

Initiatives

In Support of Christians in the World

National Center for the Laity
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Holy Work

Is NCL only for Catholics, a donor asks? No. It is precisely because NCL has a Catholic sensibility that it is open to all those who improve the world of work—on the job, around the home and in the community.

What does NCL mean by *Catholic sensibility*?

NCL believes there is a unique treasure imprinted in each person's imagination. NCL knows this treasure can regularly enrich those who have been vaccinated with an analogical understanding of God. That is, those people who out of habit implicitly feel that God is like this or that.

The unique treasure is the suspicion that embedded in the ordinary lies the extraordinary, the miraculous, or the salvific. To have a Catholic sensibility is to appreciate the sacramental; it is to be aware, however dimly, that an exchange of love between God and God's people is mediated through this grace-filled, co-created world. The Catholic sensibility sees bread and wine, "works of human hands," as the body and blood of Christ. It sees the shopping mall, the school, the kitchen table, the factory, the courtroom and the hospital as altars of sorts—places where the ordinary, mundane labors of life may be offered up, blessed and transformed into things of beauty.

Imagining toil and turmoil as sacramental moments is not easy. Yet a profoundly simple truth lies somewhere in the corporate layoffs, the boring factory routine, the gossiping neighbors, the crying children, the disgruntled client, plus in the curiosity of students, the gratefulness of patients, the solidarity of coworkers and the unearned love of a spouse. The truth is that God so loved the world that God became one of us. God became a baby in a trough, a common criminal on a cross, a fisherman, a co-worker in an office, a neighbor, a machinist, a customer, a middle-manager, a nurse, an accountant, a human being. This incarnate God is related to each of us, not just once through baptism but many times a day, thousands of times in a lifetime, in every ordinary encounter.

Entwined with the ordinary we know so well is the extraordinary we barely recognize. Yet as in a distant remembering, we deeply yearn for this extraordinary. It is a love so knowing and embracing of our circumstances that it redeems the very stuff of our work and our existence. Through that redemptive love, our very selves are made sacrament, are raised up, are blessed and broken...bread of and for lives we lead on the job, around the home and in the neighborhood.

To be clear, this sensibility is rarely explicit. Please note that many non-Catholics have it; some Catholics have lost it. This sensibility is a profound yet accessible way of looking at the world and appreciating each person's place within it. Are you interested in such a sensibility? Welcome to our NCL network.

Attention Readers

An appeal letter regarding NCL's 2022 budget recently made its way to your mailbox. NCL's costs for printing, postage and meetings increase. Please help NCL as best you can. See the donation form on page eight.

Taking the Initiative

At a Green Business

Crossroads Solar (251 E. Sample St. #100, South Bend, IN 46619; www.crossroads-solar.com) produces certified panels for homes and facilities. It also custom makes smaller panels for yachts, RVs, road signs and more.

Patrick Regan left his tenured job at University of Notre Dame to co-found Crossroads. At Notre Dame he was an expert in the prevention of civil wars. Among his books on the topic: *16 Million One: Understanding Civil War* (Routledge [2008]; \$42.36). That's not all. He is also an expert on our climate and international affairs. His book on this is *Politics of Global Climate Change* (Routledge [2014]; \$50). Oh, and one more interesting fact: All the workers at Crossroads are released felons. We

“make perfect panels with imperfect people,” says Regan.

Crossroads expects turnover in its workforce. The goal is, yes, to make a profit, but also to train people in the skills and public disciplines needed for other jobs. The skills go beyond manufacturing (soldering, fitting delicate silicon wafers, mastering computer programs) to include accounting, sales, human relations and more.

Some executives are oblivious to their employees’ circumstances. At Crossroads each person’s story is valued in itself and as a component of the company’s success. Regan’s wage symbolizes his closeness to the employees; it is \$19.50 per hour. As the months unfold, Crossroads plans to be employee-owned through an ESOP. (*Notre Dame Magazine* [Autumn/21], 500 Grace Hall, Notre Dame, IN 46556)

Most convicts do not walk out of jail and immediately become steady employees. Success necessitates a transition period, including an intensive sobriety program, perhaps halfway housing and more. Jim Smith has been involved with prisoners and released felons since the 1980s. He now directs two transition houses. His inspiring story is told in *A Place Not of My Choosing* (Spiritus Christi Prison Outreach, 121 N. Fitzhugh St., Rochester, NY 14614; any amount donation).

Taking the Initiative *After Disasters*

The cleanup and repair business following a natural disaster is now big and will only increase with climate change. Large companies compete “for insurance payments and government contracts,” details Sarah Stillman in *The New Yorker* (1 World Trade Center, New York, NY 10007; 11/8/21). One big post-disaster company does \$2billion annually. Another has 1,900 locations in North America. “In the past five years private equity firms have acquired dozens of disaster restoration companies.”

The cleanup workers are usually recruited by subcontractors. The workers travel long distances to the disaster site and then often onto the next. Some tackle the mess which can include chemicals or sewer waste. Other workers replace drywall, pipes, wiring, roofs and more. They labor in compromised structures. The jobs often come with no health insurance, no retirement option, no overtime pay.

Over 12 months Stillman went to more than 20 disaster recovery sites. “I found more than 2,000 credible claims of harm to workers, including instances of fatal or injurious working conditions, stolen wages, assaults and labor trafficking,” she reports. These abuses occur without consequence to the main restoration company because subcontractors and labor brokers are “an ill-regulated group.” Government agencies, insurance companies and property owners understandably want the job done fast, overlooking the practices of the contractors.

Resilience Force (1717 N St. NW #1, Washington, DC 20036; www.resilienceforce.org) is a mobile worker center. Its director, Saket Soni, chases after disasters. Because he’s been at it ever since Hurricane Katrina of August 2005, Soni knows regulars in the migrant worker caravan. He organizes around grievances, confronting subcontractors for back pay or safety equipment and the like. Resilience lobbies government officials for improved oversight of the projects.

Resilience also uses the courts but, as Stillman reports, the strategy of “suing one company at a time” is frustratingly unsuccessful. Wisely, Resilience is building relationships with the big players in the disaster recovery business. One major businessperson, Mark Davis (Belfor USA, 185 Oakland Ave., Birmingham, MI 48009), asked Resilience a pointed question: “Who’s doing this better?” Thus the door to industry standards opened a bit.

National Day Labor Organizing Network (1030 S. Arroyo Pkwy. #106, Pasadena, CA 91105; www.ndlon.org) is also involved with disaster recovery workers. For example, NDLON conducts training on how to deal with wage theft. It partners with other worker centers to process grievances and to advocate for improvements. NDLON is a resource for agencies like Catholic Charities (1011 First Ave. #1100, New York, NY 10022). Through four locations in the metro area, Charities assists migrant workers with job referrals, social services and more.

Taking the Initiative *In the Parish*

Individual autonomy is modernity’s major advancement. But, particularly in U.S. culture, individuality often becomes maximum individualism. The community side of society is pushed away. A Christian in our individualistic

world is thus challenged “to be in the world enough to change it but not to let the ills of the world change the actor,” writes Maureen Day in *Catholic Activism Today: Individual Transformation and the Struggle for Social Justice* (New York University Press [2020]; \$39).

Day provides a case study on one adult Christian formation program that navigates the individualism/community tension: Just Faith Ministries (PO Box 221348, Louisville, KY 40252; www.justfaith.org). Her thorough analysis is beneficial to anyone involved in any type of Christian formation program.

Just Faith orients parishioners to the social dimension of faith. It began in late 1980s as Jack Jezreel thought about his effort as a parish minister. He developed a curriculum that drew insights from the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults and from older parish renewal programs. Jezreel details all this in *A New Way To Be Church* (Orbis Books [2018]; \$20).

Just Faith independently incorporated in 2000, expanding its program offerings. It is lay-run with a new director, Susie Tierney. Its revenue (as of 2020) is nearly \$950,000.

Just Faith starts with a retreat, as Day details in *Catholic Activism Today*. Scripture and Christian symbols (candles, water, etc.) are woven throughout. Participants tell their own stories. There is crying and hugging. Subsequent to the retreat there are small group discussions over as many as 24 weeks. Topics include poverty, peace, lifestyle, prayer and more.

Nearly all Just Faith participants are Catholic. They are also “older, middle-to-upper class and well-educated,” Day finds. Some groups eventually start a service project within the parish or volunteer in a community endeavor.

Day rightly admires the Just Faith program. It generally does not, however, instill collective thinking and behavior in its participants. Individual lifestyle modifications, individual empathy and individual charity might result, but not social justice. Just Faith finds “it difficult to translate their participants’ enthusiasm for the personal into more structural contexts,” says Day. She provocatively suggests that possibly the personal emphasis of Just Faith “distracts from and even undermines the organizational goal of attaining structural change.”

Good efforts like Just Faith and others, including our NCL, need not be perfect. NCL,

now in its 44th year, simply offers two reminders for Christian formation efforts.

- In mainstream Catholicism the collective virtue of social justice is usually not a weekend activity nor is it normally exercised by volunteers. It is about like-minded people from various backgrounds making incremental improvements on the job and inside their civic/neighborhood milieu. (Obtain *What Is Social Justice*, NCL, PO Box 291102, Chicago, IL 60629; \$5.)
- NCL avoids language like *bring Christ or take the gospel to the marketplace or into the world*. NCL finds it intriguing that Christ is already on Michigan Ave., is in the neighborhood, lurks in the office, walks the legislative halls and inhabits the school long before any participant from a parish program ever shows up. For NCL the world, like all sacraments, both hides and reveals God. The challenge is to be alert for God, not to bring God anywhere.

The Great Workbench

Herman Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener: a Story of Wall St.” tells of a copyist who blandly declines to comply with the simple requests of his law office employer, responding, “I prefer not to.” Bartleby’s noncompliance, never explained, continues to a point when he “did nothing but stand at this window in his dead-wall reverie.” His employer is perplexed and unnerved by the nonfunctioning Bartleby and the boss struggles with the proper way to respond. The comic, absurd and troubling tale operates on a number of levels, one of which is to consider humanity (or inhumanity) and soul (or soullessness) in the workplace. (*The Happy Failure and Other Stories*, Harper Collins [1853]; \$8)

Melville isn’t the only one probing the ethical and spiritual import of the workplace. The disruption in employment related to Covid-19 is leading many contemporary workers to re-examine how they look at their jobs.

The ethos of “work hard and you will be satisfied,” is eroding, writes Jonathan Malesic. The tone has shifted toward “chronic alienation and burnout.” Lots of work nowadays “occurs in an invisible realm,” making it difficult for people “to connect their efforts to a bigger story.” Many workers never see the end product; they have little time or little common space to

chat with co-workers and soon enough they are unable to give “meaningful narratives” about what they do.

Malesic calls ours “a typing-based economy.” Work occurs in places far removed from a tangible product and where a coworker can be across town or across the ocean. A jobholder on average spends 22 hours and 18 minutes per week typing (mostly email) on a computer or mobile device, he reports.

Malesic, invoking Richard Sennett’s concept of the corrosion of character, concludes that the shift in the nature of work detaches “workers from the character-forming nature of work.” (*Notre Dame Magazine* [Autumn/21], 500 Grace Hall, Notre Dame, IN 46556)

Don’t romanticize the workplaces of old, says Sennett. Work life back then was tainted by ethnic rivalries, racial prejudice, cronyism, numbing routine and more. But many workers in those days felt they and their children were moving forward. Life made sense as a linear narrative.

Now, however, workers fear lack of control. Seemingly flexible work arrangements are captive to the impersonality of numbers. The issue of time is not really about job/family tension. It is about control. Everyone is contingent, performing “episodic labor.” Today’s worker regularly changes employers, has only project-by-project colleagues and communicates only virtually with some. They “cannot offer the substance of [their] work life as an example to [their] children of how they should conduct themselves ethically,” Sennett says. Because workplaces are low on loyalty “children don’t see commitment practiced in the lives of their parents or their parents’ generation.” (*The Corrosion of Character: Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*, W.W. Norton [1998]; \$16.95)

In today’s workplace the refrain of *Bartleby* echoes: “I prefer not to.” According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 4.3million U.S. workers quit their jobs in August 2021. This does not include retirements. There were 10.4million job openings that same month.

Young adults in particular are out the door, says a survey from Civic Science (www.civicscience.com; 11/8/21). More than 50% of 18-24 year olds are looking around and 31% of those 25-34 are doing the same. The service industry, which employs many young adults, is scrambling to attract workers. (*Chicago Tribune*, 10/31/21 & 11/13/21)

Economist Paul Krugman says disillusioned and underpaid employees may have reached a breaking point. Many workers are showing an unwillingness to settle for unfairly compensated and alienating jobs. Though these defections may be making consumers’ and business owners’ lives more difficult, Krugman concludes, “Overall, it’s a good thing. American workers are insisting on a better deal, and it’s in the nation’s interest that they get it.” (*N.Y. Times*, 10/14/21)

If asked if they want to return of the pre-pandemic status quo, a growing number of workers would, like *Bartleby*, respond, “I prefer not to.” Perhaps the “Great Resignation” will lead to better conditions and compensation, especially for lower-rung workers. Still, these defections alone will not be enough set right the asymmetry between workers and employers. It remains to be seen if effective collective measures for improving workers’ lives will arise from the current discontent.

Work Prayers

For Law Enforcement Officers

Once upon a time INITIATIVES participated in a meeting at the Chancery. It began with a round of introductions. The director of the archdiocesan peace and justice office explained the agency’s purpose. The next introduction came from the chaplain to the police department. “Few people work more for peace and justice than big city police officers,” he provocatively said. His would be even more controversial statement today. Yet despite those officers who betray their profession and despite a seriously flawed law enforcement culture, many police do an outstanding, brave and heroic job day in and day out.

“Heavenly Father, as I enter the station, help me make decisions based on fairness, flexibility and understanding. Help me to rise above evil. When my tour is over, let me leave the day’s grief, pain and difficulty behind. For your glory and for the benefit of those with whom I work, help me do my duty well. In Jesus’ name, Amen.” –Francis Whitford of Elmira

130+ Years

Of Catholic Social Thought

Launched last November, Living Wage for Us (www.livingwageforum.org) is an intriguing campaign to help employers play their part in every family's ability to "afford a decent standard of living." This cyber-group has a county-by-county wage calculator that considers both the company's location and a wage pegged to the lowest-cost county within reasonable commuting distance.

The group is prepared to help businesses grow by paying a living wage. It partners with other groups interested in the topic.

It is also possible to get a living wage figure for any zip code from www.livingwage.mit.edu (Amy Glasmeier, MIT Urban Planning, 77 Massachusetts Ave., Cambridge, MA 02139).

"In every case a just wage is the concrete means of verifying the justice of the whole socioeconomic system," writes St. John Paul II (1920-2005). That is, Get wages right to get an economy right. (*John Paul II's Gospel of Work*, National Center for the Laity, PO Box 291102, Chicago, IL 60629; \$5)

A wage "should be sufficient to provide individuals and their families with a standard of living in keeping with human dignity," our U.S. bishops wrote a little over 35 years ago in *Economic Justice for All*.

Msgr. John A. Ryan (1869-1945) defines the word *sufficient*. It means "food, clothing and shelter for the laborer and [the] family; festival days and some recreation; proper education for the laborer's children; and suitable provision against accidents, disease and old age." (*A Living Wage*, Macmillan Co., 1906 plus more on Ryan in *Radical Sufficiency* by Christine Firer Hinze, Georgetown University Press [2021]; \$39.95)

Unite Here (275 Seventh Ave. #1600, New York, NY 10001; www.unitehere.org) is a union representing hotel workers, textile workers and those in food service, including at airports and in the Amtrak dining cars. Unite Here has a campaign, "One job should be enough." That's what Catholicism means by a *family wage*. Back in the day Ryan and others who developed that term assumed the wage earner was male. His assumption was sexist at the time and certainly was by 1986 when our bishops wrote *Economic Justice for All*. Thus, the bishops replaced family wage with *just wage* and *living wage*. In

INITIATIVES' opinion it is beneficial to recover the concept of family wage. It is not inherently sexist; the main breadwinner can be a woman. A household can have other breadwinners who add to basic sufficiency, as long as wages from one job are enough to cover the basics.

A final consideration in calculating a wage goes all the way back to Pope Leo XIII (1810-1903). In his May 1891 encyclical *The Condition of Labor* he explains that a just wage is not simply what is "agreed upon" or "fixed by [so called] free consent." It is "a subject of very great importance" to realize that an employee's voluntary acceptance of a wage is an abstraction.

Here's an example: A pastor or diocesan school office offers a subpar starting wage for a young adult Catholic school teacher. The teacher agrees to something low out of a sense of vocation. Justice is not thereby served, says Catholic doctrine, because the teacher has a necessary obligation to sustain one's life and support a family. "The remuneration must be enough to support that wage earner in reasonable and frugal comfort," Leo XIII writes. One job should be enough.

Rest in Peace

William Diehl (1925-2021)

Diehl lived a deep commitment to family, faith and service to others. His passion was the calling of the laity in the various arenas of daily life.

Diehl served in World War II and then graduated summa cum laude in civil engineering from Lehigh University. He joined Bethlehem Steel, where he worked for 32 years as an engineer, salesperson, and manager. He retired in 1981. But his career was hardly done. He founded Riverbend Resource Center, doing management consulting while serving on the board and as interim president for Barker Steel in Boston. Diehl knew the world of business from the inside and experienced the struggles of integrating his faith and his daily life.

His writings, some dozen books and countless articles plus his talks at many retreats and conferences reflect this focus. Among his books published by Fortress Press are *Christianity and Real Life* [1976]; *Thank God, It's Monday!* [1982] and *In Search of Faithfulness* [1987]; those published with Harper Collins include *The Monday Connection* [1991]; and with Augsburg Books there is *It Ain't Over*

Till It's Over [2003], co-authored with wife Judith (1926-2016);

Diehl's organizational skills led to the founding of several networks which advocated the crucial role of the laity in the world: Laos in Ministry for the Lutheran Church in America (before the 1988 merger) plus the Lutheran Academy, a think tank which explored issues facing laity. Later he was a founder and the driving force behind the Coalition for Ministry in Daily Life, a broad ecumenical partnership. It included institutions from mainstream Protestant denominations to evangelical churches and from the Roman Catholic tradition, including enthusiastic participation by our National Center for the Laity.

Diehl served many boards in the Lehigh Valley often as the chair. Among them were the United Way, Interfaith Coalition on Poverty and the Interfaith Coalition on Ethics. (*The Morning Call*, 5/31/21)

Diehl challenged laity to fulfill their calling to work for justice and peace precisely by recognizing their vocation on the job. He himself so clearly lived this call.

His family and deep Christian faith were most important to Diehl. He often attributed his service in World War II to shaping these priorities. He was in Europe as a combat medic with a tank battalion and later witnessed the unspeakable brutality of humankind as he helped liberate concentration camps. These experiences, though rarely discussed, led to a deep examination of what to do with his life. Diehl's calling manifested itself in promulgating the critical role of the laity in the life of society and in a commitment to civil rights, social justice and the dignity of all people.

Rest in Peace

Tony Downs (1930-2021)

It was a surprise "that a married, non-Latin-speaking U.S. Catholic whose experience was primarily as an urban economist, a real estate expert, an administrative theorist and a demographer would become Pope Anthony I," Downs fantasized in *If I Were Pope* (Thomas More Press, 1987). In his pope persona, Downs issued a 20-page encyclical.

Many Christians want to live their faith "in their normal daily lives," Downs wrote. Their settings include "business, government agencies, unions, farms, factories, hospitals, nonprofit organizations, schools and many others. [But]

they feel frustrated by their own ignorance of how to accomplish Christian goals in the complex, secular environments of their workplaces."

The encyclical suggested workplace support groups. Downs described his own effort in this regard. In 1979 he attended the founding convention of our National Center for the Laity where he heard Fr. John Coleman, SJ explain the theory of support groups. Downs spent the remainder of the conference button-holing participants from the D.C. area, where he worked. A small group convened there in 1980. Soon enough he started a second group in his Virginia community. These groups continued for many years.

In 1984 Downs, a Chicago native, joined the NCL board, travelling to NCL meetings from his East Coast home. There was sure to be an interruption within a half hour of each call to order. For example, a phone would ring loudly...this was before mobile devices. Then, just as loudly, Downs would announce that God is calling for a coffee break. Eventually he revealed a bell contraption in his pocket. NCL board members were also sure to hear a fresh joke drawn from Downs' collection of over 200 joke books.

Early on, while still living in Chicago, Downs was involved in race relations, including serving on the staff of the famous Kerner Commission. He wrote several of the recommendations in its *Report on Civil Disorders* (Bantam Books, 1968).

Based at the Brookings Institution (1775 Massachusetts Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20036; www.brookings.edu), Downs wrote 24 books and hundreds of articles or reports on real estate finance, affordable housing and urban planning. *Stuck in Traffic* (Brookings, 1992) and *Still Stuck in Traffic* (Brookings, 2004) had popular appeal. His *New Vision for Metropolitan America* (Brookings, 1994) shows that "unlimited low-density spread" hurts city neighborhoods and soon enough causes problems for suburbia, like traffic, air pollution, high taxes, lack of affordable housing and more. The fall back suburban strategy, growth management, is not a cure because the hundreds of municipal governments in a metro region are incapable of addressing regional, indeed global, problems. *New Vision* charts a third path.

The family requests donations to Maryknoll Sisters (10 Pinesbridge Rd., Maryknoll, NY 10545

Happenings

The Vatican has a website (www.laudatosiactionplatform.org) on Catholic doctrine and the environment for individuals, institutions and particularly schools. It has links to multi-media resources for study and suggests action steps. The site is a project of the Department for Integral Human Development (Palazzo San Calisto, Vatican City 00120; www.humandevlopment.va). Cardinal Peter Turkson of Ghana heads the department. Its main website is informative.

Like many groups, Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor (www.cocalinternational.org) postponed its 2021 major conference because of Covid-19. It plans a Summer 2022 gathering.

Joe Berry (joeberry@igc.org) is a leader in COCAL. His latest, with Helena Worthen, is *Power Despite Precarity: Strategies for the Contingent Faculty Movement in Higher Education* (Pluto Books [2021]; \$26.95). It details how over the years colleges have dealt with their faculty, particularly the place of adjuncts. The book also offers a case study of part-time faculty at California State University who agitated for 30 years until they achieved a respectable contract.

On a similar topic, get *Adjunct Nation* (www.adjunctnation.com), an informative e-resource for part-time teachers. It costs \$25 annual; some school libraries subscribe.

Learning for Justice (400 Washington Ave., Montgomery, AL 36104; www.learningforjustice.org) celebrates 30 years of providing educational material to teachers and parents. For example, its film series includes one on workers' struggles, four on the civil rights movement, one on the Holocaust and one on bullies in school. There is also a quarterly magazine (hard copy or internet access).

Check out *Today's American Catholic* (www.todaysamericancatholic.org), a cyber-publication that carries the news and has reflections about our faith. It recently presented a forum on Pope Francis' encyclical, *On Social Friendship*. It also thoroughly reviewed *Reveille for a New Generation* edited by former NCL president Greg Pierce (Acta [2020]; \$19.95) and posted a couple of NCL blogs.

The Rank & File Catholic is a quarterly newsletter from Kentucky that reports on local labor topics and also has reflections on Catholic themes. It can arrive through U.S. Mail or in your email. Contact Linda Payne (30 Barren Church Rd. S., Henderson, KY 42420; lpayne59@gmail.com).

Catholic Labor Network (3700 O St. NW #209 Maguire, Washington, DC 20057; www.catholiclabor.org) is likewise a source for news about labor relations. Among other efforts, it has a Catholic Employer Project that tracks how well Catholic institutions adhere to our doctrine on labor. CLN lists over 600 Catholic institutions in the U.S. that bargain collectively. The institutions are grouped by their purpose (health care, education, etc.) and by their diocese.

Ethics and Trust in Finance (www.ethicsinfinance.org) facilitates an international conversation that belies the popular impression that everyone in banking and finance is corrupt. It recently held its eighth annual awards ceremony. The U.S. was represented at the event by Kara Tan Bhala (Seven Pillars Institute, 31 W. 31st St., Kansas City, MO 64108; www.sevenpillarsinstitute.org). Her remarks and others are available on the Ethics and Trust website.

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in Action (Fortress Press, 1985) and a close associate of Bill Diehl.

NCL's board includes Sergio Barrera, Charles DiSalvo, Ambrose Donnelly, Tom Donnelly, Bill Droel, Adam Fitzpatrick and Lauren Sukal.