

<h1>Initiatives</h1> <p>In Support of Christians in the World</p>	<p>National Center for the Laity PO Box 291102 Chicago, IL 60629</p>	<p><b>June 2025</b></p> <p><b>Number 283</b></p>
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## Aloneness to Holiness

It is not the content. It is the device itself. So taught media guru Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980). The very presence of a TV (or today, a mobile device) in one's house and in society changes the environment.

Parents are rightly concerned about what young people access on various media. But the greater concern is the insidious, addictive logic of the platforms, details Jonathan Haidt in *The Anxious Generation* (Penguin [2024]; \$30), a best-seller for over a year.

There is a correlation between poor mental health (depression, sleep deprivation, even suicide) and excessive use of smartphones and social media, Haidt details. Among other dangers, he describes bullying in which a "friend" is deliberately slow to reply to an instant message, leaving the sensitive sender wondering about self-worth. A more tragic outcome of cyber-bullying is the subject of *Adolescence*, a four-part film series by Jack Thome and Stephen Graham (available on Netflix).

Haidt goes on to say that the inner design of each media is addictive. He knows it is hard to kick the habit. However, it is crucial to offset the use of devices with shared sacredness and with participation in charitable involvement.

In *Superbloom* (W.W. Norton [2025]; \$29.99) Nicholas Carr, echoing McLuhan's thesis, says that "every new medium creates a new environment." Each piece of content, including those generated by users, is dependent on prior programs. No matter the content of the moment, the inner programs are designed to engage the user, reinforcing continued use of the device.

Carr names "a raft of unintended and unforeseen consequences" of media—past and present. They promise efficiency, excitement and exude optimism but never fully deliver. Today's tech titans, for example, claim their companies create community. Yet their mechanistic view of life really tears us apart, Carr concludes.

"Information is infinite, attention is finite," writes Chris Hayes of MSNBC in *The Sirens' Call* (Penguin Press [2025]; \$32). The sheer quantity of information in our time is so

overwhelming that it consumes attention, making it difficult to focus. Thus, capturing and retaining people's attention is nowadays a valuable commodity. The premise of media companies is to grab attention in small amounts and sell it to advertisers. It is even possible for media companies "to give away the product," Hayes explains, because they make their profit "by selling the audience to advertisers... [The] ad-tech industry is the financial engine of the entire modern internet." Content is only a means to the end. In sophisticated manner the "platforms regulate attention to keep your attention on the platform," Hayes says. To the corporate office, the purpose of the content providers—the writers, the talking-heads, the announcers, the graphic designers, the entertainers, the influencers—is to grab attention.

Do not, however, get the impression that we are entirely helpless victims of the media. By nature each of us is restless and prone to chase after distractions in a quest for satisfaction, Hayes continues. We focus on the unimportant and superficial, not on the profound. The problem we face "is spiritual, not situational."

Because technology individuates, genuine community erodes. The media industry reduces a whole, holy, relational person to clicks, eyeballs and thumbs-up emojis. Even *online friends* tend to measure one another by the rapidity of their responses, their wit, their silly or revealing pictures, or the juiciness of their gossip. We are alone with our mobile device and laptop, alienated from ourselves.

## Attention Readers

INITIATIVES recently requested reports on your small group experience. Several readers sent along their story. Keep the reports coming. INITIATIVES (PO Box 291102, Chicago, IL 60629; [wdroel@cs.com](mailto:wdroel@cs.com)) will summarize them in a future issue.

## Taking the Initiative

### On Tech

Last March, Richard Putz and Fr. Vaughn Fayle, OFM addressed a conference on “Emerging Technologies and Their Role in the Surge of Christian Nationalism,” sponsored by the Chicago Chapter of the International Merton Society (<https://merton.org>) and the Siena Center ([www.dom.edu/arts-minds](http://www.dom.edu/arts-minds)). The presenters drew on insights of Fr. Thomas Merton, OCSO (1915-1968) and Jaques Ellul (1912-1994), as influenced by Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980), a pioneer on the cultural impact of media.

Fayle noted that Merton in his time was deeply critical of the damaging effects of new, pervasive communication technologies. Fayle commented, “Could it be that we again need to hear Merton cautioning us against a technological addiction that could derail our political, intellectual, and spiritual growth”?

Putz, a cultural historian, echoed McLuhan’s argument that every medium or technology molds our perceptions, behaviors and culture, such that we need to look beyond the content to understand the broader implications of the medium itself. For example, he focused on modern media’s role in the rise of Christian Nationalism, a movement whose major tenets he summarized as:

The government should declare the U.S. a Christian nation.

Thus, U.S. laws should be based on Christian values and ethics.

If the U.S. moves away from Christian foundations, we lose our country.

Being Christian is a vital part of being truly American.

God has called Christians to exercise dominion over all areas of society.

Putz noted that Christian Nationalism, adhered to primarily by white evangelicals, finds a counterpart in Catholic Integralism, a movement which fuses religious authority and political power. This, he cautioned, leads to a false form of patriotism that justifies any action as inherently righteous. He cited Merton who warned that conflating nationalism and religion can distort religious values and lead to actions that contradict Jesus’ teaching. Merton insisted that Christianity instead should challenge and critique social norms and government actions.

In an opinion piece, “Palm Sunday Was a Protest, not a Procession,” Fr. Andrew Thayer sounded a similar note: “Since the 1980s,

movements like the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition, and more recently, the New Apostolic Reformation, have not challenged the empire but rather sought to commandeer it. The Seven Mountain Mandate urges Christians to seize control of key sectors of society, including government, business, education and media. This is not a movement seeking to interrogate or challenge the injustice of empire. Quite the opposite. It is an ideology--a hunger for power and dominion--cloaked in pious language and baptized in the logic of empire. This is Christian Nationalism in a nutshell.” (*NY Times*, 4/13/25)

Much hangs in the balance as we grapple with the question of religion’s proper role in society and politics, as well as in examining the ethical and spiritual dimensions of our communications technology. INITIATIVES welcomes readers’ thoughts.

## Taking the Initiative

### Against Covid-19

It is not over. Though complete tracking is impossible, about 3,550 people in our country now die from Covid-19 each month.

In the early days of the pandemic a few historians and museum curators in NYC coordinated interviews, collected notes from the front and gathered photographs and artifacts. Robert Snyder, Manhattan Borough Historian (1 Centre St. #1900 S., New York, NY 10007), uses this material to present the experience of NYC’s essential workers in *When the City Stopped* (Cornell University Press [2025]; \$19.95). The book begins in early 2020 with accounts from health care workers, ambulance drivers and police. By the third chapter readers hear from transit workers, restaurant owners, food delivery drivers, teachers, cashiers, family members and others.

Several of the 45 contributors to the book try to make sense of the term *essential worker*. Before 2020, people were blind to essential workers, those in “grocery stores, truck drivers, delivery people,” says a restaurant owner. With the pandemic the public came to “depend on them greatly.”

“We were considered essential in the sense of sacrificing our own safety for others,” says a bike courier. “But when it comes to paying us well, to saying *thank you*, to tipping us, or even just acknowledging us...suddenly we weren’t essential for anyone.”

Several workers express frustration, even anger. “The pandemic was defined by failures of

leadership from the federal government to local officials,” as Snyder summarizes. The contributors fault President Donald Trump for creating confusion with made-up ideas. A lack of protective apparel and equipment is a common complaint. The essential workers also criticize the public for its laxity in observing precautions. A beleaguered doctor reacts to an internet conspiracy that claims hospital personnel are falsifying the number of Covid deaths. I can’t stand the hoax crowd, he says.

However, frustration is offset by solidarity. “I have accepted the fact that our government, our president, and no one is coming to help. So, New York it’s just us,” says a nurse. “I’m proud of our nurses, they’re functioning and they’re fighting through.”

Many contributors to the book express a sense of vocation. A paramedic acknowledges that he will probably get Covid and possibly “I’m going to die.” Even so, “we’re not heroes. But this is our job. I couldn’t live with myself if I abandoned my job in its most dire moment.” A police commander describes the situation when officers go to a home where a person is dying of Covid. “We must respond to these calls, that’s our profession... We accepted the danger when we raised our hands and swore an oath to become police officers.”

Do any parishes or centers honor our essential workers now and then—maybe in liturgy, in internet posts, in flyers, etc.? Please alert INITIATIVES.

## **Taking the Initiative**

### *For Veterans*

Veteran Roasters (161 N. Clark St., Chicago, IL 60601; <https://veteranroasters.com>) is a coffee shop that employs homeless or otherwise struggling veterans. VR also ships coffee to individual customers by way of its website.

VR founders Kip and Mark Doyle previously started Rags of Honor (<https://ragsofhonor.us>) which employs vets to produce U.S.-made casual shirts.

By one estimate there are 2,000 homeless vets in Chicago. To comprehensively meet the needs of their employees, the Doyles cooperate with A Safe Haven (2750 W. Roosevelt Rd., Chicago, IL 60608; [www.asafehaven.org](http://www.asafehaven.org)). It provides vets with comprehensive case management, including transitional housing and job training. (*Chicago Sun Times*, 4/7/25)

Here's a prayer for those in our Navy, Army, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard and National Guard:

All powerful and living God...protect our soldiers. Be their constant companion and their strength, their refuge in every adversity. Guide them, O Lord, that they may return home in safety. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen. (*Our Sunday Visitor*)

## **Taking the Initiative**

### *Among Domestic Workers*

The 1935 National Labor Relations Act and the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act were breakthroughs for workers. These laws enshrined the right to collective bargaining, set standards for a minimum wage, for overtime pay and other expectations now taken for granted. However, to gain enough votes of Senators and Representatives, mostly from the South, some classifications of workers were excluded from the legislation. The unprotected include domestic workers—nannies, cleaners and caregivers. Some of these workers are self-employed, many are employed through a staffing agency. They can be found in individual homes or giving private care in certain facilities.

For lack of consideration or in dishonesty, some families and others take advantage of domestics, who usually work alone. There are instances of wage theft, unreasonable expectations and even harassment.

A bill (HR 4826) to correct the 1935/1938 legislation was introduced in 2021. It still lingers in Congress. However, ten states and a small number of cities have established protections for domestics, including time off, overtime pay, the necessity of a written agreement from the employer and an anti-discrimination policy.

There is also a push to have a federal Domestic Worker Bill of Rights. The National Domestic Worker Alliance (45 Broadway #2240, New York, NY 10006; [www.domesticworkers.org](http://www.domesticworkers.org)) and others lobby for the legislation.

A few years ago, INITIATIVES was privileged to meet with Ai-jen Poo. In 2002 she began visiting playgrounds, chatting with nannies. Her persistent attention to their situations evolved into Domestic Workers United ([www.domesticworkersunitednyc.org](http://www.domesticworkersunitednyc.org)), a center for mutual support and for lobbying. She is equally concerned about what Pope Francis

(1936-2025) called our throwaway attitude toward senior citizens. She is the author of *The Age of Dignity* (The New Press [2015]; \$16.95).

There are other worker centers that assist domestics. Here in Chicago the Latino Union (4811 N. Central Park, Chicago, IL 60625; [www.latinounion.org](http://www.latinounion.org)) has a program called Coalition of Household Workers. INITIATIVES' friends at Arise (1700 W. Hubbard St., Chicago, IL 60622; [www.arisechicago.org](http://www.arisechicago.org)) likewise include domestics among their concerns.

There are also two collective bargaining unions for California domestics: United Domestic Workers (4855 Seminole Dr., San Diego, CA 92115; [www.udw.org](http://www.udw.org)) and SEIU Local 2015 (2910 Beverly Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90057; [www.seiu2015.org](http://www.seiu2015.org)). (*Dollars & Sense* [12/24], 14 Arborway Terr., Jamaica Plain, MA 02130)

### **Taking the Initiative For Refugees**

Within days of his inauguration President Donald Trump suspended our Refugee Admissions Program and froze funding for assistance to refugees. That means that contracts with several agencies are now suspended.

At its own cost, Catholic Charities Family Services (49 N. Clinton Ave., Rochester, NY 14604; <https://www2.fcscharities.org>) honors its 90-day commitment to 295 refugee families. GG Beshir, the resettlement expert at Charities, says that those applying for refugee status in our country undergo extensive screening. They must soon apply for a green card and pay income tax. They can then apply for full citizenship. "Whatever the cost we will keep the promise for these people," says Lori VanAuken of Charities.

Since Trump's decision, Rochester Refugee Resettlement (393 Lexington Ave., Rochester, NY 14613; [www.rochesterrefugeeservices.org](http://www.rochesterrefugeeservices.org)), shifts its focus to those refugee families that have completed their initial settlement. The assistance includes things like school supplies, job training, ESL education, help with legal applications and referrals. RRR Services is an outgrowth of a parish effort. The families come from Syria, Afghanistan, Congo, Somalia, Ukraine and Nepal. (*Catholic Courier*, 4/25)

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## **The Great Workbench**

*Make Your Own Job: How the Entrepreneurial Work Ethic Exhausted America* by Eric Baker (Harvard University Press [2025]; \$35) explores the set of ideas, values, and assumptions that gave rise to the ideological ascendancy of modern *entrepreneurism*.

Baker, an editor of *The Drift* ([www.thedrifthmag.com](http://www.thedrifthmag.com)) and a teacher at Harvard, traces the gradual transition from the "industrious work ethic" of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, which promoted hard work, perseverance and social duty, to the currently dominant "entrepreneurial ethic" that celebrates individuals who "create work for themselves, as opposed to merely executing, however dutifully, the work assigned to them." The new ethic posits that hard work is not enough; enterprising people will find meaning, wealth and happiness by adopting an entrepreneurial spirit in their own unique way.

Already in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as employment growth in manufacturing declined, some financial writers were exhorting workers to "make your own jobs." Today, in this era of ever more economic uncertainty and job insecurity, business schools, corporate leaders, Silicon Valley techies, and self-help gurus sound similar advice. Everyone is to be one's own boss, a notion that has great allure. According to Baker, this entrepreneurial ethic promises that workers will be rewarded with personal growth and "acquire a set of virtues, including independence, initiative, creativity, integrity and self-realization." They will escape the fear of technological displacement by taking destiny in their own hands. Unfortunately, it often results in a work life of side hustles and constant striving.

Ironically, the tech billionaire, the small-business owner and the gig worker are all lauded as entrepreneurs. But, of course, their situations are quite different. In the end, the empty promises of the entrepreneurial ethic serve the interests of those on top of our social system. This ideology helps legitimize the current economic reality of great insecurity and inequality. Our gig economy in large part represents a kind of forced entrepreneurship of exhausting, undercompensated work that an increasing number of workers undertake just to survive.

The ideology of individual entrepreneurship holds a dubious appeal as a way out of employment insecurity and economic uncertainty. Baker would rather have workers



look toward solutions grounded in solidarity and collective action.

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## News and Views

Msgr. Tomas Halik ([www.halik.cz/en](http://www.halik.cz/en)) holds the Templeton Prize for “exceptional contribution to affirming life’s spiritual dimension.” Christianity is experiencing mid-life crisis, he writes in *The Afternoon of Christianity: Courage To Change* (Notre Dame Press [2024]; \$25). “In our post-modern world,” says Halik, “the role of Christianity itself, as an institution and as a cultural force, is in question.”

Christianity might recover relevance, he continues, but only with significant alterations.

First, the easy equation of the word *church* with buildings and employees must finally recede in favor of *church* as the people of God on a journey through history.

Second, the people of God church must be a *school of life* (a concept borrowed from specialized Catholic Action). The prior emphasis on religious convictions (doctrines and rules) must take second place to experiences of faith.

Third, a reborn church must look something like a *field hospital* (an image borrowed from Pope Francis). Catholicism is not a sect, cordoned off from society’s joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties. Service to the world must take precedence over internal maintenance. Thus, all Christians must take God’s love to what Francis calls “the existential periphery.”

Finally, Halik says that a multiplicity of spiritual centers must augment the standard parish model. Again, borrowing a term from Francis, the urgency of *synodality* is a way to breathe new life into neighborhoods and communities. (See reviews of *The Afternoon of Christianity* in *Commonweal* [3/25], 475 Riverside Dr. #244, New York, NY 10115 and *The Catholic Worker* [4/25], 36 E. First St., New York, NY 10003)

Halik’s analysis is intriguing, though it lacks practical examples. INITIATIVES recommends looking at efforts like Laudato Si Movement (<https://laudatosimovement.org>), its strength and weakness. There is also The Economy of Francesco (<https://francescoeconomy.org>) and Sant Egidio Community ([www.santegidio.org](http://www.santegidio.org)).

Our own National Center for the Laity is likewise an outward-looking spiritual center.

NCL’s Advent 1977 charter affirms “the involvement of lay people in many Church ministries as a wholesome and significant

movement.” However, that type of lay involvement cannot overshadow the unique role of Christian women and men in the world “as a businessperson, as a mayor, as a factory worker, as a professional in the State Department,” and as homemakers and community members, NCL’s charter continues. If Catholicism’s outward orientation is sidelined, another generation will be lost, our NCL charter warned nearly 50 years ago.

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## Rest in Peace

### *Pope Francis (1936-2025)*

Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, who was elected pope in March 2013, made his first pastoral visit to the Sicilian island of Lampedusa, where many migrants fleeing poverty and oppression seek a new life. Francis brought them encouragement. He also challenged those of us who have a place to call home. “We have lost responsibility for our brothers and sisters,” he said. Instead we prefer “a culture of comfort [that] leads to the globalization of indifference.”

“I too had been born into a family of migrants,” Francis reminds us in his autobiography, *Hope* (Random House [2025]; \$32). “My father and my grandparents, like so many other Italians had left [their home] for Argentina... I too could have been among the outcasts today.” These Italians fleeing war and dictatorship “were artisans, woodcutters, builders, miners, nurses, blacksmiths, carpenters, cobblers, tailors, bakers, mechanics, glazers, painters, cooks, servants, ice cream makers, hairdressers, stone masons, traders, bookkeepers and countless farmers and laborers,” Francis says.

Francis spoke on and wrote about immigrants and other major concerns throughout his pontificate. He also had a unique gift for preaching a gospel of joy in street-level catch phrases. For example, he observed that too many people contribute to a “throwaway world” in which the elderly are “readily sacrificed for the sake of a carefree existence.” Too many young adults are “couch potatoes.” By contrast, the young adults who act for improvement “are social poets.” Francis warned Church employees against the tendency to “become caretakers of a mausoleum.” He faulted “the peacock priest” and “the airport bishop” who only drop by at their convenience. In a central theme of his life, Francis urged Catholics “to build a culture of encounter.” It is necessary, he said, to absorb the stories of “those on the peripheries,” and to do it so intently as to acquire “the smell of the sheep.”

Francis persisted in tireless advocacy for the plight of migrants to the end. In January of this year, Vice-President JD Vance defended our Federal administration's policies on deporting immigrants and refugees. Vance even used his platform to criticize the resettlement efforts of Catholic agencies. He suggested—without evidence—that those agencies monetarily profit from their charity.

In response, Francis urged U.S. Catholics to “reject anti-immigrant narratives.” Indiscriminately deporting those in difficult situations violates their dignity.

Catholicism teaches a type of compassion that pre-dates modern utilitarian ideas. It is called *caritas*. Catholics are to help whomever they can, to the extent that they can. In his last homily, Francis used the parable of the Good Samaritan (*Luke 10:29-37*) to affirm that Catholicism is “a fraternity open to all,” not merely a club for immediate friends, families, neighbors, and colleagues.

Ever gracious, Francis accepted a brief visit from Vance on Easter Sunday, just hours before our beloved pope died. Vance arranged a photo-op for that occasion. That photo can endure as a reminder that compassionate Christians, no matter political leanings, are obliged to assist immigrants and others in need as best as possible.

## Rest in Peace

*Rev. Martin Marty (1928-2025)*

Marty, a historian of religion and a commentator on current affairs, was the author of more than 60 books, plus well-over 5,000 articles and reviews. He contributed a regular column to *Christian Century* magazine for 50 years and published a printed newsletter for 41 years. Titled *Context*, his newsletter often mentioned our NCL.

Marty, a Lutheran, was regularly found in Catholic circles. He was an “invited Protestant observer” at Vatican II (1962-1965). He wrote *Short History of American Catholicism* (Thomas More Press, 1995) and several articles on parish life. By coincidence he was born on the same day

## Happenings

Our NCL is assisting the Lawyers Guild of Chicago ([www.clgchicago.org](http://www.clgchicago.org)) with a June 12, 2025 forum on “Obstacles to Labor Organizing.” The event will be from 11 AM to 2 PM at Carpenters Hall (1327 W. Washington, Chicago, IL 60607). More information from CLG director Nick Ramirez ([nicholasramirez33@gmail.com](mailto:nicholasramirez33@gmail.com)).

and in the same year as was prolific Chicago Catholic, Fr. Andrew Greeley (1928-2013).

Marty participated in several NCL gatherings. At a 1998 NCL conference, for example, he gave predictions on the challenges U.S. Christians would face in the new century.

A subsequent NCL meeting considered the term *laity*. During the afternoon session one participant charged that our little NCL was perpetuating division in the church. “NCL should change its name,” the woman insisted. Marty took the microphone. “The stationary is already printed. It’s too much bother to order fresh stock,” he said to a round of laughter. Marty continued with a history of the term *laity*. He noted that although Martin Luther (1483-1546) put strong emphasis on the call to all Christians to be leaders in the faith, Luther’s teaching about the role of the laity got lost. Today, clergy run most Protestant churches, and the notion of lay Christian responsibility for the world is neglected. We Protestants need NCL, Marty concluded.

Marty had a pleasing sense of humor. But it could get him in trouble.

An early incident involved his fellow seminarian, Rev. Robert Clausen (1927-2008), whose term paper referenced an obscure (i.e. non-existent) theologian, Franz Bibfeldt. Marty’s review of Bibfeldt’s rare (i.e. non-existent) book, *The Problem of the Year Zero*, was then printed in the school’s publication. Loaded with pretentious jargon, it explained Bibfeldt’s obsession with what to call the interim between BC and AD.

Some administrators did not like the prank. Just before his ordination, they curtailed Marty’s pastoral and academic assignment to London. Thus, Marty spent 11 years after ordination in a suburban Chicago parish and as founding pastor of a second suburban parish before he went on to earn advanced degrees. Meanwhile, Bibfeldt became popular among some seminarians and theologians. More papers appeared and seminars were held. Eventually Marty, with Jerald Brauer, edited a high-level (i.e. nonsense) book, *The Unrelieved Paradox: Studies in the Theology of Franz Bibfeldt* (Eerdmans Publishing, 1994).

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## INITIATIVES

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NCL readers are entitled to receive *Today's American Catholic*, a cyber-publication. Send your email address to [editor@todaysamericancatholic.org](mailto:editor@todaysamericancatholic.org). Faith and the Labor Movement ([www.faithandlabor.blogspot.com](http://www.faithandlabor.blogspot.com)) carries NCL's *Working Catholic* blog.

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

NCL's objective is to:

- Prompt discussion of church-laity-world as provoked by Vatican II (1962-1965) and by NCL's Advent 1977 charter, *A Chicago Declaration of Christian Concern*.
- 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.

"Life inevitably has its sadnesses, which are part of every path of hope and every path toward conversion. But it is important to avoid wallowing in melancholy at all costs, not to let it embitter the heart." --Pope Francis (1936-2025)