

<h1 style="color: green;">Initiatives</h1> <p style="color: green;">In Support of Christians in the World</p>	National Center for the Laity PO Box 291102 Chicago, IL 60629	July 2024 Number 278
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Turn Toward the World

In his engaging weekly column, Fr. Robert Lauder considers the relevance of one or another writer, filmmaker, philosopher or theologian. He recently explored important themes prompted by his reading of Fr. Michael Himes (1947-2022). (*The Tablet* of Brooklyn, 3/2/24 f.)

Our NCL has long contended that God’s creation and redemption are found within our ordinary work—on the job, around the home and in the neighborhood. Here’s what Himes writes: “Grace is everywhere... Often we speak of the sacred as though it was a quite separate realm from the secular. [But] there is no secular realm if by *secular* we mean *un-graced* or *unrelated* to the *agape* [love] of God. There may be many aspects of life about which we do not customarily use religious or theological language...but that does not mean that those realms of experience are un-graced.” (“Sacramental Vision” in *Doing the Truth in Love*, Paulist Press, 1995)

Msgr. Dan Cantwell (1915-1996), a principal founder of our NCL, agrees with Himes. The spiritual life is wrongly considered an escape from the realities “which face working people every day of the week,” Cantwell says. It is not “possible to restore all things in Christ until we first show equal concern with the necessity of restoring dignity to working lives.”

Cantwell made a turn toward the world even before Vatican II (1962-1965). “My altar was already turning around. The world of work, of drama, of music and science was my world and, more importantly, God’s world... Nothing that God decides to do can be beneath God. Therefore if God became fully human, God from all eternity was at ease with human joy and human striving. The church [the people of God] is not aloof from or opposed to the world. The church needs the world. The church is in the here-and-now. It is supposed to build a human world in our moment of time. The church shares questions with the world, with the rest of the human family.”

Today, some Catholic leaders are obsessed with evil in the world. Other Catholic

leaders are fixated only on the by-and-by. In contrast, Cantwell asserts: “God is not unhappy with modernity, nor unhappy that people have traveled to the moon or that we are trying to eliminate patriarchy in the church and in married life... I am convinced that the secular is the sacred, that the service of the laity is entirely important to God.”

The church is not Noah’s Ark, affording security and preoccupied with internal needs,” Cantwell continues. It is crucial “to listen to and reflect with women and men who find God as they repair automobiles, write a sonnet, discover a healing treatment, create children, establish a business, support a spouse and dance a ballet.”

Cantwell repeatedly emphasizes that “God’s milieu is here and now. Unless we really love life right now for what it is, we will never grow to attain the full measure of life that God wants us to have in eternity. To aim toward the life to come is not to despise the present life. It is precisely when we begin to appreciate the marvelous life we now have that we also begin to realize how much more God has in store for us.”

Attention Readers

A request for a donation toward NCL's 2025 budget is forthcoming. If you missed 2024, there is still an opportunity. See page eight.

Don't forget: INITIATIVES' readers can get *Today's American Catholic*, a cyber-publication for free. Send your email address to editor@todaysamericancatholic.org.

Taking the Initiative

For Green

"Much of the plastic [we] put out for recycling doesn't get recycled at all," reports Hiroko Tabuchi. There are several types of plastic and as yet not all can be reused. Because it's confusing and bothersome, many families indiscriminately throw the wrong types of plastic into the recycling bin. Expensive and inefficient sorting is then required. Even when the reusable type is put in the proper bin, it has to be uncontaminated from grease and food residue and perhaps even the bottle's coloring.

An improvement called *chemical recycling* "can break down the plastic much further into more basic molecular building blocks and transform it into new plastic," Tabuchi writes. Pure Recycle (5958 Hazeltine National Dr., Orlando, FL 32822; www.purecycle.com) has a plant in Ohio that, the company says, can daily process 182 tons of hard to recycle plastic.

Several big-name companies (those that market detergents, pop, cleaning products, syrup and more) advertise their commitment to reduce plastic waste. In partnership with firms like Pure Recycle, they promise increased use of recycled plastic. However, Tabuchi concludes, the dozen or so chemical recycling firms are struggling. They are behind schedule and there are several glitches, including the opinion that the chemicals for processing old bottles are themselves harmful. Beyond Plastics (1 College Dr., Bennington, VT 05201; www.beyondplastics.org) and other advocacy groups say the only solution is a drastic curtailment of plastic production on a global scale. Note however, plastic production is accelerating globally. (*NY Times*, 4/6/24)

Meanwhile, other efforts to forestall the burning of our planet are afoot. They include adding iron to the ocean in order to store carbon dioxide. Also, several companies promote *carbon capture*. For example, Eni

(www.eni.com), headquartered in Rome, collects carbon dioxide from polluters and securely stores it in old gas and oil reservoirs. Sealed wells below sea bottom are being considered. (*Chicago Tribune*, 4/10/24)

Christopher Flavelle reports on an experiment using salt aerosol. The idea is to brighten clouds to reflect light and thus turn heat back toward the sun. Spraying salt skyward might do the trick. Robert Wood at University of Washington (1492 NE Boat St., Seattle, WA 98105; <https://environment.uw.edu>) is conducting initial tests. Kelly Wanser (Silver Lining, 500 N. Capital St. NW #210, Washington, DC 20001; www.silverlining.ngo) was with University of Washington and now directs a research center on the aerosol technique and other pro-environment ideas. (*NY Times*, 4/4/24)

Good intentions are carried out within systems where they mix with other interests and with the fixed priorities of our capitalist economy. No doubt many sincere workers are alarmed by climate change, including chemists, managers, engineers, mechanics, designers, executives, activists and others. But are the good intentions of these people creating worthwhile alternatives to our polluting lifestyle? Or do their efforts unintentionally allow major energy companies to *green wash* their relentless extraction of fossil fuels?

Further, can more and more technology really save us from burning away our planet? Do computers, for example, assist the human community or do they foster individualism? Do the side effects of new procedures outweigh their benefits? Reaction from INITIATIVES' readers is welcome.

Taking the Initiative

With Math

Alec Wilkinson arrived at a consideration of God "by means of mathematics." He is not a math geek. His knowledge is of a high school level and it was acquired late in life. Yet Wilkinson is convinced that math "is rife with intimations of a divine presence."

For starters, Wilkinson notes the likelihood that math is discovered; that it "exists independently of human thought." If so, this means that its theorems or rules are consistent throughout the universe. This then is an example

of the ontological demonstration (order in the universe) for God's existence.

Wilkinson then mentions Georg Cantor (1845-1918) who created math's set theory. Cantor also demonstrated that infinity is not static. There are a multitude of infinities and thus, says Wilkinson, there must be an infinity that contains all other infinities," and that is what we might call God. (*NY Times*, 2/11/24)

Wilkinson develops his theme in *A Divine Language* (Picador [2023]; \$19). What other disciplines or occupations intimate a divine presence, INITIATIVES asks its readers?

Taking the Initiative

As Middle Managers

David Brooks thinks middle managers "are the unsung heroes of our age." It's a wide category that, he says, includes department heads, construction supervisors, school principals, restaurant managers and parish deacons. The best of these people are heroes because in our divisive society they daily "resolve tensions and keep communities working." These people are the binding glue for institutions. They exhibit something "deeply humanistic," which he names *ethical leadership*.

A good manager is employee-centered rather than fixated on bureaucracy, Brooks continues. That manager prefers small gestures or common manners over "fancy pronouncements." The ethical manager doesn't routinely put on the full court press, but persists with "uncelebrated work, day after day." As appropriate, this manager invokes the ideals of the company and the employees' sense of vocation. (*NY Times*, 4/12/24)

Brooks describes these work qualities as virtues in his *The Road to Character* (Random House [2016]; \$20). Might INITIATIVES' readers associate specific virtues with a specific job or profession? What specifically are, for example, key virtues for a lawyer, a civil servant, a parent or a scientist?

Taking the Initiative

In Labor Relations

The South is generally not receptive to unions. (The exceptions are in Northern-based companies that had a union prior to opening a Southern location.) Thus it was news when this past April employees at a Volkswagen assembly plant (7675 Volkswagen Dr., Chattanooga, TN

37416; www.vw.com) voted overwhelmingly to join United Auto Workers (151 Maddox-Simpson Pkwy., Lebanon, TN 37090; www.uawregion8.net). Prior to April, this was the only VW plant in the world without a union. (*NY Times*, 4/21/24)

INITIATIVES' interest in this story goes back a few years to its implication for Catholic social thought.

In 2011 some workers in Chattanooga began a union drive at VW. They lost a vote in February 2014. Reasons for the defeat included the oddity that VW's Tennessee employees were already paid a few cents more than Northern workers represented by UAW (8000 E. Jefferson Ave., Detroit, MI 48214; www.uaw.org). Some VW employees lacked confidence in the UAW executives. (*Labor Notes* [3/14, 1/15, 3/15, 1/16], PO Box 250-480, Brooklyn, NY 11225; www.labornotes.org and *In These Times* [9/14], 2040 N. Milwaukee Ave., Chicago, IL 60647; www.inthesetimes.com)

In March 2023 Shawn Fain, a reform candidate, was elected UAW president. He then led a rolling strike simultaneously at GM, Ford and Stellantis. By October 2023 a framework for a favorable contract was in place.

Back to Catholic social thought. VW is headquartered in Wolfsburg, Germany. All of its plants have a union. Additionally, VW participates in a *works council*. VW wanted to implement that model in the U.S. However, our labor law seems to require a union before there can be a works council.

The works council model is derived from Catholicism's *industry council plan*, explains Tom Geoghegan in *Were You Born on the Wrong Continent?* (NCL, PO Box 291102, Chicago, IL 60629; \$8). The comparable term *co-determinism* is also used in Germany and the principle *solidarism* appears in older Catholic texts. The plan attempts to widen participation in the economy through a small quasi-public entity comprised of representatives from executives, employees, middle-managers, maybe consumers and government officials. The works council does not control wages or specific product prices. In mutually accountable fashion, it considers trends in the industry. The stress is on improved production, not on government intervention.

Stay tuned to learn if a works council is introduced at VW's Tennessee plant. (For more on the industry council plan, see *Ed Marciniak's City and Church* by Chuck Shanabruch and *St.*

John Paul II's Gospel of Work, NCL, PO Box 291102, Chicago, IL 60629; \$24 for both books.)

Taking the Initiative *On Affordable Housing*

Gentrification is associated with displacement of the poor, stress on senior citizens, plus destruction of older homes, the loss of ethnic cultures, increased noisy traffic and more. There must, however, be an upside. After all, every healthy neighborhood needs a stream of new residents.

One largely unknown strategy for tempering gentrification is *community land trust*, of which there are about 300 in the U.S. The largest CLT is Champlain Housing (88 King St., Burlington, VT 05401; www.getahome.org), begun in 1984.

Here's the strategy: A CLT acquires multiple plots in a neighborhood. The trust uses grants or loans to get the land, sometimes from foreclosure. It also gets municipal-owned lots that are abandoned, often for a small price. A few cities even throw development money into the deal.

The non-profit CLT, bound by its chartered vision, sells houses to families at an affordable price. The homes (and sometimes small businesses) are *affordable* because the new owner is not buying land. The structures can be remodeled within the guidelines of the CLT. They increase in resale value. They can be inherited, but the land cannot be sold to speculators. Thus, gentrification is buffered.

The CLT strategy is used here in Chicago. Some CLTs belong to Chicagoland Owners Land Trust (29 E. Madison St. #1700, Chicago, IL 60602; www.cclfchicago.org).

Some neighborhoods are experimenting with CLTs to address the opposite of gentrification. That is, to encourage new investment in a stagnant neighborhood, as is the goal of Altgeld Murray Homes Alumni Association (1235A N. Clybourn Ave. #327, Chicago, IL 60610; www.goldininstitute.org). The targeted far south side neighborhood is called Riverdale. (*Chicago Sun Times*, 4/30/24)

There are a few CLTs for sustainable farming, including the oldest CLT in the U.S., New Communities (801 Old Pretoria Rd., Albany, GA 31721; www.newcommunitiesinc.com). It was established to assist Black families. They continue to harvest squash, zucchini, pecan and

other crops. Recently formed Bear Creek CLT (31167 Ferrier Ln., La Plata, MO 63549; www.bearcreekcommunitylandtrust.org) has 152 acres. It is an intentional community with a counter-cultural ethos.

National Housing Trust (1101 30th St. NW #100A, Washington, DC 20007; www.nationalhousingtrust.org) and its partner Institute for Community Economics (www.community-wealth.org) can help CLTs find funds and other resources. Several CLTs belong to a consortium, Grounded Solutions Network (PO Box 70724, Oakland, CA 94612; www.groundedolutions.org).

Taking the Initiative *With Clothing*

INITIATIVES regularly reports on the apparel industry's use of sweatshops and the improvements being made. INITIATIVES also considers how best to minimize pollution when disposing clothing. Alde Wicker (www.ecocult.com) sounds the alarm on a third topic: The "hidden effects of the chemicals in our clothes."

In *To Dye For: Toxic Fashion* (G.P. Putnam's Sons [2023]; \$29) Wicker links illnesses to chemicals in apparel. Through the Association of Flight Attendants (www.unitedafa.org), she found that some uniforms are particularly dangerous.

Wicker gives "tips for a cleaner closet," including eliminating cheap knockoffs. Purchase clothes with a safety label. Several well-known brands are members of Affirm Group (www.affirm-group.com), dedicated to reducing "harmful substances in the apparel and footwear chain." Member brands can display the Affirm label. Road Map (www.roadmaptozero.com) is a similar group that includes several European brands. Oeko (www.oeko-tex.com) is a laboratory for testing textiles and leather. It has a buying guide.

Wicker strongly advocates a ban on PFAS, an oil-based chemical used to make clothes water repellent and stain resistant. Consumers should avoid material with polyester and other poly ingredients. Brand names for PFAS include Teflon and Gore-Tex.

Work and Art

Catholic Artist Connection (www.catholicartistconnection.com) is for musicians, playwrights, illustrators, photographers, actors, poets and others. The website highlights the personalities and talents of several young artists.

CAC has eight local chapters. Each offers social opportunities, mentoring and networking, forums for reflection and community service experiences. The chapter here in Chicago (czajdel@youthjobcenter.org) has a writers' group which meets at Athenaeum Center (2936 N. Southport Ave., Chicago, IL 60657; www.athenaeumcenter.org).

NCL applauds Catholic guilds like CAC or NCL's good friends at the Catholic Lawyers Guild (www.clgchicago.org). However, as these groups know, there is a truckload of qualification before calling a book a *Catholic novel* or affixing the adjective *Catholic* to any art. Likewise, there is no such thing as Catholic legal practice per se within the U.S. system.

Patrick Reardon takes a pass on the personal life of many artists who enable him "to connect with God on a deep spiritual level." Some of Reardon's favorites include Michelangelo (1475-1564), Aretha Franklin (1942-2018), Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), Sergi Rachmaninoff (1873-1943) and Frank Sinatra (1915-1998). All of these artists and others "reached out into the transcendent, into the mystery that is divine," says Reardon. "All of art is aimed at expressing what can't be expressed." In that sense, he concludes, art "is an unofficial sacrament." (*National Catholic Reporter* [4/25/24], 115 E. Armour Blvd., Kansas City, MO 64111)

Sloppy music, careless painting, vacuous stories are bad art, if they are art at all. If the phrase *Catholic art* means anything, it means competence and honesty. God wants art with all its teeth.

The Great Workbench

The word *worker* is a noble title, says St. John Paul II (1920-2005). It is not only employees who are workers. Everyone involved with a firm, company or agency is included--executives, accountants, clerks, secretaries, drivers, janitors and more. John Paul II then asserts: "Each person is fully entitled to consider themselves a part-owner of the great workbench

at which they are working with everyone else." (*St. John Paul II's Gospel of Work*, NCL, PO Box 291102, Chicago, IL 60629; \$8)

An *equity sharing plan* is a new way that employees might become part-owners of the workbench. A private equity firm, reports "60 Minutes" (www.cbsnews.com; 5/5/24), "specializes in buying businesses with the goal of improving performance and value." Similar to those who flip houses, the equity firm soon enough sells the business at a profit.

Pete Stavros is with KKR (<https://kk.com>), a global management/investment equity firm. He promotes an employee sharing plan both at KKR and through a non-profit, Ownership Works (209 W. 29th St. #167, New York, NY 10001; <https://ownershipworks.org>).

Jon Wertheim of "60 Minutes" interviews Stavros and provides examples. KKR acquired C.H.I. Overhead Doors (1485 Sunrise Dr., Arthur, IL 61911; www.chiohd.com) in 2015. Employees will continue to get their regular salary, Stavros told the managers, assembly line workers, drivers and others. At no cost they also get shares in the business; i.e. an equity sharing plan. Then in 2022 KKR sold C.H.I. The profit to each employee/owner was about \$175,000.

Why is Stavros giving away shares? It decreases worker's alienation from their product/service and from their fellow-workers, he says. The business improves. Thus resale value of the business increases.

In her report on KKR, Lydia DePillis includes criticisms of equity sharing plans. After all, private equity firms have the reputation of cutting wages, eliminating jobs, loading their acquired business with debt and leaving behind a trail of bankruptcies. Maybe this new ownership plan is merely an attempt to whitewash a poor public image. The plan, other critics say, is a distraction from worker-owner coops, ESOPs and other strategies. (*NY Times*, 1/28/24)

Private Equity Stakeholder Project (2513 N. Central Park Ave., Chicago, IL 60647; <https://pestakeholder.org>) is a watchdog group that tracks the problems associated with equity firms. U.S. Federation of Worker Cooperatives (www.usworker.coop) is a hub for worker owned businesses. ESOP Association (www.esopassociation.org) is a hub for stock ownership by employees.

INITIATIVES notes that any type of business ownership requires competent management. Idealism is not enough.

130+ Years

Of Catholic Social Thought

When Cardinal Joseph Bernardin (1928-1996) of Chicago called out the “social sin of poverty,” he was not saying that poor people are sinners. He explains instead that our economy is currently something less than what it could be. That gap can be called *social sin*. (*Commonweal* [9/24/82], 475 Riverside Dr. #244, New York, NY 10115)

Fr. George Dunne, SJ (1905-1998) uses racial segregation as another example of social sin. As recently reprinted in *Commonweal* (2/24), he explains that racial justice does not require us to accept any individual as an intimate friend. Rather, racial segregation is about social structures and it is social sin. Home owners can rightly expect that neighbors adhere to municipal property codes. The social sin is the stigmatizing of a prospective homeowner on the basis of race alone. A government policy or a business routine that on the basis of race or ethnicity assumes that a family will detract from a neighborhood’s upkeep and property values is sinful.

Attitudes play a part because racism germinates from them. Those attitudes, though casually expressed, grow within a cultural belief that Blacks or Arab-Americans or Chinese-Americans or Latin-Americans ipso facto are something less than full human persons. Such attitudes have a protective coating of “rationalizations and evasions” plus “equivocation, subterfuge [and] evasion,” yet

they can soon enough become “widely accepted social patterns,” Dunne continues.

An institution is a social habit. Good institutions make it easier for people to recall holiness, and to be faithful.

“Healthy institutions,” writes Mark Shea, “make it much easier to do the right thing and even reward us for trying.” But when institutions are dysfunctional, it is easier for people to be callous, for clerks to cheat their employer, for police to be hostile or dishonest, for union officials to neglect the members, for bishops to excuse child abuse. No matter the obstacles, Christians along with others are called to change such dysfunctional structures of sin, Shea concludes. (*St. Anthony Messenger* [3/24], PO Box 292309, Kettering, OH 45429)

How? Boycotts or mass marches “are wonderful,” Shea says. But in themselves they do not reform institutions or replace a corrupt one for a fresh one.

Realistically, no solitary person is entirely responsible for reforming the whole world. The proper virtue for improving social structures is *social justice*. In mainstream Catholic thought it is a collective virtue practiced by like-minded people within their own milieu. The act of social justice is organizing colleagues; its outcome is improved policies or better institutions. A small number of teachers, for example, can establish norms for less bureaucratic treatment of students. A small number of neighbors can lobby for inclusive housing standards. (Get, *What Is Social Justice*, NCL, PO Box 291102, Chicago, IL 60629; \$5.)

Happenings

A rare bipartisan vote of Congress passed the Pregnant Workers Fairness Act in December 2022. INITIATIVES welcomed it. However, INITIATIVES noted that the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (www.eeoc.gov) still had to compose the specifics. The act, which went into effect in June 2024, mandates employers to give some “reasonable accommodation,” like flexible breaks, lighter lifting, a workspace away from chemicals, or time off for a doctor’s appointment. However, EEOC, upon hearing from citizens, now unnecessarily adds accommodation for abortion to the regulations. An employer or its sponsored insurance plan does not have to pay for abortion. But the employee gets time off for a procedure and for recovery—though paid time off is not mandated. (*Chicago Tribune*, 4/18/24)

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NCL's objective is to:

- Prompt discussion of church-laity-world as provoked by Vatican II (1962-1965).
- Facilitate people and institutions in the search for a spirituality that grows out of daily occupations and professions.
- Agitate and assist parishes, schools and agencies as they support the connection between work and Christian life.
- Maintain a center of information on the Christian in the world; specifically by publishing INITIATIVES, by distributing select books and by assisting writing and research on the church and world.

NCL, an independent 501-C-3 organization, was founded in 1978, in response to the mail and publicity garnered upon publication of the Advent 1977 *Chicago Declaration of Christian Concern* (reprinted in *Social Holiness*, National Center for the Laity, PO Box 291102, Chicago, IL 60629; \$1). NCL relies entirely on donations. Our gratitude quotient increases and our anxiety level decreases whenever you send along a check. (See page eight.)

NCL's papers are in Alter Library (Mt. St. Joseph University, 5701 Delhi Rd., Cincinnati, OH 45233).

Back issues of INITIATIVES are carried by *Catholic Labor Network* (www.catholiclabor.org). Go into menu, then library, then—near the bottom—into National Center.

NCL's *Working Catholic* blog is carried by *Faith and Labor Movement* (www.faihandlabor.blogspot.com).

The Pastoral Center in Alameda, CA (www.pastoralcenter.com/work.html) distributes several NCL publications plus other resources on faith and work.

“God knows who [God] is.” Why then do we “have to run around calling out [Jesus’] name in admiration, extolling him with each sentence, singing his praises? ...Is this all you can do to honor him? Christ was a carpenter. He must have started work at about the age ten, which is how it went in his day, and then at 30 he went out on the trail. But that is 20 years as a workingman, Christ with saw and hammer, working with his father. Can’t you gain any inspiration from that? ...I think he was saying more to us by his example of work than we say to him in prayers, telling him of his glory and power.” --Jimmy Breslin (1928-2017) in *The Church That Forgot Christ* (Free Press [2014]; \$16.99)