testing with
different ancestry websites and buy-

ing research books. Through neces-
sity, non-direct line descendants have

been forced to become subject matter

experts in slavery migration patterns,

DNA and ethnicity mapping tools, re-

searching obscure sources and comb-

ing through archives.

This despair is exacerbated when I re-

alize I may never uncover my link to

my enslaved ancestors in my lifetime.

Georgetown has been adding records
to the Georgetown Slavery Archive

since 2016, but they have not shared a

collection yet. From my perspective,

there has not been engagement from

Georgetown to the descendant com-

munity as to which documents are dig-

itized first. I know of no descendants

who were consulted about the docu-

ments they are most interested in see-

ing first.

I am angry that this atrocity is not

taught in schools, nor preached about

in churches. I am angry that repara-

tions have been slow in coming, or

about Georgetown’s refusal to provide

free tuition to descendants to attend

Georgetown or a college/university of

the descendant’s choice.

Greg Beaman is a historian who

specializes in slavery and urban de-

development in the Atlantic world.

He is a doctoral candidate in the

History Department at George-

town University.

My eight great-grandfather, Richard

Duke, arrived in what is now Maryland

aboard the Ark as an indentured ser-
vant owning a fixed term of labor to Fer-
dinard Poulton, a Jesuit priest. Duke

labored at the St. Inigoes plantation and

returned to England, watched his sons

die of dysentery, and died in 1671.

Even though the surviving archive

only tells of Richard Duke’s enslav-
manship as a Wicomico woman. Along with his fellow

Protestant servants, Duke harassed the Jesuits’ overseer over a

rape conviction. By 1650, he claimed 100 acres of land from the Jesuits in return for his

years of indentured labor. Duke

and Poulton, a Jesuit priest. Duke

labored at the St. Inigoes plantation and

died in 1671. His descendants have been slow in coming, or

perhaps a beginning of my contri-

bution to reconciliation is telling both

of these stories in their proper histori-

cal context. The next step might be rec-

ommencing with a renewed

commitment to abolishing human traffic-
ing. My ancestors were

bought, sold, enslaved, forced to labor,

and helped construct the first buildings

in the land of his birth. Duke

immigrated to America and died peace-

fully in the land of his birth.

How does my ancestry impact my

role in the process of reconciliation?

Perhaps a beginning of my contri-

bution to reconciliation is telling both

of these stories in their proper histori-

cal context. The next step might be rec-

ommencing with a renewed

commitment to abolishing human traffic-\n
As a people, we are made up of any combination of this [mestizaje] ... It’s such a beautiful contribution to humanity.”

JEANETTE RODRÍGUEZ

Diversity of Latino college students

In response to the need to better recognize and celebrate the diversity of the Latino community, a conference designed to help Catholic colleges and universities better serve Latinx students, made an intentional effort to do just that. Keynote speakers, campus ministers and students shared their various Latino backgrounds, including citizenship status, countries of origin, colors, language capabilities, class status and education level, during the Aug. 3-5 “Il Futuro Is Here!: Cuentos y Recuerdos for the Journey” hosted by Dominican University in River Forest, Illinois. In her opening remarks, Jeanette Rodríguez, a professor of theology and religious studies and couples and family therapy at Seattle University, commented on the role of “mestizaje” (mixed race) when talking about race and culture.

“As a people, we are made up of any combination of this [mestizaje], that is, you’re American, African, Indigenous, Asian, etc.,” Rodríguez said. “It’s such a beautiful contribution to humanity.” Community and comilación de los santos (communion of saints) were two themes listed as a focus for the event.

In response to Rodríguez’s keynote, “Cuentos y Recuerdos: Stories, Memories and Dichos that Educate,” participants reflected on the power of memory and the role storytelling plays in the healing process.

Read more of the story at NCRonline.org/node/2002815.

— Melissa Cedillo

DEVASTATION IN HAITI

A woman takes shelter in a makeshift camp Aug. 17, 2021, during the passing of Tropical Storm Grace in Les Cayes, Haiti. The storm swept over Haiti with drenching rains after a magnitude 7.2 earthquake battered the impoverished Caribbean nation Aug. 14, 2021. Relief workers said the earthquake might not be as catastrophic as the 2010 quake, but recovery will be complicated because the quake came on the heels of July’s presidential assassination, of an economic and ongoing political crisis, the coronavirus pandemic and an active storm season now underway. CRS staffers reported widespread damage to buildings and homes as area hospitals have been overwhelmed by the disaster, pushing them to capacity and forcing them to turn away people in need. The major road connecting Les Cayes to Jérémie is impassable due to landslides and cracks on the road. You can read more of the story at NCRonline.org/node/200322.

—CNS/Reuters/Ricardo Arduengo

ON THE WEB

1 Francis was right on Latin Mass

NCR political columnist Michael Sean Winters writes about the “wailing and gnashing of teeth” by those who are championing Latin Mass following Pope Francis’ Traditionis Custodes, the motu proprio rendering his restriction on the traditional Latin Mass. They said that restriction on the traditional Latin Mass was not the best way to deal with the problems in traditionalist communities.

“More effective move would have been to put restrictions on the destructive behaviors and ideologies they promote,” she writes. “The traditional Latin Mass is not itself the problem. The problem is that many traditionalist communities embrace and promote ideologies contrary to the Gospel.”

Read more of Bratten Weiss’ commentary at NCRonline.org/node/200374.

3 Two nuns killed in South Sudan

Srs. Mary Daniel Abut and Regina Roba, South Sudanese members of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart in the Juba Archdiocese, were shot and killed along a South Sudan highway on Aug. 16. The sisters were in a bus returning to Juba with seven other sisters and five men after attending centenary celebrations at Loa Catholic parish in the eastern Diocese of Torit, according to a statement.

According to the statement, the bus left at 7:30 a.m. and was an hour into the trip when armed men ambushes the bus and started shooting at it. The driver ordered the men on the bus to flee, thinking that the gunmen would spare the sisters. Four of the sisters left the bus with the men. The gunmen followed and shot Abut and Roba.

You can read more of the story at GlobalSistersReport.org/node/200341.

4 Celebrating John Krejci

Carol McShane writes an appreciation for the founder of Call to Action Nebraska, John Krejci, who died Aug. 11. McShane, Krejci and others were excommunicated in 1996 by then Lincoln Bishop Fabian Bruskewitz.

“He blessed all that he did with a spark of life,” McShane says about Krejci. “He knew goodness and truth when he saw it and had the courage to speak up when he didn’t see it.”

You can read more of the appreciation at NCRonline.org/node/200379.
My colleague Rafael Luciani is one of the world’s leading experts on the topic of synodality, the experience of “walking together” rooted in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council that Pope Francis has called on the Catholic Church to embrace.

Luciani, a native of Venezuela, serves as a theological expert for the regional Latin American Episcopal Council (CELM) and the Confederation of Latin American Religious (CLAR). He is also one of three Latin American theologians invited as expert advisers for the theological commission of the secretariat for the next Synod of Bishops. Earlier this year, Francis expanded the upcoming synod: it will begin with a diocesan phase this fall, followed by continental meetings next year, and will conclude with a general assembly at the Vatican in 2023.

Luciani is professor extraordinary at Boston College and a full professor at the Universidad Católica Andrés Bello in Venezuela.

We spoke in early August about synodality, why some Catholics seem reluctant or unwilling to consider this way of being church, and what it means that Xaviere Missionary Sr. Nathalie Becquet, his former student, will be the first woman serving as a voting member at a Vatican synod.

Following is our interview, which I translated from Spanish and edited for length and clarity.

**Osipov: We hear much about synodality these days. What do you think needs more clarity to understand this topic better?**

**Luciani:** Above all, synodality is a way in which the church is and acts in history. It is not a method of doing things, but rather a process of proceeding grounded in the ecclesiology of the people of God described in Chapters 3 and 4 of Dei Verbum. According to Cardinal Leo Joseph Suenens, the document’s architect, this is the key to interpreting the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council. During Francis’ pontificate, the reflection on synodality has unfolded as an exercise of discernment (congresso in conjunto, collaboratively).

As it unfolds, the synodal model today seeks to achieve some sensus eclesiae (to feel with the entire church). It is not about limiting or eliminating the decision-making power of the pope or that of the bishops. In fact, it affirms that and strengthens it, demanding that their decisions emerge from sincere consultation and seeking consensus, since every exercise of authority in the church is to be at the service of the people of God.

**Osipov:** Why do you think that some sectors in the church in the United States still see synodality with suspicion?

**Luciani:** I think that it has to do largely with ecclesiological mentality that treated unity as equivalent to homogeneity. In its document “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” which has not received much attention as of yet, the International Theological Commission reminds us that the first level in the exercise of synodal discernment is listening to the local churches and how the faith is expressed in different cultures and contexts.

That is what the conciliar decree Ad gentes proposed. Seeking to impose ways of being Catholic that are theologically and culturally homogeneous is akin to arguing in favor of a new colonialism.

The local church is to express the church’s universality in terms of what it believes and to affirm its diversity in terms of how that faith is incarnated through differentiated ecclesial forms and practices.

You served as Sr. Nathalie Becquet’s academic adviser and directed the international theoretical work of synodality when she studied at Boston College. Now she is under-secretary of the Synod of Bishops, and the first voting member of the Synod to serve as a woman with a right to vote in such an ecclesial entity. How should we read this appointment?

It is a meaningful appointment, although its major impact is not what many U.S. Catholics and mass media venues often highlight. Many interpret her ability to vote in the Synod of Bishops as an exercise of lay power. That perspective may give the impression that the church is moving toward a model of representative democracy in which a majority — ordained or lay — makes important decisions.

That analysis would be simplistic. There are several other lay women and men at the Vatican with juridical power that was traditionally reserved to bishops. To vote in these instances must be understood in a much wider context.

Sister Nathalie’s appointment is an affirmation of the voice of ecclesial minorities and their influence on the decision-making process of the church. Only a culture of consensus can guarantee that minorities are recognized and included.

Do you recommend to understand and appreciate more these conversations on synodality?

First of all, humility and openness to listen. We need to overcome fears and prejudices when talking about these topics.

Read more, starting with a more in-depth study of the documents of the Second Vatican Council. Become familiar with the document of the International Theological Commission, “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” which has not received sufficient attention, even among theologians. I also recommend taking part in the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (2021-23).

[Osipov] is a professor of theology at Boston College, where he chairs the Department of Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry.
When the dignity of a refugee, a migrant, a human being is destroyed by war and/or in the aftermath of war, the imago dei is destroyed.

In supporting the resettlement of Vietnamese refugees, sponsoring my parents, offering English and citizenship classes, providing shelter, purchasing food and supporting them psychologically, spiritually and physically, parishes in Michigan and California performed the corporeal works of mercy. “They lived out God’s calling to “cut away, therefore, the thickening about your hearts and stiffen your necks no more … and uphold the cause of the fatherless and the widow; and the stranger, providing him with food and clothing. You too must befriend the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Deuteronomy 10:19). By focusing on the humanity of Vietnamese refugees rather than subscribing to the political drama surrounding the Vietnam War, they helped my parents to regain their human dignity. These servants continued the Catholic tradition of caring for refugees, which has its roots in the Old Testament and the New Testament. "Let all who are wise understand. The destruction of one’s dignity is not less injurious as deep as the humanitarian crisis of the Vietnam War. It is our turn to answer God’s call to tend to the needs of our brothers and sisters. It is our turn to call on our elected officials to rescue, resettle and integrate Afghan refugees into our communities by supporting them with the same gifts, treasures and talents. It is our turn to “act justly, love tenderly, and walk humbly with our God” (Micah 6:8).”

[Theresa La is the proud daughter of war refugees and graduates of Catholic schooling from elementary school to Marymount University and Georgetown Univ. She is currently a master’s student in philosophy at Marymount University. When not advocating for social justice issues, she can be found drinking coffee and trying to teach her dog how to pray.]

When the dignity of a refugee, a migrant, a human being is destroyed by war and/or in the aftermath of war, the imago dei is destroyed. when we destroy the destruction of one’s dignity. The concept that “every human being is created in the image of God, entitled to human dignity and respect,” as the Catechism of the Catholic Church says, is the foundation of modern Catholic social teaching.
It is with deep gratitude that we acknowledge those who have informed NCR of their decision to include NCR in their estate plan. The following are the names of members of the NCR Legacy Society.

"I rely on NCR for its independent news analysis of my church and our people. I look to NCR to feed my faith and its stories undergird my spirituality and in it I find community. I want NCR to have the funds to continue so I enthusiastically put them in my will, donate to the annual Friends of NCR fund and gift a dozen subscriptions annually.

—Anne M. Jenkins, Edmunds, WA

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From NCR I get a view of the church I find in very few other publications. It gives me a vision of the church that is dynamic and open to the Holy Spirit and at the same time, a church which is changeable and always in need of reform because it is made up of frail human persons. NCR holds the church accountable for its failings, but above all it is committed to be a voice of the church’s mission as the hope and the light of Christ in a darkened world.

—Fr. Anthony Schumacher, NCR legacy donor. 1927-2019

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Learn more about NCR’s Legacy Challenge: NCRonline.org/legacy, email legacy@ncronline.org or call 816-968-2217
Demonstrators in Atlanta gather outside the Georgia State Capitol Wednesday, May 26, 2021, to protest H.B. 531, passed by the Georgia House to restrict ballot drop boxes, require more I.D. for absentee voting and limit weekend early voting days passed.

“VOTERS: THE SILENCE IS VERY NOTICEABLE”

Continued from Page 1

“The silence is very noticeable, and it’s sad and disappointing,” said Sr. Anita Baird, a member of the Religious Congregation of the Society of the Daughters of the Heart of Mary who serves on the board of directors for the National Black Sisters’ Conference.

State legislatures in Georgia and Florida passed and Republican governors in both states signed controversial broad omnibus bills that the Brennan Center and civil rights groups like the NAACP and the Leadership Conference of Women Religious defend the right of all citizens to vote. The sisters also called on Congress to take up legislation to protect voting rights, such as the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act, and called out elected officials “at every level who continue to introduce measures that would return us to the era of Jim Crow.”

“This should be an issue that would be very easy for the bishops collectively to issue a very strong statement on the sanctity and the right to vote, and the responsibility we all have to ensure that all citizens’ voices are heard,” Baird told NCR.

Instead of challenging Republican lawmakers and conservative lobbyists who have led the charge to tighten voting regulations on questionable grounds that the 2020 presidential election was marred by fraud, the bishops have widely opted for a nonconfrontational posture — either remaining silent or issuing general statements reiterating official Catholic support for voting rights without mentioning the recent bills. The Catholic bishops have not joined leaders of other Christian denominations and faith traditions who have spoken out and mobilized against the new state voting laws. On Aug. 12, dozens of interfaith leaders and state legislators spoke outside the U.S. Supreme Court to call on federal lawmakers to secure voting rights and end the filibuster, the threat of which Senate Republicans utilized in June to block debate on the For the People Act, Democrats’ voting rights and campaign finance reform bill. The interfaith leaders also marched to the U.S. Capitol with signed letters to present to lawmakers. No Catholic bishops participated in the march.

On June 24, the chairman of two U.S. bishops’ committees sent a letter to congressional lawmakers urging them to ensure “the right to vote is available to all citizens in our democratic society.” However, the bishops took no position on any federal legislation and did not mention new laws that restrict voting access in states like Georgia and Florida.

Fr. Bruce Wilkinson, a priest of the Atlanta Archdiocese who is retired from active ministry, told NCR that “as a Black man, it doesn’t surprise me. But as a Catholic, it really disappoints me.”

“The typical response from the Atlanta Archdiocese to previous concerns raised by him and others regarding issues of racial injustice has been silence,” he said.

“When all these things happen, like voter suppression, which has been a very big issue, especially in the Black Catholic community, there’s silence,” Wilkinson said.

A spokeswoman for the Atlanta Archdiocese told NCR in an email that the archdiocese was “not interested in participating” in this story. The Georgia Catholic Conference, which acts as the public policy arm for the state’s bishops, did not take a position or comment on the passage of the Election Integrity Act of 2021, which Gov. Brian Kemp signed into law on March 25. In addition to provisions that tighten restrictions on drop boxes, voter ID’s and absentee ballots, the Georgia law prohibits volunteers from handing out food and water to people waiting in line to vote. The law also enables the state legislature to take more direct control over the ballot counting in Democratic-majority areas.

Two months before the law’s passage, Francis Mulcahy, the executive director of the Georgia Catholic Conference, told The Georgia Bulletin, a newspaper for the Atlanta Archdiocese, that the local church would defend voting rights as a key feature of Catholic social teaching in the upcoming legislative session.

“We would be opposed to any restriction on voting rights,” Mulcahy said in January. “Exactly how that will play out in legislation and what we will do about it will depend on what comes out in the legislation.”

But when organizations like the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, the Southern Poverty Law Center; the League of Women Voters of Georgia and the American Civil Liberties Union filed legal challenges and accused the state’s Republican lawmakers of crafting legislation designed to suppress voters in Black-majority districts, the Georgia Catholic Conference did not join the challenges.

As NCR has previously reported, major Catholic philanthropists and pro-life leaders have bankrolled and spearheaded voter suppression efforts to conservative-leaning states since Donald Trump’s defeat last November. Joe Biden, a Democrat. Trump has attributed Biden’s victory to baseless claims of widespread voter fraud that helped fuel the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol and that have helped provide a shakier foundation for Republicans’ election-integrity push.

Besides possibly not wanting to alienate politically conservative donors, other potential factors — including political calculations and disagreements among the bishops themselves — could explain their hesitancy or inability to collectively oppose new state-level restrictions on voting.

“I think the USCCB, the church hierarchy in general, might say that we take on issues that directly reflect the teachings of the church, and that how elections are administered is not really central to Catholic teaching,” said Geoffrey Layman, chairman of the political science department at the University of Notre Dame. “I think they felt it was an effort to not stick their head into politics where it doesn’t belong and to restructure their political activism that is central to church teaching. That might be one thing that they would say,” said Layman, who also suggested that bishops in conservative states could be playing the political long game as well.

With the U.S. Supreme Court and its conservative majority more likely to give states further latitude to regulate abortion rights, possibly even overturn Roe v. Wade, bishops in those states may not want to alienate Republican lawmakers when the time comes to legislate away abortion, he said.

The Texas Catholic Conference of Bishops, on its website and its Twitter feed, has staked out positions on dozens of bills this year related to abortion and health care workers, “the advancement of gender ideology” as well as on issues related to immigration, religious liberty and education. But there is no recent mention of the Texas Legislature’s pending bills to restrict voting access.

A spokesperson for the Texas Catholic Conference told NCR in an email that the conference would not comment.

In May, the bishops of Colorado signed his state’s new restrictive voting law on May 6 during a live tap on the Fox News show “Fox and Friends.” The law, which will make it more difficult for legal challenges from groups such as the League of Women Voters of Florida and the Black Voters Matter Fund.

The Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops did not take a stand on the law. “Not having sufficient expertise to know the true impact of the provisions it would have been imprudent to take a position,” Michael Sheedy, executive director of the conference, wrote in an email. He added that he had expected that if the bills were passed, the provisions would be challenged. In case it does not, “we should be better suited to sort things out.”

Baird of the National Black Sisters’ Conference said many Black Catholics rely on the federal government to service issues that impact their communities, when in reality the institutions are not in solidarity with them.

“This is about the very survival of our democracy, and certainly what is at stake if disenfranchising voters is happening in these states.” These bills are being put forward to keep African Americans, Latinos and other people of color from voting,” said Baird.

[Brian Fraga is NCR staff reporter.]
How might *Laudato Si’* guide community responses?

By BRIAN ROEWE
broewe@ncronline.org

Floods are a prevailing problem in Charleston, South Carolina. In 2019, the Atlantic coastal city experienced 88 days of flooding, or nearly one of every five days that year. That blew past the previous record of 58 times, set in 2015, and represented a dramatic shift from more than a half-century earlier, when in 1960 flooding events occurred roughly twice a year, according to a recent study by the coastal ocean science center of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

In some ways, it’s no surprise that Charleston regularly floods — it sits only a few feet above sea level, is next to an ocean and is surrounded rivers and tributaries. That makes it especially prone to storm surge from heavy rains and coastal storms, though flooding can also occur on sunny days, too. The hazards are exacerbated by climate change, which is causing more intense storms and also causing sea levels to rise. But that only partly explains the rise in flooding that in Charleston, people involved in justice ministries said at a virtual workshop on *Pope Francis’ encyclical “Laudato Si’,* on Care for Our Common Home.”

They point to development that has replaced critical marshlands with waterfront properties in one of the country’s fastest-growing cities. “If you build on that salt marsh, you’re taking away that buffer from sea level rise, the buffer from floods, from storms as well as just a buffer in general,” said Lee Ann Clements, a marine scientist and chair of the committee on integral ecology for the Diocese of St. Augustine, Florida. “It’s very easy for people to see that coastal environment, that waterfront property, as the thing they want, as desirable. But to the detriment of the whole environment and to the detriment of the community,” she said.

The flooding has also intensified the southern city’s racial and economic gaps. Black and poor communities are located in areas most prone to flooding, but they are least likely to receive assistance, said Marina Lopez, a member of Charleston Area Justice Ministry. “We never have enough money for the poor neighborhoods and the things that need to be done in those places. But we are discussing without any concern the money that we are going to spend to save the more affluent neighborhoods,” she said.

The situation in Charleston was one of several environmental challenges identified during the *Laudato Si’* workshop Aug. 17. The event was organized by the Direct Action and Research Training Center, or DART Center, and co-sponsored by five Catholic dioceses, Allegany Franciscan Ministries and the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. The workshop featured Franciscan Sr. Ilia Delio and Miami Archbishop Thomas Wenski, each of whom reflected on the pope’s encyclical and how Catholics and others can respond to its message.

In July 2020, the Catholic Campaign for Human Development awarded a $500,000 grant to the DART Center, which is made up of 28 multifaceted justice ministry organizations in the Southeast and Midwest, to put the principles of *Laudato Si’* into action in Southeast communities facing hazards from climate change. Seventeen DART-affiliated groups are building care for creation teams as part of the initiative, with the goal of identifying climate impacts in each community and mobilizing faith organizations to lobby for local policies to address them.

Francescan Sr. Ilia Delio speaks during the virtual *Laudato Si’* workshop Aug. 17, 2021. “We have built a very complex world for ourselves at a very rapid pace. And so we did not learn how to really live in this world adequately,” she said.

The *Laudato Si’* workshop was the kickoff of a series of listening sessions planned for the coming months that seek to engage as many as 1,000 people in each of the 17 locations to continue discussing local impacts of climate change and solutions that benefit all people, particularly those who are poor and historically disadvantaged.

Josette Josue, a parishioner of St. James Catholic Church in North Miami, described how property values and rents are soaring in the Little Haiti neighborhood — located near the center of the city and therefore farther from the coast and rising sea levels — and forcing people to abandon where they’ve lived for decades.

“Haitian residents are moving out while wealthy communities are moving in,” she said.

Wenski said that for Floridians concerned about rising seas, “the news was not good” in the recent report on the state of the global climate from the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

The archbishop said that a core message from Francis in *Laudato Si’* is that addressing the environmental challenges facing the planet begins with restoring broken relationships with God, with neighbor and with the Earth itself.

“We are all interconnected, and if we’re going to solve the problems that beset us we have to recognize that,” Wenski said.

Delio, the Josephine C. Connelly Endowed Chair in Theology at Villanova University, said part of the problem is that humanity has become disconnected from the earth.

“We have built a very complex world for ourselves at a very rapid pace. And so we did not learn how to really live in this world adequately,” she said.

That has led to a selfish mentality, particularly evident during the coronavirus pandemic, of “take for me first, let me take care of myself first, and if I have anything left over, maybe I can help you,” she added. “And that’s a deep problem for us. We have no real sense that we really belong to one another and we belong to one another on this Earth.”

Delio said that solving the problems of climate change and environmental degradation begins with changing ourselves, and that communities seeking to live in the spirit of *Laudato Si’* must reflect a sense of mutual care and mutual sharing that sees the Earth as part of that community and not simply a repository of resources.

“The ultimate concern of the human must be the integrity of the universe upon which the human depends in such an absolute matter,” she said.

“Care for the Earth sounds like we’re in charge, but the fact is the Earth cares for us. And if we destroy ourselves, it’s likely that simple biological life will continue on.”

(Brian Roewe is NCR environment correspondent.)
Parents drew together to start North-nivity, raised funds and built their own...
Dear Readers.

When I took over as CEO/Publisher last fall, I did so with a deep sense of responsibility to do my part to sustain the journalistic high standards and quality that are NCR’s hallmark. It is a pledge that is my honor to uphold.

Part of my new role involves getting to know you, our readers. Over the past several months, I’ve had the pleasure of talking with many of you. I have so enjoyed these conversations. Again and again, I hear that NCR is a breath of fresh air, that NCR nourishes your faith life.

These words inspire all of us at NCR to continue bringing you the news coverage, analysis and reflection you need and expect from us. Now, it is our turn to say to you, “Thank you. Your support keeps us going.”

On the following pages, we list the names of those who made a donation to NCR during the fiscal year that ended on June 30, including those who made their gift as a tribute to someone special.

Please know how much we deeply appreciate every reader and every gift. NCR truly is a community, and we are so grateful to have you with us.

With gratitude,

Bill Mitchell
NCR CEO/Publisher

P.S. I encourage you to check out the full-page ad in this issue that lists our NCR Legacy Society members and introduces the NCR Legacy Challenge.
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Sr. Matilda Inyang cares for malnourished and abandoned children in Nigeria

By VALENTINE IWENWANNE

or more than a decade, Sr. Matilda Inyang of the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus — one of the foremost religious orders of the Catholic Church in Uyo, Akwa Ibom, one of Nigeria’s oil-rich states — has cared for dozens of malnourished and homeless children from the streets of Uyo, many of whom had family who believed they were witches, at Mother Charles Walker Children Home. Social, economic and religious factors have fueled the rise in belief in witchcraft and black magic, paving the way for some Pentecostal pastors to incorporate witchcraft beliefs into their brand of Christianity which resulted in violence against children.

Born June 6, 1960, in Kaduna, North Central region of Nigeria, where her father worked as a military officer, Inyang is the second of six children in the family from Iniayong Usuk in Uruan Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom. In 1981, Inyang answered the call to a religious life of chastity and service and joined the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus. Her first profession was in 1984, and her final profession was in 1992.

Her work has included fighting adults’ superstitions and the accusations of locals that has led to the stigmatization, torture, abandonment and killing of thousands of children. She also helps provide quality education for them.

Many children suffer because of the superstition of the adults, and the accusations have become a menace that has led to the stigmatization, abandonment and death of thousands of children. Why is it important to deal with this problem?

Inyang: As humans, we have the right to live; we have the right to choices and decisions in life. This fight against the abuse of children and their rights to live is simply about preparing and spreading adequate information and speaking up on behalf of others to authorities, to bring their abusers to account and live up to their responsibilities to these poor children. It’s also about helping them so they know and understand their rights and can demand that they are fulfilled.

How do you teach children and the adults in the communities where they come from about how to prevent the violation of children’s rights and how to act in any case of such violation?

We start from the home; we care for them from their first day here. The caretakers here have been taught about the rights of a child, and our children also know their rights. Even in the school, they teach them about the rights of a child, so in that way, they are educated about their rights and their environment, and they also know when such rights are violated.

How do you strengthen the position of these local communities to solve the problem of superstitions?

Well, it’s not an easy project, and it takes the grace of God because advocacy work requires a lot of strength and time. To do this, I visit churches and women’s groups to sensitize and educate them about children’s rights. I talk to them about the dangers of abuse on children and how it affects their psyches and growth, also. I also go to their village meeting locations, village halls where they host events and other activities, and talk to parents and guardians about knowing the rights of children and keeping to them, too.

How do you strengthen family bonds broken by superstition and accusations of witchcraft before the child is reintegrated to the family?

When a child is labeled as or accused of being a witch and is being sent away, it will break their family bond to a large extent. The family is not going to outwardly tell you what happened because the government has enacted laws criminalizing this as an act of child abuse. So, they will give an excuse that a child ran away on his or her own.

In some cases, depending on the level of acceptance, you’d tell the child to go back home and stay around, monitoring and observing how he is being accepted and treated because they are likely to accept that child, and when you are gone, they’d start maltreating him.

So, pushing this child back without properly strengthening the family bond is a problem because they would still be pointing accusing fingers on him, and when you tell them it’s a mere case of misbehavior, they would be watching to see if the child has truly changed from the way he or she was before.

We also strengthen the broken family bonds by having the child live here and going to school, from primary to secondary school. Then, the parents will start showing interest in him, especially when he has gone to the university. They will no longer have any negative impression about that child.

How has the work and ministry impacted your spiritual life, and how is working as an advocate for children’s rights a fulfillment of your call?

I have a very strong faith in God, and I believe that God is greater than anything, I believe in Jesus Christ. Whether there are forces or not, I believe in God. I can’t go every day without being thankful to God. When I have a problem, I turn to him because he is with me and in me. So, the most important thing to me is to live for my life. Coming to work with the children in that field I can say is giving me that fulfillment. As a Christian, anything you do to the least of my brethren, you’re doing it to me.

Are there plans for expansion of the home?

The facility we have now is an old convent where three sisters used to live. The problem is accommodation, and we have started work on a multi-story building that will take about 80 children. And when the new accommodation is ready, the children will be relocated there while the renovation of this old one begins. The challenge now is accommodation, and we are on it. We ask our friends to support us, and people are already supporting us with bags of cement, sand, concrete and iron rods.

But we need much more than that to meet the needs of the children. Two of them will be going to university soon; they have passed their examinations and have been given admission to study. So, a lot of money is involved. Even the children who are already at school at other universities, we pay their school fees and buy them clothes and books, too.

Sr. Matilda Inyang with some of the children at the Mother Charles Walker Children Home, where she cares for malnourished and homeless children from the streets of Uyo, Nigeria

[Valentine Iwenwanne is a Nigeria-based freelance journalist who writes about global health, development and the environment for various publications, including The National and Vice World News.]
By PAM HACKENMILLER
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Milers is an economist who has taught countless sisters and students about economics as a tool for social justice.

Prejan is well-known for her tireless advocacy to abolish slavery, particularly among marginalized communities.

Dr. Mercedes Cañizales, of the Daughters of the Incarnation, discussed her collaborative approach to leadership, which also could have its roots in the years she spent playing sports, then coaching.

“What she tries to do is listen, to take the experience she has had as a woman and as a sister, and open and see how it all fits together,” said Sr. Marianne Gaynor, who joined the leadership team of the Immaculate Heart of Mary sisters in 2018. Joining the presidential triumvirate for 2021-2022 is the new president-elect, Sr. Helene Lacy, of the Dominican Sisters of Springfield, Illinois. She is prorios of her community and has been a member of LCWR for 16 years. She also was a founding member of the Springfield Dominican anti-racism team and has been involved in anti-racism at the community level for almost two decades.

“LCWR’s virtual assembly tackles racism

By PAM HACKENMILLER
phackenmiller@ncronline.org

On Aug. 12, in her keynote address on the assembly’s opening day, Dominican Sr. Elise Garcia, now president-elect 2020-2021, offered “a profound apology.”

“As we Americans have cheated ourselves of the Fullness of our truth, of our history, of our tragedy, and of our pain, we have cheated ourselves on the stories that inextricably interweave and form the full fabric of our lives as African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, Euro Americans, Latin American,” Garcia said.

“There is a direct thread of complicity that we have involved our history, from the first enslaved Afric Americans dishembying the White Lion, as they were sold in the street corner in Houton, Virginia, in late August of 1619 to the murder of George Floyd on a street corner in Minneapolis, Minneosta, on the May 25, 2020,” she said.

“We need to know this.”

Garcia’s address reflected the reckoning that occurs in all of us, as the crises and sisters across the United States are undertaking in regard to their role in the country’s systemic racism and grappling with their own failures.

“We as women religious are abosolutely called to this work,” Garcia told Global Sisters Report in an interview before the LCWR assembly. “It’s fundamental to who we say we are, and the first step in that is to know our history, all of our collective history and our specific history. We have to admit and recognize the ways we have been complicit in this.”

In addition to working to eliminate racism, LCWR and its members also are looking at the depth of their own lives as a part of their life. This has been a common theme at recent LCWR assemblies.

In her remote address to the 2021 assembly, Sr. Mercedes Cañas Sánchez, of the Daughters of the Holy Spirit of Mexico, waved together wisdom from poets, legends and philosophers in a literary and mystical reflection on what the future may hold.

“God bless our sisterhood. I love that we are free agents of the Gospel in the world,” she said. “I don’t any thing apart from the sisterhood.”

Miller said she had grown up with a passion for social justice, so she and her sisters learn how to teach economic justice and social justice.

“But after all these years, it looks like maybe I was the right woman in the right place at the right time,” Mill er said. “I’m humbled by the award.”

On the final day of the assembly, LCWR bid adieu to Sr. Jayne Helminger, a Sister of the Incarnation, who ended her time in the presidential triumvirate. She served as president-elect 2018-2019, as well as president 2020-2021.

“We are looking forward to your thoughtful approach to every conversation, for your thorough reflection on every matter that came before us,” said Sr. Carol Zinn, a Sister of St. Joseph of Philadelphia, who is LCWR’s executive director.

“We thank you for your listening ears, your listening heart, your deep, contemplative spirit.”

In a column for GSR, Helminger reflected on the highlights of her three years in LCWR leadership, almost half of which was spent navigating the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Our collective response to the mounting needs of our brothers and sisters was met with ingenuity, creativity, daring and grace,” she wrote. “Networks formed over the decades were accessed and used by our lenses and sisters from around the world — and often accomplished through emergency calls, gatherings,” she added. “It brought home to all of us the fragility of life and the importance of the ministry of presence.”

She also was a founding member of the Springfield Dominican anti-racism team and has been involved in anti-racism at the community level for almost two decades.

“If people think of the LCWR assembly, one word that comes to mind is ‘virtual.’

The LCWR presidency now passes to Sr. Carol Zinn, a Sister of St. Joseph of Philadelphia, which also could have its roots in the years she spent playing sports, then coaching.

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Catholics have no grounds to claim exemption

COMMENTARY
By JASON T. EBERL and TOBIAS WIRNIGHT

Concerns regarding recently instituted or expected mandatory vaccination policies for COVID-19 by various governmental and institutional authorities, including Catholic health care systems and universities, have been voiced by the Catholic Medical Association, the National Catholic Bioethics Center and the bishops of Colorado.

These statements either critique the mandates themselves, casting them as a form of authoritative overreach, or call for wide allowance of religious/moral exemptions. There is, however, no sufficient moral reason for Catholics to request such an exemption. Furthermore, as Pope Francis has affirmed, there may be a moral obligation to be vaccinated for COVID-19 unless one has a medical contraindication.

Such an obligation is fundamentally grounded in the Gospel’s call for each of us to love our neighbor as we love ourselves (Mark 12:31). Insolvent or not, it is our moral duty to protect our own life and the lives of others. Christians are called to love others by taking proportionate means to safeguard their lives and health. As St. Thomas Aquinas exhorts in his commentary on St. Paul’s Second Letter to the Thesalonians:

It is prescribed that a human being sustains his body, for otherwise he murders himself. ... Therefore, one is bound to nourish his body, and we are bound likewise with respect to all other things without which the body cannot live.

Epidemiological data clearly shows that the way to fulfill this moral duty is through vaccination and, further, that the currently available vaccines are proportionate means and effective even if they have not all yet been fully approved by the FDA. COVID-19 vaccination is thus an appropriate means of fulfilling our moral obligation to promote the common good.

Invoking the concept of the “common good” immediately provides a needed flag for those, such as National Catholic Bioethics Center President Joseph Meaney, who emphatically assert each person’s right and obligation to follow their own conscience in deciding whether to be vaccinated. There is an evident “culture war” ideology underlying Meaney’s position and that of the Colorado bishops.

Fordham University theologian Charles Camosy provides in-depth informative support for this view by citing the Second Vatican Council’s declaration Dignitatis Humanae, which stipulates that conscience should not be coerced. However, Camosy neglects to note Dignitatis Humanae’s further stipulation that “the profound and personal convictions of conscience, the Christian faithful ought carefully to attend to the sacred and certain doctrine of the Church.’

One of the church’s highest doctrinal authorities, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, has affirmed unequivocally that one may receive any of the currently available COVID-19 vaccines in good conscience.

There is a concerning subjectivism inherent in such absolutist calls for conscience exemptions in the current circumstances. The present assertion of personal political rights is not all that different from the “expressive individualism” that Carter Snead rightly critiques as being at the heart of American public bioethics, undermining advocacy for abortion and physician-assisted suicide among other morally-challenging issues.

While every person should follow their conscience, even if one’s conscience is in error; this personal moral obligation does not excuse every act if one’s conscience is misinformed by voluntary ignorance. Nor does it warrant respect in all cases by public authorities who, engaging in prudential reasoning, are charged with devising laws and policies that promote the common good – whether restricting access to abortion to protect the unborn, disallowing assisted suicide to safeguard vulnerable terminally ill persons or mandating vaccination to promote the psychological, social and economic health of civil society.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines the “common good” as “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily.” Though among those conditions are included freedom of conscience and religion, the catechism also emphasizes “the social well-being and development of the group itself” and stipulates that “it is the proper function of authority to arbitrate, in the name of the common good, between various particular interests.”

The catechism concludes: “It is the role of the state to defend and promote the common good of civil society.”

Far from being intransigent, government overreach into an inviolable sacrosanct realm, it is precisely the proper function of governmental and institutional authorities to adjudicate competing claims among individuals in light of what will promote “the common good of persons” and thereby cultivate a virtuous citizenry. Pope Benedict XVI further affirms in Caritas in Veritate that promoting the common good requires concrete action on behalf of others:

To love someone is to desire that person’s good and to take effective steps to secure it. Besides the good of the individual, there is a good that is linked to living in society: the common good. It is the good of “all of us”, made up of individuals, families and intermediate groups who together constitute society (Gaudium et Spes). It is a good that is sought not in its own sake, but for the people who belong to the social community and who can only really and effectively pursue their good within it.

The expressive individualism implied by Meaney’s absolutist position – a right-wing mirror version of the “my body, my choice” rhetoric of abortion advocates — runs counter to the conversion to which the eucharistic liturgy calls us. As Benedictine Fr. Virgil Michel aptly puts it:

“The development of a true culture, i.e., the realizing of the best possibilities in human nature, is essentially a social phenomenon, as we have seen. Now the liturgy presents us with the divinely established model of social intercourse between men [sic] under the guidance of Christ. While it safeguards all the values of human personality, it uses the energies of God Himself for sloughing off all the excesses of individualism, thus elevating all that is good in man above the narrowness of individual selfishness, of snobbery or of extreme love-blind nationalism, into the catholic sympathy of Christ for all men, for all things human, for all that is good in God’s world.

Catholicism is not a religion that promotes the glorification of the individual in asserting their political rights over others. Rather, a distinctly Catholic stance holds that respect for the intrinsic dignity of each human person is grounded in harmony with the social ethic expressed in the sacrament of Communion and articulated by the magisterium.

Benedict XVI further notes in Cari-
tas in Veritate that the teaching of Hu-
mane Vitae, by emphasizing both the unitive and procreative meaning of sexuality, “is not a question of purely individual morality” but rather evinces “the strong links between life ethics and social ethics.” Benedict concludes:

A society that, through its governing authorities, fails to employ proportionate measures to curtail the spread of a deadly virulent and its mutational into even more virulent and deadly forms effectively devalues and violates human life. Duly-appointed civil authorities have not only the right by virtue of their office, but the duty to promote the common good by whatever measures that prudential reasoning in forms their consciences are required, so long as such measures are proportionate to the end at which they are aimed.

In the present case, given the clear evidence of mutations and rising infections due to the prevalence of unvaccinated persons, as well as the safety and efficacy of the available vaccines, vaccination mandates fall under the legitimate authority of civil and institutional leaders fulfilling their moral obligation to promote the common good — and we, as individual citizens, fulfill ours by adhering to such mandates without invoking dubious claims of “conscientious exemption.”

[(Jason T. Eberl is a professor of health care ethics and philosophy and director of the Albert Gnaozi Center for Health Care Ethics at St. Louis University. Tobias Winright is an associate professor of health care ethics and theology at St. Louis University. Cardinal Konrad Krajewski, the papal almoner, wears a yellow vest as he assists with a COVID-19 vaccination clinic for the poor at the Vatican March 31, 2021.)]
The COVID-19 pandemic has reached a critical and even alarming point, say Catholic sisters and humanitarian leaders who are responding to the fast-spreadof the delta variant amid multiple problems.

"Just pick your continent, and we have some incredible challenges," said Sr. Carol Keanan of the Daughters of Charity, who heads a health task force for the Vatican COVID-19 Commission.

"The situation is worse than ever in many different places," said Sean Callahan, president and chief executive officer of Baltimore-based Catholic Relief Services. "There’s a combination of problems going on that we need to address."

One continent facing a severe problem is Asia, where countries like Indonesia are being devastated by the presence of numerous variants, including delta.

As one example of how quickly the dynamics of the pandemic are changing, the Philippines, which sustained one of the longest and strictest lockdowns in 2020, reimposed another two-week lockdown that ended Aug. 20. During the lockdown, those younger than 18 and those 65 and older are not allowed to leave their homes. People with comorbidities, those with weak immune systems and pregnant women are also told to stay home. Mass gatherings are prohibited, including religious services.

In the face of such quickly changing circumstances, Callahan, Keanan and others spelled out some of the ongoing challenges worldwide: the swift spread of the delta variant and the threat of new variants; widespread hesitancy about the COVID-19 vaccines; and the continued inadequate vaccine supplies in many countries.

The pandemic also continues to pose challenges to countries already facing difficulties, including hunger, social unrest and other longstanding health problems like malaria and HIV/AIDS.

In the midst of these longstanding challenges and new developments, Keanan said there is at least one bit of good news: COVID-19 vaccines will be available for distribution in most countries by the end of the year, an important milestone, she said.

Yet any optimism surrounding that goal will be tested by the ongoing challenge of vaccine hesitancy. This is a problem in many U.S. states, where stockpiles of vaccine are used, but it is also a dynamic in countries with a long history of corruption, suspicion of vaccination programs run by governments and private pharmaceutical companies, and fear of fraudulent vaccines.

"The thing I worry about is that we'll have enough vaccine, but that people won’t take it," Keanan said. "If people aren’t vaccine-willing, we’ve got a real problem."

Keanan said one welcome development was the announcement in early August that the Association of Sisterhoods of Kenya is launching a six-month awareness campaign intended to work with the government to create a "Covid-19 free nation."

That is part of the Vatican COVID-19 Commission’s overall efforts to enlist sisters and local parishes in the work of grassroots vaccination education efforts, including providing access to a resource toolkit that includes information on vaccines and church teaching on vaccination.

Keanan, the former director of the Catholic Health Association of the United States, said such efforts are moving slowly given the considerable health and social challenges in African countries and on other continents.

One country where that metaphor seems apt is Liberia in west Africa, where as of Aug. 12, only about 0.2% of the population had been fully vaccinated.

For now, Liberia is holding its own in terms of infections, but that could quickly change with the spread of the delta variant, said Sr. Barbara Brilliant, dean of the Mother Patern College of Health Sciences in the Liberian capital of Monrovia.

"If the delta variant gets a hold in Africa, it will be a disaster," she said in an interview with Global Sisters Report, noting that African countries have been generally behind the rest of the world in the spread of the virus as well as vaccination.

The Philippines

The latest restrictions in the Philippines are difficult to implement in densely populated urban poor areas, said Sr. Mitry Perez, a Missionary of the Hermannas Missioneras Sorvidoras de la Palabra. She and Sr. Vicky Pham, a Vietnamese member of Perez’s community live in southern Caloocan City, part of metropolitan Manila.

"This is a very populated place, full of people," Perez said in a recent telephone interview with GSR.

"My neighbors in front, [their house] is the same size as our house, but they have three families living there," she said, adding that the houses are so close that they can hear their neighbors on either side.

One sister oversees the implementation of the Kalokan Diocese’s feeding program, which continues even with the return to lockdown. The sisters and their volunteers help provide one good meal for approximately 550 children once a week.

"The community pantry is for 100 families, and in order to cover all the areas, we need 13 community pantries so we can reach all the people," Perez said.

South Sudan

South Sudan faces a number of challenges in getting people vaccinated, said Comboni Missionary Sr. Esperance Bamiroo, a sister from the neighboring Democratic Republic of Congo who heads the Catholic Health Training Institute in Juba, which trains young South Sudanese health professionals.

These include delays in setting up COVID-19 testing facilities and vaccination sites, which means some communities do not yet have access to vaccines. There is also a well-coordinated response about vaccination, with "no prioritization for either ‘frontliners’ (such as health workers) or elderly," Bamiroo wrote in an email to GSR.

"Since vaccinations were open to all, in any place where I reside there is a high rate of response," but as a result, doses ran out. "Some people who travelled long distances missed [receiving the vaccine]."

Other challenges: A vaccination rollout plan was not implemented, and there is a lack of enforcement of preventative measures, like mask mandates, she wrote. As of July 19, the most recent data available, only 0.5% of the population had received one dose of the vaccine, and not even 0.1% had been fully vaccinated.

But the biggest challenge is that the country’s attention remains on resolving an ongoing civil war, which is contributing to endemic hunger.

"People’s basic needs are not satisfied. People are more worried for their daily living than for COVID-19," Bamiroo wrote. "They go about their daily lives as usual with few people wearing face mask, no social distancing at all.

Vietnam

Earlier this year, Vietnamese hoped some sense of normality might be returning to the country. The delta variant has dashed those hopes.

Dominican Sr. Marion Thi My said the Dominican Sisters of Phu Cuong based in Bien Hoa near Ho Chi Minh City had 61 sisters infected with the delta variant as of Aug. 4. Those infected were quarantined and treated at a day care center.

"In the southern coastal city of Nha Trang is perhaps not as grim, but it is still serious," said Sr. Dien Thi Nguyen, superior of the Dominican Sisters of the Sacred Heart based in the coastal city of Nha Trang in central Vietnam, said the community’s two day care centers closed in early May because of an outbreak of the delta variant. That has caused hard-hit families to live on the income generated from the centers, which serve approximately 140 children.

"We are given [ration] tickets to go out to buy drinking water, vegetables and other basic food at some shops every four days, as our area has been isolated since the August lockdown," Nguyen said.

"We attend online Masses and spend a lot of time memorizing the liturgy and praying, reciting the rosary... and strongly appealing to God to end the pandemic soon," she said. They also read religious books and sew clothes, garden and clean the day care centers.

"We will face a lack of food if the movement restrictions are extended to one month more," Nguyen said. "We absolutely trust in divine providence."
The combination of pandemic lockdowns and Zoom have spawned a new way of being Catholic. Or, they have spawned a new way of seeming to be Catholic. We are moving toward a Catholic Metaverse.

A metaverse is a virtual world, like those existing in virtual reality games such as Roblox, Minecraft and Fortnite, where individuals exist as avatars, or three-dimensional icons of themselves. These games are precursors to an even larger virtual world, where individuals would be able to hide their identities, interact and present their views anonymously.

The future, however, is upon us. Now, it is possible to be wherever you want, say whatever you want and find like-minded folks to be with, even to worship with, all within a cocoon of anonymity.

The word “parish” has taken on a new meaning. In pre-pandemic times, folks chose parishes according to their likes and dislikes: the community, the location, the pastor and the liturgies, pretty much in that order.

Now, the good news is the bad news. It is easier to shop around.

Community has nothing to do with it. Location only presents temporal considerations: What time zone is the parish in? It is the pastor and his liturgies that make or break the choice. Tridentine or novus ordo? Intelligent homilies? Women altar servers and readers?

Community is increasingly disconnected from both online and in-person parochial life. While once the parish church was the one down the block, where the Friday potluck suppers helped cement social interaction, now the “parish” is virtual. Community is in a Catholic Metaverse created through social media in which you can participate anonymously. Or not.

Most folks are conversant with the ways and means of, say, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and the like. What they may not see, even if they participate in them, is the solidification of distinct virtual communities on these platforms. Each virtual community has a different aim and ethos. Each has a different outlook on church teaching and discipline. None is controlled by Rome.

We are not there yet, but on the horizon is a virtual reality far beyond online Masses and Catholic.
dynamics, the impact of the Great Depression, the distance between the big cities and the rest of the U.S. Most of all, it depicts the uncomprehendedness of his vocation to the priesthood and the serendipity of his choice of the Jesuits.

Interestingly but not surprisingly, O’Malley seems to have arrived at Ignatius of Loyola starting from Augustine of Hippo. But the real intellectual and spiritual love of O’Malley’s life remains Erasmus of Rotterdam: “My work on Erasmus provided me with important perspectives on two subjects that later became major projects for me — Vatican Council II and the history of the Jesuits.”

“Many of the council’s decisions echo themes in Erasmus, such as the need for vernacular language and the evils of war, and openness to divine inspiration in other religions,” O’Malley writes.

Chapter 2, “Europe: The United States: America and Austria,” is full of details on his understanding of himself and the Jesuit order. Taking as his starting point the discovery of Italy from Venice to Florence to Rome, during a trip in Austria in July 1961, brought tears to me every time I have read about it.”

I have returned for the summer after the longest absence ever from my own country due to the pandemic.

This key turn happened at a crucial time in the history of the Church as it was preparing for the Second Vatican Council. O’Malley was a scholar well aware of what was happening around him: the November 4, 1966, great flood of Florence (which took place when he was there), the 1967 riots in Detroit (where shortly after he took leadership roles in the university and in the society). An important chapter focuses on his participation as an elected delegate to the General Congregation 32 of the Society of Jesus, which opened at the beginning of December 1974.

For Jesuits, it’s like a painting of a strange and wonderful story.

For Catholics, it’s the example of a strange and wonderful story. For Americans, it’s the life of a fallen angel and educated in a pre-cultural war Catholicism, where confessional boundaries were still struggling to be accepted as an integral part of the theological canon — and what Catholic scholars had to do and still can do about it.

For Jesuits, it’s like a painting describing life of a scholar in the Society of Jesus at a particular time, of one kind of religious order to another kind after Vatican II, and the “Jesus crisis” of 1968-83 after the dramatic changes by Jorge Mario Bergoglio, future Pope Francis.

It was more than just anticipatory, a physically and emotionally challenging time: “Then, finally, on March 15, 1975, the congregation declared its business concluded. I sometimes describe the congregation as the worst — and the best — three and half months of my Jesuit life. It was the worst for reasons I just described. It was the best for many reasons.”

Chapter 3, “From the Renaissance to the Jesuits,” and 6, “Cultures, Councils and Early Modern Catholicism,” tell how a scholar who acquired international recognition for his studies on the Italian Renaissance described the key worst — and the best — three and half months of my Jesuit life. It was the worst for reasons I just described. It was the best for many reasons.”

The book is therefore about how I began to puzzle over certain issues in time and space.

In six decades of scholarly work, O’Malley educated us to a deeper understanding of the U.S. in the 1940s and 1950s: called to be a witness to inter-faith dialogue and to the value of Vatican II, the “Jesuit crisis” of 1968-83 after the dramatic changes by Jorge Mario Bergoglio, future Pope Francis.

The book will be a “metaverse company,” an “embodied internet.” He predicts a “persistent synchronous environment” in which users are embodied as holograms. The entire point is to build community.

How? Zuckerberg seems to present his research objective is to deliver a more powerful space and social systems anyone can access, including churches.

That is in the future. What is upon us now is remote access to worship, spiritual direction, preaching, Bible study, after-church socials, just about anything the congregation might provide in terms of information and interaction. Remote access allows people to receive whom to listen to and with whom to interact. It is moving to the point where Catholic fact and Catholic fiction are in competition.

The question: Will there be a Rome-controlled Catholic Metaverse? Or will the various Catholic virtual communities continue to grow in their own way? When? What is the big question? What if in all this: What happens to sacraments? Someday, the pandemic will be under control. But the church is changing. It won’t be your grandfather’s Catholic church. It is not that already.

For example, the example of a scholar in the Society of Jesus at a particular time, of one kind of religious order to another kind after Vatican II, and the “Jesus crisis” of 1968-83 after the dramatic changes by Jorge Mario Bergoglio, future Pope Francis.

For Jesuits, it’s like a painting describing life of a scholar in the Society of Jesus at a particular time, of one kind of religious order to another kind after Vatican II, and the “Jesus crisis” of 1968-83 after the dramatic changes by Jorge Mario Bergoglio, future Pope Francis. (O’Malley’s account of his testimony for the canonization process of Arriupe in 2019 is very helpful.)

This memoir also has the courage to be like a love letter for the Society of Jesus and for the Catholic Church. It’s like the title of O’Malley’s favorite book, a letter with much more praise than blame.

(Massimo Faggioli is professor of theology and religious studies at Villanova University.)

Read more of Zagano’s columns at NCRonline.org/columns/just-catholic.
How I wound up living across from a strip club

SOUL SEEING
By MARK REDMOND

God sometimes puts the right people in our lives at the right time and if we don’t pay attention we’ll miss it, or we’ll just call it something else, such as luck. But our soul tells us it is more than that. It is grace. It is real.

I went to Villanova University, not because of its affiliation with the Catholic Church, but because I was turned down by Yale, Princeton, Brown, Dartmouth, Williams College and Hamilton College. Villanova was my safety school.

When it was time to send in the first tuition check, I had to also fill out a form selecting a major. The choices were nursing, arts and science, engineering or business. I turned to my father and asked, “Which should I pick?”

“What do you want to do with your life?” he asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Pick business then,” he said, which made sense because that’s what he was, a businessman and a successful one.

So that’s what I ended up studying, and I’m glad I did because at the age of finishing near the top of my class, inducting into the business honor society and elected president of the finance club.

By senior year, it looked like smooth sailing toward a career on Wall Street. I was elected president of the finance club. But in the first semester of senior year, I happened to pick up a copy of The Philadelphia Inquirer. The paper’s front page told the story of a Philadelphia native who had been working in Guatemala after a terrible earthquake. The article ended by asking: Could the Catholic Church assist in rebuilding? Edward Fischer was now walking to his hometown of Philly in order to raise funds. “That is some long walk,” I remember thinking.

A few months later, I was at George-town University for our annual rugby game against the hated Hoyas. We played on a Saturday, lost to them for the first time in my four years on the team, partied all night and gathered in front of the chapel. John Car-roll as we planned to caravan together in our cars back to Villanova. Lying there in the grass, I noticed a van nearby with lots of children, balloons and a young man, tanned and athletic. For some reason, he wandered over and asked us who we were. When we told him, he laughed and said that he was a Georgetown graduate and had played rugby for the team and he teased us about our loss. I then realized that this was the Edward Fischer, whom I had read about and who had apparently made it all the way to D.C.

A few weeks later, I attended the 6 p.m. Mass at the main Villanova chapel. It was the most popular Mass on campus and always well attended. When it came time for the homily, the Augustinian celebrant handed the microphone to a guest speaker; someone I introduced as Edward Fischer. Back then there were no iPhones, so I don’t have a recording of what he said, but he showed slides of the devastation in Guatemala, what he was doing there, and said something along the lines of: “I look out at all of you and I see myself at your age. I had everything in front of me in terms of financial security, job security. But now I have very little money of my own. I have spent hours and days walking in the pouring rain, cold and shivering. But I’m telling you, I could not be happier. I felt joy even when I felt physically miserable. I would not trade the life I have now, and what I am doing, for anything else.”

After Mass, as everyone filed out of the chapel, most toward the campus library to study, I stood there in that pew. I felt like yelling out to everyone leaving, “Hey! Didn’t you hear what he said? Didn’t you listen to him? How can we all just get up and go about our business and our lives, as if nothing was different? Where are you all going?”

I also desperately wanted to go up to this Edward Fischer to tell him how much he had affected me, how I suddenly wanted to be doing with my life what he was doing with his. But I lacked the courage.

Eventually I was standing in the pew alone. Only a few people remained in the chapel, chatting with their friends. So, I wandered out, carrying my business books, walked into the library, found a desk and started studying about interest rates, stocks and bonds. But then, more than ever, the focus of my studies felt so futile, so useless, so not me. In light of all that I had just heard, I really do believe that God brings certain people into our lives, at certain times, for a purpose. Was it just a coincidence that I’d happen to pick up the Inquirer that day? I rarely read that I’d be sitting in front of George-town, hung over, and Edward Fischer would come over and talk to us? That I’d happen to go to that particular Mass, on that particular Sunday? No. I don’t think it was a coincidence at all. I really do believe that I was meant to happen. And I don’t think it was luck or the universe or fate. In my mind, it was God.

According to St. Augustine, “You are by no means special in regard to those who, by the accidents of time, or place, or circumstances, are brought into closer connection with you.”

That has certainly been my experience, and it has made all the difference in my life.

[Mark Redmond is the author of the newly published Called: A Memoir. Read more Soul Seeing columns at NCReligiousOnline.org/columns/soul-seeing.]

Addressing the US housing crisis must be a top priority for churches

COMMENTARY
By SERGIO LOPEZ

I know what it’s like to lose your home. As a boy I watched, helpless, as my childhood home was lost to foreclosure. Predatory lenders and financial institutions offering subprime mortgages specifically targeted demographic groups like my family’s: low-income, first-generation Americans. The choices through improved land use.”

The potential of churches in communities are most affected by helping those of the accidents of time, or place, or circumstances, are brought into closer connection with you.”

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Continued on Page 18

property near public transit could offer the opportunity “to build housing that meets the state’s twin objectives of expanding access to opportunity and reducing greenhouse gas emissions through improved land use.”

But though the report focuses on the public policy benefits of building housing, this work is also deeply in keeping with the church’s mission. Already, many congregations give back to their communities practicing hospitality through donation drives for

I still do this kind of work, now in Vermont. This June marked my 40th anniversary I never went back to Madison Avenue, or to the Upper East Side. But I do go back to Villanova, every five years, for my class reunion. And each time, I go back to that chapel, and I look at where I was sitting that night in 1978, somewhere on the left side, near the back. And I think to myself, “This is where it all started.”

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A Glimpse At The Impact Of The Housing Crisis

By MARK REDMOND

Across the country, many Catholic churches own plots of land, and, whether large or small, that property can be used to build housing for the community with attendance declining in some congregations, and in flux in others due to impacts from the pandemic, many churches also find themselves with underutilized structures on their property.

The potential of churches in communities are most affected by helping those...
Take and eat

Regarding your July 9-22 edition on the bishops drafting a Constitution document, I cannot help but say, “Take and eat, but just those without sin and who are worthy; for this is my body.”

My question is this: Who’s going to read the document? It is described as being “catechetical,” meaning dense theological language, which will appeal only to a few. There are some who might look for references to politicians to confirm their own biases. Others will dismiss it as the product of groups of people who have little credibility.

The Eucharist does not lend itself to excess verbiage. What is needed is a document that will allow the Eucharist for all who love it. Time would be better spent on showing us how to share the bread of life could influence everyday life. How can the reception of the body and blood of Jesus influence our thoughts and actions on issues such as immigration, personal freedom vs. common good, income inequality, and so on? In how wonderful it would be if documents were written on those issues, for they are much closer to the real lives of real people.

Some bishops believe, what if the U.S. bishops’ conference were to join forces with leaders of major religious denominations and draft a document on the responsibilities of politicians to speak truth and eschew partisanship. Such a document might even apply to some members of the conference were to join forces with the movement of the moneychangers but for the bishops to digest what Jesus did at the Last Supper.

Another area where my hope is high is the ability to see us from the viewpoint of the moneychangers. For the Lord didn’t let them go back to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth of the second month after their departure from the land of Egypt.

Here in the wilderness the whole Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron, “They spoke against me in Midian, but if only we had died at the LORD’s hand in the land of Egypt, as we said when we came out of Egypt. Would God have given us something to eat? Would you have fed all this flock of bread of life?”

The Lord didn’t let them go back to the promised land. The Lord gave them the land of Egypt. Why didn’t they need to keep marching toward the promised land? It’s hard to miss the parallel.

** Divestment

I am pleased to learn that many Catholic institutions have already divested from fossil fuels (NCR, July 29-32). Is there a way to have an ongoing report published that shows these groups? Is there also a way to send petitions to those institutions that have not done so?

Are you also encouraging all dioceses to join ina comprehensive on energy? I wonder also how many institutions have plans to electrify their heating and hot water systems, stoves and air conditioning.

Thank you for all that you are doing to fight climate change.

** Timely readings

St. Joseph Sr. Mary M. McGloine’s recent reflections have been thoughtful and good starting points for personal lectio.

However, I think here is another perspective that is significantly timely; I believe the readings from the 16th through the 18th Sundays (NCR, July 9-22 and NCR, July 25-Aug. 5) are pointed arrows at the bishops’ efforts for a Eucharist document. With Jeremiah’s warning “woe to the shepherds!” and the sharing of bread of leaves and fishes to the 5,000, presumably to mostly non-Christian people who had no religious profession, is eucharistic coherence. These readings are for the bishops to digest what Jesus is calling them to when he said, “Re-present my body.”

A few years back, when I worked at a counseling program, a young man came up to me a bit distraught. He was recovering from addiction and returned to church for support. He had walked to church and was chewing some black mass, the priest said. He had been eating or even chewing gum less than one hour before Mass, you cannot receive Communion.”

Thinks of that! Chewing gum is on the same plane as mortal sin in pre-
I’ve heard theology students joking about contemplating the Angry Mysteries of the Rosary. Along with the cleansing of the Temple and cursing the fig tree, we have today’s Gospel in which Jesus named Peter “Sat’an,” and ordered him out of his sight. That’s good fodder for fun among seminarians who need a chuckle break, but it’s not a very good interpretation of what happens in today’s Gospel.

Today, we see how a journey with Jesus could become an intense experience of spiritual formation. Taking advantage of the leisure of a journey, Jesus asked his disciples about how folks were perceiving him. Disregarding the opinions of his adversaries, they recounted the rumors they’d heard from people who were both impressed and confused. Some suspected he might be John the Baptist. That was a rather odd thought, anyone who knew John would have known that Herod had beheaded him not too long before this conversation took place.

They added that others thought that perhaps he was another of the prophets. Those ideas sprang from their sense of how they knew God had interacted with Israel throughout their history.

When Jesus fixed his gaze on those who had chosen to journey with him, the answer changed. Peter responded, “You are the Christ.” Peter testified that they saw Jesus not as a prophet of old, but as the Son of Man must suffer — be killed, and rise after three days.” That was so shocking that Mark adds the incredulous phrase, “He spoke openly.”

Of course, Peter was as ready to help Jesus revise his thinking as he had been to proclaim his faith in him. He pulled Jesus aside to talk some sense into him. Peter realized that Jesus had just veered wildly off the script for a messiah. Jesus’ disciples might have been free from the expectation that the Messiah would be a warrior or king, but weakness, rejection and being killed, no. That scenario didn’t correspond at all to their image of the one God would send to redeem Israel.

Although Peter rebuked him in private, Jesus’ reply made witnesses of everyone present. He addressed Peter as “Sat’an,” calling him a tempter: the kind of enemy that would sow weeds in the garden of God’s reign. “Get out of my sight” is one way to translate the next text.

REFLECTION

What Jesus said and Peter at this moment exactly what we heard in Mark 1:20, which says that Peter followed Jesus. Thus, Jesus came back at Peter with the message: “You are to follow me, not the other way around!”

Peter’s reaction to what Jesus had said was as natural and as narrow as his experience and expectations. He had grown up on salvation stories that portrayed a God of power and might. It’s unlikely that either of the other disciples had ever interpreted Isaiah’s suffering servant as an image of God or the Messiah.

People suffering under Roman domination were hardly longing for a savior who would suffer. People who waited for God to punish the wicked and reward the good couldn’t fathom the idea that God’s chosen one could be put to death. They knew that isn’t how God works!

Finally, Jesus’ talk about rising on the third day of feasting Jewish comfort. In their religious imagination, the third day had nothing to do with clocks or calendars; it was the day of salvation, which could come in an instant or an eon.

The question Jesus put to the disciples remains relevant for us today. Who do we say he is? What do we expect in our interactions with God?

As such we resist it, the mystery of Jesus, the Christ in our imagination is thoroughly unlike the materialistic, political or militaristic gods the world urges us to worship. The God we meet in Jesus does not wish for a God who is just powerful enough to defeat evil to transform it. Jesus did not escape the cross, but revealed evil’s ultimate powerlessness to overcome with life and love.

The victory of life and love Jesus tried to reveal to his disciples is what we celebrate this week in the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross on Sept. 14. This event celebrated the revelation of the breadth of the love of God that no evil can overcome. Yes, this is a mystery, and our liturgy asks us the same question Jesus’ followers had to answer: Whose disciples are we?

Knowing that Jesus the Christ is the divine servant who does not avoid suffering, but transforms it, are we still ready to get behind him?

[St. Joseph Sr. Mary M. McGlone serves on the congregational leadership team of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet.]

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Knowing that Jesus the Christ is the divine servant who does not avoid suffering, but transforms it, are we still ready to get behind him?
After Afghanistan, will we wage peace or war?

Early on in the “war on terror” — not even four months after the Sept. 11 attacks — the editors of the National Catholic Reporter asked for an alternative to violence and retribution.

“The real insult to those who lost their lives to terrorists would be the stubborn continuation of unsuccessful policies that guarantee only more terror and war,” the editors wrote in an editorial published Dec. 21, 2001.

“This time, in Afghanistan, can we expect different results?” the editors asked. “After all, the world is watching closely, and we have cited the suffering of the Afghan people under the Taliban to help justify U.S. bombing. With our new attentiveness, will we finally begin to face the desperate poverty of that country and see it within a broader context? Will we begin to imagine U.S. complicity in the suffering of the region? Will we begin to repent the way we support dictatorships when it serves U.S. economic interests? Can we finally imagine waging peace, not war?”

Sadly, the answer to those questions has been no. Now, nearly two decades later, as the Taliban seize power, the U.S. military is pulling out of what has become the U.S.’s longest war.

The costs, by any measure, have been astronomical: Tens of thousands of people have died, including 2,448 U.S. service members, 3,846 U.S. contractors, 1,144 allied/NATO service members, 444 aid workers and 72 journalists.

The death toll for the Afghan people is even worse: more than 50,000 Taliban and other opposition fighters and 47,245 civilians.

The financial cost of the war is in the trillions of dollars, and because the U.S. borrowed most of the money to go on it (rather than raise taxes), we will be paying it off until halfway through this century.

And for what? The most touted domestic success — an improvement in the lives of women and girls — has been an uphill battle. A 2017 report found that two-thirds of Afghan girls still did not attend school, not only because of discriminatory attitudes, but also because they did not have access to education.

The improved infant mortality rate, which has declined from 89 deaths per 1,000 births in 2001 to 47 deaths today, still puts Afghanistan at a rate similar to Haiti and other poor nations.

Yes, the U.S. was able to destroy al-Qaeda’s military bases and training camps, and to take out its leader, Osama bin Laden.

But Americans who have witnessed firsthand the suffering in Afghanistan report little improvement among the poorest in the countryside. Peace activist Kathy Kelly, who has made nearly 30 visits to the country in the past 10 years, describes poverty, desperation and hunger, especially among women, children and widows.

As Kelly told NCR executive editor Heidi Schlumpf, mothers weep because they cannot feed their children more than some stale bread and tea without sugar. Instead of going to school, kids are forced into labor or to scrounge for scraps of food in markets. Access to clean water may require hours of walking down dangerous mountain passes. During the rainy winter, mud houses provide little insulation and newborn babies die of exposure.

And now, those Afghans who worked with U.S. troops, contractors or aid groups are fearful for their lives under Taliban rule, and a chaotic evacuation plan — if you can call it that — seems likely to leave many of them behind.

Even veterans are depressed and angry that their tours in the country accomplished so little.

Regina Tetreault, a former U.S. Army motor transport operator who served two combat tours in Afghanistan with the 101st Airborne Division, told NCR the war was “wasteful.”

“This lives on, all the many different things that were wasted on this, and it’s not OK. It’s frustrating,” said Tetreault, who was nearly killed in combat when a rocket-propelled grenade struck her convoy on one mission.

What can Americans do now? We can expand our acceptance of refugees from Afghanistan, and other war-torn countries, while we’re at it.

And vow not to do it again.

Another NCR editorial, this one two days before the U.S. bombing in Afghanistan began in October of 2001, urged nonviolence as a practical strategy.

The argument: “Jesus taught nonviolence. The earliest Christians followed the way of nonviolence. Nonviolence teaches that violent acts have practical consequences: They cause harm to the person who engages in them. They add to the cycle of violence and they do not achieve their stated purpose. Nonviolence is not simply a goal, an end; it is a way of life.”

We also quoted now-St. John Paul II, who tried to convince the first President George Bush not to start the first Iraq war. He said killing “leaves behind a trail of resentment and hatred, thus making it all the more difficult to find a just solution of the very problems which provoked the war.”

The pope’s plea for “Never again war! No, never again war” was not heeded then, nor by the second President George Bush, who took the U.S. into conflicts in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Perhaps our country’s second Catholic president will listen. When will we ever learn?

GSR’s Sr. Joyce Meyer honored by LCWR

The Leadership Conference of Women Religious honored three of their members with Lifetime Achievement Awards Aug. 13: Sr. Helen Prejean, a Sister of St. Joseph, for “her tireless work against the death penalty”; Sr. Amata Miller, a member of the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi at the Waconia Retreat Center, Minn., for “her tireless work against the death penalty”; and Sr. Joyce Meyer, a member of the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, for her “generous service that has had far-reaching impact on sisters in hundreds of congregations.”

At NCR, we’re especially delight-ed to see the recognition for Sister Joyce, who serves as international liaison for our Global Sisters Report.

“Her continued dedication to connect with sisters and write about their perspectives from around the world amplifies the international reality of the whole of religious life,” LCWR said of Sister Joyce. “No one has been a more diligent advocate for creating a global sisterhood than Joyce Meyer.”

You can read more about the three Lifetime Achievement recipients at GlobalSistersReport.org/node/200217. A brief video highlighting Sister Joyce’s work can be found at ncrmedia/sisterjoyce. You can also read a blog by Sister Joyce about sisters carrying on in the face of tragedies in Haiti, South Sudan and Afghanistan at ncrmedia/arjoyceblog.

—NCR staff