

2019 Rome Life Forum to Explore “City of Man vs. City of God”: Interview with Forum Speaker Alan Fimister

(Image courtesy of [Voice of the Family](#))

Since the primordial rebellion of Lucifer and subsequent fall of Adam and Eve, the creatures endowed by Almighty God with intelligence and free will (angels and men) have been divided into two opposing camps: those who choose to love and serve God and those who do not. This reality has dominated the whole of human history, with tension and conflict between “the children of God...and the children of the devil” (1 John 3:10) taking countless forms. Each successive generation, each individual soul, must grapple with this intense state of affairs and choose sides, as Sister Lucia of Fatima once [stated](#): “Either we are for God or we are for the devil. There is no other possibility.”

Such is the essential theme of this year’s [Rome Life Forum](#), an annual conference hosted in the Eternal City by [Voice of the Family](#), “an initiative of Catholic laity from major pro-life and pro-family organisations” throughout the world who, according to the group’s website, “formed to offer [their] expertise and resources before, during and after the Synod on the Family 2014-15.” The theme of this year’s Forum, “City of Man vs. City of God: Global One World Order vs. Christendom,” is based on St. Augustine of Hippo’s famous work, *The City of God*, in which the renowned Bishop and Doctor of the Church treats at length of the “two cities” which “have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self” ([City of God, Book XIV](#), Ch. 28).

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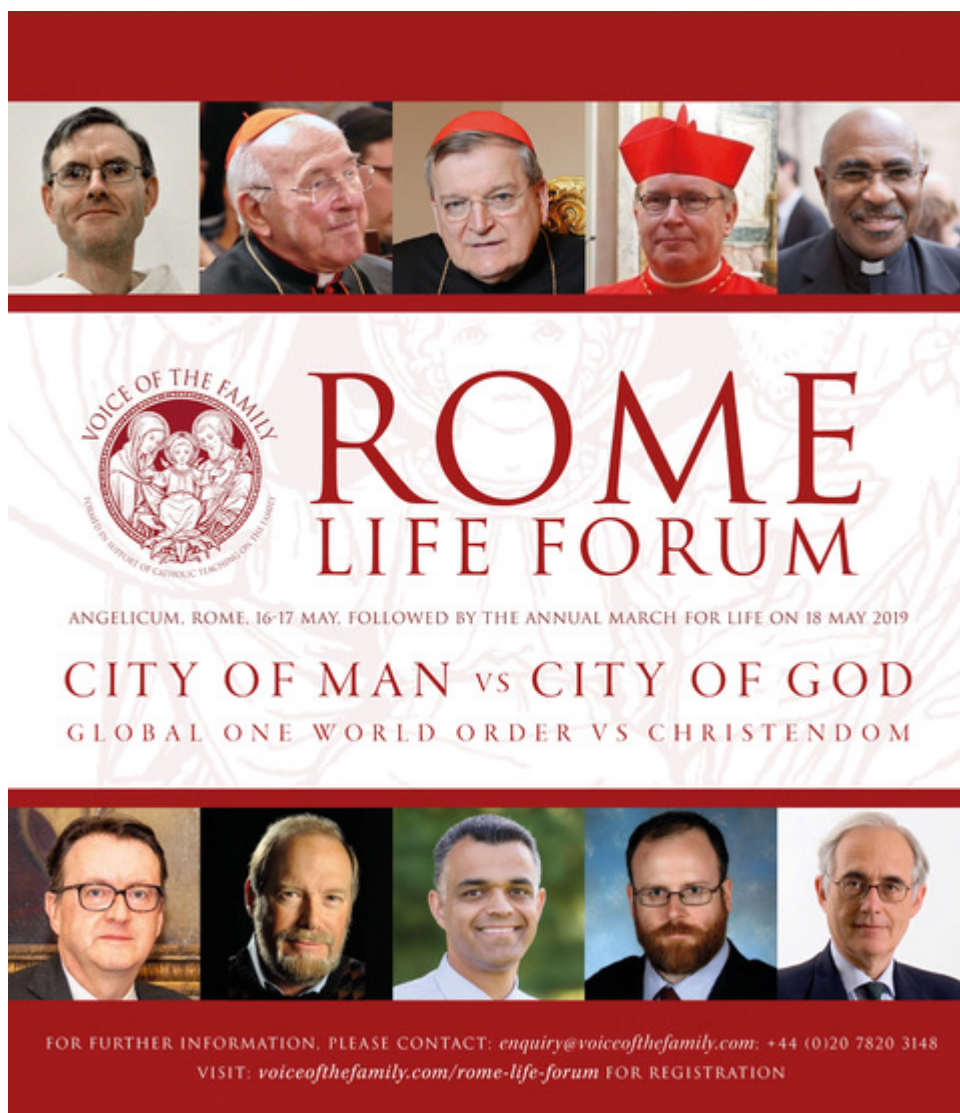


Image courtesy of [Voice of the Family](https://www.voiceofthefamily.com/).

Since its [inception](#) in 2014, the Rome Life Forum has become well known as a premier event for Catholic pro-life and pro-family leaders, showcasing an impressive array of international speakers who are willing to address controversial topics for the good of the Church and of souls. At the 2016 Forum, for example, Mr. Matthew McCusker of the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children (SPUC) in the UK addressed “[Key Doctrinal Errors and Ambiguities of Amoris Laetitia](#)” less than a month after the release of the Pope’s contentious document. During the Fatima Centennial in 2017, Cardinal Raymond Burke, a regular Forum speaker, made headlines with his [historic call](#) to “work for the consecration of Russia to the Immaculate Heart of Mary” according to the “explicit instruction” of Our Lady of Fatima. And last year, Italian Church historian Roberto de Mattei, founder and president of

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the Lepanto Foundation in Rome (another regular Forum speaker), discussed “[Obedience and Resistance in the History of Doctrine of the Church](#)”, a topic which is becoming ever more urgent as the errors of the present pontificate continue unabated.

While surveying the [program](#) for this year’s Forum, I was pleasantly surprised to spot the name of a gentleman who lives and works in my local area. Dr. Alan Fimister, who holds a Ph.D. in History and a licentiate in Sacred Theology (among other degrees), is an assistant professor of Theology at the Archdiocese of Denver’s [St. John Vianney Theological Seminary](#) and will be addressing the 2019 Rome Life Forum on the topic, “No Abiding City – The Challenge of St. Augustine”.

I first corresponded with Dr. Fimister in the fall of 2016 in reference to a [theological critique](#) of *Amoris Laetitia* dated June 29, 2016 and signed by 45 “Catholic theologians and philosophers, Church historians and pastors of souls” ([cover letter](#)), including Dr. Fimister. Readers may recall that this critique, addressed and submitted to Cardinal Angelo Sodano (Dean of the College of Cardinals), was originally intended as a private “criticism of the harmful parts of *Amoris laetitia*” in “the form of a theological censure of the individual passages that are deficient.” However, the list of signatories was leaked by the *National Catholic Reporter* in late July 2016 without the accompanying critique, so the latter was also [made public](#) in order to demonstrate the legitimacy of the censures.

After seeing him listed as a speaker, I reached out to Dr. Fimister and asked if he might be willing to field some questions related to this year’s Rome Life Forum, as well as some other topics pertaining to the current state of the Church. What follows is our interview exchange.

Catholic Family News (CFN): Thank you, Dr. Fimister, for taking the time to conduct this interview. Perhaps for starters you could share with readers a little about your professional background and how you were asked to address this year’s Rome Life Forum.

Dr. Alan Fimister (AF): I am an Englishman from Newcastle upon Tyne. I read History, Philosophy and Theology at Oxford and then studied Catholic Theology in Austria and took my Doctorate and taught at Aberdeen University. After a year discerning my vocation with the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal, I began teaching Church History and Patrology at the International Theological Institute (a papal theology institute outside Vienna founded by Pope John Paul II). After five years there I moved to St. John Vianney Theological Seminary in Denver, Colorado where I have been since 2015. The organizers of the Rome Life Forum

approached me after reading another text I composed on St. Augustine and *The City of God*, a work which I have had the joy of studying for many years.

CFN: The title of your Forum lecture is, “No Abiding City - The Challenge of St. Augustine”. Could you briefly describe your central thesis and how it relates to the Forum theme? Is your lecture title perhaps based on Hebrews 13:14, which reads: “For we have not here a lasting city, but we seek one that is to come”?

AF: St. Augustine’s response to the sack of Rome in 410 was to emphasize the profound difference between the hope of the Church and the love which animates those merely human societies which are under the dominion of the evil one. There can be no compromise between the ‘Two Cities’ identified by St Augustine: the one created by the love of self, reaching even to contempt of God; the other by the love of God, reaching to contempt of self. We can never build a common civilization with those whose hope is in this world because the city for which we strive is above.

CFN: For those not familiar with *The City of God*, could you provide a brief overview of St. Augustine’s lengthy work? How would you describe the influence it has exercised on the Church and society at large over the centuries?

AF: *On the City of God Against the Pagans* is intended to demonstrate that the true homeland of the protagonists of human history is beyond this world and that the lives of individuals and societies cannot be understood from within temporal history but only as a struggle between two cities whose rulers, destiny, and principle citizens are invisible to us. The work is made up of twenty-two books. The first ten are a refutation of paganism. Books 1-5 show that the pagan gods (in fact, demons in rebellion against their Creator and determined to ruin mankind) cannot bring temporal happiness and 6-10 that they cannot bring eternal happiness. The last twelve books explain the origin (11-14), progress (15-18), and destiny (19-22) of the City of God and its enemy, the City of the World. After the Bible, *The City of God* formed the central text for medieval man in his understanding of history and society. It was a sort of ‘Charter of Christendom’.

CFN: Pope Leo XIII singled out St. Augustine and his *City of God* for praise in his 1885 encyclical [*Immortale Dei*](#) “On the Christian Constitution of States”. In that same encyclical, he also emphasized that “the State...is clearly bound to act up to the manifold and weighty duties linking it to God, by the public profession of religion”, and not just any religion, “but the religion which God enjoins” (n. 6), namely, the Catholic Faith. Yet in more recent decades, and particularly since the Second Vatican Council, we don’t seem to hear much about the duty of nations (or even individuals) to profess the true Faith and to honor the Social Kingship of

Christ, likewise emphasized by Leo XIII (1899 encyclical [Annum Sacrum](#)) and reiterated by Pius XI (1925 encyclical [Quas Primas](#)). What can be done, in your view, to recover this largely forgotten teaching and present it as something desirable to our fellow Catholics? Does St. Augustine’s *City of God* offer any insights in this regard?

AF: The original conflict between the two cities arose because Satan refused to accept that participation in God’s own bliss—the end which God offered to His intelligent creatures—was God’s gift rather than the right of all rational beings. The fact that we cannot invent or discover our own destiny but must receive it from God and on His terms is reflected in the fact and acknowledged through recognition that all men and all communities of men must worship God in the manner He has appointed—the Catholic Faith. There is no ‘natural religion’; there is the revealed word of God, those who accept God’s gift, and those who seek to grasp at equality with God by spurning His word.

As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches ([para. 2244](#)): “Every institution is inspired, at least implicitly, by a vision of man and his destiny, from which it derives the point of reference for its judgment, its hierarchy of values, its line of conduct. Most societies have formed their institutions in the recognition of a certain preeminence of man over things. Only the divinely revealed religion has clearly recognized man’s origin and destiny in God, the Creator and Redeemer. The Church invites political authorities to measure their judgments and decisions against this inspired truth about God and man: Societies not recognizing this vision or rejecting it in the name of their independence from God are brought to seek their criteria and goal in themselves or to borrow them from some ideology. Since they do not admit that one can defend an objective criterion of good and evil, they arrogate to themselves an explicit or implicit totalitarian power over man and his destiny, as history shows.” [The inclusion of this quote does not constitute a blanket endorsement of the post-conciliar *Catechism* by CFN. – Ed.]

CFN: Switching gears a bit, I’d like to ask about your status as a signer of the 2016 [theological critique of *Amoris Laetitia*](#). How were you alerted to the initiative and what prompted you to add your name to the document? Have you faced any negative repercussions for your decision?

AF: I have known number of the individuals who drafted the earliest versions of that text for many years and they showed these versions to me at that stage. My employer has behaved extremely reasonably in regard to the document without necessarily endorsing its content.

CFN: As you know, the famous [dubia](#) of Cardinals Burke, Brandmüller, Meisner (RIP), and Caffarra (RIP) was [hand-delivered](#) to Pope Francis just a few months

after the theological critique was presented to Cardinal Sodano. Since that time, we have seen similar documents published - for example, the [Correctio filialis](#) signed by 250 clergy and lay scholars and the Kazakhstan Bishops’ [Profession of the Immutable Truths about Sacramental Marriage](#) - yet Pope Francis has declined to publicly acknowledge any of the above initiatives, choosing instead to endorse [heterodox guidelines](#) concerning the implementation of *Amoris Laetitia*. What are Catholics to make of his apparent refusal to affirm basic Church teaching on marriage, divorce, adultery, and the dispositions necessary to receive the sacraments worthily?

AF: The most charitable interpretation would be that the Holy Father is seeking to cut the Gordian knot created by these irregular unions without undermining Catholic doctrine. Having set himself an impossible task, he is unable to offer any further clarity without giving up altogether. [Readers should consult the recently released “[Open Letter to the Bishops](#)” concerning Pope Francis and examine the evidence for his obstinance in heresy presented therein. - Ed.]

CFN: In early February of this year, Pope Francis signed another controversial document, this time, with a high-ranking Muslim official. Their joint declaration “[On Human Fraternity](#)” states, “The pluralism and the diversity of religions, colour, sex, race and language are willed by God in His wisdom, through which He created human beings.” As a Catholic theologian, how would you respond to this claim that “the diversity of religions” - in other words, the true Faith plus false religions - “are willed by God”? Do you agree with Bishop Athanasius Schneider that this claim is [false](#) and [must be corrected](#)?

AF: The Holy Father appears to have clarified the matter by stating that the diversity of religions is willed by God only permissively [during a [private conversation](#) with Bishop Schneider; according to Schneider, however, a [formal correction](#) is still necessary - Ed.]. Unfortunately, this is unlikely to resolve the confusion on its own unless the clarification is given the same formal status as the original declaration, especially as it is not a very natural reading of that text.

CFN: In conclusion, I’d like to ask a couple of questions about the clerical sexual abuse crisis and the appeal of Tradition among younger Catholics.

As you know, the abuse firestorm was reignited last summer due to revelations of Theodore McCarrick’s [crimes](#) and subsequent [allegations](#) of Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò regarding a systematic cover-up of those crimes by numerous high-ranking churchmen, including Pope Francis (like the *dubia*, Archbishop Viganò’s

testimony remains unanswered). As Archbishop Viganò and many others have emphasized, the vast majority of clerical sexual abuse cases (including McCarrick’s crimes) are same-sex in nature - statistically, around 80 percent - thus indicating a [strong link](#) between homosexuality and abuse. Do you agree there is a correlation between the two? And further, do you agree with the Church’s [ongoing prohibition](#) against admitting “to the seminary or to Holy Orders those who practice homosexuality, present deep-seated homosexual tendencies or support the so-called ‘gay culture’”?

AF: The marital context of authentic sexual activity reflects the truth of human nature itself. It is inevitable that when one essential element of that truth (its heterosexuality) is removed, others (such as its free, procreative and life-long character) will also be set aside. We cannot ordain men who suffer from a profound impulse to engage in, and to solicit others to engage in, self-destructive activities incompatible with the moral law.

CFN: Lastly, since the publication of Benedict XVI’s motu proprio [Summorum Pontificum](#) in 2007, there has been a resurgence of interest worldwide in the traditional Roman Rite of Mass, particularly among young people. Moreover, a [recent study](#) “reveals a striking variance between Catholics attending the TLM [Traditional Latin Mass] versus those who attend the NOM [Novus Ordo Mass]” concerning “beliefs [e.g. abortion, contraception, “gay marriage”], church attendance, monetary generosity, and fertility rates.” What role do you think the traditional Roman Mass and Tradition, in general, will play in the rebuilding of Christendom, a subject at the heart of this year’s Rome Life Forum?

AF: Along with a deeper and more frequent reading of the Fathers, a reconnection with Catholic liturgical tradition (and a familiarity and affection for all the Church’s historic rites) is essential if the faithful are to develop a resilient connaturality for Catholic truth and a generous openness to life. Without that kind of resilience, the gift of faith cannot survive in today’s hostile secular environment.

Live-streaming of this year’s Rome Life Forum (May 16-17, 2019) will be available through [LifeSiteNews](#).