

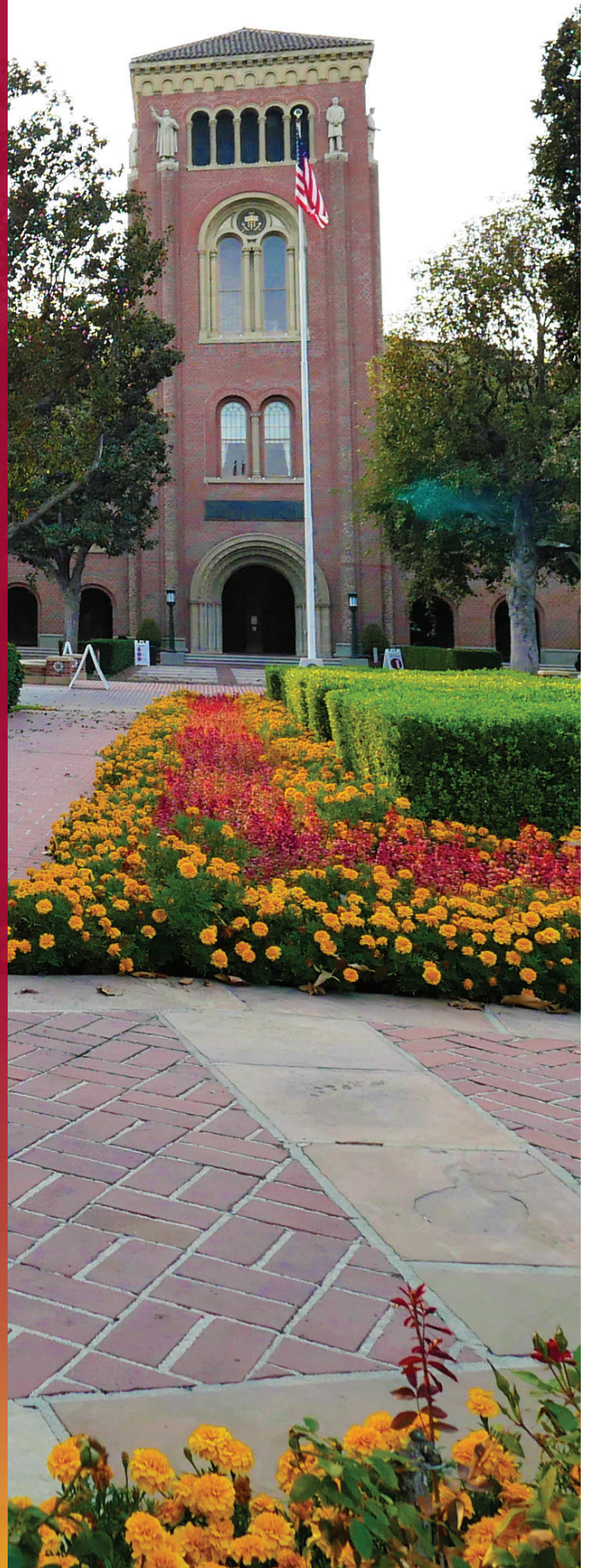


IACS

Institute for Advanced
Catholic Studies at USC

Instituto para Estudios Superiores
del Catolicismo de USC

2025 ANNUAL REPORT



LETTER FROM THE IACS PRESIDENT

Friends,

Leading the Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies at USC continues to be one of the great honors of my career. As I approach my third year serving as president of IACS, it's clear we have generated substantial 'proof of concept' for the trajectory on which we have embarked: drawing on the vision and generosity of our founders, funders, and thought partners to simultaneously advance the Catholic intellectual tradition while bringing it to bear to address crucial challenges facing the Church and our society.

The Catholic intellectual tradition — the deep reservoir of careful thinking rooted within the Catholic sacramental vision of human society and God — is not constituted solely by theology and doctrine (though certainly both are important elements of it). Rather, it includes Catholic-inflected work across the social sciences, humanities, arts and liturgy — and then the application of that work within the professional sectors of law, business, social policy, medicine, and social service. Indeed, the Catholic intellectual tradition does not exist in isolation, nor is it static. It gains insight via dialogue with secular thought and other spiritual traditions while staying rooted in deep doctrinal truths and evolving in a dynamic, relevant way as believers and all of humanity confront new realities.

So the Catholic intellectual tradition is sacramental, crossdisciplinary and emergent even as it remains deeply rooted as *tradition*. At IACS, we advance that tradition to serve humanity and the Church and to inform the authoritative decision-making of bishops and the Vatican.

But neither the Church nor Catholic thought exist for themselves. Both are oriented beyond themselves to the world, toward the “new evangelization” of cultures and institutions (Saint Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI) and toward Pope Francis’ call to “missionary discipleship.” This past year, we brought together our Generations in Dialogue cohort of leading early-career scholars to explore the role of Catholic thought and medical ethics, gathered leading theologians and policy experts to discuss how religions can support healthy political institutions and vibrant public participation, convened a European Academy of Religion session on building Catholic intellectual networks that support bishops as they lead the worldwide Church, and welcomed three trustees to our board. And, as you’ll see in the pages ahead, we did much more.

Our work at the Institute has never been more essential. Each day, we move our mission forward as we answer the Church’s call to transcend narrow interests and polarization in service of something greater than ourselves and deeper than this moment. We have worked successfully these two years (and more than two decades as an Institute) to provide this proof of concept for how our work makes a difference in the world. I am excited for the year ahead, and our future is bright — but your help is vital to scale our work and make our mission sustainable over the long term.

We hope you will read with joy about our work and consider joining those who already support IACS — and doubling down on your generosity if you're already one of our valued supporters. By contributing to IACS, you're supporting a mission that has a tangible impact today on our parishes, communities and society; a mission that will echo across generations.

As we enter 2026, we are grateful for all our funders, thought partners, and friends who accompany the Institute. Please pray for our mission and prayerfully consider supporting it in whatever way you can.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Richard L. Wood". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being the most prominent.

Richard L. Wood, Ph.D.

President

Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies at USC

MAKING AN IMPACT IN OUR COMMUNITIES

And Across
The Globe

- **February 2025:** Fellows in the Generations in Dialogue Cohort gathered in Austin, Texas to meet at Neuralink and the University of Texas, Austin, to discuss the future of medical technology, faith, and access.
- **May 2025:** IACS co-convened nearly 100 parish leaders, Catholic non-profit staff, and scholars at the University of San Francisco to advance Catholic leadership in public life.
- **June 2025:** IACS co-convened a session in collaboration with *Concilium: An International Journal of Theology at the European Academy of Religion* on building Catholic intellectual networks that can truly ‘think with the bishops’ as they lead the worldwide Church.
- **July 2025:** IACS President Dr. Richard L. Wood spoke at a convening at the USCCB with labor and business leaders from the U.S., Mexico, Canada, Latin America, and the Caribbean on how Catholic teaching can advance healthy economic development of society.
- **August 2025:** IACS hosted a two-day symposium on “The Future of Catholicism” with Tricia Bruce, Ph.D, president of the Association for the Sociology of Religion. The convening featured more than 40 Catholic sociologists, theologians, ethicists, and other scholars in Chicago. Dr. Bruce now serves as senior research fellow at IACS.
- **September 2025:** IACS hosted at USC’s Caruso Catholic Center a talk by Dr. Maureen Day, co-author of *Catholicism at a Crossroads*, based on surveys and hundreds of interviews of everyday Catholics and their leaders.
- **September 2025:** IACS President Dr. Richard L. Wood discussed his paper in Rome on how contemporary economic dynamics are undermining families by extracting people’s cognitive resources and moral lives. The discussion was part of an international convening by the Pontifical Commission for Latin America and the Pontifical Academy for Life, held at the John Paul II Institute on Marriage and the Family.
- **November 2025:** IACS and affiliated scholars Maureen Day and Lucas Sharma gathered 25 faculty and graduate students for Mass, faith reflection, and a shared meal at the annual meeting of the Society for the Social Scientific Study of Religion.
- **December 2025:** IACS collaborated with Oxford University’s McDonald Centre on Theology, Ethics, and Public Life to convene 20 leading theologians and democratic theorists on how Christianity can buttress healthy political institutions that embody the substance of democratic life.
- **Also in 2025:** Former IACS DePaul Fellow Dr. Leo Guardado, assistant professor of theology at Fordham University, edited the final book of Fr. Gustavo Gutierrez, one of the great Catholic theologians of his generation (*Pensar y Vivir con los Pobres*, coming out in English in 2026). Dr. Guardado also hosted a major global webinar from Lima, Peru to launch the book. For his work, Dr. Guardado was awarded the Faculty Teaching Award from Fordham School of Arts and Sciences in the Humanities.


- Former IACS Hancock Fellow Dr. Brandon Vaidyanathan, associate professor and chair of sociology at The Catholic University of America, extended his groundbreaking and IACS-supported research on “Beauty at Work” and a new project on the current status of Roman Catholic clergy in the United States.
- **February 2026:** IACS will host a public event at the USC Caruso Catholic Center on how parish closures, when deemed necessary, can be carried out in ways that support the local parish community and its neighborhood.
- **Fall 2026:** IACS will kick off the new Fr. James L. Heft, SM Generations in Dialogue literary cohort. Included will be a public event on the importance of literary arts in the Catholic intellectual tradition.



IACS President Dr. Richard L. Wood and Msgr. Lizardo Estrada Herrera, OSA, auxiliary bishop of Cuzco, Peru.

Regis Professor Dr. Luke Bretherton (IACS' key partner at Oxford University) speaking while IACS President Dr. Richard L. Wood and other scholars listen.

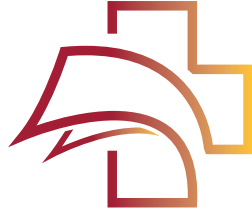


 Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies at USC

HUMANIZING NETWORKS:

HUMAN FRATERNITY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

dornsife.usc.edu/iacs/humanizingnetworks



IACS IN 2026: UPCOMING EVENTS AND PROGRAMS

The Future of Congregations and Communities: Call and Response

February 5-6, USC Caruso Catholic Center

Throughout the U.S., buildings owned by parishes, churches, mosques, synagogues and temples are undergoing profound changes, whether through re-purposing, expansion, retrenchment, or closure. What can we learn from this trend, and how can faith communities, urban planners, public officials, real estate developers, and religious leaders lay the groundwork for vigorous and spiritually integrated communities across Southern California and beyond?

The invitation-only opportunity is a collaboration between IACS, the University of Notre Dame's Center for the Study of Religion and Society and Fitzgerald Institute for Real Estate, Partners for Sacred Places, and the Lake Institute on Faith & Giving. The two-day gathering will include presentations by local and national experts on patterns of congregational use, closure, and the alternative uses of religious buildings, using Los Angeles, Chicago, Boston, and other cities as case studies from which we can all learn in order to better plan for the future.

Democratic Crisis and Cultures of Encounter

February 20, Washington, D.C.

We need to find ways to reimagine and build healthy political communities in the contemporary world. Well-worn but contested concepts like “pluralism”, “diversity”, “inclusion,” “multiculturalism,” and even “democracy” itself evoke the possibility of cooperation across divides but do not capture our divisive moment. A promising alternative proposed by Pope Francis and Pope Leo XIV — “the culture of encounter” — acknowledges deep divisions while still affirming the possibility of a shared political community. What are the strengths and weaknesses of encounter as an analytical category? How might building a culture of encounter help to address our contemporary democratic crisis?

The Berkley Center at Georgetown University and IACS will co-sponsor this convening of leading Catholic and secular thinkers to address these questions, with funding from the Henry Luce Foundation's Religion & Theology Program.

Re-Thinking Race & Religion

April 9-11, USC Caruso Catholic Center and Orange County

Premised on the view that the societal conversation on race has stagnated unproductively, this event features political theologians Jonathan Tran (Duke University) and Vincent Lloyd (Villanova). Their forthcoming book, *Race Crucified, Race Resurrected: On the Possibility of Racial Life* rejects identity-based versions of anti-racism in favor of versions founded on more solid Christian theological underpinnings.

The two-day event will feature public presentations by Tran and Lloyd as well as a day-long seminar with local scholars.

Conceptions of Authority in Roman Catholicism

June 23-25

The 2021-2024 Synod on Synodality revived an ecclesial focus on collaboration, co-responsibility, and leadership shared by men, women, lay people, religious, and ordained ministers, walking together in the Catholic Church. While the Synod introduced new forms of deliberation and consultation at all levels of the Church — while preserving the deep tradition of apostolic authority — the theological, ecclesiological, and sociological underpinnings of such changes have received less attention. The Church has a strong theology of synodality with roots in scripture, ecclesiology, history, and tradition; does it have a similar theology for the exercise of authority in a synodal Church? This convening of scholars and ministerial practitioners will produce new writing, new ideas, and new social media narratives to address these questions.

Literary Worlds

Fall 2026, University of Southern California

Two related streams of programming will focus on literary worlds: First, IACS and a team led by our affiliated scholar Dana Gioia — eminent Catholic poet, former poet laureate for California, and emeritus faculty member at USC — will organize a public event focusing on the importance of literary arts in the Catholic intellectual tradition and reflecting on how Catholicism shapes creative expression today.

Second, a new cohort of the Fr. James L Heft, S.M. Generations in Dialogue Program will gather twice a year for two years to address growing questions around literature and new A.I. tools that promise to “write this for you.” These tools raise important concerns about the nature of literature and creativity. They also prompt us to consider how to sustain human-based literary traditions, protect written work from A.I. infringement, and intentionally cultivate human-created literature. Can the wisdom of the Catholic literary tradition — one that values the full range of human experience and centers the Spirit, human dignity, and the vulnerable and marginalized — offer a path forward?

The next Generations in Dialogue cohort will bring together emerging and well-established writers to consider these crucial questions and create a Catholicism-centered literary community navigating these new waters.

GENERATIONS IN DIALOGUE: Conversations on Ethics and the Edge of Innovation

Fellows from the current GID cohort discuss the future of medical technology, faith, and access to medical advances.

By Becky King Cerling, Ph.D., IACS Executive Director

In February 2025, the medical ethics Fellows of the IACS Fr. James L. Heft, S.M. Generations in Dialogue Program packed into three cars and headed to the rural outskirts of Austin, Texas. Several GPS checks determined we were not lost, and we eventually reached our destination: Neuralink, the neurotechnology company founded by Elon Musk that develops brain computer interfaces (BCIs). The Neuralink compound might easily be mistaken for a farm — several nondescript, white buildings surrounded by fields. Once inside, we were warmly welcomed by staff, who outlined security protocols, asked each of us to sign a non-disclosure agreement, and ushered us into a small conference room for coffee and pastries — and the start of a conversation.

The conversation at Neuralink centered around the production of BCIs — current implementation challenges as well as future goals of the company. The conversation continued that afternoon at the Neurosurgery Department at the University of Texas, Austin. There the GID fellows were joined by neurosurgeons, biotech engineers, and linguists: all professors, all practicing medicine with patients, all concerned about healing and well-being. An amazing collection of practitioners and scholars gathered around a conference table.

Scholarship often happens in conversations around tables. To an observer, the folks around the table might look like any group of colleagues drinking coffee, sharing the joys and frustrations of their work, and stories about their families or faith. And that is exactly what scholars do. The substance of their conversations about work is different, but like others around tables, they listen, ask questions, introduce new colleagues, and figure stuff out.

These GID Fellows' current conversations focus on medical ethics in light of new technologies — and often seem to border on science fiction — topics that require considerable knowledge and background. The conversations also include questions that border faith and science, ethics and technology; questions that will impact all of us: what boundaries should be put on medical technology? Should those boundaries be put in place before the technology is developed — or after? Who has access to the technology? How can the Catholic intellectual tradition speak to these issues? What can the Church learn in these new frontiers? How can a person bring the light of their faith to their work at the leading edge of bioethics?

“The substance of GID Fellows’ current conversations focus on medical ethics in light of new technologies — and often seem to border on science fiction.”

Most of us don't have the background to join these conversations. But in addition to participating in highly technical conversations that expand their scholarship and extend their scholarly networks, GID fellows learn to bring the conversations to us in ways that we can understand. For example, Generations in Dialogue Fellow, Dr. Mariele



Mariele Courtois, Ph.D.

Courtois and Dr. Paul Scherz explored the implications of new artificial technology for people of faith in a podcast conversation. GID Fellow Dr. Brian J. Boyd engaged an unexpected conversation partner—the Amish—to help think about making decisions with respect to new technologies in an article in *The New Atlantis*. These are just two examples of the conversations scholars are having around tables — and the potential solutions that they can discover, together.

Perhaps most importantly, scholarly conversations around tables build friendships. Friendships that include forwarding funny memes, allowing kids to play in the background of Zoom meetings, and praying for one another as we learn each other’s concerns. Friendships that allow for continued conversation even when disagreements arise. Friendships and conversations that spark ideas and new knowledge. And friendships and conversations not confined to an academic setting, but that instead model engagement and dialogue for all of us even as they help shape the future we will all share.



Bryan Boyd, Ph.D.



Kristen Drahos, Ph.D.



Members of the Generations in Dialogue cohort gathered in Texas in February 2025 to explore areas related to transhumanism & the body. In October, the group spent a weekend together in Northern Indiana thinking about personhood and consciousness, embryo adoptions and dish brains—and how these complex issues impact ordinary humans.

IACS: PROVIDING A FORUM FOR CIVILITY AND CONSTRUCTIVE DIALOGUE

Many years ago, when Fr. Jim Heft, S.M., articulated to me the principle goal for his newly established Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies, the concept resonated immediately.

Addressing contemporary world problems and societal issues with traditional Catholic value was a much-needed and worthy idea. I was ready and eager to lend my support. Through the years, as I've watched the Institute grow into the mature, well-run and productive organization that it is today, I still cherish that initial and enduring goal.

I am also impressed with the overall demeanor that permeates the work of IACS, which provides opportunities for theologians, scientists, scholars, and even government and non-government representatives to gather and discuss society's most pressing issues, often presenting opposing views in spirited, respectful and constructive dialogue. Through its work, IACS provides an essential forum for civility and grace in the public square. Our world today would do well to dial back the acrimony and to imitate the ways of our Institute.

Maureen King
Member, IACS Board of Trustees



IACS Trustee Maureen King and Charlie King with Cardinal Robert McElroy (left) and Sante Fe Archbishop John Wester (right) at the IACS event "Forum on Nuclear Strategy: Disarmament & Deterrence in a Dangerous World," held in September 2024 at the University of New Mexico.

FROM THE BERLIN WALL TO THE VATICAN: A Sociologist's Journey Through Faith and Society

Born into the transient life of a military family, IACS Senior Research Fellow Tricia C. Bruce, Ph.D., discovered that while society may change, the Catholic parish remains a constant — sparking a lifelong mission to map the intersection of lived religion and social shifts.



By Tricia C. Bruce, Ph.D.

Editor's note: A sociologist of religion with expertise in U.S. Catholicism, parish life, and social change, Dr. Bruce is a Senior Research Fellow at IACS, where she leads select Institute research projects.

Seeing the colorful, graffitied, West Germany side of the Berlin Wall running parallel to the whitewashed concrete barrier enclosing East Germany stands out among my most poignant memories as a child. I was raised an “army brat”: the daughter of a father who served in the U.S. Armed Forces and a mother who stood by his side as an “army wife.” Our family moved. A lot. I was born and raised in San Antonio, before relocating to other parts of Texas and then on to Florida, Colorado, West Germany, and then back to Texas. My experiences in a military family awakened in me a fascination with differences across a vast world of people, places, and cultures. Realizing that people shape — and are shaped by — their environments offered, for me, an early introduction to this thing called “society.”

Building Community

For my family, the local Catholic parish was always our first stop in a new destination. It was where we found hope, comfort, and friends to start building a community all over again. At church, we found something reassuringly familiar. Wherever we moved, the Catholic Church was there. Faith and parish life lent resilience amid a life marked by change.

Late in high school, I came across a subject with a language and approach for my curiosities about people and their contexts: sociology. I was energized and intrigued — it felt like reading and doing history in real time, as the world unfolded. Sociology asked questions, looked for patterns, sought out differences, and made room for the vast wonder and complexity of human experiences.

Once in college, I combined my newfound passion for sociology with my foundational memories of religion as a site of identity formation, community building, socialization, and social impact. Sociology could ask questions differently of and about religion, with answers grounded in empirical observation and lived behavior. I started asking a lot of

questions: like what was “Catholic” about Catholic Charities, how everyday Catholics aligned with formal Church teaching (or not), what motivated some Catholics to urge the Church to change, and more.

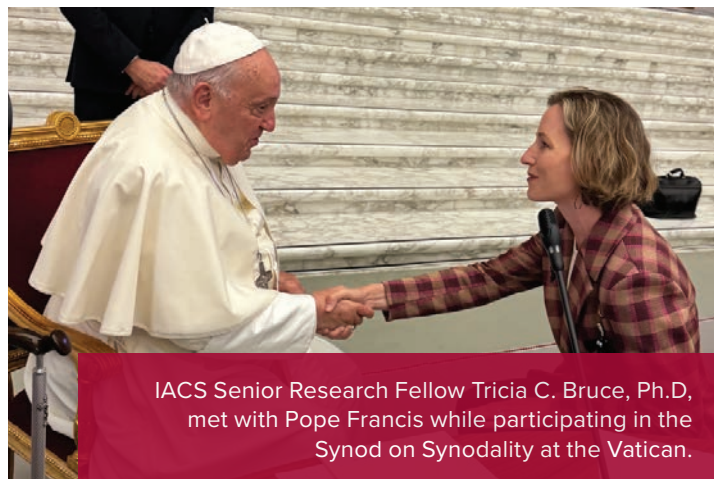
Pursuing these kinds of questions, supported by great mentors including Wade Clark Roof, led me to complete my master’s and Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of California, Santa Barbara. As a sociologist of religion, my work focuses especially on U.S. Catholicism. I’ve published several books: *Faithful Revolution: How Voice of the Faithful Is Changing the Church* (Oxford University Press, 2011/2014), *Polarization in the US Catholic Church: Naming the Wounds, Beginning to Heal* (Liturgical Press, 2016), *Parish and Place: Making Room for Diversity in the American Catholic Church* (Oxford University Press, 2017), *American Parishes: Remaking Local Catholicism* (Fordham University Press, 2019), and *Our Lives: What Abortion Attitudes Reveal About Who We Are As Americans* (University of California Press, forthcoming 2026). I’ve conducted applied research for groups including the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Lay Centre, the Catholic Project, and more. I’ve served as President of the Association for the Sociology of Religion (ASR) and am currently President-Elect of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion (SSSR). And, in 2024, Pope Francis appointed me as a social science consultant to the General Secretariat of the Synod: an “expert” participant in the global Synod on Synodality.

“I’m thrilled to be partnering with IACS to advance its mission to strengthen Catholic thought and imagination and contribute to the important questions of the day.”

Mapping the Church

Sociology brings a unique lens and set of questions to the Church: one that attends to what is more than what *ought* to be. Sociology equips lay, religious, and ordained leaders with knowledge and understanding of their “flock.” It situates the Church within broader dynamics of social and cultural change. It helps Catholics and non-Catholics alike to decipher and anticipate demographic and organizational transformation. It’s not unlike taking the temperature or drawing a map to know where and what things are.

My personal faith commitments resonate with my passion for and expertise in the sociology of religion. As a lifelong Catholic, I care about how the Church shows up in the world and what it means to and for individual Catholics. Nuns and priests were among the most influential people in my life; the rituals of Mass ground me in something greater than myself. I know personally the Catholic Church, locally and globally, to be something that continues to matter in society. My desire to equip others with truth (small “t”) motivates my research as a sociologist also sitting in the pews (and, for years, singing and playing guitar with the choir).



IACS Senior Research Fellow Tricia C. Bruce, Ph.D, met with Pope Francis while participating in the Synod on Synodality at the Vatican.

Furthering the IACS mission

I’m thrilled to be partnering with IACS to advance its mission to strengthen Catholic thought and imagination and contribute to the important questions of the day. One such important question, motivating an IACS project I’m leading, is the nature of authority and decision-making in a “Synodal” Church. A June 2026 seminar will build dialog

around “Conceptions of Authority in Roman Catholicism” (CoARC), inviting participants to: (1) speak thoughtfully into ongoing conversations regarding lay and ordained roles in the Church; (2) respond to structural conditions of a priesthood currently stymied in meeting all ministerial needs; and (3) bridge otherwise silo-ed vantage points in social science, history, theology, and practice. The seminar will serve as a foundation for an edited volume and future public conversations. Interested participants are invited to apply by January 30, 2026.

I look forward to continued engagement with IACS throughout 2026, collaborating in efforts to inform the Church using the lens and tools of sociology and to inform society through the lens and tools of Catholic thought and imagination.

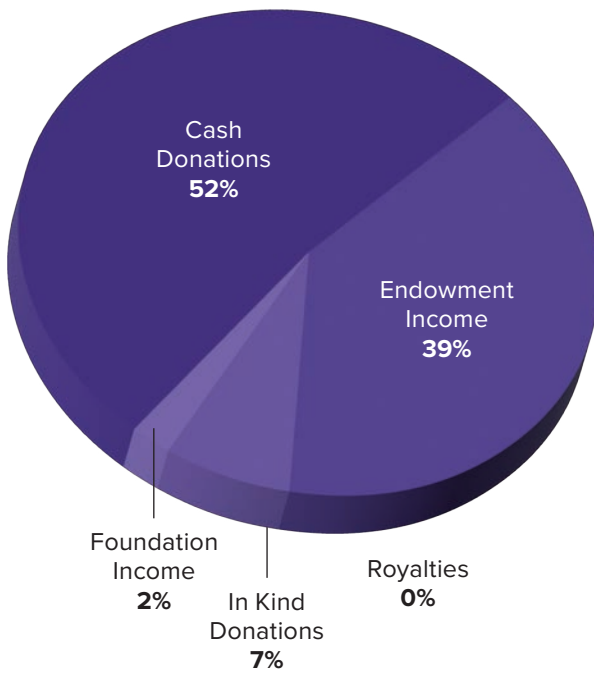


In December, IACS President Dr. Richard L. Wood visited the University of Oxford, where IACS jointly sponsored with the McDonald Centre for Theology Ethics & Public Life “In a Time of Zozobra,” a colloquium convening scholars, practitioners, and institutional leaders to discuss how Christianity can buttress healthy political institutions that embody the substance of democratic life.

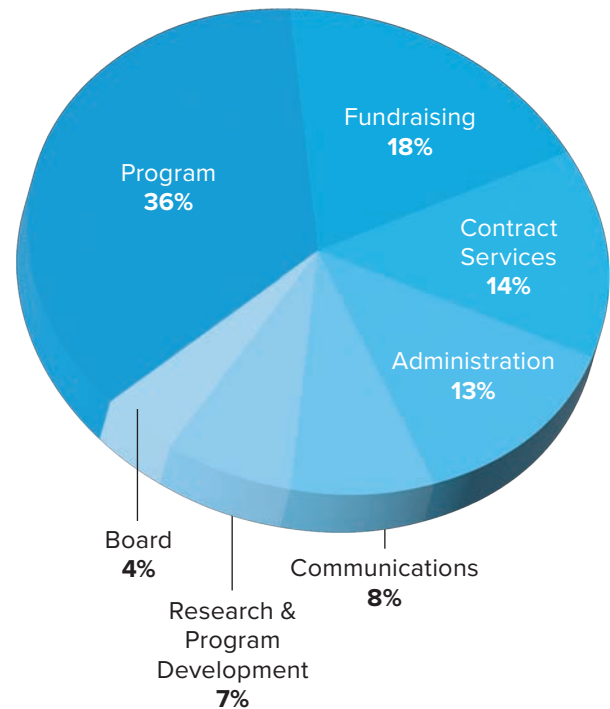
FINANCIALS

Thanks to endowment revenue, careful expense management and our generous supporters, IACS ended the year with a positive net income. **Fundraising for both program and operations continues to be a priority.**

IACS Income FY25



IACS Expenses FY25



Percentages of salaries have been assigned to program, research, communication, fundraising, administration, and board activities based on staff time allocation reporting.

Your gift will make a difference and help the Institute fulfill its **important** mission.

Learn more at dornsife.usc.edu/iacs/support

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The Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies at USC is led by trustees who are leaders in the worlds of business, tech, philanthropy, arts, academia and religion. IACS trustees provide governance and oversight while working collaboratively to further our mission of advancing the exploration of Catholic thought, imagination and experience. IACS trustees also serve as ambassadors, helping communicate the Institute's initiatives, programs and goals within their networks and among the public.

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ABOUT IACS

The **Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies** is a global research center located at the USC Dana and David Dornsife College for Letters, Arts and Sciences.

IACS draws from an international pool of scholars from diverse disciplines and religious traditions to further innovative research, create dialogue and spark ideas on Catholic thought, creative imagination and lived experience. We support scholars and artists, produce books, host academic conferences and cultural events, and further the intellectual work of the Catholic Church.

Our Vision

The Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies at USC works to ensure that the rich and evolving tradition of Catholic thinking will thrive among future generations through broad research, teaching, writing, and creative public engagement.

Our Mission

We are committed to strengthening Catholic thought and imagination and their ability to contribute to the important questions of the day.



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As part of the Institute's expanding global engagement, IACS President Dr. Richard L. Wood spoke at a conference in Rome focused on Global Catholicism and Religious Pluralism. The event was co-sponsored by Reset Dialogues on Civilizations and Georgetown University's Berkley Center, with additional support from IACS.

