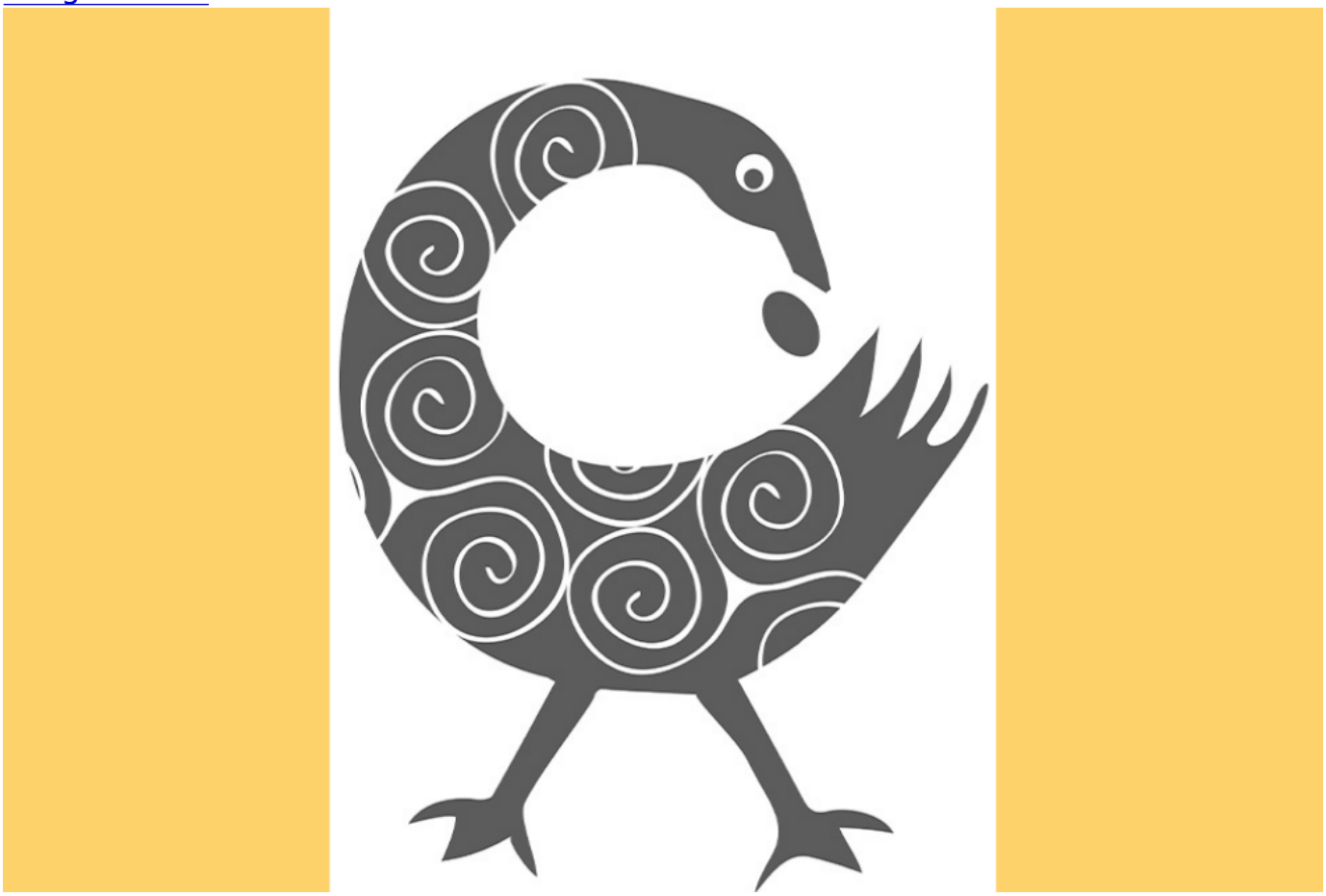
Columns
Religious Life



(Dreamstime/Tata Donets)



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July 27, 2021

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A few things converged to make it known to me that the focus for this reflection was to be the Sankofa bird. In the first in-person "Enter the Chaos" program since the pandemic one of the participants had earrings with the Sankofa bird on them. My cab driver to the airport came from Ghana, where the myth originates. And my Immaculate Heart of Mary congregation chose the Sankofa bird as the symbol for our 175th anniversary year, which we recently celebrated.

"Sankofa" is a Ghanaian word that translated means "Go back and fetch it." It also refers to a mythical bird whose feet are firmly planted forward while its head is turned backwards carrying a precious egg in its mouth.

It symbolizes the belief that the past serves as a guide for planning the future. It represents a people's quest for knowledge with the implication that the quest is based on critical examination, and intelligent and patient investigation.

The Ghanaian people believe that there must be movement and new learning as time passes. As this forward march proceeds, the knowledge of the past must never be forgotten.

That the Sankofa bird came to mind as we and the world continue to come out of the pandemic was no mere coincidence.

Our feet are poised to move forward. We are tired of being restricted, isolated, disrupted. We want to get back to doing things in person — visiting friends and family, going out, traveling, attending classes, meetings and events.

We are like the Sankofa bird with our feet planted firmly forward.

And we have learned too much to think there is a "normal" to which we want to return.

We need to ask ourselves: Do we have the courage to turn our head backwards?



Brass Ghanan gold weight in the form of a "sankofa" bird, representing the proverb of looking to the past to move forward, circa 1600-1850 (Brooklyn Museum)

The pandemic forced us to stop. We became aware of what we take for granted in our lives. We woke up to how differently we experienced the pandemic, depending on our economic status, our health, our gender and our race.

These disparities revealed causes that go beyond individual negligence or group stereotypes. They revealed political policies, legal decisions, economic choices and religious beliefs, that protected and entitled a specific group in our country.

For those in power, this privileged place often obscured the injustice and damage being done by such decisions. The pandemic has laid bare what has become normative over these last centuries. This past cannot be ignored or covered back over.

Can we learn from our past? Can we undertake a "quest for knowledge with the implication that the quest is based on critical examination, and intelligent and

patient investigation" like the Ghanaian people believe?

If yes, then what may be the "precious eggs" of our past that may have been forgotten?

As I turned my head backwards this is what I found as a few of our "precious eggs."

I saw the first three words of the preamble to the Constitution: "*We the People*." Although we know that when it was first implemented it did not include everyone living in what was becoming the United States, I wondered if there is a "precious egg" there for us today.

Can these words be lived into the future where all women and men — regardless of race, economic status, gender identity, physical and mental ability — have access to decision making and creation of norms for a truly pluralistic United States of America?

I saw our Black sisters and brothers who experienced slavery and its generational effects holding a "precious egg" for the future. It is *one of suffering, courage and hope*. In spite of decades of having their lives stolen and their bodies broken, they continued their journey to freedom believing that this is not what should be. They had the courage to follow hope calling them forward.

Can *we the people* find strength in such wisdom as we come to terms with what should never have been, as we together honestly access how the benefits accrued so unfairly over the years can be restored in some way as we move into the future?

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In looking backwards, I remembered the *concept of the common good* and it too became a "precious egg." This belief — so strong in Catholic social justice teaching — is in our political documents as well. But it seems we have forgotten how to live it.

Politically, it means a mutual commitment to the common goods which benefit society as a whole, and the value of political action as public service. In Christianity it is rooted in compassion — to do for others what you would have them do for you.

Can this concept of the common good be brought to bear on freeing ourselves from an individualistic consumer culture, so that as a nation we can provide essential

services ensuring that the basic human needs of all are satisfied as we move into the future?

Finally, I saw our ancestors, our Native American brothers and sisters holding another "precious egg." They understood that *all of life is connected*. They knew that humans survive only when the rest of creation survives and thrives. They have never forgotten that Earth is our home and we must care for it.

Can we find the wisdom to see that our future is bound up with the future of our planet? Can we gather the wisdom to see past our divisions and rediscover that we are all one creation as we move into the future?

During these months in which we are moving forward out of the pandemic, take time to turn your head backwards and see what other wisdom emerges from our past. What are those "precious eggs" that we will need if we are to learn from this moment and move forward together?

Let that wisdom sink in, and when we sit in contemplation simply let go — surrendering to the workings of Divine Love. We will then know where to go back and how to fetch the "precious eggs" for our future.