



PASOS
NETWORK

NEPANTLA

Undergraduate Journal of Faith, Culture, and the Arts



Volume 1 • Issue 2 • Fall 2025

Nepantla: Undergraduate Journal of Faith, Culture, and the Arts

Volume 1, Issue 2 (Fall 2025)

ISSN: 2997-884X (Printed)

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SUBMISSION POLICIES:

Nepantla: Undergraduate Journal of Faith, Culture and the Arts seeks to promote the artistic expressions of faith, culture, and justice of undergraduate students. We are looking to highlight and publish those writers and artists who create from a space of liminality, embracing their status as “ni de aquí, ni de allá” (from neither here nor there). The PASOS Network invites undergraduate students to submit any form of art that reflects the ways in which we engage in culturally responsive and sustaining practices that center the lived experiences of students from minoritized communities. We invite undergraduate writers and artists to contribute to our journal, exploring the rich, complex, and other transformative experiences of navigating this liminal space.

Submissions are open to undergraduate students from all disciplines. Written works such as essays, poetry, short stories, personal narratives, and reflections should be submitted in word format. Visual arts such as photography, digital art, paintings, and other visual creations should be submitted in the highest resolution possible and JPEG or PNG format. Writers and artists should submit one online form for each of their pieces, along with their respective artist statement and an artist's biography. All submissions must be original and previously unpublished.

Nepantla: Undergraduate Journal of Faith, Culture, and the Arts is published once a year by the PASOS Network, an entity of Dominican University (River Forest, IL).

Armando Guerrero Estrada
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Message from the Director	1
What is <i>Nepantla</i> ?	2
Meet the Staff and Student Editors	3
 <i>Untitled</i>	 9
Emily Reynoso Munoz	
 <i>Abudancia, Esperanza y Liderazgo</i>	 11
Neomi De Anda, Ph.D.	
 <i>Te Pido</i>	 28
Ingrid Bustos Aleman	
 <i>Panchita</i>	 32
Daniela Funes Rivera	
 <i>Corazóncito</i>	 34
Sandra Padilla-Cervantes	
 <i>In The In Between</i>	 36
Christian Espinoza	
 <i>En lo Cotidiano</i>	 40
Monica Petek	

<i>¿De Dónde Eres?</i>	42
Kamila Chavez	
<i>What We Left Behind</i>	46
Edhem Planincic	
<i>Sweet for the Soul</i>	48
Sahr Karimu	
<i>Chasing the American Dream</i>	50
Laura Solis	
<i>Entonces, ¿Qué Eres?</i>	52
Andrea Estrada	
<i>My Mom is..."Different"</i>	54
Allison Pea	
<i>Mi Identidad Polifacética</i>	58
Melanie Canales	
<i>Temperaturas / Temperatures</i>	60
Stephanie Vasquez	
<i>The Interconnectedness of the Secular World and Akhirah</i>	62
Marwa Abdullah	

MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

Faith, Culture, and the Arts: Joy as Resistance

Finding joy in the midst of turbulent times can be difficult, particularly for college students, who are navigating courses, work, family responsibilities, and much more. However, for these college students, and for many for whom the in-between is a daily reality, joy often becomes an act of resistance; joy as resistance is a sacred form of celebrating identity, culture, and community.

The second issue of *Nepantla: Undergraduate Journal of Faith, Culture, and the Arts* highlights the sacrifices and the accomplishments, *la lucha* and the joy and flourishing of *nepantleros*—those who live in the in-between, those who traverse borders of any kind. Contained within the pages of this issue are illustrations, prose, poetry, and scholarly articles that demonstrate varied experiences of nepantla, showing that in-betweenness can involve much more than cultural identity. Emerging themes include migration, identity, biculturalism, and the bond between mothers and daughters. The artwork raises awareness of issues such as gentrification, racism, and prejudice towards people with physical disabilities. These are only a few of the many issues faced by today's college students. To all of the students whose submissions are included, thank you for your beautiful art; keep creating; keep thriving!

My gratitude also extends to Neomi De Anda, Ph.D., one of the keynote speakers for the 2025 ¡El Futuro Is Here! Conference, hosted by the PASOS Network at Dominican University. Her essay, “Abundancia, Esperanza y Liderazgo: A Marian Perspective,” is a powerful reminder that “liderazgo is esperanza,” and she provides a beautiful model through Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, who enacts the gift of *abundancia* (abundance), amidst an economy of scarcity. This example challenges us to imagine new and collaborative economies of abundance and joy. Accompanying Dr. De Anda's essay is Emily Reynoso Munoz's untitled artwork, which depicts a smiling Virgin Mary teaching a community of learners. Thank you to both Dr. Neomi and Emily.

This second issue would not have been possible without the incredible work of our student editors: Faith Adedokun, Vanessa Bello Hernandez, Angelica Carrillo, Lorena Murgula, and Emily Reynoso Munoz. A special thank you to Maria Villanueva and Victor Martinez Macias for their dedication to the success of *Nepantla: Undergraduate Journal of Faith, Culture, and the Arts*. Finally, I am grateful for Monica Petek's efforts in designing and executing a beautiful archive of stories, images, and poetry.

Armando Guerrero Estrada
Director, PASOS Network
Division of Mission and Ministry
Dominican University

WHAT IS *NEPANTLA*?

The *Nepantla: Undergraduate Journal of Faith, Culture, and the Arts* seeks to promote the artistic expressions of faith, culture, and justice of undergraduate students.

Nepantla: Undergraduate Journal of Faith, Culture, and the Arts takes its name from nepantla, a Nahuatl word that means “in-betweenness.” We seek to highlight and publish writers and artists who create from a space of liminality, embracing their status as “**ni de aquí, ni de allá**” (from neither here nor there). That can mean different things for different people. For some, it might mean being from both the United States and another country. For others, it can be embodied in the navigating of obstacles unique to the experience of first-generation students.

The *nepantla* identity of our students also informs the ways in which they theologize and engage in the world; this journal explores the many ways in which students engage with the divine through the arts and social justice. We consider this journal to be a radical act of decolonization in that it highlights the voices of those for whom publishing has many barriers, including, but not limited to, perceptions on the capabilities of young students of color, who make up a large constituency of colleges and universities across the nation.

MEET THE STAFF AND STUDENT EDITORS



Director, PASOS Network

Armando Guerrero Estrada is a PhD candidate in Theology and Education at Boston College. He currently serves as the inaugural director of the PASOS Network at Dominican University, where he also teaches in the theology department. As a DACAmented theologian and administrator, his scholarship examines the interlacing of Catholic higher education, theologies of migration, and immigrant literature.

He holds a Master of Theological Studies from Vanderbilt University's Divinity School, where he also earned graduate certificates in Latin American Studies and in Religion & the Arts in Contemporary Culture, with an emphasis in U.S. Latinx literature.



Program Coordinator

Maria F. Villanueva is currently pursuing a Master of Arts in Theology and Ministry from Boston College and is the recipient of the Hacienda Caminos Fellowship. Maria holds a Master of Arts in Trauma-Informed Leadership from Dominican University and a Bachelor of Science in Business and Economics from North Park University. Maria currently serves as the Program Coordinator for the PASOS Network at Dominican University. She has served in the

Illinois Student Assistance Commission as a Community Outreach Specialist for high schools in the City of Chicago with a high population of first-generation students. She also served as the College and Career Coach for Little Village Lawndale High School Campus and College Counselor for the Chicago Scholars Foundation.

Santa Rosa de Lima Fellow

Victor Martinez Macias is a senior at Dominican University pursuing a Bachelor of Science in Computer Science, with minors in Informatics and Theology. Since the summer of 2024, he has served as a Santa Rosa de Lima Fellow for the PASOS Network. Victor is also the President of the Organization of Latin American Students (OLA). As a first-generation Latino student, he takes pride in celebrating and uplifting Latin American culture and diversity within the Dominican University community, fostering belonging, and helping others from similar backgrounds achieve their goals.



Senior Graphic Designer

Monica Petek is a graduating senior at Dominican University, pursuing a BA in Graphic Design with a minor in Theology. A first-generation college student of Mexican-Indigenous & Eastern European heritage, she is the Senior Graphic Designer & Illustrator for *Nepantla: Undergraduate Journal of Faith, Culture, and the Arts* and a Santa Rosa de Lima Design Fellow with the PASOS Network for Fall 2025. Over the summer, she served as a Design Intern with the PASOS Network and the Willenborg Civic Action: Graphic Design for the Public Good Internship through Dominican University. Through both roles, she supported a conference and local nonprofits, spotlighting marginalized stories.





EDITOR

Faith Adedokun is a rising junior at Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, majoring in Psychology with a minor in Public Policy. She is actively involved in campus leadership through her work with the African-Caribbean Student Association, Hawk Hill Law Club, the Faith-Justice Institute, and the University Student Senate. Her involvement reflects a deep commitment to equity, advocacy, and inclusive leadership. Faith's academic and professional interests center on the intersection of law, education, and public policy. She aspires

to attend law school and pursue a career in education rights advocacy and policy development. As a member of the editorial board, she is excited to support student scholarship that advances meaningful dialogue and social change.



EDITOR

Lorena Murguia is a senior at Dominican University, currently majoring in English with a minor in pre-law. She is a first-generation college student who believes everyone has a story to tell. *Nepantla: Undergraduate Journal of Faith, Culture, and the Arts* offers a unique opportunity for students to share their stories surrounding "in-betweenness." One day she aspires to be a lawyer advocating for and amplifying the voices of women, children, and communities of color. She is honored to be a part of this year's edition of *Nepantla* as it

demonstrates "true stories well told" through each visual and written piece presented.



EDITOR

Emily Reynoso Munoz is a senior at Dominican University majoring in painting with a minor in biology. Emily hopes to go into medical illustration in the future. You can find Emily's work online under the username *paintbristle*. Much of her work focuses on being comfortable within one's body at any angle and at any state. As the eldest daughter in a Hispanic household, Emily's work highlights the importance of positive representation and healthy self-esteem. In addition to serving as a student editor for the *Nepantla: Undergraduate Journal of Faith, Culture, and the Arts*, Emily is a student athlete and holds various leadership positions on campus.

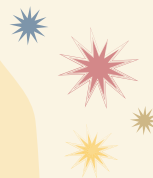
EDITOR

Angelica Carrillo is a Psychology major with minors in Health Communication and Criminology at Dominican University. She is an active member of the Psychology Club, the Undocumented & Immigrant Alliance (UIA), and TRIO Student Support Services, where she supports initiatives that promote equity and student success. As a Ministry en Lo Cotidiano (MLC) Student Fellow, she integrates faith, reflection, and service into her academic and personal growth. Angelica's bilingual writing, which includes poetry and reflective essays, focuses on mental health, identity, and the empowerment of students navigating higher education. She views writing as both an act of healing and advocacy, using language to connect lived experiences with broader conversations about compassion, resilience, and community.



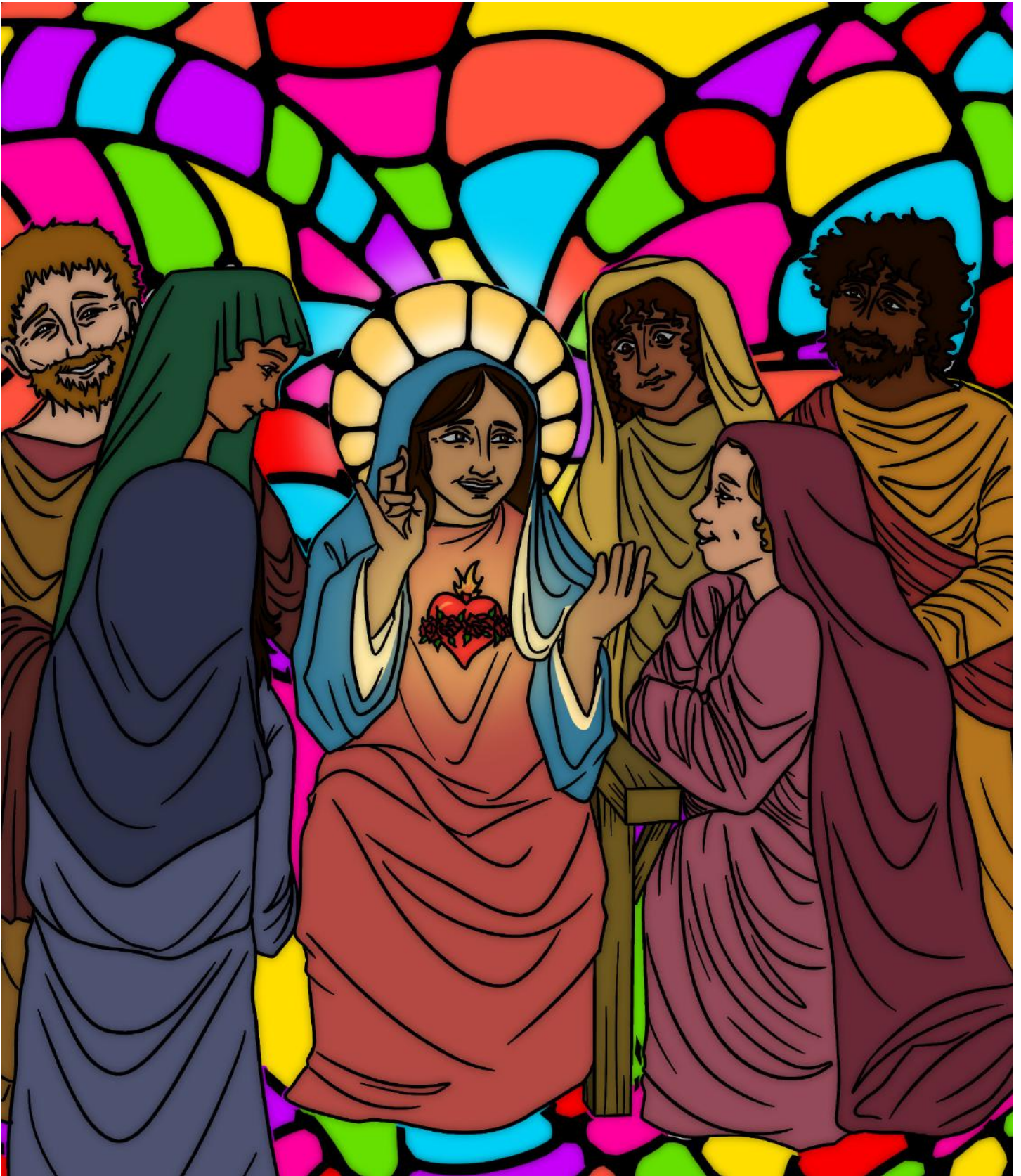
EDITOR

Vanessa Bello Hernandez is a senior at Dominican University, majoring in Computer Science and minoring in Graphic Design. Shaped by her Mexican heritage and her upbringing in the United States, she understands firsthand the challenges of navigating two cultures and traditions. She has explored these themes of in-betweenness in her poetry and writing. Beyond her writing, she is a passionate advocate for immigrant rights. Vanessa has collaborated with local nonprofits, participated in community leadership training, and supported efforts to provide resources for newly arrived immigrants in the Chicagoland area. As she moves forward, Vanessa hopes to build her own consulting business while continuing to support and give back to her community.









SOURCE: Emily Reynoso Munoz, *Untitled*, 2025



Neomi De Anda, Ph.D.

University of Dayton

Neomi De Anda, serves as the Executive Director for the International Marian Research Institute. She is also a tenured Professor in the University of Dayton Department of Religious Studies. She teaches courses in religion, languages and cultures, Latinx and Latin American studies, race and ethnic studies, and women and gender studies. She is a Marianist Educational Associate. Dr. De Anda is a Catholic Lay Marianist and part of the Micah Theotokos Marianist Lay Community.

Dr. De Anda holds a Ph.D. in Constructive Theology from Loyola University Chicago. She also has master's degrees in Theology (Oblate School of Theology) and Educational Leadership (St. Mary's University). Dr. De Anda has scholarly presentations, publications and exhibitions on her research interests of Mary and breast milk; chisme; LatinoXa Christology; migrations in conjunction with the Marianist Social Justice Collaborative Immigrant Justice Team. She maintains a commitment to a border theology at the intersections of the environment, migrations, labor, and women because of her roots in El Paso, Texas. Dr. De Anda hosts the Chisme Symposium at the University of Dayton. **Learn more at www.chisme.space.**

Abundancia, Esperanza y Liderazgo:

A Marian Perspective

El Futuro is Here 2025 | Dominican University

By Neomi De Anda, Ph.D.¹

The following is a summary of the keynote presentation given at the 2025 El Futuro is Here Conference 2025 organized by PASOS Network on August 2, 2025, at Dominican University, Shaffer Silveri Atrium. Academic sources have been cited as footnotes. For more information, visit: www.dom.edu/about-dominican/mission-and-ministry/el-futuro-2025

Let us begin by acknowledging that we gather today on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of various Native Peoples, including the Mishigamaw, Inoka, Kaskaskaham and the land of at least ten other nations the University of Dayton team drove through to participate in El Futuro is Here. Many of us here today also carry our own native ancestors and sadly many of us, like me, do not know the names of those peoples, nations, and lands because of non-innocent and sinful systems which have stripped us from those roots.

- We call into this space our ancestors, whom the Catholic Church has re-taught us to call the Communion of Saints – among whom first is Mary of Nazareth.
- We request from our ancestors to be with us and protect us these days.
- We honor and pay respect to the elders, past and present, as they continue their stewardship of these lands and waters.
- We remain committed to building relationships with these communities and working towards reconciliation and justice.

For one way to learn more about specific ways towards reconciliation and justice, please visit the Native American Center of Central Ohio (NAICCO).

¹Neomi De Anda, PhD. Professor of Theology. College of Arts and Sciences. University of Dayton.
Executive Director of International Marian Research Institute.

The Native American Indian Center of Central Ohio (NAICCO) is devoted to preserving and restoring balance in the lives of Native Americans through traditional, cultural, educational, family, community, and wellness driven values and initiatives. For maps and other educational resources visit tribalnationsmaps.com. Gracias.

¡Buenas tardes, EL FUTURO!!!

Ok. This time when I say “Buenas tardes El Futuro” you rise up as you can and say “We are here!” Ready?

¡BUENAS TARDES, EL FUTURO!

WE ARE HERE!

¡BUENAS TARDES, EL FUTURO!

WE ARE HERE!

¿A quién le gusta el fútbol? Who likes futbol/soccer? Who are your teams? In women’s international soccer, I root for the USA and Germany. In men’s, Mexico y Deutschland. On July 5th of this year, I had the joy of attending the Bayern Munchen/Paris Saint Germain fútbol partido in Atlanta, Georgia. If anyone questions the purchasing power of the Latine population in this country, they needed to be at that game. The fans easily consisted of half if not 2/3 Latine peoples. Remember the teams were German and French! But, that’s chisme for a different day.

Well, to my glee, during the game, someone started the wave around the stadium. It went on for a good 20 to 25 minutes. The Wave, attributed to Krazy George Henderson, gained international recognition during the 1986 World Cup in Mexico. But what does the wave have to do with my talk you ask? Well, wave or onda – that which we call the energy which moves things – microwave, frequency waves, wavelengths is at the heart of the word abundancia.² The etymology of abundancia has the word unda –

² Etymonline, s.v. “Abundance (n.),” (Douglas Harper, 2025), <https://www.etymonline.com/word/abundance>.

which means wave. The Wave, now over 40 years old, is an international phenomenon created by one human to bring great joy to thousands at a time in venues with circular seating. It began as an idea and now brings together thousands of people at the same time.

DO THE WAVE!!!

The wave is completely dependent on communities of people to exist. It needs for one person to follow the previous person in raising their arms. It exists only in relationship. Without relationship, it cannot exist. Just a little note for your leadership toolbox – remember that another word for relationship is economy. The word economy comes from the Greek word *oikos* which means household and those in relationship in a household. Theologians use the word economic to talk about the Trinity's relationship within itself as well as with humanity. You can read Catherine LaCugna's stellar manuscript *God for Us* to learn much more. It's a short read of 448 pages. It's a true theological page-turner.

Shifting gears a little (ok maybe a complete 180), the Latin root “unda” can also be found in the word inundate. Fascinating how the same thing – a wave can bring us fullness of life – abundancia and the feeling of overwhelm – inundate – like a wave of the ocean can be something we ride and brings joy, it can also suck us under and at worst drown us. We live in times which easily inundate us. But, the power of liderazgo is esperanza when sinful systems of global economies want us to believe the lie of a world of scarcity and inundate us.

Now please find a piece of paper and a writing tool. You will be giving this paper away, so make sure it is not something you wish to keep. On the piece of paper, do not write your name. Do write EVERYTHING that is weighing you down and worrying you as you enter this conference. I'm going to set a two minute timer. Be as honest as possible and know that no one living in this realm is going to read your paper (but if you need to talk at some point, various ministers are around the room). On your paper write everything that is concerning you from the smallest personal things to global social sins.

Go ahead and finish. As you are finishing, I'm going to talk a little about a tradition in which I was raised called “El Pesame.” English language USA television taught me to translate this as a wake. But, el pesame is a practice rather than just a gathering or a moment. When someone's loved one passes, we give el

pesame to that person. It is called el pesame because of the phrase “me pesa” in other words “it weighs on me...your loss weighs on me...let me carry the weight of your loss with me.” So, now, please think of a loved one who has passed from this realm of life. Remember that just a few minutes ago we called them to be with us in this space these days? As you place your piece of paper in the container, think of that person taking the paper with all of its weight and telling you that they are helping you carry all of the weight of these burdens, worries, and concerns. The worries and concerns are not going away in this moment, but we know we are not alone. The world is heavy right now, and **it is easy to feel alone** and helpless. Everyone in this room is coming with inundations. Between the speed of change since the COVID19 pandemic, the uncertainties of the future, and centuries now of tyrants causing global harm beginning from these lands, nos sentimos que nos estamos ahogando. We feel as if we are drowning. This little paper activity is just one way to desahogar. To vent and undrown ourselves, so we feel less alone.

We are not alone. We can call on one another. We can call on our elders. We can call on our ancestors. We can ask Mary for her leadership. All of these are ways of letting God know that we are co-creators in this vida abundante and know that God’s greatest grace is our ability to live fullness of life as a whole of creation. Pull this activity out of your leadership toolbox when you and/or others are feeling inundated.

As I said earlier, the power of liderazgo is esperanza when sinful systems of global economies want us to believe the lie of a world of scarcity and inundate us. Our tool for finding esperanza is abundancia because abundancia – the fullness of life – comes from the Holy Spirit. Abundancia gives us tools to feel, smell, and see the gifts from God. It allows us to have senses which inspire us to create out of nothing.

Create out of nothing? You ask.

Yes. Just like Krazy George Henderson’s The Wave.

Remember we are Imago Dei. We are made in the image and likeness of God. Our communities from mixed backgrounds of oppression and fullness of life have really tapped into God’s ability to create out of nothing. Now, we don’t often hear about this ability as it is told in the Genesis creation accounts. But, I hear it when we would tell mi abuelita that we invited more people to a gathering because invitation for others to join is always open. She would say, “Échale más agua a los frijoles.” “Add water to the beans,

so that they will feed more people. Or when I worked at the Catholic Theological Union and the Romero Scholars were always cognizant of who had not yet arrived to our formation gatherings, so there was enough food for everyone. Y es más, everyone could eat a little less to send some food home with someone caring for a sick elder. This is abundancia. This is the ability to ride the wave of creation which the Holy Spirit has gifted us to create out of nothing. My dad helped my sibling and I hone this tool deeply. He creates out of what is available because he is able to see beyond the purpose for which something is being used. His relationship with the world is one of gratitude and potential. We may see an empty plastic gallon vinegar jug headed for the recycle bin, but he sees a holder for the toilet plunger. Our mom threw out a broken ironing board. He took it apart and created a system to store things hanging from the ceiling of the garage. We may see the large jug of juice or Fabuloso – you know which one – the one with the plastic handle. He washed it out very well, drilled some holes on the bottom, hung it from a tree branch, stuck a water hose in it and VOILA! We had an outdoor shower! Our relationship with one another, with God and how we see the world provides our perspective on the world and our ability for leadership. These are economies in our leadership toolkit.

Look into your packets and randomly pull something from it. Not any digital technology. As I continue this talk, look at what you are now holding and think within an economy of gratitude and potential. How is this object calling you to be grateful? What of your potential and potential in your community is this object inspiring? Keep reflecting upon this object as I keep talking.

While our dad taught us to hone our gift of abundancia. I did not understand the connection between it and our Native Peoples ancestry until I listened to the book *The Serviceberry Abundance and Reciprocity in the Natural World* by Robin Wall Kimmerer of the Potawatomi Peoples who is also a botanist. Dr. Wall Kimmerer outlines the notion of abundance economy in this deeply wise book of 128 pages. The following is a summary of with some quotes from chapter 3; however, I highly recommend this book. They begin by laying out the argument that the global economic model of capitalism runs on scarcity by rightly claiming, “economics is about decision making in the face of scarcity...With scarcity as the main principle, the mindset that follows is based on commodification of goods and services.”³

As a botanist, Dr. Wall Kimmerer then makes the connection between plants and a gift economy of

³Robin Wall Kimmerer, *The Serviceberry: Abundance and Reciprocity in the Natural World*, illu. John Burgoyne (Scribner, 2024), 38.

abundance and reciprocity. For Potawatami Anishinaabe peoples of the great Lakes region, plants have unconditional love for people. In Anishinaabe economy one life is given in support of another. Gratitude is first response to a gift; generosity; unconditional love. Gratitude of a recognition of indebtedness. Remember: water is life; food is life; soil is life; become our life through the paired miracles of photosynthesis and respiration. Food in our mouths is the relationship that connects us in a relationship simultaneously spiritual and physical as our bodies get fed and our spirits nourished by a sense of belonging which is the most vital of food.

To continue with Dr. Wall Kimmerer's own words, "These two economic worldviews, of prosperity gained through individual accumulation and prosperity gained through sharing of the commons, underpin the history of colonization in this country. The whole enterprise of dispossession and assimilation of the original peoples was designed to eradicate the notion of land as a source of belonging and to replace it with the idea that land is nothing more than a source of belongings. This required a narrowing of the definition of well-being, from common wealth to individual wealth, from abundance to scarcity"⁴ because "(r)ecognizing enoughness is a radical act in a culture that tells us we always need to consume more."⁵

While not exactly alike, in this space and in Catholic Higher Education, we stand with in a complex Christian framework. Our concern for others, our care for life, our love spread far and wide is a tool in our leadership toolbox which allows us to create out of nothing to imagine into existence the fullness of life because we understand the deep relationship of our God within Godself as well as with us and all of creation– the economic Trinity. But, I'm not going to get too Augustinian theological (yet). Instead, I'm going pneumatological and think with the Holy Spirit.

As I said before, abundancia - our ability to create from nothing is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Because God decided we are fully worthy of life. No other global system should convince us otherwise. I honestly believe that the current attack on so many of our communities by governments have to do with our strong toolkit of abundancia – our abilities to create from nothing and to see solutions from what we have in front of us.

⁴ Kimmerer, *The Serviceberry*, 43.

⁵ Kimmerer, *The Serviceberry*, 12.

While we may desire the latest technology, we also know from our own communities, that these technologies are built on the backs, the unpaid or underpaid labor of our bodies. For example, Latinas on average in the USA make 57 cents to every dollar a White non-hispanic man makes. Y le seguimos echando más agua a los frijoles – we just keep adding water to the beans. I am not saying that the system is correct. No. It is corrupt and sinful! It needs to be changed. But, our toolkit to make from little or nothing – to live within economies of abundancia - is such a threat to exposing the lies of the systems of economies of scarcity that the systems for DEI, student loans, sanctuary, safer spaces and the list continues regarding systems under attack!

My next example of abundancia includes an invitation to all of you. The video is going to be shown. Pay close attention to where you see abundancia in the video. When you are inspired, feel free to join the fun! [play video of "La Cumbia del Papa"].

I now to turn back to Mary. As we make our way through this next part of the keynote, please find the spectacular image which Emily Reynoso created to accompany this talk. Please pay attention to Mary in this image, especially her face. Look at the people around her.

Does anyone here know the story of (excuse my Portuguese pronunciation) Nossa Senhora Aparecida or Nuestra Señora de la Aparecida? The story of Our Lady of Aparecida is a story of abundancia. Who here knows the story of this Marian apparition? Would you like to come share the story with the whole group?

Nossa Senhora da Conceição Aparecida

Country: Brazil

One day in 1717, three fishermen named Domingos Garcia, Filipe Pedroso and João Alves cast their nets on the Paraíba River where it flows alongside the small city of Guarantingueta near the Port of Itaguaçu.⁶ Of late, the fishermen of the region were having bad luck with their fishing, so they had been praying to Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception in hopes God would grant a good catch. To his surprise, a fisherman pulled up a headless wooden statue.

⁶Małgorzata Oleszkiewicz-Peralba, *The Black Madonna in Latin America and Europe* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007), 119; and Nicholas Joseph Santoro, *Mary in Our Life: Atlas of the Names and Titles of Mary, the Mother of Jesus* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 140.

When two other fishermen cast their nets beside him, they brought up the statue's head and, finally, some fish. Legend has it that the parts were so heavy that the fishermen could not lift it from the water, so they set aside those nets and kept casting because the water was suddenly full of fish. Once back on shore, the fishermen cleaned the sculpture and reassembled it, only to discover that it was an image of the Immaculate Conception. Because the image appeared from nowhere followed by a miraculous catch, the fisherman decided to name the statue Nossa Senhora da Conceição Aparecida (literally, Our Lady of the Conception who Appeared).⁷ Story of the miracle soon spread and people began to visit the small city to venerate the statue. Devotion to the image caused Nuestra Señora de Aparecida's cult to grow, and the first chapel dedicated to her was built in 1737.

The little exquisitely worked dark clay statue of Nossa Senhora da Aparecida is a very humble image of a young woman with her hands raised before her heart in prayer. A large round golden open crown was placed over a colorfully embroidered navy mantle. She is not only popular for her representation, as a Black Madonna, of the racially diverse people of Brazil, but because of the miracles people have attributed to Mary over the centuries. Eventually, due to the growth of her cult, work began in 1834 on the construction of a denominated New Basilica in her honor. Prior to the inauguration of the New Basilica in 1955, Pope Pius XII (1876-1958) proclaimed Nossa Senhora da Conceição Aparecida the principal patroness of Brazil and approved the devotion to her image.⁸

You can clearly see that this apparition is about abundancia. The fishermen were so concerned about feeding the town and not finding any fish, but a Marian apparition was followed by an abundance of fish and a great celebration ensued.

But, the story does not stop there! Now, I am going to get deeply theological in the official Catholic Church teaching kind of way because we are part of this tradition. In case you do not know, Bishops lead diocese and diocese are broken into particular pieces of land. Groups of bishops are divided by areas known as a conference. The bishops of the United States of America belong to the US Conference of Catholic Bishops also known as the USCCB. There is a bishops conference for all of the bishops of Spanish and Portuguese speaking Turtle Island to Abya Yala (some people call this the Caribbean,

⁷ "Latin American Titles of Mary," University of Dayton, accessed April 12, 2024: <https://udayton.edu/marianlibrary/all-about-mary-update.php#anchor4>.

⁸ Ibid.

Central, and South America). This bishops' conference is known as CELAM.

Our two most recent popes have come from CELAM. Yes, Papa Francisco AND Papa León XIV were members of CELAM before being elected pontiff. I know we are in the childhood land (Chicagoland) of Robert Prevost aka Mongisnor Roberto aka Papa León XIV, but he was a member of the Latin American Bishops conference when he became Pope. But, I digress.

CELAM meets regularly and produces joint documents on teachings they would like to share with their dioceses – their people. These documents have very formal names but are mostly known by their meeting place. The document known as “Aparecida” because it was completed at the shrine of Our Lady of Aparecida in Brazil was largely drafted by Jorge Bergolio. Anyone know Cardinal Bergolio's other name?

Yes. Papa Francisco.

The document commonly known as “Aparecida” of CELAM theologically develops discipleship around the verse from the Gospel of John 10:10b, “I came so they may have life and have it abundantly.” The document along with its adjacent letter from Pope Benedict XVI situate this notion of discipleship in having life abundantly within the teaching of the Catholic Church from Pope Paul VI's document *Populorum Progressio* (note: all translations are mine because the English translation I found online takes quite some liberties). Pope Benedict states, “The pueblos of Latin America have a right to a life of abundance which is proper to the children of God with conditions which are more humane and free from threats of hunger and all forms of violence.”

We – those of us in this room who carry Native Peoples blood within us and come from legacies of oppression, violence, and suffering – are part of those pueblos of Latin America. Not to say that the suffering is over nor that Native Peoples, gente indígena, and First Nations no longer exist. We still exist (some in very mixed ways and others in communal but strongly marginalized ways). We vehemently continue to strive for life in abundance amidst the suffering. The Catholic Church is not innocent on this front and names of children lost and killed at Indian Boarding Schools may never be fully compiled. Papal teaching has now spoken against it for over fifty years and continues to act against it more overtly through public apologies and a repeal of the Doctrine of Discovery. More needs to be done by the

Catholic Church in this way and further understanding and practicing abundancia economy is just one way. The popes have spoken in the line of apostolic succession not only from Peter and Paul but also from Mary.

I turn back to Mary. Remember I said that Mary is the first among the Communion of Saints? Mary is also a leader in co-creation with God. When God asked her to Incarnate (en carne) make flesh the second person of the Trinity, she did.⁹ She enacted the gift of abundancia – fullness of life – creating from what she had. When they had no shelter, she birthed Jesus and found him a bed from the place that the animals ate.¹⁰ She enacted abundancia. When the Holy Family had to flee because Herod called for the killing of all boys under the age of two, she nursed Jesus in his earliest days, was his first teacher, and along with Joseph built a life as asylum seekers.¹¹ They poured out abundancia. When the wine had finished at the wedding, she knew Jesus could create water from wine and she got everyone moving.¹² She unleashed abundancia in Jesus and the servers. Mary co-created with God, she and Joseph co-created with God. They taught Jesus as a human to co-create with God because of their belief in God's promise to them. They saw abundancia available to them because they lived a faithful relationship with God. As scriptures tell us, life did not get any easier either. Both Jesus and Mary, whom the Catholic Church teaches are sinless, suffered greatly because of human sin to the point of Jesus' death on the cross. But, the story did not end there because of what? You were thinking I was going to say abundancia. Yes AND the story does not end there because of **Esperanza**.

The word *Esperanza* en español is so much better than its English translation of hope. *Esperanza* means hope, but it also contains the word *espera* – wait; anticipate; it connotes patience but expectation and intention. Feel free to jot down some thoughts or let your hand doodle images which come to mind as I continue discussing *Esperanza*.

In SPES NON CONFUNDIT *Bull Of Indiction Of The Ordinary Jubilee OF THE YEAR 2025*, FRANCIS, BISHOP OF ROME, SERVANT OF THE SERVANTS OF *esperanza* addressed ALL WHO READ THIS LETTER MAY HOPE FILL YOUR HEARTS and connects *esperanza* e abundancia with the words, "Si,

⁹ Luke 1:26-28 (NRSVUE).

¹⁰ Luke 2:7-16 (NRSVUE).

¹¹ Matt. 2:13-15 (NRSVUE).

¹² John 2:1-12 (NRSVUE).

necesitamos que ‘sobreabunde la esperanza’ (cf. Rm 15,13) para testimoniar de manera creíble y atrayente la fe y el amor que llevamos en el corazón; para que la fe sea gozosa y la caridad entusiasta; para que cada uno sea capaz de dar aunque sea una sonrisa, un gesto de amistad, una mirada fraterna, una escucha sincera, un servicio gratuito, sabiendo que, en el Espíritu de Jesús, esto puede convertirse en una semilla fecunda de esperanza para quien lo recibe.” (my translations because the official English translation misses the nuance around abundancia) Yes! We need an over abundance of hope (cf Rm 15, 13) to give credible testimony and make attractive the faith and the love we carry in our hearts, so that our faith is joyful and our love enthusiastic, so that each person may have the capacity to share at least a smile, a friendly gesture, a siblingly look, a genuine listen, a free service, knowing that in the Spirit of Jesus, this can be converted into fertile hope for all who receive it. He then goes on to describe what hope contains. Among a list which includes the other two cardinal virtues of faith and love (caridad), he discusses that esperanza is a way we share in God’s happiness (21). He also names the witness of Mary and her living with the “Gift of grace amid realities of life.” (24). She is the Mother of God and Mother of Hope who comes to our aid when we need her (35).

While not exactly the same, Francis’ flowing thoughts on hope, especially a fecundity of hope or fertile hope (however one wishes to translate it) makes me think of the Latina Feminist Theologians’ notion of Empapamiento of Hope. We, Mujerista and Latina Feminist theologians, try to remain grounded in the messy, complicated, joyful, and painful reality of lo cotiando/daily life. Empapamiento of Hope first presented by Dr. María Pilar Aquino as an ability to “saturate ourselves,’ ‘imbue ourselves’ or ‘permeate ourselves” with hope, to believe that life will improve or that change will occur”¹³ allows for Esperanza to remain grounded and honest with reality. I add that this esperanza is so deeply saturated that we know el camino de esperanza is not easy. It includes enduring blisters and bad smell from the saturation. It means paying attention to the glimpses in time when the espera has ended and realized hope has arrived. When inundation has gotten the best of us and we are taken under the wave because sinful systems are set to feed off of lives to feed the lie of scarcity, I am reminded of the Holy Family during the Flight to Egypt stopping at the spot that is now known as the Milk Grotto to quickly and quietly nurse Jesus to keep him satisfied and quiet, so as not to disclose his and their presence. In the little details of daily life, economies of abundancia gently sparkle. The espera, while maybe fleeting, has momentarily ended and hope is realized.

¹³ María Pilar Aquino, “Latina Feminist Theology,” in *A Reader in Latina Feminist Theology: Religion and Justice*, ed. Daisy L. Machado, Jeanette Rodriguez, and María Pilar Aquino (University of Texas Press, 2002), 149.

To discuss Esperanza a little further, one may see a butterfly embedded in the stained glass of the colorful image which Emily Reynoso created to accompany this talk. One can see it better in its black and white form. Monarch butterflies in particular are HUGE symbols of hope because of the journey they make every year traversing these lands north to south and south to north. They do not have papers for national borders but the plight to make this trip takes multiple generations. Butterflies in general are symbols of hope in transformation and that life completely transforms this being.

The honor of the invitation to give this keynote arrived in my email on May 7, 2025. Pope Francis transitioned from this realm on April 21, 2025. Papa León XIV was elected on May 8, 2025. Clearly, between popes, we the Church continued. During this papal transitional time, I was finishing Francis' autobiography and pulling highlights from a PhD seminar I had taught on CELAM last semester. I was also preparing a piece on Hope and a Marian Church for the publication *The Priest*. In my readings by Francis from "Aparecida" to "Querida Amazonia" to his short speech at the meeting with Argentine youth at World Youth Day 2013 to the Bull of Indiction of the Ordinary Jubilee of the Year 2025, two things stood out. The first ESPERANZA, which we have been discussing.

The second, "Hagan Lío" as he told the Argentine youth, which quickly spread throughout the world. "Hagan LÍO". I'm going to share one last lesson in etymology. The word lío has both Latin and Greek meanings. In Latin, lío means to stir things up; to create a revolution (does not always mean violence but does mean change). In Greek the word lío means strength and bravery and from there we get the word lion or león. So aside from Francis making a great connection to his successor el Papa León XIV (the Holy Spirit works its spirating ways!), Francis in saying, "Hagan LÍO" was saying be courageous and full of strength to create revolutions of change. Like Mary, we may not know everything our yes response to God's call will entail but remember the power of liderazgo is esperanza when sinful systems of global economies want us to believe the lie of a world of scarcity and inundate us!

¡Muy bien! Let's close together. Please stand as you are able. Take a giant breath in through your nose and let it out through your mouth. We are going to end with a call and response, which our Catholic tradition teaches us a fundamental way to worship God.

I will say the calls, and we will all do the response together. The response has motions to it, so engage as you can. The response is "We are here!" [motion arms straight up] "We create from little or nothing!

[hands in a heart]. The hands in a heart reminds us to hacer lío to create revolutions! They are not always violent but revolutions to create change.

Let's practice three times.

We are here! We create from little or nothing!

We are here! We create from little or nothing!

We are here! We create from little or nothing!

OK READY? Here we go...

Like Mary, we may not know everything our yes response to God's call will entail but remember the power of liderazgo is esperanza when sinful systems of global economies want us to believe the lie of a world of scarcity and inundate us!

We are here! We create from little or nothing!

We weave relationships with other humans and all of creation so deep that some people just don't know how we are so well connected!

We are here! We create from little or nothing!

We function within economies of abundance and reciprocity which allow us to ride the wave rather than be inundated by it!

We are here! We create from little or nothing!

We are able to extend el pesame and carry the burden of each other's mourning! and we are able to call upon our ancestors to help us to do the same!

We are here! We create from little or nothing!

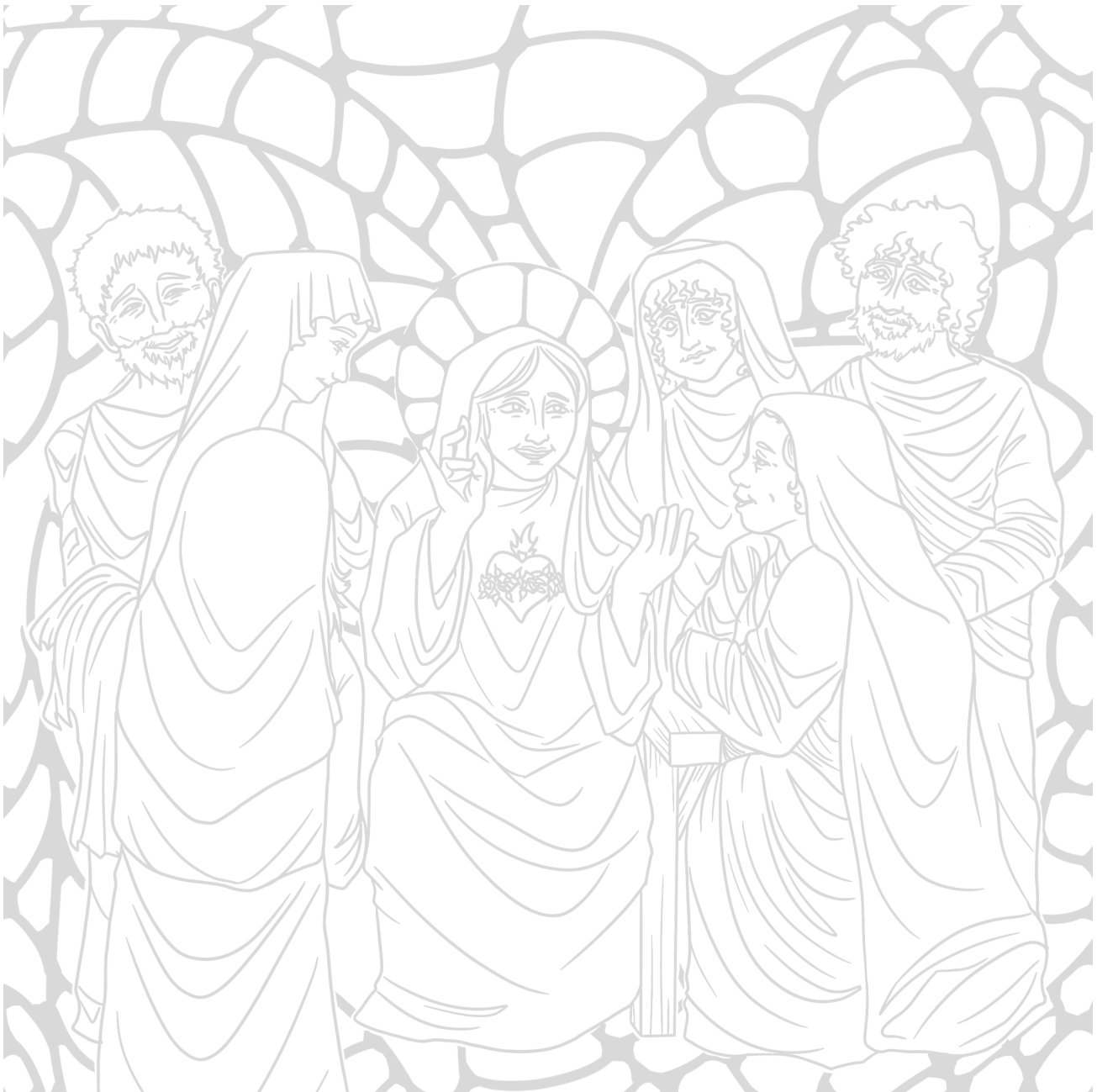
Like Mary, we may not know everything our yes response to God's call will entail but remember the power of liderazgo is esperanza when sinful systems of global economies want us to believe the lie of a

world of scarcity and inundate us!

We are here! We create from little or nothing!

Yes, El Futuro – We are here!

¡Gracias!









INGRID BUSTOS ALEMAN

Dominican University

Ingrid Bustos Aleman is a dedicated advocate for education equity and community empowerment. She graduated with a dual major in History and Secondary Education from Dominican University. Ingrid worked with the Arthur J. Schmitt Foundation to create a podcast and website to amplify the voices/experiences of undocumented staff and students in a country that rapidly changes its immigration policies. The podcast “The Undocumented Archives” is meant to encourage storytelling as a form of protest and provide a voice to those who are often overshadowed. During her time at Dominican, she was president of the Undocumented and Immigrant Alliance, which promoted awareness of undocumented student experiences through impactful events and mentoring peers. Ingrid’s efforts extend to researching undocumented student retention, facilitating college resource workshops, and creating inclusive spaces on campus. She wants to continue fostering greater equity and understanding across diverse communities through her professional field.

“Te Pido” tells the story of my parents crossing over from Mexico to the United States through the prayer *Hail Mary* in Spanish. The lines found in between the prayer verses of the *Hail Mary* are lines of a poem describing the worries of a mother separated from her only child. The poem also captures the longing of a father to be a united family again. The helplessness of getting bags and clothes taken away and only being left to hold onto the small things that give us hope. **“Te Pido”** represents the story of a child who is an immigrant, first-generation, undocumented Mexican-American who is constantly living in that “in-between.” This story was written to express those feelings and experiences of a child who feels too Mexican or not American enough and vice versa. This story was written as an homage to the little Guadalupe figurine that guided my mother and I to the United States. That little figurine is represented through the lines of the *Hail Mary* prayer, as she is the only thing that remained constant throughout the chaos.



Te Pido

Dios te salve, María...

My mom would pray as she crossed the border with me by her side
She would pray as she spent the nights awaiting to see the Silver Gates
She would pray so that she could stay alive in a city notorious for human/sex trafficking
She would pray as she longed to see my Dad
She would pray and hope

Llena eres de Gracia...

Hope to see the love of her life again
Hope to see the next day, even if it was this harsh reality
Hope that her child wasn't missing her too much
Hope that her child made it past the border
El Señor es contigo. Bendita tú eres entre todas las mujeres...

"Por favor que no me la roben, por favor que este viva."

She would say, longing to see her child again
The *caminata* was tolerable; spending three days apart from the one pure thing she had
was torture

Y bendito es el fruto de tu vientre, Jesús...

Those three days were the most challenging thing that a mom had to go through
In the end, she had no need to worry
For they entertained her child with Kraft Mac and Cheese
She finally reached the airport stop, where she was reunited with the love of her life

Santa María, Madre de Dios, ruega por nosotros, pecadores ...

"Por favor que llegue bien." My dad would say as he crossed the border

"Te extraño" he would say as he held his daughter's picture in his hand

He would pray this day and night

Day: when he was walking the hot desert, trying to stay as hydrated as possible

Afternoon: when he was setting up camp to get food and sleep

Night: when the flames got too big...

When the people with the authority to send him back chased him

When he had to go back for that one picture that was keeping him motivated and alive

When he had to run twice as fast to get away from the authority

When he was finally safe and hidden

When he finally made it to the Silver Gates

When all he had was McDonald's minimum wage to bring his wife and daughter
to the United States

Ahora y en la hora de nuestra muerte...

I am their fury, I am their patience, I am a conversation
I am my parents' daughter
I cannot talk about myself without bringing up my parents
They were the ones who created me
They are the ones who keep catching me when I fall, stumble, or cry
They are the ones who celebrate my *logros*

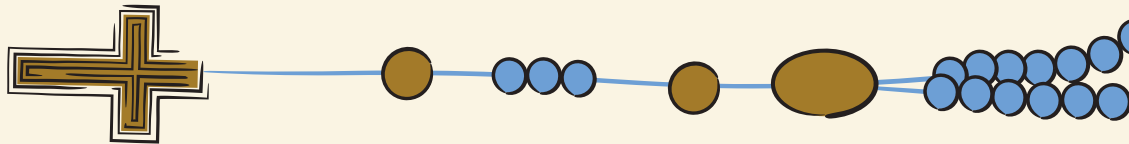
I have their fury, when I say that,
I mean that all the issues I am passionate about they instilled in me
Their fury to keep fighting day after day,
night after night to keep fighting in that desert,
keeps me swinging and punching to make a better life for them.

The patience that they have, I have.
The patience to deal with racist remarks
The patience to deal with shut doors in my face
The patience to deal with ignorant people
The patience to deal with getting called an "alien"
The patience to fight day and night

The fury and patience to keep living

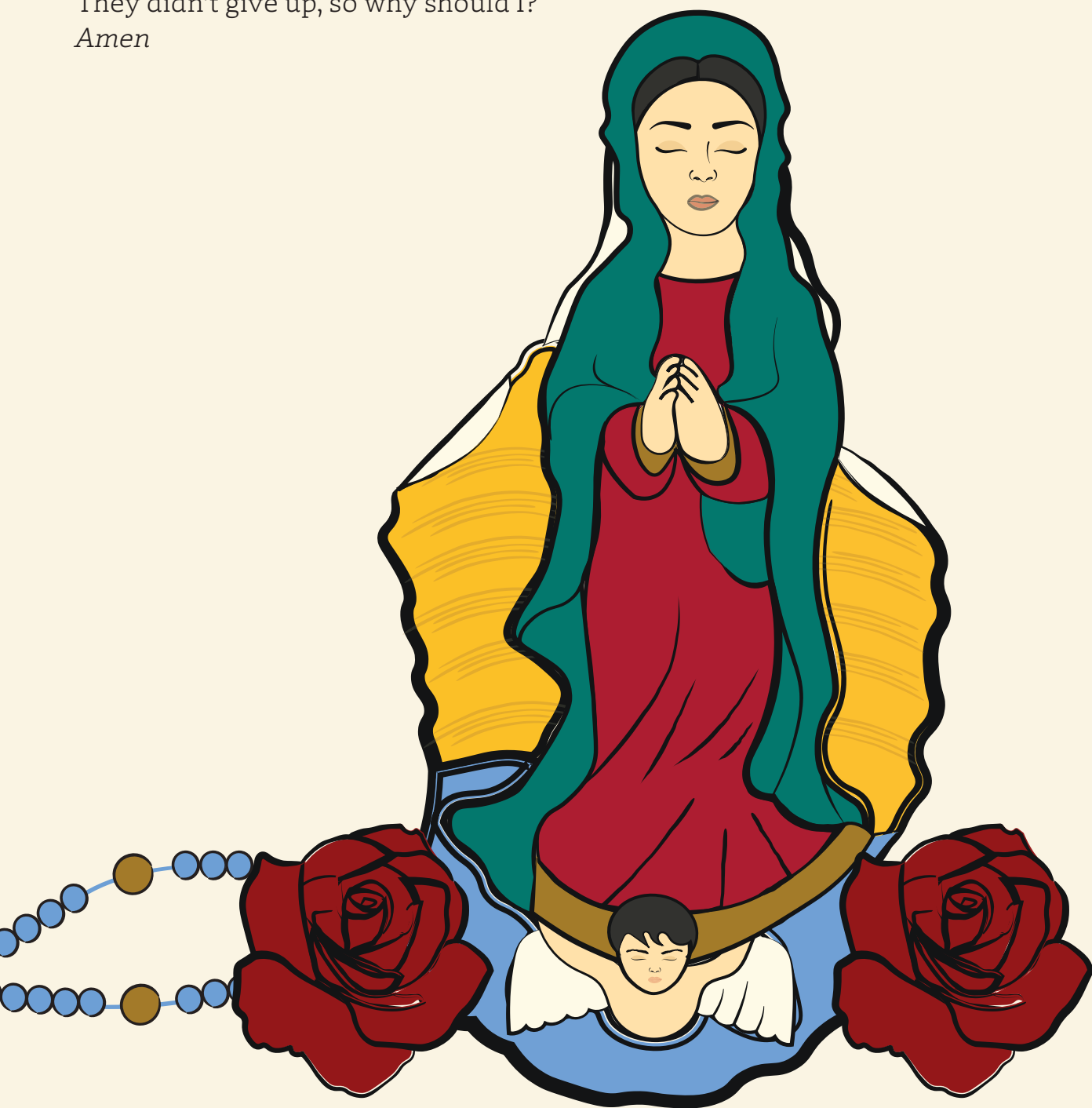
I am a conversation
The fact that I am standing here in a room full of people telling my story
I am the one in college
I am the one who stays fighting in the world
In a world that constantly tells me "NO"
In a world that says that we are less than human because we don't have that nine-digit
magic number

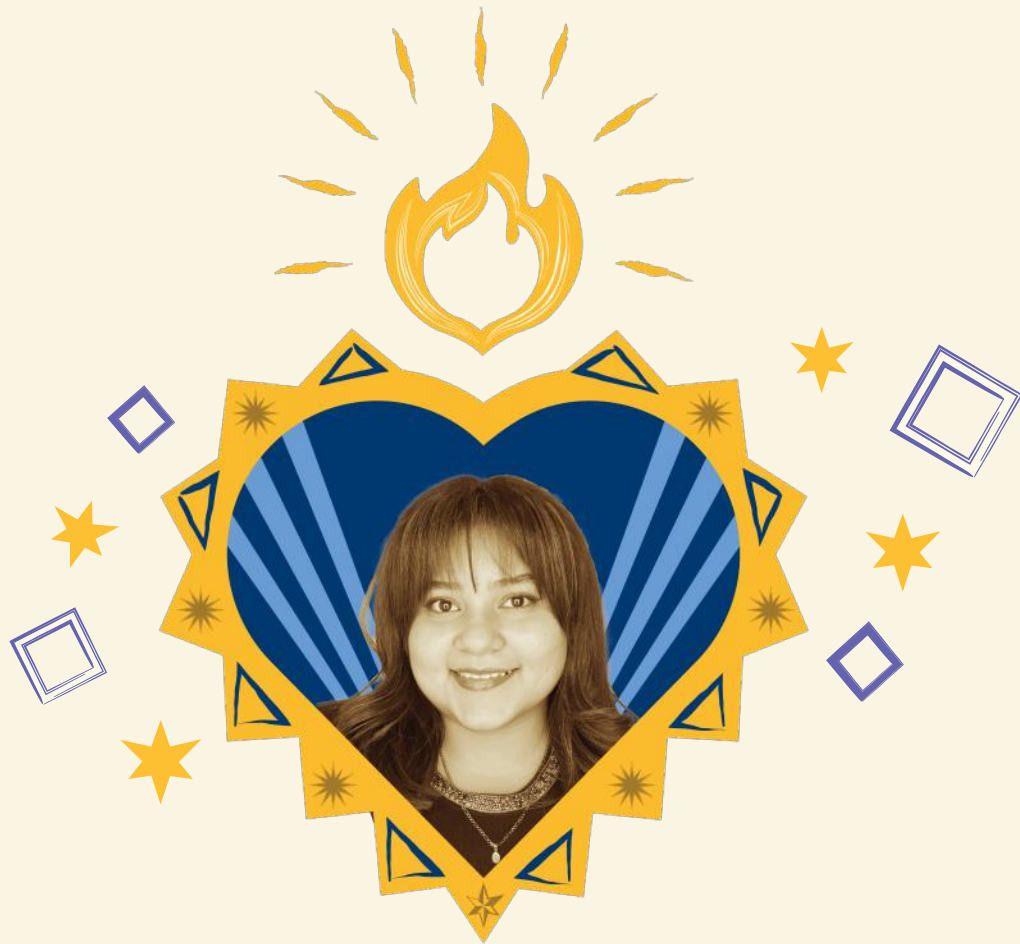
In a world that is constantly trying to tell me that I cannot do it
In a world that is always looking to put me down



Little does the world know...
That the strongest dad and the wisest mom
Did not create someone who loses easily
They created someone who is a fighter,
A lover
A caregiver
A friend
They created someone who is ready to face the world with all her might

And if I do happen to fall and get hurt,
I have them
They didn't give up, so why should I?
Amen





DANIELA FUNES RIVERA

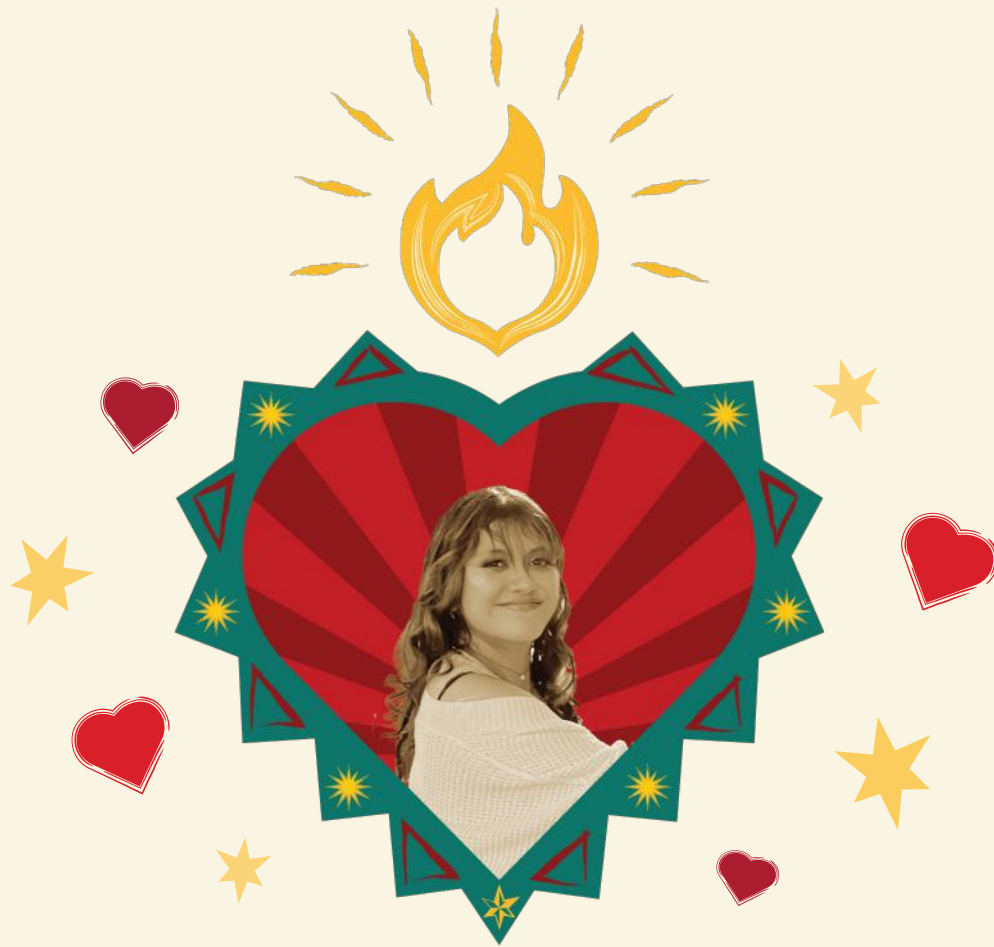
Dominican University

Originally from El Salvador, she moved to the United States at the age of 15. Currently an undergraduate student at Dominican University, Daniela is majoring in Graphic Design with minors in Theology and Latinx Studies. As a practicing Catholic, her faith has been a guiding force throughout her academic journey. Over the past few years, her experiences at Dominican have deepened her connection to both her faith and her calling to serve the Latinx community. Daniela has been working as a Senior Marketing and Communications intern at the Center for Cultural Liberation since her freshman year. She strives to represent her culture and her roots through her work. Even if she lives far from El Salvador today, all of those stories have brought her to the US. Through her ancestors she is reminded of her roots, which inspire her to be resilient and strong in the face of adversity.

More than 80 years ago, in my home country, El Salvador, there were some hardworking women called Panchitas. They came from Panchimalco to sell flowers, fruits, and vegetables on the streets of El Salvador's capital. By naming this piece "**Panchita**" I want to highlight the indigenous aspect of El Salvador, despite the negative connotations associated with it there is a need to recognize the importance of the history of resilience and lucha behind them. For me, watercolors represent the unpredictability not just of the medium but also of life. I hope this piece can serve as a powerful tool to reclaim the word bringing awareness and highlight them in a positive way. During the creation of this watercolor piece, I found myself praying over it, just like how my grandma told me. This piece is one example of my day-to-day tradition to pray over things, so they turn out well.



SOURCE: Daniela Funes Rivera, *Panchita*, 2025



SANDRA PADILLA–CERVANTES

University of Portland

My name is Sandra Padilla-Cervantes. I'm a first-generation student. I grew up in a Mexican American household. I'm double majoring in secondary education and English. I'm currently in my senior year at the University of Portland. I've always loved reading and writing, and that is what has nurtured my love for education. I couldn't be prouder of my mom, who has been there for me in all the moments of joy, anxiety, and the unknown. My mom and I have a very close relationship and often spend time together in the kitchen. We have been told we look alike! Due to our shared birthday, we both adore our lucky number 13. Given my mom's hard work and my own, I am living the dreams she was unable to by pursuing higher education. I hope to inspire my future students to use their voices in their writing to empower them and their cultural identity.

I wanted to acknowledge the hardships that come from being bicultural. I am “ni de aquí ni de allá.” I am forever grateful for the sacrifices my mother made so that I could have a life of freedom. Faith is very important in my family. Faith has allowed my mom and I to make the most out of unfortunate situations, carrying a noble heart and mind. Having a “corazón de pollo” reminds me that being loving towards others and myself is what this world needs to function. We cannot control what happens to us, but we all can control how we react. In a world that is often heavy, I remind myself to lead with love. Soy muy afortunada de cumplir los sueños de las mujeres que no tenían la posibilidad de vivir sus sueños.

Corazóncito

My mother had me at nineteen being a baby herself.
My grandmothers and their mothers are all unhappily married.
Soy la hija mayor de cinco hijos.
I'm the first in my family to go to college.
I'm living the dreams that my mother and the women before me were
unable to live.

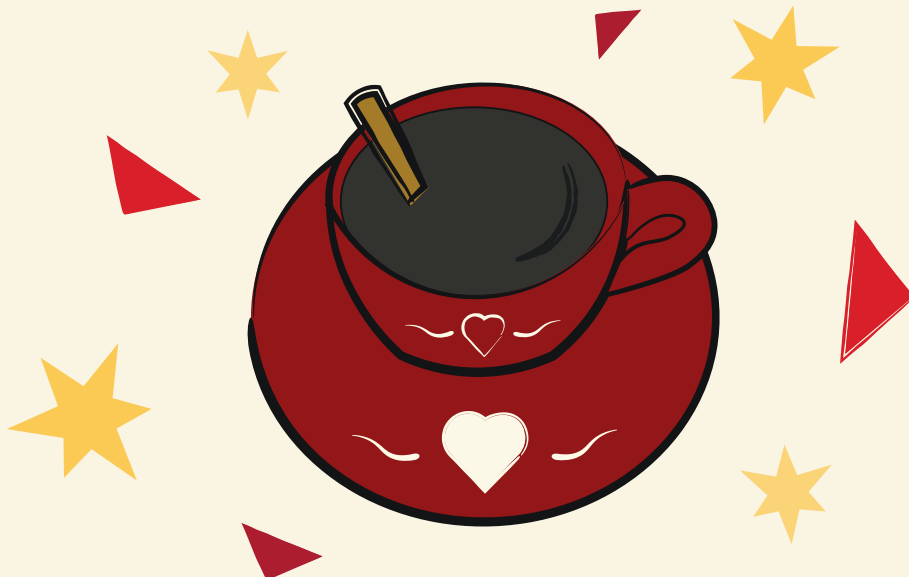
Estoy hecha por la imagen de Diosito Santo, los panes dulces de mi mamá,
mi piel morenita y me cabello negro como la noche que brilla junto a las
estrellas que mi mamá y muchas otras mujeres han deseado tener una
vida como la mía.

Las lágrimas, risas, chismes, y cafecitos me recuerdan de mi mamita
querida y mis amigas del alma en momentos difíciles para seguir adelante
Tengo el “corazón de pollo” como dice mi mamá.

Aunque Dios me ponga a prueba se que Él me está cuidando y
fortaleciendo para ser una mujer de bien.

Me equivoco de vez en cuando pero aprendo de mis equivocaciones y
camino con la frente por delante.
Pase lo que pase en mi vida siempre buscaré usar mi corazoncito para
amar a mi prójimo.

I'm living the dreams that my mother and the women before me were
unable to live.





CHRISTIAN ESPINOZA

San Bernardino Valley College

Christian Espinoza is a first-generation, queer Latino student at San Bernardino Valley College. Originally from Michoacán, Mexico, and raised in San Bernardino, CA, Christian's work explores themes of identity, resilience, and belonging, particularly within immigrant and marginalized communities. As a scholar, writer, and advocate, he has been recognized for his contributions to urban educational leadership and immigrant rights. His creative writing delves into the lived experiences of those navigating liminality, cultural duality, and systemic barriers, drawing from both personal and community narratives. Christian's work has been featured in academic conferences, advocacy spaces, and cultural storytelling initiatives, reinforcing his mission to amplify underrepresented voices.

"In The In-Between" reflects what it means to exist in liminal spaces—between cultures, languages, and identities. As someone who is *ni de aquí, ni de allá*, I wanted to capture the quiet yet complex struggles of living an in-between existence. Through sensory details, readers are invited to taste *café de olla*, hear swap meet chatter, and feel the weight of a name that doesn't quite fit. These moments mirror the experience of many who constantly translate themselves to be understood. The story honors the beauty and pain of duality—the longing for a home that is both everywhere and nowhere, and the cultural traditions that root us. It's about finding belonging not in a single place, but in the spaces we create for ourselves.

I hope readers feel seen and comforted, realizing the in-between isn't emptiness—it's where identity, love, and culture can thrive.

In The In-Between

Mamá always says that **home is where your feet stand**, but I have never known which land to claim as mine.

I was born in a town I do not remember, raised in a country that does not claim me. In California, my tongue slips between Spanish and English like a thread weaving two tapestries together, but never quite belonging to either. At school, I am too Mexican—my lunch a torta de frijoles con queso, wrapped tightly in foil, a Jumex de Mango tucked beside it, my name stumbling off the teacher’s tongue, mispronounced and unfamiliar. But when I visit Mexico, I am too American—my Spanish too slow, my accent betraying me, my cousins calling me **pocha** with a mix of teasing and pity.

I walk through life like a shadow between two suns, stretched thin but never whole.

We wake early, the smell of café de olla and warm bolillos drifting through the house. Mamá moves through the kitchen, her floral apron tied tight around her waist as she sets out plates for breakfast. She hums Marco Antonio Solís under her breath, her voice blending with the low murmur of the Spanish radio station playing in the background.

I eat quickly, my thoughts already elsewhere. Sundays are predictable—church, then the swap-meet, our routine as solid as the crucifix hanging above the doorway. The air inside the church is thick with burning incense and melted wax, the scent clinging to my clothes as I settle into the pew beside Mamá. The priest stands at the pulpit, his voice smooth and measured as he speaks of Exodus, of a people wandering for years in search of a home.

“Faith is knowing you belong, even when the land does not recognize you,” he says.

His words lodge in my chest like a stone.

I wonder if Moses ever felt like me—stuck between two worlds, never fully embraced by either. Did he worry about the weight of his words in one language more than another? Did he wonder which people were truly his, or if he had the right to claim any?

Mamá notices my silence after mass. “¿Qué pasa, mija?” she asks, smoothing my hair, her touch warm and grounding.

I hesitate. She wouldn't understand. She belongs here and there in a way I never will. Instead, I shake my head. "Nada, Mamá."

She frowns but doesn't push, instead taking my hand as we leave the church.

We drive through the heart of our neighborhood, where murals of Aztec warriors, monarch butterflies, and Frida Kahlo decorate the walls, their colors vibrant under the morning sun. Taquerías line the streets, their windows fogged with steam as workers prepare tortillas hechas a mano and sizzling carne asada.

But just a few blocks away, everything shifts. The signs change from "Carnicería" to "Organic Deli", from "Zapatería" to "Boutique Footwear." The cafés are new, sleek, filled with people who sip lattes and carry tote bags with slogans that say "Support Local Art"—even though their very presence is pushing locals out.

"Gentrificación," Mamá mutters under her breath, shaking her head. "Un día, no habrá nada para nosotros aquí."

Her words sit heavy in the air between us. I look out the window, watching as a man paints over an old panadería sign, replacing it with something modern, something in English.

I say nothing.

The swap-meet is where I feel closest to home.

It is neither here nor there, but something in between, a place where people like me exist without question.

The moment we step inside, the familiar scent of tacos de birria, cinnamon-dusted churros, and leather belts fills the air. The sound of cumbia and merengue hums through old speakers, blending with the lively calls of vendors.

"¡Dos por cinco, señora!"

"Get your phone cases here, only ten dollars!"

"Barato, barato, just for you!"

We weave through crowded aisles, past stacks of bootleg DVDs, racks of beaded rosaries, and knockoff designer purses that Mamá refuses to buy. She always says, "Si te van a ver con una bolsa de mentiras, mejor sin bolsa."

I laugh under my breath, trailing behind her as she stops to haggle over a gold-plated Virgen de Guadalupe pendant. I know how this goes—she'll feign disinterest, pretend to walk away, and then, suddenly, the vendor will lower the price. It's a game she always wins.

I wander toward a small stall filled with handmade bracelets, names woven in bright, delicate thread.

I scan the display, searching for mine.

“Ashley.” “Kevin.” “Maria.” “Jose.”

But **never mine**.

The vendor, an older woman with silver-threaded hair, looks up. “¿Quieres uno especial, hija?” she asks, noticing my hesitation.

I nod, and she smiles, already threading my name into place.

As she works, I think about my name—Nicolasa. I used to hate it.

At school, teachers always hesitated before saying it, their mouths clumsy, their voices unsure.

“Ni-ca...Ni-ca...?” they’d stutter, waiting for me to save them.

“Nicolasa,” I’d mumble, eyes cast down.

“That’s unique!” they’d say, as if it were a compliment, as if unique were anything but another word for different.

But at home, my name was music.

Mamá called me Nicolasa, mi amor, her voice rich with warmth. Papá shortened it to “Nico,” casual and light.

In Mexico, my name was normal, easy. Here, **it was a question**.

But holding the bracelet in my hands, the letters woven together in bold red and gold, something inside me settles.

Maybe I will never be fully here or fully there—but I am mine.

Later that night, I sit at my desk, tracing the letters of my name on the bracelet. Outside, the city hums—cars speeding down streets, dogs barking in alleyways, cumbia music floating through the open window from the neighbor’s house.

I think of Moses again, of his people wandering. Maybe he felt it too—the longing, the searching, the waiting for a place that felt like his.

Maybe home isn’t a place you find. Maybe it’s something you **carry with you**. I slip the bracelet onto my wrist, the thread snug against my skin.

For the first time, I don’t mind being in-between. For the first time, I know that **I belong to myself**.

And maybe, just maybe—that is enough.



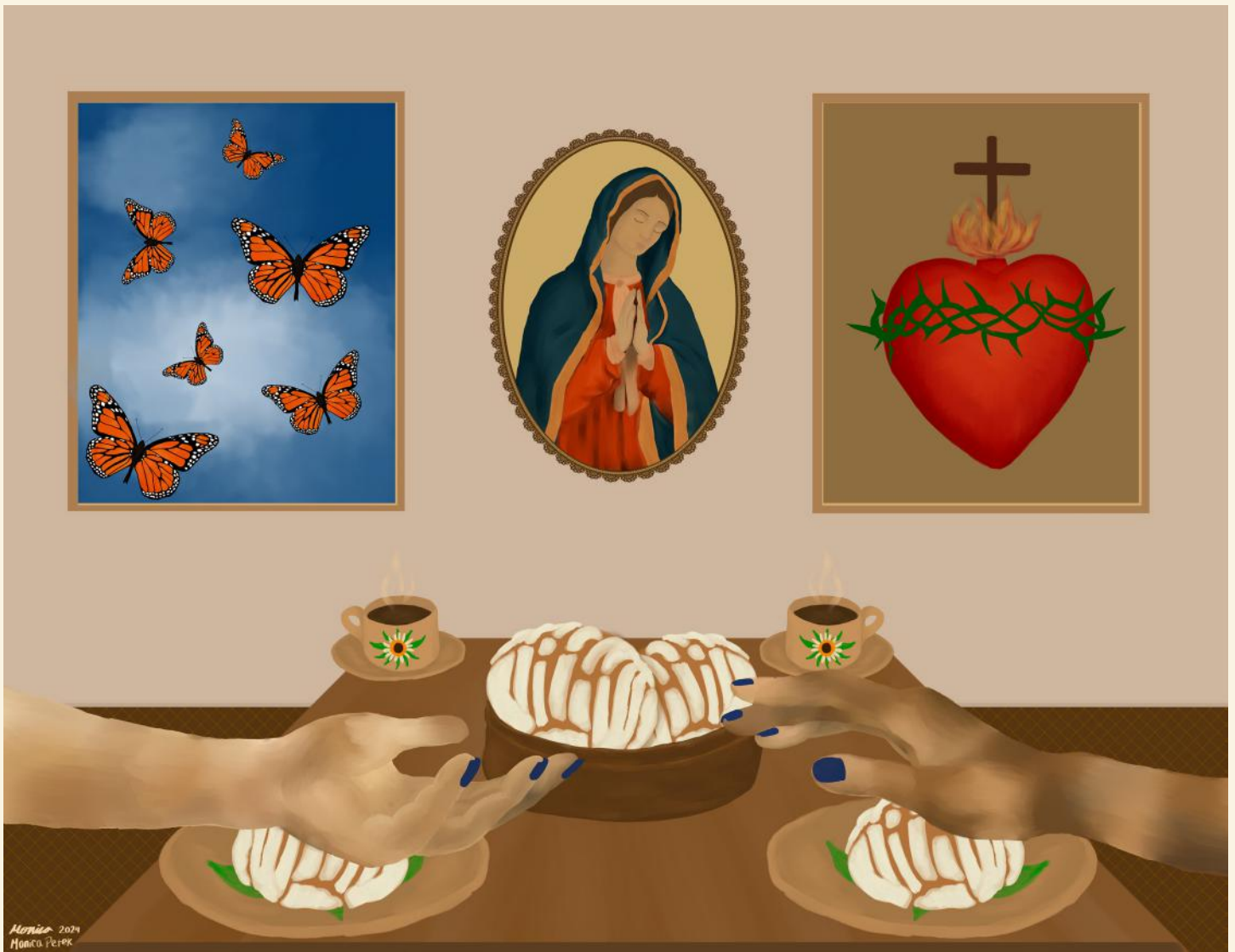


MONICA PETEK

Dominican University

Monica Petek is a first-generation, graduating senior at Dominican University in River Forest, Illinois, majoring in Graphic Design and minoring in Theology. A first-generation college student of Mexican (Purepecha) and Eastern European heritage, she is passionate about using visual communication to uplift marginalized communities. Guided by the belief that her own story informs the lens through which she functions, she approaches design with humility, acknowledging what she doesn't know, and engages communities long-term rather than only within a project's timeline. As an Arthur J. Schmitt Scholar, she co-led a team partnering with Rebuilding Together Metro Chicago for National Rebuild Day, helping renovate the home of an elderly family in Maywood. Driven by her family, particularly her mom, older brother, and cousins, she is deeply committed to approaching both milestones and obstacles with perseverance and as opportunities to continue to create meaningful impact. Her approach to justice-centered design is rooted in patience, care, and deep listening, shaping her path forward as both a creator and community ally.

She created **"En Lo Cotidiano"** for Dominican University's Dr. Claudia Herrera-Montero, who presented it during a guest lecture at DePaul University in October 2024 on Abuelita Theology. The piece visualizes the space where this theology is born—within the intimacy of those closest to us. Multi-toned hands invite viewers, especially those from underrepresented backgrounds, to see themselves in the work and reflect the diversity within Hispanic and Latinx identities. Food and art appear in the background, honoring the role of creative expression and storytelling in building community. **"En Lo Cotidiano"** is a visual beckoning to reflect on and actively participate in your community's storytelling traditions, because storytelling is how we learn and grow as people.



SOURCE: Monica Petek, *En Lo Cotidiano*, 2024



KAMILA CHAVEZ

Loyola University Chicago

My name is Kamila Chavez and I am a first generation Mexican-American. I am a rising junior pursuing a degree in English with a double minor in Sociology and Catholic Studies at Loyola University Chicago. My culture has always been important to me—there is nothing I love more than exploring new places in Mexico, learning about my family history and growing closer to my roots. Coming to terms with being Catholic and both Mexican and American hasn't always been an easy journey, but it has always been fulfilling. Through this journey, I have come to embrace my faith and my Mexican and American sides. I have learned that I will never be exactly like my family members when it comes to how we exist in the in-between, and that's okay. My journey is far from over, and I can't wait to discover more about my culture and myself.

As A first generation Mexican-American, I know what it's like to be in between. I am not from there or from here, and embracing being in between is something I am still learning to do. "**¿De Dónde Eres?**" can be read as an account of me coming to terms with that truth, and coming home to it. Growing up Mexican-American can be lonely and overwhelming at times, and I often felt like there was no one in my life to help me process my feelings, so I would have conversations with myself. This piece is a representation of that experience. It is inspired by those conversations with myself, and the real events that inspired them. When you read this piece, I hope you feel less alone. I hope you smell the air of the place you love most. I hope you hear the sound of coming home, wherever that may be.



¿De Dónde Eres?

I don't know where I'm from.
The simplest question to answer
Becomes an impossible choice.

Can I decide where I'm from?

Is it just a matter of making a choice?

I just have to choose.
I choose to be American.

The blonde girl in class
Thinks she's being funny
When she looks at me and asks
"Where are you really from?"

No problem.
I'll go with the other option,
I choose to be Mexican

"I can tell you're not from here,"
My uncle says while we're
Sitting in my grandmother's living room.

I ask him to elaborate.
All he says is
"I can just tell."
I have el otro lado
Written all over me.

But on the other side,
I have Mexico written
All over me.

I don't get to choose.
The other question is easier.

A woman on the corner,
Across from the only church in town
Decides I am a stranger.
“¿De quién eres?”

I know this question is coming,
I can answer it without hesitation.

It is all I can do to get away
Before she dives into a story
About what my dad and his siblings
Were like when they were my age.

For one second I am from somewhere.
Even if that somewhere is a someone.
But then I have to choose again.

Which of my passports holds more weight?
Green or **blue**?

How can I refuse to give up
Either of my flags
When keeping them both
Makes me untrustworthy
On either side?

I find refuge in the
National identity of faith.

I will be sitting in a pew
On Sunday.
My primo won't,
But he will never
Leave the house
Without his escapulario.

Responses in Spanish
Come as naturally to me
As breathing.

English fights its way out
When I'm away from home.

But it's funny how Spanish
Becomes a universal language
When you're staring at a crucifix.
And the faith still protects me
In a town where the priest only
Visits once a year.

I am still understood
Even when I am an outsider.

When I was seventeen
I sat in my dad's car for hours
Because the music was too loud
And the town was too quiet
And the waves of people meeting me
For the first time were too overwhelming
And for the hundredth time that day
I could not breathe.

My cousin came to force me from the car
"Are you not Mexican?"
He is just like me.
The only home either of us know
Is the other side
The only difference is he grew up
Going to el rancho every weekend
And I was raised exclusively in the city.

But I climb out of the car
I always do.

The sound of el grupo is the sound of coming home
But I'll stand on the sidelines and watch you dance.

Yes, I am Mexican.
Purepecha blood runs through my veins

Durango becomes home
For two weeks in December
And Michoacan holds my mother's memories
Memories that I have inherited.



EDHEM PLANINCIC

Dominican University

Edhem Planincic is a sophomore at Dominican University and is majoring in Biology and Secondary Education. He was born in Elmhurst, IL, but he has spent the majority of his life living in Addison, IL. He is a first-generation Bosnian-American who strives to promote change in the classroom and to open up more students in STEM education. Aside from his passion for STEM education, he has various other hobbies, such as cooking, drawing, reading, and exploring outside. One day, he hopes to have his own classroom where he can make a difference for students and promote the next generation of critical science thinkers.

"What We Left Behind" was created during my Introduction to Theology class. It focuses on the idea of a Bosniak's migration journey to the United States because of being forced out of their home due to war during the breakup of Yugoslavia. The image of the Statue of Liberty with the fire being the Bosnian flag, represents the idea of the United States being a safe refuge for a Bosniak who lost quite literally everything. Many Bosniaks journeyed to the United States with nothing and eventually made themselves into something. Bosniaks journeyed and began to form large communities primarily in Chicago and Saint Louis. The Statue's torch, being the Bosnian flag, is a symbolic representation of Bosniaks following the way to the United States to obtain a better life. On the other side of the image is the Bosnian parliament being burned down during the Siege of Sarajevo during the war. The building is illuminated in the American flag, representing where many Bosniak's will be forced to go because their homeland was being destroyed. The center features a butterfly with one wing in the American flag, while the other is in the Bosnian flag. This is symbolic of the many Bosnian-Americans emerging after the war, holding both ties to the United States and Bosnia itself.



SOURCE: Edhem Planincic, *What We Left Behind*, 2024



SAHR KARIMU

Saint Joseph's University

Hello, I am Sahr Karimu, a first-generation Sierra Leonean who was raised in the United States. I attend Saint Joseph's University, a college just outside of Philadelphia, where I study Art & English. My faith has uprooted the values in my life. It led me to pursue my current course of study and has inspired me to change my character in my pursuit of Christ. In my relationship with Jesus Christ, I have come to know that His Love and Light can heal even the deepest wounds.

"Sweet for the Soul" is a poem that discusses the wound of economic divide that runs through the American heart. The work speaks of two related locations that are separated by a dividing street, City Line Avenue. This scene is a picture of the economic chasms between people present both throughout American history and seen so viscerally in contemporary times. The two neighborhoods are a stone's throw away from each other, but economically worlds apart. Lower Merion stands as one of Pennsylvania's wealthiest suburbs, while Philadelphia, like many urban environments, faces several pressing socioeconomic issues it must overcome. The effects of this divide, especially on those with less equitable access to wealth, can bring despair, violence, drug abuse, and many other ills. But I believe that Jesus Christ, the Liberator and Great Physician, can mend the wounds of any who allow him into their hearts.



Sweet for the Soul

Lady of Freedom,
Here in your gilded streets,
Mere avenues separate worlds.
From atop the wings of a Hawk I look on:

A great line separates your beloved.
On one side, there lies

The Merioneth girl
Who sits beneath the red oaks.
She produces minds ready to become Bulldogs & Quakers & Lions & Tigers & Bears...
She is a child whom Trumbauer and Lloyd Wright adorned in grandiose splendor.

Across the avenue, your Father stands:

The Lover of Liberty,
The one from whom Brotherly affection flows over.
He is a land that has reared up giants.

It was he who gave us this: We the People.
It was he who gave us that musician's Favorite Things.

But in your Father's brilliance,
His heart bleeds, sickened with an illness of the spirit.
Men sleep on the concrete of his bloodied being.

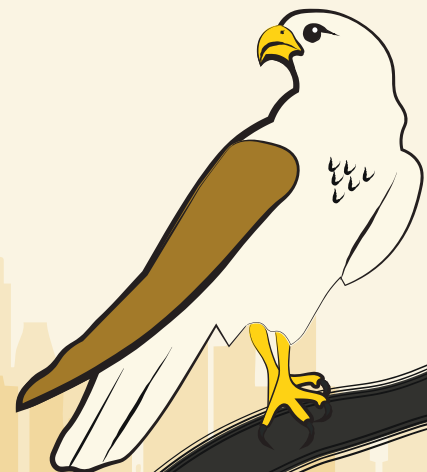
A man hears crude whisperings from passersby.
"Zombie," they say. "Fiend," they call him.
He sees neighbor killing neighbor, and brother killing brother.

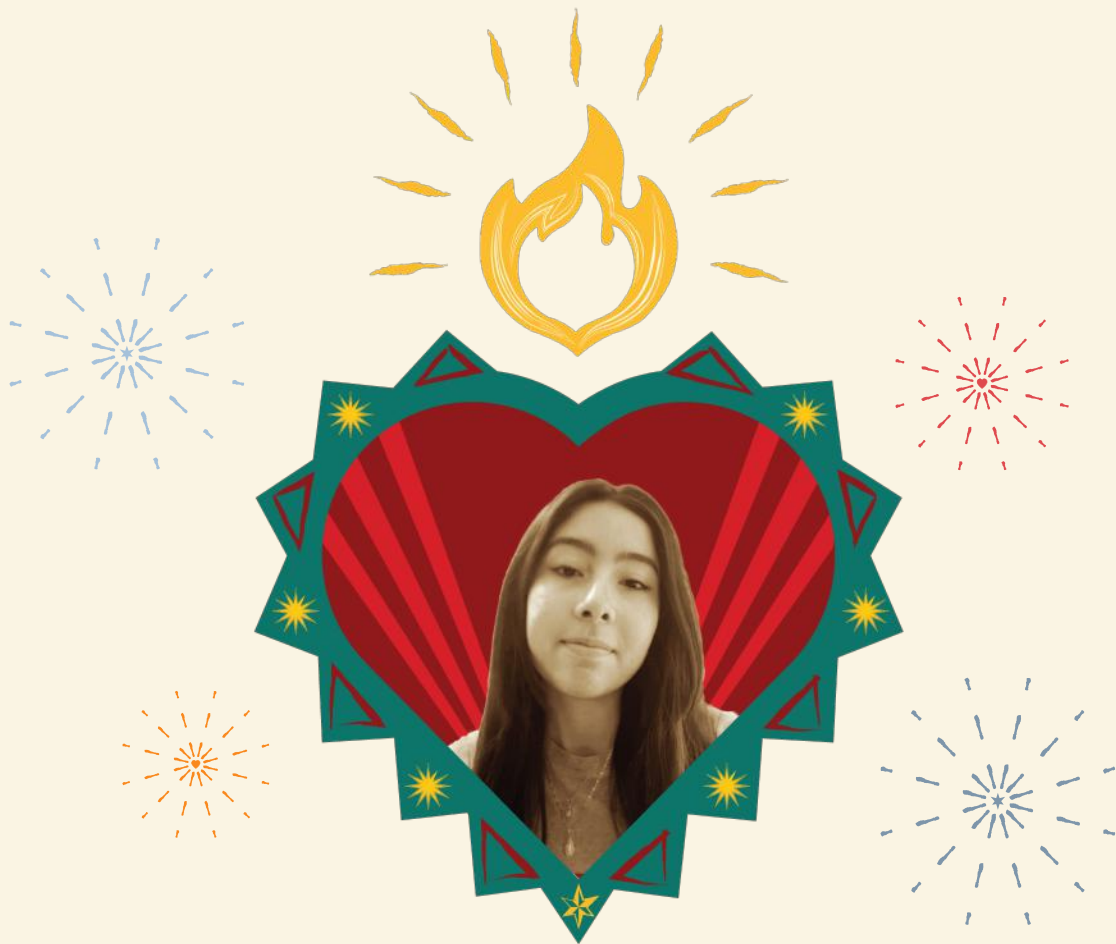
And in all this, the darkness seeks to overcome him.
But it cannot.

For in the sorrow and the sickness of this great city,
The Morning Star of Liberation comes with the Word of Life.
He comes with a healing voice.
He comes with an ointment for the heart.

Your Father is aching, Lady of Freedom.

But the Liberator stands at the door and knocks.





LAURA SOLIS

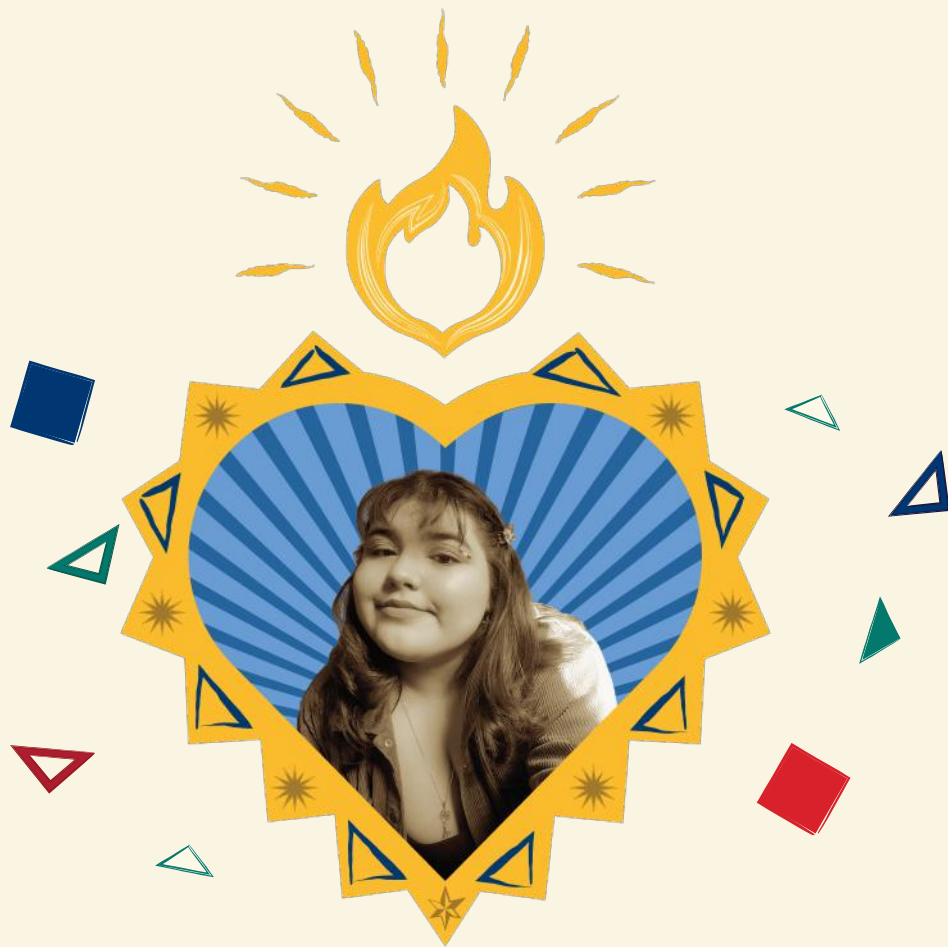
Dominican University

Laura Solis is a first-year student at Dominican University, majoring in pre-nursing. Her drive for personal growth and academic success fuels her aspiration to become a reliable resource to others. Outside of school, she holds a strong passion for art and enjoys working with various mediums such as watercolors, oil pastels, and colored pencils to express her thoughts and creativity. She was raised in a Mexican Catholic household where her family is the source of her strength and inspiration. Especially as the youngest of four sisters, they have played a significant role in shaping her aspirations in the healthcare field. Her artwork is often inspired by stories shared by extended family members and their lived experiences. She hopes her art serves as a reminder that no one is truly alone and that within her art, others can find reflections of their own journey and a comforting sense of connection.

"Chasing The American Dream" represents the struggle Mexican immigrants face in pursuit of "The American Dream." In the top left, Jesus wears a crown of thorns symbolizing suffering as he looks down. Depicted below are people crossing the border as well as crosses with white doves representing those who did not make it. This emphasizes the risks people take for the chance of a better life. The left side represents Mexico, and the right side represents America. People cheering on the right side reflect the idea of a "better" life in the United States. La Frontera is spray-painted on the border wall, serving as sharp contrast against the old English font on the United States side displaying the words "The Land of the Free." Lastly, I drew hands holding the Eucharist and purposefully wrote a prayer on Jesus' sleeves, representing faith and hope. This symbolizes how many people pray for safety and guidance as they seek better opportunities for themselves and their families.



SOURCE: Laura Solis, *Chasing The American Dream*, 2024



ANDREA ESTRADA

Dominican University

Andrea Estrada is a first-generation college student pursuing a bachelor's degree in Natural Science, with a concentration in Health and a minor in Biology, at Dominican University. A proud Mexican-American Latina and Chicana from Little Village—one of Chicago's most vibrant Latino neighborhoods—Andrea draws deep inspiration from her community's resilience. Her lived experiences with discrimination and inequity have shaped her passion for healthcare and fueled her drive to make a meaningful impact on underserved communities. As a future healthcare professional, Andrea is committed to ensuring that quality services are accessible to everyone, regardless of insurance status or financial limitations. Through her work in community clinics, she has witnessed how compassionate, culturally competent care allows patients to feel heard, valued, and understood. Andrea's path reflects a profound commitment to service and justice. Through both academic and professional pursuits, she strives to dismantle barriers and uplift those too often overlooked in the healthcare system.

"Entonces, ¿Qué Eres?" explores the experience of being caught between two cultures and not being fully accepted by either. For many of us who navigate multicultural lives, there's a constant push and pull—we speak the languages, follow the traditions, and honor our roots, yet we're often told we don't fully belong to either side. We're expected to choose one culture to identify with, but even then, we're often still seen as outsiders—unwelcome and out of place. You would think that being bilingual, navigating both Mexican and American cultures, and honoring our roots would secure us a place in each community. But instead, it can leave us feeling disconnected—from others and from ourselves—struggling to hold on to a sense of identity and home. Through this poem, I want to express the pain of not belonging, of losing a home, and eventually creating a new identity—an identity that makes space for others who feel lost, and offers a sense of belonging and home, built on our own terms.

Entonces, ¿Qué Eres?

Although I listen to the same songs
In English and en español,
Apparently, I am no different
than someone indulging in another's
culture.

I'm told que soy muy blanca,
And not Mexican enough
to handle spicy food.
However, I am not American enough
based on my food preferences.

Or that my accent is "too strong,"
Even when I am told there is no accent at all.

I struggled to learn English,
As I struggled to write in Spanish.
Yet I am not from here or there,
And sometimes I don't know
if I'm even in between.

I stand before two worlds,
Trying to navigate both without losing
myself.
They say my identity is fractured,
But they don't understand the weight of the
pieces,
The tug of my abuela's stories of struggle in
my heart
And the American dream,
I'm told to attain after studying.

They both tell me, "You don't belong here,"
"Go back to where you came from,"
But where is that?

I'm neither rooted in my beautiful Mexico
Nor embraced by the land that raised me.
The land of the "free."

I learned to smile at every insult, to nod,
To blend in, to adapt,
But deep within I yearn to yell,
To cry out that I am both,
And neither,
And all of it at once.

Dios santo,
Dame paciencia y fe.
For this burden is too heavy to bear.

All I hear them say is,
"Tú no eres Mexicana," se burlan
"You're not American," they say
condescendingly.
Then, what am I?

A soul torn between cultures,
A spirit caught in an empty space
With nowhere to go,
and no place to call home.
I speak in a language of
whispers and mumbles,
Between the lines of what I am
and what they perceive of me.

But I'll sculpt my own home in this void,
Even if it doesn't fit their mold of standards.
I'll stand strong against the wind as a bridge
Entre dos fronteras,
Y quizás, just maybe,
That will be enough to make me real

BIENVENIDOS A LITTLE VILLAGE

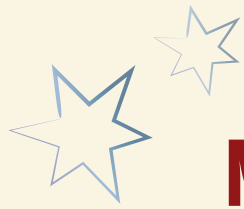


ALLISON PEA

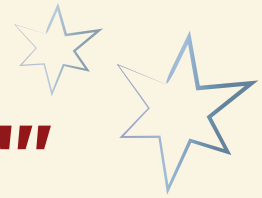
Dominican University

Allison Pea is a junior at Dominican University in River Forest, Illinois. She majors in fashion merchandising with a minor in Italian. Most recently, she worked as a project manager and writer for the NASA Minds STARS Research team. In her free time, she likes to sew, watch old movies, and spend time with her dog, Mongo. In the future, she hopes to become a public relations manager for the Chicago Blackhawks or a journalist at *Vogue Magazine*.

"My Mom is...Different" details my experience growing up with a disabled mother. I never knew my mom was "different." She's my mom. It wasn't until I got older that it became clear to me that the world didn't see her the same way I did. I noticed outward expressions of hatred towards my mom for simply existing. For this reason, I have always been protective of my mom in the way parents are protective of their children. I wrote this piece to bring awareness to the issue of prejudice towards disabled people. This essay allows the reader to walk in the shoes of someone who has experienced the issue secondhand.



My Mom is...!Different'"



When I was in kindergarten, another girl leaned over to me and said, “Why does your mom walk like that?” As I watched my mother turn and walk away, I realized that I had no idea what she was talking about. I did not know it then, but my mom had a rare form of muscular dystrophy, a disease that causes loss of muscle mass and weakness.

My mother is not in a wheelchair. She does not have forearm crutches. She does not have an obvious disability, but she is disabled. My mom has always needed me to help her get up on curbs or get out of chairs. She used to tell me, “I know this is embarrassing,” and I never understood what she meant. I guess at the age of seven, I did not understand why it would have been “embarrassing.”

As I got older, I started to notice the prejudice people have towards disabled people. I started to become aware of the fact that people would stare at my mom, when she would ask me for help, they would deny her handicapped assistance, and the worst was when someone would say something.

The worst time I can remember was when my whole family was going to breakfast. We had just arrived at the restaurant and gotten out of the car when an older woman walked up to us and complained, “Those parking spots are for handicapped people.” My mom, getting out her cane, replied, “I am handicapped.” I had never heard my mom say those words out loud before. I looked at the woman who, instead of backing off, said, “You don’t look handicapped.” I lost control. My dad had to rush me inside to prevent me from screaming at the woman. She was just so ignorant. Then I realized, that’s just it; she *is ignorant*.

It should not have bothered me since I was able to see it so bluntly, but it did because it hurt the one person I care the most about, my mom. It embarrassed her, and suddenly, I realized that my whole life, when she told me, “I know this is embarrassing,” she was speaking from experience.

Ever since then, I have looked at my mom differently, not because she is handicapped, but because she is strong. She has faced prejudice her whole life, and most of the time, people do not even realize they are doing it. I have seen people refuse to give her handicapped assistance at the airport. I have seen doctors ask her questions like, “How do you get around at home?”

I have seen people treat my mom like gum on their shoes my whole life. Honestly, it infuriates me. As long as she is alive, I will have to watch people be mean to her. I hate thinking about it because every time I do, I just become so angry.

My mom’s entire side of the family is handicapped. I think I see handicapped people differently because it’s what I know. Growing up with a handicapped mom is challenging, not because of her physical struggles, but because of the ignorance and prejudice that exists within our society. At this point, I wonder if it would be better if people would just mind their business. If something isn’t affecting you at all, then do not comment on it. Chances are, you will be incorrect regarding the circumstances of the situation, speak out of turn, make everyone involved uncomfortable, and create lifelong memories for the people that you felt the need to criticize. **What is a fleeting moment for one person can become a core memory for another.** A core memory that reminds them of how ignorant and prejudiced the world can truly be against them.





MELANIE CANALES

Dominican University

Melanie Canales is a fourth-year student at Dominican University, majoring in graphic design. A first-generation Honduran Mexican American. She thrives on being a jack of all trades and has a wide variety of hobbies and skillsets. From photography to public speaking, she continues to try new things everyday. Currently on the path to becoming a lawyer in the near future, she is definitively shaped by previous experiences as a survivor. She hopes her artwork and designs leave a lasting impression to those who have empathized and similarly felt the same internal struggles.

This piece is a representation of a multicultural divide from within, with both eyes demonstrating how two cultures collide to make up one person. **"Mi Identidad Polifacética"** is a self-portrait taking the meaning of "a picture tells a thousand words" to a new level for the artist. The eye paint symbolizes the Mexican and Honduran flags and represents her "in-betweenness" of identities. Especially being a first-generation daughter, where the preconceived notions of success within her family result in nothing but pressure. To evoke this, she included a large monarch butterfly over her mouth, limiting her freedom of speech. Yet, the monarch symbolizes new hope for herself and the immigrant community. Behind the self-portrait are multiple monarch butterflies of different shapes and sizes to honor the souls of those who have migrated and contributed to shared experience. Despite her daily struggles facing adversity, she remains resilient and will take advantage of any opportunity that comes her way.



SOURCE: Melanie Canales, *Mujer Polifacética*, 2025



STEPHANIE VASQUEZ

University of Portland

Stephanie Vasquez is a student at the University of Portland who uses she/her/ella pronouns and is the first-generation daughter of Guatemalan immigrants. She is double majoring in political science and economics with a minor in Spanish. Stephanie previously served as Vice President of her university's student government, where she worked to elevate student voices and advocate for equity on campus. This upcoming school year, she will teach English in Bulgaria through the Fulbright Program. After completing her grant, Stephanie plans to attend law school to continue advocating for the underrepresented communities that have shaped her perspective and purpose.

"**Temperaturas**" is about the realization that my journey is an extension of my mother's—a continuation of the path she began long before I was born. Her story starts in the tierra caliente of El Semillero, Guatemala, where warmth wasn't just physical—it meant home, community, and familiarity. Her migration to the United States was driven by hope for a better future for the generations to come. My story begins with her, but unfolds in a different climate. Growing up in the cold, rainy state of Oregon, I've come to associate my surroundings with distance and unfamiliarity. What once felt warm and known has slowly faded into something I watch from afar. My piece explores the contrast between my mother's warmth and my own sense of coldness—not in feeling, but in cultural orientation. While her warmth represents grounding and origin, my coldness reflects the process of assimilation and navigating the unknown. "**Temperatures**" invites reflection on inherited dreams, cultural shifts, and the emotional temperatures that define the immigrant experience. It is both a tribute and a continuation. A recognition that I am here because she walked north first.

Temperaturas

Cuando llego a la casa de mis padres, siempre está muy caliente. ¡Cómo me fastidia!
En ningún cuarto dentro de la casa que antes conocía hay un lugar donde me sienta
cómoda. Paso el día y la noche esperando que algo cambie

pero todavía tengo calor.

Estamos cenando y ya no lo aguanto más.
Cuando el calor parece estar ganando, digo:

“Está muy caliente en esta casa”

Pasan unos segundos en los que nadie me dice nada.

Al fin mi mamá contesta,

“Es porque ya te acostumbraste a lo frío”

Y ella tiene razón.

Comienza a explicar que en algún momento yo era como ella, no aguantaba el frío,
pero las cosas cambiaron.

Crecí, me fui de la casa y me acostumbré a lo desconocido del norte.

Me acostumbré al frío.



Temperatures



When I get to my parents' house, it's always very hot. It really annoys me!
There isn't a single room in the house I once knew where I can feel comfortable.

I spend day and night waiting for something to change,

but I'm still hot.

We are having dinner and I can't stand it anymore.

When the heat seems to be winning, I say:

“It's so hot in this house.”

A few seconds go by, and no one says anything to me.

Finally, my mother answers,

“It's because you've gotten used to the cold.”

And she's right.

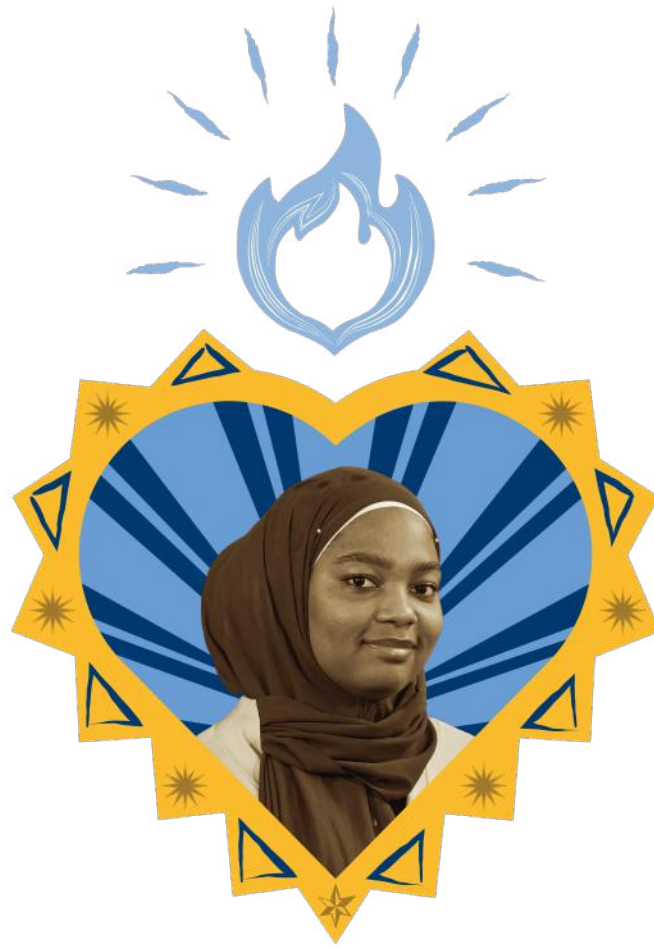
She begins to explain that, at some point, I was like her—I couldn't stand the cold.

But things have changed.

I grew up, left home, and got used to the unknown of the North.

I got used to the cold.





Marwa Abdullah

Dominican University

Marwa Abdullah is a senior at Dominican University currently double majoring in History with a concentration in the Humanities & Psychology. As an African American Muslim, her work is drawn from her rich cultural and spiritual background, exploring the intersections of identity, race, and faith. As the 2025-2026 St. Catherine Award recipient for her outstanding service to the community and high academic achievement, Marwa's academic work is deeply informed by both her personal experiences and commitment to social advocacy—with a focus on the radical healing and liberation of marginalized communities—working to empower others and cultivate spaces for reflection. Her journey is rooted in her desire to inspire others to challenge societal norms, embrace spiritual wisdom, and find strength in identity.

The Interconnectedness of the Secular World and Akhirah

Implications for the Practice of Social Change

By Marwa Abdullah

Introduction

Renowned philosopher Martin Buber once posited, “the world is far more mystical and spiritually charged than we might think. The physical world has the spiritual ground, and the spiritual life involves learning how to negotiate the physical and spiritual at the same time.”¹ His words suggest that our connection to the divine can be found in our everyday interactions, emphasizing the importance of recognizing the spiritual dimension present in our secular lives. Additionally, he also implies that part of truly embracing and understanding our spiritual life involves learning how to navigate physical aspects of our existence. It's about finding harmony and balance between spiritual and physical realms. Drawing inspiration from this proposed notion, this paper examines the interconnected relationship between the secular and spiritual worlds, exploring the ways in which both can be navigated to foster meaningful social change.²

When the terms “Spiritual” and “Secular” are often found in proximity to another, an almost condemning dynamic emerges, one in which they're presented as two distinct entities, uninterchangeable, and permanently destined to be opponents. When the secular world is viewed in the context of the religious/spiritual one, it's labeled as superficial, leisure-focused, and filled with political chaos that needs healing. On the other hand, the religious/spiritual world is seen as imposing on the beliefs of our diverse society, unverifiable, and illusory, leading to conflicts with the secular world. However, there are significant issues with both perspectives, the largest being a negation of the profound and reciprocal influence these two spheres hold over one another.

In the depths of how we comprehend our human existence, religion and politics have served as the bedrock to

¹Author's Note: This draws on Peter Feldmeier's discussion of Martin Buber's thought, where he notes that “the world is far more mystical and spiritually charged than we might think. The physical world has the spiritual ground, and the spiritual life involves learning how to negotiate the physical and spiritual at the same time.” See Peter Feldmeier, *Wisdom from the World's Religions: A Guide to Basic Human Questions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2022), chap. 4; Feldmeier here paraphrases Martin Buber's *I and Thou* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937).

² Author's Note: This paper was first presented at Dominican University's *Caritas Veritas* Symposium, August 2023.

our world-building and the formulation of our social realities, functioning as means for establishing structure and cultivating our cultural identity. Simultaneously, they hold within them the potential and aspiration for societal progress, offering a glimmer of hope for a brighter and more equitable future. So why, given their impact, is there so much friction between the two? The answer may be found in the lack of willingness to work together towards shared purposes that both seem to strive for. Rather than using each other as a means to reinforce, help, and learn from each other, they draw critiques in their enforcement and creation of norms in the limitations and presumptions each might hold. I argue that this tension between these realms arises not from inherent opposition but from the failure to recognize their shared potential. Understanding and navigating this interconnection, therefore, becomes essential to realizing genuine social transformation.

Relationship

For example, the religious/spiritual world largely focuses on the Infinite reality, an immaterial reality pertaining to our existence and our capacity to respond and be ultimately concerned, i.e., have a primary concern put above all others. The infinite realm has no limitations and cannot be constrained; it's something we can never fully comprehend. For the most part, the Infinite reality is wherein our existential reasoning or meaning and value is produced. The infinite reality cannot answer questions of concrete concerns, and so it is through faith and the weight of our ultimate concern in which we might reach beyond ourselves that the spiritual/religious world is developed. As far as any of us non-theologians are concerned, the infinite reality doesn't seem to have anything to do with our physical world. Therefore, what use is it to politics and why should a voice of immateriality be given in our world of finiteness? The best answer to this would be that infinite reality offers us faith. It's important to recognize that faith doesn't have to be expressed with religious symbols or within a religious community to be recognized as such. As mentioned above, faith is what provides us with meaning, direction, and creativity in our lives. That is, what we give value to and care about that might encapsulate our ultimate concern in life. While I might identify my faith and ultimate concern as my belief in Allah and fulfilling my duties as a Muslim, one might just as much take theirs as Caritas et Veritas, love and truth, and how they might fulfill it. Faith is an important aspect because without it, there would be no passion, desire to reach goals, or carry out our purpose. From its perspective, we're able to explore deeper meaning and significance within the finite. By contemplating existential questions, we can gain insights into our values, beliefs, and personal experiences.³

³ Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 1–2.

The finite realm is a bit different. It's approachable to our senses and has a clear beginning and end—birth and death. We can experiment, create, possess, and actively discover and learn of its limitations. The finite is comprehensible and fuels our ability to technically reason or examine the facts and determine the truth from falsehood; it's a process of objectivity and logic. One might wonder to themselves; humans are temporary, and the finite is largely comprehensible. What might that have to do with the infinite? Why should a voice of materiality and logic be allowed in our world of infiniteness and incomprehensibility? A reason might be technical reasoning, operating on logic, is vital for one's and practice of their ultimate concern, as it aids in critically examining and evaluating different perspectives, beliefs, and values related to such concerns. This does not mean one should dominate and fuel ultimate concern solely logic, as such are often subjective. Rather, balancing our reasoning with emotional, spiritual, and intuitive elements might contribute more holistically to the understanding of what—or who—we place our faith in.

Understanding and pursuing such a relationship through the reinforcement of said viewpoints that each world-building tool has to offer is essential to our diverse society as it empowers them at a personal level, urging a person to pursue their individual truths and fulfill their purpose through participating in the world around them. How might we live our lives if we all authentically believed that the secular isn't directly separate from the spiritual? Rather than viewing ourselves as just being in this world, that we are a part of it and actively participating in it? In the case of the natural world, maybe we'd be more compassionate in how we act towards it, that we conceptualize that in the same way that our actions affect others, those subsequent others will affect us.

And this is a notion projected across faiths, be it religious or not, isn't it? That one should execute their spiritual purpose through the lens of the world around them? The Golden Rule, "Honor thy neighbor," be kind—be it repairing divine shards, enlightenment, reincarnation, or Paradise, all can most effectively be achieved through interaction with our secular world. Through an awareness of what we as individuals can put forth to promote change and nurture the world we share with others; we embody the unity of these realms. So, with the understanding that both the secular and spiritual realms influence each other significantly and can work towards the same goal, what implications does this create for how we confront and enact social change?⁴

⁴ Author's note: This lays the framework toward a spiritually-centered dialogue in an integrated context of religious pluralism, interfaith work, and ideas of existential purpose. See Eboo Patel, "Building Religious Pluralism," conference call, Council on Foreign Relations Religion & Foreign Policy series, April 12, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/conference-calls/building-religious-pluralism>.

Religion and Politics

One of the largest reasons why our secular society is so reluctant towards the idea of religious faith working in the realm of politics derives from the fear of history repeating itself. It'd be immorally unjust to promote the use of spiritual/religious ideals in politics without acknowledging religion's past contradictory role in social change. In the context of the United States, the Christian faith has served as "a force of repression and exclusion" and oppression, utilizing "the scripture to justify the regulation" of marginalized and disproportionate communities.⁵ While religion's past role in politics cannot be excused, it is important to recognize that religion has also played a significant role in shaping politics in positive, constructive ways since the establishment of the United States. Both fundamentalist and non-fundamentalist forms of religion have been utilized to promote inclusivity and work towards social justice.

Existential perspectives bring a deeper understanding of human experience and help understand the diverse needs and perspectives of the population, working to create a more just and inclusive society, with the hopes of achieving our ultimate concern. In the Quran, Allah relays to Prophet Muhammad (SAW), "We have surely created the human being in the finest make and the best proportions (with enormous capabilities for an all-round advancement through the process of evolution (Quran, 95:04))."⁶ This verse highlights the Islamic belief that every human being is created in the finest form and with immense potential—a concept that when put into secular context, is an idea that our technical reasoning consistently substantiates. It emphasizes that human beings have the capability to evolve and advance in various walks of life. The verse reflects the understanding that religion can provide a framework for recognizing and nurturing the capabilities of individuals, ultimately contributing to the advancement of society. Our humane yearning for more is rooted in an impulse to seek out memorable and meaningful experiences—to discover things about the world and ourselves—to live, rather than just exist. Feldmeier observes that "while humans are born pure," they are not outside the consequences of our history; so, "we will always have to deal with the compromised humanity and be affected by it."⁷

⁵ Leticia Villareal Sosa, Silvia Diaz, and Rosalba Hernandez, "Accompaniment in a Mexican Immigrant Community: Conceptualization and Identification of Biopsychosocial Outcomes," *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought* 38, no. 1 (2019): 23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15426432.2018.1533440>.

⁶ The Qur'an, 95:4.

⁷ Peter Feldmeier, *Wisdom from the World's Religions: A Guide to Basic Human Questions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2022), 26.

In this same sense, those of religious faith may be reluctant towards the idea of secularity in politics due to concerns about the potential erosion or dismissal of religious values, fearing marginalization or exclusion of religious perspectives. Many view religion as an integral part of their identity and believe that it should have a role in shaping politics. Is there room for this group of people in our increasingly secular world? The answer is, of course, yes. In fact, it is because of the fact that we find our world leaning scales more towards secularity that these individuals play a necessary role in how meaningful change is conducted. By offering a deeper understanding of religious and cultural heritage, they can inform policies and initiatives related to diversity, inclusion, and social justice. The contributions can help bridge the gap between different communities and foster a more harmonious society.

Example #1

Accompaniment, based on the theology of liberation⁸, is a social change model of community development in which organizations work directly with and alongside marginalized communities and particular individuals within them, offering support and solidarity through active listening and understanding their experiences, fostering mutual respect. They work together to address issues at a systematic level and promote inclusivity and justice. Sinsinawa Sister, Rosemarie Riley goes to explain, "More than what we're doing, it's about how we relate to the community... how do we relate to those who come to us with a particular service but also bring us something that we don't have?"⁹

Taller de Jose (TDJ) is a pastoral ministry organization located in the Little Village community of Chicago that predominantly serves the Latinx community by "addressing barriers to accessing services due to language, immigration status, discrimination, lack of access to transportation, and lack of familiarity with U.S. cultural norms and expectations."¹⁰ With ministry work as its basis, TDJ provides resources with a disciplinary knowledge of social work and public health, thus allowing them to aid clients in obtaining access and navigating

⁸ Originating in Latin America during the Mid-1950s, Liberation theology is a social and political movement within the church that utilizes doctrine and gospel to interpret them through the lived experiences of oppressed people. Kira Dault, "What is liberation theology?" *U.S. Catholic*, October 14, 2014, <https://uscatholic.org/articles/201410/what-is-liberation-theology/>

⁹ Sister Rosemarie Riley, "Mutual Relationships: The Heart of Ministry and Dominican Life," YouTube video, 14:52, posted by Sinsinawa Dominicans, September 14, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oyqv6ETjCU>

¹⁰ Taller de José, "About Us," <https://tallerdejose.org/about-us/>

a variety of domains: health, legal, education, and social service, offering a space to feel heard and supported. According to Villareal-Sosa, despite Latinxs increasingly making up a large part of our population, "they are considered the new underclass due to their disproportionate rates of poverty and undocumented immigration status" and in an anti-immigrant climate, this places "Latinxs at higher risk for experiencing social and psychological stress such as hunger, homelessness, mental distress" and limited access to services to treat or offer help.¹¹ TDJ's goal is to combat these barriers through connecting community individuals to services or assisting them while navigating these systems. TDJ fulfills their work of pastoral ministry and addressing community needs and advocacy through the accompaniment model by navigating the spiritual and secular relationship and with their knowledge and experience in both realms, using them to produce opportunities and informing of inclusion and social justice. Sosa notes that it has been faith-based activists of all religious backgrounds who have been consistently working to protect and promote the rights and dignity of immigrants, especially given that the United States is considered the most religious postindustrial nation with deeply religious immigrant groups. This advocacy provides inclusion, complex understanding of families, and promoting resilience among immigrant groups. By emphasizing empathy, solidarity, and walking alongside marginalized communities, Taller de Jose contributes to a more compassionate and inclusive approach to addressing societal challenges through the framework of both faith and secular concerns.

Example #2

In Islam, there's well-known hadith in which the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) says, "Be in this world as if you were a stranger or traveler along a path" (Bukhari: 6416).¹² This hadith calls us towards not forming lingering attachments. That just as a traveler who does not remain in one place for long and is striving to reach their destination, we should approach life in the same manner. Our souls were not born on this plane, and they are forever longing to return to their "home" in the Akhirah; thus, we must support our souls in reaching that destination. Many mistake this hadith for being a statement to "Keep your head down and only fulfill the spiritual. Don't have any worldly aspirations, your one purpose is to connect with Allah."¹³

¹¹ Leticia Villareal Sosa, Silvia Diaz, and Rosalba Hernandez, "Accompaniment in a Mexican Immigrant Community: Conceptualization and Identification of Biopsychosocial Outcomes," *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought* 38, no. 1 (2019): 22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15426432.2018.1533440>

¹² Sahih al-Bukhari, Hadith 6416.

¹³ Author's Note: This is a general example of internalized and lived-out interpretations of this hadith, not an actual quote.

Rather, this hadith is a reminder that because we are travelers passing through with the goal of reaching our destination that we have the obligation to both safeguard ourselves through the reminder that our time is borrowed and temporary and fulfill our duties to Allah and our community members. This Hadith is self-accountability to human action because as much as it means that we don't know the future, it also means to perform as much good as we can while we're still in the present. The Prophet (SAW) stressed for Muslims to utilize our time wisely and to do beneficial and charitable acts as often as we can. It is through this very notion that existential purpose (to return home after we're tested) and morality (do as much good as one can) come to interact.

Example #3

Another example in which the relationship between the worlds of faith and secularity work together to promote positive social change can be found in another organization, the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN). Founded by the Ismaili Muslim community as a response to discrimination faced during the colonial period, they started a network of schools, hospitals, economic development organizations, and cultural initiatives for themselves and later transformed them into institutions serving of the broader public.¹⁴ What makes the religious perspective essential is that it provides a faith-backed drive for change. Activism rarely yields the final success, as political struggle is finite and imperfect.

Yet with the infiniteness that faith and ultimate reason have to offer, personal passion is the ultimate measure of worth, providing activism with the consistent drive of working towards social change. For AKDN, their mission lies in direct connection with their ultimate concern. To “Realize the social conscience of Islam by serving as a bridge between the two realms of faith, deen and dunya... Islam envisions envisions a social order which is sustained by the expectation of each individual's morally just conduct towards others. The function of ethics is to foster self-realization through giving of oneself for the common good in response to God's benevolent majesty.”¹⁵ This is one of the core values in Islam that is widely recognized across sects as essential to practice.

¹⁴ Patel, Eboo. “Building Religious Pluralism.” Conference call presentation, Council on Foreign Relations Religion & Foreign Policy series, April 12, 2023. <https://www.cfr.org/conference-calls/building-religious-pluralism>

¹⁵ Aga Khan Development Network, “Mission & Values,” AKDN, <https://www.akdn.org/our-agency/mission-values>

In accordance with the five pillars of Islam, social outreach is a form of fulfilling spiritual expectations. Through the mandated practice of the five pillars, one fulfills a trio purpose: building spiritual character, pleasing Allah, and building moral character. We submit in prayer in what is seen as an intimate connection and praise God, pray for the state of our soul and others, find guidance in our actions, and confide in Him. I am obligated to fast not to shed a few pounds, but to acknowledge that my sufferings are miniscule compared to others and to strengthen my spiritual self so that it is not overpowered by my nafs, my ego. Funnily enough, when you're not spending it eating, there are more hours to actually do stuff. Through almsgiving one aids in fostering an environment for mercy and compassion towards others, in a profound reminder of the temporary enjoyments this world has to offer. Through each pillar, one can obtain a spiritual and secular understanding that allows us to nourish and build the soul. It is through this compassion and spiritual formation that one might obtain the ability to balance the spiritual and the physical. While the AKDN is governmentally and internationally funded, most resources are contributed by the Ismaili community themselves, as a means of completing the Islamic pillar and sunnah that call for community work: Zakaat (almsgiving) and Sadaqah (charity). Through the teaching of Prophet Muhammad of inclusiveness, mercy, balance, and care for others and the environment, AKDN associates seek to embody these ethics through their work, inviting the rest of the world to follow.

Example #4

This relationship also presents itself at an institutional level. Within higher education, liberal arts encourage students to explore questions of meaning, purpose, and society through a broad range of disciplines, connecting intellectual exploration with personal growth. When we use the term, we refer to theology, history, literature, language, philosophy, sociology, gender studies, music, etc. These are all subjects not particularly geared to a single profession, but to provide well rounded education in preparation for informed citizenship and the lifelong cultivation of wisdom, cater to the passion of learning and discovery key to the human experience while providing vital real-world skills and allowing one to think deeply about their concerns and what gives meaning.

At Dominican University, a substantial part of our requisites for graduating involves dipping into the world of liberal arts in hopes that we might cultivate a passion for learning and promote critical thinking applicable to our beliefs and the world around us. In some programs, students are required to complete Community-Based Learning (CBL) hours as a means of experimental learning through community engagement, allowing students to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings and foster a greater understanding of social issues. Through the expansiveness that CBL has to offer, students are provided with the opportunity to align their passions and

values with community engagement, fostering a deeper sense of purpose and fulfillment. Here, it is the spiritual world and the weight of our existential reasoning that empowers us to strive toward critical thinking and interacting to make meaningful impact within the physical & social world around us. Dominican University's very identity as a Catholic institution is living proof of this relationship.

Conclusion

One of the most significant transformative relationships is between what Buber called negotiating the physical and spiritual. To understand and negotiate the relationship between the spiritual and secular worlds is to elevate our insight, values, beliefs, and personal experiences. It involves utilizing our technical and existential reasoning—not just to critically examine the elements of our faith, but to fulfill purpose—while exploring deeper meaning and significance within the world around us. This allows us to invoke true change through our direction, skillset, questioning, and creativity without allowing one realm to dominate the other. We can indeed “Negotiate the physical and spiritual at the same time.”¹⁶

¹⁶ See Peter Feldmeier, *Wisdom from the World's Religions: A Guide to Basic Human Questions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2022), 46. Feldmeier here paraphrases Martin Buber's *I and Thou* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937).

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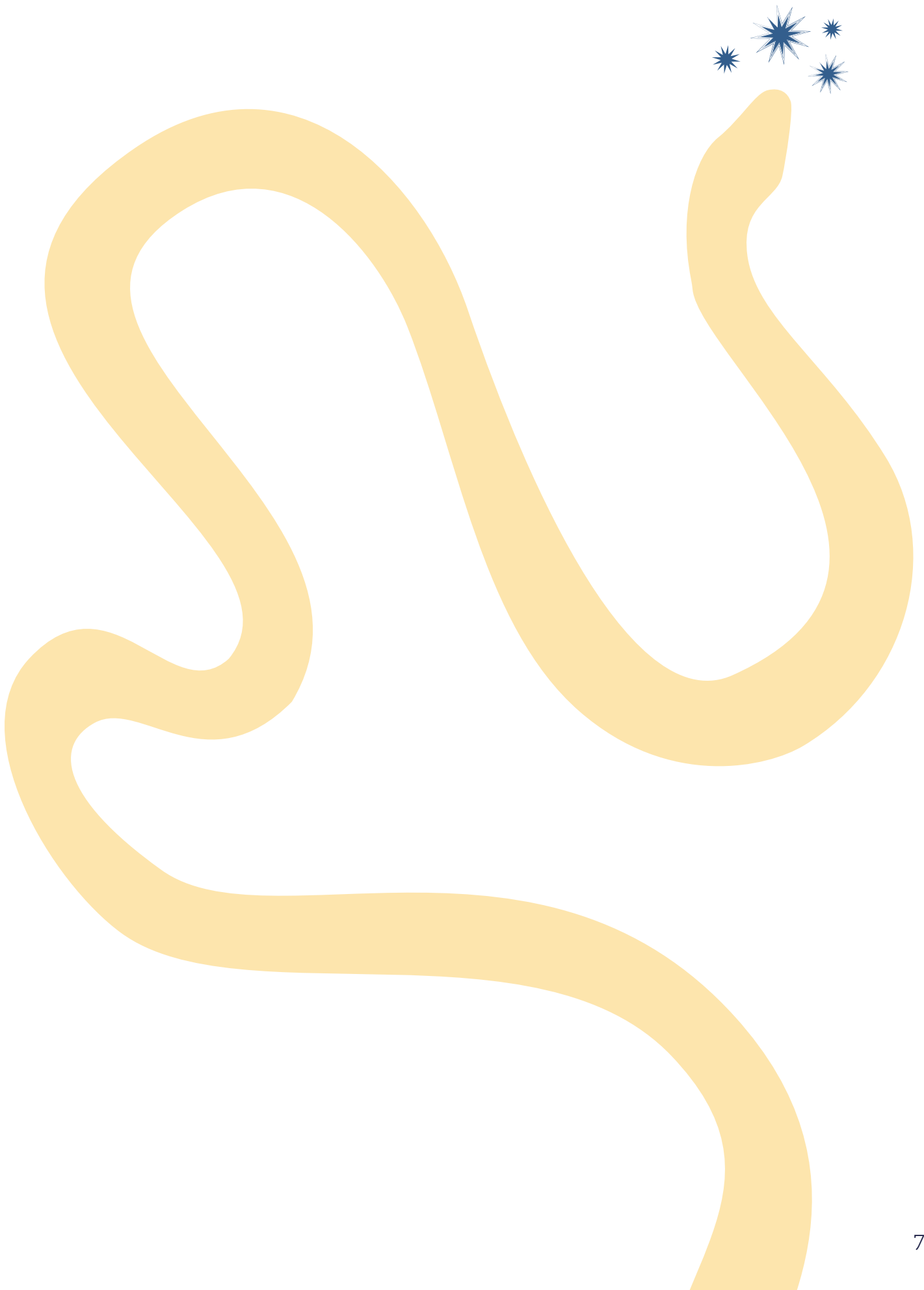
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