

NEW YORK
ENCOUNTER X

When Reality Hits

Proceedings of New York Encounter 2021

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2021



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*This book contains transcripts, not reviewed by the authors, of talks given
at the New York Encounter 2021*



Crossroads Cultural Center

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When Reality Hits

New York Encounter 2021

In 2020, reality hit us hard. First, the pandemic overturned our daily routines, jeopardized our health and economic security, and took away lives and livelihoods. It filled our days with uncertainty and discomfort, often leaving us feeling helpless and afraid. Then, the killing of George Floyd shocked our nation and prompted widespread social unrest, a desperate cry for justice. Finally, the election plunged the country into such divisive acrimony, fueled in part by the media, that we are seriously worried about the future of our democracy.

Reality is still hitting. It has elicited the best in us: an urgency to respond, admiration for the caregivers, solidarity with those in need and for the victims of injustice. But after so many months, tiredness and a sense of rebellion are sinking in. Ultimately, the events of the past months have exposed our radical neediness and debunked our illusion of control. A deeper, truer core of our humanity is emerging: expectancy. Expectancy of a vaccine, of the end of racism, of political change or...of something else, more radical. It is this expectancy that pushes us towards the future, igniting the desire to continue to walk.

We want to move forward. But we do not want our experience of these events to be muddled by ideological interpretations. We do not want to waste the sorrow we have suffered and the lessons we have learned, as if they had been in vain.

What happened in 2020 indeed changed and is still changing us. What is the nature of this change? What are we looking for? Will life ever be the same? Can this change be a milestone in the journey of life?

WHEN REALITY HITS



2020: A MILESTONE IN THE JOURNEY OF LIFE?

*The Encounter opens with introductory remarks by **Archbishop Pierbattista Pizzaballa**, Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, and with music played by **Molly Morkoski**, pianist.*

Introduction

What happened in 2020 changed and is still changing us. What is the nature of this change? Can this change be a milestone in the journey of life? Archbishop Pizzaballa has been living for decades in the Holy Land, which has not been spared by the pandemic and where social unrest and divisions between people are common.



Music from the Maronite Cathedral, Mount Carmel, Haifa

John Touhey, moderator: Good evening, and welcome to Encounter 2021. “I raise my eyes towards the mountains. From whence shall come my help?” This is the cry of someone waiting, of someone full of expectancy. During this last year, which one of us feeling helpless and afraid, did not ask this question at least for one moment? We are starting the journey of this encounter in Jerusalem, a place that reminds us that we are radically needy, that we are all waiting. A place where, at a certain point in history, a man mysteriously claimed to be the true face of all reality. We all need to see this face now in this dramatic period of our history. And with this need we begin our days together. Archbishop Pizzaballa, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem,

who has been living for 30 years in the Holy Land, will now share with us his experience of 2020.

Interview from video

Alessandra Buzzetti: Good morning and thank you for being with us. Can you tell us something about how 2020 has been experienced in the Holy Land? How the pandemic hit the region last year, and what the situation is now?

Archbishop Pierbattista Pizzaballa: Like all the world, we had different waves. During the pandemic we have had ups and downs. We have also to take in consideration that we have different countries: Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Cyprus. The four countries of our dioceses, all with different dynamics, of course. But it was terrible for all. First of all, from the health point of view, we have a lot of infected people in Israel, Palestine, Jordan and Cyprus. In Israel, we're in the middle of the third lockdown, and there are also a lot of economic consequences, especially in Palestine and the Bethlehem area, where thousands of people have not been working for a year. It is true that the State of Israel organized very well the vaccination campaign, and I think it is one of the first countries to organize for vaccinations. But to identify the vaccination with hope is an exaggeration. Hope is something deeper and larger than vaccination. Vaccination is a solid, necessary campaign we need in order to solve a problem; but to put hope only in this aspect is to say that our life is only here.

Buzzetti: How did the pandemic challenge the Christian community, especially in the West Bank?

Pizzaballa: The West Bank situation was very difficult. As I said, in the Bethlehem area we had a lot of economic consequences. In fact, the Christians are not that many, and we didn't have many casualties. In any case, the economic consequences are enormous, and also from a religious point of view, it is the first time ever that we couldn't celebrate Easter; not Christmas, not First Communion, not any pastoral activity. We've had intifadas in the past. We've had wars. But even with the worst intifada, churches were open; we could have a normal life, a Christian normal life. But with this

situation, everything is paralyzed, and this was the first time. This created a lot of confusion in our people. We're all confused, and also our priests. It is difficult now to reorganize because we don't know how, when, what; we are, in a way, suspended.

Buzzetti: Also, because your Christian community is used to having a lot of people around, international people, now it was also forced, for instance, to have a Christmas without pilgrims.

Pizzaballa: There are terrible economic consequences. People cannot work. And also, a feeling of solitude and loneliness because of the lack of people. On the other hand, we could have the experience of celebrating in intimacy and with family. Usually when there are thousands of people around us, everything is official, and the business also enters too much into our activities. Since now there is no business, there are no pilgrims, it's just us, and so we go to the essentials of the feast and concentrate less on the external aspects.

Buzzetti: You also became sick with Covid-19 last December before Christmas. How did you personally experience it?

Pizzaballa: Disease is always something you don't look for, you don't expect. From the health point of view, my case was in the middle, not very serious but also not that mild. The pain and the suffering was challenging. On the other hand, I had time to pray, to think—as much as the disease permitted me to think. But also I experienced a lot of solidarity. A lot of people wrote and sent messages, and these also helped me to understand the importance of connection.

Buzzetti: And how are you now?

Pizzaballa: I am better. Much better.

Buzzetti: Okay. In the theme of the New York Encounter we see this: “We do not want to waste the sorrow we have suffered and the lessons we have learned, as if they had been in vain.” How did 2020 change you? What is the nature of this change? What were new impressions?

Pizzaballa: First of all, everyone says that nothing will be as it was before; I'm not that sure. It depends on us. We can go back to the previous life, of course; there are changes in the infrastructure, in the health system, maybe, but from the personal point of view you can learn a lesson. We can also

decide *not* to learn the lesson. We cannot take for granted that everything will be as before. We can go back to the previous life or we can have something new. What lessons were learned, from my point of view? In a world where we want to put aside suffering, disease, and to identify life with beauty and happiness, this pandemic reminded us in a powerful, violent way that suffering and disease are a part of life; they are not outside of our life. We have to consider this and to reflect on this first. Second: community. We couldn't have gatherings, community life, and so on. But we felt and still feel that we need community, especially for us Christians. We cannot express our faith fully if not in community. The Eucharist and the sacraments are not just individual experiences but are community experiences. We need community, and we need to think how we will rebuild our communities. And then hope. I understood that we tend to identify optimism with hope; they are not the same thing. *Optimism* is thinking that everything will be okay. *Hope* is to give a meaning, a purpose to what we're living. We had a good experience of this, despite the pandemic, despite a terrible economic situation with a lot of poor, and taking into consideration that we couldn't receive a lot of support from abroad because the situation abroad is also not that easy for many communities. Churches are closed, for example, so they cannot gather offerings for the Holy Land. I experienced and saw, as a Bishop, a lot of internal solidarity, and not just within the communities. For instance, the communities of Galilee were supporting communities in the Bethlehem area. Different communities in Jordan—Amman with a poor part of Jordan, especially in South and North. This internal solidarity was not that totally new, but in this proportion was new and is a positive element. Another aspect was during this summer. Unfortunately, we saw the disaster of Lebanon. We made collections, all the churches, all the dioceses, for Lebanon, and the answer was enthusiastic. I mean not just us but also the others.

Buzzetti: Another aspect of the theme is that the circumstances brought to the surface a deeper, truer core of our humanity: expectancy. What are we waiting for? Does the Christian event change the way we wait?

Pizzaballa: Usually this expectancy, this attitude of waiting, is very important for the Christian faith. Usually, we are waiting for immediate answers, solutions. We want solutions for our children, for fathers, for the

work, for the virus, and we want the Messiah to solve all these situations. This was also the experience of Jesus when people wanted him to perform miracles and to solve their problems, to free them from their diseases, from their viruses. Jesus came to save us from the deeper disease, the sin. All this is to say that we cannot expect from God, from our faith relations, that they will solve all our problems. The faith is to live with serenity, with confidence. We trust in God, our life as it is, even in the sufferings and pain. Our expectancy is not for problems to be solved, but for company, someone with us that helps us face these situations.

Buzzetti: What does it mean in your daily life, as a bishop, as a man?

Pizzaballa: This presence does not solve all my problems, but helps me to face them. An attitude of listening, listening to the Word of God, listening to people, circumstances, there develops a capability to open one's eyes and try to understand what God is saying in all the different circumstances. This attitude of expectancy makes you be watchful and open. This is what it means for me. I try to understand because I also need to give answers to my people. They're waiting. They're also expecting me to give them a word, but I need also to listen. To the pain, to the suffering, to the joys of my communities.

Buzzetti: Do you have a special piece of gospel or of the Old Testament that you now love more?

Pizzaballa: *[laughs]* Oh, this changes from day to day. Now it is at the end of the gospel, towards the end of the Gospel of John. The dialogue between Jesus and Peter: Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me? And Jesus said, You will go where you don't want to go. But it is also saying that wherever you go I will be with you.

Buzzetti: For 30 years, you have lived in a land full of wounds between nations, between religions, between Christians. You've said more than once that this is not the moment for great gestures. This is the moment for sowing and waiting for the fruits.

Pizzaballa: We're all waiting for big gestures, peace agreements that will bring change to all the tense situations. I keep saying, Don't wait for this. I don't know if it will come. I hope so, yes, of course, but it will not be tomorrow, nor the day after tomorrow. This doesn't mean that since this big peace is not coming that we cannot live in peace or we cannot live at

all. But we cannot just live waiting for something to happen. We have to live the present as it is now in this situation. First of all, in the families. To live fully the family life, especially in communities where individualism is increasing, as it is increasing here also. Where communities are wounded by a lot of situations, external, internal, where conflict is sometimes entering—we need to rebuild the fabric of our communities and the relations between the communities. We can have wonderful relations between Christian families and Muslim families or Jewish families. We also can have wonderful relations between this group and other groups, but within communities here it is very difficult. If I say to my Christian community, or the parish of Bethlehem, We want to meet the—I don't know—the community of Muslims or Jews there, they will be scared. So we need to rebuild at this level, first of all, the trust, because this is what we are missing now. So we have to meet and build the trust little by little. We are at the beginning.

Buzzetti: And can you give me an example of your life in the Holy Land?

Pizzaballa: During my 30 years here, I have had occasion to meet a lot of people, of course. I remember very well the meetings I had with my classmates. I was studying at Hebra University, and my classmates were all Jews, religious Jews. This helped me a lot, their questions. Their serene, friendly questions about my faith, about my experience of faith, not just what I believe, but how you believe, and why you believe in this. They were questions of friends, and these questions change also my life, because their questions were never my questions. We have to explain the faith, and, I think, when we have to share our faith to someone that is of a different faith, this is more committing, more demanding also for ourselves. Their questions become your questions. Why the resurrection of Jesus? Why Jesus, how is he so significant in your life? And so on. There are a lot of similar experiences everywhere in the Holy Land, but they are all personal experiences. They should become something more: the fabric of communities.

Buzzetti: What are you looking forward to in the post-pandemic world? Will life ever be the same? Will the Middle East still be the same? How is it possible to be realistic and at the same time to remain positive, open, and full of wonder?

Pizzaballa: Here in the Holy Land, and in all the Middle East, you cannot

not be unrealistic, even if you want to be. Reality will enter into your life with violence and power, so there is no alternative here; you have to be realistic. At the same time, the hope and the wonder are not coming from outside. It is coming from your heart. If you preserve in your heart the desire to change, the desire to know, and if you keep in your heart also the wonderful relations that bring you energy, these also give you the strength to keep hoping against any hope.

Buzzetti: And is this also the way to fight the violence that you see here, and also in a lot of other countries?

Pizzaballa: Yes, a lot of violence. Violence is increasing, not just political violence but also normal violence. Unfortunately, when violence enters, it becomes a language, and you use this language in all the different contexts of your life. But once again, the solution against violence is from the heart. You have to conquer the heart. You have to keep in your heart the stubborn desire for peace, for encounter.

Video ends

Touhey: Welcome back, and a big thank you to Alessandra Puccetti and Archbishop Pizzaballa.

Now we will share a moment of beauty. Beethoven's Piano Sonata #26, Opus 81A. Performing for us will be Molly Morkoski, who joins us for the second year in a row to open the encounter, and I hope there are many more. With her on stage will be Chris Vath. Chris is also a very talented musician and composer. Chris will be sharing some stories and commentary with us to help us go deeper into the music. Without further ado, I present Molly and Chris.

Chris Vath: Thank you, John, and good evening. The year is 1809. Beethoven is living in Vienna. One year earlier his friend, patron, and student, Archduke Rudolf, who is determined to keep him in Vienna, established an income for the rest of Beethoven's life. So, what was happening in Vienna in 1809? Napoleon's army, the French army, was invading Vienna. The aristocrats were fleeing and among those aristocrats was Beethoven's friend, Rudolf. What does Beethoven decide to do? Of course, write a piano

sonata describing this situation. This says—I was thinking about this—it says something about the man that music is a natural extension of him in the world in which he lives, and so it's natural that he would write a piece. The piece is entitled: *Les Adieux*, The Farewell, and it's his only sonata to have a program, to have a story; and the story is the reference to Rudolf's forced evacuation. The first movement is titled "The Farewell"; the second movement, "The Absence," and obviously it's more melancholy and sad; and the third movement is "The Return," or the reunion. It's a feast, a party for the return of the people who had left, who had fled the city. In the opening of the sonata, you hear the uncertainty, the sadness of his friend's departure written in the score, and this is very interesting. Beethoven wrote *lebewohl* over the first three notes of music. *Lebewohl* means *farewell* in German. Let's hear those three notes.

Morkoski plays piano

These three notes become the motif for the whole first movement. Try to find them as you listen for them. It's fascinating to see how a composer will take such a small little motif and make something great out of it. Think of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. *Ta-da-da-daaa*—which is used all throughout. But all of a sudden, the mood changes. Bags are being packed, carriages are off and running because everybody is fleeing the city. Let's hear a little excitement and the second theme.

Morkoski plays piano

At the end of the first movement, the wistfulness of the opening returns, as if to say, This really is farewell. We were consumed with getting out of the city quickly, but now the sad reality of our friend's departure is with us. In the second movement we feel the mood of loss very strongly. Let's listen to a little example at the beginning.

Morkoski plays piano

Remember, the second movement is called, "The Absence," so the whole movement is sad. And don't get confused; it goes directly into the third movement without any pause, but you'll hear the difference in the exuberance of the third movement, which is titled, "The Return."

Morkoski plays piano

And just before the close of this last movement and the close of the whole piece, there's a little moment of quiet reflection, perhaps gratitude, which makes you think, Oh, I've made this journey from the sadness of seeing them leaving and then coming back, so you're more grateful for the return in the end. Molly was telling me that she had an interesting thought: that playing this piece here tonight was a little bit in miniature what the pandemic has been for us, because something's been taken away from us. And she told me that during this whole year, she's not played for any audience. Not that there's a big audience tonight, but there's a handful of people here and it's her first time playing in a year, so she's grateful for that experience.

The last thing I want to say is, let's imagine that you're Beethoven. You're almost 40 years old. You're going deaf, you're almost completely deaf. Beethoven could never find a woman who loved him, so he showers his affection on his nephews, on his friends; he has a lot of friends, one of them being the Archduke Rudolf. But what does his music have to do with all of this? Beethoven is considered one of the first composers whose music is considered personal and autobiographical. He's very honest with his music. He's going to put everything out there and let life judge it. I knew a psychiatrist once who thought listening to Beethoven was a great remedy for depression. Why? Because there's a struggle in Beethoven. He's got to fight for things. He fights against the musical structures and conventions of his time. He fights his deafness. He fights his inability to have a fulfilled relationship with a woman, and this struggle requires giving of himself, a sacrifice. It's clear he's going after big desires, not small desires. Everything in Beethoven is big. It's dramatic, because he's throwing his whole self into it. So, he, with his big desires, can pull you out of your small desires. I think that's what the psychiatrist was seeing. Let's see when we listen if we can

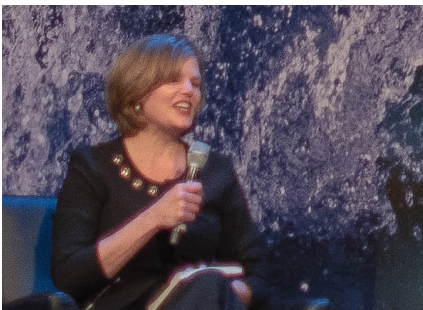
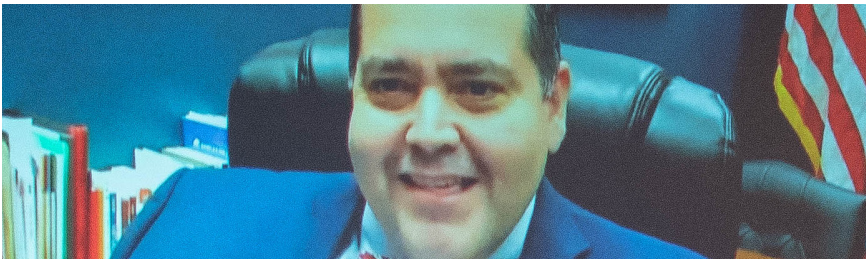
be open, if we can let our hearts be open in order to know something, to burst through what we already know, the oldness that we live. And let's see if Beethoven can communicate to us with music something of who he is, which helps communicate something of who we are. And with that I turn the stage over to Molly Morkoski.

Morkoski plays Beethoven's Piano Sonata #26, Opus 81A

Touhey: We want to thank Molly Morkoski and Chris Vath. That was beautiful, Molly, so wonderful to hear live music.

We interrupt this Encounter for an important message. "His Holiness, Pope Francis, sends cordial greetings to all participating in this year's New York Encounter, sponsored by Communion and Liberation. He trusts that these days of reflection and dialogue will foster a shared passion to 'create a community of belonging and solidarity' (*Fratelli tutti*, paragraph 36), and in this way promote an authentic culture of encounter, capable of respecting differences, advancing reconciliation and mutual understanding, and inspiring efforts to build a more just and equitable future for all our brothers and sisters in the human family. With these sentiments, His Holiness offers prayerful good wishes for the event, and invokes upon those taking part God's blessings of wisdom, joy, and peace." And it is signed by Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Secretary of State.

WHEN REALITY HITS



THE RELEVANCE OF THE STARS

Presentation of a new book by Msgr. Lorenzo Albacete, priest, theologian, and former rocket scientist, with Stephen Sanchez, president of the Albacete Forum, and Lisa Lickona and Gregory Wolfe, editors of The Relevance of the Stars.

Introduction

The first major collection of Lorenzo Albacete's writings in almost twenty years, this groundbreaking volume provides readers with valuable insights into Monsignor's thoughts on faith and culture, science, money, politics, education, and the family.



John Touhey, moderator: Good evening, everyone. Tonight we are here at the Sheen Center to celebrate the publication of a book, *The Relevance of the Stars*, by Lorenzo Albacete. And really, tonight is a celebration not just of this book, but of the man himself, Lorenzo Albacete. He was a scientist, a priest, a friend to many people—a personal friend to everybody who's going to be appearing tonight—but a friend to many, many people. He wrote for the *New York Times*. I'm very happy that we're here doing this tonight. We were going to have a mariachi band actually on stage, but unfortunately they got stuck in the Holland Tunnel. I wanted to have fireworks, but the Sheen Center said we couldn't do that. Before we get into this book, I would like to introduce Mr. Stephen Sanchez, who is the president of the Albacete Forum. Stephen, over to you. Tell us about the forum and about your relationship with Monsignor.

Stephen Sanchez: Thank you John. I'm so happy to be here tonight and share the virtual stage with Gregory Wolfe and Lisa Lickona, the editors of this very, very important book. I think it's hard not to talk about my personal experience with Lorenzo. I met him a couple of times in college. He had come to speak at my university, but more important was the moment I met him. And this was, gosh, around 2004 and I was in Minnesota. I had the opportunity to attend this thing that we call the National Diakonia, and I went up to speak at a microphone to ask a question or share an experience, and Monsignor was there. I had not really gotten to know him, and as I approached the microphone, I heard him start to chuckle in this kind of deep, throaty way that he would. As I got closer, he stopped me and said, in his voice which I love to imitate but won't tonight, "You are an answer of the Virgin to my life." And he said, "Since I met these people, the skinny Italians, I have been praying for someone to come to this movement that is fatter than me. And here you are." And I remember laughing, but I remember more importantly that I thought to myself, *This man sees me. This man sees me.* He sees everything that I am, because no one would ever have had the audacity to say something like that. That first encounter with him became a fascination with not only the way he looked at things and the way he described things, but with him: with someone who could look at me in honesty and truth and love me, and invite me into that intimacy with him. From that moment on, I was an Albacete fan, if you can say that.

Over time, I came to know the depth of this man, to laugh in hilarity to many of his comments, then to be profoundly moved by the way in which he engaged, the way that he looked at the Church, the way that he looked at the world, the way that he looked at science; he was fascinating. Not only was he fascinating for me personally, but I saw that he had that effect on everyone around him. Every chance I got, I took people to meet him. I was lucky at the end of his life to be with him many, many, times, visiting him in his home and then eventually in the hospital, in the nursing homes. Even on the last day that he was with us here on this earth, he never ceased to be a person of depth and warmth and humor. To the very, very, end. When I was asked by you and Lisa at the beginning of the Albacete Forum to join you in this work, I had to say yes, because to say no would be to say no to Monsignor.

Not only was that hard to do, but it's something I had never done, and so the Albacete Forum was created as a way of continuing Monsignor's legacy, and as a way of capturing the many, many hidden writings of Monsignor. He spoke everywhere, but he wrote most of his notes on napkins and in old notebooks that he'd picked up. He loved paper and he loved pens, and in the cleaning out of his house we found thousands of pages of his work, and that began this archival process of making sure that those writings didn't get lost. We could try to make sense of them—and making sense of them was not easy. So the editors of this book have done a big work of not only finding writings but of putting together, piecing together, notes from classes he gave, from talks he gave, from his random thoughts on matters. They've collected them, and put them together in a way that really, I think, is very much in tune with who he was. And so the Forum works to do that, to continue Monsignor's legacy, to invite people who've never heard of him to meet him, and to give a place for his thought, and for his personality to continue to provoke us. I think that Monsignor's life was a great gift to the Church and to the world. Anyone who met him knows that. But more importantly, we know that that legacy is going to last for, we hope, millennia, because he had a way of looking at things that was deeply and profoundly Christian, moved by his encounter with Jesus. For our own life is of being people who sought, and seek, the truth, and who want to know this Mystery that he was fascinated by; the light behind the corner of every reality that he encountered. Obviously, the Forum is very happy to have been a part of this work. We're happy with our partnership with Slant Books and with Greg and Lisa, who really did a fascinating and tireless job putting this together. And John, big thanks to you personally for the work on this exhibit of the Albacete Show, which, quite frankly, I feel a little bit guilty about because I know that it has been a ton of work for you. We are very grateful. I'm super happy that the world gets to see this because they get to see and get to know Monsignor in a way that's even better than I knew him, right? Because there are so many things, so many surprises here and in this book. I'm just grateful to be here tonight. Grateful to share the stage with these three people who have done such an amazing work to make sure that Monsignor's legacy continues. And as the president of the Forum, I'm just really happy and grateful to thank these three, and to

also thank the hidden, behind-the-scenes one who will be annoyed with me that I mentioned her earlier: Olivetta. I want to thank her for all her work organizing these things, lighting fires underneath us when they needed to be lit, and then running away and giving us the responsibility to put them out. Thank you very much, and I'm excited to be a part of this conversation and to see how all of it unfolds. Thank you, John.

Touhey: Thank you Stephen. And so now let's talk about this book, this beautiful book—it's really even a *physically* beautiful book. Really well put together, well published. And so now to talk with with Gregory Wolf and Lisa Lickona, the editors of *The Relevance of the Stars*. Greg is the editor of Slant Books. Lisa is—you might be familiar with her writings in *Magnificat* and elsewhere. They are both very talented, very intelligent people. People who had a very great knowledge of Monsignor. I'd like to start off this conversation with Greg by asking, What made you want to publish this book?

Greg Wolfe: Gratitude. It just felt for me like the character in the medieval fable who doesn't know what to give as a gift to the Blessed Virgin Mary, but because he's a juggler, ultimately he juggles for her and she accepts his gift. I feel like publishing and editing is what I know how to do. And for Monsignor, you know, I was aware that he was someone who...let's just say was disorganized, and that included what we've already heard about the way he treated his writings. I felt not only the irritation of that, as one person might be annoyed with somebody who is disorganized, but I also felt the beauty that he was somebody who really went from moment to moment, living in the moment and speaking to whatever group asked him to, and there were many. He would do these things, and he wouldn't work on polishing every draft, or worrying about collecting these things for publication. He had just a marvelous freedom to be present in the moment and not worry about legacy. That's what we need to do. And so putting the book together is a way of helping people to sense the power of this man's presence as a human being. We'll hear many stories about his character, but also of his mind. We shouldn't be afraid of that. I mean, he was a serious thinker, but the beauty was that he always knew how to make it accessible, how to write in ways that were concrete, story driven, and personal to people. So that's been the joy of putting this collection together.

Touhey: Thank you. I would just correct you a little: you're not just *good* at your job, you're *great* at your job, so let's get that straight. Lisa, you have a very particular relationship with Monsignor that's very different than the relationships that we had with him, and I'd like you to explain, first of all, your relationship with Monsignor: how you met him, and how that led you into the work of the Forum.

Lisa Lickona: Thank you, John. Well, when I met Monsignor, it was the early '90s. I was a graduate student just out of my undergraduate years and really an ambitious theology student. I was at the John Paul II Institute, super-excited to be there, super-serious, and expecting every class to be a high-powered introduction to the art and discipline of theology. So, much to my surprise, of course, one day I was in my first class with Monsignor, and the class started 10 or 15 minutes late. Students are milling around, wondering, Where is the professor? He comes in: rotund, Puerto Rican, Monsignor; smoke wafting around him, powdered sugar on his lapel. And it probably was another 10 or 15 minutes before the class started, because he was telling jokes and stories. That was the introduction everybody got to Monsignor, but when you're expecting a lecture, when you're sitting with your pen in hand and you're ready to get something, it was...at the moment it happened, I was shocked. I was really shocked. But, you know, shock soon gave way to affection, excitement, surprise. Because what you saw was what you got with Monsignor Albacete. He was disorganized, impoverished in some ways, and wholly present to you, wholly there. I was thinking about it on the drive down and thought, Theology is a study of the Word of God, right? And with Monsignor, the Word became flesh. You just were present to someone who was not just doing this as an academic discipline, but was living it as their life. It was exciting to do this book because the theme of faith and life is present throughout the entire volume in different ways. What Monsignor gave me—and I share the same feeling that Greg has—is total gratitude. I mean, he gave me theology as life, so it was transformative for me at that moment.

Touhey: Let's go a little deeper into what you said about the contents of the book. What are people going to find when they go out immediately after this conference and buy a copy of *The Relevance of the Stars*? It's a question for both of you, but Greg, you can start.

Wolfe: Well, they're going to find a collection of essays and addresses that he gave. As you can imagine, they're going to start with the broadest possible vision. There's some beautiful essays in the first section that really talk about the nature of the state of the culture that we live in, the challenges that we face, particularly the problem of dualism—which he really wrestled with—and which we can get into perhaps a little bit later in the conversation. That moves on to a section about the American context. I mean, he's somebody who was writing as a sort of adopted American, but he always had the background of somebody who was raised in Puerto Rico. He lived here for so many years, so he had sympathy. He had an awareness. But he also had a kind of perspective that was sort of angular. He didn't take everything for granted, and so he really brought a very fresh approach to American history and American problems. Then there's a section or two that follow that allow him to drill down into more specific issues. He talks about the various professions: Christianity and the law; Christianity and medicine; Christianity in the university. Each of them carries on the kind of overarching thematic concerns that are established in the first part of the book.

Touhey: Lisa?

Lickona: Well, what you're going to get when you buy this book is conversion. You're going to get surprise. You're going to get adventure. You know, it was funny, Greg and I were talking beforehand about what our favorite part of the book was, and every time I go through it, I like a different part more. I mean, nobody really could write like Monsignor. He could begin with something very mundane and draw you into something beautiful, mystical, exciting, very quickly. And so, I think that in this moment—you know, in this moment in which people are struggling—this is a book that's going to really change people. It's going to enable them to encounter reality in a different way. So, it's a book for this moment.

Touhey: If you go into the book, there are a couple of figures who Monsignor was always pulling from; different strands, different people, but there were a couple of people that were really heavily involved in his life—John Paul II, but also Monsignor Luigi Giussani. Greg, take just a second to explain who this guy Giussani was and why he was important to Monsignor.

Wolfe: I think the encounter that Albacete had with Giussani was clearly

decisive for his life. Lorenzo Albacete was a gift to us, because he came at just the right historical moment to synthesize the thought of three figures who had such a huge impact at the end of the 20th century: Luigi Giussani, the founder of Communion and Liberation; John Paul II; and Benedict the XVI. These essays are beautifully intuitive of these great thinkers, and channel them and contextualize them in ways that make their thought much less formidable than approaching them in the form of a big, heavy book by, say, Ratzinger. I think there's a really dramatic dimension to the story of Monsignor Albacete. When he met Giussani, he was already pretty well on in years. He was a highly regarded churchman, friend to Pope John Paul II—he had the job of escorting Karol Wojtyła around Washington D.C. when he made his visit just before he became John Paul II, and their friendship lasted until John Paul's passing. So here was a man who was an adviser to cardinals, but then somebody suggested he meet this Italian priest, and he meets Giussani and his life is transformed. He encounters a vision of the faith, a charism, a gift of the Holy Spirit that essentially resonated, corresponded to his heart in a way that reinforced what he believed, but kind of up-ended his life and put it in the pursuit of the vision of Monsignor Giussani. This was not an easy decision, and it's one of the things that I'm most moved about in the story of Albacete, because he didn't need this; he could have been a mover and a shaker in the Church—in any case, anyway he wanted to be. But he encountered something real and something that transformed him, that spoke to the desire that he might not have known he had. I just want to quote a really short piece. We put this in the introduction, but it's so characteristic of Monsignor Albacete that I think it really gives you the flavor of the man, but also of the deeper human reality behind who this guy was. He wrote—and this was years after the encounter with the charism of Father Giussani—“I am proud to consider myself a son of Father Giussani.” I'm very tempted to imitate the accent myself, too. No, sorry, I won't do that. Anyway, continuing: “But making me find this towards the end of my life? I began to be even a little bit angry. The removal, the setting aside, of whatever theological knowledge I had in order to try out what Father Giussani was trying to teach me, was done because I knew that it was a fuller knowledge. I set this anger aside, because this path led to amazement and for other reasons,

it included the heart, the desires of a heart. The decision to try that out was a costly decision, but it was a decision that I made willingly. Why? Because I am very saintly? No. Because what is at stake is my ass. The future of my ass.” And that to me, just sums it up. I mean, the irreverence, but also the seriousness, the sense that he'd encountered something that changed him but also liberated him to be what he had always wanted to be.

Touhey: Lisa, I wanted to get back to the point you were talking about, about the relevance of this book for today. Why do you think it's important that at this particular moment in time *The Relevance of the Stars* is being published?

Lickona: You know, it's really interesting. When Greg and I started the process we were really in the middle of the pandemic. Maybe we're still in the middle of it, I don't know. But also, of course, it was coming on the heels of the protests in the summer and right in a moment of going into an election, so we're seeing this frenetic back and forth ideological battle going on. I'm looking at the backdrop behind you here, the New York Encounter image for 2021, of the water splashing down. This is the theme that's been given for the Encounter; we've just been hit over and over and over, and yet the temptation, I think, is for us to seek the answer by rearranging worldly factors, right? If we just had a better government, if we just had a better system, if people had just lived with a different ideology in mind, a different philosophy, everything would be better. What Monsignor Albacete is really about is the relevance of the stars. What does that mean? Something is breaking into your life. Something is breaking into your reality, coming from the outside. This title is a beautiful title. It comes from a poem by Lorca, and it's a story about a little ant that happens to lose her way from the rest of the ants and crawls up a tree; suddenly she is facing the stars and she comes back down to all the other ants and says, “I've seen the stars. I've seen the stars!” And what all the other ants do is to proceed to kill her because she's broken rank, right? She stepped out. And that was such a dear story to Monsignor. In fact, it was so dear to *us*, it appears twice in the book; we couldn't cut it. What that speaks to is this reality of something infinite, something mysterious, something disturbing even, breaking in and waking us up. And Monsignor was a man who lived with a total awareness of this something Other breaking in. I think that's

really what we're looking for. We're looking to live with that awareness. What is happening? What is the meaning of all this? We don't want to remain on this worldly level. We want to let something else enter in. We want to let the stars enter in.

Touhey: Did you have something to add to that, Greg?

Wolfe: Monsignor always felt that the biggest question of suffering was whether there's meaning in what's going on. What people most want is not necessarily—I mean, obviously they want an end to suffering, but people know that it's coming and it's going to come in different fashions. The pandemic won't be the last blow that we experience in our lifetimes, not to belittle it at all, because of course it's an all-encompassing reality for the entire globe. But, Monsignor also was very sensitive in his writings about suffering, and he said what people need most is a sense of meaning, a sense of solidarity, a sense that there is a possibility of a Presence that accompanies us in our suffering. And in that sense, I think one of the things that he would say for us is that this is a chance for us to awaken to our vulnerability, to admit our fragility, our weakness, our dependency, and ask ourselves: Where does certainty come from? Where does hope come from in our lives? What have we met that's able to speak to us across the chasm of the practical, the issues that plague us of distancing and illness and suffering, and political strife and racial strife? And so, I think that's an aspect of his thought that I particularly appreciate.

Touhey: We would be remiss if we didn't mention the fact that this is really the first major book of Monsignor's writings to appear in 20 years. He previously published a book called *God at The Ritz*, which had an impact on the culture. I mean, it came out of the blue. *What does this mean?* That's the way he looked at everything, and then silence. He passed away in 2014. I think one of the key things about the Forum is the fact that he could have easily disappeared simply because, as we said, a lot of his materials appeared digitally. He appeared on television and things, but just in the world we live in, everybody can disappear.

He had an ability to reach people, every kind of person. You don't have to be an intellectual to buy and read *The Relevance of the Stars*; he wrote for everybody. How was he able to reach people in that way, do you think?

Wolfe: Well, I think partly he was just able to be present to them, which meant to be aware of their reality outside of himself. He was somebody who asked questions, who listened, who was present to you, and who made you want to talk about yourself, made you want to share about what you cared about, what your disappointments were, what your passions were. And I think he was a great communicator. That means that he had many gifts, and not only to translate complex theology into very concrete, earthy kind of language. I mean, when people read the writings of Monsignor Giussani, they sometimes smile because it's sort of written in a style that uses language a little differently than we do here in North America. What I love about this book is that it is a deeply Giussanian work, but it's written in a language that is very much of a North American idiom, and in that sense it really, I think, grounds some of Giussani's thoughts in ways that are fresh and arresting, that I think will just increase the expanse of those who are going to be exposed to his thought and his passion and his charisma. For me, that's one of the beautiful side benefits of this book.

Touhey: It was funny because as I was preparing the exhibit—I don't want to spoil it, I want you to go and see the Albacete Show—but one of the people in the video is appearing with his wife, and he's talking about this, and then she adds in, "And he was also funny." Which is true. He had a deep wisdom, deep insight, deep intellect, but he was also funny. How does that come into his writings, come into his work?

Lickona: It's so great that you're saying that, because when you asked the question to Greg, the first thing I thought of was his humor. Monsignor wasn't funny in the way of, like, "I'm a comedian; I'm impressing you all with my jokes." His humor was always a way to make space for other people. It was an invitation to his humanity and so instead of being overwhelmed by him, you'd be drawn toward him. You'd want to hang out with him. You'd be drawn to the kind of person that maybe you'd usually be nervous around, right? Oh, he's a monsignor. Oh, he's a theologian. Oh, he's a catholic priest; but instead you just wanted to be with him. When I was a student, there was always a cluster of students gathered around him. I think that wasn't just accidental. That was who he was and that comes through in this book in amazing ways. One of my favorite essays is an address he did for Catholic

lawyers. And I thought today, when I was driving down, I was reflecting on it and I thought, Only Monsignor Albacete would begin an address to Catholic lawyers by talking about a crook. He literally has a story about a criminal who sneaks into a jewelry store with his cronies to steal some stuff, and they run into a statue of the Virgin Mary. He says to his friends, “We have to leave. We can’t steal anything.” And they’re like, “Why?” And he says, “Well, because they’re gonna say she didn’t protect them.” This is a man who has a relationship with the Virgin Mary, and that is really intrinsic to who he is as a criminal. And as I was reflecting on this, I thought, If I’m going to do a talk to Catholic lawyers, I would start with St. Thomas More, patron saint of lawyers. Well, the amazing thing is that Monsignor Albacete manages to take that story about the criminal and bring it all the way home to Thomas More, and to show you how the criminal and St. Thomas More are working from the same awareness that something amazing has entered their life—this event that has entered their life. It’s just brilliant. Anybody can enter into this. I would also say there’s a great address in here that he gave to youth ministers and youth, and it’s brilliant. I actually sat down and read it with my 16-year-old. She loved it.

Touhey: Greg, you were speaking before about how he had this kind of sideways gaze on things that really is kind of captivating. It’s almost like being on a thrill ride or something. But I want to ask you, because I’m afraid I’m going to forget to ask this before we finish up: How did you guys choose the particular writings that appear? What process did you go through to choose those particular writings and put this book together?

Wolfe: Well, of course there was this very large archive that is still very daunting to us in many ways. I think what we were looking for, what we realized, was that he gave talks that were serious and intellectual to professional organizations, Church organizations. He wrote short, more meditative pieces for places as diverse as the *New York Times* and *Traces*. And then there was the pastoral work that he did, giving retreats for priests, for laypeople. And what we thought would be really important in launching this process, which we hope, God willing, will continue with future books, would be to take the heavy hitting stuff—the real, the thoughtful, well-argued but accessible and quite occasionally funny and witty pieces that dealt with the big topics— and

really show people. Because time passes and you lose touch with a human being's life and witness. We wanted to anchor it by reminding ourselves how brilliant this man was, and his gift was taking that brilliance and articulating it in ways that were so accessible. But we also wanted people to sense that this is the range of this man's interest, this is the range of his fascination with the world. And once we have that salted away, then we're able to consider a more pastoral, meditative book of shorter reflections on life, what celibacy means to him—things like that. So we look to a kind of sequence that will really bring out all these different dimensions of his witness.

Touhey: I want all three of you to try to answer this question, starting with Stephen. I've done exhibits for the New York Encounter before, and we had a year to do the exhibit; a very thorough process. But this year, I had just four months to pull it together and it turned out fantastic. Stephen was really insistent that I do it along with Olivetta, and he said—I'll never forget—"No, I really need Monsignor right now." So my question to you is: What made you think that this man, who is dead, who is not present in the pandemic, not present with any of the problems we're having right now—what made you possibly think he could have any kind of relevance to the situation we're living today? What made you want *him* as opposed to any other person in your life right now?

Sanchez: Great question. It wasn't just the pandemic, right? It was the experience also of all of the turmoil that we were experiencing as a country in the midst of the protests and the rioting. It was in the midst of the election, all of those things. Monsignor had a way of cutting through a lot of the rhetoric, through a lot of the ideology, and getting to the heart of what was really at stake for us. But also doing it with a little bit of humor. Everybody had a serious reaction to what was going on in the midst of the various crises that we were experiencing, the quarantine that we were living, everybody had really deep meaningful things to say, opinions about what was important and what we should care about. And not that Monsignor wouldn't have had that—he would have. He would have had a clear, decisive kind of feeling, but he would have felt it, too. He would have shared his own fear, his own anxiety, his own mess. He would have admitted all of that and he would have made a joke. And all of those things together? What I wanted—gosh. You

know, Monsignor had become, especially at the end of his life, very much a father, and maybe even a grandfather in some respects, right? Someone who had been there, had seen it, and who knew that this wasn't the final word. And I was missing that; I was missing that openness.

Touhey: I would direct a question to you, Lisa, and in a similar way because it's very related. You have been engaged with this material very deeply, both you and Greg, but your reaction to all this is to immediately see there's a connection to all of the stuff going on right now. Where is that coming from in you and why do you say that? I mean, that could seem absurd to many people. Why are you saying that?

Lickona: To be honest, the very first thing that came into my mind was Monsignor's appearance on the Charlie Rose Show after John Paul II died. I don't know if you saw that, it's on YouTube. Because Charlie Rose was like, you know, "What are you going to do now that John Paul II is gone?" Monsignor said, "He's not gone to me. I feel him very much present." Monsignor is not gone to me. I feel him very much present. I mean, part of what we're invited into is this greater communion, right? So that's part of the answer. But as far as what came out of the writing, and this particular task of editing the book, I mean, I concur with Stephen. I've read all of these essays many times now, and I find myself looking at reality differently. I feel encouraged to look at it the way he looked at it. With a great deal of wonder and reverence and expectancy and poverty. Because how can we live every day? How can we live? We can't. We're not the self-made man or woman. And I find in here that the way Monsignor approaches reality is a way for me to live that is full of joy. I know I'm suffering, but with an awareness that there's something else, there's someone Other that is addressing me in this particular moment right now, and I keep coming back to that every time I go in here.

Touhey: Over a year ago, there was a text from Greg saying, "Well, what's going on with the books? Would there be any interest if we wanted to do something?" And I thought it was great, but I was also a little bit surprised because Slant is a fantastic publisher. Check out the Slant Books website. Greg publishes wonderful literature, poetry, and stuff, so I was a little surprised that you wanted to do this. I'm very happy, by the way, very, very happy. But it

was surprising to me, and it brings up the question, Why did you take on this task? Why are you motivated to make this man known to people?

Wolfe: I'm happy that Monsignor Albacete is in the company of poets and fiction writers. I think he would have felt right at home there. In fact, I remember our very first conversation all the way back in 2002. We spoke for what seemed like hours and this was the gift he had. I mean, it was probably maybe 45 minutes, but we spoke for hours about Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy and their insights into the nature of modern man and the kind of ills that he suffers from, including the problem of dualism we talked about before. I just love that he cared about these literary writers, that he wasn't just an abstract theologian who only read abstract works of theology, but he loved to see how storytelling could incarnate these issues. I think the whole question of dualism is important, because particularly in the American tradition, the American cultural tradition, we have a temptation to separate faith from life, to separate the head and the heart—to become either abstract and ideological in some ways, to think that ideas will save us or to become sentimental and moralistic and believe that only behaving perfectly and making sure everyone else behaves perfectly will solve our problems. But in fact what he kept saying was, moralism, doctrinalism, activism, all of these *isms*—are a way of avoiding an awareness of presence, of a presence that can change us, that can open us up to wonder and amazement, and kind of thwart our attempt to impose abstract ideas and to label everybody. There's just a whole incarnational, sacramental vision at the heart of this man's work that I think, honestly, if it was truly disseminated into people's minds and hearts would be a great moment for the American Church.

Touhey: Monsignor and I had talked occasionally, but very generally, very briefly about working together on things, but we never had the time. The basic idea of the Albacete Show, which I put together for this year's New York Encounter, and which I hope you will watch, is: What would a television show with Monsignor actually look like? It would be a wild ride, and that's what the exhibit is, a bit of a wild ride, I think. But really, for me, working on this exhibit was a privilege. I came in without any idea of what it was going to be, because I had four months to do it and was like, *How?* It's overwhelming to try to convey this man in four months. But what really

started to happen was—and I'm really convinced that this was Albacete—I really felt him, his friendship, over my shoulder with every single decision I made. I was surprised so many times by the things that came up, and really felt him laughing. A new idea would come up and I would be, like, Yes, that's what we have to do here. But what was really most moving, what really touched me the most working on the exhibit itself, was to understand, in a way that I had not before, the humanity of Monsignor and the deep need he had for friendship with people. The deep, deep, need. I was working on this, gathering materials, and I picked up my copy of *God at the Ritz* that he had signed. I hadn't looked at it in years. He had written, "I'm so glad you liked the book." And then he wrote at the bottom, "In deep friendship." And it really struck me for the first time that it wasn't just something he wrote. I think he really meant that. So I hope people go to the exhibit immediately after this talk has ended, and go pick up a copy of this new book. Monsignor would want me to pitch the book. If he was here right now, he'd be doing a song and dance, getting you to buy this book. I feel no hesitation in telling you to go out immediately and don't wait to buy the book. And also click on the exhibit, okay?

I hope there are more books, Greg. You and Lisa did such a beautiful job with this book. The day I got it I was like, "Oh this is crazy." It's wonderful. even with the fonts and everything, every decision is beautiful. This is the humanity of Monsignor, the friendship of Monsignor, which I think is the most important thing to reach people. Any last thoughts?

Wolfe: The beauty is that there will be some people who read the book because they knew Monsignor, but I think as time goes on, the book itself conveys so much of the flavor of who he is, that people will intuit that personality, and they'll get a twofer. They'll get the ideas and the thoughts, but they will also get a flavor of the man and that human presence, that particular human personality. My kind of bottom line about Lorenzo Albacete is that he's a free man. And there are very few people I've encountered in my life who have that kind of freedom about them. Not to say he didn't have burdens. You can have heavy burdens, but inwardly be free, and that's why he was able to be playful. You play when you don't have to do something for utilitarian purpose, or out of anxiety or out of pressure; you're free to kind

of gamble through the world, and he did. The one last thing I will say is, when we would be in the same room, and I would walk in the room, he'd be surrounded by people talking to him and he would look up at me, and his head would sink down and he would say, "Oh my God!" As if, you know, "Oh God, look who's come in the room," which I knew was both a kind of gentle way of keeping me humble, but also of showing his love and affection for me. He was a free, free man and I loved him.

Touhey: Lisa, last thought?

Lickona: I second everything Greg just said. I think one of the things I love about Monsignor's legacy is that it's like the pebble that gets dropped in the pond and there's a ripple effect. I notice that the Encounter is having conversations through the course of the weekend with people that met Monsignor. I wanted to click on every single one of those and register for every single one, because I want to catch every one of the ripples. And so yeah, I'm encouraging everybody here to catch the ripples, and I look forward to the next book.

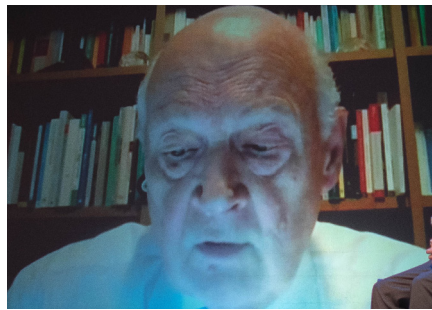
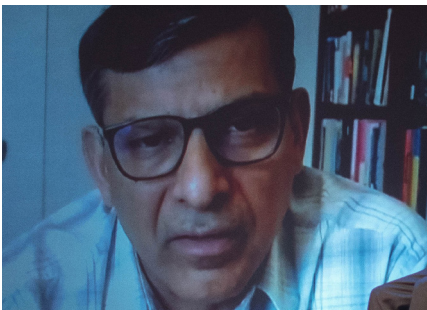
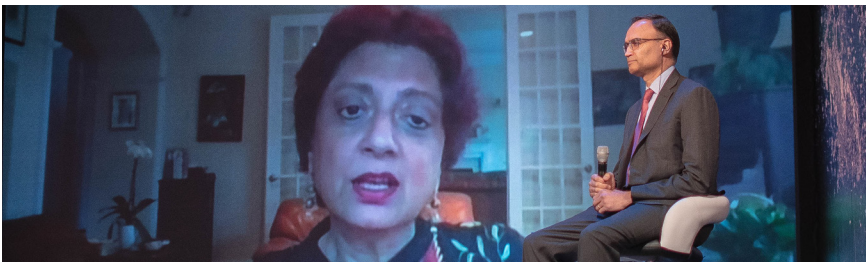
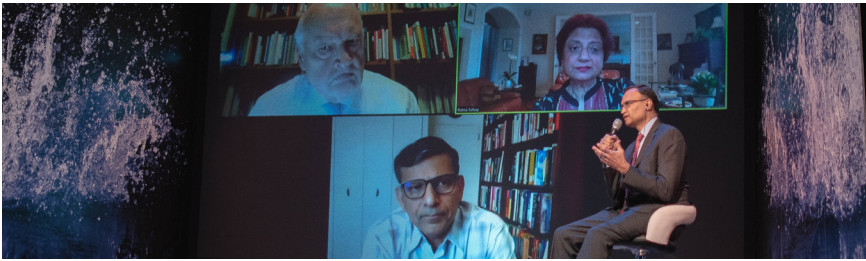
Touhey: Stephen, I'm sure you're very happy to get the breaking news from Greg that he's interested in getting more books out if we can.

Sanchez: Yeah we have plenty of material. so we're ready for that.

Touhey: Slant Books did such a great job on this. I really encourage you to go out and give yourself a present during this difficult year we're having.

I want to thank Greg Wolfe and Lisa Lickona, the editors of *The Relevance of the Stars*. I want to thank them for the work they've done, and godspeed. I hope we sell a zillion copies this weekend. Stephen, thank you. Thank you for pushing me to do the exhibit and thank you for the work that we're doing together on the Forum. Thank you and goodnight.

WHEN REALITY HITS



NOT BY PROFIT ALONE

*Online conversation on rethinking work, business, and economy in a post-Covid world, with **Raghuram Rajan**, the Katherine Dusak Miller Distinguished Service Professor of Finance, the University of Chicago Booth School of Business, **Ratna Sahay**, Deputy Director, Monetary and Capital Markets Department, International Monetary Fund, and **Stefano Zamagni**, Professor of Economics, University of Bologna and President of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences.*

Introduction

What are the lessons to be learned from the pandemic for economists, financial operators, international institutions, and small and big businesses? What to expect in the short and long term in the job market and in the economy? How should the economy change in the wake of Covid-19, and what can bring about that change? Do we need new economic models or a new vision?



Anujeet Sareen, moderator: Welcome to this year's edition of the New York Encounter. My name is Anujeet Sareen, and I'll be moderating this next event, *Not By Profit Alone*. Before I introduce our distinguished speakers and give you a little bit of a sense of what we will be talking about, let me first thank AVSI-USA for helping organize this event. Let me also acknowledge and thank Mr. Domenico Fanizza, Executive Director at the International Monetary Fund, the IMF, for listening and watching this event this afternoon. And welcome to everyone else online who has joined us for what I'm sure is going to be a very interesting conversation. We're here to talk about how

this pandemic has impacted the economy; how it's impacted businesses and the labor markets, and to think about possible new policies or frameworks we may need to consider for the challenges ahead. As is often the case when a shock hits the economy, it tends to put a spotlight on vulnerabilities that already existed. Challenges and issues that maybe we just haven't confronted as a society, but now there's a greater urgency to look at them. And so in that sense, as we go through this next hour, our speakers will start by first focusing on the main issues prior to the pandemic hitting the economy, and then we'll talk about what comes after.

The other thing I think that's useful to keep in mind is a little bit of the narrative that brings us to 2021. As I'm sure you are all well aware, the ideological debate between free market capitalism and communism—that was resolved decades ago, right? And in fact all through the '90s and 2000s there was this sense that free market capitalism was ascendant. Until, of course, we hit 2008, the great financial crisis or GFC, and there was a sense that we hit some type of limit, a point at which, if not for a substantial amount of intervention by the government, by the state, we would have experienced perhaps the second Great Depression in the United States and elsewhere. We as a country voted in that direction. We elected a Democratic president, Barack Obama. We put the Democrats in control of both houses of Congress, because that's the party that best represents and values the role of government in society. But very different from the 1930s and '40s and '50s, it did not endure, right? In the '30s, '40s, and '50s, the Democratic Party held control for a very long stretch of time; the pendulum swung dramatically from one side to the other, to having a much greater role of the state in the economy. This time, since 2008, we as a country have gone back and forth; there isn't a clear sense of what's next. This is where our speakers really come in, to really ask ourselves this question: What else can we consider and think about that's not part of our dialogue today?

There's certainly a far more extensive bio you can find for each of our speakers on the website, but I will introduce each of them here in alphabetical order. We're joined today by Professor Raghuram Rajan, the Katherine Dusak Miller Distinguished Service Professor of Finance at the University of Chicago's Booth School. Prior to that he was the Governor of the Reserve

Bank of India from 2013 to 2016, as well as the Vice Chairman of the Board of the Bank for International Settlements from 2015 to 2016. Doctor Rajan was the Chief Economist and Director of Research at the IMF from 2003 to 2006. Doctor Ratna Sahay is Deputy Director of the Monetary and Capital Markets Department at the IMF. She leads key policy papers and projects in the areas of monetary policy, exchange rate policy, capital account, financial development, financial inclusion, and gender and finance. She has published widely in leading journals on monetary policy and the financial sector. And then last but certainly not least, Professor Stefano Zamagni, a Professor of Economics at the University of Bologna, and since 2019 President of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences. He's the author of numerous books and journals on welfare economics, the theory of consumer behavior, social choice theory, economic epistemology, ethics, history of economic thought, and civil economy. Thank you all for joining us today.

Dr. Sahay, maybe we could start with you. You've done a lot of work on the financial system, right? What do you think is the definitive lesson learned from the financial crisis, particularly at a time when people still wonder what the link between Wall Street and Main Street actually is?

Ratna Sahay: Thank you very much, Anujeet. I would say that there were three lessons. First, we learned very vividly that we live in a globalized world with many interconnections, and finance is no exception. That the failure of one bank, Lehman Brothers, in one country, the United States, could bring the global economy to a halt—was unthinkable only a few decades ago. But today, crosswater flows are the norm. There is a wide range of complex and opaque financial services and products that look very, very, attractive, and they have proliferated. But sometimes they carry a lot of risks. Capital now moves at lightning speed, transferring such risks across national borders just like the Covid-19 virus today, so that's one lesson. A second lesson, of course, is that we need to do a much better job of monitoring, assessing, mitigating, and, if possible, preventing financial risks and crises. Otherwise, they can affect whole systems, and this is what we economists call *systemic risk*. Strengthening regulation and supervision was a big lesson, and after much hard work, banks are indeed safer today, and we're working towards making the non-bank financial sector safer. I still think that some

financial institutions remain too big to fail. We really haven't resolved that model has a problem. And finally, the third lesson I'd like to emphasize, and that's based on my own research and also some research that Dr. Rajan has done, and which hasn't, in my view, caught on widely yet, is that there may be too much finance in some countries, especially advanced economies. But what do I mean by too much finance? Conventional wisdom is that financial development helps spur economic growth. That was true until the 1980s, but that relationship really has broken down with the rapid growth of the financial sector since the 1990s. You know, by some measures today, the debt of the financial sector is more than four or five times the GDP in some economies. In our research we found that beyond a certain point, large financial systems can actually hurt growth. I would say this is a case of too much finance. So why does it hurt growth? Well, there are three possible reasons. A large financial system can increase the frequency of booms and busts, which can hurt growth and increase inequality. Another argument is that there are very high compensations in the financial sector, which diverts talent and human character away from active sectors, which leads to an inefficient allocation of resources. And finally, some have also argued that as financial systems become very large as they did, they acquire not just financial but political clout that rewards the financial sector excessively. So this leads to a rise in income and wealth inequality and also explains the disconnect between Wall Street and Main Street, where as you can see today, stock prices are at historic highs, even as unemployment and income, especially in low income homes, have fallen a lot due to the Covid crisis. So let me stop. Thank you.

Sareen: Thank you Dr. Sahay. Professor Rajan, maybe we could shift to you. You published a very interesting book a couple of years ago, *The Third Pillar*. What is this third pillar? What else do we need to interject into the dialogue to move forward?

Raghuram Rajan: Thanks for having me here. Let me start where Ratna left off. I mean, clearly we have deep problems emerging in the world. They've been emerging for the last 20 to 30 years. One of the most important problems is inequality, both within countries and across countries. There are far too many people who can't take advantage of the opportunities the capitalist system offers. And, you know, before the financial crisis, I think

one of the attempts to ameliorate inequality, when people didn't have jobs, was to give them more access to credit. Some of the housing boom, especially housing targeted at low-income segments of society, was in many ways part of the answer. And in fact, when you look at consumption inequality in industrial countries, certainly in the United States, it did not go up as much as income inequality did. Because the gap was being bridged by the financial sector through easy lending. This can't go on forever. It had to come to an end, and it came to an end with the global financial crisis. Since then, we've sort of discovered there are many kinds of inequality. It's not just the traditional inequality across society between different class segments. In industrial countries there is a profound inequality of place, partly exacerbated by technological developments that make it much more valuable to be in a mega city, like New York or San Francisco, and not in a small town far away. I think the inequality of place has translated into a serious inequality of opportunity. Places that have lost their main manufacturer, partly as a result of trade, are places that have been swept by hopelessness, where the schools deteriorate, where you get drug abuse, alcohol abuse. This is where you get the deaths of despair that have been so clearly documented by Angus Deaton and Anne Case.

The worry is, this is changing the politics of industrial countries significantly, but in the process it's also changing the politics of many emerging markets. So, in *The Third Pillar*, I argued that we really have to focus a lot more on what I call the community, and of course many people think of communities in very different ways. But let's talk about what most people think of as a community: a place where people come together to create local institutions, such as good schools, such as a safe and secure environment for kids to grow up in, and so on. And I argue that we have to pay attention to the community, this third pillar, if we want people to participate in the other two communities effectively, with the other two communities being the market economy, the economic side, and the government or the political side. And one of the big fragilities in the world today is because peoples' communities have broken down. They simply are not able to participate in the other two pillars in an effective way, and we get the kind of fractures and frictions that we see across the industrial world, which is also breaking up

the integrated world that helped us come where we are from where we were, post-World War II. I can elaborate on that, but let me stop there and hear Professor Zamagni.

Sareen: Yes, Professor Zamagni, I would love to have you join the conversation. You recently said something very provocative about democracy. I heard you say we think that democracy is only something relevant for the political sphere, and that it's not relevant for the markets and the business sector. That democracies are costly, they're time consuming, businesses need to be fast paced, efficient; and you argue that that separation is a mistake. What does that mean?

Stefano Zamagni: Thank you. Thank you first of all for the invitation, which I was very happy to accept. Today we are witnessing a process in which the rule by electoral democracy is replacing liberal democracy, and the implication is that the rule of law is being replaced by the rule by law. And we observe a tendency towards neo-patrimonial states where coalitions of allies share rents. Now it seems to me that this is a major impediment to the advancement of a credible model of global governance, so we are facing a sort of internal contradiction to this system. In other words, what is the difficulty? The difficulty is how to reconcile the internal governance rules of individual countries, each one of which has its own specific history. Its social norms of behavior, its cultural metrics, with the uniformity of the rules that inevitably characterize global governments. And in fact, in my opinion, one should not never forget that the constraints external to the country, when it has to shape its domestic policies, always entails a cost in terms of democratic legitimacy. A cost which, as it's happening nowadays, ends up reenforcing irrational pressures towards sovereign populists. There are different qualities or types of populists, and they are grown in many parts of the world. It is therefore a question of choosing between the two alternative concepts of global economic governance, one of which has been called—to use the words of Danny Roderick and others—the *globalization* enhancing global governments, and the other is the *democracy* enhancing global governments. The basic idea of the democracy enhancing global governments is that, when one starts drawing the rules of the transitional network—and from this point of view, the role of institutions such as IMF and many others is

very, very, important—it is necessary in my opinion to include among the objectives to be pursued not only the increase in efficiency in the allocation of resources, which is obvious for an economist, but also the enlargement of the democratic base. In other words, it is indeed true that globalization *per se* increases the space of negative human rights—in other words, the notion of “freedom *from*,” to use a very famous Isaiah Berlin distinction. But it also restricts, if not corrected, positive human rights, namely, the “freedom *of*,” the freedom of achievement. So it seems to me that today we have to debate at the international level, because our institutions can play a major role in fixing the rules. In my country we call it a *community index*, in order to evaluate the merit of the various proposals that are put forward. It nowhere is written that economic science should devote itself only to efficiency. Efficiency is an important value but it's not the only way. Liberty is also important. It seems to me that talking in these terms might—perhaps I am too optimistic—open a new vista in the near future.

Sareen: Professor, the term “cooperative economy”: What exactly does that mean?

Zamagni: Even though the cooperative movement started in France and England, the first successful cooperative was established in England in 1844, and then in Italy 10 years later. But it is true that a cooperative firm plays an important role in Italy, as well as in other European countries. Why is it so? Because it is obvious that we would never need a cooperative only on the grounds of efficiency; because there are many other forms of enterprise that could do even better. But the point is, cooperatives are fundamental for community building. What we have to do is move from a *dichotomous* model of social order based on state and market to a *trichotomous* model, namely state, market, and community, or as we prefer to call it in Europe: civil society organization. But more or less, this expression is the same as community. But the point is that community needs some instruments because in order to be built up. Now, cooperative firms are one such instrument. It is not the only instrument, but it's a potential because when people living in a territory realize that by organizing their labor process in a particular way they improve their luck, both in terms of income and wealth but also in terms of happiness, they realize why it is important to strengthen the community links. And in

this regard, the cooperative type of firms are playing a major role. If we did not have cooperatives in Italy it would be a disaster, because many lives were saved because of the particular way and the particular mode of this type of organization.

Rajan: Anujeet, can I just add something based on what the professor said.

Zamagni: You can call me Stefano.

Rajan: I think the emphasis he's putting on social relations is very important. But as we become more developed, we can meet economic needs but we find that social needs are left aside. There's a pandemic of loneliness hitting many industrial countries. As people get older, we need to think about what we need to do there. But there's also something very important to note about the spread of markets across the world. The general concensus is that markets and governments are opposed to each other. This was the view in the 20th century: we had all these movements, one emphasizing markets, the other emphasizing governments. The reality is that they're symbiotic. You have stronger markets, integrated markets; there's a push for having stronger integrated government and, to some extent, the point Stefano's making about democracy: when you have worldwide markets, there is an impetus to have worldwide government, and not in having democratic power have much say at either the local level or national level; it gets elevated really high. And so, what we need to consider as we go forward is: is that the way we really want to go? Do corporations need a borderless world in order to operate, or can they operate really well with very minimal loss of efficiency in a world with reasonable boundaries, where people have the democratic right to, in a sense, set up their own rules and regulations? I mean, it's useful to appeal to a Catholic principle called *subsidiarity*. Push the powers down to the lowest level at which they can be exercised efficiently. If you want to think about what rules should govern primary schools, why does it have to be determined at the national level? A local community can figure out what it ought to teach its youngest kids. But if you want to make rules on climate change, clearly you need to discuss at the global level, because it affects all of us, but it should have the consensus right down to the bottom. If you discuss climate change rules at the top and then transmit it down to the bottom like, "Here

are orders from some smoky room where it was decided in Paris," you get a reaction. People say, "I wasn't part of this rulemaking. I'm not going to obey the rules that you set up." What we saw with the *gilets jaunes* in France was precisely that. Rules on, say, carbon tax, on gasoline taxes, which they had no part in determining and so they were protesting. We need to reassert democracy, and that means, in a sense, placing the powers to decide at the right place. We've elevated them too much and we need to bring them back, and often by doing that you can have both more of an emphasis on the social side, but also not give up efficiency to the extent that sometimes you have to give up if you had a very different change.

Zamagni: May I add something on that, please? I'm talking to our moderator.

Sareen: Yes, yes, please.

Zamagni: I totally agree with Raghuram. Any society is based on three different principles: exchange of equivalence of value, the principle of redistribution, and the principle of reciprocity. Now, also scientists are aware of this triadic structure; but until recently, only two of these three principles have been incorporated into the models of social order, and that in part explains the unsatisfactory results that we have obtained. What happens if one of the three principle is absent? If reciprocity is eliminated, what does it mean? We have a model, a social order based on state-market dichotomy, what has been called the Lib-Lab pendulum. The market produces and the state benevolently redistributes according to some criteria of fairness. On the other hand, if redistribution is eliminated, we have the so called compassionate capitalist model. And there is no need to explain this, because, particularly in America, this is very well understood. Finally, if we eliminate the exchange of equivalence, we produce those types of collectivistic systems that history has proved to be untenable. The principle of reciprocity is what motivates and justifies subsidiarity. Because reciprocity is to give without losing and to take without taking away. How do we describe the relationship among the members of the same family, of the same social group? We cannot use the word *command*, or we cannot use *exchange of equivalence*, but that is the typical principle as it is practiced in the marketplace. We use a reciprocity, and that is why we need to strengthen the community links. But to strengthen them we

need to extend the area of application of the reciprocity principle. And that is why cooperatives and non-profit organizations benefit the corporations. Many other types of organizations are important as well because they translate into practice the principle of reciprocity, which is lacking. And I never understood why in economics, in mainstream economics, it is enough to check in with the textbooks or whatever—the principal of reciprocity is never mentioned because the typical duty of an economist is to deal with the state or with the market; or with the relation between the two forgetting about the so-called third pillar. And that is something I expect in the near future will change, because we cannot, in my opinion, continue in this way.

Sareen: Dr. Sahay, I'd love to hear your thoughts on what's just been said.

Sahay: So, Anujeet, let me just say that I very much agree with what Raghu and Stefano have said. Just this week I was listening to a lecture by Noreena Hertz. It was about the lonely century and I was really shocked to hear some of the numbers; during the pandemic, for example, half the population here feels lonely. You know, 60% of the people in nursing homes have no visitors. One in five people at work haven't made a single friend. The bottom line of what I'm saying is that we've become too individualistic, and that's where this role of the community makes sense. But coming back to your question on policy and culture, in my mind the two interact—they are not separate. Working for a policy institution, I'm a very strong believer that policies can change culture. I know it sounds difficult, but sometimes it doesn't even take much time. What is really important, from what I observe and what I've read and seen, is that the signal from the top public and private sector leaders matters a lot. I want to give you a couple of examples. Esther Duflo, the Nobel Prize laureate in 2019 and her co-authors, conducted studies on the implications of gender quotas policies and village learning in India at the community level, and they found that exposure to female leaders improved perceptions in India about women's effectiveness and weakened stereotypes about gender roles. So women are now much more likely to stand for and win elected positions. Yet, as an Indian, I can say that we still have a very long way to go.

Let me give you an example from the private sector. Unilever, a multinational consumer goods company, recognized that women account for

70% of their sales and control 65% of spending, so they began to target the needs of women in their production and sales strategies. Then they partnered with the United Nations and formed what is called the un-stereotype alliance. Many big companies—like Facebook, Alibaba, Google, Microsoft, etc.—they joined as partners because they realized that there's a business economic case to focus on women.

And finally, I just want to talk about my own field, because it's so close to my heart. In economics we found that even though racism and gender bias are detrimental to economic growth, these topics have received very little attention even today. So just recently, we compiled some data on every article in the top economics journals over the past 10 years, and what we found is that only 0.2% of the nearly 8,000 articles covered the issue of race. And more recently, a survey of the American Economic Association, with more than 9,000 members, revealed that about 50% of the women felt they had been treated unfairly, compared to only 3% of the men. Seven out of 10 of these women say that they felt their colleagues' work is much more valued. Janet Yellen recently talked about this and said what you see in the survey is just an unacceptable culture. I'm convinced that even discrimination—race, gender, any other—can be reversed by policy, too. This is so true about our own managing director, Kristalina Georgieva, who's really inspiring us to work more towards rooting out discrimination.

Rajan: I think it's very important for industrial countries to recognize they actually have a problem of underdevelopment. There are many places in industrial countries that would not be out of place in a third world country, and unless you recognize that, you will continue a policy of more and more stimulus. Stimulus works when you are a developed area that just needs a little more *oomph* to come out of a trough. But development is not stimulus. Development needs much more careful work on local institutions, on local infrastructure, essentially creating the possibilities of local growth. And why do I say this? I say this because the policy establishment in the United States still doesn't seem to recognize this. Think about the debate in Washington today. On the one hand, the Fed has pushed its foot firmly on the accelerator and is going to hold it there no matter what happens. You know, you have a frothy financial market creating some of the conditions that Raghu talked

about, but no matter—we're going to put the foot on the accelerator. That's fine. But also on the fiscal side we have spending, and what is the spending? The Cares Act was extremely important in providing relief to households and firms. But, as Larry Summers points out, there are many households now, certainly in the upper income brackets, that have plenty of money and they are not spending it. We have to be careful about the next round of spending to make sure it's much better targeted at those who are unemployed, those small businesses that need relief, but it can't be yet another open checkbook written to everybody regardless of whether they need money. And what you see in this is a kind of policy that diminishes room for the really necessary policy. Outside my window I can see the southside of Hyde Park, which was devastated by a previous wave of de-industrialization in the late '70s and early '80s. And the manufacturing communities have, in the parlance of economists, suffered "China shock." We need to work on these areas. Many of these areas, for example, don't have broadband. How can you not have broadband in the digital economy and be part of the economy? The good news about the pandemic is we that can spread economic activity wider. Many of us have discovered work at a distance. It will not all stay the same way; many people will go back to offices in the big cities, but there will be many jobs that can now be done four days a week, stay wherever you want, come in one day a week. These places that have been left behind can actually create the possibility of people coming and staying there if only they improve their infrastructure a little bit. They have better parks, they have better trails, they have better broadband, so that people can work at a distance. Then, high income workers can work there and spread economic goodies across the country. We need to be thinking about new ways of spreading activity, making capitalism work for many more people, perhaps through the kinds of cooperative organizations that Stefano's talking about. But what we seem to be resorting to is back to the standard playbooks: central government spends a huge amount of money, devised by policies through the center with no thought of what the localities need, and unfortunately, local government, local decision-making in the United States, has a bad aura with it, you know, tinged by past racism and the fact that state's rights and local government were emphasized by the South in order to keep African communities down. I

think we can get beyond that and recognize that in fact, if you want stronger democracy, we do need to push much more decision-making, especially in this "building back better" post-pandemic period, back to the localities.

Sareen: Does the pandemic change any of this? Does it accelerate this? Is there something else now we need to be thinking about beyond the immediate demand shock and some of the immediate needs as well?

Zamagni: Yes. This pandemic is opening our eyes to three fundamental, ethical dilemmas. The first one has to do with the following question. For the first time, policymakers are facing a trade-off between epidemiological cost, which means lives, and economic cost, which means livelihoods. So the triple question asks how to design smart policies that are effective in reducing the spread of the disease, while at the same time minimizing economic cost. Second, how large is the tradeoff between saving lives and preserving livelihood? And third, who should bear the burden of the economic cost? Because to us, to answer this question we would need a distributional pandemic possibility function, showing the distribution of welfare costs associated with the different containment and fiscal strategies across different types of workers and families. And this is not done yet, even after more than one year from the beginning. I have to stress that this is sort of a failure, because the economic profession at large is not being able to ask itself the question: who should bear the cost? The fact is that, as we are observing these days with the vaccine, the burden of the cost is on the poor countries and poor people. But on top of that there is the other ethical dilemma, namely, what is the criteria to be adopted in the allocation of scarce resources such as the vaccine? We know the story of the vaccine these days, the callbacks etc. So far the criterion has been the QALE. QALE is an acronym that stands for *quality adjusted life*. Everybody takes that for granted. But how are we sure? Because QALE is a criterion that comes directly from utilitarianism. Now suppose that, for whatever reason, I do not accept utilitarian philosophy—and there are many reasons not to accept it. Why should I impose, why should we impose on physicians and hospitals the application of QALE? That is a real question, because QALE says we should give the vaccine to those who are more productive. If you are less productive than another—for instance, because you are older than another—you should give it up, etc. And that's spreading visibly in Europe

in these days, and it seems to me that economists at large should provide an answer to that because there are alternates. Finally, a third ethical dilemma. The recent literature talks about "optimal lockdowns." I have read very nice papers that elaborate this and are mathematically perfect, etc.—but they seem not to realize that the very moment you talk about optimal lockdowns, you are not considering the notional trade off that can be done on terms which are on the same level. But you cannot make a tradeoff between a supreme value, such as rescuing a human life, and another value of lower importance, such as, for instance, an increase in income. Vaccines are not private goods, they are common goods. They belong to the category of common. They're neither private nor public, and you cannot apply to a common good the same logic that is okay if applied to a private economy. That is why I expect in the near future that the profession will start considering an expansion of the vision needed to be devoted to this issue. We know that 9 or 10 years from now there will be another pandemic, so we need to prepare ourselves now by formulating proper criteria or behavior.

Sareen: Professor Rajan and Dr. Sahay, any other thoughts you have on how the pandemic changes things here? Or some of the other lasting changes that we may need to expect?

Sahay: There's aging, there's climate change, there's the digital technology that Raghuram mentioned, and also there's a shifting of global economic power. These trends have not changed, they are just getting worse. So if you look at inequality within countries, it's high and rising. It's higher in emerging markets, it's true, but it's rising very rapidly in advanced economies too. And aging is going to exert pressure on public finances, especially in these advanced economies. As we know, climate change is also reducing productivity and growth prospects and really accelerating migration pressures. Digital technology brings a lot of improvements in productive routine, but it has been a major factor in rising inequality. For example, robots replacing skilled workers. And not to forget that the big techs like the Amazons, the Googles, the Facebooks, Apple, etc.—they have gained enormous market power. Also, geopolitics has shifted. For decades, the U.S. has been the undisputed leader in economics, military, etc., but that is being challenged today. So what has changed, was discovered, since the crisis? First, there's a growing realization

that the force of nature, Covid-19, can be so much more powerful than the progress we've made in science, technology, economics, and finance. I mean, it's been a humbling experience. I already talked about public debt, which has really risen very sharply, and we do need fiscal policy expansion, and need also to preserve livelihoods due to this pandemic, but it's a legacy that many countries will have to live with. There are many jobs and farms in contact intensive sectors that are lost and may never come back. We really need to worry about the people who work there. Fourth, it's so clear that we have to invest much more in human and physical capital, including, of course, health, education, and infrastructure. But all of this requires broad consensus in society. Yet, social media has also shown how it can polarize societies and hinder consensus building. To me, what has been amazing is how it can detract from facts and numbers and ensure that the lens through which each of us sees truth can be so different. We need to tackle all of that.

Rajan: Clearly the pandemic has been devastating in industrial countries, but I think, to pick up Stefano's point, it's potentially far worse in many developing countries and emerging markets. We've seen the spectacle of industrial countries cornering vaccines. I hope this is an early response, that down the line there is a more moderate response in sharing the vaccines, because we know from the work of epidemiologists that if it rages uncontrolled elsewhere, there is the possibility of variants developing that come back to hit us, and that will pierce the protection that the vaccines give us. This is an area where we need global cooperation that has been sadly missing. I think the key problem has been that U.S. leadership has been missing in action so far. There is a hope that the U.S. reasserts itself in providing and organizing global public goods, but it has to be rethinking this at an order of magnitude different from what has been thought of previously. This is why we need a lot of work strengthening international organizations, perhaps creating new ones, because really, if you think that the industrial countries have been set back a year or two, many developing countries in emerging markets have been set back by, in some cases, a decade or more. And that kind of hit often results in political change. This is why it seems to me when the West is talking about creating a coalition of democracies, that coalition of democracies may risk having very few followers. A certain kind of global thinking is needed at

a time when the natural tendency is to look inward at your own economy and think, We have big problems, we can't think about the world. Yes, but if you don't think about the world now, you will have big problems 5 or 10 years down the line, when the effects of the pandemic finally play out. Here this is where I think it's important to look at hope also, that you know, the pandemic has accelerated the acceptance of technology in many ways, which gives us many new ways of dealing with some of the older problems we have. We've realized that you can get 90% of education, college education, on the web. You can't hit 100% because for 100% it is sometimes better to be in the same room with your students and professors, to have a vibrant conversation. But you can have a pretty decent conversation, as we're having right now, on the web. And so why can't we have better education for many more people who can't access it today because they're limited by distance? Why can't we have more telemedicine? Many places don't get access to a good doctor, but we've seen, certainly in the United States, a big movement towards telemedicine in the early days of the pandemic. Now, of course, people can meet a little more in person. I think some of that impetus is waning, but it shows us this can be done. We need to embrace technology to provide solutions to older problems, but we also need to recognize there are new problems, and if we don't tackle them directly, systemic change will be forced on us in directions that we don't want.

Zamagni: A new word has been recently coined: *syndemic*. The reference is to the October 2020 issue of *Lancet*, the famous journal. They said the present situation is not a pandemic but a symptom. By *syndemic* they mean that the causes of pandemics are exogenous to the virus that produced it. In other words, what we are suffering is not only because of the virus, but has to do with the vulnerabilities of our economic and social models. And since I understand that the time is up, let me conclude with this quotation from Jonas Salk. Jonas Salk was the inventor of the vaccine against poliomyelitis. In 1973 he wrote the following: "I now see that the major shift in human evolution is from behaving like an animal struggling to survive to behaving like an animal choosing to evolve. And to evolve we need a new kind of thinking, and a new kind of behavior, and a new morality. It will be that of the evolution of the everyone rather than the survival of the fittest." I was

really surprised. And let me add that Salk refused to patent his invention, even though some lawyers advised him to do that. He would have become very rich. But he said no, if I patent it, my vaccine will not reach children all over the world. And he insisted on that. Thank you very much.

Sareen: Thank you professor. And yes, unfortunately we are coming up to the top of the hour. I would love to carry on this conversation—

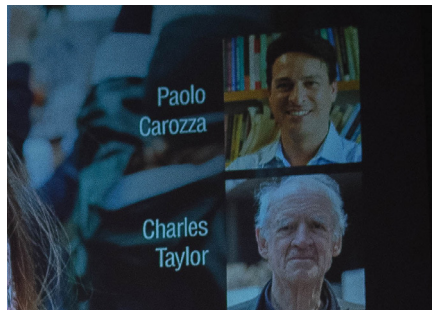
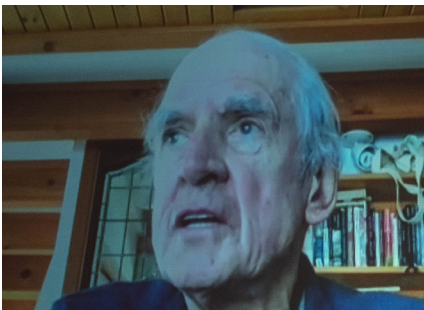
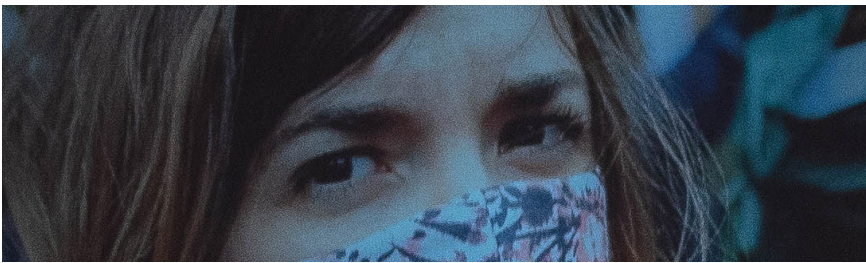
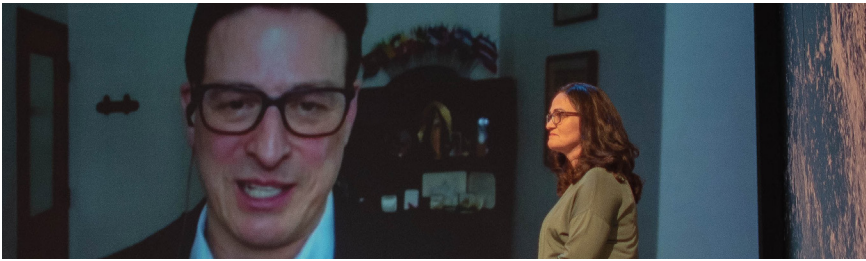
Sahay: Can I make a pitch for just one thing?

Sareen: Sure, we've got 2 minutes, go ahead.

Sahay: I just want to follow up on what Raghu said. I mean, the globalized world is here to stay. The contagion spillovers across national borders are inevitable, and we saw this during the GFC and in the Covid crisis. It's so clear to us at the IMF that all nations need to work together to find global solutions, whether it's health, finance, what have you. After the second world war, major countries got together, established the Bretton Woods system like the IMF World Bank, and they fostered stable exchange rates and growth economies. And we saw the biggest economic expansion after World War II. Same thing with the GFC. International bodies got together, built a new global regulatory standard. That has now come to strengthen the World Health Organization, the World Trade Organization, and possibly other new institutions to regulate cybersecurity data, privacy, social media, as well as rules of engagement for the big banks. I was very heartened to read just yesterday a press release that the G7 countries have renewed their commitment to multilateralism to solve global issues. At the IMF, we are now focusing on things like climate change, digital technology, inequality, and of course health. I just wanted to say thank you.

Sareen: Thanks to all three of you for what I think has been a terrific discussion. Thank you for taking the time on a Saturday afternoon to be with us. At this point we do need to conclude. Let me just once again thank AVSI-USA for sponsoring this event.

WHEN REALITY HITS



THE CORE OF OUR HUMANITY

*An online dialogue on the Encounter theme with **Paolo Carozza**, Professor of Law and Director, Kellogg Institute for International Studies, University of Notre Dame, and **Charles Taylor**, philosopher and Professor Emeritus at McGill University.*

Introduction

The events of the past months have shattered our illusion of control and humbled our pride. Have they also revealed something of value in our humanity that we were neglecting? And, as Stephanie Zacharek asked in her article in the special issue of *Time* dedicated to the year 2020, "After a year of so many changes, will we change radically too? We learned a lot in 2020—but what, exactly, did we learn?"



Susan Fields, moderator: Good afternoon and welcome to *The Core of Our Humanity*, a conversation about the theme of this year's Encounter. A special thanks to En Route Foundation for helping to organize this event. I'm Susan Fields, and on behalf of the New York Encounter I am honored to introduce Professor Paolo Carozza, who will join us online and will interview our very special guest, Professor Charles Taylor. Paolo Carozza is the director of the Kellogg Institute for International Studies and professor of law and concurrent professor of political science at the University of Notre Dame. With expertise in comparative constitutional law, human rights law and development, and international law, he focuses his research on Latin America,

Western Europe, and international themes more broadly. Charles Taylor is professor emeritus in the department of philosophy at McGill University and one of the most influential thinkers within contemporary culture. He has authored many books, including: *Sources of the Self*, *The Ethics of Authenticity* and *A Secular Age*. He has received many honors, including the Templeton Prize, the Ratzinger Prize, and membership in the Order of Canada. You can find their full bios on our website: newyorkencounter.org. Professor Carozza?

Paolo Carozza: Thank you very much. Susan and Charles, welcome to the New York Encounter. It's a real privilege for us to have you here for this dialogue and for me to be able to engage you in a conversation about the theme of the New York Encounter. As you've seen, the Encounter this year looks at the year 2020 as one, frankly, of crisis. Crisis in the original sense of that word, as a moment of decision or a decisive turning point, and asks us, What is in it that we need to embrace and hold onto? And that question puts us squarely in front of your life's work. I can say that over the decades that so many of us have followed you through your writings, and one of the most compelling things that we've found is your capacity to embrace, with great openness and without fear, many of the central features of the reality that we're living in modern times; whether it's secularism, or the emphasis on self and authenticity and identity, or the pluralism of our societies, for example. You've seen in them possibilities for beauty and goodness and for growth of our humanity, and not simply something to withdraw from. So, with that spirit in mind for the Encounter, I thought maybe we would begin with one thing that has been, really, a lifelong theme of your work, and that is the integral relationship between community and the individual, or individual identity belonging as a condition of freedom and flourishing rather than as a limitation or contradiction of the self. And I can't help but notice that in these months of Covid pandemic, with respect to the way that we've lived community, there seems to be a sort of paradox around us. In some ways, maybe we've never in our lifetimes experienced so concretely an awareness of our interdependence with one another—who our neighbors are, and who the essential workers are that surround us. At the same time, we've witnessed a degree of lived forms of severe social isolation, the absence of bonds and

absence of forms of communal living, of education, of worship, that have very stark and brutal consequences for our day-to-day life, from the education of the young to economic well-being and mental health. So, what do you make of this paradox, looking at this relationship of ourselves to the community that we live in, and how should we understand the effects and meaning of the pandemic and its aftermath with respect to our life together in community?

Charles Taylor: Well, I mean the lessons of it are that there's something's really wrong with our society that we managed to ignore, that we had a much more partisan society because of politics, and a certain kind of laissez-faire neo-liberalism. But we had a society that was much more concerned with increasing production, increasing production of goods for individual use, at the expense of creating the conditions for living together in healthcare, and education, and the whole sphere, in the care of the elderly and so on. These wrong priorities were revealed in this catastrophic and dramatic way by the pandemic, where the deaths occurred were in the areas where there was great inequality, or where there was inadequate healthcare provision, inadequate provision for the old and so on. It was a real wake-up call, and on one level we reacted with a real sense of solidarity. I remember at the beginning, in a number of countries people would go out in the streets and sing songs to the health care workers, and express great gratitude. But it's also been terribly trying for some people, just awful economically in terms of their life, getting the means for life but also in terms of their relationship with their family. And so there's been this struggle between maintaining a sense of solidarity and breaking out of the disciplines and various other ways because one can't really stand it. Talking about United States, but not only, there's a way in which that solidarity side really, I think, in a certain way became extremely important, and continues to be. I'm thinking of the tremendous movement around the death of George Floyd, which is an extraordinary movement because, of course, Black Lives Matter reacted and quite rightly so, but it's also a moment when people felt a need to liberate themselves from all sorts of exclusions and inequalities and discriminations and—this is even more remarkable—not just in the United States, but I would say throughout much of the world. There was an outburst of a real sense of solidarity many, many months into the terrible pandemic, right? Nevertheless, I think that reaction

may be something we can carry through the whole thing and re-enter so-called normal life with a quite different attitude.

Carozza: Well, some of the expression of solidarity that we've seen in recent times, not just through the pandemic but over the last few years, might also be characterized as a certain form of collectivism that you've been critical of, also of tribes and the polarization of our political life and to expressions of nationalistic exclusion, for example, or reducing the determinants of who we are solely to questions of race or ethnicity or sexuality. How do we keep the balance between this relationship with the self in the community and the appreciation for freedom that modernity has given us and that you've celebrated in your work, while not reducing the question of our humanity to simply tribes and groups that we belong to? How can we take both belonging and self seriously?

Taylor: Well I think because one of the really important institutions—if you want to call that—or communities or action together, which does dominate our scene is the creation of democratic citizen republics, if you like. And they demand fulfillment and new creations for human beings, which have been always there in potential, which are now being brought out and made real. We're really working in good faith with other people to decide things together with a sense that what we're looking at is the common good; not just my good but the common good. If you can rise to that you liberate yourself from a totally narrow focus on your own advantage, of your own particular narrow gang, and something emerges which is, I think, a tremendously important human development. I think that's what everybody sees in these battles over the identity of political societies throughout the—I was going to say the Western world, but not only the Western world—that's on one hand, there are people who have appealed to some of these narrow identities against others, and this is really an appeal of what Nietzsche called resentment, you might say; and on the other side is an appeal to rise to the occasion of being able to work with others in an open way, which is characterized by mutual concern and listening to the other and so on, which really liberates something in us. And liberates our capacity to listen to others, our capacity to work with others, our capacity to create something together that is really, morally admirable. That's why I think there's going to be some

continued consequences from our reaction to this pandemic, because this issue—do we have the capacity to create the kind of solidarity that can really work for the common good? or are we going to be locked into our mutual distrust and mutual contempt? I'm speaking at this point to both sides, right? Because I'm very much on the so-called liberal side, obviously. I mean, I'm horrified by the Trump presidency and so relieved it's over. But I can't help thinking that a lot of people that were on "our" side just talked about these yokels and illiberal, ignorant people, without any attempt to understand what they were actually living, what their ambitions were, what the human side of their lives was, and so this is a challenge to us as well as to them, to reach out and have a capacity to understand what's really going on in our fellow citizens.

Carozza: If the social bonds that you mentioned and that kind of sympathy and awareness of our fellow citizens is so essential to shoring up democracy, and especially in a pluralistic society, how do we generate and maintain those social bonds, given some of the trends we've seen towards, let's say, emotivism, scapegoating, a sort of collective mob mentality that's fed, certainly, by social media. How can we respond to that and still construct a sense of solidarity and belonging to one another that you see as so essential?

Taylor: I think there are two sides to the path to something richer. Number one, which is kind of obvious, is that there are all sorts of common interests that bring together objectively, people on both sides of this divide. If you take again U.S. politics, with all the people in the Midwest who voted for Trump because they live in the Rust Belt, they're looking for new jobs, new development and so on, but they're not going to get that from Trump. I can understand how, having made the mistake, they threw themselves into it. So there's a way in which you can reach out on the pure basis of, "Listen, we have a very important common interest here, we have to reconstruct America in a way that will deal with global warming, that's going to mean a lot of stimulus and investment and we can create jobs." That's one level.

On the other level, the level of where you have to liberate someone from this deep investment in contempt and indifference from the other, there is a much more powerful common interest with—but at a very, very deep level—that these stances in life really crush something in us that could possibly be

immensely creative. This is what I found just wonderful in the leadership of the African-American movement in the United States, from Martin Luther King to John Lewis. John Lewis kept saying this wonderful thing: "Put down the burden of hatred." And hatred *is* a burden, it's dragging you down, dragging you into a narrow little cell where you can't really flourish. And on another very deep level there's a profound common interest in both sides getting out of their definitions of themselves as being purely in opposition to someone else, right? Whether it's liberals thinking these yokels out there, or people in the Midwest thinking—what is it?—"latte sipping eastern liberals." There's something funny about this ridiculous business but there's something also tragic. There's a real liberation to be had and that's what I find remarkable about some of those demonstrations after George Floyd, that you've got all these young people, they sensed that there was something self-liberating in this, right? It's a very deep insight that not everybody in politics has, but people like Gandhi and King and so on, really lived by.

Carozza: It's interesting to me how much that connects quite directly to the title of this year's New York Encounter. Because your description sounds to me like it's saying, in a certain sense, that the ways of thinking that are ingrained in us, that separate us from others, can be broken down by a relationship with reality as it strikes us, right? Whether it's an event like the death of George Floyd or simply getting to know someone else, the encounter with another person, things that draw us out of ourselves.

Taylor: Exactly.

Carozza: Human beings as self-interpreting animals is how you've described us, and I think some of us might hear that and think, Well, that's a recipe for subjectivity and isolation, because it just closes us in on ourselves if we're interpreting ourselves without any relationship to the reality outside of us. So in light of what you just said about an encounter with reality drawing us out, how does that fit with your understanding of human beings as essentially constituted by their capacity to interpret meaning themselves?

Taylor: It's on two levels, one reason to talk about self-interpreting animals is to just look at history or politics and you see how very different cultures have a very different way of realizing the human potential. Although there hasn't been a conscious act of interpretation here, interpretations have arisen

in history of what it is to be human, and then we have to have anthropology and sociology to help us understand. I think what you're referring to more specifically is the development of modern forms of individualism in which people are called upon to discover their own vocation in what they really can do, what is specific to themselves. And this is not necessarily a recipe for enclosing yourself in your own references. You can never work it out with yourself in a dialogue or exchange with others. If you are still in contact with reality, you discover that your way of being, your vocation, is something that involves relating to others in all sorts of different ways. A doctor who's been very successful and made all the money, suddenly decides it's not enough, so he goes to *Médecins Sans Frontières*, or Doctors Without Borders. This is a person discovering herself or himself, right? It's a classic example of the ethic of authenticity. What am I really in this world for? What do I want to do? But it's absolutely the opposite of self-absorption. Because you're going to some very foreign country and meet a very different culture and learn really to serve these people; it drives you outward, and there's no necessary connection. People can deny that kind of reality, deny those kinds of needs, and that's what we've seen a lot of in our society, which is supposedly based on meritocracy and looks down on people who aren't successful, as if it's all their fault because they haven't been working. It's a really self-delusive ideology, because people who are successful never did it all themselves.

Carozza: That way of looking at how we live the ethics of authenticity dovetails really very well into what has been some of the most influential and magisterial work that you've done for us, which is thinking about the meaning and implications of secularism and the secular age. The way, in other words, that the secular age in which we we're living opens us up to new possibilities rather than being something that we need to react to, least of all, out of a certain fear or withdrawal. Rather, it's an opportunity in the way that, for example, that it has interrupted certain very contingently, culturally contingent forms of religion that might have become ossified over time and rigid; or the way that it's brought us—those of us who are Christians, at least—back to an appreciation for the nature of Christianity as essentially an event and not an ethical construct, or a political project, or a set of norms, or a set of pieties. And that kind of openness to the secular age has been

something that has been, I think, very inspiring in terms of relating to the world.

We've seen a very sharp rise in secularism, not only in the United States but in particular here, and arguably also a variety of social pathologies that are associated with the absence of belief in anything transcendent. What Pope Francis refers to as “the throwaway culture,” or the “globalization of indifference,” are all manifestations of an increasingly uncompromising secular world. It leads me to wonder how you thought about the movement towards a secular environment in the years since you wrote that book, and do you think about it any differently today?

Taylor: It's the same, only more so. It seems to me there is a kind of moral evolution going on in history. Theologically, I would talk about St. Irenaeus' idea that God is exercising a certain pedagogy in history. And I think you can point right back to the actual period as an example of that, where quite different civilizations were out of contact with each other, and the idea of the universal becomes central. That's something that has been going on.

Let me give you one striking fact that we all know but haven't really thought of. In the early centuries, Christians and stoics and a lot of other people thought that slavery was a rather uncomfortable thing, but it was part of the world, part of the reality, and so the injunction was to treat your slaves humanely. Paul says to recognize them as fellow Christians. In the 18th century, we arrive at a moment in which tremendously powerful movements arrive and say, no; this is just not acceptable. The abolitionists. A lot of secular people will talk about the Enlightenment, by which they mean a kind of very secularized way of thinking. But of course, in the English-speaking world, it was Evangelicals who were really exercised by that. The real driving force of abolitionism in the States, for instance, was a certain kind of Protestant theology. This kind of thing, where does it come from? Is it simply because people rationally thought, All humans are human, so, gee, slavery is bad—no, no, no! But something was happening in history, and we have to look at it as part of a total pattern of change.

Another extraordinary thing about our lives today, as opposed to 500 years ago, is that we have an incredible sense of control over our kind of society. Just think of the organizations that we're now trying to set up to

vaccinate everyone, and then to make people obey rules. That kind of control didn't exist earlier. Put all this together and you're in a quite new situation where you have to—is the word *develop*?—your spiritual sensibility to get an orientation on what's going on. And so you get these remarkable people that I'm seeing—John Main, for example, who introduced a Christian meditation that I follow—but a lot of others as well. New ways of acting, of bringing the Spirit into the world again, making it active and alive. We have no choice. That's the way forward. You can't possibly get back to what existed before. The mold is broken, so instead of sitting around saying, "Oh, it's terrible, we're losing all these things, we have to hang on as much as we can," we need spiritual exploration, spiritual discovery, reading the gospel anew. Francis is a great example of that. He said the Church is not a huge, organized society, it's a field hospital. That's a really striking image, right? A really striking image. Imagine convincing Innocent III or one of these guys in the Middle Ages, "It's a field hospital." "Yeah? What do you mean? "

Carozza: What do those of us who are educators of our children and our students need to do to equip young people to live in the world that you describe, and to do so in a way that is still authentic and open to the transcendent and generative of new form, of the new forms of life that you're calling us to? How do we transmit that?

Taylor: You make available as much as you can—to your students, your kids—examples of this really creative exploration of new departures, and hope that something catches on. Instead of presenting the faith as, "Here are a set of rules, and don't step outside of them or terrible consequences will occur," which for a lot of people is just dead wood. As an educator, the most wonderful thing you can do is communicate, and the most wonderful thing I've had in my education is people who can communicate.

In my undergraduate years, I studied history, but then I needed some electives, so I looked around and saw a comparative religion class that appeared interesting. I signed up for it, and it turned out to be taught by Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who later founded the Islamic Institute at McGill and then at Harvard. This man walked up and down with a gown, and he made real for us what it would be like to belong to these other religious faiths—mostly Islamic, because that was what he really knew, but also Buddhism and others.

I was absolutely carried away. This is a way of living in the world, a way of being, as a Christian, a way of exercising spirituality in the world that could take us in a completely different direction.

Carozza: I've noticed that you have emphasized the central importance of interreligious encounters and dialogue, yet at the same time you've been very clear to say that this doesn't mean syncretism, it doesn't mean a lack of distinctiveness among the religions and what each one is bringing into the world. Could you explain that a little bit? How those two things fit together for you, and how we should think about that relationship?

Taylor: If you think of religions simply as competing sets of propositions, then obviously the ones of Buddhism and Christianity don't mesh. If you think of faith as a single path, then you can't have something that is a kind of mix. The Dalai Lama said it wonderfully at a meeting I attended. He said, "You can't put a sheep's head on a yak's body." If you're a Christian, how are you trying to go further along in this faith by prayer—which in my case is a kind of meditation that is like prayer, in which you're trying to reach that extraordinary love of God through Christ. It's not the same kind of thing if you're a Buddhist, say. Maybe you could make some kind of mix; that's possible, I suppose, but ultimately you can't put all these things together as a path. However, you can find people on the other paths—Muslims, Buddhists, and so on—people who are really striving in sort of the same direction, with even great overlap in how they want to realize things in the world. And this is where my political experience has been tremendously important for me, because I discovered myself in coalitions that contained atheists, Muslims, etc. As far as the things of this world are concerned, we're really very closely aligned. We're aligned and working together, and a great respect grows from that; but it can produce a kind of empty syncretism in which you try to put together a prayer that's not a prayer at all, and it just doesn't work. The paths are different and you have to be in one of them.

But you can really respect people on other paths and that's what I got from Will Smith, actually. It's a very deeply satisfying thing to develop friendships, learning what makes them, what moves them. I'm not sure how to explain it to people who are locked in, looking at faith as a set of propositions.

Carozza: The disruptions that we've witnessed around us, and are

experiencing in our own lives, have a feeling of being an inflection point socially and historically. You've used the term "social imaginaries" to talk about the way there's an interrelationship of values, institutions, laws, and symbols by which we live and imagine the social whole. Do you think it's right to have an intuition right now that we are witnessing a historical moment where there may be a new social imaginary emerging out of these disruptions?

Taylor: Yeah, I think so, but I think I want to put a modification on that. If you look at history from one point of view, it's a movement forward—like that famous moment in the 18th century when people decided to abolish slavery. But each one of these moves forward has produced deviant forms that are sometimes more horrible than anything else. I mean, even Genghis Khan didn't have something as terrible as the Holocaust, or Xi Jinping's attempt to make over the minds of all those Uighurs in Chinese torture camps. These are extreme cases, but there are less flamboyant cases of evil or wrongdoing.

We're often tempted to think we've reached a plateau of some kind, where everything is now fine. I think this is one of the terrible mistakes we make in the democratic world. In 1918; we made the world safe for democracies, but then along comes Mussolini. We crush him and other fascists and make the world safe for democracy. Then along comes the whole issue of decolonization. And then in 1989 we once again make the world safe for democracy. It's a terrible illusion.

Look at Eastern Europe today, at Poland. I'm very close to her for a variety of reasons. We kept the kind of people who are in continuity with *Solidarność* and with John Paul's poor on one hand, and we now have the present governor of Poland, who has regressed the country to an extremely narrow kind of ethnic Polish nationalism. The Poles have these two great models in their history, and they are still fighting it out. There isn't any moment when you can say, "So that's it, we've reached the plateau." That's not the way it works.

Carozza: Right, it's a triumphalistic vision of the end of history.

Taylor: It isn't history, it's...oh, at my age I keep forgetting names. Fukuyama. It's Fukuyama.

Carozza: What role does Christianity in particular have to play in this transition to an always new form of social imaginary? I wonder whether at

least one of the things that we Christians have to contribute in this era is precisely the awareness of the fragility of human affairs and the need always to return to the beginnings of things, the sources of things. You beautifully always emphasize: we have to go back to the sources, we have to go back to the sources, we have to go back to the sources. What is the role of Christianity in this time, and what does it have to do with the need to return to sources to avoid triumphalism, to avoid a sense that history is over?

Taylor: Well I think that you just have to be a little bit self-critical, you have to be able to see the deviations as they are arising. But if you see our situation clearly, then suddenly other things jump out at you. I mean, what jumps out at me, for instance, from the New Testament account, is how this man is constantly learning, he's constantly seeing individuals who are different from the models that have been given: "I've never seen such faith in Israel," or the Samaritan woman at the well. That kind of ability to be open and to look at what people are, even be surprised by it and respond to it; that is really what we need today. This kind of society can recreate that solidarity if you have an ability to reach out and look and see what's there.

Carozza: From the gospel examples that you mentioned, I think about how St. Paul in his travels encounters such different cultures and tries to dialogue with them on the basis of what was most essentially human, right? Is that the model for what we need to do today as Christians? Something like that?

Taylor: Absolutely, but realize we can't just repeat the letters of Paul, that it requires also a real insight into what's going wrong today.

Carozza: One of the other things that Christianity distinctively has to offer a world dominated by an immanent frame—as you put it—is the sense of what you call the sacramentality of reality, right? That reality has within it a certain kind of meaning that is beyond what we can put into it by ourselves. You've said, "My whole philosophical work really was trying to understand human beings as embodied beings." That's really intriguing for us, I think, and maybe something that we need to dive deeper into. What do you mean by that? Contrast for us incarnation and exarnation.

Taylor: Our moral explorations, our moral positions, our moral insights, are often conceived as the result of reason in a rather narrow sense. Finding

out the results of science, being logical and consistent. We have thinkers I immensely admire and have enjoyed working with, but their idea is very, very simple: you contradict yourself if you arrogate something to yourself and don't, as it were, open it to the other. I call this *excarnate*, because this kind of reasoning is just math and logic, and is maximally trying to push our gut feelings and emotions to the side because they are disturbing actors, right? I can't see that you're a human being like me, and that you have the same rights as me, because I don't like you, or because you're against me, or because you're authority or whatever. I think this is just not how it works. What we have are these very powerful, deep gut feelings. What about the universality of a Beethoven symphony? You don't say, "Hey, that's logical." No, you're deeply moved by it. Human beings have feelings and intuitions, and that's what we need to draw on to be real, good, fulfilled, proper human beings.

Carozza: That brings to mind how misunderstood the meaning of human desire is. On the one hand, we have a culture that is eager to hawk the latest iPhone to us, and this is a diminution of human desires to just playthings and small satisfactions. And on the other hand, we have a certain kind of appeal to desires for belonging that get expressed in ways that can be quite frightening, right? Nationalism, exclusion, hatred. The real fulfillment of the human being, this incarnated and embodied fulfillment, depends on taking seriously what human beings desire at their core. How do we cultivate that?

Taylor: Hitler's fascism appealed to something in us that very much comes from the body and a sense of dominating, of being excited about being in the crowd. And so it is something terrible. But how do you defeat that Hitlerism, and how do you defeat any of our very divisive goals that are alive in our politics today? You overcome it by appealing to something else in people. By appealing to what is crying out in them, you cultivate the power to create something really great and beautiful with other people, because you're working together, realizing real common needs in mutual respect. It's a wonderful liberation from the earlier, cramping forms of exclusion. It's not the only condition, though, and if the only way you can stop the fascism movement is by reading Habermas, then I'm all for reading it, don't get me wrong. He's done a bit of stopping the wrong kind of stuff, so I greatly admire

his work in Germany. But if you want to see how to move even beyond that, you have to discover these deep potentialities in human beings that reveal themselves, first and foremost, in very deep gut feelings that need to be interpreted and brought out. Criticized maybe. A whole lot of work of the intellect has to go on here. That is where the deepest ambitions of humanity in us reside and are discovered.

Carozza: The "education of desire" seems extremely relevant to our political life. You were talking about serving with others, constructing something for the common good. What has it meant to you personally to be a philosopher, but also someone who's continued beyond academics to be engaged in politics throughout your entire life? What has been the relationship for you between the life of the mind and this engagement in the construction of the common good? How would you describe that?

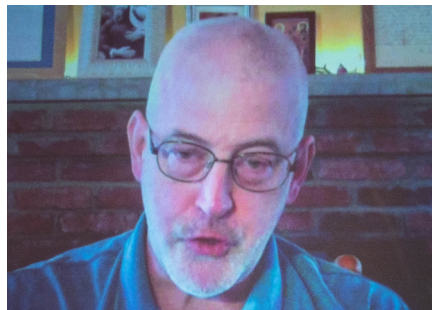
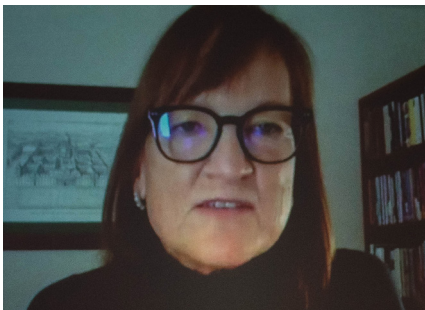
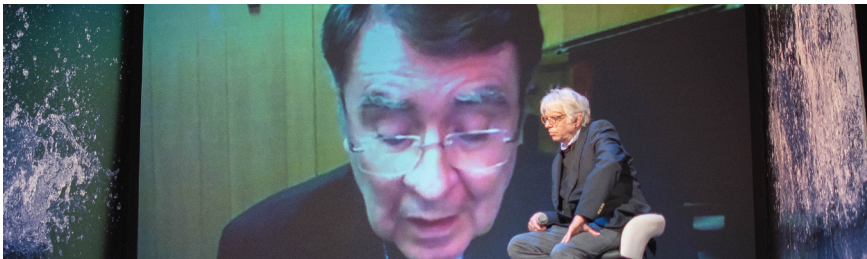
Taylor: I have always been very interested in politics, very concerned with what's going wrong, and we can't just stay on the sidelines, can we? That being said, there's a conflict, because the more time you spend in the study and work, the more stuff you can write, and the more time you spend out there hustling, the less time you spend in the study, right? But I found there's been a marvelous complicity on another level, because you won't read or understand why you are doing this, you won't understand how you can convince people who are doing politics of the wrong kind that it is, in fact, the wrong kind. You're thrown back on reflections of the kind we've been exchanging and kicking around here today.

Carozza: You're appealing to politics implicitly as a realm in which we seek and give reasons for what we do, give reasons to ourselves and then reasons to persuade others, right? We have to be realistic and admit that the politics of the world around us these days doesn't appear very conducive to the exchange of reason that you encourage. We can even be more blunt and say that a lot of us see the world of politics as having been reduced entirely to the realm of conflict and ideology and self-interest, and even mendacity has reached levels that in our lifetimes we've not known before. Do you think it's realistic for us to think of politics becoming again a locus of reason and dialogue? How would we recapture that and get there?

Taylor: You can see various reasons why our political life and political

structures have become terribly opaque to people. And their opacity is what allows various merchants of totally phony solution—like Trump—to make great headway, and people can be sucked into following them. There are several elements to this. One is our information system. We seem to be living in silos, with people looking at Fox News and other people looking at CNN, MSNBC, NBC, and we seem to be living in another kind of division, where people get exclusively from social media completely false information. There are two ways of moving from here to there—though not totally there. One is, of course, to improve political organization. We can have real political organization at the local level, because that's where people get together, they meet their neighbors, they realize we need this that or the other, they learn to trust each other, and they know what they want, and they know what levers to pull on state and federal governments. And the other way is more large-scale mobilizations, which you saw in the States in 2018, but this leaves unsolved or unchanged the information split. It's a two-part, two-sided development: political organization and doing something to cure the information split.

Carozza: Charles, I can't thank you enough for this entire conversation. I really regret that we're out of time. I could go on all day with my curiosity, and I know how much everybody listening would benefit from your judgments. But these minutes have been precious and I'm very, very grateful for your time here with us. Thank you so much.



THE FAITH OF FR. GUISSANI

Presentation of the exhibit with Archbishop Christophe Pierre, Apostolic Nuncio to the U.S., and Barry Stoblman, entrepreneur.

Introduction

In the homily at Fr. Giussani's funeral Mass, on February 24, 2005, Pope Benedict XVI, then-Cardinal Ratzinger, said: "Fr. Giussani kept the gaze of his life, of his heart, always fixed on Christ. It was in this way that he understood that Christianity is not an intellectual system, a collection of dogmas, or moralism. Christianity is instead an encounter, a love story; it is an event...This love affair with Christ, this love story that was the whole of Giussani's life, was at the same time quite far removed from any superficial enthusiasm or vague romanticism. Seeing Christ, Giussani truly knew that to encounter Christ means to follow him."

Fr. Giussani is known in the U.S. mainly through his writings and as the founder of Communion and Liberation. Very few people had a chance to meet him in person or see him in action in the U.S. The exhibit consists of a 60-minute documentary, which collects video clips from several of Fr. Giussani's talks, coupled with interactive Zoom meetings. The exhibit is an encounter with the gaze and vibrant humanity of Fr. Giussani, a man who describes what meeting Christ meant for him.



Jonathan Fields, moderator: Good afternoon and welcome to *The Faith of Father Giussani*, a presentation on the founder of Communion and

Liberation. I'm Jonathan Fields and I'll be joined online by Holly Peterson, the principle of Nativity Faith and Reason School in Colorado. She's the curator of this exhibit and will lead the presentation with Archbishop Christophe Pierre, Apostolic Nuncio to the United States and longtime friend of the Encounter, as well as with our friend Barry Stohlman, entrepreneur and business manager. You can find their full bios on the Encounter website, which is newyorkencounter.org. Holly?

Holly Peterson: Welcome everyone, and thank you so much for joining us today for this virtual event. I want to share with you the exhibit and how it was born. Basically, because we're not able to see one another face to face, we aren't able this year to have an exhibit in which we can share by touching and seeing and feeling the children of Father Giussani. So instead, we invited two beautiful guests and great friends to share their experience of Giussani. This year the exhibit is actually a movie. It was a film that was made a few years ago by a good friend in Italy, Roberto Fontolan. It's pretty unknown to American audiences, so we wanted to share it as our exhibit this year. Today, this is the introduction to that video with our friends, Archbishop Christophe Pierre and Barry Stohlman. Before we begin, I'd like us to see just a brief clip of the video, so we have a starting point for those who have not yet seen it. Can you please roll the video?

Short video plays

Peterson: Most of us here in the United States know Father Giussani through either his writings or his children, and this video gives us an opportunity to see him. To see him with young people, with older people, with students, with colleagues, with journalists, with politicians, with the Pope. Many beautiful, beautiful moments, and I encourage you all to watch it. I'd like to begin with you, Archbishop. If you could share with us a little bit of the impact Father Giussani has had on your life as a person, as a professional, as a nuncio, and what impact you think he could have on culture, or has had on culture.

Archbishop Christophe Pierre: Thank you, Holly. If you will allow me, I would like to begin with the speech of the Holy Father to the diplomatic

corps in Rome a few days ago, on the 8th of February. Pope Francis said that this year that just ended has left in its wake fear, unease, and despair, as well as grief for the great loss of life. It led to this spirit of isolation and mutual suspicion that caused states to set up barriers. These are full, very meaningful words, and I found it useful to quote them before speaking about Giussani. The interconnected world to which we have become accustomed gave way to a world once more fragmented and divided. And in his message for Lent, the Pope speaks of a time of trouble when everything seems fragile and uncertain. It may appear challenging to speak of hope, so we know that the purpose of Francis is not to increase pessimism or despair. On the contrary, he wants to help us, as persons and as a Church, to become living signs of hope, capable of challenging the situation of the world as it is. However, we cannot escape from reality. You know, I was struck by the title of your Encounter, “When Reality Hits.” This is the main reason I have been fascinated personally by two great pastors, and I put them together: Pope Francis and Monsignor Giussani, both of them with their very profound desire to reach out to people in real situations in order to announce to them the good news of Jesus’ presence. And I insist on the word *presence* in their lives. The life of Giussani has been constantly marked by the profound social and cultural changes he found himself confronted with, because they challenge the transmission of the faith. We are all aware of his decision to spend the rest of his life as a priest with young people when he suddenly observed the disconnectedness between their faith and their life, and I would like to highlight that. While many of these students professed to be Catholic—they knew the Creed of the Church, they knew their catechism, or at least they appeared to know it, as we may know it ourselves. Faith as a lived experience was not being transmitted. When it came to making judgments and decisions about things that a young person viewed as truly important to his life, his ideals, and hopes for happiness, the criteria were shaped by a secularized mentality in which Christ and the Church were largely absent. That’s what Giussani saw, and I’ve been impressed by that. The decisions of young people were shaped less by Christ and more by the forces of the modern era, including the ideology of scientism, the exaltation of subjectivism, the reduction of faith to ethics or moralism, and an emphasis on emotional individualism. Therefore, there was

a gap between doctrine and the reality of life. When we read Giussani, as I've done over the course of many years in my life, we notice that these concepts appear all the time. It became his fundamental task to educate. You know that Giussani is essentially an educator, and we're supposed to be educators ourselves. His task was to educate young people and to lead them to see the attractiveness of Christ as the center of life and the fulfillment of their desires. Holly, you are an educator yourself, and we can't educate without a proper method that corresponds to the reality of the people we teach, and the reality of who we are as teachers, as educators. So his method was to challenge the secularism that dominated the mentality of his students by inspiring them to conduct a kind of rigorous examination of themselves. The fundamental experiences that characterize man's life and aspiration, and the incapacity of modern secular culture to do justice to the deep mystery of the human heart.

I think the educator needs to reach out and verify the proposal of Christianity with their own experience, and to see whether it corresponds to their desire for happiness. Giussani believed that this examination would lead to a rediscovery of man's religious sense. You know that the religious sense for him was a concept that appears all the time, and we need to understand it. That is the fundamentally religious character of the questions and desires inscribed on the heart. Man has been made for God. The person can only realize the truth of himself or herself and find happiness by recognizing God and adhering to him, and Giussani sought to guide young people to appreciate in a deeper way the fact that God has made this adherence to himself completely possible, attractive, and beautiful by becoming man and perpetuating his Incarnate Presence—again, the word *presence*—in the world through his Church; Christ and the Church. This was the new approach, and it brought a freshness back to the faith of many. This was really, may I say, the glorious beginning. Although they were humble, they were glorious in the sense that Giussani reached the people, the young people who were listening. I think about that myself, about myself and my Church today, and even in this country. I hear constantly from the priests and bishops, and they tell me they cannot reach the people, especially the young people, where they are. So here we have a good example, the example of a priest who actually was, you know, in his ivory tower, studying at a very high level, and suddenly decided

to go down and to reach out to young people, and he managed to do it. But do you remember 1968? It was a time of crisis. In a time of upheaval, many young people left the movement he had created; the movement Giussani had created with hundreds and hundreds of young people. But suddenly something happened. Many were well-intentioned and decided to create a better world. Their approach was one of social activism, turning to ideologies and politics. There was, during the time of student protests, a genuine desire for authenticity and public life. Many felt the need to throw off an old order filled with ambiguity and deceit, and to replace it with something new. This led to hostility towards the past. It became impossible to appeal to authority. The changes happened so quickly and left many bewildered. The way of confronting the world adopted by many young people was to return to the old methods that did not involve a personal encounter with Christ. We thought that we could resolve our problems by ourselves and what we called social activism.

As things seem to be slipping away, Giussani—I see Giussani like an antenna. He had a special sense; he could perceive things because he was in contact with reality. Giussani showed his true fatherly concern. He posed a simple question that we always should ask ourselves: What is it that we want? The answer: that we must understand that we are persons in every kind of circumstance. The genius of Giussani lies, as I see it, in his religious anthropology, in his proposal of the religious sense as the foundation of the human person's awareness of himself and his engagement with life and reality. Giussani proposes that we observe ourselves in action as we are in these circumstances—*as we are*; that's very important—and investigate the dispositions and expectations that shape the way we approach life's circumstances. In this process, we discover that the motor that generates our activity and places us in front of things with a real interest in them is something within ourselves that is both reasonable and mysterious. We cannot eliminate the Mystery. We cannot remain only with reason. Simply put, it is the search for happiness, the search carried with both the mind and the heart. We have a need for happiness, but this also involves an experience of it. Genuine human activity aims at happiness by being an enacted expression of fundamental questions. And this is what the educators should look at and find. When

acting, the heart of the person full of desire for something, searches for something that it does not yet possess. We are looking for something else, especially the young people, which we cannot give ourselves. The heart is drawn to the Mystery it seeks, and becomes aware of this Presence. Where? Where, are we going? What is going on in my life? It is there and can be known. In other words, the anthropology proposed by Giussani is open to the transcendent reality. What are the fundamental needs of the heart but truth, justice, goodness, happiness, beauty? As a person pursues things that attract him, these needs become urgent. The crisis in the life of many people is that they are looking for something but never find it. Transforming desire into questions. What will make me happy? What will correspond to my heart's desire? You know these questions because these have been constant and permanent in the formation of the disciples of Giussani. This is what I've learned myself. The more seriously we take ourselves in our humanity, the more we realize that we cannot avoid these questions.

The anthropology proposed by Giussani is a response to the crisis of '68, which was a very strong moment in the western world. I was in France at that time, but I know that in America it was kind of a traumatic experience, especially for the Church, especially in the seminaries. So this anthropology is very instructive. For just as there were difficulties in transmitting the faith then, so too now we are faced with new and more severe difficulties. Because what was once self-evident is no longer so. I read in the book of Father Carrón, *Disarming Beauty*, a beautiful book from a couple of years ago, where he speaks about the collapse of the self-evident; things which before were evident have collapsed, and nobody believes in it. They do not appear evident to us anymore. There is a greater weakness of consciousness that people have today. There is an on-going reduction of the self. You know, Pope Francis speaks a lot about the isolated conscience. This is basically the same concept, and he says this is one of the characteristics of today's world. So in this ongoing reduction of the self that reduces our ability to look at reality, the current cultural context is different, because at least before people saw the evidence or argument for something, and either accepted or rejected it. I received a few concepts, a few ideas from my parents, my parish, my priest, my teacher, and I could say yes or no. But what they say today is

not evident anymore for me. So, what should I say? How should I respond? It is not evident anymore, so people cannot see it and they cannot make decisions. And this is what explains the words of the Holy Father I quoted at the beginning to the member of the diplomatic corps. People suffer from an existential uncertainty. And if you read a lot of books today, a lot of people say that. We live in a world with an existential uncertainty. Their means of responding to this uncertainty have been found in an efficiency based social commitment. We see that a lot in America. Touched with moralism: "You should do that. This is the answer." But if the answer doesn't correspond to the desire of our heart, it goes nowhere. Even the best moralism goes nowhere. And embarrassing themselves with activity. As I see it, we are very good in this country with organization, and we think that in order to resolve problems we have to reorganize all the time. But it does not work. None of it brings relief or the newness of life that's promised. Modern man has lost touch with his own humanity. So despite his activity, the old man, the unsatisfied man, remains. And maybe this is where I saw how Giussani helps us to understand what we live today.

The education he speaks about, aiming at the rediscovery of our own humanity, happens only through a living encounter. A living encounter with Christ that happens through the Church, and I emphasize that. Education, encounter with Christ, for the Church. How do people reawaken humanity? This is a big question. He meets us; Christ reawakens humanity, he meets us just as he met the Samaritan woman. I like the passage of the Samaritan woman, very well known to all of us, when Jesus met this good lady at the well of Jacob. This encounter changed her life. It was a very simple moment, but it was a substantial one. He places before people a human presence that is not reduced. He places people before his presence, the presence of Jesus. As a man who is God, but who is in touch. As we would say today, he is connected. And we live in a world where people mainly are disconnected. The impact of our humanity running into his reawakens us to the importance of our needs. The Samaritan lady had many problems. She was not even aware of herself. She was running through her life and then, suddenly, a few questions, a Presence, reawakens her humanity and she becomes a new person! What

happens? This is precisely the encounter. And this is the encounter Giussani speaks about.

I've always been impressed by the books of Giussani. We have hundreds of them because he was speaking all the time. He was a good teacher, you know, but he repeats all the time the same thing in different ways, and offers different shadings of this example of the encounter, because our life is precisely made of encounters. This is what changes our life: when the encounter corresponds deeply to our needs. The problems faced by the person today do not immediately go away, but somehow they face them differently, not always directly, but by examining in depth the subject who faces them. Christ came to reawaken the religious sense and our own humanity to face these problems. You see, at times we think that God wants to restore the order of the world. Just to impose on us laws and principles of words. No. Christ comes to have an encounter with us. And this encounter will change our lives because Christ is precisely the one who goes to the heart. What he proposes—and this is the gospel, by the way—is not just a book of morality. No, no. It's a book of encounters, and we have invited ourselves to become a new person encountering Christ in the same way that Jesus met the first disciples, Peter and James, and those who became his disciples, and the Samaritan lady, and Zacchaeus; there are many of them, and you and me. This encounter will change our lives.

In the context of epochal change—and indeed we live a new kind of epoch—we need to announce the gospel. There is a deep need, by the way, to announce the gospel. You cannot do so by neglecting the new forces that can influence new generations who have their own expectations and aspirations. The main reason, it seems to me, that the difficulty in the intergenerational transmission of the faith exists is specifically rooted in the difficulty we encounter in attentively reading the epochal change in which we are living. I think what I learned from Giussani is precisely that. He tells us, My friends, look at the world today. Don't be afraid of the reality. Look at the reality today, but don't forget. The Church is, as we say, the sacrament of God's presence in the human reality. And we are the Church.

We all experience an existential fear today, increased by the coronavirus because it has isolated us. We need really to reconnect with others, with

ourselves, and with God. In the face of this existential fear and the collapse of the self-evident, one approach would be simply to build a world around ourselves. Many people try that to protect themselves. We have many symbols of protections today that are horrible but might be necessary, like the mask. But this would never rid themselves of loneliness or interior fear. This would not actually help us to live in a new way or to experience the joy that comes with freedom offered by Christ and the gospel. The alternative of building walls is dialogue. At the heart of dialogue is the communication of one's own personal life to others, and maybe this is what education is all about. It is a sharing of the existence of others in one's existence. It is not always about proving oneself to be right. It is about a mutual sharing of persons who deal with how to live and ask questions. A dialogue should express the lived Christian experience, not as a type of moralism, but as a grace we have received from our initial encounter with Christ. And I leave you with that for the moment.

Peterson: Thank you Archbishop Pierre, that was beautiful. I could just talk and ask so many questions here, but we're going to pass the word over to Barry Stohlman. Barry, here's my question for you. So, you first encountered the "children" of Father Giussani, then Giussani himself. How has that impacted your life and your work—your work as an entrepreneur, as a businessman, as a father, a grandfather, a husband, etc. What is the impact Giussani has had on you?

Barry Stohlman: Thank you, Holly, good afternoon. First of all, I'd like to say to the Archbishop that it's truly comforting to hear that you, who represent the Universal Church, the Holy Father, described for me clearly something that speaks of an understanding of my own experience, and that's a real comfort. Thank you.

The chance for me to reflect on the question of who Father Giussani is and how my encounter with him in my life with the movement has formed me, first of all, has been a real gift for me in this moment. To have stopped long enough to reflect on what I've been given through my encounter with this man and this movement is truly a blessing. I'm not here to speak to you as one who has resolved these questions. These questions that Father Giussani put in front of me, I wrestle with every day. Father Giussani opened

my heart and has taught me to be free, free enough to stay in front of, and to live with, these questions. As he says at the beginning of the video, “The question of our lives is Christ, yes, or no? There is no greater question for my humanity, for my existence, than this one: Christ, yes or no.” All of Giussani’s life was full of the proposal of Christ present, asking only for us to know and love him. My life has been full of the challenges of how I respond to this proposal. Do I know, seek, and love Christ? In 1987 I was a junior in college and I first met some friends who introduced me to a completely new and surprising passion for all of life, all of reality. I am and always have been someone full of passion and interest, enthusiasm for life, always able to throw myself fully into whatever interested me or attracted me. Yet these friends were different. They lived a similar passion, similar gusto, but they did so for all of reality in front of anyone they met. They were full of the awareness that all of reality speaks of Christ present. Theirs was a passion born not out of their particular interests, but of a passion for all of reality. I’ll give you a few examples. I’ve always loved music: traditional music, ballads, dance music. But when I met Giussani, I was introduced to classical music. I had never listened to a piece of classical music in my life. Maybe that’s funny, but it’s true. But Father Giussani introduced me to a new way of listening to music. Music as a prayer, as a begging, as a cry for infinite meaning. Music for me now is not a question of personal interest or a distraction from life. It has become a tool to communicate what love and friendship, nostalgia, death, longing for meaning, home—what all these things mean for me. In a similar way, the same is true with literature. In college I was a philosophy major, and I always read plenty. Yet over the years, all of my culture and knowledge has been formed through the readings suggested by Father Giussani. I wanted to know what made that man so human, so attractive. So I read what he read. It’s as simple as that.

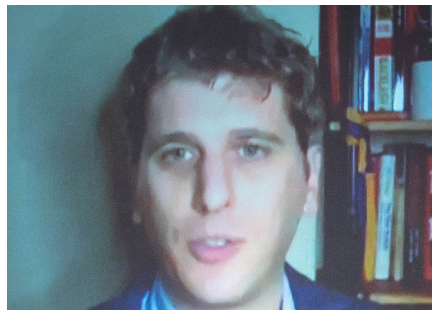
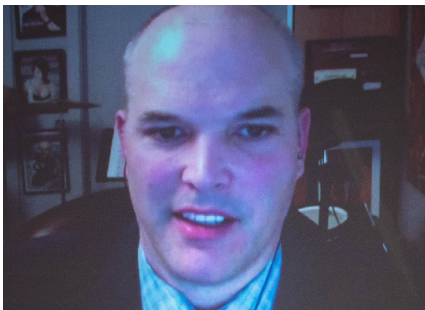
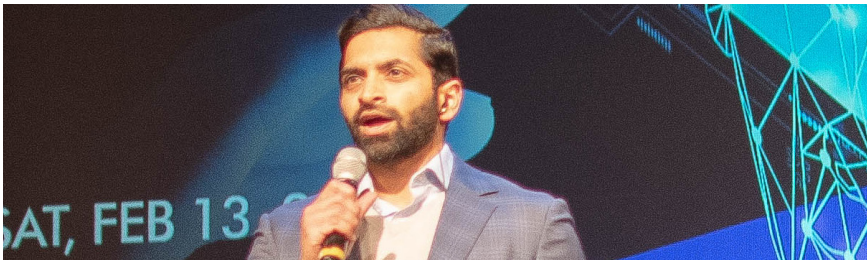
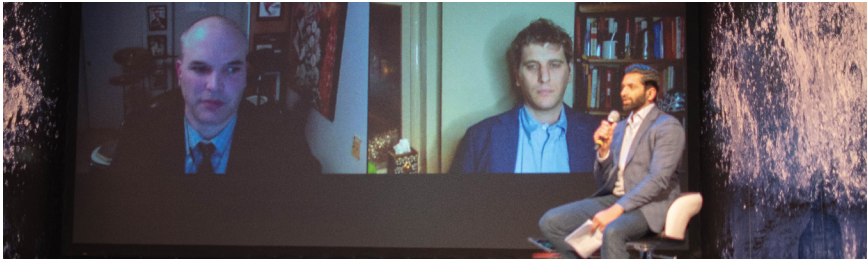
As a product of this American culture, though, this American dream, I am also full of the mentality of the self-made man. If you want it enough and you commit to it, the world is yours. Except that it doesn’t always work out quite so well. In my 35 years since encountering Father Giussani, and almost 30 years of marriage to one of those friends that I met in ’87, and my eight children, our eight children—my life has been full of joys and sorrows,

challenges and dramas. In 1998 our family, with three children at the time, moved back to America after almost 10 years in Italy. I began my adventure as an entrepreneur. Then in 2004, the business I was running burned to the ground. We tried to rebuild, and yet by the time the financial crisis of 2008 hit, the business collapsed. When reality hits: Christ yes, or no? Yes. Yes, he took the form of many friends who supported us, even financially, for months as we worked to get back on our feet. Yes, yes. Christ took the shape of an old friend who offered a job. It happened on March 19th, the feast of Saint Joseph. Fast-forward another 8 years and in 2017, through continued financial struggle, we lost our home in the suburbs of Washington D.C. When reality hits again: Christ, yes or no? To say yes to Christ is to look seriously at the signs of reality, and in this case look at the signs of reality so as to understand where we would go to live. The method proposed by Father Giussani is to follow the signs of reality, certain that reality is given by God. I want always to risk, to discover how this given reality is good for me.

Again, another example, a more recent one, from February of last year, February of 2020. In fact, at last year's New York Encounter, I experienced again the human companionship of Christ among us. My wife had been diagnosed with cancer and she and I were able to sit down with three friends, doctors, who helped us to understand how to face this new challenge and gave us real hope. The source of that hope was the experience of facing a challenge with a few people who were given companions. Simply put, they were Christ present in that particular of reality that hits. As a father, I've been formed by the method of Father Giussani. Openness to all of reality and absolute trust in the human heart; this has been the foundation of how my wife and I have tried to educate our children. Openness to all of reality and absolute trust in the human heart. This education comes through a constant proposal of life experiences. Very few words needed. And now, as my children become adults, I begin to have the experience of being a son to my sons, and to my daughters. Which brings me back to the recognition that I depend, that what I truly need most in life is to be loved, and to accept that love. This life is a journey, and seeing again Father Giussani in this video brings out the best in me. I'm moved. Thank you.

Peterson: Thank you, Barry. Beautiful. The way you were educated,

Barry—it's exactly what the Archbishop was describing: a person who can look at life, observe life, observe our experience, look at ourselves in action and recognize his face, his hands, his mark. Thank you both very much. First of all, it's beautiful to see you both, and second, thank you for taking the time to be with us today. For those observing this video today, we'd just like to share the video we are all speaking about on Father Giussani, *The Faith of Father Giussani*. You will find it on the New York encounter website: newyorkencounter.org, then click on the Giussani exhibit. It's a beautiful video, 45 minutes. If you've never met him, and even if you have met him, or if you're curious about who he is, please watch it.



DEFENSELESS?

*A conversation on the power of Big Tech corporations, free information, and social media censorship with **Matt Stoller**, fellow at the Open Markets Institute, and **Matthew Taibbi**, author, journalist, and podcaster.*

Introduction

Today, more than ever, large corporations are exercising forms of power that traditionally were the monopoly of the state. In particular, big tech companies control the flow of news and information and have power of censorship over what gets published or broadcast (e.g., Facebook's and Twitter's censorship of politically undesirable news, Amazon's ability to marginalize books, etc.). Ultimately, no matter which side of the political spectrum one belongs to, what is at stake is democracy itself and, at a deeper level, free conscience and individual liberty. What can be done, if anything, to protect these essential aspects of our individual and social life?



Brandon Vaidyanathan, moderator: Hello and welcome to the New York Encounter 2021. I'm Brandon Vaidyanathan, or at least that's what they tell me. I'm the moderator for this session titled, *Defenseless*, a conversation about the power of Big Tech corporations and the challenges they pose to our democracy. I'm joined by two very special guests today online. You can read their full bios on the New York Encounter website, but I'll introduce them very briefly. Matt Stoller is the Director of Research for the American Economic Liberties Project and the author of *Goliath, the 100-Year War*

Between Monopoly Power and Democracy. Matt Taibbi is the author of four *New York Times* bestsellers. He is an award-winning columnist at *Rolling Stone*. His latest book, *Hate Inc.*, examines how the media twists the truth to pit us against each other. Thank you both for joining us. It's such an honor to have you here. Let's get started. So the first question let me direct to Matt Stoller. And the question is: What's the big deal with Big Tech, right? When lot of Americans think of Big Tech, we think of companies like Amazon. We like our instant, overnight delivery or two-day delivery. You think of Google, and hey, who can go a day without googling something? I think of Facebook, and that's just the sort of platform where you go to check what Miss Popular in high school is up to or where you can go post your latest cat video. Matt, you've written that if we don't do something about Big Tech now, we're going to end up with fascism. So help us understand, why are these corporations a threat to democracy?

Matt Stoller: Yeah, I mean, start out with the boldest claim. [*laughs*] So you can go back to the founding of the country and look at the question of monopoly power and what that really is, and when you look at how firms like Google, Facebook, Amazon, Apple, maybe Microsoft—you'd have to say that they have substantial amounts of market power. Now, what is a monopoly? You look at it in an economic sense, but traditionally Americans have seen it as a political system, so a monopoly is a private government that sets the terms and conditions over how a recognized branch of trade or service operates. It's traditionally been a commodity. They set the prices, they set the terms, but now it's different. We have an information age and software, social media, and so on. But these are private governments, and so you have to see what Mark Zuckerberg is doing as governing and not as running a business, and he's actually been explicit about this. Mark Zuckerberg has said that Facebook is more like a government than a business. "What we're really doing is setting policies." That's it. That's a direct quote. And if you look at the things he's been doing over the last few years, he's tried to set up his own currency; that was the Libra. He's tried to set up a Supreme Court, right? These are things that a sovereign entity does. And Google and Facebook have both threatened Australia, which said we would like to regulate you and they said, well, we're going to pull out this core essential service that your citizens rely on if you

try to implement rules on us. And so what this is really about is who has power in our society or in our societies. Are we free through our democratic legislators or are we run by a small group of unaccountable people? And I think you could see this in sort of very obvious ways, like just the decision by a small group of Silicon Valley people to say that Trump doesn't get to talk anymore; he doesn't get to talk publicly on the internet, or at least not through our platforms. That's an enormous amount of power, whether you agree with the decision or not. And what you're seeing is that more and more civil society groups are asking Mark Zuckerberg, Sundar Pichai, and others to exercise this power on their behalf to censor. Now, it's not just that very politically heated element; I mean, you have a lot of people who are just going about their daily business and having a lot of trouble. There was a *Wall Street Journal* article—just to pick it at random—a couple of years ago, the *Wall Street Journal* reported on fake listings in Google Maps. And this guy said, look, I'm really afraid to talk about this—I think he was a plumber or something like that—because Google, you know, the government is a little bit scary, but Google can just make me homeless; they just remove my listing. They do something, they just make that choice. And I think that's what we've seen with consolidation in general, but these five companies are just so powerful that they actually are taking sovereign power. So that's kind of the way that I look at the problem of these companies: they're exercising political power. They've concentrated power, and once you start fusing the state with a small group of private, unaccountable actors, that's when you start to get into more autocratic types of systems. And I think we're seeing that more and more in the U.S. We're still democratic, but we're kind of corporatist and we're kind of in this transitional moment. We could go either direction, but you've seen this before. This is typically how democracies collapse. First, you have this massive increase of concentrated power and then you see political actors purpose that power to seize power from the public at large, and I think that's kind of where we are right now.

Vaidyanathan: Thank you. We're not typically accustomed to thinking about Facebook as a government, but we also don't think about Facebook as a news media company. And so Matt Taibbi let me turn to you. In the past couple of years, Facebook has been curating and pushing out news to its

viewers, and in doing so, it's outcompeted traditional media conglomerates. Could you help us understand what's going on there? How have these companies, how has Big Tech changed the nature of journalism today?

Matthew Taibbi: Well, it's changed in a number of ways. If you talk to advertising executives from the '70s or '80s, they would have told you that the real product was not the news program that the media company put out, but actually the commercials; that the news was designed to bring the audience in and what they were actually selling were the products in the commercials. And with the tech revolution and with the internet, it's actually changed that dynamic significantly. The consumer, the person who's reading or watching news online, these companies are collecting data about their viewers and about their readers constantly, and they're selling that data, so the news consumer is both a consumer and a product that is itself sold. It changes ultimately the relationship of people who watch the news. They're becoming themselves products that are sold. The internet also has fundamentally changed the strategies of news businesses, because it's such an extraordinarily effective mechanism for identifying audiences and feeding them news that they know those audiences will agree with, or at least respond to in a certain way. It's changed the strategy. So back in, again, back in the '70s and '80s—I'm not going to in any way say we're better now, but it's a very, very different system. Back then, we had three big news networks: ABC, CBS, and NBC, and their commercial strategy was to try to get the entire audience, they were going for everybody. The strategy behind a newscast was, we want to create a program that the entire family can watch. So it's the right-wing uncle with the teenager in the Che t-shirt, and they can all sit together and watch Dan Rather or Walter Cronkite. Today's new strategy changes that dynamic completely. Really, what's going on now is we have a massive, atomized, fragmented landscape where news companies are identifying target demographics and they're able to dominate them, because they're getting so much information about each one of these little segments of the population. And they are able to continually—through things like push notifications or the Facebook newsfeed—they're able to target that news so effectively and so directly that most people will never even see news that is not designed specifically for them. Rather than creating one news broadcast that the whole

country watches or reads, and we have a commonly accepted set of facts that we all debate, we now have multiple, separate news universes, and most of us don't see what the other groups are watching or listening to. We have no commonly accepted set of information, which is one of the reasons why America today is so divided. We're not getting the same information. They're so effective at this targeting that there's really virtually no crossover between the audiences anymore.

Vaidyanathan: Could you say a little more about this, about the polarization that's been created by news media, and about how Big Tech has contributed to ideological polarization?

Taibbi: The old system was designed as a commercial strategy. I want to stress that this was not an ethical decision that the old networks were employing. If you read newspapers in the pre-internet period, the articles were always written in this kind of dry, detached, third person voice, which was designed to be inoffensive for everybody. The new style is completely different, and there were really multiple things that contributed to this. It started with the 24-hour news cycle on CNN, which put tremendous pressure on news companies to generate much more content than they ever had before. Rather than doing one newspaper a day or one newscast a day, now you're creating a constant cascade of content. It's funny: I talked to an old newspaper owner who reminded me that there was a time when we could speak of "reading the news." In other words, finishing it; like, you would pick up the newspaper and read it from the beginning to the end and you would be done until the next day. That doesn't exist anymore.

Then the internet also radically changed the commercial structure of media. Because again, it's such an extraordinarily effective advertising mechanism that things like classified ads, which were the backbone of the commercial formula for newspapers, disappeared virtually overnight. In fact, Marshall McLuhan, way back in the 1960s said that if classified ads ever went away, if we lost that, the newspapers would die virtually overnight. He wasn't exactly right; they continued to exist. But it was a huge blow to us. And then the third thing was that companies like Fox News figured out there was a new strategy that could be employed, in which once again, rather than trying to reach a broad audience, you picked an audience and

dominated it by carefully selecting content that you knew was going to work with that audience. The thing they found that was most effective was also the cheapest—because remember, in this new news cycle you have to create so much content. The answer was: argumentation and divisiveness. Rather than create a very expensive news program, or doing investigative journalism, you put two people on camera and just have them argue about something. And that was drama, it was like sports, and it generated lots of audience and great ratings, and they also figured out that audiences responded to being flattered and made to feel superior, and the easiest way to do that was to tell them something negative about their neighbors that they don't like, or their coworkers, or maybe immigrants, or some group that they have suspicions about. You feed them a constant stream of those stories and it addicts them to the experience of feeling angry and superior at the same time. It started in that one corner of conservative media, but almost everybody does this now in one form or another, where you're basically stroking your audience and flattering them, but you're also creating this divisive impact, and I think that's one of the reasons why people are at each other's throats in a way that they never really were prior to this era.

Vaidyanathan: It seems that cultivation of addiction is central to the operation of Big Tech, right?

Taibbi: Absolutely.

Vaidyanathan: I want to go back, Matt Stoller, to your point about monopolies, and to ask if you could tell us a little bit about the history of how we've dealt with monopolies in the past. You mentioned in *Goliath* that the situation we're in isn't entirely unprecedented. We've had to deal with monopolies before. We've even had to deal with the context in which there was an erosion of trust in democracy. How do we come out of that? And what lessons can we learn today from the past?

Stoller: I think I'm going to add a little something to what Matt just said. Behind a lot of what happens in terms of 24-hour news cycles and development of these internet business models is policy. There were a whole series of policy choices that are part of why we have a much more consolidated, addictive, fragmented media and tech sector, which really thrives on surveillance and micro-targeting and market power. And so what happened? How did we get to

this place? It's not like the internet just happens and all of this stuff is natural. What happened is there was a change in philosophy of how we organized our society, and this change happened, you know, slowly from the '50s to the '70s, but then Ronald Reagan, along with some left-wingers, implemented it. And it was the idea that we shift the basis of political power from thinking about ourselves as citizens to thinking about ourselves as consumers. This was a weird alliance of the kind of libertarian right with...well, what happened on the left was that they transitioned from a labor-based model to a consumer rights-based model. And together, they came to the 1980s and said, well, we don't really care if you have lots of independent small stores, or locally-owned radio stations, or whatever, as long as it's efficient, the price is low, and stuff is cheap; that's what we can agree on. Reagan deregulated a bunch of stuff, but the Democrats were right there. I mean, Carter started a lot of deregulatory trends. I think this came out of the New Left, the kind of counterculture, but it got instrumentalized into policy in the 1980s. You saw the roll-up of radio, you saw a lot of the newspapers get put into huge conglomerates, and then ultimately the '96 Telecom Act set the stage for how we regulate the internet today. It was an important moment in how we structure our media, and it was organized around the principle of consolidating power in the hands of a small group of people who can make things really efficient.

Well, we've been here before in the first half of the 20th century, and really from until the 1880s until the 1920s, there was this question about how to deal with industrial power. Because oil, railroads, telegraphs, telephones—these allowed for the extension of power in spheres that people had never had to deal with before, and it allowed for fascism. That was one political system that emerged instead. Communism sort of came out at that moment too, the practical instrumentation of that system. In the U.S., we had battles between populists, farmers, independent merchants, and robber barons who were largely focused on, you know, organizing Wall Street. In the 1920s, it was essentially four financial holding companies that controlled and ran America, and they had their little feudal types that worked for them. One of the Republicans at that time, Andrew Mellon, was an oligarch, and was also a Secretary of the Treasury. Then you had a massive crash. There was the question, Okay, what happens now? This old system is falling apart.

We're kind of in a moment similar to the 1920s, where you have the *forms* of democracy, but corporatism at the same time, a lot of real cynicism about democracy, which was also a big part of the 1920s. In some parts of the world, like in Germany and Italy, it went fascist, but in other places it didn't. In the U.S., we kind of figured out we're going to break apart these financial empires and restrain these corporations. What FDR called the unofficial economic government of the United States, we're going to take that on. We're going to have the public structure our markets and run our society, and that's what the New Deal was really about: fighting the robber barons, dethroning them through a whole series of policy ideas, including media regulation. That worked, and up until the 1970s it was a middle-class society, and then you had this philosophical change.

The consumer mindset says, Who cares? This stuff is free, this stuff is convenient. That's a consumer mindset, right? And that's what we're really fighting, this idea we have in our own heads that we should be treated like consumers, and that power doesn't matter. Political power, commercial power, that doesn't matter as long as we're getting the consumer goods we want and getting them cheap. The core political battle we're having—and that we've been having since the financial crisis ended—is whether we are just consumers or whether we are citizens in a democracy.

Vaidyanathan: That's a really crucial point to make.

Stoller: Concentration is a systemic feature of the American economy, and they always justify it with the consumer framework. That's just how they make the argument. You can look at any merger proposal from a company, and anytime someone says, "We need to deregulate," there will almost always be an argument for consumerism.

Vaidyanathan: Looking at the Big Tech monopolies we have today, is there anything unique about them? Anything different when compared to monopolies of the past? I mean, one aspect that strikes me is that they don't just see themselves as being only out for profit now, they style themselves as agents of social change, they see themselves as enforcers of wokeness. And that's a little bit odd, because you typically would associate large corporations with the right, I mean, maybe big oil still is, but Big Tech seems to be in many

ways trying to align itself with the left. Could you help us understand the ideological dimension of Big Tech?

Stoller: I wouldn't necessarily agree that they're trying to align themselves with the left. I think there's an opportunism there. But there's one thing that I think a lot of people don't know. Jeff Bezos founded Amazon, the everything store, right? That was the idea. He was also one of the first five investors in Google, whose goal was to organize the world's information. These guys have always thought really big, and they've always thought in a kind of autocratic way—they want to run *everything*. I mean, that's sort of their goal. So, what's different about these companies? I would say there's a couple of things that are different. I'd say three. Well, maybe, I could probably make a really long list, but the first is: they're global. There were global companies in the '20s and '30s, but not like this, where you have a company like Google, which has nine platforms and over a billion users. Or Facebook, which has 3 billion users across four platforms. They are embedded into the core infrastructure of companies pretty much all over the world. That's new, that's different. We've never had to deal with something like that. I think there are a lot of policy makers who are trying to figure out whether to collaborate or not. What do you do? So that's number one.

Number two, they manage communications and media, and we've never had a concentration of communications and media like we have today. America was founded on the idea of decentralization of power. One of the first institutions that Congress created was the Post Office. And de Tocqueville, when he came to the U.S., said, There's so many newspapers here that nobody's ever going to be able to dominate this place. Because they're not very good newspapers, and there's just too many. By the way, I think 1,000 out of 3,000 counties have no daily newspaper, which is something we've never had before. I mean, this is a totally weird experiment in a democracy, right? We've never had this concentration of power in the hands of so few in communications and media; that's new, that's different.

And then, I think, there are a couple of other things. It's pretty hard for them to shoot people; like, you could massacre people in the coal mines in the '20s. You can't really do that anymore. It's frowned upon, I suppose. And then the fourth is, I think, the amount of data, the ability to personalize; that's

new. Standard Oil could engage in discriminatory pricing, they could do it through regions, they could maybe do it, you know, based on the company they were buying or selling from. But Google, Facebook, Amazon, and a lot of companies throughout the economy—they can actually personalize in a way that is new. I think those are the four things that I would say.

Vaidyanathan: I guess they don't have to kill people directly if they drive them to suicide or something, as Amazon might. But Matt Taibbi, I want to extend this question to you. One of the ways in which Big Tech wields ideological power is through censorship. This has traditionally been in the purview of governments that silence dissidents on the left. So this de-platforming of Trump is a unique kind of phenomenon, where you've got companies that are more powerful than the President of the United States. I'm curious to know what you think about this in light of the fact that what makes these companies profitable is ideological polarization. Why would they alienate part of their base that could be really profitable? And what are the implications of this for democracy?

Taibbi: Yeah, that's a great question. And this also gets back to some of the things that Matt was just talking about, too, about the nature of these companies and what their profit centers are. We've seen a real transformation in the last five years, especially in the attitude of these companies towards censorship and content moderation, and we've also seen a commensurate shift in public attitudes about this. I don't think that's a coincidence. If you go back to 2013, 2014, when Edward Snowden first came forward and the country first learned about this elaborate government surveillance program that the NSA was involved with, passively collecting everybody's information, their emails; and they also learned through things like Inspector General reports about the regime of National Security letters that the FBI was sending to companies like all these tech platforms, that were in turn not informing their customers that they were sharing data with the authorities—this had a profound effect on audiences at the time. There were polls done that showed that when the Snowden story broke, people almost immediately stopped using words like *bomb*, *terror*, *plot*, *Muslim*—because they were now suddenly cognizant of being watched in a new way that they had not been previously. So, the psychology of people was immediately very concerned

about this whole problem of being surveilled in a way that they never thought about before.

But then this shifted radically. When Trump got elected, a bunch of things happened. There was a story about Russian interference that consumed a lot of the Democratic Party apparatus, but also some Republicans as well. And there was also a steady stream of editorials that you started to see in the news suggesting that we had too much democracy, that the problem that had resulted in Trump was caused by an epidemic of misinformation, an electorate that hadn't been corrected when it was reading fake news, and other things like that. There was this political drive to get companies like Facebook and Yahoo and Google to suddenly start moderating content and censoring in a way they never had before. And it's crucial to understand that they themselves did not see their business model as being that at the time. If you go back and look, you'll find these amazing quotes that evolved over time. Back in September of 2016, Mark Zuckerberg said flat out, "We are not a media company, we are a technology company." Shortly after that, his language changed slightly to, "We're not a traditional media company and we're not a traditional technology company." They gradually changed the way they perceived themselves. Then there was another big shift that I think was important, which was that the Senate demanded all these companies come into hearings—the Senate Judiciary Committee, specifically in 2017—and basically demanded that they all come up with a plan for what they called the prevention of the fomenting of discord. And they asked, you know, the CEOs of Twitter and Facebook and Google, what are you gonna do to prevent proliferation of fake news and foreign disinformation? The implied threat was of taxation and greater regulation. One of the Senators, Mark Warner, had a very thick, white paper that he had written, that was ready to be launched at these companies if they didn't comply with this instruction. Almost overnight, they became very aggressive moderators of content, when before they were ideologically opposed to the very idea of editing. That was against their business model. So, what we've really seen since the election of Trump is a fusing of power, whereas before, the tech companies maybe saw themselves as having an adversarial relationship to government, at least in some respects. They said that they were more libertarian in their outlook.

They believed in letting everybody say what they wanted, only interfering if there was child pornography or beheadings, or crimes in progress. Now, all of a sudden, it's completely in the opposite direction and it's really a partnership between government, the intelligence community, and these companies. That's much more open than it was before. I think they've managed to marshal public support for this because there's this overwhelming sentiment among a lot of people that the failure to do this previously is what gave us Donald Trump. I think it's a dangerous moment because they've managed to take an already concentrated landscape, a financially concentrated and politically concentrated landscape, and they've made it even more concentrated in the last four or five years.

Vaidyanathan: Could you speak to what sort of precedent this might set, if anything at all? And I mean this kind of censorship, this sort of power? I mean, at the moment it seems that people say, look, we've got these platforms that can at least eliminate far right groups and not allow them to have a space in which they can congregate, plot, and so on. But what is the future consequences of such a move?

Taibbi: First of all, as Matt mentioned previously, we've never had an immediate regulator in this country, not in the formal sense. In fact, it was one of the defining features of American society that we had no centralized conception of what the media should be. Even before this regime that's now being instituted, Google had essentially become a de facto media regulator with their algorithm; it upranks certain content and downranks other content, and that is something that we've never had before. There was a sorting system that drove some content to you and pushed you away from other content. But now we're in this place where essentially all content is being monitored. The problem is this enormous concentration of distribution ability. Facebook and Google and Twitter—that's how the overwhelming majority of people consume their news. It's now possible to control the flow of news. Matt mentioned those thousands of newspapers that de Tocqueville talked about. Well, now it's down to just a couple of distribution points. We're completely overturning our prior conception of how the media is supposed to work.

If you look back at all the court cases about censorship in the pre-internet era, the judges all were deeply concerned with allowing as much

speech as possible, because they believed in the American concept of, *We defeat bad speech with better speech*, and that's why they constantly had very, very high bars for intervention. So, on the civil side, in cases like *New York Times vs. Sullivan* in the early '60s, it was very, very hard to be punished for liable or defamation. You had to prove that the journalist made a very, very serious mistake and almost knowingly did so, and the idea there was to— it's specifically stated in the case that they did not want reporters shying away from topics that they felt might be too controversial; they wanted them to engage with those topics. Same thing with *Brandenburg vs. Ohio* in the early '70s, or maybe it was the late '60s. But this was the case that is the current standard for what is legal and not legal in terms of incitement. The current standard is imminent incitement to lawless action, and again, the judges were trying to say that we want to encourage speech up to the point where, unless you're actually ordering someone to commit an imminent violent crime, we want you to be allowed to do that. Even if it's hate speech, even if it's a speech that might lead to violence, we want to allow that because the American system revolves around the belief that an informed public that gets the most information makes the best political decisions. We've now completely turned that idea on its head, and the new idea of how we deal with media is that we're going to just prevent people from seeing ideas that are considered dangerous in any way. That is deeply problematic on multiple levels, but I think the biggest reason is that, if you do that, the only deceptions that are going to flower are *official* deceptions, which happen to be the most dangerous. Those are always the ones that have the most catastrophic effects on society. You think about things like the WMD episode. You know, are those going to be caught in the future? No, because the same people who are going to be in charge of moderating the content are going to be the ones who are going to be deceiving the public. And so, without the ability to have completely open, free speech that is allowed to be wrong, or conspiratorial, or crazy, we're not going to have that regulatory check on government abuses.

Vaidyanathan: Thank you, that's really insightful. Matt Stoller, do you want to add anything to his point on censorship before we move on?

Stoller: Yes, I do. Actually, I think that was a really eloquent way of talking about the tradition of thinking about censorship. I think there has

been a different regulatory model which we've abandoned, which is, we have had regulators of media systems as businesses. Not content regulation, but we have had aggressive media regulation, but that media regulation has always been about the structure of the media industry, right? So who gets to own how many radio stations, newspapers, or television stations, broadcast licensing; these kinds of things where we said the Fairness Doctrine was sort of content regulation, but it was neutral. The idea is that we've always tried to decentralize media ownership. We've had antitrust cases against the AP, for example. And against newspapers for consolidating advertising or consolidating wire services. There were controversies in the 19th century over Western Union doing the same thing. We've always pushed our media systems to be diverse, both in terms of who gets to own or control them, and then also in terms of advertising revenue. There's a huge racial gap that I'm leaving out here because, you know, Black people have never owned their own media systems as much as white people have. In fact, in the Jim Crow era, one of the things that happened was the systemic destruction of Black newspapers. But generally speaking, the American tradition with regard to media has been about decentralizing—decentralizing telecom and media power.

What's interesting is, at the same time you have this sort of shift in how we think about censorship norms, you've also seen this incredible takedown of traditional American media regulation. So things are incredibly concentrated right now. One of the protections against censorship is having a diversity of advertising streams and a diversity of media institutions, so that if you get kicked out of one, or fired from one, you can go start your own. Or, if one advertiser wants to threaten you, you can have other advertisers or one ad agency. There's no middleman that controls everything. Advertising is so important versus government funding, because advertising actually shields a newspaper from the state; they're not reliant on government funds. The Post Office was a subsidy to newspapers, but it was a structural subsidy, it wasn't subsidizing any particular type of content.

I think we also really have to look at the collapse of traditional media regulations and the formation of a new media system. It has really consolidated power, and now we have these middlemen controlling distribution, communication, and who gets to finance news gathering. And that is what's

really scary, right? Because this should be the most amazing moment for the media. Think about all the interesting things going on, and think about the fact that everyone has a super-computer in their pocket that can take really high-quality videos. This should be an extraordinary time to be telling stories and to be building new medium models. We can't do that, right? That's not happening. And the reason it's not happening is because the financing has been constrained. We typically don't think about advertising and financing as mechanisms of censorship, but they really are. When you come at this from a regulatory perspective, you have to look not just at content censorship, but also at the kind of financial censorship and distribution censorship that we're also seeing with these tech monopolies.

Vaidyanathan: We've talked about what's at stake for democracy. We've talked about how we've gotten here. Let's talk a bit about the way forward. Matt Taibbi, I want to ask you, given on the one hand that trust in media is at an all-time low, and on the other hand, we're so conditioned by these ideological echo chambers that we've been cocooned in—what sort of future do you see for a journalism that is in service of democracy, that serves the public rather than profit?

Taibbi: We can go back to the Telecommunications Act of...I think it was 1934. They came up with the rules for the use of public airwaves. There was a section in there that essentially says the government is going to lease the public airwaves at a very agreeable price, but in return the companies have to produce some content in the public interest. It was kind of a tacit arrangement and a tacit subsidy of news. For a couple of generations, even a big company like CBS or NBC would understand that they would make their money on public airways by creating entertainment, or broadcasting sports, or whatever it was, but when it came to the news, the news was allowed to be a loss leader. I grew up in a family of media. My father was a reporter, my godparents were reporters, and back when they were getting into the business, there was just really very little understanding by people in the news media that the news had to make money. It just was not a consideration in the way that it became in the '80s and '90s. We're in a difficult place right now because, first of all, it's highly centralized: the news is much more national and much less local than it ever was before. We've lost 2,000 newspapers since the early 2000s. We're

going to have to come up with some kind of a mechanism that supports public interest reporting, and unfortunately, I don't think we've discovered it yet.

There *are* things that do make money and that are very successful and independent on the internet. An example: whether you like the show or not, Joe Rogan, the podcaster, has an audience many times larger than the largest cable news audience. His interview with Edward Snowden, I think, had 16 million views, which is maybe four times the size of the biggest cable news TV audience. So there are, in fact, independent types of media that are making money. I work at a platform called Substack now, which is kind of a reader-supported model for supporting journalists. However, none of these things, none of these models, is really going to support investigative journalism of the public interest variety, where you need some kind of institutional framework that's going to allow people to do two- and three-month investigations, and especially to do stories with the understanding that if they don't find anything, they don't have to produce content. There's just such a tremendous commercial pressure to produce stuff and pump it out, that that's what's missing from the landscape these days. I think it's going to take somebody having the inspiration—and maybe a little bit of stamina from an investing standpoint—to understand that there is a need out there. There is an audience that wants to get hardcore public interest information, but they're going to have to be content not to make the same kinds of profits that other forms of media are making.

Vaidyanathan: That could be a challenge for some people, right? Figuring out what motivations beyond profit could draw people in to do this.

Taibbi: The television show *60 Minutes* was an extraordinarily profitable program when it first hit, but the tendency with the internet is a shortening of attention spans. That type of reporting isn't profitable anymore.

Vaidyanathan: Matt Stoller, I want to ask you about policy, because you've talked about the importance of antitrust actions and repealing Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act. Could you tell us a little bit about this? For those who don't know anything about it, what are these initiatives and how might they help?

Stoller: There are two main policy tracks to address the problem with Big

Tech. The first is a specific sector, it's a sector-specific rule called Section 230. The other is a broader set of anti-monopoly rules that would not just address concentration of Big Tech, but would have implications for the rest of the economy where there's concentration. Let's start with Section 230.

Section 230 was part of the Telecommunications Act of 1996. It's called Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, which was part of the Telecom Act, and Section 230 says that if you have an effective website, let's say, or if you are an interactive service provider, then you can't be held liable for what other people use your platform for. Even if you know that they're causing harm, even if you know that they're using it to stalk or harass, incite, commit libel, whatever—there are hundreds of years of common law, torts, and rules about things you are and aren't supposed to do to keep a society functional, everything from negligence to defamation. But now, if you're a tech platform, you don't have to deal with any of that. A really good example of this: Trump was putting out that Dominion voting systems had doctored the vote, and Fox News, OANN, and a bunch of conservative news channels kept talking about this, kept saying, yeah, it's outrageous what Dominion is doing. Dominion then sued or threatened to sue, and says, you are defaming us, you have no evidence, you are knowingly lying and are harming our brand, and are harming our viability as a business. And when they did this—defamation is very hard to prove, you have to meet some strong criteria—immediately these television stations just stopped. They had to stop because they were going to be liable for a lot of money because they were knowingly lying to harm another entity. That's a restriction on speech. It's a restriction on speech that we have, because when we didn't have that, people used to fight duels, or they used to engage in violence. There are historical reasons that we have rules against defamation. But Facebook or Google, they can spread this kind of information. There's a lot of bad stuff on the left and on the right; this is not about a particular partisan outlook. But if they spread this information, and they're selling ads on it, too, then they're profiting, right? It's not like they're just a telephone network transmitting information in a neutral way; they're making money off of it. They don't have to deal with being potentially held liable for anything that they're doing.

There are two really good examples, but one of them is military service

men. Often what will happen is scammers will set up fake profiles for them on Facebook. Then they will flirt with women and try to get money from those women, pretending to be servicemen. The servicemen will come home and these women will be waiting for them."Hey, I don't know you." It's a systemic problem. Sure, you go after the scammers, but Facebook knows it's happening. They're making money off of it, but you can't sue them for it because of Section 230.

There's another example that involves Grindr. An ex of someone was impersonating him on Grindr, which is a gay dating app, and sending a thousand men to this guy's apartment over the course of a year. These guys kept coming to his apartment and basically threatening him or doing really scary things, and Grindr wasn't held liable because of Section 230. This is a really serious problem. I think we should repeal the law so that traditional torts can be made effective again, and we can bring some sanity back to how we run the internet.

The second thing is these antitrust or anti-monopoly rules. You have five lawsuits right now against Google and Facebook from state attorney generals and the federal government. I'm going to say I'm not actually a pessimist on the media. I think that if Google and Facebook weren't stealing ad revenue—and I think that's what they're really doing—you would see an incredible explosion of news gathering and publishing, and I don't think it would look like traditional newspapers, it would be way better. So I'm not a pessimist, I just think we've allowed monopolization here, and if we stop this monopolization we could have an amazing media system. But these laws have been defanged by the courts. They're pretty weak and we need to restrengthen them. Congress is, I think, going to do that. Last Congress, there was a 16-month investigation of Big Tech firms by the House Antitrust Subcommittee, which culminated in some high-profile hearings. They made a bunch of recommendations about how to strengthen these rules. There's a lot of really good stuff in there. Most of it was a Democratic initiative, but there were a bunch of Republicans that came along as well, and now the Republicans are getting more interested in anti-monopoly rules because of the de-platforming of Trump. So I'm pretty optimistic on the policy level.

The speed at which anti-monopoly sentiment has moved throughout the American establishment on the right and on the left is very exciting.

Vaidyanathan: The bipartisan nature of this is perhaps a sign of hope. We're down to our last five minutes. I've got so many more questions, but I want to ask a big picture one. On the one hand, reading your book gives me hope that by getting a better sense of history, by understanding the struggles it took to gain the freedoms that we take for granted, we might find the confidence to take back the power to govern ourselves. But given that we've been conditioned to be consumers, there is a certain kind of soft despotism that seems to have taken us over, right? I mean, what if most Americans don't have the desire to do the work of self-governance? What if we're just addicted to and pacified by our tech overlords? You know, happy with our same-day deliveries and our one-click self-expression? How do we overcome that?

Stoller: After World War I, you know, Americans were just docile and didn't believe in democracy anymore. Didn't believe in justice and became very cynical. It happened for a good reason. Twenty years of reform just collapsed in a massive conflagration. I think that people being cynical and not believing in democracy and the rule of law is a rational response to the Obama administration, who came in with lots of hope but then didn't deliver. The Trump administration, and before that the Bush administration—this country has been governed really badly for a long time. If you're questioning democracy and the viability of democracy, it's a pretty rational thing to do. We've got a bunch of people in elite positions that keep telling us to listen to experts, that regular people are stupid and racist or whatever. There are problems here, and I think you're right to say that self-governing is a lot of work. But ultimately every generation gets to make the choice about what kind of country they want to live in. America is not good or bad. America is a battle, and every generation gets to decide. And that's not just America; I mean, these problems are global, too. Every generation decides who wins that battle. I think we can self-govern. I think America can be a great place. I don't think we should give up on it. That's ultimately our choice as a free people. We can give up our freedom if we so choose, and I don't think we should, and I don't think we're going to.

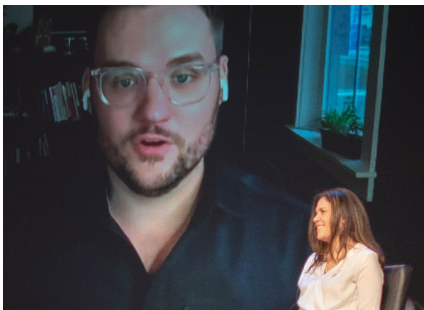
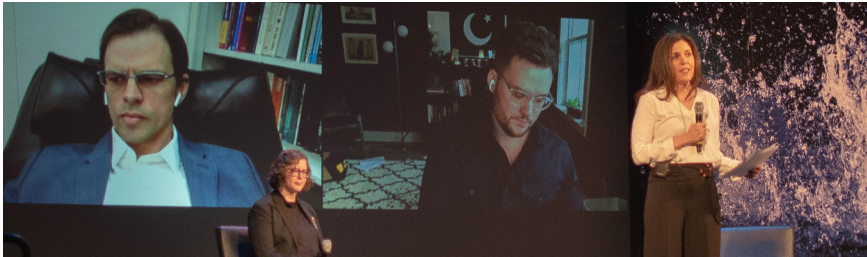
Vaidyanathan: Matt Taibbi, I want to give you the last word. I'm thinking

of this quote from Hannah Arendt that the ideal subjects of totalitarian rule are those who have lost the ability to make the distinction between fact and fiction and between true and false. There is a sense in which it seems we have, as Americans, become detached from reality. I'm curious if you can help us to understand what would it take for us to reattach to reality.

Taibbi: Arendt and a lot of other philosophers of that same school were reacting to the experience of the Nazi Party, which rose from a democracy, a weak democracy, the Weimar Republic. There was a profound pessimism about the idea of the marketplace of ideas: that truth would always rise to the top. The belief among a lot of those thinkers was that negative ideas and lies have superior power if they're not actively restrained. That has not been the traditional belief in America. We fought for centuries, actually, to maintain a belief in the other standard; that we allow free discussion and will come to the truth eventually. I think for the first time in our history we're seriously thinking about moving to this other model, which is pessimistic, which looks at the public and says, 'They're not able to sort out the truth effectively, so we have to tell them what it is, and we need these companies to do that for them. I think that would be a major mistake because I share what Matt thinks. Among its positive qualities over the years has been America's devotion to the idea that we all seek the truth together in this open forum, and I think that's the way to go. I think we shouldn't let that tradition recede, because it has been positive for us throughout our history. We should be careful about giving that away.

Vaidyanathan: Thank you both so much. This has been such a great pleasure and honor and it's been very insightful.

WHEN REALITY HITS



WHY ON EARTH?

*An online discussion on the “epidemic” of suicide and mental health issues in the time of Covid, with **Aaron Kberiaty**, associate professor of Psychiatry, Irvine School of Medicine, University of California, **Jeremy McLellan**, comedian, and **Mary Townsend**, associate professor of philosophy, St. John’s University.*

Introduction

The pandemic did not only fill our days with uncertainty and discomfort, helplessness and fear. It also brought a dramatic increase of mental health issues. But what is, and what is not, mental illness? Is it possible to cope with it? How? Why does it carry a stigma? Covid-19 also worsened the horrific epidemic of suicide, especially among young people. How can it be addressed? Is “how to fix it” actually the right question? Are there other more fundamental questions that need to be answered? These are some of the questions the panelists will discuss.



Margarita Mooney, moderator: Welcome to the Sheen Center in New York. My name is Margarita Mooney, and I’m pleased to be moderating this panel as part of the New York Encounter. *Why on Earth?* is a panel where we will discuss the epidemic of suicide, mental illness, and isolation that has been exacerbated by the Covid pandemic. Never in my wildest dreams did I think that on Valentine’s Day I would be moderating an event with a psychiatrist, a philosopher, and a comedian to talk about suicide. I’m grateful to the New York Encounter for this opportunity to discuss this issue and to

give us a chance together to talk at length and at depth about an important and pressing issue for our society.

Let me now introduce you to our three guests. Aaron Kheriaty is a Professor of Psychiatry at the University of California Irvine School of Medicine, where he's the Director of the Medical Ethics program at USI Health. He serves as Chairman of the Medical Ethics committees at UCI Hospital and at the California Department of State Hospitals. He has authored books and articles for both professional and lay audiences on bioethics, social science, psychiatry, and religion. Mary Townsend is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Saint John's University in Queens, New York. She has written philosophy articles for the general public in magazines such as *The Atlantic*, *The Hedgehog Review*, and *Plough Quarterly*. She writes on mental health, moral relativism, and the moral implications of beauty.

Jeremy McLellan is an internationally touring stand-up comedian. He's a staple at interfaith events around the world and has completed sold out tours in the U.S., Canada, the UK, and Pakistan. He's a recent convert to Catholicism and has written about his own experiences with mental illness in *America Magazine* and *The Catholic Herald*.

Now let's begin our dialogue with Professor Kheriaty. You are a professor of psychiatry, a practicing psychiatrist, who cares deeply about the intersection of medical science and human ethics. In reading your work, I was really struck by how you take a holistic view of the human person as a unity of mind, body, and soul. I wondered if you could explain for us how you understand the definition of mental illness and how it might differ from others in your profession of psychiatry? For example, I was really struck by one phrase in your article in *First Things*, where you said, "Hope is not something you can get from a pill." Could you explain that statement to us and how you understand the intersection of psychiatry and religion?

Aaron Kheriaty: Sure. Thank you, Margarita, it's a pleasure to be here at the New York Encounter. Thanks for that kind introduction and I'm delighted to be on this. This is my first time, too, on a panel, with a philosopher and a comedian, not to mention on Valentine's Day. So, I try to understand mental illness through the lens of a Christian view of the human person. At least, that's the backdrop against which I understand what it is

that I do as a psychiatrist. The original meaning of the term *psychiatrist*, if you break it down into the Greek origins of the word, is that I am supposed to be, or supposedly, a doctor of the soul, a doctor of the psyche, which strikes me as a rather strange and tall order. But Christianity tells us a few really important things about what it means to be a human being, a kind of human anthropology. I understand a human person as created good, fundamentally good, and yet fallen, wounded. This is the postulate of Original Sin that we don't share with various contemporary ideologies of rationalism or scientism, that think the current state of the human being is sort of the normal state. No, Christianity understands that there's something deeply amiss, that we so easily miss the mark for a reason. G. K. Chesterton once quipped that Original Sin is perhaps the only Christian doctrine that is empirically verifiable—all you have to do is turn on the evening news. So we're created fallen, and therefore are wounded both in our body and in our soul, and yet we are redeemed, we're healed by God's grace. We're fully and finally healed and made whole only in heaven. In this life, we're subject to illness, we're subject to death, we're subject to the struggle of disordered passions, and so forth. In addition, our faith tells us that we can't draw a rigid distinction between the body and the soul, right? Body and soul are so intimately united until death that it's really hard to separate the two, and it's important for us not to forget that. Then, the third basic background element is that we are built to be in communion with others. The image of God is as a trinity of persons. If you want to put it in sort of neurobiological terms, we're hardwired to connect with other people, so human beings can only flourish in community. We are intrinsically social and relational, or intrinsically political in Aristotle's sense, and I imagine later in this panel we will get into that issue in more depth, talking about Covid and the effects of the lockdown. Against this kind of background understanding of the human person, we can understand mental illness, in all its complexity, in terms that are not simplistic and reductionistic, right? Because we're unity of body and soul, we know that mental illness can originate in the body, and the sort of medical disease model is useful to some extent in understanding mental illness. It's not comprehensive, but we can understand mental illness in terms of what we have. Maybe there's a broken part in the brain, or the wires got crossed and that's leading to the symptoms of schizophrenia, my

hallucinations, or my delusions. But we can also understand mental illness in terms of misdirected behaviors. That my will, my freedom, is not fully in line with my rationality, because of the fact that my nature is wounded, and the fact of what the theologians call *concupiscence*, and this can lead us in the direction of eating disorders, addictions, and suicide, and being impaired not in terms of what we have, but in terms of what we do, in terms of the exercise of our freedom. We can struggle because of innate traits of what or who we are. We may have IQ traits that are on the low end of a normally distributed spectrum, so we may struggle in that regard with some form of cognitive impairment. We may have personality traits that are on the extreme end of the spectrum and that caused us in certain circumstances to have particular vulnerabilities. And then, finally, as Charles Taylor talks about a lot—he was with us yesterday—we can suffer and struggle because of what we have experienced. All of us are embedded within a particular story, we understand ourselves and our identity, and who we are and where we're going by virtue of the fact of being placed within a particular narrative. We can struggle with mental health problems because of what we have experienced. This is the perspective that allows us to understand things like trauma or grief as being perfectly understandable.

I think all four of these perspectives—and perhaps we could add others to this list—are necessary to appreciate the complex ways that mental illness can manifest in our lives. The danger for contemporary psychiatrists is to reduce everything to the disease model and forget about the role of freedom and rationality in terms of our behaviors, or, reduce everything to a kind of chemical imbalance in the brain. It may be true that you have a serotonin imbalance, but it may also be true that you have a problem with your mother, and these two things are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Human beings are complex, and I think there's a tendency today to understand mental illness only in terms of what's happening in the cranium. And the solutions put forward to that are very often limited to simply looking at being engineers of the synapse and tinkering with your neurochemistry. I don't want to throw those things out; I prescribe medications every day, and they can literally be life-saving for certain conditions. But at the same time, I think that the thicker and richer Christian anthropology, the Christian understanding of

the human person, allows us to appreciate the nature of mental illness in much more depth.

Mooney: Thank you, Aaron. That was a wonderful answer. I grew up in a family of people who suffered from mental illness and who were sometimes hospitalized, so I always had a positive view of the role that psychiatric drugs could play in helping people suffering from severe mental illness to finish school or take care of their families. It wasn't until I was a graduate student in sociology, and then teaching in sociology and working on a project with young adults who experienced trauma, that I began to ask the kinds of questions that you so artfully addressed. Which is, what is it that the disease model of psychology and psychiatry can address, and really what are the limitations of the model? You spoke about the power of your profession to help people, but also acknowledged some of the limitations. You also said—and I want to turn this question now to our next guest, Professor Mary Townsend—that a Christian anthropology starts with understanding the human person as fallen, as sinful, in need of redemption. So that leads into my question to Mary Townsend. You published a fascinating article in *The Hedgehog Review*, which you and I were discussing backstage before this event. You wrote that article in part because of a personal experience that sadly we both share, having worked with a student who committed suicide. You wrote this article where you talk about Walker Percy and an essay from his work, *Lost in the Cosmos*. Aaron just told us that our brokenness, our sinfulness, is a fundamental part of our human nature, and Walker Percy asks, Wouldn't it be expected, then, to be depressed, if not suicidal, about the state of the human condition? So, could you tell us a little bit about what led you to write that article in *The Hedgehog Review*, what Walker Percy says about depression and suicide, and how we escape the conclusion that the human person is nothing but sinful and wounded and therefore life doesn't have hope?

Mary Townsend: A few years ago, I had just finished my doctorate and I was teaching at Tulane University and Loyola University. Two years in a row, I had the really catastrophic experience of teaching during two different suicide clusters. The first at Tulane, the second at Loyola. It was really hard, because I think both the students and I were struggling with basic information. We didn't always know what was going on. I had to ask students, you know,

what's happening, like, what is this recent death? Do you even know who died? The response of the university was to basically ignore it, pretend it wasn't happening, just sort of speak about it as little as possible. That was their plan for helping the community heal. Well, it didn't work. We experience ourselves as impermanent. We're caught in time between *not yet* and *things that will never come back again*. It's only in really trying to understand the temporary nature of being a human, our relationship towards death, that we can start to understand what the human person really is. I think it's a helpful addition to Christian anthropology if you can ask this question of yourself: "What does it mean that I lack being?" Then you can start to ask yourself, "Well, is there a being that doesn't lack being?" But it's only when you're honest about your own relationship to death that these questions even become relevant or interesting.

Mooney: It sounds like what you're saying is that, although what you witnessed was sometimes an unwillingness, or perhaps an inability, to face the reality of the tragic death of students, it sounds like you're actually saying that facing the reality of suicide could be the beginning of a philosophical question into who we are as human beings. If we experience our own being as necessarily finite, as imperfect, then faced with that reality you can ask a deeper question: Is there a being who is not finite? How have some of the philosophers that you write about answered that question? And if I may be provocative, is there not a strain of philosophy that is actually quite nihilistic and denies that there is an ultimate being, or that there is an ultimate answer to this search for truth? How does that philosophy of nihilism contrast with Christian hope?

Townsend: I think one of the things I'd like to teach is the moment in *The Gay Science* where Nietzsche describes the death of God. He experiences it as something that will happen in the future, but he obviously understands a society is going to be dealing with the absence of faith. He speaks about it as something that will lead to nihilism. You've been believing your whole life that human life is fine, it's perfect, it will get better and better, and then you sort of realize that it isn't—that it is imperfect, that you are finite. It produces this crisis that can lead you to then totalize from that moment, and believe, well, since my life isn't perfect, then nothing exists perfectly; there is

no creature that exists all the way. When you turn to Christian existentialism, someone like Walker Percy, someone like Kierkegaard—they can really walk you through that moment of being honest about what Kierkegaard calls, “The individual’s absolute relationship to the absolute,” which is his way of talking about the eternal, about God. It’s a contrast to what he thinks of as real despair, which is not even knowing that you are a finite creature in relationship to an absolute. Real despair is going through your life as though your career is the most important thing, that job success is the only existence. And it’s that moment when we tell high school students and college students that that is their existence, that that ought to be the focus of their being. We are setting them up for something like nihilism and something like despair.

Mooney: It sounds like you’re saying that part of what happens in many universities is that we set up an implicit end to human life, which is: your job, your achievement. But by actually looking directly at these questions about our being, about our mortality—we can actually posit a more fulfilling understanding of who we are as human beings, and a way to face the journey of life and the sadness that sometimes we face. And face it with a sense of courage and realism. I like to quote Viktor Frankl in his memoir, *Man’s Search for Meaning*. In one of the appendices, he wrote about a kind of tragic optimism; that we can have a hope in the goodness of life and all that it can offer, while being realistic about the tragedy and the sadness that we face.

I want now to turn to our third panelist, Jeremy McClellan. Thank you for being here today. I heard you were a hit last night in the comedy show. I want to ask you a rather serious question. I was quite impressed by your willingness to speak publicly and write publicly about your experiences with depression. I want to ask you to explain to us how you have experienced the differences between confession—as a recent convert to Catholicism—and therapy. What can those two different practices do to help someone who has mental illness, and what can they *not* do?

Jeremy McLellan: Thank you so much for having me. I’m very honored to be here with these other speakers. A few days ago I got sinus surgery and a tonsillectomy. So if I sound weird, that’s why. But I also mention it for another reason, and that is because both chronic sinusitis, which I had, and huge tonsils can cause poor sleep and mouth breathing. So those are the two

main things, and it can cause ADHD, depression, all these other things. That can then cause a lack of executive functioning, sort of like what ADHD is and a big part of not. A lack of executive functioning, by the way, is not being able to keep your promises. Then we get to the question, Is it a sin to break your promises? I think when you ask people, they answer, yeah, of course. It's not good to break your promises. When you promise to do something, you should do it. If you break your promise intentionally, and you then go to confession, confess your sin, do it quickly; don't take up the priest's time. But what if I go to confession and then continue breaking my promises? Then I'll keep going back there over and over and over and over with the same confession, because I haven't fixed anything. I've confessed the sin, but in order to actually fix the problem I have to either go to therapy and learn some stuff, maybe take anti-depressants, or do like I did a few years ago, and get surgery. It's a weird thing to think about. At the same time, if having surgery or taking a pill does suddenly make you able to keep your promises, then you weren't really breaking your promises on purpose, right? It wasn't an act of the will if a pill can make you do it. So hey, good news, right? But you'll have to ask my wife in a few months whether I'm actually better at planning stuff. But I think that's a good overview of my distinction between confession and therapy. To be virtuous, it's very, very important that you understand and interpret the world correctly. And we call that *prudence*. I equate prudence with mental health, where, if you're mentally ill, it means that something is causing you to interpret and process reality in an incorrect way. Which, by the way, presupposes that there is a correct way to process reality, which presupposes some sense of objective truth; you're not just imposing your will on reality. Going to therapy can make you a more prudent person. And I think it's essential to living the virtuous life and, I think, to being a good person in general.

Mooney: Thank you. That was fantastic to hear. I was born and raised Catholic, so confession was part of my grade school education. I once heard somebody who converted to Catholicism talk about confession as a way of learning to say out loud all of the things that you know you willingly do that you shouldn't. And when I was in 3rd grade, I confessed—I don't know,

taking a paper clip from my teacher's desk or something like that. But there's something to naming what you've willfully chosen to do.

McLellan: And naming it in a boring way; that's really important, because in therapy, you're talking about the sin like it's just fascinating, right? But in confession, I don't do that. I say I lied. Once. That's it. The priest will thank me for telling everyone that. You don't have to go into a long story about it. In that sense, confession can be therapeutic. In the sense that you stop thinking of your vices and your sins as interesting. No, your virtues and your excellencies, that is what makes you interesting.

Mooney: If I understood you correctly, therapy can be helpful precisely because it allows you to tell the long story that might lead you to be the kind of person who does a certain kind of thing, and in doing that, then you develop the virtue of prudence. But the goal is to develop the virtue of prudence. The goal isn't telling your story for the sake of telling your story, but for the sake of getting to the bottom of it, to be able to develop the virtues.

McLellan: Josef Pieper talks a lot about something very essential to prudence: being able to tell your story truthfully. Someone who lives in a fantasy world and got a divorce, but then, narrates the divorce in a very dishonest way—they are never going to see things correctly. Therefore they're never going to be able to act in accordance with reality, which is essential. By going to therapy, you tell stories, you talk about your abuse as a kid, right? Or whatever issues you have, and while you're talking, the therapist—a good therapist—will spot from a mile away the gaps and equivocations and ways that you've distorted the story. Plot holes, if you will. You watch a movie with a million plot holes and it's just obvious. A good therapist will be able to make you realize what the actual truth is, so you can actually live in reality, which is such a gift of mental health.

Mooney: I struggled the most with mental illness after my father died. His funeral was September 10th, 2001. I woke up the following morning to 9/11 and was quite literally numb. I couldn't cry, I couldn't speak, I couldn't do anything. I sought out therapy and it didn't go very well. Then I actually sought out a Catholic therapist and that helped, because I was talking to somebody who understood that I was going through a real experience of grief, but that I was also dealing with the deep questions about what had

just happened to our world. To me, 9/11 felt like the world had been turned upside down and that was its own question that I had to deal with outside of therapy.

Which now turns me to a question for all of you. We're having this panel about a year after the pandemic really hit the United States. All of thought pondered questions about mental illness and suicide before the pandemic hit. What has the pandemic done to the epidemic of mental illness and suicide that we were already dealing with? Aaron, I wanted to ask you, as a psychiatrist who has published on this in *First Things*, could you give us just a brief overview of this rise in suicide? In particular, what groups are most susceptible? And then I'd like all of the panelists to comment on the relationship between social isolation and the culture of American individualism. Not to discount any of the biochemical processes that could lead to mental illness or suicide, but what are some of the cultural or social potential causes of mental illness and suicide, and what can be done about those?

Kheriaty: Margaret, I'm really glad we're addressing this issue, even though it's a difficult issue to talk about. I'm going to give a few numbers just to sketch what's happening in terms of suicide during the pandemic. This is a very personal issue for me. I lost a friend in December to suicide, a young man, 17 years old. Parents are very close friends, and William was his name. He grew up with my second-oldest son. They were very close friends. This is a kid I've known since he was an infant. He struggled with depression, and I think in part because of the effects of the lockdown, he ended up taking his own life in December, just before Christmas. Going back even further, a close friend of mine, a good high school friend, was diagnosed with bipolar disorder when I was in medical school. Seeing what he went through was, I think, a big part of what influenced me to choose psychiatry as my specialty. Matthew was his name. He ended up taking his life as well. He died by suicide when I was an intern, so this is a deeply personal issue for me and one that I'm very, very concerned about right now. We know that suicide has been on the rise since 1999, even before the pandemic began. Between 1999 and 2019, we saw rising rates of suicide in the United States for men and women in basically every age group up to the age of 75. A slight drop for the elderly, but everyone else was seeing more suicide in the United States. And this was

against the backdrop of suicide rates declining internationally. Something was happening over the last 20 years in the U.S. to contribute to a problem that wasn't necessarily a worldwide phenomenon.

We don't have definitive suicide numbers for 2020. It takes the CDC a year or two to collect that data, but we see some early indications that we're seeing this problem worsen, not surprisingly, during the lockdown. The military, for example, last year reported a 20% rise in suicide among veterans. There was a study done last June by the CDC that flagged some very concerning trends in terms of people *contemplating* suicide. Back in June of 2020, approximately 1 in 10, around 11% of Americans, reported that they had seriously contemplated suicide. Not over their lifetime, *but during that month of June*, sometime in the last 30 days. Most concerning to me was, if you break it down by age, those who were 18 to 24 years old in June of 2020, reported that they had considered suicide in the last 30 days. That number was 24%. So basically, one in four adolescents or young adults, in the month of June, had considered suicide. This is a large spike in suicidal ideation as compared to the previous year, 2019. We saw a tripling of anxiety disorders from 2019 to 2020 in that study. We saw a quadrupling of depressive disorders in the same period of time. We know that these problems tend to contribute to suicide. I have a lot of trepidation about what we're going to see when those numbers finally are released, but what I've seen in my own clinical practice and the resident clinics that I supervise, what's impacted me personally through the loss of this friend, has got me very concerned. And I'm glad we're addressing it, and looking at maybe what can be done about it.

Mooney: Thank you, Aaron. I think some of the numbers you gave are extremely sobering, but they set the stage for why we're having this discussion.

Let me start with Mary, because she and I were talking about this backstage. Is there something to be gained now that the rates of suicide have grown so high that they've affected so many of us? One of my closest friends lost her husband to suicide just a couple of months ago. And Mary, you've lost students to suicide. You wrote your article in *The Hedgehog Review* almost as a *cri de coeur*. How do we talk about the reality of suicide and death in a way that can give people a sense of hope? Mary, could you share with us why

you wrote the article in *The Hedgehog Review*, and how you teach and address this very real phenomenon of suicide with your students?

Townsend: I think one of the strange ways that universities tend to deal with this—and now they're going to be dealing with this even more because this age group is at greater risk—is that we think that people who are having an existential crisis need to be roped off, so we don't have to think about them, and sort of make it all their fault. Walker Percy points out that to be human is to experience alienation while we live. We're alienated from God, we're alienated from others in our community. And the philosophic legacies that we have make this worse, and the careerism of the world makes it worse. As he points out, if you can live in a world like this—and this is even more true since the pandemic—and think that everything's fine, then you're the one with the problem. If we can see that attempting to understand this philosophically and religiously is the first task of all humans, and we can't put it off anymore, then I think that's the beginning of a more serious approach to it. I think that college students want to give themselves a way of thinking about these big questions, but they feel so pressured to get good grades and to only take courses that actively influence their job prospects, that they can pass this moment by. I think it's going to be so important that we think about education, philosophic education, theological education, as a way of dealing together as a community about what these questions really mean for us.

Mooney: Jeremy, you work with a lot of young people, and you do your standup comedy to a lot of different audiences. Could you share with us the types of conversations you have with young people? And perhaps share with us why you chose to write so publicly about your own experiences with mental illness. What's been the reaction to you starting this conversation about it?

McLellan: I'm a comedian, so I don't have much shame. It's not like I had to get over sharing stuff like that. One thing that's really important to realize is that asking someone if they've been suicidal does not put the idea in their head. Before comedy, I worked with people with intellectual disabilities for 15 years. One of my jobs was teaching suicide prevention to caregivers. Caregivers were always worried that if they asked somebody, "Have you ever thought about suicide?"—they'll take it as a suggestion. People think about

suicide all the time. It's an eternal question we have. And I think making way too much out of intrusive thoughts is a lot like thinking too much of your dreams. If you dream that you sleep with your neighbor's wife, it doesn't mean there's this huge meaningful issue to contemplate. I don't know why I brought that up on Valentine's Day, but anyway. Part of mental health is just being mindful. A thought pops into your head, you see it, you notice it, and then you just let it go. That's part of being mindful of your own thoughts. One thing that I've learned is not to catastrophize various things in my own thoughts. When I do standup and talk about mental health, people are always very, very relieved just to be having these conversations. Especially now that we're isolated, or have been for a year, and people don't necessarily have a sense of community. These are conversations that we need to have. If you're honest about your mental health and do it in a helpful way, people are cool talking about it. I've experienced nothing but good responses to me talking about it.

Mooney: When we begin to have these discussions, how do we engage with people so that the discussion has a sense of being hopeful?

Townsend: In the professional world, we tend to think of these subjects as taboo, but then once you start talking with students about them, they're right there. They've already been talking about them. They're so ready to talk about them, and they are looking for hope. Honesty about the seriousness of the question is the first step, but then also just knowing that our entire life is structured towards a being that is more eternal than ourselves; it's the beginning of a relationship. Things like sadness, despair—if we think of them as questions, as the beginning of a path, a beginning of a seeking, then it's not a negative thing. It can be the beginning of a greater relationship with the divine.

Mooney: I'll share one story and maybe some of you, some of the other panelists, have experienced this too. When I was at Yale as a faculty member, I was living in one of the student dorms. In a summer program that I taught, a student revealed that she had suicidal thoughts. I have to admit, I felt scandalized. I didn't know what to do. I was terribly worried, and the advice I was given was to sit down with her and have a conversation. That was helpful advice, and it did work well, but then I asked her to lunch again and at that

conversation, I felt like I was breaking an unwritten rule: I told her why I thought her life had meaning and value. She had been raised in an atheist household, and told me she thought when we die, we are simply specks of dust that go back into the Earth. I shared with her that I was a Catholic, and the reason I thought her life had meaning was because God had created her in love, that the end of her life was to grow in love, that and I believed one day she would come to experience that love in some way. I must admit I had that conversation with a lot of trepidation, because at a secular university, that's not something you're supposed to say. But the student's reaction really got me. She didn't say very much in that moment, but she went out all around New Haven looking for Christmas cards and could find only very secular ones, with *Joy* or *Peace* or something, but no Jesus or Mary or Joseph. She finally got a card with Jesus, Mary, and Joseph on it and put it on my door. She thanked me for my open thoughts and big hugs. So one thing I've learned as a cradle Catholic is that people who are not raised in faith are open when you are willing to share with them how you answer the meaning of life. What I find sometimes happens in universities is we blow open the question about the meaning of life and then we refuse to say how we answer it. How do you share your own understanding of what makes life meaningful, when you know you're dealing with people who may be atheist or not share your faith?

Kheriaty: It's a great question, Margarita. We shouldn't think of these conversations only as the purview of the professionals, The risk averse university administrator who says, "If a kid mentions suicidality to you, you should stop talking, pick up your phone, and immediately refer them to student mental health," is really insane. And I say that as the person on the receiving end at student mental health who may see them when they arrive in my office. The first thing to do, even though it's uncomfortable, is to do what you did: listen. "Tell me more about that. When did you start thinking about that? What's going on in your life that has led you to the point where you've begun to wonder whether it's worth going on or not anymore?" And just listen. I think there's initially a lot of fear, because we assume we have to solve the problem. The first step is simply to understand and make a connection with the person so the person feels a little less isolated. Two people coming in contact with one another, and one person saying to another person, Yeah,

I can understand, given what you've gone through and given what you've struggled with, or just given the way that you see the world—why you're suffering in this way. And down the line that may lead to a referral, and it may lead to deeper conversations about what gives me in my own life meaning, and we know that those things are helpful, too.

We look at medical research. My colleague at Harvard, Tyler VanderWeele, has done a lot of work on the role of religious faith and religious participation in lowering the risk of suicide. He's replicating a lot of work that's been done previously on that, so it's very well understood in social science that religious faith and participation will lower the risk of suicide. It doesn't immunize us against suicide, and people of deep faith do succumb to suicide, but the way in which we fundamentally see the world does matter. Certain worldviews can lead to various forms of insanity. It's important for us to have those conversations about metaphysics and religion as well, because these things have real impacts on people's lives.

Mooney: You know, part of the reason I was willing to have the conversation with that young woman at Yale is that I had done a research project on young adults who had experienced some kind of a trauma. And what I heard again and again was similar to what you just said, that people who had suffered chronic mental illness felt that when they went to different institutions, whether that be therapy, or psychiatry, or sometimes even to their churches, they were treated as a problem to be fixed. What I kept hearing from people was that they just wanted to be treated as a person, as a whole person. If you had lost a parent or lost a child or had trauma from serving in the military, they wanted to be able to share those stories without necessarily being labeled a problematic person. I discovered that many of the people I interviewed found that their symptoms of mental illness decreased through prayer or some kind of meditation. Aaron, you just alluded to this. There are plenty of clinical studies that show this, that prayer or meditation can have a positive impact on reducing the symptoms of mental illness. But Jeremy, you also say in your article that it's not the right thing to tell someone suffering from mental illness, "You should just go pray more." What *is* the role of prayer and meditation in facing mental illness?

McLellan: Well, I think you should tell everybody to pray more, no

matter what is going on. But we don't want people thinking the reason they are struggling with mental illness is because of some moral failing, and therefore if they pray more for God to fix it—like, God has to receive 27 prayers from them to fix it, but they're only at 22 and so they need to pray more and then God will make them happy or something.

Josef Pieper has a book, *Happiness as Contemplation*. And that is what happiness is, the contemplation of reality and ultimately of God. People who reject that, a lot of rationalist people who are atheists, realize there's a restlessness, a desire to go fix something. A desire to make the world right. But part of our belief as Catholics, I think, is that in the ultimate analysis, the world is sound; the world is created by God, it is a gift to us, and in the final analysis, all is right with the world. And that is something hardly anyone believes today, that the basic fundamental reality of the universe is good and is love. If that is your worldview, then I think you owe it to everyone to not only operate that way, but to tell them. And that involves, obviously, prayer.

Mooney: Thank you, Jeremy, that was wonderful. Mary, could you tell us how you talk about spirituality or faith at St. John's? Not just as a philosophical system, but as a worldview, as something that's personally meaningful and could potentially be personally meaningful to the students you interact with.

Townsend: At Saint John's, I've had the pleasure of teaching metaphysics, and have taught metaphysics from both theistic and non-theistic perspectives. When you think about existence, you're also along the path towards thinking about ultimate things as well. Just being in the presence of what existence means and letting yourself be there, not because you're hoping it'll make you feel better, but just sitting with it for its own sake. I think prayer is like that. Saying the rosary, or walking—anything you can do for its own sake puts you in a mode of contemplation of existence.

Mooney: From what you're describing, the way you try to teach philosophy is the contemplation of our being, the contemplation of our humanity, being in awe, being in stillness, being in wonder at the mystery of creation. Is that what I hear you saying? Creating a space for the disinterested learning that should characterize a university but so often gets caught up in one or another goal or credential or skill.

Townsend: This is a very old Aristotelian distinction, between something as an instrumental good and something for its own sake. And you see it mapped out in human life. We take our life as instrumental. We take life as instrumental to a career. And then you also think of the university as instrumental to some further building block, but you get lost in this infinite loop of things that are for the sake of something else and something else. It's so hard to turn your eyes back to that moment, but it's the beginning of philosophy, and I do think that it's the beginning of a religious consciousness.

Mooney: Given the rise in suicide that's been occurring for the past 20 years, and which seems to be accelerating during the Covid pandemic, several of us on this panel have known someone in the past year who has committed suicide. What can you say, and what should you *not* say to the loved ones who have lost somebody to suicide? How do you communicate the idea that the world is ultimately good? That the basis of reality—as Jeremy said so beautifully—is love. How do you communicate that unity, that love, that hope, to someone whose life has been marked by tragic suicide?

Kheriaty: I think you begin by being present to them and by showing them a loving, faithful presence through friendship. Don't tell them that you know what they're going through, or try to analogize it to some experience of loss that you've had. If you have lost a loved one to suicide, then of course you can do a little bit of that. But I've not lost a child to suicide; I cannot imagine. Losing a friend was bad enough. Telling William's parents that somehow I understood what they were going through would have been a lie, and they didn't need that. What they need to know is that you love them, that you love the person that they lost. One of the beautiful things that was emphasized during the homily at William's funeral is that as Catholics we have something we can do for the deceased: we can pray for them. We can offer the mass for them. We can offer the rosary and prayers via the communion of saints that the person is not utterly lost to us, and that, because Christ descended into our misery in the Incarnation and on the cross, no person is ever lost from God's love, right? That in the Garden of Gethsemane, he suffered the anguish that we suffer; and his cry on the cross is an identification with those who, because of their illness, who because of their anguish or their despair, cannot at a particular moment feel God's presence. I think the key is friendship, and

the key is that the Christian community has to show that we love one another, not in spite of, but especially in and through those most difficult periods of life. When William died, to see the whole local Christian community come out and support his parents, support his siblings and family—as anguishing as the whole thing was, it was also very, very edifying and beautiful. That's what Christians have always done from the very beginning. That's what attracted the pagan society that Christianity came into—they saw what love Christians had for one another.

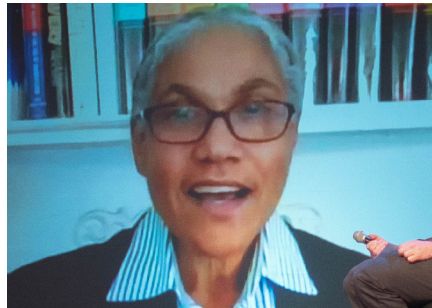
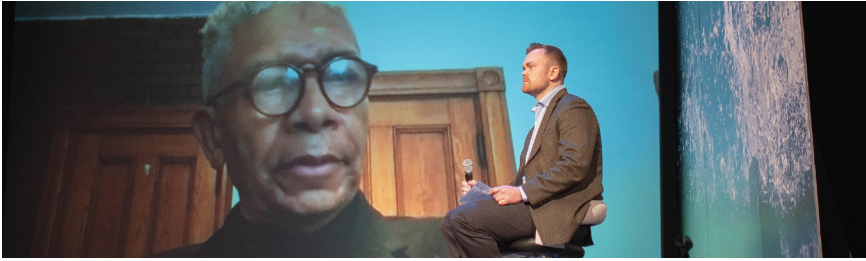
Mooney: Being present, being in friendship, praying for the dead, lamenting publicly together. Mary and Jeremy, in the few minutes we have left, would you like to share your thoughts on this question? How do you respond in a compassionate way to somebody whose life has been marked by tragic suicide of a loved one?

McLellan: Going back to what I said earlier about happiness being a docile contemplation and reception of reality—that's not a comfortable thing. I think it's very important to say that. Meditation and prayer are not necessarily fun. Part of docility is not imposing your will on reality, and that means that when someone is suffering, when there is horror, a horrifying tragedy, you're not escaping it and just thinking about flowers or something. You are receiving it, and not trying to cram it into your preconceived idea of what the person should be going through, or how they should be processing it. There is something very courageous but difficult about just taking that person's suffering and being with them as they are suffering.

Mooney: Mary, we have very little time, but I do want to give you the final word before I make an announcement.

Townsend: We have to have respect for someone in great suffering. You know that they've seen something of the vastness of the world that is terrifying, and so you have to have respect for that feeling and sit with it.

Mooney: Death is a part of reality. Tragedy is a part of the reality we all face. We need to have respect for people who have seen the darkness, but also be present, mindful, hopeful, and loving to them. Thank you, Aaron, Jeremy, and Mary for this wonderful conversation. Thank you to all of our viewers on YouTube, and thank you to all who organized the New York Encounter and made this conversation possible.



A DESPERATE CRY FOR JUSTICE

*Seeking a truly human path to racial justice with **Anika Prather**, professor at Howard University, **Eugene Rivers**, Pentecostal Minister, and **Jacqueline Rivers**, director of the Seymour Institute for Black Church and Policy Studies.*

Introduction

Many people in the US today are seeking ways to heal the wounds of racism and move forward. However, this requires traveling a narrow road between two cliffs. On the one side, there is the danger of denying or ignoring both the past and present racial injustice in our country. On the other side, there is the temptation of reducing all our human experience to a matter of power, which inevitably perpetuates violence. Speakers will share their experience of traveling this narrow road, and also of opening the way for others.



Jonathan Liedl, moderator: Good afternoon and welcome, live from the Sheen Center in Manhattan, to the New York Encounter 2021. My name is Jonathan Liedl, and I'll be moderating our conversation this afternoon, *A Desperate Cry for Justice*. Before we begin, I just want to give a special word of thanks to *Plough* for their generous support in organizing this event. The killing of George Floyd shocked the world, and it sparked a widespread desire to seek racial justice in America. However, it's been difficult to find a unified way forward, and often the conversation around racial justice seems dominated by ideology and influenced by political partisanship. Many of these approaches fail to meet not only the demands of justice, but also the

demands of the human heart, and many of us are looking for something else. Today we are joined by three leaders in the movement for racial justice who, by their bold calls for justice and also their deep commitment to our shared humanity, are witnessing to a different way forward. I'm very grateful and honored to be here with our guests, and I'm really looking forward to this conversation. I'll introduce them now, but I want to remind everyone that if they'd like to see the full biographies, they can visit the New York Encounter's website at newyorkencounter.org.

Dr. Anika Prather teaches in the Classics Department at Howard University, and has degrees from Howard, NYU, St. John's College, and the University of Maryland. She is the founder of the Living Water School, a Christian school offering a classical education to a predominantly African-American student body, and she recently published her book, *Living in the Constellation of the Canon: The Lived Experiences of African-American Students Reading Great Books Literature*. Welcome, Dr. Prather.

We're also joined by Reverend Eugene Rivers III and Dr. Jacqueline Rivers, who are husband and wife and live and work among the poor in the inner city of Boston. Dr. Jacqueline Rivers is the Executive Director of the Seymour Institute for Black Church and Policy Studies. She holds a PhD in African-American Studies in Sociology from Harvard, where she has served as a lecturer and as a Doctoral Fellow in the Multidisciplinary Program in Inequality and Social Policy at the J. F. Kennedy School. Dr. Rivers has worked on issues of social justice and Christian activism in the Black community for more than 30 years. Welcome, Dr. Rivers.

Reverend Rivers is the Founder and Director of the Seymour Institute for Black Church and Policy Studies. He received his education in Philosophy at Harvard, and he is a widely published writer, lecturer, and community activist. He has also advised both the Clinton and Bush administrations on their faith-based initiatives, and Reverend Rivers serves as the pastor of the Azusa Christian Community in Dorchester. Welcome Reverend Rivers.

The killing of George Floyd sparked a renewed conversation in this country about racial justice. But each of you has been committed and working for this cause for a number of years. I will start with you, Dr. Rivers. I'd really be interested in hearing from each of you on how you experienced this desire

for racial justice in your own lives. What events throughout your life have had the biggest impact on you?

Dr. Jacqueline Rivers: Thank you very much, Jonathan. Thank you for the opportunity to be here for a very important conversation, and one that is all the more so in light of events in January, January 6 in particular. I'm from Jamaica, and was already an adult by the time I came to the United States. It was with some trepidation that I came for college, because of a sense that the United States was a racist country. I went to Boston, which had the image of being very racist, given the busing crisis that ran while I was a freshman. I remember that we were advised to stay out of downtown Boston because of the violence there. What was the violence? Well, it was around that time, I believe, that a young football player was shot and paralyzed purely because of racial animus; shot and paralyzed. That was my introduction to the United States, and that, I think, has been one of the big events in shaping my sense of racial injustice.

But I think it goes beyond just that personal experience. It really is concern for the Black poor. I really felt strongly as an undergraduate that God was calling us to work on issues of justice and social justice, and that as a Black person, I couldn't simply enjoy my Harvard degree and go on to business school and be wealthy and forget the poor that I was intimately linked with others—my identity was connected to theirs. And so we moved into a poor neighborhood in Dorchester, a poor neighborhood of Boston, which also turned out to be extremely violent. Living in the middle of this played up the importance of racial justice.

Liedl: Beautiful, thank you for sharing. Dr. Prather, what's been your experience?

Anika Prather: I'm unique in that my first awareness of a problem went beyond just hearing about it, reading about it, knowing the history of it—but by being a Black child going to a predominantly white Christian school. I endured quite a bit of racism in those experiences under the love of Christ, so that's when I really began to feel a passion for racial reconciliation based on the word of God. Based on what God says about what our relationship should be with each other, my passion for showing the church should be the light in this, not the problem. I went out to Howard University, where I

became very involved with the impact movement that was led by Dr. Charles Gilmer. His teaching and his discipleship, along with other people like James White, their discipleship, their leadership, was instrumental in helping us serve our people and serve humanity, and bring racial reconciliation based on truth and the word of God. They made us *do* things, and not just sit in the pew and hear about it. We were going into the community, we were speaking, we were being activists wherever we were placed. And that college experience tied back to my childhood experience. It did nothing but ignite more of a fire in me, so that I became very committed. Even if nobody knew my name, in whatever school I'm working in or wherever God is placing me, I was going to speak on these things. And that's how I've made it my life's work.

Liedl: Beautiful, thank you. And what about you, Reverend Rivers?

Rev. Eugene Rivers: I'll give you two incidents. The first time I was living in Chicago, I was chased by a group of young white boys who caught me and stomped me. And this is a few years after the execution of Emmett Till. Emmett Till was from Chicago; I'm in Chicago. They chased me, I tripped and fell, and they stomped me brutally. And that was very interesting. There was some white girl that I said hi to—this was like Emmett Till—and the white girl's name was Susan. I walk by her house on my way home. The young white boy says, "What's that n***** doing here?" And they chased me across a railroad track. I stumble, and then about five or six of them just stomped me until they got tired, and that was my introduction to reality. What's important to note is that this had nothing to do with my feelings. This was a fact. I got stomped by these white people. What I felt made no difference to anybody. Feeling is almost a luxury in this context. This is the first time.

Then the second occasion. When I was eleven, I'm standing in my doorway—in my doorway; not outside, not on the steps, not in the street, but in my doorway. Two police wagons come up the street in Philly and the guy says, "Get in the truck." It was a paddy wagon. I say, "Sir, what did I do? I'm just standing in my doorway." "N*****, did you hear me? Get in the truck or it's going to be worse!" They put me in a paddy wagon, no explanation for why I'm arrested. I'm taken to the 35th District Police Department, they put me in a cell. I called my mom, devout Christian Bible believer; the whole

thing, right? On my maternal side, our folk were serious Christians. My mom comes and says, “Well, why would you arrest my son? What did he do?” The officers didn't tell my mother. “N*****, if you don't shut up, we'll put you in the cell with him.”

Then one more, quickly. I got arrested for sneaking on a bus to go home from summer school. The police caught me, they took me to a police station, they locked me up. We're there for an hour, they take me out of the cell, put me in a police car, and take me two miles into another gang territory and drop me off, saying, “N*****, you're on your own.” It ain't got nothing to do with how I feel—this is what it was. For me, I am not afforded the luxury to operate on how I feel. My feelings have nothing to do with any of this, it's facts. And so, this conversation, I'd like to talk about what's real, because I lost my privilege and right to have an emotional feeling about any of this when I was six or seven years old, and that was a thousand years ago.

Liedl: I'm struck by each of you sharing these personal instances. But as Dr. Rivers pointed out, it goes beyond personal experience to widespread patterns in the culture, in society, be it in business, economics, or policing. What was the impact on you personally when George Floyd was killed?

Dr. Rivers: What struck me was, this was just the worst in a long, long, long series of events like this. For as long as I've been in this country, and I came in '79, there's been a history of these events. In Miami—

Rev. Rivers: Trayvon Martin.

Dr. Rivers: No, no, well before Trayvon Martin. There were riots in Miami because a man on a motorcycle was killed by the police, and that was decades ago. And then we've had just one series after another of these events. What is different in the current era is that now these are captured on cell phones. This was a horrendous crime. It was a heart-stopping crime. To think that a human being could kneel on the neck of another human being, and just have him die under your knee while he pleaded for his life and called for his mother—that was just horrifying. But I really saw this as just the worst of what had happened so far, and the fact that this person was a police officer—I mean, he wasn't a Nazi criminal. This was a police officer who was sworn to protect and defend.

This is now captured on cell phones, and so you have much more awareness

of it, and white people weren't able to deny it as they had in the past. They couldn't justify it. They had to confront it. These were the thoughts that were going through my mind, that even in this era where it's caught on cell phones, on videos, in so many cases officers simply walk. It takes so long for them to be charged, if in fact they're ever charged. Very often, the grand jury doesn't bring an indictment, and even if they are indicted, then they are found not guilty. I mean, the terrible events in Los Angeles that kicked off the riots in Watts. You would have thought that there was no way those police officers could have walked. Amadou Diallo in New York. You would have thought there was no way that these police officers could simply have walked, have been found guilty of doing nothing wrong, not even reckless endangerment. In the Amadou Diallo case, they shot 41 times into an apartment building where innocent people were. That really was how I was reacting when I saw this. You know, it was horrifying, but sadly not surprising.

Liedl: Reverend Rivers and Dr. Prather, how did it impact you?

Prather: I couldn't get over it. I had to make myself stop watching the videos, seeing him there, seeing him crying for his mother. He was sort of a new Christian, kind of trying to change his life around. As Dr. Rivers said, it wasn't surprising, the only difference is we're catching these things on video now. One of my biggest fears has been that something like what happened to George Floyd would happen to my brother. Because he could take a girl out on a date and when he's driving home, "Dad, they stopped me again. Dad, they said my windows are too tinted. I told them my windows aren't tinted, then they told me to put my hands up." It's a constant recurring cycle, and he's your typical, almost 6-foot, chocolate, African-American male. I mean, it's so bad, he can pass a police car and he'll say to himself, "They're gonna stop me," and they usually do. Then when he comes home, my dad says, "Son, did you keep your hands on the wheel? Did you do this? Did you do that?" What George Floyd tells us is that it doesn't matter what you do. You're thinking, "Okay, if I just do these things, I can be safe from this happening to me, if I teach my children this." When we watch things like George Floyd, it's not just, "Oh, that's so awful! I can't believe they did that to him"—there's actually a whole bunch of terror that comes over you. I am the mother of two young sons, ages 8 and 10. My brother has a 12-year-old son

and a 7-year-old son, and so he cries whenever this happens. We both cry. We both get terrified, because what if somebody accuses our boys of something and this happens to them?

What George Floyd triggered in me was a really strong desire to make it stop, but I felt helpless. Like, how does little ol' me stop it? I'm not into politics at all, I'm just a little Christian education person, so what do I do? I began to think it through, talked with my parents and my husband. And that's when I decided to host a protest called the Black Lives Funeral, where I partnered with funeral homes all over D.C., and we drove around the city and shut the Maryland-D.C. area down on our side. We had posters all over our cars, and we held a public funeral with a casket decorated with all the lives that have been lost. You go to our website and you can see all the lives lost to police brutality. We made an educational video to educate people on the George Floyd Justice in Policing bill that needs to be passed. When I saw George Floyd go through that, it was kind of the nail in the coffin for me. I've gotta do something before my children grow up, before they are outside of my protection. That's what it did for me.

Liedl: Reverend Rivers, what about yourself?

Rev. Rivers: When I saw the George Floyd thing, I wasn't surprised. It was business as usual. Walter Scott was shot seven times in the back in South Carolina, running down the street away from the police. Walter Scott. Mother Emanuel—I mean, George Floyd is an improvement over Mother Emanuel. A young white terrorist—a white terrorist—goes into a Black church during a prayer meeting. They welcome this demon into the church. He empties out in the church. Walter, Floyd, Mother Emanuel, Walter Scott. Go down the list. For me, the thing that is most horrifying is not the list, because that's standard operating procedure in this country. The thing that *is* striking to me is the depraved indifference of so many white Christians. I had a conversation with a progressive white Christian, and the conversation was so disconcerting, I couldn't sleep half the night trying to process the horror of the indifference. That was worse than the actual murder of these Black people.

Prather: Yes, yes.

Rev. Rivers: But you can't have an emotional thing about that. What is the most pathetic to me, and this is where you get my emotion, is what

appears to be a depraved indifference to *doing* something. In fact, the disgrace of Black Lives Matter is that Black Lives Matter exists because of the disgrace of the churches. Black Lives Matter wouldn't exist if the white churches had stepped up and the Black church—I'm not going to let them off the hook, either. The thing that's most amazing to me is the lack of any outcry from progressive Christians on January 6th. They said it was a race war, a civil war. I thought there would be a vast outcry of all the peace and justice white people. So that's where I'm at.

Dr. Rivers: It's really been happening for decades. I mean, it's been happening since slavery, but just to give you the details of two examples. The Overtown riots in Miami were in 1980. A Black motorist was beaten to death by four police officers after a traffic stop, but there were no cell phone cameras in 1980. Rodney King in 1992, there were video cameras and they still walked. They didn't manage to beat him to death, but they beat him on camera, and they still walked. Christians needed to speak out about this. Like Dr. Prather, I really wanted to be on record as a Christian opposed to this, and the most powerful way I could do that was by writing. Our church had a press conference about this, and the Boston Globe ran an article that really captured my sense of the situation and the need for police reform. That led to an article in *Religion Unplugged*, really fleshing that out, highlighting the fact that as Christians we are called to act on justice. Saying we love people but not acting for justice is meaningless. Yes, if you see a young Black man being harassed by police, take out your camera, try to intervene, try to save his life, but you can't be there for every young Black man who's being attacked by the police. Some of these issues have to be solved at the level of policy. Trying to put that into the conversation from a Christian perspective, but addressing the broader problem, was the approach that we took.

That then led to an article that ran in *Plough*. Our desire is really to speak to the Black church, but the Black church already has a history of acting on these things. Do we need to do more? Yes, but we have a history of acting on these things. The people who we really want to wake up are the white church. We want to say to the white church: you are called to do justice. You serve Jesus. Jesus was about justice. He said to the Pharisees, look, you tithe dill and mint and cumin, but you ignore the weightier matters—peace and

justice and mercy. And where is the white church on these issues? Why are we not hearing their voice? And why don't we, as Black Christians, speak more loudly?

There were all of these massive rallies. I had to be there. Yes, we're in the middle of a pandemic, but I've got to be there. And so I put on my mask, stayed on the edge of the crowd, but I was there. You know, we're kind of old to be out in the middle of a pandemic, but I was there because I felt compelled. I've got to do something. I've got to act. In addition to writing, I've got to act. When I got there, I saw all of these signs, and I was like, None of these signs said anything about Jesus. I'm going to make myself a new sign: "Christians Against Racial Injustice." And I was out there with my sign, because I wanted people to know that Christians are standing up for this.

Liedl: In that interview with *Plough*, you pointed out that in the response to George Floyd's killing, the solidarity between whites and Blacks was greater and more significant than during the civil rights era. But you also pointed out that the Christian church, the white Christian church, is not stepping up. Reverend Rivers, I know you speak about racism as having a spiritual component to it, so I'm wondering what is lost when Christians vacate their rightful role in standing up for this type of injustice?

Rev. Rivers: Let me share with you the next five to six years. Just like Martin Luther King said in 1962, "Look y'all, we need to deal with this thing or we're going to have riots. I'm the best thing you got. Please hear what I'm saying." They blew him off. In 1964, Philadelphia, Newark, Los Angeles—the churches refused to hear from the prophet. The country exploded. What I see now is that the sins of the church—the white church in particular, because the white church, as a function of its white privilege, has a political authority that Black churches will not have—well, we're in for a very tough time because of our sin. We should have spoken out, cried aloud, and exposed the sins. But we haven't.

Let's go to the spiritual thing. I did an article in *Sojourners* in 1998, a transcription of a talk I gave in 1996 at Virginia Commonwealth University. It was entitled, *Blocking the Prayers of the Church*. I argued that in the 10th chapter of Daniel, you've got the story of Daniel praying, trying to get a word, the angel wants to respond to Daniel's prayer, but says, "Daniel, at

the point at which you sought understanding and humbled yourself, I heard your prayer, but I was detained 21 days by the Prince of Persia.” Spiritual blockage; they tried to get a breakthrough. And what I argued was that the principality and power of the United States, the demonic principality of power, that blocks the prayers of the church in this country—is white supremacy. White supremacy is idolatry. I’m total Bible on this. When you elevate the image of the created above the Creator, then you turn the created into the Creator by making God white, Jesus white, angels white, heaven’s white—everything’s white in heaven. And that idolatry perverts the spiritual integrity of the witness. My argument was basically that the United States is bound by a demonic principality that has infected the entire white church and had an adverse effect on the Black church. The political crisis of the United States is spiritual. It is the church’s failure to engage in the intercessory spiritual warfare against the demonic principality of white supremacy that affects everything and explains—to the disgrace of the church—that to this day, Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in America, which is the most damning indictment of the entire church game.

And the criminal silence. White Christians could have stood up and challenged that terrorist insurrection. Nothing. The white churches could have stood up when they went into Mother Emanuel, right? They didn’t. So look—killing Black people, that’s a day at the office. That’s gonna happen, in part because of the complexity of the white church, and I’m not trying to make you feel guilty. So any of you white people listening to this, I can’t use your guilt, your guilt don’t do nothing for me or for Black people. So, if you’re feeling bad, please, I don’t want to make you feel bad. I don’t need your guilt. Guilt don’t pay no bills. I’m here this afternoon to share not what I feel, but what the truth is.

Prather: I really want to piggyback off of what you’re saying, because I want to talk about my experience of going to white Christian schools. I went to some of the top Christian schools in the Maryland-D.C. area. I was in Christian schools from pre-K through 12th grade, and I endured horrible racism in the schools. I was taught in Bible class that God made Black people inferior, that it was God’s will for Black people to be enslaved. It was through our enslavement that we were saved from pagan beliefs. I was just taught

horrible things in there. I was taught that it is a sin for different races to intermarry. My dad is very militant sometimes, so what he would do, he would show me scriptures. He said, "You're going to these schools, this is probably what they're going to teach you. In that Bible class, you have to say *this*. If they tell you that Black people are cursed, you read the scripture back to them and let them know, no, no—Ham was not cursed, Canaan was cursed, and that was fulfilled at such and such a time. And it has nothing to do with white people at all, it's about the children of Israel." And my mom was constantly showing me, "You are fearfully and wonderfully made, so no matter what they say to you, know it. I know people think we're crazy for putting you in this little white school, but we feel like we want to put you there. We feel like this is what God is telling us to do. We're not having you go in there blindly." As a result, my brother and I both were very vocal. One of our schools would not allow us to have a gospel choir. We were told Black music was a sin, so we protested. We went to another white Christian school that had moved way out in Maryland, away from Black people, but we were one of those few Black people that found the school. We ended up going there and some other Black families followed us. They expelled all of us—parents had to protest. These are Christian schools.

My heart breaks, though, that there seems to be a resistance to acknowledging what was happening. The teachers that taught me this way are still alive; some of them are still teaching. They have children and grandchildren. I have talked to them as a sister in Christ. There was anger; they didn't want to receive my thoughts and I wasn't coming to make them feel guilty. But I do want to say this type of behavior of not acknowledging the racism within the church—I fear for the church meeting Jesus in the state that it is in. Like a lot of us talk about, "Oh, I can't wait till the Lord calls. I can't wait to see Jesus." My thinking is, Okay, I don't think you're ready. I don't think we're ready to see him. And the reason why we're not ready is because we're not dealing with racial reconciliation. The Book of Revelation was written as a warning to the church: get your stuff together before I come back.

I would love to see race relations get better in the entire world, and I sometimes get overwhelmed with that passion. I pray about it all the time.

But one thing God began to show to me is, start where you are. Where am I? I'm in the church. I'm a child of the church. My father's a pastor, my grandfather was a pastor, all my uncles are pastors. All I know is church life, and so that's where I can be. And another thing I have is my experience as a Black woman going to white Christian schools, and in literally every single one I experienced racism. In those schools, did I have teachers that were loving, who tried to live out Micah 6:8? Yes, I think it's Micah 6:8. I just need to look it up, you know, to love mercy. Yes, I had them, but the leadership as a whole, as an organization, there was silence. People had to sneak to be nice to you as a Black person. I remember one time a teacher was saying, "You know, it's a sin for races to intermarry." She's teaching this. My mother and father had both taught me what the scripture had said about that, so I said, "Well, Moses married a Black woman," and she put me in the corner.

I use Christian publishers, but I'm teaching Black students. I can't use most of the Christian education publications for my school because none of them show my people. As a church, we have a book that is full of diversity: in the lineage of Jesus Christ, every single ethnicity is grafted into his genealogy. How do you claim to know the Bible and go and make everybody white? No, I'm not a supporter of making everybody Black. We don't have to make it up. It's in the Bible. We could just say, okay, this person's from here, that's modern-day Iraq, so this person should be tan. Okay, this person is from Africa, somewhere near Ethiopia, so that person is probably chocolate. When I bring this argument to my non-Black brothers and sisters in the Lord, they say, "Oh, you know it's not all about color. We're all just one in Christ." Okay, if we're one in Christ, then show how God has made us one in Christ by putting all of us in the art, putting all of us in the genealogy of Jesus Christ and identifying that. And it goes back to that wanting to elevate one over the other, and Black people do it, too. We want to say, "No, Jesus was Black, and so-and-so is Black, and we're better than—" Well, that's not pleasing to the Lord either. We're all one in Christ. God is no respecter of persons.

Liedl: We've detailed the failures of the church to respond adequately to racial injustice. I'm wondering, though, has the response from non-Christians been adequate, or are we missing something there?

Dr. Rivers: I think it's been very impressive. I think there are lots of

factors that play into that. Some of it is the frustration of the pandemic, the anxieties that that has created. Some of it is, you know, you're locked in and now suddenly there's a cause or reason to get out, so there's excitement. I don't want to suggest that everybody who is out protesting is ready to lay their life down for the cause, right? I don't want to suggest that there's that level of commitment, but it has certainly given it a certain power, and we've seen that this kind of protest is part of what brought about the Civil Rights Act in '64, the Voting Rights Act in '65. So I'm excited to see this kind of response. But it has to go farther. Out of the protests and the marches of the civil rights era came important legislation. We've got to see the same thing here. And some of this is not so much at the federal level, but even at the state and local levels. We have to see laws holding police accountable change, and that's a heavy lift. The church has a special role to play here, both in prayer and intercession, because there's a spiritual dimension to this, which the secular forces, the young people, are not going to see. Occupy Wall Street didn't actually result in any concrete changes. We want to make sure that this actually results in concrete changes. Here in Boston and Massachusetts, there have been laws passed around police reform, so we want to see that kind of momentum go forward.

Liedl: And Reverend Rivers, you said that the national conversation on this issue has been corrupted by national media. What does an adequate conversation look like? What are we missing?

Rev. Rivers: I'll answer that last question first. The white churches should make a decision to follow Jesus on the basic principle of justice. Luke 4:18: "The spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor." *Booyah!* That's his inaugural address. I'm here with my political agenda—good news to the poor, freeing captives, recovering sight to the blind. That's his agenda, that's his revolutionary agenda. So that's the church's piece. I

The Black Lives Matter game has done great good. It brought global attention to an issue that, had you waited on the white churches, would have never showed up. So secular people were moving closer to what Jesus says in terms of looking out for the poor than the white churches were. But the Black Lives Matter thing is being financed by the transgender gay

community; they're underwriting the whole game. This has become a totally commercialized, ideological, fashion item. You got Black Lives Matter everywhere, everywhere, every major corporation. And the back story is that the gay transgender community understood that the best way to market their agenda was to wrap it in Black people. Black Lives Matter says that being transgender is the new Black, which is just a racist lie. Because of our failure on race, another group has hijacked the Black thing and is now running it, unbeknownst to the churches. You can track the marketing, who's financing and funding this thing, the human rights agenda group that's a big national transgender gay thing, they are underwriting Black Lives Matter. We tracked this carefully, the underwriting and the financing, because what happens is, Black Lives Matter was somewhere one day, then all of a sudden exploded—it was everywhere: Coca-Cola, National Football League, NBA. Everybody and their mama was on Black Lives Matter because it had been financed. That didn't come out of nowhere, and the churches have to be more vigilant and alert.

Last thing. At some point, there needs to a conversation about whether or not we're prepared to have the theologically adult conversation about these issues. I'd like to come talk about my feelings, you know, but at some point, the white churches have to decide whether or not they're gonna follow Jesus for real, for real.

Liedl: We've talked about the failures of the church, and we've talked about the inadequacies of a secular approach. What does an authentic path forward to racial justice and racial reconciliation look like?

Prather: When we did our protest, it was not a Black Lives Matter thing. It was a very church-based thing, very scriptural, and we were very focused on representing the Lord when we did ours. My brother preached a sermon about what God feels about justice; it was just a really beautiful moment. But Black Lives Matter, even though they knew we weren't a Black Lives Matter event, they sent flowers, a wreath of flowers to honor the lives of those we were commemorating, and I appreciated them doing that, even though we may have different spiritual backgrounds, different viewpoints, on some of the things you shared, Reverend Rivers. Sometimes people get frustrated with me about not being more vocal about how different we are in our spiritual

standing. It's because I have a hard time complaining about that when the church has been silenced. Well, Black Lives Matter chose to not be silent. I struggle, especially with the white church. That's why I'm very careful about speaking against Black Lives Matter; because a lot of times, white churches will complain about BLM's different spiritual values to discount the work that they're doing. And I think that's the danger.

Liedl: Dr. Rivers, let's go to you

Dr. Rivers: One of the really important things is getting out of our echo chambers. What has been really destructive about cable news and the way that culture has developed, is that people are only hearing from the people they agree with. Psychological studies show that in that situation, our positions get more and more extreme. Add to that the political reality of gerrymandered congressional districts, which means that you have the most extreme politicians being elected, and it becomes almost impossible to be a moderate. We're on this upward spiral of polarization. Reconciliation is not going to result from that. We've got to begin to listen to one another, to listen across political differences, across racial differences. That's when we can begin to work towards reconciliation. And the role that some self-avowed Christians played in storming the Capitol on January 6 is also really important; parading the flag of the Confederacy through the halls of Congress, the flags of traitorous states. How do we address this? I think these are the issues that we have to engage with. And as much as I don't agree with the Biden administration's position on human sexuality or on religious freedom, I am hopeful that this is someone who is more moderate, that this administration may, in fact, create some space for there to be reconciliation. But we the church, we really have to model it. Martin Luther King Jr. preached about love. He opposed injustice in a non-violent way that affirmed the importance of love. We need to do the same. We're not going to get reconciliation without love, so that there can be room for real forgiveness as well as repentance.

Liedl: I'm hearing from all three of you a great amount of...righteous indignation, I think, is the scriptural term we would use for these injustices, and also for the complacency of your brothers and sisters in Christ. But at the same time, just getting to know the three of you over the past week or two, I know there's an immense amount of hope, too, and even to come back like

you just did, Dr. Rivers, and to speak about love—I mean, we're not hearing that in the mainstream. I'm curious, then, how you are able to still have your heart not be hardened after these experiences? Reverend Rivers spoke of being stomped on. How are you able to have a heart that can still hope and love in the pursuit of racial justice? What have you found that allows you to do that?

Dr. Rivers: My faith is central to that; the only source of hope is really in my faith and in seeing the success of the civil rights movement.

Prather: Mine is my faith. The fact that Jesus ran after me and died on the cross for me when I was so unworthy. How dare I judge anyone outside of that? As a matter of fact, I'm not supposed to be judging. I just read in my devotions this week where Jesus said eternity will take care of all of that. Everything has to be rooted in love. James Baldwin talks about that in his book, *The Fire Next Time*. He talks about the trials we go through as a people, but at the root of it, we've got to love each other.

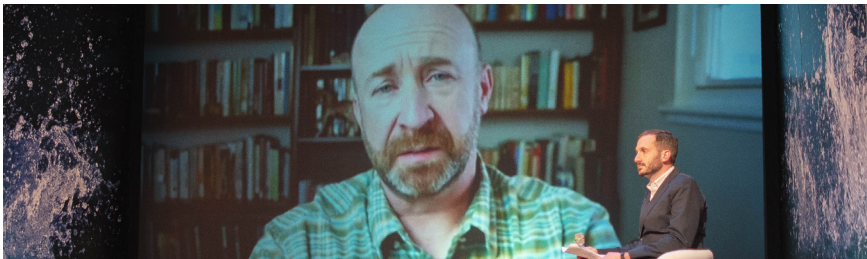
Rev. Rivers: It is the love of God. It is faith. The only game left is the game of faith and love. Now if we could get the churches, yeah, to put their hips with the lips on the love thing, right? We'd be alright.

Liedl: I want to thank the three of you for joining us this afternoon and really sharing from the heart. And I hope it inspires not just nice ideas and nice feelings, Reverend Rivers, but action as well. Thank you so much.

Rev. Rivers: Praise God. God bless you, Jonathan.

WHEN REALITY HITS

A DESPERATE CRY FOR JUSTICE



LESSONS LEARNED

*Online witnesses on education during the pandemic with **Damian Bacich**, professor of Ibero-American Literatures, San José State University, **Peter Fields**, Ph.D. candidate in physics, University of Chicago, **Rev. Edwin Leahy**, O.S.B., high school headmaster, and **Michelle Ratti**, teacher.*

Introduction

Education has been probably the single area where the pandemic was felt the most by the great majority of people. Basically, nobody escaped the impact of Covid-19: students, parents (and their employers), teachers, administrators, politicians. But the new challenges also made everybody rethink the goals and methods of schooling, and the relevance of the family in education. What were the lessons learned in 2020? What changes will be worth preserving after the pandemic?



Patrick Tomassi, moderator: Hello and welcome to the Sheen Center for this special discussion, *Lessons Learned*, witnesses to education during the pandemic. I want to give a big thank you to Benedictine College for helping make this event possible. I'm joined today by Father Edwin Leahy and a number of other guests who work in education or who are students. I'm going to read some quick bios of those guests, but you can read their full bios on the New York Encounter website. Damian Bacich is an educator, writer, and translator. He's been involved in public higher education since 1997 and is Professor of Ibero-American Literatures at San Jose State University. Damian

has been Chair of the Department of World Languages and Literatures at San Jose State since 2012. Peter Fields graduated from the City College of New York. He's currently pursuing a Ph.D. in physics at the University of Chicago. Father Edwin Leahy became headmaster at Saint Benedict's Prep in 1972, where he is also an alumnus. He graduated from Saint Ben's in 1963, took his first vows as a monk of the Benedictine Abbey of Newark in 1966, and was ordained to the priesthood in 1972. Today, Saint Benedict's Prep has more than 750 students, mostly African or of African heritage and Hispanic backgrounds, which are served by 58 faculty members. The school boasts nearly 6,000 alumni who have gone on to become not only leaders in their respective careers, but in their families and their communities. Michelle Ratti is a high school science and literature language teacher at Brookewood school in Kensington, Maryland. She also often teaches natural history to elementary school students and is the mother of three boys. My name is Patrick Tomassi. I am the dean of boys and a math and science teacher at Trinity Academy in Portland, Oregon.

This hour we are discussing education and what we learned during the pandemic. It's striking to think that education has become so central to our national conversation, more so than at any point in my memory other than maybe the implementation of Common Core. When schools began to close in March, when kids were home with their parents, when teachers were working remotely, colleges sent students home; something that we often overlook grew in importance in our eyes. In this conversation, I do not want to focus on the political back and forth that this generated, though it would be unreasonable to pretend as if those political divides did not come up. Much of the debate at a national level has had to do with this question: Should we reopen schools, or should we keep kids home until some future milestone—vaccination, herd immunity, eradication—has been reached? This is an important question and one that, for me as a teacher working on Zoom for 11 months, has serious relevance for my daily life as it does for many of you.

But the pandemic has brought to the forefront lingering questions, ones that were already relevant but that we did not see clearly, which are deeper. What is the role of the parent in their child's education? Should more people consider homeschooling? Why did some students struggle so much

with distance learning while others thrived? What was missing? How do we remedy the social inequities in education that the pandemic exacerbated but were present already? What is the real purpose of education? Why bring kids back to school? These are the questions that we'd like to explore. So firstly, panelists, I'd like you to tell us a little bit about yourselves and what you experienced during the pandemic in terms of education. And Peter Fields, let's start with you.

Peter Fields: Hello, thank you for giving me this experience. Yeah, as Patrick said, I'm a Ph.D. student at the University of Chicago. I'm in my second year, so, if you do the math, I was five months into the beginning of my Ph.D. when the pandemic occurred and everything abruptly changed. Teaching assistant duties went online, graduate courses went online. I was doing some experiments at the time my lab was closed. I later had to improvise some experiments in my apartment to continue my work. If I had to sum it all up in one sentence, I would say it's not that the pandemic was hard, it's that graduate school is already a hard thing and the pandemic just made it a lot harder. Graduate school tends to be an onerous activity even without a pandemic, filled with doubts about what you're doing and why you're doing it. In-person learning is an experience filled with organic human encounters that make the sacrifice worthwhile. And not having it was difficult. At the same time, the pandemic also accented these questions: Why educate? What's the point of learning? Surprisingly, I did experience a grace of renewed interest in what I studied, because the things I do study are quite fascinating. So, to summarize in the briefest way possible, my experience of education during the pandemic was one of tested but ultimately resilient interest in what I study, and expectancy for going back to normal.

Tomassi: Great. Thank you, Peter. Michelle, what was education during the pandemic like for you?

Michelle Ratti: I'm afraid to be very negative, but really, I guess the word that came to mind the most was *atrophy*; just a wasting away. I felt like I was witnessing on Zoom a social, intellectual atrophy of motivation, even of their relationship with me and with each other. That was the predominant thing. When I was an undergraduate and read some of the ancient Greeks, I had this quote that I liked—it's kind of an odd quote from Democritus that's very

short. It says, “To live badly is not to live badly, but rather to spend a long time dying.” My friends thought this was depressing, and for some reason I thought this quote kind of inspired me, because it meant that life is so precious, there isn't time to live badly, there's an urgency to live well. This quote came back to me very vividly during quarantine, because we're quarantining in order to avoid death. There was another kind of death I was witnessing—the death of joyfulness, the death of curiosity, the death of personal responsibility as kids grew more and more lazy. Maybe it's melodramatic to call that a death and to say such a thing. I have tendencies towards melodrama, so maybe that's a fair accusation, but on the other hand, we were allowing our kids to live badly in a way that gave me a tremendous sense of urgency and a great sadness to watch. They're at an age where they're being formed and they're being shaped. To just put their lives on hold and to say, Oh, this is all reversible—I don't know, that's a big assumption. I had a great urgency to want to lift them out of that.

Tomassi: Thank you. Damien?

Damian Bacich: There was so much going on at the time. Apart from the fact that I'm a parent, right? I have two kids, two elementary school-age kids, and was dealing with all the things that all parents were dealing with. We have 35 faculty members in our department, and people were starting to ask me, What are we going to do? And then meeting after meeting with our dean and deciding what we were going to do. Two things started to happen. One was to help each other think clearly, because there was a lot of information coming at us: from the news, from the president of the university, from the dean, from the provost. But trying to help people say, Okay, let's just stop for a second, let's look at what's happening and try to think this through. Let's help each other out and get through this. Secondly, we educate in my department about 1,200 students in a given semester, so we needed to communicate with them and to let them know this is what we're planning on doing, this is where we're planning on heading, and don't worry, you take it easy and take care of yourself and we're going to be with you. There was a process of trying to think clearly, trying to help all the faculty members and the staff help each other out to get through the initial period. As a department chair, I've got a budget, I've got money to deal with. So it's also been a matter of trying to get the resources to the instructors, to the professors, to really

help their students, right? Because this was very abrupt. A lot of people had never taught online, but immediately needed to start. Maybe they didn't have the right type of camera, or the right type of sound equipment, or—how do you use a learning management system? It's a bit hard to reflect on it when you're still driving down the road at 80 miles an hour, but that's how it sort of started for me.

Tomassi: Thank you, Damian. Alright, now Father Ed.

Fr. Edward Leahy: The principle thing we try to do is to be a sign of faith in the middle of the city. Everybody looks at us as a school—we're certainly that and we teach all the normal subjects—but the primary thing that we work at doing here is creating community. Not just for the sake of community, but to be a sign of faith to those folks who contact us this community so that others may come to know God through an experience of us. And you can do that if you see signs of faith that are love and communion: people living together, strange people, some smart, some not so smart, some that are Black, some that are brown, some that are white—all living together. And people look at that, and they say, "How's all that possible? How can these people all do this and get along, when everywhere else in the world we seem to be at each other's throats?" Well, through the presence of the Holy Spirit it becomes possible. So that's really what we try to do. Unfortunately, the pandemic made that visible community disappear. We had to find other ways to create community virtually, which we've worked at doing. We stopped school on March 14th, and on the 17th we were virtual and had our morning meeting as we always do, this time virtually, and we actually discovered things that we're going to continue. So there were some benefits to the pandemic that we never would have discovered.

Tomassi: Great. Thank you, everyone. Peter, I want to address a question to you first. You talked about how frustrating it was to be starting grad school during this time. I suppose you got five months in before going online, but obviously that was something that was outside of your control. It wasn't as if you could get your university to teach in person instead. But it was a frustrating experience, right? My question is: What was missing in online grad school?

Fields: I think it's worth talking for a moment about what graduate

school looks like normally. Very briefly, graduate school is about studying something you love and studying it intensely and deeply and for a long period of time. Most people in graduate school sacrifice a lot of free time, and either aren't making very much money or are paying a lot of money to do it. In and of itself, that's tough. There's a quote from Dostoyevsky: "Though these young men unhappily fail to understand that the sacrifice of life is, in many cases, the easiest of all sacrifices, and that to sacrifice, for instance, five or six years of their seething youth to hard and tedious study, if only to multiply tenfold their powers of serving the truth and the cause they have set before them as their goal—such a sacrifice is utterly beyond the strength of many of them." I think there's some truth to that.

Also, there's no societal pressure to be in graduate school like there is for undergraduate school. Most people go to college nowadays, but most people don't go to graduate school. The things you study in graduate school tend to be very esoteric, of little practical import. It's just not apparent. Last year, I was working on an experiment with a very particular phenomenon in fluid mechanics, and who knows what it'll have to do with anything in the future? All this is to say is that what makes me really struggle in graduate school is knowing the meaning of what I do. In my experience in those first five months, I really got to encounter some things that were quite phenomenal in helping me through that. I can't describe it as anything other than community. I met really brilliant people. My peers were all very interested in what they were doing, and it was always a pleasure to talk to them and have my interest renewed by their interest. Similarly, with the professors, although they can be intimidating because of their intellect, you really feel yourself challenged and it gives something to aspire to be. Or even interacting with undergraduates by being a teacher assistant. Sometimes they ask a really good question that stumps you makes you think. Hanging out in the graduate student lounge, going to the coffee machine where everybody hangs out, you know—like I said before, organic human experiences helped me continue on this path. So, to answer your question about what was lacking in an online learning graduate school, the answer is all of that. And this kind of gets at what Michelle is saying, this atrophy associated with not having support to go

through the beautiful experience that education can be, but also the honors experience that it can be.

Tomassi: Michelle can we talk a little bit about the attribute that Peter mentioned and that you mentioned? You were obviously frustrated with not being able to go back to school sooner, both for your children and for your students. You wanted to go back faster than other people were comfortable with, right? I want to ask why. What did you see that was so crucial to in-person education that was missing in distance learning? What was causing this atrophy?

Ratti: If education is an introduction to reality, then unfortunately it's my impression is that virtual learning is, for most people, a disengagement with reality, and for lots of reasons. Human nature is weak, and given less structure and more free time there's a great misuse of it. Technology is a great temptation, and so there's a lot of misuse and excessive use of it. For adolescents, for middle schoolers and high schoolers, a defining characteristic of adolescence is the need to learn from other peers and from adults outside of the family. They really need to look outside of the family and, all of a sudden, they were cooped up with their family. And lastly, there's a huge disparity when it comes to characters, that some characters naturally have more motivation and more emotional stability, and then when it comes to family cultures, there are family cultures that have the energy and the joy to deal with this, and to pose ways to help their kids live well and study well; but many families don't have that energy and joy and they don't have the basis to really help. All those things, those disparities, became very apparent. And so for all of these reasons, I felt this was an educational disaster. I just was longing for them to be able to be back in person with everyone.

Tomassi: I'm not being critical of remote learning *per se*, but just as a basic fact, we took a generation of children who already deal with a pandemic of screen addiction, and then said, Sit in front of your computer for six hours a day and don't get distracted. As an educator who's doing this over Zoom all the time, I know that's extremely difficult, even for the kid with the most willpower and the most determination.

Damian, I wanted to bring the conversation to you, because obviously, education is not just difficult for students, right? Education has been very

difficult for educators during this time, both in the K12 arena where I am, and also in the university. I was saying to a friend that, during the first few months of remote learning, I literally was having a hard time staying awake in the afternoon while teaching over Zoom. I wanted to ask you: What made this time so challenging for educators?

Bacich: Well, I mean, Zoom fatigue is real, right? Being online, being in front of a camera, being in front of a computer screen is real. I think the other thing is, when you think about a professor in his or her classroom, the students come to you and you create an environment for an hour and a half, two hours, three hours, whatever it is. You're in my house and you're learning my content. But with the pandemic—at least in the case of my university—something different happened. Now I'm projected out into the students' lives.

Let me tell you a story. We're a big campus, a big urban campus, but we draw people from all over the agricultural valleys to the South. Most of my students in the Spanish program, for example, are Mexican, or have Mexican-American origins, and often an agricultural farm worker background. I had a student who hadn't been in my classroom for my online classroom for a couple weeks and I shot her an email and said, "Hey what's up; everything all right?" You know, I wanted to check in, I hadn't seen any activity. And she wrote back to me like a day or so later, saying, "Hey professor"—this is the first couple months, by the way, of the pandemic—"I'm sorry, yeah, it's been hard to check in because I've been packing salads all day and all night for the last few weeks, and so it's been tough to stay online. It's been tough to check in, so I just wanted to let you know that I appreciate that." This person is in the middle of a pandemic, and she's in a produce factory packing salads and trying to follow class at the same time. I had another student who—same thing—I hadn't heard from him in a while, and I checked in with him. Sure enough, he was in the National Guard. He was on deployment to another state, and he hadn't been able to check in. I had another colleague who said, Yeah, one of my students told me how she was listening to my lessons on her phone as she was picking fruit in the Salinas Valley. It's been interesting to become cognizant of the fact that you are part of somebody else's life.

Tomassi: Father Edwin, I want to ask you: As an administrator at the school, what questions came up? What figured into your decisions about how

to run Saint Benedict's during the pandemic, and what issues would you say emerged as most critical?

Leahy: I'm going to go back again to that issue of community. The first question that came up is how do we preserve as best we can some sense of community? Some sense of giving up what I want for what we need? It's fundamentally what community is about; giving up what I want for what we need. We had to work hard at deciding how we were going to do that. It's not easy to do. We're made to be connected, to be together. We even talk about the mystery of the sublime, of the mystery of God, as being communal, correct? We talk about Father, Son, Spirit. This dynamism that Avery Dulles, Cardinal Dulles, used to call "the dynamism of the spirit of God" that moves in us and holds us together. When we're separated like that, it creates distress and difficulty. The first challenge that we had was to try to create community somehow, and it's a huge challenge.

Tomassi: Let's open this. I would love to hear from the rest of the panel about this question of community. This is crucial. I'm thinking about my own experience teaching. I teach online in the school where I normally teach. I don't teach from home. I knew very quickly that that would not work for me, and my school has the space to allow us to teach over Zoom from school. One thing I found almost instantly was how much I missed those little interactions with the students. Just walking around the hall, right? It's not the same when there's no one there, but I wonder if you have thoughts about the challenges that this raised.

Leahy: We have an interesting cultural challenge. We have students on the property. We decided pretty quickly that the five- and six- and seven-year-olds cannot learn virtually. Or if they're going to learn virtually, it means mom or dad can't do anything else except sit next to them the whole time. We've had elementary students who wanted to be here, whose parents wanted to be here, they've been in every day. We have another group of students that we know don't do well virtually. We make them come in, and with their parent's cooperation they are here being supervised. Our teachers are all teaching here as well from the building. A group of them come in, but that presents a challenge, too, because of the virus. I grew up in an Irish Catholic family, so six feet for us is a little close, you know what I mean? *[laughs]* That's

okay. But if you are a Latin American, or African American, or from the African dispersion, or from Italy or Spain—I mean, it's impossible to keep people away from each other. Everybody has to hug each other, shake hands and be touching each other, so that makes it really difficult when you have students on the property and you have to keep so-called social distancing. It's been a very big challenge.

Another thing to think about are the social implications, the cultural implications of the virus. The other day I heard a couple of students under my window in the monastery. They were out on the street and were talking in a loud voice. I looked out my window, and here they are about 6 inches away from each other—two African American kids—and they're going at it, talking about this, that, and the other thing. I went out on the front stoop and started screaming at them for being so close together. I said to myself afterwards, "Oh, that felt good. I haven't done that in 11 months." [*laughter*] I had an opportunity to yell at somebody. So yeah, you miss that. You don't hear balls bouncing in gyms, you don't hear conversations going on about class or about anything, it's a big...it's a suffering, is what it is. It's a suffering.

Tomassi: You're saying you're running an all-boys inner-city school and you came by that raspy voice naturally? [*laughter*] I want to go back to a question that came up, Peter, and what you were saying about motivation. Why did motivation become so difficult for us?

Fields: For me personally it was difficult to remain motivated. The things that usually support me and keep me motivated were taken away. I have a friend who's brilliant, who is just very easygoing, physics is like a nice walk in the park for him, and he is the person I go to when I ask for help. We became really good friends because we were TAs in the same course together. And normally when I would go to him for help, I would be freaking out. I'd be like, "Oh my God, I don't understand any of this. Why am I here? Why did I try to study physics? This is too hard, none of this makes sense, none of this works." My friend was like, "Peter, you understand this, you've done stuff like this before." And he would write out in his very simple way, "Here, it's just this." And I'm like, Oh yeah, that's right. I'd just be totally diffused and would be happy to continue studying and working. And those sorts of natural things that helped me on my path—I mean, they were taken away.

The whole point of what makes those valuable is you only have to go a little bit out of your way. You ask for help from your friend and then something beautiful comes out of it. Human nature is weak, as Michelle said, so why look for something that's not prevalent?

Tomassi: Panelists, I'd love to hear what you think about this question of motivation. Why did we struggle so much with education, and what does that reveal about what's essential in education?

Bacich: It's really easy to get caught up in teaching people your subject. Because at a university you're a little removed, not like on a high school campus. You walk into a classroom, you teach your subject, you leave, the students leave, you see them in another couple of days. But one of the things I've seen over the years is that education doesn't stop. Being an educator—even if it's on a college campus—means being an educator in the sense of being a partner with a person in things other than just the content that I'm teaching. I share my experiences as a parent with my students. Many of my students are parents. Or sharing little things, like how to dress when you go on a job interview. It's something that I have to be cognizant of, and not only that, but that there's a lot that I can learn from the students in my classroom. They are bringing experiences that I don't have. You have to get out of your content a little bit. When we're all online, it's harder. You have to try and find moments to be with your students, like, for example, having Zoom office hours. It's my chance to spend some time with this person and get to know him or her better, or it's a chance to understand the struggles that somebody else is going through and to share my own with them. I think the motivation comes from two things: achieving a goal that you're trying to achieve but knowing that you're not alone on it. That there's a point up ahead that we're both walking toward together, and it's a little bit harder now because you can't be there physically but we're still together.

Tomassi: Michelle or Father Edwin, do you guys want to chime in on this question?

Ratti: We have a lot of helpful ideas about education that come from our charism and other places. Education is the communication of oneself and not a project. Education is more like the lighting of a fire than the filling of a pail. My son's headmaster says that one often and I love it. Education's

purpose is to reawaken freedom and set it in motion. These are things that I find very beautiful and helpful when I'm in a normal teaching situation, but in the online situation that we had in spring, and that I partially have right now—I have about 80% of my students in person and about 20% online—somehow, they all fall flat. They all fall dead. Even the idea that Covid itself can be the provocation that reawakens them and reawakens me—it all seems to fall dead and fall flat. I felt like I had been stripped of so much of my joy and my efficacy as a teacher. I felt like my students had been stripped of their community and their friendships, and it allowed them to fall into apathy and laziness. What was left? What was really left?

Well, to some extent I started to think it would just be frustration, drudgery. But then what I discovered is that, having been stripped of everything, I discover that I love them. That I love them tremendously. That I'm overwhelmed by how much I love them. On a morning when I'm tired, and when my job seems a drudgery, and the weather is miserable, I can make the effort to get out of bed and say, "Jesus, save my day, make my day worthwhile." If I can do that for myself, then I can look at them and say that my life is a gift and their life is a gift, and they've been given to me. Even if it's just an hour a day, they've been given to me. I have a tremendous sense of responsibility and attachment to them. I've had a lot of anger and bitterness about the online situation, because I find it really frustrating. Teaching both in person and online has actually been very, very, burdensome and time consuming. But over and over, I find that I'm surprised by how much energy this love gives me. I'm always increasing the amount I'm Zooming after school. I'm not cutting short the chapters of the content like I thought I would, because I care for them. Having felt like I was stripped of everything, I was left with something tremendous. Which is just the fact that I want their happiness and well-being. It doesn't feel like a triumphant or beautiful story; it's not full of deep, insightful quotes and great experiences. Sometimes it feels more like just suffering with them, and trying to impart to them a desire to live well.

Tomassi: Father Edwin?

Leahy: We have a relationship with Hadera in Israel, and we've been back and forth. Our kids have been back and forth, and their kids have been here.

I heard a story in Israel from a man who said that two Jews were speaking to each other, two men. One said to the other, “Irv, do you love me?” And Irv said, “Moishe, you know that I love you.” Moishe: “But do you know my suffering?” And Irv said, “No, I don’t know your suffering.” And Moishe said, “Then how can you say you love me?” Understanding each other’s sufferings in the midst of this pandemic is what we’re called to do. As we understand one another’s sufferings, then in that endeavor we become a sign to others that God may be able to be seen through us in that experience.

What we actually discovered during the pandemic has been over-the-top energy. It’s been unbelievable: creating all kinds of clubs, baking clubs, and all kinds of things that we were not doing before. Ways of pulling people together. It becomes an encouragement. Because if you’re online with a student, you have no idea who’s listening over their shoulder. A mother or a grandmother might be curious, for example, and now at our morning meeting we have 2,000 people coming to it and watching it. We have a group now who are all 80-year-old women or older. They come every single day. Why? They are encouraged by seeing these young people pray together, and then make announcements and plan the day. And if our morning meeting goes over, we just change the school schedule. *I* don’t change it; one of those students changes the school schedule. It runs over almost every day because the African dispersion’s view of the clock is completely different than those of us who are farther north on the globe. And if there’s an alumnus who’s 78 or 80 years old and not at the meeting, the kids are looking for them. They are making calls to see if they’re okay. There’s been a whole dynamic that’s happened here that has been an encouragement to me in the midst of this strange time. It’s not been miserable. I mean, somehow the plagues in Egypt led to new life, right? I don’t know how the new life is going to manifest itself, but I believe that it will.

Tomassi: Peter, you mentioned that grad school is already a place in which you spend a large portion of your time wondering why you’re doing it in the first place. That is the question of motivation, right? That’s what I hear from my students constantly, and I tell them—and I sometimes get flack from parents for saying it—I tell them that that’s the right question for them to be asking right now. Ask that question, be serious about that question.

Because there are two ways to ask the question, right? You can ask *why* and mean *no*, or you can ask *why* and mean *why*. It seems to me that this question is a question we should be encouraging students to ask.

Okay, I want to ask a question to the group here. *Time Magazine* made a provocative cover at end of 2020. It said, “2020: The worst year ever.” Some of you probably saw that. On March 13th of 2020, the last day we had in-person classes at my school, I had an eighth grader asked me in science, “Mr. T, can we just not have school until the pandemic’s over?” Now we’re eleven months into this; should we have followed my student’s suggestion? Was it really worth it to go through this whole experience? Whoever wants to can start.

Leahy: Is suffering meaningful or is suffering absurd? I would say it's meaningful. I hope everybody on this screen would say it's meaningful, but I think that's the bottom line.

Fields: Was it worth it to go through this? Suffering, to paraphrase Lorenzo Albacete, about whom there are many other interesting talks and exhibits during the New York Encounter, suffering is an opportunity to become very intimate with this question of why. And what we need is something that answers that question, but an answer that's tantamount to the cry, which is something as real as the cry. Was it worth it? I think it was worth it, but I should add that I think the answer to the question, the prerogative of answering the question, is within the heart of every single human being that's gone through it. Was it worth it? Well, it's not an obvious question, and it might take you two, ten, or twenty years after this is all over to see the resurrection. I mean, even Jesus waited three days. [*laughter*]

Tomassi: I want to add a question to that question. What did you discover in this whole experience that is essential to education, and what did you discover that is actually *inessential* to education?

Bacich: I think the people at *Time* need to get a little perspective, because I think 1914 was pretty bad, and I think 1939 was also kind of a rough year. What has been essential for me has been my relationship with my wife and children. I got to know myself more as a husband and father, and as a bad husband and father, right? It was a grace in the sense that it's been a grace to be able to stop and see myself in action. To catch myself in my daily life.

The essential part has been to take stock of who I am. And secondly, do I understand the suffering of the person in front of me? Do I understand the suffering of the person on the other side of the Zoom chat with me? I can't get inside their skin, but I can understand that they are living enormous challenges, challenges that I know are too much for them because I'm living challenges that are too much for me. I think to have to try and have a moment of tenderness whenever possible, both with myself and with the other person, and to also look at where there's hope. I mean, there's a lot of navel gazing going on in our first world situation, but if you look at reality, just from the fact that I wake up in the morning in a home with a roof, with a wife and children that God gave me—that already is a sign that reality is good and that someone loves me. Acknowledge *that* is the best thing I can do for anybody I happen to meet. That life is still good.

And then the other stuff: Are we hitting our learning outcomes? Well, I hope so, but not always. But are we there for our students and for each other as faculty members? Yeah. That I can answer yes to.

Fields: I second that. I was never too into technology making education better, but I've certainly fallen more out of love with it because it just doesn't work sometimes. My iPad lags while I'm writing an equation that's screen mirroring, when putting chalk to the board is so much easier, you know? All that to say, there really is something to being in a classroom and being with people, having a simple human interaction in a place that's dedicated to that.

Ratti: It's an obvious point, but the difficulties have given us an occasion of urgency to communicate, to affirm life, to affirm our students, and to affirm how precious what we've been given is. Even the chance to learn is so precious. It's a privilege, in a way, to be able to live a terrible circumstance so that we have the chance to say that life is still worth living. I know it is.

The other thing the crisis gave me was a sense of urgency about how much these kids need. There's not a minute to waste, there's not an occasion to waste. Everything we can live with them is worth it. Every once in a while, I tell them the homework for the weekend is to do something beautiful. And then we get in a big argument as to what something beautiful is or isn't, and talk about what's worth doing and what your time is worth. We have to have the persistency in casting, and casting, and casting again, until

something that we offer is received. And I think it is. I think when we have the authenticity to offer because we really care for them, then it is received. Even one of my most unreceptive and difficult students, who won't turn her camera on for me except for a moment when I beg her to—she briefly turns it on and turns it off—she still says, “Thank you, thank you, Mrs. Ratti, thank you,” at the end of every class. I receive that as a little something, and as a motivation to continue.

Tomassi: Pretend it's fall 2021, we're all vaccinated, everyone can go back to life as normal. What is the one thing you take with you from this experience, something you don't want to lose?

Ratti: That we're so precious to each other. That what we offer each other is so much greater than the things we're afraid of, whether it be illness or doing things exactly right, and that our companionship with each other is truly precious.

Tomassi: Damian?

Bacich: Yeah, I would say that we need each other. That I need you and that you're an essential part of my life.

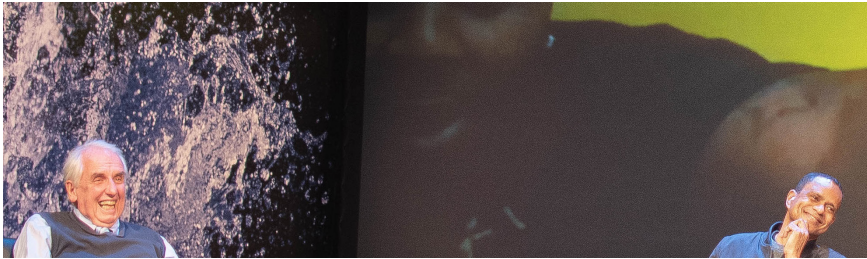
Tomassi: Father Edwin?

Leahy: I want to end where we started: that we're made to be connected, we're made to be in contact with one another, just like the mystery of God.

Tomassi: And Peter?

Fields: I think one thing I'll also take away is a renewed appreciation for my education. To be educated really is a privilege, and that's in the best sense of the word. It teaches you how to enjoy the things that are valuable.

Tomassi: Thank you, thank you so much to all of our guests for this riveting discussion. And thank you to Benedictine College for making it possible.



“HOPE ALWAYS SURPRISES ME” (CHARLES PEGUY)

Stories of new beginnings with Mikel Azurmendi, sociologist, Carolina Brito, school principal, Fr. Dustin Feddon, founder of Joseph House, Matthew Laracy, founder of the Magnificat Home, Juan Tapia-Mendoza, founder of Pediatrics 2000 and member of SOMOS Community Care, and Gabriel Tunage-Cooper, resident at Joseph House, followed by concluding remarks by Julián Carrón, president of the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation.

Introduction

Is it reasonable to hope when we look back at 2020, with all its hardships, uncertainty, injustice, divisions? Yes, if we recognize that the radical neediness we experienced revealed an expectancy, which expresses itself as the desire to keep walking. Even in the worst suffering, even in deepest pain, something in us looks forward. Deep inside us, there is inscribed the promise of a better future. Fr. Giussani once said, “Reality, as it emerges in experience, is so positive that it presents itself as inexorably appealing. Instead of appealing, we might use another word...promising.”



Rebecca Cherico, moderator: Good evening and welcome to the Sheen Center in New York City. This is the New York Encounter 2021, and I am Rebecca Cherico. I will be moderating this final event of the New York Encounter, *Hope Always Surprises Me*. Looking back at 2020, with all of its hardships, injustices, confusion, divisions—is it really possible to keep on hoping? And yet, in the midst of so much suffering and confusion, there is

something within us that keeps looking forward. It keeps looking up. Deep within there is a promise that we cannot eliminate. Tonight, we'll be hearing stories full of that promise. We are honored to have a number of guests with us this evening. Some of them virtual, and some of them live on stage with us. The first person we will hear from is Carolina Brito. Carolina is proud of her Latin American roots and she has spent her career working to build communities in classrooms of Black and Latino excellence. She started by founding a bilingual ethnic studies program at Cristo Rey, Boston, and has most recently become the principal at the Rafael Hernandez Dual Language K-8 School, a public school in Boston. The school was founded in 1973 by a group of Puerto Rican families who wanted an education worthy of their children. On March 17th of 2020, this school was closed as a result of the general lockdown imposed to slow the spread of Covid-19. They just recently reopened in February. The Raphael Hernandez School has continued to be a beating heart in Roxbury, the densely populated African-American and Hispanic neighborhood of Boston. We are very grateful to have Carolina with us to share her community story.

Carolina Brito: A little bit about my community: we are 85% Latino, and before the pandemic about 75% of my families were hitting below the federal poverty line. We don't have data post-pandemic, but I know and I can feel in my gut that that percentage has gotten a lot higher. I'm really humbled to be telling the story of my community today, because it's actually the story, not of me, but of 851 Black, Latino, and white folks in Boston who are trying to survive and find solidarity in a historically catastrophic situation. This was the year where in the schools we all faced racial reckoning, Covid, and then tried to reinvent education while we were at it.

First off, 450 of the protagonists of our tale are my incredibly resilient students, who log on every day. They survived hunger, trauma, loneliness—but they're still out there, doing incredible academic work. They deserve that shout-out first and foremost. And then 250 of the folks in this are our teachers, staff, and families, who did the impossible to make it all work. And last, but certainly not least—this is for me the real marvel of the year—is that we've met over 150 people from all walks of life who volunteered, donated, and met our school community throughout this past year in ways that they

had never interacted with anyone before. Some of these people I may never actually get to meet, but others have actually become very dear friends. This is a story of the world opening in a time where all the doors closed for us.

We started redefining ourselves as a community when we were trying to meet the need for food, books, and school supplies. These three little things have actually fundamentally changed who we are and what we've come to value. Our story started with food. On March 17th we get the notice from the Superintendent, "Listen y'all, schools are closing down. I'll see you guys in a month," which all of us knew was unlikely to happen. Nonetheless, on March 17th we had 24 hours to prep for the building shutting down. The first thing we panicked about was how kids were actually going to eat over the next month. For many, many families, school lunch and breakfast are a huge part of the strategy to keep folks alive. How were we going to stay engaged with learning in that month? And I'm in a high needs district, right? In my building I had 48 working computers for 450 children. It's not like the doors closed and everybody got a free laptop; we only had 48 machines. The first thought became, how do you stay connected with learning? And so all of us, a few dozen staff members, went into the basement three hours before the building opened for the last day, and just stuffed food in bags and with every book we could find. Part of that experience was thinking about how you answer a need with no infrastructure, with no system. One of these dozens of staff members actually had a brilliant idea to call up the restaurants that were all about to close because of the governor's orders. We had 15 restaurants donate a few hundred pounds of fresh produce. So on March 17th, the end of the school day is 3:00pm and we're giving out the few Chromebooks we have, a bunch of fresh produce from the restaurants, and the entire inventory of books from the basement of the school library. In two hours, all the food and books were gone, and we delivered a few packets of work that we could figure out for the next month. We suddenly realized that this was a drop in the bucket. This was a 24-hour marathon to meet a need that lasts about maybe a week in people's lives. So the question started to change.

My community and particularly my leadership team had to figure out the cost estimates for the next few weeks. How much would it cost to feed all of the folks in my community? If you do the math on this one, you're

looking roughly at about 700 people, including families and children. *Way* too expensive. We actually started calling everybody we could find in the neighborhood, every neighborhood partner, organization, nonprofit. I asked my friend who is an engineer by trade, "Listen, man, I got this problem. How am I gonna figure this out?" And within a couple of weeks, we had about 13 partnerships across the city trying to figure out how to feed 700 people. The beauty of the moment actually wasn't just trying to figure out all of this and knocking on doors and banging down doors sometimes to ask for help. This incredible thing emerged, because I wasn't afraid to unashamedly ask, to advocate for families, and the world opened up in a really counter-intuitive way. Now I feel much more connected to the city and its people because we have a common need. And little miraculous moments kept happening. A friend who is friends with another friend had a connection to Goya, and they gave us a couple thousand pounds of food through some of the donations that were coming in through the city. We managed to actually employ a group of our families that had lost employment in the shutdown; they helped us unpack, distribute, and give out those 2,000 pounds of food.

In retrospect, what we managed to accomplish was to give people an experience of solidarity and unity in a moment where there was none. We're talking about white folks donating to, talking to, and working for folks of color in my community. Folks of color in my community leading initiatives and saying, Okay, we have to fix this problem, so how are we going to do it? What I saw was the birth of a people trying to solve a problem together, and that, to me, is actually a lot more powerful than, "We fed some folks." But that's good, too. You gotta do that; people are starving. But the thing that gets born and that lives and stays, that's the thing I've been really interested in.

The pinnacle moment for me was actually in the fall. After we gave away all the books and did the food thing, we suddenly realized that schools are going to be closed for a really long time. So not only do we have to keep the system going and feed about 600 people a week, but we were also trying to figure out how to pool enough money to buy some basic school supplies. We've got to do school online. We're talking notebooks, pencils, pens, what have you. I've got some great, hardworking folks, but they physically weren't reporting to the buildings, so I ran out of volunteers to pack supplies

for 450 kids. I called my friend Monica, who's usually unafraid of pretty much anything. I have a five-person team, and I've got to distribute literally thousands of pounds of whiteboards, markers, etc. I don't know who to ask and I'm desperate. She calls up her caravan of white, suburban mom friends. I want you to picture them all driving into Roxbury in their soccer mom vans and lining my parking lot. Before I knew it, I had 25 little kids, all under the age of 10, there to volunteer for a Saturday with their 12 or 13 parents, most of whom I constantly got into fights with because this was in the middle of election season. But now they are all showing up at my door, like, "Oh, you called? You needed us?" And I have to say that that was one of the most important things that happened to me all year, because it caught me by surprise. This is not the ideological crew you'd usually roll with when asking for help for people of color, right? Like, that's not my intuition, not who I'm gonna call first. I was profoundly moved by that. I think that moment for me redefined my understanding of what it means to build community in crisis. It is to look a need in the face and to say, We might have some stuff that actually divides us here, but at the end of the day, if we are to call ourselves Church or Christians, then you move because your brother or your sister needs you and you leave the rest at the door. Because of that experience, I was much more interested in what it meant to marry my faith to my work than I was before. For me it was a very redeeming moment, and we've had many of those since.

I just want to close with a bit of an Amanda Gorman quote, which seems to be the thing to do nowadays because Amanda Gorman is amazing. But I think I would actually sum up the year as follows:

“So while once we asked,
‘how could we possibly prevail over catastrophe,’
now we assert,
‘how could catastrophe possibly prevail over us?’
We will not march back to what was
but move to what shall be”

So, thank you for letting me share my story, and I'm looking forward to hearing more about you guys, too, on this panel.

Cherico: Thank you, Carolina. It's really beautiful to hear about the unity of a people that emerged from this moment of crisis. Now we're going

to hear from Matthew Laracy. Thank you so much for joining us. Matt Laracy and his wife, Mary Lynn, have been married for 50 years and brought up their seven children in Jersey City. Matt worked as a supervisor for UPS, as a parish catechist, and also as a high school religion teacher while raising his family. Together with a group of family and friends, he founded a nonprofit in Jersey City 12 years ago. It is called Magnificat Home, and offers a home to low-income women in what were once convents. Since its beginning, Matt has been dedicated to making it a place of welcome. You might think that a pandemic would have disrupted life at Magnificat Home, but you'd be wrong. What Matt has to share with us tonight is a witness of hope and of peace.

Matthew Laracy: Years ago, I made a great discovery that was to change my life. I discovered the boarding home people. My brother-in-law Mark invited me to a boarding home where he was working in Newark, and I got to know these people and they welcomed me like I was their favorite cousin or their long-lost brother. I would show up there to visit them with a couple of brownies and they made me feel like I was a king. Well, I would leave there on a Monday night and would feel like I was the most important person in the world. So the boarding home people are for me the forgotten people, the invisible people, they fall through the cracks. They're not quite homeless. They're not in institutions, they're not in hospitals or group homes or prisons, but they lack the resources to provide a decent home for themselves. They might get \$800 a month in a Social Security check. I find them endearing, humble, full of faith, often wounded, sometimes crazy in entertaining ways, and entirely captivating. Let's see a short video of some of our residents.

Video showing Magnificat Home

Maybe you can understand why I fell in love with these people. I wanted to do something. I was talking with my sisters and my friends, and pretty much everybody knows someone who needs a good boarding home, you know. I made some feeble efforts, but nothing was working out. I remember making a very clear, simple proposal to God, but it's a big job; it needs resources. I said, Lord, you would need to gather a team, like a strong team,

and I want to be on that team and play my role. But you need to gather a team. Fast forward about five years, and I was walking across northern Spain, doing the Camino de Santiago. I'm enjoying the fresh air and the walk in the countryside and the history. I'm walking alone, enjoying solitude and prayer. A prayer would well up in me: "Lord, you have a purpose for me?" And as soon as I would say that, I would think of the boarding home people, and as soon as I thought of them, I would say, We've already discussed this; you need to bring a team together. That prayer was recurring as I'm walking across Spain, and at some point my mind sort of stopped and I could see a whole network of friends and in-laws. I realized we actually had the resources. We had the money. We had the energy, the interest.

So, we had a meeting and there was a lot of enthusiasm. And my mother—she just passed away a month ago at 101. She had a beautiful life and a very peaceful and calm death. But back when I approached her about a house, she said, Well, how much would this thing cost? I said, "I think about \$100,000 to jumpstart." She said, "I'll give you a \$50,000 check when you're ready." We were off and running.

Magnificat Home has been a series of almost daily surprises and delights. And it's low stress work. It's not *no* stress, but it's low stress for me, because I have a very serene conviction that this work came from God, that it dropped down from heaven on the Camino, you know? And God's in charge. I'm not carrying this work. All I have to do is my little role, and Divine Providence is taking care of things. It's sort of like in *Field of Dreams*: "If you build it, they will come." Or it's like AA. We don't market. We don't recruit. The AA motto is, I think, "Attraction, not promotion." I used to love Michael Jordan after a game in which he scored 45 points and won with a triple-double in double overtime, and he would say, "I let the game come to me." I want to be like Mike. I kind of let the game come to me because I know the Lord is watching over everything.

Five years ago, Sanserei walked through the door: a big, strong, very impressive Black woman, but she was crying. She couldn't even talk because she was crying, she was homeless. She had six children she loved and they loved her, but they couldn't help her. Quite hysterical. The lady with me, my manager, sweetly said everyone in this house has known this abandonment

and the sadness, but you will find a home here and you will be happy. So, Sanserei comes in and I get to know Sanserei; very quiet. But to my surprise, she's actually very steady emotionally, very intelligent, strong, street smart. And then about five months later, when I needed a manager, she was the obvious choice. She's there now. She's magnificent, she's strong, she's a steady presence. She always lowers the temperature, you know, when people are angry and fighting, or there's mania, or there's high anxiety. She always lowers the temperature. She told me when she was young she always wanted to be a manager, so now she has the dream of her life. We've taken in two granddaughters, one who was pregnant. We took her in during the pregnancy. Sanserei is now in RCIA. She hopes to enter the Catholic Church at Easter, which of course thrills me.

I have so many happy stories, I could go on for a long, long time. But just this week, another lady, a dear friend of ours, a resident volunteer who's become a dear friend of my family, said she wanted to talk about a personal thing with her family. We talked a few minutes and then I didn't say much. But as she smiled at me, she said, "Well, thank you for the gift of your attention." And then she quoted Simone Weil: "Attention is the rarest and purest expression of generosity." Beautiful quote, right? Attention is the gold, it's the magic. For me, this work is like Martha and Mary, where Martha is keeping the place going. It's like the plant maintenance and the paperwork. Changing light bulbs and shoveling snow and getting people to doctors and going to the bank. All that Martha stuff. But Mary is the gem, you know? Mary is the real magic. Attention is probably, I think, the most underrated and desperately needed thing in the world. I'm glad to see you nodding, thank you, you agree.

Covid hit us hard early in March. One of our smaller homes—we have about 50 women in the two homes in Jersey City—but in the smaller home with 15 people, we had three deaths. Our three staff members were out, either sick or quarantined because of their medical conditions. We were very anxious that it would spread. I was the only one that could go in there. I went in there, of course, and my family was fighting with me, insisting that I wear the PPE and the shield and the garb. To be honest, I put it on, then one day, I just couldn't do it. I took a calculated risk. Public health protocols are not

my strength. No Tony Fauci. But then Florence came back. She's a nurse and she was very good. She was sanitizing and taking temperatures, and we were doing the right stuff thanks to her. We got through that with a lot of prayer. The other day, one of the ladies said to my wife, "Thank you for taking care of us through that." When my wife told me that, I thought to myself, Well, what did we do? What we really did was show up. We just showed up. A young woman, a lovely young woman I know in her 30s, said to her mother recently that she hopes to meet somebody. And she said, "I just want a guy that will show up. I just want the guy to show." I think Woody Allen said life is 99% showing up. After attention, I think showing up may be the second most underrated and desperately needed thing. I thank you, Matthew and Carolina and Rebecca. I thank you who are showing up and giving me your precious and rare gift of attention.

Cherico: Thank you. That's definitely a great note for all of us, I think. We now want to hear from another home. Father Dustin Feddon and Gabriel Tunage-Cooper are remote guests of ours. Father Dustin is a priest in the diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee, and he teaches philosophy at Saint John Vianney College Seminary in their online program. He joins us today to tell us about Joseph House, which he founded in May of 2019. After spending two years visiting with incarcerated men, often those in solitary confinement, Father Dustin was inspired to start a non-profit ministry he called Joseph House. Father Dustin is the Executive Director of Joseph House, which was designed to support the complete restoration and full integration of formerly incarcerated individuals—and above all, those incarcerated for violent crimes—into local communities and neighborhoods. This is a really impressive and beautiful ministry. He is joined by Gabriel Tunage-Cooper. Gabriel is originally from Miami, and is a resident at Joseph House. Gabriel is currently pursuing his GED while also building rocking horses for Joseph House Enterprises. We are honored to have Father Dustin and Gabriel share their experience of life in Joseph House in 2020.

Fr. Dustin Feddon: Thank you, Rebecca, for inviting us to share a little bit about Joseph House. It was started after doing so many different prison visits, in particular to those in solitary confinement, and seeing the brutal, horrific conditions that men were living in—men and women. But in any

given moment, in the state of Florida we have about 10,000 men in solitary confinement. The best way to describe solitary confinement is: it's like living in a mop closet with constant noise and banging and isolation. I was having conversations with men through a plexiglass window and hearing about their lives and where they grew up, and then realized that many of them had no idea where they were going when they got out. In fact, many men that I would talk with were led directly from solitary confinement to the bus station. They would just be released from these dungeons and have nowhere stable to go. It dawned on me that we as a Church have to do something if we're going to be preaching the gospel. If we have knowledge of the situation these men are in, that they have nowhere to go when they leave, then we should be the people of hospitality, of welcoming the strangers, of welcoming the exiles back into the land. After a while, I and a few parishioners started dreaming big about creating a community that would welcome these guys back. While I was doing these cell visits, it was the work of Bryan Stevenson that was a great inspiration to me, especially his call to proximity; that the best way to fight injustice is to draw close to the marginalized. Also, Pope Francis and his call to this kind of accompaniment.

After a while, it seemed almost impossible, frankly, to pitch this idea to our bishop and to others. *Hey, let's build a home and welcome men who are coming out of prison.* During Advent, there's a preface you may know: "Dare to hope." And that phrase kept speaking to me every time I would celebrate mass during Advent. *Dare to hope.* It was almost as though the Lord was inviting some of us—me and some lay people—to really risk, to create something, a house, a community, where men could be welcomed back. And so we did.

I really appreciate what Carolina said about people from all over the ideological spectrum coming together. People on the right and on the left; people that probably would not often share meals together or talk about culture and politics together. But so many people from all over the spectrum rallied around us to create a beautiful house in a very safe place to serve those who are in need of a house.

We really started off 2019 with a bang. We had a lot of people coming out and taking guys to get driver's licenses, helping them shop at the grocery

store and prepare for their GED. But then Covid hit. I remember everything just came to a screeching halt. Where are our people? How is this going to survive without the volunteers, without community members coming and interacting with the guys who are staying here at Joseph House? Although the interior of our house is beautiful, the backyard was infested with weeds, and looked like a mini-jungle out there. I remember pulling into the driveway and thinking, This has got to end. Maybe we could start planting! I talked to Gabriel about it. And then I talked to a few of our other community members about creating a meditation garden. That day, Gabriel and I went out and just started hacking weeds. Knees and elbows in the soil. And it was there that I got to know Gabriel. It was during those long conversations in the humid heat of the Florida panhandle, that I got to know Gabriel, his history. And he got to know a little more about me while we went to the nursery together to pick up plants. Relationship is the only way forward. It's Bryan Stevenson's call to gain proximity, closer proximity, to discover each other. For me, that is kind of fundamental to what Joseph House is.

Gabriel Tunage-Cooper: Hi, how you guys doing? I'm just gonna first start off with a prayer. *Dear, graceful God, we thank you for this season of Valentine's, and we want to pray for all the single people, the widowed people, people who don't have a home, let them know that it's a loving day; we should love continually; say kind words. And show love.*

I want to say it's a big blessing to share what God has done for me at the Joseph House. When I was released out of prison, it was a struggle thinking about a stable place to rest, and that was heavy on my mind. The day I went to the sheriff's office for fingerprinting, I met one of the interns from Joseph House. That moment I knew God still cared about me and wants to see me doing good. This all happened before Covid. I got acquainted with the Joseph House community. I became a part of building the meditation garden there. I spent two months working, chopping branches, laying soil down and planting flowers. We believe in Joseph, who dreams and continues his dreams. I recently just got a tattoo of Joseph. *[shows tattoo]* It's in Hebrew and says, "Joseph dreams a dream." I marked my body. And this is something I have to deal with. There are going to be bad thoughts about it when I have rocky days. But this community has overwhelmed me with so much love, and

I feel that when I look at that tattoo, or if I'm just speaking of existing, that I have to dream; and this community is big on sleeping, having a house over your head, making sure that you're comfortable, and that your mental health is safe. So I think I made the right decision with this tattoo.

One of the activities I'm involved in is the virtual book club. We're reading *Just Mercy*. And you guys can join. Please, we need some suggestions on a new book. We get together once a week and we do *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson. I'm a big fan. I haven't met him yet, but I'm a big fan. We take turns reading, breaking down words. I did not know how to read. I didn't take school seriously. But once I ended up at Joseph House, these people helped me capitalize big words, and now I know how to read fluently. I'm starting school on Tuesday. I have my placement test. We discuss our feelings and reactions. So thank you.

Cherico: Thank *you*. Wow. This is a really humbling event this evening. Dr. Juan Tapia-Mendoza is joining us on stage as you can see. He was born in the Dominican Republic and grew up in the Washington Heights neighborhood of New York, where he joined a gang and became a famous graffiti artist under the pseudonym Cat 87. Because he hadn't attended school regularly, he was almost illiterate, but he still dreamed of being a doctor. I'm looking at *you*, Gabriel. [*smiles*] As it happened, although he had no academic history, his graffiti art showed that he was a highly motivated young man, and he was given the opportunity of attending college at the Universidad Central del Este in Santo Domingo. His dream became a reality, and today, Dr. Juan is one of the most respected pediatricians in New York. He founded Pediatrics 2000, a clinic where he helps children from the Hispanic community. He is also a proud member of SOMOS, a network of doctors serving the most vulnerable people in New York. Now we will hear how he and his doctor friends in SOMOS did not lose hope, despite the many challenges and hardships of this past year.

Juan Tapia-Mendoza: Thank you for your invitation. Yes, I was born in the Dominican Republic. And my mother, like many other immigrants, came here in the early '60s and left me in the Dominican Republic to live with my extended family. I didn't even realize my mother was gone, because I lived with a lot of extended family in a poor community in the capital of

the Dominican Republic, where everybody knew each other, everybody cared for each other, it was a real community. Where to be called *negrito* meant to be called *me amor*. Then suddenly I came to the United States in the summer of 1966, and I was shocked, because my first words when I arrived at 187th Street and Broadway was that my building looked like the ruins of Columbus—and I came from a poor neighborhood in the Dominican Republic.

My second setback was that in the Dominican Republic I was going into to the 6th grade, but here, due to my age, I was demoted to the 4th grade. That quickly led to me losing interest in school. By the end of my first two years in New York, I had already lost interest in school and turned to the streets, where I felt welcome, where 80% of my neighbors were also drop-outs. I started playing hooky—I don't know if we still use that word. I started not going to school after the 6th grade. For the next 4 years, I was promoted over and over, from 7th grade to 8th grade, to 9th grade, all the way up to high school, without ever returning back to school, until I was eventually kicked out of George Washington High School for doing graffiti. I never lost hope, though, because one of the things that my mother taught me was that in the worst of times, there's always hope, and that bad things are followed by good things. At the end, goodness triumphs over evil. I have always practiced that.

I did many things that I shouldn't have while I was a graffiti artist. I was a gang member. I was the warlord. The warlord of a gang meant, like, the Secretary of State; but in a gang, a warlord was the person who can go from one neighborhood gang to another without getting beaten up. Because I used to be the person that would set up the fighting, make peace deals, etc. And in fact, in most of the fighting we just ran away, because all the other gang members were really big guys, older than us, like the Galaxies and the Saints from West Harlem. We were in Washington Heights.

I was lucky to find a mentor, which is, I think, so important in life. A mentor who listens, who listens to you and understands your problem. I was lucky enough to find somebody by the name of Hugo Martinez, who said that these graffiti artists, the original graffiti artists from the early '70s, were not vandals. These were kids who were highly motivated, just like myself,

because I felt isolated, I felt discriminated against, I felt that I had no reason to live, and what gave me a feeling of belonging to my community was the fact that I became a famous graffiti artist. I think that all of us not only need to have a hero, but we need to have somebody who listens to us, worries about us, and I found that with Hugo Martinez. I was one of the lucky ones that did not wind up in jail, because between the ages of nine and thirteen, I saw a change in all of my friends. None of my friends ever said they wanted to be, you know, a thief, a drug dealer, or a pimp. All my friends used to talk about being lawyers, doctors, accountants; we had a lot of movie stars. Most of my friends thought that, somehow, they were going to go to Hollywood. But by age thirteen or fifteen, I had over ten friends of mine that were killed, that were locked up, or that had overdosed. Most of them dropped out.

I decided to become a doctor. I didn't want to do pediatrics, but never say never. I became a pediatrician and decided to stay in my community, because communities like ours have bad reputations: everything sucks; we are inherently bad; everything that happens to us is our fault; and there is nothing you can do about it but accept your destiny. My mother showed me that that's not true. I never lost hope, not even in the worst of times. Then I met SOMOS, which is a community of physicians, of primary care physicians, numbering over 2,500 in New York, the brainchild of Dr. Ramon Tallaj. He had the idea of uniting community physicians, not only so they can fight for their share of the healthcare dollar, but also so they can fight for the invisible communities. The communities that have been traditionally underserved, under-represented, that are fearful of hospitals, that have nobody to turn to, that do not speak the language, that do not understand the system, that have no sophistication at hospitals. When I started practicing 25 years ago, hospitals used to turn away patients that did not have Medicaid. So I followed the lead of other doctors who decided to stay in communities like ours to work specifically with Medicaid patients. Over the last 20 years, this small group of doctors has turned into SOMOS, which is a network of over 2,500 doctors dedicated to caring for the most needy. But when the pandemic came, that's when all the disparities that communities like ours have been suffering for centuries came to light. Dr. Tallaj, along with the governor and other good people, decided that we could not wait for the federal government, to start

doing something, because there was complete chaos. We didn't have personal protection equipment. Unlike other nations, we did not have agencies that were prepared. It was every man for himself. Dr. Tallaj, along with SOMOS, started doing testing, because the primary thing you have to do in a pandemic is find out where the disease is spreading. You have to do contact tracing, and isolating people who are sick. Dr. Tallaj and SOMOS have been doing that for the past year, and I see a lot of hope for 2021, because now we have the vaccine of hope. I know a lot of people, especially our Latino people and African-Americans, are fearful of the system because of so many things that have happened throughout generations. But I told everybody that I already got vaccinated. We need to be vaccinated, we need to believe in science, and I really see a light at the end of this. My message for this year is: let's not lose hope, and if we fall down, always stand back up. Thank you.

Cherico: Thank you. Wow. I'm gonna conclude with a quote from Father Giussani. Father Giussani once said, "Reality, as it emerges in experience, is so positive that it presents itself as inexorably appealing." Instead of appealing, we might use another word, *promising*. I want to thank our friends tonight: Matt, Gabriel, Dustin, Carolina, and Juan, because you and your communities really have given flesh to this ultimate irreducible positivity of life. In a few moments, Father Carrón will join us with some concluding remarks, but before we turn to him, we have one last virtual guest, the Spanish Basque sociologist, Mikel Azurmendi, who is going to speak to us about where he still manages to find hope in the midst of his pessimism.

Translator: Mikel, in this overview, like you said, the possibilities range from the most aggressive individualism to recognizing that the other person could be a gift. You recently wrote a book, *El Otro es un Bien* [The Other is a Good]. Where could we find a change in this direction? What are human beings hoping for, what possibility of a strong change in humanity are you hoping for?

Mikel Azurmendi: A child of five or seven years old, one child out of the 50 million children that are working in the world, working exhausting hours—what is this child hoping for? That someone takes him out of there, of course. However, how does this hope materialize? This waiting relies on someone that loves him, on someone that redeems him. Only love could

take this child out of his waiting. Take, for instance, a young African man or woman whose family gathered some money to pay an illegal group that smuggles immigrants to Europe by boat. What does this young man or woman want? Do they only want papers? Are they only asking for papers, or are they asking for company? For someone that loves them, that understands them, that is also able to introduce them to a society that they don't understand? Take me, for example, an elderly person. What do I want? Euthanasia? Or do I want someone that loves me and alleviates my pain when they come to visit? You see? I could answer the question of what are we hoping for and examine each social sector, and it would take us a month to talk about what everyone is hoping for, right? I think everyone is hoping to be loved. Only love gives hope. In other words, there isn't anything else, I don't see anything else. I'm not very optimistic, you see, but there's a way out. Love provides a way out.

Vaneese Thomas performs Deep River for the New York Encounter

Riro Maniscalco: Good evening. We want to share these last few minutes of the 2021 Encounter with Father Julián Carrón, President of the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation. He is not in New York this year, but one way or another, he's always with us. Thank you Father Carrón, for being with us. We want to ask the question that has accompanied us throughout the weekend: Father Carrón, the year that just went by has brought about a big change. How has the experience of change become a milestone in our life journey?

Julián Carrón: I think that this year we have all perceived an unprecedented challenge to our normal way of living. We have been challenged by sickness, by the deaths of people close to us, by the problem of work, and by the questions that constantly arose in us in front of all these facts that provoked our humanity to stay afloat. It is as if we have discovered a part of the depth of our "I" that could not be satisfied simply by what we already knew, what we already had in mind, but that forced us to answer questions we completely ignored on so many occasions in normal life. Now, answering them is urgent. So, the first point is that in order for this to become a point of no return, something that is meaningfully acquired, one needs to become aware of what

has happened. In order to face our future, it is not enough just to cling to what happened, like a treasure we've found. In order to generate something, it needs to be truly judged for its value. Then we'll notice it in the way we return to normal things. If we have really learned anything, we'll see it in the newness with which we do the gestures that we had done in the past. They will seem normal, taken for granted, but we will begin to notice: a person stands before us whom we can embrace and value. Things are not the same as what we lived before, and we no longer take them for granted. This is an example of how so many things—like having a job, returning to work, waking up in the morning and not being locked up, and once again feeling and experiencing the urgency to live—all of this will be significant if we have grown as persons. Therefore, we will have had a meaningful experience only if we have grown as persons because of it. When something like what happened this year appears on the horizon, we gain a clearer conscience of what life is for and its significance. This is what will allow us to face new challenges with an “I” that has grown, an “I” that has matured, rather than one that has been made small by fear or lack of confidence about the future. I think if we truly realize how we have been able to grow and learn, this will be what endures to help us face all the challenges of the future. Thank you very much, everyone.

Maniscalco: Thank you, Father Carrón, and thank you to all who made the New York Encounter happen, all the volunteers in this adventure of gratuitousness and gratitude. It wasn't easy, but we knew we needed it, and we're grateful we made it. Let's keep all that we received in our heart, so that it may bear fruit and continue to build a new work within this world.

