Initiatives

In Support of Christians in the World

National Center for the Laity
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Aloneness to Holiness

The Health Ministry Team at Sacred Heart (3 Catholic Way, Castleton-on-Hudson, NY 12033; www.sacredheartcastleton.org) is responding to the loneliness epidemic, calling it "the defining challenge of our time."

To be alone at times is healthy. It can be time to reflect, to pray, to simply appreciate one's surroundings. To feel lonely at times is normal, even in a crowd, even in a marriage. Unhealthy isolation is, however, wrecking our culture. It takes an emotional, spiritual and physical toll.

The Sacred Heart team is aware that "social connection is much more than a personal issue. The larger political, economic, technological and cultural environments all influence [our] social connection."

The Sacred Heart leaders began with an information session that detailed isolation's damaging effects. The team furnishes referrals and resources to parishioners and others. The effort will continue. (*The Evangelist* of Albany, 4/16/26)

Since the mid-20th century a measurable increase in individualism has steadily weakened social connection in our society. Economic, psychological, and even geographic determinism accompanies this decline in connectivity.

Churches, mosques and synagogues can mitigate isolation to a degree. Regular churchgoers are more likely to belong to other groups and to aid social causes, reports Timothy Carney in his fascinating *Alienated America* (Harper Collins [2019]; $20.99). They donate 400% more to charity than the unchurched. "They enjoy much more social connection" regardless of income, Carney continues. "The best predicator of civic virtues is regular attendance at church." Note: These positives apply to churchgoers, not to those Christians, Muslims and Jews who are not attendees.

Why has individualism overtaken social capital? The causes are not easily distinguished from the effects. Robert Putnam, now retired from Harvard (www.robertputnam.com), made his career by exploring the question. Factors include economics, deindustrialization and the enormous wealth gap. The significant difference in outcomes between those with or those without a college degree plays a part. The shift to devotion to a celebrity politician rather than loyalty to a political party adds to isolation. The trend among couples to forego the institution of marriage is in the isolation mix.

Putnam, who is guardedly optimistic, found several dead ends in his quest for a single cause of increased individualism. More women in the workforce, for example, does not correlate with less involvement in social activities. One factor does, however, have a consistent link to low social capital: Time spent watching TV or surfing the internet. (Putnam's classic, among other books, is *Bowling Alone*, Simon & Schuster [2000]; $21.99.)

The American Time Use Survey (www.bls.gov) reveals that time spent at home has significantly increased. Yes, Covid-19 drew attention to the trend, but it began before Covid-19, and it persists. At home, in the car and elsewhere, TV and internet use is accelerating. Nearly 70% of teenagers use a chatbot in addition to other technology. TV is more popular than ever given streaming services and specialty channels.

Please tell INITIATIVES about social capital efforts on your jobsite, in your church, neighborhood and wider area. Obtain *Public Friendship*, a booklet from NCL ($6).

Taking the Initiative

Among Caregivers

The number of elderly is increasing. They live longer than in the past. As they become homebound, family members are stretched in providing adequate care. Thus, in-home caregiving is an expanding job sector. In fact, about three million are currently employed in homecare, not counting nursing home employees.

The family of a homebound person might try rotating care among its members and reliable neighbors. For those with the wherewithal, this arrangement has several positives. But after a few months it takes a

measurable toll, particularly if the primary caregiver is a spouse.

Helen Ouyang gives a heartrending report on the estimated four million primary caregivers who are children. They give shots, change bandages, record vital signs, clean the house, schedule and participate in medical appointments and attend to insurance and benefit forms. At the same time these children try to continue their schooling yet miss a significant number of days.

Ouyang mentions American Association of Caregiving Youth (https://aacy.org). It cannot possibly help four million children who care for a homebound relative. But it models how to provide academic support, respite, some socializing and mutual support to high schoolers who are primary caregivers. (*NY Times Magazine*, 8/16/26)

Resources permitting, a family can opt for a paid caregiver. Wages vary by locale. About $17 to $20 per hour is an average. Immigration policy has implications for the availability and quality of caregivers, about one-third of whom are immigrants. The federal reduction in Medicaid is also a factor in the option for a caregiver, Courtney Martin writes in *The Nation* (226 W. 17th St., New York, NY 10018; 9/26).

Most caregivers are affiliated with a for-profit agency. A smaller number are self-employed. The turnover rate is high. About 75% quit annually, though some eventually return to caregiving.

Martin profiles an alternative to for-profit agencies and to independent contractors. There are now about 25 caregiver worker-owner cooperatives. Their people have a lower turnover rate and receive slightly better wages. They participate in management and can allocate the profit toward a bonus or a collective investment.

Most caregiver coops are small. The largest, says Martin, is Cooperative Homecare Associates (400 E. Fordham Rd., Bronx, NY 10458; www.chcany.org). Founded in 1985, it has over 800 worker-owners and another 800 employees. CHCA, like several of the small firms, is affiliated with a support network. CHCA belongs to National Alliance for Caregiving in the District of Columbia (www.caregiving.org). National Alliance provides marketing, research and lobbying to its members.

A worker-owner team is not prohibited from forming a union, Martin explains. Those at CHCA belong to SEIU1199 (www.1199seiu.org), giving them a way to lobby their state legislature for better reimbursement to families.

Catholicism affirms worker cooperatives. In fact, the largest coop, Mondragon (www.mondragon-corporation.com), was founded under Catholic principles by Fr. José María Arizmendiarrieta (1915-1976). Coops can be part of an alternative to the callousness of extreme capitalism. Keep in mind though that coops and other alternatives are not total replacements for humane capitalism. They find their place "within normal economic activity," as Pope Benedict XVI (1927-2022) explains in *Charity In Truth* (NCL, PO Box 291102, Chicago, IL 60629; $6).

For more on caregiving of the elderly, obtain *The Age of Dignity* by Ai-jen Poo (The New Press [2015]; $16.95).

Taking the Initiative

Among Farmers

Blessings to National Family Farm Coalition (110 Maryland Ave. NE #307, Washington, DC 20002; https://nffc.net) on its 40th anniversary. Its members are 38 groups of farmers from 42 states. NFFC supports farmers who seek fair economic opportunities in a sector dominated by large corporations. NFFC lobbies government entities on agricultural policy, while it provides mutual support. Its newsletter and blog keep its members informed on trends and resources.

Family Farm Defenders (PO Box 1772, Madison, WI 53701; https://familyfarmers.org) is an NFFC member. Its informative newsletter reports on legislation, the status of agricultural workers, on the proliferation of data centers, on the Roundup Herbicide controversy and the like. It also contains reviews of books on food, health and economics.

The Price of Milk (www.priceofmilk.com) is a four-episode documentary about the dairy industry. Among other topics, it considers the *checkoff fund* or *checkoff program*. This is an obligatory fee that farmers pay to Dairy Management Inc. (www.usdairy.com) for the general marketing of their products. Family farmers who appear in *Price of Milk* object to the checkoff structure and its allocations, saying it favors big corporations.

Sen. Peter Welch (199 Main St., Burlington, VT 05401; www.welch.senate.gov) introduced the Milk from Family Daries Act (S 4906) this past June. Its provisions include a formal process for a farmer to appeal the checkoff tax and

other fees. If the bill passes, there will be alignment between national and regional interests to establish fair pricing. There will also be a floor price so that a major market fluctuation will not doom a small farm.

Those who work on dairy farms likewise have concerns.

Milk with Dignity (PO Box 8116, Burlington, VT 05402; https://milkwithdignity.org) with its Dignity Code of Conduct is a clever effort to uphold the rights of dairy workers to safe housing, a family wage and other needs. At the same time it supports sustainable dairy farming and ethical supply chains.

A dairy farm can be certified and monitored by Dignity's affiliated Program and Standards Council. It promotes its certified farms to retailers and to consumers. The farm can also receive financial premiums through the program. Already 54 farms participate.

To keep current on farmworker issues, send a donation to National Farm Worker Ministry (PO Box 10645, Raleigh, NC 27605; www.nfwm.org). Their newsletter is called *News & Views*. Also connect with Farm Worker Justice (1126 16th St. NW #507, Washington, DC 20035; www.farmworkerjustice.org). They lobby for healthcare access, provide legal assistance, publish a newsletter and furnish reports.

Catholic Rural Life is now housed at University of St. Thomas (2115 Summit Ave. #4080, St. Paul, MN 55105; www.catholicrurallife.org). They distribute a booklet, *Vocation of the Agricultural Leader*.

Taking the Initiative
Among Scientists

Institute for Theological Encounter with Science and Tech (ITEST, 20 Archbishop May Dr., St. Louis, MO 63119; https://faithscience.org) was founded in 1968 by John Matschiner (1927-2003) and Fr. Robert Brungs, SJ (1931-2006).

The rapid development of science and technology "is perhaps the greatest intellectual and cultural challenge facing the church," writes Brungs. Yet, "almost no attention has been paid" to a dialogue among scientists about the meaning of their work, nor among scientists as Christians. The crucial arena, Brungs continues, is not in a realm of philosophy or abstract theology, but "in the personal integration of faith and scientific activity" among medical researchers, health care professionals, computer engineers, biologists, regulators, meteorologists, ecologists and others.

The heady ITEST newsletter, *First Principles* (formerly *Itest Bulletin*), is 16-pages. The current issue has three essays. One by Mark Stahlman (Center for the Study of Digital Life; www.digitallife.center) delves into AI. He mentions among others St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), Rene Girard (1923-2015), Max Weber (1864-1920) and Pope Leo XIV. Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980), an INITIATIVES' favorite, recurs in the essay.

McLuhan's basic insight pertains to our deliberation over AI and other technology. What appears on a screen, he says, is less influential than the technology itself. In McLuhan's catch phrase, *the medium is the message*. Merely having AI in one's home, pocket or office changes the environment and changes the thinking and behavior of its user.

For an example of the influence of social media and omnipresent mobile devices on children and young adults, obtain *The Anxious Generation* by Jonathan Haidt (Penguin [2024], $30; www.anxiousgeneration.com).

Taking the Initiative
Among Gig Drivers

The app-based ride and delivery business is a flawed model in its design and management. Its drivers come up short. The companies "control their fares and trips, [the companies] take an everchanging percentage of their pay" and dismiss drivers for questionable reasons, writes Kade Heather in *Chicago Sun Times* (7/20/26).

Through the effort of Illinois Drivers Alliance (www.illinoisdriversalliance.org) and others, rideshare drivers can now bargain with Uber and Lyft. A state law, as enacted in early June 2026, allows drivers to form a union. This follows a similar change in California and Massachusetts. For the record, some normally pro-union voices are unenthusiastic about an oddity in the law: it solidifies the *independent contractor* status of these drivers.

There are about 85,000 registered rideshare drivers in metro-Chicago. Their competition with taxis prompted Chicago to allow a 20% taxifare increase as of Summer 2026. Yet, taxi drivers are losing out. Unlike the rideshare drivers they must have a chauffeur's license and undergo frequent inspection and

training. Further, owning a taxi medallion is no longer a sound investment.

Uber and Lyft, responding to drivers' misbehavior (sometimes of criminal nature) are tightening their safety procedures. Background checks are more thorough and frequent.

Stay tuned. INITIATIVES will report when rideshare drivers secure a contract. It is expected that such an agreement will be sector wide. (*Chicago Sun Times*, 10/13/24, 7/5/26 & 7/20/26 and *Chicago Tribune*, 6/2/26 and *NY Times*, 6/4/26 & 6/27/26)

Taking the Initiative
For Health Care Professionals

The Curatio Apostolate (3317 Edward St. NE, St. Anthony, NM 55418; https://curatioapostolate.com) was founded for all those who care for the sick: doctors, nurses, nursing home, hospice and clinic professionals, with a mission to promote, support and sustain the *gospel of life*, and to see Christ in patients and co-workers. Curatio follows the Vatican's 1995 *Charter for Health Care Workers,* a guide for humane delivery of health care; a model that goes beyond "technical activity but also one of dedication and love of neighbor." It has affiliated groups in St. Paul, Chicago and elsewhere.

Taking the Initiative
With Liturgy

A Matter of Spirit (Intercommunity Peace & Justice, 1216 NE 65th St., Seattle, WA 98115; www.ipjc.org) devotes its Summer 2026 issue to liturgy and public witness.

As an example of liturgy and witness, the magazine details what happened (or didn't happen) in a western suburb of Chicago. About 2,000 gathered outside Broadview Detention Center on November 1, 2025 (feast of All Saints) for Mass. Sr. JoAnn Persch, RSM (1934-2025) attempted to bring the Eucharist to the refugee/immigrant inmates. She was denied entrance. Persch, who died two weeks after this Mass, ministered each week for 19 years at area detention centers with her friend, Sr. Pat Murphy, RSM (1929-2025).

Coalition for Spiritual and Public Leadership (329 W. 18th St., Chicago, IL 60616; www.csplaction.org) organized the All Saints Mass. Within days of the Mass and the rebuff to Persch, CSPL filed a suit against Department of Homeland Security and President Donald Trump alleging a violation of religious liberty. The outcome is detailed on the CSPL website.

"Protesting injustice [can be] a viable and vivifying response" to our earthly kingdom's imperfections," concludes *Matter of Spirit* contributor Anne McGowan of Catholic Theological Union (www.ctu.edu).

The chosen people escaped Egyptian oppression, write Matthew Kaemingk and Cory Willson in *Work and Worship* (Baker [2020]; $32). Crossing the Red Sea was one thing, but "extracting the Egyptian economy out of the Israelites was another thing entirely." They were tempted to mistreat their fellow workers. And so, they needed the social reminders of temple worship.

Kaemingk and Willson continue: Worship was designed to "prevent them from repeating the economic patterns of Egypt… [Specifically] the Sabbath was a liturgical reminder to workers that Israel's economy would be a renewing economy." Then and now "the oppression of workers destroys the worship-filled character of work." (See *Exodus* 14, *Deuteronomy* 16 and consider too Solomon's backsliding in using forced labor to build the temple honoring the God of Liberation, *1 Kings* 9:15f.)

Fr. Virgil Michel, O.S.B. (1890-1938) of Saint John's Abbey in Minnesota was a pioneer in connecting daily work with the liturgy. Others joined the effort, like Msgr. Reynold Hillenbrand (1904-1979) of Chicago and his disciples, including NCL founders Msgr. Dan Cantwell (1911-1996) and Ed Marciniak (1917-2004).

While studying in Europe, Michel was exposed to theology and pastoral practice that was the basis for Vatican II (1962-1965). Michel promoted these ideas upon his return. In particular, "his vision of a strong link between liturgy and social justice became the unique contribution of the American church to the worldwide liturgical movement," writes Rita Ferrone. For him "active participation in liturgy is indispensable to social reconstruction," Ferrone continues. "The liturgy renews our communion in Christ's mystical body, and the grace that flows through the liturgy empowers us to seek the common good." (*Commonweal* [8/26], 475 Riverside Dr. #244, New York, NY 10115)

What can be done Sunday upon Sunday to instill in worshipers a weekday fervor for social improvement? It is important not to add gimmicks to the order of Mass. Two NCL books

contain modest suggestions: *The Mass Is Never Ended* ($10) and *Monday Eucharist* ($10).

Taking the Initiative

For the Trades

By a financial measure a college degree is still worth it. Over their employment years those with a degree earn nearly twice as much as those with a diploma. It is completing the degree that counts, not merely attending college. The comparison, please note, does not adequately consider a young adult's starting point. Did the graduate come from a two-parent family that was upwardly mobile, giving that student a head start? Was the degree earner able to focus solely on college life with minimal outside responsibilities?

A young adult considering a career in the trades often must overcome discouraging words from parents and friends, reports Carlie Holtermann in *NY Times* (7/19/26). Yet plumbers, electricians and others find meaning in their jobs, as well as intellectual challenge and sufficient income. Trade jobs are not inferior, Holtermann concludes.

Bring Back the Trades (https://bringbackthetrades.org) based in Rye, NH is among groups combating negative stereotypes of welders, bricklayers, machinists, carpenters and more. In addition to its public relations campaign, Bring Back offers mentoring and scholarships

There is a recent movement among some Catholics to educate young adults for careers in the trades.

Emma Green of *The New Yorker* (1 World Trade Center, New York, NY 10007; 4/17/26) profiles College of St. Joseph the Worker (424 Washington St., Steubenville, OH 43952; https://collegeofstjoseph.com). A background in the liberal arts and competency in a trade are not mutually exclusive, says the school. It offers a rounded education about work and life, about vocation. A student takes three courses per semester and spends significant time on a jobsite, often renovating buildings. Campus life is structured yet fun, Green finds.

St. Joseph leaders are idealistic, but for now their experiment shows success. There is no federal money involved, though the school applied for a grant from a neighboring municipal entity. A few high-profile conservatives endorse St. Joseph College.

San Damiano College for the Trades (4879 LaVerna Rd., Springfield, IL 62707; www.sandamianotrades.org) was recently founded by Bishop Thomas Paprocki. The school offers a liberal arts curriculum and after three years awards a certificate in a construction trade. The school's culture is reinforced with Catholic piety.

Green mentions other Catholic trade schools in Grand Rapids, MI and Silverado, CA.

This movement is not in opposition to union apprentice programs. In Chicago as elsewhere there are outstanding Catholic teachers and administrators in the union schools who, along with colleagues, impart public skills and a sense of justice to their students.

Work Prayers

For Customers

Give us eyes O God to see the worker in the work. Not just the title or the salary scale. Not just the output and the product. Let us really see you when you serve us lunch, when you give us insurance forms to complete, when you take our money at checkout. Let us see you in one another.

--Rev. Donna Schaper (https://thedonnaschaper.com)

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135 Years

Of Catholic Social Thought

"Tax the rich" is a slogan increasingly heard these days. No wonder. The wealth gap exceeds imagination. Worldwide only about 60,000 people have all the money. "The world's wealth has grown in absolute terms, [yet] it is increasingly concentrated in fewer hands, widening inequalities both within and between countries," writes Pope Leo XIV in his 2026 encyclical, *The Dignity of Humanity* (NCL, PO Box 291102, Chicago, IL 60629; $15).

Progressive taxation (the higher one's taxable base, the higher one's tax rate) is thus an acceptable antidote to the disparity. It is an application of the Catholic principle of distributive justice.

But constructing and maintaining the good society takes more than one policy. To simply think "that for somebody to be poor means somebody else must be getting rich…is not Catholic social teaching," writes Clifford Longley. Catholicism "tells us that wealth

creation results from an active collaboration between labor and capital, where one does not have to get rich at the expense of the other but from which both benefit." (*The Tablet* [8/5/26]; www.thetablet.co.uk)

Catholic social principles are complimentary; one or another cannot be emphasized while neglecting others. In the case of "tax the rich," other Catholic principles are in play, including the *universal destination of goods* and the *right to private property*.

The universal destination of goods encourages a common effort from everyone for a humane world, one "in which the creation of wealth can take on a positive function," explains the Vatican's 2004 *Compendium of the Social Doctrine*. This principle is violated when the progress of some is "an obstacle to the development of others." It is not honored when everything is an exercise in "the art of the deal." As used today, "a deal" no longer refers to fair exchange. It means that a wealthy person pulls a fast one over a weaker person or that our country boxes another into a losing situation.

The principle of private property is essential to a moral economy provided all can become owners in some measure, says the *Compendium*. Catholicism quickly adds that "private property is subordinated to the right to common use." St. John Paul II (1920-2005) puts it this way: Each family is to have some meaningful level of ownership in the great workbench. "There is a social mortgage on all private property," he insists. (*St. John Paul II's Gospel of Work*, NCL, PO Box 291102, Chicago, IL 60629; $8)

Keep in mind that these Catholic principles--invoked from the left or from the right--are not like the fundamentalist use of the Bible. They must be mediated through reason and experience as we make timely decisions. It is readers of this newsletter and other sincere, competent people who are the bridge between doctrinal principles and society.

Rest in Peace

Wendell Berry (1934-2026)

Berry managed a 125-acre farm in Kentucky while authoring about 50 books—poetry, fiction, polemics and memoir. His primary interest was farming and conservation.

Culture was integral to Barry's reflections. For example, *The Hidden Wound* (Counter Point [1970]; $15.95) explores how Berry understood himself and Southern culture "in regard to…[my] crisis of racial awareness." His ancestors were slaveholders, he admits. He heard stories about them, but his family and neighbors suppressed any conflict or moral anguish about race relations. Yet they and other Southerners (white and Black) suffer greatly from what is known but is never said.

Churches, Barry reflects, contribute to the suppression. They focus on heavenly salvation while ignoring how to live with others. The wishful mystical aspects of religion "completely overshadow the moral," he writes.

Like all his writing, *The Hidden Wound* challenges readers to reflect. Berry does not stand apart from what he describes. He learns by conversing with those on his path. This book was written some 40 years before MAGA. Yet without preachiness, it aides our understanding of current events.

The Berry Center (www.berrycenter.org) is in New Castle, KY.

Happenings

Blessings to Liturgical Press (PO Box 7500, Collegeville, MN 56321; www.litpress.org/100) on its 100th anniversary. Founded by Fr. Virgil Michel, OSB (1890-1938), Liturgical Press anticipated Vatican II's call for "full and active participation" by all the baptized in the sacred rituals. In addition to publications about the sacraments and Scripture, Liturgical Press, continues Michel's insistence that the liturgy is a school for social improvement with its books on race relations, care for creation and more. The liturgy, don't forget, includes the Divine Office. For 15 years Liturgical Press has published a monthly booklet, *Give Us This Day*. It is an abbreviated Divine Office--Lauds (morning), Vespers (evening) and Compline (night).

The latest issue of *Ministers At Work* (Christians in Secular Ministry; www.chrism.org.uk) notes the forthcoming 50th anniversary of our National Center for the Laity. This issue also contains an article by your INITIATIVES' editor on the theology of work. "We hope to strengthen the friendship between CHRISM and NCL," this journal from England says.

NCL began in the late 1970s when the Priests' Council in Chicago decided to compose a report on "the status of the laity." Fortunately, Msgr. Dan Cantwell (1911-1996) was a member of the Council. Thinking it strange that no lay people were included, Cantwell expanded the group to 47 members--priests, women religious, union officers, business leaders, homemakers, students, artists and others. They made a crucial decision: Proceed independently, acting only on their own authority. The *Chicago Declaration of Christian Concern* emerged from their conversations. The reaction to it was overwhelming, such that a secretariat became necessary. It was called "National Center for the Laity."

"The involvement of lay people in many Church ministries [is] a wholesome and significant movement," the *Declaration* affirmed. But what about the daily challenges of jobs, professions, homemaking, community building and the like? The good news of Christ "is as present to the world through the ordinary roles of lay Christians as it is in ecclesiastical roles," NCL's founders wrote. Yet many lay people do not see that their weekday activity is building God's kingdom. The default assumption is that serving inside the Church is holy but one's daily secular routine is not ministry, not a vocation, not Christian service.

Despite Vatican II (1962-1965) and despite NCL's effort of 50 years, the laity's mission to the world seems left behind. What happened to the laity? Could INITIATIVES' readers gather a few friends to discuss the status of the laity? Send INITIATIVES your reflections.

INITIATIVES

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Back issues of INITIATIVES are at www.catholiclabor.org, bottom shelf of the Library.

Our National Center for the Laity is chartered in the State of Illinois and is registered as an independent 501(C)3 organization. NCL relies totally on donations.

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 Christianity and daily 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.

"How beautiful will be the day when all the baptized understand that their work, their job is a priestly work, that just as I celebrate Mass at this altar, so each carpenter celebrates Mass at the workbench." –St. Oscar Romero (1917-1980)

"All these fine Christian-type people seem to think they know what God wants for all of us. That's certainly more of a sin than anything they would claim about us. To judge people is one of the greatest sins." –Dolly Parton (1946-2026)