Crossing the Divide

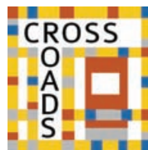
Proceedings of The New York Encounter 2020

NEW YORK ENCOUNTER

2020

Crossing the Divide

This book contains transcripts, not reviewed by the authors, of talks given at the New York Encounter 2020



Crossroads Cultural Center

HAB
Human Adventure Books

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Publisher
Human Adventure Books

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Proceedings of New York Encounter 2020
Crossroads Cultural Center
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Crossing the Divide
February 14–16, 2020
2020

the point where they would, at the same time,
possible and that nothing was true.
audience was ready
because it held
a lie anyhow.

“We Climbed Up, He First And I Behind Him…To See Again The Stars” (Dante)

*The Encounter opens with music from **Molly Morkoski**, pianist, and with staged readings from* The Divine Comedy *by **Giuseppe Mazzotta**, Sterling Professor of Humanities for Italian at Yale University, and welcoming remarks by **Seán Cardinal Patrick O’Malley, OFM**, Archbishop of Boston.*

Introduction

In the late 1950s, Fr. Giussani was saying the following to his high school students:

“First, we must open ourselves to ourselves. In other words, we must be acutely aware of our experiences and look on the humanity within us with sympathy; we must take into consideration who we really are. To take into consideration means to take seriously what we experience, everything we experience, to discover every aspect, to seek the complete meaning.

“We must be very careful, because all too easily we do not start from our true experience; that is, from our experience in its entirety and authenticity. We often identify our experience with partial impressions, truncating it, as often happens with affective matters, when we fall in love or dream about the future.

Even more often, we confuse, perhaps being unaware, our experience with the prejudices or schemes that we absorb from our environment. Therefore, instead of opening up to that attitude of expectation, sincere attention, and dependence that our experience suggests and fervently demands, we impose

categories and explanations that constrict and distress our experience, while presuming to resolve it.

"The myth that 'scientific progress one day will solve all our needs' is the modern formula of this presumption, a wild and repugnant presumption, because it does not consider or even know our real needs. It refuses to observe our experience clearly and to accept what it means to be human, with all the needs that this implies. For this reason, modern civilization causes us to move blindly between this desperate presumption and darkest despair….

"…When we discover ourselves helpless and alone, our humanity spurs us to come together. If we meet someone who better feels and understands our experience, suffering, needs, and expectations, we naturally are led to follow that person and become his or her disciple. In that sense, such persons naturally constitute authority for us even if they do not carry special rights or titles. Naturally, above all, it is one who most loyally lives or understands the human experience who becomes an authority.

"Thus, authority is born as a wealth of experience that imposes itself on others. It generates freshness, wonder, and respect. Inevitably, it is attractive; it is evocative. …

"The encounter with this natural authority develops our sensitivity and our conscience; it helps us to discover better our nature and what we aspire to from the depths of our present poverty."

(*The Journey to Truth Is an Experience*, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007, p. 54; 56-57.

Midway in the journey of our life
I found myself in a dark wood,
for the straight way was lost.

It is so bitter that death is hardly more so.
But, to treat of the good that I found in it,
I will tell of the other things I saw there.

I cannot rightly see how I entered it,
I was so full of sleep at the moment
I left the true way.

But when I had reached the foot of a hill,
there at the end of the valley
that had pierced my heart with fear,
I looked up and saw its shoulders
already clad in the rays of the planet
that leads men aright by every path.

Then the fear was somewhat quieted
that had continued in the lake of my heart
through the night I had passed so piteously.

And as he who with laboring breath
has escaped from the deep to the shore,
turns to look back on the dangerous waters,

so my mind, which was still fleeing,
turned back to gaze upon the pass
that never left anyone alive.

After I had rested my tired body a little,
I again took up my way across the desert strand,
so that the firm foot was always the lower.

And behold, Near the beginning of the steep,
a leopard light-footed and very fleet,
covered with a spotted hide;

And it did not depart from before my eyes,
but did so impede my way,
that more than once I turned round to go back.

It was the beginning of the morning,
and the sun was mounting with the stars
that were with it when Divine Love

first set those beautiful things in motion,
so that the hour of the day and the sweet season
gave me cause for good hope

of that beast with the dappled skin;
yet not so much, that I didn't feel afraid
at the sight of a lion that appeared to me

and seemed to be coming at me,
head high and raging with hunger,
so that the air seemed to tremble at it;

and a she-wolf that in her leanness
seemed laden with every craving,
and had already caused many to live in sorrow.

She put such heaviness upon me
with the fear that came from sight of her,
that I lost hope of the height.

And like one who is eager in winning,
but, when the time comes that makes him lose,
weeps and is saddened in all his thoughts,

such did that peaceless beast make me, as,
coming on against me, she pushed me back,
little by little, to where the sun is silent.

While I was running down to the depth,
there appeared before me
one who seemed faint through long silence.

When I saw him in that vast desert,
I cried to him, "Have pity on me,
whatever you are, shade or living man!"

"No, not a living man, though once I was," he
answered me, "and my parents were Lombards,
both Mantuans by birth.

I was born sub Julio, although late,
and I lived at Rome under the good Augustus,
In the time of the false and lying gods.

I was a poet, and I sang of that just
son of Anchises, who came from Troy,
after proud Ilion was burned.

But you, why do you return to so much woe?
Why do you not climb the delectable mountain,
the source and cause of every happiness?"

"Are you then that Virgil, that fount
which pours forth so broad a stream of speech?"
I answered him, my brow covered with shame.

"Oh, glory and light of other poets,
may the long study and the great love
that have made me search your volume avail me!

You are my master and my author;
you alone are he from whom I took
the fair style that has done me honor.

Giuseppe Mazzotta: Before jumping into the reading of the text, let me say that it's my duty and privilege to express my gratitude for being a part of this historic event. I've been preparing for an event like this since last year, preparing for the memorial celebration of the seven centuries since Dante's death. He died in 1321. Next year, 2021, will be devoted in many parts of the world, from Florence to the United States, from Latin America to Asia—to remembering Dante and to reflecting on how *The Divine Comedy* is, for all of us, a continuing source of inspiration. It was Fr. Giussani—I vividly recall him saying that, thanks to Dante's prodigious imagination and sensibility, he laid the vital foundations of our modern world. Thanks to his creativity in thought and sensibility, we have inherited the legacy of the classical culture of Rome, which today is right here, in this wonderful place, New York City.

My immediate role here now is to read something about Virgil, how he figures into *The Divine Comedy*. I decided to share with you a few facts about who Virgil was, historically. He is cast, we know, in *The Divine Comedy* as the moral guide of Dante. He is a distinct, central character at the very outset of the work. From the start, Virgil's status in the poem is that of the trusted guide to Dante's journey, a status which arises in large measure from the *Aeneid*, which he wrote, with its narrative of Aeneas's historical journey from Troy, facing the challenges and battles along the routes while carrying his old father, Anchises, on his shoulders, and hand in hand with his son, to the shores of Italy and to Rome, which would be founded by his descendants. Virgil has been called the father of Rome. The city, and the sphere that Rome ruled, was founded as the sacred seat of all inheritors of the great St. Peter.

Let me read the opening passage from the first two cantos of *The Divine Comedy*, where Dante and Virgil establish their respective identities. The first quotation starts at Canto 1, line 64, with exchange between Dante and Virgil. Dante starts first: "When I saw, seeing him near in that great wilderness, to

him I screamed my 'miserere': 'Save me, whatever – shadow or truly man – you are.'"

That's Virgil's answer, which I could not have said any better. He says to Virgil, "You are my master, and my author. You are he from whom I took the beautiful style that has given me so much honor." But all of this, this way of meeting and guiding us all so far, all of this I must say, is the preamble to the final appearance of Virgil in the narrative. So it goes from the beginning, where they meet, and where Virgil is established as the guide, to what happens when he disappears in the poem. This happens in Canto 30 of *Purgatorio*, immediately after the symbolic pageant with twenty-four elders, the seven golden candlesticks, etc. All are shouting, "*Benedictus* to Venice"—blessed is he who is coming. And then it's interrupted: "Within a cloud of flowers"—this is the situation; this is preamble to the events of the end of *Purgatorio*, with Beatrice. When Virgil disappears within a cloud of flowers, a woman appears; Beatrice appears. Dante sees Beatrice, and is terrorized by this encounter with her—he had not been very loyal to her before and so is scared of the encounter. He looks around for Virgil but Virgil has disappeared.

I have to add one little personal note. This scene is particularly significant to me. It reminds me of an old teacher of mine. Quite a few years ago, a German professor, a very distinguished professor named Ulrich Layo, left Germany just before the war and went to the United States. He then moved to Canada and started teaching at the University of Toronto. Every time he would read this passage, he would start crying. To him, the scene of Virgil's disappearance was unbearable. He must have recalled the close friends he had lost during the war, the pain of losing his spiritual companion. But maybe he was crying during the class not because of Virgil's disappearance, but for the joy in knowing that Virgil will never leave his readers. So this is where my time now comes to a stop. Thank you.

Riro Maniscalco: Thank you to Michael, Molly, and Giuseppe for helping us open up the door to this 2020 New York Encounter. This is the message we received from the Vatican.

"On the occasion of the New York Encounter, sponsored by Communion and Liberation, His Holiness Pope Francis sends cordial greetings and

prayerful best wishes to all gathered for this annual meeting. His Holiness trusts that these days of dialogue and fellowship will promote that 'culture of encounter' so necessary in our times, in which people of good will are committed 'to find points of agreement amid conflict, build bridges and make peace for the benefit of all.' Upon the organizers and those taking part in the 2020 Encounter, His Holiness invokes the divine blessings of wisdom, joy and peace."

And now we have a great friend who would like to greet us all. He has been with us as a constant presence, and we're very grateful to him for this. His Eminence Cardinal O'Malley.

Seán Cardinal Patrick O'Malley: Good evening everyone. After this sublime music and the reflections on Dante, I feel like I'm one of those silly commercials at the Super Bowl that play during the halftime show. But I often share with people one of my favorite stories, which is about a man who goes to the doctor because he's very sick. The doctor does all these tests on him, and at one point the doctor asks to speak to the wife. The doctor says, "Your husband is very sick, and the only way he will recover is if you take very good care of him." She says, "What do you mean, doctor?" He says, "Well, serve him his favorite meals, let him go to sporting events with his buddies, let him go fishing, and don't ask him to take out the garbage or shovel the snow. Let him have the remote control for the television set. And don't invite his mother-in-law over too often. If you do all these things, I'm sure that he's going to get well." On the way home, the man was very nervous and said to his wife, "What did the doctor say? What did the doctor say?" His wife said, "Honey, the doctor said you're gonna die." [*audience laughter*]

Well, the moral of the story is, of course, and as Pope Francis is always reminding us: we are here with a mission to take care of one another. And part of that mission is, as the theme of this New York Encounter reminds us, crossing the divide. What a great challenge that is in today's world. Communion and Liberation resonates with so many of the very central themes in the pontificate of Pope Francis. A culture of encounter; Francis is always talking about that. Accompaniment. Tenderness. Being close to people. Using the *via pulchritudinous*, the way of beauty, to evangelize, to help people to be able to glimpse the goodness and the beauty of God. That's what Molly

was doing tonight with her beautiful music. This week, Pope Francis has given us the post-synodal exhortation: *Beloved Amazonia*. It's been described as a love letter from Pope Francis, expressing his love for our common home, our earth, our planet. And his love is for all of those who are on the margins. It was my privilege to be at the synod. I think the impression that was created about the importance of the synod was very deceiving. What moved me the most was being with a couple of hundred of missionaries who are risking their lives to carry the good news of the Gospel to the ends of the earth. I had three friends, all bishops, who were all murdered in their ministry of working in Latin America. My classmate, who also was working with indigenous people in blue fields—at one point they threw a hand grenade into his jeep, killed one of the nuns with him, blinded the other, and blew off part of his arm. The first theme that Francis held up for us at the synod was the response that we need to make to violence. The Amazon is an area where people, and the earth itself, are suffering from so much violence. But we are here to take care of each other, to show the world that we are capable of crossing the divide, that there is a connectedness and interdependence that is so important. In today's world, for example, so many people want to embrace euthanasia; it's attractive, because then I don't have to be a burden on other people.

There's a famous scene in the life of Father Flanagan, in *Boy's Town*, when he comes upon an orphan carrying his little brother, and so he offers to help. And the orphan says, "Oh, Father, he's not heavy; he's my brother." That has to be our attitude. I'm delighted, of course, having been a classics major, that we're beginning tonight with Dante. Michael Rogers did an extraordinary job of proclaiming the poetry, and I'm so grateful for Professor Mazzotta's interpretation of this genius, who is one of the great pillars of western civilization.

Our Beatrice in the *Paradiso* is Olivetta Danese. [*audience reacts and claps*] If she did not work so hard, then we would not have this annual climb together, that lifts us above the routine and the din of our daily life and allows us to experience communion with God and each other in this special encounter, that does liberate us from the extreme individualism and stultifying materialism of our age. Thank you, Olivetta. It's not by accident that we begin this Encounter on the feast of St. Valentine. Think of it: every young

man can offer his beloved roses, chocolates, and the New York Encounter. [*audience laughter*] It doesn't get any better than that.

Poor St. Valentine has been co-opted by Hallmark and romantic love. We know little, for sure, about his life, but we know that he was a martyr. In the early Church, martyrdom was the great ideal of all Christians. The Colosseum, the catacombs, the countless churches in Rome with relics of the early martyrs—thse are all a reminder of this. In today's Rome, the Isola Tiburtinato, San Bartolomeo, entrusted to the Sant'Egidio community at the request of Pope John Paul II, has been made a shrine to the 20th century martyrs. *Martyr* means *witness*. Their witness helped the early Christians to cross the divide. Peter converted some of his jailers. Cardinal Van Thuan also converted his, and there are many legends about St. Valentine bringing his jailers to the light of Christ. As children in my generation, our first experience of epistlatory tradition was sending Valentines. Big paper hearts, "Be my Valentine." Sisters taught us how to address the envelopes with now-defunct terminology: "Master John," "Mistress Mary Ellen." We dipped our wooden speedball pens into the inkwell and wrote in cursive—remember what that is? Letter writing has gone into the same dustbin as calling children *master* and *mistress*, and has been replaced by email, WhatsApp, Facebook, etc. The complementary close and the purple patches of great literary prowess have been replaced with the "thumbs up" and the "like" symbol, and I doubt if the publication of Hillary Clinton's emails will rival the epistles of Abelard and Heloise. But St. Paul tells us: it's clear that you are Christ's letter. Written not with ink but with the Spirit of Christ. Carved not on tablets of stone but on human hearts. Let our Valentine be that message, written in the Spirit on our hearts, as we strive together to cross the divide in a world where there is so much polarization, and so much globalization of indifference. To witness to something and Someone greater than ourselves, that draws us together, gives us hope, and inspires us to love, because we have discovered that we are loved by God with an unconditional and a gratuitous love. Happy St. Valentine's Day, and welcome to the great New York Encounter! Thank you.

STOKMAN
FLYNN

A PLACE FOR LIFE

Witnesses on the enduring importance of family, with ***JD Flynn****, editor-in-chief of Catholic News Agency;* ***Sarah Hemminger****, founder and CEO of Thread; and* ***Matteo Stohlman****, software engineer in a DC real estate startup.*

Introduction

The 2020 Encounter will explore how we can break out from the ideological schemes that dominate our culture and separate us from one another. It will also explore how the “rediscovery" of reality is a necessary premise to find unity with ourselves, with those near us and with our larger national community. This cannot be sustained, however, without being in a trusting relationship with someone who can guide us, like a father or a mother, a friend, or an authority. From this perspective, there is a growing renewed awareness of the relevance of family, not necessarily limited by DNA, as the ideal place where one’s humanity can flourish. Speakers will show meaningful examples of this rediscovery and the type of relationship that can be offered to young people in order for them not to become prey to any dominant ideology.

Marcie Stokman, moderator: On the behalf of the New York Encounter, good morning, everybody, and welcome. I’m Marcie Stokman and I will be moderating this event. I’d like to sincerely thank Benedictine College for

sponsoring this presentation. I'll now read brief bios of the speakers, but full bios are available on the website.

To my left: Sarah Hemminger is a social entrepreneur, scientist, and ice dancer who cofounded Thread with her husband Ryan in 2004. In 2010, she received her PhD in biomedical engineering from John Hopkins University. She also received the prestigious Siebel Scholars Award for outstanding work in the field of technology and engineering. Sarah received her undergraduate degree from John Hopkins University in 2002 and, prior to pursuing her PhD, worked as an engineer for Medtronic XOMED. JD Flynn, meanwhile, is the editor-in-chief of Catholic News Agency and a canon lawyer. He has published op-eds and essays in the *Washington Post* and *New York Post*, *First Things*, and elsewhere. He is an advocate for people with disabilities and for the full inclusion of children with disabilities in Catholic education. He's a husband and father of three, including two children with disabilities. Matteo Stohlman is a software engineer working in the real estate tech industry. He's the oldest of eight siblings and the father of three. Let's begin with Sarah.

Sarah Hemminger: Good morning. When I was in high school, my best friend Ryan's family unit was completely shattered when his mom was in a car accident and became temporarily paralyzed. She ended up losing her job. They lost their home. They moved from suburbia into Section 8 housing. As a result, she became very depressed and addicted to painkillers, and then began selling them in order to support her own drug habit. This all coincided with Ryan's transition into high school. He ended up missing more than 30 days of school and failing his freshman year. But there was this incredible group of teachers who didn't just say, hey, you can do better, they would actually show up and give him rides to school, help him with his homework, and make sure that the heat and the water stayed on in his home. And that radically changed his life. It made it easier to decide to go to school when he didn't have to take three buses. It was a lot easier to choose to go to school when he was not hungry. And it was a lot easier to go to school when he had clean clothes that he could wear and not be afraid of being teased.

By his senior year, he had become a straight A student and varsity athlete, and was on his way to the United States Naval Academy. And, yes, later married me. [*audience laughter and applause*] In 2004 Ryan and I founded

Thread to harness the power of relationships to bring people together across lines of difference. At the time I was a graduate student and was quite lonely. It was a super-competitive environment. I'm an extreme introvert and had trouble making friends, and what I didn't understand explicitly at the time, but do now, is that for me it triggered a trauma from my own childhood. I grew up in a very religious community, and when I was eight years old my father found out that the pastor of our church was misusing church funds. When he revealed this, instead of firing the pastor, they decided they would shun our family. So, from the time I was eight to the time I was 16, the adults, the children—no one was permitted to speak with me, interact with me; even my own cousins, aunts, and uncles. Thread came about not because I was trying to help anyone other than myself, really. I wanted to find a place to belong, and it dawned on me that maybe there are other extraordinary individuals like Ryan who are in unthinkable situations, and that maybe together we can find a sense of belonging. So what does Thread do? Well, we enrolled 9th grade students who rank academically in the bottom 25% of their class. The average GPA of our cohorts is around 0.9 on a 4.0 scale. Once young people are in Thread, we make a 10-year commitment. We lovingly joke that it's longer than your average American marriage. [*audience laughter*] Each young person is given four extended family members who do whatever it takes to support them: rides to school, refurbishing their house, helping them with their homework, whatever. The way to think about it is, if you would do it for your own child, we do it for ours. Then, to ensure that the Thread families can really focus on building their relationships, we also provide program spaces where they can do things like community service, or go camping. Spaces where both the young people and the volunteers can hone their skills, find their passions, and figure out where they fit into the world. We also have Thread collaborators who provide pro bono expertise in things like preventing evictions, or how to access healthcare. Again, this is so that the Thread family can focus on their relationships.

I want to share with you about a relationship with a young woman named Judy that started for 16 years ago. If you look in the upper left, she's the one who looks really angry. [*audience laughter*] Judy and I have a lot in common. She was—and still is—a severe introvert like me, so when I would

give her rides to school, you can imagine that in the beginning it was the most awkward silence ever. I took 15 young people camping in January, and at the beginning of the trip there were eight inches of snow on the ground. But this was really the beginning of our relationship; we both hated the cold, and that's where we started to form our conversations. Over time, it was really hard. It took a lot of work, but we eventually got to know one another. Judy not only ended up graduating from Dunbar High School, but she ended up going to Wesley College, where she received her degree in nursing. I remember sitting in the auditorium when she was getting ready to go up and receive her undergraduate degree—she now has her Master's—and I said, "What type of nurse do you think you're going to become?" And she said, "You know, I've decided that I'm going to become a mental health nurse." It dawned on me that the reason Judy wasn't going to school in those early days wasn't because she didn't want to, or because she didn't want to succeed; it turned out that she had been so badly abused by a family member—to the point of near death on two occasions—that she was so severely depressed and suffering from anxiety, that on many days she physically could not get out of bed. Fast forward years later, when she had been able to achieve so much, and she said, "Of course I'm going to be a mental health nurse, because with every other disease—cancer, dementia—your family flocks to you. But when you have a mental health disorder, everyone runs away. I want to be the one person who's left when no one else is."

If we think about who the pipeline of leadership is in Baltimore City, where Thread is located, or in our country, it really is young people like Judy. The interesting thing is, she is very special, but she is actually not unique. Of the young people in Baltimore City who have GPAs of less than 1.0 during their freshman year, on average only 6% graduate in four years. In Thread that number is 85%. [*audience applause*] We never let go of a single young person, so in our 16-year history we've retained every student we have ever enrolled during that tenure, period. And of the alumni, 83% have received a four- or two-year college degree or certification. As our alumni continue to excel, we thought, What could this be in the bigger scheme of things? And so Thread has established a very ambitious vision in which we plan to enroll 7 1/2% of the entire freshman class across the school district in Baltimore

City. Getting to that capacity would mean that, yes, we would move the needle citywide on the high school graduation rate. More importantly, what that would mean is we would be weaving together relationships across lines of race, class, religion. With over 20,000 Baltimoreans thinking about their students, their families, our volunteers, their families, collaborators, donors, staff—altogether we would represent 5% of the entire adult population in the city. That is the movement that we're working to build. We've looked back and said, Well, how did we get to this stickiness in our relationships in a world that is often so divided? We've realized that for us, success really comes down to how you define success. Do you define it simply as a young person graduating from high school? Or do you define it as we do in Thread, that we are all on a journey to grow and change? If we want our young people to go to school, and we say we're gonna take them to school, then we need to show up and take them to school. If we want young people to never give up, then we have to actually never give up on them. We have to move from this place of "you matter"—which in reality is such a low bar—to "I need you." And that is what comes to mind when I think about the rides to school with Judy. In those early days, we often would debate things like fashion: mostly her making fun of my Rockports, which I find very comfortable but she found atrocious. We would also sometimes talk about her mental health challenges and the fact that I've lost three family members to suicide. Later in life, ironically, we both very much struggled to have children, and so sometimes—it might be in one another's homes, or in a coffee shop—but we would just sit there silently, because after suffering such loss there was just really nothing to say.

Three and a half years ago, when I thought I had it kind of figured out in my relationship with Judy, I was in a very bad car accident and had a head injury. It was so severe that I lost 30 pounds—don't worry, I've gained it all back—and was nauseous all the time, and had daily migraines. One day I was driving home from work and had a massive panic attack. I had no idea what to do. I didn't even know what was happening. I'd never had one before and I was terrified. My father's grandfather had just passed away, and Dad needed to travel home to Indiana for the funeral. The idea of being left alone…it caused me to suffer this debilitating attack.

Ryan was about to go to the funeral, and I didn't know what was

happening in my body. I was like, *I can't be left alone with this munchkin; what am I gonna do?* That's the funny thing: when you hit those moments and feel embarrassed and humiliated, it's not that I didn't know a ton of people, but it was a question of: Who do I feel comfortable calling in this moment of deep and incredible vulnerability? So of course I called Judy, who came over to the house and sat with me for the entire weekend. Our daughters played, and it turned out to be one of the most beautiful experiences of my entire life. The person who in that moment could make me feel seen and understood, really, was Judy.

So, in Thread, we think about how to get to that place with 20,000 people. That takes a different type of work and intentionality around three things that we think of as critical pieces of our framework: structure, spaces, and norms. We must acknowledge that structures, whether it's the family structure, or a structure within a company or within a church—structures define who you're initially in relationship with. What we find is that if you want adults to be on this journey, if you want to have a volunteer go and pick a young person up for school, it might be six months before anyone answers the door. If that volunteer is expected to go and knock on that door every morning for six months and be rejected, they need a coach, too. In Thread, those four volunteers are coached by what we call a "head of family," who is also a volunteer. Heads of family are coached by grandparents. What it does is create a culture in which everyone is modeling what it is to grow and change. Then, when we come together in these relationships, there are certain norms. Often we come into spaces as humans and default to a certain set of norms that depend on the context. In Thread, we're very intentional that the norms dictate how we show up in relationships, and they reflect the diversity of the Thread community. The first of these is showing all the way up. Do you recognize your own inherent value? Do you understand that you can simultaneously hold that value and also have room for growth? Are you physically and authentically present in the interactions? Do you challenge yourself to push through discomfort? These are all things that much of our society discourages us from doing.

The second thing is failing forward: being involved in that iterative change process is about having the ability to speak the truth but speak the truth with

kindness. We call it "calling a thing a thing." I was sitting at breakfast this morning, and the person sitting next to me noticed that I had a crumb on my cheek. He was kind enough to point it out, but think about how many times you might go through lunch and have spinach between your teeth, and no one tells you. In Thread, if you can't tell someone about the spinach, how are you going to tell them about the thing they really need to hear when you're in that deep and intimate relationship? It's also about sharing how you've changed. In order for people to re-norm what it is to be vulnerable in that way, you have to be willing to share your journey. In this world where we have a range of privilege and power, the more privilege and the more power you have, the more that we believe that you need to share that journey in a way that becomes contagious for others.

The third thing is treating relationships as wealth, understanding that our ability to thrive is inextricably linked. The individualistic approach is so destructive, and in Thread we really understand that everyone has value. We're not a group of "haves" trying to swoop in a group of "have nots." We're family that leans on one another and shares moments of joy and of trial all at the same time. It's also about meeting people where they're at. It's understanding that we're all at different places in our journey and learning how to meet each individual where they're at, but intentionally crossing those lines of difference.

The final one is learning from all voices. Making the table accessible, assuming that people have the best of intentions. I would say that this is the hardest one for most people. If you just started every feeling of conflict with an assumption that the other person has the best of intentions, and try to understand it from their point of view, it would become so much easier to have those sticky relationships.

So what does this actually look like in Thread? Well, we use spaces to reinforce these norms, and I'll leave you with just one quick example. This is our holiday party. We love, love, *love* to gather in groups. And again, spaces are a way to allow you an opportunity in groups to reinforce those norms. This might be during afterschool Thread hours, or the camping trip. How the adults are showing up in those spaces sends a very clear message to our young people about their value and their place in our community. So this is Krishna,

he's a member of our board of directors, and if you'll recall thinking about power and privilege within a community organization, a board of directors is where a lot of that often lives. At our holiday party, instead of having a young person stand up and share vulnerably their journey, and how they had grown, and how they had changed—Krishna got up and shared his. He shared how he had been sober from drugs and alcohol for the previous six years because of the relationships he had in Thread. And you can imagine the young people in the audience. There were 600-700 people there who were astonished, because if you look at Krishna, he's now the managing director of a private equity firm. He doesn't have to choose to share that story publicly. For those sitting in the audience it was this moment of, "Oh, maybe I'm not so far off from where you are, and we have a lot more in common than maybe I realized." This was a way for him to show all the way up, for him to be vulnerable and for him to message to our entire community how much we need them.

We wanted to get everyone on the dance floor, but when you have 700 people of all ages, races, and many different music preferences—how do you accomplish it? We had African drummers come out and start, and who might you guess jumps on the dance floor first? The young people, right? So they get out there dancing, and there's an extreme awkwardness for the rest of us, because no one was jumping in. But hen came Sean. I don't know if you can see Sean in the photo; his back is to us. He has a blue and white plaid shirt. He's a middle-aged white man and he just said, Screw it, I'm going in. He jumped in the middle of the dance floor with a teenager and they were pretending to jump rope. It broke the whole thing wide open, because the minute Sean did it, everyone else felt the freedom to do it. His willingness to put himself out there and be vulnerable and maybe look a bit silly—which he didn't—it changed it for everyone else. All of a sudden you found the dance floor was filled with people, and yet, there was still one group not on the dance floor. It was the older people in the room. So what did we do next? We played the Electric Slide. Why? Because everybody loves the Electric Slide, all ages.

What I would say is, as you're moving through space, what we've learned in our family, is that it's about creating spaces and leveraging structures and having a set of norms that really allows people to feel loved, feel like they

truly belong. And at this incredible time in our country's history, amid this immense division and strife, we need to find a way to rediscover the thing that is most important, which is one another. Thank you. [*audience applause*]

JD Flynn: That was really beautiful. I do not wish to follow it, but nevertheless I am here. Sarah was here to tell you about this extraordinary thing that she has done, which is beautiful, and thank you so much for sharing it. I am not here to share with you about anything that I have done, because I have not done anything worthy of sharing. But I am here to share with you a set of experiences I have had, and a set of experiences in my own family, and the experience of my own life having been transformed by unexpectedly knowing and loving people with disabilities.

I have three children, two of which are adopted, and the two adopted children have Down syndrome. I do not have them on purpose, which is to say, we are not the sort of good people who adopted children with Down syndrome because we wanted to do something nice for the world, or for people with disabilities. We're the sort of people who adopted children because we couldn't have children and wanted to have children, and these were the children that showed up. These were the children that got brought to us, unexpectedly. We met our son Max in the hospital when he was 10 days old. Our very best friend, Sister Mercy, who's here today, was with us on the day that we met our son Max in the hospital, and it was for me the first time I had ever met, in a meaningful way, any person with disabilities. Maybe like a lot of you who are also old, you probably did not grow up with the experience of having people with disabilities in your classroom or even in your school, perhaps. I knew one person with a disability growing up, and he was a man in our town who was intellectually disabled and rode his bike around town, and kids were sort of scared of him. We made up urban legends about him but we didn't know anything about who he actually was, and we hadn't encountered anything about him at all. That was the sum total of my experience of persons with disabilities when I met my son Max, who was just 6 pounds of baby with a lot of wires and an oxygen cannula and monitors attached to him. We took Max home once we could get some of that crap off of him, and then we started to learn what it was to be parents, and also learn what it was to know people with disabilities. Less than a year later, we

got a phone call from our adoption agency. The social worker called—it was a Thursday—and said a woman came to the agency that day who was going to have a baby on Sunday; the baby has Down syndrome, and this woman is looking for a family who already knows something about Down syndrome and is devoutly Catholic—do you know anyone? [*audience laughter*] I feel like I can say this here: I thought, *Shit*. I called my wife and said, "Do we know anyone?" and she said, "Well, we don't have any plans on Sunday," so… [*audience laughter*] We went to the hospital and had to—like, adoption isn't free. So, like, you beg, borrow, and steal 20 grand in about 5 minutes. That Sunday, we went to the hospital and met our daughter, Pia Torres. And knowing and loving these children has been transformative for me, and it has taught me a lot about myself, about my relationship to God the Father, and about what family life is and what it's for. I want to tell you a little bit about that, but to do that I just want to tell you a little bit about my kids, because people with disabilities aren't a category of persons who are all the same. My kids, both of whom have the same diagnosis, trisomy 21, couldn't be more different from each other.

Let me tell you about my son Max. My son Max is a beautiful boy. He has almond-colored eyes and a mop of blonde hair, and a smile—we call it his goofy smile—that is disarming and irresistible, a source of joy. My son Max is intuitive and kind. He's also nervous about things that he doesn't understand, and he doesn't understand a lot of things. My son Max approaches the world cautiously. He delights in the joy of other people. At school, at recess, he stands on the sidelines while his friends, his classmates, play football, and he cheers for every play. He cheers as much for a fumble or incomplete pass as a touchdown, they're all the same to Max. He's cheering because they're boys out there and they're alive and he's glad to be a part of it. But if you ask Max if he wants to play—which the boys do, because they love him and they're good to him—he looks at you like you're crazy and says, "No way! Be careful!" Max is careful about everything. "Be careful" and "Careful, guys" are his mottos. He's also slight. Max is the skinniest person I know. He doesn't take after his dad. Max is actually the skinniest person I've ever seen in real life—I can count his ribs and his vertebrae, and again, as you can see, that's

not a family trait. I'm always worried that he's going to break a hip, but he's careful, so that's good.

But Max is skinny because he hardly eats anything ever. It's hard for Max to hold food in his mouth. As a consequence of Down syndrome, Max has a host of challenges related to his senses. He experiences everything that he senses, everything that he touches, or tastes, or feels, more intensely than most of us do. Everything he hears, he hears at a volume much louder than we hear it, so that Max walks around a lot of the day like this [*hands over ears*]—especially when dad is talking, because I'm so damn loud. It's hard for Max to hold food in his mouth. It's hard for him to put clothes on his back; the textures can be too much for him. Sometimes there are three or four things that Max can wear. He has a mop of hair because it's impossible for my son Max to endure a haircut. To endure a haircut, I have to lay on top of him, putting all of my body weight—which is substantial—on his little body weight while my wife cuts his hair and talks him through it, and give candies, and plays Curious George; it is a show for my son Max to have a haircut. Max is not free. He teeters on the edge of freedom. There are ways in which Max is free. There are ways in which Max is full of joy and full of life and there are ways in which Max is encumbered by his own experience with reality, but overwhelmed by the reality that he encounters. Max loves his siblings and his mom and his friends at his school. He also—and this is weird—loves the dryer. Something about the tumbling of the clothes is calming to Max, so when Max has had too much of the world, he goes to the dryer and puts a couple of things in it, then he turns it on and he crouches in front of it and just watches. And sometimes it's all that he can do for 20 minutes, 25 minutes. Max loves the dryer so much, and there's so much he doesn't understand about the world, that he thinks because he likes watching the dryer he would like being *in* the dryer. And so, more than once, I've caught Max convincing his sister to turn the dryer on once he's climbed in, and I've had to run in at the very last minute before the kid gets fried in the dryer. I can't tell my wife about that because she'll kill me. [*audience laughter*] What kind of person lets his son go inside the dryer?

Max is my beautiful, and loving, and generous, and simple, and struggling son. What I've learned from Max, what I've seen from Max, is that no amount

of his own efforts, no amount of my own efforts, can set Max free from the things that he struggles with. What I've learned about Max is that only grace and a long, sustained application of love can set Max free from some of those things.

Let me tell you about my daughter Pia. My daughter Pia has a pair of pigtails that bounce on the back of her head whenever she moves, which is always. My daughter Pia is always moving, and so her pigtails are always bouncing there. My wife wouldn't like me to say this, but because Pia is always moving, those pigtails are often knotty rat tails of lollipops, and marshmallows, and mud, and substances that I don't want to know about, bouncing on her head, and our furniture, and wherever else Pia is. Pia doesn't walk anywhere, she jumps, and she tells you to jump, and if you don't jump she gets mad at you, and she insists that you jump, and then she pushes you until you jump. Pia is inquisitive, and kind, and funny. And not like "little kid" funny, where parents think their kids are funny but they're not; my daughter Pia is really funny—she has great timing. She's funny! I get in trouble all the time because the girl can make a joke and get out of damn near anything, and I will let her out of damn near anything because she's funny. Pia is often covered, as I said, in something sticky from head to toe that I can't quite identify, but Pia is also covered in scars. Across her chest and her back are little nicks and scarred zigzags. They're evidence of scores of procedures that she has earned—scars that she has earned spending a lot of years battling two different diagnoses of cancer. Pia is a miracle. She shouldn't be alive. Five days after Pia was born, in the middle of the night, she had two heart attacks and doctors rushed in and saved her life. We were completely helpless. The only reason those doctors saved her life is because Pia was at the hospital, and the only reason Pia was at the hospital is because we had checked her in that afternoon because, that morning, she had been diagnosed with a kind of leukemia. Pia is alive because of the cancer diagnosis that she has spent a very long time fighting. She should have died that night. She should have died other times in her life. She spent most of three years altogether battling different diagnoses of leukemia. Pia has been on the verge of death; we have watched the color and the life drain from her body, but our daughter Pia is alive. In some ways, that's enough. My daughter Pia is a witness to the fact

that life is a gift, and whether she knows that intellectually—which I don't think she does—or she just intuits it, my daughter Pia is determined to spend the gift of that life in joy. She's a witness to a life well lived. My children are beautiful and a source of joy for me, and a source of life for me, and a source of conversion for me, but they are also invisible. Not so much here among people of the Movement and their friends, who are determined to see life as a gift in itself, and are determined to encounter reality; but in so many places we go my children are invisible. They live on what Pope Francis calls, "the existential peripheries," and so they are either not seen at all or they're infantilized, they're made into a sort of stereotype about Down syndrome that has to do with being happy all the time and being a sort of mascot for life that has nothing to do with the person. My children are not mascots—well, sometimes they dress up like mascots but that doesn't really fit here. My children are not mascots, they are persons. They live in reality, and having them in our family, being a family with them, has been transformative with me, because it's invited me to see the person, the gift of the person in a new way.

So, there's sort of three things that I have learned or I have seen; things that have been made manifest to me by my knowing and loving my children that are about family life, which is what I'm asked to talk about. And the first is that family is or can be the place that defeats the lies of technocracy. The lies that we hear and endure and often integrate into our understanding of ourselves in the world without even realizing it; the lies that say that our value comes from what we do; that a successful life is a life of something called a contribution to our common welfare, that it has to do with something that I make or produce. The lie of radical individualism. The lie that says that I am a person who finds my happiness by finding the things that fulfill or interest me apart from these other people who are in my life. The radical individualism that says I can do it by myself; the atrocious sort of American mythology of the man who's pulled himself up by his bootstraps. My children have bootstraps on their rainbow boots, and they can't pull their boots up, let alone by themselves and I see that. I see that the idea that most of us have—that most of us carry, that I myself carried for so long—is wrong: that my value even to God has to do with what I do for the Kingdom, or the way

that I contribute, or whether I'm smart enough, and erudite enough, and cosmopolitan enough, and clever enough. My children are none of those things. In family life we've encountered the unity that comes not from what we do, but from simply being together and seeing one another as persons. In the Christian life, most of us are infected to one degree or another with the heresy of Pelagianism. Pope Francis keeps saying this to us: most of us think that we will go to heaven because we've done enough good things for God, and in one way or another most of us think even the sacramental life is a sort of a set of checklists: that we'll be okay with God when we fulfill the set of checklists. The sacramental life is essential to ourselves, to our salvation, but what God is after is intimacy, is real unity with us, and what saves us is not the things that we do; we only participate in the saving work of Jesus Christ. I've learned that watching my children, who can't really do anything by themselves. Who can't get dressed by themselves, or go to the bathroom by themselves, or put themselves to sleep, or eat by themselves, or be left alone with her brother because she'll beat the shit out of him. [*audience laughter*] I've learned that. John Paul II, in *Familiaris Consortio*, says that the relationship between family members should be guided by the law of "free giving," while most of us in our technocratic society are infected with the idea of transactionalism. Even in our family life, I do for you what you do for me. Our marriages are infected with the idea of transactionalism: I did the dishes so you owe me a kiss. Even if we don't say it, we think it sometimes, right? We keep in our minds a scorecard of how we're doing with our spouses, of how we're doing with our children, of how we're doing with our boss, of how we're doing with the Lord. If we start to see that some of the lowest, most beloved people, are people who won't make any marks on the scorecard, then we start to realize that those things have nothing to do with our real worth. The only thing we can give is ourselves, and freely. What I have learned is that vulnerability, and even weakness, and perhaps even especially weakness, is the locus of authentic communion with another person. This has been the thing that has most transformed my own relationship to God the Father. My children really need a lot. There are so many things that they can't do for themselves, and sometimes they labor under the illusion that they do things for themselves. I do like 95% of it, then they do the last step, and then they

boast all day to me that they did it by themselves. "Myself!" My daughter says, "Myself!" when she hasn't done it by herself, right? But most often, my children have to come to me more than I have to go to other people and say, *Help, I can't do it*. They pick up their shoes, they want to put their shoes on, and they have to come to me every day, and say, *Dad, help*. My son wanted to take off his sweater the other day because it was too warm. He fumbled around with it for a few minutes, got frustrated, and had to say it again, *Dad help*. Most of us are ashamed to have to go to someone to ask for help. And most of us, even with regard to God the Father, want to ask for help in a very generalized way. We want to say, "Father bless us; Father be with us." But the locus of intimacy for me and my children, the thing that gives me the most opportunity to be in their life, to love them—is when they come to me with something that they just can't do and say, "Dad, help." I delight in that and am so grateful for that. I've realized how much God the Father is waiting for me to come to him, not with shame, not with humiliation, but with trust, so that every time I say, "Father, help," the Lord is delighted that I've come to him, that we have this new opportunity for intimacy and unity. This is true in human relationships and so much more true, I found, in our relationship with the Lord.

The third thing that I've learned, and that I hope all of us are learning in one way or another, is that family without mission is dead. We have a sense, I think, those of us who are living the Christian life in the context of a family, that our job as parents is to teach our children a set of truths, right? To convey to them a set of truths about God and ourselves and about the universe. And we can, in that sense, become very insular. If the family is the domestic church, we can become caught in the sacristy of the domestic church, in the same way that Francis says the whole Church can be caught in the sacristy. We can have the idea that our family, that our mission as parents, is our children. To form our children, to educate our children. And we can lose sight of the fact that our family has a mission in the world. Our family doesn't exist as an end in itself, in the sense of a closed system. If I want to teach my children the Christian life, I have to teach my children what it is to go out. I have to not only tell them about it, but I have to model for them and give them opportunities, and invite them into opportunities to encounter other people

and to proclaim in word or deed the Kingdom; and then to invite other people to accompany us in the Kingdom. Every family has precisely that mission. When John Paul II talks about the mission of the family in *Familiaris Consortio*, Pope Francis picks this up, too. The idea of our family identity is the way that our family is living to proclaim the Kingdom. So often I think we can get lost in the sense that, in our house, this is the way we live; but we can put up walls, we can sort of allow ourselves to become withdrawn; we can talk, perhaps, and maybe even publish books about a strategic withdrawal from the world. But Christians don't strategically withdraw from the world. Christians plunge *into* the world. The Christian family needs to do the same thing. And for each of us that looks different, which means that the Christian family needs to discern: What is it that God is calling us to? What are the doors that God has opened us to? What are the unique set of circumstances by which we may proclaim and witness to the gospel in a way that's different than any other? The good thing about that is, it's not just an imperative, it's the source of life. For our family, the set of things to which it has become clear that God has called us to, is providing hospitality and becoming a place of prayer and conversation with other families of disabled people, advocating for inclusion of disabled people in Catholic schools, helping to facilitate that and train teachers and school administrators, and a variety of schools to do that. All of those things are inclusive of all of us, they involve all of us, they require something of all of us, but they also give life to all of us, and they have become a source of unity for all of us. Our apostolic identity ought to be as a family, the source of our unity, and the source of our identity, and if that's not the case, then simply knowing a set of propositions about faith won't be sustaining for anybody. Most of us know people who know a set of propositions about faith that they don't live, and in which they don't find life.

So those three things: that the family is the locus of the defeat of technocracy; that vulnerability is the locus of intimacy; and that the family exists for mission—are things that I've learned from my children. But mostly I just wanted to introduce you to them, because for me they have been a source of great joy and a reminder to look for the meaning and the encounter with each person, because each one of us, I think, is longing to be loved, and

longing to have intimacy as much as my children do, even if many of us are better at hiding it. Thank you. [*audience applause*]

Matteo Stohlman: Thank you Sarah, JD, Marcie. I apologize in advance that I'm nowhere near as good of a speaker, so I'll mostly be reading from my notes. I was asked to share the experience of growing up in my family and how that has shaped my life. For those of you who don't know me, I am the oldest of eight children, but there was never a year that we didn't have someone else living in the house with us. Whether it was exchange students, PhD students, guests—you name them, they spent time at our house. I tried to put together a count for this talk and quickly gave up. It's no exaggeration to say that it was 100 people over the years. We used to say a prayer every evening, listing mommy and daddy, Matteo, and so on—the kids' names. For a few years we kept the tradition alive and recited the litany of all those who had stayed with us in the past, but it didn't take much for that list to become too long to manage, so we resorted to mentioning just those who were living with us at the time. With all the chaos you might imagine in a house with so many people under one roof, dinner was always a moment of great importance. There were usually about 15 people at dinner. If the table was only set for eight we would all comment in surprise, "Where is everyone?" Most nights, in addition to the usual people living at home, we had guests over for dinner. With all those people at the table, the most important rule was: only one conversation. My parents were strict about this rule. So typically, while my mother interrogated our guests with her total lack of holding back in her line of questioning, and my father prepared his thoughts on what would become the heated debate of that evening, we children mostly listened. We had astronomers, bishops, friends from Italy, and, of course, family friends from our community. The conversation around the dinner table was almost always guaranteed to be captivating, to the point that even my friends would love to come over to participate in the Stohlman dinners. There was something unique about that way of staying together over dinner that was truly appealing to us. We found ourselves interested in things and people more than in other settings.

I mentioned an astronomer coming to visit. He told us all about his work and the study of the stars. As I listened, I waited for the inevitable question from my father, who never missed the chance to challenge our guests on

what they were saying. He said, "But isn't this all a waste of time and money. What is the point when I need to put food on the table?" I remember being stunned at this man's response, as he retorted without hesitation, "What is the point of putting food on the table if we cannot ask ourselves about the stars?" Personally, I've never been the kind of person who is particularly mesmerized by the stars. I took pride in myself for being a supremely practical person. But this response cut deep for me as a kid, because it went so far beyond the transactional practicality of life we were taught. Because even in those dinners I knew I wanted much more than just to put food in my mouth.

Over and over again, my mother and father invited people to dinner, not just to eat, but to share a passion for life and to follow those around them who had this same passion. When I was younger and would get sent to bed, I would often hide around the corner on the stairs, listening to them talk to their friends who had come over for dinner. I remember being blown away by the level of friendship they shared with these people. It was clear how much they depended on these friendships. It's shocking as a kid to see people you look up to so much express this dependence and asking. In this way, I grew up to see my parents in a different way than many of my friends. My parents were shaped by relationship with everything around them, by an infinite curiosity about everyone. It was clear to us that this relationship was necessary to their identity. They invited people because everyone and everything was fascinating to them. Everything was an opportunity to learn a bit more, to be challenged a bit more, and to discover that life is beautiful.

We're taught to avoid the word *judgment* today, but growing up in our house the insistence on judgment was far more important than most any rule. I remember something that was said to me one time by one of the many people we hosted at our house. We were in the middle of a basketball game—he was about 10 years older than us—and he stopped in the middle of the game and said, "Isn't it amazing that He loves our freedom more than our happiness?" The relationship with my parents was exactly like this. For my parents, the insistence that I use my freedom to judge my life, to take seriously the question of my happiness in front of everything, was the most important thing. This is a radical position. I don't understand it fully. You may be thinking to yourself, That is quite obvious in a sense, but I don't

mean it lightly and the consequences are not small. For example, I started smoking when I was fourteen, to my parent's obvious dismay, but they did not stop me. I don't know if I could or would allow my children the same thing, but the radicality of this point is not the question of smoking or not. My poor mother suffered every cigarette. The radicality of this position was the awareness they had of the need of a child to learn to judge in accordance with the ultimate question of happiness in my own life. To learn to compare my truest desires with everything around me. My father always insisted that he could never prepare us with the answers to all the questions we would face in life, but rather, he hoped to show us that through the method of truly responding to the question, "Does this make me happy?" we could respond to anything.

There was a thing my mother always did that has stuck with me—bothered me, really—ever since I can remember. She would come home after visiting some neighbor and exclaimed to us that a miracle had happened. She said it with such sincerity and joy that I fell for this trick for years. She would then explain something to the effect of how she had just met the neighbor down the street, and they had talked about some enormous challenge they happened to be facing, and that they would now be coming over for dinner, and that they were going to give us their trampoline. [*audience laughter*] We went through tons of trampolines. I don't think I'm alone in thinking that "miracle" is a bit of an overstatement, but over and over again she would come home and do this to us. For her, life was a constant miracle. We'd come back home after school and she would begin recounting the miracles of her day. They're all stories of people she had met. She would start the story with, "A miracle happened today," and end with—in Italian—"Quanto è bello il mondo e quanto è grande Dio," or, "How beautiful is the world and how great is God." You have to be either crazy or see something so much more in life to be that way. I, as a kid, concluded she was crazy. [*audience laughter*] But the sheer force of attraction in the way she looked at life drew an enormous number of people to her, including us. She made no sense in my mind: she asked questions you're not supposed to ask; interacted with people when you're supposed to just wave; and never once failed to see a person as a

miracle. In looking at my mother, the judgment of life was clear and simple. Life is beautiful, life is given.

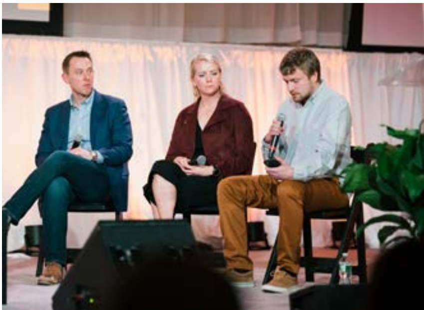
When I eventually went off to college, I lived at home and commuted to school. When my father would see me leaving in the evening to go to a party, he would remind me, “Nothing good happens after midnight.” [*audience laughter*] The point again was not the rule. There’s nothing magical about midnight, I think. The point was the need for things to be good. The point was for him to put his need for things to be good in front of me and challenge my freedom, After many wasted nights I would feel so bad coming home, with these words ringing in my ears, and thinking to myself, “Was this good?” The next morning after such nights, on a Saturday morning after having partied, I would be up at 7:00 a.m. ready to work, ready to come back to the unity and affirmation of goodness we experienced in working at home. We worked all the time. There was always a project going on, usually to the dismay of my mother, for all the incomplete projects from the previous few years. The passion for work was driven by my father. He never stopped at a crazy idea. In 2009, my father had the bright idea to have an end-of-summer party. We would cook for all of our friends and celebrate the end of summer and the beginning of a new year. Naturally, we couldn’t just do the typical cookout with burgers and hot dogs, for, as he would say, “If we’re going to do it, we might as well do it well.” And the importance of a meal was never taken lightly. So he said, “Why don’t we cook a whole pig?” The pig roast was born and became a yearly tradition until 2019. By the last year, the turn out surpassed 600 people and we were cooking one whole pig, six whole hams, in addition to fresh mozzarella, homemade limoncello, and the list goes on. People would make plans to come in from out of town just for the pig roast. The pig roast was my father’s understanding of work. For him, it was a chance to testify to the community of the beauty of life. Because of that foundation, we invited everyone to it, and it was clear. Growing up, there were many things I was actually embarrassed to invite people to. Not the pig roast; there was a certainty of the universal attractiveness of that event that went beyond any of my concerns of embarrassment. Work was unity and passion for my father. Whether we were peeling hundreds of lemons for limoncello, or building the set for the school play, work was his response

to every aspect of life being supremely interesting. And working together was a possibility for unity and companionship in front of these interesting things. Working together to build something, or make something, was—for me as a kid growing up—a constant discovery of how fascinating and given things are. And there were countless others like me who came week after week to help our family can tomatoes, slaughter pigs, and peel lemons. Kids, particularly those that everyone said were the tough ones, came week after week to be looked at by my father and mother and valued through working together. Work in this sense was an enormous point of unity for our family. An invitation that was readily accepted by so many others.

Finally, I want to offer my experience of some more recent discoveries in the relationship with my family, to show you that I'm not naïve. Having moved out and away from home five years ago, I have seen more and more the inadequacies and limits of my parents in front of the new challenges and difficulties in life. This is an experience I have heard shared by many of my friends around my same age. My parents lost their house in the financial crisis. A few of us kids moved away, and a variety of other challenges—probably pretty normal ones for aging parents and kids becoming adults. I don't mean "normal" in a diminutive sense; in fact, the drama of life that my parents have always communicated to us is now more clear than ever before in the dramatic questions of their own life today. I've seen my father uncharacteristically go through the infinite heartbreak of feeling alone and hopeless. The heart of an entrepreneur and work and life reaching its limits. I've seen my mother fighting to continue to proclaim that goodness in front of the challenges of our family, her own health, and those of her parents growing old far away in Italy. I was recently listening to a talk by our Italian friend, Franco Nembrini, on a similar subject, and one line really helped me to understand the drama I am facing now. He quotes the first line of the last canto of *The Divine Comedy*: "Vergine madre figlia di tuo figlio" ("Virgin mother, daughter of thy son"). He goes on to talk about his own experience of discovering the resonance of this phrase in his own life. I've seen in myself, my older siblings, and many of my friends the beginnings of this precise dynamic take shape. Throughout my life my parents went from being the absolute authority with testimonies of an immense goodness of life, to real companions and friends

in life. Now we're starting to see a role reversal, in a sense. This return to a dynamic of relationship familiar from when we were younger, but in some way flipped. We start to become like fathers to our fathers. I am here to testify to all of you, and especially to my parents, that same goodness of life that they taught me. It may seem vain to make such a bold claim, but it is simply the result of that greater goodness not residing in my father and mother, but rather in the experience of living the possibility for life to have meaning and for all of life to be reaching towards this meaning. So my vanity has nothing to do with it, because what I'm claiming is not that I've surpassed my parents by any means, but rather that the very passion they had in front of life that inspired me as a kid is precisely the need I now communicate back to them.

I've now been married almost five years and am a father of three. I often find myself in need of this approach in front of my own children. The rules and to-do lists are ever-growing, but the anxieties that come from seeing my own limits in raising my children, or being a husband to my wife, are set at ease by this memory that, for me, what was most meaningful in the way I was raised was that my parents were first and foremost searching for themselves. I'm recalled to my own need for happiness. The desire that every moment be a miracle and that my life be full of asking. We often thank our parents for giving us life—as we should—but like my friend the astronomer said, "What does putting food on the table mean if we cannot ask questions about the stars?" More than anything I would thank my parents for communicating to me, through their own life, the urgency and need that life be good and have meaning, because in carrying this urgency with me now, my eyes are opened again to the promise of the beauty of life.



Working In An Inclusive Economy

Young workers and entrepreneurs discuss Pope Francis' economic vision with ***Carlos Martínez****, CEO of 376 Management Group and* ***Giorgio Vittadini****, President of the Foundation for Subsidiarity and Professor of Statistics at the University of Milan-Bicocca, Italy.*

Introduction

An important area in our fragmented society that can easily become prey of ideologies and either facilitate divisions or help to overcome them is the economy. Pope Francis is very passionate about this issue and has recently sent an open letter to young men and women studying economics to "change today's economy and to give a soul to the economy of tomorrow." A different kind of economy "one that brings life not death, one that is inclusive and not exclusive, humane and not dehumanizing, one that cares for the environment and does not despoil it." What does Pope Francis mean by this "different kind of economy"? Can its features be really relevant in the business world? How can they impact and change the everyday working experience of workers and entrepreneurs? Speakers will discuss these questions in a dialogue with young workers and entrepreneurs.

Anujeet Sareen, moderator: Welcome everyone. I think the title of this event is an interesting one. I think there is a tension in this title that is worth

touching on briefly. There are ideas that each of us have about what it means to work, what is the economy, what is business. We live in a world in which there's hyper-competitiveness: things are changing rapidly, and there's some practical realities of what it means to work and do business. We also have ideas of what it means to be inclusive, to live in a sustainable economy. Those ideas, I think, evoke certain moral values. I think they evoke a certain sense of politics; and in that sense, I think the title bespeaks a certain uneasiness. How does this all come together? How, in fact, do we work in an inclusive economy?

There's a term that's used more frequently these days: "stakeholder capitalism." Which is different from what people traditionally think of as "shareholder capitalism." Shareholder capitalism speaks about how the purpose of business and work is really to maximize profit for the owners, the shareholders. Stakeholder capitalism takes a much broader view. It says, Look: the people that a business impacts are much greater than the owners themselves. The stakeholders of a company include: the customers, the lives of the employees, the local communities, and, in a much larger sense, the global economy, particularly with respect to the environment. But there's an uneasiness about this. Just this past last week there was an opinion piece in the *Wall Street Journal* really pushing back on this notion—sayings this is really about political correctness and businesses should focus on business.

And that's what really brings us to this event today, to really look at this and understand how to live this, how this is possible, this working in an inclusive economy. Part of what generated this event is another event that's coming up at the end of next month. Pope Francis has invited a number of young economists and entrepreneurs, one of whom is onstage today, to join him in Assisi, Italy, to look at this. How is this possible, what experiences can we look at, what is a way forward?

So, in that context, let me introduce the folks onstage today. To my left is Giorgio Vittadini. He is the Founder and President of the Foundation for Subsidiarity, and the editor of the online newspaper *ilsussidiario.net*. He is a member of the American Statistical Association. He's also a Professor of Statistics in the Statistical Department at the University of Milan.

To my right is Carlos Martínez. He is the CEO of 376 Management

Group, a real estate construction and consulting firm. Carlos has a degree in architecture from the Polytechnic University of Puerto Rico and is a Master's candidate in real estate development at Georgetown University.

We're going to start with Giorgio Vittadini, who'll give us an introduction to the broader theme and how to begin to think about this. We'll then speak to Carlos about his very interesting and specific experience in Puerto Rico, and then we'll turn to Justin Welter, Laura Kelly, and Nick Stokman, to really explore this issue in specific situations here in the United States.

Giorgio Vittadini: Last year, the pope wrote an open letter addressed to young economists and entrepreneurs, inviting them to a three-day, March 2020 event in Assisi, entitled "The Economy of Francesco." They purported to discuss a different kind of economy; inclusive, not exclusive; human and not dehumanizing. One that cares for the environment and does not despoil it. Then there is the second encyclical by Pope Francis, *Laudato Sí*, that says this economy, the knowledge-based economy, is profit-oriented, based on misconception, and provides only limited economic growth. What does it mean that, until this last financial crisis, we could think that the only kind of economy was this kind of economy. It was impossible to avoid it. But now we understand that this kind of economy, this materialistic kind of economy, has many problems. First of all, we understand that it's not true. Because we see a lot of problems. First of all, global warming. I don't know if global warming is provoked by the demands of human beings or for other reasons, but we see that the environment has a lot of problems, and these problems are connected to this kind of economy: using too much energy, too much oil, carbon, all of which gives us pollution. Second, injustice. You see that there are big differences between the rich and poor people. Last week, we learned that 1% of the people have 49% of the riches in the world. It's impossible to go on in this condition. And then unemployment, we are substituting human work with machines and devices. You understand this is not the only way to go on?

The pope said that you shouldn't avoid and destroy progress, but you have to build different solutions. Different solutions that are connected to a new idea that the United Nations built, which is sustainability. This means you should build progress with an approach to the problem that meets the

needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It's not true that being selfish is good for everything. That 18th century philosophy is bad. You remember certain ideas of Adam Smith. "If you are selfish, you help everyone"—it's not true. You have to start from another idea of a human being. I am a statistician. I know that you have rules. You need mathematics, you need to demonstrate theorems, you need econometrics. But if you start from another idea of the human being, you can build another economy, and the United Nations summarized this in seventeen points: poverty, education, war, inequality, peace, justice, natural resources, gender equality, and many more. But I think in this way we are destructive. Too many points, different points. What does Pope Francis suggest instead? That we can summarize three points to understand this. First of all, you can build an economy where the human being is at the center. A human being that starts from wonder, from creativity, from positivity, from goodness. It's not true that to build a new economy, a modern economy, you need to embrace the untrue notion that profit for an individual is a good for everyone. You remember the movie *Wall Street*, where we see this kind of man. It's not good. He's not the only man. A human being who builds the new economy, a human being who invents, is a human being who is able to take into account reality that says, "I want a world where other people can grow." It's not true that selfishness is better.

If you look at the global GDP, the amount of global finance activity was calculated in 2013 at nine hundred ninety-three billion dollars. Where is this kind of money? You don't use this money for improving the economy. Think about Italy, Italy is bad. But now finance is good. Why is the real economy bad, but the finance is good? Something doesn't work. You should have a finance that invests in the real economy, for helping people. Second, think about destruction of forests. Wood companies in Italy, furniture companies, have a sustainable pathway. They use forests and cut the trees, but after that they plant new trees, so in ten, twenty, thirty years—you have a forest. But if you destroy a forest in Amazonia, in Africa, in Asia—then no forests, no wood, no furniture. It's better to have a sustainable economy. I give you another example about energy. Oil, carbon. The CEO in the most important oil company in Italy, in a meeting some weeks ago, told us that in 2050 the

most profitable way of having energy is not oil, not carbon, not wind, and not sun, but rubbish. You can use 99% of rubbish for producing energy. And so the plastic problem is solved. You don't have this kind of idea in Italy; no plastic, no plastic, no plastic! But in reality, you can now use rubbish for energy, so you have a sustainable economy. Another example I give to you: think about the most important development in a new economy, also about a digital economy. Think about the invention of the phone, or internet inventions—Steve Jobs. Steve Jobs. He didn't think about the profit at the beginning. It started at Stanford. He didn't study electronics or formatting. He was a creative. He didn't merely invent electronics; he was able to look at people. The creativity of human beings is the beginning of a new economy. If I am open to you, if I understand what you need. Not if all I think about is money. The human being is the center of the economy.

I give you another example. In Italy, many entrepreneurs use young people for a long time. It's not like in America, where at 5 o'clock you go home. No, you have to work for me until 10 o'clock, or 12 o'clock—ten hours a day because you have to work. No family. You have to stay at the company. You think it is better? No, it is not better, because this guy after eight hours is too tired. He cannot do anything and is angry with the entrepreneur because, for example, he can't date a girl. [*audience laughter*] No date. He is so angry. It's better to say, Okay, at 5 o'clock you go home. You can have family, you can date. We need an economy where the human being, the family, the human being who desires goodness, the human being who is in relationship—is the protagonist. We do not need to go back to the Middle Ages, but to build a new future where you can overcome the problem and to go on in development. [*audience applause*]

Sareen: Thank you. Let's turn now to Carlos. Carlos has a very interesting story of a real estate company that he started after Puerto Rico had a very significant disaster. I think he has something to share in terms of what Giorgio just spoke about.

Carlos Martínez: Yes. First of all, thank you for having me here. I'm very excited for the opportunity. It's an incredible crowd. I've been speaking with some of you yesterday night and this morning. September 20 it all started—September 20, 2017. We had Hurricane Maria, a Category 5 hurricane that

devastated the island of Puerto Rico. Basically, the worst natural disaster that we've had on the island. [*shows pictures*]. I've brought some pictures so you guys can understand the magnitude of what happened on the island. We had $91.6 billion in estimated damages. Around 99% of the island was without power for 3-6 months, 4,600 deaths, and it basically shifted my perspective about my profession as an architect. It was a moment to take a step back and decide how, in any other way, I could contribute to the redevelopment of the island. So, as Papa Francisco in Spanish said, we live in a deaf world. So we started to react. We started doing, we developed a small-scale real estate development startup, specifically for a sustainable approach. We are driven by social impact and the need for improving residents' quality of life and an affordable housing market. The U.S. has around a $7 million deficit in public housing, and we decided that it was our time to approach that sector as real estate developers, but most importantly, not only approach it as developers, but also implement sustainable designs that can promote a better lifestyle and have a direct impact to the community and the environment.

But I'm sure all of you are asking, What is sustainable design? Sustainable design is the intention to reduce or eliminate any negative environmental impact through design. This starts from the pre-construction planning phase, all the way through the operation of the managing of the facility. The pre-construction phase is the planning and material selection, where one helps the environment, that helps the quality of living of the space; and during the construction phase, we use recycled materials, we try to have the least impact possible on the properties; then during the operation phase we try to integrate the tenant with the other mindset by providing them a bike, providing them a different type of event so that they can be aware. We actually promote recycling with some discounts on the rent and by helping them with the process. We send them educational material. We think that is the proper path to educate the community on how to react to a bigger problem. That's our mindst, that's our approach, that's what we want to address.

We must understand the importance of the built environment. This is much more than brick and mortar. It is about creating safe, resilient, and integrated spaces for all kind of persons. Here in the United States, there is a lot of incentive for tax credits, for big-scale development that allows developers

to reduce costs; but there is not much for single-family, low-income housing. I believe that it's a sector that needs it. We're all on the same page, we're here looking for alternatives, and this is a sector that really needs it.

People always ask me: So what do you do differently? Why is your start-up or small development company different? Even our investors ask, I don't understand what you are bringing other than good design! I say, Well, I'm not bringing anything different for you as an investor. I'm just doing what everyone who owns a house should be doing: implementing good lighting, LED lighting, for example. It's as simple as going to any store and buying that. Thermal insulation, the correct thermal insulation for the property, choosing the correct material for the property. And they say, That's something that I can do. Neighbors come to us and say, Give me what you do. We give them the specs for what we put on the property, because our mindset is that if our neighbor uses the same things that we use, and the other neighbor sees it, and wants the same thing, then we're on the right track. We're on the track of educating, we're on the track of convincing society and the community that it's a possibility, and that step by step, door by door, community by community we're changing, we're helping the environment. [*audience applause*]

Sareen: Thank you Carlos. I'm really fascinated by what you have done. You have a hurricane that tears apart the country where you live, and I would think the immediate response would be, Let's just go fix stuff; let's just go rebuild it. The notion that you would want to integrate an awareness of the environment and sustainability wouldn't necessarily be the first thing that would come to my mind. I'm fascinated by that thinking. What drives that? It doesn't sound like you're just trying to be a good guy.

Martínez: Yes. Well, it all started…we have to go back to '90, '94-'95. There was another hurricane that did a lot of damage to Puerto Rico. The biggest problem we had is that people did the rebuilding and reconstruction, the wrong way. They weren't up to code, they just did it desperately, and it's totally understandable that if you don't have a roof on your house, you're just gonna put it back any way you can. Fast forward a couple of years and you pay the consequences. The only different now is that they're very, very conscious, because it's sweat. They work hard to be able to pay for a wood panel and put it on the roof. They say, Hey, it already happened to me, it was

very hard the first time, it's gonna be even harder this time, so I'm just gonna take a step back and try to figure out how to make it happen.

Part of our work, in addition of our investments in low income housing and green space startups, is that we also help Habitat for Humanity. Our work with Habitat for Humanity is helping to get funds to Puerto Rico and, at the same time, use those funds correctly. You have a lot of people who would give the money to Habitat for Humanity and say, "When are we gonna start to build? I just want to see the houses in a couple months." It's not that way. We want to do it the right way. We want to look for the correct location for those houses and do it the correct way. So, it has been a great opportunity. You gotta understand, the construction industry consumes 36% of worldwide energy and is responsible for 40% of the C02 emission. It is important for the next generation of the industry to take this into consideration and use it as a mindset. If we're gonna do construction anyways, if we're going to be in the business, then why we don't consider alternatives that are available? Technology keeps developing new products, keeps evolving. Well, let's take a step back and decide what's the best way to do it, and that's where we are right now.

Sareen: I think that's just very compelling, because there's nothing automatic about this, right? One, people have been doing development, real estate development, a long time. But the notion that you factor in is that you can innovate in how you build properties and develop this for Section 8 housing, low-income housing. This is not just about sticking a bunch of expensive solar panels on a rich person's house so they can be more energy-efficient; this is about actually bringing this to a more pervasive level of development, and it comes about because you look at the situation. There's a need for housing for the poor, and there's a need to take this issue of the climate seriously and to be creative, as Giorgio was just talking about. It's really quite impressive.

Martínez: Also, it is very important to understand that this is not because I'm interested in just being the "green guy" here, and saying, Hey, we're just about sustainable design. It's a commitment that all the investors—the designer, contractor, the development team—have to be in the same boat, we have to be onboard, because it affects all of us directly or indirectly.

Sareen: You ended up having to build your proposal in Baltimore first, before you could do it in Puerto Rico.

Martínez: Yes. Actually, our first phase of trial and error—I'm gonna say it that way—was in Baltimore. Puerto Rico doesn't have any tax incentives; we just buy the property and do it as any other person here can just buy the property and do the flip. We're gonna call it a flip. So, we went to the bank, we want to get a loan, we're gonna buy this portfolio of houses and we're gonna flip them. We're gonna adjust them to put on sustainable features. The bank in Puerto Rico tells us we can't. "We don't have any way of helping you other than just buying this as a regular house, and with the regular interest." We're in a financial crisis, so the interest rates in PR are extremely high. So, we went to Baltimore. And the reason we chose Baltimore is that it has been passing through a process very similar to the one in Puerto Rico. We went there and they were completely open to the idea. We actually finished the property in Baltimore with our own money, to prove not only to the bank, but also to prove to the investors that it could be done. That was another key part of the process. Yes, maybe there are other industries that give you a better return, if all you care about is money. But here it's not just about money. It's about contributing and putting back something into society and to the community, and they jumped on board and we're making it happen.

Sareen: I think there's something very compelling about this aspect of your story, because surely in an ideal world you would wish that the bank of Puerto Rico or the government would give the appropriate incentives, when there's a real crisis in Puerto Rico to do it. But the fact that you had a conviction about what you were doing meant that you could do this with the banking system in Baltimore and prove the concept. Then you were able to go back to Puerto Rico and say, Listen, this works. I think this is a part of the innovation that Giorgio spoke about. I think that is really commendable. Thank you very much.

Martínez: Thank you. [*audience applause*]

Sareen: So with us today we also have Justin Welter, Laura Kelly, and Nick Stokman. All three of them work in the United States—small firms, their own firms, larger firms. The pope's invitation to this event in Assisi next month is really an exploration of looking at our needs as human beings, these

things that we value—how do we live them? I think each one of them has brought a question here today. We'll start with Justin.

Justin Welter: So, going back to your comment, Giorgio, specifically talking about inclusive economy: How do we rectify the advances in technology and the replacement of jobs that come with that, with an inclusive economy? To give you some context, I work for a start-up in San Francisco, we are actively working to replace sales and marketing teams with artificial intelligence—AI—so I am literally working to replace my own job and the jobs of my peers. So the question becomes, with that said, How do we make work human while we are actively working to take humans out of work?

Vittadini: I don't speak about the pope, I speak about McKinsey. It is not a Catholic company, but McKinsey says that the human will still be indispensable because expected productivity gain can only be achieved if man works side by side with the machines. Think about it. It seems that only one in ten employees will be replaced by machines. But one in three is at a risk of change. We must contrasted that with investment in training. Recent research foresees that within five years, about a third of the skills required in the labor market will come with skills that are not considered central today. Think about the 18th century. There is the Malthusian theory: no future for humanity, too many people, so it's impossible to go on. What happened? Intelligence, reason, and affection built new possibilities, new cultures, new industries, new markets, new possibilities. Now it is the same. If this kind of man is able to look at reality, and stands in front of these new devices, we can build new possibilities. Think about it. How many new jobs with Google, Facebook, LinkedIn? With the internet and social media? Social media reduced the need for mail, but also provided how many new jobs? How many new jobs can we have with Zoom, with Skype, with staying in contact remotely, how many possibilities? If you think the human being, like some neuroscientist says, is only a mechanism, then we are destroyed. Otherwise, you will invent new jobs. Think about Elon Musk. Elon Musk is better than NASA because he invented a new way of going into space with this intelligence, and opened up new possibilities for jobs. When I took my degrees, there was no internet, no cell phone, no photocopies, nothing.

Sareen: Yeah, you're old, Giorgio. [*audience laughter*]

Vittadini: 1979, eh? No typewriter, no video picture. Think about it. Instead, now there are new possibilities. How many new jobs with these kinds of possibilities? So, the problem is whether the human being can be in front of reality. We don't know how, but we know that it is possible.

Sareen: We are getting close on time. I want to be sure we get to both of your questions. Laura, please.

Laura Kelly: In his letter announcing the upcoming event in Assisi, Pope Francis tells us, "There in Assisi, St. Francis stripped himself of all worldliness in order to choose God as the compass of his life, becoming poor with the poor, a brother to all. His decision to embrace poverty also gave rise to a vision of economics that remains most timely." So, this example is beautiful from a spiritual and saintly perspective, but comparing it to today's economy makes it seem idealistic, impractical, and somewhat removed. And to put it in very general or oversimplified terms, today's economy is enabled by competition with people at both the individual and organizational levels striving to be better than their peers. Today's economy has and is serving many people, it's improved the quality of life for the working and middle classes and has advanced technology. So how do we reconcile Francis's example and Pope Francis's call to follow it with the economy we're living in today?

Vittadini: Do you know about soft skills or non-cognitive skills? Nobel Prize winner James Heckman began to study these kinds of skills in the '90s. He discussed the standardized tests in American schools, saying, If you only think to have skills and knowledge, then with this standard test you destroy a part of intelligence.

Sareen: You mean like technical skills?

Vittadini: Technical skills. I know that Lincoln was an American president. That is simply knowledge. But there are different kind of skills that need creativity, empathy, openness. This kind offers qualities that cannot be developed only remotely, they need sharing. In this moment, in this time of social media, where you are far from other people, you need more connection, because these kinds of skills can grow only if you are in connection, if you share, if you meet. So, in this moment, you need a new way of walking but a way of walking where to stay in relationship is interesting. You need these kinds of soft skills. These kinds of soft skills need sharing, like right here.

We can't substitute the New York Encounter with a TV transmission where everyone of us is at home looking at a television—it's different.

Sareen: Pope Francis is proposing a new approach to business in the economy that starts from the human person, that looks out for the poor and vulnerable—I'm kind of paraphrasing from the letter you read—and that doesn't exclude anyone. For many entrepreneurs, however, the difficulty of starting from this perspective is that it can make any business decision almost impossibly complex. Growing a business means hiring new people and letting go of others. It means giving raises to certain employees and not to others. A new technology may simplify a process, but it means certain jobs or roles are no longer necessary. As an entrepreneur, when I read this proposal, in some ways if feels unrealistic, because it feels like it's saying, Hey, you entrepreneurs, business owners, CEOs—it's your job to make sure everything is fair and equitable, where no one is left behind. However, if entrepreneurs and business owners were to really take the entirety of the pope's proposal seriously, it seems like we would always be at a standstill, because there's always going to be somebody adversely affected by any given decision. So I guess my main question is, Are there simple, practical ways we can bring the principle of the human person into our work, while still ensuring we are making sound and wise business decisions in the process?

Vittadini: A manager in California told me the difference between a manager and an entrepreneur. A manager is able to go on in an economy that is already established. With these rules, I am able to guide a company and to go on with these skills and these rules. An entrepreneur is different. An entrepreneur says—like you—that Pope Francis is an idealist, living in a utopia. But the entrepreneur is able to build something new, because you need vision for building the new economy of Pope Francis, you need something similar to Christopher Columbus. I know now that Christopher Columbus is…[*audience laughter*] but I like Christopher Columbus because otherwise it would have been impossible for our encounter here today, because I was in Europe. But Christopher followed a vision. How many people told Christopher Columbus, "It's impossible to go beyond Gibraltar, there is only water and there are monsters—stay here. It's impossible." And think about Magellan. Think about Galileo. Everyone who began something new had

a vision, started from an idea, from the evidence they had. You can build something new! If you have this vision, you can build a different company where human beings are respected.

So, in answer to your question, we have to use ourselves. We have to build a new society with our jobs. Because this suggestion of the pope is not mandatory. These are guidelines, suggestions. God doesn't tell us what we should do. He suggests that we should use our intelligence. And I think if we do this, we can build a different kind of company, a different kind of work, different kinds of societies, and we have to give testimonies about this. This is our beauty, not only in private life, but also in a common life. It's time to go beyond, using our creativity. And, after that, next year we will have a meeting about it with four-hundred attendees, and everyone will speak about what we did, of the newness in his job and the people who are entrepreneurs. So, we are building a new world.

Sareen: So you all have your homework assignment. [*audience laughter*] Thank you all. Let me say a couple of words here before we conclude. What I find so interesting about this is there's a willingness to say, Look, let's put our desire for living in a more inclusive world, let's put our desire to build a successful business, let's put our desire to live in a more sustainable ecological world, our desire to live charity as St. Francis of Assisi did—let's put that in front of us and allow our creativity and innovation to start to respond. Innovation isn't merely to maximize business profitability; innovation affects all of our desires, all of our needs. We can put them in play and allow that perspective to answer. I think your point about the Malthusian view of the world comes up repeatedly—we're going to run out of stuff, we're going to run out of things. Back in the '70s, we were told we were going to run out of energy; that hasn't happened. We're going to run out of food; that hasn't happened. It's because the capacity for us as human beings to innovate is really quite remarkable. But to orient ourselves across the human dimension, not narrowly, is really essential in all of this. There isn't a theory here that is being proposed. The nature of this whole event was, Let's talk about things that are intrinsically important as human beings, let's look at a real example of someone who's living this and then let's raise some questions. Questions that I think all of us can carry into our own workplace. How do we live this call of

the different things that we talked about to day in our particular circumstances and allow ourselves to be moved and be creative in front of those needs? Thank you, Giorgio, for your time here today; thank you, Carlos, for coming up from Puerto Rico, and the three of you for being onstage with us today.

WILLIAMS

BISHOP
FAMOLARO
WILLIAMS

Crossing The Divide In The Most Unlikely Of Places

*A conversation on reconciliation with **Jeanne Bishop**, Cook County Public Defender; and **Fr. George Williams**, Chaplain for San Quentin State Prison's death row.*

Introduction

A public defender reconciling with the man who murdered her sister, un-born child, and brother-in-law, and a chaplain serving in the seemingly hopeless place of death row will share their experience of going over apparently uncrossable divides.

Fr. George Williams: They're the outcast alley cats who had no one to care for them. The unloved ones. So that's what led me to prison ministry and especially to death row at San Quentin. Now, I don't want to romanticize these guys, and I say guys 'cause I mostly work with men. Many of these men are severely damaged human beings. They've committed truly horrible crimes. They've tortured and hurt and murdered innocent people and they've destroyed lives all around them. They're not nice people; they can be really annoying…they're like old alley cats. They can hurt you because they've been hurt. Here's the key, though: they are still God's children and they always will be.

So people ask, "What's death row like?" Well, death row is a slice of hell

on earth. When you walk into death row at San Quentin, you're taken aback by the size of the place; it's as big as a city block, it's huge, and there are four or five floors that are called tiers of cells. The dirty windows let in this yellow light that does nothing to brighten the space. It looks like a big warehouse. It's kind of like a giant Costco in purgatory, but just like Costco they never have what you're looking for. It's empty and lifeless and there's 50 cells on each tier, and all you see is this wall of cement and black metal doors and it's loud, it's really loud. The most annoying noises are at the guard station. They have an intercom and they're constantly making announcements, calling for others to go get the guys and take them to the showers or lawyer visits or to whatever medical appointments, and it just echoes in the building. And then right outside the building are about a dozen large cages, 12 feet by 12 feet, like dog kennels, and these are where the men who are on "Walk Alone" status go to recreate a couple hours a day; they get other cells for that. They're on Walk Alone status because they've proven themselves too dangerous to mix with other prisoners on death row: we often have stabbings and assaults that happen there because these men live in such close quarters and there's just this constant gossiping and verbal abuse going on. Every man there has told me over the years that the hardest part about being there is the loneliness; but because of the danger of the environment, each man has his own cell.

These cells are small, maybe from my shoulder to the end of my arm, 5 feet wide by 10 feet deep. Each man has an individual, windowless cell that is fronted by a heavy metal screen or mesh, and it's padlocked shut most of the time. At the back of the cell there's a stainless steel toilet with a stainless steel sink on top of it, and there's also a small round metal stool bolted to the wall, and then in front of that is the bed. What most of the guys do is take their little thin mattress off the bed and sleep on the floor, and then they use the platform of the bed as a desk or a place to draw on, or for storage. The cells are dark and cramped, and all the guys there have these little TVs, these little flatscreen TVs they can purchase. That's their only window to the outside world.

The place smells horrible, like a cafeteria of bathroom odors, locker room and kitchen smells; it's very unpleasant. It's a horrible place, and over the past 40 years far more men have died there of old age or suicide or murder than

from execution. We've executed 13 people since the 1980s, but many, many more have died. Really, it's…they die of despair, and their despair kind of lingers in the building long after the bodies are wheeled out. Because of that, there's a lot of ghosts in the building. Whenever people come to visit they notice, and they describe how eerie it feels, how there's this almost palpable air of oppression that hangs over the place all the time.

There are 720 men living on California's death row. It's shocking how many. We don't actually kill them; we just sentence people to death, and some of them have been there for over 40 years. We have a chapel on death row about the size of this stage, but imagine this stage completely covered by a cage, a black metal cage. The men are allowed to come into this cage about 10 at a time, and there are several benches bolted to the floor. I'm outside their cage, in my own cage. It's about twice the size of an old phone booth. If any of you are old enough to remember phone booths, well, imagine I'm inside one, padlocked in. I have to padlock myself in, it's in the regulations. I'm wearing my black stabproof, bulletproof vest, which is also required. This makes me the only Jesuit in my community that celebrates mass in Kevlar. I'm very proud of that. [*audience laughter*] Right above my head there's this really harsh fluorescent light that's on all the time. Whenever I celebrate mass—which is three times a week—and I hold the Blessed Sacrament up, the light catches the host, and as I look out it's always moving to see the expressions on the men's faces. No matter how rambunctious they were before that, they're always very attentive at that point in the mass. As I'm standing there, the light of Christ is shining from this Blessed Sacrament out to them: "This is my body, which will be given up for you." We hear this at every mass. These were the last words said at the last meal of a man who was about to be executed by the state. It's very strange how in prison—and especially death row—the words of the gospel take on a very different resonance. Jesus was an executed prisoner. Now I know Jesus was innocent. I know that these guys on death row have really done a lot to earn a spot on death row. It took real doing on their part and their crimes are often these heinous, brutal things that are the stuff of horror movies and nightmares; but I don't see murderers in front of me when I'm celebrating mass, or whenever I'm with them. I see human beings. These are men, and if Jesus was not given up for them, if he

did not give up his body for them, then what difference would our religion really make? The fact that Christ's love reaches down into this very pit of hell is what gives my life purpose and meaning. I'm often moved to tears at this point of the mass because I realize I've been given such a gift to be able to stand there and witness to the power of Christ's love in this dark, dark, place. In the cage there's a little 14-inch slot—it was originally a mail slot. I don't know how it ended up there, but we can put our hands through that and shake hands at the sign of peace. I'm always surprised at how firmly the guys grasp my hand at that point. Because there's so little human touch on death row, it's like they're reaching just to touch a different reality, one where there is still human contact.

Now as far as I know, I work on the largest death row in the Western Hemisphere, possibly on the planet. As strange as it sounds, I love the work. I've been doing this for 26 years. I've spent 10 years at San Quentin, and I feel that this is the best ministry I could ever have imagined. I wouldn't trade this experience for anything. When I leave San Quentin, every day I drive over the Golden Gate Bridge and it's just breathtaking, and I kinda have to pinch myself. It's like, How did I ever get such a cool job and a work that is so charged with the power of the gospel? It's sad that there aren't a lot of priests or lay people banging on wardens' doors saying, "I want to be a prison chaplain." I wish there were, because there's such a shortage, especially of Catholic prison chaplains. Because I work there doesn't mean I approve of prisons either, by the way; but if I were to choose to fight against the prisons and stand outside them, I would never have the opportunity to go in there and minister to the prisoners and to the correction officers, which is also an important part of the ministry. I would never get to hold up the Blessed Sacrament as a sign of light and hope in this human hell.

So what have I learned on death row? Well, if you think about it, nothing can be more vulnerable and helpless than being nailed naked to a cross. Jesus felt fear and anxiety that last night of his life. He was fully God, yes, but we often forget he was also fully human, and he was feeling overwhelmed with powerlessness and weakness that night. God the Father did not spare Jesus from the suffering, from the powerlessness, the vulnerability, the weakness. So why should we expect to be spared? One of the things I've learned about

working in prison is that we are pretty much guaranteed in life that we're going to experience powerlessness and weakness. It's what we do with this powerlessness, it's what we do with this weakness, or what we let God do with it that makes all the difference in our spiritual growth. Working with prisoners reminds me that powerlessness and the ultimate surrender of freedom—and even of our life itself—is something that none of us can avoid. We're all prisoners in one way or another. We're all prisoners of our fears, or painful memories, our addictions, or lack of ability to forgive and let go—and like prisoners we're really powerless in the face of these things in our lives that imprison us and oppress us. And even if we don't feel like we're prisoners now, if we're lucky enough to live long enough, we're going to experience the loss of freedom that inevitably comes with aging. We're all prisoners to the inevitability of death as well. So in a very real way, we're all living on death row. We're all under a sentence of death. You almost never hear it in our churches, but Jesus was an executed prisoner. He spent his last night on death row. He spent the last night of his earthly life in prison. So did Peter. So did Paul. So did John the Baptist, James, Stephen—almost all the early followers of Jesus spent their last night in prison, and they were executed by the state. So the early church was no stranger at all to prisons. Just read the Acts of the Apostles. Of course, you all know contemporary people, Christians who were death row inmates as well: Edith Stein, Maximilian Kolbe, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A long, long list. So it's sad that our contemporary church is often a stranger to prisons. I think Pope Francis has been doing a great job of leading us back to that through his words and his example. Hebrews 13:3 says, "Remember those in prison as if you yourself were in chains." I remember that at every mass: remember those in prison as if you yourself were in chains. Because guess what? We are.

In a couple of weeks we're going to celebrate Ash Wednesday. We're going to receive ashes on our heads to remind us that we're mortal, that we're from the dust and to the dust we will return. Ash Wednesday reminds us that we need to surrender to the reality of our mortality, because it's in this surrendering, it's in this weakness, owning the vulnerability and the nakedness, that we had the opportunity to experience God's great grace in our lives. Some of the men

I work with on death row have shown me glimpses of what this grace looks like, and I want to share two examples with you,

Recently at mass I asked the guys on death row, "What were you thinking about this morning when you first woke up?" I was kind of curious, and one man spoke up right away and his answer really shocked me. Now his name is Bill, and Bill's a guy who's been on death row for nearly 25 years. He committed a truly terrible crime and he's exhausted all his appeals. He's in the front of the line of people waiting to be executed, and fortunately we have a moratorium on the death penalty right now in California; Governor Newsom has said he will not sign any death warrants while he's in office. But if we were to resume executions, Bill would be at the front of the line to be strapped down on the gurney for lethal injection. The best-case scenario for Bill is life in prison without parole. He will never get out of prison, he will never be physically free again in this life. So, when I asked him what thoughts were in his head when he woke up, this is what he said to me: "You know, Father, every day I wake up I'm filled with gratitude." Wow. He went on to say that he felt this overwhelming gratitude to God because he was no longer the terrible person he was when he committed the murders that landed him on death row. He feels gratitude because he knows he is loved and forgiven by God. So here's a man living in the highest security prison in all of California and the biggest death row in the world, and yet, in some ways he's one of the most free people I've met.

Another man on death row, Todd, arranged to have his wife murdered because he was having an affair with another woman. He wanted to get rid of his wife, so he had her killed. He was caught, condemned to death, and sent to death row. He freely admits what he did, and says he believes he deserves to be on death row, he deserves to be executed. But what's really remarkable about Todd is that, two years ago, he took vows as a Benedictine oblate on death row. He had contacted a monastery in Pennsylvania, and over a couple of years had done basically a novitiate by correspondence with these monks, and he eventually became a monk himself. In our chapel, I received his vows on behalf of the monks. The guards grought him in, shackled and handcuffed, and I received his viws. Todd has devoted the rest of his monastic life to praying for the souls of all the men and women who have been put

to death on California's death row over the last 150 years or so. That's his vocation. So for me he's such a wonderful witness to God's grace in even such a hellish place as death row at San Quentin. Both of these guys have found freedom. They found forgiveness despite the powerlessness and the vulnerability of being on death row. They can't change their situation, but their hearts were changed.

So the question for us is: From what or from whom do you seek forgiveness? Who and what do you need to forgive in your own life? Are you willing to surrender yourself to God's mercy and forgiveness and finally forgive yourself or someone else in your life once and for all? You know, would that we could all learn to wake up each moment of our lives filled with gratitude to God for all the ways we've experienced his healing and forgiveness. Would that we could all be open to God's grace to become signs of light and healing in our world. I think that's what we're here for today, actually. This theme of crossing the divide; the outside world to the inside world of death row, for example. At the heart of all our longing is the desire for God. It's our incarnational faith that reminds us that, in Jesus, this union with God is inseparable from union and communion with one another, with other human beings, and with all of creation. So what matters is to be in communion with one another in Jesus Christ, and in communion with the poor, the outcast, the prisoners. We're all called by our baptism to be with Jesus not only in his glory, but also in his powerlessness, his vulnerability, and his nakedness. We're all called to be compassionate to all those One-Eyed Petes of our world; the ones that no one else wants to see, who no one else wants to love. Death row exists because injustice exists. Death row exists because hatred, fear, racism, and indifference to human suffering exists. Death row exists because people choose to serve death, not life. But we know that because of Christ, love is stronger than death. Love and compassion are the only way we can defeat the power of a culture of death. The only thing we need to do is get involved and love those whom no one else wants to love. Thank you. [*audience applause*]

Jeanne Bishop: So my story starts thirty years ago this coming April 7th, in 1990. It was the night before Palm Sunday, a Saturday night, and I was out with my younger sister, Nancy, who was 25 years old, her husband, Richard, who was 29, and my parents. We were at an Italian restaurant on Clark street

in Chicago, celebrating the happiest news imaginable: Nancy and Richard were going to have a baby. Nancy was three months pregnant. This was a really wonderful thing, because I'm one of three sisters. I have an older sister, I'm the middle child, and Nancy was the youngest. So even though Nancy was kind of the baby of our family, she was the first who was going to be a mom. We were all just over the moon. This would have been the first grandchild for my mom and dad. It would have been my first little niece or nephew, and so we had pasta and talked and laughed and celebrated. I had bought a baby gift for Nancy. We all said goodbye in the parking lot that night. Nancy hugged me, and I could feel her warm body and smell the perfume she wore, and I said, "I'll see you tomorrow," because the next day after church I was going to go over and see her. And those are words that I never say anymore to anyone. It almost felt like a foreboding of doom. I had no idea that that would be the last night I would ever see her alive on this earth.

My parents went home to their big house in the suburbs, and I went back to my apartment in Chicago. I was working as a corporate attorney at a big law firm; I lived by myself in this little studio apartment. Nancy and Richard went back to their townhouse in Winnetka, Illinois, one of the safest suburbs in the country. There hadn't been an unsolved murder in Winnetka in more than a century, and there had been only one murder at all in those hundred years, just a few years before, but it was solved instantly. So the last thing Nancy and Richard were expecting when they walked through their front door was to see a killer waiting for them. He had broken into their townhouse by using a glass cutter to enter through a sliding glass door in the back, because he knew that *breaking* the glass might have alerted neighbors to call the police. At the crime scene you could see glass stacked on the ground.

He had a .357 Magnum revolver loaded with .38 caliber bullets. When Nancy and Richard walked through the door, fresh from a warm family dinner where we were celebrating life, he pointed that gun at them and ordered them into the basement. Nancy and Richard told them that she was pregnant. Richard begged him not to hurt his wife because she was expecting. The killer took them down into the basement. He put the gun to the back of Richard's head and fired once, execution style. I can't imagine what must have gone through Nancy's heart and mind at that point, because she loved him. She

wanted to have a big happy family with him, raise their children, and grow old with him. To see that dream shattered in an instant, one gunshot. And then to see the gun turned on her. When that happened, she covered up her own head with her hands and kind of huddled in a corner. And so, instead of shooting her in the head, he fired into her pregnant side and abdomen twice, which is the cruelest place imaginable, because more than anything in the world Nancy wanted to be a mom. She just wanted to have that baby and hold it in her arms. And then he fled. The coroner's report estimated that she lived about 10 minutes after that. The blood trails in the basement and the marks on her body showed what she did. First, she tried to call for help, and this is kind of unthinkable for us, because we're all so used to having a cellphone. There was no such thing as a cellphone in 1990, and so she didn't have any way to call for help from this basement. At the crime scene, you could see a middle shelf with indentation marks in it: she had been banging on the shelf with the tool, trying to make a noise that someone, anyone, might hear, and come in and save them. I imagine that at some point she must have felt the darkness closing in around her, her life kind of ebbing away, and realizing that she was dying and that no help was coming. At that point, she dragged herself over to Richard's body. She had to pull herself along the floor by her elbows. You could see the scrapes and marks on her elbows, and the trail of blood along the floor. And when she lay there next to him, in her last moment, she did this unimaginable thing: she dipped her finger in her own blood and drew the shape of a heart and the letter U. *Love you*. And then she died there beside him.

The next day after church—Palm Sunday—my dad went over to the townhouse and rang the doorbell, and when they didn't answer he had a kind of foreboding of doom. He used the key to open up the door, and he saw the glass from the sliding glass door, and the light on in the basement. When he went to the top of the stairs and looked down, there were Nancy and Richard, lying there dead. For six months, no one could figure out who had killed this happy young couple with no enemies, with everything in the world to live for. One night, I came home from work and my phone was ringing. I picked it up and it was a reporter for the CBS news station, wanting to know my reaction to the arrest in my sister's murderer. I said, "Arrest? What arrest?" And he said

there was a teenager in custody in the Winnetka police station. I hung up the phone. I went immediately to my parents' house in Winnetka and waited for news. It was a 16-year-old boy, a junior in high school, the same high school that Nancy had gone to, the same high school that my 16-year-old son attends right now. He had bragged to his friends about killing them. He showed a friend of his the .357 Magnum revolver that he had kept under his bed, and handcuffs like the ones he used on Richard. The police went to the home with a warrant, found the gun, and tested the ballistics: a perfect match to the bullets in my sister's body. They found this trophy notebook of press clippings that he had kept. We even learned that he had gone to Nancy and Richard's funeral. When we found this out, I went to the police station with my parents. Initially it hadn't been clear, how they had died, because their bodies had been so covered with blood. Had they been bludgeoned to death? Or struck down with an axe that had been the basement? But this night we learned that they had been shot to death. And when I learned this, the first thing that came out of my mouth was, "I don't want to hate anyone." And everyone in the room kind of looked at me like I was crazy. I don't even know where that thought came from except this: until that moment, I had lived a pretty privileged, safe, and happy life. But this was evil, such as I had never known. To look into my sister's beautiful, bright eyes—she was such a loving, bright, funny, sunny, generous person—and to pull the trigger to snuff out the light in those eyes...it was so unimaginable to me. I thought, This is casting a shadow of evil over us and you have to respond to evil. You cannot *not* respond to evil. And I knew if that response was hatred and vengeance and bitterness, that there wouldn't be enough hate in the world to pay for the lives of my sister and her husband and my little niece or nephew.

So the first thing I did was to tell myself that whoever had done this, I was not going to hate him. For six months this crime went unsolved. I would walk down the streets of Chicago and thousands of people would be walking by, and I'd think, Is it him? Did he do it? Is it them over there? Are they coming back for the rest of my family? Do they hate us for some reason? It was such a mystery.

Then came the arrest. The young man went to trial, took the stand, and denied the crime. He showed no remorse, he took no responsibility, tried to

blame someone else. The jury didn't buy it, and they found him guilty within a couple of hours, based on his confession, the physical evidence, the details of the crime scene that no one else would have known. When he was sentenced, he received the mandatory punishment that you got at the time for being a juvenile who committed a crime in which you kill more than one person in the same incident: life in prison without parole. When he was taken away after the sentencing,, my mom turned to me and said, "We'll never see him again," and I was fine with that. I thought, you know, *Good*. I had forgiven him, but I hadn't forgiven him directly. I'd never had any conversation with him, and so the forgiveness that I had towards him was in my own mind and heart. But the forgiveness wasn't supposed to be about him, or to include him, or to cross that divide between me and him in any way. It was really for God and for Nancy and for me. The God part, we know as Christians, is to ask God to forgive our sins as we forgive others. We know that the disciple Peter asked Jesus, How many times do I have to forgive this brother of mine—is seven times enough? And then I can just say, That's it, I'm done with you, we're through. But Jesus said no: seventy times seven, meaning you have to keep on forgiving. I forgave for Nancy because, as I told you, she was this incredible force of love and life, and I thought the last way to honor her was to be consumed with bitterness and vengeance towards the person who took her life. It would be so much more of a living memorial to her to try to stop this kind of bloodshed, to stop gun violence, to stop this idea, this pernicious idea, that one human being can just kill another. I forgave from me, because this saying that I love, says that hating another person is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die. I didn't want to give him that power over me, so I forgave him. But it was a forgiveness that said, I forgive you, and now I'm shaking you off my feet like dust and I'm leaving you behind to God, and I'm gonna never, ever think about you. That's what I did for 20 years. I worked against gun violence. I worked against the death penalty, and am proud to say we abolished the death penalty in my state of Illinois in the year 2011.

Then I met this law professor named Mark Osler who, like me, is a kind of unusual opponent of the death penalty. He's a former prosecutor, former Assistant U.S. Attorney, and I met him at a conference at Ebenezer Baptist

Church (Martin Luther King, Jr's church) in Atlanta, Georgia. He gave me a book. In the book was a chapter written by one of his teaching colleagues, a very distinguished author, a Southern Baptist preacher and university president named Randall O'Brien. This chapter was about forgiveness, and I thought, Oh great, I'll read this, this will be good. And then I came to this one sentence and I skidded to a halt. That sentence was this: "No Christian man or woman is relieved of the obligation to work to reconcile with those who wronged them." Let's just hear that again. "No Christian man or woman." That means me, right? I call myself a Christian. "…is relieved of the obligation." Meaning, you have to work to reconcile with those who have wronged you. Meaning that it's my job to walk over, hand outstretched to this young man who killed my family members, no remorse, no apology, and try to make peace with him. And I was so mad when I read that sentence, I called Mark Osler to yell at him for giving me this book with such a sentence in it. He said , "Don't yell at *me*, call Randall O'Brien." So, I did. I called him up and I got the secretary to the president of Carson Newman University, and I left a message that Jeanne Bishop wanted to talk to him. I thought, Oh gosh, he will never call me back; some strange woman calling out of the blue. But he did. He was so gracious and loving when I told him the story I told all of you. He said, "You know, you sound like such a wonderful person, I'm sure in time in your spiritual journey, you will—" And I was like, No, no, no! *No!* What would reconciling with this remorseless killer even look like? And he said it would look like Jesus on the cross. I started to cry because I knew two things. One, that that's exactly what Jesus was doing, he was in the process of being killed by people who were not sorry. No one had apologized to him. They were taunting him, they were gambling for his clothes, and he was doing something I had never once done, and that's the second thing: I had never once prayed for this young man who had killed my family members. I called myself a Christian and never, ever, prayed for him. That was the first way that I had to cross my divide. I had put up this very neat wall between me and him. On my side was good, innocent, victim's family member and on the other side of that divide was him—evil murderer. I got to be in my nice space of righteousness while he could just suffer in prison. What I learned from Randall O'Brien is that God breaks down that wall. God loves him every bit

as much as God loves me. I am every bit as much of a sinner, as flawed and fallen as that young man was. So I started to pray for him.

Then I was challenged yet again by Mark Osler on how I regarded the killer. I said to him, "I don't know. I mean, he's still remorseless, right?" And Mark said, "You don't know that. How do you know that? You've never even spoken to him." And I thought, Oh my gosh, he's right. So that night I wrote a letter to this young man in prison and I said, "I forgave you a long time ago and told everyone in the world but you, and that was wrong, and I'm sorry. I've waited all this time for you to apologize to me. I'm going to go first. I'm sorry, and if you want me to come see you I will." And so then I got to cross another divide, from having him be this mythical monster behind bars in prison, to a man whose hand I shook when I went to visit him that first time at the prison. To introduce myself, taking the hand that held the gun, that pulled the trigger that fired into Nancy's pregnant stomach. I got to have this amazing encounter with him in that first visit, where I got to do what we never got to do at sentencing, because it was a mandatory sentence, and that was: to give him my one-on-one victim impact statement, how what he did affected my mother, my father, everyone who loved and knew Nancy and Richard. And I got to learn things about Nancy's last moments from him that were so healing for me that I never would have learned without sitting down with him. I visit him still, and am going to visit him, actually, about a week from now. It's taught me so much about what God wants of us, what he asks of us, and that is: to break down that wall, to reach out to that divide, to be willing to see—even in the people who have done the worst—the face of the living God, and to see their preciousness and worth, and to never, ever, give up on anyone, as just as God has never, ever, given up on any one of us.

Theresa Famolaro, moderator: Thank you both so much. We have some questions, and I want to start with Jeanne. Why do so few of us visit people in prison? I mean, for Catholics, it's a corporal work of mercy and yet so few people visit prisoners.

Bishop: Because it's hard, right Father? I mean, first of all, we put most of our prisons out in the country, at least we do in my state of Illinois. They're not easy to get to for most people, it usually involves a couple hours' drive down a dusty road to some kind of small town. Then you get to the prison

and you can't bring anything in with you. You go in with just your ID, you sign in, there's often a long wait. I know all this because when I left the corporate law job, I became a public defender, and when I go into a prison as a lawyer, I get to waltz to the front of the line, I get a private room, I can talk as long as I want. But when I go to visit the young man who killed my family members, I'm not going in as a lawyer. I'm not his lawyer. I go in just like any other, like a grandmother or cousin or friend, and I have to wait in that long line. I've gotten turned away because I'm wearing the wrong thing. Or there's been a riot and or something and so there's a lockdown and you can't do the visit. You go through the indignity of the guards sometimes not being so nice. You go through the search and then you go through the long wait, and it's a very bleak, noisy, smelly environment. It's hard. It's hard to take time out of your life to do that. Yet it's one of the holiest things, right? Because Jesus was a prisoner. So even though it is hard, I always come away feeling, like, touched by the sacred. There's always this mystical thing that happens when you have an encounter with someone for whom everything else it is stripped away, and all that is left is that humanity and the unconditional love of God.

Williams: It's hard to add to that, but I would mention fear, too. Most people are, like I was, terrified of the idea of going into a prison. The media, the way people in prison are portrayed, it's like they're monsters. It's when you see the humanity that everything changes. But the hard part is getting past that initial fear.

Famolaro: In 2018, Pope Francis came out with a new teaching on the death penalty, which basically said, "We're against it, it's not helpful." I want to know if you could comment on that.

Williams: He said it was inadmissible, and you know, for the first 2,000 years of the Church's existence, the death penalty was perfectly acceptable. It was culturally acceptable. And there was a need for it at one time, because it was the only way people could defend the community against a dangerous person. They didn't have the kind of technology we have now, with prisons to keep people safely removed from society. But we're not there anymore. We have the ability to keep people safely removed from society, so I don't think Pope Francis was changing Church teaching, but rather he was expanding on

a deeper teaching, which is the sacredness of human life: all human life, from the moment of conception until the time of natural death.

Bishop: You know there was a retired history professor at Northwestern University, where I went to college—Gary Wills. He was asked once what is the Christian view of the death penalty. What do we know about Jesus and the death penalty? And Gary Wills said, "What do we know about Jesus and executions? He stopped one." If you go to John chapter 8—we all know this story—there's a woman caught in the act of adultery. No question of innocence. Caught in the act. Definitely a violation of the law of Moses. They bring her before Jesus, who's preaching at the temple, and they throw her down in the dirt in front of Him. They say, "This woman is guilty of an act that is subject to capital punishment. The law of Moses says we should stone such women, and what do you say?" We know what he said, right? "Let he who is without sin among you cast the first stone." And what I love about that is he didn't say, "Oh, adultery, it's not so bad—why should we kill her for that?" He didn't say she might be innocent. He didn't say she didn't deserve to die. He said, in essence, that we don't deserve to kill her. And I think that's part of the point, right? For us as Christians.

Famolaro: I've visited some prisons and I've seen the guards, and I'm wondering if there's a way to minister to them? Especially, let's say, those involved in death row.

Williams: Well, it's something dear to my heart, because I did my doctoral dissertation on prison staff and stress, and what I learned was, first of all, many of these men and women who work as correctional officers are Catholic. They're a part of us. It's not like in the movies, where inmates are caricatured but also the guards, who are often portrayed as knuckle-dragging Neanderthals who are brutal and sadistic. No, most of these are really good men and women, many who have served our country in the military and are now in law enforcement. They are dedicated to their profession. I like the correctional officers I work with, and I do minister to them as much as possible. I have to be careful, because it's so tribal. I have to do it kind of discreetly, the ministry, but it's essential because they're in the same environment that the prisoners are in. They're being traumatized everyday by being around people who are traumatized. They're seeing violence, they're

under threat of violence themselves, and they take this home to their families and communities. They have the highest suicide rate of any people in law enforcement. Alcoholism, drug addiction, family violence, divorce—it's like a plague in that particular profession. So I think we have a moral obligation to minister to them, to love them, and to care for them. And ultimately—this is kind of what my thesis was about— if we really want to change prisons, we don't change the prisoners, we change the people who run the prisons. We change it by making the situation more humane for everybody involved in it.

Bishop: Whenever an execution is carried out, it's carried out not in the name of the victim, or the governor, or the prosecutor—it's carried out in *your* name, in the name of the people of the state of California, or the state of Illinois, or wherever the execution is taking place. Yet we're outsourcing this act to guards who have been with these guys for, like, 10 or 15 years sometimes, and they have to take a person they know is no longer a threat to society and walk him down a hall and strap him to a gurney and take his life. I was in a cab in Virginia and I found out that this cab driver had been a prison guard on Virginia's death row, and I asked him, like, Did you ever preside over an execution? And he said, "Oh, yes, once, and I never wanted to do it again." He said, "Do you know they give us 10 weeks off with pay? Ten weeks off with pay after we participate in one of these executions because people are so traumatized and they need time to get over it." It's really interesting. When I first started visiting Nancy's murderer in prison, the prison guards didn't know who I was, but after a while, the word got out that I was coming there because of my Christian faith. They started asking me about that, and now I've been witnessing to all these prison guards just by the act of going.

Famolaro: Just visiting prisoners is really not enough, and I know this from having visited prisoners myself. When they get out, they've been traumatized by being in prison, and they need some way to be restored back into the community. How can we as a community help to restore these people, especially if they're going back to very rough situations?

Bishop: That's such a great question, because we are now in this period where we're realizing we've incarcerated way too many people in this country. There has been mass incarceration and now we're trying to have people go home. So we need to figure out how to help with re-entry. I go to a Presbyterian

Church in Chicago, and we were doing a self-examination and realizing that we're good about sending volunteers into prisons to do things like tutoring, but we're really bad about welcoming returning citizens back from prison into the community. I heard once on the radio about a program—I think it is here in New York—where there's a choir of people from the church out in the community, and when prisoners were released they could immediately come into this community and be in the choir. You now have this whole family of people who are there to know you and to help you. We need more things like that. We need to have things in place that will help people with housing, some kind of access to an income, some kind of social work help connecting you with the places that can get you the things you need to succeed.

Williams: I think your question speaks to the problem of the sheer size of the issue of the criminal justice system. Our country is so large and so broken, it's an opportunity for all of us as Catholic Christians or as Protestant Christians to find ways to minister and serve. One way to do it is to work with people when they come out of prison; but we can also work with the families of prisoners while they're still in prison and help them prepare. We can work with the victims of crime, we can do all kinds of ministry, prison ministry, without actually going into prison. It's not for everybody to be in the prison; there's a huge opportunity, a great harvest of souls waiting for you out there, with people who are affected by the criminal justice system. We can minister to them without ever setting foot inside of a prison. And certainly educating ourselves and getting to know family members, victims of crime—all these things are necessary and valuable.

Famolaro: Jeanne, I want to ask you about David, who murdered your sister and brother-in-law and their unborn child. He actually wrote to you and said, "Look, I did it." That was beautiful in a way, finally admitting it after so many years of denying it. But what about those who are not remorseful at all for their crimes? They're getting out, too. How can we help them as a society? Our prisons often appear to be about punishment and nothing more. You get in, you do your time, and you're let out, instead of really helping somebody face what they did, what it did to their family, what it's done to society, and to really live a meaningful life when they get out.

Bishop: Yeah, we have a term: "restorative justice." And it is different

from just "punitive justice," where our object is to simply punish you and make you suffer as much as possible for what you did. The restorative justice idea is that if you sit down with the victims of your crime, and, or the victim's families in the case of a murder, that you might, in that relationship, learn something that will help you develop the remorse that I think you need to become truly rehabilitated. The restorative justice that I did was kind of my own seat-of-the pants made up thing, you know—one-on-one restorative justice—but I know that more and more there are programs in places all over the country, offering an opportunity to have that kind of conversation. I can tell you that David, the killer, once said to me—because I would talk about my sister all the time, what she was like, and all these wonderful things she had done—"The more I get to know you and your sister through you, the worse I feel about what I did." Okay, that's remorse. Because now it's not a faceless stranger that he shot in the dark, a nameless person, but now he can her as a fully fleshed-out human being who no longer exists in this world because of what he did. The remorse is huge and deep and genuine, and it never would have come about without us having this conversation.

Williams: Most of the guys I work with in prison do show remorse, and are really hungry for forgiveness. But there are some, especially some of the more sociopathic guys on death row—we have several serial killers—they don't have any remorse. But forgiveness doesn't depend on the remorse of the offender. We forgive not for them but for ourselves. Often, forgiveness is about freeing ourselves from the other person's action, not necessarily requiring them to show remorse or sorrow. It's wonderful when it happens, and it is very healing, but it doesn't have to be there, because, again, our forgiveness doesn't depend on their remorse, it depends on our willingness to let go. I see that operating a lot in the prison. The media kind of portray all these prisoners as conscienceless sociopaths, and they're not. Most of these are people who deeply regret what they did and want forgiveness, but it's not always that black and white.

Bishop: Sometimes it's a matter of time. I've actually written another book called *Grace from the Rubble*. Two fathers wrote their way to reconciliation after the Oklahoma City bombing. It's the story of Bud Welch, whose daughter Julie died in the bombing at the age of 23, and Bill McVeigh, the father of

Timothy McVeigh, the young man who set off that bomb and killed 168 people, including three pregnant women. Bud talks all the time about how people's remorse and coming to a point where they can be reconciled is really a matter of time and healing, and everybody's moving on their own timeline. Some people are able to do that right away. I mean, witness the relatives of some of the victims of the Emmanuel Baptist Church shooting in Charleston, where literally the next day they were telling this young man, Dylann Roof, "We forgive you, we hope you find Christ."And then there are people like me, who took, what? Twenty-three years to finally reconcile with the killer? It's a matter of God working on the heart of every individual.

Famolaro: This was absolutely moving, and I have to say that it's only with Christ and the Church that we can experience this. I want to close with something from Fr. Giussani. He says, "In fact, within the Church, nothing is extraneous, neither people nor things. It demands an openness to all things, the capacity to become one even with those who are hostile, a sense of forgiveness all the way to an awareness of the victory over death."

In Search Of The Other America

*A conversation with **Chris Arnade**, writer and photographer, and **Patrick Deneen**, Professor of Political Science and Constitutional Studies at the University of Notre Dame.*

Introduction

> There are more things in heaven and Earth, Horatio,
> Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.
> *Hamlet* (1.5.167-8)

Once a Wall Street banker, Chris Arnade spent three years crisscrossing the United States to visit "the places you were told not to go to." His travels took him from the Bronx to the Ozarks to East Los Angeles. He will share, in conversation with Dr. Patrick Deneen, why he started his journey, what he discovered, and why what he learned is so relevant in today's America.

Jon Balsbaugh, moderator: Good afternoon everyone. On behalf of the Encounter, I want to welcome you to "In Search of the Other America." I'm Jon Balsbaugh and I will moderate this event. With me are Chris Arnade and Patrick Deneen.

Chris Arnade is a freelance writer and photographer and the author of *Dignity: Seeking Respect in Back Row America*, published last year by Sentinel

Books. He has a PhD in Physics from Johns Hopkins University, and worked for twenty years as a trader at a prestigious Wall Street bank before leaving in 2012 to document poverty and addiction in America.

Patrick J. Deneen is the Professor of Political Science and the David A. Potenziani Memorial College Chair of Constitutional Studies at the University of Notre Dame. He is the author of four books, co-editor of three volumes, and numerous articles, including *Why Liberalism Failed*, published in 2018 by Yale University Press. His scholarly interests include ancient, modern, and American political thought; religion and politics; literature and politics; and democratic and liberal theory. Join me in welcoming them. [*audience applause*]

So, I'll start with a question to Chris. One of the greatest divides in the country right now is the cultural divide between what Chris has called America's back row and its front row. And you open your book by saying that you walked into the Hunt's Point neighborhood of the Bronx because you were told not to. You were told it was too dangerous, it was too poor, and you were too white. For those who haven't read the book, can you just start by telling the story of what happened after you took that step of walking into Hunt's Point, and maybe share with us just a little bit about what you learned.

Chris Arnade: Thank you, first of all, for being here. I haven't been to New York in a while, and I'm reminded of when I lived over in Brooklyn Heights, not far from here, and I had a very good life. I worked on Wall Street, I had a five-bedroom apartment, but to relieve stress I would just walk all around New York. And often twenty-mile walks. I would take my token at the time and go to the end of the subway and just walk home. What I've always loved about New York, and why I remember why I'm here, is that you're forced to deal with things you don't necessarily want to deal with when you walk in New York. New York is basically a collection of disparate neighborhoods stitched together by a subway, and so I would do that. I would go into Queens, I would go into Far Rockaway, and then walk home all the way to LaGuardia. And what I started realizing, that what I really loved about those walks, was not trying to get somewhere, but rather the people I met during those walks. It gave me a glimpse into something that was not my life. And as my career on Wall Street became less fulfilling to me, I started finding

those walks to be the part of my life that was the most fulfilling, the place where I actually met people; people I didn't necessarily intend to meet and talk to them about their lives.

I eventually started carrying a camera around and people would stop me and ask me to take their photos. During the process of taking the photo they would then tell me their stories. I started writing those stories down. Eventually I realized I knew Queens, I knew Brooklyn, I knew Manhattan, but I didn't know the Bronx. I remember telling somebody, "I'm going to the Bronx," and they said, "Whatever you do, don't go to Hunt's Point." So I went to Hunt's Point. In Hunt's Point, for those who don't know, is New York City's poorest neighborhood. It's stigmatized by all the things we stigmatize people for: crime, poverty, addiction, sex work. And when I went in there, I found those things, and that's why people told me not to go there. But while I'm there, I certainly saw those things, but I also found what ultimately is the title of my book, *dignity*. I found 35,000 people living in a community and facing all sorts of hardships, all sorts of stigma, doing their best to maintain a sense of worth. To maintain dignity.

It's a small thing but it really matters to me: there was a lot of beauty in Hunt's Point, put together by basically the garbage of what we, the front row, the elites, consider garbage. For instance, there are a lot of auto body shops in Hunt's Point. If you go into the auto body shops, I'm really fascinated by how beautifully aligned were the different parts of the cars. It wasn't accidental. People had carefully placed all the rearview mirrors in a beautiful, well, it was almost a mosaic. There was beauty in the auto body shops and there were also pigeons. I don't know if you notice it if you're in New York, but people keep pigeons. They keep them on their roofs. I remember looking at these beautiful flocks of pigeons zooming overhead, and then I realized they were kept by people as a hobby. They were often kept by people who had nothing else. They would find an abandoned building and put together these coops on top, collect 500-600 pigeons, and then train them to fly in these beautiful swirling arcs. So there was a lot of beauty there that I think most people would consider flying rats or junkyards. But there was also dignity, and the people trying to maintain a sense of community despite all the outside forces trying to stop them from maintaining community.

For me, though, what really stuck and what ended up starting this project of five or six years talking to people who generally aren't talked to, was a particular woman named Taquisha, and she's a sex worker. When I had first started going into Hunt's Point, I would go and take pictures: hanging out with the pigeon keepers, hanging out at the junkyard, hanging out with the people who take old Schwinn bicycles and turn them into beautiful works of art. I had always kind of avoided Taquisha—out of respect for what she did, and given the obvious differences in our lives—and I remember that she called me over and said, "Hey, come take my picture." And I took her picture and she told me about her life. It was a life that was just filled with every tragedy you could imagine. I remember at the time I'd always ask people to give me one sentence to describe themselves, and she said, without missing a beat—"I'm a prostitute, a child of God, and a mother of six." Boom. Just like that. That friendship formed, as much as a friendship could form between me and her, where for the next three years she guided me and introduced me to a street family of people who are heroin addicts and sex workers. They make their money by stealing, sometimes. They live under bridges, they live in abandoned buildings, they live in cars. I ended up quitting my job on Wall Street and spending three years in the Bronx with this forty, fifty, sixty people who are homeless addicts. Eventually, after that I did the same project over and over; I put 350,000 miles on my car driving all across the country.

Balsbaugh: Thank you. Patrick, you've also written about the divide that Chris encountered, though in a little bit of a different way. I wonder if you could speak to what you described in your book as a "new aristocracy." That, I think, is very similar to what Chris was describing as America's front row, maybe even intensified a little bit. So, maybe speak to how some of the things Chris encountered are maybe products or features of our culture, legacies of our tradition that tend to perpetuate the divide that would keep us out of Hunt's Point and vice versa.

Patrick J. Deneen: First, not only thank you for being here, but thank you to the organizers for giving me the opportunity to share the stage with Chris. I was invited to read Chris's book when it was still in galleys and to provide a blurb for it, which I did, so that's one of the main reasons to buy the book: to read my eloquent blurb. [*audience laughter*] But I think that,

in the course of writing, the first thing I said is, This is a hard book to read. It's a hard book to read because it confronts us with a world and with people that many of us would express a sympathy for, a desire to help, and yet which many of us don't see. We don't genuinely see it and don't generally encounter it. So, Chris's book is really a very powerful witness and testimony to a human dignity that's found everywhere, everywhere where human beings seek this fundamental thing that we desire, which is dignity.

Let me tackle your question. Chris provides a kind of negative argument for what the new aristocracy is, and I'm sort of the opposite argument. A couple of the stories in his book stood out to me. One of them was the stories he tells of young people who expressed to him a desire to go to college, to leave home—like I'm sure many of us have done—and to go away to college. But in many cases they couldn't, because they were taking care of a parent or a sibling. They were bound in where they were and couldn't simply leave. There's another interesting set of stories that were very close to home—literally close to my home near South Bend, Indiana, over in Gary, Indiana, where we interviewed a number of people who he asked, "Why haven't you left?" If you've ever been in or through Gary, Indiana, that might be a question you pretty quickly ask someone: Why haven't you gotten out of this pretty horrific landscape? It was amazing to hear the common replies: "This is my home. This is where I grew up. This is my place." I think another thing that Chris articulates well, and explores, are people who have opened up churches or religious communities, often in storefronts, and so for them their faith keeps them in these places and working with people who are facing these many challenges. It was, I think, especially these expressions of commitment to family, commitment to place, and commitment to faith, that struck me as a contrast to what I described as the "new aristocracy." In each of these cases, this experience of family, a place, and a faith, in some ways is an expression of our recognition that we are creatures of dependency; that we are not creatures that are in some ways self-making creatures; that we are born, and that we remain dependent upon each other, dependent on the places from which we come; dependent on a God who creates us. How is it that it's the back row people—as Chris calls them—who in some ways are some of the best exemplars of people who recognize this dependency? And why is it that the

front row people have come to create a world in which the real sign of being a successful person is to appear independent, autonomous, free of other human beings.

We've given a place of pride to a condition we could say is really an exception to the rule. Who among us is genuinely independent? Alasdair MacIntyre, my colleague at Notre Dame and a philosopher, wrote a book called *Dependent Rational Animals*, in which he said the core and essence of what a human being is: we're creatures that are dependent upon one another. We're born dependent upon our parents. We are certainly dependent upon other people as we approach our deaths. But there's a very brief period of time maybe when you're 28 to 35 years old—all the people we saw at restaurants last night in New York City—when you think you're independent, when you've left home and you feel full of your power and your independence, and what MacIntyre observed is that we have built a civilization on the belief that the norm is to be 28 to 32 years old. What civilization can possibly survive 28-to-32-year-olds being in control? Or at least that particular ethos being in control? In many ways, the new aristocracy is a false conception of what it is to lead the good life; to be in a condition where you are independent of other human beings. And again, what's striking about Chris's book is that it's the people who are struggling at the margins who in some ways embody the sense of dependency, and it's the people who have at least created this faux condition of independence that we regard as having succeeded in front row America.

Arnade: I realize I didn't answer your first question, which is that my thesis is basically that we're divided by education. The front row—to use the schoolroom analogy—and then the back row, the people I ended up spending time with. I'm very much from the front row, and then I spent the last seven, eight years in the back row. You talked about dependency. I think it's really fascinating that what defines the front row in some senses is, yeah, I call it credentialism: we've basically defined success as "building a resume." And we're the people who make the political policies in this world, we're the people who generally build the system that the back row has to live in, and we just assume that everybody wants to get the credentials. But we also assume that any non-credential forms of meaning—faith, race, and

place; community and family are not valuable. We don't really put it into our spreadsheets when we build these ways of thinking about how life exists, and the net effect is we've basically devalued these forms of meaning that are essential to building a meaningful life, especially for people who aren't born wealthy. I mean, you're gifted these things at birth. There is no barrier to entry to these. The front row has built this world in which it is not conducive to forming community health. It is not conducive to those things you talked about, because they don't think about it. The biggest change for me in writing this book is what you talked about in Gary, and I heard it over and over and over and over again. I remember when I was...I think it was, ironically, named Rootsville; I think Rootsville. Some small town in Ohio, and I remember sitting there, writing down the stories of these people, and I said, "Let me get this straight, now. I'm just checking my notes again. You've lived here all your life?" He's like, "No. I was born ten miles down the road near the fairgrounds." [*audience laughter*] Okay, but no, he didn't live here all his life. He moved ten miles. That's a different part of town, man.

Cairo, Illinois, is the southern tip of Illinois, where the Ohio and Mississippi meet. It's a town that I feature in my book, and it's one of the most beautiful physical places, because it's a delta. It's like a triangle where the Mississippi and Ohio meet, but it's got nothing now. The population has diminished from probably 50,000 to 4,000. If you read my book, you'll know that the fact that it doesn't have a McDonald's tells you that it's really struggling. [*audience laughter*] There are no hotels, there is one gas station, there's a Dollar General, I think; but it's almost all African-American. And you go there, and you talk to people who stay there, it's like, "Why are you still here?" "It's my home." Or, the young woman I was interviewing in the projects who said to me—again it's the same thing—I said, "You're from Cairo, right? You've lived here your whole life?" and she's like, "No, I'm from the north side, I'm not from here." That matters. And we in the front row, we celebrate change, physical change. When I worked on Wall Street, people would brag about, "Oh, I was just in Mayfair, London, and I'm gonna do a posting there, then I'm gonna go do an expat package in Jakarta," as if that's what you're supposed to do, and if you stay in the same place you're somehow backwards. The policies we've built assume people are gonna move. We're just

widgets that get up and move, and that's extraordinarily disturbing to people for whom place is all they have. You just can't pick up and move. We just assume people can move, and we've built a society that requires movement to be successful.

You talk about the three things. I talk about the three things. Faith, which for this crowd, I think, is a bit of an outlier relative to most Americans. Most Americans, successful Americans, look down on faith, and so faith is also important in Cairo. It's important in Gary, it's just something that's gifted to you. You don't have to build a big resume to have it. It's been very disturbing to back row America to have these things that are central to them taken away from them. It's like taking away a front row person's resume and just ripping it in half and saying, "No, you didn't go to Harvard, actually." You know, that would gut you.

Balsbaugh: I think both of you have suggested that one of the challenges to crossing these boundaries, or one of the things that makes this divide so sharp, is different understandings of, access to, and success in navigating the educational systems. Patrick, you even quoted Wendell Berry, saying most of the more middle-class, upper middle-class students in American colleges are simply majoring in upward mobility. The whole notion is: get a better job, or get a better education so you can get a better job, so you can have a better life. Can either of you speak more to the challenges that back row America faces in how things are sort of stacked against them?

Arnade: [*to Deneen*] You teach these children, right?

Deneen: I do, but I'm not sure I can actually speak to the challenges of back row America, although I feel I know them and who they are pretty well by the kinds of students I see who are not from back row America.

Arnade: Do they have a tough transition?

Deneen: I've taught at Princeton, at Georgetown, and Notre Dame, and generally I think we don't see many students who have been in the back row. In many ways, today we use the language of diversity. And I don't mean to slight the importance of diversity, but we use the language of diversity to prove that we are actually not just drawing people from all the same places. I used to teach at Georgetown, and in the convocation every year, the students would march in carrying flags from every state and country they came from,

and then we would have this wild diffusion of how diverse we were. But then when you have students in the class, they were all basically from the same socio-economic background. They had the very same, very similar kinds of experiences.

Systemically, elite institutions are seeking out exactly the kind of person that's well-equipped, and has proven through their resume, through their high schooling, through their activities, their extracurriculars—that they are going to be members in good standing of front row America. In other words, that they're capable of acquiring skills that are portable; often these schools want to draw people from far away. This is one of the bragging points for these schools, by drawing students from far away. They've proven that they have the ability to leave home, that they're not attached to any particular place. I once joked to a group of freshmen, when I was teaching at Georgetown. I said, "You know you're all gonna end up in one of five cities in the world," and I had a freshman raise his hand who said, "What are the other two?'" [*audience laughter*] They know what they are designed to do and what their goal is. I think that it's precisely the kind of skill sets that gain you admittance to these institutions that sort of puts the finger on the scale of whether or not you're going to be a member of the front row or the back row.

Arnade: And they're not going to go back to the cities they came from.

Deneen: Well, I talk with students a lot about this. They recognize that they have gifts and ambitions, and those gifts and ambitions can probably only be best expressed in the most economically vibrant places in our country, or at least that's what they've been largely told. I often have some agonizing discussions with students by asking the following question: You were probably one of the best students at your school to get into a place like Notre Dame, Harvard, Princeton, so forth, and you're probably a person of enormous gifts; if you end up going to a place like New York and working in the industry you used to work in, or going to D.C. and working at a senator's office, you'll be engaged in some work that's important, but you will not be one of the most important people in the place where you are. I mean, they all hope that they're gonna be Supreme Court justices, or president, or what you will, but in many cases they won't be. So the question I often posed to them is: If you came from a smaller town, a small city, and you go and move to someplace

like that—Indianapolis rather than Washington, D.C.—would you not be contributing more by giving your enormous gifts to a place like that then mixing your enormous gifts in a place where it will probably be a drop in the bucket? And I think for students it's an agonizing question.

Arnade: When you spend time out there, there are people who just don't want to go to college. And that's all right. We, as a culture, tell kids over and over and over and over: Go to college, go to college, get educated. Guidance counselors, Oprah, everybody, everybody. I don't wanna be the person who says, "Don't go to college," but I'll talk about the two people you mentioned in the book. I spent a lot of time at night in McDonald's and basically in loser neighborhoods. And a lot of people do that who don't have a lot of money. I remember the one young woman, she was probably twenty. Mexican-American woman in East L.A., sitting in the McDonald's. She would see me every night sitting at the table, typing up my notes. She would be sitting there, playing her GameBoy or her Switch. I asked her to take a picture of me at some point, and we started talking. She found out I was from New York City. She said she was there every night because her parents didn't have Wi-Fi. Her parents didn't have a lot of money, so she'd go sit there for four hours and play her things, and so I had seen that. That's very common across the United States, you see that everywhere. "New York's great," she said, "I'd love to go to New York." And I said, "Well, there's a lot of good schools; maybe if you play your cards right you could end up in New York." And she's like, "Well, I can't leave." She was going to East L.A. Community College, which is fine. When I said, "Why can't you leave?" She says, "I'm my mother's translator." Like a lot of recent immigrants, her mom doesn't speak English, and the oldest daughter is tasked with being the translator. I think a lot about that story, because I think she did the right thing. She's staying with her family, to help her mother, because she's essential to the family. She is staying to keep the family together. But I think a lot of people would say, No, that's the wrong choice.

The other one I think about is a young African-American kid at another community college, in Reno, who could have gone out of state. He could have gone to "a better school." I said, "Why are you here?" He's like, "My mom was an addict," and then he went through a lot of stories about awful things.

His father throwing his mom down the stairs; his mom being gone for three weeks when he and his brothers were 12,13, them basically living alone. "My mom, she cashed in her four-year chip the other day and I need to be there for her. If I go she's gonna relapse." Again, that's an admirable decision and I think it's the right decision. But I think by the metric we measure success in this culture, he has to take a loss. He's taking a loss to help his mom. Both of them are, which is just mind-boggling. We've created culture or society where that's the wrong decision.

Deneen: Can I add one thing? I'm thinking about this divide that in many ways is reflected in educational decisions and opportunities, and in my book I compare this to strip mining. Many of us would stand up in opposition to strip mining when we see what happens to a mountain when you tear off the top: you completely devastate the physical natural environment. But in many ways, what we have actually organized and arranged in our society is a strip mining of human capital, of human potential, in the same way that you strip mine the potential of material resources. I'm pretty implicated in this because I have taught at many institutions that contribute to this. We are engaged in a process of identifying really valuable raw material. We do this through SAT scores and through letters of recommendation. We identify the best pieces of natural human resources in every human community, hamlet, town, city, in the entire world. We bring them to processing plants that we call elite universities, we process them, and then we put them in the stream of useful commerce, where they can now become productive like a nice piece of coal. But what do we leave behind? What are we leaving behind in these towns and hamlets? It's not all that different in human terms, what we leave behind when we strip mine a mountain or a countryside. Just last weekend, my wife and daughter and I were in Saugatuck, Michigan, and we sat down on a bench, and the bench said—it had a little sign on it—"Dedicated to the memory of Doctor R.J. Walker, erected by his family and friends." I got curious and looked online. Who is this R.J. Walker? I discovered he'd been the town doctor and had practiced in this town for about sixty years. I read the number of births, the kids that he had assisted into the world, the number of clubs and organizations he was a member of, probably a very prominent member of all these organizations, in this little town of Saugatuck, Michigan.

I can bet you with almost certitude that if R.J. Walker had been born today, or eighteen years ago, he would have been swept up, sent to an elite school, and would never have returned home to a little town like Saugatuck, Michigan. We, in the front row, have to begin to ask ourselves: Have we created a world in which the gifts that God in his wisdom has spread widely through the world—have we created a world in which we are acting unjustly by reorganizing everything so that all talent is geographically relocated to a very few places, and leaves behind an extraordinary form of devastation?

Arnade: I've met those gifted kids. Basically every town has a little vacuum cleaner: it's basically the gifted program that sweeps up the kids and then sends him off to these schools. I've met a lot of them and they're great kids, and I can't fault them for the decision they make, because of the world they're living in. But I always think about my daughter as one of those kids. In New York City, you can get into any high school, it's basically a free-for-all. You have to test in and all this. And while my daughter was going through that part, she ended up at LaGuardia High School, which is a wonderful, elite high school. If you read my book, there are pictures of this kid doing leaps in the air. I ended up calling him "Jose the Amazing." He was a 16-year-old kid who did all these amazing somersaults in midair. He was my feel-good project. While I was spending my time with heroin addicts, Jose was a person I would take these joyful pictures of doing flips. He's wonderful, he was exactly my daughter's age, he's lived in the Bronx, and I remember once I was picking him up to do our usual Sunday photo session of him doing flips, and he's like, "Chris, I really need you do me a favor." "What, Jose?" He goes, "I really need you go to the police station for me." "Why do you need me to go to the police station for you?" Long story, but basically, he was homeless and was staying with somebody who had stolen his possessions. He needed his books, his schoolbooks. He needed me to go get the police so he could go in the house to get his possessions, so he could study. All of a sudden, this feel-good project had collapsed into the reality of the streets. He wouldn't go to the police station himself because he thought—incorrectly—there were warrants for his arrest for having jumped the subway: he would sleep on the subway at night. He was scared to go get the police. I ended up going in and getting his books for him, but I had to break into the house to get the books

so he could study. Here he was, this kid my daughter's age, who is as bright as my daughter, certainly as talented, but who has ended up in some "I-did-not-apply" cull high school, and that was that.

I think it's just so massively unfair. Not only are we strip mining, but as a people, we at the top have all these advantages. Not only do we define success, we deny meaning to those who don't agree with it. The tightrope you have to walk to get the resume, to get into Harvard, it's just absurd. We pretend that anybody can succeed. The flip side of this is, if you fail, it's your fault. And so people feel like losers. They feel stigmatized because they didn't make it. Never mind the fact that they had secondary everything. Never mind the fact that maybe they had an obligation their family. There are multiple cases in my book of people who don't have high education; some of them can't even read. And they all tell me up front, "You're not gonna hear what I'm saying, I'm dumb. I don't know my ABCs." One of things I wish I had communicated better in this book is that this gentleman—I think his name was Jerry Wise, in Kentucky—who said, "You don't wanna talk to me, I don't know my ABC's," was one of the most eloquent speakers. He didn't know big words, but the thoughts he had were just beautiful. And, similarly, there's this homeless woman, Takisha, who is funny as hell when you listen to her, she's just so eloquent. She was ranting about how Columbia University paid her for a study where they injected her with cocaine. You see them advertise on the subway: earn $3000.00 to come to this study. I remember writing down what she ranted. I turned it into a poem because it was effectively a poem. It even had a play on the words of Columbia: *Columbian* crack, *Columbia* University. But she can barely read or write. It's just so remarkably unfair that you have these immensely talented people who are scared to compete or scared to contribute, because they don't know the right words and they've been told all their life they're dumb. They really do feel like losers, and that stigma is huge. We have a culture that says: if you don't make it, you're dumb.

Balsbaugh: What's the way forward? I know there are no easy solutions. Patrick, in your book you quoted Vaclav Havel saying, "A better system will not automatically ensure a better life. In fact, the opposite is true. Only by creating a better life can a better system be developed." And I was thinking of Chris's, book, where he points out that so many of the formal institutions

that we might think of as being set up to help or serve or assist many of the people in the communities you visited—they have a kind of soullessness to them. I was really struck by your description of the place with an inspirational sign that said, "Hope offered here," right next to a sign reading in all caps, "PLEASE DON'T TOUCH THE TV." I wonder if both of you could comment on just the inadequacy of institutional, programmatic thinking, and maybe talk about something that might suggest an approach that's more personal.

Arnade: I guess I'll go first. I'm not just saying this given the crowd, but I started this project off as an atheist. Iin these towns, these communities I go to, the only things that worked often were churches. And McDonald's was the other. [*audience laughter*] The joke is, I started this as a vegetarian atheist and now I'm a churchgoing meat-eater thanks to churches and McDonald's. [*audience laughter and clapping*] One of the things I try to write about in the book is the experience of me going into these churches, which are not necessarily front row churches. They're small Pentecostal churches, they're churches where someone's taken an old Kentucky Fried Chicken and turned it into a church. I have a whole series of photos of places that have been turned into churches, like an old furniture store in a strip mall in Amarillo. there's no other way I can describe it: the places had soul. The government institutions have harsh lighting, linoleum floors, signs that tell you what you can't do; you know, it's a secular hell. It's like, there's no fun there, there's no heart there. Then you immediately go into a church. And again, I walked into a lot of churches where I don't think they've seen someone look like me come into their church. I was often the only white person in the church, often the only person who spoke English in the church. Sometimes I was the sole congregant in the church. But I was always warmly welcomed. It went beyond the aesthetics. When a homeless addict comes into a church, they know that there is—certainly within the minority communities—they know that other congregants in the church and the people running the church understand them in a lived reality. A lot of them have been there before. A lot of them actually look the same, have the same skin color, have gone through the same problems—so there is not this condescending, "I'm jumping in here to help you" thing; rather, it's "I get you, welcome." And that's huge. I

think I'm gonna say this as an agnostic: I think part of the solution is faith. If you look at the three things—race, faith, and place from their standpoint—I mean, *place* they've basically taken away from us, meaning the front row; I don't know if you can go back. *Race* is dangerous for a lot of reasons, and *faith* is one that is there for everybody, and it really is a great counterbalance to the kind of soullessness of the front row.

Deneen: We think that we defeated ideology: we defeated communism, we defeated fascism. But we live in an ideology. That ideology is liberalism. It's the system that we all take for granted. That ideology basically argues that you are not free unless you are a 28-to-32-year-old effectively your entire life. Freedom, liberty, consists in our capacity be completely independent, not to be reliant upon any other human being, and not to have any human being genuinely relying upon us, needing us, so that we have devised mechanisms; mechanisms to realize a kind of depersonalization. A systemic form of depersonalization. And we've spent all of our politics of the last 50 years arguing which depersonalized mechanism is better. Is it the market? And if it's the market, you're Republican. Or is it the state, providing various kinds of welfare benefits? If it's the state, you're a Democrat. And these last 50 or 60 years, we thought, We have this great titanic political divide that defines us in America. Which depersonalized mechanism is the most effective at liberating us from any genuine obligation to anybody else? I therefore think the first thing is actually to see the water we're swimming in. We are actually living in an ideology. We're actually living in a world that shapes us to assume a certain definition of freedom, and to conform ourselves to that definition of freedom. The first thing is to see the nature of the water we're swimming in, and then to resist the temptation to simply divide along these false partisan lines that necessarily put you in the camp of saying which depersonalized mechanism is better. What has impressed me so much here today are all of the stories and conversations; the resistance to ideology isn't necessarily World War III. It's not fighting some titanic battle. It's what I heard this morning: the creation of thread. JD Flynn talking about his children and having lots of people over for dinner. That to me is how you fight ideology, and I think there's not one solution but rather many solutions. [*audience clapping*]

Balsbaugh: I'll end with a question for Chris. One of the more moving

passages in *Dignity* for me was when you wrote that places like Hunt's Point or Gary, Indiana, had been literally left behind by people like me. There was a personalization to that that I think is a significant part of the power of the book: the personal responsibility you took for crossing that divide. And I know you know not everybody can take three years off and travel to these places, but I think those of us in this room, if we're honest, most of us are front row Americans. But I think a lot of folks here are deeply moved and desire to cross these boundaries. What advice—not solutions but advice—might you offer to someone who would say, I wanna do better; I wanna cross that boundary, I don't wanna assume that I know the solution to everything, I wanna know people?

Arnade: The joke answer is buy my book and read it. [*audience laughter*] But no, I get lots of really beautiful emails and questions about that, and I wish I had a better answer, but my basic point is to break out of your bubble. If you live in New York City, that's pretty easy to do. Get a Metro card and just ride it to a stop and get off and walk around. You'll be surprised by what you see. Additionally, I'm gonna pitch McDonald's again. I don't own any of their stock. Go to the McDonald's for safety reasons—some of you may not feel comfortable walking in certain neighborhoods. Go to the McDonald's in quote-unquote the worst neighborhood in your town, and sit there and talk. You'll find that you will form friendships with people that you might not have originally wanted to form friendships with, or ever thought you could. You'll form enemies, too. That's good. After I wrote my book, I ended up getting sent a book by a man who was recently deceased—his wife sent it to me. He was a 102-year-old anthropologist who did exactly what I did, but in the same McDonald's for 30 years. He was a professor of anthropology and he went to the McDonald's on the bad side of town and just sat there. He ended up forming these intense friendships with people who had multiple felonies. And he did it by simply sitting in the McDonald's. Again, I think you just get out of your comfort zone a little bit; it takes time, though. You can't just go one day and solve everybody's problems. But go there and listen and watch. The other thing I would suggest is charity work, but charity work where you wanna be there, not because you wanna feel you have to resolve something, but because you really wanna be there, because you really like

doing it. And don't be scared about getting more involved then you might think is appropriate. Life is messy and it's not all gonna be good, but that's part of the value. I don't romanticize the back row in this book. There are bad people in the back row just like there are bad people in the front row, and one of the realities of when you spend time with people you may not necessarily have spent time with before is that you realize your faults as well as everybody else's faults.

THE
DIVIDE
ENCOUNTER
2020

Ideals vs. Ideologies in politics: A lost battle?

A conversation on the direction of American politics with ***Sohrab Ahmari****, op-ed editor, the* New York Post*, and* ***Christine Emba****, columnist,* The Washington Post.

Introduction

Politics, instead of reflecting shared ideals and the desire for the common good, has become prey to ideologies that relentlessly fuel divisions. Recognizing the difference between "ideologies"—both on the right and on the left—and "ideals," and being open to the impact of real events, seem critical in America today. Speakers will dialogue on the direction of American politics and which ideals, if any, can or should still guide political action today.

Brandon Vaidyanathan, moderator: Good evening, everybody. I'd like to welcome you to "Ideals vs. Ideologies in Politics: A Lost battle?" I am Brandon Vaidyanathan. It's a weird name, but I'm a weird guy. I'll moderate this event. I'm absolutely thrilled to introduce our two guests. Their full bios are available on the Encounter website.

To my left: Sohrab Ahmari is the op-ed editor of the *New York Post* and a contributing editor of the *Catholic Herald*. Previously, he served as a columnist and editor with *The Wall Street Journal* opinion pages in New York and London, and as a senior writer at *Commentary* magazine. The memoir of

his Catholic conversion, *From Fire by Water*, was published in January 2019 by Ignatius. He'll be signing copies after the event. He's working on a new book for Penguin Random House exploring 12 questions our culture doesn't ask.

Christine Emba is an op-ed columnist and editor at *The Washington Post*, where she focuses on ideas and society. She is currently writing a book, "Rethinking Sex," on the failures and potential of sexual ethics in a post-#MeToo world. Before coming to the *Post* in 2015, Christine was the Hilton Kramer Fellow in Criticism at the *New Criterion* and a deputy editor at the *Economist Intelligence Unit*, focusing on technology and innovation. Christine holds an A.B. in Public and International affairs from Princeton University. Please join me in giving our guests a warm welcome. [*audience applause*]

So our event this evening is about how politics, instead of reflecting shared ideals, has become prey to ideologies that divide and polarize us. Ideals emerge from the relationship between reality and our deepest desires as human beings for truth, goodness, freedom, justice, cheesecake… [*audience laughter*] Their pursuit requires a willingness to learn from our experience, to be corrected by reality. Ideologies are, by contrast, systems of ideas that provide a sense of coherence and identity, or even a means to power. They're also distorting filters that inhibit our openness to reality, making it *de facto* irrelevant. As George Packer said, "Ideology knows the answer before the question has been asked." At least that's how we're using these terms this evening. I want to start by asking you, Christine, what ideals and what ideologies you see as most potent and influential in America today?

Christine Emba: I would say the ideal I think is the most potent is one you guys actually talked about just before this, an ideal of the self. Of the individual who is responsible for himself and no one else. Who is self-actualized. Who moves through the world freely and unencumbered. And that is an ideal, that is something that many people aspire to, but I'm not sure it's an ideal like cheesecake, say; that is an unalloyed positive. [*audience laughter*] Just to be clear, we're all in on cheesecake. And then an ideology—this is one I've written about, this one has come up a lot in this election, specifically—capitalism. When you think of a totalizing way of understanding a framework through which you can put everything, and which always knows the answer,

the way that America especially lives right now, by far the most domineering ideology is capitalism. When we think of the world, when we think of how we live, how we can become better people, how we achieve our desires, we think about the market, and it's become a totalizing obsession. I'm writing this book about sexual ethics and, as a result, I'm spending even more time than usual talking to my female friends—and some of my female not-friends—about their thoughts, their feelings, their hopes and dreams about relationships. I'll give you one example. A friend of mine who is a little bit older than I am, is not dating anybody, but she really wants to have children. She is weighing all the costs. She calls this—jokingly, but also kind of despairingly—"dating under late capitalism." Conversations with her and many other women often involve a discussion of market value. If I see this person, am I blocking myself from seeing this other person? Is this worth my time? How much do I need to save up to have a child? In one case, somebody told me they think to have a child they need to have $200,000 a year, and that this is the justification they're making for freezing their eggs, taking certain jobs, and dating or not dating certain people. The answer is always money. Even the nearest desires of our heart are always seen through the lens of the market. How can I optimize my Tinder swiping so that I meet a person quickly—but not so quickly that it keeps me from fulfilling my own human capital and engaging in my job and in my own market in the best way? It's totalizing and I think it's terrible.

Vaidyanathan: Thank you. Sohrab, what about you? What do you see?

Sohrab Ahmari: Thanks for having me. Ideology is a fraught topic for me. I'll tell you a story. When I was twenty-seven, I started working at the *Wall Street Journal* opinion pages as an intern. I was part of a cohort of interns and I was doing pretty well, hustling really hard, placing maybe an op-ed a week. And I had another friend who was also an intern, but he was a philosophy PhD student, he was Catholic at the time and I wasn't, and we were at a gathering of young *First Things* kids. He was kind of complaining, "Look, how can you have an opinion a week, or a day?" And like I said, I was twenty-six, twenty-seven. And that was easy for me, I'm an ideologue. [*audience laughter*] I think I would ditto what Christine said about the ideology of the self-creating self. I don't think it's an ideal, insofar as it doesn't match the reality of who we are as human beings, of our nature, of

our longing for community, for deep attachments. In that sense, it's a mirage and an ideology, not so much an ideal, and from it flows the way we think about economics, that markets exist for their own sake, and for fulfilling our longing for capital, for accumulation, and nothing else. I would say that there is a subsidiary ideology that goes with that, which is the kind of scientistic, technocratic, economistic ideology that says the only questions worth asking are ones with answers you can measure or articulate, either in mathematical formulas or in market value, or in something feasible. I think those are some of our reigning ideologies. I would just add a third one that scares me, and that is in some ways a reaction to the ideology of the unbound self and of this kind of deracinated individual subject. But it's also a thing that exists in itself and shouldn't just be treated as a reaction, and that's the idolatry of race or nation. I think that's coming back, and it's very old and very pagan, and it's being rekindled today. I think these three that I mentioned have a perverse interplay.

Vaidyanathan: Can you say a little bit more of the idolatry of race and nation, and in what sense?

Ahmari: Well, every kind of nationalist movement is worrisome, and I think some of the new nationalists are actually onto something about liberal ideology and its shortcomings. But when it's a kind of pinched nationalism, a kind of omniscience in which your identity answers all questions and you make all deductions from that, then it's dangerous.

Vaidyanathan: Thank you. I want to talk about a few specific ideals. The French revolutionaries famously invoked liberty, equality, and fraternity. And at least liberty and equality hold a prominent place in American political discourse today. Perhaps the one we hear most often on the left is equality, but what does equality mean today? Why is it so prominent in our political imagination? And can our increasingly secular society even sustain a belief in equality? What do you think about that?

Ahmari: I think equality is a modern ideal, it's a worthy ideal. I find more meaning and more ability to think through social problems in the ideal of justice. It's obvious there are inequalities built into the human condition, none of which can be ultimately, completely overcome through policy or this and that; but justice is the idea of giving each his due, including God and

society, which I think is a worthwhile enterprise. But either one—whether you go with that more modern concept of equality or justice—to me, it seems very hard to sustain without a belief in the human person as having a special origin and a special destiny. In other words, why should I see a dignity in another who's radically different from me if that person is nothing more than just a collection of cells and tissue and synapses firing and there's nothing special about his origin? In that sense, religion is the backbone of of justice and of all of our notions of human dignity, in a way that would be as recognizable to Saint Augustine as it would be to someone like Martin Luther King or Howard Thurman. Ritual is also necessary for most of our ideas about human dignity and community and justice.

I'm working on a book, and one of the questions mentioned is: Why or how does God want you to play? And by play, I don't mean games, but play as being the closest secular analogue we have to ritualistic or liturgical behavior. You see this with Catholics and the Christian liturgy, or Jews with the Sabbath, but even with tribes in Africa, right? Victor and Edith Turner are a pair of Marxist anthropologists who went to then-British Rhodesia and encountered and lived among the Ndembu tribe. What did they notice about the ritual that the tribe had for selecting a new chieftain? The new chieftain is called the *kanonshega*. The character or the mythic figure who in ritual gives the chieftain his new status, right? Every ritual involves you separating yourself from the community and then being brought back in somehow, and your status is upgraded or your tensions with the community are healed. The figure who gives him this is called the *kafwana*, and she is a feminine figure who represents the people who till the earth and don't have political power. In the process of the ritual, the chieftain-to-be has to be subjected to a kind of ritual humiliation by all the villagers. They can say whatever to him, they can insult him: "He looked at me weird," blah, blah, blah. He's supposed to take it all, and after he assumes his status as chief he's not supposed to hold it against the people who insulted him. It's a religious ritual in which the strong, in order to attain his status as the strong, has to show solicitude for the weak. There are much clearer analogues of this kind of thing in Christian liturgy, but I don't know where we find them in a modernity that's not a ritual way of living.

Vaidyanathan: That ought to be the way we promote people to CEO. [*audience laughter*]

Emba: Yeah, virtual humiliation. I like that, yeah.

Vaidyanathan: Christine, how about you? What sense do you make of equality in this context we're in today?

Emba: Sure. Differently, I think. My definition of equality is pretty simple. I think it means that people, all people, are equally deserving of worth and respect based on their intrinsic human dignity, and so they should be treated equally. Not treated as more or less valuable, worthwhile or less worthwhile, based on their race, their sex, or any other characteristic. I think we still mostly pay lip service to the idea of equality, although even that lip service is slipping in certain movements. I think that that ideal is harder to maintain in a secular society when there isn't a clear place to…there's not a clear backstop. There is not a clear place to appeal to for that definition of human dignity. I think as Catholics, as Christians, people who believe in a God who created us all and loves us all, there's an easy explanation for why every person is a valuable person. But when there is not a consensus on that kind of simple, but very important claim, then it's harder to make the point to people who disagree with you—who are racist or sexist—that actually, no, you should be kind and respect everyone. While equality is a simple concept and still exists, it is somewhat in danger, as our shared understanding of who gives that equality is receding.

Vaidyanathan: Thank you. The other thing I seemed to notice is many people who today are animated by the ideal of equality, are drawn in a new way to socialism. Why do you think that is the case, and what consequences do you think that might have for us?

Emba: In anticipation of this question I was looking through some things that I wrote. In 2016 I wrote a piece called, "Our Socialist Youth," which makes me feel very old because I'm not sure I can call myself one of our socialist youth anymore. [*audience laughter*] But the genesis of that piece, and an explanation that I think still holds true—even more true today—is that socialism is not necessarily as it was in our parents' age, when those who lived through the Cold War associated it with Stalin, with the U.S.S.R., with communist countries, and food shortages. Socialism has sort of taken on the

meaning of, like, Scandinavian, but in the coolest sense. [*audience laughter*] It's about equality for people, it's about a government that treats its citizens well and also treats most of them kind of the same. Not just the ones who can pay for it are deserving of healthcare, or education, or houses to live in, and so it tries to provide that to people equally. I think that comes to the fore now in the past several years, because millennials—and I still claim that I'm one of those—really came of age during or after the Great Recession. They have seen that the opposite of socialism—the currently reigning ideology of free market capitalism—did not lift all boats equally. In fact, it seems to have sunk many of them and lifted some completely out of the ocean, and they want to be equal. I think our technology, our ability to use social media, our increased connection through the internet—has also made it really easy to see inequality. You can see exactly what everyone else is doing, including those who are far better off than you for reasons that are not clear, or even are clear and are terrible. Perhaps they're exploiters in some way, perhaps they have abused the law and yet you're completely unequal. That feels unfair and unjust to many people, and if socialism is a more equal way of life, that equality is very attractive.

Vaidyanathan: So what do you think of this?

Ahmari: I think the attraction isn't a mystery. There's too much insecurity built into American life. It's too hyper-competitive. I mean, I feel it. I feel it, let alone people who are struggling in the economy. We're seeing remarkable growth, but even among people in my milieu, they feel a kind of constant pressure. I think the health insecurity, the sense that anytime you could lose your job, and then if you got sick, what would you do?—is going to get people thinking about socialism. What I always say to people on my side of the debate is: if you don't want socialism, you have to try to address these concerns in a more meaningful way than people on the right have done for a long time. To Christine's point about people not making sacrifices or not committing to anything: that's certainly true in my milieu, where people are in their ninth year of dating. What are you doing? At that point, what mystery is left? [*audience laughter*] You know, you're living together. In order to make great sacrifices, you have to feel a kind of security, and in a society where disruption is an ideal and an end in itself, people will feel insecure and

they won't make sacrifices. But what I worry about in the new socialism is precisely what Christine said: that what's imagined is a society in which the ideal is still the pursuit of the self-creating, unbounded self. It just happens to have a bigger, more bloated welfare state attached to it. That's the question that I think people on the left have to answer. "Okay, what is the end of human life? What are the goods that should be pursued at the level of the political community?"

Vaidyanathan: Thank you. Let's take the second ideal: liberty. Or as my French friends say, *liberté*, which is my favorite brand of yogurt. It's one of the founding principles of our nation, but it has also taken on a heavily ideological flavor, right? Many understand liberty as this absolute autonomy of atomized, socially disembedded individuals. Christine, you've written about how this ideology of maximizing individual autonomy, especially as embodied in the sexual revolution, led to the various problems that gave us the "Me Too" movement. And Sohrab, you've written about how the same ideology promotes the worship of free speech and free markets without limits. Can you say more about what's wrong with this notion of liberty, the way we think about liberty, and what a healthier ideal of freedom could look like? Sohrab, let's start with you.

Ahmari: In many cases, and I think Pat Deneen, who spoke just before this session, has diagnosed this precisely—in many dimensions of life, the ideal of freedom without limits, without either natural or traditional limits, has ended up perversely promoting tyranny, right? So, you can look at various dimensions of life and see this working itself out. At the university, toppling the old kind of autocratic master didn't lead to a kind of birth of free thought, it's brought forth these giant, bloated administrations that regulate student life to a minute detail. And the students themselves have deeply authoritarian instincts. In the level of, let's say, the workplace in the sexual revolution, you see how corporations are happy now to say, "We need to support a right to abortion" because it's good for business. In Ireland, the story came out not too long ago that airlines had been putting pressure on female pilots to either abort or keep their jobs. Again, the ideal of freedom becomes the worst kind of totalitarianism. The idea of unbounded freedom becomes a source of unfreedom. Losing the Sabbath as a social practice and an ideal has

not made us free. I mean, unless you think of long brunches as a source of profound encounter. For lots of working-class people, the loss of the Sabbath has meant that they don't have time to see family, to go to a baseball game, to have a minute for contemplation. The loss of barriers between work and leisure means that lots of people in my class can't sleep; they spend hours by the ghostly blue glow of a phone or computer screen, haunted, just surfing or responding to emails. Is that freedom?

Vaidyanathan: Christine, what do you think? What is freedom and what is a healthier ideal of freedom?

Emba: I think that I perhaps tend to think about these questions on a much more personal and individual level. In fact, sometimes I worry that expanding definitions of freedom to describe schools as authoritarian or not authoritarian is a little bit of an ideological statement.

Ahmari: I'm an idealist. [*audience laughter*]

Emba: In my writing about sexual ethics, I've come to identify something that actually has been identified by smarter people before me. In fact, I think Isaiah Berlin made a speech exploring this concept in 1958, this difference between positive and negative freedoms. There's the freedom that is avoidance, right? Like, you're free from external strictures; no one will tell you what to do. You can leave work whenever you want, you can sleep with anyone you want, no one has control over you—and that freedom is really celebrated today. We see it evolve and re-emerge in different forms. I also think of the slogan of the '68 revolution in France and Paris, and one of the main statements was that it was forbidden to forbid. That was the only thing that was not allowed: to constrain yourself. But there's also another kind of freedom, a positive freedom, and that's a sort of self-mastery. The freedom to not be pulled hither and yon by things that you can't control. Not to be controlled by your lust, to be controlled by your desires, to be controlled like I am sometimes by an inability to log off the internet, to just get off Twitter. "Christine, just get off Twitter." A freedom, a personal freedom. A freedom that lodges itself within you and allows you to interact with the world in the healthiest ways. I think the problem that we're seeing today is that America has really embraced—really the West, the modern world—has really, really embraced the former kind of freedom. We want to be free from

any stricture, free from ties to our families and parents; they can't tell us what to do. Free from recommendations from a church or community: "I don't want to go anywhere on Sunday." And as Sohrab pointed out, this is very easily overtaken by tyrannies that play on our lack of the other freedom, self-mastery, to convince us to do things that we actually don't want to do. But I think that what's at issue is that we spend far too much time cultivating that negative freedom, pushing away all ties and strictures and not enough time freeing ourselves, understanding who we are as people, and what the good would actually look like for us: what we were made to do, what our society is supposed to look like, how we can aim towards that. We are left unmoored, completely free, but also tied down and kind of empty.

Vaidyanathan: What about the third ideal that nobody seems to speak about any more, which is fraternity. Why is that? Why aren't we talking about fraternity? Does it even matter? What is the scope for genuine fraternity in today's world? What do you think?

Emba: I actually think the answer to that one is pretty clear. Fraternity talks about other people. Fraternity implies, and in fact demands responsibility to someone else. You are responsible for your brother; that's fraternity. What they need has an impact on your life, and you are obliged to take care of them. And to many people, responsibility feels like the opposite of freedom. As we continue to reify freedom, being responsible for your brother, responsible for your neighbor, responsible for the person who goes your church—is less and less attractive and something that maybe we'll give lip service to. We'll toss something into the collection box, we will donate through our screens to some far-off charity, but when it actually comes down to speaking with the person in front of you, even just taking off your headphones on the subway to acknowledge the humanity of the person sitting next to you—that seems a little bit too hard sometimes. A real embrace of fraternity could be grand. Immigration, for example. Not just thinking about it abstractly as, "Oh, this will make my life difficult in some way or not difficult in some way," but rather, "Who are the people who want to come here? What would drive someone to cross the border? What would that look like in my family? How do I feel towards them and how can I help this person?"

Ahmari: I have two thoughts. One is just to paraphrase Monsignor Knox:

fraternity is only possible if you have a sure paternity. This goes back to the early idea of religion—and specifically biblical religion—as being crucial, I think, to the ideal of human dignity and equality and justice. In other words, if I can see you as having origins in the same place as I do, in the image of God, then I can fraternize with you and see you as my brother or sister. With secularization, that has obviously been eroded. The liberal society ideal of the citizen not really belonging to a community but just being free to go anywhere, party anywhere—leaves people unable to socialize and recognize as brothers people who don't have that way of life, because they're not part of the class of people who can, for example, live in London, work in the city, and then just jump on the Eurostar and spend the weekend in Paris. Increasingly, the people who aren't mobile and hyper-mobile in that way, and the people who are mobile, see themselves in an emotive confrontation. I would say, finally, that this idealized subject of the liberal order who isn't bound to community, raises questions about his or her political attachment to any community, right? In other words, the citizenship which is bound up with fraternity requires you to feel some degree of loyalty to some community. As a political realist, I have to say that humanity at large is too large. For all these reasons, I think fraternity has become a an elusive ideal.

Vaidyanathan: Thank you. Sohrab, you've had a remarkable journey from Marxism to conservatism, but can you talk about one ideological aspect that you don't like in today's conservative movement, and perhaps one ideal that you respect in today's left?

Ahmari: I spent the last year arguing with the right, more or less. I'll just name some things that get on my nerves. [*audience laughter*] One of them is that the right has—at least sections of it—become obsessed with dethroning political correctness. So many on the right are like, "Now I'm going to be offensive." As, you know, an end unto itself. You can blame censorious liberals all you want, but to decide in response, "I'm just going to be a bore"—is silly. We should propose a counter-ideal, which a lot of conservatives don't do. All they often stand for is the right to be obnoxious, and that's not any kind of ideal. On the economic front, there is a lack of empathy in certain corners of the libertarian right, I'd say, where it doesn't answer life's questions and problems for lots of people to say, "If you don't like such and such, move."

"If you're poor, work harder." One can be grateful to the "new" right—if you will—because it's discarding some of these old shibboleths.

Vaidyanathan: What about an ideal on the left that you find admirable?

Ahmari: Umph. [*audience laughter*] Look, I could talk about it all evening. I think the right needs to talk about economic justice. The right needs to talk about equality. The right needs to talk about health care. We may disagree on precise solutions, but to say, as much of the right-wing think tank intellectual apparatus does, that it's not a problem—first of all, that doesn't win you elections. Second of all, it's unjust in itself.

Vaidyanathan: Christine, wherever you put yourself on the left-right spectrum, tell us about an ideological aspect that you don't like in today's left; and an ideal, perhaps, that you respect on today's right.

Emba: Yeah, it's funny: it seems I'm all over the map. Like maybe on both ends of the spectrum, sort of in the middle; it's unclear. I think by now, most observers have converged upon the conclusion that I'm towards the left, although perhaps more socially conservative than some might expect. That has been the response when people come to some of my writing on sexual ethics; sort of surprise and confusion. But I appreciate the earnestness of the left. I do think, though, one thing that I would criticize is scale. I think the discourse on the left often gets caught up in the bathwater and sort of misses the baby completely. Or, it heightens some imaginary conflicts and does not seem to notice the real ones going on in the real world. I'm thinking of exchanges I've had or seen on social media. People saying things like, "Not being asked to answer X question in class is violence," and, "This guy leaving my messages unread is violence, this is a mental health issue for me." I'm like, "Is it, though?" [*audience laughter*] I mean, it's when somebody doesn't use the cultural depicter that you prefer, when they say *Latino* or *Latina* instead of *Latinx*—maybe that can be annoying, but there are real people in Latin America who have real problems, and maybe we should spend more time talking about the actual issues. Keeping your eye on the real issues and not making everything about your personal problems—or assuming that your personal problems are everyone's problems—I think that's something the left can struggle with a bit.

Vaidyanathan: Is there any ideal on the right that you find admirable?

Emba: The past four years have really scrambled the political categories, I'm not sure that there are many true conservatives left, but the thing that I have always loved about conservatism, and have learned from it, is that there are things worth conserving. That we can look to tradition, that we can look to the past and try to gain some understanding of what things have persisted through time and things that are valuable. Whether it's an ideal of beauty, or truth, or goodness, love for place and family—it's not worth throwing all of those out. There's still something valuable there, it should come with us into modern life. I think it's incredibly important to note that all progress forward doesn't necessarily mean forgetting everything that is behind. [*audience laughter*]

Vaidyanathan: We are in an election year. Are you seeing any examples of crossing the divide in our current campaign? [*audience laughter*] Either on the left or on the right, do any of our presidential candidates demonstrate a willingness to be corrected by reality instead of manipulating it? Is anybody championing ideals more than ideologies? I realize I shouldn't have phrased this as a yes or no question. [*audience laughter*]

Emba: Yeah, what a time to be alive. [*audience laughter and applause*] It's great. Actually, do former presidential candidates count?

Vaidyanathan: Sure!

Emba: I think a lot of people experienced this. The impeachment proceedings were both long and short and confusing, and at the end we kind of knew how things would turn out. But what I think shocked a lot of people in politics, and maybe also a lot of people who had tuned out for most of the proceedings, was the fact that former presidential candidate Mitt Romney gave an impassioned speech, voting yes on an article of impeachment against President Donald Trump. He said that he did this because his faith demanded it. The role that he was elected to play in the Senate demanded it; that he look at the truth, respected the truth, invoked the truth. And in doing so, he went completely against his entire party, the ideology, the ideal of which now seems to be presidential boosterism and not much else. And I think that felt to many and to me like a shot of light through the clouds in some way, seeing someone take a stand for what they thought was actually correct instead of going along to get along. Actually, a current presidential candidate I have

found myself interested in is Elizabeth Warren. I think she's a good example of somebody who has allowed reality to check her ideology or ideals. She started out as a very pro-free market Republican when she was a professor at Harvard, and then her research took her to bankruptcy and financial issues. She spent a large amount of time researching how bankruptcy works in the United States, talking to people who have lost their houses, their livelihoods, because of bankruptcy. And then she wrote this book, *The Two Income Trap*, and actually revised her economic ideology to take into account the fact that families were struggling. That the "markets will solve it, and if you're going bankrupt it just means you're not working hard enough and it's your fault" ideal was, in fact, not really the case for many of these families. Who were working as hard as they could; who were doing all that they could, and who could not compete against big banks and Wall Street financiers who were running what did seem to be a corrupt system designed to take from them. She went from being a Republican to being a Democrat, and worked to fight corruption and finance at this point. ,I find that admirable.

Vaidyanathan: Sohrab how about yourself?

Ahmari: For my sins and for professional reasons, I had to pay attention to the impeachment hearings. I hope most of you didn't have to do that, so I will just leave it at that as far as Mr. Romney's intervention goes. If you've been on the right, and you've felt the weight of the dogmas emanating from the libertarian-industrial complex, you will be—or should be—very pleased with how President Trump has challenged so many of those. Just think of the issue of China. I remember because I was immersed in it: it was just taken for granted that we have to move toward ever deeper trade integration with communist China. There was no one challenging that ideology until a kind of Queen's vulgarian came around and said, "Wait, we're having the Chinese build our 5G infrastructure? This regime that keeps a million Muslims in a concentration camp? We're thinking about having them build a national security-sensitive infrastructure?" All that was perfectly normal to the sort of expert ideology of the right. I think we have to give credit where it's due. That's a radical departure from where the right was on these issues. I would also say he doesn't get enough credit for criminal justice reform—though he sure brags about it a lot. The First Step Act was an example of

the Trump administration crossing the divide. I've had such bad experiences prognosticating election outcomes, so I really shouldn't do this, but I think that will pay dividends in November, but we'll see.

Vaidyanathan: Thank you. You're both journalists, and in your profession I'd like to know how difficult you found it avoiding falling into the trap of ideology. The theme of the New York Encounter this year talks about the possibility of something unexpected, an event that can break through the shell of ideology, that can allow your humanity to emerge. Are there such moments in your own experiences as political journalists that you can share?

Ahmari: Yeah, I'm just such a boundless source of magnanimity on Twitter. I kid. No, it is a trap to fall into ideology and to see the other person as just an avatar that you argue with. It's very ugly. I think it was your former colleague, Liz Bruenig, who not too long ago posted a hospital bill for her child being born, and it was something like $160,000, of which she and her husband were responsible for $8,000. I had a similar experience. I felt like I crossed the divide with Liz in the sense that, awhile ago, my son caught something called a human metapneumovirus. It's not a big deal. I mean, it can be a big deal because it affects their breathing, but it just requires some monitoring, so we had him at a hospital and it was fine, they monitored him, sent him home. It was fine. A grand total of 24-48 hours. And then this bill came. It was $23,000 for one night, of which were responsible for $3,000-$4,000. Now for me, okay, I'll give an extra speech somewhere, I'll write an essay, whatever; we can handle it. But it made me think: How do middle class Americans deal with that? If you're living paycheck to paycheck, even if you have decent insurance—which is often a questionable matter—how do you begin to deal with a $4,000 bill, or in Liz's case an $8,000? Liz and I have our disagreements, but at that moment I felt her Twitter rage in a healthy way.

Vaidyanathan: Thank you. Christine, how about you?

Emba: I wish more of my experiences of humanity breaking through were as salutary, literally and figuratively, as that one. For me, I think that the experiences that have been most transformative are in some ways not even necessarily reaching across the divide—although doing so is important—but the ones in which the humanity of other people is forced through. As political journalists, we spend a lot of time thinking about polls, or prognosticating

about our ideas, or punditing—as I called it—in our break room; toiling in the content mines to come up with more ideas and more takes on different subjects. It's really easy when doing that to lose perspective on some level. You think in terms of arguments to make, lines of thought to pursue, policy ideas that you think are good, while not even necessarily thinking of the person. Who they would impact, how they might impact you or others, what this is doing in the real world. A painful moment of bridging the gap between reality and ideas came for me in 2017, when white supremacists were marching in Charlottesville, Virginia. I spent a lot of time writing about ideas in society—that's my beat—and had been thinking about the rise of nationalism. How do we address this from my office in Washington, DC? But then that weekend happened. It was an odd confluence of events, because I grew up in Richmond, Virginia, where my little sister is actually still in college, and was in Charlottesville the night before for a college visit. It was a profoundly shocking day. A profoundly shocking experience in the sense of feeling a real hatred, a real danger was this close to me; this close to my family. That it was real; it was not a question of polling and people on the internet and what ideologies are swirling in the ether.

Vaidyanathan: For the benefit of the folks who may be from out of the country, could you say in a minute what happened in Charlottesville?

Emba: Sure, sure. There's been a long-running controversy about Confederate statues in various places like Charlottesville, which is the home of the University of Virginia. There is a statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee there, and a debate had begin about whether to take down this statue, because it celebrated a Confederate soldier. In response to a decision to take down or move the statue, there was a march in Charlottesville by a group that describes itself as Unite the Right, which ended up being a motley collection of white supremacists, KKK members, people who believe in free speech, and people who called themselves conservatives, but generally just people who were racist and angry. On the day of the march, there were many conflicts, somebody was killed, many assaults happened. It was a frightening day and unexpected. I was covering that.

Vaidyanathan: How did that affect you?

Emba: There's a a difference between arguing with somebody on the

internet about, hey, you shouldn't say racist things, or political correctness—maybe we're too politically correct or not politically correct enough, or you're impinging on my freedom because I'm not allowed to say the "N word" in a joke. Discussing that is one thing, but knowing that your actual humanity is threatened in person, and realizing that that's really what the discussion is about is an entirely different matter. When it broke through to me, it made even the writing process much more fraught.

But these discussions aren't just about nationalism, or free speech, but they're about real people's lives, real people's pain, understanding that we are deciding to treat some people as human and say that some people don't belong here, some people don't belong in our country and deserve to be harmed, and that's major.

Vaidyanathan: Thank you. In the minute or so we have left, I'd like to ask you to perhaps say in a sentence or so what do you think is the most important and urgent ideal that should guide American politics for the good of the American people.

Ahmari: Catholicism. [*audience laughter and applause*] I would say reason, but reason properly understood in the sense that it's not just narrowly scientistic, economistic, technical reason, but reason in its full sense, that questions about the good of human beings and their final goals or the ultimate good are within the scope of human reason and that human reason can be aided by the Church.

Vaidyanathan: Wonderful, thank you. Christine, how about yourself?

Emba: That's a hard follow-up. I think for me, the word would be *humanity*. And I think the best way to guide thinking about how America should function, is to first think of people as humans. This is not some ideology we need to impose on America top down, or that the country needs to change in *x* way. There are humans, individual human people who are hurting in some way, who need certain things, who want to live their lives, who are brothers and sisters to you and I. How do we think about them? How do we center the human person in making decisions?

Vaidyanathan: Thank you. It's great. Fantastic. I don't know about you all, but I think we're kind of on the right track here, eh? This weekend has been, I think, a great embodiment of these ideals in many ways.

DAR
MEDINA
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What Can Free Us From Ideology?

A conversation on the Encounter's theme in light of Where is God?: Christian Faith in the Time of Great Uncertainty *(McGill-Queen's University Press), with its author,* ***Fr. Julián Carrón****, President of the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation;* ***Ami Dar****, founder and Executive Director of Idealist.org; and* ***Aaron Riches****, Professor of Theology at Benedictine College, Kansas.*

Introduction

Can we meet God in our "liquid," contemporary society? And how does one communicate the Christian faith in a social context characterized by pervasive secularization and creeping and widespread relativism? Fr. Julián Carrón, President of Communion and Liberation, answers these and other interwoven questions in *Where is God?*, a new book-length interview with veteran Vatican analyst Andrea Tornielli. In the current situation, Christianity can contribute to the re-humanization of society only if it is witnessed in its true nature and proposed in its originality as an event of life, a fascinating and concrete presence of a new humanity. Only then can Christianity free people from ideology. If, instead, Christianity is presented as just another system of ideas and moral practices, it can easily become an ideology, making it part of the problem and not the solution.

Fr. José Medina, moderator: Good morning everybody. Welcome to the

Encounter. I want to thank especially the En Route Foundation for the support that it has given to the Encounter and for sponsoring this presentation. With us, we have today three friends of mine. Starting from my left: Father Julián Carrón, then Ami Dar, and Aaron Riches. Aaron is a professor of theology at Benedictine College. Ami is the CEO and founder of Idealist, a software company here in New York. Can I call it software?

Ami Dar: It's a nonprofit.

Medina: A nonprofit software company in New York. Which is actually a contradiction, because "nonprofit" and "New York" usually are…[*audience laughter*] Anyway. And Father Julián Carrón, who comes to visit us often from Italy. He is the President of Communion and Liberation, the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation. The reason for our being here today is because Fr. Julián has written a book called *Where is God?* I will briefly tell you why I think it is particularly interesting, and then we will throw ourselves into a friendly conversation, which means a conversation between friends.

I invite you to think of that moment in your life where this question came to be: Where is God? And it's not a question one asks himself in terms of philosophy or theology, but in terms of experience. Because there are moments in life in which one remains aghast, without breath, because something happens that is perceived, maybe overwhelmingly, perceived as shocking, that leaves you with questions that ultimately lead to this point.

At the event on Friday night, there was a piece on 9/11, but it was a collection of reactions after that moment in which the towers fell. In which one feels, in the words of Don DeLillo, that everything is not okay. Therefore, we are almost pushed into this adventure of understanding, into what that moment has done to us, shaking us, throwing us into an uncertainty that comes from the fact that the certainties we thought we had are not able to actually respond to what happened. DeLillo wrote: "I want to understand what this day has done to us, before politics, before history, and before religion. This catastrophic event that has changed the way we think and act. This moment that often fills us with fear." And he continued: "This time that we are trying to name the future, not in our normal hopeful way, but guided by dread." What Fr. Julián proposes with this book is a journey from being aghast to being agape. The possibility of journeying from this point of uncertainty,

not to a certainty that we've invented, but to the possibility to remain in awe, in wonder. What Fr. Julián proposes in the book is a journey, not another certainty. It's not enough to say, "I know where God is." It's not enough to read a philosophy or theology book. It needs to be able to contribute to that particular moment. To me, that moment most recently came quite recently, when a friend called me, aghast at the fact that she could not bear children. And in that moment, it's not that she opened the conversation saying, "Where is God?"—but it was an overflowing of, "What is the meaning of my life? What is the meaning of the desire of generating that I had? Why did I even marry?" Questions we have when the circumstances leave us aghast. Do these questions contain the question, "Where is God?" We are interested in starting from this point, and then seeing, by interrogating the author of the book, whether we can go to a position of being agape in front of something that seems to be negative. Ami, do you want to start?

Dar: I guess I don't have a choice, yeah. [*audience laughter*]

Medina: What is God, Ami?

Dar: When I see those three words, "Where is God?", I don't usually put a question mark at the end. I think I usually put an exclamation mark at the end: "There is a God!" In other words, I don't really expect God to intervene in my daily life, I don't expect to see God. So, if something bad happens, I don't think God is accountable to me for something bad that happened to me. I don't think it works in that direction. I think it's more the wonder of seeing certain things. My wife will give birth in about ten days from now. And yeah, she's out there in the audience somewhere. You should clap for her, because I had very little involvement. [*audience laughter*] She's about to give birth, and having gone through this process and just watching this evolve the last few months, beginning to see the baby kicking and moving—to me, God simply is. Not "Where is God?" God is there. I'm not sure it's a good answer, but I don't normally ask that. I see it and I wonder at it. I live agape, I guess.

Medina: And when do you feel yourself aghast?

Dar: At what people do. That example you gave, of 9/11. The decision of nineteen people to get up in the morning and hijack airplanes and do that, that leaves me aghast. But it's them exercising their freedom to do that, unfortunately, in that way. I don't blame God for that. That is their decision,

and it leaves me aghast at what people are able to do with their God-given freedom.

Medina: Before we move on, should we get rid of freedom to get rid of moments of being aghast?

Dar: Well, I don't think we can choose, right? We can't choose to get rid of certain actions that people will take, it's the whole package, and I don't think it's worth it. I think freedom is what makes us human, and I would not give that up. It would be too much to give up. It's why we are here this morning. It's why I married my wife, it's everything. I'm not going to give that up.

Medina: You are saying there are moments in our life in which we remain aghast because of the freedom of other people. Fr. Julián, you have an interest in freedom. This is part of what I see in your book. You see freedom, in itself, as something profoundly valuable. What is freedom, then? And why is it so important that we not take the route of limiting each other's freedom?

Julián Carrón: Let's briefly go back to the question, "Where is God?" If we substitute something invisible for God, like love, can we identify what love is? We can identify that love is real, not some kind of invention or creation of ourselves. We can identify somebody in which love is happening. We can see it, it's very easy to identify it when our work, our life is happening. When somebody in love goes to the office, and people see that this person is changed, the change can be visual, touchable. We usually ask, "Did you fall in love?" And we want to know if this is a trick of the mind, or rather an event within ourselves. Freedom is at stake. Is it a mechanical phenomenon within the cells, something chemical? Or, instead, can I be sure that this person is loved? What is the difference between a mere chemical reaction and a genuine phenomenon in which somebody is entered, enlivened so powerfully, changed so visibly that I can see it in my life? There is something that is invisible, but which in that moment we can see with our eyes. It's not our imagination. It's not a result of a logical syllogism, pushing us to decide if there is something else that is love: biology, psychology, or cultural background. The problem isn't at this level.

When people ask me about God, I often ask them, "But are you sure that your mother loves you? Afterwards we can speak about eternity, about

whether God has become man, but the first question is, 'Can you be sure that you are loved?'" You can try to reduce this phenomenon to some mechanical explanation; you can try to reduce it. And we can do the same with God. Can I ask somebody what is God? Can I ask somebody what is love? God is as invisible as love. Can I identify some place in which I can see love at work in reality? This is our question. It's about love, it's about freedom, about justice, it's about everything that is untouchable.

Someone who lived in Palestine centuries ago, they met an exceptional man and experienced a newness in the way he looked at people, so different from the common mentality, so contrary to the common mentality, that it was a scandal for them: "Who is he? Who is he? We have never seen anything like this!" And when they saw this, they thought, *God is coming to us*. Why God? There was something so exceptional about this man, so beyond compare, so unbelievable, but at the same time so real, so touchable, that they were challenged, they had to decide in front of him. It is impossible to be in front of somebody like him and not feel our freedom engaged. The attraction of such a presence is so big, we cannot be simply a spectator to the film; we are *part* of the film. We become protagonists of the film.

When we awaken in the morning or when we are distracted in the middle in the subway: he's inviting us. In such moments he appears and we are taken out of our comfort zone. Everybody has to answer. This is a journey. I don't have to answer for you. You are in love. I don't have to answer for you. I don't want to convince anybody. This is the fight that Jesus has introduced into history. We have to choose: it's merely an illusion, or it's our own creativity, or it's a fact.

Medina: Aaron you have to follow that. [*audience laughter*]

Aaron Riches: This book arrived to me on January 28th. It was the same day we learned that our parish priest had killed himself. I was struck by the line from the book that quoted a girl from Hong Kong: "Waking comes and the flood of what can't be undone." And for me, personally, this overwhelming question couldn't be undone, especially when looking at my children. Ever since we arrived from Spain almost two years ago, we had attended this church with this priest. My son served mass with him. You can't help but feel a terror at the thought that the first funeral your children will

attend will be the funeral of their priest, who they loved, who had taken his own life. What the book provoked me to do is the hard work of adhering to that reality as a way of testing my faith and finding God in that situation.

I'll give you just one concrete, maybe two concrete things. The first thing in my experience was I wanted to flee. I wanted to go exactly in the opposite direction. *I don't want this to happen. I don't want this to mark my children's history*. Also, the flood of doubting who this priest was, right? You can't help it. The first 48 hours are filled with, "He must have been somebody I didn't think he was." And rage with the question, "Why that church? Why couldn't we have just started going to a different church?" If only I could change the circumstances. But, you know, as Fr. Julián says in his book, an event is something that is completely undetermined, but then once it happens, [*snaps fingers*] it's done. It's there, it's written in history, it's the factor of reality now. I didn't want my children to know what had happened. That was the first experience I had in my own heart, but my wife is wiser and smarter than I am, and she, of course, told them the whole story. I mean, not all the gruesome details, but she told them what had happened. Therefore, as a family, we were able to go to the holy hour that very night, to the visitation, to the funeral, and to the internment. The thing my wife said to me 48 hours later seems to me absolutely clear: "Aaron, I realize now that when Mr. Evans called and told us that Father Harkins had killed himself, that that was itself an act of charity. That he thought of the people that he loved in the parish and he picked up the phone and called us." So even with the most horrible news, I can't deny that it came with an act of love within it.

The students from Benedictine College who went to this church, they waited at the graveside after everybody left, after the priest's family left, after all of us had left for the lunch. And when the gravediggers came, these students said, "Please give us the shovels, because we would like to bury our priest." It seems to me a gesture of adhering to reality to the very end. But if I'm asked the question, "Where is God?", it seems to me the clearest evidence I have is what hapened at the graveside.

My daughter, who's nine years old, wanted to meet Fr. Harkins' parents. And so, right beside the casket, I walked up with her, and she started crying inconsolably when I said, "Edith, this is Fr. Harkins' mother and father."

It was as if she understood even more the tragedy of the situation, and she started crying uncontrollably. Fr. Harkins' own father stood up, and he bent over her, wiped her tears, and said, "Sweetie, it will be okay. I promise you it will be okay." And either "It will be okay," means nothing, and is just a piece of sentimental emptiness, or it's like the end of *The Four Quartets* by T.S. Eliot: "All shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well, when the tongues of flame are in-folded into the crowned knot of fire, and the fire and the rose are one." That is a judgment about the nature of reality that burst forth from a certainty that this man had seen. Because of that, it gave me a whole new gratitude for the whole experience.

Medina: Aaron, before I ask Fr. Julián to follow up, you are a man of faith, you're a professor of theology—but this event is a slap in your face. You said that the contribution you've received from the book is to adhere to reality to the very ends. You give the example of going to the very ends with your daughter. "Let's go and meet the father." At the beginning you mentioned you had receiving the book at the same time this tragedy happened. Why do you say that the journey Julián proposes in this book actually helped you to adhere to reality to the very end?

Riches: Two things. In the first place the book came, and it was the work I had to do. In between classes, I had to read this book while I was grieving the death of my priest. So in that very material way, it was accompanying me. And every page of the book accompanied me as a provocation. The antithesis to Christianity is the flight from reality, right? Fr. Julián says that at one point. But the question of the slap: there are three incredibly beautiful pages in the book that really struck me. First, an account of the unbelievable miracle, that this little people, the Jewish people, had a history which objectively is just a horrible history. They go into exile in Babylon, and that's where they write the beginning of Genesis. That's where they make this incredible judgment that at the heart of it all, there is goodness, and the goodness of God is the thing that grounds the goodness of all reality. And then, as a way of explaining this, Fr. Julián remembers an event with a kid who says, after a terible car accident, "I don't believe there can be a God, because there's been this car accident." And Fr. Julián says to the kid, Okay, you get slapped in the face by a stranger in the street; what do you do? And the kid says, "I slap the guy back even harder."

Fine. You get slapped by your mother when you get home, what do you do? He says, “I ask her why.” And this “why,” this is the question: Where is God? Where is love? Why is this happening to me? The bond of love produces not an immediate reaction but a question, right? Which ultimately becomes the question of Jesus and Gethsemane. If it’s possible, let this cup pass from me, which then drives all the way to the cross: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? But all of this, Fr. Julián says, was to manifest the absolute bond and adherence of the Son to the Father, right? And as long as the bond is not broken, reality is affirmed. As long as the bond is not broken, the will of the Father is accomplished. And as long as the will of the Father is accomplished, then evil—suffering, death—is not the last word. To the contrary, love is the last word. That was the key part in the book that just made me say, Well, if my own God, Jesus, could say, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” and go to this length, then we will, too.

Carrón: I was very struck by what you said, because often we can arrive at the end of reality only with that companionship. Many times we are so afraid of reality—it’s too overwhelming, too mysterious—to go to the very end. Without a companionship, you cannot introduce yourself or your children to reality. Without the possibility of educating reason to the very end, then reason becomes mere rationalism., which is only a partial use of reason. Please note that reason is blocked by our fear. If we have a companionship that allows us to use reason up to the end, then it is only in that moment that we are really using our freedom. Like a child that’s entered into the darkness of a room, quietly, with the hand of his mother. A little child is full of fear, he’s afraid of the darkness. But the mother comes in that moment and takes him away with her. He can enter quietly and at peace because he’s accompanied. This is crucial for us, because ideology comes from fear.

Only because I am in love can I overcome the limits of my reason. The consequence of this fear is the raising of walls, arguments, fights, because people are so afraid. And because we are afraid, we take our children away from something that is unpleasant. Do we introduce them instead to reality? In that moment, you can became a companion to your children. Education is introducing somebody to the totality of reality. Fear is overcome only by a presence, like the mother for the child. It is very difficult to find people who

want to go to the depths of the problem, and for this reason, what we usually do is try to escape from the difficulties. Your first reaction was to take your children away from the difficulties. This is the general reaction. If we have trouble in our job, we have to change jobs. If we have trouble with our wife, we have to change wives. We always think that the solution to our problem is to escape, but this is our defeat. The victory is actually *in* reality, not in escaping from reality. Otherwise, there is no possibility of hope.

Riches: When we try to change the circumstances, another kind of tragedy happens. It's a defeat in the moment, but then it becomes a defeat for our whole history. In this concrete circumstance with this priest, we had, for a year and a half, a certainty about who he was. And then this thing happened that we couldn't understand, and the visceral reaction of the parent is to run away and protect his children. But if you go all the way, you discover that the further you go into reality, the more it verifies the certainty you had before: he was a holy man. He was a great priest. All the gestures of love that he had given before were saved, because we went to the depth of the tragedy. If we had cut ourselves off, if we had retreated, we would have had to negate all the certainty that a year and a half generated.

Carrón: When we meet somebody like that, who is he? Who is this person? What is the origin? It is the same question that comes out in front of Jesus, but now in front of somebody who doesn't escape from reality.

Medina: Ami, you are the agnostic one of the group. But you keep very strange company. Not only in the fact that you are here, but also you have friends like me and Aaron, who are saying that fear is only overcome by a presence. I have a deep curiosity to understand, from your point of view, what you see. When you hear somebody say that fear is only overcome by a presence, what do you think?

Dar: Well, first of all, Aaron has been a close friend for fifteen years, and so just listening to the story is…it is hard to say anything beyond just hugging him. I think all of us have all kinds of fears all the time. We each have our pet fears, our big fears, our strange fears, and I think that we overcome them—if we overcome them—in different ways. It's interesting: sometimes we talk too much about overcoming fear, as opposed to living with that fear, and moving forward anyway. There's this obsession, I think, in the U.S., this idea that I

will overcome my fears through sheer willpower. Well, sometimes you don't, and you keep going anyway, right? I mean, you guys have experienced this, probably. This idea that you either feel fear or you don't, and if you feel fear, then you are paralyzed; and if you don't feel fear, then you can act. I think you can act with fear, and I think it's okay to understand that. The fact that we're afraid of something doesn't mean it must stop us. We can keep going with the fear.

One sort of semi-related thing you said earlier, Fr. Julián, is the idea of falling in love. I can't hear that phrase without always thinking that it's so strange that we talk about "falling" in love, when in fact it feels like "rising" in love, right? We don't fall, we rise in love. I'm not sure how that's connected to the issue of fear, but… I don't know. I think very often it's not even a question of overcoming that fear, it's a question of feeling that you have enough within you, or outside of you, to move forward anyway, if that makes sense.

Medina: The way in which Julián speaks about religiosity is unusual, because he's not speaking about certain behaviors, certain traditions, certain way of doing things, or even certain ways of praying; he's talking about the possibility of a relationship with an invisible presence, an invisible presence that is as real as the love you have for your wife. We desire a relationship with an invisible yet real presence. What do you think about that?

Dar: Last night we were having dinner, and I mentioned that the—you guys have all heard about these sort of fanatical atheists, right? People who say they *know* God doesn't exist, right? To me, those people are strange, because they're essentially religious. How do they know that God doesn't exist? They have this strange faith; they know that God doesn't exist, but, like, how do you know that? It's one thing to say you don't believe in this religion or that religion, but to say that God doesn't exist would be like someone saying, "I can be married to this person or that person, but I don't believe in love." And that's just weird to me. To say that you don't believe in any of this, would be like saying that, because though you haven't yet found love, therefore you don't believe in love. It's like, No, you simply haven't found it yet. It doesn't mean it doesn't exist; keep looking. Other people have. Love absolutely exists, and the fact that you haven't found it doesn't mean it doesn't exist.

Medina: Thank you. I want to close by asking Fr. Julián a question that

relates to what Ami was saying, and what Aaron said before. The fact that you haven't found love doesn't mean that love doesn't exist; there is a "perhaps" still there. I can extend the analogy: the fact that you haven't found God doesn't mean that God doesn't exist. And at the same time, Aaron was talking about the experience of being aghast, which introduces a sense of doubt into your relationship with the God you found. These two things—"doubt" and "perhaps"—put us in a position of uncertainty, of questioning, and this is profoundly discomforting for us. I wanted to ask you for the final comment on this.

Carrón: Many times, we think that we can deal with reality in an objective way, without freedom being involved. This is the modern way of thinking, no? I want to arrive at a certainty that can eliminate doubt, that can eliminate freedom, no? In front of the same phenomenon, one person can say, I have been loved. And the other person can say, *perhaps* it's love. *Maybe* it's love; why not a mechanism? Why not biology? There is no possibility of knowledge without experience. This is what you need to decide in every moment.

When a mother gives a slap to a child—now it's not politically correct—the child can ask, "Why?" Or the child can think it's cruel. But usually, if he has a relationship with the mother, the real question is "Why?", because the slap cannot eliminate completely their relationship. It's not enough to let this slap eliminate this relationship. You have to decide between cruelty and love. This is what is always at stake in the relationship with reality.

CROSSING THE DIVIDE
NEW YORK ENCOUNTER
2020

A Paper-Thin Distance

How the discovery of our common humanity can shatter racial ideology, with ***Daryl Davis****, musician and public speaker, and* ***Christian Picciolini****, author and founder of the Free Radical Projects global network.*

Introduction

An African-American blues musician who engages with members of the Ku Klux Klan. The former leader of a white-supremacist skinhead group who has left hate behind. A surprising dialogue on crossing the divide from opposite sides of a seemingly unbridgeable chasm.

Jonathan Fields, moderator: Welcome everybody, I'm Jonathan Fields, and I will moderate this incredible event. Just some short bios: Daryl Davis is an international recording artist, actor, leader of the Daryl Davis Band, and is considered one of the greatest blues and boogie-woogie rock 'n' roll pianists of all time, having played with the Legendary Blues band—formerly the Muddy Waters band—and Chuck Berry. You've heard of them, right? Yeah. He has done film and television work as well, and had roles in the critically acclaimed five-year HBO television series, *The Wire*. As a race relations expert, Daryl has received acclaim from many leading media institutions for his book, *Klan-Destine Relationships* and his documentary, *Accidental Courtesy*.

Christian Picciolini is an award-winning television producer, public

speaker, author, peace advocate, and a former violent extremist. Christian's involvement in, and exit from, the American white-supremacist skinhead movement is chronicled in his memoir, *White American Youth*. He now leads the Free Radicals Project, a global extremism prevention and disengagement network, and has helped more than 300 individuals leave hate behind. This work is spotlighted in his MSNBC documentary series, *Breaking Hate*. His forthcoming book, *Breaking Hate: Confronting the New Culture of Extremism*, will be released on February 25th, 2020. Without further ado, Mr. Davis: Would you like to begin?

Daryl Davis: Sure. Thank you all for coming out! Well, I'm gonna talk to you a little bit about communication, which is something we lack today in our country. We spend way too much time talking about the other person, or talking *at* the other person, or talking *past* the other person. What I've learned to do, which I have found to be very effective, is spend time talking *with* the other person. Now you all saw the events that transpired in Charlottesville, Virginia, a couple years ago at the Unite the Right rally, correct? A lot of different white supremacist groups came together, and it was nothing but mayhem there, including the murder of a young girl, Heather Heyer, when a white supremacist got inside his vehicle and drove full force, full speed, into a crowd of counter-protesters, attempting to murder as many as he could. He succeeded in injuring twenty and murdering that one young lady, Heather Heyer. When I go to KKK rallies and neo-Nazi events, I'm not there to fight. I'm there to talk and to have a conversation, and to try and understand what is going on in their minds, and help them to understand that I am a human being. At the end of the day, we all want the same thing. We all want to be loved, we all want to be respected, and most importantly, we all want to be heard. When I say "respected," we don't necessarily have to respect what somebody says, but let's respect their right to say it. So here we have…I've been doing this stuff for about thirty-four years. [*picture flashes onscreen*] That's about twenty-seven years ago at a Klan rally in the state of Maryland. Rally's about to end, you see the cross going out, flames going out. [*another photo onscreen*] That's in Missouri three years ago. And what I do there is talk, have conversations. [*next photo*] Charlottesville. This is one of the many incidents that happened in Charlottesville. The people you see coming down

the stairs are Ku Klux Klan members. You don't know that because you don't see them in their robes and hoods. I know that because I know each one of those guys individually. The gentleman on the bottom there, with the flamethrower, he had an aerosol can, lit a match, and created a flamethrower. He's trying to set these guys on fire and they're trying to hit him with their Confederate flagpoles. Now, the guy in the white t-shirt, the first one on the steps there, he is the Grand Dragon for Virginia. Grand Dragon means state leader. The Imperial Wizard, which means national leader—he's out of that shot. He had already come down in front of the people. I'm going to show you him in just a moment. He's wearing a bandana on his head, a blue jean vest and black jeans. He comes down the stairs before the black man lights up the flame. He walks this way, he turns around to see his members, and he sees the flame. He pulls out a handgun and points it at the head of this black man and shouts, "Hey, nigger"—and then lowers the gun and fires it into the dirt near the black guy's foot. It was later dug out of the dirt. Then he turns around and walks away. Standing just feet away are the Charlottesville police, wearing green neon vests, standing there like this [*crosses arms*], watching the whole thing go down. They did not do anything except watch. They did not intervene or anything. That was one of the many incidents that led to the chief of police of Charlottesville being fired. Today, they have a new police chief, thank goodness.

You can see it unfold here. This video is courtesy of the ACLU of Virginia.

[*video plays, showing the incident just described*]

Okay, that's Charlottesville, Virginia. It might not be New York City or Syracuse or Buffalo or Newark, but don't think for one second it cannot happen right here. It can happen anywhere there is unaddressed hate. And Charlottesville is just as much a part of your city as New York City is. If you are an American, *every* city in this country is your city. You can only live in one city at a time, but you belong to all the cities because this is your country.

Now you saw him there in his street clothes? Here he his is in his Imperial Wizard robe. [*photo*] Now what would you do if you saw that taking place in your city? You want to blame somebody? You wanna blame the black guy for trying to set people on fire? Yeah, we can blame him; he should not have been doing that. You wanna blame the klansman coming down the steps

trying to hit somebody with their Confederate flagpoles? Sure, we can blame them. They shouldn't be doing that, either. Let's blame the Imperial Wizard for pulling out a gun and firing it. Yep. He should not have done that. He can be blamed. Let's blame the police for not doing their job. They are paid to serve and protect, and they stood there and watched somebody fire a gun and say, "Hey, nigger." We can blame the police. But, you know, perhaps we should blame ourselves for allowing our society to come to this point in the 21st century. But sitting around blaming people is a waste of energy. Every time you blame somebody, they want to blame you or blame somebody else. I wanna tell you something. Our society can only become one of two things: it can become what we sit back and let it become, or it can become what we stand up and make it. So, before you go to bed tonight, I want you all to ask yourself this question and answer it: What do I do when I see this? Do I sit back and see what my society becomes? Or do I stand up and make my society become what I wanna see? That's the question you must ask.

Now, what did I do? I called that guy up. I said, "Hey, man, you and I need to talk. Not klansman to black man, but man to man, American to American. Your Confederate history is as much a part of my history as my black history is a part of yours. We both are Americans. It's all American history intertwined. Let's get together and explore it. I talked to him for about half an hour on the phone. He agreed. We set a date. I drove an hour and a half by myself to his house. I sat in his living room. His house is full of KKK stuff and Confederate flags. I sat on a Confederate flag blanket on his couch, and listened to him and his fiancée klan lady give me a history lesson for two hours on American history. From a Confederate perspective, of course. But I sat there and I listened, and when he was done, I corrected him on a few things that he got wrong. Some things he got right, some things he got wrong, and I made sure I corrected him. Then when it was my turn to present my platform, I suggested that we set a date, as this is in Maryland, almost an hour and forty-five minutes north of Washington, DC, north of Baltimore. I suggested he come down to my house. I live in Silver Spring, fifteen minutes from Washington, DC. "Come down to my house; I will secure tickets to the new National Museum of African-American History and Culture, and let's tour that museum together." He said okay. I have a connection at the

museum. I got the tickets, he and his fiancée came down to my house, and we went to the museum. I put them in my car, I drove them downtown to DC, then we went to the museum. This is how he entered the museum, the largest black history museum in the world: check out the head attire. [*photo shows man wearing Confederate bandana*].

What did we do while I took them around on tour? We looked at different snippets and displays on slavery, on integration, segregation; we watched little video clips on blacks and medicine, blacks in sports, education, science, the arts, music, etc. Okay. He is a big rock 'n' roll fan. His favorite rock 'n' roll artist of all time is the late, great Elvis Presley. I love Elvis Presley. I saw Elvis fourteen times, I met him twice, and I went to his funeral. But Elvis Presley did not invent rock 'n' roll. [*audience laughter*] My big boss man invented rock 'n' roll: the late, great Charles Edward Anderson Berry, better known to most of you as Chuck Berry. One of Chuck Berry's Cadillacs—his cherry red Cadillac—is in the museum. I saw that at Chuck's house but it's in the museum now, so I took him to see it.

Hey, looks who's holding his fiancée now. [*photo of Daryl standing between the man and his fiancée; audience laughter*] I work fast, alright? There's Chuck Berry and myself, playing *Johnny B. Goode*. [*photo*]

We toured the museum for about two and a half hours. It is impossible to take in everything in two and a half hours. I mean you can't even do it in two and a half weeks. That place is vast, and you really gotta go there and spend a lot of time and go back and back again just to absorb it all. So we did two and a half hours and then we left. I gave his fiancée my cell phone to take a picture of him and I in front of the museum for posterity, in front of the marquee. This is what he did; I didn't arrange this. [*photo of klansman with his arm around Daryl, both men smiling*] He has come a long way since Charlottesville, from "Hey, nigger," to *boom!* The Charlottesville thing was August 12th, 2017. This was the end of June, 2018. But you know what? He's come a long way, but he still has a way to go. At least now he's going in the right direction. But it goes deeper than that.

A few weeks after that picture, he's getting married to the klan lady. I've been working with him now for about a year. I get invited to the wedding. To a *klan* wedding. I'm the only black guy at a klan wedding. But hold on, it goes

deeper than that. You can't make this stuff up, folks, this is for real. [*audience reacts to photo*] The young klan lady is from Chattanooga, Tennessee. Her father was too ill to come up there, to make the trip to walk his daughter down the aisle and give her away. Rather than ask one of their trusted klan members to be a surrogate father and escort the bride down the aisle and give her away to the groom, they asked me. I said I would do it.

In the very beginning, when we first started working together, CNN interviewed him. And he said, you know, he was gonna be buried in his robe. Well, a little under a year later I asked him if I could invite CNN to the wedding and film this, because this is not an everyday occurrence, a black guy walking a klan lady down the aisle, giving her away. He said yes, he just asked that they not film the klan members and show their faces, just his and his wife's. I said okay. I talked to CNN, they agreed. Well, here I am walking her down the aisle, and you look up in the window of his bedroom, you see a Confederate flag there. Like I said, he's come a long way, but he has a little way to go. Alright, so here is the bridal march. [*video clip*] There is the Imperial Wizard, the groom, the klan lady, and the surrogate father. Folks, people can change. It has to do with exposure and conversation, civil discourse. Let's make it a plan to not sit back and see what our country becomes, but stand up and make it become what you wanna see. It starts first with conversation, civil conversation. Thank you all. [*audience applause*]

Fields: Thank you. Mr. Picciolini, would you like to begin?

Christian Picciolini: I just want to say first and foremost what an honor it is to be here, but also what a privilege it is to be here, considering my past. People with brown skin and black skin often don't get the same second chances that I've gotten, and I want to acknowledge that and to maybe help raise their voices as well through my story.

My journey was a little bit different than Daryl's. It began twenty-four years ago, in 1996, when I walked away from the American neo-Nazi skinhead movement that I helped build almost from the very beginning. I was twenty-three years old here [*photo*] but had already spent eight years from the time I was fourteen years old, as a member of America's first neo-Nazi skinhead group. Prior to that, I lived a relatively normal life. My parents are Italian immigrants who came to the United States in the mid-1960s, and when

they arrived, they were often the victims of prejudice themselves, so it wasn't really a part of my family foundation. In fact, it was the opposite. My parents had friends from all over the world, different races and religions, and I was surrounded by a lot of love. But because my parents are Italian immigrants, they had to work extremely hard to raise the family, and they were often gone seven days a week, sometimes fourteen hours a day, and as a young kid I didn't understand why they weren't around. I often wondered what I had done to push them away, but I certainly wasn't mature enough to ask. So I started to act out. I started to try and vie for their attention. One day in 1987, when I was fourteen years old, I was standing in an alley and smoking a joint. A man drove his car down that alley, stopped in front of me, and exited the vehicle. He had a shaved head and was wearing boots. It was 1987, so nobody really knew what a skinhead was in the United States; I certainly didn't. But he walked up to me and pulled that joint from my mouth, then he looked me in the eyes and he said, "That's what the communists and the Jews want you to do to keep you docile." Fourteen years old, I have to admit, I didn't know what a communist was. I don't think that I had met a Jewish person before then, and if I'm being honest, I didn't really know what the word *docile* meant. In fact, I had to look it up before I got here. [*audience laughter*] I really had became very isolated growing up, and at fourteen, this man came up to me and he essentially saw me. I felt seen for the first time in my life. The next thing he asked me was very important, though, because he asked me what my last name was, and of course I was afraid to tell him, because people had used that as a form of torture against me. My last name is hard to pronounce, and the end of it rhymes with *weenie*, which of course I heard a lot while growing up. When I told him what it was, instead of attacking me for it, he said, "That's an Italian last name; you should be really, really proud of that." And having grown up in an Italian-American neighborhood with parents who spoke Italian and hardly spoke English, I knew very well what it meant to be an Italian. But then what he said next was that somebody wanted to take that sense of pride away from me, and in fact it was the only pride that I really knew anything about. Then he started to tell me that it was blacks and Jews and gay people and anybody who wasn't white and European who were trying to take that away from me. I started to kind of hang around this group

of people who would gather, these skinheads, and I started to adopt what they said. I started to mimic what they looked like, and I very quickly shaved my head and put on my first pair of boots and suddenly felt empowered for the first time in my life. Before that, my life felt like nothingness; but after I had been recruited, then suddenly I felt like somebody could see me, like I had a sense of agency. So I very quickly went from that fourteen year old to a soldier, essentially, in an extremist movement.

But what led me there? Since I didn't have a foundation of hate, what was it that led me in that direction? I think like anybody else, especially at that young age, I was searching very desperately for a sense of identity, a community, and a purpose. Those are things that we all search for. Things that are important, so much so that they kind of define our values going forward. I didn't know who I was. I didn't know if I was Italian. I didn't know if I was American, or if I was Italian-American. I didn't know what my family was, because I felt as though they had abandoned me. They hadn't; that's just how I felt as a young person. As far as purpose, well, that was something that was defined for me very, very, clearly: it was me against the world. I was on the fringe.

If this is something that we all look for, if we're all searching for a sense of identity, community, and purpose, then why aren't we all extremists, right? I was on a journey just like everybody else. You could even see that the identity was so clear: we all dressed the same, we used the same words, we hung out in these tight groups. My family became something that all of a sudden elevated me to a position of notoriety. I felt at first as though I was respected, as though I had some sense of agency. And my purpose was very clearly defined for me. [*shows photo*] This was me in 1992, in front of the Dachau concentration camp in Germany. So, what led me there? I come from Chicago, and if anybody's ever been to Chicago, we have a lot of potholes. You have them here, too, I think, in New York, but these are metaphorical potholes. These are the things that happen to us in our life's journey. Things like trauma. For me, it was abandonment. It can be abuse, it can be joblessness, it can be a lack of education, it can be privilege, even, if it isolates us from the reality of humanity. It can be mental illness. It can be millions of different things. It can be the loss of a parent or a relationship that somehow sends us to the

fringes, detours us, so to speak, on our search for identity, community, and purpose. My potholes had not been repaired and I did not know how to navigate them. Eventually, they detoured me to the edges of society, where the narratives of hate were plenty. Now, there are all sorts of narratives on the fringes, extremist narratives, and I define extremist behavior as anything from being a neo-Nazi to being a drug abuser or committing suicide; or walking into a school and murdering your classmates, or flying to Syria to join ISIS, or sex trafficking. Those are all manifestations of extremism, all narratives that live on the fringes, if we are suddenly lost because of the search for identity, community, and purpose. And the recruiter, the man who found me, knew exactly what to look for. I was vulnerable. I was idealistic. Had a group of ballerinas been across the street and approached me at the same time those skinheads did, I could have been the greatest dancer on earth. [*audience laughter*] Then you would maybe see me on stage with Daryl in a musical capacity, but unfortunately that never happened. Had a baseball coach or a soccer coach or some artists come up to me at the same time, I gladly would have chosen them. It just never happened. At fourteen, I felt, like teenagers do, that I knew everything but that my time in the world was short, so I had to make decisions. And even though when he approached me with these ideas in that alley about racism and Nazism, I had no idea what he was talking about, I still bought in. And that was because the reward of that sense of identity; finally knowing who I was, at least who I thought I was at the time, or where I belonged. The family that accepted me was more of a reward than any of the other things that I had to do to stay a part of it.

Then things started to change. I spent eight years as a part of this movement, but during that time, about six years in, I met a girl and fell in love. At 18 we were married, and we had a son at 18, and another son at 20. Suddenly, that sense of identity, community, and purpose was challenged for me, because I had to ask myself, Was I hate monger? Or was I a father and a husband? They couldn't coexist. I had to question what my purpose was in life. I wish I could tell you I made the right decision at that time. Even though my wife and I stayed married for four years, and even though I didn't bring my ideology home, I was a very different person at home. Even though my wife knew exactly what I was doing as a leader in this movement. I had started

a band—one of the first bands in the United States to play racist music—and then started to export that and perform overseas. Even though she knew that, she loved me and gave me a chance. I didn't make the right decision, though, because at the end of that four years, because I had not left that movement, my wife couldn't tolerate it any more. I didn't prioritize the family over my beliefs. The reality was that I was afraid. I was afraid to start over because I didn't want to go back to the nothingness that I had at fourteen. I was afraid that I would lose the only meaning I thought I could ever find, and because I totally missed prioritizing my family, I ended up losing them.

My wife eventually left and took the children, and that caused me to spiral. I actually opened a record store to sell racist music that I was both importing and making at the time. What happened next I was not expecting. Of course, I couldn't go to City Hall and ask for, you know, a business license to sell racist music, so I told them I was selling all sorts of music; and, in fact, I did stock my store with racist music, but also hip-hop and punk rock music and heavy metal. I didn't expect people to come in to buy that other music, because 75% of my revenue came from the racist music, but people did come in to buy the hip-hop and the punk rock and the heavy metal, and those people were people of color, they were Jewish people, they were gay people. Suddenly, even though they knew exactly who I was, exactly what I was about, they chose to not attack me. And of course, when they came into my store to shop, I wasn't all that interested in having conversations at first. I was happy to take their money, but I wasn't interested in establishing any sort of rapport with them. But they kept coming back, and eventually they started to talk to me. Eventually I started to respond. After a while, I started to develop casual relationships with my customers, people I'd kept outside of my social circle for so long.

One instance I remember was a black teenager who would always come into my store and goof around. He was happy, never really bought anything, but would come to see what all the new titles were. One day he came in and he wasn't so happy. I chose to ask him what was wrong, and he told me that his mother that morning had been diagnosed with breast cancer. Suddenly, I was able to relate to him on a deeper level, because my mother had been diagnosed with breast cancer just six months before, and I found

myself forgetting all about who this person was, and instead had this very deep conversation, very touching conversation between us, until I started to realize who it was I was actually having a conversation with. And that happened time and time and time again. In fact, it was the people I had kept outside of my social circle that came in and showed me compassion when I least deserved it. They were the people, frankly, that I least deserved it from, and I'm so grateful for them because they were the ones who allowed me to see that the demonization that was happening in my head towards them could actually be replaced with humanization. I started to see them as people I respected much, much, more than the ones I had surrounded myself with for eight years.

Eventually I closed the store once I became embarrassed to sell the racist music. I went through a period where I was able to disengage myself from the movement that I was leading. Of course, I wasn't genuine with my comrades at the time. I told them I needed to find a new job, I wanted to repair my relationship with my ex-wife and my children, and that I needed to take care of myself and I told them I'd be back. This was January of 1996. I had no intention of going back. I just wasn't brave enough to tell them at that time.

In 1999, four years after I left, a friend of mine, a new friend, came to me. I was really trying to out-run my past, so I made new friends. I moved, and she came to me and said, "Listen, I've been watching you and I don't want to see you die,"—because I'd been waking up every morning wishing that I hadn't woken up. And she said, "You've gotta change something; something, you know, we need to do something." I said, "I'm all ears, so if you have any suggestions I'll take 'em." She said, "I just started working at a company called IBM. You should go apply there." I laughed when she said that. I'd been kicked out of six high schools, I didn't go to college, I didn't have a computer, I was an ex-Nazi, I was covered in tattoos. It was kind of a ridiculous request, but I went in for an interview and they asked me back for another one, and I ended up getting the job. It was an entry-level position installing computers at universities and businesses. They would order one hundred or two hundred computers, and we'd go in and set them up. I was so excited until they told me where I would be going my first day at work. It was my old high school, the same one I'd been kicked out of twice, to install

their computers. I didn't laugh. I was terrified, but I decided I needed to go. I needed it. This was a new start for me. I had been treating other people with respect, but I was not treating myself with respect, so I went and, of course, I knew somebody was going to recognize me. And who recognized me within the first few minutes was Mr. John Holmes, the security guard I'd gotten in a fist fight with, that got me arrested and kicked out for the second time. When I saw him, I didn't know what to do. I said, "I'm sorry," and he looked at me and said, "I appreciate that. Thank you very much. I hope that makes you feel better because it doesn't do a damn thing for me." But he listened to me. At the end of that conversation, he forgave me for what I had done to him, and he encouraged me to forgive myself, but only after I went out and repaired the damage that I had caused. And I've been doing it for twenty-three years. I've used the process he used with me and that the people in record store used with me. I've helped over…I think you said three hundred, but it's closer to four-hundred, I think—over four hundred people disengage from extremism. I've worked with neo-Nazis, Klansmen, former ISIS members. That's what I do now with my organization, the Free Radicals Project. So I will just end with one challenge and I hope you will do this today and every day: I urge you to find somebody you think is undeserving of your compassion and give it to them, because I guarantee you, they may not deserve it, they may not ask for it, but they're the ones who can possibly benefit the most from it. Thank you very much.

[*audience applause*]

Fields: Thank you both for telling us these incredible journeys. I had a couple of questions for each of you, if you don't mind. I had seen your talks before I even knew about this. It's been going around for awhile. Backstage, you were talking about disengaging and compassion as the first step, but you said to really disengage you have to do some work. What do you mean by that?

Picciolini: We were having a conversation about people who had just disengaged from extremism and wanted to rush in and do the work of helping others disengage. While I do believe that former extremists can be powerful voices in helping that happen, there needs to be a lot of self-reflection that happens first. I've spent twenty-four years trying to repair the damage I've

caused, and I don't think that I'll ever stop doing that. But there are some people who think, I'm done with this, now I want to be absolved from it. Unfortunately, it doesn't work that way. Daryl said something very, very, important about communication. I think so much of communication has to do with listening instead of speaking, and I think we forget that. I'm not suggesting we listen to the bad things that they say, or the bad words, or the toxic ideas that they're spewing. For me it's about listening for those potholes, because I understand that haters—people who hate—really, it's based on a self-hatred being projected onto other people. Hate is like a suit of armor that allows you to project what you're feeling on to others so that you don't have to deal with it yourself. It's hard for them to recognize that what they're feeling about other people is actually what they feel about themselves. Uncertainty drives so much of this. But the work really is about repairing the damage you've caused. It's not about being a public speaker and telling your story, but about committing yourself to going out into the world and showing compassion for those who maybe don't deserve it, or being empathetic when maybe you don't feel like it. It's about working in communities that are vulnerable, that have been marginalized. So, it really can mean a million different things for different people, but essentially it is about the penance you have to do, the responsibility that we have after having been involved in something, to let the world know, to shed some light on the truth of what's happening.

Fields: Most of us don't go toward extremism, and so we don't listen so much. We kind of just go about life not realizing how rich life and relationships are. It's almost like your experience of extremism: it almost became a gift in a certain way for you to be able to…I mean, it's kind of like St. Paul. You know, St. Paul was just so vicious and then he changed, he appreciated the change in himself so much. And that work means so much to you. I'm not saying it was it's good what you did—

Picciolini: I mean, it really is a responsibility once you recognize that you've led a toxic lifestyle. To just wash your hands of it and walk away and not commit yourself to helping the people that might come after you—I think it's kind of skirting your responsibility. It can mean something different for everybody. Not everybody is a public speaker or makes TV shows or writes books, but they can change their own communities. They can change, help

people that are closest to them change. I think knowing what I know, having been through what I know, I have a responsibility to make sure no other fourteen-year-olds go down that same path. I try to be the person I wish came to me in that alley when I was fourteen.

Fields: Daryl, you said that you have to begin with discussion and compassion. That somehow is the icebreaker, too. I mean, you look at everything that's happening in the world and the news, you don't hear this—that there's a power that can change things, and it's as simple as being looked at. It can break through an identity. It happened to you; it didn't happen to everybody; but something can happen when you engage a person.

Picciolini: Hatred is born of ignorance. Fear is its father and isolation is its mother. It is the perfect marriage to create a sense of fear that then is projected onto others.

Fields: Daryl, you to the Klans people, "How can you hate me if you don't know me?" Can you expand a little bit on that?

Davis: My parents were in the U.S. foreign service. I grew up as an American Embassy brat starting in 1961 at the age of three, traveling overseas. You live in a country for two years and then you come back home to the States. You're here for a few months, then you get transferred to another country for two years. Back and forth, back and forth. Today, I play all over the world as a musician. When you combine my travels as a kid with my travels as an adult, I have now been to a total of fifty-seven different countries on six continents. I've literally seen a multitude of ethnicities, cultures, religions, colors, you name it; and all of that has helped shape who I've become and my perspectives. One of my favorite quotes of all time is by Mark Twain and it's called the "travel quote." Mark Twain said, "Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime." It's so true.

One time, when I came back from overseas, we moved to Belmont, Massachusetts, which is a suburb of Boston, and I was one of two black kids in the entire school. Me in fourth grade, 1968, and a little black girl in second grade. So, I really didn't see much of her except, like, at recess or lunchtime.

Consequently, all of my friends were white and in fourth and fifth grade. A lot of my guy friends were members of the Cub Scouts and they invited me to join in 1968. I joined the Cub Scouts. We had a parade, marching from Lexington to Concorde, the route that Paul Revere rode: Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, Cub Scouts, Brownies, 4H Club, and a bunch of other organizations. I was the only black participant and my Den Mother let me carry the American flag. Streets were blocked off, sidewalks lined with nothing but white people cheering and waving and yelling, "The British are coming!" and all that kind of thing. [*audience laughter*] Everybody is happy. But somewhere down this parade route, suddenly I got hit with bottles and rocks and soda pop cans, and debris from the street by a small group of spectators off to my right. And I can still see the picture in my mind: I remember it being a couple of kids, maybe my age or a year older, and a couple of adults—might have been their parents—and they were throwing things. Because I had no precedent for it, my first inclination was, "Oh, these people over here don't like the Scouts." That's how naive I was. It wasn't until my Den Mother, Cubmaster, and Troop Leader all came running and huddled over me with their bodies—these are white people—and escorted me out of the danger, that I asked, "Why? Why are they hitting me? I didn't do anything." And all they would say is, "Shhh, Daryl, move along Daryl, move along, it'll be okay." They never answered my question.

When I got home, my mother and father, who were not at the parade, were putting Band-Aids on me and cleaning me up, and asking me, "How did you fall down and get all scraped up?" I told them I didn't fall down. I told them exactly what happened. I had always been able to go to them if I had a problem or a question. They never lied to me. Never. Either they answered the question or solved the problem, or they gave me the tools by which I could derive the solution or answer. I didn't have big brothers and sisters to go to; my parents got it right the first time. [*audience laughter*] So, I relied on my folks. When they told me why this was happening to me, I literally did not believe them for the first time in my life. My ten-year-old brain could not wrap itself around the idea that someone who had never seen me, someone who had never spoken to me, someone who knew absolutely nothing about me, would want to hurt me for no other reason

than this, the color of my skin. It made no sense, so I thought my parents were lying to me. And then a month and a half later, that same year, 1968, on April 4th, Martin Luther King was assassinated. And nearby, in Boston, right here in New York City, my hometown of Chicago, Washington, D.C., and Baltimore and Philadelphia and Detroit—they all burned with destruction and violence, all in the name of this new word that I learned called *racism*. Then I understood that this racism thing existed but I didn't know why. So at that age I formed a question, which was, "How can you hate me if you don't even know me?" And for the last fifty-one years I've been looking for the answer to that question. I bought books on black supremacy, white supremacy, the Ku Klux Klan, the Nazis in Germany, the neo-Nazis over here, looking for the answer. I asked people, they didn't know. "Well, you know, some people are just like that." That was the only answer I could get. It wasn't good enough. So, one day I graduated with my degree in music from Howard University and I was playing in a country band. Country music had made a resurgence. There had been a movie out called *Urban Cowboy* with John Travolta and this mechanical bull, right? Remember that? And all the clubs that were doing Top 40, they switched over to country. So, I joined a country band. I'm the only black guy in the band. So anyway, here's a funny thing: Christian and I were sitting in the dressing room before we came out here, and he's a musician as well; I asked him, "What do you play, blues?" He says, "No, I wasn't playin' blues back then, because I was in a white power Skinhead band." I said, "What were you playing?" "Rock 'n' roll." I said, "Don't you know rock 'n' roll is black, too?" Anyway…[*audience laughter*]

Picciolini: I knew the same three cords, too.

Fields: That's going to unite us, those three cords.

Davis: But anyway, I'd been in this band, and I'd come off the bandstand after a break, and I'm following the band back to the band table, and this white gentleman comes up behind me and puts his arm around my shoulder and says, "I really enjoy you'alls music." I said, "Thank you." I shook his hand and he points at the stage and says, "I've seen this here band before, but I've never seen you before. Where did you come from?" And I explained yes, I just joined the band, and yes, they've been here before. He was like, "Man, I sure like your piano playing. That's the first time I ever heard a black man

play piano like Jerry Lee Lewis." Now, I was not offended, but I was kind of surprised that this guy did not know the black origin of Jerry Lee's style, so I went on to tell him that he learned it from the same place I did: from black blues and boogie-woogie piano players. That's where rockabilly and rock 'n' roll came from. "Oh, no, no no. Jerry Lee invented that. I've never seen a black man play like that except for you." Well, he was fascinated with me. I said, "Look, man, Jerry Lee's a friend of mine. He told me himself where he learned how to play." He didn't believe that, either, but he wanted to buy me a drink. I go back to his table, I get a cranberry juice, he clinks my glass, and cheers me and tells me this is the first time he ever sat down and had a drink with a black man. Now I'm curious. What's going on here? I asked him. Turns out he was a member of the Ku Klux Klan. We had a good conversation, but it was music that brought us together.

Not that night, but a long time afterward it dawned on me: Daryl, the answer to the question that's been plaguing you since age ten fell right into your lap. Who better to ask that question to than someone who went so far as to a join an organization with over a hundred-year history of practicing hatred for people who do not look like them? I got back in contact with that Klansman and got him to fix me up with other Klans people that I could interview, and that's how I wrote my first book on the Klan. Through those conversations. Rather than turn that hate back at him, because he was hating, something like that—no: take that and turn it around. You know, everything can be used to a positive or negative degree. You take fire, right? It's a double-edged sword. I can take fire, I can bring fire to your house and heat your house, or I can bring fire to your house and burn it down. So, we try to take things and use them in a positive light. And this is what led to me meeting a lot of Klan people and neo-Nazis, and through those conversations, some of them, many of them, ended up leaving that ideology and giving me their robes and hoods. I have a whole collection of robes and hoods. [*audience applause*]

You take somebody where Christian was in his former life at this end, then take me at this end. [*gestures with hands far apart*] If he's willing to sit down and have a conversation, even though we're at opposite ends of the spectrum, there is an opportunity to plant a seed. You have to nourish that

seed, okay? That's some of the work that Christian's talking about doing; you can't just jump out there and do it. You have to nourish it, you've got to learn it. So, you nourish those seeds, you find commonality, and then you go from here to here. [*gestures with hands far apart, then brings them closer*] Now you've created a relationship from here to here. It's a relationship. You begin nurturing that relationship and you're crossing that divide.

Picciolini: The answer in the middle is music, I think. [*audience reacts*]

Davis: That's right! So that by the time you get here you've found a lot of commonalities. And guess what? When you get here, trivial things you have in contrast, such as the color of your skin, or whether you go to a church, or a temple, or synagogue, or a mosque—it doesn't matter anymore at all. You get together with people and have these conversations, do the work, but understand what you're doing first. And I think Christian can elaborate.

Picciolini: I have that same philosophy. If we can meet in the middle on the things that are fundamentally important to us—our families and what brings us meaning—even if we're on the opposite ends of the spectrum, we can find connection in those things and we can start the conversations there. Eventually we may get off track ideologically, politically, whatever, but we have a reference point to come back to. If we start out on the opposite ends of the spectrum and never find a way to get to the middle, we will never get there.

Fields: I'd like to thank you both for giving real flesh to the title of this talk, "A Paper-Thin Distance." Thank you both.

Our Tears Are The Same

An Israeli and a Palestinian share their stories of reconciliation, with ***Bassam Aramin****, International Spokesperson for The Parents Circle-Families Forum, and* ***Robi Damelin****, Director of International Relations, The Parents Circle-Families Forum.*

Introduction

The Parents Circle-Families Forum ("PCFF") is the only association in the world that does not wish to welcome any new members into its fold. The bloody conflict between the Israeli and Palestinian societies has taken a heavy toll on each of its members. Each of them, in fact, has lost an immediate family member to the ongoing conflict. It is through this pain that all of the PCFF members have chosen to exchange their feelings of rage and revenge, helplessness, despair and the void, with activities of hope for reconciliation.

Speakers will show that when attention is paid to a shared human experience rather than to abstract ideas and preconceptions, seemingly unbridgeable distances between people are discovered to be, in reality, paper-thin.

Marta Zaknoun, moderator: Good afternoon and welcome to everyone on behalf of the Encounter. I'm Marta Zaknoun and I will moderate this event. I would like, first of all, to sincerely thank the American friends of

the Parents Circle-Families Forum for sponsoring this presentation. Robi Damelin and Bassam Aramin are our guest speakers, have been members of the Parents Circle-Families Forum for many years, and as they explicitly requested, I'm not going to read their bios, because they're gonna tell us their stories. Unfortunately, Bassam could not be with us in person because of a health problem, but we are very fortunate to have Robi here with us and a video recording from Bassam, so we will be able to hear their stories. Today, I'm very happy to have the opportunity to listen to Robi and Bassam. I, myself, come from Jerusalem. I lived as a Christian Palestinian within the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for many years, and so I'm very eager to listen to them. I think what is special about today is that it's going to be a different conversation. All of us, I think—or many of us, I assume—have at some point engaged in a conversation about this conflict. Inevitably, we all fall into the temptation of wanting to pick a side, and subonsciously absorb the ideologies around us. So I think what is interesting about today is that the point of departure is beyond ideologies, beyond slogans, and instead comes from true personal experience.

We're going to start with Robi.

Robi Damelin: Wow, what a lot of people! Thank you very much. I find myself in the weirdest of places. I mean, what is this nice Jewish girl doing at the Catholic Encounter? [*audience laughter*] As I was listening to the last session, I was thinking how extraordinary it all is that our work is so intertwined, and that what we're all doing is more or less the same thing, because we believe in transformation. Because if you don't think people can change, there isn't very much point in doing this work. I was thinking, too: What makes a person a survivor or a victim? You can choose. Where are your first social acts, your very first act of social justice? I looked back and I promise you, when you go home tonight and you put your head on the pillow, start thinking about why you came here today. There must be a reason long ago that you did something to make a difference, or you had some act of social justice. So normally, if we didn't have so many people, I would ask everybody to tell me the worst thing they ever did, or the first act of social justice, so I'll share with you mine. As you probably recognized by now, I don't exactly have an Israeli accent. I was born in South Africa, and I remember my first act when I was five years old.

There used to be a man who delivered the milk with a horse and cart. I love animals, but he used to beat the horse and I couldn't bear it. So, me and my friend, Barbara Fudge, decided we would steal the horse. I was about this high [*gestures about hip height*] and this is a huge carthorse. We took carrots, and we went to the dairy and we stole the horse. We brought it home and we put it in my tennis court, and of course my father came home, and you can imagine how delighted he was to find a horse in the tennis court. Shortly after that, I got sent to a very British boarding school, [*audience laughter*] and I was very naughty, so they sent me to a convent. I was thinking, Where does this all come from, what made me a survivor? There are so many acts in my life.

When the army came to tell me that David had been killed by a Palestinian sniper, apparently one of the first things that I said was, "You may not kill anybody in the name of my child." I have no idea that I even said that, but I was told that's what I said. And that is quite extraordinary, because it was almost a premonition of what I was going to do with my life. There's nothing worse than losing a child. It's as if somebody comes and tears your heart out and changes your whole perspective on life. No joy is ever the same, but you can make choices. Do you die with your child as many people do? Maybe not physically, but they stay at home and they do nothing. Or do you want to make a difference and try to prevent other families from experiencing this pain? And I knew that I wanted to do something, because we had to do something to end this madness.

I remember the very first time—it must have been three months after David was killed—they asked me to come to a demonstration in Tel Aviv and talk to something like 60,000 people. It couldn't have been more than three months. Normally, I never write anything, and people don't actually believe me that I just make it up as I go along, but for this event I wrote, because I really wanted to have good Hebrew. I read it and I walked up onto the stage. And I suddenly found the speech again about a year ago and realized that it was a premonition of what I was going to do with the rest of my life, because in this speech I said, "We cannot do this alone; we must have a partner in the Palestinians, we share the same pain." A religious Jewish man came to see me after that. I became quite infamous, I would say, not too famous, for the things that I said about the occupation. He came to see me, and he invited me

to a weekend in east Jerusalem with other bereaved parents, both Palestinian and Israeli. I didn't really want to go, but he was more of a bulldozer than me and I promise you that's hard to find. So, I just said, Okay, I'll go. When I walked into the room and I looked into the eyes of the Palestinian mothers, I realized almost immediately that we shared the same pain, and that the tears are the same color, and that we could be the most incredible, powerful force if we would stand on the same stage and talk in the same voice for nonviolence and reconciliation. I just closed my office and decided: *This is it; this is my life from now on*. I started to travel all over the world. I thought it was a really a big deal. I could speak English, so I went to the House of Lords, and to Congress, and to hip-hop concerts, and wherever anybody invited me. By the way, do not be selective about who you talk to, because those you don't agree with, if you will not talk to them, they will become more radical; it's a problem worldwide.

I was really very pleased with myself. But then one night I was sitting at my computer when there was a knock on the door. I went to the door and opened it, and saw three soldiers. When you see three soldiers it can only mean one thing—so I slammed the door in their face. I thought, I cannot lose another child; this is beyond anything I can handle. And they kept knocking and knocking and knocking, and eventually I opened the door. And they said, "We came to tell you that we caught the man who killed David." There was no sense of joy or any kind of revenge or anything in my heart. There was only a fear now. You see, you can walk around the world and you can talk about peace and love and forgiving, and you can read bad poetry, but do you really, really, mean it? And this was a really difficult time for me, because I didn't know. I thought, There's now a face to the man who killed my child. How can I go around the world talking about reconciliation if I'm not willing to face this? I didn't sleep for something like three months. Really and honestly, I was wandering around my apartment all night long, thinking, What can I do?

Eventually I wrote a letter to the family of Thiah—Thiah is the name of the man who killed my son. There were two Palestinians who delivered the letter from our group, and in the letter, I told them all about David. David was a student at Tel Aviv University, and he was studying for his Master's in

the philosophy of education. He was part of the peace movement, and he didn't really want to serve in the occupied territories at all. He came to see me before he had to do his reserves. You know, in Israel after you finish the army, you have to continue to serve for many, many, years—like, three weeks every year. And he said, "I don't know what to do. If I don't go, what will happen to my students?" He was teaching philosophy to students who were going to be inducted into the army. "Is that the right example? If I don't go, what happens to my soldiers?" He was the officer. "And if I go, I will treat people with dignity and so will all my soldiers."

So here you are: you think you know the person behind the gun; I don't think you do. And here's a young man who's grown up in this dilemma of not wanting to carry a gun, and not wanting to be violent, and yet being swept along with the mess of people in agreement. I also told the family that we had to meet; we owed it to our children and grandchildren. I told him about the Parents Circle. We are more than six hundred families—everybody who has lost an immediate family member—and what we believe in, the vision that we have for the future, is that there has to be a framework for a reconciliation process as an integral part of any future peace agreement, political peace agreement; because if it isn't that, at best we can have a cease fire until the next time. So, all the work that we're doing on the ground is geared towards that.

After the letter was delivered—I'm not the most patient character in the Middle East, as I think Maria can probably tell you by now, who has looked after me like a little girl since I arrived—I imagined that I would immediately get a letter back from the sniper. But of course, one has to realize that there's no such thing as instant reconciliation. It is a process. It may never happen. And so every day I was there and I waited, and it took something like three years until I got a letter that came through the Palestinian website, telling me that I'm crazy. It's like I was telling Congress…can I tell the story? Why not. [*audience laughter*]

I was visiting Congress and we had a briefing, and I was giving a whole big speech about the Parents Circle: we lost our budget because your beloved administration decided to cut off cross-border budgets, cross-border activity funding, which is something like 30% of our funding. So, I said, "The Parents Circle really needs a sugar daddy," and there was a dead silence. Then

everybody started laughing, because it doesn't mean in South Africa or in England what it means here in the States. So, you have to be very careful with words. [*audience laughter*]

This is actually a lesson in how to understand other peoples' cultures. We don't usually understand other people's cultures, and so we go blundering in and doing the most terrible things to offend people. What we must learn—somewhere along the line—is good manners. You'd be amazed how that works.

In any event, this letter came after three years and it was from Thiah, and he said I was crazy, and that I should stay away from his family, and that he had killed ten people to free Palestine. Well, I actually knew that wasn't exactly true, because his parents had told us that when he was a very little boy, he saw his uncle violently killed by the Israeli army, and then he lost two uncles in the second uprising. I think he saw his actions as revenge. He became a folk hero.

When I wrote the letter is when I gave up being a victim. He could no longer affect who I am. My life was no longer contingent upon what this man does or says. I'm free. When you give up being a victim of circumstance, you become free, and that is the most extraordinary feeling.

What happened is, two filmmakers arrived and asked if I would go with them to South Africa to look at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. We wanted to meet perpetrators and victims who had given evidence at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission after Mandela came out of jail, and we wanted lessons about what we could learn for Israel and Palestine. What I wanted personally was to ask, What is the meaning of forgiving? You might all ask yourself that same question. It's such a personal thing. Do you come at it through your religion? Is it something that is inborn within you? Do you recognize that if you cannot forgive, then you will be a prisoner for the rest of your life? How do you come to all of that? I wanted to meet people who'd actually experienced physical forgiving. I met a South African woman whose daughter had been killed by the African military wing. She'd gone to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and said to the people who killed her daughter, "I forgive you." What does she mean? I wanted to understand, and I went to meet her. She said her definition of forgiving is giving up your

just right to revenge. That meant something to me. And then I went to meet the man who actually sent the people to kill her daughter, and I thought he was gonna be some kind of monster. He turns out to be this incredible man of integrity. He said, "By her forgiving me, she released me from the prison of my inhumanity." How strong is that statement? Imagine: "By her forgiving me, she released me from the prison of my inhumanity."

I went back to Israel and decided it was time to meet the sniper. But red tape is in the way: I need permission from the Minister of Justice, and I need permission from the police, and I need a go-between—I don't use the word mediator—I need a go-between. Who's the most perfect person? In a few minutes you will see a wonderful message from Basssam, who, by the way, sends his love to all of you. He was the one I wanted to be the mediator, and you'll know exactly why after you see him. Eventually, I realized that the person in the way was actually me. It's a scary thing to do, to go and meet the person who killed your child. But I decided I had to do this—more for completion than anything else.

I went to meet the Minister of Justice. You realize that, in Israel, we have a lot of elections lately? I don't know if you've noticed, but every couple of months we have a new minister of something. So that minister was a Minister of Justice, and she gave me permission, and she gave permission for Bassam to be the mediator—not mediator, the go-between. We were waiting for the police, and then we had elections, and then we got a Minister of "Just Us" who had no intention of letting me go into the jail.

So that's where the story is at the moment, but what an incredible gratitude I have in my life for all the wonderful people I've met along the way, and for the understanding that people can change. Thank you.

Zaknoun: Thank you so much. You will now watch the video from Bassam. As I mentioned earlier, because of health issues he unfortunately could not be with us, but we will watch his witness and then have the opportunity to ask Robi some questions.

Bassam Aramin: Hello, everyone. Thank you very much for inviting us, and for this opportunity to talk to you. I will start with my part of this story. My name is Bassam. I am a Palestinian. I'm a Muslim, which is by chance, it's not my decision, but I am very proud to be a Muslim.

Briefly, it's very difficult to be a Palestinian. It's very difficult to grow up under a strange occupation by people you don't know and who don't speak your language. You don't know why they came to control your life, to occupy you. It's very easy to become a fighter or a warrior. It's very easy to hate those strangers. You don't need education to hate the occupation.

At the age of thirteen, I started with four kids a local military group—that's what we called it—and we started by raising the Palestinian flag, which was a crime at that time. We noticed that the soldiers became crazy when they saw the Palestinian flag, and we just wanted to make them crazy. This is how we started our struggle. At the age of sixteen, we found some weapons in a cave—two grenades and other military materials that we didn't know how to use. Two of my friends threw the two grenades at the Israeli soldier patrols in our village near Hebron, and, of course, they harmed no one because they disn't know how to use the grenades in a professional way. One year later, we were arrested. The first one gets twenty-one years in jail, and nineteen, fifteen, fourteen, and I had seven years.

I learned in jail that if you know your enemy, you can defeat him or you can kill him. If you only hate him, you will kill yourself. I started to study Hebrew—their language—to know how to kill or to defeat my enemy. Then I watched, by chance, a movie about the Holocaust. And for the Palestinians, we don't believe in the Holocaust. We think it's a big lie, and they use this big lie to justify their crimes against our people. Because of this big lie we lost our country, we became a people of refugees. We paid a price for this crime that has never happened. And because we don't believe it, we don't want to know anything about it. In spite of that, I wanted to enjoy this movie as a kind of revenge, to see someone who was tortured, killed him. I wanted to someone arrest my enemy and occupy him, because I am in their jails and because they occupied my people.

What happened after a few minutes was, I found myself crying. It was sympathy for those innocent people. I started to hide my tears from other prisoners. I cannot believe that there are human beings who can do such things to other human beings. I said to myself, *It's just a movie; nothing like this exists in reality*. But I decided I wanted to understand more about this big lie, to see if it really happened or if it was just a movie. It took many years.

I eventually earned my Master's degree about the Holocaust at Bradford University in the U.K. Then, after that, I started to visit death camps in Germany.

But back to jail. In jail, it's a long seven years. Briefly, they taught us how to hate them, how to be more determined to continue fighting them because of their brutal behavior. They didn't arrest us and send us through a rehabilitation process. No; their goal is to kill our humanity in every moment, because for them we are the bad guys; and for us, of course, they are the bad guys. They are the occupiers and we are freedom fighters. We have a mission to survive in order to continue our way, our struggle, to liberate ourselves and our land.

In 1992, after seven years, I still believed in armed struggle as the only way to talk to those people. When I say "people," I mean the Israeli soldiers, the Israeli army. Those are the kinds of Israelis the Palestinians know. The checkpoints in our villages, in our cities, our refugee camps. So it's very easy to justify your struggle against militants. In 1993 we had the Oslo Agreement, and for the first time ann agreement between the PLO and Israel. Suddenly, we have peace. We start to see the Israelis in our cities everywhere, we go everywhere to Israel, and for normal people this is peace: freedom of movement. Most of the Israelis and Palestinians support this agreement, because they want to live a normal life in peace, and this is what happened to me.

I am also part of the Palestinian people. It's not a personal problem between my family and Israel, so I supported this agreement and I started to believe that that, finally, we have peace. We started to prepare ourselves that we could live together, and this was the reality. In fact, I got married and started to have kids, and suddenly I had six kids, and those kids became my Palestine, my homeland, my world. I wanted to do everything possible to protect them, which unfortunately is an impossible mission if you live in Palestine. And in Israel—it's not at the same level, but still, you have no safe place for yourself. And sometimes, if you survive, it's just by chance, which is not a normal life.

I discovered in 1994 that for more than one hundred years we were trying to kill each other, defeat each other. And we did everything possible in spite,

against Israel and the United States of America, with the rest of the world against the Palestinians. But we forgot to die. We're still here, with more blood, more pain, more victims, and through negotiation we understand that maybe we can get some kind of agreement. I had to ask myself, Why did I spend seven years in Israeli occupation jails? As long as our leaders can sit down and achieve such an agreement, why didn't they didn't make it twenty, thirty, forty years ago? They will save thousands of lives on both sides.

I started to be active in my society and in the Palestinian's fight. We needed to change our methods to achieve our goal. It's the same goal: to end the Israeli occupation. We never changed it. We will never change it. But how to achieve it? I understood that the Israeli people must come to support us, to end their own occupation, because this is our common enemy. In fact, to support themselves to stop to be occupiers and oppressors.

In 2002, I heard in the Israeli media about something called *Refuseniks*, which are ex-Israeli soldiers and officers who refuse to serve in the occupied territories or in Palestine, because they want to live in a moral place. They don't want to be part of this illegal and immoral occupation. I wanted to meet those people, to understand why they refused to continue occupying us. In 2005, we had the first meeting between four Palestinian ex-prisoners—I was one of them—with seven ex-Israeli officers and soldiers. It was the most difficult meeting for each one of us. We hated each other. We didn't trust each other. And we did our best to kill each other, physically, from both sides. This meeting took place for about four hours. It continued off and on for one year, and we discovered that we are the same: we wanted to kill each other because we wanted peace and security for ourselves, our families, and our people. Of course, each one from his point of view.

After one year, we had three hundred members, all of them ex-prisoners and ex-soldiers—ex-enemies. We decided to lay down our weapons and create a movement. We called it: Combatants for Peace. We started to work together. Nelson Mandela said, If you want to make peace with your enemy, you need to work with your enemy, then he become syour partner. It's not only to talk to your enemy, but to work together against your common enemy, which is the occupation and the hatred and the violence.

This is what happened: we started to work together. Two years later,

on the 16th of January, 2007, a teenage Israeli border police officer shoots and kills my 10-year-old daughter, Abir, whose name means "the scent of the flower." Ten years old, my fair child, and in front of her school, 9:30 in the morning, from a distance of fifteen to twenty meters, shot in her head, from the back. She was with her sister, Areen, and two other girls in front of her school. She fell down, and two days later she passed away in Hadassah University Hospital in Jerusalem. It's the most difficult thing that could happen to anyone on earth. Especially because Abir was only ten years old. She didn't know anything about the conflict. She didn't know anything about the Palestinians and Israelis. She paid the highest price because she was in the wrong place, wrong time, and because she was a Palestinian.

The most difficult thing is to recognize that there is no revenge, which is very easy. It means to kill the rest of the Jews on earth. You need to know how to live with this pain, how to manage this pain. Always I said: "One Israeli soldier killed my daughter, but more than one-hundred ex-Israeli soldiers from Combatants for Peace built Abir's garden, named in her memory, with the help of an American organization called the Rebuilding Alliance. One can kill, one hundred can build. I want to prove that we can use our pain in a different way, and not only for revenge. And revenge is not always to kill. We can take revenge in a different way. I believe when Jesus said, "Love your enemy," it's a kind of revenge, because when you love your enemy, he cannot harm you. You will eliminate him with your morals, with your humanity. In fact, I joined the Parents Circle two days after I lost my daughter. I knew of this organization two years before I lost my daughter, because one of the co-founders of Combatants for Peace was from the Israeli side, and was a bereaved brother. He lost his daughter, fourteen years old, Smadar, to a Palestinian suicide bomber on the 4th of September, 1997. I got to know her father, now my brother, Rami Elhanan. We became very close friends. Always I wanted to ask him about his daughter, about Smadar. But I said, Maybe he forgets. Because sometimes we laugh and he looks normal. Then, after what happened to Abir, I understand now that he never forgets, he will never forget. We just try to escape from our pain; there's no other way.

I know Robi, my dear love, Robi. She was a little bit famous in the Palestinian media, so I knew the parents had heard her message. But in my

wildest dreams I couldn't have thought to join this amazing group. We are more than six-hundred and twenty families, Israelis and Palestinians, who get to understand that we have the moral authority to raise up our voice and to say, "No more blood, we don't want to see more blood." We paid the highest price. Jerusalem: we love Jerusalem. It's a holy place for the Christians. It's a holy place for the Jewish people. It's a paradise for the Muslims. Every Muslim around the world believes and wishes to die in Jerusalem, without any connection to the Israelis or the Jews or the occupation, because we believe that paradise will be there in Jerusalem. We call it the Capital of the Sky, the Key of the Sky, the widest city on earth, so we love it. And I believe millions of people are ready to die just for the name of Jerusalem. But instead of enjoying this love of Jerusalem, together we kill each other for Jerusalem.

We meet each other underground. I'm not sure if Jerusalem knows who we are. We need to decide what is more important: our lives or the holy stones of Jerusalem and other places. The parents said, We want to prove that we are partners, and we can be partners only. We don't need to love each other. Because of the blood of our kids, we can be partners, we can be friends, we can be brothers, and we can be family. Because we are the same. I wish you peace and justice. Thank you very much for listening and for giving me this opportunity to talk to you. [*audience applause*]

Zaknoun: Robi, I want to ask you a question—well, I guess it's for both of you, in a way. Bassam touched upon the Holocaust, and that generally it's something not accepted as a fact in Palestinian society. He said he was moved in prison when he saw the movie and he cried. My question to you is: How much, for both sides, is the process of knowing the other an opening to his narrative of the process of reconciliation and forgiveness? Because, as a personal journey, you had to be able to forgive; but then, who are you forgiving? Who are the people we're talking about? Can you tell us about the concept of knowledge in this?

Damelin: There are so many questions in what you just asked me. I think, mainly, the work that we're doing is to make that emotional breakthrough, through a person telling you their personal story. It's very hard to resist. Even the hardest of hearts, and people who don't agree with you, if they hear someone talking and telling his story, how can they not be moved? So that

is the, I would say, the main way that we work in the Parents Circle. We run a lot of workshops where people tell their story; but also, they have to learn it's not all about hugging and kissing and eating hummus. It's much deeper than that. And to really tell the truth to somebody, so they will get to the point where they will trust you regardless. Now here's the deal, the difference between mediation and dialogue. One is all about listening with empathy, whether you agree or not; and the other one is a compromise. So, I'm all for dialogue in the meantime. And so that's how we work, even with kids. We go into Israeli schools—something like three or four hundred schools, each having about eight classrooms, nine classrooms of seventeen-year-old kids. How many in the audience have been to Israel and Palestine? Quite a lot. Well, the average seventeen-year-old kid in Israel has never met a Palestinian in his life, so if I go into his classroom with Bassam, and for the first time they really experience Bassam's narrative—of course, you all understand why I want him to be the go-between—they cannot help but be moved. They don't all become Martin Luther King, okay? But when they go to the army, they will have recognized, maybe for the first time, the humanity in the other, and that's a really important part of all of the work that we do. And it's the same when I go into Palestinian villages, where I'm not really allowed to go.

I believe that women need to come to the table now, right? Women need to come to the table, and so I do a lot of work in the West Bank with women. When you first walk into the house, there's a kind of antagonism until you tell your story. Why would they think I'm any different—who have they met, ever, that's not in uniform, or is not a settler? So why would they see me as somebody different? Just a mother with the same pain as them? All of the work we do here is introducing ourselves to each other, through our stories.

We have a summer camp, which is real good fun, and my grandchildren have been facilitators for the last couple of years. I'm so proud, because I didn't push them to do this, they did it on their own accord. It's just extraordinary to watch the women's group grow, and see how they are going through a course right now on reconciliation. We cannot stop this work. Whatever it is, you have to take it into your own communities, too, because the world is becoming polarized. It's either pro-Israel or pro-Palestine, and by doing that, what you're doing is importing our conflict into your country and creating

hatred between Jews and Muslims, and I'm sure you don't want to do that. [*audience applause*]

Zaknoun: I was thinking about Bassam's story. This man obviously had a change of heart while in jail. He comes out of jail and becomes what you might call a peace activist, or at least he sits at the table with ex-military people and talks to them. He says the conversation is difficult, it's not easy. Then he works towards peace, he works towards this dialogue, and then his daughter is tragically killed in this conflict. And David was in the peace movement. So how do people who believe so strongly in peace keep believing and nurturing this, and defending this concept of reconciliation through this pain? What is it that gives you hope?

Damelin: I don't know. There's not a recipe for this, but I think it's a lot of introspective work all the time. This is hard to say, but the man who killed David didn't kill David because he was David. If he'd known him, he never could have done that. He killed his uniform; that's the truth. That's very hard to say, but if we start to really look within, and to understand…it's very hard for me to explain to you. I mean, I've watched myself change, because I've got a tongue like a viper and I could wipe everybody out in a minute. But that doesn't serve any purpose whatsoever, because all you do is close people off. You have to learn that there is a rhetoric of peace. You have to really believe it within yourself, and that means you have to be at peace with yourself. I'm so grateful for that. People can't actually understand when I talk about gratitude, because they say, "How can you be grateful? You lost a child?" Of course I lost a child; it's the worst thing that can happen to anybody. I'm a fixer, but I couldn't fix this. Yet I'm so grateful that I could take something from within me and touch other people's hearts, and then maybe just change somebody so that they would become non-violent. It's not for me to make you love anybody. But I might make you respect them as a human being and see their humanity. That's the only thing I can really do. [*audience applause*]

Zaknoun: You were telling me the other day about Bushra. Bushra is the Palestinian mom you will see later in a video clip, in a song that will conclude our meeting. Can you tell us about that episode?

Damelin: All right, for this I'll stand up, because I respect her. I told you I move around in the West Bank a lot with women, and I went to this

meeting and there were only Palestinian women there. I was only Israeli. This woman walked in—and you'll get to know her quite soon through this clip—she had a necklace with a picture of her son, which meant to me very clearly that she had lost her child. She recognized that I was Israeli, and she wanted to run away. This is the story of how you make that emotional breakthrough. I caught her at the door and I asked her, "Please stay. I want you to tell me what happened to your son." We sat down, and she sat with her back to me like this, which is really rude, you know? But I wanted her to understand that I was there with empathy. I asked her who she lost, and how old he was, and what happened. She told me the whole story. Then I said, "Would you like to see a picture of David?" and she reluctantly said, "Okay." She turned towards me, and I had the picture in my hand, and she said "Haram," which means, "What a pity." And that was her emotional breakthrough.

Today, Bushra is one of the most active women in the Parents Circle. She donated blood with me, she's traveled all over the world with me. For the first time in her life, I took her out of her village and we went to Lincoln Center to Women in the World. I got her addicted to hamburgers and also took her to Central Park, where we rode the horse and cart. She sat on stage and told her story, and the whole audience was in tears, and everybody stood up to applaud her. It's extraordinary. You see, she was very, very miserable and sad all the time. But slowly, slowly, she started to tell the story of Mahmoud. Eventually, we traveled all over the world together and then went to Toronto—also to Women in the World—and when she made a joke on the stage, I realized that her transformation was complete. Before we made the clip that we are going to show you now, she made one of those necklaces for me with a picture of David. You'll see it in the clip, and that's the ultimate act of love. So let's watch the clip.

[*video clip plays*]

Zaknoun: Just to conclude, I want to say that the awareness of the people we heard today, of Bassam and Robi, in itself is a miracle in the Middle East. It generates a new reality in that place; it generates a new culture. And when you live in Palestine or in Israel, I think inevitably the conflict shapes you, it shapes your identity, and the conflict is intertwined with the antagonism you have towards the other. To be able to live outside of the conflict, and to form a

new identity, to actually be defined by your own terms to be free, to really be free, to be free because you forgive—is something very rare and exceptional. I think what really struck me is that both of you let forgiveness conquer everything. Forgiveness becomes this higher ideal that really encompasses all the other ideals, which is your love for your homeland, your love for your family, your love for your community. It's really not to be taken for granted, because to be able to love your homeland in a different way, just as Bassam said, "You can love the stones, but then what? You love the stones under the ground; what's the point of that?"

I would like to conclude with a quote of John Paul II, because he often was quoted about peace in the Middle East. Very often people say there's no peace without justice, but they often leave out the part about forgiveness, which is actually very visible in what we saw in your experience. "True peace, therefore, is the fruit of justice, that moral virtue and legal guarantee which ensures full respect for rights and responsibilities, and the just distribution of benefits and burdens. But because human justice is always fragile and imperfect, subject as it is to the limitations and egoism of individuals and groups, it must include and, as it were, be completed by the forgiveness which heals and rebuilds troubled human relations from their foundations. […] Forgiveness inhabits people's hearts before it becomes a social reality. Only to the degree that an ethics and a culture of forgiveness prevail can we hope for a 'politics' of forgiveness, expressed in society's attitudes and laws, so that, through them, justice takes on a more human character."

So, thank you, Robi, for witnessing this to us. Thank you. [*audience applause*]

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Someone, Somewhere, Who Lived Fully

Witnesses on the martyrdom of 40 Burundians killed by Hutu rebels and 21 Copts killed by ISIS extremists, with ***Fr. Zacharie Bukuru****, Benedictine monk in Buta, Burundi;* ***His Grace Anba David****, bishop of the Coptic Orthodox Diocese of New York and New England; and* ***Rev. Marcel Uwineza****, SJ, Rwandan genocide survivor.*

Introduction

What do 40 young boys affirming their unity in God to the point of dying rather than giving in to hate and tribal division say to our fragmented society? What kind of life do 21 humble laborers holding fast to their faith to the point of shedding their blood witness to? What do stories of unimaginable forgiveness suggest to our seemingly unchangeable prejudices? Speakers will share stories of people who lived fully, who can be true friends.

Barbara Gagliotti, moderator: Good evening. My name is Barbara Gagliotti and I'll be moderating tonight's event. Special thanks to Plough Publishing House for sponsoring this panel discussion. After a weekend devoted to breaking out of our ideological shells, explored through a range of social, economic, artistic, and technological lenses, we've reached the extreme. Is there someone, somewhere, who is fully alive? Someone who can make the ultimate sacrifice by giving his own life to affirm the value of another

across the divide? Is there someone who could give their life for an enemy? In the next hour we will hear impossible stories of genocide and forgiveness; martyrdom and mercy; impossible to our mindset, and yet, they've happened. Let me briefly introduce our distinguished guests.

His Grace Anba David, Bishop of the Coptic Orthodox Diocese of New York and New England, which is a Diocese of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria, Egypt. His Grace will reflect upon the experience of the twenty-one Egyptian men executed by ISIS militants in 2015. Fr. Zacharie Bukuru is a Benedictine monk and Abbot of the Benedictine monastery in Buta, Burundi. He was rector of the minor seminary there when armed rebels attacked the compound during the country's civil war in 1997. Fr. Marcel Uwineza is a Jesuit priest and a survivor of the Rwandan genocide of 1994. He is currently completing his PhD in theology at Boston College. Welcome all. [*audience applause*]

Rev. Marcel Uwineza, SJ: It is a distinguished honor to come here and share my story. I come from a country of wounds. I come from Rwanda. That's a small country of twelve million, but a country that is, a country filled with many wounds and unreconciled memories. To give you an idea of what the country has gone through, especially in the last twenty-five years since the genocide, I will show you a short clip so that you understand the magnitude of what we suffered, and why forgiveness means a lot to us.

[*video clip plays*]

The tragedy that we have known in the last twenty-five years has left a lot of wounds, and my story is a part of those wounds. But it is a story that has become a testimony. My father had already been killed in 1992, accused of having collaborated with those who were trying to save some Tutsis, so we had him buried. Now in 1994, as the genocide really begins, we go to the nearby Catholic Church and we hope that the pastor will accommodate us, since the whole country was after the Tutsis. We arrived there with my mother, my grandmother, my two brothers, and my sister. Two other brothers and sister were left to my aunt, and then we arrived at this parish. We ask the pastor to accommodate us at least for one night. My mother who was a great teacher told the pastor, "Father, we have nowhere else to go. Could you accommodate us at least for one night?" And the pastor, Fr. Joseph, he

looked at us and he said, "I have no place for Tutsis here. You go away." My mother insisted, "How can you say such a thing? You are a man of God." And he insisted—and mind you, this is happening in the local language in Kinyarwanda, which I understood completely—and he said, "I have made it clear. You go away. I have even chased the others." Then my mom said, "Maybe you don't have rooms at the rectory. Can we get into the church building and at least spend one night there?" Then he asks the gatekeeper to go and lock the church. We are left there.

It is the evening, and fortunately—this is the beauty and the complexity of Rwanda—not every Hutu is going out to kill. This wonderful man—I will show a picture at the end—this wonderful man, Mr. Kabera, he saw us meandering around the church and he said, "Come; I take you to my home." He took us to his home, where he had a beehive compound. Hives where there were many bees, and the compound was fenced. The genocide happened during the rainy season, for those of you have watched some movies, *Hotel Rwanda* and the like. We were put into this compound, and the bees were friendlier than human beings. Kabera would come at around 2:00 a.m., when everything was quiet, and would bring us food. Now, the complexity of Rwanda is that whoever was not going to the roadblocks or to hunt the Tutsis would be also be suspected. So they began to wonder whether Kabera was hiding some Tutsis, and they gave him a notice that they were coming to search his house. One particular night, Kabera gives us food, coming when everything is quiet, so that they don't suspect that anyone is hiding in his place. After we had eaten, he says, "I'm afraid this might be the last night. I'm told they're coming to search for you, to search my compound tomorrow. Is there any other place you can go?" Where do we go? The whole country is after us, but at the same time, we know if we remain there, we will probably all be killed, and he may also be killed, so my mother said, "Kabera, you have done all you could. We will leave or go." We had spent almost five nights there, and then we took the road going back to our village.

On our way, we met these armed men who beat my mother, inflicting injuries that would later lead to her death. My grandmother managed to survive with us. As we were on this way going to our village, they discovered a prominent Tutsi whom they had been looking for, and all those who had

encircled us suddenly ran after him to kill him. Among the spectators were some who said, "What are you still doing here? Go!" So one of them gave us his son to guide us to the district office of Jimana. Luckily, we arrived there safely, but it was horrible. Life was miserable. The mayor—again, the complexity of Rwanda—the mayor was of mixed blood: a Hutu father and a Tutsi mother. He was more sympathetic, so he ordered three big buses like the Ts in Boston—for those of you who are familiar with the Ts in Boston. They packed us into those buses and two additional cars to go to the cathedral.

When we arrived at the cathedral, we were met by armed men, they call them *Interahamwe*, those who attacked together to kill. And these *Interahamwe*, they asked for identity cards. Not what you see here, [*photo onscreen*] this is the national identity card, and they have ones that show affiliation, so if you showed it during the genocide, then you betrayed yourself, because it immediately proved who you are. So none of us gave our identity cards. The soldiers said, "If you can't prove who you are, that shows you are Rwandan and so you are going to die here." And here is the beauty of complexity. The parish priest of the Kabgayi Cathedral came out and paid money to these guys to let us in. You see the difference between the priests? Don't put all of them in the same box; there are wonderful priests. He saved our lives.

But at that point we were at the mercy of some NGOs and governmental organizations, people were dying of disease, cholera. We were there almost a month and a half before the RPF liberated us. Some of the people were taken to the River Nyabarongo, that spills into the Kagera and then goes into Lake Victoria. In Lake Victoria at that time, there were so many bodies floating from Rwanda. If you read the Human Rights Watch report, Kenyans and Ugandans at that time stopped eating fish because of the floating bodies in Lake Victoria.

We were finally set free in June, free from the killings but enslaved by those who had finished our families. My mom was gone, dad was gone, and data then showed that my two brothers and my sister—the ones who had not gone with us—they too had been killed. So we were left orphans. What was the future? That is where the mountain of hatred begins.

These are some of the images you would see of churches, where so many people were killed. [*photos onscreen*] And these are the militias who were

trained to kill. [*more photos*] The young ones—you can see this child, breast-feeding from his mother who is already dead. And here is the grave of my parents [*photo of parents' grave*] and this is the place of my healing when I speak of forgiveness.

At this press conference in 2003, I had already joined the Jesuits. After the genocide ended, I quit the Catholic Church for almost four years. Later on, I came back to the Catholic Church because my uncle, who was a medical doctor, used to tell us, "You go to the city, visit the city as you wish, but on one condition: you go for mass." Then I said, "If I don't go for mass, how would he know?" But my uncle is a man of integrity. He said, "You accepted my money, you do what I do. What I command."

The Jesuits eventually lured my heart. They got me. I entered the Jesuits, finished the novitiate—the first stage of Jesuit formation—and then I went to visit the graves of my parents. And the idea is that when you visit the grave, you don't just remain in the past; you go to see the future clearly. I'm standing there, and who do I meet? The guy who killed my two brothers and my sister and threw them into a pit latrine. He had been released from jail and confessed to the government. The law of the land was, if you confess, then you would be released and do community work, because the prisons were full. He was released from jail but not released by my heart. He sees me. He had a car nearby. He came towards me, and then he knelt before me. I remember I was just standing here. He's trying to look at me in the face and I don't want to look at him. In front of me there is a beast. I'm even worried whether I'm safe; is this a trap? But then he looks at me and says, "Marcel, I know you don't want to look at me, but I confessed to the government. I'm so lucky you are here. You remember you had me jailed, but will you have some space now to forgive me?" It took me some time. I'm wondering whether I actually have the right to forgive on behalf of the dead. He killed my two brothers and sisters threw them into a pit latrine, and here in America you might not understand what that means. It's really the lowest you can imagine. But we are oriented toward something bigger than ourselves, and by some power I can't explain I found myself asking him to rise, and finally we embraced. And when I said, "I forgive you," I felt free.

Both of us were shedding tears. The Jesuits are not rich but they had

given me some money, so I took him to the nearby pub and bought him some beer. We shared the beer; it was a celebration. When I went back home, some of the relatives made me think I was crazy. How can you do that? But I share this—it set me free. Maybe that's what forgiveness does. Forgiveness unbinds you and it unbinds the one who is forgiven. And as Paul Ricoeur in his book on forgiveness says, forgiveness is really doing the unimaginable. Or it is like lighting a candle in a dark room and you begin to see that there is life there, other people. Or as Desmond Tutu posted, it's like you are in a stuffy room and you open up a window, some small window, and there is some oxygen. It enters, it changes the atmosphere in the room. That's what forgiveness has done to me. Now our families, my family and the family of that man, we come together and we celebrate. And before I conclude, here is the man, Mr. Kabera, the man who lives in a beehive compound. [*shows photo*] I invited him to my ordination in 2012. I felt that of all the people I needed to thank, Kabera should be the first. The Archbishop of Calgary was there and many other people, I thanked all of them and then said, "I have someone so special who deserves all the gratitude," and many people thought it would be somebody who had sponsored the whole event, who gave the money. Then he came up, a villager from central Rwanda, and everybody looked down, but Mr. Kabera was so happy, so excited and he gave a speech. Two weeks later, he said, "Marcel, your gratitude changed me. You know, I am not baptized. Now that you have become a priest, would you have some time to come and baptize me with my wife?" I said, "Kabera, you took all that risk and you are not even a Christian?" He said, "No, it was our shared humanity first." Then I said, "Kabera, even if that means taking you into the swimming pool to baptize you, I will do that." [*audience laughter*] Of course, I do that in a joking manner. You know what I mean. So, we prepare Kabera, I heard his confession with his wife. They had been living together for ten years. Baptized him, confirmed him—the Bishop had given me permission—then, of course, the sacrament of matrimony and reception of the Eucharist in one mass. [*audience reaction and applause*] Mr. Kabela was so excited and it was so joyful.

I came to study here at Boston College. The Jesuits sent me here. A year later, I received a phone call from Kabera. He says they have some good news.

I said, "Please, go ahead. Anything from Kabela I will take." Then he says, "Marcel, after ten years we have a baby girl." Now they have three.

That is my story about the wounds of Rwanda. The unimaginable event that is forgiveness. Thank you very much. [*audience applause*]

Gagliotti: We now turn to the story of the forty seminarians of Burundi, whose cause for sainthood was opened this past summer. The New York Encounter is delighted to be able to screen here the short film by Davide Salvucci, entitled *Buta: the Jewel of Africa*, which took first prize in its category in the 8th annual Harambee International Award for Communicating Africa. The prize aims at creating more accurate images of Africa. Ones that reflect existing complexities and conflict, but also show the reasons for hope.

[*video plays*]

Gagliotti: Fr. Zacharie, what made this extraordinary experience of brotherhood across tribal boundaries possible?

Fr. Zacharie Bukuru: [*through a translator*] Thank you. As you've seen, the history of Buta begins with the assassination of the President of Burundi, Melchior Ndadaye. The first democratically-elected Hutu president, who was killed by Tutsi guerillas three months after the election. In some regions, the Hutus—to avenge the president—killed all Tutsis and imposed their ideology. The seminarians in the seminary of which I'm a rector, are afraid. They're afraid now of losing their families and of losing their lives. All of my work as a rector was to reassure the seminarians and, above all, to reflect on these endless cycles of wars, of ethnic conflicts, that sadden, that make our country grieve. The first thing I do is to bring them together so they can speak about the problems, about their wounds. This helped them listen to each other, to love each other, and to esteem each other. The second thing we did, we started sport activities, so that the seminarians could have times of relaxation together. The other thing we did was, we started to teach them dances, cultural dances, so that they can commune again together, because after all, it is the same culture, the same language, and the same religion. Above all, we started to pray together. We sometimes spent entire nights praying together for peace, for fraternity, for brotherhood.

Four years later, when we had already forgotten that we were Hutus and Tutsis, an armed band of 2,000 guerillas attacked in the morning. I

am the first target, as well as the students, the seminarians. They look for me, but they can't find me because I had hidden myself. They break down the doors but they still can't find me. They call for anti-aircraft fire to fire on the building where they think I'm hiding, and they can't touch me; I am not killed. God has saved me miraculously. The guerillas enter into the dormitories. The seminarians go hide immediately under the beds, but the guerillas see them. They tell them, they scream at them, "Get out from under the beds! Hutus on one side, Tutsis on the other!" But instead of coming out, the students don't obey. In fact, they hold each other's hands, and they said, "We're not coming out." At that point, the guerillas say, "Bring the machetes. We're going to cut them to pieces." At this point, the students come out with their hands up in the air, and turn against a wall. With their fingers on the trigger of their machine guns, the guerillas tell them to separate themselves. Hutus on one side, Tutsis on the other. The students refuse. A second time, the order is given. Hutus on one side, Tutsis on the other. And again they refuse. A third time they are told to do this, and at this point, when they refuse, one of the leaders—a woman—takes a machine gun from her bodyguard and starts shooting the seminarians at point blank range. Her bodyguard takes a grenade, throws it at them, and blows them up. There is a mountain of bodies. There is blood everywhere. I arrived there later, and I see all these ripped up bodies in a pool of blood. It is horrible. I go and see the wounded children that have survived, and I am thinking to myself, *All of these efforts have been in vain*. I see a student who is injured, covered in blood. He is smiling and he tells me, "Father, they separated us, we refused." As if to tell me, *Courage, Father, we won. Victory is on our side*. And thus is consummated the martyrdom of Buta. Forty young men just below the age of twenty died for this ideal of unity.

Let me tell you about some fruits of this martyrdom. First, all the parents accepted that their children should be buried together at the seminary. Together. From that day until now, until the present, miracles are happening. The first miracle is that this seminarian said, as they were being shot, "Lord forgive them for they do not know what they do." They forgave their killers. All the ones who survived, the wounded, forgave the ones who had tried to kill them, thanks to their prayers, thanks to the martyrs. Myself, I had the grace,

the special grace to forgive all these people who had killed the students I loved so much. Today, Buta has become a center of international reconciliation. It is a place of international pilgrimage. People come from all over the world to kneel in front of this, at the shrine of these martyrs, and ask for the grace of forgiveness. Rome has agreed to start the process of beatification of these martyrs. Three-hundred meters from where they were killed, I founded a monastery. I've always thought that the monastery is a privileged place where God is present. In Buta, Jesus is truly present, He is the center of our lives. There are nineteen young monks who are praying day and night to continue the unfinished work of the martyrs. We are Benedictines, and we try to live like the martyrs, holy in this place. I also founded an association to help the young unemployed in the region, to find hope in their lives. And like I said, Buta is a gift that God has given to all of you, and to all of humanity. A sign that is given to each one of us by these young people, who showed us all how to go through divisions together. I give thanks to God that He has chosen me to be a privileged instrument in this place. He is my friend. He has chosen me on this path of suffering and the cross, because He loves me. Because I love Him, I have accepted with all my heart to follow Him on this way of the cross. Because I'm sure that for those who love God, all things lead to the good. [*audience applause*]

Gagliotti: Next, we travel to the shores of Libya in February 2015, when the world watched in horror as twenty-one young men in orange jumpsuits were marched onto the beach and made to kneel before their executioners. Black-clad Islamic State militants systematically beheaded their victims by sword. Most of them were men from Egypt, many from the same Coptic village. They were mainly poor migrants who had taken jobs in Libya to send money back home to their families. They had been kidnapped weeks earlier and had been beaten and tortured in captivity. We are told that they encouraged each other at night in song and prayer. Indeed, the footage of their last moments captures audibly many of them praying to our Lord Jesus Christ. Some display the most serene countenance in their final moments. They had been offered freedom if only they would renounce their faith and profess belief in Islam, but they chose not to do so and were led to the slaughter. Among them was a man from Chad, who the captors suspected of

being Muslim. Matthew was his name, and he was asked point-blank in that video, on camera, "Do you reject Christ?" Moved by the face of his Christian companions during that week, he boldly responded, "Their God is my God," and was executed along with the rest.

We will now view a short video with interviews of the family members of those murdered.

[*video plays*]

His Grace Anba David: In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, One God, Amen. It was not fair to run this video at the beginning, because it made me tearful and so emotional as I witnessed the courage of the families of the martyrs, although I have seen this so many times. But every time I see it, it brings me to tears. It is my honor to come today and share in this blessed occasion and talk to you about the twenty-one martyrs.

In the beginning of Christianity, in the Book of Acts, we hear about three themes or notions: *martyria*, *koinonia*, and *diakonia*. *Martyria* means witness, to witness. This is where the word *martyr* comes from, but it really means to witness, to be brought in front of the rulers of the world and giving witness to our faith. And, in the process, if we do not deny our faith we will be killed. The Lord said to not be afraid of those who kill the body, but fear him who, after the body is dead, has power to cast into hell. *Koinonia* means fellowship; to share everything together in order that there will be no one in need. And *diakonia* is to serve one another. Forgiveness is following the example after our Lord Jesus Christ, who said on the cross to his persecutors, praying for them, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." And following after the example of our Lord, we are called to forgive. Not only to forgive, we are even asked to forget, and even to love our enemies; love your enemies. This needs special grace from the Holy Spirit to be able to forgive, forget, and love. Is it humanly possible? Yes, and we have seen it in the video, how they prayed for their enemies, and they prayed that God would open their eyes to see the light and to see the truth. February 15th, the day of their martyrdom, became a celebration in the Coptic church and an annual celebration for the new Coptic martyrs, because they are not the only martyrs, but we have martyrs on an almost constant basis in the Coptic church. The Church recognized February 15th as a day in which we celebrate all the Coptic martyrs

on one day. This was approved by the Synod of the Bishops of the Coptic Church a few years ago. The Coptic faith is one of the oldest in Christianity, dating back 2,000 years. A religion that has endured that long and ridden the tides of history, watching the world change in leadership, opinion, and affinity. Around AD 300, the Coptic Church entered the time of Emperor Diocletian's reign. History recalls he released an edict to level all Christians' places of worship, destroy liturgical texts, and force Christians to renounce their faith until their blood reached the knees of his horses. This was one of the many times we saw historical figures use their power to overcome the Christian population. Diocletian's impact was, in fact, an essential fabric in our modern-day storytelling. The Coptic Church's Synaxarium has allowed us to capture these moments and ingrain them in our daily readings as a recounting of our faith. The Synaxarium captures more than events, but it allows us to relive countless stories of faith, love, courage, and forgiveness. You saw that the father in the video, who is a simple man, yet because he attends the church and hears the stories of the martyrs every day when he goes to church, he knows Diocletian. Only because he attends the church. We hear about the martyrs every time we go to church, in our liturgical service. We read these stories daily and recount many more events in historical textbooks as something far removed from our day-to-day. We tend to say, This was so long ago, no one does this anymore. On February 13, 2015, five years ago, twenty-one men were led across a sandy beach on the Mediterranean Sea, in what would be the most public display of martyrdom in our time. On that day, the world began to ask, Who are the Coptic Christians who could be so unafraid to pronounce their faith in God while facing the blade of death? What is martyrdom? That day was not so long ago. The mere minutes of the video's recording on the sanded beach teaches us much about what makes a martyr. With minimal words, the world watched their demeanor and waited for their response. We watched Matthew from Ghana, a man of unknown faith, reply to his executioner, "Their God is my God." Who is this God they defended? How could this God give these men so much strength to face the blade of death?

There is a thread of commonality in the characteristics that make a martyr. We will talk about three of them today. The first one is love. We read

in the epistle of Saint Paul to his disciples and Timothy 1:7: “For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.” In 1 Corinthians 13, St. Paul boldly proclaims that, “Though I speak with tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass and a clanging cymbal.” If we contemplate the beauty of the simple words that Gerges shared with his brothers, we find that his words were as sweet as honey and as medicinal as a salt that soothes their souls. He comforted them in the night as they lay distressed, waiting for the next day of torture at the hands of their angry captors. He comforted them during their suffering as their hands and feet were bound and they were subjected to humiliation. He comforted them in their final hours as they watched their brethren surrender their lives. Praying fervent prayers for the families that would succeed them. As St. Paul continues his message to the Corinthians, we read of the countless characteristics of love. To name a few: it is long-suffering, kind, is not self-seeking, and rejoices in the truth. Our Coptic Church has seen many saints exude their divine love, despite the torment they may be experiencing. St. Marina the Ascetic is one such example. After losing her mother at a young age, St. Marina’s father decided the ascetic life was the only way for him. St. Marina insisted on joining her father, cutting off her hair, and donning monastic garb. St. Marina’s community service made her an easy target for an evil man, who claimed she—who he thought was a male monk—had fathered a child with his daughter. Selflessly, St. Marina did not deny the claim, but took on the care of the baby boy, even after the Abbot expelled her from the monastery. How life-giving was St. Marina’s sacrificial love that she cared more for the child than to clear her name, or even set the record straight about her identity? It wasn’t until her death that St. Marina’s true nature was revealed, and the Abbott cried out to God for mercy for his error. St. Marina the Ascetic’s life was truly a display of selfless love.

The second characteristic is courage. In Joshua 1:9, our Lord tells Joshua, “Have I not commanded you to be strong and of good courage? Do not be afraid nor be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.” Built on the foundation of this divine love, this strong presence of God in our lives is courage, our second characteristic. This great courage stems from knowledge of God and the faith in his kingdom to come. Gerges knew that

their battle may end in death and that their journey was finite. But Gerges also knew that, although their journey on earth may have come to an end, their new life in God was only just beginning in eternal life. Christ himself told us, “My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body but after that have no more that they can do.” We are commanded to fear not. A command by our Lord Jesus Christ to be recalled every day of the year, every day of our life.

In ancient Turkey, around AD 300, we meet a young lady by the name of Eulita who was baptized into Christianity. Eulita was married at a young age, bore a baby boy and named him Kyriacos. As a loving mother, the most precious gift she felt she could give Kyriacos was the knowledge of God, and it was no surprise that his first words were, “I am Christian.” When Diocletian began his persecution of Christians, Eulita tried her best to escape for the sake of her three-year-old boy, but she was captured by a Roman ruler who offered to spare her life if she would worship the idols. Eulita’s faith in her Lord was unwavering, so the ruler had her whipped in front of inconsolable Kyriacos. As the child’s crying increased, the ruler ordered the soldiers to stop, and asked Eulita once more if she would be willing to bow to the true gods for the sake of her son. She stood firm, proclaiming, “I am Christian.” Kyriacos took up the chorus even as his mother was tortured before his eyes. The Roman ruler was furious and threw Kyriacos down the throne steps, killing him with a fatal blow to the head. Eulita joined her son soon after, leaving this physical world, joining her courageous son in the kingdom to come.

Characteristic number three, forgiveness. Our Lord Jesus Christ tells us in the book of Matthew 5:43-45, “You have heard that it was said, You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.” We are born with love, and courage stems from it; but how do we explain our third characteristic—being able to forgive? Many times we have heard others say, “What he or she has done is unforgivable; I could never forgive them. How could anyone?” Yet, when we watch interviews of the family members of the martyrs, Gerge’s mother said she forgives them.

His wife said she doesn't hate them. And they say it with great peace in their hearts, not forced, not for recognition.

In conclusion: looking to these giants who lived, ate, and breathed among us, who traveled to work to support their families in a faraway land, we may find it hard to follow their lead in giving the ultimate sacrifice. But instead of becoming discouraged, we should be reaching out to them in prayer. They have set an example of resounding love, endless courage, and pure forgiveness. And their memory is alive in their stories. Their families imitate their behavior, their villages sing of their bravery, and the whole of the Coptic community looks to them with pride. A forest of blossoming trees bearing spiritual fruit that will last through the generations. Although they suffered, they were grateful for the opportunity to do so. As St. Paul reminds the Philippians, "For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake."

May we all be courageous enough to continue each day, despite the adversaries against us, and look to the saints before us as well as our Lord, who loves us. Thank you for listening. [*audience applause*]

NEW YORK ENCOUNTER

New York Encounter (the Encounter) is an annual three-day public cultural festival in the heart of New York City.

The Encounter strives to witness to the new life and knowledge generated by the faith, following Pope Benedict XVI's claim that "**the intelligence of faith has to become the intelligence of reality.**"

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