



Glenmary Fr. Aaron Wessman celebrates Mass during the inaugural Paulist Summit on Polarization, held in Las Vegas April 19-21. "Curiosity will lead to faith, and faith will lead to unity," he said in his homily. (Jeannine M. Pitas)

by Jeannine M. Pitas

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A Harvard-based lawyer who facilitates conflict resolution workshops, the founder of a national movement focused on depolarizing conversations, and an NGO leader with international peacebuilding experience were among the featured speakers at the inaugural Paulist Summit on Polarization, held in Las Vegas April 19-21.

"Polarization is a first-order crisis," Paulist Fr. [Ricky Manalo](#), a celebrated Catholic composer and leader of his order's [Initiative on Polarization](#), told NCR.

"We can't talk, debate, or dialogue about any issue until we learn how to talk with one another," he said. "Abortion, ecology, immigration, gender and marriage, gun control â?? we are wasting our time trying to have meaningful discussions or debates in a toxic context where we don't listen to one another. We need to create, nurture and promote contexts for fruitful dialogue."

Manalo's interest in polarization stems from decades of work on intercultural relationships, focusing on Latino, African and Asian American Catholics in the U.S. "While I was studying for my doctorate, I got the idea that 'culture' is not limited to traditional anthropological perspectives, such as ethnicity and race, but includes more sociological perspectives, including politics. This led me to look at polarization," he said. "A lot of the principles I've used in intercultural dynamics between ethnic or racial groups can be transferred into the realm of political culture."

'Every single one of us seeking to live out our Catholic faith should realize that we have a unique and important role to play in reducing toxic polarization â?? including by loving our neighbor.'
â??Rebecca Cataldi

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In 2023, Manalo attended a conference of [Braver Angels](#), a national organization aimed at reducing polarization, of which he now leads a Catholic branch. He then worked with a small advisory committee of Paulists â?? half left-leaning, half-right leaning â?? to plan the first Summit on Polarization. They invited about 100 people to the event: Paulist priests and lay associates, bishops, academics, media experts, publishers and people directly involved in initiatives aimed at reducing polarization.

"The goal is to create alliances among us and see if there is interest in sustaining our efforts beyond 2024," he said.

The conference featured a discussion between the leaders of the two NCRs — Joe Ferullo, publisher of National Catholic Reporter, and Jeanette De Melo, editor of National Catholic Register, who shared the same stage and had a face-to-face dialogue for the first time.



Joe Ferullo is publisher and CEO of the National Catholic Reporter. (Courtesy of Joe Ferullo)

"Getting out with people is important," De Melo said when asked how Catholic media can work on depolarization. "Send reporters to cover different issues than they normally do, to broaden their scope."

"Maybe we as organizations need to look at ourselves first," Ferullo said. "How can Catholic media organizations grow spiritually?"

The conference also featured Bob Bordone, director of the Harvard Negotiation and Mediation Program at Harvard Law School, who spoke of the need for self-awareness and humility to build resilience in the face of conflict.

He urged participants to think of the stories we tell about ourselves â?? stories in which we are usually heroes or victims â?? and recall times when we have done and been the opposite. "If we have a grounded, three-dimensional identity â?? 'I'm a loyal person who has sometimes betrayed; I'm a loving person who is sometimes unkind' â?? we can see hard conversation as a way to integrate a broader view of ourselves and one another," he said in his talk.

One participant who found Bordone's talk especially helpful was Fr. Aaron Wessman, vicar general and formation director for the [Glenmary Home Missioners](#) and author of [The Church's Mission in a Polarized World](#). For the past several years he has led retreats and conferences on polarization, and he views curiosity as an essential antidote to the strong emotions that conflict can elicit. "The key to the kingdom is curiosity," he said in a homily for a Mass he celebrated as part of the event. "Curiosity will lead to faith, and faith will lead to unity."



Panelists at the inaugural Paulist Summit on Polarization include, from left, Paulist Fr. Ricky Manalo; Rebecca Cataldi, representing Braver Angels; Peter Denio representing the Bernardin Center and Leadership Roundtable; and, Kate O'Brien, representing the Focolare Movement. (Jeannine M. Pitas)

Rebecca Cataldi, senior program director for the [International Center for Religion and Diplomacy](#) in Washington, D.C., has worked in conflict zones across the world, including in Yemen, Pakistan and Mali. She said she is now seeking to apply her experiences abroad to a U.S. context.

"It concerns me to hear colleagues in Northern Ireland, for example, express their concern for America because they are hearing the same type of dehumanizing language and hate speech being used against the political 'other' in America that they heard in Northern Ireland before violence broke out," she told NCR.

"While each context is unique, there are many aspects of our work that apply in the U.S., such as the importance of core conflict resolution and communication skills like active listening, the impact of perceived identity threat and the need to address it, and the critical role that religious leaders and communities can play in peacebuilding," she said.

For her, the summit highlighted the importance of shared responsibility among Catholics in addressing this issue — from clergy to lay people to educational institutions to Catholic media.

"During the summit we talked about building a repository of practical resources that can be used in communities to help reduce toxic polarization [such as Braver Angels workshops] and working to make them accessible to every parish in the country," she said. "Every single one of us seeking to live out our Catholic faith should realize that we have a unique and important role to play in reducing toxic polarization — including by loving our neighbor whether they be a Republican, a Democrat, or anything else."

Boston College theology professor Hosffman Ospino, who has been studying polarization for years, told NCR that while differences of opinion are normal, we need to focus on our shared humanity, dignity, and identity as children of God.

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"Present-day expressions of radical polarization have managed to obscure, sometimes erase those commonalities, and that is dangerous," he said. "History is replete of examples of how the dehumanization of others, fueled by ideological adherence, can lead to much suffering. Catholics should do better."

He also said that it is important to avoid reducing conversations to binary oppositions. "There are many opinions and experiences when interpreting our social, political, and religious experiences," he said. "Just because people in certain ideological extremes are louder, it does not mean that the extremes are the only way to interpret reality."

Veronica LaVista, a Paulist lay associate from Florida, said the conference served as a reminder to prioritize people and not positions. "I realized how much bigger the Catholic faith is than my own tendency to compartmentalize it. [Las Vegas] Archbishop George Leo Thomas reminded us that the eyes of our hearts must be fixed on Jesus; that we must remember that all are created in the image and likeness of God," she told NCR.

She cited speaker and Braver Angels founder William Doherty, who gave the participants a simple but strong message: "Love God, love neighbor, love thyself."