

Critical Theology

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Summer 2021 issue edited by Scott Kline

Introduction

By **Scott Kline**

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Karl Barth, one of the most influential theologians of the 20th century, famously told his students, "Take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret the newspaper from your Bible!"¹ Barth's point is that theology must engage the world's challenges, controversies, conflicts, and, of course, joys if it is to mean anything to people trying to make sense of the world. Today, our news outlets are rife with stories focusing on inadequate responses to the coronavirus pandemic, racial injustice, climate change, and fundamental challenges to democratic governance. It is, therefore, not a surprise that a central theme in this issue of *Critical Theology* is identifying and analyzing a few of the deep divisions that have increasingly come to define much of social, political, and, to some degree, religious life.

Carmen Celestini introduces us to QAnon, the widely held conspiracy theory that sees Donald Trump as a providentially appointed leader to save the United States from an elite group of cosmopolitans. Her ultimate focus is on the QAnon fallout, particularly as families and friends of QAnon followers seek advice on how to deal with their lost loved ones. Ben Szoller examines the Amazon Synod and what it could mean for rural social justice movements, not only in

¹ Eberhard Busch, ed., *Barth in Conversation: Volume II*, 1963, trans. Translation Fellows of the Center for Karl Barth Studies, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2018).

the Amazon but globally. Finally, Donna Geernaert analyzes the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity's recent document, *The Bishop and Christian Unity: An Ecumenical Vademecum*, and what it means for advancing ecumenical relations within the Christian community.

Scott Kline

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Conspiracy

The Aftermath of QAnon

By Carmen Celestini

University of Waterloo

In the wake of the violent overtaking of the United States Capitol Building on January 6, 2021, articles and think pieces began claiming that many QAnon adherents were seeking solace and comfort within online support groups. One such support group, QCasualties, on Reddit grew exponentially as the inauguration of President Joe Biden loomed closer. Magazine and news reporters scoured Reddit and Telegram groups to speak to individuals who had been affected by the Q phenomenon. A scan of the Q support groups on social media platforms makes it clear that there are endless posts by academics, including graduate students, and reporters looking for insights into how people were grappling with the end of a tumultuous era of conspiracy, distrust, and fear now that the predictions of Q did not come to fruition. As the stories of Q survivors and those affected by Q are starting to appear, an important component of this post-Q survivor phenomenon remains largely unexamined; that is, while it is important to analyze and understand the Q conspiracy and why it has gained such a large following, both in the United States and globally, we must also analyze the potential impacts of the “cure” to the Q conspiracy, which, to put the matter bluntly, relies on many of the same types of half-truths that self-proclaimed experts asserted in social media groups in support of the Q conspiracy. While many of these support groups are, no doubt, well-intentioned, the catalysts that drew people to join QAnon in the first place now exist within these groups and will likely play an integral role in potentially new conspiracies.

What Is QAnon?

QAnon is a right-wing movement, largely rooted in a bricolage of far-right conspiracy theories that have circulated in online chat rooms and social media since the final days of the Barack Obama administration. A central tenet of the Q conspiracy is that former President Donald Trump is leading a secret and, according to some of the more religious adherents, sacred war against an international group of satanic pedophiles. Since its inception in Fall 2017, QAnon has become a home for far-right politics, conspiracy theories, apocalyptic religious beliefs, and a radicalized following that has propelled some individuals to engage in violence and criminal acts. While there remains a core narrative

within the movement that focuses on Donald Trump as a heroic and providentially appointed leader, QAnon allows for individuals to interpret and develop theories related to the principal conspiracy, which has resulted in the construction of an alternative history and an alternative reality. This is one reason adherents feel invested in the driving narratives. In its early iterations, QAnon focused on American politics and the “demonization” of those in power in the Democratic Party and, more generally, anyone associated with liberal political values. This was due, in part, to the origins of the QAnon movement. In Fall 2016, far-right social media posts began to circulate widely asserting that the New York Police Department had uncovered a pedophilia ring linked to the Democratic Party and Democratic leaders such as John Podesta, who was, at the time, chair of Hillary Clinton’s 2016 presidential campaign. This ring was supposed to have been run out of a pizzeria in Washington, DC. Asserting wild claims about the true meaning of American symbols, historical dates, and architectural design, and alleging that Podesta’s emails, which had recently been hacked, were coded messages meant to hide criminal activity, proponents of the infamous (and now thoroughly debunked) “Pizzagate” conspiracy found themselves in online chat rooms, sometimes referred to somewhat problematically as “communities,” with shared values and beliefs. The proliferation of people in these chat rooms presaged the actual announcement of the QAnon conspiracy, which occurred October 28, 2017, on the pages of 4chan’s “politically incorrect” page. Q’s first announcement was that former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton would be arrested on a specific date and time. From there, Tracy Diaz, a YouTube vlogger, used her considerable influence with her significant subscriber base to discuss the “crumbs,” or clues, left by Q, the movement’s anonymous user, launching the conspiracy theory from the pages of 4chan.

QAnon links contemporary politics, racist tropes, and apocalyptic religious beliefs. Adherents of QAnon believe they are social heroes rising against “The Cabal,” whose singular goal is to undermine American democracy and consolidate power within The Cabal. This means that The Cabal seeks to destroy American freedom and subjugate American citizens under the control of The Cabal. Mixed within the conspiracy are

the moral taboos of pedophilia, Satanism, and human sacrifice, which The Cabal supposedly actively promotes and defends by members asserting their power through politics, the market, and secret networks. Adherents of QAnon also believe that, in the end, the oppressed (the authentically American citizen) will be free when “The Storm” comes to arrest and destroy the oppressors.

Even though QAnon is rooted in American politics, the general conspiracy has garnered a global following. QAnon groups on social media such as Telegram, Gab, and Bitchute include adherents from countries around the globe. With the global popularity of Q, the scope of the principal conspiracies has extended to global networks. So, while the political foundation and the origins of Q may be American, the conspiratorial lens that Q offers extends beyond American borders. Adherents have come to believe that there is a globalized cabal to bring forth a new world order.

The pandemic, social unrest, and ultimately the search for the “cause” of all that seems disastrous in society is creating an opportunity for conspiracies to thrive. A poll conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) in May 2021 found that 15% of Americans believed that “the government, media, and financial worlds in the U.S. are controlled by a group of Satan-worshipping pedophiles who run a global sex trafficking operation.”¹ Further, the poll found that one in five Americans believed that the Storm predicted by Q is indeed a coming event that will eliminate “elites” from the very institutions these respondents distrust; furthermore, these elites will be replaced by the “rightful leaders.”²

The PRRI poll also found that religion played a significant role in the adherents of the QAnon conspiracy.³ The Q support groups also have a significant number of posts blaming religion for what is happening to their family members. The linking of religion, the occult, and chaotic times is an important component of the development of conspiracy, yet in the support groups, religion, and specifically Evangelicals, have become the main source of blame for the loss of family members. Support group members have labelled Christianity as the cause of what is happening to their families, and as conspiracists look to the Deep State as their enemy, many in the support groups look to Christianity as their enemy. Both conspiracists and those looking for solace have created a spectre that is more powerful than they are, that is in control of what is occurring in their world.

QAnon as Improvisational Conspiracism, Nationalism, and Populism

QAnon is an example of what Michael Barkun, a scholar of apocalyptic movements, refers to as “improvisational conspiracism.” This form of conspiracism can only exist when there are significant subcultures, Barkun argues. Mainly rising or appearing during times of crisis, improvisational conspiracism typically includes a mixture of heterodox religion, esoteric and occult beliefs, fringe science, and radical politics. Working together, this mixture produces what Barkun refers to as “stigmatized knowledge,” which is a belief that secret hidden evil forces are controlling human destinies.⁴ When enough people gather around these ideas and knowledge, the conspiracy has the capacity to influence the politics of a nation.⁵

Conspiracy theories like QAnon have a history in the modern world. That have been on the margins of the extreme right and have acted as powerful instigators for both political action and right-wing social movements. Many theories are well known. These include the Red Scare, the Tuskegee syphilis experiment, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, Watergate, 9/11 truthers, Birthers questioning the birth certificate of President Barack Obama, and the Deep State via QAnon. Not all conspiracy theories lead to radicalization, nor do they necessarily spur political action or mobilization. But sometimes they do. Across the United States, conspiracies can be linked to both political action and mobilization. These theories have provided a conduit for the expression and symbolic representation of the extreme right’s fears. In defining the extreme right and the use of fear and conspiracy for mobilization, important commonalities need to be acknowledged. First, there is a trope of making their nation more ethnically homogenous and demanding a return to more traditional values. Second, those in power and national institutions are seen as being under the control of elites who place internationalism before the nation. And third, elites, or powerful individuals, are described by the extreme right as putting their own interests ahead of those they represent. This notion of fear and dread is an important component of the power of conspiracy theories in that they can provide an answer or rationale as to why these fears manifest.

Andrew F. Wilson, a sociologist who works on nationalistic political movements and conspiracy theories, argues that with the mainstreaming or public acceptance of extreme politics, conspiracy theories have gained increasing acceptance because the narratives driving extreme politics are often delivered via conspiracy theory.⁶ Politicians who have extreme political positions in their platform often find a way to legitimize their positions with the public by aligning themselves

with their base, normally those on the margins of political boundaries, while at the same time positioning themselves as reasonable defenders of a national identity. The proliferation of conspiracy theories in the public domain only blurs fact and fiction; with this blurring effect, a conspiracy can then be positioned as the foundational narrative framing political actions. Typical of far-right conspiracies, these political leaders propagate a message that is anti-elite and pro-nation. It is a message that serves to valorize the “everyday person” as a social hero as they fight to protect their nation’s values and identity.⁷

Conspiracy theories play a crucial role in populism. Historian Michael Kazin defined populism as “a language whose speakers conceive of ordinary people as a noble assemblage not bounded narrowly by class, view their elite opponents as self-serving and undemocratic, and seek to mobilize the former against the latter.”⁸ Public policy scholar Nathan Jessen argues that populists are critics of power, and conspiracy theories provide a mode for that criticism.⁹ Populists operate with the premise that the government and those in authority do not represent the people, or the silent majority. Populism emphasizes the sovereignty of the people, promotes attacking the elite and ostracizing the “other,” and invokes nationalism. Conspiracy theories enable populists to identify hidden controlling factors preventing their representation and to shape a relatively cohesive narrative, even if based on faulty premises and facts. Appealing to a sense of resentment against the elites and others whose loyalties perpetuate a weakening of the nations, populism typically calls for radical change by eliminating the hierarchical structure of societies. In essence, populism serves not only as a conduit to express unfairness and injustice but also as a recourse and remedy.

The “Left Behind” and the QAnon Fallout

QAnon has evolved as the political process has continued. As President Biden was inaugurated, some adherents lost faith but found new hope in connected conspiracy theories such as the Blue Beam Project and Sambyk. These conspiracies used contemporary events to validate belief systems. Simultaneously, extremists and white nationalists used political memes to entice Q believers to darker realities. Scholarship on far-right populism has acknowledged a normalization or mainstreaming of the movement. The boundary between democratic political protest and that of racist far-right populism is becoming thinner and blurred, which is creating a challenge to democracy itself.¹⁰ With the pandemic and protective measures being put in place by governments worldwide, there has been a rise in those who are protesting these measures. Ulrike M. Vieten, a sociologist who studies nationalism and radicalized citizens, compared the social media

and messaging of far-right white political protests during the lockdowns. What Vieten found was that there was a growing normalization of far-right groups as they joined “anti-hygienic” or anti-lockdown protests. Vieten argues that far-right white nationalists have tied wider struggles over pandemic politics to arguments about who belongs. Vieten’s research focused on what this combination could be articulated as in the “new normal” of “pandemic populism.” With the new normal emerging from the pandemic, in the minds of the friends and families of QAnon adherents, they are left in a process of mourning for those they have lost.

With the mainstreaming of extreme politics and conspiracy, there is a growing interest among conspiracy theory researchers in former adherents and what happens to them once they distance themselves from the conspiracy. At this point in QAnon’s history, there are now a significant number of former adherents “who are left behind.” These are the ones who have left the conspiracy for whatever reason. There are also those adversely affected indirectly by the conspiracy, often family members or close friends, who became estranged as the result of a loved one’s embrace of the conspiracy. Indeed, in the days following the events of January 6, support groups such as QAnon Casualties, Alt Right Brainwashing, and ReQovery were adding new moderators as their membership swelled. In many cases, it was family members of people who are believers in the conspiracy that found themselves posting in these support groups. Post after post recounted tales of relatives who espoused COVID conspiracy, Deep State theories, and unwavering belief in the reinstatement of Donald Trump as the rightful president of the United States.

One of the support groups on Reddit has a page dedicated to a “list of casualties,” which is where family members, partners, and friends can list those they have “lost” to QAnon. The list is long. Typical responses to the postings are condolences and thoughts and prayers. In spite of the death narratives in these support groups, there are still very few, if any, formal grieving rituals or bereavement supports in place. Instead, those who share their grief through their posts and listing of the “dead” seem to be searching for a sense of control over what is happening, a control that is normally expressed through the mundane acts of organizing funerals or the closing of the deceased’s affairs. These virtual communities provide some sense of control and a loosely organized group (or “community”) of mourners who offer consolation and advice.

Similar to the disinformation, or “YouTube University,” that led to the conspiracy theories, the same type of conjecture and anecdotal advice is pervasive in these support groups. Advice and support resources come from links to Wikipedia and substack newsletters.

There is a void of experts and counsellors available for those who are in the mourning process. For instance, those seeking support often frame the loss of their relatives or friends as deaths, and yet there is virtually no professional assessment or advice on how to deal with this kind of death. One of the common responses to those seeking help is to tell young people about disinformation and how to research. Yet, so many of the stories of the lost souls are from parents, aunts, and uncles—adults. From the outside looking in, you can see that there is an obvious missing element, not only within the support community but also within academia. While universities and high schools focus on teaching students about internet disinformation, how to research, and how to navigate the numerous sources of “news” on the internet, adult post-truth literacy remains a monumental social challenge.

Authority in these support groups rests on self-proclaimed expertise, structurally very similar to the claims of expertise or advanced knowledge among conspiracy adherents. The advice sections are filled with people who claim to have read books on cults, who promote the Socratic method, and who say they have been “deprogrammed” on their own. Many of the “deprogrammed” seem dubious, as they “suddenly” realized they had been duped and are now centre left or Democrats. These admissions and confessions seem as suspect as the disinformation that led many to conspiracies. For an outsider reading these posts, it would appear as though there is a mix of attention seekers and internet trolls who are attempting to “own” those who are seeking solace. Whatever the motivation of these self-proclaimed experts and others posting on these forums, there is a real sense that there is a large group of people who have experienced QAnon as a religious cult.¹¹

A New “Pandemic Populism”?

“Pandemic populism” is a term we as scholars should consider as we examine the growing influence of conspiracy theories on public discourse during the pandemic. As both experts and laypeople attempt to visualize what the new normal will be like, we cannot dismiss the rise of pandemic populism or the morphing of various groups into a movement. From QAnon, to Sambyk, to claims that COVID is a hoax or a tool to enslave all and create a new world order, contemporary conspiracies have connected these disparate groups. For conspiracies to take hold in society in general, there must be widespread distrust in governments and institutions as well as a sense that the individual is disenfranchised and voiceless within the political process. Tepid responses from governments around the globe in the early stages of the pandemic, with the emergence of new variants of COVID leading to further lockdowns in some countries, led to

citizens’ overall trust in their government decreasing.¹² Populism was able to capitalize on this distrust by claiming that the elite—political leaders—had misled their countries. As social, economic, and political institutions grew increasingly fragile in the early stages of the pandemic, the QAnon conspiracy provided a narrative to those feeling persecuted and marginalized. It also provided a reason to rise up against an evil cabal to “save” America. This persecution narrative is based on fear and a sense of impending disaster that crosses boundaries between the secular and the religious as it blends conspiracy theories, eschatological myths, and fear of economic downturns. As a result, the laws and restrictive public health guidelines put in place to address the rapid spread of the coronavirus helped fuel the QAnon conspiracy.

As the restrictive health guidelines begin to ease, the sense of distrust in institutions and the sense of mourning will remain. These losses cannot be alleviated with a return to the “new normal.” The tepid response we saw to the pandemic was a “super spreader event” of sorts that fuelled the spread of conspiracies and pandemic populism; the aftermath of QAnon and other contemporary conspiracies cannot be met with the same tepid response. As adherents begin to adapt beliefs in new conspiracies such as the Blue Beam Project and Sambyk, they continue to view the world through a conspiratorial lens, interpreting real-world events as “evidence” of their belief systems. Left on social media without experts, without social supports, and where adult post-truth literacy remains a monumental social challenge, we face the possibility of a continued rise in populism, fear-based social and political movements, and, for some, monumental loss. Academics, policy makers, and experts need to come together to provide the support, research, and policies needed to address the aftermath of and continued mainstreaming of conspiracy theories.

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1 PRRI; “Three Components of the QAnon Conspiracy.” May, 27, 2021, <https://www.prii.org/research/qanon-conspiracy-american-politics-report/#page-section-3>.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., 2.

5 Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, vol. 15 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), xi.

6 Andrew Fergus Wilson, “#whitegenocide, the alt-right and conspiracy theory: How secrecy and suspicion contributed to the mainstreaming of hate” (2018), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329782319_whitegenocide_the_Alt-right_and_Conspiracy_Theory_How_Secrecy_and_Suspicion_Contributed_to_the_Mainstreaming_of_Hate.

7 Barbara J. Perry, "Defenders of the Faith: Hate Groups and Ideologies of Power in the United States," *Patterns of Prejudice* 32:3 (1998), 32–54.

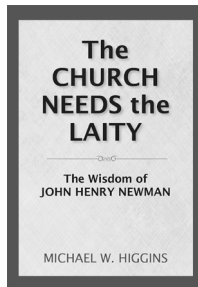
8 Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 1.

9 Nathan Jessen, "Populism and Conspiracy: A Historical Synthesis of American Countersubversive Narratives," *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 78:3 (2019), 675–715, at 680.

10 Ulrike M. Vieten, "The 'New Normal' and 'Pandemic Populism': The COVID-19 Crisis and Anti-Hygienic Mobilisation of the Far-Right," *Social Sciences* 9:9 (2020), 165.

11 As one who studies conspiracy theories, the general response to QAnon recalls the moral panics of the Satanists and ritual child abuse in the 1990s, with calls for censorship and deprogramming.

12 Thomas Strandberg, "Coronavirus: US and UK Government Losing Trust," *The Conversation* 6:6 (2020), <https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-us-and-uk-governments-losing-public-trust-137713>.



The Church Needs the Laity The Wisdom of John Henry Newman

BY MICHAEL W. HIGGINS

"Michael Higgins's *The Church Needs the Laity* is a lively and engaging introduction to the thought of John Henry Newman through the four lenses of laity, the university and the Magisterium, spirituality, and the priority of conscience. This book is a must-read not only for students of theology but for all serious-minded Catholics."

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The Amazon Synod Revisited

Rural Solidarity, Canadian Catholic Communities, and COVID-19¹

By Ben Szoller

University of Waterloo

In March of 2020, I travelled from my Ontario home to a religious studies conference in the northeast United States. The theme for the conference was simply *death*—a topic that had been established well before COVID-19 entered the news just months earlier. It was on the drive back home that I was first told I couldn't fill my reusable travel mug at a coffee shop. It was a small inconvenience, to be sure, but at the time it was still surprising. Our expectations for COVID-19 were very different then: the first death due to the virus in the United States had just been reported, with Canada's first coming the following week.² Researchers were not yet in a position to consider the impact of the coronavirus on our religious understandings of death. Papers presented on the same topic today would obviously look very different.

The paper I did present, entitled “The Death (and Life) of the Rural Catholic Church” (a reference to Jane Jacobs, the annalist of the modern American city), considered the newly released Catholic document *Querida Amazonia* and some of its implications for rural Catholic communities. In that paper, I proposed that this document and the way it was developed implied an evolving motif within recent Catholic social thought: diversity and complex systems are associated with *life*, while homogeneous structures—even prolific ones—are a prognosis for *death*, a logic that might be applied equally to biological, organizational, and epistemic structures. Plenty has happened since I rushed to examine this important Catholic document. In this article, I want to revisit some central themes of the Amazon Synod and Pope Francis's most recent encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti* (2020), in light of the coronavirus pandemic. Additionally, I highlight three ways in which the Amazon Synod can be applied in the Canadian context and consider their import for the study of religion in Canada, particularly around the study of rural communities.

The Amazon Synod to *Fratelli Tutti*

In October 2017, Pope Francis called for a synod, comprised primarily of bishops from Amazonian countries, to address growing ecological and ecclesial concerns in South America. In recent years, there had

been an increase in fires in the Amazon, a product of rising global temperatures and heightened exposure as vast swaths of rainforest were razed for monocultures, strip mines, and cattle farms. At the same time, the Church was struggling to meet the pastoral needs of rural Catholics, and there were concerns about how to reconcile the missionary posture of the Church with renewed calls for Indigenous self-determination. For the Church, these were not discrete existential questions but symptoms of a compounded social crisis rooted in the rural experience.

In October 2019, Catholic bishops and leaders convened in Rome for three weeks to discuss the effects of ecological stress on the people of Amazonia. A month later, the Synod of Bishops published its final document, *The Amazon: New Paths for the Church and for an Integral Ecology*. In February 2020, the pope released his official response to the synod, *Querida Amazonia*, or *Beloved Amazon*. Tasked with discerning how to best meet the spiritual needs of rural laity, particularly in the remote regions of the Amazon, the bishops debated whether married men should be eligible to perform sacramental rites and re-evaluated the role of women in Church leadership. The synod also highlighted the importance of Indigenous communities, particularly how “ancestral wisdom” might help leaders confront environmental crises. These topics were predictably contentious, dominating headlines and online forums alike. You may recall the widely published photograph of an Indigenous Pachamama statue included in a celebration—and reports that the figure was later stolen by Orthodox Catholics and thrown into a river.

In early 2020, while the reach of the virus was still uncertain, Pope Francis announced yet another document in the works, this time an encyclical on the themes of social friendship and solidarity. As infection numbers skyrocketed, the new encyclical came to address explicit social concerns, including those exacerbated by the pandemic. In October 2020, *Fratelli Tutti*, commonly known in English as *Fraternity and Social Friendship*, was released. Many commentators see *Fratelli Tutti* as a “capstone” statement because

it continues to synthesize Francis's long-standing concerns around structural injustices: the experience of transnational refugees, globalization's impact on human dignity, and the need for "integral ecology." In the text, Francis reiterates that *encounter* is the foundational experience through which Catholics and Catholic organizations are called to solidarity and care (the only magisterial document that employs "encounter" as often is John Paul II's 1999 exhortation, *Ecclesia in America*). This is not, of course, altogether new. Francis often speaks to the importance of encounter, saying, for example, that the Church needs to have its shoes "soiled by the mud of the street."³ He condemns nationalistic principles, myopic social structures, and even emerging technologies that inhibit "the development of authentic interpersonal relationships."⁴ In *Fratelli Tutti*, Francis cautions a growing dependence on digital media, not because it limits ideas and information, but because it sanitizes them of critical qualities: the "trembling hands, the blushes and perspiration" and "even the smells" that accompany 'real life' encounter.⁵ In the midst of the pandemic, *Fratelli Tutti* reconsiders not only the role of technology, but the availability of Catholic solidarity for rural communities today. The question becomes even more important: How do centralized institutions like the Catholic Church assess and alleviate global concerns while still attending to local, contextual factors?

Application for Canadian Catholic Communities

One of the major contributions of the Amazon Synod, though less flashy, was its affirmation of the Church's synodal structure. In an interview, Maricio Lopez, the executive secretary of the Pan-Amazonian Ecclesial Network—the group that catalyzed the synod—argues that the medium is part of the message: the synodal structure is "telling us that the periphery is the center." Traditionally, "governments, private companies, and the people themselves" saw the periphery "as a space to colonize and exploit."⁶ Although speaking primarily to the benefits of epistemic decentralization, Lopez's use of "periphery" also highlights the unique vulnerability of rural and remote communities: social peripheries intersect with geographic ones. *Encounter at the peripheries* therefore informs the Church about who should be at the forefront of care in the time of crisis; moreover, it can also inform those of us who study the Catholic Church.

Taking Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* in 1891 as a starting point, we can see that Catholic social teaching has conveyed not only the nature of an encounter but also the place of the encounter. In the early development of Catholic social thought, there was an emphasis on human dignity and the centrality of the family, which was, given the time, typically a farming family. As the

20th century witnessed "rural flight" to urban centres and the intensification of food systems, Catholic social teaching reflected the demographic shift. For example, Pope John Paul II's *Laborem Exercens*, from 1981, recognized the tenuous relationship between agricultural technology, labour, and human dignity in the "industrial era."⁷ During the same period, Catholic-run Residential Schools operated rural vocational programs that hastened the resettlement of Indigenous land. The last half of the 20th century saw major changes in agronomic policies, rural land ownership, and increased global environmental awareness. Bishops circulated social documents that synthesized recent Vatican encyclicals with growing environmental science and applied them to their own rural settings. In Canada, for instance, the Catholic Bishops of Ontario released *The People and the Land* in 1989, which recognized both the social and ecological fallout brought about by modern agronomic models. *The People and the Land* stated that families were struggling under the economic burden that accompanied larger farms, and bankruptcy, depression, and suicide were increasingly common.⁸

Today, similarly, COVID-19 cannot be seen as an isolated crisis, but as a global event that amplifies injustices already compounded by ecological devastation, economic disparity, and the lasting impacts of colonization and globalization. Sociologist Grace Davie reminds us of the significance of such moments, "when 'normal' ways of living are, for one reason or another, suspended and something far more instinctive comes to the fore: under pressure, the implicit becomes explicit."⁹ Accordingly, the pandemic provides an opportunity to examine the implicit or historically neglected venues of encounter for Canadian Catholics. At the synod in Rome, pan-Amazonian leaders discussed how to meet the needs of rural Catholics and expand the Church's presence. While the bishops rejected "a colonial style of evangelization,"¹⁰ they also confirmed the role of mission today, citing Francis: "Missionary outreach is *paradigmatic for all the Church's activity*."¹¹ The documents use the term "inculturation" to describe the "mystical" process of the Church's incarnation in the world, and Francis writes that the Church "constantly reshapes her identity through listening and dialogue with the people, the realities and the history of the lands in which she finds herself."¹² Parts of the Amazonian documents may be unsettling, especially when considering the very word "encounter" in a colonial context.

Canada continues to face its settlement history; while regional bishops and parishes have confronted, to varying degrees, the impact of colonization on Indigenous communities, intergenerational concerns remain around the missionary work of the Church in Canada. However, various Indigenous Catholic organizations seem to precede the synod's call for

unilateral cultural conversion by actively centering an Indigenous Catholic identity. For example, the Our Lady of Guadalupe Circle describes itself as “a Catholic coalition of Indigenous people, bishops, clergy, lay movements and institutes of consecrated life, engaged in renewing and fostering relationships between the Catholic Church and Indigenous Peoples in Canada.”¹³ It provides religious resources in Indigenous languages, healing circles, reconciliation education, and ongoing outreach for dialogue and public awareness. Several parishes celebrate long-standing Indigenous membership—such as the Sacred Heart Church of the First Peoples in Edmonton—and Saint Paul University in Ottawa offers Catholic training through its Indigenous Pastoral Leadership Formation program. In Canada and the United States, there appears to be a growing devotion to St. Kateri Tekakwitha, an Algonquin-Mohawk patron who has become emblematic of both the Church’s ecological mission and its Indigenous identity. The Indigenous-run Kateri Native Ministry centre in Ottawa offers rural retreats, educational “missions,” and, for more than 20 years, an annual Healing and Reconciliation Conference.¹⁴

It is also important to recognize that Inuit, Métis, and First Nations communities consistently dispute the Church’s claims of authentic encounter. For decades, the Assembly of First Nations has called for Vatican accountability in Catholic-run Residential Schools, cries that have become even more salient after the recent discovery at the Kamloops Indian Residential School on the Tk’emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation,¹⁵ among others.

Catholic Indigenous voices also help identify additional intersections of encounter in Canada. COVID-19 has highlighted conversations around access to care, particularly in rural and remote communities. Ultimately, the Canadian government prioritized vulnerable groups for access to vaccines, including remote communities and, in a broad manner, essential workers. The Amazon documents emphasize the peripheral position of women in rural communities, as well as refugees and immigrants.¹⁶ Both these documents and the Canadian government acknowledge the vulnerability of transnational bodies. The alarming outbreaks among temporary foreign workers and processing plants highlight Francis’s attention to modern agronomic models.

In Canada, the Catholic agency Development and Peace maintains a portfolio of international rural development projects: campaigns advocate for access to care and partner with other stakeholders to deliver services. But their domestic programming, and funding, is much smaller.¹⁷ In the United States, where the employment of temporary foreign workers and un-

documented immigrants are even further entrenched in the agricultural system, rural Catholic parishes are strategizing ways to attend to not only the spiritual health of migrant communities, but their physical and social health as well. In a Washington state diocese, all seminarians must spend their summers working on farms to better understand the rural transnational experience.¹⁸ The American organization Catholic Rural Life vigorously lobbies for the rights of foreign workers. Such programs may equip clergy to advocate for preferential access to care and to communicate with workers in their own language about on-farm risks compounded by COVID-19.

These examples start to hint at the role the Catholic Church plays in the public sphere, especially the lobbying by clergy and Catholic organizations in rural affairs. For example, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, or CCCB, and Development and Peace have for decades called for reform of exploitive resource extraction, not only out of environmental concern, but also out of concern for the worker. The pandemic, we know, exacerbates the negative impact of industry and the welfare of those most vulnerable. Solidarity, a fundamental principle in Catholic social thought, lies at the heart of these campaigns. In 1967, Pope Paul VI cautioned that while unions should organize to maintain just wages and working conditions, they must do so in a way that would not jeopardize international trading partners and, more specifically, their employees.¹⁹ The rights of workers in Canada should not undermine the rights and dignity of workers abroad. The Amazon documents echo *Laudato Si’* and explicitly call out international mining corporations in particular, many of which are Canadian.²⁰ Today, Development and Peace’s Brazilian campaign sends letters to the Canadian and Brazilian governments as well as to Canadian mining companies. They encourage Canadian Catholics to message their MPs to “demand” a stop to free trade and ensure respect for “the territorial rights of Indigenous peoples.” Catholic organizations and the CCCB played an instrumental role in establishing the Canadian Ombudsperson for Responsible Enterprise, a third-party advisor who would investigate human rights and environmental abuses and even recommend sanctions against Canadian companies on behalf of nations in which they operate.²¹

Reconsidering Rurality

Over a decade ago, Canadian sociologist Lori Beaman charged that modern sociology of religion focuses too much on urban centres and “fails to convey a sense of the religious life of rural inhabitants.”²² Thus, ruralized communities are on the periphery not only of services, but also of research. I suggest that examining these documents can inform us not only about Catholic

communities, but also about the methodologies used to study religion in Canada. So far, I have used the term “rural” fairly indiscriminately, but I recognize its limitations. Typically, the criterion for rurality reflects only population density and does little on its own to define lived experience. Every institution, be it the Catholic Church, the state, or an NGO, attempts to reconcile general principles with the real-life needs of individual communities. But many groups do not fit neatly into normative rural/urban boxes:

Rural	→	Agriculture	→	White
Urban	→	Industry	→	Multicultural
Remote	→	Natural resources	→	Indigenous

Such characterizations have become increasingly insufficient to help Canadians conceptualize the rural landscape in light of shifting demographics, decentralizing agronomic models, and increasing discourse around territorial rights and sovereignty.

To better speak about rural solidarity, organizations and researchers might identify discipline-specific characteristics that expand the typical criteria of population density. These are called *rurality indexes*; in Canada, most efforts at developing functional criteria come from the health care sector. For instance, public health researchers surveyed thousands of Canadian nurses to establish “the salient features of rurality” based on qualitative data.²³ The responses suggested that identifying multiple “community characteristics” was necessary to profile the needs of its residents and provide appropriate services. These characteristics should include specific infrastructure features, access to amenities and services, but also “community relationships,” socioeconomic indicators, and “individual attitudes,” which are often overlooked. Several themes reflected the specific type of work nurses do and, as such, may prompt researchers in different disciplines to identify useful characteristics of rurality through direct encounter with their members. Catholic understandings of the preferential option are increasingly supported by sociological data, and language around vulnerable groups is instructive for both Catholic agencies and health care providers. What is the impact of seasonal employment and periodic access to care on religious worldviews? How do the Church and state serve translocated groups that find themselves not only in another country but in a totally different relationship to work, to the natural world, and to one another? We might also pay special attention to translocated bodies, especially as the pandemic, like environmental crises, has a greater impact on those working in certain sectors and regions, including temporary foreign workers. Ethnographic methods do an excellent job of profiling such diverse—and

compounded—peripheries. Most, however, trace the journey from rural to urban, not the reverse.

Next Steps

COVID-19 is undeniably a *sign of the times*: it has stressed the fragility of global food supplies, disrupted trade markets, and changed lives already disproportionately impacted by ecological and political unrest. Part of what makes studying Catholic social teaching surprisingly complex is how it addresses large-scale social concerns at regional, national, and international levels, often simultaneously. The ways in which Catholic clergy and agencies scale their responses and navigate structural and political boundaries are built on the principle of subsidiarity—simply put, how to tackle issues on the smallest level possible, but the largest level necessary. There exists a critical tension between solidarity and subsidiarity. In April 2021, Pope Francis publicly lobbied international leaders to make vaccines readily available to the poorest communities.²⁴ Meanwhile, parishes are tasked with developing strategies alongside local stakeholders. Examining responses to the pandemic will illustrate how solidarity and subsidiarity shape religious activity in the public sphere, but more work can be done to trace the conduits of subsidiarity within Catholic organizations. For example, what are the criteria for expanding the Church’s public efforts from the diocese to the national level? What are the unique dialectical and social mechanisms that connect regional and papal teaching with local parishes? Moreover, because the pandemic constitutes one of many overlapping social concerns, sociologists and theologians alike might also evaluate what Catholic historian Donal Dorr describes as the *inductive* processes by which religious leaders discern ethical priorities.²⁵

Sociologist of religion Nancy Ammerman applies an ethnographic approach to trace the link between the personal religious public life of the individual and the work of public institutions, asking if and how religious institutions “devote significant organizational energy to nurturing and teaching their traditions.”²⁶ The next practical step is to do some comparative work to examine how Catholic messaging is rearticulated in different settings according to their unique characteristics.²⁷ Both the Amazon documents and *Fratelli Tutti* emphasize the role of education (a topic which is less explicit within a tradition of Catholic social teaching than one might expect); soon I will begin an ethnographic research at several Catholic sites that offer a hybrid of spiritual and agricultural training. Questions will examine rural and religious identity to assess features of a rural Catholic subculture in Canada, including possibly how food producers incorporate themes and language developed within the Amazon documents, particularly around issues of food sov-

ereignty and ancestral knowledge. Ammerman puts it well: “Understanding religion will require attention both to the ‘micro’ world of everyday interaction and to the ‘macro’ world of large social structures.”²⁸ To do so, we might look to religious organizations or, better, *encounter* with the members and leaders themselves.

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1 This article is based on a paper presented at the annual conference of the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion in May 2021. The theme for the conference was “Why We Shouldn’t Return to ‘Normal’: Working towards Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Decolonization.”

2 Bill Chappell, “1st Known U.S. COVID-19 Death Was Weeks Earlier than Previously Thought,” *NPR*, April 22, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/04/22/840836618/1st-known-u-s-covid-19-death-was-on-feb-6-a-post-mortem-test-reveals>; Karin Larsen, “1st COVID-19-related death in Canada recorded in B.C.,” *CBC*, March 9, 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/covid19-coronavirus-first-death-bc-canada-1.5483932>.

3 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html, 45.

4 Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, (2020), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html, 11, 43.

5 *Ibid.*, 43.

6 Inés San Martín, “Questioning Amazon Synod? Local Says, ‘Come Live Here for a Year,’” *Crux*, September 23, 2019, <https://cruxnow.com/amazon-synod/2019/09/questioning-amazon-synod-local-says-come-live-here-for-a-year>.

7 John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens* (1981), https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens.html.

8 Catholic Bishops of Ontario (now Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario), *The People and the Land* (1989).

9 Grace Davie, *The Sociology of Religion* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2007), 25.

10 Special Assembly for the Pan-Amazonian Region, *The Amazon: New Paths for the Church and for an Integral Ecology: Final Document* (2019), 55, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20191026_sinodo-amazonia_en.html.

11 Special Assembly for the Pan-Amazonian Region, *The Amazon: New Paths*, 21, citing Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 15: “The Church is mission! Missionary outreach is paradigmatic for all the Church’s activity.”

12 Francis, *Querida Amazonia* (2020), 73, 66, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20200202_querida-amazonia.html.

13 “Our Mission,” Our Lady of Guadalupe Circle, <https://ourladyofguadalupecircle.ca/who-we-are/our-mission>.

14 “Outreach Missions,” Kateri Native Ministry, <https://www.katerinativeministry.ca/outreach>.

15 The official statement from the CCCB cites the “discovery”; however, many responses from First Nations communities across Canada demonstrate that “confirmation” is a more accurate word. At the time of writing, the Canadian Catholic Indigenous Council, an advisory group established in 1998 within the CCCB under the guidance of John Paul II, had not released an independent statement. Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Statement from the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops following the recent discovery at the former Kamloops Indian Residential School on the Tk’emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation,” May 31, 2021, <https://www.cccb.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/CCCB-Statement-on-discovery-at-residential-school-in-Kamloops-31-May-2021-EN.pdf>.

16 Special Assembly for the Pan-Amazonian Region, *The Amazon: New Paths*, 12, 30.

17 Development and Peace, “How your money is spent,” <https://www.devp.org/en/donate/transparency>.

18 Chaz Muth, “Working Alongside Migrant Laborers Prepares Seminarians for Priesthood,” *America*, October 12, 2018, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2018/10/12/working-alongside-migrant-laborers-prepares-seminarians-priesthood>.

19 Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio* (1967), 58, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum.html.

20 In a recent interview with Vatican News, Bishop Lionel Gendron, who was also the single Canadian delegate at the Amazon Synod, remarked that “half of all mining companies in the world are Canadian”—if not by fact, then by association. Christopher Wells, “Voices of the Synod: Bishop Lionel Gendron,” *Vatican News*, October 17, 2019, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2019-10/voices-of-the-synod-bishop-lionel-gendron.html>.

21 Development and Peace, a partner with the CCCB, would quickly withdraw its support for the ombudsperson amid growing concerns around the position. Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, “CCCB welcomes decision by Government of Canada on Canadian Ombudsperson for Responsible Enterprise,” January 19, 2018, https://www.cccb.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Statement_-_Position_of_Canadian_Ombudsperson_for_Responsible_Enterprise_-_EN.pdf; Michael Swan, “Development and Peace quits ombudsperson’s advisory board,” *Canadian Catholic News*, August 15, 2019, <https://grandinmedia.ca/development-and-peace-quits-ombudspersons-advisory-board>.

22 Beaman writes: “For often pragmatic reasons much of the research on religion and society is done in urban centres. This gives us a particular view of the religious dynamic in Canada, but fails to convey a sense of the religious life of rural inhabitants.” Lori Beaman, *Religion and Canadian Society: Contexts, Identities, and Strategies*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press), 2012.

23 Judith Kulig et al., “How Do Registered Nurses Define Rurality?” *The Australian Journal of Rural Health* 16:1 (2008), 28–32, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1440-1584.2007.00947.x>.

24 Catherine Marciano, “Pope calls for social justice and vaccines for all,” *CTV*, August 19, 2020, <https://www.ctvnews.ca/world/pope-calls-for-social-justice-and-vaccines-for-all-1.5070420>. Such examples of Church leaders engaging public and political discourse is not new: sociologist Jose Casanova reminds us that the Catholic Church has increased its global presence over the last 50 years: “The reason for the growing diplomatic relevance of the Holy See,” Casanova writes, is because “the Catholic Church has become such an important transnational organization in the emerging world system that no state can afford to ignore it.” José Casanova, “Global Catholicism and the Politics of Civil Society,” *Sociological Inquiry* 66:3 (1996), 358, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-682X.1996.tb00225.x>.

25 Donal Dorr celebrates Pope John’s *inductive approach* to the “signs of the times,” by which the Church could identify the needs of its people around the globe in their own particular settings: “Consequently, the idea that Catholic social teaching constituted a single universal body of truth could now be challenged.” Donal Dorr, *Option for the Poor & for the Earth: From Leo XIII to Pope Francis* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis), 2016.

26 Ammerman continues, “Are they vigorous social communities where bonds of solidarity are created and reinforced? Are they creative mobilizers and networkers? Do they train and support leaders who can articulate compelling visions? In short, do they cultivate religious resources that are maximally portable into the everyday worlds where their members live?” Nancy Ammerman, *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 233.

27 For example, I am currently working on a project with colleague Xochiquetzal Luna to compare how major dioceses and Catholic organizations in Canada, the United States, and Mexico develop programming and messaging around COVID-19, particularly in light of *Fratelli Tutti*.

28 Ammerman, *Everyday Religion*, 234.

Reflections on *The Bishop and Christian Unity: An Ecumenical Vademecum*

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We're all familiar with, and sometimes quite appreciative of, the owner's manual that accompanies a new piece of household or office equipment. It is with this in mind that the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU) has published its most recent document, *The Bishop and Christian Unity: An Ecumenical Vademecum* (December 2020).¹ The term "Vademecum," which is the Latin for "go with me," has been used since the early 17th century to describe a guidebook or manual that is concise enough to be carried in a pocket. Addressed to bishops, *An Ecumenical Vademecum* is intended to help diocesan and eparchial bishops "better understand and fulfil their ecumenical responsibility" (Preface).

This *Vademecum* is the latest in a series of documents published by the PCPCU to encourage and assist in implementing the *Decree on Ecumenism (Unitatis Redintegratio)*, promulgated by the Second Vatican Council on November 21, 1964.² These texts include several instructions and statements issued from 1966 to 1973 on mixed marriages, common celebration of the Eucharist, ecumenism in higher education, eucharistic hospitality, and ecumenical dialogue. A two-part *Directory Concerning Ecumenical Matters*, published in 1967 and 1970, was updated in 1993 as the *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism* to serve as a resource for all who are engaged in ecumenical activity in the Catholic Church.³ In addition, the PCPCU issued its *Guidelines for Interconfessional Cooperation in Translating the Bible* in 1987 and *The Ecumenical Dimension of those Engaged in Pastoral Work* in 1997.⁴ Beginning in 1965, the PCPCU has cooperated with the World Council of Churches through the Joint Working Group to produce papers, reports, and study documents on such topics as the notion of hierarchy of truths, ecumenical formation, implications of a common baptism, and Catholic participation in national and regional councils of churches. Papal encyclicals, especially John Paul II's *Ut Unum Sint* and, more recently, Pope Francis's *Joy of the Gospel* have also contributed to the extensive store of documentation in support of the ecumenical endeavour.⁵

In line with its identity as a *Vademecum*, this new PCPCU text has a number of special features. It is

relatively brief, synthesizing topics covered in more detail in the 1993 *Directory*. Published over 25 years after the earlier *Directory*, it can take account of recent ecumenical developments and learnings from various dialogues. Drawing on insights from both Anglican and Orthodox dialogues, for example, the text refers to Pope Francis's address on the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops to highlight the deep relationship between episcopal ministry and synodality and to affirm the ecumenical significance of building a synodal church (article 4). In its description of the role of consecrated life in promoting ecumenism, article 23 recognizes the emergence of recently founded institutes with a distinct charism for the promotion of Christian unity and notes that some of these include members from different Christian traditions. Furthermore, the text makes it clear that "interchurch marriages should not be regarded as problems for they are often a privileged place where the unity of Christians is built" (article 35). This same article goes on to encourage involvement of interchurch families in local and diocesan ecumenical activities. The reflection on changing ecclesial affiliation as an ecumenical challenge and opportunity in article 37 raises a topic of particular importance to its episcopal audience. With reference to the experience of the French Joint Committee for Catholic-Orthodox Theological Dialogue and the Anglican-Roman Catholic Bishops' Dialogue of Canada, the text notes the development of a *Code of Conduct* between ecumenical partners as a way of helping to alleviate difficulties and maintain strong relations in situations which may offer some specific local challenges (article 37).

Addressed to bishops who live with full agendas and are already inundated with considerable and varied demands on their time, the *Vademecum* seeks to be user-friendly. Its content is organized simply in two parts: 1) The promotion of ecumenism within the Catholic Church, and 2) The Catholic Church in its relations with other Christians. Seeking to identify practical steps for promoting the search for Christian unity in a diocese, part 1 begins with a review of ecclesial structures available to assist a bishop in carrying out his ecumenical responsibilities. It continues by highlighting the importance of establishing and supporting programs, workshops, and conferences in ecumenical

formation for laity, seminarians, and clergy. Finally, it concludes with an endorsement of the role of media, particularly of the diocesan website, as a means of fostering good relationships in the Christian community and circulating information about ecumenical documents and resources. With a focus on relations with other Christians, part 2 begins with a reflection on spiritual ecumenism as the soul of the whole ecumenical movement. Next, it outlines three interrelated forms of dialogue: the dialogue of love that deals with encounter in everyday life, the dialogue of truth that concerns the healing of doctrinal divisions, and the dialogue of life that invites joint action in pastoral care, service to the world, and culture. Consistent with its identity as a *Vademecum*, each section of the text is summarized

in a list of practical recommendations. Another very helpful summary is found in the document's appendix, which offers an introductory guide to the multiple international dialogues in which the Catholic Church is involved. From the perspective of the PCPCU, the decision to develop a *Vademecum* for the use of bishops appears to be strategic. In line with the centrality of the bishop's role and his

list of practical recommendations on this topic, the *Vademecum* suggests that bishops present the clergy of their dioceses with the guidelines given by the *Ecumenical Directory* and help them to discern when its conditions apply and when, in individual cases, sharing in sacramental life might be appropriate. It also recommends that the bishop consider preparing a set of guidelines for exceptional sacramental sharing. In the 1990s, the Episcopal Commission for Ecumenism of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops consulted with the Canon Law Commission to prepare a set of documents to assist bishops in issuing a decree identifying particular cases of serious spiritual need general to their diocese. This was in accord with canon 844, § 4 of the Latin Code and canon 671, § 4 of the Eastern Code, which recognizes the diocesan bishop's legal competence to enact such a decree.



We place this work in the hands of the world's bishops, hoping that in these pages they will find clear and helpful guidelines, enabling them to lead the local churches entrusted to their pastoral care towards that unity for which the Lord prayed and to which the Church is irrevocably called."

—From the Preface

responsibility for oversight of all diocesan activities, episcopal commitment is integral to the search for Christian unity both locally and nationally. In terms of ecclesial structures, the diocesan bishop is in a position to guide and direct local ecumenical initiatives. He is the one who will appoint an ecumenical officer, establish an ecumenical commission, and encourage participation in local formation programs. Interchurch marriages represent a specific ecumenical opportunity, and it is the diocesan bishop who is called upon to authorize these marriages. It is also his responsibility to dispense from the Catholic rite for the wedding ceremony when appropriate. Sharing in sacramental life is a significant pastoral concern for the diocesan bishop. In this context, the *Vademecum* hopes to provide assistance by synthesizing earlier Vatican statements and directives on the topic. Since the Catholic Church's position on sacramental sharing neither excludes all forms of sharing nor promotes an unrestricted sharing, careful discernment is required, and it is the bishop who is the one to discern. In its

While the bishop is essential to the promotion of ecumenism in diocesan life, his commitment to stimulating the search for Christian unity among other local churches and ecclesial communities is no less important. With respect to spiritual ecumenism, the bishop's presence at events marking the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity signals the Catholic Church's support for ecumenical prayer and encourages parishes and other diocesan groups to become involved. His readiness to issue a joint statement with other Christian leaders to mark a shared liturgical feast or to host an ecumenical prayer service for a matter of common concern is likely to invite participation. The dialogue of love is advanced through a culture of encounter, and when the bishop takes the first step to meet with other Christian leaders, such an initiative often leads to more permanent forms of engagement. Since Christian communities in a given locality usually face similar pastoral challenges, a willingness to work cooperatively rather than competitively is an effective means of fostering ecumenism. Here, the bishop's encouragement and support will be a major factor in contributing to the success of various endeavours. An interesting example of Christian commitment to work together can be seen in a covenant between the Anglican and Roman Catholic dioceses in Regina, SK, signed by the two bishops in 2011. The covenant lists a number of ways the two dioceses may seek to move forward together in joint mission and service and expresses the intent of working toward an ever-widening covenantal relationship among all Christian communities in the area.

In episcopal churches, bishops will take a leading role in promoting ecumenism. Thus, in May 2000, when pairs of Anglican and Catholic bishops from 13 regions around the world met to assess relations between the two communions, one of its goals was the hope that the bishops would have an experience of exercising *episcopé* together, which might lead to

a more regular exercise of shared *episcopé* locally. This meeting was followed by establishment of the International Anglican–Roman Catholic Commission for Unity and Mission (IARCCUM), again comprised of pairs of bishops from a variety of countries and charged, among its tasks, with searching for strategies to translate the degree of communion that has been achieved into visible and practical outcomes. Similar goals are evident in the Canadian Anglican–Roman Catholic Bishops’ Dialogue, which was initiated in 1975 and has met annually since that time. The dialogue’s *Pastoral Guidelines for Interchurch Marriages between Anglicans and Roman Catholics in Canada* was published in 1987.⁶ A text on *Pastoral Guidelines in the Case of Clergy Moving from One Communion to Another* was completed in 1991.⁷ In 1995–1996, the dialogue provided a pastoral message to encourage ecumenical involvement and stressed the importance of engaging in common projects at a local level. A statement on pastoral practice, *When Anglicans and Roman Catholics are at the Eucharist Together*, was issued in 2007.⁸

Asserting that the search for unity is intrinsic to the nature of the Church, the *Vademecum* clearly states that ecumenical engagement is not an optional dimension of the bishop’s ministry. At the same time, commitment to ecumenism is not to be seen as an exclusive endeavour. In particular, there should be no conflict between commitment to Christian unity and the social and political witness of the churches. This is evident in recent international dialogues, which illustrate an emerging convergence in concepts of kingdom, church, and the commitment to social justice. The point is substantiated in reports from Reformed–Roman Catholic Dialogue, where the Church’s mission to serve as a prophetic sign of the kingdom of God means that Christians will be active in the promotion of justice, liberation of the oppressed, and protection of the environment. In its 2005 report, *The Church as Community of Common Witness to the Kingdom of God*, case studies from Canada, South Africa, and Northern Ireland are used to show how the struggle to overcome Christian divisions (doctrinal issues) relates to the struggle to overcome what divides societies, nations, cultures, and religions (social justice concerns).⁹ These dialogue reports challenge all churches to reinvigorate the Lund principle’s call to act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately.

Drawing on the insights of popes John Paul II and Francis, the *Vademecum* affirms the importance of dialogue as an exchange of gifts and recognizes the development of Receptive Ecumenism. Over 40 years of intense dialogue, both bilateral and multilateral, have set the churches on a new relationship with each other. People mix easily with one another at the congregational level, and, at the level of church leadership,

structures are in place to give heads of churches an opportunity to meet regularly. Despite formal divisions that still exist, churches have been doing much to nurture what already unites them. Even though progress has been made, there is a sense of impasse—a sense of looking for a way forward. In this context, Paul Murray, a lay Catholic theologian in Durham, England, has proposed the concept of Receptive Ecumenism.¹⁰ In essence, Receptive Ecumenism asks, given the consensus that has been reached in dialogue, what can my church learn from the other? The question is about a willingness to be self-critical and an openness to grow through learning from the other. Receptive ecumenism has the potential to help churches look with fresh eyes at their own situation, especially the challenges they face. The first international bilateral dialogue to adopt the methodology of receptive ecumenism is phase three of the international Anglican–Roman Catholic Dialogue (ARCIC III). This new approach requires dialogue partners to look humbly at what is not working effectively within their own tradition and to ask whether this might be helped by receptive learning from the experience of the other. This approach is not a matter of proving who is right or wrong, or who is better than the other; rather, it is a matter of being willing to receive from the gifts and example of the other communion. Receptive ecumenism is a call to conversion and a path to renewal for churches that see its possibilities.

This recent *Vademecum* on Christian unity addressed to bishops is an opportunity to revitalize Catholic ecumenical commitment. The text concludes with the reassuring reminder that Christian unity will not be brought about by human effort alone. It has already been achieved

by the grace of God in Christ’s victory over sin and division. Our task is to be open to receive this grace, especially through an active attentiveness to the gifts God has sown in other Christian communities. Such attentiveness will enable us to become more faithful disciples of Christ and enhance our ecclesial witness to the reign of God.

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It is the experience of many bishops that in the Dialogue of Love ecumenism becomes much more than a duty of their ministry and is discovered to be a source of enrichment and a fount of joy through which they experience ‘how very good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity’ (Ps 133:1).”

—From no. 26

1 *The Bishop and Christian Unity: An Ecumenical Vademecum* (December 4, 2020), <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2020/12/04/201205a.html>.

2 *Unitatis Redintegratio* (1964), https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html.

3 For the updated version, see <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/documenti/testo-in-inglese.html>.

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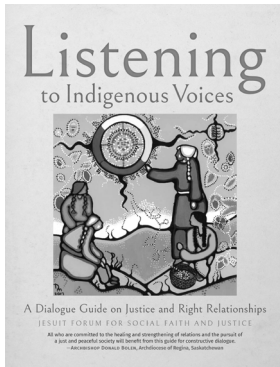
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