

## Revelation and Invitation

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### Introduction

Most Catholics in the USA voted in the 2024 election for President Trump, who won the Catholic vote by a double-digit margin.<sup>1</sup> But Catholic have been divided since the inauguration in large part due to the Trump administration's efforts to deport migrants who lack permission to enter the USA. Vice President Vance has criticized the U.S. bishops and offered a theological defense of his administration's policy. The bishops and Pope Francis have fired back. Catholics have watched this play out in the news. All of us have opinions about it.

This, however, is not the principle aim of this talk, which is about divine revelation and God's invitation to share the divine life. Before politics, I want to reflect on revelation. We usually think about it in terms of Scripture and tradition, which reveal God in the words and deeds of history. But at a deeper level, I propose, we encounter God at every moment, especially as we face reality and respond to it. Here is what I mean. Throughout our lives, we meet people and learn new things. They prompt us to make decisions and to act. In these decisions and actions, God calls us, asking us to avoid evil and act justly. In our free choices, we define our relation to God. Revelation is not just Scripture and tradition, I want to say, but our encounter with God at every moment.

Today let us reflect, *first of all*, on the importance of trust in God. Trust emerges as we encounter reliable teachers. *Second*, I want to reflect on something that all of us know. I mean the way we learn from experience. From our earliest years, we encounter new things and people. New things challenge us and people do not always agree with us. We have to learn how to integrate these new experiences. This is especially true in the realm of faith and religion. So we start with trust (first) and then move (second) to the assimilation of experience.

Then we come to my *third* goal. It is to describe the contest between the Trump administration and the Church. The contest comes down, we shall see, to the nature of Christian charity and whether entering the USA without official permission is criminal. I will then ask you to express your views on these issues, before finally returning to my main theme of revelation and invitation.

It is common today to be frustrated by the divisiveness of society. Political divisions pervade every aspect of life and can poison our relationships with family members and others. Some of us may be tempted to turn away from TV, radio, and social media. I want to caution against this. Today's challenges and today's difficult people are in fact a divine invitation to discern God's word and respond to it. I believe we should pay attention.

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<sup>1</sup> Tyler Arnold, "[New poll shows Latino voters helped Trump win the overall Catholic vote in 2024 election](#)," Catholic News Agency, 01/21/25, accessed on 02/22/25. The poll, published by the Public Religion Research Institute, showed that Trump (since 2020) has gained in his percentages of the white and Latino vote.

## The Importance of Trust

Let me begin with some memories about trust in God. In 1974, I had graduated from the university and was preparing to be a high school teacher. At that time I lived in a Catholic parish, Our Lady of the Rosary. It is located in Union City, in the San Francisco Bay Area. The pastor at the time, Father George Crespín, died last April. I stayed in touch with him throughout my life. While I did my student teaching at a nearby high school he had offered me room and board at the parish. In those days, I was thinking of entering the seminary, but instead I enrolled at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. After graduation, I worked for the Diocese of Oakland and, in 1990, began teaching at St. John's Seminary in Camarillo.

My days at Our Lady of the Rosary changed me. As an undergraduate, my attendance at Mass had been irregular. At Our Lady of the Rosary, I saw parish life up close, got involved with the parish community, and began to understand the role of pastor. When my time at Our Lady of the Rosary was up, Father Crespín presented me a gift. It was *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, a massive volume published in 1968 by Catholic biblical scholars in the USA. During my years at the seminary, I always kept it within reach at my desk.

Looking at *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* now, I notice how my thinking about theology has changed. As a theological student in Berkeley, I had an exaggerated reverence for scholarship in comparison to my grasp of faith. Let me give an example. At the end of the *Jerome Biblical Commentary* there is a "Suggested Basic Bibliography." It recommends a host of books, including Hebrew and Greek versions of the Bible. When I arrived in Berkeley, I eagerly purchased them and enrolled in biblical language courses. Excellent professors influenced me. I think of my introductory course on the Bible from Franciscan Father Neal Flanagan. His class text was *The Formation of the Christian Bible*, a book by Hans von Campenhausen. The footnotes at the bottom of each page were longer than the text above them. Another Franciscan, Father Kenan Osborne, taught Christology. He had us buy the *New Testament Theology* by Joachim Jeremias. Jeremias was famous for extracting, from the Greek New Testament, particular Aramaic words that he called "the very voice of Jesus." Under the influence of these books and professors, I gained a good understanding of revelation as it is mediated by Scripture and tradition.

But there is more to revelation. We Catholics believe that faith is a gift from God who is "revealed." The *Catechism* describes faith as our response to revelation. We read that the invisible God addresses us as friends, moves among us, and welcomes us into a divine fellowship. Faith is our fitting response to this divine invitation (*Catechism*, no. 142). God shares the divine life with us and invites us to respond. I say "invites" because God does not compel or coerce belief. In faith we are drawn into a relationship. In our relationship with God we experience revelation. There is more to it than the act of reading Scripture or studying traditions. As a young man, however, the "science" of theology enchanted me. I looked down my nose at those who were not similarly fascinated.

## The Integration of Experience

This brings me to a second point. I have often had an experience that I suspect you too have had. It is the experience of listening to people whose words initially strike us as reasonable, wise, and true. We believe them. We adopt their viewpoint as our own. We try to persuade

others of their correctness. Indeed, we are so convinced by these words that we criticize anyone who doubts them. When others object to what we say, we pity their naivety. We may even become angry, denigrating them or speaking about them with contempt. Our minds close.

In a few moments, I will ask you to reflect on this in terms of our contemporary political situation. For the moment, however, let us follow this train of thought. We can change, I said, from being close-minded and can gain a deeper understanding. How does this happen? It starts when we see that our own viewpoint has weaknesses. At one time, we had adopted a viewpoint as our own, convinced that we understood it thoroughly. It seemed wholly correct. But then doubts arose. The so-called experts we initially found so convincing and unassailable suddenly developed feet of clay. Gaps appeared in their arguments. As we reflected on them, our viewpoint shifted. We changed our mind. Instead of being rabid partisans we gained a critical distance. We “wised up.”

I do not mean that we are fickle. Some people say, “The only constant is change,” but I disagree. Gaining a more comprehensive viewpoint is just that. More comprehensive means better. We are not talking about relativism, but about growth in understanding. Throughout our lives, reality shows itself to us. Consider how we learn new things. In perceiving the world, we go outside of ourselves, discovering something new. In the outer realm of experience, we see and hear things we did not know before. Then, having had an experience of the world, we return to ourselves, integrating our new knowledge with the old. It is not a matter of having first one viewpoint, and then another, and then another, *ad infinitum*. No, we remember what we used to think. We compare it to what we think now. We can judge the reliability of our past thoughts. Over time, our understanding grows.

This kind of experience is especially common in the realm of faith and religion. There are many who can speak persuasively about these things, using eloquent words to win us over. Their eloquence can bewitch us. St. Augustine talked about this in his *Confessions*. Before he became a Christian, Augustine encountered the beliefs of the Manicheans, a Persian sect that viewed the world as a struggle between the principles of good and evil. Augustine was greatly impressed with the eloquence of Faustus, a Manichee bishop, but the initial attraction soon wore off. About Faustus, Augustine made a discovery. The Manichee bishop, he found, was pious but ill-informed, clever in speech but weak in the liberal arts. “I was beginning,” wrote Augustine, “to distinguish between mere eloquence and the real truth” (*Confessions*, transl. R. S. Pine-Coffin, V.3). The future Bishop of Hippo was describing an experience that we all have had. What once seemed to us as true, obvious, and utterly convincing may not be. Over time we may see through it. We gain a clearer perspective.

This is not just philosophy but theology as well. In our experience of the world, God is **revealed** to us. It is nothing less than a divine invitation to recognize in the world God’s goodness, truth, and beauty. We Christians know this in Jesus Christ. His uniqueness was apparent from the very beginning of his life. In his human flesh the disciples saw Jesus’ oneness with God the Father. Since then, twenty centuries have testified to the union in Jesus of our human nature with God’s nature. In our human nature we are capable of being at one with God.

I have said that revelation is more than Scripture and tradition. It is more than the words of the Bible and the teachings of the Church. Revelation is a human experience. It happens whenever we encounter something new. We have to make a decision and act. In the moment of

our decision, and in our action, God speaks to us. God wants us to do what is right and good. By that decision, and in that action, we learn about God. That too is revelation.

### The Example of the *Ordo Amoris*

Earlier I said that something may *seem* true but not *be* true. Another person's words can bewitch us. We can falsely identify eloquence with wisdom and truth, and this can blind us to reality. In this third part, I want to provide a recent illustration from current events. I will try to be as honest as I can. In a few minutes, you can judge whether I am fair-minded.

Let me begin with President Trump, who has vowed to "protect the American people against invasion." In an executive order signed on January 20, he directed the Department of Homeland Security to "encourage aliens unlawfully in the United States to depart as promptly as possible, including through removals of aliens."<sup>2</sup> To this order the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops quickly objected. On January 22, Archbishop Timothy P. Broglio said that the U.S. bishops found Trump's order "deeply troubling" in that it will "harm the most vulnerable among us."<sup>3</sup>

Four days later, Vice President Vance was interviewed. He said that he was "heartbroken" by the bishops' statement. The Vice President said that the bishops "receive over \$100 million to help resettle illegal immigrants." He speculated that, with President Trump's Executive Order, the bishops might be "worried about their bottom line."<sup>4</sup>

That was on January 26. Then on January 29 the Vice President spoke to Fox News. In this interview, he presented a theological justification for the deportation policy. Vance said that one should love one's family before loving those who are less close to us. Family comes first, he argued, and supersedes any other claim. The Vice President told Sean Hannity,

You love your family, and then you love your neighbor, and then you love your community, and then you love your fellow citizens in your own country, and then, after that, you can focus and prioritize the rest of the world.<sup>5</sup>

Our own kin, Vance meant, have a claim on us. Their claim surpasses any claims that others might make. Family comes first. The world comes second.

This was part of a discussion about the Trump administration's plans to deport migrants who lack official permission to remain in the USA. They may have fled trouble in their native countries, but those countries are far from us. Vice President Vance meant that Christians need

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<sup>2</sup> Donald J. Trump, "[Protecting the American People against Invasion](#)," Executive Order of 01/20/25, accessed on 02/21/25, section 12.

<sup>3</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "[Statement of Archbishop Timothy P. Broglio on Executive Orders Signed by the President](#)," 01/22/25, accessed on 02.21.25.

<sup>4</sup> J. D. Vance, CBS Transcript, "[Vice President JD Vance on 'Face the Nation with Margaret Brennan](#)," 01/26/25, accessed on 02.21/25.

<sup>5</sup> J. D. Vance, interviewed on 1/29/25 by Fox News' Sean Hannity. See Ashley Carnahan, "VP Vance Doubles Down on WH's 'Ambitious' Goal to Get Criminal Migrants Off the Streets," 01/29/25, [Fox News website](#), accessed on 2/19/25. Fox did not publish a transcript of the Hannity interview. Vance's words were quoted by Richard Clements, "First, Love Locally: J.D. Vance and 'Ordo Amoris,'" [Word on Fire website](#), 2/11/25, accessed 2/13/25.

to take care of their own families and communities. After that, they might consider helping others. Immediate responsibilities should precede any care for the rest of the world. Duty to those closest comes before duty to those far away.

The day after the Hannity interview, Rory Stewart, a British politician, criticized Vance's theology. He reminded Vance of the words of Jesus, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12-13). Replying to Stewart, the Vice President introduced the principle of the *ordo amoris*.<sup>6</sup> This principle is identified with Saints Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. The fourth-century Bishop of Hippo, for example, had taught that nobody ought to love "equally" those things that "ought to be loved either less or more."<sup>7</sup> Thomas Aquinas,<sup>8</sup> to give another example, agreed with Augustine. He said that we ought to love more as something is more loveable. There is, in other words, a hierarchy or right measure to love. That which deserves more love, such as God, should receive more love. Vance identified this principle with his own concept of a widening circle of responsibilities. Replying to Stewart, the British politician, Vance asked a pointed question. Does anyone really think, Vance asked, that "his moral duties to his own children are the same as his duties to a stranger who lives thousands of miles away?"

On February 10, twelve days after Hannity's interview with Vance, Pope Francis wrote to the Bishops of the United States." The Holy Father did not mention Vice President Vance's application of the *ordo amoris*, but the Holy Father might have been referring to it. In the papal letter, Francis expressed fear about "the major crisis that is taking place in the United States with the initiation of a program of mass deportations."<sup>9</sup> Deporting people *en masse*, said the pope, shows no respect for their dignity. It places them, he said, "in a state of particular vulnerability and defenselessness." To be sure, said the pope, a nation should defend itself and protect its citizens. But the conscience should reject, said Francis, "any measure that tacitly or explicitly identifies the illegal status of some migrants with criminality" (par. 4). Mass deportations attribute criminal status to those enter the USA without permission. Such deportations undermine the dignity of migrants. With his February 10 letter, the pope indirectly rebuked the Trump administration, including Vice President Vance.

Francis' letter to the U.S. bishops spoke in more detail than Vance about the *ordo amoris*. This concept, the pope said, presents a particular understanding of the human person. People are not mere individuals who occasionally engage in philanthropy. No, said Francis, the human person is the creation of God who gradually matures in "identity" and "vocation." This takes place in our relationships with all people, he said, especially those who are poor. The word identity means that we can respond to God's invitation and grow in holiness. The word vocation

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<sup>6</sup> The criticism by Rory Stewart, as well as Vice President Vance's reply, can be found on the X platform: <https://x.com/JDVance/status/1885073046400012538>, accessed 02/19/25.

<sup>7</sup> St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 27.28, quoted from the [Christian Classics Ethereal Library](#), accessed 2/13/25.

<sup>8</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 26, art. 6, cited from the [New Advent website](#), accessed 02.23.25. Agreeing with St. Augustine, Thomas says, "We ought to love one neighbor more than another. The reason is that, since the principle of love is God, and the person who loves, it must needs be that the affection of love increases in proportion to the nearness to one or the other of those principles."

<sup>9</sup> Pope Francis, "Letter of the Holy Father Francis to the Bishops of the United States of America," 2/10/25, available on the [Vatican website](#), accessed 2/13/25.

means that God calls us, offering a share in the divine life itself. In short, the *ordo amoris* means that we mature by participating in the very life of God.

The Holy Father asked readers to meditate on the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:25-37). In it, a Pharisee asked Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus tells the story of a traveler from Jerusalem to Jericho. This man, a Jew, was robbed, stripped, beaten, and left for dead. Traveling along the same road, a priest and a Levite saw the victim and ignored him. But a Samaritan – one who was not a Jew – tended to the man, brought him to an inn, and looked after him. Pope Francis said that the true *ordo amoris* is revealed in “the love that builds a fraternity open to all, without exception” (par. 6). The Jewish victim of robbers was not the Samaritan’s next of kin or fellow citizen, but the Samaritan showed the true measure of love.

Let us remember that our immediate family, according to Vice President Vance, deserves our care first. His argument envisioned a series of concentric circles: family, neighbor, community, and fellow citizens. He said that they are the Christian’s first interest. “After that,” said Vance, “you can focus and prioritize the rest of the world.” But Pope Francis indirectly disputed Vance’s argument. “Christian love,” said the pope, “is not a concentric expansion of interests that little by little extend to other persons and groups.” Family and stranger do not occupy different levels in a hierarchy of interests. The right measure of love, according to Francis, can only be one that strengthens the whole community.

Since the pope’s letter was published on February 10, the meaning of the *ordo amoris* has been widely debated on the internet. Richard Clements, for example, said on Bishop Robert Barron’s Word on Fire website that he supported the Vice President.<sup>10</sup> Clements, however, did not mention the plan of mass deportation criticized by the pope. Instead, the Word on Fire author quoted Vice President Vance. He told Hannity that some people “seem to hate the citizens of their own country and care more about people outside their own borders.” Clements never acknowledged Francis’ critique of Trump for identifying “the illegal status of some migrants with criminality.” A similar tone was struck by V. J. Tarantino, writing on the Catholic website “Where Peter Is.” He approved of Vance and Francis’ invocation of the *ordo amoris*, but did not speak of migrants or deportation.

Other Catholic writers have taken the side of Pope Francis. Here in Los Angeles, for example, Greg Erlandson criticized Vice President Vance. Vance had wrongly asserted, said Erlandson, that the U.S. bishops had “not been a good partner in common sense immigration enforcement.” In *The Angelus*, Erlandson said that the Church’s role is not “to be an arm of the government” but “to serve people in need.”<sup>11</sup> Raymond J. de Souza made a similar point. Pope Francis does not favor completely open borders, de Souza wrote in the *National Catholic Register*, but opposes “a denigration of their dignity and the political exploitation of their plight.”<sup>12</sup> Denigration and exploitation – that is the danger that mass deportation presents.

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<sup>10</sup> Richard Clements, “First, Love Locally: J.D. Vance and ‘Ordo Amoris,’” [Word on Fire website](#), 2/11/25, accessed 2/13/25. More thoughtful support of the interpretations by J. D. Vance has been offered by

<sup>11</sup> Greg Erlandson, “[Why J.D. Vance should not be ‘heartbroken’ on immigration](#),” *The Angelus* (Archdiocese of Los Angeles), 02/12/25, accessed on 02.21.25.

<sup>12</sup> Raymond J. de Souza, “[Pope Francis’ Unprecedented Letter to US Bishops Stresses an Open Heart, Not an Open Border](#),” *National Catholic Register*, 02/12/25, accessed 02.21/25.

The disagreement between the Trump administration and the Church hinges on two questions. The first is about the *ordo amoris* or right measure of love. Vance correctly said that we should first take care of those nearest and dearest to us. Francis, however, countered that there is more to the *ordo amoris* than a hierarchy of interests. If that were all it meant, the *ordo* could be seen as an excuse for mass deportations. But the right measure of love, Francis argued, builds community and invites us to mature in identity and vocation. So the interpretation of the *ordo amoris* is the first question.

The second has to do with people who migrate without official permission. President Trump's Executive Order was entitled "Protecting the American People Against Invasion." People who cross the border without permission, he meant, have invaded the USA. His duty as president, he said, is to protect the country. By contrast, Pope Francis compared migrants to the Holy Family that fled to Egypt from Herod's persecution. Francis refused to describe as "criminal" the undocumented status of some migrants. The Holy Family was not criminal.

My point is that this dispute over theological and legal principles is not just an example of frustrating divisions in contemporary life. It is also an opportunity to hear God's voice and to recognize that we are being called to a deeper understanding of reality. But before we try to wrap up our reflections, let us consider your opinions. We have looked at the dispute between the Trump administration and Pope Francis. I have argued that this is an opportunity to encounter reality and define, by our response to the dispute, our relation to God. Now I ask you: is this true, and was my description of the dispute fair and even-handed?

### Conclusion

We should not be surprised that Catholics are divided over President Trump's policy of mass deportation of undocumented immigrants. They have not complied with U.S. rules and regulations. It is easy to consider them criminals. In addition, Vice President Vance's citation of the *ordo amoris* is, at a basic level, no more than an application of common sense. Charity demands that we take care of those most immediately in need. Among them are the people we know personally and see every day.

On top of that, Pope Francis' distinction between illegal and criminal behavior is subtle. The illegality of migrants he calls a "status." The vast majority of undocumented immigrants has not committed "violent or serious crimes." Crossing a border is *not* such a crime, said the pope, so migrants do not deserve to be called criminals. This is a subtle point. The Trump administration refuses to concede it. Moreover, Francis' expresses his understanding of the *ordo amoris* in terms of Christian anthropology. The human person, he said, has a dignity which can mature. Our human dignity can and should affect our very identity and vocation. Francis' Christian anthropology is far more complicated than saying, as Vice President Vance said to Rory Stewart, that we owe more to our children than to strangers.

It is easy to understand why Catholics disagree. For my part, I find the arguments of Pope Francis and the U.S. bishops more convincing. Mass deportations are not an expression of love for those who are near to us. They seem more like a limitation of love rather than a right

ordering of it.<sup>13</sup> Nor do mass deportations harm only strangers. They can harm those who mow our lawns, who clean our houses, and who worship at our parishes. But unpermitted migration and criminality are easy to confuse, and the subtleties of Christian anthropology can escape us. No wonder many Catholics approve of the Trump administration policies.

The spectacle of an American Vice President alluding to the saints to justify a program of mass deportation, and the pope and bishops chiding him for abbreviating the concept of *ordo amoris*, is indeed divisive. But this does not justify us for shrugging our shoulders and ignoring politics. That would be a wrong-headed “flight from the world.” My argument is that the politics of this moment are an invitation from God. We define our relationship to God by our words and deeds. God invites us to discern the truth amid a welter of opinions. By doing so, we mature. In seeking the truth and acting on it, our understanding changes. Our identity as Christians grows more solid. Our ability to hear God’s voice becomes more sensitive.

Revelation is more than reading Scripture and abiding by our traditions. God is also revealed as the one who wants to be the center of our lives, who summons us to consider wisely and to take a stand. By responding to this invitation, we strengthen our union with God.

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<sup>13</sup> Stephen J. Pope, “[The problem with JD Vance’s theology of ‘ordo amoris’—and its impact, on policy](#),” *America Magazine*, Feb. 13, 2025. Pope writes, “The interpretation Mr. Vance proposes seems more focused on setting limits to love than on ordering it properly.”