

About this Issue: Bridging the Human and the Divine—An Unfinished Conversation

MST Review 28, no. 1 (2026) explores the role of communication through monotheism, interreligious dialogue, catechesis, and embodied devotion as its current general theme for pastoral reflection. Over the centuries, the Catholic Church has developed faith practices across various media so that ordinary people may understand her teachings. Through the hagiography of saints, pilgrimages to holy sites, and popular devotions, such as the rosary or novena prayers, the Church has established classic references for the community of believers to understand the faith. As sacramentals, they act as windows to God's grace, allowing the faithful to bridge the human and the divine. Beyond the words written in the Bible, sacramentals conjure an image of the faith that is colorful, living, and present. They tell stories of God's work in salvation history through practices that resonate with the laity's reception of the faith. Through the richness of its signs and symbols, the Church communicates the Gospel in a recognizable way that even non-believers could easily attribute to Christianity.

Words are not enough to express God's dialogical relationship with humanity. Despite the Church's institutional attempts to articulate doctrines in formulas to achieve clarity, constancy, and coherence, believers have their creative ways of articulating the faith. It shows that communicating Christianity as a narrative goes beyond the fixity of its doctrines or rituals born of repetitive practices. The way it communicates is rather built on a living tradition that contextually adapts to the needs of the faithful. In this way, the Church becomes responsive to the challenges it faces, not only *ad intra*

through its customary signs and symbols but also *ad extra* whenever it communicates its faith and morals to the world. The message of the Gospel is therefore not only preached as an *Ecclesia docens* (teaching Church) but also as an *Ecclesia discens* (learning Church) whose pastoral sensitivities listen to the “joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties” of humanity (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1).

The role of the Catholic Church in bridging people from different backgrounds by communicating the urgency of peace in today’s belligerent world can be gleaned in three interconnected events since the last issue of *MST Review*.

First, the 2026 Iran War, which began on 28 February, is symptomatic of broader geopolitical tensions worldwide that urgently need disarming diplomacy. Amidst the efforts of the United States and Israel to legitimize their military operations through the ‘just war’ doctrine, Pope Leo XIV called “all people of goodwill to always search for peace and to reject war”.¹ US Vice-President JD Vance warned the pontiff to be “careful when he talks about matters of theology”, expecting that the Church should leave State matters to politicians.² This exchange reveals the underlying opposing political theologies on Church-State relations, which subsequently influence policies on migration and national security. While the current US administration

¹ Deborah Castellano Lubov, “Pope: The Threat against the Entire Iranian People Is Unacceptable,” *Vatican News*, 7 April 2026, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2026-04/pope-leo-xiv-appeal-to-journalists-castel-gandolfo-7-april-2026.html> [accessed 11 July 2026].

² Justin McLellan, “Vance Questions the Pope on Just War Theory Hours after Leo Honored Its Founder,” *National Catholic Reporter*, 15 April 2026, <https://www.ncronline.org/vance-questions-pope-just-war-theory-hours-after-leo-honored-its-founder> [accessed 11 July 2026]

adheres to an exclusivist Christian nationalism, Pope Leo XIV's apostolic journey to Algeria, Cameroon, Angola, and Equatorial Guinea on 13-23 April demonstrated the Catholic Church's inclusivist attitude by promoting interreligious dialogue, social justice, and preferential option for the poor, stating that Christians and Muslims "can live together in peace."³ One can thus see the contrasting ways of communicating the Catholic Church's teaching in relating with the 'other'.

Second, to commemorate the 135th anniversary of *Rerum novarum*, Pope Leo XIV published *Magnifica humanitas* on 15 May to highlight the "grandeur of humanity" amid the growing impact of artificial intelligence (AI) in contemporary life. While technological advancement aspires to achieve self-sufficiency and efficiency, it also tends to weaken solidarity and destroy the environment. The encyclical states that "Current AI systems require enormous amounts of energy and water, significantly influencing carbon dioxide emissions, and place heavy demands on natural resources" (*Magnifica humanitas*, 101). The threat AI poses to the environment is evident in the Diocese of Bayombong, Philippines, where Bishop Jose Elmer Magalinao, Fr. Christian Dumange, and other local leaders were sued in court for "forcible entry" in June for supporting the local community's blockade to the 4,456-hectare mining exploration project by the North Luzon Mineral Resources Corporation (NLMRC).⁴ Although

³ Elise Ann Allen, "Christians and Muslims Can 'Live Together in Peace' – Pope Leo Says on Plane Leaving Algeria," *Crux*, 15 April 2026, <https://cruxnow.com/pope-in-africa/2026/04/christians-and-muslims-can-live-together-in-peace-pope-leo-says-on-plane-leaving-algeria> [accessed 11 July 2026]

⁴ Mark Saludes, "Philippine Court Dismisses Case against Bishop Involved in Mining Dispute," *EWTN News*, 25 June

later dismissed, the case demonstrates how the Philippines is part and parcel of the US-led Pax Silica, which it signed on 17 April, to secure the global supply chain of critical minerals that power AI systems.

Third, the Priestly Fraternity of St. Pius X (FSSPX) was excommunicated *latae sententiae* for schism after they ordained new bishops without permission from the Holy See on 2 July 2026.⁵ Founded by Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, the FSSPX advocates the restoration of the Tridentine liturgy while rejecting Vatican II's engagement with modernity, promotion of ecumenism, inter-religious dialogue, lay empowerment, and inculturation among other changes. This nostalgia asserts that the papacy's duty is to restore Imperial Christendom, which Lode Wostyn critically describes as a 'fortress Church', an inward-looking ecclesiology that is static, clerical, and defensive to secular influences.⁶ For the FSSPX, their vehement disagreement against Vatican II is rooted in their belief in *Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*, that the Catholic Church has the monopoly of truth to achieve salvation.

One year into his papacy, Pope Leo XIV has been facing hurdles from groups, both *ad intra* and *ad extra*, who theologically challenge the Catholic Church's position on 'just war', state sovereignty, interreligious dialogue, environmental protection, and Vatican II itself.

2026, <https://www.ewtnnews.com/world/asia-pacific/philippine-court-dismisses-case-against-bishop-involved-in-mining-dispute> [accessed 11 July 2026]

⁵ Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Decreto di scomunica della Fraternità Sacerdotale San Pio X (FSSPX)*, 2 July 2026, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_dof_doc_20260702_decreto-scomunica-fsspx_it.html [accessed 11 July 2026]

⁶ Cf. Lode Wostyn, *Doing Ecclesiology: Church and Mission Today* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1990).

Communication between the divine and human is an unfinished conversation rather than the certainty of Empire or the rigidity of nostalgia. Each event represents a different manifestation of power that seeks to silence rather than to listen. In response, it must be collectively affirmed that the Church's mission of building peace and communion begins with the willingness to encounter the 'other' as partner in the shared search for truth and justice.

Against this background, the seven articles in the current issue reflect the ongoing need for dialogue among communities and between the human and the divine. Each article explores themes on how to creatively communicate this relationship beyond the customary formulas or practices of the Catholic Church.

First, Thomas Moore's article, "Cracking the Monolith: Political Monotheism, Territorial Exceptionalism, and the Divine Feminine," examines the evolution of political monotheism by analyzing the intersection of settler monotheism, decentralized "wild ass" monotheism, and the apotheosis of the feminine through the veneration of the *Theotókos*. Drawing on Peter Schäfer's work, the research contrasts these frameworks to explore how theological shifts impact power structures and gender inclusivity in religious thought as an expression of the ongoing dialogue between God and humanity.

Second, Ben Carlo N. Atim's article, "Jean-Luc Marion's Hermeneutics of Charity and its Relevance to Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Dialogue", develops a hermeneutics of charity to address the assimilationist tendency of interreligious dialogue that reduces the religious 'other' into homogenized categories. As a proposal to this methodological crisis, Atim retrieves Marion's phenomenology of givenness by shifting the interpreter from a position of absolute epistemic control

to one of vulnerable, receptive witnessing. Pastorally, this means prioritizing deep, non-judgmental listening over rigid dogmatic correction by establishing a non-colonial missiology that honors local traditions is necessary to foster mutual trust and resist cultural assimilation.

Third, Teofilo Giovan S. Pugeda III's contribution, "Reflecting on *Nostra aetate*, The Natural Law, and Conscience", employs a systematic theological analysis to view conscience as the subjective appropriation of natural law for interreligious dialogue. Through the nexus of conscience and natural law, the Church recognizes the elements in non-Christian traditions that are "true and holy" (*Nostra aetate*, 2) while fully preserving essential doctrinal distinctions. In this way, the study positions natural law not as an alternative soteriological mechanism, which remains exclusive to divine revelation and grace, but as an anthropologically grounded platform for collaborative global ethics.

Fourth, Edwin B. Odulio's research, "Integrating Christian Living Education with the Good Manners and Right Conduct and Values Education Curriculum", employs a strategic curriculum mapping to harmonize secular civic morality with Catholic faith formation while addressing systemic challenges, such as teacher training and differing grading systems. At the core of this policy shift is the inherent philosophical tension between teaching universally applicable, secular civic morality and fostering faith-based spiritual development. Without standardized, protective integration models, Catholic schools risk losing their religious autonomy to state mandates. The research concludes that a well-crafted integration framework allows Catholic schools to preserve and reinforce their religious autonomy and doctrinal integrity while fulfilling government academic requirements in a pluralistic society.

Fifth, Noel Asiones et al.'s research, "Pastoral Communication in Papal Catechesis", addresses the urgent Catholic mission to reimagine a modern catechumenate for diverse audiences. By analyzing 122 of Pope Francis' catechetical reflections from his 2022–2024 General Audiences, the authors identify 10 key themes and communication patterns to fill a critical gap in pastoral literature. The article outlines three practical strategies – adapting content, tone, and delivery – and advocates using relatable stories, authoritative references, and multimedia. Ultimately, the findings provide pastors, catechists, and missionary workers with an audience-centered framework for religious communication that balances doctrinal accuracy with strategic, culturally adaptive delivery to foster deeper spiritual engagement.

Sixth, Ronel P. De la Cruz's study, "Re-Placing Theology Amid Ecological Displacement", offers a context-specific Filipino theology of place to demonstrate how ecological restoration and community solidarity serve as sacramental signs of God's presence amid ecological crises and forced displacement in climate-vulnerable regions. Reflecting on Philippine social and environmental realities, the article presents 'place' as a site of resilience and belonging, thus providing a valuable resource for better understanding the links between environmental action, community identity, and pastoral care.

Lastly, Midielee Ditablan and Ferdinand D. Dagmang's article, "The *Giwang-Giwang* Devotion in Sta. Ursula Parish, Binangonan, Rizal: Understanding Religion from Below", examines the twelve-hour *Giwang-Giwang* processional devotion during Good Friday in Binangonan, Rizal, where thousands of male devotees (*mamamasan*) intensely sway the *carroza* of the *Santo Entierro*. Utilizing ethnographic participant-observation

to document the sensory-saturated event, the study highlights how shared physical suffering fosters communal solidarity by allowing participants to transcend everyday consciousness to embrace divine grace (*biyaya*). The ritual thus acts as an essential anchor for local identity and a profound manifestation of embodied faith or sensuous religion.

Taken together, these seven articles model the very communication they describe: a Church that speaks not through the fixity of formula but through a living, adaptive tradition. Each article, in its own idiom, answers the same pastoral summons named at the outset of this issue: to listen as an *Ecclesia discens* even while teaching as an *Ecclesia docens*. In an age of geopolitical belligerence, ecological extraction, and doctrinal fracture, these articles serve as tools to better reflect and communicate the message of the Gospel not as an imposing monologue but as a dialogue patiently sustained between the human and the divine.

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