

Catholic

UPDATE

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Beyond My Parish

THE UNIVERSAL REACH OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

RICHARD W. THOMPSON

To some people, the Catholic Church seems “small”—irrelevant to their concerns, unimportant in their lives, disconnected from the “real” world. This is sometimes the opinion of those with just a passing knowledge of the Catholic faith and, too often, the belief of those who were raised Catholic.

Catholics can be very parochial. For many, their idea of the Catholic Church is their parish or the school they attended. With such a small idea of the Church, it’s no wonder so many feel as if they “outgrow” the Church.

The meaning of *catholic* in the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds we profess at Mass is “universal.” “The Church is catholic because she has been sent out by Christ on a mission to the whole of the human race” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 831). Jesus charged the apostles to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19). Many of us don’t experience just how literally the Church extends to the whole world. Certainly, the geographical expanse of the Church is impressive as on any given Sunday, Mass is celebrated in every language in nearly every city and village of every country on earth. But also consider the extent to which the Church has entered into deep reflection and dialogue with almost every area of human interest and endeavor. If you are among those who feel the Church is out of touch, I’d like to challenge you with a few examples of just how engaged, how universal the Catholic Church really is.

THE UNIVERSE OF SCIENCE AND FAITH

Let’s start with a common misunderstanding—the idea that science and religion are in conflict or even contradictory. You can probably think of at least one major scientific theory of the last century—the Big Bang Theory. Did you know this theory was originally conceived by a Belgian Catholic priest and physicist, Fr. Georges Lemaître (1894–1966)? Fr. Lemaître had an eminent career, studying astronomy at the University of Cambridge. He completed his doctorate in 1926 at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He became an expert in Einstein’s theory of relativity and even met with Einstein on several occasions.

Fr. Lemaître thought about the beginnings of the universe and in 1931 proposed his “hypothesis of the primeval atom,” the idea that our universe expanded from a single point. This concept evolved into the Big Bang Theory—which is now widely accepted by cosmologists. He was recognized and lauded in the international scientific community before he died.

When young Georges was still in elementary school, he found himself drawn to science, but also to the priesthood. Even as a little boy, he reasoned that there were two paths to arrive at the truth and he decided to follow both of them. In an in-depth interview in the *New York Times* in February 1933, Lemaître talked about the apparent conflict between



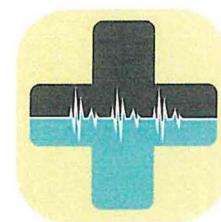
science and faith. Part of the problem, he said, is due to scientists themselves. “Scientists can be too literal-minded,” he said. The Bible is not intended as science. The story of creation in Genesis “is simply trying to teach us that one day in seven should be devoted to rest, worship and reverence—all necessary to salvation.”

For all those boys and girls who eat up the STEM classes in school (science, technology, engineering, and math) and for the generous parents who donate thousands of dollars to support such programs, they might be interested to learn about the Pontifical Academy for Science. Just their archived list of topics, going back to 1936, is impressive.

And for those intrepid science buffs who love field trips, how about a trek to the Vatican Observatory in Tucson, Arizona? Light pollution in the Eternal City led the Vatican to seek a better location. Arizona was the perfect site. The Vatican Observatory Research Group was established at the University of Arizona in 1961.

THE CHURCH AND MEDICINE, THE ENVIRONMENT, AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Furthering its involvement in science, the Catholic Church is the world’s largest nongovernment provider of health-care services. In 2022, the Vatican held a two-day meeting with an international group of stem cell biologists, immunologists, and engineers. During their time together, they discussed advances in clinical stem-cell research that could lead to tractable solutions for patients with degenerative diseases, including Parkinson’s disease, age-related macular degeneration, leukemia and other therapeutically recalcitrant malignancies, bone-marrow failure syndromes, age-related muscle atrophy, inherited valvular heart disease, and SARS-CoV-2. Here the Catholic Church joins the cutting edge of the health-care industry.



Another serious concern, climate change, affects our health and many other aspects of our lives. Thus, the Vatican and the United Nations have teamed up to discuss ideas and possible solutions to problems in the oceans in the UN decade dedicated to Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021-2030). The UN established World Oceans Day in 2008. The 2023 theme is “Planet Ocean: Tides Are Changing.”

Indeed they are. Oceans are home to 80 percent of all life on earth and comprise the source for feeding over three billion people. Pope Francis sent a message to the

Science can purify religion from error and superstition; religion can purify science from idolatry and false absolutes.

FROM ST. JOHN PAUL II’S LETTER
TO THE DIRECTOR OF THE VATICAN OBSERVATORY, 1988

Though faith is above reason, there can never be any real discrepancy between faith and reason. Since the same God who reveals mysteries and infuses faith has bestowed the light of reason on the human mind, God cannot deny himself, nor can truth ever contradict truth.

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conference stressing our common humanity and an integral vision of ecology, a theme he highlighted in *On Care for Our Common Home* (*Laudato Si'*). The pope's encyclical encouraged people to care for the oceans with humility, gratitude, and awe.

Maybe mountains are your thing. The International Mountain Day Symposium was held at the Vatican as part of the International Year of Sustainable Mountain Development in 2022. Anchored in the words of *Laudato Si'*, the meeting was hosted by the Vatican Dicastery for Culture and Education of the Holy See and the Mountain Partnership—the United Nations alliance dedicated to the development of mountain areas.

Pope Francis made several concerns a high priority in *Laudato Si'*, including care for the poor and love of creation. The Pontifical Academy has also issued a statement to help reduce the vulnerability of the world's poorest populations to the effects of the climate crisis. It noted that an interdependent world makes us more conscious of the negative effects of certain lifestyles and models of production and consumption that affect us all, and—more importantly—the Academy encourages us to ensure that solutions are proposed from a global perspective, not simply based on the interests of a few countries.

Recently the Vatican partnered with the Stockholm Environment Institute to prepare *Our Common Home*, a booklet that calls us to renew our relationship with our living planet. The booklet details the extent of climate breakdown and discusses the need to decrease our dependence on fossil fuels. It challenges us to increase our awareness of the “connectedness” of all living things, reminding us that healthy ecosystems benefit all forms of life. Safe drinking water and sustainable forms of food production are the rights of every person. Pope Francis grounds all of this solidly in the Catholic tradition by quoting St. Francis of Assisi: “Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with colored flowers and herbs.”

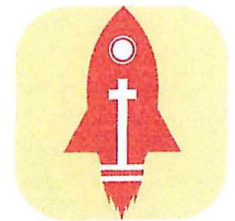
In addition to caring for our common natural home, a current discussion among ethicists and others is the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI). A 2021 issue of the journal *Cultures and Faith*, published by the Dicastery on Education, is devoted entirely to AI, or “algorithmic systems,” as one

author preferred. Questions and comments about the impact of AI on Catholic doctrine were raised, including the memorable description of a person as a “rational animal.” But given the appearance of “reason” in machines, is “rational” still the best word to use to differentiate humans from other forms of thinkers? Continued study in this area invites theologians to reconsider the Trinitarian origins of the creation of the human person. Rather than a person's intelligence, perhaps the essential difference between a person and a machine is the ability to be in relation to God and to others. Perhaps “relatability” is the true image of God in humanity.

THE CHURCH REACHES INTO SPACE

Pope Francis' memorable, solitary moment of prayer in an empty, rainy St. Peter's Square on March 24, 2020, stirred hope in believers as the frightening new COVID-19 virus spread. The *urbi et orbi* blessing he delivered on that lonely night will literally resound through the heavens as it travels, in nano-book form, around planet earth in the Vatican's own satellite—*Spei Satelles* (Latin for “Guardian of Hope”).

The football-sized satellite, launched from the Vandenberg Space Force Base in California aboard a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket on June 10, 2023, travels in low-earth orbit about 325 miles above our planet. The vessel carries the nano-book version of Pope Francis' image and fragments from his 2020 blessing. The nano-book, designed by the Polytechnic University of Turin, is about the size of a pen tip and can only be read by specialized nanotechnology-reading devices. However, anyone anywhere with a UHF-band radio can pick up the broadcast that is beamed from the satellite as it passes overhead.



THE CHURCH AND WORLD PEACE

Back on our common home, at the World Expo in Dubai, the Holy See constructed a pavilion to share the culture and history of the Vatican with the Arab world. The walk-through exhibit uses architectural displays, enhanced by multimedia systems, generating an immersive experience. The website for the expo explains that the Vatican pavilion provides visitors with a sense of the uniqueness of the Vatican, expressed in an experimental way with a new intersection of art, culture, science and technology. The display was so successful that it won the BIE (Bureau International des Expositions) gold award for interior design.

But the Vatican outreach to Islam goes beyond tourism. In 2019 Pope Francis visited the United Arab Emirates and issued an apostolic letter titled *Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*. The letter was coauthored with Pope Francis by the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb.

Inspired by this interfaith cooperation, the Abrahamic Family House of three separate houses of worship—a mosque, a church, and a synagogue—was constructed in the Saadiyat Cultural District in Abu Dhabi. Their website proclaims: “Diverse in our Faiths. Common in our Humanity. Together in Peace.”

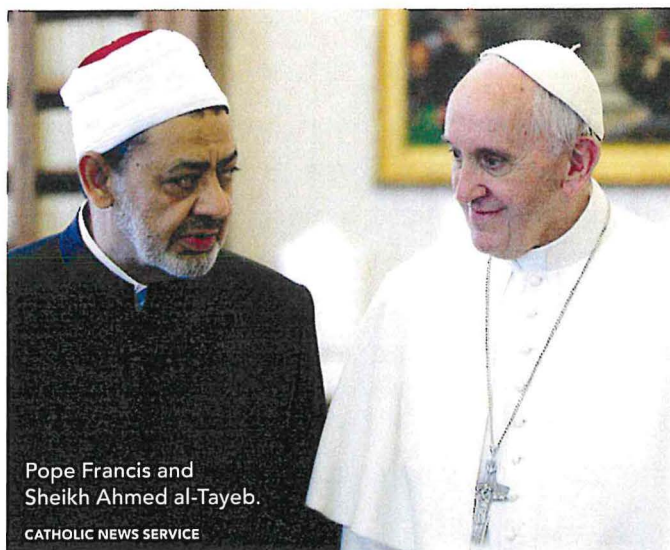
The Abrahamic Family House began welcoming visitors in March 2023. Friday prayers are held every week at the mosque; Mass is conducted in English every Sunday at noon in St. Francis Church; and daily services take place at Moses Ben Maimon Synagogue. The signatures on the Human Fraternity documents of both Pope Francis and the Grand Imam are preserved in marble at the site.

THE CHURCH IS ALWAYS ASKING QUESTIONS

So many important matters face our world, and the Church is there to ask and help answer the questions. For example, how do the Olympics fit into the mission of Catholicism? How can we develop a sustainable worldwide food system? What strategies can we employ to make cancer treatment available to all? What can be done to contain or even avoid another pandemic? These questions and more are being addressed all over the planet, including its smallest country, the 100-acre city-state of Vatican City.

Some people look to the Catholic Church for answers. Others are attracted to the Church because it continues to ask questions. Many are happy that the Church both has answers and asks questions. As it is with health care, the Catholic Church is by far the largest nongovernmental provider of education in the world. People seeking to know everything there is to know about the world can thrive in the Catholic Church. And we should be proud to do so.

Richard W. Thompson earned his doctorate in religious studies from the Catholic University in Louvain, Belgium, in 1985. He taught New Testament at Saint Francis de Sales Seminary and Marquette University in Milwaukee and at Gonzaga University in Spokane. In 1993, Richard was awarded his law degree and was a practicing attorney for twenty-five years. An accomplished musician, he serves as the organist and choir director at the Cathedral of Saint Peter in Belleville, Illinois. In addition, he has been a member of the Society of American Magicians for two decades.



Pope Francis and
Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb.

CATHOLIC NEWS SERVICE

DIG DEEPER

- Each dicastery (meaning a group of people) and pontifical academy (an honorary academic society under the direction of the Holy See) has a website with volumes of content to peruse. Consider looking at a list of them and let yourself explore with wonder and awe the involvement of our Church in the world.
- Wander into the Pontifical Academy of Fine Arts and Letters, established in 1543; perhaps through the Academy of Science or Archaeology; and be sure to stop by the two new dicasteries established by Pope Francis: the Dicastery for the Laity, the Family and Life; and the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development.

List of Dicasteries: <https://www.vatican.va/content/romancuria/en.html>

Index of Pontifical Academies: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_academies/index.html

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EDITOR: PAIGE BYRNE SHORTAL