

Commonweal

A Review of Religion, Politics & Culture

AUGUST 14, 2015

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on the Pope & the Planet

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on Mercy for the Remarried

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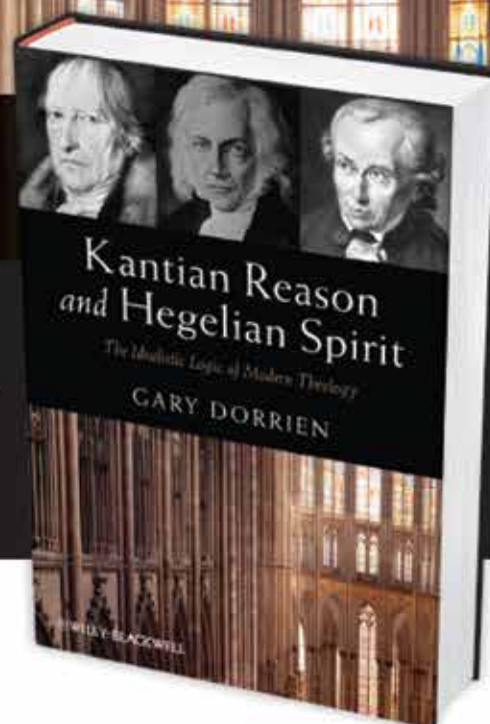
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LETTERS

Academic discipline, Confirmation, etc.

BALANCING ACT

Thank you for Dennis O'Brien's stimulating piece: "Incarnation U.: The Future of Catholic Higher Education" (June 12). To use his terminology and that of John O'Malley, I share the sense that the "academic" university culture needs to be balanced by the "humanistic." No present or former college president would, I suspect, think otherwise. But I also think that the "prophetic" culture—or what O'Brien calls interestingly the "witness studies" culture—needs the skeptical discipline provided by the "academic." In Catholic circles, at least, the "prophetic" has a way of spilling over into the ecclesiastical, and while I don't share Lord Acton's proclivity for detecting independently of the church the validating finger of God in the stupefying scramble of events that we call history, I do resonate strongly with his affiliated insistence that "no ecclesiastical exigency can alter a fact."

FRANCIS OAKLEY
Williamstown, Mass.

CONFIRMED REPORTS

Rita Ferrone's article on confirmation ("Slap Them Sooner," July 10) makes some very necessary points and advances a sensible solution to the current situation regarding the time and relationship of confirmation and first Communion. One element of the process is either assumed or found not germane—the question of

the purpose of confirmation in the first place. If baptism confers full membership in the body of Christ, confirmation is no longer part of Christian initiation, and its only apparent purpose is, as Ferrone notes, a rite of passage to adulthood with its usual instruction. And this is certainly valuable to the church. If, therefore, this is the case, confirmation is disconnected from initiation and thus from first Communion, which can therefore begin much earlier in life. Such a revision would clarify the basic understanding of baptism and link that sacrament to the Holy Eucharist.

MILTON H. COLEMAN
East Syracuse, N.Y.

WELL-PLACED SLAP

As the catechist for the second graders at my parish, I couldn't agree more with Rita Ferrone ("Slap Them Sooner") that the Eucharist is the culmination of Christian initiation, and it's recognized as such by both the kids and their parents. The Eucharist is the driving force behind the entire year's catechesis. Every lesson refers to it. The emotional impact of the Eucharist is so natural and so strong that my fear about administering confirmation at the same time is that confirmation simply can't compete, that it will get lost in the sacramental crush. I also prepare my kids for first reconciliation, but it's far enough away from first Communion (at our parish we do first reconciliation during Lent) that it can be given the individual attention—and prayer—that it deserves. Even so, in the kids' eyes, it's still a poor cousin to first Communion. If they were to receive both Eucharist and confirmation at once, they might feel like confirmation was an add-on, an opening act for first Communion. It would be "the one with the oil." And while the Catechism states that confirmation can be administered at the "age of discretion" (like the Eucharist, around age seven), one might interpret the term

**The next issue of
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September 11.**

From the Editors

A Better Way



How good is the deal the United States and its partners have struck with Iran to dismantle that nation's capacity to build a nuclear weapon? On the face of it, the agreement looks like a remarkable achievement for President Barack Obama, Secretary of State John Kerry, and the five major powers that have been in negotiations with Iran. Of course, everything depends on whether Iran's compliance can be verified with confidence. There are good reasons to think it can.

Iran has agreed to reduce its ability to enrich uranium by two-thirds, cut its stockpile of already enriched uranium by 96 percent, convert its impregnable underground facility at Fordow into a physics-research laboratory, and remove the core of the heavy-water plutonium-producing reactor at Arak. It will retain a capacity to enrich a small amount of uranium at very low levels for medical and scientific purposes. An intrusive inspection regime by the International Atomic Energy Agency will last ten to fifteen years. Those inspections, which will include Iranian military installations if necessary, are much tougher than anything the United States could get the Soviet Union to accept in Cold War disarmament talks. Sales of conventional offensive weapons to Iran are prohibited for five years, and ballistic-missile technology for eight. Today it would take Iran just a month or two to produce enough weapons-grade uranium to build a nuclear weapon. Under the new agreement, that so-called break-out time will increase to a year, giving the world ample time to react if necessary.

In return for mothballing, if not abandoning, its nuclear ambitions, economic sanctions against the country will gradually be lifted. This will allow the Iranians to reclaim as much as \$150 billion in frozen assets and to become, once again, a major supplier of petroleum and natural gas. Critics argue that giving Iran access to international markets will provide its authoritarian regime with the resources it needs to create greater instability in the region. That is a clear, if limited, danger, and one that the United States and its allies are already taking steps to guard against. What remains indisputable, however, is that the threat Iran poses to its Sunni neighbors and to Israel would be much greater if it possessed a nuclear weapon. Some opponents of the agreement think stiffer sanctions combined with the threat of imminent military action is the only answer to Iranian aggression. Others argue that war is inevitable. But preemptive war is neither strategically nor morally justified. For the past two years Iran has demonstrated a

willingness to cooperate with I.A.E.A. inspections and come to a realistic accommodation with the international community. Meanwhile, the sanctions have worked, crippling Iran's economy and limiting its political options. Iran is a young and highly educated society, and its older, radical religious leaders face increasing domestic unrest. Unilateral U.S. military action would set back the Iranian nuclear program only a few years at most and result in an even greater Iranian determination to acquire a nuclear weapon in the name of self-defense. An attack would also shatter the international coalition now keeping Iran in check and strengthen the ayatollahs' hold on the populace.

Congress has sixty days to debate the merits of the agreement. The lobbying is already fierce. Most Republicans, urged on by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's apocalyptic warnings, are opposed to any deal. Democrats in the House will likely stand with the president, if nervously. In the Senate, it will take the votes of thirteen Democrats to override the president's threatened veto and hand Obama a defeat as momentous as that suffered by Woodrow Wilson when Congress rejected the League of Nations. Should Congress reject the agreement, the Iranians will be quick to condemn the United States for obstruction and belligerence. The international coalition behind sanctions would then quickly unravel. That prospect hasn't stopped Republican presidential hopefuls from vying to outdo one another in demagoguing the issue. Summoning the tireless ghost of Neville Chamberlain, Jeb Bush called the deal "appeasement." Former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee claims it will enable Iran to "carry out its threat to 'wipe Israel off the map' and bring 'death to America.'" Meanwhile, Netanyahu has called the deal "a stunning historic mistake."

It would be a stunning historic mistake if Congress did not seize this opportunity to put Iran to the final test. If Iran cheats, there are strong mechanisms in the agreement that quickly re-impose sanctions. As Obama has argued in explaining the value of negotiating with regimes you don't trust, both Ronald Reagan and Richard Nixon concluded verifiable treaties with much more dangerous foes than Iran. The right-wing hawks strongly opposed those deals as well, insisting that the United States could and should impose its will on our enemies and allies alike simply because of our strength and presumed virtue. The long and tragic series of recent U.S. military failures abroad should remind us that there is a better way. ■

Fr. Nonomen

How to Do a Funeral

STEP ONE: KEEP YOUR GLASSES OFF THE COFFIN

The uncle of a parishioner died. His funeral was being held in a church a couple of towns away and I decided to attend as a concelebrant of the Mass. I actually enjoy these occasions, since they offer an opportunity to pray at a liturgy without the usual responsibilities of preaching or having to lead the worship. Very often, this old dog learns a few new tricks—some fresh new preaching angle, or maybe a bit of new music—but sometimes there's a clear lesson in what not to do, as was the case in this instance.

Things began well enough. The pastor would preside at the Mass, and he greeted me warmly in the sacristy. He was an amiable and friendly guy and we chatted about the deceased and his family, as well as developments in the diocese and parish. Things started going south with the opening hymn. There was a blast of sound from the organ and suddenly the priest and adult altar server, still in the sacristy, jumped to attention. We marched out into the church and down the main aisle to greet the body and the family, all the while accompanied by one of the most piercing human voices I have ever heard. I recognized the hymn, but could not make out a word of it, since the organist's voice was so high. I should have known we were in serious trouble when the priest, in the greeting prayer, blessed the body of "Amos" rather than the body of "Joseph." I'm sure I looked rather confused. I heard that Uncle Joe had died. Who was Amos? Only later did I learn that, despite using his middle name of Joseph for his entire ninety-four years, the deceased's legal name was Amos.

When it was time for the homily,

Father Pastor stepped away from the pulpit and walked down to the family in the pews. I was about to give him extra points for speaking from the heart without notes, when, from under his robes, he produced a newspaper clipping. The obituary. He read it aloud and then did something I have never seen in all my decades of priesthood. He removed his reading glasses and casually placed them on the casket as if it were the coffee table in his living room.



He continued in his own words, some of which I recognized from a sample homily in an old guide for funerals. But at this point no one in the congregation was paying much attention to what he was saying because we couldn't take our eyes off those reading glasses! I knew the pastor to be a nice man. He wasn't intentionally being disrespectful. Just unthinking.

Sensitivity. If there is ever a time when a parish is called to be sensitive, and to be thinking about what sensitivity requires, it's when ministering to a family after a death. Not only has someone dearly loved been lost, but very often that loss comes after weeks or months of worry and suffering. Nerves have been rubbed raw and patience worn thin. Sometimes, a funeral is a person's first

contact with a parish after years of inactivity or absence.

In these days of larger parishes and fewer priests, chances are greater that the pastor will not have known the deceased. Priests should take the time to meet with a family a few days before the wake and funeral. I have found that spending an hour with a family listening to their stories about Grandma and then walking them through the liturgical choices that have to be made

makes my job much easier when it comes to preaching and presiding. Learning the little things about a person's life can help guide the family to more meaningful scriptural readings. Learning the big things, like what first name the deceased used, is not only comforting, but spares the congregation from having to scratch their heads and wonder who Amos is. Let the music at a funeral be singable or, at the very least, bearable. Many

parishes have volunteer "Resurrection choirs," which are particularly effective in creating an atmosphere of prayer and participation.

Finally, remember that a funeral might well be the first trip back to church for many, not to mention an introduction to Catholicism for many others in the congregation. It's a chance to show that the compassion of Christ lives at the heart of our communities. That compassion ought to be manifest in all the liturgical choices we make, keeping us mindful, one hopes, of the difference between coffins and coffee tables. ■

Fr. Nonomen is the pastor of a suburban church. He has been a priest for more than twenty-five years.

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Jo McGowan

The More You Know

WHAT GAY FRIENDS TEACH US

One of the great things about Facebook is the wide range of people one can be “friends” with while still clinging to one’s own ideological profile. In real life, we hang out and converse mainly with people who agree with us. Our views are seldom challenged; we don’t have to bother very often with people we believe to be misguided, stupid, or just plain crazy.

But on social media, where I am “friends” with high-school classmates, colleagues from work, friends of friends, my children’s circle, and a host of others I can’t even remember meeting, I am frequently pulled up short. I recently posted a photo of myself holding a newborn baby. The photo was overlaid with the Gay Pride rainbow currently omnipresent on Facebook. The caption read: “This baby will grow up free to choose who he loves and how he lives.”

My left-wing friends loved it. I got hundreds of “likes” and dozens of comments agreeing with the caption. But then my conservative friends began to weigh in: “How do we define marriage? Does the state decide or is it more profound?” “How about marriage between siblings? Why should this be a problem for same-sex couples? Or opposite-sex couples who aren’t sleeping together?” “And will the people who don’t want to participate in this be equally free?”

One of my conservative friends posted a link to an article by Peter Kreeft—a professor at Boston College—laying out the traditional Catholic position against same-sex marriage. Reading it, I finally realized the problem with that position: It simply makes no sense to anyone who isn’t Catholic.

Religious visions of marriage are opaque to those outside the fold: Hindus, Muslims, and Jews—to name just three—also have complex definitions of marriage and rules for husbands and

wives (particularly wives) that would be unacceptable and absurd if they were imposed on nonbelievers. What Catholic couple would accept sharia law in their marriage? How would a Catholic wife feel about the Orthodox Jewish rule that she cut her hair and wear a wig? What young Catholic couple would accept the Hindu practice of parents choosing their child’s spouse?

India, where I live, is still struggling to enforce a uniform civil code years after its constitution declared it a secular state. Here, people of different religions still obey different sets of laws. The result, predictably, is chaotic, unfair, and particularly harmful to marginalized groups like women, gays, and people with disabilities. For example, the law says that Hindus may divorce under certain circumstances. Christians may not divorce under any circumstances. Muslim men (not women) can walk out of a marriage simply by uttering Talaq three times. Polygamy is against the law for everyone except Muslim men. Hindus may adopt legally; Christians and Muslims may only be their adoptive child’s “guardians.” Some women can inherit; others may not. Rape survivors are instructed by Hindu and Muslim judges to marry their attacker to preserve their honor. Gay people, of any or no religion, are not allowed to have sex (it’s punishable with life in prison). Until recently, people with disabilities, whom traditional Hindus regard as paying for sins in an earlier life, were not allowed to own property, open bank accounts, or refuse to be sterilized. Just being a citizen of India does not entitle a person to all the rights that other Indians enjoy. In many cases, your religion determines how and whom you may marry, what can be done to your body, what kind of parent you can be, and what will happen to your property after you die.

Religion makes for bad law, especially because it is seldom subjected to a democratic process. Revelation, scripture, and tradition can be used by the powerful to relegate women to a subservient position, rob the disabled of any meaningful life, and criminalize gays simply for being who they are.

Many people who oppose gay marriage have no gay friends (that they know of) and are repulsed by a sexuality that seems so different from their own. Religious teaching reinforces that disgust with frequent reminders that gay sexuality is sinful and inherently disordered, subtly making it acceptable to discriminate against LGBT persons and adding to a climate in which outright persecution is also acceptable. There is no such hysteria about other “sins.” Greed, for example, robs the poor of a just wage, legitimizes mindless consumption, and destroys the natural environment. But while we may disapprove of it, we don’t isolate or target all those greedy people.

As Catholics, we don’t make it our mission to oppose war taxes or to fight for legal sanctions against a consumer culture, though both run counter to the life that Jesus calls us to. Why such a concerted effort to impose our political will on gays and lesbians? Fear does strange things.

The more gay people we know, the less likely we are to hang on to the old stigmas and exclusions: love changes everything. Perfect love casts out fear. Nothing—*nothing*—has changed me as much as being friends with gay people has. The theory, the doctrine, the dogma: it all disappears in the face of friendship, lived experience, and love.

I can’t speak for Jesus. None of us can. But considering the people he hung out with, I think he might approve. ■



Charles R. Morris

Bring Back the Drachma

WHY GREECE SHOULD LEAVE THE EUROZONE

Euripides and Aristophanes might have enjoyed the current agon of the Greek government, for it offers a rich admixture of tragedy and comedy. It's hard to feel sorry for Greece. An oligarchy of ship-owners, bankers, and politicians have enriched themselves and impoverished the country, buying off the electorate with no-show jobs, early retirements, and extensive subsidies—a banana republic in the heart of Europe.

Greece's spendthrift ways have elicited several bailouts since 2009, each one eventuating in half-hearted austerity measures, higher debt, and lower growth. Over the past few months, the maneuvering for yet another bailout has generated a change in government, riots and demonstrations, and, most recently, a capitulation of sorts by the leftist Syriza government. But the details of that are yet to be negotiated, and no new money will be forthcoming without tough new spending cuts. August 20 is a crucial date: that's when the Greeks must pay a €3.5 billion loan installment to the European Central Bank (ECB). A default could pave the way for the so-called Grexit, a Greek exit from the single-currency regime, which many fear could lead to a breakup, or at least radical shrinkage, of the entire eurozone.

Greece joined what is now the European Community only in 1981, half a dozen years after it had installed its first modern democratic government. The single-currency eurozone was established in 1999, but membership required standards of financial management that Greece could not

meet. But in 2001, it managed to squeeze in after Goldman Sachs showed the Greek government how to falsify its national accounts.

For Greece, eurozone membership was destabilizing. Members can issue eurobonds, so post-admission Greek bonds looked much like the bonds issued by the sober and reliable German or Dutch governments. Greece naturally issued lots of eurobonds—for example, to build the stadiums, airports, and new hotels it needed to host the 2004 Olympics.

Greek bonds did carry a small interest premium, however, so they were devoured by European banks. Interest rates were scraping bottom throughout the world, and the small Greek premium, when multiplied by the thirty- or even forty-to-one leverage ratios favored by European banks, produced boffo profits. Bank lawyers somehow managed to remain oblivious to the very prominent provisions in the eurozone treaty stipulating that each country was responsible for paying back its own debt.

Had bankers had eyes for anything other than their own bonuses, they would have soon capped Greek debt issuance, for Greece was a subprime country if there ever was one—the equivalent of the one-room shack with a subprime mortgage in Orange, California. But, hey, this was the 2000s, the epoch of the “Great Moderation.” The world's central bankers proclaimed that they had eliminated recessions. Trade was booming, high finance was a new Acropolis, bond buyers were high on the intoxicating gases of the Oracle at Delphi.

Then the cold blast of the Great Recession whisked away the illusions, and the marble temples of investors' imaginations were exposed as so many skid rows.

So, yes, the Greeks got into this mess with eyes wide open. But so did the rest of the eurozone and all the world's international bankers. And the country that profited most from the indiscipline of the Greece was Germany, now the new Scourge of Profligacy.

International trade requires exchanging currencies. American purchases from China are made with yuan, not dollars, and vice-versa. (The actual exchanges are managed by banks.) Americans have long complained that the Chinese government represses the value of the yuan, instead of allowing free-market pricing to determine the yuan-dollar conversion rate. But China's growth strategy required export surpluses to fund its development. An undervalued yuan made Chinese products look very cheap in terms of dollars, and made dollar-denominated products very expensive when priced in yuan. Presto, a big Chinese trade surplus with America.

When the single-currency eurozone was created, the value of the new euro was based on its average purchasing power throughout the currency zone. Greece and Germany were on opposite ends of that average. So Greece could borrow in euros and enjoy a currency that was grossly overvalued relative to its ability to pay. Germany, on the other hand, was gifted with one of the cheapest trading currencies in the world. Some recent estimates are that if Germans had stuck with the deutschemark instead of joining the eurozone, the price of German exports would now be 40 percent higher.

Predictably, German trade surpluses soared, with more than half earned from other eurozone countries. Germany retired a great deal of its old debt, balanced its budget, and at the same time kept investing in its export machine. After the 2008 crash, German trade within the eurozone dropped sharply, as doubts rose about the ability of the "PIIGS" (Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Greece, and Spain) to pay their bills. But Germany has diligently diversified its export markets, so exports still account for nearly half of German GDP. The German 2014 trade surplus was about 8 percent of GDP, one of the highest in the world. (China's trade balance has recently been running at only about 2 percent of GDP.) The world's most predatory trader is now Germany, both inside and outside the eurozone.

Although Germany's lending within the eurozone has already generated huge trade flows and profits, it is insisting on punctilious repayment of every euro. That has put it at odds with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which has participated in the previous bailouts. Christine Lagarde, the IMF's boss, has been insisting that the Greeks need true debt relief, not just further loans. According to the IMF's most recent analyses of Greece's obligations, the Greeks would have to run a budget surplus, before interest payments, of 3.5 percent a year for "several decades," and achieve the

same productivity as Ireland and the same unemployment rate as Germany. Those are laughable objectives. Ireland is a young and technically sophisticated country, with the highest productivity in Europe. Germany is populated by Germans, who have a fondness for discipline. Greece is an aging third-world relic, culturally and economically closer to a Turkey than to a France or an Austria.

That events could come to such a pass is a telling commentary on the inadequacy of eurozone institutions. For example, any bailout of a member state, other than one caused by natural disaster, requires the unanimous consent of all the other member states. Finland has taken an even harder line than Germany, and may still insist on submitting any final Greek deal to its parliament for approval. Imagine if the Texas legislature had a veto over, say, federal aid to Detroit.

Greece, indeed, may be better off outside the eurozone, as the hard-line German finance minister, Wolfgang Schäuble, speculated a few weeks ago. The repeated imposition of austerity policies in Greece has generated a catastrophic collapse of GDP, a spike in what was already Europe's highest unemployment rate, and a partial shutdown of banks. Greece's recent referendum on accepting the eurozone's financial requirements produced a resounding "Hell no!" But polls suggest that the Greeks really didn't mean it—perhaps because they don't trust their own politicians without the eurozone looking over their shoulders.

But the recent experiences of countries like Argentina suggest that default may be workable. The first step would be to repudiate all outside debt, and create a new internal currency that would have to be carefully controlled so as not to create runaway inflation. Elect a reform government that collects taxes and reduces spending. Get rid of all the rules that specify the size of a loaf of bread, and other petty bureaucracy. Over time, peg your new drachmas to the euro, pay your bills and balance your budgets, and your drachmas will gradually be recognized in trading for external essentials. Then start negotiating with external debtors for greatly reduced settlements of defaulted bonds.

That's more or less what a number of Latin American countries did in the 1980s after defaulting on their trillions of 1970s petrodollar debts. Those were pretty irresponsible borrowers, but when total collapse hit, countries pulled up their socks, elected some responsible politicians, and stayed the course, although each had to pass through years of grinding poverty. It may have made a difference that the austerities were ones they imposed on themselves. Greece is a small country, but it is a prime tourist attraction, and has world-class specialty agricultural products—its olive oil, experts say, may be the best in the world.

All of that will take time, and it will be very painful. But it already is. ■

Charles R. Morris, a Commonweal columnist, is the author of *The Two Trillion Dollar Meltdown (Public Affairs)*, among other books, and is a fellow at the Century Foundation.

‘Under God’

Whether Americans today sin more frequently or less frequently than they did when I was a boy growing up in the 1950s is difficult to say. Yet this much is certain: Back then, on matters related to sex and family, a rough congruity existed between prevailing American cultural norms and the traditional teachings of the Catholic Church. Today that is no longer the case. If any doubts persisted on that point, the Supreme Court decision in the case of *Obergefell v. Hodges*, legalizing gay marriage, demolished them once and for all.

No doubt the hypocrisy quotient among those upholding various prohibitions on what Americans could do in the privacy of their own bedroom or the backseat of their father's car was considerable. But for a nation locked in an existential struggle against a godless adversary, paying lip service to such norms was part of what it meant to be "under God."

The Justices who voted in favor of gay marriage don't care a lick about whether the United States is "under God" or not. On that score, however dubious their reading of the Constitution, they have accurately gauged the signs of the times. The people of "thou shall not" have long since become the people of "whatever," with obligations deriving from moral tradition subordinated to claims of individual autonomy. That's the way we like it. August members of the Supreme Court have now given their seal of approval.

4

TREASURE CHEST

SINCE THAT FATEFUL DAY IN 1917, COMMUNISM HAS GROWN BY LEAPS AND BOUNDS. TODAY ALMOST ONE THIRD OF THE WORLD IS COMMUNIST TERRITORY. AND COMMUNIST LEADERS HAVE THEIR EYES ON THE UNITED STATES, TOO. THE FOLLOWING STORY TELLS YOU WHAT A FAMILY'S LIFE WOULD BE LIKE IN A COMMUNIST UNITED STATES —

THIS IS THE VOICE OF YOUR COMMUNIST GOVERNMENT SPEAKING. TODAY, COMMUNIST FORCES HAVE COMPLETED THE OCCUPATION OF YOUR COUNTRY, THE UNITED STATES. NO LONGER EXISTS. IT IS NOW THE UNION OF SOVIET STATES OF AMERICA! LONG LIVE THE U.S.S.A.!!

WHAT DO WE DO NOW, DAD!

WE SHOULD HAVE DONE OUR THINKING AND PRAYING BEFORE THIS HAPPENED, BILL. BUT IT IS NEVER TOO LATE. LET'S GO TO CHURCH AND ASK GOD'S HELP.

CLICK!

BUT WHAT A SURPRISE AWAITS THEM AT THE CHURCH DOOR.

IT SAYS THE CHURCH PROPERTY HAS BEEN TAKEN OVER BY THE GOVERNMENT! THEY'RE GOING TO MAKE A COMMUNIST MUSEUM OUT OF IT!

BUT WHAT ABOUT FATHER RYAN?

THEY CAN'T DO THIS! LET'S WRITE OUR REPRESENTATIVE IN WASHINGTON!

BUT BILL, WE DON'T HAVE A REPRESENTATIVE GOVERNMENT ANY MORE. WE HAVE TO DO WHAT THE COMMUNISTS TELL US TO DO!

THE NEXT DAY, MANY QUESTIONS ARE ANSWERED.

AND IT SAYS ALL THE CATHOLIC PRIESTS AND SISTERS ARE BEING SENT TO A LABOR CAMP! THOSE WHO RESIST WILL BE KILLED!

THEY'RE DOING THE SAME THING WITH MOST OF THE JEWISH AND PROTESTANT MINISTERS!

even today politicians adhere to rituals that retain religious overtones. For example, the National Prayer Breakfast that President Eisenhower instituted in 1953 remains a fixture on Washington's calendar. Yet this is an exercise in nostalgia, devoid of substance. Some symbols matter—like displaying the Confederate battle flag, for example. Others—like emblazoning your currency with “In God We Trust”—don’t mean squat.

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A nation once purportedly “under God” has decisively rejected the hierarchical relationship that phrase implies. Those who interpret the nation’s laws have dropped all pretense of deferring to guidance from above. From here on out, we’ve got the green light to chart our own course.

Again, however, there are likely to be foreign-policy implications. For Americans, as *Obergefell* vividly testifies, freedom is not a fixed proposition. It evolves, expands, and becomes more inclusive, bringing freedom’s prevailing definition (at least in American eyes) ever closer to perfection.

But a nation founded on universal claims—boldly enumerating rights with which “all men” are endowed—finds intolerable any conception of freedom that differs from its own. The ongoing evolution of American freedom creates expectations with which others are expected to comply.

Recall that for the first two centuries of this nation’s existence, American diplomats were indifferent to discrimination against women. Then gender equality found a place on the American political agenda. Now the State Department maintains an Office of Global Women’s Issues devoted to “empowering women politically, socially, and economically around the world.”

We should anticipate something similar occurring in relation to LGBT communities worldwide. Their plight, which is real, will necessarily emerge as a matter of official U.S. concern. Today the United States condemns the racism, sex-

ism, and anti-Semitism that Americans once found eminently tolerable. Tomorrow standing in principled opposition to anti-LGBT discrimination wherever it exists will become a moral imperative, Americans declaring themselves rid of sins they themselves had committed just yesterday.

Whether or not U.S. support for LGBT rights goes beyond the rhetorical, societies still viewing themselves as “under God” will bridle at this sudden turnabout. Especially in the Islamic world, demands to conform to the latest revision of American (and therefore universal) freedom will strike many as not only unwelcome but also unholy encroachments. Whether the upshot will contribute to the collective well-being of humankind or sow the seeds of further conflict remains to be seen. At least in the near term, the latter seems more likely than the former.

In any case, we are witnessing a remarkable inversion in the relationship between religion and American statecraft. Rather than facilitating the pursuit of America’s liberating mission, faith now becomes an impediment, an obstacle to freedom’s further advance. It’s no longer the godless who pose a problem, but the God-fearing with their stubborn refusal to accommodate truths that Americans have ever so recently discovered. Almost without anyone noticing, God himself has moved from our side to theirs. ■

Andrew J. Bacevich is a professor emeritus of history and international relations at Boston University.

FORTRESS OR FIELD HOSPITAL?

The Synod Takes on the Family

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The panel discussion
at 4:00 PM will be
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Artist, Activist, Martyr

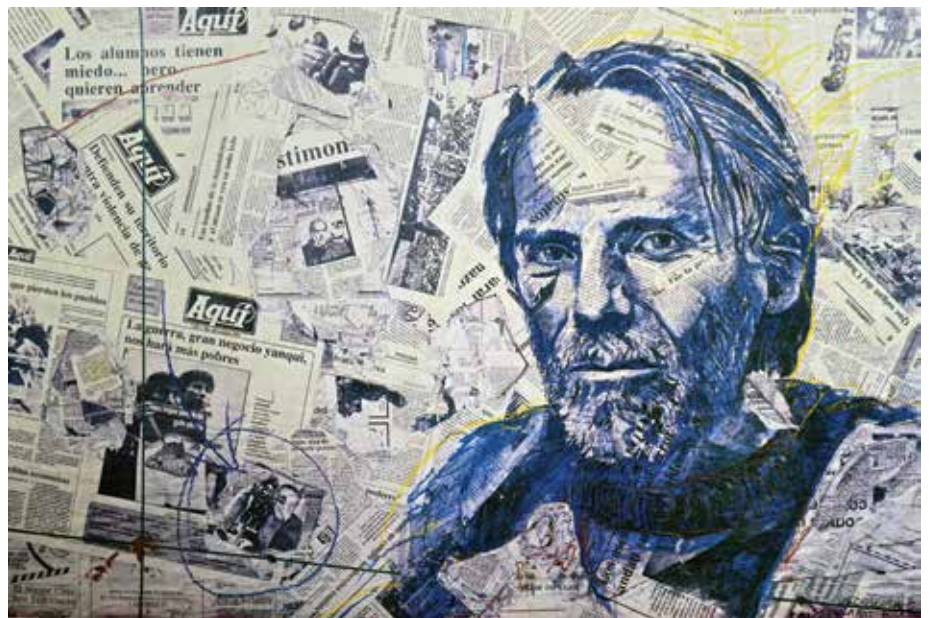
THE PRIEST BEHIND THE HAMMER-AND-SICKLE CRUCIFIX

Outside of Bolivia, I don't think many people knew of Luis Espinal before Pope Francis, during his recent visit to that country, stopped to pray at the site where Espinal's body, riddled with bullets and showing signs of torture, was found in a landfill. Evo Morales, Bolivia's first indigenous president, gave the pope a replica of a wooden crucifix that Luis had sculpted; it portrays Christ nailed to a hammer and sickle. This seemed a clumsy and controversial gesture, to say the least, implying that Espinal, an icon in the country's struggle for democracy, was in fact a secret Marxist who would have supported Morales. This, at any rate, was the impression I had from the way the incident was presented by the media. I was disconcerted at first. This was not at all the Luis Espinal I knew.

I lived in Bolivia for five years and got to know "Lucho" Espinal fairly well. In fact, he is one of the god-fathers of my son. In a corridor of our house hangs a wooden sculpture by Luis depicting the head and arms of the crucified Christ. Christ appears to be in a peaceful yet somehow painful sleep, all absorbed in his work of redemption. It wasn't hard to get to know Luis: he was a very simple and unassuming person who always seemed to be available to anyone. At that time he was known mostly as a film critic and taught communications at the Catholic University of La Paz. His main interest was the media. He lived with two other Jesuits in a very simple dwelling in one of the poorer districts of La Paz.

To understand Luis, it is important to situate him in the context of his times. The day I arrived in La Paz in 1974, the big news was that Hugo Banzer's government had ordered the suppression of the Justice and Peace Commission of the Bolivian bishops' conference. The priest in charge of the commission was expelled from the country. The church, accused of fomenting social unrest and encouraging subversion, was deeply divided. The Bolivian Constitution still recognized Catholicism as the official religion, and the state promised to favor and protect it. (This changed a few years ago, when Bolivia became a secular state after a referendum.) In return for this privileged status, the church had the obligation to cooperate with and support the state. Under Banzer, the

military ruled by decrees; political parties and trade unions were banned. The Justice and Peace Commission was the only organization that had dared to criticize the government. With its suppression, tranquility was restored—but it was the tranquility of a graveyard. A large part of the clergy and hierarchy were satisfied with this: as long as they behaved and stuck to administering the sacraments and overseeing popular devotions, they were considered to be doing God's work and had it pretty good. But underneath it all, there was deep frustration and humiliation. Elements of the clergy were shocked by the dismal conditions and thousand little tyrannies to which the people were submitted. Many foreign priests, in particular, were unaccustomed to dealing with such situations and felt they could not cooperate



Portrait of Luis Espinal by Gaston Ugalde

with policies and practices so offensive to simple human dignity. Luis was Spanish but totally devoted to the poor of Bolivia; he had renounced his Spanish citizenship and was a naturalized Bolivian.

A turning point came in 1978 when Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, the future Nobel Peace Prize recipient, visited La Paz. At that time he was head of what was called the Peace and Justice Commission of Argentina, a human-rights advocacy group. He quietly proposed to set up a similar group in Bolivia. Jimmy Carter had been elected in the United States and was championing human rights; and it was widely felt that if we could put together an organization dedicated exclusively

to human rights, the military would probably not dare to attack it. It was also important that such a group be totally independent of the church and its hierarchy. The new group would be a voice for the oppressed, their only voice. A few months later a delegate of Pérez Esquivel came to La Paz and helped us organize. He did a remarkable job: within a week the Permanent Assembly for Human Rights had become a reality. Luis was part of the project, but he was not offered a leadership role—nor would he have wanted one. That would have been totally out of character for him.

The new Human Rights Assembly set itself very modest goals at the beginning. It was not at all prepared when a group of women whose husbands had been jailed showed up and announced that they were going on a hunger strike and planned to install themselves in the bishop's residence. Members of the Assembly tried to dissuade the women, telling them it would be pointless at this stage of the game. The women's reply was simple: "We didn't come here looking for advice or even support. We are simply telling you what we are going to do whether you like it or not. Our husbands are in prison, we don't have anything to eat anyway so we might as well fast publicly." There were three women and perhaps ten children in the group. When, after a few days, it became obvious that this was very serious and the children still refused the food the bishop had sent them, ten members of the Assembly offered to replace the children and this was accepted by the mothers. Luis was among those who offered themselves. The new group set up shop in the offices of *Presencia*, a Catholic daily newspaper, not particularly known for its opposition to the dictatorship. Hunger strikes soon began to break out all over the country. After about two weeks, the government broke into the newspaper offices and forcibly removed the hunger strikers. The authorities claimed they found plenty of food, liquor, and drugs on the premises, and that the whole thing was a farce. Unfortunately for the government, a television station, alerted to the raid, had the whole thing filmed and broadcast. The footage showed people being carried out on stretchers, too weak to walk and singing the Beatitudes. About a week later, Banzer announced that he was resigning, and that elections would be held.

The transition to democracy after years of a totalitarian dictatorship was not easy, and for a long time the situation was chaotic. During that period, Luis launched a weekly newspaper called *Aquí*, which was a voice of sanity and clarity in the middle of all the confusion. He continued to teach at the Catholic University. He was a poet and an artist, with a very acute sensitivity and a genuine love for the oppressed and humiliated. On March 21, 1980, he was kidnapped a few blocks from his house. Someone heard him cry, "This is it!"—as if he was expecting it. His body was found the next morning.

They say that after the death of Benedict Joseph Labre—a homeless beggar and mystic who lived among the ruins of

the Roman Colosseum—the people of Rome proclaimed him a saint before he was even buried. Something similar happened to Luis. He was not particularly well known, not much of a public figure, but the whole city of La Paz shut down for his funeral. The largest crowd I'd ever seen accompanied Luis's body from the cathedral to the cemetery, some singing hymns and praying, others shouting political slogans. Luis had touched something deep in the hearts of the Bolivian people he loved so much, and they recognized their purest aspirations in him. Their affection and gratitude has not faded with the passage of time. Streets, markets, and schools have been named in his honor. You can't go far in La Paz without seeing his name.

Luis did not belong to any political party. Nor was he part of any organized "movement." He was a man of peace and dialogue. There was even something a bit timid about him; he never imposed himself and would render little services without being asked. There was an unmistakable purity in him, and this purity was truly revolutionary.

But it would not surprise me if, given the situation at the time, Luis had seen in Marxism Gospel values that were sorely lacking in certain sectors of the church, and believed that these values could and should be incorporated into a Christian vision of society. That he should have such sentiments seems almost natural. I had them myself at the time. In Latin America, Marxism took many forms; it was not identified only with the Communist Party. In fact, the bona fide Communist parties I knew in Latin America were little self-enclosed cliques with little popular support. There was a need for some sort of collaboration with what was best in the left-wing parties. That seemed indispensable if real change were to come about.

When Pope Francis was questioned about the "strange" gift of the "Marxist Christ," his response clarified the real significance of the sculpture. The pope, unlike myself, seems to have gotten it right away. Just as those who tried to live the Beatitudes were automatically branded "Marxists" by the powerful and comfortable, Christ too might have been crucified as a Marxist, branded with the stigma of the hammer and sickle, with all its connotations of hatred and destruction. It is a very powerful and provocative challenge. There are not lacking voices today, in this country and even in the church, similarly branding Pope Francis a "Marxist" (for example, Rush Limbaugh). Bishop Romero was assassinated two days after Luis for being a "Marxist"; Dorothy Day was considered a Communist; Thomas Merton, a subversive. Time has shown them to be prophets, ahead of their time. "By their fruits shall you know them."

What Pope Francis, the "Marxist pope," is doing for the church is the stuff Luis dreamed of. And I think that Pope Francis, who certainly knew Luis, is well aware of that. It was people like Luis who went to the peripheries and prepared the way. ■

Jerry Ryan is a frequent contributor to *Commonweal*.

Mercy for the Remarried

What the Church Can Learn from Civil Law

Cathleen Kaveny

When Pope Francis announced his plan for last October's Extraordinary Synod on the Family, he insisted that it not focus on abstract questions of moral theology, sacramental theology, and canon law—as important as they may be—but rather on pastoral concerns. Francis asked the synod fathers not to sidestep thorny questions facing the church today, but rather to engage in open debate, even if doing so led to passionate disagreement. The bishops followed his advice.

Some of the most passionate disagreements surrounded the question of whether Catholics who divorce and remarry can receive the Eucharist. On one side are those like Cardinal Gerhard Müller, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, who insist that such Catholics be barred from the Communion line. On the other are those like Cardinal Walter Kasper, who want the church to find a way to readmit some of them. Both camps have publicized their arguments in books, magazines, and journals, marshaling theology, Scripture, and tradition to make their cases. But there is an unlikely source neither has yet cited, one with a lot to offer: the secular legal tradition.

What is it about the insights of secular law that might help address this question of Catholic discipline? Secular law can help us grapple with questions about when wrongdoing begins, when it ends, and how people can put it behind them

and move on with their lives. In other words, secular courts have something to teach us about the practice of mercy—a subject to which Cardinal Kasper has given considerable attention. In a lecture delivered to the consistory of cardinals in the spring of 2014, now published as *The Gospel of the Family* (Paulist Press), Cardinal Kasper discussed the relationship of mercy, justice, and law in the context of

pastoral questions, including how the church deals with divorced and remarried Catholics. Those Catholics, Kasper reminded his fellow cardinals, have been encouraged to receive spiritual communion at Mass, despite their “irregular” marital status. Why then, he asked, should they be excluded from the Eucharist? Allowing them to receive the Eucharist, after all, does not mean that they can contract a second sacramental marriage during the lifetime of their first spouse.

In order to receive Communion, Kasper argues, a divorced and remarried person must be “properly disposed.” What does that mean?

Kasper identifies five criteria, requiring that the person who is seeking Communion: (1) is sincerely sorry that he or she failed in the first marriage; (2) views a return to that marriage as out of the question; (3) understands that the second marriage cannot be abandoned without incurring new guilt; (4) is attempting to conduct the second marriage in the context of faith, and (5) longs for the sacraments of Reconciliation and Communion.

Kasper has his critics. Some insist that because a sacramental marriage endures until one's spouse dies, the church must treat the second marriage as adulterous. But is “adultery” the best way to describe the sin of a divorced and civilly remarried person against his or her sacramental first mar-



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riage? It is worth noting that the concept of “adultery” has changed significantly over the centuries. In ancient times, the law viewed adultery as analogous to a property crime—the property being the woman. In Mosaic law, as in early Roman law, adultery was condemned because it rendered the lines of patrilineal succession uncertain, since a man could not be sure that the children borne by his wife were really his. (Thus a married man who had sexual relations with an unmarried woman was not viewed as committing adultery.)

In our own era in the West, “adultery” applies equally to men and women, and refers mainly to the betrayal of one spouse by another, a betrayal that is not merely sexual, but also emotional and often financial. In the broader contemporary culture, therefore, “adultery” does not apply to a situation that arises after a married couple obtains a divorce and one or both parties remarry. Catholic teaching does not view marriage in the same way, of course. But even canonists recognize that secular divorce changes the relationship between the parties—since many dioceses will not even consider a case for annulment until a secular divorce has been finalized.

Adultery is certainly wrong, and we should condemn it. But how should we describe it? Here secular law provides helpful insights. As legal scholars William Theis and Jeffrey Chemerinsky have noted, the first task facing any prosecutor is to determine the “unit of prosecution” for the wrong committed. Does a shoplifter who takes five sweaters from a department store commit one crime or five? The challenge is more difficult when what is at stake is not an isolated action but an organized pattern of behavior, such as adultery. In *Ex parte Snow* (1887), the U.S. Supreme Court took up the case of a polygamist in Utah charged with one count of unlawful cohabitation for each of the three years he lived with more than one wife. The Court held that prosecutors could not arbitrarily divide a single, uninterrupted unlawful cohabitation into three separate criminal charges. In reality, it was one event, and properly describing the defendant’s actions required looking beyond the discrete acts to a broader pattern of activity. It required recalibrating the focus of the law’s lens to get a wider perspective.

That sort of recalibration could assist the Catholic Church in understanding the situation of divorced and remarried people. The parties to the second marriage are not skulking off to a hotel room to grasp disconnected moments of irresponsible pleasure, after all; they are engaged in an ongoing relationship that typically involves much more than sexual relations, often including commitments to children and aging family members. What sense does it make to claim, as canon law does, that a civilly divorced and remarried Catholic is engaged in multiple acts of adultery?

One might answer that even if such people do not sin in every act of sex outside the first marriage, they still sin in the totality of their relationship. Indeed, a key barrier to admitting divorced and civilly remarried persons to Communion is the canonical judgment that their offense against the first,

sacramental marriage is a continuing offense. According to Kasper’s critics, that is what distinguishes a murderer from a divorced and remarried person—with respect to Communion, anyway. The murder is a completed act; the murderer can repent and receive the Eucharist. The divorced and remarried person cannot, because the sin is ongoing.

Yet, as legal scholar Jeffrey Boles has demonstrated, distinguishing instantaneous from continuous offenses is not always easy. Generally speaking, the civil legal system considers an instantaneous offense to be a “discrete act” that occurs at a particular moment in time. The harm that it causes occurs in that moment, and does not extend beyond it. A continuing offense differs in two ways: first, it generally involves ongoing conduct; and second, the harm it causes persists over that period of time. These distinctions are reflected in statutes of limitation, which not only encourage efficiency and accuracy in prosecution, but also protect the defendant’s rights, acknowledging the need for people to be able to move on with their lives and—except in the case of very serious crimes, such as murder—not be forever haunted by past mistakes.

Are divorced and remarried Catholics supposed to suffer forever for their failed first marriages? Is it correct to say that the harm done to the original spouse, the children, and the community continues to pile up indefinitely, year after year? In the majority of cases, the harm is completed with the dissolution of the first marriage. In fact, the relationship between the parties to the original marriage may be stabilized, and the well-being of their children enhanced, if both move on to second relationships. Secular law frequently distinguishes between the offense itself, completed within a finite period, and the ongoing consequences of that offense, which may continue longer. The church might do well to adopt an analogous distinction. The Catholic moral and canonical approach treats each sexual act in the second marriage as an ongoing betrayal of the first marriage. But the life of the second marriage, including its sexual relationship, is best seen as a living out of the second wedding ceremony, which in most cases decisively ends the possibility of resuming the first marriage.

Catholics are bound to obey God’s law as it was revealed in Jesus Christ, as recorded in the gospels. Yet Scripture does not interpret itself. When it comes to Jesus’ teachings on divorce and remarriage, it’s important to look closely at what the biblical texts say, what they don’t say, and to whom they were originally speaking.

First, we have to attend to the social context in which Jesus spoke. Divorce was a common phenomenon in the ancient Near East, including among Jews. “Almost all the pre-70 Jewish texts known to us reflect a Judaism in which a man could divorce his wife for practically any reason,” writes New Testament scholar John P. Meier. By contrast, a woman could not divorce her husband for *any* reason, and a divorced

woman was in an extraordinarily precarious position: unless she could find another man to marry, she would be dependent on her own birth family to protect her. In Luke and Matthew, the accounts of Jesus' statements on divorce reflect this vast disparity in power between husband and wife. It is the man who divorces his wife and marries another who commits adultery. He causes his former wife to be involved in adultery when she remarries (according to Matthew); the moral fault is primarily his, not hers. In contrast, Mark's gospel and Paul's first letter to the Corinthians assert that a woman who divorces her husband commits adultery. Most commentators point out that Mark and I Corinthians were written in the context of a Roman legal system, in which women as well as men had the right to divorce their spouses. Because this was not even an option for ordinary Jewish women in Jesus' era, Meier concludes that Mark 10:12 "almost automatically falls out of consideration as a saying coming from the historical Jesus."

Is it logical to extend Jesus' words condemning divorce from a Palestinian context in which men can unilaterally divorce their wives, leaving them vulnerable, to a Roman one in which—as in our society today—women can also choose to divorce their husbands? If the purpose of prohibiting divorce and remarriage is primarily to protect sexual purity, then the extension might seem valid. But what if the primary purpose is to protect vulnerable people, especially vulnerable women? In many cases, preventing women from remarrying after divorce can leave them and their children at great risk of material harm.

We must also pay attention to the audience Jesus is addressing. The fullest synoptic account of Jesus' views on divorce are found in Mark 10:1–12, where Jesus is tested by Pharisees who cite Moses's commandment granting permission to Jewish men to divorce their wives—for any reason—and then ask Jesus whether it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife. Jesus' response sounds almost scholarly: "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother, and the two shall become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate."

In this rejoinder, Jesus conveys God's original purpose for marriage even as he demonstrates his rank relative to Moses, claiming his own authority as the paramount interpreter of Jewish law. But Scripture also shows that Jesus does not use

his insight into God's original purpose for marriage as a cudgel to beat those already bruised by sin. In dealing with the broken, sinful, and vulnerable, Jesus acts as a merciful healer. Take, for example, his encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well, recounted in the Gospel of John. Jesus asks her for a drink, which astonishes her, since Jews normally disdained interaction with Samaritans. In return, she asks him for the living water that only he can provide. Jesus tells her to "call your husband and come here," but she tells him she has no husband. "You have correctly said, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband," Jesus replies.

Jesus then reveals to her a great mystery—that he is the source of the waters of eternal life—and calls on her to "worship the Father in spirit and truth." Yet he does not impose a rigid rule on her obviously irregular marital situation as a condition of her discipleship. He does not tell her to return to her first husband. He does not treat her situation in the same abstract manner in which he conducted his academic discussion about marriage and divorce with the Pharisees. In short, he acts as a pastor to her.

The Gospel of John also highlights the mercy in Jesus' treatment of sinners. Seeking to trap Jesus yet again, the Pharisees use a woman caught in adultery as bait. They bring her to Jesus,

asking whether they should stone her in accordance with the Law of Moses. Jesus evades the trap, and places himself squarely on the side of the terrified woman. "He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." Everyone else drifts away, leaving Jesus alone with the woman. Yet the only sinless man does not condemn her, but tells her, "Go. From now on sin no more."

What does Jesus' admonition mean? Would he require her to leave a second husband she married after her first husband divorced her? Why would Jesus deflect the condemnation of the Pharisees only to impose another legalism on her conscience? For Jesus to tell the woman to "go...sin no more" means that it must be possible for her to go and sin no more—and to continue to live. Given the radical dependence of women upon their husbands for shelter and support, this woman would likely need to find a man to take her in as his wife; in all probability, it would not be the first man she had married, or even the man with whom she committed adultery.

No legal provision is self-interpreting; each law must be understood and applied with reference to the good of the

Over the centuries, canon lawyers have found creative ways to preserve the ideal of lifelong union while dissolving many marriages in order to allow Catholics to participate more fully in the life of the church—or as the canonists say, "in favor of the faith."

community it purports to serve, and Jesus regularly reminds us that the commands and prohibitions of the Torah must be situated in a broader context. When a Pharisee—confronting him with yet another test—asks him which commandment is the greatest, Jesus responds: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the great and foremost commandment” (Matthew 22:37–38).

As Walter Kasper has argued, the God whom we are to love is the God of mercy, the God who wills to save all human beings. We must interpret Jesus’ words about marriage and divorce in light of that overarching truth. Jesus teaches us that in an ideal world, one untouched by sin, there would be no divorce and remarriage. But nothing in Jesus’ words or conduct demands that in our broken world, the sin involved in divorce and remarriage be treated as one that continues indefinitely, without possibility of repentance. To impose such a requirement in every case confounds the mercy that is the touchstone for the divine lawgiver.

The parties to a failed first marriage may very well have harmed each other during the course of their breakup and its aftermath. But in most cases, the contracting of a second civil marriage extinguishes any hope of reconciliation in this lifetime; and since there is no marriage in heaven, as the church teaches, the harm the parties have done to their first marriage is complete, not ongoing. Therefore, they should be able to repent of that harm and move on to fulfill the new responsibilities of their second marriage.

Does such an argument apply to sacramental marriage, which the church teaches is indissoluble? The sharp distinction between natural and sacramental marriage is not supported by Scripture. Jesus himself did not make that distinction; it is an innovation of the canonical tradition. So why shouldn’t it be possible to see the bond created by the first sacramental marriage as continuing in some way (e.g., in the obligations of the parties to care for their children and to pray continually for each other), while not foreclosing the possibility of a second, natural marriage? Does the church have the power to develop its doctrine of sacramental marriage in that way, in favor of mercy?

Yes, and it wouldn’t be the first time it has done so. As the historian of the canon law of marriage John T. Noonan Jr., has pointed out, canonical tradition has long balanced a number of values in its definition of marriage. In his book, *Power to Dissolve* (Harvard University Press), Noonan explains that Catholicism viewed marriage as a symbol of the unbreakable union of Christ with the church—like the union of a bishop with his diocese. But from the beginning of church history, the symbolic value of both sorts of unions had always been balanced against other values. For example, the Gospel of Matthew (5:32), written for second-generation Christians, permits divorce for serious sexual immorality (“porneia”), such as adultery. Christians

have long debated how this passage should be treated. Since the Council of Trent, adultery has been treated in the Catholic tradition as grounds for permanent separation (although most Protestants, following St. Augustine, view it as grounds for divorce and remarriage). Earlier, in the first generation, St. Paul, confronted with situations in which one party to a pagan marriage desired to convert to Christianity, instructed the new convert to stay with his or her unbelieving spouse if possible. But Paul allowed divorce—and tacitly permitted remarriage—in cases where a pagan spouse was unwilling to remain in the marriage. He writes: “But if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace” (1 Cor. 7:15). To this day, canon law recognizes the papal power to dissolve a natural marriage between two unbaptized persons in order to enable a new convert to marry in the faith; it calls this power the “Pauline Privilege.”

Over the centuries, canon lawyers have found creative ways to preserve the ideal of lifelong union while dissolving many marriages in order to allow Catholics to participate more fully in the life of the church—or as the canonists say, “in favor of the faith.” Many of these developments, such as the significant expansion of the “Pauline privilege” in the sixteenth century, were the consequence of missionary efforts to the Americas. Pius V (d. 1572) did not insist that a polygamous native man remain married to his first wife; such converts, he allowed, could choose the wife with whom they would be baptized. Gregory XIII (d. 1585) permitted slaves separated by great distances from their lawful spouses to remarry in the church, even if they could not say for sure that those lawful spouses would spurn Christianity. Moreover, canonists began to articulate the so-called Petrine Privilege, which enabled the pope to undo a marriage between a baptized and a nonbaptized person, in order to enable one of the parties to remarry in the church.

For a very long time, in other words, the church has claimed the power to dissolve marital unions: unions between the unbaptized; unions in which only one party is baptized; and unconsummated unions between baptized persons. So far, the church has stopped short only of dissolving valid, consummated marriages between two baptized Christians. And yet, in the rocky waters of modernity, these sacramental marriages break up too. What about those who are shipwrecked, particularly those abandoned by their spouses—what can be done in favor of their faith? As Cardinal Kasper has repeatedly noted, his proposal does not give such persons a second ship in the form of another sacramental marriage. It does, however, grant them a “plank of salvation”—namely, renewed admittance to the sacraments. Granting this renewal will bring the letter of canon law into harmony with its spirit. More important, it would reflect the merciful Spirit of God as revealed to us in Christ Jesus—the God who, as St. Paul states, “has called us to peace.” ■

The Next Step

How Laudato Si' Extends Catholic Social Teaching

Anthony Annett

Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum novarum* offered the church's first official response to the rapid economic changes following the industrial revolution. Leo read the signs of the times with great clarity, and condemned both socialist collectivism and a savage capitalism that led to gaping inequalities and grave injustices against the working classes and the poor. The church's social doctrine began to develop on this foundation, applying the principles of the Christian tradition to the particular circumstances of the industrial era. It called for a correction of the dysfunctions that pervaded modern economies, especially by seeking a more balanced and equitable relationship between capital and labor.

In the postwar era, the church also started to pay more attention to the stark imbalances between richer and poorer countries, not just between the rich and the poor in a single country. Noting that excess and overconsumption often had their counterpart in exclusion and underdevelopment, it called for greater global solidarity between north and south and for citizens of richer countries to move away from lifestyles characterized by waste and surfeit.

It is fair to say that, until now, most of Catholic social teaching has been variations on a basic theme—the need for economic relations between people and nations to be guided by justice and mutual responsibility. This theme remains very pertinent in our world of enormous inequality. A mere 1 percent of the world's population controls half of the world's wealth. More than 2 billion people are mired in extreme poverty, and almost a billion people suffer from hunger. Elsewhere, and not always far away, we see astounding opulence and wastefulness. Catholic social teaching signals a clear moral imperative to correct these imbalances.

What makes Pope Francis's *Laudato si'* stand out is that while it strongly affirms this traditional focus, it also stretches beyond it. This is what makes *Laudato si'* the most significant addition to the corpus of social teaching since *Rerum*



A farmer pulls a cart on a rice paddy near a factory outside Hanoi.

novarum. In essence, the new encyclical suggests that our responsibilities extend across time as well as space, and that they include the entirety of creation. *Laudato si'* thus develops a broader notion of solidarity—solidarity not only within generations but also between generations, and solidarity not only with our fellow human beings but with the whole earth and all its creatures.

This thicker notion of solidarity is not an innovation, but *Laudato si'* puts it right at the heart of the church's social doctrine, and provides a firm theological basis for its centrality. From the title to the final prayer, this encyclical is suffused with the spirituality of St. Francis of Assisi, affirming a close kinship between humanity and the natural world. One implication of this is that all creatures have inherent value, and all have their own purpose, apart from their usefulness to us.

Of course, such a worldview has profound implications for human behavior. Harking back to Genesis, Pope Francis teaches that “human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our

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neighbor, and with the earth itself.” Whenever one of these relationships is ruptured, the others are ruptured too. This is the idea of integral ecology. It is the central message of the encyclical, and it is not merely a theological message; it also has important implications for politics and policy.

Pope Francis is blunt and forceful about the extent of environmental degradation. He writes that “the earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth.” Basing his analysis on the firm evidence of science, he argues that our current global economic model has become reckless and unsustainable, brushing up against some critical planetary boundaries. When *Rerum novarum* was written, a great economic transformation—powered by the burning of fossil fuels—was still in its adolescence. The technological advances brought about by steam engines, railways, and steel production were already well established, but electrification had just begun, and the age of automobiles and petrochemicals—to say nothing of information technology—still lay in the future. The economic benefits of the industrial revolution were mostly confined to Europe and North America.

Today, the economic landscape is dramatically different. The global economy is now over two hundred times larger than it was at the outset of the industrial revolution. But its rapid expansion has come at the expense of the planet and its climate. Already, the concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere has jumped to a level not seen in 3 million years—and this over a mere century and a half, a blink of an eye in planetary history. The overwhelming weight of science tells us that if we continue burning fossil fuels at this rate, we can expect global temperatures to rise by 4 to 6 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels by the end of this century. This would have catastrophic implications for life as we know it. We would expect to witness more severe droughts, flooding, and extreme weather events. Crop yields would decline dramatically. Some small island nations would simply cease to exist. And those least responsible for climate change will be hit hardest by it. Pope Francis asks what kind of world we wish to leave our children. Surely not this one.

Climate change is not even the whole story. There is also the acidification of the oceans, depletion of freshwater resources, rapid deforestation, large-scale pollution caused by chemicals and fossil fuels, and a dramatic degradation of ecosystems and loss of biodiversity. It is remarkable that *Laudato si'* touches directly on many of these issues, displaying a keen awareness of the scale and complexity of the environmental crisis. It also places this crisis within a larger context. As Francis puts it, “we are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental.” We are harming creation, which has value in its own right, but we are also harming humanity, especially the poor. As Francis repeats over and over, everything is connected.

The solution, according to Francis, lies in integral and sustainable human development. This means prioritizing not merely economic growth, but also social inclusion and environmental sustainability. As the pope notes, it must include “combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature.” And while sustainable development is compatible with growth in the developing world, *Laudato si'* cautions that wealthier countries might need to cut back on their own “insatiable and irresponsible growth.” The goal is to restore balance—between rich and poor, between humanity and the natural world.

This, of course, is easier said than done. It would require a radical transformation of the habits of consumption on which the global economy now depends. In conformity with prior teaching, *Laudato si'* is deeply suspicious of the classical liberal emphasis on individual autonomy and promotion of self-interest as the prime motivating force of economic interaction. Francis understands that an ideology based on “collective selfishness” and a “deified market” cannot bring about social inclusion or environmental sustainability. It leads instead to an exaggerated focus on short-term profit, and it contributes to a throwaway culture that disdains both the earth and the excluded. One clear example of this short-sightedness can be found in the avaricious behavior of the financial sector, the force behind the global economic crisis of 2008.

The lure is not just profit, but power too. The encyclical apports some of the blame for environmental degradation to our uncritical attitude toward technology—to the Enlightenment promise that science provides humanity with the tools to master nature. The pope insists that technology is never neutral and can easily allow those with knowledge and resources to dominate others and ruin the natural world. This “modern anthropocentrism” can even derive from a distorted form of Christianity that emphasizes dominion over stewardship. As Cardinal Óscar Andrés Rodríguez Maradiaga—leading adviser and confidante of Pope Francis—puts it, “man finds himself to be a technical giant and an ethical child.” The way forward, as laid out by *Laudato si'*, will involve regulation and changes in economic policy, but it will begin with a change in attitudes and culture. It won't be easy, especially for those in wealthy countries that now consume much more than their fair share of the world's resources. Yet the gravity of the situation presents us with little choice—either we change our ways, or we prepare for a grim future.

There is some good news on this front. It is no coincidence that Pope Francis chose to promulgate his environmental encyclical at this particular time. In September, the world's leaders will gather in New York to sign on to the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals. Then, in December, leaders will convene in Paris for a crucial climate-change conference, which may be the last chance to reach a binding agreement on cutting carbon emissions before it is too late. Encourag-

ingly, the G7 countries recently agreed to move away from fossil fuels entirely over the course of the century. Only this kind of “decarbonization” strategy would allow us to limit the rise in global average temperatures to 2 degrees Celsius. It needs to form the basis of a global agreement. Noting the failure to follow through with past agreements, Pope Francis prays for a positive outcome to the upcoming discussions. And if *Laudato si’* is widely read and well received, it could prove a great boon to these efforts.

Regrettably, the country where it is likely to be least well received is the United States, where belief in the liberating power of both technology and free markets is especially prevalent. In recent decades, a crass libertarianism has become resurgent, aided and abetted by powerful financial interests. This worldview does not sit well with the traditional principles of Catholic social teaching—or with the newer emphasis on sustainability combined with the demand that wealthier countries compensate poorer ones for the environmental damage they cause. And yet an influential group of U.S. Catholics has been insisting for decades that Catholic social teaching is perfectly compatible with the modern practice of laissez-faire capitalism.

This helps explain the anxiety evinced by some American Catholics even before the encyclical was released. Anticipating its criticism of laissez-faire capitalism, and trying to insulate themselves from it, some critics argued that Pope Francis simply does not understand the market economy—the virtuous American kind, rather than the corrupt Argentinean kind. Others (and sometimes the same people) urged the pope not to wade into an “unsettled” scientific debate.

The most insidious criticism of all, though, is that sustainable development is merely a cover for population control—reducing the numbers of the poor. As if to preempt this line of attack, Hans Joachim Schellnhuber, one of the world’s leading climate scientists, said at the official launch of the encyclical that “it is not the mass of poor people that destroys the planet, but the consumption of the rich.” The same point is made by the encyclical itself. *Laudato si’* also links abortion to a broader set of concerns related to human dignity and protection of the earth. As understood by the church, sustainable development is prolife: it is predicated on the dignity of every human person, and seeks to create the preconditions for human flourishing.

Such development is the great challenge of our time, and it will require commitment at all levels—global, national, local, as well as personal. It will involve courageous policy initiatives along with the cultivation of different habits among consumers. The genius of this encyclical is that it provides a moral framework for this kind of all-encompassing reform. When this century draws to a close, people will surely look back on *Laudato si’* much as we now look back on *Rerum novarum*, as a timely clarion call. Will it be heeded in time? ■



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Pomp & Circumstances

The Same-Sex Marriage Decision

Paul Horwitz

For those of us who believe in equal rights under the law for gays and lesbians, and who also favor legal same-sex marriage, the Supreme Court's landmark decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* is a victory. One could rest there and say no more. Before we analyze victories, first we celebrate them. The joy and tears of millions of gay and straight Americans over the past two weeks is testament that many had cause to celebrate.

In our culture wars, however, each milestone is just the prelude to the next conflict. There is rarely time to reflect calmly on the various meanings of such events. Too many commentators immediately seek to fix the "real" meaning of the case and secure the strategic high ground for the next battle. That's too bad. Despite some positive aspects, *Obergefell* raises many questions and contains some serious flaws.

For those who support same-sex marriage, *Obergefell* is definitely a victory. But the victory is not primarily one for the Supreme Court—or for Justice Anthony Kennedy, who wrote the opinion. The decision is largely about a change in social consensus. As demonstrated by the opinion's lengthy list of state laws and judicial decisions allowing same-sex marriage, the Supreme Court was hardly the prime mover in making marriage equality a legal reality. Indeed, the Court spent years avoiding the fundamental question of same-sex marriage's constitutionality, waiting for public opinion to shift until its decision was virtually preordained. There are heroes in this story; some are even lawyers. But not necessarily the ones who sit on the Court. The real heroes are the many men and women whose public coming out, often at risk of disparagement, disinheritance, and even physical harm, transformed national sentiment. The Court's role was secondary.

The Court certainly plays a role in turning social change into legal fact. But that role is less romantic than anything in Kennedy's opinion suggests. He hints at this point when he recounts the history of the gay-rights movement, writing

that "questions about the rights of gays and lesbians soon reached the courts, where the issue could be discussed in the formal discourse of the law."

Substitute "must" for "could"—an important change—and you have a description of the Court's proper role. Constitutional phrases like "equal protection of the laws" are not self-explanatory. They require judicial elaboration. And Supreme Court decisions have to be applied by a vast number of lower court judges and government officials. Its decisions must strive for clarity and predictability. Judges and officials should be able to apply them easily and consistently, rather than having to anticipate the mood of particular sitting justices.

The "formal discourse of the law" that results is rarely moving. Equal-protection jurisprudence, with its seemingly crisp categories of protected groups and technical language of "tiers of judicial scrutiny," echoes the workaday prose of instruction manuals more than the eloquence of Abraham Lincoln. It's dry, even dull. But it is manageable.

The Court's gay-rights decisions have fallen short of this standard from the beginning. Part of the reason for this failure is that the Court lacked either the votes or the will to declare firmly that gays and lesbians are a protected class, and that laws targeting them require strict judicial scrutiny. Some of it stems from problems in equal-protection jurisprudence itself, which always promised more clarity than it actually delivered. But much of it has to do with Kennedy himself.

Give him his due credit. For those of us who believe gays and lesbians are owed legal and moral equality, Kennedy's staunch support for gay rights, and his role as "swing justice," have been crucial. His votes will long be remembered.

His writing and thinking are another matter. From his first major gay-rights opinion in 1996 to today, Kennedy's leading opinions on gay rights have been a jumble of cloudy reasons and purple prose. Proust showed more economy of language; the Oracle at Delphi was less, well, Delphic.

His decisions have relied heavily on "substantive due process" law, finding substantive rights (like the right to abortion) in the seemingly procedural language of the Due Process Clause. This provoked strong criticism from *Obergefell*'s four dissenters. Identifying new, "unenumerated" fun-

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damental rights does raise questions of judicial legitimacy. But most lawyers have come to terms with substantive due process, while other citizens are unaware of, or indifferent to, these niceties. More troubling is the weakness of Kennedy's justifications for finding particular fundamental rights, and the uncertain boundaries of those rights.

Relying on the Equal Protection Clause could have given greater clarity to his opinions. Federal Judge Richard Posner's opinion striking down Indiana and Wisconsin's marriage laws took this simple tack. Given the long history of discrimination against gays and lesbians, he wrote, "more than unsupported conjecture" is needed to justify laws that permit unequal treatment on the basis of sexual orientation. The states' reasons for limiting marriage to heterosexuals, he held, were "not only conjectural; they are totally implausible." His solution was clean and forceful, and avoided the need to delve into the mysteries of substantive due process. Equal protection figures in Kennedy's opinion, but even that part of the ruling is murky at best.

Kennedy's gay-rights opinions have given rise to a strange cottage industry for constitutional law scholars. After each opinion, they set to work on articles purporting to explain and defend Kennedy's opinions or uncover their "hidden clarity." A nadir was reached after his opinion two years ago in *United States v. Windsor*, which drove one scholar to defend "The Virtue of Obscurity" in judicial writing.

The opinion in *Obergefell* is clearer than *Windsor*, in bulk if not in specifics. But it is still stuffed with airy generalities—"The Constitution promises liberty to all within its reach, a liberty that includes certain specific rights that allow persons, within a lawful realm, to define and express their identity"—and unhelpful college-essay truisms: "The history of marriage is one of both continuity and change." It is clear not because the opinion is clear, but because its bottom line is: The Constitution requires legal same-sex marriage. And so it does, in my view. But Kennedy's opinion is not so much a demonstration of how or why this should be so as it is a homily, which assumes that it is true and insists that this is a good thing. As Judge Posner's opinion suggests, there are strong arguments to be made for the constitutionality of gay marriage—and difficult questions about the nature of such a right and what happens next. Neither is addressed satisfactorily here. There are also arguments to be made that at times, it makes sense for the Court to sacrifice some clarity for the sake of some stirring or poetic language. But for bad poetry?

Justice Kennedy's opinion in *Obergefell* has been compared to the Court's famous school desegregation opinion, *Brown v. Board of Education*. Would that they were more similar. *Brown* addressed a nation that largely favored desegregation but contained substantial pockets of die-hard resisters. Chief Justice Earl Warren intended the unanimous opinion to be short enough to be reprinted in every newspaper, and



simple enough to be widely read and understood. *Obergefell* is fairly short, but much less clear. *Brown* left many questions unanswered and its logic was not airtight, but it was admirably direct. Warren understood that Supreme Court decisions cannot change hearts, but can make clear what will no longer be allowed. Its most-quoted sentence—"We conclude that, in the field of public education, the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place"—is moving precisely because it does not seek to move anyone. Warren knew that the real emotion would come from the simple fact of the legal holding, and all that it meant.

By contrast, Kennedy reaches strenuously for grandeur, and falls flat. Many people took to Facebook—that modern substitute for meaningful political involvement—to quote *Obergefell*'s conclusion, which says that "no union is more profound than marriage, for it embodies the highest ideals of love, fidelity, devotion, sacrifice, and family." Did they really agree with this? No: surely many liberal readers would protest bitterly if told that cohabitation is less "profound" than legal marriage. Did they find the language terribly moving? It's doubtful, since it is indistinguishable from a greeting card. The result moved them, not the language. Kennedy should have devoted more effort to clarity and guidance, and less to pomp and sentimentality.

Worries about whether we must now constitutionalize polygamous marriage can be set aside for now as premature, if not silly. *Obergefell* teaches us neither that the Constitution is limited to two-person marriage, nor that some clear legal principle demands or precludes such an outcome. Rather, it suggests that polygamy will be protected by the Constitution only if enough people strongly believe that it should be, and not before. We are a long way from that moment. But *Obergefell* raises two more pressing questions.

First, resistance. Will we face the same political division, protracted official non-compliance, and violence that occurred after *Brown*? Maybe, but I doubt it. The history of discrimination against gays and lesbians is long and its effects far-reaching. But it is less central to American history than our deep struggle over race. Racial segregation, moreover, worked—and still does—by combining legal, social, and economic forces to keep blacks and whites in separate worlds. It is easier for a white person to think of African Americans with contempt when he is not confronted with them as neighbors, fellow parishioners, family, and friends. A major reason that sectors of the Republican Party have shifted on gay rights is the nearness of gay and lesbian sons, daughters, and colleagues, whose unashamed existence changed hearts and minds. Presence, not absence, makes the heart grow fonder. Many changes still need to occur, not least the wider protection of sexual orientation in antidiscrimination laws. Still, I suspect that legal barriers to equality of sexual orientation will fall faster and more easily than those erected on the basis of race.

Marriage-equality advocates have often insisted that same-sex marriage need not affect anyone else's choices or conduct, and that claims of a threat to religious freedom were baseless. That calculus has shifted. Such concerns are newly plausible.

What of religion and religious accommodation? Must small-business owners write messages on wedding cakes and photograph weddings that they object to? Objecting churches will not be required to perform same-sex weddings or hire gay clergy. But will they be legally branded as practitioners of invidious discrimination, and face the loss of tax-exempt status?

Here, the outcome is likely to be different and more difficult. Marriage-equality advocates have often insisted that same-sex marriage need not affect anyone else's choices or conduct, and that claims of a threat to religious freedom were baseless. That calculus has shifted. Such concerns are newly plausible. Already, some legal analysts have confidently proclaimed that *Obergefell* itself clearly (but, oddly enough for a "clear" statement, only impliedly) eliminates any possibility of reliance on religious reasons by lawmakers, no matter the subject of the law. Meanwhile, in the decades since the passage of our nation's landmark civil-rights statutes, the scope of so-called "public accommodations" laws has broadened significantly, leaving more activities subject to state regulation and private lawsuits. And we are seeing an upsurge in stringently egalitarian arguments about what the law requires. Things like tax-exempt status may come to be seen, not as an acknowledgment by government that religion or churches constitute a private or separate sphere,

but as a "statement" by government that violates constitutional "values" and must perforce be eradicated. Arguments to the contrary will be painted not as a vote for political and religious pluralism, but as merely reactionary.

Kennedy's opinion in *Obergefell*, as the dissenters forcefully point out, nods at the existence of these issues but certainly does not settle them. It assures churches and religious individuals that they can "teach" what they wish about marriage. But it says nothing about whether and how they

may exercise their religion consistent with their beliefs about these questions—a strange omission, given that the First Amendment speaks about the free exercise of religion. As Chief Justice John Roberts observed, "Hard questions arise when people of faith exercise religion in ways that may be seen to conflict with the new right to same-sex marriage." On these issues, the majority is simply—perhaps ominously—silent.

In truth, however, the underlying lesson of the case is that they can't be settled by legal decisions alone. In the long run, these disputes will turn on the weight of public opinion, not on Kennedy's own views. That includes changes

in public opinion in, and about, religion and religious communities. Many faiths' own views on LGBT issues have altered and will continue to do so, partly from independent conscientious reflection and partly in response to public and perhaps legal pressure. It is possible that changes in the views of religious groups will occur even faster than changes in the law, and thus render moot many of these difficult questions.

Still, while other faiths and churches may—God willing—become more genuinely loving and welcoming to gays and lesbians, they are likely to remain adamant on particular doctrinal positions concerning homosexuality and marriage. How they will fare as a legal matter is harder to guess. The nature of church-state relations has hardly been static in this country. It has had moments of strong religious pluralism and legal accommodation, and others of unyielding legal "neutrality" and refusal to accommodate, combined with latent and sometimes open hostility to clericalism and ecclesiastical bodies.

Same-sex marriage rights are first and foremost about the couples themselves, and we should celebrate their gain. But of course they will have wider effects. What course the public will choose to take on those matters is hard to predict. It is not clear what Justice Kennedy himself would like to see happen. But that doesn't matter all that much. Loath as he seems to admit it, his is only one vote in a much larger world. ■



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Richard Alleva

Casualty of the Fame Machine

'AMY'

Right after I saw Asif Kapadia's riveting documentary *Amy*, about the brilliantly talented and pathetically vulnerable pop singer Amy Winehouse, some observations about Dylan Thomas by the novelist-critic Elizabeth Hardwick floated up from the recesses of my memory. So I tracked them down:

The urgency of his drinking, his uncontrollable destructiveness seemed to add what was needed beyond his talents. He was both a success and a failure in a way we find particularly appealing.... He had everything and "threw it all away."... He was a wild genius who needed caring for.... Even excess, carried off with so great a degree of authenticity and compulsiveness, has a kind of chic.

Most of that also applies to Winehouse. Like the Welsh poet, who did some of his finest work while still in his teens, she was a prodigy who, at nineteen, revealed a talent comparable to that of some of her idols, such as Billie Holiday and Tony Bennett. But, also like Thomas, Winehouse "threw it all away" to feed her addictions. And if Thomas both needed and defied his friends and caregivers, ducking into the White Horse Tavern in Greenwich Village for endless whiskeys, Winehouse assured her listeners, with her most popular song, "Rehab," that she wasn't having any, having taken a lover who hastened her end by using her money to buy drugs for both of them. And like Dylan the drunk who competes with Thomas the poet for fame, Amy the squalid disgrace is still just as clearly printed on the public's memory as Winehouse the careful crafter and performer of some unforgettable songs. (The film makes it clear that she was no rock 'n' roller but a jazz musician of the highest order.)

But Hardwick's comment about Thomas's "chic" definitely does not



apply to Winehouse. Nowadays, public displays of messy excess reach us through a social media whose keynote response is derision. Thomas's stunts became amusing anecdotes while Winehouse's were posted on YouTube. Kapadia includes montages of late-night British and American TV hosts getting mileage out of the singer's deterioration. "Rehab," though intended ironically, only aggravated the derision. All the world loves a winner? Yes, but especially when a winner becomes a loser, for then the cameras really have something to feast on. For example: a booze-sodden and love-smitten Winehouse (during a photo shoot) circling her midriff with a knife and claiming that she'd like to carve the name of her lover, Blake Fiedler, into her flesh; or a dazed Winehouse lurching around Fiedler's apartment and bumping into walls while he, equally intoxicated, films her; or the singer going mute and nearly zombie-like at a Belgrade concert and, when roundly booed by thousands, turning and giving the audi-

ence a ghastly, pleading smile. None of these scenes exudes even a hint of chic.

Amy is very much an assembled documentary, a product of the editing room, where Kapadia stitched together footage garnered from iPhones, news clips, TV excerpts, and stuff shot on the streets by amateurs and pros. This isn't a "talking heads" documentary, where newly filmed interviews comment on past events seen in old footage. To be sure, Kapadia did conduct fresh interviews with Winehouse's friends, lovers, and colleagues, but most of their commentary is heard in voiceover rather than seen. It is the old footage that determines the shape of the narrative—what gets discussed and emphasized and what doesn't. And since there's little footage of Winehouse's childhood and early career, while the later scandals were covered ravenously, Kapadia's film, though fascinating, is also unbalanced. After all, Amy Winehouse lived for twenty-seven years, but more than three-quarters of this two-hour-plus documentary deals exclusively with her rapid decline.

PHOTO: RAMA

But what we do see of the early life is poignant. In a home movie there's a robust, happy fifteen-year-old Amy singing "Happy Birthday" at a party, and her voice, at first childishly raucous, expands and brightens as she gets into it. A record company executive remembers the young Winehouse as a "classic North London Jewish girl." Her amazingly large, hungry eyes, which will later be garishly outlined with heavy mascara, look at the camera with the voracity of a child quite certain she could eat all the birthday cake without any help. We hear brief accounts of her troubled home life: her father Mitch's adultery and departure, her mother's inability to restrain her daughter's willfulness. The mother remembers that when Amy was just a little girl she complained, "You should be tougher, Mum." But this telling early material is over much too quickly.

Next we encounter the up-and-coming nineteen-year-old who still has the robustness of a child but also the sexy luster of a young talent who's just realized there's a world out there that wants to listen to her. She also soon realizes that being discovered by the music industry can lead either to the deepening of one's gifts or to the slick commercialization of them. "Leave me alone," she apostrophizes the wheeler-dealers and publicists, "and I will do the music." The problem was she hadn't yet realized what she'd become capable of when she wasn't doing the music and had unlimited access to drugs and alcohol.

We all get to watch her make that unhappy discovery. Kapadia treats us to a ninety-minute barrage of news clips and TV and Internet footage showing each stage of the singer's physical and emotional downfall. Though Kapadia has said he would like his film to free the singer from her tabloid legacy, his choice to rely so much on this late footage results in a movie that actually highlights Winehouse's tabloid legacy. But this probably was inevitable, since coverage of the singer proliferated precisely when her career began to go awry.

If *Amy* doesn't exactly rescue Winehouse, it certainly indicts the way in which mass media has changed for the

worse. As the director said in his radio interview with Terry Gross on NPR's *Fresh Air*, "Rehab...was famous in the U.K. when all the newspapers went digital. So suddenly there were websites... Facebook, YouTube, all of these other social-media things suddenly turned up.... [When] she had a bad concert, everyone saw it around the world.... There was just this machine around Amy where it became about them and not about her, and she was the one that was getting more and more lost." Precisely. But that same machine generated the coverage that gives this film most of its visual material.

And thereby hangs a happy paradox. The footage that the tabloids and websites once used to exploit the Winehouse miseries have been carefully sequenced by Kapadia and his editor Chris King so that they now bring her humanity home to the viewer. Seeing Winehouse drunk in an isolated YouTube clip is one thing, but seeing the same clip in the context of Kapadia's narrative with the off-screen voices of friends and collaborators explaining the circumstances is something quite different. There's no denying that we are watching a trainwreck in progress but the tragedy never reduces Winehouse to being a mere freak or spectacle. The image of her as the "classic North London Jewish girl" survives all the ensuing successes, survives all the wrong men and wrong choices. And of course Winehouse survives in her recordings. The way she imaginatively presents herself in her songs confirms in a controlled way what the camera catches raw: a young woman who, when she wasn't at work, seemed completely unable to erect a deflecting persona that would help her deal with a devouring media—no clever patter or snide comebacks, no ready self-promotion. Her huge gray-green eyes express what we hear in her voice as she wails the word "black" through the concluding bars of "Back to Black," the title song on her best album. It's the wail of a child who loses her mother in a crowd and finds herself surrounded by strangers, all of them armed with cameras. ■

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Richard Cohen

Harper Leaves the Club

Harper (appropriately) has unleashed a two-million-copy first printing of Harper Lee's second-to-be-published novel, *Go Set a Watchman*, and in doing so has removed her from a unique group—the ninety or so celebrated authors who have published just a single novel.

Lee said years ago that she did not intend to publish another work, and we know that *Go Set a Watchman* was rejected by her editors both before and after *To Kill a Mockingbird* was published (she had also spent several years working on a novel called *The Long Goodbye* but eventually abandoned it). Even if her new publication gives us pleasure, I would prefer to remember her as the author of a single towering achievement, a member of one of the most unusual groupings in literary history.

The reasons for each one-novel novelist's fame vary. Sometimes it's distinction in other fields. For instance, several politicians are in the club—Napoleon (*Clisson et Eugénie*), Winston Churchill (*Savrola*), Georges Clemenceau (*Les Plus Fortes*), Francisco Franco (*Race*), Joseph Goebbels (*Michael*), and Benito Mussolini (*The Cardinal's Mistress*).

Napoleon, Churchill, Goebbels, and Mussolini each wrote his novel early in his career, the last in 1909 in serial form when working for a popular socialist newssheet, each episode written by lamplight after the main day's work was over. When the full novel was published in English, Dorothy Parker wrote: "This is not a book to be set aside lightly; it should be thrown, with great force." There are good reasons

why some authors stopped writing fiction when they did.

The world of entertainment has had its share of one-offs: Sarah Bernhardt, Noel Coward, Errol Flynn, Jean Harlow, Michael Redgrave, and Orson Welles all tried their hand, as did the singers Bob Dylan and Woody Guthrie. Artists Aubrey Beardsley and Salvador Dali also wrote a single novel.

Then there are the ancients: Apuleius, Heliodorus, Longus, Petronius, Achilles Tatius. In most cases, our knowledge of their output is limited—we can make only an informed guess based on the single novel that has come down to us.

The largest group of one-off novelists are those whose creative talents are in other art forms: short-story writers such as Michael Arlen, Alice Munro, Edgar Allan Poe, J. D. Salinger, or poets like Walt Whitman, John Ashberry, John Berryman, Randall Jarrell, Boris Pasternak, and Edward Thomas (though Thomas died young, in World War I).

Then there are the dramatists: Brendan Behan, Berthold Brecht, William Congreve, Oliver Goldsmith, Arthur Miller, Joe Orton, Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard, and Oscar Wilde. Of these, Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* and Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are the two classics, although Miller's *Focus*, written in 1945 to battle American anti-Semitism, is a powerful work on a theme that he felt could be fully explored only in novel form.

Several essayists and critics had one novel published—Max Beerbohm, Harold Bloom, Cyril Connolly, G. V. Desani, William Empson, Herbert Read, Allen Tate, and Lionel Trilling—but not always from want of trying. Read

started several works of fiction, recording that "the only occupation to which a serious man could seriously put himself was the writing of novels," while after Connolly died no fewer than six unfinished novels were discovered in his flat. As his biographer Michael Sheldon noted, "He was prodded along by a passionate desire to join the ranks of great novelists, but it was impossible for him to keep his fundamental weaknesses as a novelist from his sharp critic's eye."

Some single novels are by a jacks-of-all-trades group that defies categorization: Elias Canetti, Primo Levi, Samuel Johnson, Voltaire. There's a scientist (Carl Sagan); a sportsman (C. B. Fry); an army officer (Pierre Choderlos de Laclos); religious figures (Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, and John Henry Newman); a biographer (Michael Holroyd); a journalist duo (George and Weedon Grossmith); a diarist (Samuel Pepys); a travel writer (Patrick Leigh Fermor); a politician (Benjamin Constant); and a would-be politician who may yet write another novel (Arundhati Roy).

Harper Lee herself belongs to a group that suffered from writer's block: Margaret Mitchell and Ralph Ellison both found it difficult to write again after the huge success of their first novels. Mitchell was fatally hit by a car when she was forty-nine, but by then she was so overcome by fame she was never likely to write again. (After her death, her estate dredged up a second novel, *Lost Laynsen*, written when Mitchell was just sixteen: it proved a curiosity that did nothing for her reputation.)

The last category takes in those who either worked in secret to produce a novel that was published only after their



Gregory Peck and Brock Peters star in a scene from the 1962 film 'To Kill a Mockingbird,' based on the novel by Harper Lee.

death (Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, Robert Tressell), or who labored on their one full-length work of fiction for many years, like Marcel Proust or Alessandro Manzoni, who actually published three different versions of *The Betrothed* over his lifetime (Verdi wrote his *Requiem* for Manzoni's funeral).

What is one to make of this extraordinary list, which includes almost thirty classics of world literature? No other art form can compare. In classical music, there's a theory called the "one violin concerto principle," which is that—Mozart apart—no composer ever managed more. Beethoven wrote a single opera, and César Franck one symphony, but such examples are scarce. Even fewer examples exist of a one-off play (Picasso wrote one!), or film (about thirty one-film directors, but no more than a couple—Brando, Laughton—of any

worth). As for a single painting, the nearest one gets is Michelangelo, who attempted only twice a painting in oil—"Oil painting is for women," he scoffed. Poetry is almost a nonstarter, with *The Divine Comedy* and *Leaves of Grass* coming closest, but both Dante and Whitman wrote other books of poems.

No, one-novel novelists present a mystery. Most writers mature as their careers continue, but if a first novel is produced in maturity—Lampedusa, Pasternak—the novelist may have nothing more to say. The published novel may be the product of a lifetime's striving.

Many of those on the list were writers by trade or vocation and contributed in other genres. Literary fashions also count, influencing writers to take up or abandon a particular form. If someone's first novel is a great success, does that make future novels more difficult? Sometimes an author might have written more,

but died early: Emily Bronte, Erskine Childers, Alain-Fournier, Sylvia Plath, and Mikhail Lermontov are the best known. But there is still the feeling that Herbert Read articulated: writing at least one novel entitles you to enter a privileged group engaged in a vital enterprise. Being a novelist is special, a siren calling.

Which leaves me thinking that, although her thousands of fans will be delighted to pick up her new novel (if they can stomach the notion of Atticus Finch being a racist in his old age), it is a little sad that Harper Lee is vacating this special club. ■

Richard Cohen is the author of *By the Sword: A History of Gladiators, Musketeers, Samurai, Swashbucklers, and Olympic Champions* (Modern Library) and *Chasing the Sun: The Epic Story of the Star That Gives Us Life*. His new book, *How To Write Like Tolstoy*, is due out next May from Random House.

Thomas Baker

Paved With Good Intentions

The Road to Character

David Brooks

Random House, \$28, 273 pp.

Character,” like “leadership” and “values,” is one of those virtuous-sounding, malleable words that frequently end up in places like prep school mission statements, where being more specific might be too threatening for everyone concerned. David Brooks, however, thinks character is the very word that describes what’s missing in our garish, self-centered society. In *The Road to Character*, he has written an extended sermon on the old-fashioned virtues of humility and duty and stability, a self-help book for an age he believes values the self much too highly.

A familiar voice from his *New York Times* column, Brooks (especially in his broadcast appearances) always seems likable and reasonable, which helps mitigate his weaknesses for sweeping, oversimplified sociology and Republican economics. In classic Brooksonian style, *The Road to Character* packages the human moral condition in clever dualisms. We have, he says, allowed the résumé virtues to overshadow the eulogy virtues—or, alternatively, our Adam I nature (utilitarian logic) to outpace Adam II (moral logic). For Brooks, we (and it seems to be all of us) have largely abandoned a sense of self-discipline and our own imperfections. In their place, we live motivated by ambition and self-esteem, and follow our feelings rather than striving to conquer them. After World War II, a great turning point in the Brooks worldview, we have been horse-whispered by everyone from Norman Vincent Peale to psychologist Carl Rogers to Dr. Seuss to Elizabeth Gilbert’s *Eat, Pray, Love*, all telling us to put our personal dreams first.

What we need, says *The Road to Character*, is the inner cohesion and realism about ourselves that character provides. People with character are “calm, settled, and rooted”; they are dignified but they get things done through dedication and self-conquest; humility is the primary virtue. If this sounds more like an idealized Roman general than anyone you know, this is no accident: it is the past that Brooks turns to for all his examples of how to live. Pointing to the Greek biographer Plutarch, he says that “the tales of the excellent can lift the ambitions of the living.” Most of this book is a *Plutarch’s Lives* of Brooks’s design, with twenty-five-page character sketches melding a short biography with a summary of the virtues of character that each life embodies.

If it sounds like such didactic por-

traits might end up feeling potted or hagiographic—well, yes, at times they do. In a childhood sketch of Dwight Eisenhower, we read that “In Abilene, everybody, from business owners to farmers, did physical labor every day, greasing the buggy axles.” A. Philip Randolph “fought any tendency toward looseness or moral laziness with constant acts of self-mastery.” Soldier and statesman George C. Marshall’s schooling shows the virtue of learning “habits of self-restraint, including emotional self-restraint, at an early age.” George Washington and the cherry tree aren’t here, but there are points where they might have fit right in.

To Brooks’s great credit, not all his character virtues are related to axle greasing, self-mastery, or detachment. Some of his heroes were people of con-



General George C. Marshall

stant pushing and fearless confrontation—for example, he clearly finds the austere and passionate Dorothy Day as appealing as his World War II generals. And the book truly comes alive, very unexpectedly, with George Henry Lewes and novelist George Eliot. Their unconventional relationship becomes a sign of the transformation and fulfillment of character through love, and suddenly it becomes clear that there's more to what Brooks is driving at. "Love is a surrender," he writes. "You expose your deepest vulnerabilities and give up your illusions of self-mastery.... [Love] provides a glimpse of some realm beyond the edge of what we know."

Nevertheless, despite a few high points, by the end I was eager for the album of exemplary lives—about 85 percent of the book, alas—to be over. Saved for last is Samuel Johnson, whom Brooks calls a moralist "in the best sense of that term," but who in my mind always seemed more of a crank and pontificator than anyone we would strive to be more like. "His conversation," Brooks writes, "even when uproarious, was meant to be improving." A little improving conversation goes a long way, and I am afraid Brooks the aspiring moralist turns out to be not nearly as lively or enjoyable as Brooks the political pundit.

In the end, perhaps the Plutarch model just can't deliver what Brooks hopes it will. It causes him to fall into the trap of the preacher who recedes too completely behind his desire to exhort, never revealing enough of his own struggles and weaknesses to close the sale. In a book that rails against a culture of unnecessary self-revelation, Brooks undervalues how important a seasoning self-disclosure is in any attempt to sermonize about virtues, weaknesses, and how to live. For one brief moment in the introduction, he moves out from behind the heavy curtain created by these virtuous people of the past.

I wrote [this book], to be honest, to save my own soul. I was born with a natural disposition towards shallowness... I have lived a life of vague moral aspiration.

AUNT GRACE WEARS BEAUTIFUL CLOTHES

Asleep, she has no idea she is old.

She's running uphill, no lightfoot, but quite fast
past the houses and driveways of family friends
toward the higher fields just breaking into flower
that weren't there before, when she was awake.
She stops at the tree edge. The sight that yields
is daisies. Careful she enters the pathless field
of daisies daisies hundreds sunning. She takes
her time. She crouches among their stems. Bowered
low, she looks up at their heads, their far sky.
The wind's soft. The sun's high. It can't last.
Aunt Grace is coming to lunch, she's been told.
Good. Maybe she brings a love-me-not daisy or
Love-me. Aunt Grace will know what daisies are for.

—Marie Ponsot

Marie Ponsot recently received the Aiken Taylor Award for poetry, given annually by Sewanee Review. Her Collected Poems (Knopf) will appear in 2015. In 2013, she was awarded the Ruth Lily Prize for lifetime achievement by the Poetry Foundation.

Clearly, there's something going on here. The book is laced throughout with the vocabulary of sin, holiness, redemption, grace, and Powers Greater than Ourselves, and nearly all of the people Brooks profiles were powerfully shaped at some point in their lives by religious faith and commitments, rather than by a more abstract concept of character. It could easily be seen as a book by someone on the precipice of a religious conversion, something about which Brooks, in recent interviews, declines to comment. (If he becomes Catholic, we can't wait to have him for lunch at *Commonweal*.)

Despite his passion, though, he can't entirely rescue character from the graveyard where vague, somewhat preachy words belong. It's real, living

people we can see and know who still have a much better chance of grabbing our moral imagination than *The Imitation of Ike*. And as an alternative to the occasionally tiresome-sounding virtues in *The Road to Character*, the attractive but uncomfortable heat of the Sermon on the Mount and Matthew 25 is actually a welcome alternative. At the last judgment, thankfully, we aren't asked many questions about character, or whether we were calm, settled, and rooted. It's a relief to remember that even without much in the way of character as defined in *The Road to Character*, redemption is still out there waiting. ■

Thomas Baker is *Commonweal's* publisher.

Jean Hughes Raber

At Least One Levitated

The Wisdom of the Beguines

The Forgotten Story of a Medieval Women's Movement

Laura Swan

Bluebridge Press, \$16.95, 202 pp.

In the twelfth century, single women began moving in large numbers from farms to cities of the Low Countries to work in the textile industry. Many of these women formed communal living arrangements that offered safe, affordable accommodation, and a life of service to their neighbors. According to Laura Swan's recent book, *The Wisdom of the Beguines: The Forgotten Story of a Medieval Women's Movement*, the beguines, who flourished for several hundred years, were one of many lay groups seeking the *vita apostolica* as a faithful response to spiritual renewal. The beguines are hardly forgotten—they have received a good deal of scholarly attention recently, and a modern ecumenical beguine movement has arisen in Europe—but Swan's book provides an accessible overview of beguine spirituality in the context of their own times.

The availability of textile work and the establishment of schools by the countesses Joan and Margaret of Flanders helped beguine communities to coalesce, writes Swan. However, it was the beguines' skill in caring for the poor, the sick, and the dying that earned these

women the respect of townspeople, local authorities, and, at first, church leaders. Swan sees the beguines primarily as religious communities with self-governing rules (though not a rule) and a magistra (rather than an abbess or prioress) who served as a leader and spiritual guide. Beguines did not take vows, though many stayed in the beguineage their whole lives; they were free to leave their communities to marry and raise families. As their learning increased, beguines took a lively interest in theology, wrote their own meditations, and even translated Bible stories into

the vernacular. They embraced a lively form of worship that involved singing and spontaneous dancing.

Church authorities who had initially supported the beguines began to view them with growing consternation. Women coming and going unattended at all hours of the day and night, claiming to be on missions of mercy? Women debating theological issues like university scholars? Women translating Holy Scripture? All this, says Swan, led to accusations of sexual misconduct or, worse, heresy. To mollify church leaders, beguines found it prudent to make visits in groups or to expand their dwellings to take in patients, the elderly, and school children. Some beguines willingly donned distinctive gray dresses and white hoods so as not to be mistaken for prostitutes.

Some agreed to live in enclosed communities or to submit to the supervision of a religious house. Sometimes these concessions were not enough. A few beguines and their works were burned as heretical. It is difficult not to read the accounts of the constraints placed on women beguines by a suspicious male clerical hierarchy and think of those imposed on women by clerics in many faiths today.

Most scholars place the best-known beguine writers—Hadewijch, Mechtilde of Magdeburg, and Marguerite Porete—in the tradition of women medieval mystics. Swan introduces readers to many more beguine mystics and their stories. Beguine mystics reportedly experienced trances, ecstasies, visions, and the stigmata. The twelfth-century beguine Christina the Astonishing was said to have levitated at her own funeral. At the heart of beguine mysti-



From *Die Gartenlaube* (The Gazebo), 1863

cism, says Swan, was a special devotion to Christ as lover and sufferer. The triune God, wrote one beguine, was Lover, Beloved, and Love itself. Some beguines re-enacted Christ's passion for audiences, realistically recalling his suffering.

Beguine thinking may have influenced notions of purgatory as a process of purification (rather than a place of punishment) that brought sufferers closer to God. Swan traces a special call many beguines felt toward the souls in purgatory, which perhaps grew naturally from their care of the dead. The beguine Agnes Blannbekin, for example, had a vision of purgatory in which there was no punishment at all except the yearning for God. Christina the Astonishing, who claimed to have seen purgatory, wrote that "nothing made God weep more with mercy for sinners than when sinners are moved by mercy toward their neighbors," presumably including their "neighbors" in purgatory, whose thirst to be with God could be slaked by the merciful prayers of living sinners. Because of the beguines' devotion to those in purgatory, many citizens left money to the beguinages in exchange for prayers—bequests that sometimes elicited jealousy from the local clerics who found their chantry revenues dwindling. Swan notes that in 1303, Pope Boniface VIII addressed the problem by requiring the beguines to give 25 percent of their death bequests to the parish in which the deceased was born.

In times of interdiction, beguines provided spiritual comfort for their neighbors, and Swan raises the possibility that this comfort led people to wonder—as early Reformation leaders did—whether the sacraments were necessary to salvation, or priests needed as intermediaries with God. While Swan is careful not to suggest that the beguines were in league with Protestant reformers, she notes that some beguine communities embraced Protestantism when it arrived while maintaining friendly relations with Catholic beguines. Interestingly, this ecumenism is a feature of modern communities inspired by the beguines.

Swan's book does a good job of ex-

plaining both the beguines' spiritual practices and their continuing legacy. Precisely because many beguines left their community to marry and raise families, it is hard to determine the full influence of beguine spirituality. Those who left the beguinage must have passed on their education and knowledge to their daughters, granddaughters, and nieces. It is difficult not to imagine that these women, no less than those who stayed

in the beguinage, raised the estimation of women in the eyes of others through their service to the Lord as mothers, helpmeets, and good neighbors. ■

Jean Hughes Raber teaches college writing and communication in Michigan. Her feature about the beguines, "Simple Lives: A New Beginning for the Beguines?" appeared in the May 18, 2009, issue of *Commonweal*.

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BOOKMARKS

Anthony Domestico

In early 2014, two of America's best liberal journalists, Jonathan Chait of *New York* magazine and Ta-Nehisi Coates of the *Atlantic*, engaged in a public debate about the history of race in the United States. Chait offered a tempered but optimistic reading of American racial history as a "progression" from slavery to Jim Crow to desegregation to President Barack Obama. To note that things have gotten better, Chait argued, isn't to say that they are perfect (or even adequate). But, if we look at the country's long racial history, we must see "halting, painful, non-continuous, but clear improvement."

Coates disagreed. Slavery went away but poll taxes and lynchings and redlining and police brutality rushed in to fill the void. Segregation and the mass incarceration of black males are different phenomena, but they flow from the same toxic place—a place that fears blackness and so seeks to brutalize and contain it. White supremacy, Coates argued, "afflicted black people in the past, continue[s] to afflict black people today, and will likely afflict black people until this country passes into the dust." According to Coates, racial history isn't "progressive." It's recursive.

Several months later, events proved this debate not merely an intellectual exercise. First, Eric Garner died after police put him in a chokehold in Staten Island. Then police shot and killed Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. In both cases, the victims were black and unarmed. In both cases, the police were white and not indicted. Then, a black boy in Cleveland was shot to death while playing with a toy gun. Then, Freddie Gray was killed while in the custody of Baltimore police. In response, riots erupted in cities across the country and slogans were born: "Hands Up, Don't Shoot"; "Black Lives Matter."

It's worth noting that, as with all things involving race in the United States, this is a messier story than it might appear to be. Michael Brown almost certainly didn't raise his hands and say, "Don't shoot." Three of the policemen indicted in Baltimore are black, and the city has a black mayor and a black police chief. Poor black communities suffer from police brutality, but they also suffer from high levels of violent crime.

But these complications shouldn't obscure the central fact uniting these incidents: black Americans suffer discrimination and violence from agents of the state at disproportionate levels. African Americans have always known this—sons receive "the talk" about how to conduct themselves in the presence of police—but the events of the past year have made this a topic of conversation outside the black community. The Chait-Coates debate seems more relevant than ever. Does the arc of American racial history bend toward justice, or does it just circle around to the same point? Is history improving or merely repeating itself?

Two recent books take up the problem of race in America. Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* is a powerful and strange work, looking—sometimes coolly, sometimes angrily—at how racism continues to speak in ways both quiet and loud. In *The Fire Next Time* (1963), James Baldwin wrote, "There are too many things we do not wish to know about ourselves." Chief among them is how racial hatred destroys both the hater and the hated. Rankine's book makes the same point, and it seems likely to stand with the works of Baldwin as a canonical articulation of black experience in America.

Citizen is difficult to categorize. It

blends short prose-poem sections, bursts of lyric poetry ("And still a world begins its furious erasure— / Who do you think you are, saying I to me?"), and pages of what read like cultural criticism. It features photographs of athletes and reproductions of paintings by J. M. W. Turner and art installations by Radcliffe Bailey. Put out in a beautiful edition by Graywolf Press, the cover displays a single empty black hood, torn from a hoodie sweatshirt and set against a white background. This is a photograph of David Hammons's installation *In the Hood* (1993), and it's a perfect entry point to the book's main concerns: how blackness is defined against whiteness; how black culture—hip hop and hoodies, for instance—is imagined as menacing.

The book opens with a rapid-fire series of vignettes, each documenting an instance of "micro-aggression"—a sociological term for the unintended and unconscious acts of discrimination that occur in the course of everyday social existence. These are the quiet ways by which racism lives in a putatively color-blind society: when black politicians are unfailingly referred to, with an air of surprise, as "articulate," or when a person of color struggles to get a taxi in New York City. (This isn't just a problem with white cab drivers. Black cabbies confess to the same kind of discriminatory behavior—further proof of the insidious effects of racism.)

Rankine has the ability to make the incidents she relates seem both absolutely specific and totally generic, and she accomplishes this trick primarily through formal means. The opening prose sections are written in a style that is flat, spare, slightly off, occasionally infelicitous. In one, we hear that "a woman with multiple degrees says, I didn't know black women could get cancer." In another, a "man at the cash register wants to know if you think your card will work. If this is his routine, he didn't use it on the friend who went before." Read in isolation, these snippets can seem stilted. After all, "a woman with multiple degrees" sounds almost robotic, and the use of "routine" and

“friend” in the same sentence causes the reader to pause: we sense that the “friend” is white, since his use of a credit card wasn’t questioned, but whose friend is he, the speaker’s or the clerk’s?

Yet the flatness is not, I would argue, a flaw but a conscious decision: the endless, draining nature of such incidents can only be represented in a flat, almost deadened style. Rankine, who has published five previous collections of poetry, isn’t writing expository prose but prose poetry, and this kind of writing works by accretion and repetition. At one point, Rankine writes, “When a woman you work with calls you by the name of another woman you work with, it is too much of a cliché not to laugh out loud with the friend beside you who says, oh no she didn’t.” This trumping of the individual by his or her racial identity—one black person is just like every other black person—occurs throughout the book. From earlier, is “the friend who went before” the speaker’s friend or the clerk’s friend? In the end, who cares? What matters is that he is white and therefore can use his credit card without suspicion.

We’re never explicitly told that this friend is white, nor that the speaker in this particular vignette is black. Rankine is doing something subtle here. She’s forcing the reader to make assumptions, not telling us how to read the racial implications of the situation but showing us that we are always reading racial implications into such situations. Throughout the book, Rankine uses the present tense and the second person: “You wait at the bar of the restaurant”; “You are rushing to meet a friend in a distant neighborhood.” The effect of this is startling: the reader feels addressed directly and immediately. We aren’t merely looking at these situations. We are involved in them, whether we want to be or not. And that is one of the



CITIZEN

AN AMERICAN LYRIC

CLAUDIA RANKINE

major arguments of *Citizen*: that to be American is to be involved in a complex, haunted racial story, one that you can’t escape by wishing it away.

Early in the book, Rankine describes the “anger built up through experience and the quotidian struggles against dehumanization every brown or black person lives simply because of skin color.” *Citizen* relentlessly shows how the accumulation of such incidents—a slighting remark overheard here, a police stop there—provokes anger, and how expressing this anger provokes its own violent backlash.

In one section, Rankine looks at Serena Williams as a test case for negotiating the racial politics of anger. She imagines how frequently Williams must have bitten her tongue when faced with the casual (and not so casual) racism of the tennis world: the taunts heard from fans, the unconscious bias of referees,

the praising of her “natural athleticism” over skill or strategy. When Williams on occasion has given vent to her anger, she’s been described as terrifying and barbaric. (A nice point of contrast with Jimmy Connors, whose anger was largely seen as a sign of competitive spirit.)

In Rankine’s reading, Serena Williams becomes an allegory for black experience. American culture provokes black rage and then demonizes it if and when it is expressed. When nine people are killed in a shootout involving mostly white gang members in Waco, it is treated as an isolated incident. When looters destroy property in Baltimore, they are described as “thugs.” Here is Rankine:

Again Serena’s frustrations, her disappointments, exist within a system you understand not to try to understand in any fair-minded way because to do so is to understand the erasure of the self as systemic, as ordinary. For Serena, the daily diminishment is a low flame, a constant drip. Every look, every comment, every bad call blossoms out of history, through her, onto you.

In later sections, Rankine remembers Hurricane Katrina—the government’s inept response and CNN’s “aestheticized distancing from Oh my God, from unbelievable.” She remembers the deaths of Trayvon Martin, shot dead in 2012 for looking suspicious in a hoodie, and James Craig Anderson, robbed and run over by a pickup truck in Mississippi in 2011 for being black. Inevitably, fatalism can set in. As Rankine writes, “And you are not the guy and still you fit the description because there is only one guy who is always the guy fitting the description.”

This kind of thinking, Rankine suggests, characterizes and degrades American society. To be black is to be informed by memory—memory of the country’s long, horrible history of racism

but also of one's own shorter, still horrible, more intimate history of the same. Yet to be black is also to be told to forget it, to get over it, to move on, to suck it up. Toward the book's end, Rankine writes, "Nobody notices, only you've known, / you're not sick, not crazy, / not angry, not sad— / It's just this, you're injured." The injuries continue to pile up, and they aren't going away.

Jeffery Renard Allen's new novel *Song of the Shank*—also from Graywolf and also excellent—makes for an interesting pairing with *Citizen*. Like Rankine, Allen writes in a jagged but beautiful style. Like Rankine, Allen includes extra-textual material: photographs, an old concert program, historical newspaper clippings. And where Rankine reads Serena Williams allegorically, Allen dramatizes how an earlier black star, the musical prodigy Thomas Wiggins, became a site of racial contestation in Civil War America.

Tom Wiggins, known as Blind Tom,

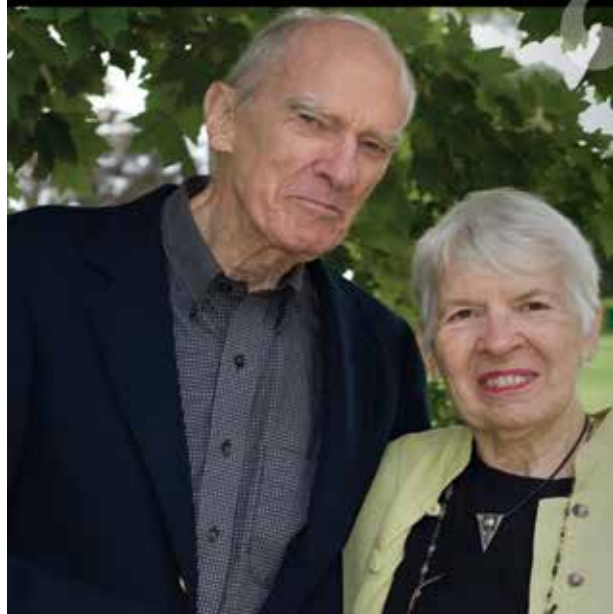
was a real historical figure, though Allen's fictional version frequently veers from the factual record. Born into slavery in Georgia in 1849, Tom was most likely autistic (in the novel, he's described as "feeble-minded"). Undoubtedly, though, he was a genius. Early in childhood, Tom went blind. In a gruesome scene, Allen imagines that Tom blinded himself, leaving his eyes, as one character describes them, "orbs [that] were completely blank and hard in appearance." Tom's blindness, as well as his fits of anger and shyness, makes him a mystery to those around him. "If our eyes are indeed windows into our soul," one character thinks, "then Tom lacked windows. Hard blackness sealed off inward entry."

Soon after this act of self-maiming, Tom displays an uncanny ability to mimic all manner of sounds. It's as if the loss of one sense has sharpened others, with Tom able to hear how "in vibrations of grass earth records the sound and intensity of falling shafts of

sun" and then to re-create these sounds himself. First, he uses his voice to imitate the twitterings of birds. Then, he sneaks into his master's house, using the family piano to imitate the songs he has heard white folks play. Tom's skill is remarkable: he can hear a song once and then play it back, without error and with complete facility. Tom's master, the newspaperman and secessionist General Bethune, realizes that such a gift might be transformed into a "most profitable investment." At eight, Tom goes on the vaudeville circuit. Within years, he has raked in a fortune for his owner—much of which goes to support the secessionist cause—and has become the most famous black person in America.

As such, Tom becomes a figure fraught with racial meaning. To white characters, his capacity for imitation shows that he remains, despite his immense gifts, essentially inhuman. As his first music teacher, General Bethune's wife, rhetorically asks, "But can he do anything other than parrot what she

SKILLIN SOCIETY PROFILE



When we became engaged 57 years ago, we drove to have dinner with my brother Ned, a Jesuit priest. It was the first time he'd met Mary Alice, and she spent the whole meal arguing good-naturedly with him that *Commonweal* was superior to a certain Jesuit magazine. It was dessert time before I got to ask him if he would celebrate our wedding Mass.

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— Vincent and Mary Alice Stanton, Watertown, MA
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does? Can any Negro be more than a parrot? True genius creates." For her, Tom's abilities don't show up the problems of treating humans as property but confirm slavery's rightness. He is not really, she imagines, a thinking being: "she concludes that Tom is fully of a piece with his race. Shut eyes and bulging forehead, he lacks the needed spirit...Yes, his details are exact, his description is accurate, but his interpretation and conclusions are random. Where is the conscious breath?"

For the novel's black characters, however, Tom's performances "put the lie once and for all to the vicious claims for the Negro's lack of intellect and refinement, genius and culture." Tom can recite Plato in the original Greek; he can play Beethoven and Bach and Chopin. Surely, then, he must have a soul. It's a sign of slavery's grotesque moral logic that such an argument would need to be made.

After emancipation, the debate over the meaning of Tom's genius only intensifies. Tabbs Gross, a former slave himself, tries to convince Tom to begin performing again. (The boy has retired from music and is living with a white woman in New York City.) Gross, whose life has been punctuated by failure, sees Tom as a way to success, a means to "break back into the world of the alabasters on his own terms." Even those black characters who would embrace Tom tend to treat him as a thing to be manipulated and used.

In a striking departure from history, Allen sets much of his novel not in the South or on the music circuit but in Edgemere—an imaginary island off the coast of New York City where a group of freedmen attempt to create a community after they've been emancipated but then rejected by white society. (Allen dramatizes the 1863 Civil War draft riots that targeted New York City's free black population.) It's a fantastical island

populated by conmen and preachers, where violence alternates with kindness and where black history can finally be spoken aloud: "They put their song in the air, a sound not easily separable from their bodies and what moves within their bodies, usually kept under wraps, but not so now, skin curving back like windblown curtains to expose auction blocks, swinging gates, the whips, hounds, chains, crops, violations, and vulgarity."

There are many things to love about *Song of the Shank*, especially its intoxicating, cadenced prose: "The human body dazzles the imagination with existence from crown to heel bone, from the brain riding in the head to the winding provinces of the intestines and the heart that branches with its wild arteries and the muscles of the back that somehow remain steady and strong under stress and strain." But Allen doesn't

make it easy to love, or even understand, Tom himself. He is occasionally childish and regularly unpredictable. He speaks in gnomic utterances. In the end, he may not even know that he's black. (Among the many things that Tom imitates so perfectly: white society's hatred of blackness.)

Song of the Shank ends with a description of Tom in retirement: "But once he was back inside the apartment, they recall hearing piano music, a tune that none of them recognized. Soon thereafter, the music stopped. And no one ever heard it again." Tom stops playing, and the music stops with him. But the song that Allen sings in this novel—the song of America's long, painful relationship with race—continues to be heard, and the pain this song gives voice to hasn't gotten any easier to bear. ■

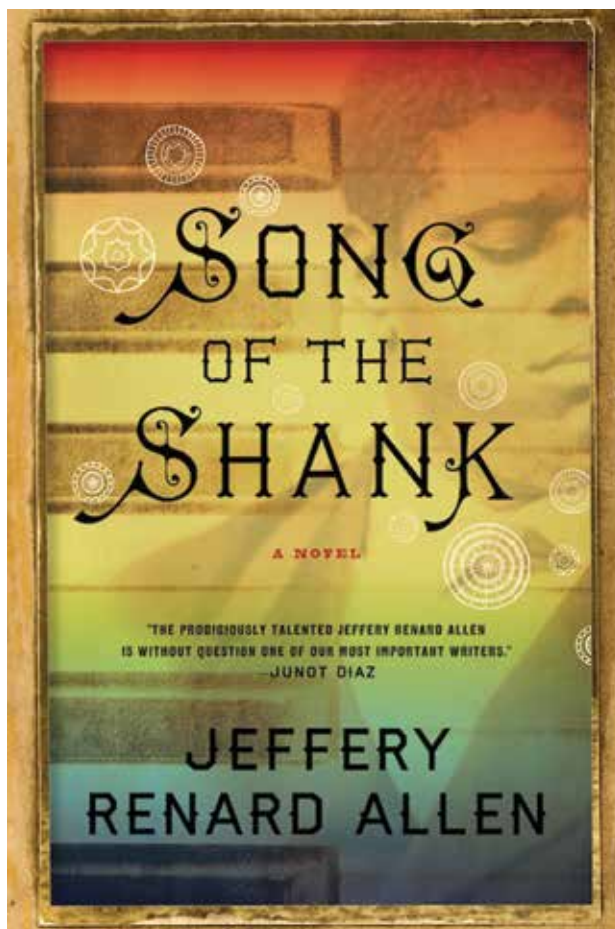
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LETTERS continued from page 4

"discretion" as the ability, even the nascent ability, to make adult decisions, a view supported by the sacramental theology of confirmation. In catechetical terms, this implies a more mature theology and deeper spirituality for young people on the cusp of maturity. At our parish, for instance, confirmation preparation has a strong focus on community life and social justice, an approach that, in purely developmental terms, would be largely lost on a second grader. And I am, finally, also in the keep-them-around-a-bit-longer camp. If we are afraid of losing kids after seventh grade, we should be terrified of losing them after second.

JEFFREY ESSMANN
New York, N.Y.

WHAT'S THE RUSH?

I'm of a mind to disagree with Rita Ferrone's thoughtful assertion that the sacra-

ments of Communion and confirmation ought to be conferred together ("Slap Them Sooner"). I, too, have presumed that confirmation was something of a Roman Catholic bar mitzvah, and now, with Jewish members in my distant family, I believe that that thirteen is even too young for them, although that is none of my business.

My best recollection of my confirmation is that it occurred at around the age of eleven. Oddly, the Diocese in Syracuse, New York, in the mid-1960s offered confirmation candidates the option of making a pledge to not drink any alcohol until they were twenty-one! Quite a commitment for a preteen boy, but I took it. Why? I was sitting at the end of the pew and I didn't want folks standing along the sides of the church to think I was an alcoholic. The pledge stood intact until some years later when I explained it to my buddies, who promptly ridiculed me without mercy. The pledge was broken at the age of sixteen. Rightly or wrongly, I became bitter at my church, for abun-

dant reasons, but the "pledge" was chief among them.

Oh yes, the concomitant Catholic guilt raged, but now, in my early sixties, I remain convinced how wrong the diocese had been to impose such a burden on kids so young. Ironically, I would quit drinking thirty-two years later at the age of forty-eight, thanks to a spiritual program (yes, that one!) that has left-handedly enhanced my Catholicism in ways I never before imagined. The upshot is that my real confirmation finally occurred sometime around my forty-ninth birthday.

Let's not rush our children. The true spiritual nature of our religion must be allowed to evolve in God's time, not our own. At the age of sixty-three, I have realized that I am still a child of God and that his will for me is still unfolding. Confirmation, like matrimony and extreme unction, may be one of those sacraments to let God handle. He has ways of letting us know.

JOE PALKA
Gaithersburg, Md.

ALL IN THE FAMILY

I compliment Anthony Domestico and James Hannan for intriguing reviews of *The Green Road* (by Anne Enright) and *An Unlikely Union* (by Paul Moses), respectively, in the July 10 issue.

With a strong interest in Irish history and culture arising from my mainly Irish heritage (some of my Irish ancestors lived in New York before moving to Wisconsin), I was fascinated by the description of the family dynamics of the Madigans and the cultural and ethnic struggles between Italians and Irish in New York.

It stirred me to look at my own family dynamics anew. Such relationships continue to form us, and cannot be escaped, something Domestico observes as a central theme in *The Green Road*. There were attitudes and ethnic struggles in my hometown that were similar to those Moses describes in *An Unlikely Union*.


I share Moses's hope that based on the stories he tells there is a possibility for diminished ethnic and racial resentments towards today's immigrants.

TOM MCGOVERN
Milwaukee, Wis.

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Two Confederate Flags

Bethe Dufresne

Most Americans cheered last month when the most conspicuous symbol of the Confederacy, its battle flag, was removed from South Carolina's capitol grounds. But the flag remains with us, as does the debate over its significance. Nowhere is it more tenacious than in the province of the dead.

Two Confederate flags haunt my memory of a recent trip to Cedar Key, a small island off Florida's upper west coast. This is "old Florida," where a stroll through the town cemetery, shaded by cedars and moss-draped live oaks, is as soothing as a walk in the woods. That is, until you encounter the final resting place of "Big Ed."

A massive stone replica of the Confederate battle flag, in living color, forms the headstone for Eddy Peters, born March 21, 1963; died March 3, 2004. He was a firefighter, a beer drinker, a hunter, and a lover. Judging by the profusion of mementos—toy fire trucks, plaster angels and ducks, beer bottles—and a stone bench erected for contemplation at the gravesite, Big Ed had a lot of friends. All the trinkets pale, however, against the giant Confederate flag etched onto his black granite headstone. The left triangle of the flag reads, "American by Birth"; the right, "Southern by the Grace of God." A color photograph of the big man himself adorns the top of the monument. Smiling broadly, with one strong hand Big Ed holds aloft what looks to be a large, freshly slain boar; with the other, he extends his middle finger. But the greatest obscenity to me was the flag.

While my husband snapped photos to show our friends back home in New England, I stood in silent debate with Big Ed. He must have loved the Confederate flag and felt it conferred some kind of honor on those who continue to cherish it. Didn't he understand or care how painful the flag is to the descendants of slavery? A daughter of the South myself, I knew, or thought I did, what Big Ed would say: that racism has nothing to do with the Confederate flag; that it is a symbol of rebellion against all who would curb our freedom to define our culture and live as we choose.

Just beyond Big Ed's gravesite, atop a gentle rise, I spied another Confederate flag. This one was small, a cheap cloth swatch atop a wooden stick, tattered and tottering beside a plain, slim white headstone. I walked over to read the faded letters: "Isaac Richburg; Co. A; 10 Fla Inf; C.S.A. [Confederate States of America]; born July 6, 1846; died Nov. 4, 1925."

I usually feel a certain uneasiness when looking at the Confederate flag. Yet seeing it here by the grave of a Confederate soldier, a strange, distinctly unwelcome sensation came over me. I didn't mind it. I was even, despite myself, rather touched by it. Isaac, when he enlisted or was drafted into the Confederate army, was only a teenager. So was my great-grandfather, John Dargan, a South Carolinian sent off to fight at age sixteen, reportedly with

a slave in tow. After the war, I'm pleased to say, Dargan redeemed himself as a newspaper editor who championed civil rights for black Americans.

No one, I'm confident, ever planted a Confederate flag by Dargan's grave. Still, though I condemn what he fought for, I don't find it easy to judge Isaac Richburg. His pitiful cloth flag, in any event, had seen better days. Another good storm and it would surely disintegrate, unlikely to be replaced.

Walking on, I encountered a military veteran visiting from New York who said he periodically plants fresh flags on the graves of other veterans. I asked him if it was proper to plant the Confederate flag by the graves of Confederate soldiers. The Civil War was a long time ago, he said. Our judgments must be tempered with an understanding of history. Anyone had a right to the flag they fought under.



But as I headed back toward Big Ed's headstone, I couldn't help but judge. This monument offended me. Big Ed's Confederate flag was clearly not a symbol honoring the sacrifices of a distant past but one embraced during my own lifetime in often violent resistance to the end of white supremacy. As far as I'm concerned, the only proper display of the Confederate flag is as a muted artifact of unspeakable tragedy, a reminder of a seemingly unavoidable conflict that took the lives of seven hundred thousand Americans. Using a symbol forever linked with slavery to proclaim your freedom is, like the pose Big Ed strikes in his photograph, a profane gesture. But arguments, like war, are passions for the living. It's pointless to argue with the dead. ■

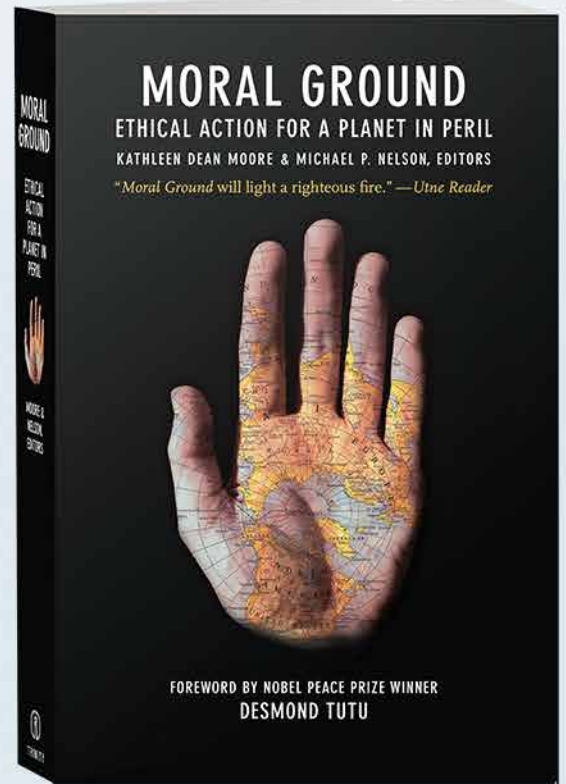
Bethe Dufresne is a freelance writer in Old Mystic, Connecticut.

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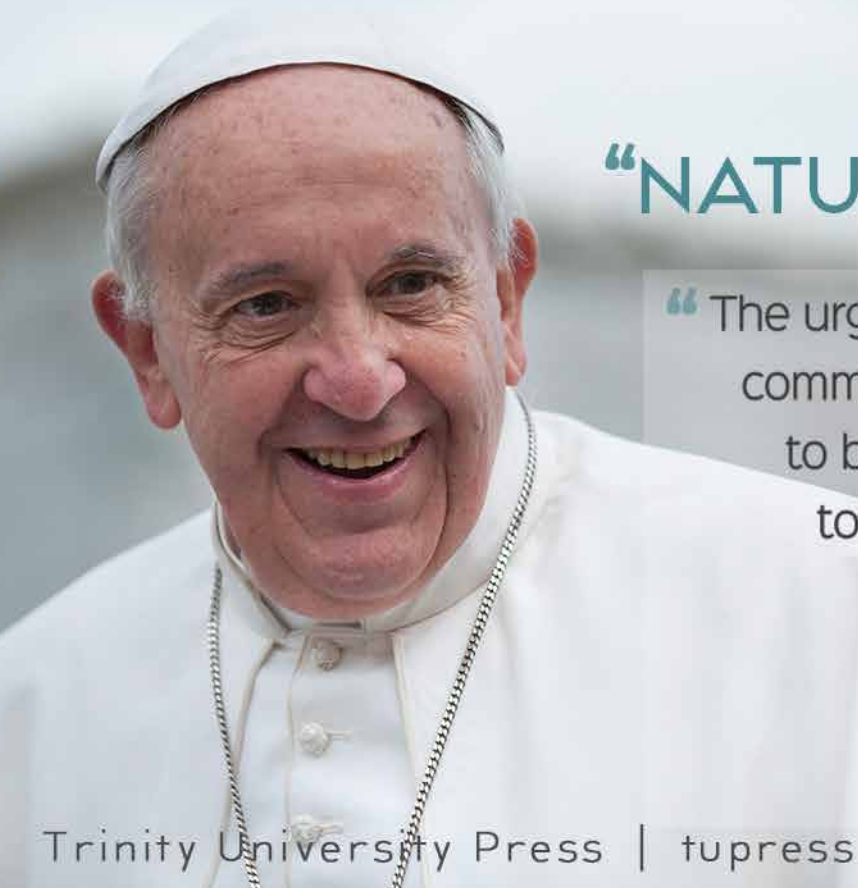
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