

# Meet Our Sunday Visitor's 2021 Catholics of the Year

A year ago, as we flipped the calendar from 2020 to 2021, we thought that the worst was behind us. With new vaccinations, we thought we would beat back the COVID-19 pandemic. But the virus killed more people in 2021 than it did in 2020. Other tragedies befell us in 2021 as well – hurricanes, wildfires, earthquakes, mass shootings and so much more.

But through it all, there were those whose stories inspired us to persevere in Faith. Each of Our Sunday Visitor's 2021 Catholics of the Year offered, in their own way, a witness to the power of following the will of God and the fruits that blossom from doing so. Our Sunday Visitor is proud to hold up this year's honorees as shining examples of those who have made indelible marks on the Church and the world throughout the past year.

## **ST. JOSEPH**

For being a shining example of virtue in a world in which it is so desperately needed

**By Michael R. Heinlein**



## St. Joseph (CNS)

Although, according to tradition, St. Joseph did not live to see the fullness of redemption in this life, we know assuredly that he received the fullness of life after his foster son's resurrection. Drawn into the heart of God's plan of salvation, St. Joseph was entrusted with the care and protection of God's Son – and this has endured in his patronage of Christ's own body, the Church. St. Joseph's life, example and intercession are so important to the Church that he was declared the Church's universal patron in 1870.

To commemorate the 150th year of this declaration, just before the Year of St. Joseph pleasantly took the Church by surprise, [I wrote a piece in these pages](#) offering a few reasons for St. Joseph's relevance and importance amid contemporary challenges: to bring life to families, strengthen us amid the pandemic and its effects, and help heal our wounded Church.

But, as the last year of ecclesial life has clearly shown, there are myriad reasons for St. Joseph's enduring relevance and popular appeal. And, underscoring this reality, numerous resources have been offered in the past year to assist the faithful in making St. Joseph a central figure in their spiritual life. Pope Francis' apostolic letter *Patris Corde* ("With a Father's Heart") impresses upon the faithful the multifaceted fatherhood of the Church's patron, and his addition of new titles to the Litany of St. Joseph shed more light on his intercessory role. The indulgence offered by the Apostolic Major Penitentiary, particularly in completing the works assigned to the indulgence, has given the faithful the opportunity to make St. Joseph's life their own.

Although silent in the Gospels, St. Joseph's voice has resounded through the ages and speaks to us still today. He calls us to total commitment to God's will, even amid suffering, uncertainty or doubt. His eminent virtue, which particularly shines in the Gospels amid struggles and

difficulties, challenges us to embrace our call to be holy. And his invitation to imitate his enduring love for Mary and Jesus encourages us to find true joy, peace and contentment by making them the center of our lives, too. Catholics have every reason to have celebrated him thoroughly in 2021, and that is why Our Sunday Visitor lifts him up as an example now.

*Michael R. Heinlein is editor of SimplyCatholic.com and author of a forthcoming biography of Cardinal Francis E. George, OMI.*

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## **JEFF CAVINS AND FATHER MIKE SCHMITZ**

For helping to bring Scripture into countless homes via ‘The Bible in a Year’ podcast

**By Katie Prejean McGrady**



Jeff Cavins (CNS)

At the beginning of 2021, within days of launching, [“The Bible in a Year” podcast](#) sat atop the download lists, beating out The New York Times’ “The Daily,” Joe Rogan and Oprah. Its popularity continued, in no small part because of the wisdom, insights and scholarship of Father Mike Schmitz and Jeff Cavins. Hundreds of thousands of people have tuned in daily to

hear Father Mike apologize for being so excited and Jeff connect the dots of the Biblical story so many are loosely familiar with but have grown to know and love.

Anyone could talk about the Bible, and many have (there's no shortage of Catholic podcasts), but Father Mike Schmitz and Jeff Cavins talking about the Bible is something special, and it stands apart, because their instruction and explanation is guided first by their fatherly hearts.

Jeff Cavins is a teacher and scholar, leading thousands of people on pilgrimage and writing Bible studies that have transformed lives. I still have my Great Adventure Bible bookmark tucked into the back of the Bible I used in college. But most importantly, Jeff is a husband, dad and grandpa, and every time I've had the honor of visiting with or interviewing him, his first question to me is "How are you? How's the family?" He's a father to all he teaches and meets.



Father Mike Schmitz  
(CNS)

Father Mike Schmitz is a priest who loves his people, known worldwide because of YouTube videos and fast-paced homilies tackling tough subjects, but I've known him as a friend who never fails to give comforting advice and lend a listening ear. In the summer of 2017, while pregnant with my daughter,

Rose, Father Mike and I met while speaking at a Steubenville Conference, and when Braxton Hicks contractions sent me to walk the halls to manage the pain, he walked with me, making me laugh and taking my mind off the discomfort. He's a father to his friends, parishioners and even perfect strangers.

The work Father Mike and Jeff have done with "The Bible in a Year" podcast has changed lives, introducing people to sacred Scripture not as a fairytale or textbook, but as a love letter and story of salvation of which we are part, and which they love themselves. Their tender hearts and fatherly wisdom both unpack the text of Scripture and give witness to the love of the Father who gave us this Bible in the first place.

We'd all do well to give thanks to the Lord for the good dads, the humble fathers, the Scripture scholars who've guided us so well this year, my good friends and two personal heroes, Jeff Cavins and Father Mike Schmitz, the Bible dads.

For bringing the word of God into so many homes in such a loving and unique way, these two men are more than deserving of being honored as Catholics of the Year by Our Sunday Visitor.

*Katie Prejean McGrady is an award-winning author and host of "Ave Explores" podcast from Ave Maria Press and "The Katie McGrady Show" on Sirius XM.*

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## **BISHOP SHELTON J. FABRE**

For his strong faith and leadership amid a difficult year in Louisiana

**By Ansel Augustine**



Bishop Shelton J.  
Fabre (CNS)

Proverbs 3:5-7 states: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart / on your own intelligence do not rely; / In all your ways be mindful of him, / and he will make straight your paths. / Do not be wise in your own eyes, / fear the Lord and turn away from evil."

This Scripture passage perfectly summarizes the life and personality of Bishop Shelton Fabre of the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux, Louisiana. I have had the pleasure of knowing Bishop Fabre as a friend, mentor and supervisor when he became the auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of New Orleans in 2007. He was also best friends with my "Dad," Father Michael Jacques, SSE, who served as our pastor at St. Peter Claver in New Orleans for almost 30 years until he died in 2013.

Since 2007, I have seen Bishop Fabre weather various personal challenges in his life, from deaths, tough diocesan decisions, chairing the anti-racism work of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and now rebuilding after Hurricane Ida. Throughout all these trials, I have witnessed a man so close to God that his faith has "moved mountains." In fact, it is this faith that inspires those around him to grow closer to God as well.

This past August, [Hurricane Ida devastated our region;](#)

although New Orleans was affected, we were nowhere near as distressed as Houma-Thibodaux, which is about 40 southwest of New Orleans. Here we are, several months later, and much of that area is still being rebuilt from scratch. It is in this reality that we witness Bishop Fabre submitting to the will of God to help the people he is called to shepherd. Not only has Bishop Fabre been in meetings with FEMA and other agencies to try to get help for his people, but he has also been in the trenches with the people serving. There is a popular picture that was run throughout the country of Bishop Fabre carrying a large bag of ice to help during the rebuilding process.

Bishop Fabre is a true witness to the goodness of God. He is very worthy to be included as one of Our Sunday Visitor's Catholics of the Year. For as the Scripture states, his trust and submission to God's will continues to help make the paths straight for all those he has been called to serve.

*Dr. Ansel Augustine has served the Church in various capacities for over 20 years. He presently serves as the area director of Vagabond Missions.*

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## **JOHN GARVEY**

*For his role in strengthening the Faith at The Catholic University of America*

**By Russell Shaw**



John Garvey (CNS)

When John Garvey announced last September that he would step down as president of The Catholic University of America after this school year, genuine regret greeted the news. In 12 years as president, he built up the school in many ways – not least, by reinforcing and strengthening its “serious Catholic intellectual culture.”

In the turbulent 1960s and 1970s, the “Catholic” part of the school’s name sometimes seemed questionable. But under several recent presidents – and notably under Garvey – The Catholic University of America became proudly Catholic again.

Born Sept. 28, 1948, in Sharon, Pennsylvania, Garvey studied at Notre Dame and Harvard Law School. In 1976, he began teaching at the University of Kentucky law school, an appointment he held until 1994. From 1981 to 1984, he was assistant to the U.S. solicitor general, arguing several cases before the Supreme Court. After teaching law at Notre Dame from 1994 to 1999, he became dean of the Boston College Law School. In 2010, he was named 15th president of Catholic University – the third layperson to hold the post.

Especially by hiring choices, he emphasized a Catholic approach to scholarship in every discipline and school, including the new Busch School of Business, founded to integrate business education with Catholic social teaching. He



also worked to strengthen the university materially, with gifts and grants totaling more than \$500 million and university assets increasing to nearly \$1 billion.

In a letter to the university community, Garvey recalled that when he became president, he “did not foresee how much I would fall in love with” the school. Even the pandemic – “one of the most difficult crises in the university’s 134-year history” – helped by showing him “close up what makes the school so special.”

Garvey and his wife, Jeanne, have five children and 23 grandchildren. He is a prize-winning author who has written five books and contributed articles to numerous Catholic and secular journals. Having taught a yearly undergraduate course on the virtues while serving as president, he plans to teach at Catholic University’s Rome campus after leaving that position.

For his outstanding achievements in building up the Faith at the only Catholic university founded by the bishops of the United States, Our Sunday Visitor is proud to name John Garvey as one of its Catholics of the Year.

*Russell Shaw is a contributing editor for Our Sunday Visitor.*

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## **BISHOP KEVIN C. RHOADES**

For leading the Church and the faithful through two crucial and contentious issues

**By Scott P. Richert**



Bishop Kevin C.  
Rhoades (CNS)

In the United States, 2021 was marked by disagreements among Catholics, from laypeople on up to bishops, that had more to do with secular politics than with concern for the teachings of the Church. In the midst of those disputes, one bishop in particular stood out as a voice of unity, charity and truth: Bishop Kevin C. Rhoades of the Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Indiana (and chairman of the board of OSV).

In his role as chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Doctrine, Bishop Rhoades (along with Archbishop Joseph F. Naumann, chairman of the Committee on Pro-Life Activities) issued "Moral Considerations Regarding the New COVID-19 Vaccines" in the final days of 2020. In the months following, Bishop Rhoades [became the public voice](#) of the Church's teaching that the use of such vaccines is not only morally acceptable but "an act of charity that serves the common good." His leadership undoubtedly accounts in no small part for the higher average rates of vaccination among Mass-going Catholics in the United States.

As the debate over vaccination raged on, another storm was brewing in the middle of the year: The U.S. bishops were divided on the need for, and the content of, [a document affirming the Church's teaching](#) on the Eucharist and the

implications of that teaching in the lives of all Catholics. In the wake of the election of the second Catholic U.S. president, such a document was bound to be seen in political terms, and the bishops' June meeting reflected that reality.

Between June and November, however, the Committee on Doctrine, under the guiding hand of Bishop Rhoades, produced "The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church." And at the U.S. bishops' general assembly in November, something that few would have predicted in June occurred: The document passed nearly unanimously.

Too often, we speak of our bishops in political terms: This one is "conservative"; that one, "liberal." The highest compliment we can pay to a bishop, though, is that he speaks with the mind of the Church. In doing so, Bishop Kevin Rhoades truly lives up to his episcopal motto – *Veritatem in caritate* ("truth in charity") – and deserves his place among Our Sunday Visitor's Catholics of the Year.

*Scott P. Richert is publisher for OSV.*

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## **JASON AND MELISSA SHANKS**

For showing the world how to keep the Faith in times of trial

**By Gretchen R. Crowe**



Michelle and Jason Shanks. Courtesy photo

In his capacity as president of the [OSV Institute for Catholic Innovation](#), Jason Shanks does a lot of good for the Church. But it is not for these accomplishments that he and his wife, Melissa, have been selected by Our Sunday Visitor as Catholics of the Year for 2021.

In mid-February, Jason returned home for the first time in three months after fighting a long battle with COVID-19 – a battle he almost didn't win. After being sick with COVID for more than a week, Jason was admitted to the hospital in mid-November of 2020 and was immediately sedated and intubated. For the next several weeks, his condition worsened. Melissa rallied the community around him in prayer. But it wasn't until mid-December that things really became dire. Jason's body – in a race to out-survive the COVID that was still raging within him – began to shut down. On Dec. 15, a worldwide novena to St. Jude, patron saint of lost causes, began at the request of Melissa. Her intention was specific: "We need to get over COVID," she [told me earlier this year](#). "We need a radical change in our course right now."

And that is exactly what happened. As the novena progressed, Jason's condition, which had seen so little improvement in weeks, suddenly began to change. "It was a completely

different phase,” Melissa said. “That novena took us from being sick and in fear of death to the path to recovery. It made a huge difference.”

Jason’s recovery continued to amaze his family, friends and his doctors. After time at a rehabilitation facility, he was home by mid-February, and he returned to work later that month. Now, he is fully recovered. But though the crisis has passed, he has not forgotten the lessons that he has learned.

“What I have learned from my recent trials is relationships matter,” he wrote on Facebook in November, saying that his relationships with his wife and five children are the most important. “My impact with the life I have left will be in them.”

Jason and Melissa’s story exemplifies the beauty of faith. It shows the power of prayer. It is a witness to married love in a time of crisis. It is a story of remembering what matters most, and of cherishing and prioritizing those things: faith, family, prayer and love of one another. Jason and Melissa Shanks’ battle with COVID-19 was inspiring to all of us who witnessed it, and they are well-deserving of the recognition of Catholics of the Year.

*Gretchen R. Crowe is editorial director for periodicals at OSV. Follow her on Twitter @GretchenOSV.*

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## **Sister Nathalie Becquart and Sister Raffaella Petrini**

For breaking barriers at the Vatican

**By Deborah Castellano Lubov**



Sister Nathalie  
Becquart (CNS)

In 2021, Pope Francis made two groundbreaking appointments inside the Vatican by elevating two women religious to prominent posts inside the Holy See. In February, he promoted French [Sister Nathalie Becquart](#), 52, to become the first ever woman undersecretary to the Synod of Bishops, and in November, he appointed [Sister Raffaella Petrini](#), an Italian member of the U.S.-based Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist, to be secretary-general of the office governing Vatican City State.

In elevating Sister Nathalie, she becomes the first woman to be able to vote in a synod. She is often called the “sailing nun,” as she is an experienced sailor who has enjoyed the sport since childhood. This Xavieran sister with a business background studied at Boston College’s School of Theology and Ministry and Centre Sèvres in Paris, and worked throughout North America. While often contributing to encounters of ambassadors to the Holy See on women’s role in the Church, she eloquently reminds us that leadership and nominations are to be attributed to merit and faith, not gender.



Sister Raffaella  
Petrini (CNS)

Sister Raffaella Petrini is another humble powerhouse, and now the woman holding the highest post in the Vatican after being named the second in command in the Vatican government. She is now secretary general in the small sovereign state's government, whose structure is found in the middle of the Vatican City State and is responsible for the Vatican's day-to-day and financial operations. Anyone you speak to about her lauds her character, intelligence and faith. Sister Raffaella, an expert in Catholic social doctrine, was born in Rome in 1969. She holds a doctorate from the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas in Rome and a master's from the University of Hartford's Barney School of Business in organizational behavior.

For their faith, expertise in their fields and their ability to shatter glass ceilings in a world mostly dominated by male clergymen, these two sisters are well-deserving to be honored as Catholics of the Year.

*Deborah Castellano Lubov writes from Rome.*

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## STEPHANIE WEINERT

*For opening up her heart amid tragedy and showing the world a mother's love*

**By Elizabeth Foss**



Stephanie Weinert  
and Beckett.  
Courtesy photo

On the day my friend Stephanie Weinert gave birth to her fifth child, the hours dragged on as I waited for news. Inexplicably, I was certain this was not going to be a typical birth story. The text was brief, and she was weary. A few more texts and then a pause – a day to let it all come clear, and then not clear at all. Beckett Martin had Down syndrome, with probable heart complications. It would be a week before Stephanie shared the news on social media. When she did, she opened her heart with honesty and candor, but even Stephanie didn't know how much she would eventually lay bare on Instagram.

She wrote, "Beckett is going to have a good and happy life, we will make sure of it. He will also have lots of therapy, open-heart surgery when he's an older toddler, and many things our family will be able to offer up along the way."



Stephanie maintained a lively social media presence as she adapted to her new role as a special-needs mom. Whenever we saw her on our screens, we saw Beckett, too. Thousands of women fell in love with Stephanie's baby.

Shortly after his first birthday, concern over Beckett's health grew grave. As she endured one heartbreaking diagnosis and complication after another, Stephanie offered it up and opened up. With courage, honesty and vulnerability, she invited us to her baby's crib and allowed us to keep vigil with her there. She shared her grief, her doubts, her struggles and her astounding faith.

When Beckett died in Stephanie's arms in the spring of 2021, she shared that, too.

Determined to reveal the glory of God in the most painful place imaginable, Stephanie invited us to the funeral, where weeping, watchful people worldwide learned to celebrate the life and death of a child in the Mass of the Angels.

Beckett had a good and happy life. Stephanie and her husband, Peter, made sure of it. He also had a good and happy death. In the months following their tremendous loss, Stephanie listened to the stories of people who asked for Beckett's intercession. She began to catalog the fruits of those prayers, rejoicing even as she grieved the indescribable personal loss that brought us a good little saint. The sweet joy of her boy and the intense sorrow of her loss – she offered it all along the way, and we are all better for it. For her bravery in sharing her family's story, Our Sunday Visitor is proud to honor her among its Catholics of the Year.

*Elizabeth Foss is a Catholic author and blogger. She writes from Virginia.*