

## Third Sunday of Advent, Year C

### OLHOC Parish Priest: Fr. Nathan McKay

**ARTICLES OF INTEREST** (Continuation and extension of parish bulletin. Please email parish if you would like a copy of the parish bulletin emailed)

#### **What do Catholics really believe about purgatory?**

October leaves flash gold and red, blowing over streams and roads. The cold November rain transforms the foliage into a damp carpet on sidewalks and forest floors. Our attention turns to hot soup, spiced drinks and wintertime.

The church begins November by celebrating all of the saints in heaven. The second of November brings the commemoration of All Souls. We are invited to pray for our relatives and friends who have gone before us. Many families visit cemeteries to pray at the graves of their loved ones. In Mexico, people celebrate El Dia de Los Muertos, the Day of the Dead. Masks, music and food turn gray cemeteries festive with color and song.

For Catholics, the death of the faithful is cause for hope, even rejoicing, amid the mourning. A prayer at the funeral Mass proclaims, "Lord, for your faithful people, life is changed, not ended." Death is not an end, but a gateway into everlasting life.

But what that everlasting life looks like remains a mystery to us while we are here on earth. Most of us aim for heaven and hope to avoid hell, but rarely do we think about that other option: purgatory. Purgatory seems to come up more often in television shows or classic literature than in our daily discussions of the afterlife. But what do Catholics believe about purgatory? Does purgatory deserve a proper burial along with other medieval superstitions, like bloodletting and limbo? I find in this Catholic teaching a gritty, hopeful realism.

Let's be honest: We are not all saints yet. Ask the men in my Jesuit community and they will give you plenty of examples of my grumpiness, laziness and impatience. "Was I on for dish duty last night? Oops." I can give similar examples for them, too. I try to forgive, but I choose not to forget. We are not devils either, not entirely. We are caught somewhere in between, with flashes of charity and selfishness side by side. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states, "All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven" (No. 1030).

This describes many of us. We are "imperfectly purified." Yes, I do pray. I celebrate and participate in the sacraments, especially Mass and confession. As a Jesuit, I have been on two 30-day silent retreats and 24 eight-day retreats, plus a handful of weekend retreats and days of prayer—almost 300 days on retreat as a vowed religious. I should be holier than this. I am working on it. Kind of.

Pope Francis asks us to pray for the souls in purgatory. "Let us not forget, however, that so many deceased also await our spiritual support," he said. "Let us remember them in our prayers, together with Mary, 'Queen of All Saints.'"

Perhaps purgatory does not belong in the ecclesial waste bin but rather deserves our attention,

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like other neglected teachings such as the Sacred Heart devotion and reparation. Praying for those in purgatory is communal. We pray as families and in the church, with Mother Mary. We are sinners praying for sinners. I will need to apologize to some people when I get there. I will need to grant forgiveness to others. This reality is also an incentive for me to do these things now.

There is a great continuity between earth and purgatory: I have opportunities for purification, or purgation, from my sinful habits now. These come every evening at the dinner table and at Thanksgiving with my extended family. Life on earth is a kind of purgatory. We are not in heaven nor in hell. We can experience heavenly moments in a glorious Mass, when separated lovers are reunited or when holding a newborn child. We see glimpses of hell here, too, in the blank craters on a Ukrainian battlefield or a mother seeing her son convulsing after a drug overdose.

Purgatory is not an act of God's justice but a sign of God's mercy in the face of human sinfulness. If the Beatitudes are a pathway to heaven, then what about the times that I ignore those guideposts and do the opposite? Blessed are the meek and the peacemakers (Mt 5); what about the overbearing and the warmakers?

Pope Francis' views on hell are complex and worthy of another article. Recently he stated, "What I would say is not a dogma of faith, but my personal thought: I like to think hell is empty; I hope it is." But at a prayer service for those murdered by the mafia in Italy in 2014, he addressed the hitmen: "Convert. Stop doing evil.... There's still time to stay out of hell. That's what's waiting for you if you stay on this path." Perhaps the pope's first statement is a prayer and his second is a warning. Jesus likewise speaks of hell while doing all he can to keep us out of it.

Pope Benedict XVI writes eloquently of the afterlife in his encyclical, "Spe Salvi." On purgatory, he reflects:

The belief that love can reach into the afterlife, that reciprocal giving and receiving is possible, in which our affection for one another continues beyond the limits of death—this has been a fundamental conviction of Christianity throughout the ages and it remains a source of comfort today. Who would not feel the need to convey to their departed loved ones a sign of kindness, a gesture of gratitude or even a request for pardon? (No. 48).

St. Ignatius encouraged, even ordered, Jesuits to pray for their deceased brothers and for departed donors to the Jesuit order. These are prayers of gratitude for all they did on earth, and prayers that they join the saints so that they can pray for us in heaven. This tradition continues as Jesuits are required to offer two Masses for the dead each month; one is for deceased Jesuits and another for departed benefactors.

For Catholics, the dead never really go away. "Life is changed, not ended." We can still love the departed, pray for them, remember them. I offer a twofold petition: "Grandma, I love you and pray for you. If you're in heaven, pray for me and help me to see you there."

What is purgatory like? Saints and Scriptures offer images and descriptive parables, always related to heaven. If heaven is like a wedding banquet (Mt 22), then purgatory may be understood as a cleansing and preparation for a great celebration. It is not a dreary waiting room at the D.M.V., but

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a place of lively hope and excitement. The Book of Revelation describes heaven as a garden with fruit trees and rivers (21-22). In this way, life on earth and in purgatory are a journey to a glorious destination. Am I in the backseat kicking my siblings and complaining, “Are we there yet?” Or, with the saints, am I helping my fellow travelers, like the Good Samaritan—as we anticipate our arrival at our eternal home?

See you in Purgatory! Let us pray that we are not there for long.

#### Author

**Joe Laramie**, S.J., is the national director of the Pope’s Prayer Network (Apostleship of Prayer). He is the author of *Love Him Ever More: a 9-Day Personal Retreat with the Sacred Heart of Jesus*, based on the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola.

#### **Why does the French government—and not the Catholic Church—own Notre-Dame Cathedral?**

The world held its breath five years ago as one of the most famous and beloved churches in the world, the Cathedral of Notre-Dame de Paris, burnt to a shell of its former self. Now a global audience has followed the remarkable work of its reconstruction.

American Catholics may have wondered about the seemingly outsized hand the French government has played in the restoration. The country’s president, Emmanuel Macron, gave the final approval for the design of the reconstruction, which was then overseen by a general of the French army. He was also the one to invite the pope to the reopening on Dec. 7, and Mr. Macron first announced that he would give a formal address inside the cathedral that weekend, though it was later decided to move the president’s speech outside.

It all points to the unique and counterintuitive fact that Notre-Dame, and many churches in France, are owned by the state and merely used by the church.

Hélène de Lauzun, a French historian, explained to America that there are two key events to understanding the unique relationship between church and state in France: the French Revolution in 1789 and the closely linked Civil Constitution of the Clergy in 1790. The first marks the violent beginning of the end of the French monarchy and its Catholic confessional state, and the emergence of the French Republic.

As the anti-religious and anti-clerical revolutionaries took control of the government, they outlawed religious life, forcibly closed monasteries and convents, and attempted to control the clergy. Only priests and bishops who agreed to an oath of loyalty to the new regime were permitted under state law to continue their ministry.

In 1790, the revolutionary government appropriated all of the church’s property—then a considerable amount of real estate—and used it to pay the government’s debts. Many churches and monasteries were destroyed, abandoned or turned into barns, armories or military barracks.

Then, in 1801, Napoleon Bonaparte came to power. He was famously crowned emperor of France

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in Notre-Dame. (French kings had traditionally been crowned in the Cathedral of Reims.) He also signed a concordat—a formal agreement between the Vatican and a government—allowing the church to resume its normal functions in France and reclaim many of its properties. Religious life was legalized. The 19th century proved a welcome period of recovery for the Catholic Church, Ms. de Lauzun said.

But the beginning of the 20th century marked another swing toward aggressive secularization and a government strongly hostile to church and faith. The question of who should own and administer church property was renewed with the passage of a law, in 1905, establishing *laïcité*, or state secularization. A bitter struggle between the church and the state resulted in a breakdown of diplomatic relations between the Holy See and France, a struggle that reverberated across French society. The government proposed establishing state structures to administer church property and carried out inventories to appraise the value of the church's holdings. The most radical voices in the government wanted to transform some churches into places for secular activities—buildings for general public use, or headquarters of trade unions and stock exchanges, Ms. de Lauzun said. These efforts by the state met strong resistance from French Catholics, some of whom died in the fight to protect their churches from desecralization.

In the end, the pope and the French bishops offered the government an arrangement that created local lay-based associations connected to the hierarchy to own and administer church buildings. All parties agreed to a compromise: The state could own churches built before 1905 but had to provide financially for their upkeep and allow them to be used freely and without cost by the church.

According to Ms. de Lauzun, the 1905 law is often lauded as an expression of a balanced form of secularism, but at the time Catholics experienced it as a traumatic sacking of the church by the state. The rights of the church were not fully clarified and respected until after World War I.

According to François Euvé, S.J., editor of the French Jesuit journal *Études*, the drive for secularization affected religious orders like the Jesuits as well. According to the new law, religious communities had to register with the state, a requirement with which many refused to comply. Not having registered, the Jesuits were forced off their properties and had to close their schools, including their seminary in Paris. During those first decades of the 20th century, they lived in small groups in regular residential housing. Other religious orders went through similar trials.

These tensions and restrictions were not resolved until 1924, Ms. de Lauzun explained. She believes one reason the bishops agreed to state ownership of older churches was that they knew they could not afford their maintenance.

Father Euvé adds that these old churches, many of them parish churches, had been built and maintained by the people for centuries, not owned or controlled administratively by the bishop.

“The churches were built by the French citizens. They belong to the French people,” he said.

In some sense, then, the present arrangement reflects this tradition. Father Euvé points out another seemingly incongruous role of the French secular state that follows a similar philosophy.

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The state pays teachers' salaries at private schools, including Catholic schools, because the general education work of Catholic schools is considered a public service.

The church-state arrangement can be a double-edged sword, Ms. de Lauzun said. As church attendance falls, she worries the state could use declining enrollment figures as an excuse to stop maintaining some churches, particularly in rural areas where population loss has left churches increasingly empty.

"Thanks to God, in a way, in France, the state is paying for [church upkeep]," she told America. "But the problem is that if we no longer have Masses, which is the case in many churches in the countryside, is the government going to pay for buildings that are not used for worship anymore? That's a big problem."

Ms. de Lauzun also explained that this situation of state ownership and funding for Notre-Dame provided the context for Mr. Macron's proposal to speak inside the church as part of the reopening.

"That's why there is such a strong pressure from Emmanuel Macron [to speak at the reopening] because, well, he did the job. He rebuilt the cathedral in five years. Not in three days, of course—he's not the Lord—but he's very proud of that," she said, adding that highlighting this accomplishment has obvious political advantages.

In the end, Mr. Macron backed down from speaking inside the cathedral, but Ms. de Lauzun said it shows how the church is "constantly negotiating" with the state. As another example, any changes to the physical structure of the church must be approved by the ministry of culture, and sometimes the archbishop and the government disagree.

This tension is still playing out at Notre-Dame, Ms. de Lauzun noted, around the stained glass windows. Some new windows of contemporary design are slated for installation in 2026. The initiative came from the archbishop of Paris, Laurent Ulrich, who proposed it diplomatically in a formal letter. The stained glass windows, which are already a mix of works from various centuries, were not broken in the fire, but the prelate wanted something new to mark the incredible restoration of the cathedral.

The French National Commission for Heritage and Architecture, the advisory body to the ministry of culture regarding the preservation of historic buildings, came out against the idea. Mr. Macron, however, sided with the archbishop, and the government is accepting proposals for a series of windows depicting Pentecost. Ms. de Lauzun is curious to see if in the end the more preservation-minded attitude of the state prevails.

The rebuilding of Notre-Dame has also stirred up the question of whether or not to charge an entrance fee to see the church—a proposal that the archdiocese has steadfastly resisted. Undoubtedly, debates of this kind between church and state will continue to brew.

#### Author

**Bridget Ryder** is a freelance writer based in Spain.

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### Never die? The dangers of transhumanism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

On the internet, YouTuber and social media influencer Bryan Johnson proclaims a message of radical life extension. Johnson, who made millions in Silicon Valley, regularly sports a t-shirt plastered with block letters reading “Don’t Die.” His goal: to slow the aging process. Or reverse it altogether.

Johnson’s fortune, social media accounts and strict daily schedule are all laser-focused on that goal. His day-to-day life includes intermittent fasting, an entirely dark sleep environment, a diet regimen with over 100 supplements a day and painful facial injections. You won’t catch him drinking a beer or bringing donuts to an early morning meeting anytime soon. Or smoking a cigar to celebrate his achievements. Or even regularly staying up too late. More controversially, Johnson receives “fresh blood” transfusions from his teenage son. Cue the metaphors about vampirism and older generations feeding off the younger.

Overall, though, things seem to be working for Johnson: He looks younger than his 46 years. He certainly looks better than me: a 40-year-old, sleep-deprived father of young children who battles rosacea and a bad lower back. Johnson, moreover, is no niche YouTuber: He has over one million followers. Comments on his channel regularly describe him as a “motivation to all of us,” and he has been featured in Fortune Magazine, MSN, the Los Angeles Times, Business Insider and Time Magazine.

Meanwhile, in my home state of Illinois, legislators have introduced the End-of-Life Options Act. The bill would add Illinois to the 10 other states (plus Washington, D.C.) in which patients can request a doctor to help them end their own lives. Other states—including my former home state of Minnesota—have recently been grappling with similar bills. Pope Francis has consistently opposed such legislation, on the grounds that “We must accompany people towards death, but not provoke death or facilitate any form of suicide.”

Why? Put simply: Because our lives are given to us by God, and not ours to take or leave. To call such acts “death with dignity” subverts what the Catholic moral tradition means by dignity—being created in the image of God—and reduces it to the Enlightenment notion of self-determination.

These two phenomena—so-called “death with dignity” legislation on the one hand, and an internet influencer marching under the banner of “Don’t Die” on the other—may seem very different sides of 21st century life. But they are, I believe, two sides of the same coin. They are united, fairly obviously, in their shared fear of and obsession with death. Johnson and his life-hacking followers attempt to flee from death, even as death with dignity legislation attempts to master death and bring it under human control. In both circumstances, humans usurp a role intended for God.

What kind of life is valuable?

Johnson and death with dignity legislation, however, share a deeper unity than the fear of death. Both are also unified in manifesting a common set of cultural values that run counter to Catholic morality, yet are widespread in contemporary culture. These values fly under the banner of transhumanism.

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Transhumanism “promotes an interdisciplinary approach to understanding and evaluating the opportunities for enhancing the human condition and the human organism opened up by the advancement of technology,” according to Nick Bostrom, prophet and cheerleader of transhumanism. “The enhancement options being discussed include radical extension of human health-span, eradication of disease, elimination of unnecessary suffering, and augmentation of human intellectual, physical, and emotional capacities.”

It should be obvious why Johnson’s “Don’t Die” protocols exemplify transhumanism. Bostrom’s transhumanist writings are, in some ways, Johnson’s manifesto. The intermittent fasting; the blood transfusions; the unrelenting commitment to a good night’s sleep: All are aimed at the “radical extension of human health-span.”

Death with dignity legislation is the dark flip side of Johnson’s protocols, but is equally cultivated in transhumanist values. Transhumanism, after all, sets out a certain kind of life as valuable: a long-lived, able-bodied, well-rested, physically strong and aesthetically pleasing life.

But what happens when things don’t work out? What happens when our lives are threatened to be cut short by disease or accident? When our good looks are marred? When our physical prowess is undermined? When our daily lives fall short of optimization, and are rather filled with suffering? When we (inevitably) fail at the goals transhumanism sets for us, and that Johnson aims to achieve? Well, we may as well throw in the towel. Death with dignity legislation results when transhumanist values meet the realities of human existence.

Any morality focused on basic human dignity, of course, stands deeply opposed to this outlook. Yes, a robust account of human dignity runs counter to death with dignity legislation, but it also contradicts the more basic transhumanist assumptions out of which this legislation grows—the misguided assumptions about what makes a valuable human life.

The 2024 Vatican declaration “Dignitas Infinita” summarizes this alternative outlook well: “Every human person possesses an infinite dignity, inalienably grounded in his or her very being, which prevails in and beyond every circumstance, state, or situation the person may encounter.” Contra transhumanism, human worth comes not from longevity or physical ability or cognitive capacity or even so-called quality of life. Humans lives rather matter because they are human lives. Full stop. It can be difficult to recognize this idea for how radical it is, until we are confronted with cultural manifestations running in the opposite direction.

The influence of transhumanism

It would, however, be misguided for us simply to point accusatory fingers at the Bryan Johnsons of the world, or at the misguided motivations behind death with dignity legislation. Should we oppose both? Absolutely. Yet it is crucial to recognize these movements are not created ex nihilo. They are rather distillations of wider cultural values, values that you and I are in part responsible for cultivating.

Put differently: transhumanism is not merely some stuffy academic theory. Nor is its influence felt only among those who advocate for death with dignity and the latest life hacks of Silicon Valley. Transhumanism rather finds its power in the everyday habits, values and assumptions of 21st

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century lives, including yours and mine.

Use an Instagram filter to optimize your selfies? Suffer through a juice cleanse every spring? Strap on a FitBit every morning to count your steps? Captivated by Elon Musk’s dreams to inhabit Mars, or Mark Zuckerberg’s push for the Metaverse? None of these cultural touch points count as full-blown transhumanism. Yet all spring from and cultivate transhumanist ideas about what makes a human life valuable and which goals we should prioritize.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with many of these practices, or the goals for which we aim in pursuing them. There’s nothing wrong—and even something genuinely good—about aiming for a well-balanced diet. Or cutting back on beer. Or tracking steps.

And you know what? It would probably serve me well to adopt some of Bryan Johnson’s tips. I’m skipping the blood transfusions, but could learn a lot from him about a good night’s sleep. Christ came so that we could have life to its fullest, and it is in part our responsibility to pursue the full life God has promised.

Yet we must take care to separate the goodness of these goals from the assumption that achieving them is what confers value on our lives. For as soon as we adopt this assumption, we also take on its nefarious inverse: the idea that a life without them fails to be valuable, and that we can request for such a life to be ended as soon as it falls short. Death with dignity legislation is one of the ultimate manifestations of the “throwaway culture” that Pope Francis has urged us to resist. A culture in which quality of life is reducible to social contribution, and the most vulnerable among us can be discarded.

**Life with dignity**

Yet in resisting death with dignity legislation, we must see it in its broader cultural context. First, we should see that it is the dark inverse of the life-hacking, longevity-seeking and socially-palatable attempts to nudge up the human lifespan—or even simply the cultural push towards “life optimization” and “living our best lives.” We can draw a line connecting Bryan Johnson’s futile attempts to avoid death and the increasing acceptance of legalized euthanasia.

Perhaps more importantly, however, we must see how our own practices and assumptions till the soil that allows these values to flourish. Our own lives—and our guiding assumptions about what makes life valuable—all too often reinforce the idea that human lives are not valuable for their own sake, but only to the degree that they nurture some cluster of utilitarian ideals. All too often, our practices hold up the ache-free, well-slept and socially-adept versions of our lives as intrinsically better than the grubby lives we actually live. We structure our days and thoughts around the very values and pursuits underlying the practices we are called to oppose.

Again, don’t get me wrong: The life hackers and longevity-pursuers of Silicon Valley often hold up goals that are worthy of our pursuit. But we must understand these goals as contributing to a life that is already intrinsically valuable, not as conferring value on our lives to begin with. Any defense of human dignity starts with our own practices. Any conversion of the wider culture starts with a conversion of our own hearts.



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Author:

**Joseph Vukov** is the author of *The Perils of Perfection and Staying Human in an Era of Artificial Intelligence*. He is an Associate Professor of Philosophy and the Associate Director of the Hank Center for the Catholic Intellectual Heritage at Loyola University Chicago.

**The faith that sustained Russian dissident Alexei Navalny**

Note: Abridged article.

As a preamble to his second mental exercise, Navalny wrote:

*I have always thought, and said openly, that being a believer makes it easier to live your life, and, to an even greater extent, engage in opposition politics. Faith makes life simpler.*

Navalny then wrote of his second approach to the unendurable, the unimaginable:

*The initial position for this exercise is the same as for the previous one. You lie in your bunk looking up at the one above and ask yourself whether you are a Christian in your heart of hearts. It is not essential for you to believe some old guys in the desert lived to be eight hundred years old or that the sea was literally parted in front of someone. But are you a disciple of the religion whose founder sacrificed himself for others, paying the price for their sins? Do you believe in the immortality of the soul and the rest of that cool stuff? If you can honestly say yes, what is there left for you to worry about? Why, under your breath, would you mumble a hundred times something you read from a hefty tome you keep in your bedside table? Don't worry about the morrow, because the morrow is perfectly capable of taking care of itself.*

*My job is to seek the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and leave it to good old Jesus and the rest of his family to deal with everything else. They won't let me down and will sort out all my headaches. As they say in prison here: they will take my punches for me.*

How is it that the Russian Alexei Navalny, in the early 21st century, so closely echoes the Roman Ambrose of Milan, writing in the fourth? "Take firm hold of the rudder of faith so that the severe storms of this world cannot disturb you." Both believed that the only way to survive this world, to love and to serve this world, is to know of a world yet to come.

Author:

**The Rev. Terrance W. Klein** is a priest of the Diocese of Dodge City and author of *Vanity Faith*.

**Vatican launches virtual College of Cardinal 'dashboard'—an interactive map of the people who will elect the next pope.**

[https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2024/12/05/vatican-virtual-college-cardinals-dashboard-249415?utm\\_source=piano&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=2928&pnespid=70B6B39Aaq4AyKSZqy3tEoKpuUOjDYt8JLTgnrcxqQNmlfXNV5TqsGykSyTJrwiczQxTurn4](https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2024/12/05/vatican-virtual-college-cardinals-dashboard-249415?utm_source=piano&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=2928&pnespid=70B6B39Aaq4AyKSZqy3tEoKpuUOjDYt8JLTgnrcxqQNmlfXNV5TqsGykSyTJrwiczQxTurn4)

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**Tim Norton installed as third Bishop of Broome**

<https://mediablog.catholic.org.au/tim-norton-installed-as-third-bishop-of-broome/>

**Pope invites Christians to allow God to fill their lives with hope**

[https://cathnews.com/2024/12/04/pope-invites-christians-to-allow-god-to-fill-their-lives-with-hope/?utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=Labor%20offers%20faith%20groups%20cash%20to%20release%20unused%20land%20for%20housing%20%20NAPLAN%20scores%20soar%20after%20return%20to%20old-school%20teaching%20methods%20%20Australian%20Catholic%20University%20warned%20it%20faces%20losing%20its%20religious%20designation&utm\\_content=Labor%20offers%20faith%20groups%20cash%20to%20release%20unused%20land%20for%20housing%20%20NAPLAN%20scores%20soar%20after%20return%20to%20old-school%20teaching%20methods%20%20Australian%20Catholic%20University%20warned%20it%20faces%20losing%20its%20religious%20designation%20CID\\_d2c46234b53cc5d38bf9194077ef760b&utm\\_source=Cathnews%20Newsletter&utm\\_term=Pope%20invites%20Christians%20to%20allow%20God%20to%20fill%20their%20lives%20with%20hope](https://cathnews.com/2024/12/04/pope-invites-christians-to-allow-god-to-fill-their-lives-with-hope/?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Labor%20offers%20faith%20groups%20cash%20to%20release%20unused%20land%20for%20housing%20%20NAPLAN%20scores%20soar%20after%20return%20to%20old-school%20teaching%20methods%20%20Australian%20Catholic%20University%20warned%20it%20faces%20losing%20its%20religious%20designation&utm_content=Labor%20offers%20faith%20groups%20cash%20to%20release%20unused%20land%20for%20housing%20%20NAPLAN%20scores%20soar%20after%20return%20to%20old-school%20teaching%20methods%20%20Australian%20Catholic%20University%20warned%20it%20faces%20losing%20its%20religious%20designation%20CID_d2c46234b53cc5d38bf9194077ef760b&utm_source=Cathnews%20Newsletter&utm_term=Pope%20invites%20Christians%20to%20allow%20God%20to%20fill%20their%20lives%20with%20hope)