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OCTOBER 24, 2014

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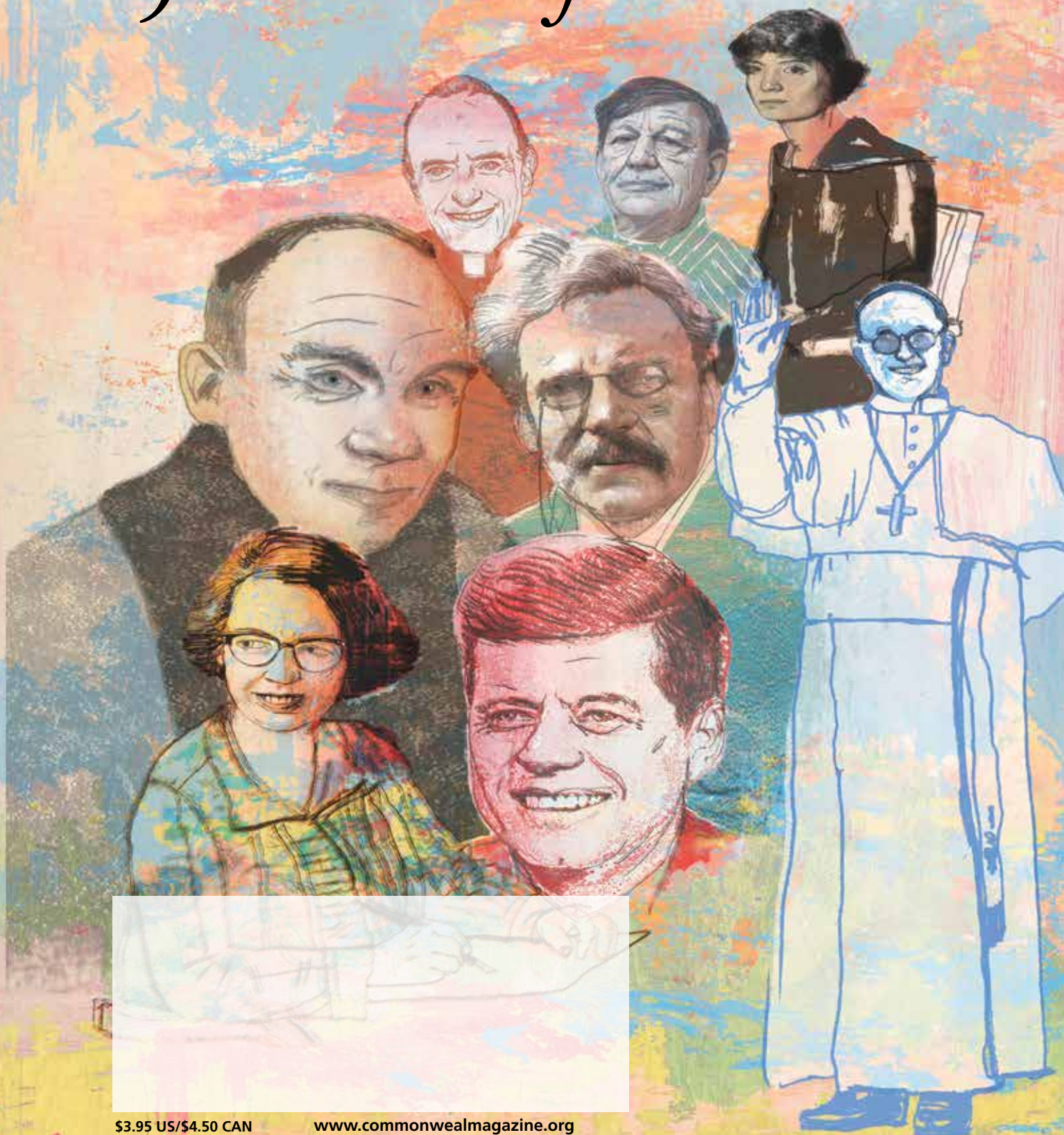

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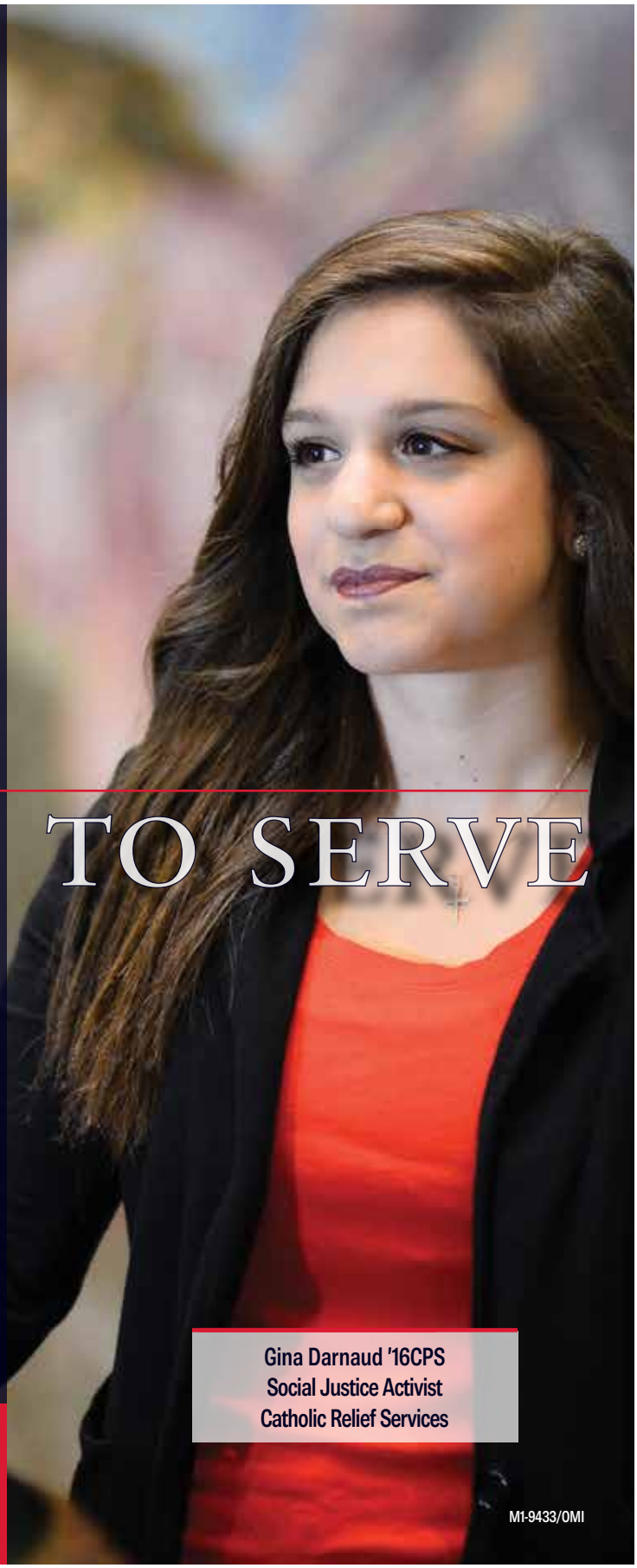

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90TH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

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LAST WORD

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LETTERS

Soviets & Synods

CORRECTION

I was surprised by a historical error in Margaret O'Brien Steinfels's otherwise insightful column on the illogical and emotional causes of war, "Why We Fight" (September 12). She writes that Russia lost Ukraine after World War I, and then regained it after World War II. It is true that following the Russian Revolution in 1917 Ukraine was momentarily independent of the Russian Empire. But that independence was short-lived. By 1919, the Russians under Lenin regained control. Except for the period of occupation by the Germans during World War II, Ukraine remained under Russian control until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

I am particularly aware of this moment in history because I took a course in Slavic history from Professor Roman Smal-Stotsky while I was a student at Marquette University. During Ukraine's brief interval of independence from 1917 to 1919, Smal-Stotsky had served as vice-premier of the Ukrainian Republic. In 1919, he fled the Soviets to Poland, where he taught at the University of Warsaw, only to flee the Germans again in 1939, ending up in Milwaukee.

PAUL J. SCHAEFER
Clinton Corners, N.Y.

Pictured on the cover: From top left to bottom right: (top row) Andrew Greeley, W. H. Auden, Dorothy Day; (middle row) Thomas Merton, G. K. Chesterton; (bottom row) Flannery O'Connor, John F. Kennedy; (right corner) Pope Francis

THE AUTHOR REPLIES

My source was Margaret MacMillan's *Paris 1919*. Looking at the text again, I see that Ukraine's independence was indeed short-lived and that, after fierce fighting, Poland and the Soviet Union divided the country under the Treaty of Riga, signed March 18, 1921.

MARGARET O'BRIEN STEINFELS

RIGGED

After reading Molly Farneth's article "At Rome's Mercy" and John Wilkins's article "Great Expectations: Pope Francis & the Synod on the Family" (September 26), I came away with a very pessimistic view of the upcoming synod on family life. I drew a parallel between the American justice system and the structure of the synod.

Many observers of the American justice system realize that the outcome of some trials are determined from the outset after jury selection. When jury selection is done badly, the results of the trial can be blatantly unjust. An obvious example of this injustice was the Mississippi trial in the 1950s of the three white men accused of murdering a sixteen-year-old black boy from Chicago named Emmett Till. The all-white jury acquitted the accused—a decision that could not be reversed, even though the three men later admitted to killing Till. Once twelve white jury members were chosen to decide the fate of the three white men accused of murdering a black boy in 1950s America, the outcome of the trial was a foregone conclusion.

I fear the outcomes of the synod on the family are similarly predetermined because of the structure of the synod itself.

The Catholic Church continues to have a hierarchical structure in which the members of the jury, those deciding the outcome, are all celibate men with no

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From the Editors

Two Faiths

"We're in for troubled times," the Oxford historian Margaret MacMillan recently warned, addressing a group of historians in Salzburg, Austria, who gathered to discuss the threats to peace, democracy, and world order facing the international community today. In comparison with what she called "the certainty of the Cold War" and its "particular clarity," MacMillan asserted that "we're now living in a much more complicated world, with low-level conflicts that never seem to conclude, and the sense of things ending somehow, of a great period of transition."

It is easy enough to be pessimistic. War rages between Sunnis and Shiites across the Middle East and Northern Africa, with Islamic extremists pledging to carry the fight to Europe and America. In Egypt, the Arab Spring has ended in the return of military dictatorship. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict festers endlessly. Negotiations over Iran's nuclear ambitions are at a precarious juncture, with hardliners here and in Israel urging military intervention. Europe, too, is unsettled. After brazenly annexing Crimea, Russia's president Vladimir Putin has fomented civil war in Ukraine and boldly asserted Russia's right to extend its sphere of influence, playing a dangerous cat-and-mouse game with the West. In Asia, meanwhile, China aggressively flexes its muscles in territorial disputes with Japan, the Philippines, and other countries, while stifling pro-democracy demonstrations in Hong Kong.

There is indeed precious little "particular clarity" about how to deal with these challenges—and little clarity, for that matter, about the fundamentals of political economy in our complicated world. Triumphalist prognosticators who declared liberal democracy and free-market capitalism the only viable path forward after the collapse of the Soviet Union have had to watch as a marriage of crony capitalism and autocracy has prevailed in a number of countries. Meanwhile, economic stagnation and political paralysis afflict the liberal democratic West, especially the United States, where cynicism about the frustrating business of democratic governance is deepening. One hopes that what MacMillan calls a period of transition will not be one of democratic retreat.

Commonweal, which celebrates its ninetieth year of publication with this issue, was born as a consequence of World War I. The magazine's founding editor, Michael Williams, had worked for the National Catholic War Council—a precursor to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, established to support the war effort and assist the spiritual needs of Catholics serving in the armed forces. At the time, the nation's Protestant majority still harbored deep suspicions about the loyalties of Catholics. When it came to war, would Catholics take their orders from the president, or the pope? Much of this nativist prejudice was allayed when hundreds of thousands of Catholics rallied to Woodrow Wilson's call to arms.

After the war the United States enjoyed unprecedented prosperity, with its still largely immigrant Catholic community growing steadily in strength, confidence, and political and economic clout. *Commonweal's* founders hoped that a journalistic and intellectual endeavor of quality would

Michael Williams

continued on page 6

draw attention—and give expression—to the contributions Catholics were making to American society, and especially to the vitality of liberal democracy. To this end, in its first decade *Commonweal* explored the underappreciated Catholic wellsprings of the American nation. The editors insisted that a certain religious piety—an outlook rooted in a larger, transcendent hope—not only went hand-in-hand with democracy's celebration of the common man, but was crucial to forging consensus about the common good in a pluralistic society. Our freedoms as individuals ultimately depended on the commitment of all to the institutions of democratic governance, not merely the pursuit of personal ambitions or the exercise of individual rights. As far as the editors were concerned, the Declaration of Independence's bold assertion that "all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights" rested on bedrock Catholic principle regarding the inherent value and dignity of every human life—and society's duty to protect it. A democratic republic that honored that principle would flourish; one that neglected it would founder.

Then as now, this faith in democratic principles had to be defended against merely materialistic understandings of human life and purpose. In this spirit the magazine opposed communism and pseudoscientific notions about eugenics. It also opposed fascism (even where fascists were allied with the church) and condemned racial prejudice. Liberal democracy, very much in retreat between the last century's two world wars, received little encouragement from the church in its struggles with authoritarian forces. Yet *Commonweal* refused to abandon its belief in either democracy or Catholic truth, consistently arguing that in the modern world the health of one was very much related to the health of the other.

If the magazine has been guided by any one principle, it is this: that despite the bitter post-Enlightenment conflicts between church and state in Europe, democracy and Catholicism need not be antagonists. Indeed, they can and should be partners.

If the magazine has been guided by any one principle, it is this: that despite the bitter post-Enlightenment conflicts between church and state in Europe, democracy and Catholicism need not be antagonists. Indeed, they can and should be partners. The church has something to learn from American democracy about institutional accountability, but Catholicism still has much to teach the modern world about justice, the limitations of individualism, and the sanctity of life. From its inception *Commonweal* embraced the religious-liberty guarantees in the U.S. Constitution, long rejected by the church as an indulgence of religious error, and insisted that religious pluralism and ecumenical understanding need not end in the indifferentism Rome feared. In Vatican II's Declaration on Religious Freedom, the church finally conceded as much, vindicating our conviction that political and religious freedom are both inalienable aspects of human dignity.

Today, an array of religious voices regularly issue dire warnings about the failures of American democracy, the decadence of contemporary culture, and the marginalization or even persecution of religion by the secular state. There is an element of hyperbole in this rhetoric. With authoritarian governments on the rise across the globe, and genocidal violence threatening Christian communities in the Middle East, the dangers posed by secular democracy are surely comparatively benign. Are there prominent secular forces hostile to religion? Of course. But many of the problems besetting the churches are self-inflicted, and can only be remedied by an honest examination of their own failings. What is more urgent now, in this "great period of transition," is for religious believers and communities to spur a renewal of trust in democracy itself by forcefully speaking out in its defense.

Democratic egalitarianism has deep Christian roots. Yes, democracies are short-sighted, easily manipulated by the wealthy, eager to pander to interest groups, often unwilling to make hard decisions, and prone to stumble through crises. Yet, in our era, they have proven to be far more resilient than authoritarian regimes. Why, exactly? Two centuries ago, Tocqueville concluded that while democratic institutions were fallible, democracy finally worked because people believed in it. Ultimately, the faith people had in the democratic idea made them resolute in the face of error or corruption. Mistakes could be corrected, and were; incompetent or corrupt politicians could be voted out of office, and were.

Historically, religious communities in America have led the way in propagating this faith in self-government, and so perhaps it is not surprising that as Americans have become more secular, they have also become more disillusioned with government in general. Yet the church continues to remind us that our fates as individuals are forever intertwined, even in our hyper-individualistic age. In dedicating ourselves to the commonweal, we direct our lives toward a meaning that we otherwise neglect at our peril—and in the process, as the political philosopher Michael Sandel has written, "we can know a good in common that we cannot know alone." In similar fashion, Catholics believe that more transcendent truths are also something we must come to know together, in communion, if we are to know them at all. Today, no less than ninety years ago, these two faiths must continue to complement and nourish one another. ■ □

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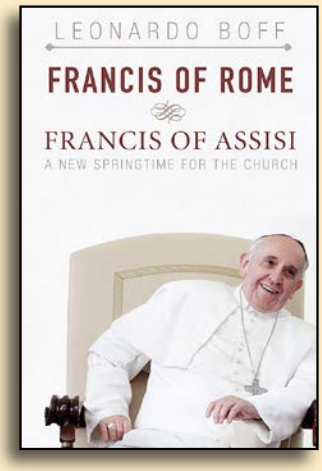

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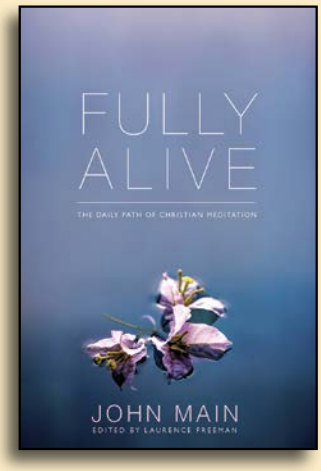

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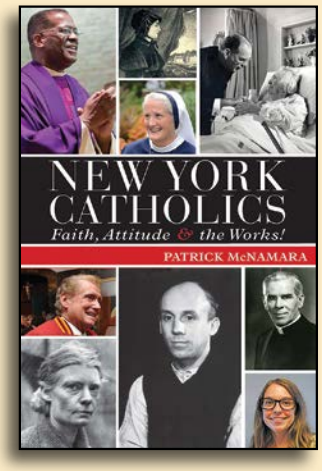

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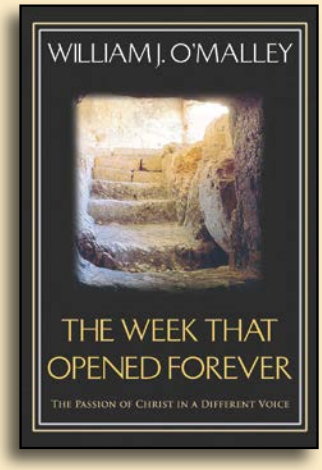

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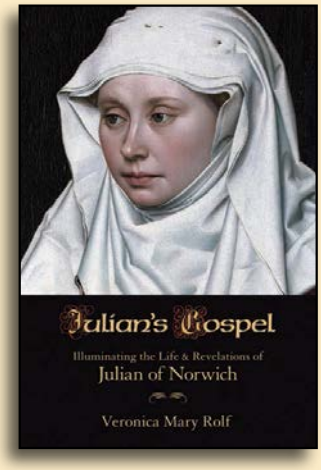

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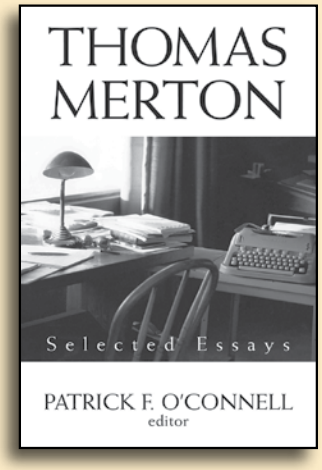

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Mollie Wilson O'Reilly

Men at Work

RAISING BOYS WHO BELIEVE WOMEN CAN DO (ALMOST) ANYTHING

My big mistake was not looking closely enough at the storybook zoos. I thought I was raising a liberated preschooler, unburdened with hoary notions of gender roles that might thwart his ability to form healthy relationships. His favorite toy is his play kitchen, where he cooks like Daddy does. When he plays "going to work," it's me he imitates, hoisting the bag that holds the breast pump for the baby onto his three-year-old shoulders and heading for the door with a cheerful goodbye. Once we showed him a video of a men's swimming relay, because he wanted to know what swimming looks like. He watched till the end and then said, "Now it's the ladies' turn." I was proud: he'd noticed the imbalance and sought to correct it all on his own.

So, I was taken by surprise when he told me confidently, "Only boys can be zookeepers." We had once again turned to YouTube as an educational tool, this time to prepare him for a trip to the Bronx Zoo. Knowing his idea of a zoo was shaped by what he'd seen in books, with animals housed in narrow concrete cages rather than roaming their spacious habitats, I wanted him to have a more accurate picture of what the visit was going to be like. So I called up a video that began with a woman in a Wildlife Conservation Society uniform introducing herself: "I'm a wild-animal keeper, and I take care of the aardvarks here at the Bronx Zoo." My son shook his head: not possible. He wasn't disdainful, but matter-of-fact. He knew better.

Books are where my boys get a lot of their impressions of the wider world, and so I try to be mindful as we read of what sort of messages they might be getting. Sometimes I will make an on-the-fly edit, such as skipping the line in Fred Rogers's *Going to the Dentist* about how dental hygienists are usually women (true, I suppose, but why point it out?). For the most part, the books cooperate with my feminist intentions: there are, to be honest, far more women driving buses and working at construction sites in contemporary picture books than we're likely to see in real life. But storybook zoos are resolutely old-fashioned, even in recent books, and they have the personnel to match. I made a mental inventory of our bookshelves: *Sammy the Seal; Good Night, Gorilla; Animal Strike at the Zoo. It's True!; A Sick Day for Amos McGee*…not a female zookeeper in the bunch. It had never occurred to me to look for one. But Marty had noticed. And, just as I feared, he had drawn his conclusions without even questioning their logic.

That particular error was easy enough to correct—we saw lots of women on the job at the real-life zoo. But what else has he inferred about what girls or boys can or can't do? I've been wondering when my sons would take note of the one vocation they encounter on a regular basis that is, in fact, limited to men, and what I would say when they finally asked, "Mommy, why can't a woman be a priest?" But now I'm more concerned that they won't bother to ask at all.

People sometimes defend the practice of excluding girls from being altar servers—even though the Vatican has clarified that both sexes are eligible for that ministry—because, they say, boys will be more attracted to the role, and thus potentially to the priesthood, if it's something only boys can do. That may well be true, but is that really the motivation we want our future priests to have? I hope finding out that women *can* be zookeepers hasn't made that job less attractive to my son.

I would love to see my boys as altar servers, and I would love for them to grow into adults who would at least consider dedicating their lives to the service of the church—even if that service is not reserved for men only. But if I should have a daughter—who surely *will* ask about the sex-based limitations she encounters at church and nowhere else—I will want the same for her.

Who knows: maybe my kids will grow up to be the ones who can explain the all-male priesthood to me in a way that makes sense—who can offer a theological justification that doesn't sound like begging the question. It hasn't happened yet, but like any parent, I think my children are exceptional. For now, I just want them to keep believing there's nothing they can't do—and not only because they happen to be boys. ■

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U.S. Catholic Historian Volume 30, Number 2: pp. 87-134
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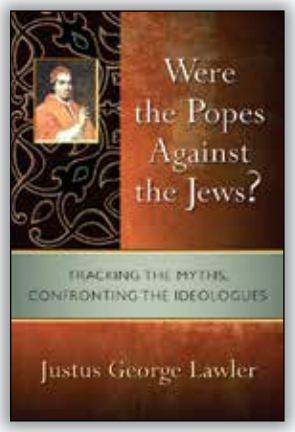

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Margaret O'Brien Steinfels

Consider This

WHY OPINION JOURNALISM STILL MATTERS

Commonweal has long identified itself as a "journal of opinion edited by Catholic laypeople." In a world where facts are hard to pin down and opinion is everywhere, "journal of opinion" is a curious choice of self-identification, one obviously dating from the gentlemanly time, ninety years ago, when some opinions were considered better than others and achieving a considered opinion was actually thought to be a notable accomplishment. Is today's decline of facts and ascendancy of opinion an advance for public discourse, or the end of Western Civilization?

Daniel Patrick Moynihan's prescient report on male unemployment and the black family (no less prescient for white families, we now see) was supported by *Commonweal* when much liberal "opinion" denounced it as racist. Was this the occasion for his famous riposte—"Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not to his own facts"? Moynihan's dictum reflected a time when facts were the common currency of policy experts drawing on the social and physical sciences, economics, history, and law. Opinion, on the other hand, was the trading card of blowhards and barstool repartee. Moynihan, a man steeped in both fact and opinion, was almost certainly aware that all "facts" are established from some perspective and emerge from some process of consensus among inquirers. He must also have been aware of the reasons for the triumph of opinion over fact.

Too many facts turned out to be false, sometimes the product of seeing what one wanted to see, sometimes outright lies. As America learned after Vietnam, the facts announced by politicians and military leaders do not always square with reality. The official "facts" did not square with the role of government agents or rogue operators in the civil-rights struggles, Watergate, counterterrorism in Central and Latin America, and the war in Iraq. Government deceptions and cover-ups were mirrored by those of bureaucracies from General Motors and the National Football League to church leaders. Authorities dissembled and the public's trust turned to skepticism.

So here we are. The highest levels of fact-certifying institutions, governments and jousting scholars, even churches, have lost their credibility, even when they tell the truth. Talking heads mouth streams of opinion recycled as factoids; though they may never quite become facts, they never disappear. Blogs, social media, and tweets generate "factiness" while anything resembling facts lumbers far behind the wash of opinion. And despite optimistic hopes for a new "democracy of opinion," what is more like a new anarchy of opinion has not overcome public skepticism.

Here enters the idea, mentioned above, of "considered" opinion. Journals of opinion, such as *Commonweal*, have served as gatekeepers, less concerned with discovering facts or distinguishing them from opinion than with sorting out the overlap between them, elevating some facts and questioning, endorsing, or refereeing some opinion, separating the reasonable from the preposterous. Editorials, columnists, reviews, reports of ecclesiastical quarrels, and published letters to the editors were reasonable; they were "considered" opinion. Facts, when they came, were ascribed to appropriate sources and authorities. Preposterous opinion went into the circular file. As *Commonweal* celebrates its ninetieth anniversary, we can lament the lowly state of facts while acknowledging the importance not of any old opinion, but of considered opinion. Considered opinion surveys all the possibilities. Considered opinion tenders a reasonable assessment. Considered opinion is often willing to admit, We don't know yet. We are not infallible.

Entitled to their own facts?

WHITEHOUSE.GOV

Take two recent media fascinations: Did Malaysian flight 370 disappear over the Indian Ocean—or the South China Sea? Are the plane and passengers being held for ransom by terrorists in Katmandu? Was Malaysian Air Flight 17 shot down by separatists who took it for a Ukrainian air-force plane? Or shot down by Ukrainian forces who thought Putin was on board? Or by Russians who wanted to demonstrate Putin's muscle?

There's more evidence to go on in the second case than in the first, but both tragedies are cloaked in a fog of conspiracy theories. What counts above all is what difference the facts will make as the United States, NATO, Ukraine, and Russia snarl over this scrap of territory. Considered opinion would at least hold that this is not a casus belli for World War III. Considered opinion is the stock in trade of *Commonweal*. And that is a fact. ■

William Pfaff

Trying My Hand

HOW I GOT STARTED IN JOURNALISM

After I graduated from Notre Dame in 1949, I faced the problem of what to do to make a living. All my college friends seemed headed for graduate school, but I felt that I had spent quite enough time in a classroom and should find a real life.

I had majored in English and minored in politics and philosophy. (Political science, blessedly, had not yet been invented.) My teachers included Waldemar Gurian, a Jewish-Catholic exile from Nazi Germany (see his friend Hannah Arendt's *Men in Dark Times*, in which he figures), and Yves Simon, a lifelong friend and collaborator of Jacques Maritain. That pair, combined with Frank O'Malley's two-year daily course in European literature and the modern Catholic intellectual renaissance in Europe, had given me and other privileged students a formation probably unique in the United States at the time. But it was hardly one that appealed to employers—in any case, employers of what?

I was interested in history and international politics, and, having no better ideas, put my name in for the State Department Foreign Service examination. Just before receiving a summons to Atlanta for the test (I lived in Georgia at the time), a letter came from what then was called *The Commonweal* (the definite article disappeared well after my time). It was from Edward Skillin, the editor, publisher, and one of the owners of the magazine—one of the nicest men who ever lived. "Professor O'Malley has suggested your name in connection with a vacancy we have for an assistant editor," he wrote. "The salary is $75 a month [if my memory serves]. Would you like to come to New York and try your hand?"

My father, a businessman, exploded. "Try your hand! What is that supposed to mean? What is this magazine? I've never heard of it. You would rather 'try your hand' with it than have a civil-service job in the State Department with a pension?" Today, sixty-five years later, I appreciate the force of his concern. But I took the train to New York, got a room at the Sloane House YMCA hostel, and presented myself the following day to Edward, Philip Burnham, who had just returned from wartime service, and the brilliant but brooding Edward Meagher, whom I would come greatly to admire—another ND man recommended by Frank O'Malley.

The vacancy I was to fill was created by the departure of C. G. Paulding, a marvelous writer, who subsequently became an editor of Max Ascoli's new *Reporter* magazine (Ascoli had been an early exile from Italian fascism). Paulding had been responsible for *Commonweal*'s comment on the Hiroshima atomic attack: Why didn't they drop it in a desert someplace, and tell the Japanese to go and look at the hole?

The magazine was located at Fourth Avenue and 32nd Street (upper Fourth Avenue became lower Park Avenue some years later). Edward Skillin had his own office, and the rest of us shared a large editorial room. A second private office was used by John Brubaker, the beleaguered advertising manager, striving to keep the enterprise afloat, and a third private office was sublet to the president of the Catholic Poetry Society, whose name I do not recall, as he was infrequently there, and whose publication I thought it prudent not to read. His greatest interest, other than Catholic poetry, seemed to be the Lotus Club on Gramercy Park, an establishment of theatrical origins, of which he was an officer. Our entourage was completed, as was usual in those distant days, with a delightful and efficient Irish secretary of uncertain age, named Molly.

From left: John Brubaker, Carlton J. H. Hayes, William Pfaff, John Cogley, William Clancy, Edward Skillin, James O'Gara, 1955

My duties were to prepare copy, read proofs, and go downtown to the printer on Thursday evenings to "read the stone"—that is, to read the magazine for errors after the type had been set, locked into forms, and proofs drawn by the forms' being placed face down on a dampened table-sized sheet of thick paper. The printers were friendly but condescending, and always in a hurry. I think they gave us a discount.

To my surprise and delight, soon I was given some book reviews and editorials to write (thus did I become a pundit). From the start, it was first names for all, and we usually lunched together. Edward was often delayed by a few impoverished men who hung around waiting for him outside the building. They consulted Edward, who listened patiently and usually slipped them some cash. I cannot say enough in praise of this gentle, saintly man, who, with his wife,

Jane, would later adopt two Vietnam War orphans to add to their own children.

We were sometimes joined by our movie critic, Phil Hartung (who also reviewed for a major women's magazine). Our theater critic, Kappo Phelan, never came to the office. I liked her writing very much and was intrigued by the infant name, but as she was a childhood friend of Edward's and I was not quite twenty-one at the time, it seemed a little pointless to try to meet her. I would soon be taking out to the movies a nice Irish girl, a former novice nun, who had jumped over the convent wall to work as a waitress at Schrafft's. We were not a have-a-drink-after-work crowd because I was one of just two Manhattan residents on the staff. I had to learn my drinking (mostly) on my own.

The editorial group soon changed. Phil retired. John Cogley arrived with his wife Teddy and children, fresh from taking an advanced degree in theology at Fribourg in Switzerland. He and Jim O'Gara, who was to join the staff while I was away during the Korean War, had founded the Chicago Catholic Worker House (but both dissented from Dorothy Day's pacifism). Jim came not long after I returned. He bought a modest GI-loan house in Levittown on Long Island and, next to Edward, was to become the mainstay of the magazine for the next few decades. He would be my son's godfather, long after I had left the magazine.

Bill Clancy came from an academic background, and was destined for the priesthood (with the Oratorians). He filled the slot I temporarily vacated for the army.

John Cogley became the most noted American Catholic journalist of the period, recruited to the *New York Times* and then the Ford Foundation–endowed Fund for the Republic, but to the consternation of all (he wrote a good book to explain it), he became an Episcopal priest after Vatican II.

The Commonweal was founded in 1924 as a review of the arts and current affairs, under the auspices of well-to-do Catholics, meant as a demonstration that an American Catholic educated class existed. The Franco uprising in Spain in 1936 was the great Catholic political cause of the 1930s. It provoked a crisis among the magazine's staff. Michael Williams, its founding editor, supported Franco. But the junior editors, Edward Skillin and Philip Burnham, took a neutral position on the war. They emerged in control of the magazine.

The Catholic hierarchy and Catholic publications the world over, however, threw their support behind General Franco. That placed *Commonweal* in a delicate position with respect to the American hierarchy and Rome. There were semi-official efforts to disavow the magazine as not really Catholic. Even lay people, after all, were expected to think what they were told to think, and the new *Commonweal* editors were not falling in line. In the end, the magazine's editorial position on Spain cost it a good many subscribers but solidified its position and reputation.

I never learned exactly what happened in 1936, but I believe that both Edward, a Williams College graduate, and Philip, who had been schooled privately and at Princeton, came from at least moderate wealth, and I know that in my time there were wealthy benefactors called on from time to time to sustain the magazine, destined by its nature to chronic (if not holy) poverty.

In the 1950s, another crisis occurred when the magazine, one of the most articulate of the limited number of Catholic critics of the Communist-hunting Sen. Joseph McCarthy, was invited before the Senate Permanent Subcommittee for Investigations. On a few occasions, McCarthy had suggested that *Commonweal* was a pro-Communist or otherwise subversive publication. That claim was skillfully rebutted by John Cogley in his testimony. John would much later advise John F. Kennedy in preparation for his crucial speech to Southern Baptist leaders, many of them convinced that Kennedy's election would, spiritually at least, put the pope in the White House.

To indicate how distant those days now are, I will add one more personal note on the summer of 1950. I was at a party one Saturday night, mainly for my roommate's friends from the National Federation of Catholic College Students (in which he, a wartime army officer, had been active at Notre Dame). The visitors were leading a Holy Year student trip to Rome. I said to the person in charge that I greatly envied them sailing for Europe in a few days. "Come along," she said. "One of our staff has dropped out and you can take his slot."

On Monday I eagerly shared this with Edward and begged for enough time off to accept. He naturally agreed. My heartfelt argument was, "I may never again have a chance to see Europe!" After Rome and Paris, the army called, with which I traversed the Pacific, returning afterward to *Commonweal* for three more years. By 1955, I felt it was time to leave the happiest job I ever have had, to see still more of the world in Africa and the Middle East. In 1961, with a grant following my first book, I was in Southeast Asia and again the Middle East. I was much interested by Indochina, and came home convinced that it was an absolutely disastrous idea to enlarge the U.S. intervention, which was then in its infancy.

I began contributing a foreign-affairs column to *Commonweal*, expressing that (and similar) views with regularity and extreme vigor until 1971, when I began two decades of writing political "Reflections" for William Shawn's *New Yorker*, while continuing the occasional piece for *Commonweal* that happily has kept my name on the magazine's masthead to the present day. ■

William Pfaff *served as an assistant editor of* Commonweal *from 1949 to '52 and again from 1953 to '54, and was an associate editor from 1954 to '55. He is a columnist for the* International Herald Tribune*, and his most recent book is* The Irony of Manifest Destiny: The Tragedy of American Foreign Policy *(Walker and Company).*

Cathleen Kaveny

That '70s Church

WHAT IT GOT RIGHT

Meg, John & Cathleen Kaveny, Easter 1968

COURTESY CATHLEEN KAVENY

Unpacking some boxes after a recent move from South Bend, Indiana, to Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, I came across my confirmation stole, which I made in the spring of 1978. The members of my class were told to personalize our stoles to reflect our unique faith journeys. Then completing my first year of Latin, I wrote the word *Credo* on one panel with Elmer's Glue in the best cursive I could muster, and then covered the glue with a layer of deep blue glitter. On the other panel, I traced a simple cross, using the same technique. (This was not a theological statement: a crucifix was beyond my severely limited artistic abilities.) To make a border for my stole, I attached the cornflower trim that my late, beloved grandmother had used in sewing my First Communion dress eight years earlier. That dress was Marian blue. The girls in my First Communion class were discouraged from wearing traditional white lace dresses and veils, because they were expensive and impractical. We were all very disappointed at the time. Now, I am grateful. My grandmother's handmade blue dress with its cornflower trim is a tangible sign of the communion of saints.

I do not remember much about the confirmation ceremony itself. I am pretty sure we sang "On Eagle's Wings." Don't judge—it was the '70s! I also remember feeling a mixture of accomplishment, relief, and release. We had just completed a demanding two-year program, fulfilling requirements that included weekly classes, multiple service projects, and periodic weekend retreats. Being confirmed meant that we were finally adult Catholics. We continued to go to Mass. But for most of us, that was the end of any formal instruction in the faith. Like other adult Catholics, we learned to juggle secular and sacred responsibilities. As time went on, the former began to crowd out the latter. My generation's connection with the church became more and more attenuated. For many people I know, the connection was finally broken by the revelations about the sexual abuse of minors by priests and the way bishops covered up those crimes.

So, I belong to what many Catholics now dismiss as one of the church's lost, post–Vatican II generations. Catholic prelates and internet pundits regularly scorn the fifteen years following the Second Vatican Council as the "silly season," the era in which catechesis was evacuated of all substantive content in favor of supposedly trivial activities such as sharing, caring, and constructing felt banners. The catechesis of the 1970s became a cautionary tale, the model of what *not* to do in passing on the faith.

For many years, I was sympathetic to that analysis. But I am increasingly uneasy with the wholesale dismissal of the catechetical programs of my youth. First, the stock caricature of the period is unfair. The programs had far more content then they are given credit for. Second, the criticism only reinforces polarization within the church. Scapegoating 1970s religious-education programs fosters the illusion that the church's problems can be fixed by going backward, by inoculating children with something like the simple question-and-answer method and content of the Baltimore Catechism. But the root problem facing the church, then and now, is not catechesis. The root problem is that Catholics didn't have—and still don't have—a way of dealing constructively with the substantial and irreversible changes in both the church and the culture. Those changes began before the council and only accelerated in its immediate aftermath. They show no sign of abating today, much less of being reversed. Among those developments were the suburbanization of the Catholic population, the astonishing affluence and high levels of education among post–World War II Catholics, the powerful shift away from Catholic defensiveness and toward ecumenical and interreligious cooperation, and the unprecedented rates of Catholics marrying outside the fold.

How did religious instruction try to deal with these changes? My parochial elementary school used the very popular *Life, Love, Joy* series published by Silver Burdett and written by Carl Pfeifer and Janaan Manternach. My own textbooks have long gone to their eternal reward. But my mother, who taught sixth-grade CCD for many years, held on to her old teacher's handbook, which I recently perused. The content is surprisingly rich. The series proclaims itself to be "grounded in the traditional teaching and practices of the Catholic Church, while respecting recent developments in the theological and social sciences." Among the theological developments it reflects is the emphasis on Scripture called for by Vatican II. The theme of sixth-grade religious education was "Growth in the Spirit," which is explored in units titled: "Abraham and the Mystery of Faith," "Moses and the Mystery of Freedom," "David and the Mystery of Service,"

and "Jeremiah and the Mystery of Hope." The series took care to emphasize that these mysteries were deepened and revealed in Christ Jesus, and passed on in their fullest form in the Catholic tradition. A final unit in the book reinforces the Christocentric understanding of the themes by reflecting on the meaning of major Catholic holy days.

Judging by this text, the content of the series was both rich and deep. So what was the problem? Some Catholics have claimed that students were not sufficiently drilled with objective, impersonal, timeless propositions and rules. It is true that the emphasis in my program was on fostering personal and conscientious appropriation of a Catholic worldview, rather than on inculcating a set of prefabricated questions and answers. As I recently learned, the reason for this new approach was historical. Catholics were appalled by the carnage of the Second World War and the unimaginable evil of the Holocaust, and they were horrified by the possibility of a nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union. Questions about the moral presumptions of the modern state, including the United States, had to be asked. Catechism-trained Catholics had participated in the Nazi horrors, often with blind obedience to authority. The goal of post–Vatican II Catholic catechesis was not to foster obedience, but instead to cultivate responsible men and women who were shaped by the Catholic Christian vision, sensitive to our debt to the Jewish people, and independent enough to stand up to injustice, even if sanctioned by church or state.

So the pedagogical strategy of *Life, Love, Joy* made sense in itself. It was overcome, however, by a wave of superseding events. My overwhelming impression of the church in which I grew up was instability. In first grade, the nuns at my parochial school wore long habits; in second grade, they wore short habits; and in third grade, they wore no habits. When I was a fourth-grader, the parochial school closed, and I went to public school from then on. First Communion was originally administered in first grade, and then it was administered in second grade. First confession was held before First Communion, then it was after First Communion, and then it was off on its own, in fifth grade. Parish music and décor changed radically with each pastor. The votive candles mysteriously disappeared one day and the tabernacle seemed to be on walkabout in the front of the church.

The culture was changing rapidly as well. Women were joining—and remaining in—the workforce in great numbers. Marriages were breaking up. Even the country seemed to be breaking up, as the battles over Vietnam were succeeded by the scandals of Watergate, which dominated television and newspapers.

My generation was not lost because of religious miseducation. It was lost because of the changes in the culture. No CCD program, no matter how rich and nuanced, could overcome the challenges created by the simultaneous breakdown and reconfiguration of the institutional Catholic world and the American social world.

Many influential prelates and lay Catholics now say that it is better to create a bulwark against the chaos, by presenting Catholic teaching and moral rules in a classical, timeless manner. The new Catechism seems to encourage just that. It abstracts doctrinal propositions not only from the context in which they were formulated, but also from the documents in which they were promulgated. This obscures the various levels of authority attributed to the various doctrines. It presents Catholic belief in the manner of a tax code.

I don't think this will work. More important, if the vast numbers of young Catholics who continue to leave the church is any indication, it is not working. In fact, the glaring disjunction between an ahistorical presentation of Catholic teaching and the rapid pace of ecclesial and social change is likely to prompt even more skepticism and cynicism. I think that in the long run, the only solution is to teach young people how to think and pray within the context of a tradition that is not exempt from historical development and change.

The Roman Catholic tradition does not need to be afraid of history; its central claim is that God became a man who fully experienced the contingencies of life in a certain time and place. The relationship between eternity and history has always been porous. In order to articulate eternal aspects of relationships within the Godhead, for example, early Christian theologians drew upon concepts deeply tied to particular times, places, and philosophical schools. We are not God. We cannot escape the historically conditioned aspects of our tradition. Guided by the Holy Spirit, our community can come to a deeper understanding of the mysteries of our faith as it moves through time. God willing, it can even correct its mistakes—such as its acceptance of slavery and its absolute prohibition of lending money at interest.

Growing up Catholic in the 1970s gave me the sense that the church was unstable, even fickle. It also, however, gave me some wonderful role models for trusting in God's fidelity in tumultuous times. Our CCD teachers were young wives and mothers who had grown up with the Baltimore Catechism. Unlike their own children, most of them had gone to parochial schools. No one had taken the time to explain to them the continuities between the pre–Vatican II era and the post–Vatican II era. They had to figure it out for themselves. And they did figure it out, because handing on their faith to their children was important to them. They were not nostalgic about their own religious education, because they had an intuitive sense of its limitations. At times uncomfortable about the scope and nature of the change, they put their trust in God's providence.

I admire these women tremendously. Their example prepared me for life as an adult in a changing church much better than any amount of memorization ever could have. And I thank God for the communion of saints, those among the living as well as those in paradise. ■

Cathleen Kaveny, *a columnist for* Commonweal*, teaches law and theology at Boston College.*

WE LIVED

by Christian Wiman

We lived in the long intolerable called God.
We seemed happy.

I don't mean content I mean heroin happy,
donkey dentures,

I mean drycleaned deacons expunging suffering
from Calcutta with the cut of their jaws

I mean the always alto and surely anusless angels
divvying up the deviled eggs and jello salad in the after-rapture

I mean
to be mean.

Dear Lord forgive the love I have
for you and your fervent servants.

I have so long sojourned Lord
among the mild ironies and tolerable gods

that what comes first to mind
when I'm of a mind to witness

is muric acid
eating through the veins

of one whose pains were so great
she wanted only out, Lord, out.

She too worshipped you.
She too popped her little pill of soul.

Lord if I implore you please just please leave me alone
is that a prayer that's every instant answered?

I remember one Wednesday witness told of a time
his smack-freaked friends lashed him

to the back of a Brahman bull that bucked and shook
until like great bleeding wings the man's collarbones

exploded out of his skin.
Long pause.

"It was then," the man said, "right *then*..."
Yes. And how long before that man-

turned-deacon-turned-scourge-of-sin
began his ruinous and (one would guess) Holy Spirit–less
affair?

At what point did this poem abandon
even the pretense of prayer?

Imagine a man alive in the long intolerable time
made of nothing but rut and rot,

a wormward gaze
even to his days' sudden heavens.

There is the suffering existence answers:
it carves from cheeks and choices the faces

we in fact are;
and there is the suffering of primal silence,

which seeps and drifts like a long fog
that when it lifts

leaves nothing
but the same poor sod.

Dear God—

Christian Wiman is the former editor of Poetry *magazine and a current faculty member at the Yale Institute of Sacred Music. "We Lived" is from his new collection of poems,* Once in the West, *which was published last month by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.*

The Commonweal Catholic

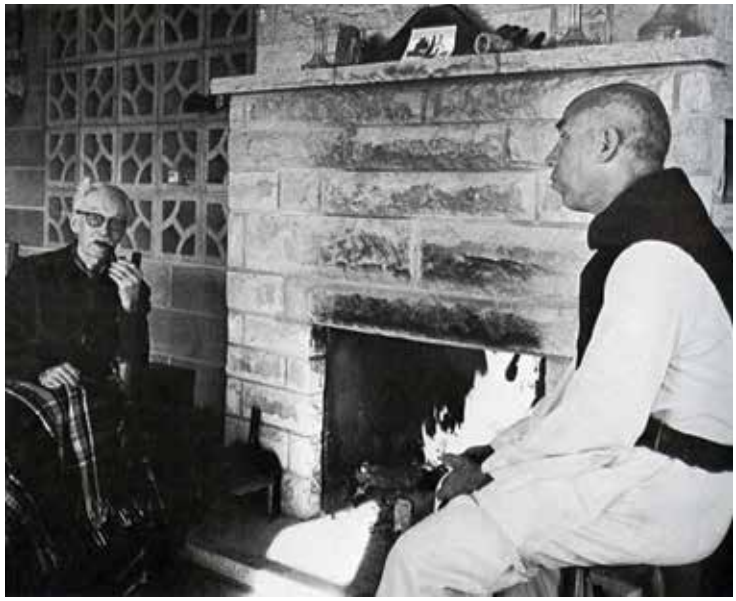
It Started with Origen

Luke Timothy Johnson

Over the past several years I have spoken at some wonderful colleges and universities across this country—Smith, Northwestern, Christian Brothers, Stanford—through the sponsorship of *Commonweal*. I treasure these occasions for the chance they have given me to meet students and faculty, and to share with them my enthusiasm for *Commonweal*. I try to persuade younger listeners to start the habit of reading this unique journal; the older members of my audience are already persuaded. I do this gladly, convinced that American Catholicism would be improved in exact proportion to the increase in the ranks of *Commonweal* Catholics.

It has been, in fact, one of the joys of my life to have been associated with this publication, as a writer and speaker, for more than twenty years. From the first time I picked up a copy, in the monastic library at St. Joseph Abbey in Louisiana in the 1960s, I wanted to be the sort of writer whose work appears in *Commonweal*. After all, so many of my literary and spiritual heroes wrote for it: Jacques Maritain and Thomas Merton, Daniel Berrigan and Michael Harrington, Wilfrid Sheed and Evelyn Waugh, Dorothy Day and G. K. Chesterton and many more. These were people serious about the life of the mind and the condition of the world. They wrote passionately on war and peace, on Christian philosophy, on the hidden poor, and on art and literature as well.

Commonweal writers struck me as "Catholic" in the oldest and deepest sense of the term: they had a sensibility grounded in centuries of sacrament and spirituality. But they were not parochially Roman Catholic. Rather they engaged the pressing issues of the day with a bracing intelligence, freedom, and boldness; self-confidently Catholic, they wrote as citizens of the world. This combination of qualities has been so fundamental to *Commonweal* that in 1999 Patrick Jordan and Paul Baumann summed them up in the subtitle of the magazine's seventy-fifth anniversary anthology, *Commonweal Confronts the Century: Liberal Convictions, Catholic Tradition*.



Two contributors: Jacques Maritain and Thomas Merton, October 1966

PHOTO BY JOHN HOWARD GRIFFIN

In my eyes, *Commonweal* writers represent a heritage that traces all the way back to the greatest of early Christian theologians, Origen of Alexandria, who combined an unswerving embrace of the Rule of Faith with a willingness to subject obscure or undefined elements of that faith to critical examination. Origen was great not simply because of his astonishing learning and prodigious energy, but because, having devoted his heart to the Gospel—he ultimately died following torture under persecution—he dedicated his mind to follow the path of truth wherever it might lead. He was convinced that the tension between an unfettered intelligence and a heart committed to the tradition was a creative tension; his sense of God's grandeur made him appreciate both the necessity for truth to be embodied in specific forms and words, and the reality that truth transcends all specific embodiment.

That this heritage is so imperiled in today's church and society makes it all the more precious. The space *Commonweal* (and its faithful readers) seeks to occupy is a tight one,

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and difficult to maintain in a world that insists we either mindlessly adhere to received teachings or recklessly reject the wisdom of the past in the name of enlightenment. In such a world the notion that one can be "liberal" in some ways while "conservative" in others seems too difficult for many to grasp. The forces of bifurcation are not unique to Catholicism. All Christian denominations find themselves split between—for lack of better terms—fundamentalists and modernists (and Judaism and Islam in their own ways are similarly divided). On issues such as the religious leadership of women or the inclusion of homosexuals, most adherents invoke the unswerving authority of Scripture or the magisterium, while a hardy minority assays the perils of theological tightrope-walking.

Meanwhile, the distance between liberals and conservatives—another inadequate but unavoidable distinction—inexorably grows, deepened by chronic misunderstanding and distrust. If the religiously liberal regard traditionalists as dumb sheep, the latter regard the former as wolves out to ravage the flock. Mutual acceptance remains difficult to find and almost impossible to sustain, and so the two groups drift ever further into a kind of ghettoized separation. Those Catholics who espouse liberal convictions, increasingly finding themselves at the margins of the tradition they want to affirm, take refuge within the academy. Even if they are not themselves academics, they are likely to feel more at home at a university Catholic Center than at the local parish. The flight of Catholic intellectuals from the clergy and the parish has led to a dismaying split, in which the academy is celebrated as the place of the intellect and the church as the repository of faith.

This division of the heart and the mind has had sorry consequences across the board, as church and university alike have severed the link between critical thinking and faith. In Catholicism, as in almost all Christian denominations today, the tradition of the learned pastor is virtually dead. Rare is the bishop or parish priest who can hazard a critical reflection in a sermon or other public setting; the protectors of Catholic orthodoxy are vigilant, ever ready to identify—and report—such heretics. On the other side, equally rare is the academic who can openly profess traditional Christian beliefs while retaining credibility as an intellectual. Hiding one's faith, or abandoning it altogether, is increasingly the price of citizenship in the world of free inquiry. Thus, in the university department of religion, it is a matter of pride to study religion rather than to practice it; some professors of religious studies understand their mission to be the demystifying of traditional beliefs and practices among their students.

One might want to think of religious institutions of higher learning as an exception, but in fact the pressures there are often even greater. In religious colleges and seminaries, many professors of theology become expert at practicing what I

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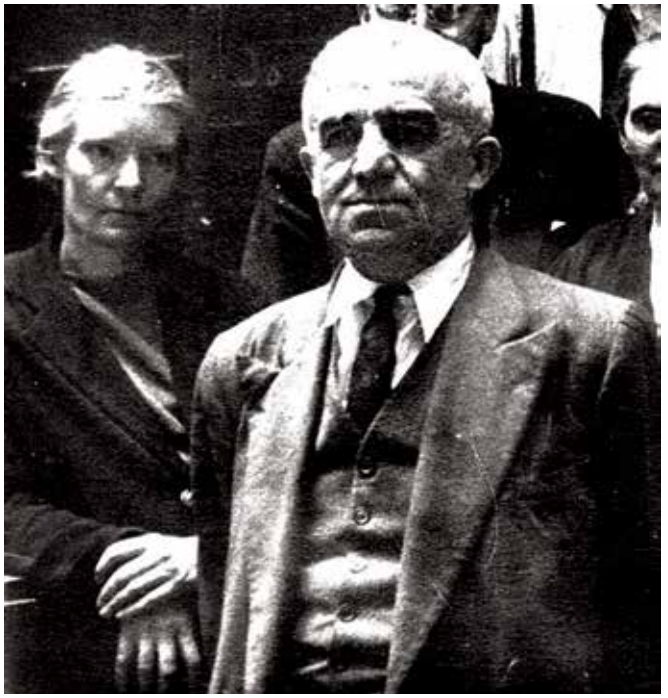

Catholic Worker founders Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, introduced to one another by a Commonweal *editor*

think of as the "higher fundamentalism," camouflaging a lack of genuine critical thought with an elaborate apparatus of scholarship. Behind their credentials and impressive displays of learning, they are in truth upper-level catechists who do little more than pass conventional wisdom on to the next generation. Those scholars who actually try to bring critical acumen to the tradition, or who seek to expand the conversation beyond parochial boundaries, risk being censored or suppressed: the roll call of recent decades includes Charles Curran, Roger Haight, Elizabeth Johnson, and Margaret Farley. Spirited and passionate theology cannot thrive in such a context of fearful conformity.

Meanwhile, the liberal academy itself turns out to be repressive in its own way. In the humanities especially, where free critical inquiry is the ostensible ideal, progressive dogma exercises an astonishing influence, so much so that one is hard pressed to find any diversity of political and social positions. "Political correctness" is an overused term, yet it accurately designates a complex of academic "right-thinking" that emphasizes an apocalyptic vision of climate change; the evils of tobacco (but not pot); the oppressive character of late capitalism; the malignancy of "europhallic" thought; and the embrace of all forms of human diversity except those representing religious traditions. The *Chronicle of Higher Education*, in fact, recently published an astonishingly ill-informed and illiberal essay ("The Great Accreditation Farce") by an Ivy League professor calling for the disaccreditation of religious institutions such as the excellent Evangelical Wheaton College. As for politics, you're as likely to find a Republican in an English department as you are to find a liberal Democrat in an Evangelical church.

In a recent convocation address to graduates of Harvard University, former New York mayor Michael Bloomberg—a great patron of Johns Hopkins University—lamented what he perceived to be a total lack of political diversity and social thought within the contemporary academy. Here's a case in point from my own academic home. Without question, the former speaker of the House, political theorist, and novelist Newt Gingrich is among the most accomplished of Emory University's alumni. He is also a provocative and polarizing figure, whose worthiness for university recognition can legitimately be disputed. Yet so anathematic is he to the reigning orthodoxy that it has been virtually impossible to put his name into consideration for an honorary degree from Emory. Even to *suggest* that he is as worthy of consideration for such a degree as, say, the CNN reporter Christiane Amanpour (who has received one) is to invite only an embarrassed silence.

Amid such division, the ideal toward which *Commonweal* has striven for nearly a hundred years is more valuable today than ever. The magazine stands as evidence that authentic faith can support free inquiry; it insists, and demonstrates, that rigorous thought is not alien to religious tradition, but demanded by it. More than ever, the world needs a place where "liberal convictions" and the "Catholic tradition" are in conversation. For ninety years, *Commonweal* has provided such a place. It is perhaps then worth asking, in the spirit both of critical inquiry and the Catholic tradition, what those poles actually mean today, and how well *Commonweal* holds them in creative tension.

To begin with, what do "liberal convictions" mean for today's *Commonweal*? I'm confident that most of those associated with the magazine would agree that the phrase does not entail a set of specific positions on matters liturgical, hierarchical, or political, but rather a conviction that the free engagement of serious thought from a variety of perspectives is necessary for healthy conversation. To this end the magazine should eschew the McCarthyism of the religious and political left just as vigorously as it historically opposed the religious and political McCarthyism of the right. For *Commonweal* truly to display "liberal convictions," in short, it ought not to be a place where readers know what views they will find in its pages, but rather one where they can expect to engage vigorous and critical thought.

And for the most part, I think, it is. The reviews of books and films are consistently tough-minded and unpredictable. The pages of reader correspondence continue to provide sharply stated and civil exchanges. The major articles on religious issues also reveal a refreshing diversity of views and arguments. Indeed, the editors often set up symposia in which divergent views on hot-button issues can be argued within the same issue. The fact that *Commonweal* frequently infuriates *both* sides of such hot-button issues as abortion and same-sex marriage suggests a genuine independence. If there is one area where "liberal convictions" tend to lead

to predictable positions, it is in the editorial pages—especially when the topic is national and international politics. Here, I think, the magazine has accepted the premise that righteousness and goodness surface more regularly among Democrats than Republicans, and that only the interventions of big government can create social justice.

And then what about the phrase "Catholic tradition"? For the first half of *Commonweal*'s history, the magazine's editors and writers could address the non-Catholic world with the confidence of those who inhabited an unchanging, even unchangeable, tradition. But over the past fifty years that confidence has evaporated. The Second Vatican Council, with its long and contested aftermath, has divided Catholics over the question of what constitutes the authentic Catholic tradition, and the pages of *Commonweal* over these decades bear ample testimony to the ideological, moral, and political dimensions of the church's internal struggle.

Because the reformist spirit of the council arose out of the critical inquiry of the great preconciliar theologians, who themselves experienced censorship and suppression for their efforts, it was natural for the magazine to applaud the effort to make the church more liturgically adequate, more ecumenically inclusive, and more institutionally responsive. Here "liberal convictions" corresponded exactly with what seemed to be the new shape of the "Catholic tradition." That didn't last. As we all know, forces within the church in recent decades have consistently sought to mitigate and even reverse the reforms of the council—and have done so with the tacit and sometimes explicit support of the Vatican. Claiming to speak in the name of the tradition, some have sought a return to a Tridentine church, which in their view means a church of absolute obedience to the magisterium, where critical thought is viewed as dangerous. In this ideological divide, *Commonweal* has spoken boldly of a church large enough to embrace critical thinking and appropriate change.

This is a battle about basics, where one must take sides. It is not possible for the magazine to be "fair-minded" to all positions, when one of those "positions" seeks to deny the legitimacy of any other position. If, in defense of liberalism, *Commonweal* has found it necessary to privilege some voices more than others, because these voices explicitly seek to maintain a universe of open conversation, the editors have nonetheless managed to include many less-than-liberal writers in its pages, and I applaud them for that. And I praise them as well for continuing to enunciate an understanding of the catholic tradition that is much older, deeper, and wider than this fray. The magazine in recent years has represented that deep tradition with its vigorous examination of Catholicism's historical sources in Scripture, in patristic authors, and in the writings of mystics and theologians through the centuries. As it was for the council, this sense of history is the necessary precursor to helping make the church more comfortable with a diversity of expression within its unity of faith.

What more can *Commonweal* do to communicate even more effectively its sense of the church? Four projects particularly recommend themselves. The first is to bring back the voices of such early reformers as Wycliffe, Huss, and Marsilius of Padua: agents for change whose powerful arguments issued from within the heart of the Catholic tradition. The point is not that Marsilius's *Defensor Pacis* (1324) was correct in every respect concerning the role of the state, but that his call for a limitation to papal power and for the authority of general councils preceded Luther by almost two centuries. The point is not that John Wycliffe (1330–84) was right in his doctrine of the sacraments or his attempt to locate all authority in Scripture, but that his views anticipated truths taken up six hundred years later by Vatican II. These are, or should be, our heroes; they demonstrate that Catholicism in the deepest sense is *semper reformanda*.

The second project is to investigate empathically the views of those who seek a return to a Tridentine church. What are the values they see as having been lost? What forms might best embody those values? Such questions suit a magazine that consistently shows a capacity for catholic inclusiveness by offering generous readings of positions hostile to its own. Like few other forums, *Commonweal* can create conversation among disputants through historically and theologically informed analysis.

The third thing *Commonweal* can do to represent the Catholic tradition more comprehensively is to devote greater attention to the demands of discipleship in the broadest sense: the moral entailments of the Gospel, the shape of piety, the call to holiness. One way to do this is to engage with the prophetic lives of the saints of the past. Another is to elicit personal reflections on the path of sanctity from among the magazine's gifted and deeply committed writers.

Finally, although *Commonweal* correctly refuses to identify the Catholic tradition primarily with the Vatican or the papacy, like all media it gives more attention to the church's central authority than it does to the many manifestations of the tradition in parishes, monasteries, and convents. A lay Catholic journal, it would seem, ought to celebrate and illuminate what is precisely lay in the tradition. One of my favorite *Commonweal* pieces was the collection of "liturgical reports" concerning the actual experience of the Eucharist, contributed by writers in parishes across the country. More such reports might help shift attention from a Catholicism that is defined by the Vatican to the Catholicism that lives vibrantly—or not so vibrantly—in parishes, convents, seminaries, and social ministries.

No, I am not running for editor. I am instead deeply grateful for the ways in which the editors of this precious magazine, past and present, have negotiated the difficult position of being at once liberal in conviction and Catholic in commitment. I am glad to be a contributor to *Commonweal*'s pages and to speak in its name. There is no other sobriquet I value quite so much as that of being a Commonweal Catholic. ■

Authoritative & Ignored

The Overlooked Council of Constance

Francis Oakley

Human beings chart their collective past, like their individual ones, via anniversaries, and this year has been particularly rife with important memorializations. June saw the seventieth anniversary of D-day in 1944, a date that increasingly tests the limits of living memory. In August we observed the hundredth anniversary of the outbreak of the Great War. Go further back, and you enter a remoteness where anniversaries more typically engage the historian than the man on the street. Well, I'm a historian; and it is a sixth-hundredth anniversary to which, somewhat forlornly, I wish to draw attention. Forlornly, because I am guessing that we are unlikely to hear much about it, and least of all from church-connected sources. Yet the anniversary marks a truly great ecclesiastical event—one on which the fate of the universal church was directly dependent. November 16, 1414, saw the opening at Constance of a general council of the Latin Church. Both for what it was and what it did, the council was an event of great and historic significance.

In size alone—and it was far better attended than the later, iconic Council of Trent—Constance was perhaps the most imposing of all medieval representative assemblies, ecclesiastical or secular. A citizen of Constance who was charged with helping find quarters for the flood of visitors listed, in addition to popes John XXIII (the *first* John XXIII, the one who had convoked the council) and Martin V, some five patriarchs, 33 cardinals, 47 archbishops, 249 bishops and suffragan bishops, 247 abbots and priors, 217 doctors of theology, 361 doctors of both laws, 5,300 "simple priests and scholars," 3,000 and more merchants, shopkeepers, craftsmen, musicians, and players—and over 700 "harlots in brothels." The council, moreover, attracted not only the papal but also the imperial chancery, as well as the official representatives of a host of European countries; one historian has called it the nearest medieval equivalent to the United Nations.

And what did the council do? Quite a lot, in fact, not least of all the passage of a series of reforming measures, one of which—the decree *Frequens* (1417)—mandated the automatic assembly of frequent general councils, thereby making them a regular and continuing part of church governance. Had the popes not chosen to ignore that decree, the abuses of the late-medieval church might well have been remedied and the great "rupture" of Protestant Reformation avoided. But the council's most important achievement was its success in bringing about what years of negotiation, diplomatic pressure, and even military action had failed to achieve—namely, the ending of the Great Schism of the West, which, after a disputed papal election and nearly forty years of debilitating deadlock, had seen Latin Christendom divided first into two and then into three rival "obediences," each presided over by its own claimant to the papal throne.

The Schism was the greatest and most intractable scandal to have overtaken the Latin Church since its fateful breach, three centuries earlier, with the patriarch of Constantinople and the world of Greek Orthodoxy, and one would think that the council's success in ending that scandal would have won it lasting acclaim. Yet over the centuries, and especially since the nineteenth-century rise of the papacy to imperial preeminence, Constance has not enjoyed a particularly good press. At times, indeed, it has enjoyed no press at all. The *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique*, one of the great achievements of Catholic scholarship in the first half of the last century, simply omitted Constance from its listing of the church's general councils—a bold exercise in the ecclesiastical politics of oblivion. This omission is part of the ideological repression, historiographic self-censorship, and institutionally sponsored forgetfulness that followed in the wake of the high-papalist triumph at Vatican I in 1870, and that made the intricate disputes surrounding Constance seem hopelessly recondite—a matter of interest, perhaps, to the blinkered denizens of research libraries and rare book rooms, but of questionable relevance to the pressing challenges confronting the Catholic Church today.

As one of those denizens myself, I acknowledge the intricacy of some of the issues involved. And yet they remain profoundly relevant to our current ecclesiastical woes. This topic is admittedly a neuralgic one, and those of ultramontane/high-papalist conviction have struggled mightily to consign it to the dust heap of history. The reason they have

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done so is not, of course, that Constance succeeded in ending the Schism; all parties, presumably, would want to celebrate that. What vexed ultramontanists is the particular route the council fathers followed in fashioning that happy outcome. That route presupposed an ecclesiological stance that was anathema to the adherents of the Roman theological school later on. And *that* school's position would be endorsed in Vatican I's twin definitions of papal infallibility and papal jurisdictional primacy, while the rival, Gallican position, dominant across northern Europe for well-nigh half a millennium, would be thrust into the outer darkness of heterodoxy. During the debates at Vatican I, when some of those speaking for the anti-infallibilist minority—men like Henry Maret, dean of the Sorbonne's theology faculty, or August Vérot, bishop of St. Augustine in Florida—sought to evoke the authority of the Council of Constance and to quote its decrees, they were met with derisive laughter from the (predominantly Italianate) bleachers in St. Peter's Basilica, shouted down with cries of "No! No!" "Heresy!" and "Shut up!"

What the infallibilist majority so vehemently opposed was the continuing northern European adherence to the "conciliarist" ecclesiology: the belief that in certain critical cases the general council possessed a jurisdictional authority superior to that of the pope. However divinely instituted his office, the pope in this view was not construed as an absolute, monarchical ruler, incapable of doctrinal error, but rather as in some sense a constitutional ruler, susceptible to correction and restraint. He was seen to possess only a limited, ministerial authority delegated to him by the whole community of the faithful for the good of the entire church, which alone possessed the gift of indefectibility. That community, this view held, had not exhausted its inherent authority by the mere fact of electing its papal ruler. Instead, it retained whatever authority was necessary to preserve the truths of the Christian faith and to prevent its own subversion and ruin. It could exercise that authority through its representatives assembled in general council, and in certain critical cases could do so against the wishes of the pope—and, if need be, could proceed to judge, punish, and even depose that pope.

This position was by no means novel. It drew much of its inspiration from the essentially synodal or conciliar mode of governance of the ancient church, and derived much of the structural precision crucial to its implementation from elements of medieval canon law—specifically, from its teaching on the case of papal heresy and its development of a body of sophisticated corporation theory. In short, it was not something alien to the church's immemorial tradition, but in many ways a logical deliverance of that tradition. Constance gave that tradition a solemn affirmation in the decree *Haec Sancta Synodus* (1415), and then acted on that decree when it tried and deposed John XXIII, the pontiff whom the council fathers deplored as a bad man even while they recognized him as the true pope. The council then wrapped up the business of ending the schism by pressuring the

Painting of Jan Hus at the Council of Constance by Václav Brožík (1883)

Roman and Avignonese claimants to resign, pragmatically dangling before *both* of them the opportunity personally to convoke the council before so doing. Gregory XII, the Roman claimant, took the bait and was allowed to resign. Benedict XIII, his Avignonese counterpart, obdurately refused the offer and was, accordingly, tried *in absentia* and deposed. All of that done, the council went on to elect Martin V, the pope to whose standard the entire church finally rallied.

In a tangle of issues where the devil lies even more than usually in the details, it would be easy enough to be drawn into the historical weeds. But, having put in my time thrashing about in those weeds, let me resist that temptation and limit myself to focusing on just two things: first, on what happened to *Haec Sancta* and the conciliarist ecclesiology during the centuries after the Council of Constance; and second, on the pressing need to come to terms with the enduring significance of that ecclesiology.

After the triumph of the ultramontane or high-papalist tendency at Vatican I and the defeat of those sympathetic with the Gallican theological tradition centered on Paris, the conciliarist ecclesiology came to be classified as a happily defunct heterodoxy. Its history was downgraded accordingly, until in time it came to be understood—and not only in the Catholic world—as little more than a minor perturbation on the outermost orbit of the ecclesiological consciousness. In the official listing of popes, the Roman line of claimants during the Great Schism now came to be treated as the sole legitimate line. Thus the Council of Constance could be depicted as a legitimate council only after Gregory XII went through the charade of (re)convoking it, with the result that *Haec Sancta*, promulgated before that event, could be dismissed as invalid. And so on.

In all of this, along with a degree of casual institutional forgetfulness, we see the working of an active institutional politics of oblivion. "He who controls the past controls the future," George Orwell wrote in 1984, and "he who controls the present controls the past." And the past certainly has been controlled in the case of Constance—sucked, as it were, into an Orwellian memory hole. To rescue that ecclesiological past from the long, coercive shadow cast backward by Vatican I, is to discover that the conciliarist constitutionalism expressed in *Haec Sancta* in fact enjoyed a good deal of life during the centuries following Constance. As Bishop Bossuet pointed out in the late seventeenth century, this type of conciliarism was the constant teaching of the theological school of Paris from the time of Constance onward, along with schools of theology right across northern Europe, from Louvain to Krakow, Vienna to Erfurt. The appeals made to it at the Council of Trent (1545–63) were so insistent as to induce the papal legates there to abandon any attempts to promote a decree concerning the precise nature of papal primacy. This was hardly surprising, given the fact that the celebrated Charles de Guise, cardinal of Lorraine and leader of the French episcopal contingent at Trent, had proclaimed himself proudly to be a Frenchman "nurtured at the University of Paris where the authority of the council is held to be above that of the pope and where those who hold to the contrary are censured as heretics."

Two centuries later, even in the beleaguered world of English recusancy, this outlook maintained a persistent following among secular clergy and learned laity alike — among people like Bishop Lingard, Fr. Joseph Berington, Charles Butler, Lord Petre, and other members of the (appropriately designated) Cisalpine Club. Like Daniel O'Connell, the great Irish "Liberator" later on, Berington could insist that he was "no papist, nor is my religion papist." Instead, he clearly sympathized with the Cisalpine insistence that the pope was possessed of a merely "limited superintendence," was subject to the authority of a general council, and in certain critical cases could be judged and deposed by such a council. Nor had a great deal changed by the early nineteenth century, when the English historian Henry Hallam could describe *Haec Sancta* as one of

"the great pillars of that moderate theory with respect to papal authority which...is embraced by almost all laymen and the major part of ecclesiastics on this [i.e., the northern] side of the Alps." And in 1869, in his *Du concile général et de la paix religieuse*, a two-volume work submitted as a memorandum to the upcoming Vatican Council, Henri Maret reaffirmed yet once more—and with great specificity—the half-millennial tradition of conciliarist constitutionalism and its embodiment in *Haec Sancta*.

All of this, I can imagine the gentle reader murmuring, may doubtless be of interest to the professional archaeologist of defunct ideologies. But amid the multiple miseries of our present ecclesiastical discontents, does it really have any practical significance for the church today? I believe it does, and for three reasons.

First, as Gerson reminded Pope Martin V in 1418 and as Cardinal Cesarini, papal legate at the Council of Basel, reminded Pope Eugenius IV in 1432, if the decree *Haec Sancta* were dismissed as invalid, so, too, would we have to dismiss the actions that the Council of Constance had based on it, including the trial and deposition of John XXIII. But if the latter's deposition were invalid, so, too, would be the elections of Martin V, Eugenius IV, and, by any traditional understanding of papal succession, all subsequent papal elections and titles down to the present. By church law only legitimately appointed cardinals can elect popes, and only legitimately elected popes can create cardinals who can themselves lay claim to being legitimately appointed. To accept the ultramontane insistence that *Haec Sancta* is not the valid decree of a legitimately assembled general council is thus logically to confront a nightmare scenario, an explosion of doubt about papal legitimacy that is truly sedevacantism with a vengeance.

If, on the other hand, *Haec Sancta* and its essentially constitutionalist provisions are accepted as valid, then some modification of the current, absolutist understanding of papal monarchical power is necessarily called for. (This, presumably, was what Cardinal Koenig of Vienna had in mind when, in 1964, while Vatican II was still in session, he advocated synthesizing the disparate ecclesiological traditions informing the work of Constance and Vatican I.) If the validity of *Haec Sancta* is taken seriously, then we must concede that limitations on papal authority are far more extensive than those conceded by the standard modern manuals, and that the Roman Catholic ecclesiological tradition is richer and more pluralistic than commonly assumed—more polyphonic, if you wish, than the insistently high-papalist melodic line of the past century and a half. We would similarly have to come to terms with the fact that the degree of control exercised by the papacy over the convocation, composition, agenda, activity, and procedures of the general council (and, by analogy, of the Synod of Bishops) should properly be far less than that enshrined in the current provisions of canon law.

This is not an unattractive line of march, and the arguments in its favor are not lightly to be dismissed. Unfortunately, however (and edging now toward my third reason), they rest on the assumption that it is somehow both possible and legitimate to stress the validity of *Haec Sancta* while sidestepping the provisions of Vatican I's *Pastor Aeternus*, with its twin definitions of papal infallibility and the papal primacy of jurisdiction—both of them reaffirmed, one should note, in Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium*. It would of course be disingenuous to claim this. Yet forty-five years ago, when I first addressed the question, studying both *Pastor Aeternus* and *Haec Sancta* in the light of the conciliar debates that helped produce them, taking into account both the changes they underwent in their drafting and the commentaries that followed their promulgation, I could see no way (*contra* Cardinal Koenig) to bridge the gap between the two decrees.

I concluded accordingly, and not without considerable discomfort, that Constance's *Haec Sancta* and Vatican I's *Pastor Aeternus* confront us with an instance of two legitimate general councils of the Latin Church genuinely in contradiction, and moreover on a truly fundamental doctrinal issue concerning the locus of ultimate authority in the church. And so regarding the interpretation of conciliar pronouncements, I committed myself to what Benedict XVI would later disapprovingly label "a hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture" rather than a "hermeneutic of reform" or continuity. Stepping impetuously across the line dividing the theological from the historical, and abandoning the anxious preoccupation with certitude that is so deeply rooted in the Catholic temperament, I was led to accept the historically conditioned, reformable, and essentially provisional nature of *all* doctrinal formulations, ecclesiologies, and church structures—conciliarist no less than papal.

In some of this (or all of it) I may, of course, have been wrong. Historians often are. And while I do not believe that to be the case, even if I were wrong, what would remain striking is how little attention our Catholic theologians have been willing to pay to the whole issue raised by Constance. It is as if they remain under the spell of Cardinal Robert Bellarmine, that "great administrator of doctrine" who, crossing swords in 1606 with the acerbic Venetian theologian Paolo Sarpi, bluntly insisted as a matter of principle that legitimate general councils simply *cannot* contradict one another. To suggest otherwise, he said, smacks of "the reasoning of heretics." For "that [council] alone is legitimate which asserts the authority of the pope to be superior to all councils." QED!

Not so long ago, the British Dominican Fergus Kerr, writing about twentieth-century theologians, commented that "sooner or later the Roman Catholic Church will have to come to terms with what was true in the tradition of conciliarism." Fair enough. But the time is already depressingly late and, all other things being equal, sooner, surely, would be preferable to later still. ■

Formative Years

What 'Commonweal' Means to Six Young Staffers

In addition to Commonweal*'s Campus Speakers Program and the free subscriptions donors make available to college students, the magazine offers internships and full-time jobs to recent college graduates. This is another way in which* Commonweal *is reaching out to the next generation of readers and contributors. After a year or two at the magazine, these young people typically move on to graduate school or other jobs. For this ninetieth-anniversary issue, we asked a number of our former staff members (along with our current marketing coordinator) to write about their responsibilities at* Commonweal*, what they learned while working here, and about their hopes for the future of the magazine.*

Chris Staysniak

During the year I spent at *Commonweal* right after college, I was (among other things) the magazine's one-person customer-service department. In this role, I was constantly reminded that *Commonweal* is a vibrant catalyst of conversation—and even conversion, of a sort. Looking back, I can see that the most successful issues of the magazine were the ones that left my voicemail and e-mail inbox brimming with a variety of positive and negative responses from our passionate readership.

On one end of the spectrum were the *Commonweal* faithful. This core of cheerleaders always let me know that they had read the latest issue from cover to cover, and were eager to offer kudos for a particular article, or sometimes for all of them. It was their intellectual and theological manna, and they could not wait to thank us. The worst thing that could happen to these subscribers was that the postal service had lost or mangled the most recent issue, forcing them to wait a few more days for us to send a replacement.

Chris Staysniak

Receiving these plaudits and passing them on to the rest of the staff was one of the easiest and most enjoyable parts of my job, but there was often more critical feedback as well. *Commonweal*'s independence has never failed to generate both praise and ire, and during my brief tenure in the front office, I was routinely exposed to both. In one of my first weeks on staff, a gentleman called not only to cancel his subscription but to upbraid me for what sounded like years of grievances against the magazine—if he wasn't reading from a carefully prepared and annotated list, it sure sounded that way. Before finally hanging up, he added that he would be renewing his subscriptions to "real" Catholic magazines, and strongly suggested the editorial staff turn to those journals for a little guidance.

Another morning, I fielded a call from an animated reader who was appalled by the image of Karl Marx on the cover of the latest issue ("Was Marx Right?" April 8, 2011). He found the decision to put Marx on the cover a travesty given the historical and intellectual conflict between Catholicism and "atheistic" communism. He was quite articulate and had lots of arguments. As the most junior person on staff, alone at an early hour in the office, and without even having finished my first cup of coffee, I stumbled, stuttered, and barely managed to inform him that someone better qualified—and better composed, I thought—would get back to him.

My secret hope was that the editor who returned the call later that morning would rebut the caller's arguments in a conclusive way. But instead of a fiery exchange, I was told later that the follow-up discussion had been mutually enlightening. The aggrieved reader had even accepted an offer to write a response to the cover story (by literary critic Terry Eagleton) in the *Commonweal* tradition of "continuing the conversation." I was a bit disappointed by the lack of fireworks. But while the more controversial articles published by the magazine sometimes made my job uncomfortable, the passionate objections of some readers were the best indicators that *Commonweal* remained true to its mission. As an independent lay-led enterprise, the magazine is at its best, I believe, when it's committed to dialogue and civil exchange rather than predictable polemics. At a time when

the Catholic Church and the larger culture are thought to be increasingly at odds, *Commonweal* helps build bridges between the two. Mutual isolation is not really an option. So, please keep those letters, phone calls, and e-mails of dissent, despair, and congratulations coming.

Chris Staysniak *is a graduate student in history at Boston College.*

Ellen B. Koneck

Approaching an institution long held in high esteem can be intimidating, and not just because it's suddenly in such close proximity. There's also the fear that it will prove something less than hoped for. It's like meeting a favorite artist or finally visiting a famous city: How will the experience compare to the expectations?

When I first arrived as editorial assistant at *Commonweal*, I was tongue-tied and, compared with my new colleagues, ignorant on just about every topic. I quickly decided it would be better to follow the old adage about staying quiet and seeming foolish rather than saying something to confirm it. I vowed to listen, and like a sponge, absorb anything I could.

Unfortunately, the folks at *Commonweal* are so friendly and eager to engage with others (keeping in mind that teasing is the highest compliment) that deference can't last long—the aura of Venerable Magazine is soon lost, replaced by intimacy. In fact, it was only my third day on the job when I began to see what *Commonweal* was really about. That was the day of the first (and perhaps the last!) "company picnic"—an afternoon of bocce and swimming and grilling at the beautiful home of a board member in bucolic Connecticut. Of course, I feared at first it might all be an elaborate hazing scheme. But I was wrong: it turned out to be lovely, with no nefarious purpose.

On our way to the outing, our editor surprised us with a visit to the grave of Michael Williams, *Commonweal*'s founder and first editor. Our caravan pulled into a cemetery and Paul Baumann pulled out a few bottles of champagne. We poured libations, toasted our founder, and lingered a bit before proceeding to the picnic. Drinking champagne at the grave of someone I'd never met but whose life was now affecting my own highlighted several things about *Commonweal*: its sometimes controversial history (Williams resigned over his support for General Franco), its catholicity (particularly revealed in combining celebration of the dead with early-morning drinking), and most important, its embodiment of the authentic experience of community, along with communion with one another and those from *Commonweal*'s past. Intimidated as I might have been, I felt I'd just witnessed something fundamental about the identity of the magazine I'd so long admired.

But, if I'm being honest, in finally encountering this

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Ellen B. Koneck

idealized object I was also shown its imperfections—such as the frustrating, day-to-day aspects of magazine work. For instance, I learned it was the editorial assistant's job to register each issue for copyright status—an awful (and awfully tedious) chore. I spent what felt like endless hours folding and stuffing envelopes. (Won't someone send us one big check so we can stop dunning you all!) And even though I didn't write or edit the stories we published, it often fell to me to pacify the readers who called to complain about them—even when I might not have liked some of those stories myself. *More Francis, less Obama; I can't stand that writer, why can't you get the other one; that editorial wasn't funny; you aren't Catholic/liberal/moderate/secular enough; your articles are too academic; your articles are too simplistic; you don't have enough female writers.* I heard it all.

But no complaint—or affirmation, for that matter—can finally define what *Commonweal* is, essentially. People get it wrong when they think just one aspect of the magazine (editorials? columnists? reviews? Commonweal Conversations?) captures the nature of the whole enterprise. One of the benefits of finally seeing it up close is learning how important all of these things are—including the people I came to know as colleagues, along with those who preceded them—and that there was really never any reason to feel intimidated in the first place.

Ellen Koneck *is a student at Yale Divinity School.*

Marianne L. Tierney

On the Tuesday following Memorial Day in 2007, I anxiously rode the subway up to 116th Street in Manhattan and then walked several more blocks to *Commonweal*'s office on Riverside Drive. Publisher Tom Baker had agreed to take me on as a summer intern despite my lack of journalistic experience. My internship turned into full-time employment as the summer came to an end. Thus my sentimental education at *Commonweal* began.

As a summer intern, I spent my days recording answers from reader surveys that had gone out a few weeks earlier and entering data about who *Commonweal* readers are and what they are most drawn to in the magazine. I spent some time climbing around in the overstuffed archive closet and being fascinated by old issues of the magazine dating back to the 1920s and '30s. I was given galleys to proof and sat in on editorial meetings. I even got to help write headlines for articles. The best part of being a summer intern, though, was getting a taste of what the *Commonweal* daily lunch table was like.

Every day at one o'clock, the entire *Commonweal* staff (eight to ten people, most days) would gather for lunch in the conference room overlooking Riverside Park and the Hudson River. The conversation would range from baseball and television shows, to theater, theology, and politics. Gossip about journalism, academia, and the church was also part of the mix. Guests were always welcome: I remember lunches with Peter Steinfels, Paul Lakeland, and Donna Freitas, among others. Exposure to this unusual community of journalists, intellectuals, and academics inspired me to become a theologian. I wanted to make a serious contribution to these conversations, and to become someone who could help bring the next generation of students into the *Commonweal* fold.

In a way, the magazine is an extension of those wide-ranging lunch-table conversations. *Commonweal* thinks that theologians, journalists, students, readers, and everyone in between should have an opportunity to voice their opinion about what is happening in the world and in the church. My experience at *Commonweal* taught me that, as a young woman, I can contribute and my voice can be heard.

Marianne L. Tierney *is a PhD student in theology at Boston College.*

Marianne L. Tierney

Kaitlin Campbell

Kaitlin Campbell

When people ask what I do for a living, I say, "I work for a magazine," and "Yes, they still exist!" and "We have a small staff, so everybody does a little bit of everything."

As *Commonweal*'s marketing coordinator, my tasks range from ordering red pencils to proofreading pages; from tweeting links to our website to combing archives for articles we'd like to republish online. I change our Facebook profile picture when the new issue comes out, and I alert the printer to the number of copies of each issue he needs to print. I coordinate our local reader communities across the country and—with the cooperation of a few willing millennials—have just helped launch a *Commonweal* discussion group in New York City (with beer and wine as inducements). Questions about the copy machine or "that book" or "those envelopes" also come to me, as do subscribers' difficulties with accessing the website or downloading the app.

The other day I was on Twitter to see who was talking about @commonwealmag. "Liberal Catholics still trotting out the old chestnuts," one tweet read. "For some people it's always 1968." This person was responding to a tweet that linked to a *Commonweal* article written in 1968 by moral theologian Fr. Bernard Häring. Häring had urged those whose informed consciences could not accept *Humanae Vitae* to speak out against it "as a service of love for the pope." The pope, Häring was sure, had also written the encyclical in a service of love. Häring was a very careful theologian, and it was obvious to me that the Twitter user had not even read the article.

I then got an email from the leader of our Milwaukee reader group. "Thank you for the link to the 1968 article," he wrote. "I am sure I read it at the time. I thought [*Humanae Vitae*] was a terrible decision, mainly because I thought the hierarchical church lost a lot of its credibility with the real church—'The People of God.'" I thanked him; I also agreed with him. I was grateful to learn that it wasn't just *young* people (I was born in 1989) who, in the words of Häring, "do not think it's an insult to the Holy Spirit if [one has] doubts about the rhythm method."

But I knew that. My great-grandmother raised eight kids. In 1934, she submitted an article about birth control that was rejected by *America*, the *Ecclesiastical Review*, and *Truth*. "You're a laywoman," one rejection letter said, "and frankly there isn't anything the laity can do about this." She should have submitted it to *Commonweal*, where the theologian Bernard Häring, thirty-four-years later, would say that the real issue about birth control was not "a misunderstanding of Christian marriage," but an "outmoded understanding of curial power."

When we began planning website coverage for *Commonweal*'s ninetieth-anniversary year, we decided not to focus on contraception or abortion. "People are sick of it, especially young people," I said. We made an exception for the Häring piece. As someone with no historical experience of Vatican II, and with only an incomplete education about what happened there (the priest turned around and everyone started praying in English for the first time, right?), I've found it fascinating to see how the arguments played out in real time. Even more surprising was learning that the church seemed more open to a range of opinions forty years ago than it has been, at least in my experience, during my formative years.

One of my friends works for a Catholic organization in Washington, D.C. He lobbies on behalf of immigrants, the working poor, and prison inmates. We studied theology


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ON NATURE

And the puzzles surrounding the cosmological constant,
spacetime imploded into existence. Ten to fifty years
between asbestos breathed and mesothelioma
discovered, a rare form of cancer in the lungs
or heart, or, if in the stomach, spreading
quickly to the liver or spleen. Uploaded
onto one of a half-a-billion or so blogs: "The human
imagination? A relatively paltry thing, a sub-product,
merely, of the neural activity of a species
of terrestrial primate"; and in another, that other
dimension, the Hudson River, black and still,
the day about to open at the Narrows' edge.
Light on a mountain ash bough, a fresh chill's
blue sensation felt in the eyes. One week buds, then
the temperature's up and the landscape turns yellow,
in a few days the wind scratches the blossoms,
in a few weeks the sun scorches the leaves…

I, too, see God adumbrations, I, too, write
a book on love. Who, here, appears, to touch the skin.
Hundreds of thousands of square miles of lost
Arctic sea ice, bits of bones on killing grounds,
electromagnetic air. Atrocious and bottomless
states of mind, natural as air...

—Lawrence Joseph

Lawrence Joseph's most recent books of poems are Into It *and* Codes, Precepts, Biases, and Taboos: Poems 1973–1993, *both published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux. He is Tinnelly Professor of Law at St. John's University School of Law, and lives in New York City.*

together at Fordham, and like most of my friends, we very much believe that Catholic social teaching is the indispensable core of Catholicism. We were taught that forming relationships with those on the margins of society and fighting against the systematic oppression of the poor is central to our faith. We hardly ever talked about abortion and contraception. Like the exclusion of women from the priesthood, those were topics we'd been conditioned to "give up on," topics about which everything that needed to be said had already been said. Our focus has been elsewhere. A good example of this was my friend's reaction to the editorial, "The Truth about Marriage," that ran in *Commonweal*'s August 2013 issue. "This editorial really pissed me off," he said. The tone was *too* diplomatic, too careful. "It didn't challenge anyone to think differently [about same-sex marriage] than the bishops." The magazine is too academic, he complained. There should be more stories grounded in human experience, particularly the experience of those struggling to get by, and fewer on obscure intellectual, theological, or political questions. I often think the same thing. When proofreading a forthcoming issue, I have upon occasion firmly gripped my red pencil and written "SO WHAT!" in the margins.

About once a month, I get a phone call from one of our readers in Detroit who gives me the "on the ground update" about who is taking the free copies of *Commonweal* I send him. He distributes them (as part of what he calls his "evangelizing mission" to "make people think") at two parishes: one poor, downtown; the other affluent, in a suburb (where he had to "strong-arm" the pastor into letting him leave a stack of ten by the bulletins). I asked him if he thought the magazine was "too academic." "Well sure," he said "*Commonweal* is for literary geniuses. You should tone it down a little bit" because, he continued, "Do you know what? The people from the poor parish—people who aren't so poor, but who struggle to get a stew on their table—they line up at the door when I bring the magazines, they're seeking out the commentary in your publication. And the people who are eating filet mignon turn a blind eye." I laugh.

Sure, what seems like the inconclusiveness of decades of debate often drives me crazy. But I also know that those exasperating intellectual and theological debates are an essential part of human experience. Whether I like it or not, this never-ending contestation of views is very much a part of my American Catholic heritage—and it matters.

Kaitlin Campbell *is* Commonweal*'s marketing coordinator.*

Christopher Cimorelli

My time at *Commonweal*, where I worked as the editorial assistant, was sandwiched between tours of duty in academic theology. I consider the time spent at *Commonweal* to be invaluable, and I believe the magazine to be more important with each passing year. *Commonweal* continues to navigate the volatile intersection of religion, politics, and culture, giving voice to Catholics who are seeking to understand their faith in a challenging secular environment. Today, faithful adherence to Catholicism risks being subsumed under partisan politics. The very colorful world of faith is too often portrayed in black and white, by those both inside and outside the church. In the face of an often hostile Western context, the church is tempted to fall back into a narrow defensive posture. *Commonweal* takes the secular antagonism toward Catholicism seriously, but has resisted any sectarian reaction or retreat from that engagement. The magazine has been able to do that because it stands within the Catholic tradition, while knowing that the tradition must continue to develop.

As I am writing this I am surrounded by the works of John Henry Newman, the subject of my academic research. Perhaps it is not surprising that I went on to study this seminal modern figure after working for *Commonweal*.

Christopher Cimorelli

Newman believed that the church must engage the world boldly, despite the risks of such an encounter.

All of the above, if I may borrow from Newman, is still a somewhat "notional" view of the magazine because it does not account for its "real" constitutive elements: the editorial and administrative staff, the contributors, the subscribers, the many readers, and the visitors to the website. As the editorial assistant, I had the pleasure of interacting with all these members of the *Commonweal* community. And while I relish the articles and essays in the magazine, I find myself thinking just as fondly of such things as the staff lunches—table fellowship featuring equal measures of challenging dialogue and hilarity—and my phone conversations with subscribers. The website, blog, and digital subscriptions have opened a new frontier for the magazine, one with as many opportunities as challenges. But the real success of *Commonweal* will always depend on the quality of its people, an asset I have been lucky enough to experience firsthand.

Christopher Cimorelli *is completing his PhD in theology at the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium.*

Joanna Gardner

There's a link on the desktop on my computer gathering cyber dust. It's been there for two years, a long time in the world of internet information. But I haven't deleted it. Each time I look at it, I'm reminded a little of the rush I felt when I first encountered the article it links to on the *Commonweal* website. I was a junior in college and fascinated by the religious-liberty debate sparked by the contraception mandate in Obamacare, and especially by the U.S. bishops' objections to the mandate as put forth in their statement "Our First Most Cherished Liberty."

For me in that particular year of college the question of religious liberty was a momentous one. It seemed that the stakes—the relationship between church and state in the unique cultural and political landscape of the United States—were very high. What did this battle mean for my identity as a Catholic but also as a citizen? To be honest, I couldn't find a platform that fully engaged both sides of the debate.

Then I stumbled on *Commonweal*. The magazine had published a lengthy symposium on the issue ("The Bishops & Religious Liberty," June 15, 2012), presenting expert voices from a variety of perspectives. I learned later that *Commonweal* often compiles this sort of an exchange of views on the most pressing questions facing the nation and the church.

It's hard to express the relief I felt. I had thought that only hot-headed, partisan debate on the question existed. I was under the impression that in order to hear both sides of the issue I had to jump between liberal and conservative, religious and secular outlets to get anything close to a full treatment of the question. *Commonweal* was different. It evidently believed in presenting all sides—or at least most sides.

Last summer I spent seven glorious weeks interning at *Commonweal*. My principal project was to help organize local discussion groups, Commonweal Readers Communities. The idea was to bring small groups of readers together to discuss articles in the magazine but also other questions that mattered to them. A year later some of you have participated in these groups, and all of you are welcome to start your own! All you need is a subscription to *Commonweal* to get things started. (Check out www.commonwealmagazine.org/local.)

I found out in contacting readers all over the country that a real passion for this kind of discussion exists. In fact, many readers were eager to host such conversations. The beauty of *Commonweal* is that the magazine and its readers are more concerned with exploring new insights and considerations than giving or receiving ready-made answers. ■

Joanna Gardner *is a 2013 graduate of the Catholic University of America.*

Joanna Gardner

Richard Alleva

Manhattan Story

'LOVE IS STRANGE'

Sometimes a work of fiction can bear witness to a profound social transformation by taking it for granted. Such is the case with *Love Is Strange*, directed by Ira Sachs and written by Sachs and Mauricio Zacharias.

George (Alfred Molina), a music teacher at a Catholic high school in New York City, has been the lover and companion of Ben (John Lithgow), a painter, for thirty-nine years. The school's principal and staff have long known of this and tacitly accepted it. But when the two get married in an unsplashy but nevertheless public ceremony announced on Facebook, the archbishop compels the principal to fire George for publicly defying church doctrine. The couple's reduced income (Ben is living on his pension) forces them to sell their Manhattan apartment. While George hunts for new quarters and stays with a couple of young gay cops, Ben boards with his nephew in Brooklyn.

What's quietly revelatory about *Love Is Strange* is that its creators didn't feel the need to turn it into a social-protest document. Instead, the script takes for granted the viewer's approval of a loving gay relationship and its right to marital benediction. After the first few scenes establish the story's premise, the plot expands to raise themes that concern us

SONY PICTURES CLASSICS

all, regardless of sexual orientation. This is a surprisingly multifarious movie.

You might assume that Ben, being a painter, would find a kindred spirit in the novelist with whom he is lodging—his nephew's wife, Kate (Marisa Tomei). But the loquacious Ben is, at seventy-one, well into his anecdotage, and his blather is driving the otherwise good-natured Kate crazy, especially when his grousing about the solitude he needs in order to create keeps her from typing a single sentence. Lithgow and Tomei are marvelously funny in their negative chemistry—he with his self-satisfied geniality and she with a smile tightening into a snarl.

But George's situation is much worse. A refined and retiring man alert to the subtleties of a Chopin nocturne, he now finds himself living with guys who party all night and listen to head-banging, conversation-crushing rock. When a sympathetic party crasher asks the obviously suffering George (Molina's battered stoicism is both pathetic and hilarious) why he doesn't simply retreat to his bedroom, George nods toward the couch the man is sitting on: "That's my bed."

There is also the comedy of generational divide. While George would rather listen to his Schubert and Schumann, his young apartment-mates urge him to join them in DVD binges and board games. Dozens of their pals, gay and straight, drop in for the fun. The movie is quite shrewd about the fact that younger generations are gratifyingly relaxed about sexual orientation, but it's also perceptive as to how group hilarity can smother solitary pleasures.

Ben's generational problems are at first similarly comic, but they give way to more poignant conflicts. He now sleeps in a bunk bed below his fifteen-year-old nephew Joey (sensitively played by Charlie Tahan), who is a lot less shy than his parents about displaying resentment. And young Joey does have some cause for resentment: it's embarrassing to bring a pal to your room for homework or a bull session and discover your elderly great-uncle snoring through his afternoon nap. But we also see how oldsters and youngsters can sometimes communicate better with each other than either can with the middle generation. When Joey mocks Ben's use of one of his schoolmates as a model—"That's so gay!"—his parents reprimand him for what they take to be a homophobic insult, but Ben grasps the new meaning the young have attached to the word: nothing to do with sex, roughly synonymous with "weird" or "stupid."

Still, those modeling sessions with an attractive boy also evoke another of *Love*'s themes: the comedy of idealism mugged by reality. Though Ben displays no desire for his teenage model, Kate can't help questioning what she calls the "appropriateness" of an adult gay man painting an adolescent boy (never mind Michelangelo, Leonardo, Rembrandt). Joey's father is worried that Joey is spending too much time with his friend, and the worry doesn't seem to be about possible drug use or some other delinquency. Viewers can infer that he doesn't want his son to turn out like his uncle, despite his liberal opinions about sexuality. This is not a matter of simple hypocrisy on the part of Joey's parents; it's about complicated, deep-seated, and largely unconscious fears that can't be easily set aside, however much the couple may want to be on the side of progress.

With happy irony, it turns out to be Ben rather than one of the hovering parents who sets the sexually uncertain Joey firmly on the path to discovering his true sexual nature. That he turns out to be a likely heterosexual compounds the irony. Yes, love is strange.

The chief strangeness and central irony of this excellent tragi-comedy is that the public affirmation of devotion that the old lovers display by getting married becomes the very thing that divides them during what should be the poignantly happy twilight of their relationship. The closing scenes of this movie, especially the unforgettable shot of Ben descending into a subway station after kissing George goodnight, lay a lingering melancholy on the viewer, a melancholy that somehow glows. ■

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Thomas Baker

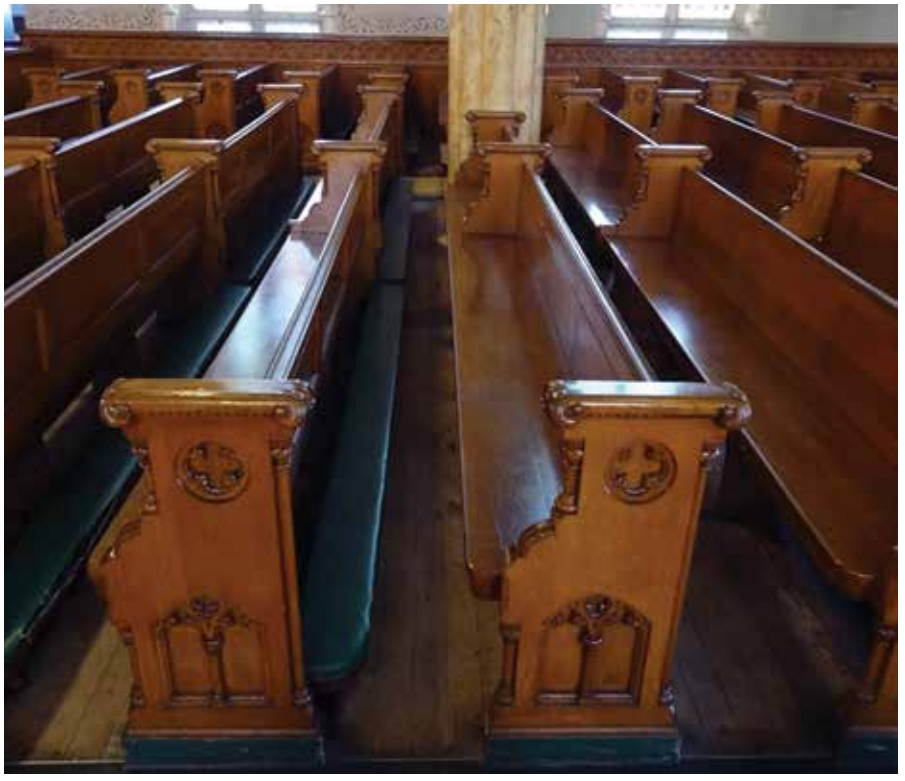
Kids Today

Young Catholic America
Emerging Adults In, Out of, and Gone from the Church
Christian Smith, Kyle Longest, Jonathan Hill, and Karl Christofferson
Oxford University Press, 326 pages, $29.95

Here's the bad news for *Commonweal* readers, and we may as well get right to it: Just over half the young people raised by parents who describe themselves as "liberal" Catholics stop going to Mass *entirely* once they become "emerging adults"—a new demographic category that means either prolonged adolescence or delayed adulthood, defined here in *Young Catholic America* as ages eighteen to twenty three.

But now, let's put that sad trend in perspective: The picture isn't all that much better for the children of "traditional" Catholics. Although only a quarter of *those* young adults say they've stopped going to Mass entirely, only 17 percent say they're going every week, and in general, their allegiance to church membership and participation seems nearly as faded as the kids of so-called feckless liberals.

The fact is: In this discouraging book, the future looks bad for just about every flavor of Catholic. For those who remember *Commonweal*'s series on "Raising Catholic Kids" last November, the worry expressed by those dedicated, well-meaning parents seems here to be fully justified. You may hear about pockets of enthusiastically "orthodox" young adults out there somewhere, but as my old mentor in the market-research business used to say, the plural of the word "anecdote" is not "data." Smith (a sociologist at the University of Notre Dame) and his co-authors have the data, and it tells us that the majority of Catholic "emergers" are, by our historical standards, not what we are used to thinking of as practicing Catholics at all.



Young Catholic America analyzes three waves of results from the National Study on Youth and Religion, collected from 2002 through 2008. Since many of the same young people were surveyed across this time period, the authors can compare earlier thirteen-to-seventeen-year-old respondents with those same young people five years later. Now that they're eighteen to twenty three, their current status as Catholics might discourage even the most ardent evangelist. Only 7 percent of these young adults who *might* have turned out Catholic can be called "practicing" Catholics—if "practicing" is tightly defined as attending Mass weekly, saying that faith is extremely or very important, and praying at least a few times a week. About 27 percent are at the other end of the spectrum, classified as "disengaged," meaning that they never attend Mass and feel religion is unimportant. In between these two poles is a complex landscape of the marginally attached—perhaps willing to identify themselves as Catholic, attending Mass sporadically at best, and in general living life with their Catholic identity as a more dormant, if not entirely irrelevant, force.

Perhaps the most depressing chapter is one where we hear not numbers like these, but the actual words of some of these younger should-be Catholics, a small sample of whom the authors interviewed in 2008. Most were "out," considering themselves estranged from the church or no longer Catholic, and

only twelve met an expansive definition of "active." For everyone, active and not, "church" seems associated primarily with morals and obligatory Mass attendance rather than anything that sounds like Jesus and the Gospel. More disturbingly, their vague priorities of "being a better person" don't seem likely to generate much of a desire for deeper answers to life's questions, at least in the short run. "It's just easier not to follow a religion, is what it comes down to," says a typical young adult—and even though I feel that way some of the time myself, it's hard not to agree with the authors' sense that this is a generation largely lost to what we oldsters think of as Catholic identity.

So, what brought us to this point? *Young Catholic America* reminds us that bad as these statistics may look, in fact they are not new: Mass attendance and other measures of involvement and allegiance among young adults have been at low levels since the 1960s. To the authors, the genesis of the decline is clear: "After [Vatican II] ended, the church in the United States did a less than ideal job of instructing the faithful in the pews about its teachings and their implications.... It does not appear that such unified, lucid, authoritative instruction and direction was provided." This, of course, is a familiar trope from conservative analysts of the church's plight, naïvely assuming that our crisis of membership and allegiance is primarily a failure of ardor in education and explanation.

It seems to be an appealing idea to some that our bishops could have prevented the collapse of Catholic culture in the 1960s if only they had preached doctrine and Catholic obligations more heroically. However, from my years in business, I can tell you there are few sadder phenomena than a company that thinks its failed product would surely have been successful if only customers could have had its greatness fully explained to them. The theory that vigorous teaching could have saved Catholic culture understates the magnitude of what has happened to church authority and credibility. It also casts a rosy nostalgic glow around the preconciliar church, remembering it as an era of higher Mass attendance (definitely true) and religious literacy (more doubtful, in my mind, although it certainly was a golden age for Catholic facts and lists).

But never mind the post hoc theorizing—what do these young people themselves report about the reasons for their weakened ties to Catholicism? There is little evidence from the authors' interviews that the issues so neuralgic for many *Commonweal* readers—the male hierarchy, bad preaching, sexual abuse, the church's position on gay Catholics and marriage, the alliance of so many bishops with Republican political agendas—are at the top of their list of problems. (Other studies, such as those cited by Robert Putnam and David Campbell in *American Grace*, do suggest a recent trend of young people abandoning religion because of its closer alignment with conservative politics.) Instead, the most obvious factor identified in both the interviews and the survey data in *Young Catholic America* seems to be disaffection from Catholic sexual teaching, dramatically so with respect to both premarital sex and birth control.

It should be no surprise to observant parents that 61 percent of even the "practicing" category of unmarried emerging adult Catholics report that they have had premarital sex, with 60 percent of those having had sex within the past month—only slightly lower than the percentages reported by much more marginal Catholics. In interviews, even churchgoing young Catholics acknowledge they have major differences with the church's "unrealistic" teaching in this area. (Surely it's also one of the reasons younger Catholics are less likely than ever to present themselves at a parish for Catholic marriage.) It's an impasse of a magnitude that all the New Evangelization and Theology of the Body workshops in the world seem unlikely to resolve anytime soon.

Does anything "work" in the face of all this data suggesting that nothing does? The authors point out that marriages where both partners are Catholic are more likely to produce children who stay at least marginally Catholic; that fathers' active involvement in religion is particularly helpful; and that Catholic schools do make it slightly less likely that a graduate will completely abandon practice in later life. Yet even these factors seem

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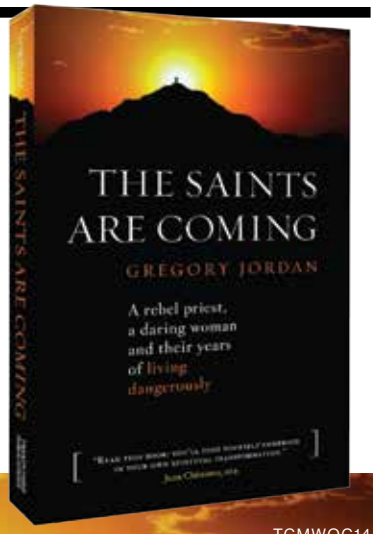

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to operate on the margins in terms of statistically proven effectiveness. As a parent, you'll finish this book feeling as if, even if you do everything right, the odds are way less than 50-50 that you'll see your children turn out as Catholic as you are.

This is a difficult book—not simply because of the sense of helplessness it may generate, but because it is densely packed with analysis that may discourage readers unfamiliar with complex research and social-science data. It requires keeping track of multiple classification schemes the authors have developed to define Catholic involvement and adherence, and also deciphering pages of bar graphs where the different shades of muddy gray are almost impossible to distinguish. Yet despite the obstacles, all those concerned with youth evangelization, campus ministry, or the overall demographic future of the church will need to engage this book and its data, even if they don't agree with the authors' diagnosis of the underlying causes.

Where do we go from here? That re-do, or un-do, of the 1960s that many seem to be hoping for seems unlikely, and a strategy predicated on reviving the Catholic culture of another era will, at best, attract a passionate minority. Whatever happens, we'll need to change the way we talk about the boundaries of our Catholic enclave, because the majority of our young adults have placed themselves outside it, and don't show many signs of coming back voluntarily.

Perhaps the only hope is Pope Francis's recent emphasis on making the "kerygma" of the faith a far higher priority than doctrinal and moral pronouncements. Even half of some of the most disaffected Catholic young people in this book's survey data claim they believe that Jesus was the Son of God, raised from the dead. It's a start, at least. And when you're done reading *Young Catholic America*, you may find yourself thinking it's the only message they might be able to hear. ■

Thomas Baker *is* Commonweal*'s publisher.*

Leo J. O'Donovan

Closed for Repair?

Icons of Hope

The 'Last Things' in Catholic Imagination

John E. Thiel

University of Notre Dame Press, $35, 256 pp.

At the end of "Experiences of a Catholic Theologian," Karl Rahner's last public lecture, delivered not long before his death, he suggested that contemporary theology needs to find a way to speak more meaningfully of eternal life. "But how, but how?" he added, in a markedly plaintive tone.

In *Icons of Hope: The 'Last Things' in Catholic Imagination*, the distinguished American theologian John E. Thiel has brought his impressive scholarship and theological sensitivity to bear on the question. Thiel, a professor of religious studies at Fairfield University, is known for his fine work on tradition and on the problem of innocent suffering, and for his steady service as a leader of the Catholic Theological Society of America (he was its president from 2011 to 2012). His theological writing has always combined poise and a sense of urgency, and this intricately argued treatise on eternal life is no exception.

Dante and Beatrice in Paradise *by Phillip Veit, circa 1822*

Thiel begins by distinguishing between fundamentalist and modern critical approaches to eschatology. The latter, he argues, suffer from an "imaginative reductionism" traceable to the Kantian critique of claims about imperceptible realities. Thiel agrees with Rahner that eschatological hope arises from our present experience of grace, but he thinks both Rahner and Karl Barth were too modest in their speculation about the "last things." Their awareness of God's mystery, and perhaps a fear of idolatry, inhibited their theological imagination. Thiel's project is to retrieve "a premodern style of theological interpretation" that will allow a "thicker" understanding of eschatology.

As he tries to imagine the life of the blessed dead, Thiel first contrasts Thomas Aquinas's understanding of heaven—where the Beatific Vision, a kind of passive contemplation, fulfills all desire—with Jonathan Edwards's view that the life of the saints will also involve an active, loving relationship in community. Thiel himself proposes "forgiveness as an ongoing moral endeavor of the blessed dead." Active discipleship will continue in heaven, as the saints, in imitation of their risen Lord, contribute to the work of reconciliation, thereby becoming ever more truly who they are. "We may hope," he writes, "to be busy in heavenly life at the work of redemption, whose gift we have received."

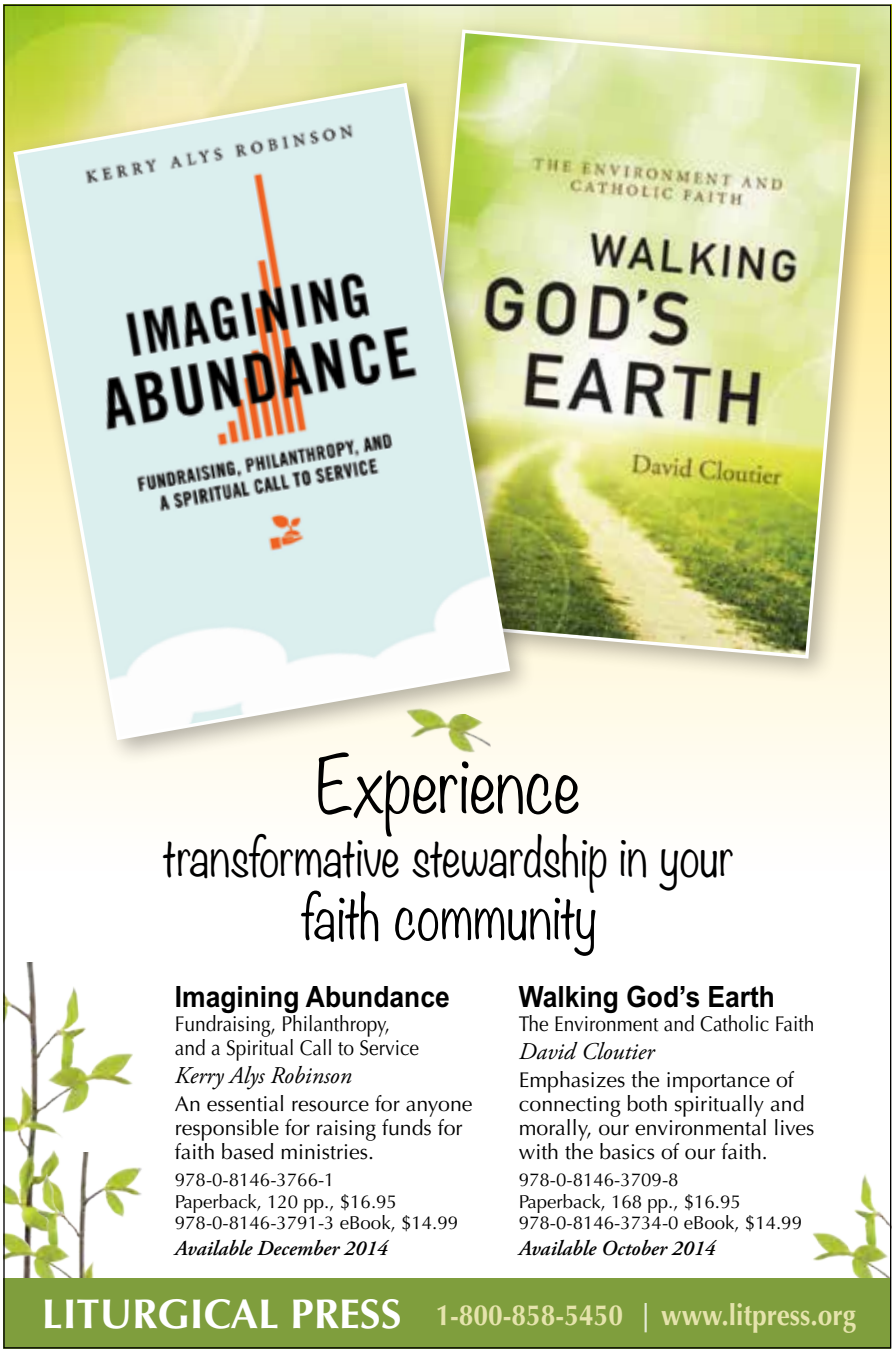
In a long chapter on the doctrine of purgatory, Thiel examines its relatively late development in the twelve century, its prominence in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and its prevalence until Vatican II—after which, as Avery Dulles, SJ, once remarked, the doctrine was closed for repairs. The French historian

Jacques Le Goff argued that medieval interest in the "third place" was shaped largely by social and historical conditions. In Thiel's reading, ideas about Purgatory were largely dependent on a deed-oriented "Matthean spirituality," as contrasted with a Pauline spirituality of grace as utter gift—a distinction he tends to overdraw. Haunted first by the incomparable example of the early martyrs and then by the ascetic witness of great saints such as Antony of Egypt and Francis of Assisi, medieval Christians accepted "a hierarchy of discipleship," and were burdened by uncertainty about their own worthiness. The suffering of Purgatory offered a way to bridge the worrying gap between the flaws of the ordinary believer and the heroic sanctity of canonized saints. Faith became a competition, a kind of race. Saints were the winners. The damned never crossed the finish line. Everyone else got honorable mention, and could, after an interval of further training, be received into the company of the victorious.

How might a "noncompetitive" faith, one based more on a Pauline sense of the utter gratuity of grace, recast traditional belief in the Last Judgment and the communal reality of salvation? In answer to this question, Thiel proposes a contemporary appreciation of the Last Judgment. For Luther it was "the anticlimactic manifestation of God's predestinating will." By restoring a sense of existential suspense to the drama of salvation, Thiel conceives of the Last Judgment as climactic, not anticlimactic. And he makes a clear distinction between God's final and all-encompassing judgment—not just on individual lives but on humanity as a whole—and God's entirely gratuitous gift of eternal life. There is suspense because we do not yet know how each of us and all of us together will be judged, but also because we do not yet know if God's grace and mercy will finally lead to universal salvation—although we may hope for that, à la Rahner, von Balthasar, and Moltmann.

Pursuing this distinction between God's judgment and God's grace, Thiel turns finally to the traditional doctrine of the communion of saints. Here, in dialogue with Jacques Derrida and John Milbank, and drawing as well on the Council of Trent's doctrine of grace, Thiel deepens his theme of forgiveness and argues that genuine forgiveness requires a reciprocity between the one forgiving and the one forgiven and, thus, a true restoration of community. In this way, the communion of saints cooperates with God's redemption by extending its reconciling effects through all eternity—and with the increasing joy that comes from its practice. By overcoming the remaining traces of alienation from their earthly life, the saints constitute more truly their "communion," or shared life in the Spirit.

Avowedly speculative, Thiel's study may be as valuable for the questions it raises as for the answers it proposes. Its relatively brief defense of purgatorial



and heavenly time, which is in basic agreement with a 1992 text of the International Theological Commission, begs for development. Thiel's book highlights the need for a contemporary theology of time. Do heaven, hell, and purgatory exist outside of time, or is there more than one kind of time—historical time, which will end at the Last Judgment, and what we might call eschatological time? If time itself will end, how can a genuinely successive duration be predicated of purgatory and heaven?

Thiel's book also raises questions about the role of the imagination in theology, and especially in eschatology. His emphasis throughout is on "imagining" the last things. But he ends up proposing ways to "think" or "speak" about these things as often as he proposes ways to imagine them. To say that the saints in heaven continue Christ's work of reconciliation is not yet to imagine how that happens. Of course, if it is not impossible to imagine heaven or purgatory, it is at least hard. Most of our language about the afterlife, like our language about God himself, is either figurative or analogical. More engagement with art might have helped here. While the book is enriched by handsome plates of late medieval and Renaissance art analyzed in the text, a contemporary eschatology would be all the more persuasive if it considered more recent art, such as the religious paintings of Stanley Spencer, Olivier Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time*, or the films of Carl Theodor Dreyer (*Ordet*) or Terrence Malick (*The Tree of Life*). The famous last sequence in Malick's film "imagines" an apparently reconstituted community on the shore of a sea—but without any detectable narrative. The scene shows us reunion. Does it imply reconciliation?

In the end, though, one can only be grateful to Thiel for a book that stirs us from our dogmatic slumbers about the world to come, a book that tries to put some flesh on the bones of our hope. ■

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William H. Pritchard

Direct Impressions

The Arsonist

Sue Miller
Knopf, $25.95, 304 pp.

Sue Miller's acclaimed first novel, *The Good Mother*, was published in 1982; now, almost thirty years later, *The Arsonist* reminds us, if we needed reminding, of her remarkable achievement in fiction. Her work is so quietly accomplished as to be overlooked in the glare of more strident claims made for Joyce Carol Oates or Toni Morrison. It may also be the case that Miller has been typed as predominantly appealing to a female audience; if such pigeon-holing has taken place, it is a mistake, since the quality of her novels transcends any possible gender bias. Her engagement with life is large enough to free her from such a constraint.

In her more recent novels, beginning with *The World Below* (2001) and continuing through *Lost in the Forest* (2006), *The Senator's Wife* (2008), and *The Lake Shore Limited* (2010), Miller has demonstrated a steady growth of her abilities and her venturesomeness as an American realist—to make use of a possibly outmoded generic classification. But realist she is, in the line inaugurated by the early Henry James, continued by Theodore Dreiser and Willa Cather and more recent practitioners, among them Bobbie Ann Mason, Richard Ford, Anne Tyler, and Gail Godwin. One is not primarily drawn to these writers by the presence of a formidable style that calls attention to itself. Like them, Miller's style is always subordinate to, and in the service of, the life that James invoked so memorably in his great essay, "The Art of Fiction": "a personal, a direct impression of life whose only obligation is that it be interesting."

The life that informs Sue Miller's fiction is mundane, domestic, family oriented, full of disruptions and dislocations, conflicted and intense. Its erotic component, a significant one, is heterosexual, usually though not always experienced through the person of a woman. It is most powerfully and disturbingly present in *Lost in the Forest*, in which a young adolescent girl falls into the exploitative hands of an older, married man. The *Lolita* echoes are unmistakable, but Miller doesn't play any of it for comedy or antic narrative games.

In *The Arsonist* the principal vehicle for erotic feeling is Frankie Rowley, a woman in her thirties, returned from Africa where she has been doing aid work for some years. Her return is to a small New Hampshire town, Pomeroy, where her parents have recently moved to their summer house, now a year-round one since both husband and wife have retired from academic pursuits. Sylvia, Frankie's mother, is a smart, ironic figure whose equilibrium is shattered as her husband, Alfie, becomes increasingly a victim of Alzheimer's. (Miller's memoir, *The Story of My Father*, vividly lays out some of the disease's lineaments.) This family disruption coincides with an outbreak of unexplained fires, usually of unoccupied summer houses, which disrupts the community. Parallel to these events is Frankie's developing attachment to Bud Jacobs, editor of the local newspaper and occupied at the moment with writing up the mounting instances of what is clearly arson. He has been twice married and divorced; she has had many affairs in Africa and is wary of becoming too deeply involved. Nevertheless it happens.

At the risk of overlooking someone, my sense is that at present there are few serious American woman novelists who are at ease, indeed have an inclination toward writing about heterosexual love. On consulting more than one reader of contemporary fiction and asking about

who they think of as a portrayer of such love, the name Erica Jong often surfaces, which suggests how far away the author of *Fear of Flying*—iconic in the 1970s—is from today's fictional scene. Aside from the previously mentioned *Lost in the Forest*, where a twisted relationship is centrally treated, one doesn't come up with any memorable erotic encounters in Miller's books; rather, they are taken for granted as a fact of life, not to be given central billing as in John Updike or Philip Roth. An example: Frankie and Bud spend some time lying in a field looking up at the Northern lights and tentatively exploring each other physically. The words for their encounter are nothing out of the ordinary: "He rolled against her; he kissed her. For a moment her whole body moved, rejoiced, in response to the length of him, the size of him against her. Her mouth answered the warmth of his." A little later, still before they have slept together, Bud is having coffee and toasting a piece of bread. He thinks about Frankie and sex: "He'd thought about it, her, numerous times in ways that were at once all too generic—legs opening, et cetera—and very specific." He recalls that she had seemed hesitant "in a way that seemed to him to spring from all that was unclear and unresolved and troubling to her in her life—and that seemed to be just about everything." A solemn reflection, followed by this:

> On the other hand they were both freezing their asses off at that point. The toast popped up noisily. Sometimes it flung itself out so enthusiastically that it landed on the counter, and he always felt cheered when that happened. Not today. "Wuss," he said to this slice, nicely browned.

D. H. Lawrence once praised the novel for showing "the full play of all things." In Miller's sentences above, to follow a lyric reflection about sex with "freezing their asses off" and a piece of toast that fails to misbehave ("Wuss") is a Lawrentian moment turned toward comedy, a small version of the full play of all things.

This tonal and moral complication of feelings—always mixed feelings in a

Sue Miller

Miller novel—is backed up by an ever-present solidity of specification. After Frankie moves temporarily into her sister's newly built house, she goes outside to cut some meadow flowers; "Purplish joe-pye weed, blue cornflowers, the flat delicate fretwork of Queen Anne's lace." Returning to the house with a sense of belonging and a large bouquet, "she ran some tap water into one of Liz's clear-glass Mason jars and arranged the flowers in it. She set the jar and its drooping bouquet on the trunk by the chairs." She goes into the bedroom for a book picked up from her parents' shelves, James's *Portrait of a Lady*, settles herself in a chair and begins to read:

> She heard the refrigerator grumble back on, she heard the sawing of the crickets in the heat outside. Slowly she lost herself in the words about another kind of countryside—tamed, green, shadowy. About another kind of expatriate.

This seems to me perfect in its unfussy selection of details, as well as delicate in the way James's heroine and the opening of *Portrait* is alluded to.

As a nice contrast to this moment of order, there is the inside of a trailer, where Tink Snell, arrested as the probable arsonist, has been living:

> Dark rucked-up carpeting covered the floor. Clothing was strewn around on it, and a couple of girlie magazines. Along the wall facing him, a smudgy picture window looked south to the Presidential Range. Under that was a banquette and a built-in table with a Formica surface. There was a small television set on the table opposite this.

A reader, carried along by matters of plot and character, is not likely to register all these details, but when you take the unobtrusive sentences more slowly they feel quite unmistakably right.

In an appreciative essay on William Dean Howells's novels, John Updike listed three of the novelist's characteristic qualities, one of which was a tendency of his stories "to defuse themselves, to avert or mute their own crises." For Updike this was an important part of Howells's realism, the attempt to render life as it goes on, not often presenting the dramatic or melodramatic resolutions and endings that novels—often less than good ones—feature.

I'm certain there is nothing like a conscious debt to Howells's example in Miller's books, but her own way of defusing or averting or muting their crises should be noted. In *The Arsonist* the two main plot lines, often converging, are first, the identity of the firebug, and second, the romantic relationship between Frankie and Bud. One possible

KNOPF

way to end the arsonist plot would be to have some member of the community identified as the culprit. In Miller's book there is a culprit, but some doubt is cast on his guilt, certainly in Bud's eyes, by the way his confession was elicited. We find ourselves suddenly being asked not to care very much about just who was responsible. As for the love plot, Frankie has to decide between taking a new job in New York City or settling down, in one manner or another, with the newspaper editor. On the verge of a scheduled interview in New York, she changes her mind, gets off the train, and heads home. Then she disappears from the book briefly, while in a capsule account of the next few months Bud decides the affair is over and anyway their passionate love was bound to fall off. If we've been waiting to give a cheer at their reunion, we're invited to regard it as likely to be something other than a happy-ever-after one.

An often-quoted sentence from Henry James's memorial essay on Anthony Trollope marks Trollope's singular virtue as "a complete appreciation of the usual." What follows the claim is not so well remembered, as James tells us that such a gift is "not rare in the annals of English fiction" since it would "naturally be found in a work of literature in which the feminine mind has labored so fruitfully." He continues in a manner that might upset equal-opportunity students of the sexes: "Women are delicate and patient observers, they hold their noses close, as it were, to the texture of life. They feel and perceive the real with a kind of personal tact, and their observations are recorded in a thousand delightful volumes." Yet surely James himself was deeply committed to being a delicate and patient observer, holding his nose (or whatever) close to the texture of life, and recording his observations thereof. Sue Miller's novels seem to me an outstanding example of the way such a realist disposition is observable in American writing today. ■

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Paul Horwitz

Unoriginal

Scalia
A Court of One
Bruce Allen Murphy
Simon & Schuster, $35, 656 pp.

One of the most famous stock characters in Italian *commedia dell'arte* is Pulcinella—the "Punch" in "Punch and Judy." Pulcinella is self-centered, cruel, a picker of fights. He's the villain you love to hate. Every show needs one. Which brings us to Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia.

Like Pulcinella, Scalia is, for many liberals, a villain fit for the stage of his beloved operas: cunning and mean, larger than life, and almost always wrong. He has his champions too, of course. For them, Scalia's ideas, his coruscating opinions on and off the bench, and his joie de vivre have become iconic.

Commenting on her recent, widely read *New York* magazine interview with Scalia, Jennifer Senior captured those polarized views in describing why "the left and the right both responded so enthusiastically to this piece. Each side sees its own views affirmed. One sees a monster and the other sees a hero."

These lines are quoted near the end of Bruce Allen Murphy's new biography, *Scalia: A Court of One*. Had the book opened with them, it could have been much better. The book feels exhaustive, although "exhausting" is more accurate. It makes two or three good points that should not be forgotten in the face of the stringent criticisms the book has received on the right. But those aren't original points, and the conservative reviewers are mostly right about this book. In the end, it offers us a better view of Scalia's press clips than of Scalia himself.

The book's useful observations are summarized in its subtitle. Scalia has been a singular force on the Court. His views on statutory and constitutional interpretation have changed the terms of debate on and around the Court. Because of Scalia, statutory interpretation is more text-driven. Originalism—once a search for the "original intent" of the Constitution's drafters, now mostly Scalia's preferred method of looking to the "original public understanding" of the Constitution's text at the time it was ratified—is, if not the dominant method of constitutional interpretation, at least the one against which others are measured. Former Justice John Paul Stevens's lengthy dissent to Scalia's opinion in *Heller*, the case holding that the Second Amendment confers an individual right to bear arms for, among other things, self-defense purposes, was an *originalist* dissent. Scalia's methods

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Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia

and their consistency, his politics, and his views on individual cases can be disputed. His influence cannot.

Murphy's subtitle also captures the "lion in winter" air around Scalia these days. Our public values and leading political issues, as well as the main currents of thought both on the Supreme Court and in the Catholic Church: all have changed since Scalia's appointment. Younger legal conservatives, including his colleagues, treat him as a forebear, not a leader. Warm in person but cutting on the page, Scalia cannot build majorities. One senses in him a greater degree of embitterment—at changing times as much as disappointing rulings—and more willingness to expostulate on matters of politics and policy, not law. The heated remarks he offered from the bench a couple of years ago when dissenting from a decision striking down much of an Arizona immigration enforcement statute, are an embarrassing example. So: "a court of one."

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Two good but not novel points hardly make a good book, however—especially one this long. The book is largely a clip job, drawn heavily from other publicly available sources (including Joan Biskupic's superior *American Original: The Life and Constitution of Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia*, published in 2010). Repeated passages reprint long excerpts from the oral argument in a case, a summary of the published opinions, and reams of harsh responses from various online commentators with preformed views. Not much that's useful here is new.

What's new, alas, is not useful. Murphy is full of opinions and speculations. The opinions are conventional, the speculations tendentious. They're easy to spot, at least: you know you've reached the end of the record and the beginning of fanciful speculation when the footnotes suddenly vanish. There are countless examples of overconfident speculations that quickly become treated as fact, and of downright questionable conclusions.

Liberal Catholics and others may take interest in Murphy's chapter on the Court's Catholic majority. With neither wit nor accuracy, he titles it "Opus SCOTUS." ("SCOTUS" is a standard abbreviation for the Court.) Those readers might even find some sympathetic aspects of Scalia's statements on the "Catholic question," such as his exploration of the differences between being a Catholic judge and "Catholic judging." But for Murphy, every Scalia speech has an ulterior motive, one that only Murphy—plus dozens of online critics—is sharp enough to discern. Everyone knows there are grounds for criticism of Scalia's views on this and other issues. But all those readers will get here is a bibliography, not insight.

Murphy's prose deserves special mention. Workmanlike at best, the writing is often clunky and tedious, straining to achieve eloquence and landing instead on pomposity. Brevity is the soul of wit, it is said. This book is 650 pages long and feels longer. It is a book you will not be able to put down often enough.

It's not surprising that Murphy's book has received rough treatment at the hands of conservatives. It is a little surprising that, although a few liberal reviewers have spotted this book's flaws, many have given the book more tender treatment than it deserves. But it's not *wholly* surprising, alas. That's the point of Jennifer Senior's quote. Whether *Scalia: A Court of One* is good or bad, fair or not, has been largely irrelevant. What matters is the occasion the book provides for liberals to come together in gleeful disdain for their stock villain, or for conservatives to gather in joyful defense of their hero. They've relived the Scalia controversy rather than reviewing the book. An experienced judicial biographer, Murphy has chosen well and labored hard—but in vain. ■

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Raymond A. Schroth

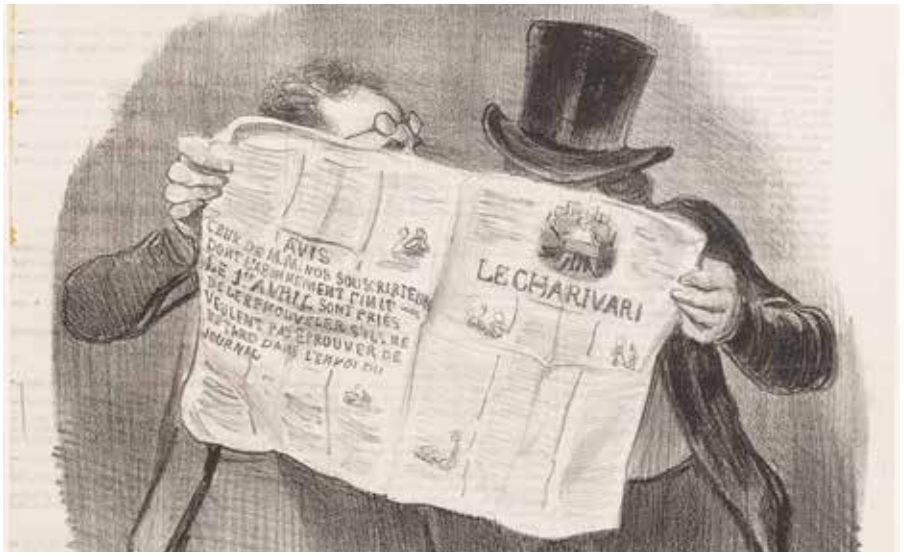
Fit to Print?

The News
A User's Manual
Alain de Botton
Pantheon, $26.95, 243 pp.

In the introduction to his 1946 autobiography, *Not So Wild a Dream*, the great newsman Eric Sevareid described journalists as the ultimate generalists—jacks-of-all-trades and masters of none," he wrote, "save the trade of being jack-of-all." The journalist's job, said Sevareid, was to "pull together the threads of disparate thought" and "weigh them on the scales of common sense."

Though not a journalist, the Anglo-Swiss author Alain de Botton has fashioned for himself a jack-of-all-trades beat that includes architecture, travel, love, sex, a column in the *Independent*, TV, pop philosophy based on some years in graduate school...and a non-believer's guide to religion. On this last topic his message, in short, is that you don't have to be religious in order to use some of religion's ideas. His approach to journalism, as expressed in *The News: A User's Manual*, is similar. The mind flashes back to "News You Can Use," the original marketing motto of *U.S. News and World Report*; de Botton digs out the message buried in each journalistic literary form and applies it to our lives, in hopes of helping make us better persons. His M.O. is to select a bunch of headlines and offer advice—both to the media on how they should have described, say, a scandal in a more positive way, and to us on how we should use a tragedy to make us grow.

A journalism professor might begin the semester listing the primary functions of the press: educate the public; provide a political forum; entertain readers; record history; elevate culture; build community while serving as its conscience; stimulate commerce; and (oh yes) make money. De Botton's list is a lot smaller, and highlights journalism's function in shaping how we see and experience the world. Citing Hegel, he says that "societies become modern when news replaces religion as our central source of guidance and our touchstone of authority." In developed economies, he says, "the news now occupies a position at least equal to that formerly enjoyed" by faith. "Matins have been transubstantiated into the breakfast bulletin, vespers into the evening report."



Sketch by Honoré Daumier, 1840

De Botton calls his book a "record, a phenomenology, of a set of encounters with the news." As for the definition of news itself, he leaves it vague. (The most down-to-earth definition was Joseph Pulitzer's: "that which is talked about," a definition that required editors to be tuned in to what the people are saying in the streets.) *The News* is not ultimately about a journalism profession faced with an identity crisis and struggling to remake itself before the last paper folds. Rather, it is about our feelings as we read and how we make use of what we read—or fail to.

De Botton is rightly restless with the profession's "dispassionate and neutral presentation of 'facts'" as practiced by, for instance, CNN and the BBC. Though "bias" has a bad name, he believes we should be more accepting of it, since "bias" is simply a method of evaluating events. (He does not seem to know about the New Journalism of the 1960s and '70s, in which novelists like Norman Mailer, Joan Didion, Tom Wolfe, and John Hersey applied both their creative narrative skills and their moral convictions to subjects ranging from Hiroshima to New York liberalism.) De Botton is uneasy with the journalist's zeal to bring down powerful politicians who have abused their offices; he does not share the enthusiasm for the Watergate investigations, which inspired a new generation of idealistic young men and women to go to journalism schools. Concentrating on "baddies," in his view, distracts reporters from subtler evils—for example, "property owners who condemn thousands of people to live in humiliating environments"—that don't break the law but have evil effects.

Indeed, de Botton seems to think there is very little that journalism today does right. Foreign news, he says, is not presented in a compelling way; editors wrongly assume that a bombing that kills thirty people is more newsworthy than a quiet day in a fishing village. On a visit to the BBC headquarters in London he complains that the BBC coverage of Uganda is scant on ordinary Ugandan life. A young Ugandan who

has spent several years in refugee camps tells him to go to Uganda and see for himself, and he does. Arriving, he is immediately struck by the exotic smells of roasting meat and the "weavers and touracos that wheel in the light-blue morning sky." He attends a press conference by the prime minister, who is accused of being a thief. These impressions develop into an essay on what makes a good photograph. One such photo captures the poverty embodied in a musician's battered tuba at a parade celebrating Ugandan independence. De Botton recalls W. H. Auden's poetic reference to Bruegel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, wherein ships, shepherds and cities go their own way, not noticing two legs splashing in the sea where the reckless Icarus has plunged to his death. Foreign-news editors, he suggests, lack the vision of the painter and poet who call the Icaruses to our attention.

In line with its view of journalism's religious function, this book seeks to bolster the news's moral function. Gertrude Stein defined a celebrity as someone who is "well known for being well known," and de Botton believes that too much of the media is preoccupied with celebrity. Instead, he urges the press to present psychologically rich portraits of noble-minded individuals so that the rest of us can have "secular patron saints" to rely on, instead of the merely famous. He sums things up by outlining the kinds of news stories that can make us more tolerant, sensitive to other nations, grateful for avoided disasters, and happy in spending money. Finally he advises us to forgo the news altogether, in order to pay more attention to snow geese, spider beetles, and small children.

I am grateful for de Botton's suggestions; but I still read the *New York Daily News* quickly, and the *Washington Post, New York Times, Manchester Guardian*, and a dozen other periodicals slowly every day. I never think I am "using" the press; rather I devour it as I would the Eucharist, finding God in all things. ■

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Anthony Domestico

Gift & Bait

Accepting the Disaster

Poems

Joshua Mehigan

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, $23, 96 pp.

Accepting the Disaster, Joshua Mehigan's superb new collection of poetry, begins with a poem called "Here":

Nothing has changed. They have a
welcome sign,
a hill with cows and a white house on top,
a mall and grocery store where people shop,
a diner where some people go to dine.
It is the same no matter where you go,
and downtown you will find no big
surprises.
Each fall the dew point falls until it rises.
White snow, green buds, green lawn, red
leaves, white snow.

This is all right. This is their hope. And
yet,
though what you see is never what you get,
it does feel somehow changed from what
it was.
Is it the people? Houses? Fields? The
weather?
Is it the streets? Is it these things together?
Nothing here ever changes, till it does.

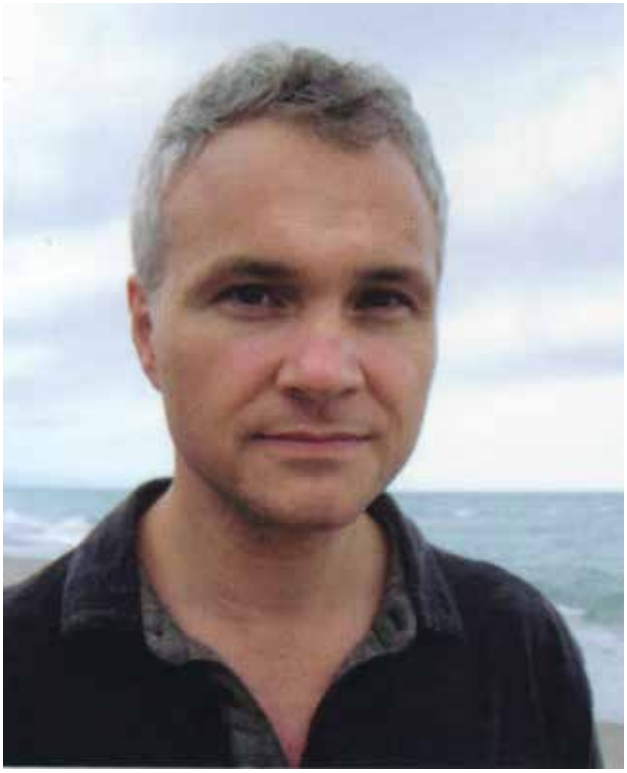
At first glance, this appears to be a perfect sonnet: an octave that describes a particular emotional or existential situation (nothing here has changed—not the landscape, not the houses, not the businesses, not the natural world), with a turn in the sestet that sees this situation anew (something ineffable *has* changed). Each line is crisply end-stopped and iambs predominate. Everything seems in order.

But when you look closer, you begin to realize the ways Mehigan deviates from perfect formal regularity. The opening stanza slightly differs from the expected Petrarchan rhyme scheme (*abbaabba*), using instead a brace octave occasionally employed by Yeats: *abbacddc*. Similarly, while all the other lines are in pentameter (five feet), Mehigan gives an extra syllable to the sixth, seventh, twelfth, and thirteenth lines. These lines are *almost* pentameter, but not quite. Another slight irregularity. Like the best poems, "Here" makes its argument not only by statement but also and especially by formal enactment: a poem about the change lurking beneath changelessness makes this change felt through the play of harmony and dissonance, structure and modulation. The town has "somehow changed"; the lines are somehow different from what we might have expected in a textbook sonnet. At the end of the poem, we realize that, though we might see order and sequence—first winter (white snow), then spring (green buds), then summer (green lawn), then fall (red leaves), then winter again—change remains ready to take us unawares. Is the poem's unnamed change death? Simply time passing? We can't be sure. All we can be certain of is that, as the poem's most striking line puts it, "what you see is never what you get."

"Here" serves as a perfect introduction to *Accepting the Disaster*, Mehigan's second book of poetry, because it so powerfully exemplifies the rest of the collection's stylistic strengths and thematic interests. Almost every poem here contains a striking formal moment, where Mehigan uses meter or rhyme or line break to do something surprising, and almost every poem concerns itself with time—how it passes and how we pass it, how it predictably wounds us and how it unpredictably ends us.

"Work Song," for instance, is a seemingly straightforward poem about blue-collar work, one of the collection's recurring subjects. The opening stanza is mostly a series of blunt assertions:

This fastening, unfastening, and heaving—



Joshua Mehigan

this is our life. Whose life is it improving?
It topples some. Some others it will
toughen.
Work is the safest way to fail, and often
the simplest way to love a son or daughter.
We come. We carp. We're fired. We worry
later.

Again, the poem's excellence lies in Mehigan's formal control. Look, for example, at his careful shifts in verb tense. The work that we perform, the "fastening, unfastening, and heaving," is continuous, ongoing, seemingly unending. In the third line, work becomes the subject, and we see it do two things to workers: in the present tense, right now, it "topples some"; in the future tense, some time later, it "will toughen" others. This shift bears enormous weight. It can topple us at any moment, suddenly. If it toughens us, though, it *will* do so only after we've been at it a while.

By this point, we think we know where the poem is going: labor isn't ennobling but enervating; management doesn't care for "improving" the lives of its workers but only for toughening them, for making them less resistant and thus more productive. The fourth line appears a mere continuation of this line of thinking: "Work is the safest way to fail, and often"—this is the poem's first moment of enjambment, and we believe that we can easily fill in the blank: *and often / we do fail,* or *and often / it fails us*. But the next line runs in an entirely different direction, making the sentence it completes something far more complicated: "Work is the safest way to fail, and often / the simplest way to love a son or daughter." Work, then, isn't just a way of being toppled or toughened. It's a way of loving. We originally read the question in the second line—"Whose life is it improving?"—as rhetorical: it's improving no one's life, we confidently think. Now, we see that this might not be entirely true. "Work Song" is a poem about the exploitation of working-class labor, but isn't *just* that.

This is one of the guiding arguments of *Accepting the Disaster*: things rarely are just the way we think they are. To return to "Here," what you see isn't what you get. Many of the poems in this collection are about looking at something once and then looking at it again, either from a different perspective or from a different, later time.

"The Smokestack," for instance, consists of sixteen quatrains, each rhymed *abcb* and each describing the smokestack that dominates the skyline of a factory town. "It could look like Cuba / as seen from our space. / It could look like a pedestal stone. / It could look like Jesus' face," one stanza runs. Another reads, "Sometimes it looked like ermine, / sometimes like elderflower. / Sometimes it looked like a Persian cat, / and sometimes like power." The poem reads like a contemporary, working-class rewriting of Wallace Stevens's "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." We are forced to see the smokestack through different lenses: through the lens of class relations, for example ("To labor it looked like a witness, / to management a snitch"), and through the lens of history ("It came before Lincoln Steffens. / It survived Eric Blair"), with the final stanza trying to capture the beauty and noxiousness of the American factory:

On cool summer evenings,
it billowed like azure silk.
On cold winter mornings,
it spread like spilled milk.

Another short poem, "The Crossroads," looks at the site of a roadside fatality. Like "Here," this poem explores the imperceptible and devastating nature of change:

This is the place it happened. It was here.
You might not know it was unless you
knew.
All day the cars blow past and disappear.
This is the place it happened. It was here.
Look at the sparkling dust, the oily smear.
Look at the highway marker, still askew.
This is the place it happened. It was here.
You might not know it was unless you
knew.

Other poems—many others, in fact—examine the ultimate change, death. The late poet and critic Allen Grossman once wrote, "Poetry is the principle of power invoked by all of us against our vanishing." But if we can use poetry to resist our vanishing, we can also use it to examine our vanishing, to stare directly at the death that awaits us all. Mehigan's "Believe It" offers a terrifying vision of death's nullity:

Hard to believe that, after all of it,
in bed for good now, knowing you haven't
done
one thing of any lasting benefit
or grasped how to be happy, or had fun,
you must surrender everything and pass
into a new condition that is not
night, or a country, or a sleep, or peace,
but nothing, ever, anymore, for you.

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The final two lines, where Mehigan piles up comma after comma, force us to linger over all that death is not and all that it is: it's not a night, not a country, not a sleep, not peace. It is, Mehigan tells us, just endless nothingness.

So what are we to do when faced with the inevitable prospect of death? How can we go on? One thing we can do, Mehigan suggests, is work. That's why so many of his poems circle around labor: it's what there is to do in the little time we have. Work is drudgery, but it's also necessary. As "The Cement Plant" puts it, "None cheered it. It sustained them." Another thing to do? Accept the disaster, as the collection's title suggests, but also accept the rare moments of beauty that come with the disaster, those moments when industrial smoke "billow[s] like azure silk." Accept the disaster, in other words, but also acknowledge the wonder.

That, it seems to me, is the argument of the collection's final poem, "Shark's Tooth." In this poem, the speaker describes the wonder he felt at finding a shark's tooth one evening on the beachside. Such a discovery resulted not from the speaker's effort but from his cessation of effort. As he writes, "After three days of looking, and then not, / I stepped onto the sand, and there it was." He tries to repeat the discovery but without success. All he can do is remember, and recreate for the reader, his finding the tooth "poised on a peak between the two child-sized footprints, / like a gift, or like bait, held out to me."

Is such beauty a gift, or is it bait? Does it reorient us to a beautiful world's mystery, or does it trick us into thinking that a malevolent world is other than it really is? Both, Mehigan tells us. The world is both gift and bait, beauty and terror, and *Accepting the Disaster* shows us both sides of the coin with fearless honesty. ■

Anthony Domestico *is an assistant professor of literature at Purchase College, SUNY.*

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experience of being married with children in the modern world, and no firsthand experience of the attendant problems and moral dilemmas. The first meeting consists of members of the hierarchy and a few lay "observers." Next year's meeting is supposed to include broader representation of the faithful. We'll see.

But given this structuring of the synod, I doubt that there are enough members of the hierarchy who have the empathy and compassion of a prelate like Cardinal Walter Kasper to effect any significant change in the church's laws or practice regarding marriage and family life. I hope I am wrong and that the Holy Spirit will somehow guide the decision-makers at the synod to devise laws and practices that are fairer and more in touch with the issues facing married couples today.

THOMAS SEVERIN
Connellsville, Penn.

A PATTERN, NOT A PEOPLE

The essay by Molly Farneth is a very helpful reflection on power, authority, and the need for a structural reform of the Catholic Church. She makes use of the fine writing of Mary Douglas, who provided a defense of the idea of hierarchy from an anthropologist's point of view. I would like to suggest a conclusion to Farneth's essay, which she might agree with. That conclusion is that so long as the bishops are called "the hierarchy" there is no possibility of even raising a question of church reform. It is impossible to propose a different image of hierarchy if one group of people is called "the hierarchy." The Catholic Church taught the modern world to use the word "hierarchy," but we seem to have forgotten that hierarchy is an institutional pattern, not a group of people. Farneth cites an essay by Douglas that was titled "A Modest Proposal: A Place for Women in the Hierarchy" (June 14, 1996), even though Douglas was not proposing the ordination of women. On March 5, 2014, a *New York Times* story claimed that Pope Francis "said that women must have a greater presence in the church hierarchy," which implied that he had changed either his view of women's ordination or the meaning of hierarchy. What he actually said was that "women should play a greater role in decision-making," which means little in a hierarchical church that has a group of people called "the hierarchy."

GABRIEL MORAN
New York, N.Y.

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A Job, Not a Career

Emily Stout

Pope Francis has a way of shocking us with what we already know. During his first Chrism Mass last year he said that priests ought to be like "shepherds living with the smell of the sheep." Although he was addressing the clergy, his comment can also be applied to the priesthood of all believers. Whatever our particular vocation, we must not imagine we can serve anyone without real exposure to their circumstances.

When Simone Weil, an intellectual from a bourgeois background, requested a leave of absence from teaching so that she could work in an auto plant, it was because she wanted to understand the "icy pandemonium of industrial life" from the inside. She did not think real solidarity with manual laborers was possible for someone who had no personal experience with the kind of work they do and the conditions in which they do it. As she wrote, "When I think that the great Bolshevik leaders claimed to be creating a free working class and probably not one of them—surely not Trotsky, and I don't think Lenin did either—ever set foot in a factory and hence did not have the faintest idea of the real conditions which determine the servitude or freedom of these workers—politics seems a sinister farce indeed."

Photograph for Simone Weil's identity card at a Renault plant, 1935

Can the same be said of the church when Christ's disciples keep themselves insulated from the everyday life of the poor? Have we become afraid that the stench of poverty will rub off on us if we spend too much time in the company of those the Gospel calls us to serve?

I knew an elderly priest who would go and talk with a woman as she cleaned offices because that was the only time she had. And another priest who organized a group of college kids to visit the roughest part of town and hand out hot chocolate to drunks at 2 a.m. I know of parents who have chosen to raise their children among the poor in Catholic Worker houses. And recently we've all read news stories about aid workers who've come home from foreign countries sick with a deadly disease they had been treating.

These are all people who understood that real service requires risk. Some of them risked death; others risked only discomfort. None of them played it safe. Not everyone is called to heroic self-sacrifice, but all Christians are called to solidarity with people who live on the margins. And we cannot help such people without going to the margins ourselves.

A little more than a year ago I decided to leave my job as an oncology nurse—a job I loved—to join the Little Sisters of Jesus, a religious community whose members work menial jobs alongside the poor in factories, hospital kitchens, or on farms. Of course, I could have joined a nursing order, but I didn't want my religious vocation to be determined by my professional training, and I was drawn to the kind of work the Little Sisters do. By having a wage rather than a salary, a job rather than a career, the Little Sisters serve those on the margins of society by presenting themselves not as benefactors from the helping professions but as approachable equals. They see the other part of their lives—the communal prayer and contemplation—as a way to be "standing delegates" before God on behalf of the people with whom they work every day. I wonder if Simone Weil might have lasted longer in the auto plant if she had had the support of a community like the Little Sisters of Jesus—people with whom she could share her difficulties because they shared her sense of mission.

For the past year I've had a job cleaning airplanes. It isn't always pleasant, and it certainly isn't easy. But there are moments of delight and revelation, when the daily routine becomes an occasion for friendship. I have listened to stories of heartbreak, read pregnancy tests, held one of my coworkers when her little boy went missing. I have been present at very difficult moments, and learned that presence itself can be a kind of ministry. My coworkers' pain is not as obvious as my patients' pain was, but as I have lived with them in the same neighborhood and worked the same job, it has slowly become more visible.

The church is called to what Pope Francis has called the "existential peripheries" of "pain, of injustice, of ignorance and indifference to religion." It is called to assist those in every kind of need, but also to accompany them, to share the weight of the crosses they carry. In other words, the corporal works of mercy cannot be easily segregated from the spiritual works of mercy: those who need to be fed or sheltered will also need to be comforted and encouraged—not from a safe distance, but face to face. ■

Emily Stout, *a graduate of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, is a postulant with the Little Sisters of Jesus.*

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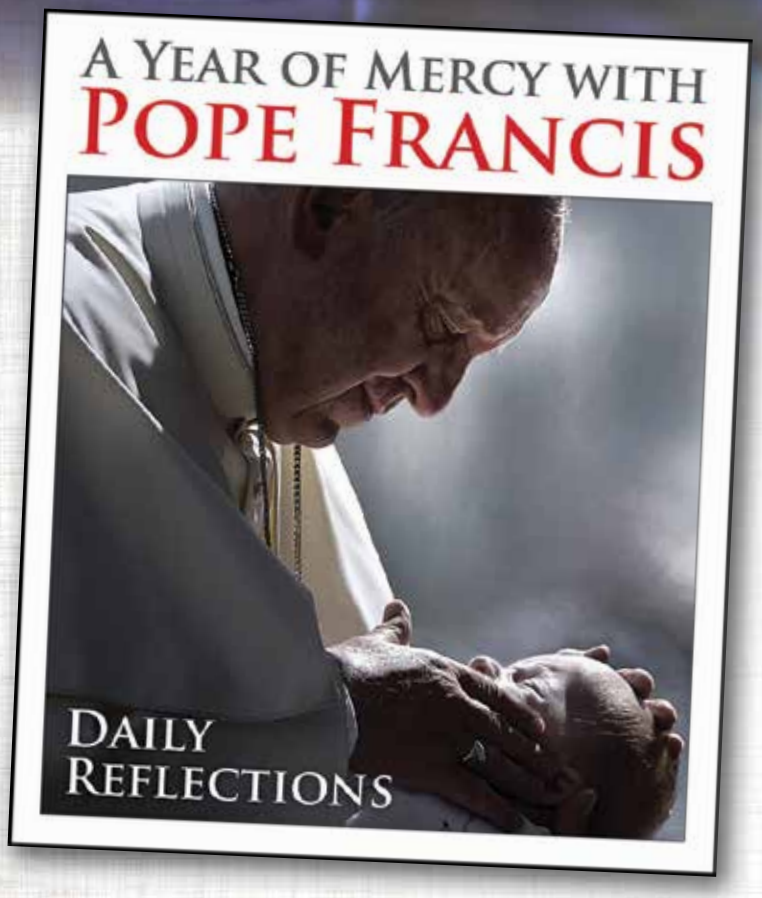

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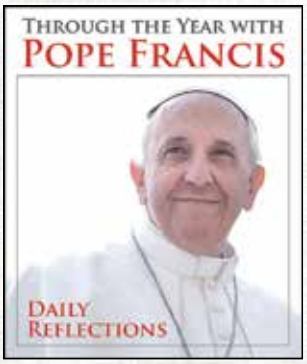
KEVIN COTTER is a missionary with FOCUS (the Fellowship of Catholic University Students), where he serves as the Director of Curriculum and Web. As the creator of PopeAlarm.com, Kevin notified over one hundred thousand people about Pope Francis' election via text and e-mail. He holds an M.A. in Sacred Scripture from the Augustine Institute and lives in Denver, Colorado, with his wife, Lisa, and their young children.



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