A Review of Religion, Politics & Culture

Commonweal

JUNE 1, 2014

MARGARET O'BRIEN STEINFELS ON
VIVIAN MAIER

BETHE DUFRESNE ON
CHURCH DESIGN

ALAN WOLFE ON
ROBERT GATES

CATHLEEN KAVENY ON
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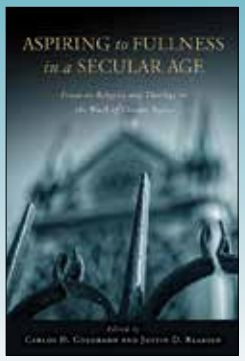

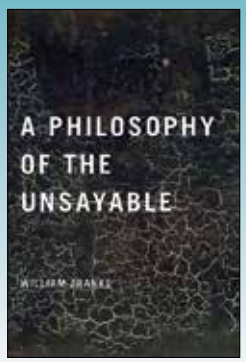

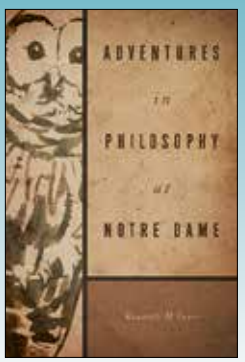

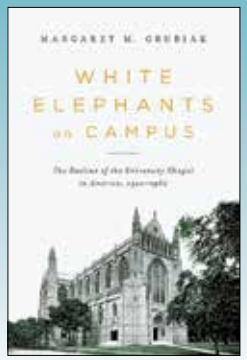

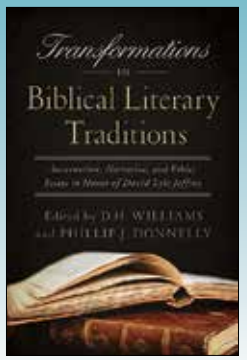

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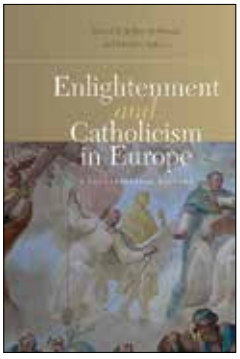

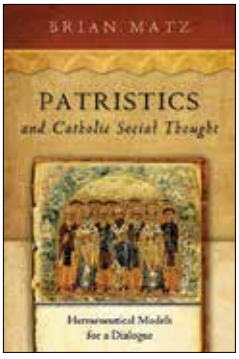

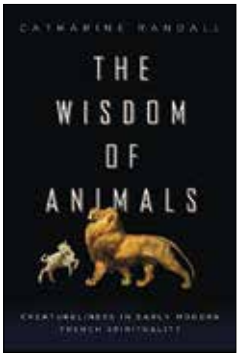

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Commonweal

JUNE 1, 2014 • VOLUME 141 • NUMBER 10

INTERVIEW

9 **The Mother of the Man**
An interview with Richard Russo
Wayne Sheridan

ARTICLES

11 **A Sermon in Stone**
Church design after Vatican II
Bethe Dufresne

18 **Holy Surplus**
Recycling Dutch church art
Tom Heneghan

Statues of St. Michael the Archangel, St. Florian, St. Joseph, and St. Mary Magdalene at St. Joseph's Chapel in Manhattan's Battery Park

LAWRENCE HOY

UPFRONT

4 **LETTERS**

5 **EDITORIAL** *All Hands on Deck*

6 **COMMONWEAL ONLINE**

COLUMNISTS

7 **Caught in the Gap**
Cathleen Kaveny

8 **Nanny Cam**
Margaret O'Brien Steinfels

BOOKS

20 **Duty**
by Robert M. Gates
Alan Wolfe

23 **Jesus**
by James Martin
Lawrence S. Cunningham

24 **Bookmarks**
Anthony Domestico

POETRY

10 **Widow of Zarephath**
Lou Ella Hickman

LAST WORD

30 **One Pound, Fourteen Ounces**
James Hannan

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LETTERS

Chinese names, curing clericalism

CORRECTION

Peter Quinn's very interesting article on the political and ideological uses of famine ("Hunger Games," May 16) makes reference to Yang Jisheng's *Tombstone*, a study of the great Chinese famine of c. 1958–61 (almost certainly the greatest famine in human history). But the article refers to him as "Jisheng," which is his given name; the surname is "Yang." Only his family and his buddies would have called him "Jisheng." It would be the same as referring to the current president of China (Xi Jinping) as "Jinping," or referring to Mao as "Zedong." Or for that matter, referring to FDR, in a serious book on presidential history, as "Franklin."

NICHOLAS CLIFFORD
Middlebury, Vt.

A SIGN OF HOPE

I truly appreciate Rita Ferrone's piece on RCIA, "Room at the Font" (May 2). It is as precise and true as anything I have read on the subject. Even though she paints a troubling picture, we have to look for hope somewhere. We should search out areas of pastoral life where clericalism has not had its chilling effect.

Three principal Vatican II documents were supposed to update the church: *Sacrosanctum Concilium, Lumen Gentium*, and *Gaudium et Spes*.

By now we should know that the reason the first document has not had its intended effect is because the collegiality of the second document was never allowed to come to fruition.

Many evils flow from clericalism—the sexual-abuse scandals, the stealing of parish funds, and so on—but I am more concerned with what clericalism has done to liturgy. Where might we find hope in response to that kind of clericalism?

There is a parish in Chicago where lay ministry is valued and where the RCIA is carried out to perfection. At Our Lady of Mercy in Albany Park, more than sixty nations are represented and more than forty-six languages are spoken.

At that parish, the Easter Vigil service was celebrated in three tongues: Spanish, English, and Tagalog. It began at 7:30 p.m. and did not conclude until 12:30 in the morning. Not a soul left the service early—so full was the congregation's participation in the Mass.

It was a celebration of the best of Christianity. What was proclaimed or spoken in one language could be read in the other two on the text given to the congregation. Songs were shared, the words projected on a screen that everyone could see.

Our Lady of Mercy Parish begins First Communion Masses for children in May. They do not end until July. Each celebration is planned by the parents who trained their children in the sacrament. High-school students who want to be confirmed send a letter to the staff indicating their desire for the sacrament and expressing their commitment to two years of instruction before receiving Confirmation. At the end of the letter, they select a ministerial commitment that will allow them to serve the surrounding community.

That is what RCIA was meant to do. The parishioners of Our Lady of Mercy—young and old alike—are invested in the church and committed to carrying out its ministry faithfully.

Of course, those programs didn't spring up on their own. It took twenty years to develop them, and Fr. Joe Tito has kept them going with his staff for the past twelve years. One hopes they will last forever.

DON HEADLEY
St. Mary of the Woods, Ind.

From the Editors

All Hands on Deck

In an essay defending the "vulgar" custom of talking about the weather, G. K. Chesterton argued that there was both an element of worship in the practice ("the sky must be invoked") and a welcome recognition of human equality. "In the mere observation 'a fine day,'" he wrote, "there is the whole great human idea of comradeship."

If only that were true of the current American political debate about the increasingly obvious and dire consequences of climate change. Earlier this month, the White House released the most recent National Climate Assessment, a report compiled by scientists as well as experts from private industry and the government. According to the report, the pace of global warming has accelerated, and its deleterious effects are already being felt in weather patterns and rising sea levels. Low-lying areas of this country such as South Florida are battling the encroaching sea. Drought across the Southwest and California will intensify, endangering basic water supplies. Severe storms and rising sea levels, caused in large part by the melting of the polar ice caps, threaten much of coastal New England and the Middle Atlantic states. Sea levels are estimated to rise from three to six feet in this century. Average temperatures in Alaska have increased dramatically over the past decade, ensuring vast ecological damage. The report makes clear that the emission of carbon gases, mostly from automobiles and coal-burning power plants, is causing climate change—this is not a hypothesis, but a scientific fact. Unless we take steps now to reduce emissions, the problem will only get worse.

Republicans in Congress resolutely deny that global warming is man-made, and this head-in-the-sand stance has become an article of faith in some GOP primaries. Facing congressional stalemate on the issue, President Barack Obama has shifted his focus to regulatory measures, such as requiring greater energy efficiency in federal buildings. In June the administration will announce tougher E.P.A. standards on greenhouse-gas emissions from power plants. Obama has also taken to the bully pulpit to engage the public on an issue that remains near the bottom of the average citizen's list of pressing concerns. To some extent, public apathy about climate change is understandable. It is easy to confuse "climate" and "weather" by focusing on immediate conditions rather than obvious trends. The threat seems far off and the most apparent effects erratic and contradictory. At the same time, even those who believe the claims made by scientists and environmentalists are often overwhelmed by the magnitude of the problem. What can an individual, a community, or even one country do that could conceivably alter what seems to be inevitable at this point? If the international community cannot come together to end the slaughter of innocents, what is the chance it will agree to enforce higher gas-mileage standards or a switch to low-carbon energy sources? Finally, concerted efforts by industry and conservative groups to question the scientific consensus and dismiss the danger of global warming have often turned the debate into a ritualistic denunciation of so-called elite opinion.

Yet as the National Climate Assessment took pains to point out, there is still much that can be done to ameliorate, if not forestall, the effects of climate change. Although the assessment made no specific legislative suggestions, the way forward is as obvious as it is politically difficult. Per capita carbon emissions in the United States remain among the highest in the world, so reductions here can have a disproportionate effect on global warming. Yes, China and India must also rein in their automobile and coal-plant emissions, but they have already started doing this because of the health effects of their notoriously polluted air. There is no reason—other than scientific obscurantism and political cynicism on the part of Republicans—for the United States not to take the lead in this environmental and health crisis. Imposing a carbon tax on all goods and services seems the fastest and most effective way to bring emissions under control. Once the cost of climate change becomes evident in every consumer purchase, the demand for alternative energy sources will propel both behavioral and technological change. Revenue from the tax might be used to reduce the deficit and rebuild the nation's infrastructure. Americans, the objection goes, are allergic to taxes. Yet we also know that Americans are not indifferent to the suffering and cost of floods, drought, and severe storms. If the chance of enacting a carbon tax is slim, so is the chance that these calamities can be avoided unless the industrialized world stops pumping carbon into the atmosphere.

In his essay Chesterton reminds us that we are "all under the same cosmic conditions. We are all in the same boat." That boat is listing badly, and as Chesterton suggests, we will all sink or swim together. It is time to take up the vulgar business of talking about the climate as well as the weather—and doing something about it. ■

THE WHICH BLAIR PROJECT

From the dotCommonweal post "Documentary Revisits Jayson Blair Scandal," by Celia Wren:

A curious shift occurs towards the end of the new documentary *A Fragile Trust: Plagiarism, Power, and Jayson Blair at the 'New York Times*,' which premiered on PBS on Monday, May 5 (and is now available at pbs.org). Up to this point in Samantha Grant's thorough, thoughtful look back at the notorious newspaper scandal, Blair has come across largely as a troubled sufferer—a victim of mental illness who made a series of egregiously terrible judgment calls while coping with intense workplace pressure. In a major coup, producer and director Grant has managed to wrangle an exclusive interview with Blair, who even provided the filmmakers access to his private e-mail account from the period leading up to his 2003 departure from the *New York Times*. On camera, Blair is a sober, soft-spoken fellow who gives off an older-but-wiser vibe as he analyzes his past journalistic misdeeds (plagiarism, outright fabrication), accepting culpability while at the same time attributing his behavior in part to the effects of bipolar disorder, aggravated by substance abuse.

But then the documentary reaches the point in the story where Blair, as a disgraced ex-reporter, starts pitching a tell-all to book publishers. The book, *Burning Down My Masters' House*, was published in 2004. Suddenly, we see him discussing the book with Larry King ("The main reason I wrote the book, Larry…"), Howard Kurtz ("It's part of the process of healing for me to go through this trial by fire…"), and Chris Matthews ("I think I'm going to write a novel [next]..."). And we see him offer wisdom, supposedly grounded in his own experience, on the speaking circuit. (He currently works as a "certified life coach" in Virginia.) Suddenly, Blair starts to seem like a sociopath—a sociopath who knows the value of spin. And you can't help but wonder: Was his participation in Grant's documentary just another creepily devious attempt at spin?

Fortunately, the Blair interview is only one source of material for *A Fragile Trust*, which is airing as part of the PBS series Independent Lens. Grant has also interviewed a large group of Blair's former colleagues, including Howell Raines, who was the executive editor of the *New York Times* during the Blair crisis, and who left the paper in its aftermath. Former associate managing editor William Schmidt was in charge of personnel issues and disciplinary actions at the time of the scandal; he contributes some satisfying details about what happened when Blair's journalistic crimes came to light.

Complementing the spoken insights are a rich collection of images, including photographs and video of news events that Blair was assigned to cover; footage from television reports on the 2003 scandal; photos of Blair as a child; and even part of an old recruiting video for the University of Maryland (Blair's alma mater) that appears to show the cub reporter walking to work in his earliest days at the *New York Times*.

Two visual leitmotifs intensify the documentary's somber mood while also underscoring a key theme. Occasionally, bits of simple animation appear (an animated sequence depicts Blair making a phone call during the crisis, for instance), the contour lines scrawled white against a field of black. At other times, we see what appear to be photographic negatives of newspaper articles, the letters and photo shapes bright against a black background. The white-on-black shapes tie into the theme of contrasts and reversals of expectation: readers of Blair's articles found lies where they expected to find truth, and deceit where they expected to find integrity.

The black-and-white images in the documentary also echo the racial issues that have seemed, to some, to eddy beneath the surface of the Blair imbroglio: Blair is African American, and some have wondered whether he was given too much leeway, and too many second chances, at the Gray Lady because the paper was trying to make its staff more diverse. *A Fragile Trust* raises that question, but it also asks another in passing: When reporter Stephen Glass (who is white) was found to have fabricated articles for the *New Republic* in the 1990s, why didn't his race become an issue? Does the discrepancy between the way we discuss the two cases say something about our own assumptions and biases?

Ultimately, of course, there are questions that *A Fragile Trust* cannot fully answer: What was really going on in Jayson Blair's head when he plagiarized and invented reporting? What is going on in his head now? Why—in the final analysis—was he able to get away with so much journalistic wrongdoing? More than a decade after the scandal broke, such questions still exert a tantalizing pull. ■

Jayson Blair

Cathleen Kaveny

Caught in the Gap

TOO POOR FOR SUBSIDIZED HEALTH INSURANCE, NOT POOR ENOUGH FOR MEDICAID

In 2012, the Supreme Court upheld the Affordable Care Act's requirement that most Americans obtain health insurance or pay a penalty. In so doing, the Court preserved the law's backbone. As we are now discovering, however, the same Supreme Court decision also cut out the ACA's heart: the justices struck down the law's requirement that the states expand their Medicaid programs to cover all adults at or below 138 percent of the poverty level. The requirement is now an option. Each state can choose whether to expand its Medicaid program or keep it as it is. As of March 2014, twenty-four states have refused to expand their programs—despite the fact that the federal government promised to pick up more than 90 percent of the costs for the next decade. Most of these are "Red States" in the Southeast and Mountain regions, along with the vertical line of states from South Dakota to Texas.

We are now beginning to see the consequences of Red State hostility to health-care reform, and they are devastating for the poor. According to an April 2 report from the Kaiser Family Foundation ("The Coverage Gap: Uninsured Poor Adults in States that Do Not Expand Medicaid"), nearly 5 million people below the poverty line will now be ineligible both for Medicaid and for the subsidies available for the new health-care exchanges. The door to health-care coverage is doubly barred for the most vulnerable of our fellow Americans.

How can this be? We need to begin with a realistic picture of Medicaid. Many Americans believe all poor people already receive health-care coverage through Medicaid, just as all elderly people receive coverage through Medicare. But that's not true. Most of the states that are refusing to expand Medicaid provide no coverage whatsoever to nondisabled adults who don't have dependent children. And in many of these states, parents of dependent children don't fare much better. Only the poorest of poor parents are covered. In Alabama, for instance, parents are covered only if their annual income does not exceed 16 percent of the federal poverty level—that's $3,221 for a family of three. In Texas, the eligibility limit is 19 percent of the federal poverty level, which is particularly problematic given that state's large uninsured population. The average cutoff for the twenty-four states that have refused to expand Medicaid is 46 percent of the federal poverty level, which is about $9,000 for a family of three.

Lyndon Johnson signing Medicare bill in 1965

And that's not the worst of it. Many adults who exceed the state Medicaid limits are too poor to purchase insurance on the new health-insurance exchanges, which were designed to subsidize insurance for working and middle-class Americans making up to four times the poverty level. These insurance policies are completely unavailable to adults earning below the federal poverty level, because lawmakers assumed such people would be covered by the expansion of Medicaid. A family of three with a household income of more than $9,000 and less than $20,000 will be out of luck in many parts of the country.

Why did the Supreme Court strike down the Medicaid expansion mandate? In a nutshell, seven justices held that threatening the states with the loss of all their Medicaid funding unless they expanded the program was too "coercive," and that it therefore exceeded Congress's power under the Spending Clause. But the Spending Clause confers broad authority on Congress to distribute federal funds. No state is entitled to federal funds from year to year. And Congress regularly uses money as both a carrot and a stick to secure state compliance with federal programs. Given the fact that the federal government is subsidizing nearly all the costs of the Medicaid expansion, it's hard to see this as constitutionally impermissible coercion.

Why did some states refuse to expand Medicaid? Most point to the cost of doing so. But that is short-sighted on the part of cost-conscious governors and legislatures. First, it now looks as though expanding Medicaid won't cost as much as the federal government initially expected it to. Second, by expanding Medicaid, states avoid the cost of treating the uninsured in hospital emergency rooms, which is not only expensive but also breathtakingly inefficient. So it's hard to make sense of the refusal to expand Medicaid on financial grounds; it looks more like ideological opposition to President Obama and health-care reform.

Let's hope the poor in these states have better access to polling booths than they do to doctors. According to the Kaiser Foundation's report, 86 percent of all poor, uninsured non-elderly adults fall into the Medicaid coverage gap. That's not just a gap. That's a sinkhole. The Supreme Court opened it up, and Red State governors and legislatures pushed their poor people into it. ■

Margaret O'Brien Steinfels

Nanny Cam

THE POSTHUMOUS FAME OF A STREET PHOTOGRAPHER

In an age when obscure talent strives for celebrity, it astonishes when real talent remains hidden. Vivian Maier's obscurity was so complete that her first public notice was a death announcement: "Vivian Maier, proud native of France and Chicago resident for the last fifty years, died peacefully on Monday. Second mother to John, Lane, and Matthew. A free and kindred spirit who magically touched the lives of all who knew her. Always ready to give her advice, opinion or a helping hand. Movie critic and photographer extraordinaire" (*Chicago Tribune*, April 23, 2009).

Vivian Maier was a nanny who cared for John, Lane, and Matthew Gensburg from 1956 to 1972. They remember her as a Mary Poppins figure—energetic, adventuresome, and definitely the adult in charge. When they outgrew their need for a nanny she moved on to other families, but the Gensburg boys never forgot Ms. Maier. In her old age they paid for her rent and nursing care. It was they who posted the death notice.

But that was not the end of Vivian Maier. When the fees for her storage units went unpaid and the contents were auctioned, "recyclers" found troves of photographs along with rolls of undeveloped film. One of them, John Maloof, admired the photos, but searched in vain for their creator until the *Tribune* death notice popped up on Google. Now he has made her famous.

Maier has been declared a world-class street photographer, and prints of her pictures are said to sell for thousands. Her solitary after-work evenings and weekends roaming Chicago produced portraits of down-and-outers and women in fur jackets, crowds gathered for parades and at flea markets, buildings standing and buildings being demolished, animals dead and alive, stockyards, bridges, and elevated train platforms. All this work was stashed in the storage units.

Posthumous recognition began when Maloof posted some of her work online to the acclaim of Shutterfly users. He began to offer negatives and photos for sale. Her fame grew. His documentary *Finding Vivian Maier* has been widely reviewed. The BBC produced a TV documentary, "Who Took Nanny's Pictures?" Exhibits have gone global. Some declare her to be the equal of Henri Cartier-Bresson and Diane Arbus.

Those accolades have not been enough. More than her talent, her fans want to know: "Why?" Why did she hide her work? She could have been rich and famous! "Why is a nanny taking all these photos?" asks Maloof at the beginning of his film. That is not what nannies do. But why not? Why not shoot a photo of a crying child or an imperious matron? Maier carried her Rolleiflex camera everywhere and used it with dexterity and intelligence from framing the image, to lighting, to focus, to eliciting the gaze of her subjects. Was there pleasure, as one critic observes, in her being "incredibly gutsy," looking down to frame the picture while maintaining eye contact with her subject? Did she lose interest once the photo was developed? But, asks a former neighbor, "What's the point of taking pictures if no one sees them?" And still another critic declares, it "isn't art until it's seen by others."

Few people ever saw Maier's photos. One who did was Don Flesch of Central Camera, whose shop developed the photos. In the BBC documentary, he says, "She wouldn't like it [her posthumous fame] at all; too much delving into her life." Indeed, both Maloof and the BBC have tracked down family secrets and interviewed the neighbor who saw her in old age eating out of a can. Flesch calls her "a private person," and defends both her privacy and her reticence. He dismisses the exhibits and publicity as "only an interpretation" of Vivian Maier. "I have my own feelings about her," he says, and presumably he has no use for Maier's many new fans. Few refrain from creating "an interpretation," above all one that explains "why" she "hid" her photos: she was mentally ill, she was a hoarder, she was mean, she was abused, etc.—all the modern diagnoses of a woman who kept to herself. In fact, maybe she was "incredibly gutsy," and didn't need the world's acclaim, or all the interpretations that today analyze her rather than her art. ■

Self-portrait of Vivian Maier

THE JOHN MALOOF COLLECTION

Wayne Sheridan

The Mother of the Man

AN INTERVIEW WITH RICHARD RUSSO

Richard Russo's novels include Nobody's Fool, Straight Man, Empire Falls *(which won the 2002 Pulitzer Prize), and* Bridge of Sighs. *His most recent book is* Elsewhere, *a memoir. He recently spoke with* Commonweal *contributor Wayne Sheridan.*

WAYNE SHERIDAN: Your selections of what to include in your memoir *Elsewhere* seem to me to be truly honest ones—your relationship with your mother, for example, which was very complicated, yet very warm. Readers will have to actually read the book to find out how very complicated.

RICHARD RUSSO: Yes, quite complicated.

WS: Your mother was, in many ways, quite a heroine and ahead of her times. She wanted to escape from Gloversville, New York, your birthplace and childhood home.

RR: And especially, she wanted *me* to escape.

WS: In addition to Gloversville, Martha's Vineyard also plays a prominent role in your memoir and also in many of your novels. I recall that in *Empire Falls* [2002] it's a central place and a sort of metaphor.

RR: It is a metaphor. It's the place, where, you know, for working-class people, a place that maybe you can visit for a week, but it's beyond your reach. The only reason I didn't use it in *That Old Cape Magic* [2010] was that I had used it so often. I used it in *Empire Falls* and *Elsewhere* and in a couple of short stories. And it's been the story of Barbara's [Russo's wife] and my life for a very long time.

WS: In the memoir, you write that when you were nine or ten years old your mom took you to the Vineyard. You also relate how you scattered her ashes in the waters there.

RR: We scattered her ashes in Menemsha. Whenever I go to the island I always go out there. You know, I'm not "religious." But she loved it. And so I usually go out and kind of walk around that area where we scattered her ashes and sit and maybe read a little bit, just until I become so self-conscious that I can't stand it. I think, what in the world am I doing? I don't know why in the world we do such things.

WS: There's an extended scene in *Elsewhere* in which you and your mother, against the vehement objections of her father and mother, your grandparents, decide you are going to move to Arizona and that you will go to the University of Arizona. Of course, she is coming with you—a sort of double escape from Gloversville. You drive there in mid-summer 1967, three thousand miles, with you doing all the driving. You had just turned eighteen, with only three months of local driving experience, and you drove a seven-year-old, severely underpowered sedan, which your friends dubbed "The Gray Death," pulling a trailer behind.

Richard Russo

ELENA SEIBERT / COURTESY OF KNOPF

RR: Why we didn't die is still a mystery to me. That trip to the other side of the country—really, I can't imagine anyone doing a dumber thing. And yet, every great thing that I have, the things that are the most dear to me, every single thing in my life I most cherish, I owe to that journey.

WS: Would you have become a writer if you had not made that lunatic journey?

RR: I don't know. I suspect not. I suspect everything would have been different.

WS: Toward the end of the book, you say you came to the conclusion that your mother most likely suffered from obsessive-compulsive disorder.

RR: There's no doubt in my mind. And that is another one of the tragedies about my mother's life, because OCD is treatable. There is really not much discussion anymore about what needs to be done. Everyone agrees what the regimen is. It can be unpleasant at times, but the hard thing is making

WIDOW OF ZAREPHATH

i was like a small bird
pecking near a gate
when i went in search of twigs—
a bit of wood for a fire
so after one last meal
my son and i could die...
then a man asked for water—
a bit of bread
now i, a small bird,
found more than twigs
because i too, like ravens, fed him

—Lou Ella Hickman

Sr. Lou Ella Hickman, IWBS, has worked as a teacher, librarian, and parish adult-education director. She is now a spiritual director and freelance writer.

people who suffer OCD understand what they are dealing with, because obsessive compulsives, almost without exception, are secretive. Whether they are hoarders, or scared to go out, or whatever the constellation the disease has in the individual. One of the things they all have is that they are very secretive. They don't want anybody to know.

WS: You write that while at the University of Arizona you also had obsessions. A pinball obsession. Then later on an obsession about gambling at the dog tracks. Then poker.

RR: Of course, in my family, it came at me from two different directions. Because from the female side there was my mother. And my grandmother, we learned after talking with my aunt, had a number of outrageous symptoms which manifested themselves when my aunt and mother were young. I had no idea about these while I was growing up. These dovetailed with the Russo side, especially with my father, who was a compulsive gambler. So in me, it was kind of a perfect storm. Something would just take hold of me. But, of course, writing for me has been the final obsession.

WS: You're the type of writer, then, who cannot *not* write.

RR: Yes. Also, as I've gotten older, I've noticed my process has changed a lot. I've always revised. But, now, I spend more and more time turning sentences around and getting things as close to exactly right as I can. And I know this is a good thing for a writer to do. Because writing is revision and it is making things as beautiful and as true as you can possibly make them. So going over the words; making sure that you've got the right ones, making sure they are in the right order; all of those obsessions are what make a good writer.

WS: Did you ever consciously use you mother in your work? Or, did you try to avoid doing so?

RR: Well, she appeared glancingly at times, I think in my second novel, *The Risk Pool* [1988]. I needed the character to go live with his father in that book and in order to make that happen I gave his mother a nervous breakdown. And of course I knew at that time that my mother was suffering. I knew there was some problem as I was growing up. She was the one who told me, "I'm going to end up institutionalized if something doesn't happen here." So all those threats she made found their way into this character's mother.

In the case of my mother, I thought: What would her life have been like if she didn't have these demons? She was a smart woman and a brave one. And as I was thinking that through, I suspect that is where Tesa Lynch came from in *Bridge of Sighs* [2007]. She is married to a real sweet but not terribly bright man; she is the much sharper knife in the drawer, and she is the one who would figure things out. She'd know exactly what to do and also have the courage to do it. My mother I think would have been like that if she hadn't been hampered as she was. But also at times I imagined my mother with her great energy and her determination, and her great courage, minus the disorder. The result of that is some of the strongest women to appear anywhere in my fiction. Tesa Lynch just takes my breath away.

WS: Your mother was worried about your putting your academic career aside to jump into writing full time. You had achieved professional and some financial success and suddenly you were your dad again, taking a gamble.

RR: Yes, taking a gamble. My mother always walked that knife edge between viewing herself as a rebel and being in her heart of hearts a very, very conservative person. She did not like risks. When I declared at age thirty that I was going to be a writer and that I didn't think I was going to be a professor much longer, that struck her as the kind of hubris that had been her doom. So, she was not a fan of that decision. Nor was anybody. It did seem like such a damn foolhardy thing to do. And if you read any of those early stories, that would have been further evidence.

WS: The title *Elsewhere*, it seems, has at least two meanings. Could you talk about the title?

RR: Well, it's always where my mother wanted to be. When she was in Gloversville, she would always say, anywhere is better than this, take me anywhere. But, as soon as she got anywhere, she needed to go home. In all those moves, one move right after another, there was always something wrong with where we were. And, it just seems so cruel to say, what was wrong with where she was, was that *she* was there. ■

JEANNE JUGAN RESIDENCE CHAPEL, BRONX, NY. PHOTO: LAWRENCE HOY

A Sermon in Stone

Church Design After Vatican II

Bethe Dufresne

One afternoon last summer, Lawrence Hoy and Robert Rambusch toured New York City's Church of the Holy Family, nodding appreciatively at each other's observations as they walked. The fifty-eight-year-old Hoy, a well-known liturgical designer and president of Renovata Studios, hadn't seen Rambusch, his ninety-year-old mentor, in some time. The two friends were relishing this chance to revisit the interior they had created together back in 1998, including a tabernacle enclosure modeled after the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem.

Bethe Dufresne, *a frequent contributor, is a freelance writer.* *Funding for this article was provided by a grant from the Henry Luce Foundation.*

Dedicated in 1965 and located near the United Nations—it is commonly called "the UN parish"—Holy Family was designed by architect George J. Sole to express the open spirit of the post–Vatican II reformed liturgy, with its increased emphasis on the participation of the laity, Scripture, and the use of vernacular language. As Hoy and Rambusch toured the church, an older woman who had stopped in to pray watched the pair closely, seeming to recognize them as persons of influence. Eventually she approached and offered a suggestion. Wouldn't it be lovely, she asked with a faint Russian accent, if the towering statue of the open-armed Risen Christ had some company? There was, after all, ample free and unadorned space. How about adding the twelve apostles, six on each side?

"That's a brilliant idea," replied Hoy, and advised her to take it up with the pastor.

Safely out of earshot, Rambusch, a revered but controversial giant in the field of liturgical design, flatly declared the idea "stupid." As for Hoy, whether he actually liked the idea was beside the point. People offer unsolicited advice all the time, he likes to point out, and as a designer you have to deflect what's inappropriate to the renovation or building process without closing yourself off to public sentiment.

People care passionately about their places of worship, and while that puts a liturgical designer like Lawrence Hoy in the line of fire, it's also precisely what drew him to the profession in the first place. Hoy knows that liturgical design is entirely different from the design of a bank, a store, or an office building. You are striving to evoke the eternal as well as a connection to a specific religious tradition. That's a tall order, especially given the acrimonious debate that has swirled for decades around the liturgical design changes inspired by Vatican II, and around architectural modernism as a whole.

Renovata Studios, the Port Chester, New York, firm Hoy co-owns with Peter Scurlock, has navigated this challenge with aplomb. In 1996 Renovata won a competition to provide the altar for the Central Park Mass conducted by Pope John Paul II, and in 2008 Hoy designed the papal chair used by Benedict XVI at Ground Zero, Yankee Stadium, and St. Joseph's Seminary. Other noteworthy projects include the adaptation of the Arthur Ashe Tennis Stadium at Flushing Meadows for the Diocese of Brooklyn's Jubilee 2000 Millennium Mass, and the historic restoration of sanctuary murals and stenciled walls at New York's Church of the Ascension in 2008. Recently, Renovata built a labyrinth to be engraved with poems from local poets inside St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Chestnut Hill, Pennsylvania. The labyrinth is open to the public all day. "It really transforms the space into something that's so much more than a 'Sunday only' worship space," says Hoy.

The Vatican calendar on the wall in the entry hall at Renovata's headquarters in Port Chester is for 2010—its cover features the papal chair the company made for Benedict. Elsewhere on the wall are letters of praise from several cardinals, including John O'Connor and Edward Egan. Clients say what distinguishes Hoy is his firm grounding in both historic preservation and artistic transformation. At times these twin imperatives make him feel like a tightrope walker. But for more than thirty years his goal has remained steady: to respect the best of the old—whether the ornate grandeur of centuries long past or the spare modernism of last century—while embracing the best of the new.

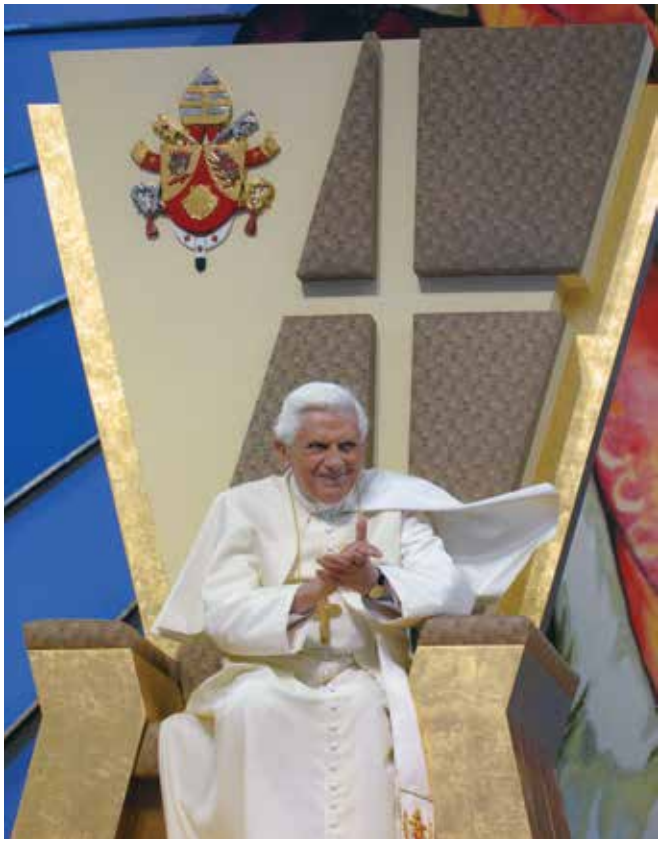
Most of Hoy's work is for Catholic churches, but, he says, "most churches don't call you for design." Instead they take what he calls a "turnkey" approach. "They see something wrong, like old wiring, paint peeling, etc., and want it fixed." A major renovation Hoy recently completed for St. Luke's Church in Queens, New York, began with such practicalities. Paint was peeling, stained glass needed repair, and the baptismal font leaked. But Monsignor John Tosi saw in the needed repairs the chance to do more—what he calls "an opportunity to enhance the liturgical space."

Lawrence Hoy with the papal throne he designed for Pope Benedict's 2008 visit to New York

LAWRENCE HOY

Prior to coming to St. Luke's, Tosi was director of liturgy for the Diocese of Brooklyn, and during that time he got to know Lawrence Hoy and admire his work. "Larry is creative, yet he has an appreciation for what's already there," says Tosi. "He can honor history while bringing it up-to-date with the times." St. Luke's presented such a challenge. The church is really two churches in one: an 1898 brick English Gothic structure—Tosi calls it "Country Gothic"—and a mid-twentieth-century addition that houses the sanctuary. Stylistically, the two parts had never meshed. Hoy set out to correct that, in part by copying Gothic moldings in the old section onto tracery for the Blessed Sacrament chapel in the new.

But stylistic dissonance wasn't the biggest problem. Tosi says parishioners were never comfortable with the removal of the tabernacle to a side area during a 1980 renovation, a change proposed by Vatican II. That renovation also brought the sanctuary forward, a move Tosi says proved "very effective, because it gathered people around the altar." In the process, however, a vast space was created that in Hoy's view cried out for containment. He solved multiple problems at once by restoring the tabernacle to the apse and building a wood canopy frame, reflecting the ceiling beams in the original part of the building, to create "a little church within a church." It blends in so well, says Tosi, "there's a sense that it was always there." (See photo on page 15.)



Pope Benedict at St. Joseph's Seminary in Yonkers, New York, in 2008

Hoy notes that the canopy is reminiscent of columns and archways in a courtyard of the Alhambra, the famed nineteenth-century Islamic palace in Granada, Spain. Taking inspiration from disparate cultural traditions is one of his hallmarks. (He modeled the angular chair for John Paul II after an African Zulu chieftain's seat.) Without championing any one style over another, Hoy draws on eclectic sources for his design and seamlessly incorporates them. Respecting the bones of a building is his prime concern. "Every now and then people will try to squeeze one architectural style into a building that doesn't want it or need it," he says. For instance, if a church community wanted to put a Gothic interior into a Romanesque building, he says, "I would try to dissuade them."

Color is another Hoy hallmark. "People are often very timid about color," he says; his mentor, Robert Rambusch, was "fearless" with color, "and I'm following his lead." Tosi worried a bit about how parishioners would react to Hoy's liberal use of dark blues, oxblood reds, and deep greens. He didn't need to. "The colors are so powerful," Tosi says, "yet they make you feel peaceful. It all harmonizes into tranquil space." For the St. Luke's ceiling, Hoy chose his go-to blue: Benjamin Moore's 804, a.k.a. Chicago Blues. He likens it to the blue of painter's tape, and admits that some are aghast when they first see a swatch. But it's been a big hit wherever he's used it, including his restoration of the interior and rectory at the Church of St. Monica in Manhattan.

Color is hardly the most controversial element in liturgical design. Everyone agrees that a church space should be both conducive to prayer, which connects us to God, and beautiful, to honor God. But what constitutes those two qualities is a perennial source of debate among liturgical architects and designers, bishops and pastors, and people in the pews. Ideological lines have formed around certain design values. Vatican II's impetus for freer movement and better sightlines, intended to foster inclusion, spawned a profusion of fan-shaped, theater-in-the-round-style churches. Designers like Rambusch welcomed the liberation from what he calls "bowling alley" design. But others feel the new style jeopardized the architectural detail, specificity of sacred spaces, and ecclesiastical order that a church should embody. Prominent among these critics is Duncan G. Stroik, professor of architecture at the University of Notre Dame, founding editor of *Sacred Architecture Journal* and author of *The Church Building as a Sacred Place: Beauty, Transcendence, and the Eternal.* Stroik does not dismiss Vatican II's emphasis on simplicity and clarity. "They're fine values," he says. "But I think we lost a lot. I think sometimes the simple became simplistic."

In Stroik's view, too many modernist, Vatican II–inspired churches could almost double, in their bland functionality, as high-school gymnasiums. (Of course, many postwar suburban Catholics will remember when Mass was often held in school gymnasiums!) But his chief complaint concerns the absence of human figures. "For certain reform Christian religions or even Judaism, that could be totally fine, but for Catholicism, it's all about the body." The Incarnation, he insists, makes it "fundamental" for Catholics "to have figures in our buildings that are God and the saints." Had he been present with Hoy and Rambusch at New York's Holy Family Church, Stroik surely would have empathized with the Russian woman's pitch for plaster apostles.

Hoy has no aversion to gospel figures—his renovation of St. Joseph's Chapel in Manhattan's Battery Park, which was damaged in the attack on the World Trade Center, includes statues of St. Florian, patron of firefighters; St. Michael the Archangel, patron of police officers; and St. Joseph, patron of workers (see page 3), as well as a welded stainless steel torso of Jesus meant to reflect the steel façade of the towers. Yet in his view, statuary is too often introduced as décor while having "nothing to do with what is happening" in the particular church. Despite Hoy's insistence that he is an "open book" when it comes to competing styles, it isn't hard to see his fundamental preference. Asked to name what he considers the world's most beautiful sacred edifice, he chooses without hesitation the Monastery of Novy Dvur, in the Czech Republic. Designed by the minimalist British architect John Pawson, Novy Dvur grew out of a reconstructed farmhouse and is most striking for its clean, Bauhaus-like lines and the gorgeous simplicity of how light streams into its vast, mostly unadorned interiors.

MARIA BASTONE

Church of St. Luke in Whitestone, Queens, circa 1945

St. Luke's after 1980s renovation

Not everyone finds this kind of rigorous minimalism an ideal model for sacred spaces. Novy Dvur is fine for Trappist monks, says Stroik, because "it goes with their charism of rugged simplicity. But what might be appropriate for those living in silence and community and praying seven times a day is different for a parish where people come once a week, if they even come that much, and are out in the world." Stroik claims that most modernist architects "would rather keep all the art out" because it competes with the architecture. Hoy disagrees—though he acknowledges that the call to liberate churches of excess ornamentation wound up robbing some of their distinctive character, and says it pains him that some design firms have basements filled with works of art heedlessly stripped from churches in the rush to embrace simplicity. (See "Holy Surplus," page 18.)

Born in Ohio to Catholic parents, Hoy was baptized but not raised in the faith. His parents wanted to expose their children to various faiths, and so the Catholic Church "was just one of the churches that I visited growing up." Yet Catholicism always held "a fascination" for Hoy and was present one way or another in his life. His father, an editor at McGraw-Hill, worked with the Archdiocese of New York (including then-monsignor Terence J. Cooke) editing the *Catholic Encyclopedia*. When Hoy was seven, the family moved to the wealthy suburb of Darien, Connecticut, where they regularly attended Quaker meetings. Hoy himself never joined the Friends. But their minimalist aesthetic—a certain austerity, purity, and the impulse to seek spiritual essence by stripping away distraction and ornamentation—appears to have had a lasting effect on him.

After high school Hoy set out to study business in college. But he was discovering that whatever he did in the future, he wanted it to be hands-on. "I had always helped my father work on the house, and I knew how to build things and fix things up," he recalls. He also knew how to separate treasure from trash, a skill honed as a child when he would visit the town dump searching for useful items for his father's do-it-yourself projects. Eventually, drawing on these skills, he found work renovating abandoned mansions in city slums. Hooked on the process, he went on to study historic restoration at Pratt Institute in New York. Though he was interested in old buildings generally, churches were a special draw. "I was always intrigued by church buildings because there's something happening everywhere," he says. "It's just an interesting building environment to be in."

A class at Pratt in which Hoy did light studies of cruciform cathedrals focused him on design and art. He graduated in 1979, and soon landed a job with the Rambusch Decorating Company, renowned for fine Old World craftsmanship and lighting expertise. Founded in 1898 by Danish immigrant Frode Rambusch, the company was led by Frode's two sons, Harold and Viggo. Harold was nearing ninety and going blind, and Hoy was hired to drive him to jobs. Shortly before he was to begin, Harold Rambusch died. But the company needed someone in the design room, and because Hoy had a knack for building things, he got to stay on. Suddenly he found himself in the equivalent of a new school, with a new teacher: Harold's son Robert, the top liturgical designer in the firm.

"It was an amazing atmosphere," Hoy recalls. "Bob was designing all these cathedrals, bringing ideas from all over the country, inspiring people"—and, in the process, breaking from the family firm's Old World aesthetic. A decorated WWII combat veteran, Rambusch knew Europe well and was eager to embrace the kind of minimalism—and cleansing aesthetic—popular among progressive architects and designers there. Hoy saw Pratt, Robert Rambusch, and "the whole Vatican II group," including Rambusch's friend Frank Kacmarcik (who later became a Benedictine oblate) as part of an artistic liberation. The first big project Hoy and Rambusch worked on together was a 1981 remodeling of St. Agnes Cathedral in Rockville Centre, New York. Built in 1958, the church was "catalog Gothic," Hoy recalls, "as if Sears and Roebuck tried to copy the Chartres Cathedral." Rambusch brought a "monastic Vatican II design" to the refurbishing of St. Agnes, recalls Hoy, "eliminating nostalgia and bringing the building to the core of its meaning." Hoy

LAWRENCE HOY

St. Luke's after renovation by Lawrence Hoy's design firm, Renovata Studios

admired and studied the thoughtfulness Rambusch brought to such projects. "A big part of what Bob did was to rethink the theological reasons behind a lot of what was in church design. He wanted the meaning to be found in the liturgy, not in the décor of the building."

In 1984, creative and financial disagreements among the Rambusch heirs led to Robert's departure from the family firm. Hoy left as well, working on various projects in New York and eventually forming a partnership with Peter Scurlock, a craftsman with a master's degree in sculpture from Pratt. Rambusch, meanwhile, had begun working on his own, and Hoy and Scurlock started doing projects for him and the clients he had brought with him, including a major liturgical renovation of the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Syracuse, New York.

In 1988 Hoy and Scurlock incorporated as Renovata; the name means "renewed" in Latin. "We aspired to be what Rambusch had been," says Hoy. "But it was difficult for two art-school graduates who didn't have any money." They took whatever work they could find—doing designs for an Armani show, restoring Brooklyn brownstones. But Renovata's core business would always be liturgical design. Hoy adopted lessons learned from Rambusch. One was the importance of keeping all aspects of a project under one roof. Even today, while Hoy will hire a lighting designer, almost all his interior designs are built in house, and Renovata's office is jammed with models and artifacts.

"Bob had a funny expression," Hoy recalls. "He'd say, 'I'm not a semen donor. I like to raise my own children.' Creativity doesn't end on the drafting table, and there's no way you can just do a design and hand it off to someone else to build—the lowest bidder—and expect to get a work of art." Renovata takes pride in staying within a budget and working with clients to decide where limited funds are best spent. "One reason we're not a big famous company," he says, "is because we don't go overboard"—unlike big-box design firms, he notes, that churn out imitations of Old World grandeur wrapped in faux stonework. A church, Hoy likes to remind people, is an individual expression of community and faith, not a stage set.

A career in liturgical design stretching over four decades offers a panoramic view of changes in the field. During the 1980s, recalls Hoy, conferences on design were held around the country and leading figures, including Robert Rambusch, gave lectures. It was an exciting time for church art and architecture. Then a stock market crash, a recession, and the sexual-abuse scandal drained church coffers and left administrators demoralized. Today many dioceses, including New York, have disbanded their Liturgical Commissions, leaving decisions "tied to the whims of individual (and increasingly conservative) bishops." The Archdiocese of New York has disbanded its building department, hiring private companies instead. Managers "tend to have a construction background," Hoy says, "so their philosophy is, 'Get the archdiocese to do the design, get the contractor to build it, and who are these liturgical artist guys? We don't need them; you can pick your altar out of a catalog.'"

Although Lawrence Hoy and Duncan Stroik may differ on modernism, which Hoy admires, and on today's conservative revival, which Stroik endorses, they agree that Vatican II

LAWRENCE HOY

inspired a lot of bad design. "Vatican II established principles, not rules, leaving an opening for creativity," says Hoy. "There was a powerful suggestion to use liturgical design consultants, which didn't really exist before then. But there wasn't really any kind of jurisdiction over who was an appropriate design consultant. A lot of architects said, 'I can do this'—and I've spent thirty years fixing their mistakes."

Despite his preference for strong and simple forms, Hoy says he's "not on a mission to convert anyone to Vatican II," and recognizes that in recent years the pendulum has swung back in the opposite direction. "People want all the bells and whistles," he says. But the same impatience that fueled a rush to implement the reforms of Vatican II is now, in Hoy's view, fueling a rush to reinstall traditional elements—even if they don't belong in a particular structure or meet artistic standards. He cites the current profusion of tapestries as an example. "Wherever there's an empty space on the wall they put up these doilies," he says, "that look like what you'd put on your grandmother's couch."

Stroik offers similar judgments of modernism. In particular he dislikes the way Vatican II architects "went low" on their designs, sacrificing verticality in the name of utility and saving money. Stroik sees height as a kind of theological imperative, and he is glad to see it making a comeback. "Most all the architects of the great modernist buildings—not just churches—were atheists," he asserts, implying that there's something antireligious about the minimalist, modernist ethos. A designer shouldn't be hired or rejected solely on the basis of faith, he concedes. But he views practicing the faith as a big plus. "The church building is a theology in stone and glass, a sermon in stone," he says. A client should ask: Who is giving this sermon?

Hoy doesn't see himself as designing a sermon. "I'm a spiritual person, but I wasn't raised to be religiously going to Mass, and it would be kind of hypocritical to say 'Well, now that I'm designing churches I should do this.' I don't want to start practicing a religion just because that's how I'm making my money." For his part, Rambusch—an observant Catholic—holds that talent should trump all. "I've done Episcopal churches and Jewish synagogues as well as Catholic churches," he says, and only once did someone—a rabbi—question his religious credentials. "But a lot of synagogues felt comfortable with Christians who were designers as long as you were a good designer. I would say the Jews more than Christians respected talent."

What bothers Hoy about the backlash against modernism and Vatican II is the same thing that bothers him about the hasty rush to embrace modernism and Vatican II in the first place. He sees both as closed-minded. The question that matters to him is: Is it art? Both Hoy and Stroik express disdain for "catalogue churches" that lack individual detail. But Hoy has equal disdain for what he calls "Disneyland churches" based on a nostalgic idea of what people left behind in Europe—or saw there on vacation. Too often, he says, people equate nostalgia with authenticity and forget that change has always been challenging. "Gothic cathedrals didn't appear until the eleventh century, and people thought they were hideous at first. Structural inventions, like flying buttresses, were weird. Only now do we accept them as beautiful."

But nostalgia is big business. "You can find all kinds of things in a catalogue that are premade in Italy," Hoy points out. "If you want an altar with the theme of the Last Supper, they'll ship it over in pieces that are numbered and you can assemble it like a little erector set." It's not that he thinks everything should be made by hand. Quite the contrary. Take Sacred Heart Chapel at Fairfield University in Connecticut, for which Hoy and Rambusch were design consultants. The chapel's walnut pews, striking for their monastic simplicity, were made by machine, yet Hoy is enthusiastic about their design and the beauty of the wood itself. "Authenticity," he quips, "doesn't mean doing everything the hard way!"

The backdrop to the altar at Sacred Heart is a stunning thirty-by-forty-foot Crucifixion mosaic made of glazed terra cotta blocks and bits of deep blue and burnished gold glass, all set in supple, undulating fiberglass mesh. It draws on antiquity, Hoy notes, but it was made by a mix of man and machine and assembled in a studio. Stroik, asked to comment about the chapel, allows that its tent-like exterior has "some nice Old Testament symbolism." But the interior is "very severe," lacking arches, columns, moldings, or any other of the representational elements he admires. And while he sees "some nice iconography" in the mosaic, he finds it "over the top" alongside the abstract nature of everything else.

Listening to Rambusch, Hoy, and Stroik, one realizes that much of their disagreement is about art, not worship. Yet all three agree that art exerts a powerful influence *on* worship. (An oft-repeated axiom is that when liturgy competes with the building, the building always wins.) Interestingly, both Rambusch and Stroik seem to consider themselves rebels. "Why are some people still so scared of contemporary?" asks Rambusch. "It's a hundred years old, for God's sake!" Stroik, on the other hand, views modernism as "a rejection of historical forms that we would see from antiquity up through the 1920s or '30s"—a rejection that itself, as he sees it, has become the establishment position against which he and other traditionalists are pushing back. As for Hoy, most of the interior features he has designed over the years, while unmistakably contemporary, show powerful classical influences; he doesn't see modernism as rejecting those forms, but rather as reinventing and building on them.

Stroik sees a big generational component to the design debate, with youth on his side. Young people, he says, want something new, and to them that means traditional. "Their attitude is that modernism is out of style," he says. With more than a trace of satisfaction, he reports that the real boom in American Catholic church building today is happening in the South; that's where the money is, where the babies are—and where the blank walls that Rambusch views as

The chapel of Thomas Aquinas College, designed by Duncan G. Stroik

"profound" are considered an anathema. "'We want a church that looks like a church,'" Stroik quotes southern Catholics. And to them, he notes approvingly, that means "traditional."

Even if this is true, Hoy counters, it doesn't mean that contemporary design should be abandoned; he continues to believe that the best way to satisfy clients "is not necessarily by doing what they tell you to do," but rather by "helping them to find themselves." A case in point is Renovata's recent makeover of St. Peter's Church in Greenville, North Carolina, where Hoy, with the help of the church's pastor, was able to steer tradition-minded diocesan leaders toward contemporary furnishings more appropriate to their 1980s, Vatican II–style building. "We definitely had to jump through hoops," Hoy reports. But once he showed leaders that his model of a contemporary altar with a gray granite base and black onyx top had roots in Baroque and Italianate churches, they embraced the contemporary form.

So what might the liturgical-design field look like twenty years from now? Robert Rambusch worries that by then all his "DNA fingerprints" will have been erased—not by the demands of young people, but by conservative bishops and back-to-tradition movements such as the one Stroik leads. He insists that he wouldn't mind if his work were replaced by new and better ideas—but not, please, by nostalgia. "Nostalgia is dangerous," he says, "because it's not facing reality and not adding to creativity." How, asks Rambusch, "can you have a living faith, unless you have living architecture and living art?"

It's almost impossible today to discuss anything related to Catholicism—certainly anything controversial—without asking, "What would Pope Francis do?" There's no telling yet where the new pope stands on liturgical design. Minimalists can take heart from his love of simplicity; but will he support directing funds toward liturgical design? Hoy, having designed elegant chairs for the last two popes, jokes that Francis might be happy just to sit "on an overturned bucket." Yet he is optimistic about the overall Francis Effect. Frugal as the pope is personally, as a "cultured man," Hoy predicts, he is likely to approve spending money to beautify churches for the benefit of the faithful. As for what such a church will look like in the future, Hoy says technology is moving too fast to predict where liturgical design will be in two decades. "On a worldwide level," he says, "creativity is expanding exponentially."

Returning to the clash between the traditional and the modern, Hoy predicts that the challenge will continue to be to "decipher the aims of the two and try to get the most out of each, the best of what they both have to offer." Concerning what Robert Rambusch calls "the glory days" of the post–Vatican II era, Hoy offers a gentle and admiring correction. "Interpreting Vatican II in its purest state was what Bob was about," he says. "But times have changed. I have no problem working with a congregation that wants something else. I'm not going to try to change them."

Still, like his mentor, Hoy has no patience for nostalgia. "Architects and artists who break new ground make you understand that the creative process is in our souls, as it was when life was created," he says. Change is always hard, but the satisfaction of a church job done well, Hoy believes, is like no other. "A lot of people will [practically] lie down before the scaffolding equipment and not let you touch their church because their church is the most beautiful thing ever," he says. "Then you re-design it and they say they never had any idea it could be so beautiful. And now *your* design is the one that they're going to lie down in front of the bulldozers for. That sense of respect for something you've done makes you realize, where else could you get that kind of feeling?" ■

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Holy Surplus

Recycling Dutch Church Art

Tom Heneghan

Catholicism is quickly fading from the crowded cities and flat countryside of the Netherlands. While still the country's largest faith, it's in retreat as secularization, the sexual-abuse crisis, and lay discontent with the hierarchy take their toll on once-solid parishes. No matter what the indicator—totals of priests, nuns, baptized Catholics, regular churchgoers, religious weddings or funerals—almost all trends point downward.

The latest sign of the faith's steep decline came in early December when Dutch bishops made their every-five-years *ad limina* visit to the Vatican. Outlining this "long-term shrinking process," as their official report called it, bishops conference chairman Cardinal Willem Eijk told Pope Francis the overall number of churches was also falling fast. "We foresee that a third of the Catholic churches in our country will be closed by 2020 and two-thirds by 2025," he told the pope.

Catholic and Protestant churches have been shutting down at the combined rate of about two per week for several years. The Catholic Church is now stepping up the pace with a plan to regroup the fifteen hundred parishes that existed in 2003 into two hundred large units by 2017. Deconsecrated churches have been sold and turned into everything from apartments and pubs to bookshops and health centers. Others have simply been torn down. But either way, the "sacred surplus" they leave behind—such as chalices, vestments, statues, and pews that no longer have any use—is piling up in the storerooms and basements of church buildings around the country.

The problem is acute in the Netherlands because its churches receive no support from the state. In most other European countries, direct or hidden subsidies help keep church buildings open even if their congregations cannot maintain them.

A small network of Dutch art specialists began ringing the alarm bells about five years ago. They helped parishes draw up inventories of their sacred holdings, and some rare pieces went to museums. But most surplus items were workaday church fixtures with no great value outside the liturgy. Reluctant to simply destroy them, the experts began to send the objects to parishes in places where the church is expanding rather than shrinking. Soon Dutch church art was turning up in Africa, Latin America, and Asia.

"If an object was made to be used in the liturgy, I want to keep it in the liturgy," said Eugene van Deutekom, director of the Museum of Religious Art in Uden, near 's-Hertogenbosch in the southern Netherlands. "This is a way to give a second life to these objects."

Evelyn Verheggen, an art historian in the Rotterdam diocese, also spoke in terms of keeping a tradition alive. "When you give an object to another church, or a church in another country, it's like someone donating a heart or another organ," she said.

Over the past few years, Dutch church art has begun popping up in unexpected places. Most pieces are sent by individual parishes or dioceses, without any central coordination. Some experts team up to meet a request, as van Deutekom and Verheggen did to send three shipping containers full of statues, an altar, a church bell, a lectern, and even rows of well-worn pews to a cathedral and church in the Dominican Republic.

Dutch monstrances have ended up in convents in Egypt and Argentina. Once word of the recycling drive got out, parishes in several African countries sought chalices, ciboria, and vestments. A parish in Brazil asked for an organ, while one in Indonesia said it had an empty building that could take just about everything a church would need. Requests have even come from Italy, where there surely is no shortage of Catholic art. Some needy parishes in southern Italy have received chalices and monstrances.

The revival of Christianity in the former communist countries has meant rising demand there as well. A Ukrainian church building used as a gas-mask factory for decades has been refurbished with pews, statues, and crucifixes from a church near Eindhoven. Churches in the Baltics ask for old-fashioned vestments only very traditionalist priests would wear in the West today.

Orthodox churches are keen on relics to adorn crosses and other pieces of church art. "They don't often ask for relics of this or that saint," van Deutekom said. "They just ask for relics by the kilo." Their only proviso, he added, was that the relics had to come from before the Great Schism of

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Eugene van Deutekom

1054. Some old chalices also have medallions embedded in their base, and these too have to be more than a millennium old if the piece is to go to an Orthodox church.

Priests visiting Dutch dioceses from far-off places sometimes ask for chalices and other sacred vessels by the kilo too, but for a different reason. With silver selling at about $600 and gold at about $40,000 per kilo, the Dutch have to be especially careful their sacred art isn't melted down for the metal.

In one diocese recently, a secretary was about to give two chalices to a priest taking them to Africa when the bishop arrived and spotted him as a con man. In another diocese, a new lay member of the parish council took a monstrance to be appraised and never came back. He was caught when he tried to sell its diamonds to a jewelry dealer.

An Augustinian monastery in Eindhoven has about one hundred fifty chalices in storage. "I could send them all to Africa and Eastern Europe in twenty-four hours if I didn't check whether the people taking them are serious," van Deutekom said. To avoid thieves, he usually asks for a donation equal to the value of the precious metal in an object. Most parishes can find a donor to pay the price, he said, and the proceeds help send items to churches that cannot afford the shipping fees. By paying $3,500 for a chalice for their son's ordination, a Dutch couple made it possible for van Deutekom to restore and donate six more chalices to the churches he's already supplied in the Dominican Republic.

Another condition is that people receiving surplus church goods must use them for religious purposes. A Dutch parish that did not demand this sold used pews to a local farmer, only to see them used as fences.

Despite their successes, the recycling efforts will still not absorb the huge wave of sacred art to be removed from Dutch churches in the coming years. In addition, many Dutch families have swamped Uden's Museum of Religious Art and the Catharijneconvent, another large religious art museum in Utrecht, with statues and crucifixes from the homes of their deceased parents. Much of it is little more than Catholic kitsch. "We hardly accept anything at all now," said Utrecht curator Marc de Beyer. "We already have most of the objects that are being offered."

But what should they do with a Jesus statue with blond hair and blue eyes, or with garishly overdone paintings? "They're popular in some places, but I feel it's a kind of cultural colonialism to send them sacred art we're embarrassed by," said van Deutekom. Dutch priests prefer modern liturgical styles, which means he's collected racks full of old-fashioned vestments, but there's still demand for them. "If you have old black-and-gold vestments, just send them to the Baltics," he said. One guiding principle is to avoid sending objects that are too far removed from a country's culture. "I got a request from Indonesia for a chalice recently. I tried to find one that was modern, not neo-Gothic."

While the work seems like that of an antiques dealer, van Deutekom says the religious angle makes it special for him. "I'm not a fine arts dealer. My interest is not in the economic value of an object, but its devotional value," he said. "We are one religious family and families share what they have." ■

COURTESY TOM HENEGHAN

Alan Wolfe

Defensive Secretary

Duty
Memoirs of a Secretary at War
Robert M. Gates
Knopf, $35, 618 pp.

Robert Gates leaves his readers without a shred of doubt: he respected, indeed loved, the men and women who served on the front lines in the two wars fought by the United States during his tenure as Secretary of Defense. His frequent trips to Iraq and Afghanistan, he writes, "took a heavy emotional toll." Each one proved more difficult than the last. "As I looked into each face," he says, "I increasingly would wonder to myself which of these kids I would next see in the hospital at Landstuhl or Walter Reed or Bethesda—or listed for burial at Arlington cemetery." I have no reason to doubt Gates's sincerity. Unlike many in his position—indeed strikingly unlike the bloodless Donald Rumsfeld, whom he replaced—Gates is clearly a man with a heart.

Not only that: Gates took upon himself this emotionally grueling task not for love of money or power but out of a sense of duty—the word he relies upon for the title of his memoirs. "I did not enjoy being secretary of defense," he writes, and again there is little reason to be skeptical. Gates assumed his position at the age of sixty-three, when others might have been considering retirement, and left five years later, well past the age when he could have relied on his position to assure a high-paying or prestigious job somewhere else. (He has since assumed positions as President of the Boy Scouts of America and Chancellor of the College of William and Mary.) The only man to have served as secretary of defense under two presidents of different parties, he never displayed the one-sidedness necessary for political advancement in this hyperpartisan age. Those who write political memoirs tend to hide their ambition, claiming that only reluctantly and against the better judgment of friends and family were they called into the fray. Gates does his share of that, and, if truth be told, he is not always convincing. But if any public servant in recent years comes close to embodying the ideal of duty, it is he.

In Gates's world, a willingness to sacrifice and a respect for duty stand in sharp contrast to that noisy, ugly, and short-sighted activity called politics. He cannot help but contrast the quiet resolve of the troops with "the self-promotion and selfishness of power-hungry politicians and others—in Baghdad, Kabul, and Washington," all of whom made difficult the task of "maintaining my outward calm and discipline, and suppressing my anger and contempt for the many petty power players." Memoirs offer opportunities to get even, and Gates, who avoided name-calling when in office, cannot resist letting the world know what he really thinks of the likes of Joe Biden, Dick Cheney, John McCain, Carl Levin, and the two presidents under whom he served. No longer repressing his anger and contempt, he offers a form of titillation unusual in political memoirs. Inside the beltway,

Robert Gates being sworn in as defense secretary in 2006

where journalists care more for personalities than policy, Gates's candidness has helped him sell books.

That same willingness to be candid, however, also reveals another side, indeed a dark side, to the service Gates offered his country. In September 2007, Gates's main task was to fend off Democratic attacks on the war in Iraq in order to give President Bush and his military commanders more time to develop strategies for improving America's crumbling position in that country. Meeting with Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, he impressed upon her the necessity of passing a defense-appropriations bill and resisting efforts to attach conditions on funding for the war in Iraq. Pelosi turned him down flat. "I wasn't surprised," Gates writes. "After all, one wouldn't want facts and reality—not to mention the national interest—to intrude upon partisan politics, would one?"

The arrogance behind Gates's comment is breathtaking. George W. Bush had taken the country to war on a lie. Elections are the mechanism we use to ensure a modicum of accountability for such actions. The conversation between Pelosi and Gates took place as a new electoral campaign was in the making—a campaign in which Americans wound up electing a president who had opposed Bush's war. In this context, Pelosi, representing both her party and her constituents, had every right to refuse the requests of the Bush administration. By sarcastically dismissing Pelosi and her concerns, Gates reveals how little respect he has for the democratic process; anger, he does not seem to understand, is the price we pay for irresponsible leadership. There was no room for that kind of anger in Gates's notion of duty. His was never to reason why. That explains why his love for the troops, as moving as it is, comes far too late: the best way to ensure that American troops do not wind up in Landstuhl is not to send them on hopeless and ill-defined missions in the first place. It was, I believe, because Pelosi also hated to see young people die that she turned Gates down.

As for facts and reality, it was the Bush administration, which Gates faithfully served, that ignored them. Where, one has to wonder, is the anger directed against a president who knew so little, risked so much, and refused to acknowledge any mistakes? Gates presents himself as a pragmatic manager working to get things done. The problem is that managerial skills used in the service of getting the wrong things done is of little help to the troops or anyone else. Concerned only with means and not ends, Gates praises Bush for all the personal characteristics that led the country to disaster. "I found him at ease with himself and comfortable in the decisions he had made," he writes of Bush. "This was a mature leader who had walked a supremely difficult path for five years." That Bush never understood the consequences of his actions was less important to Gates than that "he was a man of character, a man of convictions, and a man of action." Gates blames his failures to get his way not only on politicians like Pelosi but on Pentagon bureaucrats defending their turf. Those targets are too easy. Blame for Iraq belongs at the very top. A truly candid memoir would have posed the question of how the United States found itself fighting the wrong war in the wrong place.

For all his finger-pointing, that is a question Gates avoids. It is not an exaggeration to say that the great bulk of the work facing Gates as secretary of defense was to manage the fallout created by one of the worst presidents in our history. In this he did about as well as any single individual could do. But just as his respect for the troops comes too late, so does his sense of duty. In this case, duty requires a frank and honest discussion about how the response to the events of September 11 turned so sour. Assigning blame is a duty Gates shirks.

For whatever reason, most likely to deflect attacks on his lack of foreign-policy experience, Barack Obama asked Gates to stay on. "I thought Obama was first-rate in both intellect and temperament," Gates writes. But, he continues, Obama disliked passion, and it showed

in his relationship with the troops fighting in Afghanistan. "When soldiers put their lives on the line, they need to know that the commander in chief who sent them in harm's way believes in their mission. They need him to talk often to them and to the country, not just to express gratitude for their service and sacrifice but also to explain and affirm why that sacrifice is necessary, why their fight is noble, why their cause is just, and why they must prevail. President Obama never did that." I read this as a recommendation to infantilize the troops, most of whom were far too jaded to buy into such patriotic mush. When a large number of troops are already committing suicide or requiring extensive psychiatric help, following Gates's advice would have made the personal crises they faced far worse by asking overstretched troops to achieve impossible objectives. Obama made clear, even while sending more troops to that country, that he wanted them home as soon as possible. That, and not Bush's bluster, is what leadership is all about.

Working for a Democratic president, the contempt for democracy Gates showed in his meeting with Pelosi took on a whole new life. Gates writes as if wars can be won, but only if society gives the war-makers unchecked authority to win it, shooing away those institutions of public understanding and engagement that stand in the way. The key decision facing Obama was whether to pursue a policy of counterterrorism or counterinsurgency in Afghanistan. (The former would seek the limited objective of reducing terror; the latter would be aimed at creating a more stable and secure Afghanistan.) It all came down to whether something like the surge used in Iraq could be used in America's other war and, if so, how many new troops should be sent there. Gates, who favored the counterinsurgency strategy, complains that decision-making was complicated by what he calls "the obtuseness of many of those at home"—which others might label democracy at work. His example? The family of twenty-one-year-old Lance Corporal Joshua Bernard objected to the publication of a photo of his dead body, but the Associated Press decided to publish it anyway. Gates calls the AP decision an "outrage." Others might view it as an attempt to make real the costs of war so that Americans would be better prepared to make decisions about future commitments to another one.

Unlike Bush, Obama was deliberative. According to Gates, a total of nine two-to-three-hour meetings were called by the president so that he could get Afghanistan right. It is not unknown in our society, indeed it is rather routine, for military leaders to put pressure on the president by emphasizing the danger of not acting decisively. In this case, Gen. Stanley McChrystal, an advocate for the counterinsurgency approach, offered such as assessment to Obama, only to see it leaked to the *Washington Post*. Needless to say, Gates was furious that ordinary people might learn something about how their money was to be spent and the lives of their children put at risk.

But that is not what makes Gates's telling of this story interesting. Gates writes that he would be "very surprised" to learn that McChrystal himself had anything to do with the leak. Although it certainly seemed to Obama and his advisors that the military was double-crossing them in the hope of getting more troops, Gates "tried to persuade Obama that there was no plan, no coordinated effort by the three military men to jam him." Relying on the ever-helpful passive voice, Gates writes that, as a result of Obama's suspicions, "a wall was going up between the military and the White House." If Gates sometimes seems to infantilize the troops, here he is doing the same for his readers. Military leaders in a democracy use whatever tactics they can to get what they want. That is called politics, and the military practices it just as politicians do.

Gates refuses to see it that way. "In the end," he writes of the Afghan deliberations, "I felt this major national security debate had been driven more by the White House staff and by domestic politics than any other in my experience." For Gates, there are those guided by the maxim of duty, who simply want to do what is right, and those guided by the maxim of politics, who want to do only what is popular. He writes, "The aggressive, suspicious, and sometimes condescending and insulting questioning of our military leaders" by Obama's advisers "made them overly defensive, hardening their unwillingness to compromise." Gates may not fully understand what he is saying here, for he appears to be acknowledging that at times the military is in fact not guided by the national interest but by what it can get at the bargaining table. So, it turns out, was Gates. "My anger and frustration with the White House staff and the NSS during the process led me to become more protective of the military and a stronger advocate for its position than I should have been." Political concerns may well have influenced decisions with respect to Afghanistan, motivating those who wanted a more aggressive posture as well as those who did not.

Gates has been criticized for leaving out of his memoirs all the things he got wrong, such as the Iran-Contra affair and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Far more damaging, I believe, is what he puts in. Gates's memoir is engaging to read. As a public servant, he comes across as a man of experience and discretion. Yet anyone who believes that the United States has lost much of its democratic character as it has ceded ever greater matters to the military will find Gates's anger misplaced and his praise for his own accomplishments grating. America needs leaders who understand their duty to be restoring some sense of control over the military in the hope of winning our democracy back. A little anger toward those who led the country so astray might be the best place to begin. ■

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Lawrence S. Cunningham

More Than a Nice Story

Jesus
A Pilgrimage
James Martin
HarperOne, $27.99, 528 pp.

In the introduction to his new book, James Martin, SJ, explains that he wants to "look at Jesus" through the lens of his own education, prayer, and especially his experience on pilgrimage in the Holy Land. In a sense, Martin's pilgrimage was an effort to follow the advice of his order's founder, St. Ignatius. In the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius recommends that while praying one set himself imaginatively in the scenes of the gospels. "Composition of place," as the practice is known, is a venerable technique (and indebted to Franciscan spirituality). It has long been argued, for example, that Caravaggio used the practice as he painted the Supper at Emmaus in a Roman trattoria.

Of course, no two-week pilgrimage could cover all the Holy Land locations connected to the life of Jesus. Martin chose those that illustrated the stories from the gospels about which he had long meditated in his own Jesuit formation. What's most impressive about *Jesus: A Pilgrimage* is how Martin weaves together his own deep reading of superior scholarship with insights he received from his own prayer life. From this mélange of observations, Martin draws helpful applications of a pastoral nature.

But *Jesus* is not a guidebook to the Holy Land. Martin's intended audience is not tourists, but rather educated laypeople who can accompany him on the way—especially those who might feel a bit intimidated by the work of scholars such as Daniel Harrington and John Meier. It is a mark of Martin's skill as a writer that his engaging prose is never swamped by technical language. Neither is this a book of dispassionate observation. Martin traveled as a believer. In his discussion of the multiplication of the loaves, for example, he rejects the nineteenth-century explanation that Jesus simply urged the crowd to share what they had already brought. Citing John Donahue and Daniel Harrington, Martin situates that interpretation within the "nice thought" school of exegesis. He demands that the reader face up to the miraculous in the gospel stories. Martin rejects the argument that the Resurrection is best understood as an expression of the desire of Jesus' followers to keep his memory alive. To erase the miraculous from the gospel accounts, he writes, is to eviscerate their power, and finally to turn them into "nice" stories.

A. N. Mironov, Jesus and the Pauper, *2009*

Early in the book Martin makes the old distinction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, noting that it is the former rather than the latter that he will highlight. The distinction, of course, could lead to unacceptable theological consequences. As Pope Benedict XVI wrote in his *Jesus of Nazareth*, to emphasize only the Jesus of history is to lodge oneself only in the past. But it is clear that Jesus is vividly present to Martin, so that the distinction dissolves into a different formulation: The Jesus of history is the Christ of faith. In his discussion of the post-Resurrection stories, Martin admits as much, since those narratives insist that those who saw the risen Christ knew him because "they knew him during his public ministry. Mary [of Magdala] recognizes his voice because she had heard it before."

Because the gospels, especially the synoptics, are foundationally narrative in character, it is critical to read the stories with close attention to detail and language. As Martin points out, when Jesus is asked a question he frequently answers with a story. In the chapter on parables, he notes that when we want to know what God is like we get the answer in the story of Jesus. "In a sense," Martin continues, "Jesus is the parable of God."

Martin is one of our most popular spiritual writers—and for good reason. His writing is clear and compelling. He does his homework. He's not afraid to use his own story to make a larger point, all while keeping in mind both the convinced believer and the willing inquirer. This volume, complete with a generous bibliography and suggestions for further study, can be read on one's own, but it would also work well for a study group. If I may borrow a line from Augustine's *Confessions*: "Take up and read!" ■

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BOOKMARKS

Anthony Domestico

Denis Donoghue once wrote that James Merrill's poetry was "a net of loose talk tightening to verse." This is also a good way to describe Spencer Reece's new poetry collection, *The Road to Emmaus* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux). There is a pleasant, relaxed clarity to the verse even when Reece, who recently became a priest in the Reformed Episcopal Church, talks about darkness—the darkness of the world (the neonatal ICU, where "newborns breathed, / blue, spider-delicate in

nests of tubes"; a Puerto Rican mother who "weeps, her stabbed son intubated before us") and the darkness of the soul (Reece's struggles with vocation, with the call to remember the poor, with death and despair). These poems are delicate but rarely precious, serious but never sententious, religious but not dogmatic.

A prime example of Reece's delicacy—and of his skill as a storyteller—comes in "Monaco," one of the collection's best poems. First, we meet an ill-matched, unnamed couple. She, a hardened, "handsome" Frenchwoman, "made her money in the drug trade" and now sells works of art—"a Matisse here, a Picasso there." He, on the other hand, is a "tall, athletic, effeminate" American man who "looked as if he were being chased / by something no one could see." We learn of their rapid courtship: "They met at a sales counter in Palm Beach / where the man was ringing up items at 75 percent off each. / She invited him on a trip, / after she gave him a sizeable tip." We sense that each finds cover in the other: she for her illegal activities, he for his queerness. Reece sums up their peculiarities—and how their peculiarities, when paired off, become somehow less peculiar—in this way:

> The couple exhibited variations
> the world never embraced, but presented as
> a couple
> the world embraced promptly,
> for the world trusted what was coupled.

The couple takes a trip to Monaco, where they meet the "Baroness von Lindenhoffer," an "androgynous" woman who is rumored to be a "lesbian, / but of this she never spoke." Eccentric and rich, reticent yet wearing makeup "heavy / as a clown's, and a red polka-dotted muumuu," the baroness is mysterious and strangely alluring: "she exuded an isolation as if it were a scent. / Something inside her had ceased."

The baroness buys a painting by Toulouse-Lautrec from the Frenchwoman; the couple and the baroness have tea together; a moment of intimacy is gestured toward but ultimately abandoned; the couple leaves Monaco and eventually separates. Somehow, this encounter with the baroness has meant a great deal to them: "Was it there they came to know danger, / how one could disappear into a beautiful lie?" The man and woman look back on their relationship with sadness but without rancor: "They lived on, / both aware the one had altered the other: / whether intended or not, / the act could not be undone." All of this is sketched quickly, lightly, suggestively, and hauntingly. It really is as close to James Merrill's work as anything I've read in a long time.

Many of Reece's poems tread similar ground. "Gilgamesh," for instance, is a beautiful autobiographical piece charting Reece's five-year relationship with someone he calls Joseph O'Shaughnessy. ("'You can't use his real name,' / a member from the Coming Out Group said. / 'It's cruel. He's not out. He's not dead.'") We hear of their beginnings—"Joseph was fifty, Spencer thirty-nine— / somewhat late to begin a life together / for the first time"; of their years spent together, playing Scrabble, visiting family, caring for "a Lab mix named Butch"; and, finally, of their end: after they break up, Joseph wants to continue being friends but Spencer cannot. He can only write.

Balanced against these sketches of romance are re-imaginings of Reece's journey toward the priesthood. This journey involves a different kind of love, surely, but one that is still marked by moments of delight and despair. "At Thomas Merton's Grave" contains wonderful lines on anguish ("We can never be with loss too long"), on the Hopkins-like exuberance of nature ("the wood thrush calls to the monks, / pausing atop the stone crucifix, / singing: 'I am marvelous alone!'"), and on how time—and God's creation—can salve, if never cure, loss: "How kind time is, / altering space / so nothing stays wrong: and light, / more new light, always arrives."

"The Upper Room" describes Reece's time as a seminarian. "In search of the transcendent," Reece moves to a third-floor apartment in New Haven, which he furnishes with "a Byzantine icon of Christ," a well-thumbed Book of Common Prayer, C. S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce*, and Gregory of Nazianzus's *Orations*. Reece isn't above humor: he and his fellow seminarians, "grimly chewing our meals in the twilight," "were made for any novel by Anita Brookner or Barbara Pym." But he also gives us a sense of how this experience transformed him and how this transformation demanded a return to the world: in an echo of both St. John of the

Cross and T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, he writes, "The way forward was the way out." He closes with this meditation on the call to the religious life:

Had I chosen it?
Had I chosen it all?
The Benedictine cross around my neck,
given by a friend, was light,
a silver, tarnished, chipped Christ, on shiny
onyx,
a man I now relied on—
paradoxically bound and free—
a childless, bachelor Jew, slightly feminine.

At times, Reece's poetry seems downright prosy, as in the opening to the collection's title poem: "The chair from Goodwill smelled of mildew. / I sat with Sister Ann, a Franciscan, / in her small office, at the Cenacle Retreat House, / right on South Dixie Highway in Lantana, Florida." Or listen to these hesitant, self-correcting lines from later in the same poem: "but much I knew I would forget, or remember in a way my own, / which would not exactly be correct, no, not exactly." But then, after stanzas of looseness, the language tightens and crystallizes, leading to moments of intense clarity. Again, from the same poem: "where there is estrangement there is little peace"; "We were aristocrats of time."

Like Merrill, Reece describes the finer things in life with precision—good books and good art, "cashmere and shantung." (Reece worked as a sales associate at Brooks Brothers; he once fitted the poet Donald Hall for a sport coat.) Like Merrill, Reece is a formalist but not a slavish one: he's willing to use regular rhyme schemes and stanza structures but he's not bound to them. Like Merrill, he writes about museums ("the Neue Galerie, the Whitney, the Frick, MoMA") and the threat of nuclear annihilation (a short prose poem entitled "The Manhattan Project" describes Reece's grandfather's involvement in building the nuclear bomb). Like Merrill, he loves to include proper nouns in his work: the poet Richard Blanco, the critic Harold Bloom, and the reverend Peter Gomes all make short appearances in *The Road to Emmaus*.

This connection between these two poets is no accident: Reece struck up a correspondence with Merrill before his death, and he's currently working on a book of prose meditations that will consider Merrill, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Emily Dickinson, and George Herbert. I suspect that Merrill would have loved *The Road to Emmaus*. All readers of contemporary poetry should, too.

Like *The Road to Emmaus*, Geoffrey G. O'Brien's new collection, *People on Sunday* (Wave Books), resists the open-ended and, to my mind, often sloppy free-verse form of much contemporary poetry. He's a formalist through and through: many of his poems employ crisp, clear tercets or quatrains, harking back, at least on their surface, more to someone like W. H. Auden than to someone like Charles Bernstein.

But beneath these seemingly placid forms, *People on Sunday* pulses with anger—at the exploitative effects of unfettered capitalism, at America's seemingly endless wars, at our willingness to see everyone and everything turned into commodities to be sold and purchased. O'Brien, a supporter of the Occupy Movement who had his ribs broken at a peaceful protest in Berkeley in 2011, uses traditional verse to make a radical argument.

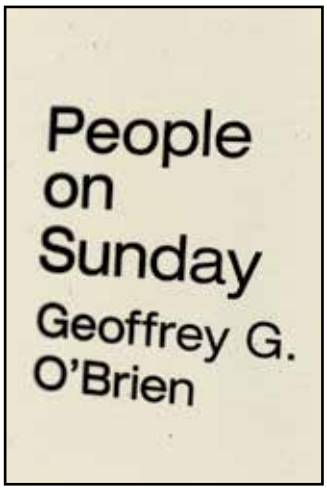
The beginning of "At the Edge of the Bed" puts this political and economic argument most clearly:

> No one yet has ever chosen misery
> Those that seem to have done so
> Haven't any more than they have
> Chosen this mist or is it rain
>
> We would first have to own ourselves
> Then give up on them entirely
> Every day rather than once
> And for all...

O'Brien believes that we don't own ourselves—or that we don't believe that we do, or that by using the very language of ownership to describe our selves we are capitulating to the market's dehumanizing logic. Work and capital seem to have tyrannized our very language: the weather is described as "76 degrees and money"; we believe that "the sun shines / Because the workweek desires it."

In "Thanatopsis," O'Brien writes that "we're taught to imagine days / As reprieves from other days," allowing the misery we feel at work to be eased by our holidays and weekends. This is the major argument of the poem "People on Sunday (1930)," which is loosely based on the 1930 German silent film *Menschen am Sonntag*. In this poem, O'Brien follows a group of city dwellers as they go about their lives on a Sunday. He deftly shifts pronouns throughout, sometimes writing from the first-person perspective and sometimes from the third, sometimes addressing a "you" and sometimes addressing a "them." With this strategy, O'Brien simultaneously collapses and opens up the distance between poet and subject, the writer and the people he is writing about.

And this is appropriate since the poem is precisely about the longing for, and frustration of, community. In O'Brien's vision, the weekend seems to be the one time that allows us to escape the tyranny of capitalism: as he writes in "Hesiod," "When the markets close / You feel time flows differently inside." We might think that this new kind of time will allow us to be cooperative instead



of competitive, play instead of work. But this isn't the case. For O'Brien, the weekends are a modern-day bread and circus, meant to distract us from the horror that is our workaday life. The pleasures that O'Brien's characters find on Sunday—swimming, walking—are primarily private pleasures.

It's true that there are moments of community: "One man breaks his cigarette in two to celebrate, / Gives half to the other man"; a hat is thrown into a tree and "This precipitates a whole other serious game / Of cooperation—at least three will be required / To spend time getting back the hat of only one." But these moments are fleeting. The retrieval of the hat is "an inefficiency permitted on Sunday," and Sunday alone. Sunday may be "full and orchestral" but it's also "about to burn"—about to end, leading to Monday and work once again.

All this may make *People on Sunday* sound dreary, and its argument is dreary, for the most part. O'Brien hopes for communal action, but he acknowledges that it will be hard, if not impossible, to change things as fundamentally as he'd like. But the collection isn't all about political economy. There are excellent poems about Strauss's "Beim Schlafengehen" ("The sound was like picking sad battles, / The red that white imagines yellow is") and about the history of language itself ("Spenser coined blatant to show us the scandal / Of truth can only be invented"). O'Brien's poetry shows that political radicalism and formal conservatism are not incompatible with each other.

If you need more convincing that traditional verse forms don't belong in the dustbin of history, then Glyn Maxwell's *On Poetry* (Harvard University Press) might persuade you. *On Poetry* is really a Poetry-101-type manual, very much in the line of older, venerable texts like *Sound and Sense* and John Hollander's *Rhyme's Reason*. Maxwell begins by claiming that his "is a book for anyone," but it's aimed at two primary audiences: those who want to write poetry and those readers of poetry who want to understand the craft from the inside. (I've assigned the book for my own Introduction to Lyric Poetry course this semester.)

Maxwell structures his book idiosyncratically. Instead of a chapter on meter, a chapter on rhyme, and so on, he has a chapter on "Whiteness," a chapter on "Black," a chapter on "Pulse," etc. Sometimes, this is really just a matter of nomenclature. He begins "Pulse," for instance, by declaring that he doesn't teach "prosody. Iambs, dactyls, spondees, trochees," but "pulse" is really just "prosody" or "meter" by another name. But at other times, Maxwell's peculiar terminology gets at something peculiar—and revealing—about his own understanding of how poetry works.

Take "whiteness," for example. As Maxwell rightly notes, poems begin in silence and they end in silence, and the thing that separates poetry from prose is the line-break—whiteness, in other words. He compares a poem to a

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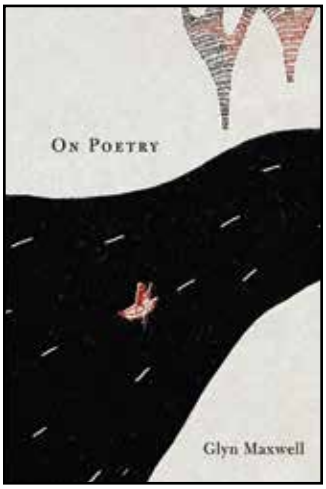

song: both have lyrics (words), but that's not all that they have. A song also has music, and the poet also has "silence, the space, the whiteness." As he succinctly puts it, "Songs are strung upon sounds, poems upon silence." And it is this play of sound and silence, text and whiteness, that constitutes the task of the poet.

Maxwell's book is studded with sharp, confident claims about poetry: "You master form you master time"; "In every poem I admire, and every poem that's still around say fifty, a hundred, a thousand years after its maker is gone, what's signaled by the black shapes is a human presence"; "Formlessness says time is broken"; "Poetry is creaturely. What survives in it echoes corporeal phenomena: the heartbeat and the pulse, the footstep and the breath." Throughout, there's a deep commitment to form. Maxwell believes that much free verse is laziness masking itself as daring. When you write free verse, he claims, you have to be extremely intelligent about the whiteness, and too few poets are. There is a reason that traditional forms have become traditional: in some deep sense, they work.

Maxwell's book is an invigorating tonic: passionate, learned, fun, and infuriating at the same time. *On Poetry* theorizes what *The Road to Emmaus* and *People on Sunday* demonstrate: that formal poetry—poetry that patterns its play of blackness and whiteness, sound and silence—is alive and well. ■

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

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One Pound, Fourteen Ounces

James Hannan

My wife and daughters and I were headed out to Saturday Vigil Mass on a dreary November evening some thirty years ago. The phone rang, and my wife and I exchanged worried glances as she picked up the receiver. Dr. John DeMaio from Pennsylvania Hospital's neonatal intensive-care unit was on the other end of the line. His voice, a calming influence during the four weeks that our son had been in the NICU, was uncharacteristically subdued.

"Mrs. Hannan…you'd better get over here right away. James has taken a turn for the worse."

Our son was born fourteen weeks premature—right on the edge of viability. He weighed two pounds, eight ounces at birth, largely because of the steroid injections my wife had endured in the weeks she had spent in the high-risk maternity ward prior to his birth. His weight quickly dropped to one pound, fourteen ounces.

In the month since James's birth, we had become accustomed to setbacks in our son's struggle to survive. We knew the odds were long. We knew that he was susceptible to such grotesqueries as necrotizing enterocolitis, retrolental fibroplasia, brain bleeds, and neonatal respiratory-distress syndrome. Would one of these end his brief life?

That night, whether out of avoidance or in an act of blind faith, I insisted that we go to Mass. James had been included in the parish's list of special intentions since his birth, as had my wife before that. We had drawn strength from our parish community, and it seemed only fitting that we worship with them before visiting our son.

Whatever inspiration we had gotten from the service soon dissolved and a mind-numbing dread settled over us as we drove to the hospital. I remember very little of the trip to Philadelphia or how we made our way to the NICU. Dr. DeMaio caught sight of us at the entrance, and he rushed to greet us, his manner oddly animated.

"Folks," he stammered, "I can't explain it, but between the time I called and about fifteen minutes ago, James's condition improved dramatically. There's just no explaining it medically."

We were stunned, and overwrought, and grateful for the miracle that had been bestowed on our family. Perhaps all those feelings colored our perception of our son as he lay in his isolette. He looked almost beatific, despite being encumbered by an array of monitor leads, intravenous lines, and feeding tubes.

His course after that evening was typically uneven—"Never trust a preemie" was Dr. DeMaio's mantra. But James gained weight, was able to regulate his body temperature, and took formula from a bottle. The hospital sent him home on a heart-lung monitor the week before Christmas. He weighed five pounds, four ounces. It was a time of great joy and even greater anxiety. We weren't new to parenthood, but his special circumstances required almost constant vigilance. We'd rush to his crib every time the monitor's alarm sounded, ready to rouse him or perform CPR. Thankfully, most of the alarms were set off by a loose wire. We didn't allow visitors for several weeks, fearing that he might pick up an infection. But we did have our parish community continue to pray for him.

James had some residual vision and hearing problems, which were resolved by the time he started school. He developed into an exceptional athlete, leading his grammar-school basketball team to three consecutive Catholic League championships. In high school, he sang in the choir, played guitar and wrote music for his band, and graduated with an award as the outstanding business student. He majored in history and music in college.

Today, he stands six-foot-two and weighs one hundred ninety-five pounds. He works as an IT specialist for a local municipality and school system. He's also served as assistant JV basketball coach at the local high school. His acerbic wit and creative mind are a delight.

Whenever my faith begins to fray, I look back to that November evening, at once so frightening and so life- and faith-affirming; to the many preemies we met who never got to go home; to the incredible course that our son's life has taken over these years; to our one-on-one contests on the basketball court (which he always wins); to the good and honorable man he has become.

And I look forward—to his wedding this October, just nine days shy of his thirty-first birthday. ■

James Hannan *is* Commonweal*'s business manager.*

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