



(Unsplash/Channel 82)



by Michael Sean Winters

[View Author Profile](#)

Follow on Twitter at [@michaelswinters](#)

[**Join the Conversation**](#)

June 10, 2024

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

Francis Maier, longtime aide and amanuensis to former Archbishop of Philadelphia Charles Chaput, tells the reader of his new book, [*True Confessions: Voices of Faith from a Life in the Church*](#), that it is "a snapshot of the Catholic Church in the United States in the third decade of the 21st century: Who she is; where she is culturally; how she got there; and her prospects for the future, with a special emphasis on the lay vocation." What Maier does not tell you, but which becomes evident pretty quickly, is that the lens of his camera only takes in a small — I had almost written narrow — slice of the picture of that church in this moment.

The book consists of a series of interviews with bishops, clergy, laity who work in the church, parents, donors and new Americans. Maier starts with the bishops. Oddly, he doesn't include the questions he posed to the bishops, only their replies, and they are not identified by name. This anonymity soon becomes deeply problematic.

FRANCIS X. MAIER

TRUE
CONFESIONS

*Voices of Faith
from a Life
in the Church*

*With an introduction by
Emeritus Archbishop Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap.*

"A fascinating snapshot of the life of
the Catholic Church in the 21st century."

—Timothy Cardinal Dolan
Archbishop of New York

IGNATIUS

Cover to *True Confessions: Voices of Faith from a Life in the Church*

"But a pope should be the principle of unity in the Church, and instead Francis fosters ambiguity, which feeds division," one bishop tells Maier. "His distaste for the United States and its bishops is obvious and unwarranted. His manner is authoritarian. And it's revealing that not a single seminarian inspired by Francis has come to this diocese during his tenure. A Church under pressure needs something better than this." Authoritarian?

"Over the past decade, the Roman curia has focused much more effectively on serving the needs of the local bishop," says a third bishop. "I give Pope Francis credit for that; and likewise for his efforts at reforming the Holy See's finances. Those efforts are needed. But I think his manner of governance is actually quite ruthless. It weakens the authority of the papal office." Ruthless?

"Francis seems to have a coterie around him with an unhelpful ideology and agenda, and a very negative view of the United States," says another bishop. Coterie? Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley has been the North American member of the Council of Cardinals which advises the pope. Is he the person accused of possessing "an unhelpful ideology and agenda?" Or is it someone else?

There is a special kind of cowardice in these anonymous attacks on the person to whom these same bishops swore fidelity and obedience. Later this week, [when the bishops gather in Louisville for their spring meeting](#), will they look at each other and wonder, "Who said these things?" At a time when the bishops desperately need to find ways to come together, these anonymous attacks on the pope are inherently divisive.

The unfortunate comments from the bishops are not limited to their opposition to Pope Francis. Their political views are alarming too. "We have a gang of juiced-up Jacobins running society who really think the government should control everything," offers one bishop. Jacobins?

"I have good relations with our local authorities ... but when it comes to the federal government, I do believe that we're dealing with a totalitarian ambition now," offers another. "And it's going to force us to separate from the state more and more clearly." Totalitarian?



Francis Maier (Courtesy of Ethics and Public Policy Center)

A third echoes this exaggerated fear of the federal government: "I have a lot of anxiety regarding the federal government and how it will impact the Church in the future. ... The priests in my diocese have a very good grasp of what's happening. I have a youngish presbyterate, and the men tend to be warriors."

Such views are somewhere past Fox News but before QAnon. Many or most of the bishops' views about what ails the church or the sexual revolution are similarly coarse. These are the kind of bishops Maier got to know in his years at Chaput's side.

Maybe the problem is different. Maybe there is some self-selection going on from the bishops' side too. Only a certain kind of bishop would consent to do an interview with the man who [explained in The Wall Street Journal](#) that he had ghostwritten a letter to Francis for 13 conservative cardinals, trying to undermine the synod on the family. Maybe, too, that was why the bishops insisted on anonymity.

The interviews with other Catholics are similarly revealing. The section on families who have adopted children shows that Maier's interlocutors are capable of sketching a multidimensional picture when they discuss their family life, but when the conversation turns to the church, everything is kind of flat and rote. "I loved Popes John Paul and Benedict very much," says Julie McGurn. "But I'm uneasy about the hierarchy right now. I trust our Lord, and I trust our Lady. ... Maybe we were too reliant on the pope in the past to figure things out for us." I admit I can't imagine expecting the pope or anyone to "figure things out" for me as an adult. How truncated is McGurn's understanding of conscience?

Or, from a woman identified as "a wife, mother, and university professor," we get this nugget of agitprop: "We also need to rethink our social service efforts. Some of our large hospitals and universities, and even some of our charities, are basically Catholic 'zombies.' They have the shell of a Catholic entity, but their reward structures are tied to worldly objectives, not religious goals." I am not sure what others expect when they check into a Catholic hospital, but I am looking to get healthy, and if that counts as a "worldly objective," sign me up. Our charities must be rooted in our commitment to serve the poor, but the homeless shelter still needs to keep out the cold and provide a safe space whether it is run by a Catholic or a Jewish or a secular organization.



(Unsplash/Grant Whitty)

The problem is not only with the people Maier interviews. It is with the questions he poses. In the section with the bishops, he doesn't say what questions he posed, but you wonder if they were leading questions. In the next chapter, when he does provide the questions he posed to priests, the wonderment is confirmed. "It's hardwired into the American Catholic mentality that we need to assimilate; to prove that we belong in this (formerly) Protestant country," Maier begins one question. "So, the Church tends to cooperate fully with the government and support public institutions because, you know, we're good citizens. ... But how viable is that going forward in the current environment?" That goes beyond leading; it is loaded.

It wasn't really surprising that megadonor Tim Busch, [co-founder of the Napa Institute](#), tells Maier, "And we get involved; we don't give money as a rule to organizations where we're not on the board." Conversely, when asked what is the biggest mistake Catholic donors make, Michael Crofton, [CEO of the Philadelphia Trust Company](#), answers, "Narcissism. Anonymous gifts are really the best kind

because they're true gifts. So, we actually give away a lot of our money anonymously." To paraphrase the late, great Archbishop John Quinn, some give because they care about the mission of the church and others do not seek to give, they seek to buy.

Not everything that is said to Maier is cranky or kooky. There is no arguing with the observation made by a permanent deacon who is principal at a classical high school that "staff meetings can be their own form of insidious, soul-destroying penance." Or when [French educator Jean Duchesne](#) notes: "Today audio-visual communications are omnipresent. But the Christian life, the spiritual life, needs a slower rhythm; something that's more meditative and that only the printed word can feed." Or when a bishop tells Maier that "there's a bourgeois quality to a lot of Church life in this country, and it cripples us with blind spots. It deadens our faith's eschatological dimension." Or, in the chapter of "New Americans," Cristofer Pereyra, an immigrant from Peru and [founder of the Tepeyac Leadership Initiative](#), explains, "why do the newest Hispanic Catholic immigrants lose their faith just as fast? I asked [Los Angeles] Archbishop Jose Gomez — himself an immigrant from Mexico — that question. He said it's the prosperity. This country enables people to believe that they no longer need faith." Bingo!

Advertisement

Maier's book is useful insofar as it provides an insider's look at the conservative wing of the Catholic Church. There is more energy, more money and more organization than anything on the Catholic left, and not all that energy, money and organization is badly spent. The Lord Jesus can find a home in conservative hearts as well as liberal ones, and some of the initiatives and ideas you find in this book are fine. But they are also overshadowed by the animus towards Francis, the bizarre paranoid fears of the government, the hubris of Tim Busch and the idolatry of previous popes held by Julie McGurn.

Most worrisome is the uncritical way so many of the people interviewed embrace their own prejudices and identify them with the Catholic faith. If the Catholic faith does not challenge you to question your own presuppositions, the fault lies not with the riches of the church's intellectual tradition but with the human tendency to co-opt what we need to enshrine our ideas. That dynamic is on display throughout. The problems the church faces are always out there, with someone else. Fran Maier, Tim

Busch, the McGurns, and all those anonymous bishops do not endure agony in the garden. They sip chardonnay and pat themselves on the back.