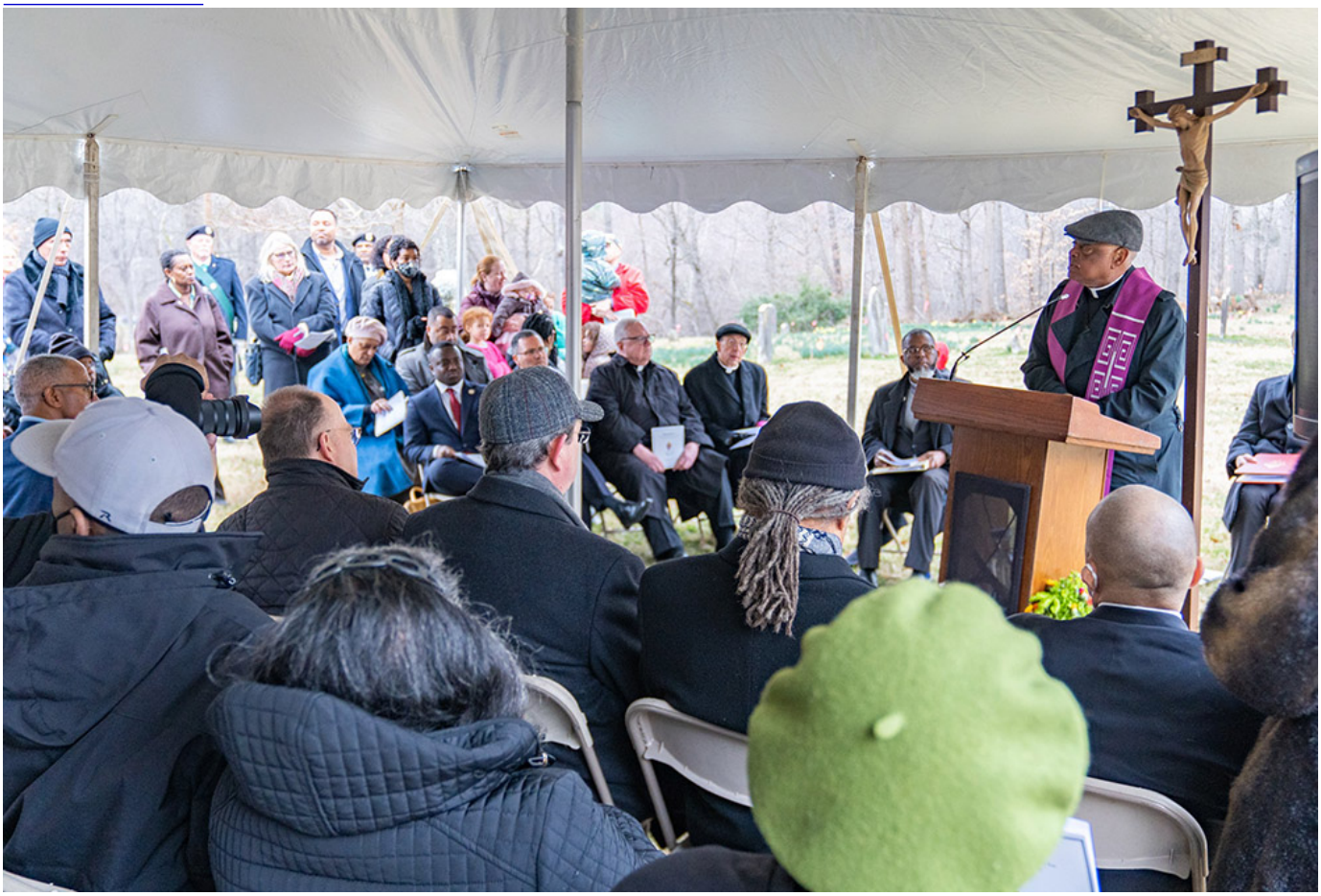
Opinion

Guest Voices



Washington Cardinal Wilton Gregory leads a prayer service Feb. 25 for enslaved people believed to be buried in unmarked graves at the cemetery at Sacred Heart Parish in Bowie, Maryland. The property is on a former plantation once owned by members of the Society of Jesus in the 1700s and 1800s. (OSV News/Catholic Standard/Mihoko Owada)

by Rebecca Bratten Weiss

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

August 11, 2023

Everyone in Christian media seems to be talking about polarization these days. A google search for "polarization in the church" or "our polarized church" will yield a wealth of content, from multiple denominational backgrounds. Publications that have put out articles on the topic within the past 10 months include America, The Christian Century, Christianity Today, National Catholic Register, Catholic Review, The Christian Post, and this publication, the National Catholic Reporter. And that's just a few on the list.

Pope Francis himself has addressed this issue, stating in his October 2022 homily on the 60th anniversary of the beginning of the Second Vatican Council, "A Church in love with Jesus has no time for quarrels, gossip and disputes. May God free us from being critical and intolerant, harsh and angry! This is not a matter of style but of love."

There is widespread agreement, across political and religious lines, that we are living in a time of extreme ideological division, and that this is not pleasant. Both the 2016 and 2020 elections took a toll on family relationships and societal connections. People lost friends and cut ties with family members.

The pandemic, and disagreements over how to handle it, or even whether to acknowledge it, exacerbated this.

> There's no virtue in settling on a middle ground between extremes, when one extreme represents forces that do harm, and the other represents those who have been harmed.
>
> Tweet this

When it comes to a solution, there is less agreement. Both Catholic and Protestant Christians who are progressively inclined often stress dialogue and relationship-

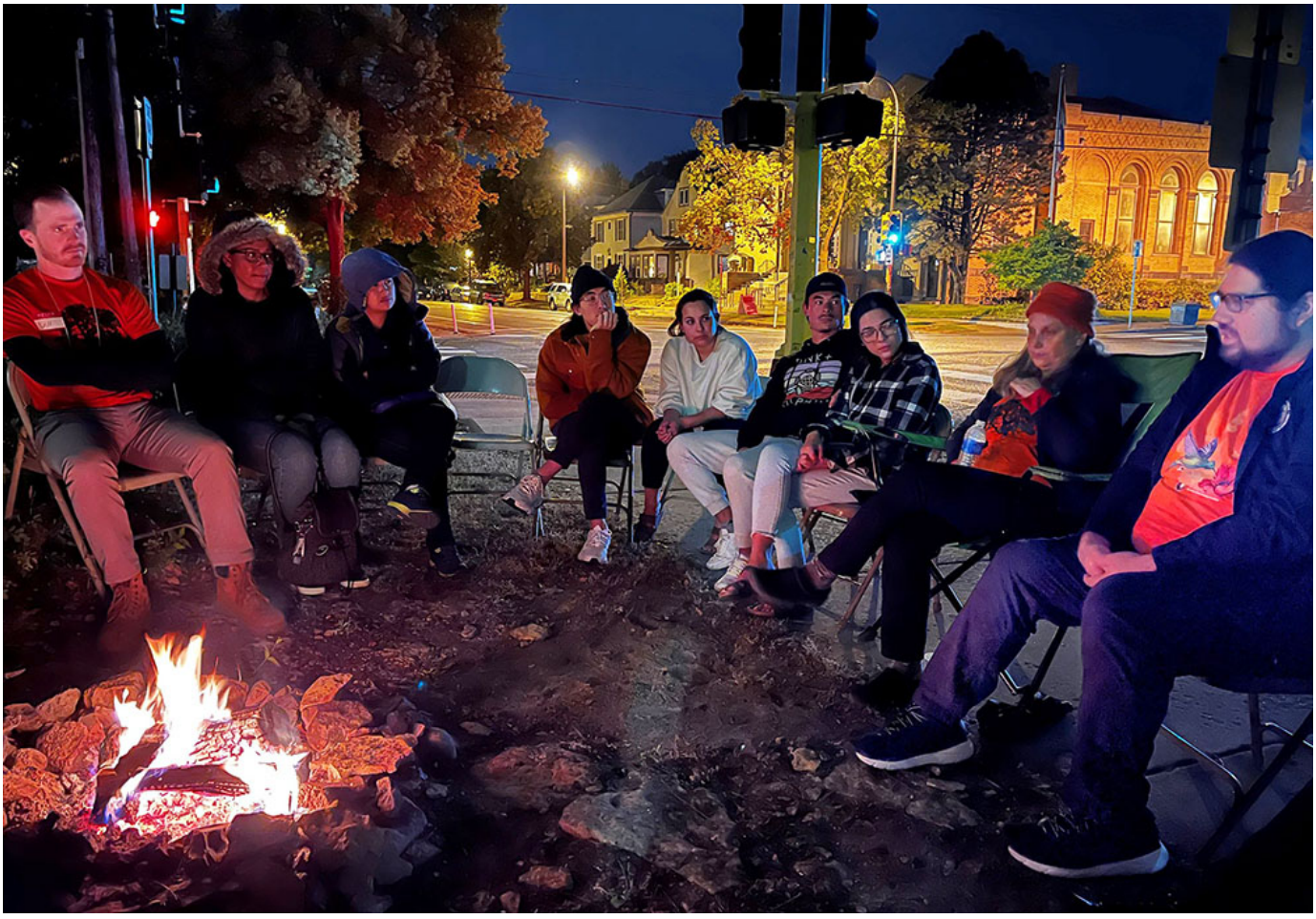
building as tools for healing from polarization, or point to the ongoing "synod on synodality" as a sign of hope. Others encourage people to find the good in others, or seek common ground.

Conservative-leaning Catholics, by contrast, tend to emphasize solutions that involve a recovery of past traditions, or increased dedication to proselytization.

What most discourses about division seem to be missing, however, is that our present polarization, whether in the church or in politics, cannot be rightly understood as a power struggle between equally complicit groups, and cannot be addressed if we continue to regard division as the primary flaw, in and of itself, rather than a symptom of a deeper and more serious evil.

Much of the polarization we are currently experiencing in the Catholic Church and across civil society is the result of ongoing, deep-rooted injustices inflicted on marginalized groups by those who have reshaped the Gospel of Jesus and attempted to use it as a tool of oppression.

This is not a new phenomenon, either. Injustice against Indigenous Catholics, Black Catholics, LGBTQ Catholics and other Catholics of historically marginalized groups have been going on for centuries.



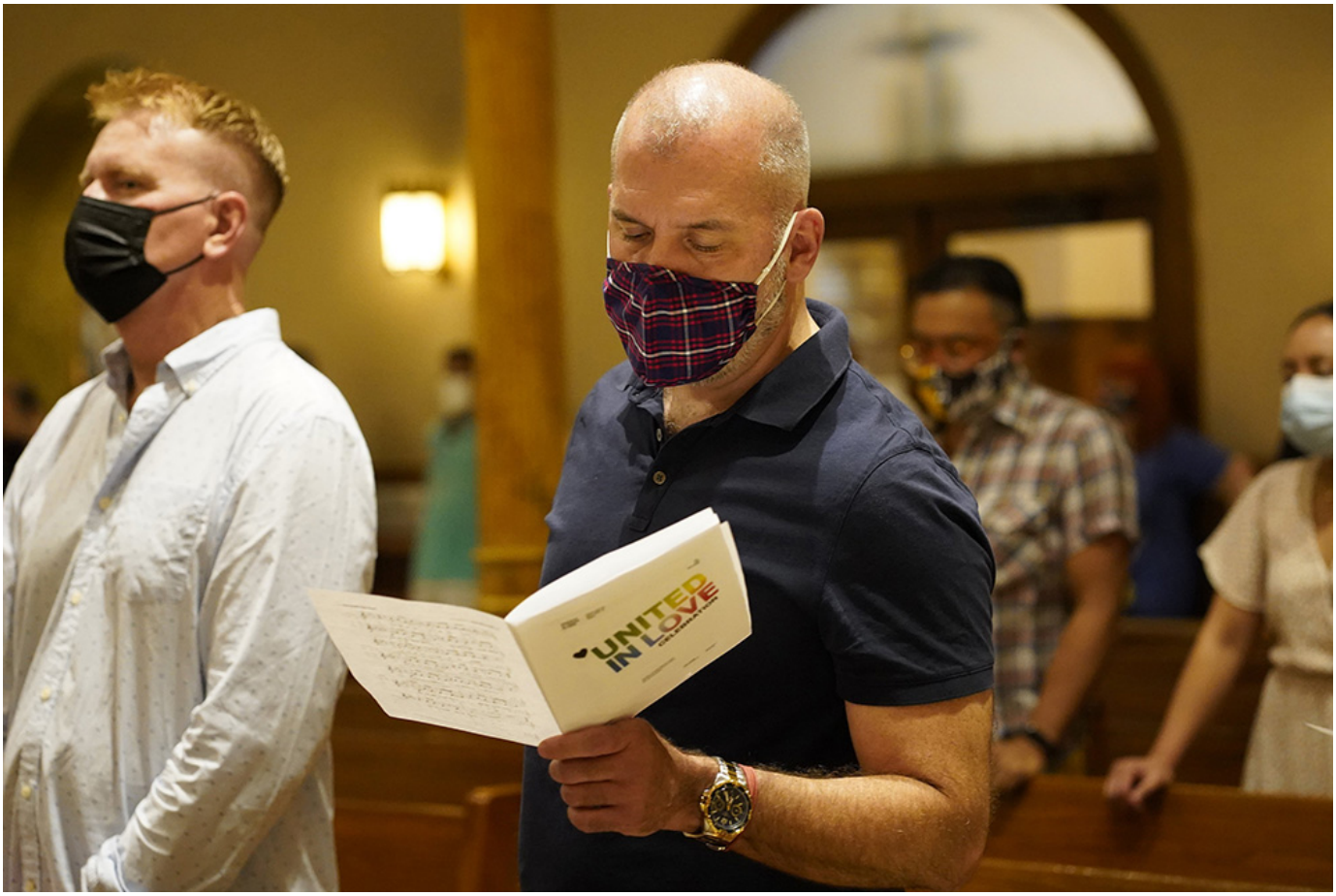
Maka Black Elk, far right, director of Boarding School Truth and Healing for St. Francis Mission in Pine Ridge, South Dakato, describes his work to participants in front of Gichitwaa Kateri Church in Minneapolis Sept. 30, 2022. (CNS/Courtesy of Basilica of St. Mary via The Catholic Spirit/Janice Anderson)

Many of us who are white Catholics are only just beginning to learn that Black Catholics were subjected to racial discrimination, and worse, for decades. Stories are coming out about the Black Africans who were enslaved by Catholics, the Indigenous families torn apart by Catholics, the forced conversions. Queer Catholics have been forced to hide their identities or experience harassment and rejection. And, as we now know, institutional sex abuse and cover-ups have been going on for centuries.

As stories of injustice and oppression, as well as of liberation and healing, enter the mainstream, many Catholics, some of them very highly placed, reject all efforts to bring about reform or accountability.

Earlier this summer, Bishop Thomas Paprocki of Springfield, Illinois, used the diocesan newspaper for an outpouring of anti-LGBTQ rhetoric, even seeming to defend a law in Uganda that includes the death penalty for LGBTQ people. Last year, Bishop Robert McManus of Worcester, Massachusetts, told a school that it could no longer call itself Catholic, after it flew Black Lives Matter and Pride flags.

The message this sends to Black or LGBTQ Catholics is clear. Inevitably, many will decide the church is a hostile place, and leave. But others stay and fight for reform.



A worshiper sings during an annual "Pre-Pride Festive Mass" June 26, 2021, at St. Francis of Assisi Church in New York City. The liturgy, hosted by the parish's LGBT Ministry, is traditionally celebrated on the eve of the city's Pride march for the LGBTQ+ community. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

One reason this keeps being framed as a simple polarization issue is that many unaffected by these disputes may be confused about what they are seeing.

If they habitually turn to their faith for comfort and peace, they may not understand, or want to acknowledge, that the institutional church, and powerful actors within that church, have inflicted harm on others. So they misinterpret conflicts as mere squabbling, and frame it as a "both sides" issue, because they do not fully understand the injustices that have been done, or the importance of working for reform and healing.

These are not "both sides" issues. It is more like a schoolyard situation where a bully has been menacing other kids, until someone finally decides to take a stand. To outsiders, it might look like two troublemakers, equally at fault in disrupting the peace. But the kids who were bullied know that the thing that looked like peace was actually terror.

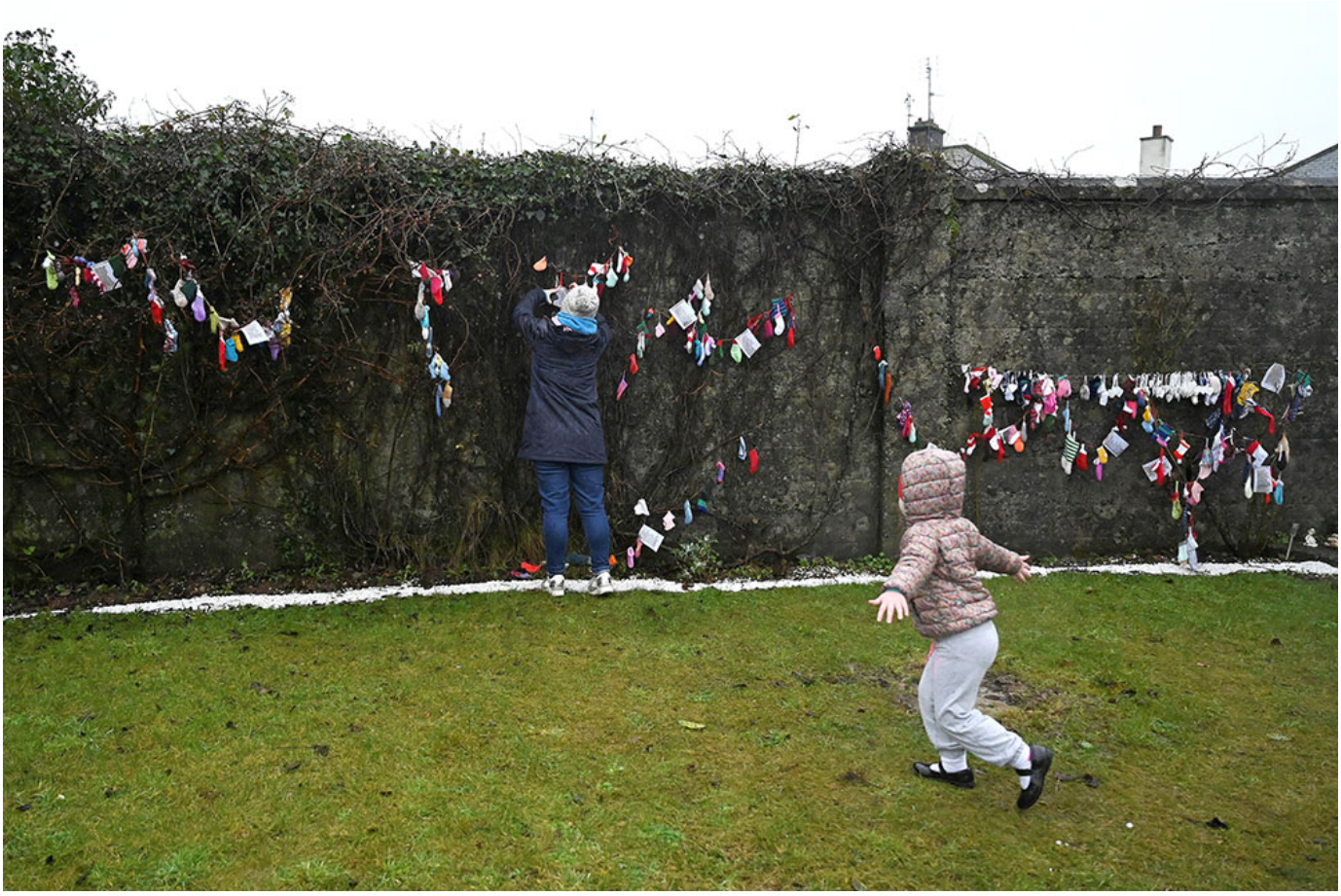
Another reason why there is a trend for framing this as a mere polarization problem, instead of looking for the deeper problem, is that unity is very important for Christians, and always has been. Jesus, in the Gospel of John, prays that his people may remain united: "As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:21). In the Acts of the Apostles, we read that all those who believed in Jesus "were together and had all things in common" (Acts 2:44). Paul's epistles to the early churches frequently emphasize the importance of unity.

Naturally, then, Catholics may view division itself as a wound in the body of Christ, without understanding that the division is simply a symptom of an even more serious malady.

Throughout history, Christians have often fought over very stupid things. Jonathan Swift satirizes this in his 18th-century novel *Gulliver's Travels*, in which the nation of Lilliput is torn apart by internal conflicts over ridiculous disagreements, such as how to crack a soft-boiled egg correctly. Waging war because of arcane points of theology really is as stupid as fighting over how to eat an egg.

Such conflicts could easily be resolved by means of finding common ground, or simply by acknowledging that the fight itself is silly.

But not every conflict in history, or in the present, should be regarded as similarly ridiculous, or so easily resolved. When religious authority has been used to abuse, marginalize, enslave and oppress others, and when those others finally say, "This is not the Gospel Jesus taught," the solution to this disagreement is not so simple as finding common ground or working for dialogue, though these techniques may be part of a broader plan for reconciliation.



Denise Gormley and her 7-year-old daughter, Rosa, pay their respects at a cemetery in Tuam, Ireland, where the bodies of nearly 800 infants were uncovered at the site of a former Catholic home for unmarried mothers and their children. The photo was taken Jan. 12, 2021, the day a commission investigating the treatment of women in such homes released its report. (CNS/Reuters/Clodagh Kilcoyne)

Additionally, we need to be careful not to set up situations where we automatically expect marginalized groups to do the difficult work of "finding common ground" with those who have harmed them, especially as this may often mean asking people to step into unsafe positions where they are vulnerable to further harm.

Dialogue itself won't do much good, anyway, if it proceeds on the assumption that inequality and injustice are problems of mutual misunderstanding. And there's no virtue in settling on a middle ground between extremes, when one extreme represents forces that do harm, and the other represents those who have been harmed. This is not ethical or praiseworthy. This is lukewarm.

While work to build bridges, foster dialogue and seek greater understanding can be powerful and important, this work is only fruitful when it focuses on leading those who have done harm to acknowledge and repent of the injustice they have inflicted, and on constructive ways to make reparation.

Groups such as New Ways Ministry, which advocates for LGBTQ Catholics, or parish initiatives such as the Thea Bowman Ministry at Christ the King Catholic Church in Nashville, Tennessee, offer examples of how to foster dialogue without ignoring the reality of injustice.

No conversation about "our polarized church" is worth much unless it points first to the work that must be done for repentance and restorative justice. Otherwise, we're just asking the wounded to ignore their own wounds, and fostering the kind of neutrality that serves the oppressor.

A version of this story appeared in the **Sept 1-14, 2023** print issue under the headline: We need to talk about repentance.