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BENEDICT RESIGNS

Joseph Komonchak

Peter Steinfels

The Editors

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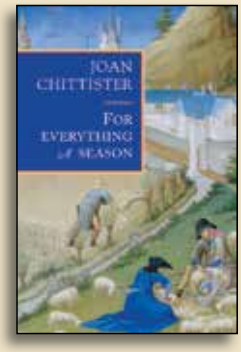

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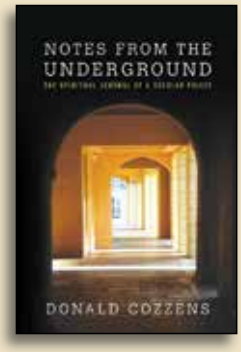

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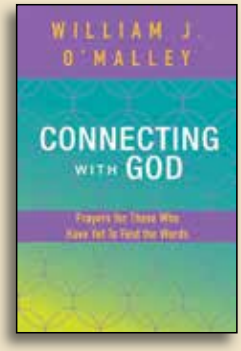

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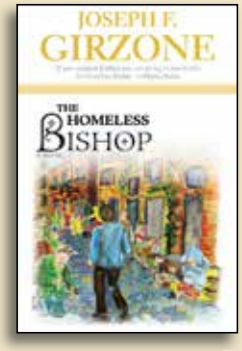

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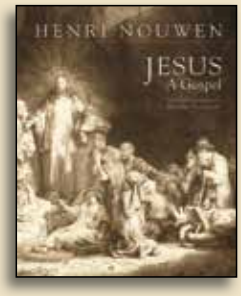

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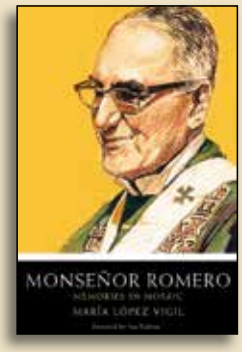

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LETTERS

Quashing 'dissent'

SMEAR TACTICS

Regarding Jerry Ryan's "Orthodoxy & Dissent" (February 8): In August 2009, Bishop Thomas Joseph Tobin of Providence published a review of Archbishop Rembert Weakland's autobiography *A Pilgrim in a Pilgrim Church* in the *Rhode Island Catholic*, the diocesan newspaper ("Archbishop Weakland's Perplexing Pilgrimage"). Unlike some conservative critics of Weakland, Bishop Tobin generously acknowledged many of his fellow bishop's personal qualities and achievements. But he was also harshly critical of what he described as Weakland's "self-serving inconsistencies and contradictions." All four of the examples Tobin gives are seriously flawed, but it is the first that is apropos here. It concerns dissent.

Bishop Tobin writes, "For example, although the archbishop always took pride in his liberal theological tendencies and his public pronouncements on controversial issues, he seemed to be genuinely puzzled, even hurt, when others labeled him a dissident." The archbishop was called a "dissenter" and many other things by critics during his decades as a high-profile church leader in Rome and in the United States. It is unlikely he was either puzzled or hurt by such name-calling, because he usually knew where it was coming from and had learned to ignore it. But there was one egregious case that deeply upset Weakland and other bishops. It involved *30 Giorni*, a magazine published by the (then) very conservative and highly politicized *Comunione e Liberazione* movement.

The episode took place during the 1987 synod of the laity in Rome. Weakland and Cardinal Joseph Bernadin were two of the four people elected to represent the bishops. As Weakland recounts in his autobiography, "Archbishop [Jan Pieter] Schotte, the director of the synod office, forbade all the other groups who wanted to pass out literature in the aula to do so, but made an exception for [*Comunione e Liberazione*]." The September issue of *30 Giorni* was distributed to all who were present. "The material was very anti-American," Weakland recalls, and both Bernadin and Weakland were named as "dissenters." They "protested to Schotte that this kind of material had been officially circulated. The Canadian bishops, very upset, complained even more vigorously to Schotte about the way in which the synod was doing everything possible to disgrace Americans." As Weakland explains, "The damage was done. I felt that Bernadin and I had been listed among the 'untouchables,' and during the whole meetings had to wear our scarlet letters—'D' for dissenter." Shortly thereafter, in a breakout session at the synod, which Weakland had been nominated to lead, "one of the participants said he had been informed, but he would not say by whom, not to vote for Weakland" because of his status as a "dissenter."

It is this officially orchestrated name-calling, and the shameless manner in which it was used to disgrace the elected representatives of the American hierarchy to an international group of laity, that lies behind Tobin's seemingly innocuous statement regarding Weakland's "contradiction" in being "genuinely puzzled, even hurt, when other labeled him a dissident." As Jerry Ryan reminds us: "Rigidity and narrowness of vision can lead to the sin against the Spirit—and this sin can be a collective one."

THOMAS EWENS
Middletown, R.I.

From the Editors

After Benedict

"The church is not the pope, and the pope is not the church," theologian Joseph Komonchak reminds us ("Benedict's Act of Humility," page 7). Amen to that. Komonchak also cautions about the "hullabaloo over the upcoming conclave," urging Catholics of every theological and ideological disposition to place Benedict XVI's surprise resignation in the broader and deeper context of the responsibilities every Catholic has for building up the church and spreading the gospel. Expectations for the papacy need to change.

Amen to that as well.

Even Benedict's most ardent supporters concede that his papacy has been marred by too many scandals and too many gaffes. The few glimpses the public has gotten into the opaque operations of the Holy See—from the Vatican bank controversy to the inept machinations of the pope's own butler—reveal an institution in crisis. These intrigues are especially disconcerting as the church still struggles to come to terms with the legacy of the sexual-abuse crisis. Unfortunately, the courtly secrecy surrounding the deliberations to elect the next pope provides an all-too-obvious reminder of the lack of transparency and accountability in the operations of the entire hierarchy.

In the modern era, but especially over the past half-century, there has been an unprecedented concentration of authority in the papacy and the Roman curia. Under the tireless and charismatic John Paul II, this focus on the pope seemed providential to many. Yet John Paul's commanding personality left little room for younger episcopal talent to flourish or alternative institutional structures of leadership and authority to develop. Only the most obdurate ultramontanists think the governance of a global church of more than 1 billion should rest principally on the shoulders of one man. In resigning for reasons of ill health and physical frailty, Benedict himself strongly suggested that the demands of the papacy have become a crippling burden, especially for a man of his age. Many think that the papacy is now a crippling burden for a man of *any* age—and that this is one of the many signs that ecclesial authority has become too centralized.

Benedict will surely be remembered for his personal humility and profound piety. He will also be remembered as a theologian and teacher of rare gifts. His three encyclicals are remarkably rich documents—especially *Caritas in veritate*, which remains one of the most thoughtful responses to the recent financial crisis, a reminder of the inescapable moral dimensions of a globalized economy.

What this shy scholar evidently could not do was manage or reform a sclerotic church bureaucracy riven by factions and left to function on its own for far too long. Real reform can return the governance of the church to the bishops in true partnership with the pope, and reduce the curia to the status of a modest administrative apparatus. Perhaps, as some have speculated, this is what Benedict hoped to set in motion in taking the exceptional step of resigning. Let's hope so.

Many Catholics first heard of Joseph Ratzinger in 1985 when, a few years into his tenure as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, a series of his conversations with the journalist Vittorio Messori was published as *The Ratzinger Report*. Readers were stunned by Ratzinger's dour appraisal of the implementation of Vatican II's reforms and his stinging criticism of liberal democratic societies. In the *Report*, the future pope comes across as deeply pessimistic about the trajectory of the church and even about the competence of local bishops. Western culture as a whole, he insisted, had also lost its moorings. Only Rome could be trusted on questions of faith and morals.

Writing in *Commonweal* (November 15, 1985), Lutheran theologian George Lindbeck, an official observer at Vatican II, suggested that Ratzinger's emphasis on Roman authority was "more a product of despair than of authoritarianism." Lindbeck, although sympathetic to Ratzinger's theological and cultural agenda, lamented his "uncritical and one-sided emphasis on the official magisterium." He feared that Ratzinger despaired "of the struggle pursued at Vatican II" to find a way to make the church's teachings accessible and compelling to the scientifically sophisticated and increasingly secular world.

It is possible to see Benedict's resignation as another gesture of discouragement. Certainly in his final remarks to the priests of Rome only days after announcing his resignation, Benedict struck a note of anguish over what he characterized as the "calamities" and "miseries" that followed the council. He blamed the media and secular politics for that disarray. But much of the responsibility lies with the Vatican, for guarding its own power and privileges too jealously. If we are not to despair of the worthy project pursued by the bishops at Vatican II, the whole church, and not just Peter's successor, must now be allowed to take responsibility for it. ■

February 19, 2013

Mollie Wilson O'Reilly

Nothing to Celebrate

GUNS & THE CULTURE OF DEATH

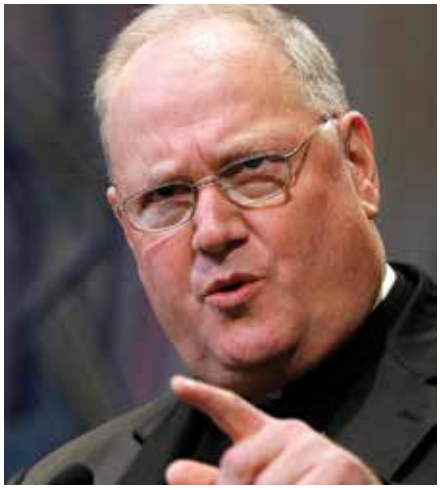
At the end of a busy week—one that included both Ash Wednesday and the pope's surprise resignation—New York's Cardinal Timothy Dolan took the time to write a blog post about gun control. Yes, he's for it: "I found myself nodding in agreement" with President Barack Obama's push for gun restrictions, Dolan wrote, quoting from that Tuesday's State of the Union address. He added that he also supported the gun-control measures signed into law in January by New York's Governor Andrew Cuomo. But what I liked best was his reason why.

"For me," Dolan wrote, "regulating and controlling guns is part of building a culture of life, of doing what we can to protect and defend human life. The easy access to guns, including assault weapons, that exists in our nation has contributed towards a culture of death, where human life and dignity are cheapened by the threat of violence."

Until I read that, I hadn't seen the phrases "culture of life" and "culture of death" enter the debate over gun control, not even in those venues where they tend to pop up often in other contexts. Why should it have taken so long? Why the reluctance among conservative opponents of gun control to criticize America's gun culture, with its vocal enthusiasm for weapons designed specifically to kill people as efficiently as possible? Anyone familiar with John Paul II's concern for "the sacred value of human life," or his alarm that "broad sectors of public opinion justify certain crimes against life in the name of the rights of individual freedom," ought to see a connection.

Where the phrase "culture of death" has come up since the Newtown, Connecticut, shooting, it has been a way of changing the subject—as in an opinion column headed "We Need Abortion Control, Not Gun Control." (Why not both?) Five days after Newtown, Rush Limbaugh welcomed a caller who scorned liberal proposals to limit gun violence on the grounds that "the left is a culture of death." Limbaugh agreed, citing "Obamacare's death panels" (in case you're wondering whether right-wingers are still trying to make that stick).

But among conservatives actually willing to address proposed restrictions on guns, I find a chilling lack of reference to the human cost of guns in America. The *Wall Street Journal*'s editorial page reacted to the Newtown massacre with a sigh: "As happened after the shootings at Columbine High School, where two students shot twelve other students, there will be calls for the control of guns, notwithstanding the existence of 200 million guns amid a U.S. population of 311 million."



Cardinal Timothy Dolan

I had to reread that sentence to be sure the word they used was *notwithstanding* and not *given*. The implication seems to be that twelve deaths—or twenty-seven, in the case of Newtown—isn't really all that many when you consider the 200 million or more guns already in circulation. (Or are they saying there are just too many guns for us to bother doing anything about them?) But mass shootings are only the tip of the iceberg. Thirty thousand Americans die from gunshot wounds every year. More than three hundred of them are children under the age of fifteen. That steady drip of senseless loss—and the knowledge that no other developed nation has a firearm fatality rate that even approaches ours—is what really lies behind the calls for restrictions on guns. Horrors like the Newtown massacre invite everyone to stop and take notice.

I can respect opposition to gun control rooted in reluctance to tinker with the Constitution or skepticism about the effectiveness of particular laws. What strikes me as obscene is the conservative impulse to celebrate gun ownership in America. Guns are not just a tool, like cars or steak knives; they are weapons designed to kill. They are not a wholesome American icon, like baseball and apple pie. They are at best a necessary evil. If ordinary Americans feel the need to own firearms to defend their homes and families, that is a regrettable fact. If ordinary Americans describe themselves as "gun enthusiasts" and respond positively to advertisements equating assault rifles with masculinity ("Consider your man card reissued"), we should be concerned about losing sight of the value of human life. Lurid fantasizing about taking out bad guys (or government thugs) with military-style firepower is a symptom of a sick society.

Are restrictions on guns the best way to stop the violence, and if so, which ones? Is there a point at which gun ownership can no longer be called "responsible," and if so, how can we define it? These are questions that deserve serious consideration. But first we have to concede that there is a problem. A debate about guns that can't acknowledge the human cost is not only incomplete, it is immoral. ■

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Joseph A. Komonchak

Benedict's Act of Humility

NOW IT'S ROME'S TURN

The last pope to resign did so more than seven hundred years ago, which is a long time even by church standards. The controversy surrounding Celestine V's abdication and the succession of Boniface VIII did not recommend the practice to later popes, and while canon law admitted the possibility a pope could resign, there were many who thought that, like those old disputes about what the church can do if a pope becomes a heretic, it was best consigned to ancient history, no longer applicable. This view was confirmed by a very modern theology and even mystique of the papacy that so identified the pope with Christ as to suggest that for him to resign would be to betray Christ. It seems that Pope Paul VI gave some thought to resigning, but a close adviser said that he wouldn't because "he cannot come down from his cross." Similar words were applied to Pope John Paul II as the church watched him fade away: "You don't come down from the cross," his former secretary said just the other day. It is not surprising, then, that many Catholics were stunned by Pope Benedict XVI's act: "Can a pope resign?" one of my sisters telephoned to ask me.

There is potentially great significance in Benedict's action, and it may be that his resignation will be his greatest contribution to ecclesiology. He has so subordinated his person to the office that he could renounce it. His frank admission that he no longer had the strength of mind and body needed for the Petrine ministry not only humanizes the pope himself but helps bring the papacy back within the church, down from what Hans Urs von Balthasar called its "pyramid-like isolation." All those unique titles that seemed to place the papal office above and beyond all other offices and ministries in the church suddenly have to yield to what their occupants all have in common: a fragile, sinful, and mortal humanity. The pope—and not just this one—loses something of his sacral apartness. He rejoins the rest of us.

Benedict's action also suggests the thought that if a pope can resign for reasons of health or of age, he might resign for other reasons too. There could come a pope who agrees with what John Henry Newman wrote in 1870, during the longest pontificate in church history: "It is not good for a pope to live twenty years. It is anomaly and bears no good fruit; he becomes a god, has no one to contradict him, does not know facts, does cruel things without meaning it." In other words, even though no term limits may be assigned to the papal office, a pope can have his own term limits in mind, and say to himself, and to the church, "*Basta!*" If papal resignations were to become something normal (that is, more frequent than every seven hundred years), then there might be less reluctance to elect someone younger and still energetic without worrying that he will fall victim to the tendency Newman feared.

Benedict visited at least twice the basilica where Celes-

CNS PHOTO / PAUL HARING

tine V is buried and prayed at his tomb. Paul VI had done so beforehand, and I wonder whether Benedict might have remembered his predecessor's explanation of why Celestine resigned: "After a few months he understood that he was being deceived by people around him who were profiting from his inexperience." That's when Celestine's holiness shone out, Pope Paul said: "As he had accepted the supreme pontificate out of duty, so out of duty he renounced it—not out of cowardice, as Dante wrote (if his words really do refer to him), but out of heroic virtue, out of a sense of duty." Perhaps Benedict also felt betrayed by people around him and recognized that he was not up to dealing with it.

One didn't have the impression that Joseph Ratzinger enjoyed being pope. He was the second pope in a row not to take much interest in administration, but whereas John Paul II seemed always on the road, exhibiting the most personalized papacy in church history, Pope Benedict retreated into his study, where he composed not only his official homilies, speeches, and encyclicals, but also three books, which he explicitly exempted from official authority. The result of this approach to the office—call it the two "vacancies" of papal responsibility—has been not only the sort of unedifying spectacle of curial rivalries we saw in the "Vatileaks" scandal, but a return to, and even heightening of, the centralized theory and practice that many had hoped Vatican II would bring to an end. Instead, after modest efforts at institutionalizing the council's ecclesiology, we have seen over the past forty years the atrophying of structures for co-responsibility and cooperation at every level of church life.

A certain paradox is visible in the events now unfolding. The very act that humanizes the papacy also produces the hullabaloo over the upcoming conclave, which tends to reconfirm the inflated notion of the Petrine office that has developed over the past two hundred and fifty years, and the impression is given, once again, that the future of the church hinges on the choice of a successor to the See of Peter. One can hear it from both sides: from traditionalists who want still-tighter disciplinary control over doctrine, worship, and practice; and from progressives who want a pope who will loosen things up in all those areas. They both want something from Rome; they want the new pope to do something about what they each perceive as critical points. But the church is not the pope, and the pope is not the church, and perhaps what we most need is a pope who will encourage and allow the laity, the religious, the clergy, and the hierarchy to assume their responsibilities for the difference the church is supposed to make in the world. Benedict's resignation was a self-denying act of personal humility. What we need now in Rome are acts of institutional humility and self-denial. ■

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Peter Steinfels

Shock Therapy

COULD THE NEXT POPE LEARN FROM BENEDICT?

By resigning, Pope Benedict served the church well. He has spared it another prolonged period of mounting disarray. He has "humanized" the papacy, as Joseph Komonchak and others have pointed out. He has jolted the church into allowing that something generally considered unthinkable for centuries is really not beyond doing after all. And he has set the stage for his successor to do likewise.

That is important. The Catholic Church needs shock therapy. True, among the world's 1.2 billion Catholics, millions of saints are leading lives of prayer and charity so ardent, brave, sacrificial, creative, and enduring that they bring tears to normal eyes. They are the best of us—and then there are the rest of us. Except in parts of Africa, the much-heralded growth of Catholicism is simply in line with the growth in population—or not even that. Latin American Catholics are increasingly turning to Pentecostalism or drifting away from religious practice and affiliation altogether, although not yet to the extent occurring in Europe and North America. It would be comforting to think that what might be lost in numbers is being gained in depth, but as Catholic identity, floundering in a sea of alternative visions, weakens from generation to generation, that seems unlikely.

The church needs shock treatment, and until the mini-shock of his resignation, Benedict, to the relief of many, did not seem like the man to administer it. Ratzinger, yes; Benedict, no. What shocks have come during his papacy were usually by blunder rather than intention. Evaluations of his tenure have balanced the pros and cons of his deeds according to the lights of the balancer. What is still untallied, except for his failure to unmistakably demand accountability in regard to clerical sexual abuse, is what has remained undone. Underlying conditions like the limitations, in numbers, quality, and age, of the clergy or the massively eroding credibility of church teachings on sexuality are no better than when he took office in 2005. Much of the hierarchy deludes itself with slogans in search of substance like "The New Evangelization," or rationalizes inaction with the familiar alibi, "The church works in centuries." In fact, history teaches that the church often suffers for centuries from its failure to act during critical passages.

Will Benedict's successor do any better? Back in 2005, observing the long painful and paralyzing decline of John Paul II, some of us felt that the next pope should *immediately* establish a procedure for a pope to conclude his service while still alive. Establishing such a rule for the surrender of papal power at the very outset of a papacy would forestall suspicions of behind-the-scenes manipulation in the case

of an ad hoc resignation like Benedict's. (It is remarkable that so few such speculations have arisen, at least to date, in Benedict's case.)

This time the white smoke will presumably greet us almost on the brink of Holy Week, so first things first. The new pope should focus his own and the world's attention on the Paschal Mystery. From entry into Jerusalem through Last Supper, passion, death, and Resurrection, from palms to holy oils, consecrated bread and wine, shrouded statues, venerated cross, new fire, and baptismal water, let the new pontiff simply be vested in the sacred rites.

Between Easter and Pentecost he can deliver the necessary shock therapy. To begin, Pope Novus, as we might call him, should declare that his predecessor's wisdom in resigning reveals a permanent insight into the realities of a modern papacy. Henceforth, popes will either serve a term of twelve years or resign at the age of eighty-two, the choice depending on each pope's reading of the church's needs at the moment. Papal interventions to determine the church's choice of a successor, something Benedict has adjured but another pope might not, will be formally prohibited.

Because the beginning of a papacy is the opportune time to deal with the delicate question of such transitions, Pope Novus should move to make future conclaves more representative. He might create a new position of "cardinal electors"; their only function would be to vote in a conclave. Cardinal electors would constitute one third of those voting. They would include the heads of the ten largest religious orders. The rest would be chosen biannually—and their names kept *in petto*—by the presidents of the bishops conferences of each continent. The number of cardinal electors would be proportionate to each continent's Catholic population. At least half of them would be women. Heads of Vatican offices, although eminently eligible for election to the papacy, would not participate in the conclave unless they had become cardinals while serving as ordinaries.

The specifics are arguable, but the general idea is clear: continuity but not cloning.

Reforming the tenure and election of popes would signal that the church is open to change, even though it only affects the future. That needs to be complemented with a dramatic gesture of immediate consequence. One idea would be a papal establishment of a massive Catholic Pietà Fund to be devoted to the health, education, and safety of women around the world. The goal would be to raise $1.2 billion, or a dollar for each of the world's Catholics. While pledging to maintain the church's role as a steward of artistic heritage, Pope Novus might initiate this fund by offering to sell one or several of the Vatican's signature artworks (the Pietà itself?). Perhaps Catholics or others could outbid buyers to keep these objects in Rome. In any case, contributions to the Pietà Fund would become a feature of papal journeys and international events like World Youth Day. Would this diminish Peter's Pence? On the contrary, it would probably swell it. And by plac-

CNS PHOTO / PAUL HARING

ing administration of the fund in the hands of Catholic women, Pope Novus would also signal openness to reexamining the role of women in the church. Had John Paul II taken a dramatic initiative like this early in his papacy, the church's voice on several major issues would have won a much greater hearing.

Two other initiatives could be reserved for Pentecost, May 19. On that day, the pope would invite bishops, theologians, and knowledgeable laity to submit their thoughts on two topics. One would be very practical: how to make the world synods of bishops an effective institution. The other would be very fundamental: *aggiornamento* and *ressourcement* on the church's understanding of sexuality.

Pope Novus would pledge to act within several years to reform the synods. He would be wise to warn that the discussion of sexuality would take time and no one should expect hasty conclusions about specific norms.

Is all this fantasizing? Obviously. Is it fantastic? These initiatives are moderately disruptive insofar as they admit of change in the church, hardly a heretical notion. They are only slightly more controversial in encouraging broader participation in the shaping of that change. They are otherwise open-ended—and about as unthinkable as a pope resigning.

Pope Novus, whoever he turns out to be, will preach many words between his election and Pentecost. They will evoke familiar images and stir familiar sentiments. But unless they are accompanied by a few vivid, imaginative, and substantial initiatives, they will wash over the listening world and the listening church, with at most an arresting phrase or two lodged in our hearts. We will stumble on. The church does not live by popes alone. The opportunity to build on Pope Benedict's startling gift will have been squandered. ■

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Assembly Required

Christ's Presence in the Pews

William L. Portier

Picture a choir-loft view of a church full of Catholics assembled for the Eucharist. It's a solemn feast, Easter perhaps. The presiding priest has just incensed the gifts and the altar, and has himself been properly reverenced in turn by the server. The server, who probably doesn't do this very often, manages to survive holding the thurible open so the priest can put in more incense, and now wobbles toward the congregation like one of those 1970s toy Weebles. Rare is the server who achieves oneness with the thurible. Most know it as an alien, near infernal smoking thing that wants to take flight on its own, and this is what it seems like as the server clanks it against the chain and wafts it three times over the congregation. In random clumps the congregants begin to straggle to their feet. From the choir loft they look more like a choppy sea than a wave. The server bows. The people are standing now. Most bow in return and watch the server wobble back into the sanctuary.

As a performance it is far from perfect. Important feasts don't happen every week, and only the pure would expect us all to get it right. In the hierarchical scheme of things, this reverencing of the congregation with incense doesn't seem that important—it is left to the server, after all, rather than the priest or the deacon. Nevertheless, it remains a precious symbolic transaction, enacting with more or less ritual grace the Catholic teaching that Christ—in addition to his presence in the Eucharist, in the Word proclaimed, and in the person of the priest—is also present in the Eucharistic assembly itself. The server's herky-jerky attempt to embody this truth in liturgical rite by reverencing the congregation with incense is both a maddeningly and a consolingly familiar microcosm of Catholicism itself, a religion mediated in history by incarnate souls who combine love and fear, faith and doubt, in ways that are sometimes heroic but more often, well, Weeble-wobbly.

Once, in another lifetime, I taught high-school religion. As anyone who has faced a classroom of teenagers knows, the experience can be withering. "Why should I go to Mass? I don't get anything out of it." "Why can't I just pray at home?" "I can be a good Christian without going to church." "People who go to church are hypocrites anyway." "You just do the same thing over and over every week. It's so *boring*!" For my part, as I get older, I find myself looking forward more and more to going to church. It is less of a discipline, more of a joy. But it's hard to communicate that to younger people who honestly don't think they "get anything" out of the experience. Churchgoing is a cumulative experience, something that forms you. If you don't do it, you get formed without it, formed in another way. There might be times when you have to do it in trust—as a discipline, a way of being taught.

When I attempt to articulate what I "get out of" going to church, I find myself increasingly emphasizing the real presence of Christ in the assembly. It has been almost fifty years since Vatican II, so it is well to recall what the council's *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* said in 1963 about that presence. It taught that, in order to accomplish the work of salvation for which the Father sent him, Christ is always present in the church, especially in the church's liturgical celebrations.

> He is present in the sacrifice of the Mass, not only in the presence of his minister, "the same one now offering, through the ministry of priests, who formerly offered himself on the Cross," [citing Trent on the Mass] but especially under the Eucharistic species. By his power he is present in the sacraments, so that when a man baptizes it is really Christ himself who baptizes. He is present in his word since it is he himself who speaks when the holy Scriptures are read in the church. He is present, finally, when the church prays and sings, for he promised: "Whenever two or three are gathered together for my sake, there I am in the midst of them" (Mt 18:20).

What's hard to convey to young people is the idea of an engagement beyond mere volition, and that our relationship to church is not simply about wanting (or not wanting) to go. The word *assembly* is important here. Our word *church* translates the idea of Israel as God's assembly, the people God calls together. An assembly in this sense is the opposite of a voluntary association. Matthew 18:20 significantly uses the passive voice, "whenever two or three are gathered," recognizing that although in the daily psychological sense we choose to go to church on Sunday, it is God who gathers us. New Testament writers use this word *assembly* to refer to

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Mass on the Feast of the Assumption at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C.

what they also call Christ's "body," what we call the church. The church assembled by God for worship is in a very real sense the *verum corpus*, the true body of Christ.

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy refers to Christ's presence "especially under the Eucharistic species," the appearances of bread and wine. We believe that in the Mass, the bread and wine really become the body and blood of Christ—the *verum corpus* in another form—and since at least the thirteenth century, we have used the word *transubstantiation* to refer to this change. Something like transubstantiation happens in a less concentrated and intense way to the assembly: a collection of people and words and movements that would otherwise appear quite ordinary becomes extraordinary. In the church gathered for worship, it is Christ who proclaims the word and prays the eucharistic prayer. According to the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, it is also Christ who responds in prayer; it is Christ who sings. The assembly is, in a real sense, the body of Christ, the *verum corpus*. In the Eucharistic assembly Christ has many voices, many hands, many faces.

This is clear in the Prayer Over the Gifts that the priest says during Lent. The prayers alternate between asking for the transformation of the gifts and the transformation of us. "Lord, make us worthy to bring you these gifts. May this sacrifice help to change our lives."

And so on solemn feasts, we reverence with incense not only the priestly minister, the Scriptures, and the altar upon which the "Eucharistic species" rests, but also, however clumsily, we waft incense over the congregation, reverencing the many faces of Christ in the eucharistic assembly.

Emphasizing the real presence of Christ in the assembly doesn't mean de-emphasizing Christ's real presence in either the word proclaimed or in the Eucharist. We should pay attention to the readings, the homily, and the Eucharistic Prayer, since Christ really addresses us and prays in those words. And one can draw close to Christ in a personal way at Holy Communion. Indeed, when I was younger, I would have thought these were the main ways to experience fully the presence of Christ at Mass. But in the forty-some years I have been going to Mass in the renewed rite of the Second Vatican Council, Christ's presence in the assembly has come more fully into view.

If taken seriously, this idea that Christ is truly present among us in the assembly could expand your vision in striking ways, help you see with new eyes. It means that when you walk up the steps and into the church and someone greets you at the door, you might catch a glimpse of the face of Christ—and he or she might, too. The lector might be your neighbor or your spouse, but at Mass his or her voice is also God's. The priest who prays over our gifts speaks the very words of Christ, and yet he remains someone we know, someone like us. This would be unthinkable if it were not really Christ who baptizes and offers the sacrifice. These are scary and humbling thoughts, not to be taken lightly.

If Christ is truly present and if his sacrifice is truly represented, then one of the most important things we can understand about liturgy is that it changes time. At Mass the past and the future that are somehow already built into the present become sacramentally perceptible. Allow me a sports fan's analogy. Writing in *Sports Illustrated*, the incomparable Joe Posnanski expostulated on the "deep, mystifying, surreal meaning of baseball." Baseball, says Posnanski, "is a game out of time" in which history is "a living breathing character." In baseball, "past and present click together." Anyone who understands baseball as Posnanski exquisitely describes it has an instant *praeparatio evangelica* for the Mass.

The body of Christ, the church, is a great church. It spreads over all time. On Sunday mornings, past and present "click together" in our churches. At Mass we are united in a communion of prayer and charity with all the living and dead throughout history who have ever gone to Mass. Not only does the Eucharist make the past present, it also makes present in an anticipatory way the heavenly banquet. The "Holy, Holy" reminds us that this rite "out of time" places

CNS PHOTO / BOB ROLLER

ASH WEDNESDAY

I boiled my life down
to the purest extract
and watched it dry
and flake away

—Timothy P. Schilling

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us before the throne of God with the angels and all those who have gone before us. In the liturgy, heaven's worshipping cloud of witnesses surrounds us. Church architecture once gave a vivid sense of this and in some places still does. You can look up and around to see the angels and the saints surrounding you.

These notions are not as crazy as they might appear. As Joe Posnanski knows, memory is powerful. The church is like a great field of dreams. It is not Shoeless Joe Jackson and the 1919 White Sox who come out of the corn and into the light, however, but Peter and Paul, Martha and Mary, Perpetua and Felicity, Francis and Dominic, Anthony of Padua, Elizabeth Ann Seton, and all the holy men and women whose prayers we ask for in John Becker's haunting setting of the Litany of the Saints. This is not exactly Mass, but it is being part of a history and knowing how to live there. The country singer Lyle Lovett has a song, "The Family Reserve," that could be about the Communion of Saints. The verses invoke the names of dead family members and friends, names like Great Uncle Julius and Aunt Annie Mueller and Mary and Granddaddy Paul. "*I feel them watching, and I see them laughing, and I hear them singing along*," Lovett sings. "*And we're all gonna be here forever*."

I like to think that Posnanski and Lovett, along with William Kennedy at the beginning of *Ironweed*, Michael Malone at the end of *Foolscap*, and many other artists, are all channeling, St. Justin–style, the Logos that writes what Pope Benedict has called creation's "grammar." They all manage to conjure up something like my sense of the dead who are present at Mass in the Communion of Saints. But you don't have to look up to be surrounded by the saints. You can also look around you and see the many faces of Christ in the assembly. There are screaming babies. There are those who have been here long enough to see their babies grow up and come to church with them—and sometimes refuse to come. There are the people you work with, neighbors, students, teachers, the plumber, the doctor, people who work in the store, nurses who took care of you in the hospital, the babysitter who watched your kids. We're all here in our ordinariness, still looking quite like ourselves. But in this holy, out-of-time gathering, we are also the *verum corpus*.

This is especially clear at particular liturgical moments. One of my favorite parts of Sunday Mass is the Creed. Christian assemblies have been professing this creed in various languages since the fourth century. I can't help thinking of the cast of characters from the Council of Nicaea in 325. There's Hosius and Eusebius, Constantine, and Arius, the unfortunate priest who occasioned the controversy the Creed was meant to settle. But most moving to me is the sound of all the people, voices welling up strongly and steadily, joining with all those who have ever said the Creed and who will ever say it, lifting and carrying one another as the tradition embodied and rearticulated in time. The Sign of Peace is another place in the order of Mass where the body of Christ shines through the assembly and where we explicitly advert to his presence among us. And the Communion procession makes the *verum corpus* in the assembly poignantly visible—a company of ill-assorted Weebles, all on the way to be fed by Jesus who ate with sinners and gave bread to the multitudes.

I look on the many faces of Christ in the assembly. Often I see them from the choir loft as they walk back from Communion. The mothers and fathers remind me of when I was young. I know their hopes and fears for their children. I know how they feel when their babies scream. Even as they cry, those babies ensure that, according to Christ's promise, his body will continue on earth when we are gone. But is all this too much? Can it really be true, that we are the very body of Christ?

Many feel obliged to walk away from such a saying. Young cynics have reason to smell hypocrisy. After all, who among us even comes close to being good enough to be the face of Christ, to speak his words? The answer is obvious—no one does. And yet, because of Jesus' command and his promise, we continue. To the young I can only say this: Do this for a long time and it will change the way you see. The familiar words you have heard and spoken hundreds of times, thousands of times, will no longer be boring. They will be like warm and familiar waters, and your spirit will float restfully in them. Over a lifetime, the words and gestures of the Mass will become heavy with the memory of all the people you've said and done them with. They will begin to speak to you of the living and the dead. You will see the Body of Christ.

When I was a young cynic, deep in my existential fouled-up period, I thought that old people went to church because they had nothing better to do and knew they would die soon. Now I know better. We go to taste the sweetness of the Lord. ■

Richard Alleva

Raw Spaghetti

'DJANGO UNCHAINED'

The director Quentin Tarantino loves genre, the grungier the better. His first three films, *Reservoir Dogs, Pulp Fiction*, and *Jackie Brown*, are gangster movies—or, rather, gangster mutants, for their creator relaxed conventions for detours into gallows humor, pop-culture disquisitions, horrific accidents, surprisingly tender romantic interludes, and Hemingway-esque trials of male honor. In fact, it is these very detours that make the movies work. Genre sets up expectations, and Tarantino reversed or exploded expectations to expand his narratives, complicate his characters, and keep his audience in a gratifying state of anxiety.

Since then, however, Tarantino has seemed more interested in decorating conventions than in transcending them. The *Kill Bill* films are nothing more than visually glitzed-up martial-arts junk. *Deathproof* (the second half of the *Grindhouse* project) comprises two excellent car chases and forty-five minutes of pseudo-tough yapping among valley girls. *Inglourious Basterds* (sic), a behind-enemy-lines thriller set during World War II, is full of dramatic potential, but the director wastes it all for the sake of a last-reel bloodbath. Though all these movies have Tarantino's customary comic-book garishness, there is a huge difference between the early and later work: the first three are populated by characters with interesting quirks, who always behave a little better or worse than you expect, thus evoking a sort of wary sympathy for them. Your heart lifts (a bit) when *Pulp Fiction*'s hit man Jules finally spares someone's life, and your heart sinks (a bit) when his partner Vincent succumbs to the violence he lived by. In the last four films, the characters exist only as hooks on which to hang mostly violent situations and are of no interest in themselves except as potential corpses, or corpse-makers.

Tarantino's new film, *Django Unchained*, at first seems content to be a deluxe version of the old spaghetti westerns of the 1960s and '70s. Even the opening credits flash across the screen in the big red block lettering characteristic of the genre, and the music blares out with all the steel-string brio of an Ennio Morricone score (though the soundtrack is in fact another of Tarantino's expertly curated collections of pop songs).

The plot has no trouble providing Tarantino's signature body count. In the Texas of 1858 a German dentist and bounty hunter, Dr. Schultz (German only because the director wanted to employ Christoph Waltz again? a dentist because Tarantino was thinking of Doc Holliday?), frees a slave named Django from a coffle by slaughtering the slave drivers. He needs Django to identify three of his former overseers, who are also wanted by the law and have a big price on their heads. In return, the Doc will help Django reunite with his wife, Broomhilda (sic!), who has been sold off to a Mississippi plantation. (And yes, Schultz does compare Django to a Siegfried questing for the Wagnerian maiden of his dreams; Tarantino's pulp world doesn't exclude highbrow pretentiousness.) It takes only a few days for Schultz to turn the ex-slave into a lightning-fast gunslinger, and off they go.

The setup contains a thousand improbabilities, but why bother to list them? The entire story takes place in movieland, the only country Tarantino knows. Viewers who enjoy Tarantino movies always accept a lot of nonsense in order to enjoy zingy patter, artful compositions, hypertense situations, and good acting. But this film's first half—the bounty hunting prior to the quest for Broomhilda—may leave some fans feeling bilked. The dialogue lacks Tarantino's usual snap and crackle; the hip-hop rhythms of his characters' speech sound out of place under southwestern skies. The compositions now seem a bit too artful, even arty, especially the groupings of graceful black women on a plantation's lawns and fields, all too reminiscent of Seurat's beach strollers—this daintiness is hardly the way to depict the sufferings of slaves. As for the acting, Waltz delivers his customary suavity but I was never convinced that Schultz was a character rather

THE WEINSTEIN COMPANY

Corpse-makers

than just a notion. The superb Jamie Foxx, so compelling in *Ray* and *Collateral* (and one of the best recent guest-hosts on *Saturday Night Live*), is too subdued here, too childlike, too lacking in the inner fire that would prepare us for the delight he takes in destroying his wife's victimizers. The supporting players deliver redneck-monster-racist clichés, unavoidable since they're playing not people but targets.

So much for the first half of *Django Unchained*. Then the movie becomes both more interesting and more repellent. After slaughtering a large number of criminals and collecting the rewards, the bounty hunters, disguised as fight promoters looking to buy black combatants, head out for Mississippi with plans to rescue Broomhilda. But when they are forced at gunpoint to buy her at an exorbitant price, Schultz does something so idiotic (and completely at odds with his slyboots character) that it leads to a massacre, which in turn creates further complications that make this film about twenty minutes too long. So why is this chaotic second half more interesting than the first?

For one thing, the action moves indoors, as the disguised bounty hunters match wits with the plantation owner, Candie, played by Leonardo DiCaprio as a sort of silky Mafioso with a southern accent. The cat-and-mouse negotiations leading up to the massacre nudge the movie away from the spaghetti western genre and toward the kind of gangster atmosphere with which Tarantino is more comfortable. You can feel the movie being recharged as the antagonists circle each other.

But, more important, it's at this point that the offensive, implausible, but fascinating character of Stephen, Candie's head slave and butler, is introduced. Some may wonder why Samuel L. Jackson, possibly the greatest American film actor alive, signed on for this. Was it so politically incorrect that he couldn't resist? Let it be said that his execution is magnificent and deserves the Oscar nomination for best supporting actor that Waltz received. But great as Jackson's performance is, the character raises questions about Tarantino himself. Jackson's makeup—the darkening of his already dark skin, the tufted white eyebrows—recalls "Uncle Ben," a persona that, like Aunt Jemima, is associated with Uncle Tom–ism. And on his first appearance, Jackson does indeed "Tom" away: truckling, joshing, shuffling, and cringing before his smug white master while snarling at the now duded-up and insolent Django as an "uppity nigger." At first we can take Stephen as the pitiful product of a brutal institution, a man so twisted by his masters that he vents his rage not on them but on his fellow slaves. But wait, there's worse to come.

Stephen begs a private audience with his master. Cut to the library. Both men are seated. Candie's lordliness is gone. He leans forward pensively, attentively, even humbly, to listen to Stephen. And Stephen's subservience is gone. Cool, masterful, even arrogant, he leans back at ease, drinking his master's wine and dispensing his insights into what the bounty hunters are really up to. Who is the real master here? And what is Quentin Tarantino up to? Is *Django* taking place in an alternate universe, like that of *Inglourous Basterds* (in which Hitler was assassinated by Jewish soldiers)? Is this just dramatic symmetry at work, the heroic white-black duo of Schultz and Django countered by the villainous white-black duo of Candie and Stephen? But by the time *Django* reaches its climax, both Schultz and Candie have withdrawn from view. As in most action flicks, the hero's last bullet is reserved for Villain Number One, not his sidekick, and here it blasts a hole in the chest of Stephen, the Uncle Tom as mastermind.

Imagine a Holocaust film in which a death-camp capo—a Jew supervising and often mistreating other Jews for the sake of his own survival but perhaps also theirs—is portrayed as more evil than the Nazi camp commander. Hard to imagine, right? But who, before Quentin Tarantino, could have imagined Stephen in *Django Unchained*? This may be the most crazed movie about race and slavery since *Birth of a Nation*. ■

James J. Sheehan

Little Stalins

Iron Curtain
The Crushing of Eastern Europe, 1944–1956
Anne Applebaum
Doubleday, $35, 566 pp.

Karl Marx was wrong: Wars, not revolutions, are "the locomotives of history." Like a devastating storm, war sweeps away the people, institutions, and attitudes that stand in its path, and on this wreckage-strewn landscape, war creates opportunities for the leaders, organizations, and ideas that promise to master its destructive fury. Nowhere was the interplay of war's destructive and creative energies more apparent than in Eastern Europe during the first half of the twentieth century.

The First World War destroyed the German, Austrian, and Russian empires and in their place created a new configuration of independent states stretching from the Baltic to the Adriatic. Politically fragile, economically weak, and ethnically divided, these states were swiftly caught up in the maelstrom of the Second World War, sometimes as Nazi Germany's victims, sometimes as its allies, and often as one and then the other. In 1944, Soviet forces began to take control of the ruins left in the wake of the German army's slow and painful retreat westward toward the Reich.

The "crushing of Eastern Europe," therefore, was first and foremost a product of how and where the war was fought. Applebaum begins her splendid new book with a moving account of the conflict's final months, which reminds us of the tragic contrast in the war's impact on Western and Eastern Europe. In France, 590,000 people were killed by the war; in Poland, as many as 5.5 million died, 20 percent of the population. Paris was damaged in the fighting, but remained largely intact; Warsaw was reduced to rubble. In Western Europe most prewar regimes either survived or were restored after 1945; in the East, all were destroyed. Moreover, in Eastern Europe violence and disruption continued well after the war itself ended: mass rape and looting by Soviet troops, politically and ethnically fueled killings, and the involuntary transfer of millions of people. Within this climate of fear, uncertainty, and suffering, Stalin set out to build a new political and social order. The origins and character of this order in Poland, Hungary, and East Germany are the subject of *Iron Curtain*.

Memorials to East Germans who died attempting to escape over the Berlin Wall

Applebaum takes her title from Winston Churchill's famous description of Eastern Europe, usually quoted from his speech in Fulton, Missouri, in March 1946, but actually first used nine months earlier, when he wrote to Harry Truman that "an iron curtain is drawn down upon their front. We do not know what is going on behind." As Applebaum correctly points out, Churchill's image of an opaque curtain between East and West was false and self-serving. Western leaders knew quite well what was going on behind the Soviet lines. While she has no doubt that the imposition of Communist domination was driven by Soviet policy, and not—as some revisionist historians have claimed—in response to Western antagonism, she recognizes that policymakers in Washington and London were fully aware of the tightening vise of oppression, even if they were unwilling and probably unable to do anything about it. The iron curtain may have inhibited Western interference, but it did not mask the way in which the Soviets were imposing their will.

The men selected to oversee the imposition of Soviet domination arrived in the baggage train of the Red Army. Walter Ulbricht of East Germany, Boleslaw Bierut of Poland, and Mátyás Rákosi of Hungary were Moscow's creatures; all had spent the past decade in the Soviet capital, demonstrating their loyalty to Stalin, polishing their talent for intrigue, and mastering the skills

necessary to survive in one of history's most lethal political environments. Behind the façade of the often absurd personality cults created by and for these "little Stalins" was the hard fact of their dependence on Soviet power.

Since they were largely out of touch with their homelands, it is not surprising that Eastern Europe's imported leaders miscalculated the depth of their popular support. When Communists did badly in early elections, they abandoned democratic forms, repressed potential opposition, and imposed strict conformity within their own ranks. Elections became an empty ritual, while the secret police, whose organization and procedures had also been imported from the Soviet Union, provided the essential foundation of every regime.

Both Communist ideology and Russian national interest demanded more than just passive obedience from the inhabitants of the Eastern European glacis that lay between Russia and its enemies in the West. It was necessary to create active supporters, enthusiastic participants in the formation of a new society, indeed a new kind of human being, "Homo sovieticus." In a series of deeply researched and vividly written chapters, Applebaum shows how the regimes attempted to do this through the use of the mass media, especially radio, the organization of youth and the growing domination of the educational system, the cult of work and the construction of new industrial cities, the ideological penetration of literature and imposition of a distinctive style of "socialist realism." I particularly admired her chapter on "ideal cities," which describes the social, political, and architectural structure of Sztálinváros in Hungary, Stalinstadt in Germany, and Nowa Huta in Poland, all intended to be vital centers of industrial production and expressions of an authentic proletarian culture. None of them truly fulfilled these goals, and today their decaying remains, partly abandoned but with new, politically correct names, are emblems of the Communist order's empty promises and ultimate collapse.

Applebaum skillfully illustrates her analysis of ideology and institutions with brilliant portraits of individuals, both members of the elite and ordinary men and women. She has a historian's grasp of long-term trends and a journalist's eye for telling details and compelling personal stories, many of them taken from interviews with contemporaries. While Applebaum has strong views about what she describes, her opinions are always well founded, her judgments even-handed and fair. On politically charged and emotionally painful subjects such as postwar Polish anti-Semitism, including the lethal pogroms that took the lives of scores of Holocaust survivors, she writes with exemplary balance and restraint.

The key analytical concept in Applebaum's book is totalitarianism. The term was originally coined by an opponent of Italian fascism but was quickly embraced by Mussolini, who proudly declared his intention to create a "total state." To both its critics and proponents, totalitarianism refers to a distinctly modern form of dictatorship that aims not simply to monopolize political power but also to dominate all public and private life, compelling total compliance and enthusiastic affirmation. Totalitarian regimes, therefore, have both leadership cults and mass parties, an omnipresent repressive apparatus and an elaborate array of political, social, and cultural organizations.

In Applebaum's capable hands, totalitarianism performs useful interpretative work, but her book also suggests some of the concept's limitations. It is, first of all, better at explaining what regimes want to do than what they actually accomplish. Despite Il Duce's ideological bluster, Mussolini's Italy was anything but a total state. And, as Applebaum makes clear, while Eastern European regimes were able to monopolize power and squash dissent, they were not able to compel unqualified popular support. Second and more important, the term works best for analyzing politics and culture, much less well for social life and economic institutions. Applebaum's chapter on Eastern European economies is uncharacteristically terse and indecisive, the least successful in an otherwise excellent book.

Iron Curtain concludes with the three turbulent years that followed Stalin's death in March 1953. In June, a popular uprising, which began in East Berlin and spread to other parts of East Germany, was swiftly repressed by Russian troops. Three years later, following Khrushchev's extraordinary denunciation of Stalin at the Twentieth Party Congress, reformers in Poland and Hungary, misreading the new Soviet leadership's tolerance of innovation, attempted to introduce broad democratic changes. They too were repressed, in the case of Hungary after a brief but bloody struggle. For the next three decades, the instruments of repression introduced after 1944 remained, as did the possibility of Soviet intervention. In 1989, when it became apparent that neither the regimes nor their Soviet allies were prepared to use force to stay in power, Eastern European communism collapsed with remarkable speed.

Like all first-rate history, Applebaum's book illuminates what happens after her narrative ends in 1956. Above all, her astute reflections on the psychological impact of these regimes explains why they lasted as long as they did. The Eastern European version of *Homo sovieticus* was often someone who had come to terms with the status quo, which, after all, they had every reason to believe would remain forever. Compelled by an uneven and unstable mixture of conviction and self-interest, hopes of reward and fears of punishment, people conformed, even when they may have disliked their government and distrusted its propaganda. Applebaum calls these people "resistant" or "reluctant" collaborators. We now know that, by the 1980s, the number of reluctant collaborators had significantly increased. Most prominently in Poland, but to some degree throughout Eastern Europe, ideological energies were declining, cynicism and dissatisfaction growing. In 1989, the true extent of popular disaffection was suddenly revealed when, in one Eastern European state after another, a contagion of revolutions produced the greatest peaceful transformation in European history.

So swift and apparently complete was this transformation that it is sometimes difficult to see how habits and memories from the old regime continue to influence the attitudes and behavior of those who lived on the wrong side of the Iron Curtain. Marx may have been wrong about the locomotives of history, but he was right to insist that "the tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living." As they set out to build stable and democratic institutions, the new democracies of Eastern Europe must, each in its own way, come to terms with these traditions. In this rich and compelling account of Eastern Europeans' troubled past, therefore, Anne Applebaum helps us understand the challenges they must now confront. ■

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John Schwenkler

Natural Enemies?

Where the Conflict Really Lies

Science, Religion, and Naturalism

Alvin Plantinga

Oxford University Press, $27.95, 376 pp.

The scientific discoveries of the past four centuries are the most significant intellectual achievement in human history. We have come to understand the deep structure of the universe, and used this understanding to improve the quality of human life in previously unthinkable ways. Moreover, we have eliminated the need for supernatural explanations of natural phenomena, and shown that many of the miracles postulated by past generations are incompatible with the laws that govern the physical universe. After the arrival of science, the only place for religion is in the minds of the simple-minded.

So goes a popular story about science and religion, which seems to leave the would-be believer forced to choose between two options. The first is to adopt a position of hostility toward science, or at least those portions of scientific knowledge that threaten religious belief most directly. The second is to conclude that, since science isn't about to go away, then any religion that remains must be mostly insubstantial, shorn of commitment to a personal God who intervenes in the course of history. Either way, the consequences of the science-religion dialectic are generally thought to be zero-sum, always favoring one side at the expense of the other. Different people choose differently, but everybody has to choose.

In *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, the philosopher Alvin Plantinga argues that this popular story gets things precisely backwards. Plantinga, a devout Protestant who taught at Notre Dame for almost thirty years until his recent retirement, now holds a chair at Calvin College, his undergraduate alma mater. Over the past fifty years Plantinga has been one of the most influential philosophers in the world. His past books include *God and Other Minds* (1967), where he argues that belief in God can be rational even if not grounded in sufficient evidence; *The Nature of Necessity* (1974), a work of metaphysics that includes a response to the problem of evil and a rehabilitation of St. Anselm's "ontological argument" for the existence of God; and *Warranted Christian Belief* (2000), a philosophical defense of the reasonability of Christian faith. Following the publication of two books co-written with prominent atheist philosophers—*Knowledge of God* (2008) with Michael Tooley and *Science and*

SIJMEN HENDRIKS

Alvin Plantinga, Utrecht, the Netherlands, 1995

Religion (2010) with Daniel Dennett—Plantinga's aim in *Where the Conflict Really Lies* is to show that far from being incompatible, science and religion are mutually supportive, since commitment to science undermines the belief that the natural world is all there is.

Stated more precisely, Plantinga's thesis is that there is *superficial conflict* but *deep concord* between science and religion, and *superficial concord* but *deep conflict* between science and naturalism. By "religion," Plantinga means any form of what philosophers call theism, or the belief that there exists an all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good God who has something to do with human affairs. (Thus Judaism and Islam are included, though the details of Plantinga's position are unmistakably Christian.) "Naturalism," by contrast, is the belief that there is no God, and that natural science provides an exhaustive account of what there is. Plantinga aims to show, superficial appearances notwithstanding, that the religious worldview is more concordant with science than the naturalistic one.

Like any work of academic philosophy, *Where the Conflict Really Lies* is argumentatively complex. But Plantinga is an engaging writer. The most challenging aspect of his argument is not any technical terminology, but rather his reliance on a way of measuring probability developed by the eighteenth-century mathematician Thomas Bayes. Bayes provided a rigorous way of calculating what is called the "conditional probability" of a claim, or the probability that a claim is true given certain background assumptions. And Plantinga's strategy is to argue, using Bayes's method, that the probability of our having scientific knowledge is very high on the assumption of theism, whereas assuming naturalism makes this probability much lower. If we were made in the image of a loving God, then it is likely that we are able to have scientific knowledge; but if our minds are the result of a blind process of natural selection, then our having this capacity is quite improbable.

To prove the second half of this thesis, Plantinga notes that most naturalists

endorse some form of materialism, according to which the mind is identical to the brain. Moreover, he says, naturalists hold that human nature is the product of evolution by natural selection, and such selection ensures only that we behave adaptively, or in ways conducive to reproductive success. Plantinga then argues that our *minds* do not have to be any good at apprehending the objective truth about the world in order for our *brains* to have evolved in a way that enables adaptive behavior. For, again, if materialism is true, then our actions are caused not by true beliefs but solely by the material properties of our brains and bodies.

If this argument is sound, then it raises a serious problem for philosophical naturalism. For central to the naturalistic worldview is the idea that science provides an authoritative account of reality. But if this worldview also entails that we are unlikely to be any good at doing science, then naturalism is as self-defeating as the belief that one does not exist. (As Augustine and Descartes observed, only someone who exists can believe anything at all.) If we are to be rational in thinking that our scientific theories are true, it should not be a consequence of our worldview that the truth of our theories is highly improbable. Thus, Plantinga holds that well-grounded scientific theories like the Darwinian account of evolution are perfectly in order, but the combination of those theories with materialistic naturalism leads to a position that is "self-referentially incoherent," and cannot rationally be accepted.

This argument against naturalism is unlikely to persuade many philosophers. Materialists believe that the mind's ability to determine our behavior is rooted in the material properties of the brain. But they need not believe that the *contents* of our mental states—that is, what they represent—are entirely irrelevant to their causal powers. For example, many materialists would say that part of what makes a certain mental state count as the belief that a tiger is nearby is the way that mental state will combine with the same person's fear of tigers to lead her to seek a place to hide. Any mental state that lacks this feature cannot be the belief that a tiger is nearby. So in order for us to evolve brains that cause adaptive behavior, we must also have evolved reliable cognitive faculties.

This doesn't mean that philosophical naturalism is out of the weeds when it comes to explaining our capacity for scientific understanding. First, there are many very general problems with the idea that mental states are identical to brain states, including the difficulty of understanding how this thesis doesn't drain the mind of any causal powers whatsoever. Second, even if naturalists can explain why our cognitive faculties are reliable enough to have kept our evolutionary ancestors from being eaten by tigers, this alone may not explain our capacity for abstract scientific and philosophical reflection. Nevertheless,

as it stands this portion of Plantinga's argument does not seem successful.

Even so, Plantinga's book is a significant achievement. He succeeds in undermining the zero-sum view of science and religion as natural enemies, by showing that belief in God supports a commitment to scientific understanding, and that our best scientific theories do not rule out religious ideas like the possibility of divine intervention in the universe. (Plantinga's treatment of this last subject is especially good.) And it would indeed be a good thing if public discussions of religion and science were reoriented along these lines, not least because it might lead more committed Christians to abandon their hostility to legitimate scientific discoveries.

Within the academy, however, the committed naturalist will likely regard this as a low bar to clear, since the fact that certain beliefs are compatible, or even that one belief is likely given another, says nothing at all about whether any of them are correct. In other words, it is one thing to show that it's "rational" to be a theistic believer committed to the *truth* of science, another to show the truth of theism when there are other systems of belief that are equally coherent. By contrast, since any inconsistent position is plainly irrational, proving that naturalism is self-contradictory would provide even a naturalist with sufficient reason to give it up. Yet as we have seen, Plantinga's arguments for this latter thesis are highly problematic, as they rest on an understanding of philosophical materialism that almost no naturalistic philosopher would accept. We are left, then, with a standoff: religion and naturalism are both compatible with science, and which position a person should adopt hinges on his or her prior commitments. Perhaps this is the best that a human knower can do. But even by Plantinga's own lights, such an argument should not be enough to convince a committed naturalist that he or she is wrong. ■

John Schwenkler *is assistant professor of philosophy at Mount St. Mary's University in Emmitsburg, Maryland.*

Valerie Sayers

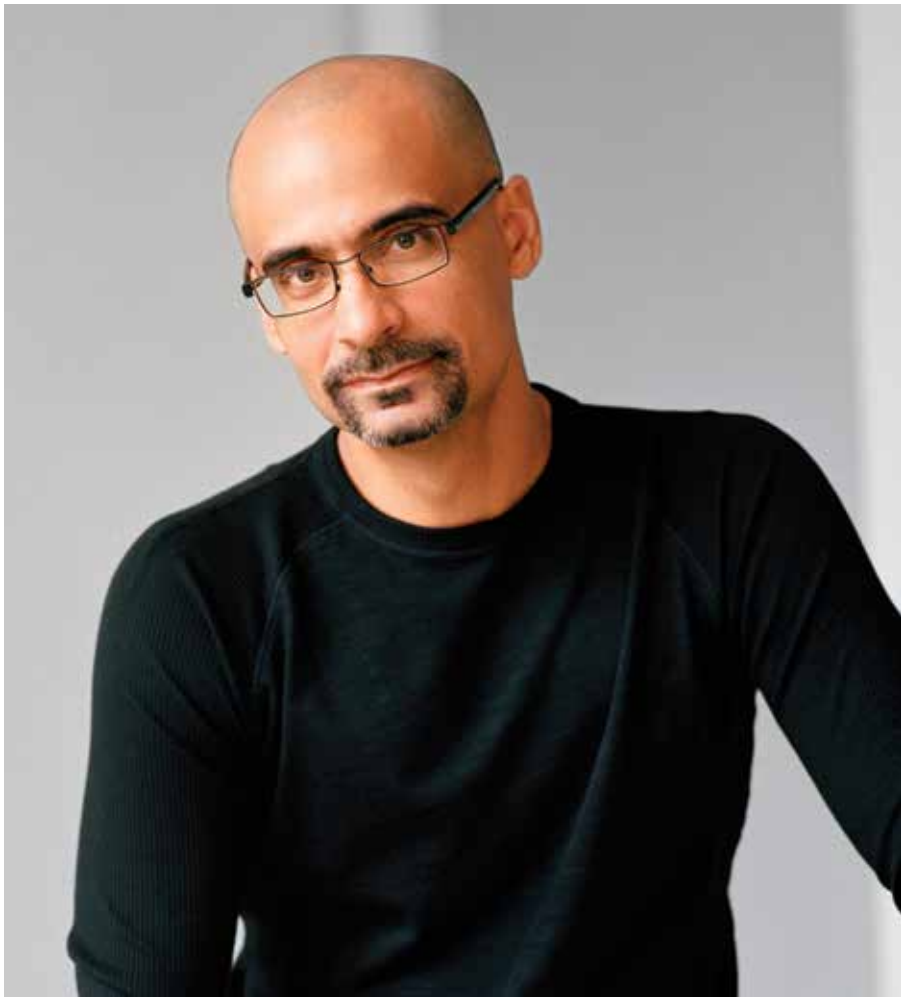
Men Behaving Badly

This Is How You Lose Her

Junot Díaz
Riverhead, $26.95, 213 pp.

Junot Díaz's fiction alternately unsettles, amuses, challenges, delights, and wounds. His new collection of stories, *This Is How You Lose Her*, is especially wounding, playing nine variations on the theme of faithless Dominican-American men and the women they betray. Díaz doesn't moralize—if anything he plays down-and-dirty with the sex lives of his characters. He has always been a provocateur, albeit one who presents himself as a realistic writer simply delivering the news, straight-up, about the Dominican-American scene. But though these narratives may appear at first to spring from the tradition of the minimalist American short story (Hemingway begets Carver begets Díaz), beneath their simple surface boils a rich cultural stew. Every story is informed by a strange, slant sensibility, the mark of a true original.

All but one feature Díaz's charming and infuriating alter ego, Yunior, who figured prominently in the author's first collection, *Drown*, and in his Pulitzer Prize–winning novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Yunior is a smart Dominican boy, confident but self-aware, who comes of age in a snow-covered New Jersey so foreign it might as well be the moon. Amid the grim urban landscape of American poverty he must contend with a brutal, womanizing father who eventually abandons him, and with an older brother bent on outdoing the father both in sexual conquest and in self-destructiveness. Just when he thinks he has loosened the psychological grip of both father and brother by escaping into a life of reading and writing, Yunior discovers that he hasn't actually escaped at all. It's an old story made new in *This Is How You Lose Her*, with a host of literary pleasures and a hard dose of pain.



Junot Díaz

NINA SUBIN

These stories create the illusion of being spoken extemporaneously, in an English peppered with Dominican slang, yet in reality every sentence is precisely calibrated. Díaz's fiction is emotionally hot, iced down with cool irony. He can be a little showoffy in acknowledging his literary debts, but gets it right so often you're inclined to forgive the occasional strutting. Look how he telegraphs a reference to Melville with a wittily apt verb: "A lot of the time she Bartlebys me, says, No, I'd rather not." Or listen to Yunior, intimidated by professorial Eurotourists on a Dominican beach, but still cocky enough to say they look like "budget Foucaults." Díaz throws postcolonial theory and Dominican history at his readers because Yunior *is* postcolonial theory and Dominican history. He's all over pop culture, too. The language of these stories is coarse and bilingual and sometimes vacuous because our culture is coarse and bilingual and often vacuous. If dirty words make you cringe, if you don't like consulting the Urban Dictionary to understand characters cursing in Spanish, this is not for you.

If, however, you are interested in struggling lives rendered with precision, intelligence and sympathy—or merely in the glimmers of illumination that good stories mysteriously provide—*This Is How You Lose Her* offers a powerful cumulative effect. These stories are much more than

simple exercises in emotional release. Two of them, "Nilda" and "Otravida, Otravez," give wonderfully empathetic visions of complex females. Nilda, the awkward, promiscuous girlfriend of Yunior's brother Rafa, remembers meeting Yunior when she was a tank-top-wearing kid who wanted to play baseball, and reminds him how "you made me put on a shirt before you'd let me be on your team," revealing a complicated, poignant longing for male protection. Yasmin, the only female narrator, leads her American lover away from his wife, and in the telling defies a reader to condemn her.

In depicting the sexual hurts of a specific subculture, these stories imply a great deal about male faithlessness and the objectification of women in the culture at large. Díaz portrays machismo as an inevitable product of the brutal heritage of Dominican dictatorship, underwritten by the American Way of Life, but he won't let Yunior hide behind political or psychological justifications for his cheating: "You claim you're a sex addict and start attending meetings. You blame your mother. You blame your father. You blame the patriarchy. You blame Santo Domingo.... You try it all, but one day she will simply sit up in bed and say, *No more....*"

Sure enough, the love of Yunior's life does just that. The final story in the collection, "The Cheater's Guide to Love," takes Yunior through five years of mourning her loss, and leaves him undertaking to write a book about how he betrayed and hurt her, "because it feels like hope, like grace—and because you know in your lying cheater's heart that sometimes a start is all we ever get." Having listened in on men trash-talking about the women in their lives, having watched them compulsively betraying the people they love, we readers understand that it will take a heap of grace for them to remember who they are, and what love is. ■

Valerie Sayers, *professor of English at the University of Notre Dame, is the author of six novels, including* The Powers, *which will be published this spring.*

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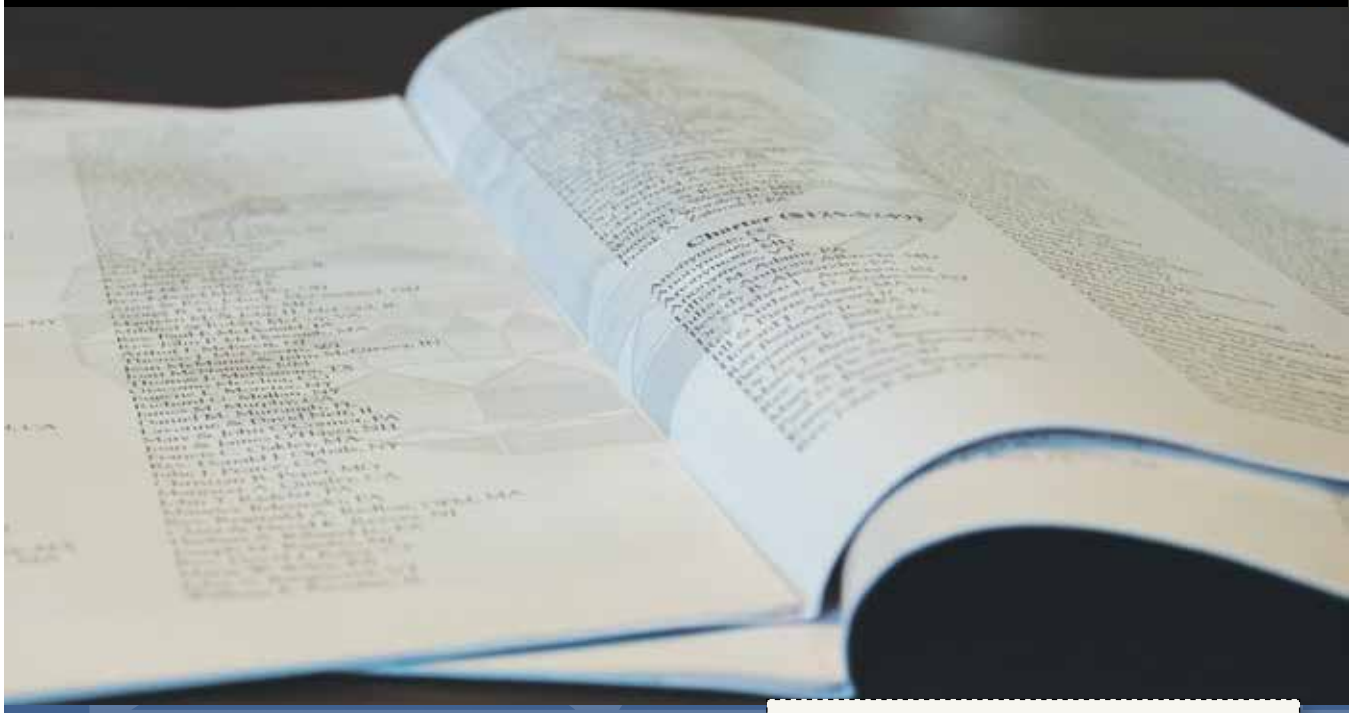

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Ribbon Chasers

Gordon Marino

Since his confession to Oprah Winfrey last month, Lance Armstrong's psyche has been lanced and explored from many different angles. Some have deemed the man who collected millions for cancer research a psychopath, others are less judgmental but no less disappointed. Writing in *Commonweal* (January 11) before the Oprah interview, Timothy Schilling sighed, "I still love Armstrong. I love him in spite of the bad things I now must concede he probably did. I've done bad things myself, and I haven't helped or inspired anywhere near as many people as Armstrong."

It is, I suppose, best for those who have found a beacon in this fallen superman to forgive Armstrong his transgressions. And it is true, our popular culture takes too much gossipy delight in watching the lives of celebrities unravel. Nevertheless, for all the psychologizing and moralizing about the winged rider, there has not been enough reflection on Armstrong's mad addiction to competition.

Banned from racing, Armstrong won't be listening for a starting gun any time in the near future. To him that quietude feels like a gun at his head. In his Oprah revelations, Armstong didn't gnash his teeth about the people's lives he crashed with libel suits or about the dent he left in his beloved sport or, for that matter, about the cannonball he delivered to his own charitable organization, the Livestrong Foundation. Instead, what almost brought Armstrong to tears was the prospect that he might not be allowed to run in the Chicago Marathon when he turns fifty. Of all the things for the iron man to get mushy about!

Of course, we lionize the competitive spirit in our society, as though the willingness to measure yourself against others were the ultimate yardstick of what kind of person you are. But isn't there something missing in an individual who feels like a shadow unless he is beating someone to some finish line?

Surely, part of the task of being a human being is to develop an understanding of what is most important in life. But the ribbon chasers can only get a fix on themselves by constantly comparing themselves to others. The Armstrongs of the world seem to imagine that if they win this race or maybe that literary award they will have gained irrefragable evidence of their own worth. After a victory, they might even gaze up and jab a finger at the heavens as though victory were evidence of being blessed by the very God who commanded us to be humble servants.

It is true that the world bows before badges and accomplishments. Triumph in competition brings a halo of sorts. Win a Tour de France or an Oscar and you'll have people genuflecting in your presence. Our champions are akin to secular saints. But at another level the yellow champion's jersey really only means that you were dogged in cultivating some talent you received in the genetic lottery. In most cases, the gift that you drove to the finish line does not advance the lives of your fellow human beings. It requires a fundamental focus on the self.

There is a powerful element of narcissism in the maniacal, Armstrong-like devotion to competition. Of course, there is a place for the arena. Going for the gold can serve to ignite a young person's talents. It can help cultivate a garden of important virtues, but competition should not become the foundation of an individual's life. Integrity, kindness, the ability to love, should be the attributes that decide our humanity. And you are not likely to find any kindness contests in the next Olympics.

The philosopher Søren Kierkegaard was a genius—an individual set apart by preternatural intellectual and literary talents. Nevertheless, he always reminded himself that his final measure would not be determined by the abilities that separated him from others. In his tender and challenging *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard warns, "Comparison is the noxious shoot that stunts the growth of the tree; the cursed tree becomes a withered shadow, but the noxious shoot flourishes with noxious luxuriance. Comparison is like the neighbor's swampy ground; even if your house is not built upon it, it sinks nevertheless. Comparison is like the secret consumption's hidden worm." The need to measure ourselves by comparison with others is a worm that thrives in the loam of our relentlessly competitive society, and it is aworm that has gnawed into and consumed Lance Armstrong. ■

Gordon Marino *is professor of philosophy and director of the Hong Kierkegaard Library at St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota. He also trains amateur and professional boxers. His* The Quotable Kierkegaard *will be published by Princeton University Press in this year.*

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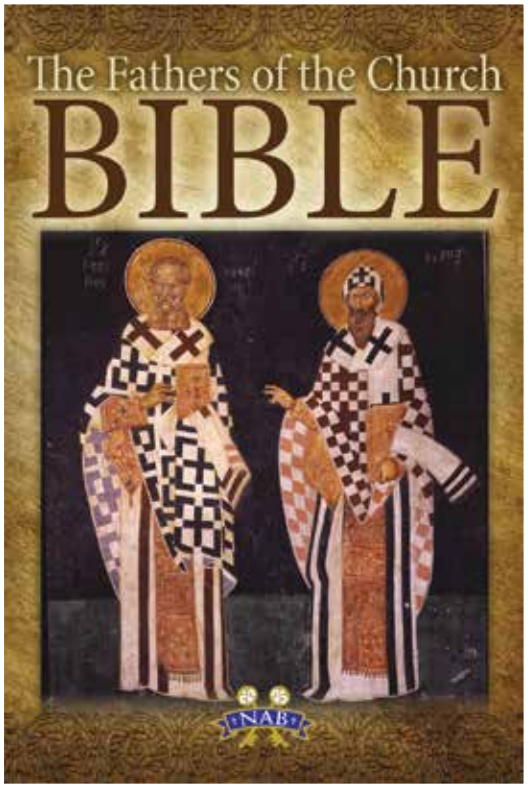

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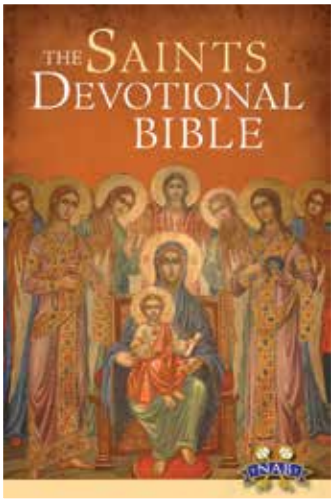

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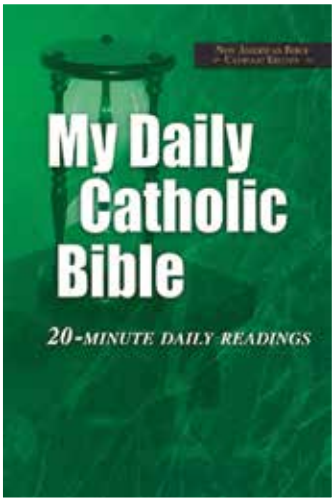

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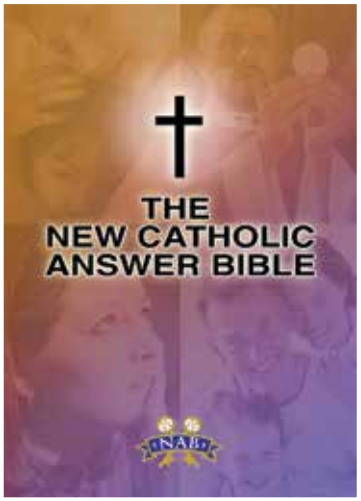

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