

New York City, 2024

Natalia Imperatori-Lee, a professor and devoted believer clinging to the margins of institutional Catholicism, to pastors of my own tradition and those in communion with us in our belief in the Paschal Mystery. Most especially I direct this letter to the faithful men and women who work daily to reach those on the margins of your communities, to welcome, include, and allow the church to breathe into the future.

Sisters, brothers, siblings and friends,

I pray very sincerely in thanksgiving not only for those pastors who are ordained in my tradition, but for all persons who do the work of growing and maintaining the beloved community of Christ's followers within and outside Roman Catholicism. I give thanks to our creator and sustainer in life for your faithfulness, your steadfast commitment to the Gospel, and your unwavering dedication to God's people. Continually I pray that you will remain attentive to the Spirit moving where it will, even beyond the bounds of the community, breathing new life in and for the church.

Increasingly, we in the U.S. Christian community find ourselves in, not a hostile, but an apathetic climate, immersed as it is in an increasingly unchurched, or anti-institutional generation of young people. Similarly, more seasoned members of religious traditions, frustrated with continued marginalization and apparent stonewalling of their concerns, are leaving churches altogether, feeling exhausted and, altogether, "done" with trying to make a progressive difference. Together, these "nones" and "dones" feel like the end of institutional Christianity as we have known it.

But this state of affairs need not be permanent—or even necessarily a sign of some impending apocalypse. On the contrary, the nones and dones provide pastors with unique opportunities to remake structures of believability and inclusion in order to grow the church and follow the spirit. Our country's current political polarization and the rise of White Christian Nationalism, increasingly aggressive "masculinist" revivals of so-called orthodoxy, and emphasis in our churches and communities on an imagined doctrinal "purity" serve to exacerbate the alienation experienced by those who are either unchurched or at their wit's end.

As the people of God, the church ideally bridges the differences between and among its members with a capacious understanding of belonging and membership. Though we certainly hold doctrines to be true, we must not allow our grip on these truths to strangle God's will for the full flourishing of God's beloved community. Nor should we use doctrines as a cudgel with which to berate those on the margins of our churches, who are frequently (as are we all) doing their best to live out God's promises in their lives through challenging circumstances.

How many times have we heard—and how many times lamented—that rather being a source of life and refreshment and hope, it is our churches themselves that have added new burdens to the weight each of us carries? We cannot and should not allow the church, our spiritual home, to become yet another cross for people to bear. No, the beloved community must, instead, strive in every way to ease one another's burdens, to lift one another up, and to give whatever aid is

necessary so that we all may flourish into our baptismal dignity. If we are to be one body, then unity-in-diversity must be our strength, and not something we fear.

In my experience with nones, who make up the majority of the students I teach, as well as with many “dones,” with whom I share a great affinity, I have found that three things are essential in their spiritual flourishing. Both groups, like all people, yearn for meaning, for belonging, and for a sense of justice in the world. Bolstered by my conviction that the Holy Spirit still breathes life into the ecclesial community, I offer the following reflections in the hopes that a renewed pastoral theology might emerge from the travails of the present.

Meaning

All of God’s children, young and old, long for their lives to be meaningful. The crisis of late capitalism has revealed how hollow the promise of the “American Dream” has rung for generations of Americans outside a small privileged class. Higher education is in crisis as well, as college costs rise and the cost/benefit ratio of a 4-year degree seems impossible for many families to justify. Add to this the remaining ripple effects of a global pandemic that introduced epic levels of isolation, loneliness, and mental health concerns to young people, and we can see that the search for meaning is floundering on the shoals of late-stage, post-pandemic capitalist America.

In the past, non-governmental organizations, including and especially church communities, pointed toward the eternal as a source and ground of meaning. Indeed, this is what was promised by Christ when in dying and rising he invited us to live not for ourselves but for him. While “living for Christ” might not be a slogan that will appeal to nones or dones, I nevertheless maintain that ecclesial communities can still be good news to spiritual seekers, if they model their work on the inclusive ministry of Christ who exhorted us to be neighbors, to love our enemies, to go to the margins and beyond in order to enlarge the tent of God’s reign.

What might it look like to have our pastors embody Jesus’s call to bring liberty to captives, sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free? Our young people are held captive by the constant productivity demanded by late capitalism, they feel erased by church leaders who diverge so much from their views on so many important issues in their lives. In the Catholic Church in the United States, two of those issues are LGBTQ belonging and women’s leadership.

So too do our elders feel that pain: They, who have waited to see the inclusion of women in ministry and a full accounting of and repair of harm done from abuse cases, remain oppressed by the moral turpitude of the Church’s public-facing sector. Many people inspired and enlivened by the promise of the Second Vatican Council and the movements that emerged from it wonder if the church still believes in the hope-filled, outward-oriented body that council prophesied and that two generations now have striven to make real.

Community

Many Latinx theologians over the past several decades have elaborated a theological anthropology that understands that humans develop in a pre-existent web of relationship, bonds

that are unchosen but nevertheless formative. This notion of *familia*, a blend of relatives and chosen family, grounds us not as individuals primarily but as communally constituted. Roberto Goizueta's work builds on this anthropological notion of "we": he describes humanity-in-relation as necessary, preexistent. Entering into relationship is not merely an option between two autonomous individuals. There is a sense in which we belong to other people, this is what makes us human. We are responsible to others. Freedom, then, is not freedom from interference, but rather freedom in relation.

This freedom in relation is a gift from God. To quote Goizueta, "If our lives have meaning, it is not because we ourselves have constructed that meaning and imposed it on creation, but because we have been empowered to cultivate a meaning what we first received from other, ultimately from God, but that we help shape through our creative response to that gift."

I encourage all of us—but most especially pastors and those in a position to lead and nurture Christian community—to lean in to the idea that we belong to one another, particularly in the face of those who have been discouraged by our actions or inaction, and toward those young people who reject institutions but long to belong.

We are responsible to those who have left our churches in frustration, and to those who desire a community where they will be seen and valued for all that they are. We are, furthermore, responsible for the felt need among so many of our fellow believers to treat the margins of our communities like centers—naming and driving pastoral priorities toward more inclusion and an ever-widening tent, empowering those who hunger for freedom-in-relation.

Justice

This empowering can only come about if the church strives more ardently for justice. In particular, for those we have identified as "dones," a main deterrent from remaining in a church community is the perception of lack of urgency or priority when it comes to matters of abuse, misogyny, clericalism, and exclusion.

In truth, it can be anxiety-provoking for pastors to face structural injustice in their communities and attempt to change the way things are done. As I mentioned above, none of us comes to exist in the church community without a pre-existing set of relationships and ways of proceeding—ways of proceeding that can be threatened or upended by an honest confrontation with injustice inside and out the community.

But an important first step involves recognizing that while listening to others and hearing their stories is crucial, listening alone is insufficient. Churches must take the necessary step of not only hearing survivors' stories and making space for those narratives, but also believing people, trusting their understanding of their experiences of abuse or marginalization and being willing to act so that abuse and marginalization is repaired and never repeated.

Toward the end of John's Gospel, the evangelist inserts a crucial aside delineating the purpose of the gospel narrative. "These things are written so that you may come to believe..." (Jn 20:31). The purpose of the gospel is not merely to open our ears but also to soften our hearts, to allow us

to lend credibility to those our society derides as having little: the abused, the forgotten, the victims of sexual violence and discrimination among them. Not merely listen to them, or tolerate or accept them, but to believe them.

Church, I urge you to bring good news to nones and to dones by believing them—believe their struggles, celebrate with their joys, affirm the dignity that enlivens them as children of our Creator. Do not listen with intent to respond, listen with the intent to believe, and to reform our communities in light of this belief.

It is my fervent hope that it is not too late to live into our destiny as a beloved community that gives the world a foretaste of the reign of God. We can do this, if we work as one body toward belonging, toward justice, and toward the unity in diversity that makes for a meaningfully vibrant people of God.

Please pray for me as I pray for all of you.