Initiatives

In Support of Christians in the World

National Center for the Laity
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NCL at 50

Our NCL is not a hit-and-run group, as should be obvious from our longevity. NCL is "not interested in a mere skirmish with authority," insisted an NCL founder, Ed Marciniak (1917-2004). NCL is not campaigning for-or-against a singular policy. NCL's ambition is bigger.

Our NCL focuses on the present and the future. Although NCL draws inspiration from 20th century people and movements, it has no interest in reviving the old days. A few years before NCL's founding, Marciniak lamented the demise of groups from those old days, like National Catholic Social Action Conference. He noted that the Conference of Christian Employers, Association of Catholic Trade Unionists and National Council of Catholic Nurses "were inoperable." These "older forms of Catholic social improvement" are no longer suitable, he concluded.

Our NCL is not anti-priesthood. NCL does, however, strongly oppose clericalism, a trait of some priests and deacons. These days, clericalism afflicts many lay people who assume that to be powerful is to be clergy-like, writes Tim Kirchoff in *Commonweal* (10/26).

NCL says that we are agents of the gospel (good news) by way of baptism. Christians don't need extra commissioning, permission, or titles to participate in God's creation and forgiveness. Christians need not run to the rectory before doing the works of mercy. Baptism confers a calling (a vocation) to serve and thus improve the worlds of commerce, family life, health care delivery, public safety, neighborhood development, education, business and lots more.

Unfortunately, a pre-Vatican II ecclesiology lingers among both conservatives and liberals. The Church speaks and decides through its employees, these clericalists assume. "The bishops should do something about…," say lay people. "He left his *job* in human relations for a *vocation* to the priesthood," says a Church publication. Routinely telling canned jokes at Mass is OK because it makes the congregation comfortable, a presider presumes. Another presider has his own reason for not offering the Blood of Christ at Mass. Another leaves out the Sign of Peace. These small examples and many more isolate Catholicism from family life, job situations and community endeavors. Clericalism in all its forms (small and monstrously serious) turns off young adults.

Our NCL eagerly cooperates with other Christians, with Jews and Muslims and more because NCL is firm in its Catholic identity. We feel the beauty of art, of liturgy and sacraments. We ponder the challenges of Scripture. We reflect on the lives of saints. We marvel in scientific discoveries. We study spiritual/pastoral writings. We relish encounters with God's best creations, including spouses and children, colleagues, neighbors, the ill, the bereaved and our guests at the food pantry on Kedzie Ave.

NCL is proud to be a *ginger group*. That is, a conscience within a broader movement for social improvement. NCL is an agent of agitation within Catholicism.

NCL is a confrontation among one another. Will we engage the world and confidently serve all those created in divine image and likeness?

Attention Readers

This is the time of year when NCL (PO Box 291102, Chicago, IL 60629) asks for your tax-deductible donation toward our volunteer effort. See page eight.

Blessings during Advent/Christmastide for all the NCL faithful.

Taking the Initiative

For Green

"Bless me Father for I have sinned. I threw a pop bottle out the car window."

Last July the International Theological Commission issued a long document about "sin against creation," titled *Care for Our Common Home* (https://infovaticana.com/en). Individuals can commit this sin through small acts that despoil the environment. Accumulated such acts,

the document continues, soon enough become sinful institutions (social habits).

Catholicism derives its environmental ethic from the dogma of the Trinity, which asserts that God in God's essence is a relationship and therefore everything in God's creation is related to everything else. Significantly, God's relational design is implanted in friendships and societies, though they are tarnished by original sin. "Preservation of planet earth for future generations" is obligatory for God's people, the Theological Commission concludes.

For more on this moral obligation, get *Ecological Sin: Rupture of Relationships* by Fr. Joshtrom Kureethadam (Orbis Books [2026]; $48).

In a related move the Vatican extended the use of a Creation Mass on suitable occasions for all English and Spanish-speaking congregations. The official Roman Missal includes this Mass. If a local worship office has not sent it to your parish, the text and suggested readings are helpfully provided by World Day of Prayer (https://worlddaycreation.com), a collaboration of 12 Catholic groups. (*The Evangelist* of Albany, 9/10/26 and *National Catholic Reporter*, 9/24/26 & 10/8/26)

Remember that pop bottle discarded out the car window? It is still around.

"More than eight billion tons of plastic waste clog the planet," writes Michael Hawthorne in a terrific series on the Great Lakes. (*Chicago Tribune*, 9/27/26 & 10/16/26)

Plastic can break down into ever smaller particles, but it doesn't go away. Hawthrone reports that about 11million pounds of plastic pollute Lake Michigan.

Nearly all plastic waste is from non-medical, one-use implements, wrappings, fixtures and containers…like that pop bottle. Only about 5% of plastic is recycled, which doesn't guarantee it is reused. A landfill or incinerator is more likely its destination.

There are alternatives to plastic, Hawthorne continues. It might sound fanciful but there are serious people experimenting with and promoting flax. The chemistry involved is known. Harvested fibers are molded, appropriately hardened, then used in products and eventually returned to soil. Already, manufacturers distribute computer parts, automobile panels and cool-looking apparel made with flax. The flax movement is credible enough that oil interests are opposing it.

Melissa Duhaime (University of Michigan, 1105 N. University Ave. #4068 BSB, Ann Arbor, MI 48109; duhaimem@umich.edu) is a leader in flax research. Check out Beyond Plastics (1 College Dr., Bennington, VT 05201; www.beyondplastics.org) and Midwest Linen Revival (www.midwestlinenrevival.org), located in Madison, WI.

Taking the Initiative

On Tech

Catholic schools in INITIATIVES' neighborhood are restricting students' use of mobile devices. At one grammar school students leave their device in their lockers. A staff member confiscates a device if a student possesses it during the day. Additional consequences await repeat offenders. Another grammar school does not allow watches with internet connection nor mobile devices in classrooms. At two high schools there is a box outside each classroom in which students deposit their devices, retrieving them during the change of classes. The class-change time is lengthened to accommodate the mobile device procedure.

The concern is not limited to one Chicago neighborhood. Sr. Mary Simon, OP is a third-grade teacher at St. Anthony School (www.stanthonyschool.org) in Washington, DC. She has a "Theology and Technology" presentation for junior high students. She finds that they don't know that apps are designed to capture attention and keep users glued to their mobile device. (*Catholic Standard* of DC, 9/10/26)

Curtailing tech dependence is a challenge. Pew Research Center (www.pewresearch.org, 12/9/25) finds that teenagers across all economic strata use social media platforms daily. Nearly 35% are on a platform "almost constantly," including their time in a classroom. Almost 65% use chatbot. About 30% are on chatbot daily. Gallup and other surveys put these percentages higher. Youngsters and teens do not live in the physical world; they are online.

Restrictions on mobile devices are possible, explain Meg Leta Jones, author of *Character of Consent* (MIT Press [2024]; $50) and Clare Morell, author of *The Tech Exit* (Penguin Books [2025]; $18.68). "Parents cannot manage the risks of [cyber] activity on their own," they write in *National Affairs* (Fall/26). Parents need institutional support for which there

is precedent. For example, youngsters are prohibited by law and culture from obtaining some products like firearms and tobacco. Parental consent is required in other areas, like in tattoo parlors or for driving permits or for participation in school sports. In other areas industries self-regulate to assist responsible parents. The movie rating system is an example.

"Social media platforms and AI chatbots [are] dangerous technologies for children," Jones and Morell conclude. Yet so far "they are largely unregulated."

To note: the words *mobile device* and *phone* are used interchangeably. However, the device is rarely used to transmit audio conversations; that is, to talk by phone.

Julie Beck, an editor for *The Atlantic* (11/26) confesses that she is "a bad texter." It is a major flaw, she reasons, because texting is our "default mode of communication."

Beck summarizes a survey: "No age group preferred anything over texting" as a means of communicating. It is the way we manage our relationships. Further, in tech culture the rapidity of one's response to a text equals one's level of care for the sender. Yet Beck grievously lags in her responses.

Beck did some research. Quantity texting can cause loneliness, she finds. Texting doesn't necessarily maintain relations and most texts are shallow, unfulfilling exchanges.

"I suppose I could opt out entirely and throw my phone [aka mobile device] into the sea," she concludes. But not yet…

For those so inclined, mobile devices can be incrementally abandoned. Check out Center for Archaic Networks (https://archaicnetworks.com). Its founder, August Lamm, is profiled in *NY Times* (10/11/26).

For its part, NCL (PO Box 291102, Chicago, IL 60629; $15) distributes *Safeguarding the Human Person* (Magnificent Humanity) by Pope Leo XIV. Talks from NCL's workshop on this AI encyclical are at www.stgregoryhall.org. Go to "about," then "programs," then "intellectual life."

Taking the Initiative
On Tech and For Peace

An international group of Nobel Prize winners met recently to warn about increased nuclear risks from the development of AI. "The speed of artificial intelligence may leave little room for human judgment or decision-making," says a report about the meeting in the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* (https://thebulletin, 7/17/26).

The group issued a declaration, *Humanity at the Threshold* (https://globalnobelassembly.org). The meeting was held at the Papal Villas of Castel Gandolfo, where Pope Leo XIV, like earlier popes, spent time this past summer. Several religious leaders were involved.

The July event "marked the first time that such a large and diverse gathering of scientists, experts, activists, and religious leaders addressed, in concert, the risks of AI and nuclear weapons," the *Bulletin* concludes.

Taking the Initiative
With Coops

Peter Maurin (1877-1949), a founder of the Catholic Worker (https://catholicworker.org), knew that one soup kitchen in NYC's Lower East Side could not end poverty nor guarantee meaningful employment for all. Yet the NYC effort and many other humble efforts, he believed, create momentum for "building a new economy in the shell of the old."

Pope Benedict XVI (1927-2022) likewise affirms such small endeavors. He names worker-cooperatives, for example, as pieces that grow "within normal economic activity" to create a desirable alternative within the shell of the old. (*Charity in Truth*, NCL, PO Box 291102, Chicago, IL 60629; $6).

Our Home Place Meat in New Castle, KY is a farmers' coop. Its cattle are milk fed and grass fed without using crowded industrial feedlots. Home Place cattle are free of antibiotics, steroids and hormones.

Home Place is a project of the Berry Center which advances the spirit of Wendell Berry (1934-2026). Orders for Home Place can be placed online (www.berrycenter.org). (*The Progressive*, 11/26)

Another experiment in coops is the Antigonish Movement of Nova Scotia, started by cousins Fr. Jimmy Tompkins (1870-1953) and Fr. Moses Coady (1882-1959). They stressed continuing education among the worker-owners, including study of Catholic principles. Coady Institute (www.stfx.ca) of St. Francis Xavier University carries on the effort. Fr. Gregory MacLeod (1935-2017) drew upon Antigonish for his coop project in nearby Cape Breton. It is called New Dawn (www.newdawn.ca).

Taking the Initiative

Against Aloneness

Ian Marcus Corbin of the Public Culture Project (www.harvard.edu) was raised by "fiercely pious Pentecostal Christians." His upbringing instilled a negative view of the wider world and a distorted superiority. Feeling "like an exile" while in college, Corbin found that philosophy gave him hints of connectedness, which he details in *To Arrive Where We Started: Belonging in the Modern World* (Yale U. Press [2026]; $32.50).

Aloneness is not an individual plight, says Corbin. It is significantly caused by the pressures of extreme capitalism and its enormous gap in the "distribution of resources." Our "rich, liberal, tech-saturated" economy and society is premised on uneven distribution, such that it is "utterly corrosive to the community that adopts it."

A strict economic analysis of aloneness is "too limited" for Corbin, however. It leaves out "the spiritual aspect." An alternative to the alienating nature of cowboy capitalism must consider that "the material and spiritual can never truly be teased apart."

To describe a healthy society that enhances the material and the spiritual, Corbin draws upon Aristotle (384-322 BC), St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881), T.S. Eliot (1888-1965) and others. Corbin does not mention Catholic social principles, though his probing aligns with our concept of the *common good*, of the *universal destination of goods*, of *solidarity* and the like.

To belong and to make a difference is to be connected to one another and to the whole world. Realistically however, public friendship normally begins locally.

William Kennedy, now 98-years old, is the acclaimed novelist of *Ironweed* (1983; $18), *Billy Phelan's Greatest Game* (1978; $24) and others, all published by Viking Press. He describes himself "as a person whose imagination has become fused with a single place, and in that place finds all the elements that a man needs for the life of the soul." That place for Kennedy is Albany, NY. Albany is the setting for his fiction, and it is examined in his non-fiction, including *O Albany* (1983; $27), *Riding the Yellow Trolley Car* (1993; $25) and others.

David Brooks, contributor to *Atlantic Magazine*, is a founder of Weave: The Social Fabric Project (https://weavers.org). It identifies "local leaders" who bypass partisan and cultural divides to assist their community. These are "the people neighbors count on," says Weave. They create "trusting spaces."

Weave Project is an outgrowth of Brooks' reflections on the temperament of our society in *The Road to Character* (Random House [2016]; $21), *How to Know a Person* (Random [2023]; $20) and others. Weave connects neighborhood leaders to others in their locale and occasionally sponsors national gatherings. It publishes a weekly newsletter that tells stories of local efforts in growing social capital. It also has an interactive directory.

Work & Art

In a message last May to the International Book Fair that took place in Turin, Italy, Pope Leo XIV wrote of the importance of reading literature, noting that it "nourishes the mind, helps cultivate a conscious and well-formed critical sense, and guards against fundamentalisms and ideological shortcuts." He urged "everyone to read books as an antidote to closed-mindedness, which is manifest in rigid attitudes and reductive views of reality."

Pope Leo linked serious reading to Pope Francis' call for "a culture of encounter," seeing engagement with great literary works as a means of moving beyond isolation, parochialism and self-absorption.

Writer Drew Calvert muses on the value of reading fiction and poetry in "Literature Is Not About You" for *Commonweal* (10/26). He contends that good literature offers something more than what can be found in self-help books that simply offer diagnoses and solutions as if our lives were puzzles to be solved. Rather, literature deals with life as mystery and engages our moral imagination. We encounter complex, vivid characters facing life's challenges and, thereby, increase our empathy and our understanding of what it means to be human.

Calvert writes, "A good novel requires us to transcend our atomized, alienated condition and allows us to perceive the world precisely and humanely."

According to the National Endowment for the Arts, the percentage of adults who read novels or short stories has been steadily declining in recent years from 45.2% in 2012 to 37.6% in 2022. The downward trend is troubling, not just as a negative intellectual indicator, but

also because reading literature can be a moral and spiritual act that strengthens our capacity for empathy and compassion.

What role does reading fiction and poetry play in your life? To strengthen empathy and compassion, what recent fiction would INITIATIVES' readers recommend?

135 Years

Of Catholic Social Thought

The fourth edition of *Catholic Social Teaching* by Fr. Kevin McKenna is available from our National Center for the Laity (PO Box 291102, Chicago, IL 60629; $18). Its 223 pages contain a coherent summary of what 20th and 21st century popes have to say about pressing issues. Select statements from bishops' conferences also appear.

The statements are organized under seven headings, corresponding to seven Catholic principles: the dignity of each person, the option for the poor, the rights of workers and more. Each section is followed by questions "for reflection and dialogue." McKenna, a former pastor and chancery staffer, is not afraid of controversy. For example, he asks readers, what are "indications that racism is still part of your own community?" Or "what are the advantages of labor organizations…for the worker [and] for the employer?"

This handsome book concludes with a preaching guide, organized by topic and selective Sundays. There is also a penance service for justice and peace, short biographies of each pope since Leo XIII (1810-1903), a short bibliography and more. If any college still offers a class on social doctrine, this is the textbook to use.

Catholics who practice their faith on weekdays benefit from knowledge of our social principles. INITIATIVES reminds its readers, however, that a papal or episcopal statement does not make something true and beautiful. Bishops and popes call something true and beautiful because it is so. Workaday Catholics are not fundamentalists. They apply Catholic doctrine as presented by bishops and popes through the filter of science/reason. Catholics are prudent. They team with others to make incremental improvements to our world.

It was 40-years ago that our U.S. bishops published *Economic Justice for All*, a reflection on the U.S. economy. It is available as a Pdf at www.usccb.org/resources.

We "fully support the right of workers to form unions…to secure their rights to fair wages and working conditions," our bishops write. This is a consistent point in Catholic doctrine. In that Catholic institutions are to be exemplary, "they must fully recognize the rights of [their] employees to organize and bargain collectively," *Economic Justice* says.

To repeat: Applying doctrine is not a simple matter of quoting the bishops or a papal document. That is why our NCL distributes a free booklet, *Catholic Administrators and Labor Unions*. In 50 pages the booklet quotes responsible managers, using their own experience, to grapple with the complexity of unions.

Unfortunately, NCL regularly learns of cases where executives and trustees bust a union in a Catholic college or hospital.

NCL's friends at Catholic Labor Network (www.catholiclabor.org) report on an employee vote held at St. Mary's Hospital in Madison (www.ssmhealth.com) in June 2026. For joining a union: 511. Against joining: 63. But now, says CLN, "hospital administrators are refusing to recognize and bargain with the workers' chosen representatives. This tactic delays a first contract in hopes that the workers become discouraged and give up."

Leaders at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles (www.lmu.edu) and at St John's University in Queens (www.stjohns.edu) are also reneging after a certified pro-union vote.

Stay tuned.

News and Views

You can "encounter the world as something inexhaustibly, constantly present," writes Ian Bogost. "Oceans and ants, sewing machines and sunsets, strangers and screen doors, microwaves and mountains, rocks and racquets, lamps and laughter all prove equally worthy" of what he calls *wonder*.

However, Bogost says, our "culture of optimization" obstructs the wondrous lurking all around us. "Contemporary life has depleted the value of the moment." (*The Atlantic*, 10/26)

Max Weber (1864-1920), a founder of sociology, likewise lamented the neglect of "mysterious incalculable forces" embedded in our surroundings.

Katya Ungerman summarizes Weber: Modern people presume that science explains

everything, that technology masters all. There is little appreciation for mystery in modern life. Calculations and materialism lead the way. The world, using Weber's term, is *disenchanted*. (*NY Times*, 5/23/26)

What others call wonder or enchantment, R. Paul Stevens calls *the beatific vision*, which he equates with a *sacramental sensitivity*, as promoted by the National Center for the Laity. For NCL the world is grace-filled. Although it is infected with sin, the world is not hostile territory.

The official sacraments contain this positive view of the world, though the sacramental outlook is not restricted to those official sacraments nor is it accessible only to Catholics.

Stevens quotes NCL advisor Kathy Hidy in his *Working Blessedly Forever* (Wipf & Stock [2024]; $29):

> There is a unique treasure imprinted in each person's imagination… It suspects that embedded in the ordinary lies the extraordinary, the miraculous or the salvific. To have this sensibility 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. This sensibility sees bread and wine, the work of human hands as the real body and real blood of Christ. It also 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…
>
> 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 in 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, 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. Yet it is a profoundly accessible way of looking at the world.

Rest in Peace

Annie Dillard (1945-2026)

Dillard, born in Pittsburgh, was a spiritual writer who expressed herself in poems, memoirs, fiction and essays. She was "a theologian looking high and low for God," writes Daniel Lewis in *NY Times* (9/17/26).

The nutrients for a spiritual life are in a particular geography, though it could be any place and for any length of time. Look around, listen carefully and converse with intentionality. Start with the ordinary, Dillard says.

Dillard's first book in 1974, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* ($13.59), launched her all-consuming career. Like all her others, it was published by Harper, and all her books are still in-print. Among them are *Holy the Firm* (1977; $11.99), *An American Childhood* (1987; $12.79) and *The Writing Life* (2009; $12.79).

"I know only enough of God to want to worship him by any means ready at hand," she writes in *Holy the Firm*. God does not expect perfection in us. There is no "clean hand, nor a pure heart on the face of the earth, but only us, a generation comforting ourselves with the notion that we have come at an awkward time."

Rest in Peace

Fr. Peter Henriot, SJ (1936-2026)

Born in Tacoma, Henriot spent most of his career in Zambia, including 22 years as director of Jesuit Center for Theological Reflection (https://jctr.org.zm) there. He championed a theological practice that has experiential connection to and action against poverty and injustice.

Henriot is known in the U.S. through a booklet written with Joe Holland, *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice*. Its 45 pages on inexpensive 7.5 X 9.5 paper draws upon Cardinal Joseph Cardijn (1882-1967) of Belgium, whose ideas are used by Young Christian Workers, Christian Family Movement and others. The booklet adds to and renames Cardijn's dynamic method of Christian formation. Henriot and Holland insist that theology begins in experience, that it benefits from competent analysis and that it takes hold only through action and reflection on the action.

The booklet was published in 1980 by Center of Concern, a think tank founded in 1971 by Cardinal Joseph Bernardin (1928-1996) and Superior General Fr. Pedro Arrupe, SJ (1907-

1991). The Center closed in 2018, but not before publishing other editions of *Social Analysis*. In the 1980s two other Jesuits joined Henriot with a similar booklet, *Our Best Kept Secret*. Eventually other authors took over the writing.

A discussion group, a book club or a presentation in the parish hall is beneficial. But without action there is little sustained faith formation. Henriot's complete pastoral cycle is as valuable today as it was at the time of his modest booklet.

INITIATIVES

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Back issues of INITIATIVES are available through Catholic Labor Network (www.catholiclabor.org). Go to the bottom shelf of its Library.

Thanks to NCL board member Chuck DiSalvo, there is now a digital compendium of all INITIATIVES' newsletters, 1978 to present. Readers are welcome to request a thumb drive copy.

NCL readers are entitled to receive *Tomorrow's American Catholic*, a cyber-publication that often carries NCL's blog. To get started, send your email address to editor@tomorrowsamericancatholic.org.

NCL is an independent 501-C-3 Catholic organization, chartered in the State of Illinois. NCL relies totally on your donations.

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 spirituality that grows out of daily occupations, family
- life and neighborhood involvements.
- 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.

"It is from numberless diverse acts of courage…that human history is shaped. Each time a [person] stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, [they] send forth a tiny ripple of hope and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance."
--Sen. Robert Kennedy (1925-1968) in Cape Town, South Africa, 1966