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Commonweal

MARCH 20, 2015

Fantasies & Clichés

Andrew Bacevich on Obama's National Security Strategy

Sant'Egidio Takes on the Death Penalty

Contraception & Catholic Identity

Why Boko Haram Is Succeeding

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LETTERS

Garvey's grace, Boehner's chutzpah, etc.

MISSED

I was saddened to tears to read about John Garvey's death ("Not Ours to Mend," February 20). I have loved his writing for years—his columns in *Commonweal*, his slim, elegant books. I have particularly cherished his columns for their compassion and their humor. His joy in Orthodox theology gave me a new appreciation for that rich tradition. My heart reaches out to his wife, their children, his friends and colleagues. Godspeed home, John.

ELIZABETH LYNN
San Pablo, Calif.

UNTOUCHABLE?

"Boehner's Blunder" (editorial, February 20)—that is, inviting Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to speak to Congress without consulting the White House—should be "rewarded" with long overdue sanctions on Israel for its brutal treatment of Palestinians and its expansionist policies. Unfortunately, this is unthinkable in a plutocracy that enjoys the best foreign policy money can buy. The very day after Netanyahu arrogantly lectured President Obama on national television, Congress gave him endless standing ovations if only to ingratiate themselves to the plutocrats financing their political careers. Funny, too, how the *Je suis Charlie* folks never dared satirize Netanyahu's American minions, unless of course they also depend on the same plutocrats.

JOHN VAVONE, SJ
Spokane, Wash.

The next issue of **Commonweal** will be dated April 10, 2015.

REALLY?

My wife handed me a copy of the February 20 issue of *Commonweal*, telling me that my retired pastor used to read the magazine from cover to cover. So I read most of the issue and was favorably impressed.

The editorial, however, was a completely different matter ("Boehner's Blunder"). What planet do the editors live on, or what do they smoke?

Our president has blatantly lied to the American public so often that nothing he says can be taken at face value. Yet the editorial carries his tainted water admirably. "Israel has long enjoyed unflinching support from congressional Democrats"—Really? Was this invitation calculated to "make Democrats look weak on national security"? Do you think they need help with that? Who actually believes what the president or the Iranians have said about the negotiations?

Your editorial was disgraceful! I hope reader feedback will show you the error of your own disingenuous screed.

ROY W. FILEGER
Jacksonville, Fla.

NEW CONFESSION

I found Fr. Nonomen's column on the Sacrament of Reconciliation very helpful ("True Confession," February 6). I suspect he's quite right about the form the sacrament needs to take these days. As he notes, though, "Not all priests are skilled at facilitating that encounter." Yet he adds, "I believe every diocese has at least a few who possess" the requisite skills. He's undoubtedly right. Still, I've long thought that there are in every diocese many pastorally educated women who possess those skills in abundance. When might we see the development of a canonical/sacramental "order of confessors" that might benefit from the gifts of such women?

JOHN F. KANE,
Denver, Col.

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CORRECTION

I generally enjoyed Jeffrey Meyers's article on Hemingway in Cuba ("A Good Place to Work," February 20), but he needs to be more attentive to the facts of history. Fulgencio Batista did not return to Cuba to be elected president in 1952, as Meyers claims. Batista was running for the presidency that year, but polls showed that he was going to lose. Instead he pulled a military coup on March 13, deposing President Carlos Prío Socarrás during his last months in office. Cuba had been a functioning and promising democracy (in spite of corruption) between 1944 and 1952.

ALEJANDRO ANREUS
Roselle Park, N.J.

WAS HEMINGWAY A CASTROIST?

It is the height of chutzpah to string together a series of Hemingway quotes to bolster the author's view that "if the United States had adopted Hemingway's sympathetic attitude and maintained relations with Cuba…the people of both countries would have benefited." Castro came to power in January 1959; Hemingway died in July 1961—just two and a half years later.

In a letter dated August 25, 1961, two months after his death, Mary Hemingway wrote, "*Por cuanto*, he never took part in the politics of Cuba." What's more, Jon Michaud wrote in the *New Yorker*: "The truth is that...the regime never managed to establish a solid link between Hemingway and Castroism."

JOSEPH W. MCMANUS
Boca Raton, Fla.

FRIENDS LIKE THESE

As an actively engaged Jew who teaches at a Jesuit university and works as a spiritual counselor for a Mennonite church, I spend a lot of time in community with Christians. As a reader of your magazine, I turned to your article ("What Christians Owe Jews," February 20) with eagerness.

After three reads all that I can say is that I felt hard-pressed to detect any philo-Semitism. This "soft supersessionism" seemed to me but a version of the old "hard supersessionism," and I came up with a short list of what this particular Jew feels owed.

At the very least I feel owed Christians' capacity to live with paradox. We know that light is both a particle and a wave. Christians ought to be able to say, "Your covenant with God is eternal and enduring, and has nothing to do with ours, which does not replace or negate it any more than light's wave-ness negates its being a particle. The two exist in different states."

Second, I feel owed Christians' capacity for questioning and doubt. For two thousand years Christians have been telling Jews that we missed the boat by rejecting Jesus. After all that Christians have put us through—Christians should say: "This messiah idea came from the Jewish people, and they have a checklist of what's required to be the messiah, and the one we call Jesus doesn't satisfy those requirements. What if they're right and we're wrong? What if our deifying him is a form of idolatry, one that has added bigotry and bloodshed to the world?" And then I hope Christians will ask themselves, "If we remove his divinity, what remains to us as Christians?" I think Christians will find that what remains is marvelous, transformative, and healing.

Third, I hope that Christians will go back to the core belief that all of humanity is one through our shared descent from Eve and Adam. And then I hope Christians will go back to the covenant God made with Noah, and remember that all of God's children are equal in God's eyes, and remember that God is the God of Muslims, Hindus, Bahais, and even those who do not believe in God, that through the Noahide laws all human beings are part of God's unfolding promise.

ANDREW RAMER
San Francisco, Calif.

Smart Guy

In August 2002, Vice President Dick Cheney told an interviewer there was "no doubt" that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction. Two weeks later the *New York Times* reported that Iraq had acquired aluminum tubes used in centrifuges to enrich uranium. Appearing on CNN the same morning, National Security Director Condoleezza Rice repeated an unnamed official's quote from the story—"we don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud"—an image soon prominent in the Bush administration's increasingly dire warnings and duly passed along by the media. In February 2003, Secretary of State Colin Powell went before the United Nations with what was supposed to be evidence of Hussein's weapons capabilities, making what the *Washington Post* pronounced an "irrefutable" case. On March 20, the war in Iraq began.

Jon Stewart, who recently announced his retirement as host of Comedy Central's satirical news program *The Daily Show*, had been on the air for about four years by then, having already won a Peabody Award for coverage of the disputed 2000 presidential election. What had started as a humorous and hip take on the day's events was evolving into something else, his sharp nightly riffs providing not just comic relief for an audience unnerved in the aftermath of 9/11, but also reliable doses of fact-based sanity amid the fear-mongering on Iraq. Stewart emerged as a figure to be taken seriously, projecting the kind of journalistic credibility the established media seemed to be losing. Its dereliction of duty in the run-up to the war was to that point perhaps the clearest demonstration of how the once-dominant television channels and national newspapers were losing authority and the public's trust. They may have lost more since. You could blame a fractured marketplace and increasing competitive pressures, but the damage is also self-inflicted—whether it's the timidity with which politically driven assertions are received and repeated, the bite-sized stories on celebrities and other sensational topics, or the fabrications that get reported as fact. The embellished memories of NBC's Brian Williams are minor by comparison, if all too emblematic. A majority of Americans under the age of fifty who follow news get it from Stewart and other nontraditional sources. One couldn't help but agree with PBS's Judy Woodruff when she recently questioned the very relevance of the old guard as embodied by the network television news anchor.

Stewart has for more than a decade functioned as a valuable corrective to much of what's wrong with mainstream news, especially political coverage that can't seem to identify the radical intransigence of the Tea Party wing of the Republican Party for what it is. By intent or default, he established himself as a relentless fact-checker and watchdog, using research, video clips, and comedy to call out politicians and other public figures on their evasions, over-simplifications—and lies. That he so often confronts Fox News is no doubt his primary appeal for many viewers, but this shouldn't be surprising. Fox is the leading source of information for a significant number of Americans, to whom it distributes a steady stream of blatant and potentially dangerous falsehoods, dozens of which Stewart recently compiled in a loop posted on his show's website (2009: "People will go to jail if they don't buy health insurance"; 2011: "Obama has accumulated more debt than forty-three presidents combined"; 2014: "Some doctors say Ebola can be transmitted through the air by sneeze or cough"). Though much of his fire is aimed at the right, he has also been critical of the Obama administration for its rollout of health-care reform, its response to the war in Syria, and its punishment of government whistleblowers: "Of the eleven times in our entire history that the Espionage Act has been used against government workers sharing information with journalists, seven of them have been under this presidency," he noted in February.

A criticism of Stewart is that the style of his nightly reporting lets both him and the viewer off too easy: laughing agreement is no substitute for serious engagement with the issues of the day. But Stewart has also regularly devoted time to lengthier segments on issues given only cursory treatment by the networks, such as a 2012 discussion with *Commonweal* columnist Cathleen Kaveny about Catholic concerns over Obamacare's contraception mandate. For his persistent reporting in 2010 on Republican obstruction of a bill pledging federal funds for the health care of 9/11 responders—a story the networks ignored for more than two months—he earned mention alongside a pair of golden-era giants: Syracuse University's Robert J. Thompson compared Stewart's work to that of Edward R. Murrow on Joe McCarthy and Walter Cronkite on Vietnam. Not bad for a comedian. Far from dumbing the news down, Stewart undeniably smartened it up. ■

ACCIDENTAL ARMAGGEDON

Michael Peppard

"In the event of a nuclear attack, which of these items would be the most helpful? Rank them in order of importance." That was one of the first worksheets I remember from elementary school. There were about twenty illustrated items. My classmates and I were perplexed. Sure, we had probably watched a filmstrip that mentioned the Geiger Counter, but none of us could remember what it did. And why would we want a broom?

It was about 1983. That year, the Soviets shot down a Korean civilian airliner over the Sea of Japan; the U.S. Catholic bishops issued a lengthy warning about the buildup of nuclear weapons; and on September 26, a Soviet lieutenant colonel secretly saved the world from armaggedon. But more about Stanislav Petrov in a moment.

Growing up in the early 1980s, not far from North American Aerospace Defense (NORAD) and the Air Force Academy, the Cold War was a hot topic—even for kids. Popular videos on the burgeoning MTV network, such as Genesis' "Land of Confusion," satirized and lamented the possibility of nuclear annihilation. Dads took their sons to see *Top Gun* in theaters, and we cheered when Russian MIGs splashed into the ocean.

Stanislov Petrov

Kids today don't have the same fears. (They don't know that the broom was to sweep nuclear fallout off your friends.) Yet nuclear weapons remain with us. They have grown in power beyond human comprehension, and there have been enough "close calls" regarding their deployment to warrant the gravest of fears.

In 2011, the *Wall Street Journal* published an important op-ed by George Shultz, William Perry, Henry Kissinger, and Sam Nunn. After a meeting at the conservative Hoover Institution, this bipartisan team of Cold War veterans encouraged a move away from "threatening force postures and deployments, including the retention of thousands of short-range battlefield nuclear weapons." Two years earlier, President Barack Obama spoke in Prague about his goal of ridding the world of nuclear weapons. But the younger generation doesn't listen to Shultz, Perry, Kissinger, or Nunn. They don't even know their names. And Obama has not followed through on the promise of that Palm Sunday speech. Perhaps young people will listen to Stanislav Petrov. A new documentary, *The Man Who Saved the World*, tells his story.

On the night of September 26, 1983, this Soviet lieutenant colonel was filling in for another soldier, when the satellite warning system indicated—with "maximum" certainty level—that the United States had fired five nuclear missiles at the Soviet Union. Though his team could not get visual confirmation because of weather, all technical instruments were functioning properly and signaling an attack. Protocol dictated that Petrov should alert the armed forces of an incoming "first strike," which would necessitate a nuclear response. Instead he declared the signal a false alarm. And then they waited. No bombs fell. "I'm not a hero," Petrov would later say. "I was just in the right place at the right time."

Though Petrov averted World War III, the death of hundreds of millions of Americans, and possibly the destruction of earth as we know it, he was not rewarded for his prudence. Rather, the film captures the vulnerabilities and undiscovered wounds of a warrior fighting against the past—his country's and his own. Contemporary interviews with Petrov are interlaced with dramatic reconstructions from 1983, and at times the viewer forgets it's a documentary. The Russian actors evoke the tense horror of the conflict between protocol and conscience, machine and man, commander and commanded. Unlike most documentaries, it has no voiceover—nor are there informational animations or explanatory gimmicks. Rather, the facts about nuclear weapons emerge naturally through Petrov's narrative.

For instance, it's only when he visits the decommissioned Minuteman-II missile silo in South Dakota that we learn the explosive power of today's weaponry. All the bombs exploded during all six years of World War II would equal only 60 percent of the payload of one missile. And the ones that succeeded the Minuteman-II are even more powerful.

The scene at the silo calls to mind other brushes with armaggedon. In 1979 we almost launched an attack against the U.S.S.R., when a technician at NORAD accidentally loaded a training exercise into an operational computer, simulating a full-scale attack. Bomber crews boarded their planes, and the Airborne Command Post took flight to manage war from the air. Several minutes later, satellite data did not confirm the attack. But what if the satellite system had failed, as it did in the Soviet Union?

More recently, on August 29-30, 2007, six nuclear-armed cruise missiles were mistakenly loaded onto a B-52 bomber at Minot Air Force Base in North Dakota. No one followed protocol to check for live weapons. After flying to Louisiana, the plane sat unguarded another nine hours until a maintenance crew discovered the nukes. For thirty-six hours, no one in the Air Force realized that six armed nuclear weapons were missing. "I have been in the nuclear business since 1966," said retired Air Force General Eugene Habiger, Commander of U.S. Strategic Command from 1996 to 1998, "and am not aware of any incident more disturbing."

All nuclear-armed states need to reconsider the role of this world-destroying power. No person should ever be put in Petrov's position again. He bore it that night, the weight of the world, but eventually it crushed him. ■

Michael Peppard *is assistant professor of theology at Fordham University. This article was adapted from a blog post that was published on February 4.*

FROM THE FILM *THE MAN WHO SAVED THE WORLD*

Charles Morris

Share the Wealth

A NEW REPORT SHOWS HOW INEQUALITY IS HURTING THE ECONOMY

It's good to see ex–Treasury Secretary Larry Summers back in the Democratic fold. After his tone-deaf gaffe about women scientists—speaking as the Harvard president no less—he has mostly been making tons of money giving speeches and shilling for hedge funds. His last public-policy accomplishment was to help block the regulation of financial derivatives in 1994, thus making himself a proximate cause of the 2008 banking collapse. But it takes a very smart person to cause the loss of tens of trillions of dollars.

Summers, along with Ed Ball, the British Labour Party's shadow prime minister, has co-chaired a working group on "Inclusive Prosperity," which recently issued a report that builds on an immense body of recent research showing that maldistribution of incomes correlates with lower growth—the luxury spending of the super-rich can't compensate for the shrinking spending power of the middle classes—and a greater tendency to economic volatility. Worse, highly skewed income distribution reduces social mobility. The locked-in advantages of the children of the top income decile of the United States may already be irreversible.

The United States actually has one of the more progressive systems of national taxation, but other countries allocate their tax revenues expressly to force more egalitarian outcomes—high-quality early childhood education, deep family supports like maternity leave, ready access to quality higher education and health care. In America, the out-of-pocket costs of health care and higher education are soaring. Obamacare has helped, but its financial benefits are tilted more to the poor than to the middle class.

One of the working group's striking recommendations is to add short-term income relief for the middle class, modeled after the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) for the working poor. Whereas the family EITC benefit phases out at just above $23,000 in income, the working group suggests that its recommended income relief pick up there and phase out at perhaps $85,000. The plan is presented as a recovery program, with a three-year sunset date. But it's a terrific idea, and might be welcomed by employers. If it's ever enacted, it would be very hard to phase out.

The cost of income supplements would be eased with strong action on the minimum wage. McDonald's workers in Denmark already get middle-class pay—on average more than $20 an hour, plus sick leave and benefits. The cost of a Big Mac in Denmark is only 35 cents more than in the United States, and McDonald's has shown no sign of disembarking from Denmark, even though their local profits are probably lower than here.

A new and very important problem, which the working group properly deplores, is the sudden rise of a new "gig economy." There is a new upstart royalty of tech firms, like Uber and Airbnb, that have already created dozens of paper billionaires by building global personal service companies, with millions of contracted employee/vendors. Uber offers taxi service in a large number of cities throughout the world. Ostensibly, the only legal relationship between Uber and a driver is a license to make use of the Uber software and accounting service. Uber shares requests for a pickup, and drivers compete for the opportunity. The riders pay Uber, which takes its cut before paying the driver. Uber expects to rake in $10 billion in revenues this year while contractually disclaiming *any* obligations to its workers or customers—the endpoint of a long trend toward the utter commodification of workers. (The legality of Uber's self-insulation is being tested in a number of courts.)

For me, the major disappointment with the report is its treatment of trade—offering a ringing endorsement of free trade, while deploring "currency manipulation," especially by the Chinese. Currency manipulation is the least of China's offenses, for it grossly violates every principle of free trade. It is engaged in the greatest campaign of industrial espionage in history. It dumps basic manufactures at costs far below the cost of production. Nucor, probably the world's most efficient steelmaker, says that China is now selling steel at less than the cost of shipping. The Chinese raise an infinity of non-tariff trade barriers—special licenses, requests to turn over source code of software imports "to ensure...safety," and mandates licenses of crown-jewel technology to Chinese partners. Disgracefully, big American companies, like Boeing, GE, and Caterpillar, lusting after Chinese markets, often comply. If history is any guide, they will soon find themselves losing business to Chinese firms deploying their technology. The international trade organizations are rarely helpful, and the time has long since passed for imposing sharp penalty tariffs against Chinese products until they follow the rules.

That said, overall the report is a cogent, research-based, and practical platform program for a Democratic presidential campaign. The slogan "Inclusive Prosperity" might make a great campaign banner. Readers can download the complete report from the website of the Center for American Progress. The research references alone are worth the price of admission. ■

Andrew J. Bacevich

Soft Thinking, Hard Problems

THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION'S NEW NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY

The Obama administration's 2015 National Security Strategy (NSS), delivered on February 6 to Congress, deserves a careful reading, but only after first fortifying yourself with a tall caffeinated beverage. For a compact product, only twenty-nine pages in length, the document is a long, hard slog, abounding in platitudes and dubious claims.

"American leadership in this century, like the last, remains indispensable." This concluding sentence arrives just in time. One more vacuous assertion of American exceptionalism and the entire edifice would have collapsed into a great solipsistic heap.

Can there be a more thankless task than assembling such texts? Paying homage to clichés ancient and contemporary; nodding to every constituency, large or small, lest anyone feel slighted; claiming to know history's very purposes, while taking care to package such claims in bland (and therefore incontrovertible) generalities; inserting anticipatory rebuttals to the inevitable sniping of partisan critics: these number among the essential elements. Satisfying them necessarily results in a product that is to expository prose what Spam is to a pig: highly processed and short on nutrition.

Yet for the student of national security, the 2015 NSS, superseding a prior version published in 2010, is by no means devoid of value. The title page misleads—the contents do not really rise to the level of offering a strategy. Even so, subjecting the document to careful exegesis pays dividends. This is a revealing document even if it reveals through inadvertence.

A diligent reading of the text will reward the exegete with three levels of instruction. The first level consists of assertions that are misleading or altogether untrue. These suggest an administration that is susceptible to delusions or prone to gaping cynicism. Examples include the following: "NATO is stronger and more cohesive than at any point in its history." More accurately: Having greatly enlarged its roster of members, NATO today is less capable, less cohesive, and less sure of its purpose than at any point in its history—a reality that efforts to grapple with the Ukraine crisis lay bare. An alliance created to deal with Stalin's large and powerful Soviet Union today struggles to agree on how best to handle Putin's smaller and less imposing Russia.

With more than a hint of pride, the NSS proclaims, "We brought most of our troops home after more than a decade of honorable service in two wars." More accurately: Failing to achieve victory, U.S. forces withdrew. Wars begun by the United States in Afghanistan and Iraq continue, with little prospect of ending anytime soon. In the case of Iraq, this has necessitated renewed U. S. involvement—some of the troops who came home are once more marching off to war.

OFFICIAL WHITE HOUSE PHOTO BY PETE SOUZA

As measured by "might, technology, and geostrategic reach," U.S. military forces are "unrivaled in human history." More accurately: While the United States undoubtedly possesses enormous military power, it has yet to figure out how to translate armed might into politically purposeful outcomes achieved at reasonable cost. Time and again, vast expenditures of lives, treasure, and political capital yield results other than those intended.

The United States is "embracing constraints on our use of new technologies like drones." A bit of a stretch, that. More accurately: Through its shadowy campaign of targeted assassination, the Obama administration is erasing long-established conceptions of sovereignty while removing constraints on the use of force. Something of a novelty when inaugurated by George W. Bush, drone strikes have now become routine—about as newsworthy as traffic accidents. In effect, Washington claims the prerogative of converting lesser countries like Yemen or Somalia into free-fire zones. What these precedent-setting actions imply for the future is anybody's guess. One thing seems likely: As drones proliferate with astonishing speed, others are likely to avail themselves of the same prerogative.

The second level of instruction consists of matters directly relevant to national security that the NSS either skims past or dodges altogether. Examples include the following: Are Pakistan and Saudi Arabia friendly nations or part of the problem? The NSS answers the question by essentially ignoring both. Is resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict a U.S. priority? You wouldn't know it from reading the NSS, which offers only bland boilerplate: "We remain committed to a two-state solution" (akin to its commitment to "seek a world without nuclear weapons"—don't hold your breath). The NSS offers assurances that the

United States will guarantee Israel's "Qualitative Military Edge." Will it act to curb Israeli settlement expansion on the West Bank? On that subject, not a peep.

On multiple occasions, the NSS reiterates President Obama's vow to "degrade and ultimately defeat ISIL." But the military campaign against this heinous group, however necessary and justified, actually forms the latest chapter in an ongoing saga that has seen the United States intervening militarily in more Middle Eastern countries than any of us have fingers. Over the course of several decades, that larger enterprise has done little to advance the cause of freedom and democracy. If anything, it has induced instability and fostered greater violence. Will defeating ISIL turn things around? Not a chance. Yet the NSS includes not a single reference to this massive failure of American statecraft of which ISIL is merely the latest expression—truly the elephant in the room.

"We reject the lie that America and its allies are at war with Islam." Yet in rejecting the lie, the NSS skips lightly past the indisputable fact that religion occupies a central place in the conflict that has consumed Washington's attention since 9/11. To pretend otherwise is the equivalent of pretending that Fox News offers a "fair and balanced" take on the events of the day. Although the United States may not be at war with Islam, it surely is engaged in a religious war. By that, I mean that issues related to faith shape political objectives, provide a basis for recruitment, and motivate fighters—if not on "our" side, then certainly on "theirs."

The NSS pays next to no attention to religion. One senses that its authors consider the subject passé. "The drivers of change in this century," Obama confidently announces in his introduction, will be "young people and entrepreneurs." In another passage, the NSS offers an expanded list, declaring that "women, youth, civil society, journalists, and entrepreneurs" will define the way ahead. Imams are retrograde, archbishops infra dig. Facebook's Sheryl Sandberg and Yahoo's Marissa Mayer—hip, tech-oriented business executives—these are the kinds of people who will shape the future.

Here we arrive at the third level of instruction in the 2015 NSS. The document offers in secular form a faith-based formula for earthly redemption, a formula hinted at rather than fully developed.

The essence of that formula is neoliberalism—the promotion of economic openness and transparency in concert with an agenda of cultural transformation. Increased trade and investment will spell the end of poverty thereby alleviating "the underlying conditions that foster violent extremism" and "decreas[ing] the need for costly military interventions." Once provided with a modicum of security and well-being, people will then embrace American values, their universal applicability taken for granted. Simply put: Out of prosperity, peace; with peace, convergence. Ipso facto.

What exactly are these American values? The NSS specifically identifies "freedoms of speech, worship, and peaceful assembly; the ability to choose leaders democratically; and the right to due process and equal administration of justice." To this familiar list, it adds the protection of "communities that are too frequently vulnerable to violence, abuse, and neglect." These include minorities, people with disabilities, refugees, migrant workers and "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) individuals." Last, but by no means least, American values require "pressing for the political and economic participation of women and girls," who are "denied their inalienable rights and face substantial barriers to opportunity."

Most (not all) Americans will see these as responding to basic requirements of fairness and equality. That others—especially in those parts of the world where the United States is most deeply embroiled in conflict—will instead detect a frontal assault on a divinely mandated order is something the NSS either does not grasp or does not bother to countenance.

Perhaps more importantly, the NSS catalog of American values omits several qualities that we might describe as neoliberalism's bastard children. Anyone who spends an hour paging through an issue of *People* magazine, an evening watching network television, or a day walking the streets of an American city will identify these as woven into the very fabric of American life: pervasive vulgarity, an obsession with sex, a fascination with celebrity and violence, extraordinary abundance coexisting with abject poverty, and a conception of human happiness keyed to material consumption—with God having long since been consigned to the sidelines.

This works for us—at least works well enough to elicit something between passive acceptance and positive assent from most Americans. Arguably, as the United States "leads" (a favorite NSS term) the world deeper into the twenty-first century, these values—the enlightened as well as the tawdry—will attract more and more adherents around the world. Especially among the young in whom the NSS places such high hopes, the seductive allure of the American way of life persists.

Yet even within that cohort, defining American values as universal does not command automatic universal assent. Pressing for their adoption produces not compliance but fierce resistance, rooted at least in part in an alternative perspective said to have universal application. Persuading these radicals, militants, or terrorists—pick your term—to think otherwise promises to take some doing.

Americans take it for granted that their values are worth fighting for. In truth, some are and some are not. Still, they come in a package. The contents of the package define who we are. So although the 2015 National Security Strategy contains many allusions to peace, its underlying logic almost guarantees more fighting dead ahead. ■

Andrew J. Bacevich, *professor emeritus of history and international relations at Boston University, is writing a history of America's war for the greater Middle East.*

Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator

Why Is Boko Haram Succeeding?

LETTER FROM NIGERIA

Officially, the terrorist group currently conducting a violent insurgency in northeastern Nigeria goes by the title "the Association of Sunnis for the Propagation of Islam and for the Jihad." But the group is much better known by its unofficial name, "Boko Haram," which, translated literally, means "Western education is an abomination."

The group was founded in 2002 as a largely peaceful, albeit radical, religious community in Borno, one of Nigeria's thirty-six states. Its rapidly growing political influence, aggressive recruitment, and financial resources soon caught the attention of Nigerian security operatives. A brutal attempt to disband the group led to the death in custody of its leader, Mohammed Yusuf. The scattered remnants then regrouped under a maniac named Abubakar Shekau, and launched a full-fledged military campaign to suppress religious, social, and political activities they considered contrary to the tenets of Islam and to impose a strict Islamic penal code known as sharia. True to its unofficial title, the group routinely targeted schools and occasionally lobbed grenades into churches.

Over the past six years Boko Haram has developed into a fearsome militia that inflicts terror on innocent citizens in rural northeastern Nigeria, bordering Chad, Niger, and Cameroon. With its trademark blend of sadistic violence and jihadist ideology, the group has become strong enough to rout whole units of the Nigerian military, sending soldiers scurrying for cover in the forest. As a result, it has made considerable territorial gains. Boko Haram's most recent act of brutality was the destruction of close to four thousand homes and the displacement of twenty thousand residents of Baga and Doron Baga towns in Borno State. Typically, Nigerian government officials dispute the casualty figures, but Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and media sources say as many as two thousand people may have died.

Boko Haram shot to international notoriety in April 2014 when militants abducted 276 teenage schoolgirls in the town of Chibok in Borno State. That brazen act of terror shocked the world and sparked an international social-media campaign (#BringBackOurGirls) to press for the release of the kidnapped students. The scope and intensity of this global protest raised expectations: Boko Haram, it seemed, had bitten off more than it could chew, and it was only a matter of time before the Nigerian military decisively snuffed out this insurgency. Almost a year later, most of the Chibok schoolgirls are still missing, while media interest in the story has fizzled. Although one or two campaign groups continue to clamor for the girls' release, Nigerian politicians have turned their gaze toward other matters—and above all to the next election.

The international media often characterize Boko Haram as an Islamic and sectarian insurgency, but beneath the thin veneer of religious ideology lies a savage and opportunistic agenda of criminality, bigotry, and wanton destruction. Conspiracy theories abound about the group's "true" origins and intent. Some claim that Boko Haram is the creation of northern Muslim politicians hell-bent on destabilizing the government of President Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian from the south. But facts on the ground undercut such claims. Notably, Boko Haram's zone of operation is in the predominantly Muslim north, and most of the thousands

CNS / AFOLABI SOTUNDE, REUTERS

Women mourn loved ones killed in a bomb explosion at St. Theresa Catholic Church in Madalla, Nigeria. Boko Haram claimed responsibility for the attack, which killed at least twenty-seven people.

of people the group has killed have been Muslims. It has targeted mosques and high-profile Islamic leaders, attacked dozens of towns and scores of villages, and destroyed millions of dollars worth of property—all in largely Muslim areas. Boko Haram's brand of violence knows no bounds: ordinary citizens, government employees, and elected public officials fear for their lives, irrespective of their religious affiliation. Mere mention of the group's name strikes fear in civilian populations and triggers panic.

But civilians are also distrustful of Nigeria's military, which has repeatedly failed to protect them from Boko Haram. In response to the insurgency, the government set up a Joint Task Force (JTF) that was to combine the best of the military and the police to combat Boko Haram. In northeastern Nigeria, JTF is as dreaded as Boko Haram. JTF has been accused of committing gross human-rights violations, including summary execution of suspected militants and their presumed sympathizers.

Boko Haram ups its ante with every victory it scores against the military. Emboldened by its success, the group continues to grow in its capacity to conduct raids and raze entire towns and villages to the ground. It has staged devastating suicide bombings in schools, churches, mosques, bars, parks, and outdoor markets. Nowadays its deadly arsenal includes children as young as ten, vested with remote-controlled bombs. At least a million innocent civilians have been displaced within northeastern Nigeria. Others have fled to southern Nigeria or across the border into neighboring Chad, Niger, or Cameroon.

The recent decision of Nigeria's electoral commission to postpone presidential and parliamentary elections—originally scheduled for February 14 and now for March 28—counts as a major coup by Boko Haram. By way of explanation, the commission noted that the troops needed to protect voters at the polls are currently deployed to fight Boko Haram. But it would be sheer hubris to think that the military will quash Boko Haram in six weeks.

The longevity and gradual intensification of the Boko Haram insurgency expose two critical elements of Nigeria's present malaise: systemic corruption and a failure of leadership.

Nigeria boasts the largest military in West Africa and the largest economy on the continent. Until recently, the country's military enjoyed a good reputation because of its success in facing down powerful rebels and militias in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Curiously, what the military achieved outside the country's borders, it now struggles to repeat in northeastern Nigeria. This isn't for lack of financial resources. Nigeria spends much more on defense and security than on education and agriculture combined. Boko Haram has provided a convenient excuse for gargantuan budgetary allocations for "war against terrorism." Yet we

CELERIAC

dirty, battered face
sleepy with no eyes
all dream and wood inside.
It fed on the dark loam its hairy sallow cheeks,
wistful under ground
green sprigs stemming out from its head.
Most of its personality lies below vision
the very core of its knobby root
overgrown family idiot of the celery
grated, chopped, or ground
Spring awakening winter can't kill.

—Jean-Mark Sens

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continue to hear about soldiers deserting the battlefront because they are poorly equipped, poorly paid, and prove no match for the superior firepower of Boko Haram. Demoralized soldiers have opted to face court martial for mutiny and insubordination rather than risk their lives fighting the jihadists. If the huge military budget isn't giving them the resources they need to do their jobs adequately, where is it all going? It seems that Boko Haram has become a pretext for funneling millions of dollars into the pockets of corrupt politicians and military commanders.

As for leadership, the government's stirring rhetoric about its resolve to crush Boko Haram amounts to no more than hollow propaganda. The more vigorously officials promise to catch and punish the insurgents, the more atrocities Boko Haram appears to carry out with impunity. There is no simple solution to the problem, but effective political leadership is surely a necessary part of the solution. So far, Nigeria's leaders have proved to be totally inept in dealing with Boko Haram—treating the insurgency as if it were just a law-and-order issue, deflecting blame whenever possible, or, worse, simply wishing the problem away. One thing is clear: Boko Haram is not an isolated crisis. It competes in the deadly transnational league of terrorist outfits such as the Islamic State, the Taliban, Al Shabab, and Al Qaeda. The scale and scope of its operation now surpass the capabilities of the Nigerian government. It has taken far too long for President Jonathan and his advisers to figure this out, though in a recent interview with the *Wall Street Journal* Jonathan appealed to the United States to send combat troops to help in the fight against Boko Haram. But the U.S. State Department has so far denied receiving any request for troops. The United States has signaled that it might be willing to participate with African nations in a task force designed to address the insurgency, but recent efforts by the U.S. government to help Nigeria deal with the problem have been hindered by disputes over equipment and lingering accusations that the Nigerian military is itself guilty of human-rights violations.

To their credit, Christian leaders, such as Catholic Archbishop Ignatius Kaigama of the central Nigerian Diocese of Jos, cry themselves hoarse denouncing Boko Haram's atrocities. They have led their flock in special novenas and have excoriated Western governments for neglecting the crisis. There isn't much else they can do.

If better political leadership emerges from the postponed presidential election, the effort to combat Boko Haram will need to move on several fronts at once. First, in order to make jihadism less attractive to millions of impoverished, disillusioned, and unemployed youth in the poorer north, the government will need to undertake comprehensive economic reforms, as well as an overhaul of the country's kleptocratic political system. It will also need to restructure the military and equip it properly so that it will be capable of executing complex counter-insurgency and anti-terrorism operations. And it will need to counter Boko Haram's jihadist rhetoric with a convincing message to vulnerable Muslims in the north, reminding them that Boko Haram is a perversion of Islam, and reassuring them that they will be protected. There should also be more forums for cooperation between the leaders and adherents of various religious traditions. Finally, there needs to be greater regional and international cooperation, since defeating Boko Haram will likely require cross-border military campaigns.

Boko Haram is responsible for Nigeria's worst crisis since the 1967 civil war. Its insurgents continue to march on towns and villages unopposed and to threaten important regional capitals. In pursuit of its goal to create some kind of trans-border Islamic state, it has demonstrated its willingness to commit crimes against humanity. Millions of traumatized Nigerians now live under the shadow of its ominous black flag, frightened by the gradual collapse of the state. Although the Nigerian government has until now been reluctant to admit it, Africa's most populous country desperately needs help from the rest of the world to end this scourge. ■

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From Trastevere to Texas

Sant'Egidio's Campaign Against the Death Penalty

Paul Elie

To understand the death penalty, Mario Marazziti likes to say, you have to go to Texas. In 2000 (having seen San Quentin in California) he went to Texas, and that has made all the difference. After that trip came many more—and came his friendships with Johnny Paul Penry, Dominique Green, Eddie Johnson and other men sentenced to death. After it came the World Coalition for the Death Penalty, the moratoria on executions in individual countries, the presentation of 3.2 million signatures to the United Nations Secretary General, the UN General Assembly's statement against the inhumanity of capital punishment, and the pledges of several dozen countries to abolish the death penalty or suspend its use. Out of that trip, that is, came the growing movement for abolition of the death penalty worldwide; and out of it has come a book titled *13 Ways of Looking at the Death Penalty*.

Just as Mario had to go to Texas to understand the death penalty, if we want to understand the present movement against the death penalty we have to go to Trastevere. In Trastevere—the rustic, vibrant district "across the Tiber" from imperial Rome—the group of friends known as the Community of Sant'Egidio came together in the spring of 1968 and began their efforts, first in the *periferia*, Rome's outskirts, then Southern Italy, Northern Europe, Africa, and now overlooked or disdained places and peoples all over the world.

The guidebooks still call Trastevere a working-class district, and there are still plenty of working people in its flats and apartment houses. Yet the district—a short walk across the bridge from the Campo de' Fiori, a stroll along the pilgrim path from St. Peter's—has lately become an upscale bohemia akin to the East Village in New York or the Mission District in San Fransisco. In summertime, especially, it can seem that the carnival of food and drink has shoved aside the place cherished as "Rome for Romans."

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On the face of it, Trastevere is a postreligious place, too. Churches are everywhere, and the *trasteverini* regard St. Francis of Assisi (who stayed there while in Rome) and Raphael (who called on his mistress, the Fornarina, there) as native sons. And yet most churches are closed most days, so that they strike you not as destinations or even as buildings but as outcroppings on the landscape.

But there's a significant exception. In early evening, crowds of people converge on the piazza fronting on the Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere, whose bell tower is the local landmark. They are on their way to eat at one of the four hundred local restaurants, to smoke a cigarette or lick a gelato near the old stone fountain, to watch mimes and acrobats perform in the piazza. Or they are bound for the basilica, where, at 8:30 on weeknights, Sant'Egidio holds the nightly service known as *la preghiera*.

I have been to the service perhaps a dozen times. You pick up a book and a headset and find a seat on a long bench below the ancient mosaics of Christ, a tallish proto-modern Mary, and the earliest Roman saints. The church—it must hold a thousand people—seems full. The crowd is mixed: young and old, stylish and not, lay and clerical, Italian and German and African. An organ note is struck and the call and response begins. There's a recitation of the litany of the saints and a Scripture reading. A member of the community gives a homily, which can be heard in translation on the headset. Then comes the *Padre Nostro*. This is not a Mass (that is on Saturday night). There is no Communion, and, generally, no priest presiding, and so it ends abruptly, with people spilling out of the basilica.

They aren't leaving, though. They are in the middle of things. Many of them have come to *la preghiera* from one of the Sant'Egidio projects scattered through Trastevere. Behind a plain door on a steep hill, the community's pantry feeds twelve hundred poor people a three-course meal, with Sant'Egidio members acting as waiters. A flat nearby is the office of the community's adoption service, which makes matches between European couples and children from Cambodia, Burkina Faso, and other countries. A back street near where Francis of Assisi worshiped among lepers is a welcome center for Gypsies, who find hot showers, clean clothes, help in avoiding deportation, leads on

The Roman Colosseum illuminated for a rally against the death penalty

jobs, or just a place to sit down and be known by name. On the Piazza Sant'Egidio is the Trattoria gli Amici, which employs mentally disabled men and women as maitres'd, waiters, cooks, and sommeliers—and so has created new jobs for people with special talents at a time when, in Italy, a good job is hard to come by. Every Christmas Day, the community makes the Basilica of Santa Maria itself a space of welcome for several thousand of Rome's poor people, who are invited to eat a holiday meal on red-draped tables set up on the priceless Cosmati tiles.

It's a paradox: this most ancient of Rome's still-standing basilicas is also the least museum-like of them all. It's a hothouse of conviviality, where strangers become friends and friends become more than friends.

One evening a few years ago I met Mario Marazziti in the rear of Santa Maria after *la preghiera* and we set out for supper at a favorite place of his. An early member of the community, Mario gradually stepped into the role of its volunteer *portavoce*, or spokesman. When I first met him, in 1998, he was employed as a TV producer and manager for RAI, Italy's state media company. I'm not sure what I expected in a humanitarian from RAI, but I didn't expect Mario, whose dark suit, straight black hair, and big smile seemed to suggest an Italian ex-Beatle.

If Trastevere embodies the paradox of Europe—emphatically old but with pockets of exceptional vitality—Mario Marazziti embodies the paradox of Sant'Egidio. He is no stranger to high society: through an old friend at the prominent wine journal *Gambero Rosso,* he and his friends put together Vino per Vita, an initiative where Italian wineries run by Mario's contacts give the proceeds from certain bottlings to Sant'Egidio's campaign for AIDS relief in Africa. He can be irreverent, relishing the story of a cleric friend whose poor Italian led him to open the church's millennial ceremonies in 1999 with a crude profanity. Yet he is selfless and tireless on behalf of Sant'Egidio—on behalf, he says, of "the Gospel and friendship." I had learned of him through a Sant'Egidio group at St. Malachy's Church near Times Square led by the author Thomas Cahill. The group was small, but Mario sustained us with calls and e-mails. I later asked him how he kept up contact with his countless friends worldwide. "Friendship is not proportionate," he said matter-of-factly.

Over soup and wine that night, Mario explained that he was just back in Rome from Mozambique, the base of Sant'Egidio's anti-AIDS program, DREAM, which is overseen by his wife, Cristina, a medical doctor. "From Mozambique and Texas," he corrected himself—and added, "The culture of life, and the culture of death." In Texas he had visited his friends on death row. And he had made a strange discovery. "The former execution chamber at the prison in Huntsville is now a museum of the death penalty," he said in amazement. "A museum which has an actual curator! Where the old death chair is kept on display!"

As he refilled our glasses from the bottle—a robust red wine from the Sicilian vintner Planeta, the neck of it stickered with an image of a dove crossing a rainbow, Sant'Egidio's logo, indicating a Wine for Life—I tried to picture him at a Motel 6 in Huntsville, Texas, and to imagine what his friendship might mean to a man sentenced to death.

What it would mean, in the months to follow, was this. Mario would make a documentary for RAI about Texas's death row, called *Thou Shalt Not Kill*. He and Tom Cahill would join his friends on death row in a "book group" with Archbishop Desmond Tutu, whose book *No Future Without Forgiveness* Cahill had published during his years at Doubleday. Mario would describe life in the prison at conferences across Europe. As the date drew near for the execution of Dominique Green, whose conviction and sentence of death seemed especially dubious, he would take part in a vigil in Rome, so that in the hours before Green was executed, several dozen members of Sant'Egidio were in prayer at Santa Maria in Trastevere, keeping him in their minds and hearts. He would get the actor John Turturro to narrate an English-language version of the film about Green, called *Dominique's Story*. He would present 3.2 million signatures calling for a moratorium on executions to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan—and would be written up by Peter Steinfels in the *New York Times* as a man "who has used up all his vacation time traveling for the death penalty moratorium." After Silvio Berlusconi was ousted from Italy's premiership for the last time, Mario would enter electoral politics—one of the leaders of the 1968 generation whom the center-left

An Anachronism

In Rome, where I live, the Colosseum is a symbol of our history, but it is also a symbol of the death penalty. There the early Christians were subjected to capital punishment by the imperial Roman authorities, left to the lions, reduced before the crowd to a bloody spectacle.

One night in 1999, the Colosseum was lit up. Albania had abolished the death penalty, and some of us in the Community of Sant'Egidio got the idea to mark this turn of events through the lighting of the landmark. Our idea (a joint venture with the mayor of Rome, Francesco Rutelli, and a UN representative, Staffan de Mistura) was to use the lighting of the Colosseum as a tool in a worldwide campaign against the death penalty. Since that night the Colosseum has been lit up several dozen times more, including when the governor of Illinois commuted the sentences of all the state's death row prisoners in 2003, and when the states of New Jersey, Connecticut, Illinois, Maryland, and New Mexico repealed their capital punishment laws.

It seems clear to us that capital punishment is a practice to be overcome in the history of mankind, as slavery has been largely overcome. Personal contact with prisoners, executioners, and the families of victims and executed convicts, both innocent and guilty, has led us to the conviction that the death penalty is not merely unnecessary in light of the alternative instruments of punishment and justice available. In truth, it is not itself an instrument of justice at all; it is a grave weakness in a system of justice that should preserve its rehabilitative intent, free of the primitive need for revenge and retribution. It winds up being not only a violation of human life, but a humiliation for everybody: a murder in circumstances in which the concept of legitimate defense cannot be invoked because of the disproportionate forces involved (the state on one side, a prisoner who is not in a position to harm others on the other), and because of the distance in time between the crime or presumed crime and the proposed execution. As a matter of fact, when the state kills a serial killer, it becomes a killer.

We hope that the Colosseum will keep on being lit up regularly until the death penalty is abolished everywhere. But for now there is the more modest effort of this book, which is meant to symbolize in a different way the world's turning against the death penalty—and to suggest different ways for our society to move a little closer to the goal of a world where capital punishment is seen as the practice of an earlier, crueler time.

—from *13 Ways of Looking at the Death Penalty*
by Mario Marazziti

drafted to run for office in the hope of repairing Italian politics, run by Berlusconi for most of their adult lives. He would be elected to the lower House of Parliament, the Camera dei Deputati. Now when he came to New York, it would be as the head of Camera dei Deputati's Human Rights Committee.

And he would write (in English) *13 Ways of Looking at the Death Penalty*, out of the conviction that the place where the death penalty is most vulnerable just now is the United States of America.

Sant'Egidio's Christmas dinner is now offered in sixty countries to some 150,000 guests. Its annual Prayer for Peace—held in recent years in Krakow, Munich, Sarajevo, and Antwerp—draws several thousand participants from the full spread of religious traditions. And lately these traditions, brilliant in their simplicity, have been joined by another: whenever a country—or, say, a U.S. state—rejects the death penalty, the Roman Colosseum, usually lit in white, is lit up in color. The event is covered by the press in Italian, Spanish, French, Portuguese, and English, and in five languages online (at *www.santegidio.org*) and the coverage, filed forever on the web, will serve to keep abolitionist countries from backsliding.

Some months after his election, Pope Francis came over from the Vatican and spent two hours at Santa Maria in Trastevere with the community and the poor. The streets of the neighborhood, always crowded, were absolutely jammed. The occasion was not a Mass, but a unique "communion event," in which Francis's words about the role of mercy and the value of friendship with the poor seemed naturally akin to the community's own efforts and outlook.

In 2014 Francis followed John Paul II and Benedict XVI in denouncing the death penalty as a violation of civilized norms and our common humanity. It was the strongest statement against the death penalty the church has ever made.

Mario Marazziti turned sixty not long ago. His business cards identify him as a politician, but he remains a genius of friendship and an enthusiast for whatever it is the Community is doing to make the world a more humane and livable place. He'll mention a plan to bring Wine for Life to the United States in the form of a tie-in with Newman's Own salad dressing. Or he'll hint at Sant'Egidio's back-channel role in creating a "bridge" to help end the violence in Syria. As we step out into the Roman night, the flats dark above the thronged *trattorie*, he'll talk about a program in which Sant'Egidio's members in Rome reach out to the city's elderly in the summertime, when the heat isolates them and puts them in danger. "One of our people goes to the top of the stairs with a bag of groceries or gives the doorman a few euros to do it," he explains. Compared with lighting up the Colosseum or fighting AIDS—or bringing the death penalty to an end worldwide—it's no big deal. But as he describes it, it seems not only simple but natural and necessary, one more way for people to be friends to one another. ■

Does Method Matter?

Contraception & Catholic Identity

Christopher C. Roberts, Marian Crowe, Lisa Fullam

Christopher C. Roberts

Two years ago I wrote a letter to the editor in response to an article *Commonweal* had published about Jacques Maritain's views on contraception. My letter proposed that Natural Family Planning requires and cultivates virtues that artificial contraception does not (see "Maritain's Blind Spot," April 6, 2012). An example: a couple using the Pill decide between themselves when and whether to have sex. This decision can be spontaneous or carefully planned. A couple using NFP have similar decisions to make, but they must also submit their wills to the woman's menstrual cycle, a pattern independent of their volition. Sometimes, if they are trying to avoid pregnancy, they will have to put off having sex. Contracepting couples use technology in order to avoid this situation. Hence, as I wrote in my letter, NFP relies on virtues ("patience, forbearance, restraint—and even a sense of humor") in ways that contraception does not. For this reason, it is false to suggest that NFP is functionally equivalent to the Pill. The experience of a couple using NFP is very different from that of a couple using artificial contraception. I have been married for sixteen years and have been a Catholic for eight, so I know both experiences well.

After my letter was published, several *Commonweal* readers replied. The most challenging response came from Anonymous in Pittsburgh ("A Greater Good," May 4, 2012). Anonymous claimed that requiring married couples to postpone sex can have cruel consequences. Biological challenges like nursing or menopause can mean months without a predictable cycle. A soldier returning from a tour of duty "should not have to be told that he has arrived home at the wrong time of the month." A husband who has just lost his job and can't afford another child "needs the loving consolation of his wife."

I do not believe these examples are as decisive as Anonymous suggests. For most couples, most of the time, the use of NFP does not entail such hardship. But I acknowledge that such hard cases do exist—including kinds Anonymous does not mention—and they demand great compassion. A few years ago, Peter Steinfels wrote memorably about some hard cases at dotCommonweal. He mentioned a childhood neighbor: a frail Catholic woman who had six children. Her non-Catholic husband was abusive. Steinfels's mother advised the woman to get a diaphragm. I also think of Cardinal Ratzinger's response to a question about couples who already have many children and decide to use contraception: "I would say that those are questions that ought to

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be discussed with one's spiritual director, with one's priest, because they can't be projected into the abstract." It's clear that Catholics—and not just priests giving spiritual direction—must always talk about these things with humility and charity. I believe that Catholic sexual ethics can open up beautiful and charitable ways of living, but these ways can also be hard and demanding, and they can take a long time to learn. Sometimes small steps in the right direction are the best we can do.

Still, focusing on hard cases can be a way of keeping the challenges of NFP at arm's length. Typically, when NFP is used to space births, it requires about ten days of abstinence per month. Studies of NFP techniques like the Creighton Method indicate that they are at least as effective as condoms or pills. So why aren't more Catholics giving it a try? A friend told me he thought most Catholics don't see the point of such asceticism, that NFP's periodic abstinence looks like unnecessary self-denial—like going to the dentist without Novocain or telling your kid to play through a sports injury to build character. This may or may not be true. But let me concede, for the sake of argument, that many Catholics think this way. The question then becomes why. Where do these and other ideas about NFP come from? My hunch is that today most middle-of-the-road Catholics probably do not know much about what the church really teaches on this question. Catholics believe in the primacy of an "informed conscience," but, in this case, I doubt the relevant information has been effectively conveyed.

For several years I taught a course on the theology of marriage at Villanova University. Few of my bright and wonderful students, including those who had graduated from Catholic high schools, had any prior exposure to *Humanae vitae* or John Paul II's Theology of the Body. Public catechesis or training on these topics is very rare in most parishes of the Archdiocese of Philidelphia, where my family and I live. One normally has to seek out such information for oneself. And, given popular caricatures about the rhythm method, many Catholics probably think they already know all there is to know about the church's alternative to artificial contraception. In these circumstances, practicing NFP (or any other sort of countercultural chastity) can be a lonely affair. The ignorance of Catholics on this subject indicates a massive catechetical failure. Madison Avenue and Hollywood have been catechizing the culture in concupiscence for decades. It's past time for some guerrilla counter-catechesis.

NFP is part of the church's mission. It requires us to place our sexual desires in the context of our wider vocational discernment. Like any road to holiness, suffering and failure are part of the package. The process can be tedious: charting fertility markers is about as much fun as daily flossing, and making it a habit comes more easily to some than to others. The periods of abstinence can sometimes be an agony. But NFP is potentially a source of freedom, self-knowledge, and spiritual depth. Like understanding that

Pope Paul VI

food comes from farms before you find it in supermarkets, understanding fertility is basic wisdom for being at home in the physical world.

If, for most healthy married Catholics, NFP requires no more than about ten days of abstinence per month, and if NFP actually works, then what substantive objections remain? No party in the present discussion is saying women must be pregnant all the time or give up on careers. *Humanae vitae*'s proposal is that a married couple pray, discern whether God is calling them to have a child, and, if not, use NFP according to good instruction. So why aren't more American Catholics trying to follow this teaching?

In most cases, I don't think it's because they're in an abusive marriage or just home from the war. I believe that most twenty-first-century Catholics dismiss NFP for three reasons: because they haven't heard a good explanation of the church's moral teaching against contraception; because they aren't aware of the method's technical effectiveness; and, finally, because contemporary American culture can accept self-denial only when the aim is physical health, not spiritual health. The church has become too reticent about the benefits of even the gentlest ascetic practice. Consider how relatively rarely we talk about fasting for an hour before Mass, or how minimal our Lenten fasts are compared with those of the Eastern Orthodox. And consider how easy NFP is compared with certain diets and exercise regimens.

Could it be that we have become too insistent on our personal autonomy and the urgency of our appetites? NFP gets us where it hurts. It requires us to abstain from pleasure on somebody else's terms. In that sense, it is profoundly un-American and unmodern. That's a large part of why it would be good for at least some of us. Catholics are called to fasting and almsgiving for many reasons, but chief among them is the need to soften our own hearts, to yield our autonomy to God and heighten our sense of his lordship over every aspect of our lives. A devotional approach to NFP works the same way, teaching those who practice it that sex is a gift, not an entitlement.

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Marian Crowe

The debate over the HHS contraception mandate has reminded us yet again that very few Catholics follow the church's teaching on contraception. Some people attribute this to human weakness. British novelist Piers Paul Read has written, "I myself have no doubt whatsoever that the church is right in its teaching on sexual morality—even in its teaching on contraception; and if for twenty years I have not practiced what is preached it is from the weakness of the flesh, not the commitment of the spirit." Yet I believe that most Catholics who use artificial contraception do not do so out of weakness. They use it because they don't believe it is immoral.

My own thinking on contraception has evolved. In 1959 I was taught at my Catholic high school that contraception is wrong because the primary purpose of sex is procreation. Even as a naïve seventeen-year-old, I knew that sex had other purposes—that physical intimacy also had something to do with emotional intimacy. (Since then, the church's message has changed somewhat. Now we're told that contraception is wrong because it separates the "unitive" and procreative purposes of the conjugal act, and thus prevents it from being a complete "self-gift.") When I married three years before the publication of *Humanae vitae*, I had already decided that the church was wrong about contraception. I reached this conclusion largely because of discussions I had with my older sister, who believed that the rhythm method had harmed her marriage. I used contraception until after the birth of my third child and was then sterilized.

I now deeply regret both decisions. I believe that both the chemical contraception I used and the sterilization harmed

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my body. There is evidence that at least some early forms of hormonal contraception increased the risk of diabetes, osteoporosis, and cervical, breast, and liver cancer. The IUD has been associated with menstrual problems and perforation of the uterus. Meanwhile, the more I have learned about Natural Family Planning—an updated and more effective version of the rhythm method—the more I have come to regret that I never tried it. I no longer dismiss *Humanae vitae* as just plain wrong. I suspect there is wisdom in what Pope Paul VI said about the value of discipline in married life. I think Paul VI was right that the systematic practice of periodic abstinence within marriage "favors attention for one's partner, helps both parties to drive out selfishness, the enemy of true love, and deepens their sense of responsibility." I have also been impressed by the insights of Wendell Berry, who, though not Catholic, has serious reservations about contraception. In an essay titled "The Body and the Earth," he writes:

> Culture articulates needs and forms for sexual restraint and involves issues of value in the process of mating. It is possible to imagine that the resulting tension creates a distinctly human form of energy, highly productive of works of the hands and the mind. But until recently there was no division between sexuality and fertility, because none was possible.
>
> This division was made possible by modern technology, which subjected human fertility, like the fertility of the earth, to a new kind of will: the technological will, which may not *necessarily* oppose the moral will, but which has not only tended to do so, but has tended to replace it.... What is horrifying is not only that we are relying so exclusively on a technology of birth control that is still experimental, but that we are using it *casually*, in utter cultural nakedness, unceremoniously, without sufficient understanding, and as a substitute for cultural solutions.

Many people see the church's teachings about sexuality as little more than a set of arbitrary constraints on our opportunities for sexual pleasure. But sexuality, like all good things, thrives best within limits. G. K. Chesterton argued that "Catholic doctrine and discipline may be walls; but they are the walls of a playground." He described a group of children playing on a high plateau. As long as there is a wall around them, they feel secure and play without fear. But, without the wall, their fear of falling off the edge curtails their exuberance.

So, NFP has much to recommend it. Besides allowing one to avoid unnecessary chemicals, it cultivates self-discipline and fosters greater communication between spouses about their sexual life. It may even help us to appreciate and enjoy sex more, just as fasting can help us appreciate food. We regulate and humanize many aspects of our lives by imposing some discipline and order. To quote Chesterton again, the proper form of thanks for the wondrous world in which we live is often "some form of humility and restraint: we should thank God for beer and burgundy by not drinking too much of them." Maybe the best way to thank God for the gift of sexuality also involves restraint.

For all these reasons, I now believe that *Humanae vitae* offers the ideal way for married couples to live their sexual lives. Yet I still feel ambivalent about insisting that NFP is the *only* way for Catholics to limit the size of their family without committing grave sin. I would like to see the church promote NFP without condemning all other forms of contraception as "intrinsically evil." I think it is this blanket condemnation that most Catholics still find so implausible. The fact that NFP has moral and cultural advantages does not make chemical contraception evil. Nor do the collateral effects of chemical contraception, however one assesses these. Although Pope Paul's VI's warnings about social effects of widespread use of contraception were prescient, we must put them in perspective. The sexual chaos of the past four decades came about not because married Catholics disobeyed the church and used contraception but because unmarried people took advantage of the ease and availability of contraception to have casual sex. In other words, it was promiscuity and the commodification of sex—not married couples using the Pill—that led to the social disruptions the pope foresaw. The advent of the Pill may have facilitated promiscuity, but that doesn't make it intrinsically evil. (Drinking also facilitates promiscuity. Does that make alcohol intrinsically evil?) Instead of fixating on the evils of artificial contraception, Catholics would do well to concentrate on rehabilitating respect for the virtue of chastity, which has become a kind of joke in our culture.

I also question whether all couples can be expected to practice NFP. Those who speak glowingly of it are almost always deeply religious and fully committed to the self-discipline involved. What if one spouse is not Catholic and can see nothing problematic about artificial contraception? What if one spouse is selfish, emotionally immature, or alcoholic? Then there are the really hard cases, heartbreaking stories of couples who were told by their pastor that they could not use contraception or sterilization although another pregnancy would be dangerous, possibly even fatal, and so they practiced abstinence for the rest of their marriage—or used artificial contraception and stopped receiving the Eucharist (see Paul Baumann's contribution to "A Modus Vivendi?" January 13, 2012).

Unfortunately, partly because of the fracas over the HHS contraception mandate, many Americans imagine that contraception is one of the defining issues of Catholicism. In truth, the church is not so much defined by the issue as polarized by it. On the one hand, there is a small minority of Catholics who embrace and defend the church's teaching about contraception and use it as a litmus test for "orthodox Catholicism." On the other hand, a large majority of practicing Catholics either reject or ignore the teaching. This division creates a kind of psychic wound within the church and erodes its moral credibility. I long for a serious conversation—among the laity, the clergy, and the bishops—that would try to heal this wound. Such a conversation would

do justice to the experience of those on all sides of this issue. It would aim for something higher than the current modus vivendi, whereby the clergy agree not to talk too much about contraception as long as the laity do not advertise their dissent. Surely I am not the only Catholic who longs to see more congruence between official teaching and what Catholics really believe and practice.

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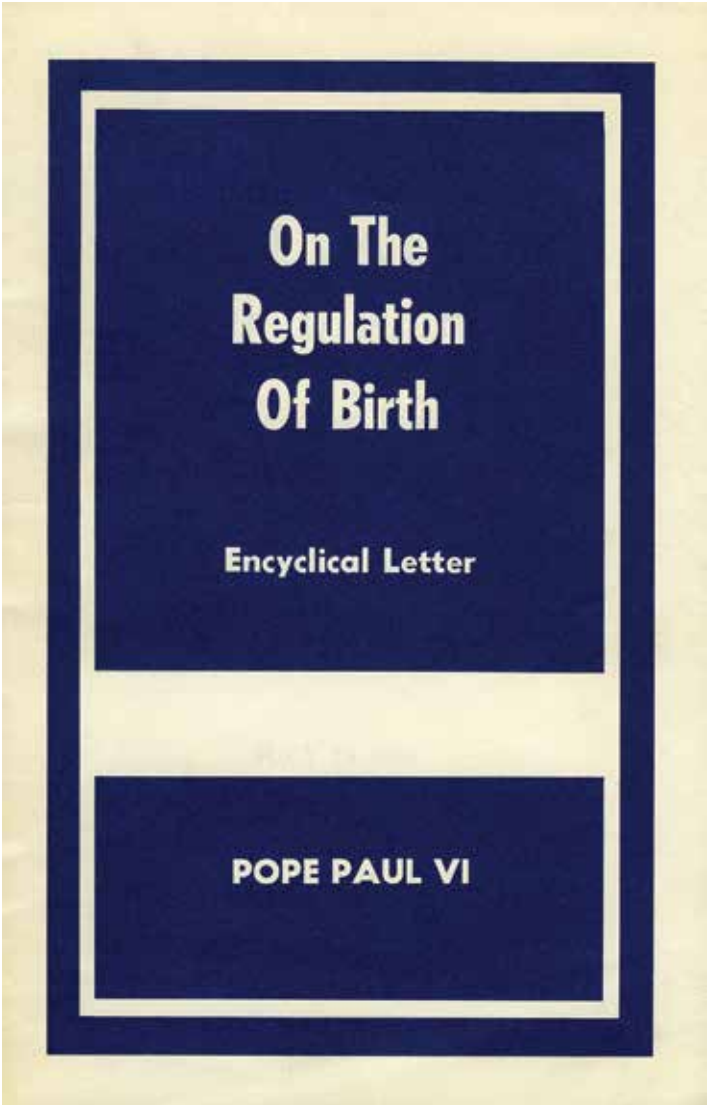
Lisa Fullam

Birth control is a divisive issue among Catholics. On the one hand, according to a 2012 survey, 85 percent of self-identified Catholics believe either that birth control is morally acceptable or that it depends on the situation (or had no opinion). Among Catholic women at risk of unintended pregnancy, 68 percent use a "highly effective" method of contraception (the Pill, sterilization, or the IUD—all forbidden by the church). Just 3 percent choose NFP. On the other hand, opposition to artificial contraception—and to any public policy that involves Catholic institutions in its provision, however remotely—has continued to be a central concern of many Catholic bishops. Meanwhile, Pope Francis has listed contraception as one of the issues with which the church has become "obsessed."

The core of Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae vitae*, which reaffirmed the church's teaching against contraception, is in paragraph 12: "This particular doctrine... is based on the inseparable connection, established by God, which man on his own initiative may not break, between the unitive significance and the procreative significance which are both inherent to the marital act." Paul VI advised couples who want to avoid pregnancy to have sex only when the woman is infertile, and disallowed other interventions because they are "artificial." Couples practicing NFP and those practicing other means of contraception may have identical intentions—to avoid pregnancy—but, according to *Humanae vitae*, only the couple using NFP respects the nature of the sex act by honoring its procreative potential.

So what's the problem? In *Humanae vitae*, Paul VI espoused an understanding of sex that is arguably unnatural in at least two respects. First, the encyclical reflects a poor understanding of sex even in its strictly physiological aspects. Consider this: Most animals do tie sex closely to procreation. Among mammals, most females announce to the world—or at least to males of their own species—when they're ovulating. An estrous baboon's bright red buttocks might spark an awkward conversation with the kids at the zoo, for example, and the yowling of a housecat ready to ovulate can keep a whole neighborhood awake. In contrast, women—and females of a few other species—do not exhibit obvious physical changes during ovulation and are sexually interested throughout their reproductive cycle. It wasn't contraception, then, that first divided the unitive from the procreative dimensions of sex in humans. It was nature.

Human sex, though, should never be reduced to its physiological features. While the vast majority of human sex acts do not result in procreation, they are naturally ordered to the forging of ties between partners. To understand human sex is to focus first on its effects on whole persons, not on its biological outcome. This is the second way the vision of sex in *Humanae vitae* is unnatural: the criteria for acceptable methods of spacing children were described in terms not of the people involved, but of the physical act only. The whole person's development as a sexual being in relationship with others was counted as less important than where and when



Cover of 'Humanae vitae,' 1968

CNS

a man ejaculates. And in a move away from Catholic moral tradition since Aquinas, the intention of the couple's act was subjugated to a consideration of its physical structure.

The corrosiveness to marriage of an NFP-only approach was reported to Paul VI's birth-control commission. Commission members Pat and Patty Crowley surveyed thousands of Catholics: most said that the rhythm method—an earlier, less effective version of today's NFP—had harmed their marriages. Then as now, there have been those who find NFP a joyous and fulfilling way to space their children. Most Catholics, however, ignore the church's prohibition of artificial contraception as irrelevant. As theologian Lisa Sowle Cahill said: "I am confident that most Catholic couples would be incredulous at the proposition that the use of artificial birth control necessarily makes their sexual intimacy selfish, dishonest, and unfaithful. Nor is their valuing of parenthood based on their experience of isolated sex acts as having a certain procreative structure."

Humanae vitae also presumes a degree of self-determination that many women do not enjoy, especially (but not exclusively) in the developing world. Paul VI warned that contraception would leave women vulnerable to sexual exploitation by men. Sadly, such abuse long predated the Pill. What reliable contraception does—especially contraception that women control—is give women greater determination over their reproductive lives, even if their partners are indifferent to their well-being and that of their children. What *Humanae vitae* described as self-indulgence sounds to many women like self-defense, or at least self-care and more responsible parenting.

Initially, *Humanae vitae* created a furor in the church. Many Catholics had anticipated that this teaching would be updated the way other teachings and practices had recently been updated during Vatican II. (This expectation may also have been encouraged by the leaking of the birth-control commission's majority report, which favored a change in the church's teaching.) While some bishops conferences enthusiastically supported *Humanae vitae*, others reassured the lay faithful that disagreement on this question would not make them bad people or inferior Catholics. The bishops of the Netherlands wrote: "The assembly considers that the encyclical's total rejection of contraceptive methods is not convincing on the basis of the arguments put forward." In the United States, a group of six hundred Catholics, including some of the foremost theologians of the day, signed a statement critiquing the encyclical and advising couples to listen to their consciences. Over time, the faithful did just that: in the matter of birth control, most Catholics "dissented in place," making their own decisions about how to regulate birth, even if they knew their chosen means was officially regarded as gravely evil in Rome.

The irony was painful: an important concern of the small minority who shaped *Humanae vitae* was that magisterial authority would be undermined if there were a change in teaching. The church would be seen to be playing catch-up. Instead, the lack of a change seemed to have exactly the effect this group feared—many people stopped listening to the pope, at least on this subject. During the papacy of John Paul II (one of the few members of the birth-control commission who had supported the line taken by *Humanae vitae*), adherence to the church's teaching against artificial contraception became an unofficial criterion for ecclesiastical promotion, a policy that eventually unified the church's leadership in opposition to a practice accepted by most lay Catholics. Over time, a culture of silence took hold in parishes; people stopped confessing the use of birth control, believing in conscience that it was not sinful (even as confession itself became rare for most church-going Catholics). Priests, many of whom also harbored private disagreements with the teaching, largely dropped the question.

And now? The church stands uneasily divided: many bishops continue to argue that the teaching of *Humanae vitae* is an important marker of Catholic identity, giving this aspect of moral teaching an unwarranted significance. Most of the laity find the teaching unconvincing and so disregard it. Priests stay quiet, lest they be caught between their congregations and their bishops. A few bishops are calling for a new look at the teaching in light of its near-universal lack of reception by the laity. It remains to be seen whether Pope Francis will revisit the question.

We need a new approach, starting with basic Catholic values like the primacy of love and justice, respect for conscience, the dignity of human life and human sexuality understood in all its aspects, and trust that sound arguments will resonate with people of good will. Doctrine should reflect the way those basic values are incarnate in the lives of Catholics, and especially women, whose voices have largely been absent from the formulation of the church's teaching on this question. The credibility of church leaders, especially on sexual matters, was badly undercut by *Humanae vitae*. To double down on a doctrine that presents an unnatural vision of sex to Catholics who know better would only exacerbate the atmosphere of distrust between the laity and their bishops. Silence is not the answer. Nor is a "gradualist" approach: the problem with *Humanae vitae* is not that people are striving, with incomplete success, to grow into this teaching, but that the terms of the teaching itself do not seem to reflect their experience. Nor does the encyclical's reasoning about what is and isn't sinful intent when it comes to avoiding pregnancy convince most ordinary Catholics. The bishops—and, more urgently still, those at October's synod in Rome—need to begin by paying attention to all the people of God, the insights of the sciences, and the full range of theological opinion. ■

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Richard Alleva

Beastly Genius

'MR. TURNER'

Mr. Turner is a movie about a walking oxymoron: a man-troll who plods through the streets as if he were carrying ten-pound hods on each shoulder; who emits piggish snorts in lieu of normal conversation but ventures to tell a woman who attracts him that her profile puts him in mind of a Greek goddess; who coldly loans a fellow painter and former friend, the depressed and endlessly complaining Benjamin Haydon, only half the sum requested, yet some time later casually forgives the debt even after Haydon has roundly abused him; who sincerely expresses an abiding love for his father, a retired barber, then later, in conversation with high-society types, denies he has any living parent; who sexually uses and abuses his devoted live-in housekeeper, abandons his former mistress and her two daughters, yet achieves domestic happiness in the last decade of his life with a widowed landlady, whom he treats with the utmost affection. Walt Whitman wrote, "Do I contradict myself? Very well, I contradict myself," but I think even Whitman would have been flummoxed by the contradictions of J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851), who is now generally recognized as England's greatest painter.

Flummoxed, at least, by the Turner played by Timothy Spall in a new film by writer-director Mike Leigh. Most biographies and biopics try to penetrate the mystery of what makes a great artist, but *Mr. Turner* deliberately preserves that mystery, visually ponders it, and seals it into our hearts and minds. In the film's very first scene, two farm girls in Holland enter a rural landscape from screen right, chatting away in Dutch. The camera (operated by the great cinematographer Dick Pope, whose lighting often evokes Vermeer rather than Turner) stays on them in medium shot, pivots to take in their slow progress, their cheerful converse, and their attractive ordinariness. Gradually we become aware of a dot in the far distance against the skyline, a dot that turns out to be a man whom the girls never notice. They pass out of the frame; the man-dot remains. He seems to be painting. This dot is Turner, of course, and soon the scene will shift permanently to England, where our attention will always be properly focused on him as the protagonist of this drama. But with this first shot Mike Leigh has already instructed us that there is another protagonist sharing the screen with the hero and almost as important as he. This character is the material world through which Turner moves—not a world for us to revel in romantically, as we revel in the period appurtenances of *Downton Abbey* or other such high-toned PBS fare, but a world to be experienced as Turner experiences it: as an exigent, sweaty, impeding reality, in which he is just one more body struggling to make its way. One of the traditional pleasures of film is that a movie can be a time machine

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taking us into the distant past, but never has the distant past seemed less distant or more concretely felt than in this film.

Though *Mr. Turner* never strains to be a pseudo-documentary (as, say, Peter Watkins's movies about Strindberg and Munch often do), it limns its early-nineteenth-century locales with an effortless authority I've seen equaled only in Leigh's own *Topsy-Turvy* (set in Victorian England). The actors give the impression of having the real dirt of old London streets smeared on their shoes; the clothes always seem to be clothes and not costumes; the rooms appear actually lived in and scuffed by human contact. As Turner paints their elders, two aristocratic girls mock him with an insouciance that contains not a scintilla of our contemporary snark, and our hero absorbs it with the casualness of a man who knows both his business and his clientele. Painters paint, silly upper-class girls mock. If, as L. P. Hartley wrote, the past is a foreign country, Mike Leigh's time machine of a movie takes us there with effortless authority.

In most good works of art, concreteness of detail supports the feeling of universality, and this is the case here. Turner's need to find love, even at the cost of sloughing off those who don't satisfy this need, is all too recognizable and feels bitterly true even though Leigh's script doesn't allow Turner to express his sexual dissatisfactions in words. Indeed, since Leigh persists in avoiding backstory throughout the movie, we have to deduce motivations from facial expressions, gestures, vocal inflections. This serves amazingly well most of the time. When the painter, without any erotic prelude (or permission), pulls his middle-aged housekeeper against him and paws at her bosom as if to make sure it's still there, the moment speaks volumes about how old masculine prerogatives could obliterate affection and decency.

This movie isn't merely a loose compilation of scenes from a famous life, a time machine without dramatic machinery. There is a definite dramatic progression signaled by the changes in the artist's domestic arrangements. We see him first as a resident in London; then as a lodger in Margate, where he falls in love with a widowed landlady, Mrs. Booth (endearingly played by Marion Bailey); and finally as a householder in Chelsea. This physical journey is also an emotional one, moving from loneliness and sterile gropings to unofficialized but happy companionship. That might make it sound like a typical redemption story—a curmudgeon turning warm and cuddly under the influence of a good woman. But this isn't the way it comes across in Mike Leigh's hands. Here no one displays seismic shifts of feeling as if on cue. When his father dies, Turner is quiet and respectful, nothing more. But a few scenes later, while undressing a young prostitute to serve as his model, he not only bursts into tears but howls like a wild animal being tortured. Clearly this is a moment of delayed grief. But is there something about the girl that provokes it? We aren't told. And why does Turner so suddenly forgive Haydon's debt? Mrs. Booth's softening influence? Turner's guilt at the way he's treated his family? Again, we're not told. But do any of us react "appropriately" at the crucial moments in our lives? Don't our reactions usually break out later, perhaps while we're eating a candy bar or watching some nitwit TV program?

Timothy Spall—whose performance as Turner won a best award at the Cannes Film Festival but was not even nominated for an Oscar—employs a porcine gait and such a medley of grunts, snarls, and snuffles that I kept expecting tusks to emerge from his jutting lower lip. And why not? Let verbal and emotional spears be thrust into this animal's hide. Let William Hazlitt complain that, in the painter's late, almost abstract paintings, "all is without form and void." Let the young Queen Victoria dismiss a late exhibit as rubbish. No matter. This animal called Turner, bristly and ponderous in physique, mercurial in temperament, knows his rightful place in the dangerous forest of life, and will not be deterred from claiming it. ■

William L. Portier

Just a Gang of Sinners?

The Future of the Catholic Church with Pope Francis
Garry Wills
Viking Penguin, $27.95, 261 pp.

"We have yet to learn all the good wrought by 'Vatican Two,'" Garry Wills observed in 1972, "and all the damage." Likening "Rome's crumbling" after the council to "the fall of a world—the cracking of an adamantine thing," Wills paraphrased D. H. Lawrence on sex and described the council as having "*let out the dirty little secret...that the church changes.*"

These reflections began *Bare Ruined Choirs*, a stunning set of essays Wills wrote as the hopes of the 1960s drained off into the dismal decade that followed. Four-plus decades later, the eighty-year-old Wills is still writing about what Catholics used to call "changes in the church." *The Future of the Catholic Church with Pope Francis* is a study both of such changes and of change itself as the church's "means of respiration." Wills sets out "to watch the phases of this process, the reaction of the church as a living body in real situations." Envisioning change in the church as a series of "comings and goings," he divides his book into five parts that deal in turn with the coming and going of the Latin language; papal pretensions to monarchy; Christian anti-Semitism; natural law focusing on contraception, patriarchy, and abortion; and, finally, confession.

CNS PHOTO / GIAMPIERO SPOSITO, REUTERS

In *Bare Ruined Choirs*, liturgical changes, especially the change from Latin to the vernacular, "posed the whole problem of change in its most poignant form." Fittingly, Wills's new book begins with "The Coming and Going of Latin," conceived now in terms of inclusion and exclusion. No poignancy here, however, just tyranny and betrayal of Pentecost. Could this be nothing more than a Yale classicist's disdain for clunky church Latin? It's hard to believe that someone who still spells Virgil with an *e* retains none of the poignancy for a displaced tradition he once described so elegantly. This is history without pathos.

At the book's center is a section titled "Coming and Going of Monarchy," including seven chapters on church and state, structured around such questions as: Who owns Constantine? Who owns Peter? Who owns the sword? Who owns the pope? Wills is most at home in late antiquity, and this section's chapters on the relation of church authority and political power are among the book's most thought-provoking. His views are consistently contrarian. In his construal, Nicaea was not primarily about Arianism and the Creed, but more about the role and authority of bishops. Constantine "created orthodoxy," writes Wills, who prefers Newman's "eclectic" Constantine to Jacob Burckhardt's "caesaropapist" emperor. With his reprise of the Renaissance humanist Lorenzo Valla on the fake Donation of Constantine, and in his treatment of the legends of Pope Silvester [sic] and Saint Helena, Wills retreads familiar ground, telling tales of forgery and deception worthy of Bart Ehrman. This unrelentingly slimy story of fall and corruption, as Peter becomes pope and pope becomes vicar of Christ—a late papal title Wills finds

grievously offensive—has little, if anything, to redeem it.

If there is a theological heart to this book, it is the chapter on "Churches and States." Here Wills, who has written six books on St. Augustine, turns to the *City of God*, in particular Books 18 and 20, to explain his understanding of the visible church in time as "a mixed bag." We catch a glimpse of how Wills might square his Thomas Nast–cartoon version of church history—all those mitred episcopal alligators emerging from the Potomac to devour our freedoms—with his self-understanding as a Catholic. In Wills's reading, the church is not St. Augustine's Heavenly City, and membership in it does not guarantee one's destiny in the City of God. He argues that, for Augustine, human societies are not based on truth and justice, but on something more like what John Ruskin called "social affections." Like the Heavenly City, the Earthly City is also eternal, and for Wills this means that "we share for a while a third city, a mixed one in both the political and religious spheres...a place of divided loyalties, not only in social relations but in the individual soul." In Wills's translation of Book 18, the church is a place "where many recalcitrants are mingled with good people, and both are collected in a kind of Gospel dragnet."

In this fallen world, Wills finds equivalence between churches and states. The "large gang of thieves called the government trying to enforce justice" operates in the third city on equal footing with "the large gang of sinners called the church trying to remind one another of the love of God." Wills concludes: "We are, at our best, not only members but patriots of our blundering state and sinning church, muddling along in our shared city."

Readers expecting a tour de force through church history will be disappointed by *The Future of the Catholic Church with Pope Francis*—as will those looking for new perspectives on the new pope. Wills's Introduction compares Francis to Buster Keaton in *Seven Chances*, running down a mountainside "pursued by a giant landslide of boulders," dodging them all the way to the bottom, where "an even greater menace forces him to run back up through the continuing rain of rocks." Later, concluding his treatment of Latin language "tyranny," Wills returns to Francis and his evocation of Pentecost in *Evangelii gaudium*, which lends weight to the conclusion that "the reign of Latin was a massive betrayal of all that Pentecost means." The pope then goes missing for 168 pages, resurfacing for cameos in in which Wills compares him to John XXIII, warning that we can't expect Pope Francis "to change the church all by himself," but should see him as a midwife who helps bring forth change by "encourag[ing] others to respond with him to the Gospel call toward the poor."

Wills appears to have dashed off much of this book largely from books in his personal library—in which Vatican II–era sources vastly outnumber more recent works. Time seems to have stopped for him during the thirty-four years of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI. But a reader may well finish these pages with a question: If the church is "a large gang of sinners...trying to remind one another of the love of God," who better reminds us of the love of God than Pope Francis?

Wills concludes that a pope like Francis "bodes well for the future of the Catholic Church." "Welcoming change," he writes, "does not mean dismissing the past, as if it did not exist, it means reinhabiting it with love, a *sensus fidei*, a reliance on the People of God." Who could argue with that? Unfortunately, however, this book is little more than a random narrative of church history whose imaginative core has Buster Keaton dodging boulders down a mountain and then back up again.

Concluding a long review of Wills's *Papal Sins* (2000), mathematician and self-proclaimed philosophical theist Martin Gardner wrote, with just a touch of frustration, of a "mystery and strangeness that hovers like a gray fog over everything Wills has written about his faith." Wills's radical Augustinianism, and the social affections to which he appeals over reason and justice, help shed some light on the mystery to which Gardner alluded. Wills, in fact, is such a radical Augustinian that the anti-Donatist Augustine, who seems to have thought that God had so endowed the "Gospel dragnet" that the grace of Christ would always be on offer there, might not recognize him.

It's not clear who, exactly, the audience for this book is. Who reads Garry Wills? I am a Catholic of a certain age who caught the tail end of the world Wills describes in "Memories of a Catholic Boyhood," the opening chapter of *Bare Ruined Choirs*; and, though I would prefer a different word than ghetto, I agree with his conclusion: "These moments belonged to a people, not to oneself. It was a ghetto, undeniably. But not a bad ghetto to grow up in." My own "social affections" are hopelessly entangled with the church. I also teach church history, and so the forgeries and deceptions Wills chronicles are not news to me. If I have to decide, I'm temperamentally inclined to take social affections over truth and justice any day. But if the church really is a "mixed bag," social affections will be mixed up with truth; and truth, however partial and incomplete, makes claims.

Wills cites John Henry Newman frequently. His study of changes in the church, however, is not about anything Newman would recognize as developments. They are simply changes. The book opens with an invocation of G. K. Chesterton's chapter on "The Five Deaths of the Faith" in *The Everlasting Man*. Corruption or the Roman Empire should have killed the church, Chesterton wrote, "yet it was constantly reanimated from some supernatural deathlessness."

Of that supernatural deathlessness, *The Future of the Catholic Church with Pope Francis* breathes barely a trace. If the scandalous list of forgeries and deceptions in church history are not mixed up with some of God's truth, then, to paraphrase Flannery O'Connor, the hell with the church! The question for Wills is this: Why do we need the church or Pope Francis to remind us of God's love? I can hear the disaffiliating millennial asking: A mixed bag—really? Why bother, bro? ■

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Valerie Sayers

Cruel Inheritance

Diary of the Fall

Michel Laub
Translated by Margaret Jull Costa
Other Press, $20, 240 pp.

The nameless narrator of *Diary of the Fall* believes it is impossible for him to write anything new about the Holocaust: "If there's one thing the world doesn't need to hear it's my thoughts on the subject." As the grandson of an Auschwitz survivor, however, he is also keenly aware that in "sixty years' time, it will be very hard to find the son of anyone who was imprisoned in Auschwitz." It is impossible for him, that is, not to write about the Holocaust.

Diary of the Fall is Brazilian novelist Michel Laub's fifth novel, but the first to appear in English. This seamless translation by Margaret Jull Costa is an intriguing introduction. Laub's opening expends a good deal of narrative energy avoiding the atrocities of Auschwitz and focusing instead on the atrocities of schoolboys. The narrator recalls his circle of friends, wealthy children at a private Jewish school, throwing a classmate in the air thirteen times at his thirteenth birthday party, their bar mitzvah tradition. This time, however, they don't catch the boy. João—the only named character in the novel and the only Catholic in their class—is poor and motherless. He has long submitted to the other boys' torments, but on this occasion, with the narrator "supporting his neck because that's the most vulnerable part of the body," but then dropping him, he is seriously injured. In the aftermath, sickened by guilt, the narrator befriends João, as if to make reparations.

Diary of the Fall is an intense contemplation of the ways Auschwitz has marked three generations, but also of the infinite ways humans have found to torment and humiliate each other from an early age. If this does not sound uplifting, be assured that it is compelling. Despite its insistence on the "nonviability of human experience at all times and in all places" in the face of the Holocaust and all the atrocities history records, it unexpectedly asserts the possibility of hope.

AGÊNCIA BRASIL

Michel Laub

Laub's narrator uses a formal device that frees him from the sentimentalized or heroic post-Holocaust narrative: most of the novel is written in numbered paragraphs. It's not a new form—J. M. Coetzee and Roberto Bolaño have certainly used it to strong effect—but here it is mesmerizing. Suggesting journal or diary entries, the numbers also imply a compulsive need to order what is objectively disordered: the cruel infliction of suffering. They allow the narrator to cut a subject short when he's feeling evasive, and to circle back to a motif in a new entry that may be simultaneously repetitive and amplifying. The prose achieves an incantatory effect. The only sections of the book not broken into numbered paragraphs are those "Notes" we readers might expect to be numbered. This is not a humorless book, but what humor it extracts is dry, to say the least.

The narrator is now a middle-aged man on his third marriage, which is falling apart as his others have done. As he recounts his past marriages, he must also inevitably record the story of his alcoholism, which begins when he is fourteen—another traumatic year. When João leaves the Jewish school, the narrator follows, against his father's wishes. Their argument about a Jewish education culminates in an outburst: the adolescent son says he doesn't "give a toss" about what happened to his grandfather at Auschwitz, and the father, in turn, finally tells the story of his grandfather's last days and suicide. The revelations allow father and son to enter a period of trucelike silence and even affection, but the friendship between the two boys cannot hold. In their new school, they reverse roles. Subjected to cruel anti-Semitic notes and drawings, the narrator retaliates with a devastating piece of psychological cruelty, betraying João all over again. "One of the things I learned over the years," he admits, "was never to show any weakness."

And now, even as he believes he cannot say anything beyond what Primo Levi (whose fatal fall from a staircase landing was also ruled a suicide) and a long list of writers from Bruno Bet-

telheim to Art Spiegelman have already said about the Holocaust, he presses on. The effects will be felt for generations to come, our narrator makes clear, but so too will the cruelties inflicted by those with family ties to the Holocaust. They will not be able to blame their actions on the Holocaust, but they must still try to puzzle through how it has affected them. The narrator's third marriage appears as doomed as his first two, until a crisis appears in the form of his father's Alzheimer's diagnosis, a fitting narrative invocation of fading memory. Though the novel has depicted multiple falls since the narrator and his schoolmates dropped João, one of the most moving is only a near-fall, when the narrator arrives at his parents' house to deliver the news of the diagnosis. His mother takes a step back, and in her disorientation and fear her son sees the love that will brace him as he confronts his own future.

Just as there are multiple falls, there are multiple diaries. Throughout the novel, the narrator intersperses his grandfather's chilling diary entries, whose hyper-realistic definitions of objects become almost surreal. As the father confronts the impending acceleration of his disease, he too begins a diary, far more personal, which he sends piecemeal to the narrator. The narrator himself, we learn, has also constructed this novel as a diary. It is in the final entries that we understand an assertion of hope is indeed being made. It is a daring move. In a novel so relentlessly bleak—so intelligently bleak—the introduction of hope comes almost as a shock: the narrator is able to envision a "past that is…of no importance compared to what I am and will be, forty years old, with everything still before me." The writer willing to take that existential turn deserves an international presence, and I hope all his novels will be published in English sooner rather than later. Meanwhile, *Diary of the Fall* will serve as a powerful introduction. ■

Valerie Sayers, *professor of English at the University of Notre Dame, is the author of six novels, including* The Powers.

Steven Knepper

Place-Based

Distant Neighbors

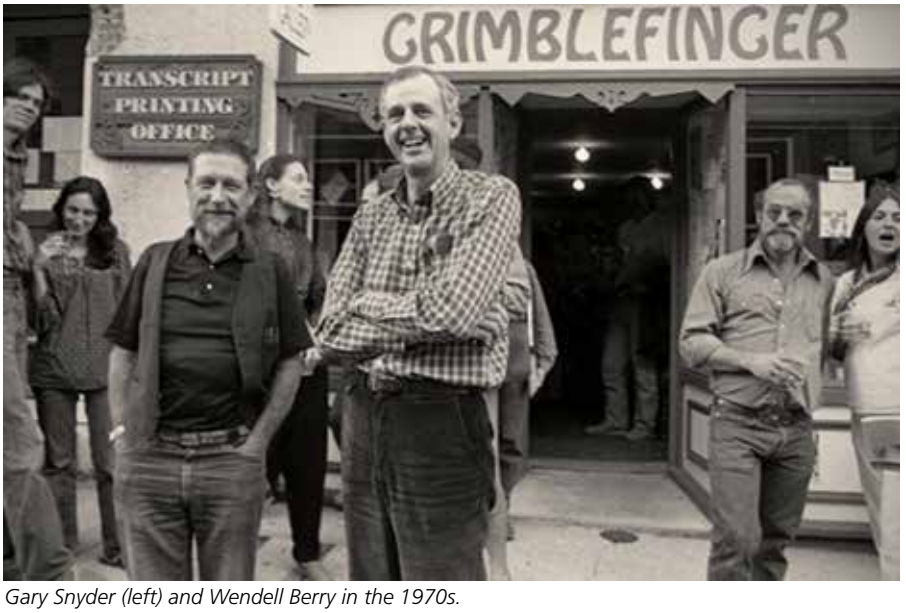
The Selected Letters of Wendell Berry and Gary Snyder

Edited by Chad Wriglesworth

Counterpoint Press, $30, 288 pp.

In a correspondence spanning forty years, from 1973 to 2013, Wendell Berry and Gary Snyder spend much time writing about the weather. "Our weather this spring has been generally bad," writes Berry in one early letter from his farm in Henry County, Kentucky, "cold and wet, with enough unseasonably warm days to start the trees budding too early." Responding from his homestead in northern California, Snyder describes some spring "mountain weather—a sudden snow fall right now—big flakes." For most people, weather talk has become a mere pleasantry. For Berry and Snyder, though, it reflects a shared commitment, one that animates their daily lives, poetry, essays, activism, and friendship. In a blurb for Berry's 1977 classic *The Unsettling of America*, Snyder describes it as a commitment to "living well, in place, on the land." For "distant neighbors" that share such a commitment, descriptions of weather, the landscape, flora, and fauna offer the means of better imagining each other's lives. As Berry writes in a poetic letter, "Here beside the Kentucky River, with songs all around us of the sycamore warbler, cardinal, indigo bunting, Baltimore oriole, wood thrush, robin, and song sparrow, we are thinking of you, dear friends, and wishing you well."

Snyder and Berry emerged from the branch of the counterculture that put down roots—that went back to the land, started intentional communities, and read the *Whole Earth Catalog*. Snyder was born in 1930 on a small dairy farm in the Pacific Northwest. He studied English and anthropology at Reed College before moving to San Francisco, where he quickly became an important figure among the Beats. He was one of Jack Kerouac's "Dharma Bums," and he read at the same 1955 event where Allen Ginsberg publically debuted "Howl." Snyder soon left the United States to study Buddhism in Japan, though, and he wouldn't settle in the United States again until nearly fifteen years had passed. Then he and



Gary Snyder (left) and Wendell Berry in the 1970s.

PHOTO: HANK MEALS / COURTESY COUNTERPOINT PRESS

his young family joined some friends in the Sierra Nevada foothills and built a homestead they called Kitkitdizze. Drawing on Eastern practice, Native American traditions, and ecology, Snyder developed a distinctive life there and a distinctive style as a poet and essayist, one that received national recognition in 1974 when his collection *Turtle Island* won the Pulitzer Prize.

Berry was born in rural Kentucky in 1934. His father was a legal advocate for small farmers, a cause he would pass on to his son. After earning his undergraduate degree from the University of Kentucky, Berry studied with Wallace Stegner at Stanford, where he was part of a remarkable creative-writing cohort that included Ernest Gaines and Ken Kesey. Berry arrived in California in 1958, shortly after Gary Snyder had left for Japan. (In his helpful introduction to this volume of letters, Chad Wriglesworth notes that Berry bought Snyder's 1959 poetry collection *Riprap* at City Lights Bookstore, but their correspondence did not begin until the early '70s, when the editor Jack Shoemaker—now at Counterpoint Press—facilitated their first interactions.) After graduating from Stanford, Berry taught at New York University for two years, but in 1964 he and his wife Tanya decided to return to a position at the University of Kentucky. A year later they purchased a small farm—Lane's Landing—in Berry's home county. Berry's writings drew on agrarian political traditions, early advocates of sustainable agriculture, and the collective memory of his rural Kentucky home. *Nathan Coulter* (1960) and *The Broken Ground* (1964) established him as a novelist and poet, respectively, but his critique of industrial agriculture in *The Unsettling of America* made him one of the country's leading social critics.

As these letters attest, putting down roots did not mean that Berry and Snyder withdrew from the concerns of the wider world. Both became more vocal on environmental and social issues. In one letter Berry writes, "I am, I believe, a 'non-violent' fighter. But I am a fighter. And I see with considerable sorrow that I am not going to get done fighting and live at peace in anything like the simple way I once thought I would." Both writers felt the tension between their commitment to a place-based way of life and the travel schedule of a prominent writer (the speaker's fees helped to finance that place-based life, of course). Berry wonders at one point, "how much of my involvement in what I don't like (internal combustion, air travel, etc.) is necessary, and how much is just inertia or self-indulgence?" These trials and tensions also unite the two authors.

But despite their considerable common ground, they do not always see eye to eye. Snyder playfully notes that "clearly you are pro-agrarian, and I am pro-hunting and gathering, which only shows I am even less credible, in the twentieth century, than you are." Real differences do occasionally

surface in their respective ecological commitments. In perhaps their most tense exchange of letters, Snyder defends the deep ecology movement against what he sees as Berry's unfair caricature of it as misanthropic. This involves a disagreement on population control. Snyder writes, "I don't know anyone who seriously hates his species, but that does not mean we cannot responsibly take on the task of defining an optimum world population (about one tenth of the present) and think of the moves that would lead, over the decades, in that direction." Berry balks at this line of thinking, claiming that it could be easily co-opted for repressive and even genocidal aims. He sees population growth as a thorny problem but ultimately one "secondary to those of use, consumption and pattern," concluding that "from a human or humane point of view, all who are alive are necessary."

Perhaps here but certainly elsewhere Snyder's and Berry's religious differences lead to disagreement. While Snyder draws on Buddhist philosophy and practice, Berry seeks to articulate a Christian ecological vision. This was a timely but controversial task in the late 1960s and '70s, when many leading ecologists (and quite a few Christians) thought that the Bible countenanced complete human dominance of creation and thus rapacious exploitation. Snyder is at times skeptical of Berry's ecological reading of Scripture, claiming that his own "problems with Christianity are two: One is basically theological, the place in the Bible where the Lord says the living creatures of the earth are 'meat' for our use; and the distinction from the beginning which is hardened into dogma by the church, between creator and creation." Berry takes up these critiques in some of his longer letters, claiming at one point that "the book of Job is a ferocious indictment of the assumption that the world is man's meat," and at another point taking aim at one of Snyder's statements about the "ideology" of monotheism: "The allegation of uniformity becomes uncomfortable, it seems to me, in the presence of almost any pair of examples you can name: Jesus and Mohammed, Dante and Chaucer, Eliot and David Jones, Billy Graham and E. F. Schumacher, Dorothy Day and Jerry Falwell, Thomas Merton and the pope."

These disagreements are never marked by malice, though. They are animated instead by a spirit of mutual respect and good will. Snyder and Berry are always forthright, calm, and charitable. In this sense, their letters are a model for interreligious dialogue in particular and serious discussion in general. Snyder and Berry clearly appreciate their common ground, but they do not shy away from their differences. As Berry writes at one point, "I think it would be both surprising and disappointing if we agreed more than we do. If we agreed about everything, what would we have to say to each other? I'm for conversation."

In the end, the sense of generosity and gratitude that pervades these letters is another shared commitment, and it is a particularly important place where their religious sensibilities overlap. As poets and essayists, in works like Berry's *The Gift of Good Land* (1981) and Snyder's *The Practice of the Wild* (1990), both writers have advocated a stance of gratitude toward the world, a way of seeing it as gift. This view is not as naïve as it might sound. It does not involve denying trials and tragedies. To hold that the goodness of life is a gift, after all, is also to acknowledge that it is not owed to us. Both writers think that gratitude is in markedly short supply. Snyder claims, "There are no people anywhere who don't act hastily and with less than adequate gratitude—most of the time—East or West..." This emphasis on gratitude and gift is perhaps their most valuable lesson for everyday living, and it is their most fundamental critique of the contemporary capitalist order, which seems to amplify the ubiquitous lack of gratitude noted by Snyder.

Those new to Berry and Snyder will first want to read some of their other works, perhaps Berry's novel *Hannah Coulter* (2005) or Snyder's poetry collection *Axe Handles* (1983). Those already familiar with their writings will find much of interest in this remarkable record of two important contemporary writers' "long-distance friendship." Chad Wriglesworth has done us a service in making these letters widely available. ■

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Measured Pains

Andrew Simons

Easygoing by temperament, and without any desire for dramatic feats of spiritual heroism, I have always been drawn to the more relaxed spiritual disciplines the church has to offer—things like contemplative prayer, the Daily Office, and *Lectio Divina*. All involve sitting in comfortable positions and closing your eyes. No one gets too excited if you happen to doze off. When I decided to enter a religious order as an oblate, I chose the Benedictines, attracted to their balance of prayer and work, ("*ora et labora*"). The Rule of Benedict, famously sane, is, with a few adjustments, as applicable to a married-with-children lawyer like myself as to a cloistered monk.

Not surprisingly, I tend to be skeptical of tales of extraordinary self-mortification. Stories of hair shirts, self-flagellation, and crawling up and down cathedral steps on one's knees strike me as neurotic rather than as authentic expressions of Christian faith. Certainly, such practices had never inspired me as models for my own spiritual life. Who needs a hair shirt when your seven-year-old is throwing up fish'n'chips into your hands at Red Robin?

But I have recently begun to wonder if a more austere approach is not sometimes necessary. In the normal rough-and-tumble of Catholic life, I have seen many of my sins and harmful habits wither away, with new virtues taking root. But the tenacity of a few particular sins is remarkable. These persistent sins have three characteristics: (1) they speak to the very heart of my character; (2) I know they are harming me; and (3) I really enjoy them.

When I manage to say no to these sins for any period of time, I fear I am on the verge of losing them forever and I scramble to experience them again. In those moments, I understand Gollum's pain in *The Hobbit* when he realizes he has lost his ring to Bilbo: "Curse us and crush us, my precious is lost!"

Which brings me back to the hair shirts. Perhaps self-inflicted irritants do have a place in authentic Catholic spirituality. I say this with extreme caution, but if saying no to sin is going to cause pain anyway, then maybe I should learn to endure pain, if for no other reason than to accept it as a part of growing in virtue. Like a boxer learning to take a punch, perhaps we can become spiritually tougher by means of small self-mortifications.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church captures this dichotomy of pain in spiritual life. On the one hand, the "way of perfection passes by way of the Cross. There is no holiness without renunciation and spiritual battle. Spiritual progress entails the ascesis and mortification that gradually lead to living in the peace and joy of the Beatitudes" (2015). On the other hand, Jesus' call to conversion and penance "does not aim first at outward works, 'sackcloth and ashes,' fasting and mortification, but at the conversion of the heart, interior conversion. Without this, such penances remain sterile and false; however, interior conversion urges expression in visible signs, gestures, and works of penance" (1430).

Slowly, and with some trepidation, I am beginning to warm up to the age-old wisdom that detachment from disordered loves is essential to the spiritual life. Still, I find myself mortified at the idea of mortification, particularly my own. I find that St. Augustine's famous prayer, "Give me chastity and continence, but not yet" resonates deep inside me.

What helps me approach the Lenten disciplines of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving is that they are, among other things, measured pains. They are concrete ways of saying no to sin. Ash Wednesday begins with the most difficult of the three, at least for me: fasting. The Ash Wednesday Collect states, "Grant, O Lord, that we may begin with holy fasting this campaign of Christian service, so that, as we take up battle against spiritual evils, we may be armed with weapons of self-restraint."

Illustration from the Nuremberg Chronicle*, by Hartmann Schedel (1440–1514)*

At first blush, the battle with my grumbling stomach hardly resembles a battle against spiritual evil. But my voluntary detachment from food, experienced as hunger, is a powerful metaphor for my hunger for sin. The pain of saying no to food builds the spiritual muscle to resist temptation. The small pain of fasting directs my prayers toward asking what really gives me life and sustains me. It also helps me realize that the physical and spiritual needs of others are similar to my own. It's no wonder that the church, following Jesus, links fasting, prayer, and almsgiving.

Ultimately, however, the focus of self-mortification is not on pain, but on joy and freedom—freedom from the addictively pleasurable bonds of sin and self. Like any addiction, sin closes us off from the one who made us, and strips us of our ability to love. Knowing this makes self-mortification seem less like a kind of spiritual athletics and more like a method of surrender. ■

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