

**THE
CHURCH'S
MISSION
IN A
POLARIZED
WORLD**



Living the Feminist Dream

A Faithful Vision for Women
in the Church and the World

Kate Bryan

Keep at it, Riley!

Accompanying my Father
through Death into Life

Noreen Madden McInnes

Rehumanize

A Vision to Secure Human Rights for All

Aimee Murphy

**THE
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IN A
POLARIZED
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Aaron Wessman

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To those who are family to me: givers of life and love,
sustainers of vocation, inspiration for learning, founts of
wisdom and joy, and reasons for existence.



Contents

Series Preface.....	11
Introduction	13
My Concern.....	15
A Way Forward	16
Structure	17
The Scope of this Project	18
 Chapter One	
What is Polarization? Sorting, Homogenization, and Intensification.....	21
The Perfect Storm	21
Sorting.....	23
Geographical Sorting.....	24
Identity-Based Sorting: Politics.....	25
Identity Based Sorting: Race, Religion, and More.....	30
Online Sorting.....	34
Homogenization.....	38
Uniformity through Sorting.....	39
Homogeneity by Group Pressure.....	40
Uniformity by Decision	42
Interlude	45

Chapter Two

What is Polarization? Intensification 47

 “Things are Heating Up” 47

 The (Increasing) Importance of Group Belonging 49

 Group Belonging as Necessary for Survival:
 Psychological Perspectives 49

 Fragility and the Need for Group Belonging 53

 Original Fragility and the Need for Group Belonging 55

 Social Fragility and the Importance of Groups 57

 The Increasing Importance of Political Groups 63

 Political Identities as Mega-Identities 63

 Some Consequences of Mega-Identities 66

 The Rising Influence of Party Identity 69

 Increasingly Hostile Engagement
 Between Political Groups 73

 Wired for Inter-Group Conflict 73

 Politics as Us Versus Them 75

 Negative Polarization 77

 Intensifying Negativity 80

 Conclusion 82

Chapter Three

The Church and Polarization 84

 “*This is not who I am.*” 84

 The Church as One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic 86

 Unity within the Church 88

 The Witness of St. Paul 88

 A Struggle for Unity in the Church 89

 Unity with the World 95

 The Witness of St. Francis 95

 A Struggle for Unity with the World 98

 The Church and Holiness 104

 The Witness of St. Damien of Molokai 104

 A Struggle for Holiness in the Church 107

 The Church as ‘Catholic’ 111

 The Witness of St. Thomas Aquinas 111

A Struggle for a ‘Catholic’ Mind Today.....	113
Christians Growing in ‘Apostolicity’.....	116
The Witness of Dorothy Day.....	116
A Struggle to Be Formed by Faith Today.....	119
Conclusion.....	124

Chapter Four

Responding to the Storms of Polarization.....	125
“ <i>They are doing what?</i> ”.....	125
Some Preliminary Points.....	128
The Culture War: <i>In Their Own Words</i>	131
The Power of Metaphors.....	138
War as a Metaphor and the Demands of the Gospel.....	141
A Charitable Assessment of the War Metaphor.....	142
The War Metaphor and the ‘Other’.....	144
The War Metaphor and Christian Missionary Engagement.....	148
Recapitulation.....	152
The Metaphor for Christians to Live By: Jesus’ Incarnational Movement.....	154

Chapter Five

Discipleship as Crossing Over.....	159
Crossing into the Storm to Save Lives.....	159
The Cost of Missionary Discipleship.....	162
The Costs of Crossing Over.....	163
The Importance of Crossing Over: Some Preliminary Considerations.....	170
The Importance of Crossing Over: The Example of Jesus.....	174
The Son of God Crossing Over in the Incarnation.....	175
Jesus’ Crossing Over in His Public Ministry.....	180
Crossing Over in His Passion and Death.....	184
The Church’s Motivation.....	188

Chapter Six

Discipleship and Salvific Encounter 190

 “*How in the world did I get here?*”..... 190

Salvific Encounter as the Eye of the Storm..... 192

Salvific Encounters through a Ministry of Presence 194

Flexibility in the Storm 199

The Flexibility of Jesus in His Ministry 199

Flexibility and the Science of Polarization 201

Cultivating Flexibility 204

Curiosity in the Storm..... 207

The Curiosity of Jesus in His Ministry 209

Curiosity and the Science of Polarization 212

Cultivating Curiosity 214

Prudence in the Storm 216

The Prudence of Jesus in His Ministry..... 218

The Importance of Prudence
 Based on the Science of Polarization 220

Cultivating Prudence 222

Conclusion 223

Chapter Seven

Hope in the Storm 225

Stories of Great Heroism 225

Courageous Individuals in the Storm..... 227

Daryl Davis..... 227

Brother Craig Digmann, G.H.M...... 229

Chris Arnade 232

Hopeful Organizations in the Storm..... 235

Braver Angels..... 236

Divided We Fall 239

Sant’Egidio..... 242

Creative Contributions in the Storm..... 246

Conclusion 250



Series Preface

Does the book that you are about to read seem unusual? Perhaps even counterintuitive?

Good. The Magenta series wouldn't be doing its job if you felt otherwise.

On the color wheel, magenta lies directly between red and blue. Just so, books in this series do not lie at one limit or another of our hopelessly simplistic, two-dimensional, antagonistic, binary imagination. Often, in the broader culture any answer to a moral or political question gets labeled as liberal or conservative, red or blue. But the Magenta series refuses to play by these shortsighted rules. Magenta will address the complexity of the issues of our day by resisting a framework that unnecessarily pits one idea against another. Magenta refuses to be defined by anything other than a positive vision of the good.

If you understand anything about the Focolare's dialogical-and-faithful mission, it should not surprise you that this series has found a home with the Focolare's New City Press. The ideas in these books, we believe, will spark dialogues that will heal divides and build unity at the very sites of greatest fragmentation and division.

The ideas in Magenta are crucial not only for our fragmented culture, but also for the Church. Our secular idolatry—our simplistic left/right, red/blue imagination—has oozed into the Church as well, disfiguring the Body of Christ with ugly disunity. Such idolatry, it must be said, has muffled

the Gospel and crippled the Church, keeping it from being salt and light in a wounded world desperate for unity.

Magenta is not naïve. We realize full well that appealing to dialogue or common ground can be dismissed as a weak-sauce, milquetoast attempt to cloud our vision of the good or reduce it to a mere least common denominator. We know that much dialogic spade work is yet to be done, but that does not keep the vision of the Magenta Series (like the color it bears) from being *bold*. There is nothing half-hearted about it. All our authors have a brilliant, attractive vision of the good.

To say that Aaron Wessman's book is a perfect fit for the series would be quite an understatement. Indeed, in many ways Magenta was created to express "The Church's Mission in a Polarized World." The term 'polarization' gets thrown around a lot, however, and one of the great features of the book you are about to read is contained in the first two chapters: a detailed, careful, precise undertaking of what it is we are attempting to resist. The rest of the book goes on to describe literally dozens of ideas and strategies for the Church to resist polarization. Of particular interest is Wessman's understanding of discipleship as "crossing over" in order to have an encounter. He does not, however, withhold clear headed warnings about the costs that come with doing so--costs which very much resemble the Focolare's understanding that authentic dialogue sometimes means connecting with "Jesus Forsaken" on the cross. Wessman's uniquely magenta vision and style of engagement perform the very thing to which he is calling us. Readers coming from multiple, plural, and even divergent perspectives will all benefit from reading this book. And may even find it to be a meeting place through which they can encounter each other.

Enjoy!

Charles C. Camosy

Series Editor



Introduction

Negative polarization and division in the United States are affecting all that we hold dear: our country, communities, schools, places of worship, relationships, and families. The scene is heartbreaking. I imagine that if you are reading this introduction, your life has been touched, in some way, by this turmoil.

Across the United States, good, thoughtful, and caring people are being subsumed into the vitriolic intensity of cultural polarization. Even as it happens, and as they try desperately to avoid it, they become something they do not want to be. They are like Dorian Gray gazing upon the monster that has materialized on the canvas even as he continues the very behavior creating the monstrosity.

Holiday family gatherings, sadly, present a glimpse of the effects of American polarization. For those who decide to gather—rather than choosing to remain at home to avoid conflict—the tension is palpable. People sit next to each other at the table in silence. Family members with shared memories—year upon year of journeying together—and who pump similar blood through their veins, have little to say. What can they talk about that will not induce rage or conflict? Religion? That is off the table. Football? Even ‘America’s game’ is rife with pitfalls. Politics? Not a chance. Few broached subjects, especially during election cycles, are navigable. One person speaks. Another interrupts. The table is pounded. Meals end prematurely.

The microcosm of the strained family gathered around a holiday table is influenced by the macro cultural environment. Not ever, perhaps, has so much ink been spilled warning Americans of the potential for a second civil war, possible cessation, or ineluctable deepening division. Stories and articles signaling impending danger are surrounded by the very thing causing the problem: depictions of the 'other group' in a negative light, or coverage of yet another politician buttressing her popularity through negativity. The intensification of negative polarization is tearing the United States apart at the seams. Even as I write these words, I am unsure how stable the country will be when they are published.

And then there is the Church. As a Catholic priest, that the Body of Christ would be my main concern is logical. To witness members who are united in divine bonds by the power of the Holy Spirit treat their fellow Christians with contempt beyond contempt is devastating. We in the Church have consumed the same Communion, been united in the same salvific sacrifice, stood together, and witnessed our children baptized, confirmed, and married, cried on each other's shoulders at death's presence, and confessed our sins to Our Father so as to journey together to our homeland. Yet, the profound mischaracterizations and irrational hatred of our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, sometimes simply because they share different political views or divergent ecclesial perspectives, reek of Cain's proto-rage against Abel. These behaviors and feelings belie the unity and charity Christ desired his members to instantiate in the world, and weaken the Church's evangelical mission.

Even ministers tasked with leading their flock have caved under the pressure to unite divided churchgoers. They seek wisdom from heaven about how to proceed in

these unprecedented times, while knowing that they, too, contribute to a polarized milieu.

My Concern

The following book is as personal as it is communal. Even as I bemoan the carnage around me left in the wake of the cultural storm of polarization, I also realize that I am just as susceptible to its influence. I am just as concerned with what is happening inside of me.

In 2017, following nearly four years studying in Europe, I returned to America and witnessed these ‘united’ states breaking apart. The anger and divisiveness were tangible. They were perhaps most obvious because I had been away for so long, sheltered from the conflict and rancor.

Questions abounded. What had happened to our country? What occurred within our Church? I thought I could remain above the fray and avoid the polemics, and yet I was immediately dragged in. Why did the anger rise in me? Was I really unable to watch certain news outlets without getting upset? What had happened to some of my loved ones? Why was I so easily triggered by particular political topics or the mere mention of certain politicians? Why did my heart fill with frustration when this or that Church official spoke? What happened to my ability to listen charitably to differing opinions and thoughts? Where was kindness?

As years passed from my entrance back into the United States, social and ecclesial divisions deepened and cultural wounds festered. With urgency, I began searching for answers.

Though much remains unknown, as the cultural markers of polarization continue to shift and evolve, this book is an attempt to synthesize some of my research into

this field. If you feel the same urgency as I do, or if you are simply a fellow pilgrim along this road, I hope the following words are, in some way, like Virgil's guidance leading the way out of the underworld.

A Way Forward

Though it pains me to have to make this admission, I believe that part of the way forward can only be found in admitting that the Church in the United States has, in part, lost her way through this valley of tears. I will, with trepidation, suggest some of the ways that this has likely taken place. However, I suspect that the lasting influence of this book will not arise from my critique. The lasting influence will come by the way in which readers, myself included, ponder within themselves to what extent negative polarization has touched their own lives. Only in recognizing where each of us needs to grow will the path forward be seen more clearly.

And yet there is always hope. God provides the Church a way forward during every age she encounters. Our age is no different.

Though I am certainly not claiming any kind of prophetic insight, I will argue in this book that part of this way forward can be found in reflecting upon, and imitating, Jesus' incarnational movement. Through his *kenosis*—in emptying himself and 'taking on flesh'—the Son of God crossed over into a world filled with strife, division, and destitution, to encounter and to save that world. He did not spurn or hide from the world. Mysteriously, he embraced it in every way but sin. His followers, not being divine, can only analogously—and prudently—imitate this movement. Nevertheless, I contend that it is within this incarnational movement—a crossing over to the 'other' with Christ—that

the Church can recover the correct path to her journey home. Only in doing so will the Church sufficiently differentiate herself from and purify polarizing impulses, thereby bringing salvation and unity to a world in need of both.

Structure

To explore the aforementioned themes, chapters one and two of this book will utilize political, sociological, psychological and theological research to answer the question: What is polarization? These chapters will pull from wonderfully written work addressing the sociopolitical reality of polarization in the United States. I will argue that polarization is best understood as the formation of two storms swirling and causing havoc in these fractured states of America.

Chapter three will pivot to an investigation of polarization and the Church. This chapter will proceed as a kind of examination of conscience for the Church—for Christians (including myself)—to ask how the logic of polarization is possibly affecting our discipleship as Christians, and undermining the fundamental tasks of the Church in the world. Rather than explore individual theological challenges and disagreements existing within the Church, this chapter will investigate how polarizing tendencies seem to be limiting the Church's ability to live fully the mystery she is to be in and for the world.

Chapter four will specifically analyze one of the problematic responses the Church has taken to counter the effects of polarization. The 'culture war' metaphor will be diagnosed as a cancer within the Church's missionary endeavors. Jesus' incarnational movement will be proposed as the medicinal metaphor that can potentially bring healing.

Chapters five and six will unpack the consequences of the metaphor of Jesus' incarnational movement for the life of the Church. What it means for the Church to 'cross over' to embrace the other, and to bring about 'salvific encounters' in the world, will be explored. In delving into the nature of Jesus' incarnational movement, and what this metaphor means for the Church in a polarized world, hopefully, I will begin to chart a path forward that can be pursued prudently in these tumultuous times.

The final chapter will explore contemporary examples of people who, and organizations that, are participating in aspects of Jesus' 'incarnational movement' in this world. These examples provide hope in the midst of the storms, and can serve as inspiration for Christians (and others) going forward.

The Scope of this Project

I love the United States, even as I recognize its complex and imperfect history. Traveling around the world has deepened my appreciation of this vast and beautiful country that I call home. Nevertheless, my primary concern in this book is not how polarization is affecting America in general. Many people have sought to address this theme. They have presented possible ways forward from a societal and political perspective. Their thoughts will infuse these pages. However, this book is neither about political policy, nor individual political parties or candidates.

What I am vitally concerned about are my primary loves: Christ and the Church he has founded. I write this not to signal that these loves are in any way lived perfectly in my life, but because I will be providing a critique of something I—and I know others—hold dear. I desire to show how polarization is affecting, or has the potential to

affect, the Church, and how the Church might respond in light of her call to live as Jesus' followers in this world. Through every generation, the Church has encountered various challenges that shape her missionary vision and practice. Polarization is our challenge.

This does not mean, of course, that the words within this book are divorced from broader societal and political problems in the United States. The Church does not exist in a vacuum. Quite the contrary, the more the Church lives according to her nature, the more the cultures and societies in which she is present, and which influence her, benefit from her presence, and she from them.

There is little doubt that the Church will respond to the challenge of polarization. In many ways this is already happening. What that response should or could be is at stake. Hopefully, the following pages provide some assistance to readers and stimulate courage, so that Christians can see the age in which we live more clearly and respond with grace to follow more fully the call God has spoken.



Chapter One

What is Polarization? Sorting, Homogenization, and Intensification

The Perfect Storm

I have always been fascinated with storms. Growing up in Minnesota, I remember observing dark, ominous clouds gather over rolling cornfields, viewing weather maps on television predicting snowfall accumulation, or occasionally hiding in our basement from the threat of tornadoes. Fascination turned to fear, however, when later in life I was assigned as a priest to a Catholic mission in eastern North Carolina and encountered my first hurricane.

It was 2018, and I, along with the other residents of the southeastern United States, watched the tempest that would be named Florence form off the coast of Africa. As the saying goes, the elements were right for a perfect storm: amassing warm moisture rising and swirling around a central point; low wind shear, unable to disrupt the clustering of clouds around the eye of the storm; and heat bringing greater intensity as the temperatures rose.

This quite large and remarkably slow-moving system advanced toward us. As I scrambled to execute my emergency plan, I could not help but wish I were back in

Minnesota. No midwestern weather event compared to this terrifying behemoth approaching my home.

In many ways, hurricanes and societal polarization have a lot in common. Rather than moisture-filled clouds surrounding the eye of the storm, human beings are sorting themselves by clustering together in groups around political, geographical, or ideological poles. Rather than low wind shear ensuring uniform strength and movement within the hurricane, there is minimal human diversity—by way of, for example, ideas, life-visions, values, or theology—interacting with clustered groups ensuring increased group homogenization. And rather than heat strengthening storms, triggered emotions or fragile identities can intensify both group belonging and negativity felt by members within groups, as well as aversion to and fear of others outside the group.

A difference, of course, within this metaphor, is that a hurricane usually exists alone and in an isolated region. Polarized groups, however, function like multiple hurricanes interacting with each other, causing, at times, seemingly irreparable relational and cultural damage from coast to coast.

Journalist and political commentator Ezra Klein has produced a helpful volume (one which I will refer to often throughout this book) summarizing an abundance of research on polarization. In *Why We're Polarized*, he alludes to these three contours, *sorting*, *homogenization*, and *intensification*, as he seeks to describe the contemporary polarized milieu.¹ He writes: “When I say the political

1. Ezra Klein, *Why We're Polarized* (New York: Avid Reader Press, 2020). There are many causes and contours of polarization. These three provide a framework to address many other details regarding this cultural phenomenon. For a comprehensive list of nearly 50 causes and contours, see Peter T. Coleman, *The Way Out: How to Overcome*