



# New York Encounter 2020: Final Statement

What can allow us to move past the ideological shells in which we spend most of our lives? This was the question that pervaded the **20 conferences, 3 original shows, and 5 exhibits** at the 12th edition of the New York Encounter, February 14-16, 2020. The Encounter came together with the help of more than **400 volunteers** from across the United States, Canada, and beyond, and welcomed thousands of guests. With nearly **15,000 present** between all events, this was the Encounter's largest edition yet.

Spurred on by a **letter of encouragement from Pope Francis**, the Encounter's theme of ***Crossing the Divide*** was introduced on Friday evening by the music of pianist **Molly Morkowski**, a staged reading of portions of *The Divine Comedy* with Yale professor **Giuseppe Mazzotta**, and welcoming remarks from **Seán Cardinal O'Malley**, Archbishop of Boston. After dinner, visitors enjoyed an intriguingly beautiful show, **The Girl from Hong Kong**, a journey across America in words, music, and images.

The Encounter's theme reflected on ways we can break out from the suffocating ideologies that dominate our culture and set us apart, and reconnect with ourselves, with people near us and with our larger community. All of the events and exhibits explored this theme in one way or another, providing witnesses of this divide being crossed in the most surprising and apparently impossible ways. Interestingly, they all had a common denominator: When, in front of events which break through our schemes, **attention is paid to a shared human experience** rather than to abstract ideas and preconceptions, **seemingly unbridgeable distances between people are discovered to be, in reality, paper-thin**. This emerged in the conferences addressing some of the most challenging topics nowadays: racial ideology (with Blues musician **Daryl Davis** engaging with Ku Klux Klan members, and former white supremacist leader **Christian Piccolini**); the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (with **Robi Damelin** and **Bassam Aramin** sharing stories of reconciliation); the relationship between crime victims and their perpetrators (with **Jeanne Bishop**, who forgave the killer of her sister, brother-in-law, and their unborn child, and **Fr. George Williams**, chaplain for San Quentin State Prison death row inmates); the divide between the "front row" and "back row" of American society (with **Chris Arnade**, author of the best-seller *Dignity*, and Notre Dame professor **Patrick Deneen**); and politics (with **Christine Emba** of *The Washington Post* and **Sohrab Ahmari** of *The New York Post*, discussing which ideals could guide political action, moving past the left/right ideological divide).

Along with the primacy of human experience over abstraction, another aspect recurred in many talks: **without the relationship with someone who can be trusted**, like a father or a mother, a friend, an authority, we twist the provocations of reality to fit our preconceptions, and **we fall back into ideologies**. This was particularly evident in the conference dedicated to the enduring importance of family, not defined only by DNA (with **J.D. Flynn**, editor of Catholic News Agency, **Sarah Hemminger**, CEO of Thread, and software engineer **Matteo Stohlman**). It was also repeated in the witnesses who were part of the series titled "**Across the divide: the power of human experience**" (with **Mario Paredes**, CEO of Somos, a network of doctors who daily cross the divide between first-rate health care and poverty; **Rex Hohlbein**, founder of The BLOCK Project in Seattle, that provides shelter for the homeless in residential backyards;



**Rita Simmonds**, who recounted the journey of her late husband, Frank Simmonds, from dereliction to a life of luminous love; and **Sisters of Life Sr. Agnus Dei** and **Sr. Virginia Joy** who spoke on their work and friendship with women who seek help to welcome their children to life, or healing from the violence of abortion). The positive need of an authority in life was even clearer in the dialogue of **Aaron Riches** of Benedictine College and Idealist.org founder **Ami Dar** with **Fr. Julián Carrón** about his book *Where is God?*. At a certain point Fr. Carron significantly pointed out the difference for a child between entering a dark room alone (like the mystery of life, sometimes, appears to be) or by holding their parent's hand.

Throughout the Encounter, attendees were invited to visit several exhibits, either on their own or with guided tours. One exhibit, **From Ideology to Wonder**, delved into the Encounter theme through writings by many modern authors. Others exploring **artificial intelligence**, the World War II writings of Dutch-Jewish writer **Etty Hillesum**, the experience of **Fr. Luigi Giussani in America**, and finally race through the writings and life of **James Baldwin**. Each of the exhibits approached the question posed by the theme in its own way, as in the case of the friendship between James Baldwin and the painter Beauford Delaney, which allowed Baldwin to begin to look at the reality of race in a true way.

Beside conferences, shows, exhibits, good food at **Encounter's food court**, and the now popular **Poetry Contest** (whose ceremony award occurred at the end of the event dedicated to poetry with **Dana Gioia**), the Encounter offered even more. At the **Kids' Village** children from ages 3 to 10 got involved in various activities. At the **Professional Corner**, visitors could meet with senior professionals in various areas and ask for career development advice. At **"How the Encounter continues"** people could learn more about the life of Communion and Liberation, that generates the Encounter, and how to live in its spirit all year long. New this year was the **"To Infinity and Beyond Lab"**, where young teens, in light of the Encounter theme, assembled over the weekend a model of Boston's Zakim bridge.

The Encounter closed with an event entitled *Someone, Somewhere, Who Lived Fully*. **Fr. Zacharie Bukuru** of Burundi, **His Grace Anba David**, bishop of the Coptic Orthodox Diocese of New York and New England, and **Rev. Marcel Uwineza**, Rwandan genocide survivor, told the stories of the 40 Burundian martyrs killed by Hutu rebels, and the 21 Coptic martyrs killed by ISIS. It was evident that those martyrs were people who lived fully and, in a way, could be also viewed as our **true friends**.

At the end of the Encounter we were left with these words, taken from the testament of **Fr. Christian de Chergé**, the superior of the monastery of Tibhirine in Algeria who, after being kidnapped, was killed on May 24, 1996, by a group of terrorists: "[Upon my death] ... this is what I shall be able to do, if God wills—immerse my gaze in that of the Father ... **whose secret joy will always be to establish communion and to refashion the likeness, delighting in the differences.**"

These witnesses to a love so certain to overcome fear and death in the name of life, which during the Encounter may have seemed great, but still distant and perhaps excessive, only a few days later, in the midst of a vicious pandemic, suddenly became closer to us, more real, and maybe desirable. See you, hopefully, next year!