



America

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Back to Wonder

THE SEARCH FOR MYSTERY IN A SKEPTICAL AGE

JOHN SAVANT

Matt Malone, S.J., is traveling.

We learned on Good Friday that the family of five refugees from Afghanistan would be arriving at my parents' house the next day. The Catholic Charities liaison told us the basics: Use the traditional Muslim greeting, *as-salamu alaykum*. Serve tea. No hugs.

My mom and I excitedly prepared for their arrival. Do we need to get the bacon out of the fridge? Is it O.K. to give Easter baskets to the kids? Should we bring out the Legos or the Beanie Babies? No; yes; why not both?

I imagine staff people at the Vatican had their own weighty questions of protocol and decorum to work through when they learned of Pope Francis' last-minute decision to bring 12 Syrian refugees back from Greece on April 16. The announcement came after an otherwise somber visit to a refugee camp on the isle of Lesbos, through which hundreds of thousands have passed fleeing poverty and persecution in their homelands.

"Today is a day to weep," Francis told reporters on the plane back to Rome, holding up a picture he received from a child in which the sun is crying. "If the sun is able to cry, we should be able to shed at least one tear" (see Gerard O'Connell's report in *Signs of the Times*, p. 8).

Many in the United States have indeed wept over the images of capsized boats and a lifeless child washed up on a Mediterranean beach. But even as the pope met with refugees who have seen and survived these horrors firsthand, he reminded them that "the heart of humanity continues to beat." Helen Alvaré, discussing the new apostolic exhortation in this issue (p. 12), writes "Pope Francis is clearly no Pollyanna" when it comes to the serious challenges facing family today, among them poverty, war and forced migration. And yet that document, "The Joy of Love," ultimately presents a vision of Christian marriage

that, despite our human frailties and failures, strengthens couples and entire communities. Likewise, in the pope's powerful gesture of welcome toward three Muslim families, we witness the potential for joy in the face of the great suffering of refugees: the joy of hospitality.

At the very end of his 256-page exhortation, Pope Francis writes, "The family circle is not only open to life by generating it within itself, but also by going forth and spreading life by caring for others and seeking their happiness. This openness finds particular expression in hospitality" (No. 324).

Whatever nerves my family had about making our guests feel at home across barriers of language, culture and religion were quickly put to rest. The parents, Raheem and Rayhana, graciously accepted our clumsy Arabic greetings and cobbled-together tea ceremony. Hasib and Laima, ages 7 and 3, skipped the Legos and made a beeline for the trampoline. We bounced for a good three hours—exchanging few words but laughing the entire time.

I could not help but think: What if these were the images that came to mind when Americans heard *Muslim refugees*? John Savant writes that "our failures to end war, injustice, poverty and violence" are fundamentally failures of the imagination (see "Back to Wonder," p. 14). Too often migrants are depicted as desperate, undifferentiated masses, images that can invite either numbness, despair or fear. Instead, the pope tells us, we must see the "faces, names and individual stories"; only then can we imagine: aging towns revitalized by striving newcomers; empty nests filled with the happy chaos of children.

I do not know exactly what dangers our guests faced in Afghanistan. I do know there was great sorrow for them as they left behind their country, friends and family. But on this joyful Easter weekend, they seemed right at home.

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Follow **America's pilgrimage to the Holy Land** with **Matt Malone, S.J.**, and **James Martin, S.J.**, right, at journeys. americamedia.org. Full digital highlights on page 17 and at americamagazine.org/webfeatures.



Guided by Faith

In “The Joy of Love” (“Amoris Laetitia”), Pope Francis urges Catholics to consult their consciences for guidance when making moral decisions. He might be glad to hear that a recent study found many Catholics already are doing just that. According to the Pew Research Center, 73 percent of Catholics “look to their own conscience ‘a great deal’ for guidance on difficult moral questions.” The statistics demonstrate that the exhortation is not simply a suggestion for a way forward but a powerful recognition of the current reality for many people of faith.

The church urges Catholics to make every effort to build a well-formed conscience, which often is done with the aid of church teaching and through dialogue with others. The Pew study, however, found that most Catholics have less experience with this approach. Despite Pope Francis’ popularity and widespread media coverage, only 11 percent of Catholics look “a great deal [to the pope] for guidance on difficult moral questions.” Just 21 percent said they consulted church teachings “a great deal,” and 15 percent said they looked to the Bible. Many Catholics also reported avoiding discussions of faith with people with whom they might disagree (31 percent, the highest of any Christian denomination).

Of course, Catholics need not choose solely from among these sources as a way of informing their consciences. Yet drawing on church teaching, tradition and conversations with fellow believers—even those we disagree with—can challenge us to think more deeply about our faith and the ways it influences our moral decisions. Catholics already understand the importance of conscience; let us now set about helping one another to form it well.

Justice Delayed

In April 2014 President Obama announced an initiative to expedite the clemency application process for federal inmates, many of whom would have already finished serving their time if sentenced under today’s less draconian guidelines. One of these is Norman Brown, who in 1993 was given a sentence of life without parole—a punishment the sentencing judge said was too harsh—for distributing crack cocaine, the minimum mandated because of his two previous minor drug offenses. For 24 years Mr. Brown kept his head down and his hope alive. Today he is one of the 248 prisoners who have had their sentences commuted by President Obama, who has extended more pardons than his six predecessors combined.

But with less than a year left in Mr. Obama’s term

(the clemency initiative expires with his presidency), thousands of men and women are still waiting to have their cases reviewed by the Department of Justice. An estimated 1,500 of the 9,000 pending applications meet the administration’s strict criteria for commutation: nonviolent, low-level offenders who have served at least 10 years with a demonstrated good record in prison. But what Mark Osler, a professor of law at the University of St. Thomas, calls a “sluggish and often intransigent review process” may prevent most of these cases from even being considered.

That would be a shame. President Obama by himself cannot fix this country’s deeply flawed system of mass incarceration. But in this Year of Mercy, it would be most fitting for him to use his unique power of pardon to give prisoners a second chance to rebuild their lives, reunite with loved ones and contribute to society.

Putin’s Hidden War

A new book by the German author and Russia expert Boris Reitschuster, scheduled for release on April 15, reveals activities by Russia’s President Vladimir Putin to train small military units throughout Western Europe. The book, *Putins Verdeckter Krieg (Putin’s Secret War)*, relies on extensive interviews with Western intelligence sources to draw a picture of an operation designed to cause trouble in the West.

Britain’s Daily Mail published a story on April 11 that alerted the public to this new book, and news sources in Eastern Europe quickly picked it up. Understandably, Poland, Ukraine and other former communist countries are particularly sensitive to military moves by Russia. The secret battle groups are trained in Russian martial arts, as are Russia’s special forces units. According to the Daily Mail’s story, which in turn drew on an advance story in the German daily Bild, Mr. Putin wants to stir up civil unrest and distort democratic processes. Mr. Reitschuster says that intelligence reveals that Russia had at least 300 such agents active in Germany last year. These Russian-trained groups, according to the author, hold maneuvers in the mountains in Switzerland and are also strong in the Czech Republic.

After the deadly attacks in Brussels in late March, reports circulated of the failure of Western intelligence sources in Europe to share precious information about the Islamic State’s foreign operations. The revelations about Mr. Putin’s secret agents show that the agencies do have valuable information. It is crucial that here, too, they share that information so as to prevent the Russian leader from sabotaging and destabilizing Western governments.

Judicial Roulette

Simply sharing breakfast has become a matter of significant political compromise. On the morning of April 12, Senator Charles Grassley, chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee, met with Judge Merrick Garland, President Obama's nominee for the Supreme Court, in the Senate dining room. In the absence of any substantive news, journalists were reduced to reporting that the senator ate oatmeal while the judge had eggs and toast.

Senator Grassley was trying to find a path between minimal politeness to a presidential nominee and the Senate Republicans' steadfast refusal to hold hearings. They maintain that the nomination should wait on the results of the election, though how they would respond at that point to a Democratic president's nominee remains unclear. While their argument has no constitutional merit—the president has a clear duty to nominate and the Senate to “advise and consent” or refuse a nominee—it is an entirely predictable response to the contemporary political stakes. In this situation, Democratic calls for the Senate just to “do its job,” while rhetorically attractive, fail to address the real problem.

One of the underlying sources of tension is that fundamental questions of social policy are increasingly referred to the court for adjudication as constitutional issues. Sometimes this approach is a shortcut around the slow process of legislative change; at other times it is a relief valve for an obstructionist and dysfunctional legislature. In sum, it has produced a situation where the main political purchase American voters currently have on fundamental policy questions like abortion, gun control, religious liberty and the nature of marriage is their votes for presidential and Senate candidates and their hopes that the Supreme Court nomination roulette wheel will stop on the right space.

For almost 30 years, since Democrats in the Senate defeated Robert Bork's nomination on ideological grounds—an unprecedented move—the court has remained in fragile balance on these major questions. It has been almost 25 years since a president has had an opportunity to shift the ideological balance of the court significantly, as the first President Bush did by replacing Thurgood Marshall with Clarence Thomas. Since then, court nominations have provided new justices who maintained the same stalemate on the fundamental policy questions that are increasingly decided by constitutional interpretation rather than legislative action.

Now the roulette wheel has stopped in a rare position, offering a Democratic president the chance to replace a sig-

nificant justice. President Obama has shown admirable restraint in his nomination. Though he leans left, Judge Garland is much

closer to the center of the ideological spectrum than the man he would replace and, at 63, is 13 years older and closer to eventual retirement than Justice Scalia was at his nomination.

For Senate Republicans, even this restraint is not enough; their position is understandable even if their motivations are not always laudable. Responding to the fight over Robert Bork's nomination in 1987, the editors of *America* admitted that the nominee's expected position on the constitutionality of abortion rights was an important consideration, arguing that “it would be silly to maintain that politics or ideology should have nothing to do” with such a decision. Further, they predicted that “those now friendly to the Bork nomination might well be questioning the nomination of some other candidate hereafter, and legitimately so.” While we take no satisfaction in pointing it out, we have reached that point.

That recognition should also move Senate Republicans to hold hearings on the nomination. If they believe, as is quite reasonable, that approving this nominee would result in unacceptable outcomes, resolving fundamental questions of social policy in the wrong direction, quite likely for 20 years or more, then they should vote to reject Judge Garland on those grounds. Both they and the Senate Democrats should abandon the pretense of a neutral evaluation of a nominee's judicial temperament or qualifications and admit that this nomination is the last available lever on policy issues that cannot be resolved elsewhere. Justice Scalia cautioned about this situation in his 1992 dissent in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, writing “if our Constitution has somehow accidentally committed [value judgments] to the Supreme Court, at least we can have a sort of plebiscite each time a new nominee to that body is put forward.”

Perhaps publicly voicing this unwelcome truth would inspire more political conversation about ways to address the deeper issue. That discussion should include possible reforms to the length of terms and nomination processes for the Supreme Court. Even more important, it should inspire legislators to work for achievable compromise on the most important questions, even if it requires the slow, difficult and uncertain process of arguing over constitutional amendments.



REPLY ALL

Free the Saints

“Money and Saint-Making,” by Gerard O’Connell (4/4), brought to mind an inspired homily by the Trappist abbot at St. Joseph Abbey in Spencer, Mass., at a weekend retreat I attended that coincided with All Saints Day. The abbey church trembled with his firm refresher to his monks and us retreatants that God intends everyone to become a saint. He emphasized that it is God who makes saints with his grace. I was gratified to hear his blunt dismissal of money-driven, political-type campaigns directed at the Vatican’s formal process of “saint-making.” Reform of that process is, indeed, most welcome and necessary.

JOSEPH W. BELLACOSA
Ridgefield, Ct.

The Spirit Speaks

In his fine article “A Sacred Calling” (3/28), Steven P. Millies writes, “It seems clear that the Holy Spirit does speak to us and can be heard in the dialogues of politics.” Indeed, the Holy Spirit works through the leaders of our church when they are authentic, truthful and willing to dialogue with the people they serve. Now and then I hear someone with authority dismiss the value of dialogue because he associates the term with those who think the church is a democracy. Sadly, some of our leaders think they possess all the truth and that listening to others for their input or to gain more information is not needed. What a shame, and what arrogance. Pope Francis calls that attitude “Phariseism.”

(REV.) JOSEPH M. CORLEY
Darby, Pa.

Make Welfare Work

The editors’ comments in “Revisiting Welfare Reform” (Editorial, 3/21) were spot-on. Making welfare reform work in Virginia has been a high priority for groups like Social Action Linking Together, a faith-based organization

that has engaged in social justice advocacy for the past 30 years. Since the commencement of welfare reform under the Clinton administration, SALT advocates have been urging state legislators to do a number of things to make welfare reform work: refrain from “supplantation,” a gimmick used by state legislators that results in the reduction of TANF funding intended to be used for direct assistance to families; invest in education and job training programs; increase the cash benefits for families in order to keep up with inflation (since TANF was created, there have been only two increases in the benefit); provide an annual allowance for school supplies and clothing for TANF children in school.

I encourage the editors of *America* to continue their challenge to candidates to provide “detailed proposals... on how to adapt the welfare reform law to current realities.”

ROBERT STEWART
Chantilly, Va.

The writer is the coordinator of public affairs for Social Action Linking Together.

Leave It to Conscience

While I appreciated “Scalia vs. Aquinas,” by Anthony Giambrone, O.P. (3/21), the author seems to recognize but gloss over an important issue—namely, that Thomas Aquinas allows that all that is immoral should not necessarily be made illegal, lest a theology become a theocracy. Instead the church should teach so that rightly formed consciences may freely consent to rather than obey because of force the dictates of morality. In light of this, perhaps same-sex marriage—which involves the deepest identity and even genetic makeup of the person—should be left to conscience. Perhaps abortion—having to do with circumstances so personal and intimate—would best be addressed by listening and counseling instead of legal abolition. In both cases the nation would be spared the ludicrous politicking of deeply serious

moral issues better left to individuals.
PAUL LUPONE
Spring Hill, Fla.

Belief Buffet

As I read “Measures of Faith,” by John A. Coleman, S.J. (3/14), a review of Robert Wuthnow’s *Inventing American Religion*, an analogy came to mind. Religion in the United States is like Chinese restaurants: ubiquitous, familiar, part of American society but with little effect in terms of how Americans understand Chinese beliefs, motivations or approaches to cuisine. In a similar way, American society “knows religion” but very little about its believers, let alone about the object or subject of their belief. And what’s worse is that this creates a feedback loop whereby believers themselves end up “dumbing down” or imbibing an unconscious ignorance whenever they speak about their beliefs in a secular world that has placed its own limits on what it can understand or interpret about religion.

Those of us who have enjoyed quality dim sum, or received a grandmother’s special cooking in a home, know that looking at the \$8.99 buffet is good for numbers but hardly good for developing a deeper relationship and understanding with the people behind it.

JAY CUASAY
Online Comment

Politics Unmasked

In *Of Many Things* (3/14), Matt Malone, S.J., decries this country’s “descent into gutter politics.” So the thin veneer of respectability has chipped away, showing us the ugly, power-seeking, self-serving nature of politicians. It has always been this way—it is just not hidden anymore. Maybe that is a good thing. Let us not allow this government to get any more powerful.

JOHN BAUER
Online Comment

Free to Disagree

In “What Did He Say?” (Editorial, 3/14), the editors write, “When he

speaks of a throwaway economic system...[Catholics] may rest assured that the commentary offered by Pope Francis is buttressed by a legion of unseen experts hidden away in the Vatican." That may be so, but it does not mean he or they are protected from criticism. For example, global poverty is at its lowest levels—less than 10 percent, according to the World Bank. Despite the narrative coming out of the Vatican, much of the reduction in poverty is the direct result of increased access to cheaper global energy sources.

So, while I respect the pope's voice and seek to discern and listen, I must also say at times he speaks with very broad brushes that overstep and overlook certain counternarratives. Such disagreement was once taken for granted when Catholic progressives objected to the pope's limited direct experience to speak on issues like family planning or even abortion. So are we now at a point where it is "creeping infallibility for me, but not for thee," as long as the pope agrees with us?

JOSHUA DECUIR
Online Comment

Know-Nothing No More

"College Free for All" (Editorial, 3/7) gives strong support to Senator Bernie Sanders's proposal of free higher education. The editors rightly note that Catholic and private universities, freed from government influence, provide a richer education in their inclusion of theology and philosophy and promotion of love for neighbor and social justice. But they stop short of noting the patent injustice of Mr. Sanders's denial of tax funds to nonstate institutions. The nearly prohibitive cost of higher education and federal government subsidization of state schools would result in closure of most religious and private colleges and universities. I am confident that Mr. Sanders would find that an unacceptable unintended consequence.

Would that the editorial had reminded that we are the outlier among

developed nations in restricting tax funds to purely secular institutions. Today the United States follows in the tradition of Know-Nothing opposition to Catholic parochial schools rather than the example of the founding fathers, whose children attended tax-supported church-run schools. The editorial should have amended Mr. Sanders's well-meaning proposal by recommending the continuation of the nondiscriminatory and highly successful G.I. Bill approach: funding college education at any accredited institution. Today we have a Supreme Court less wedded to Know-Nothing discrimination and open to state-funded charter schools and voucher programs, some of which serve students at religious schools.

WILLIAM H. SLAVICK
Portland, Me.

Improper Attribution

I am writing to call attention to a mistake in "Women in the Life of the Church: International Women's Day 2016," a podcast published on **America's** website on March 10. Guest Nicole Perone attributes to Archbishop Óscar Romero the reflection that ends "prophets of a future not our own." This is incorrect. Then-Father Ken Untener wrote the reflection as part of the homily that Cardinal John Dearden delivered at the Mass for deceased priests in the Archdiocese of Detroit on Oct. 25, 1979.

I know the editors would agree that proper credit is always a priority in communications, whether print or electronic. It is time that the mistaken references to the "Romero Prayer" stop. Bishop Thomas Gumbleton confirmed to me that Archbishop Romero's biographer could find no reference to this reflection in any of his writings or homilies. It is a mystery how this "urban legend" got started.

JUDY M. HOLMES
Sterling Heights, Mich.

The Health Gap

In "Mind the Gap," I think the editors mounted a very weak argument (Current Comment, 3/7). It is not that I disagree with the assessment on the life-span gap between the rich and the poor, but the editors overlooked a couple of things. First, one of the big reasons for this gap widening among the poor is the lack of affordable healthy eating options. I can walk into almost any fast-food restaurant in the country and buy a cheeseburger for less than a dollar, but a salad with a similar caloric value would cost a considerable amount more. We are forcing our low-income families to feed their children foods that promote obesity for the simple reason that it is all that they can afford.

As for the implementation of the Affordable Care Act, I have a 26-year-old daughter who lives in the Bronx, N.Y., and could not afford insurance. While noble in its intention, in my mind, it is a failure in its implementation. I think it will prove to be an inadequate response that will, in the long run, not do much to help the underprivileged get adequate health care.

DON BURT
Torrance, Calif.



MIGRATION

Francis in Greece: Words and Actions on Refugee Crisis

Pope Francis brought a message of love and inclusion during his five-hour visit to the Greek island of Lesbos on April 16 in a way that resonated across the world. And in what has become typical for this papacy, he did so by both words and gestures.

While the decision to take three Syrian refugee families—all Muslims whose villages had been bombed by ISIS—with him back to Rome was the most significant and spectacular gesture, there were others too that must not be overlooked. His decision to come to Lesbos—at a time when European states are closing their frontiers to refugees—was the first.

In a second striking gesture, he decided to visit the major refugee camp at Moria, which, he knew well, had been turned into a detention center since March 20. The idea to come to Lesbos and to the camp was his, but he quickly gained the full support of the ecumenical patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew I, and of Archbishop Ieronymous II, primate of all Greece, an ecumenical gathering that itself was a powerful symbol of Christian unity.

In further gestures, the group first greeted hundreds of refugees, one by one, and then had lunch with a group of refugees in one of the shipping containers that are the Spartan quarters of all of those in the camp.

Francis' final forceful gesture came at the port of Mytilene, where he joined Patriarch Bartholomew and Archbishop Ieronymous in a memorial service for the countless refugees who have drowned in the Aegean Sea. They prayed for the dead and cast wreaths into the sea as an act of remembrance. Pope Francis capped these significant gestures with powerful words, addressed mainly to the people of Europe and their political representatives.

"Europe is the homeland of human rights, and whoever sets foot on European soil ought to sense this and thus become more aware of the duty to respect and defend those rights," Francis said.

Aware of the current backlash in Europe, Francis said, "The worries expressed by institutions and people, both in Greece and in other European countries, are understandable and legitimate." At the same time, he said, "we must never forget that migrants, rather than simply being a statistic, are first of all persons who have faces, names and individual stories."

He praised the Greek people and the residents of Lesbos because in their response to the refugee crisis, they have shown the world that "in these lands, the cradle of civilization, the heart of humanity continues to beat; a humanity that before all else recognizes others as brothers and sisters, a humanity that wants to build bridges and recoils from the idea of putting up walls to make us feel safer."

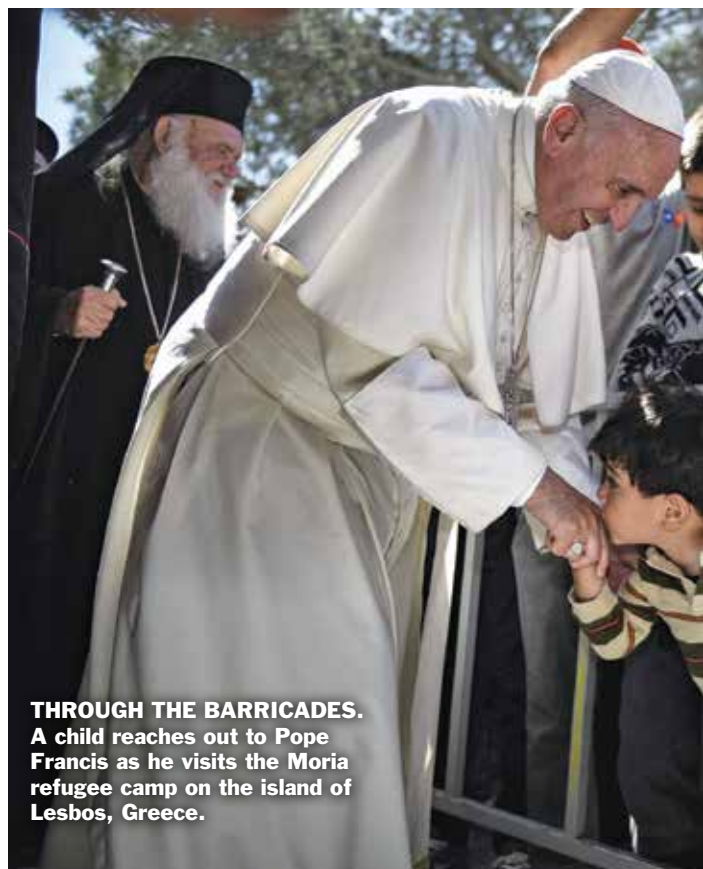
Speaking with reporters on the

plane ride back to Rome, Pope Francis insisted his visit to Greece was not about criticizing a recent agreement between the European Union and Turkey to return refugees landing without legal permission to Turkey. "What I saw today and what you saw in that refugee camp—it makes you weep," the pope told reporters.

"Look what I brought to show you," the pope told them. He held up some of the drawings the children in the camp had given him. "Look at this," he said, "this one saw a child drown."

"Really, today is a day to weep," he said. Holding up another picture, he pointed to the top and said, "The sun is crying. If the sun is able to cry, we should be able to shed at least one tear" for those children, who will carry the memory of suffering with them always.

GERARD O'CONNELL



THROUGH THE BARRICADES.
A child reaches out to Pope Francis as he visits the Moria refugee camp on the island of Lesbos, Greece.



U.S. ELECTIONS

Sanders Takes a Roman Holiday

Heading back to Rome following his moving visit with refugees in Greece on April 16, Pope Francis confirmed to reporters that he had met with U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders that morning as he was leaving his residence. Sanders and other participants at a Vatican conference were staying in the Domus Sanctae Marthae, where the pope lives.

“It was polite” for Sanders, who knew when the pope was leaving, to go downstairs to greet him, the pope said. “If someone thinks greeting someone is to get involved in politics, I recommend he see a psychiatrist.”

For his part, Sanders said it was “a real honor for me” to meet the pope. “I think he is one of the extraordinary figures not only in the world today but in modern world history,” he told a scrum of reporters outside the Vatican walls shortly after speaking at a Vatican conference commemorating the 25th anniversary of the publication of St. John Paul II’s encyclical “Centesimus Annus” on April 15.

The senator from Vermont is challenging Hillary Clinton for the Democratic presidential nomination; the meeting with Pope Francis came the weekend before the pivotal New York primary. Sanders and his wife, Jane, stayed overnight at the hotel in the Vatican gardens on the same floor as the pope.

The Vatican usually tries to avoid any perception of partisanship as far as the pope is concerned. But Francis has been known to flout Vatican protocol, and the meeting with Sanders is evidence that his personal desires often trump Vatican diplomacy.

While he may not have managed a coveted photo op with Pope Francis, candidate Sanders did achieve extensive international news coverage while in Rome and a chance to deliver his stump speech at the Vatican wrapped in the words of the pontiff, one of the most popular leaders on the planet.

“His message is resonating with every religion on earth with people who have no religion, and it is a message that says we have got to inject morality and justice into the global economy,” Sanders said.

“I believe that the pope has played an historic and an incredible role in trying

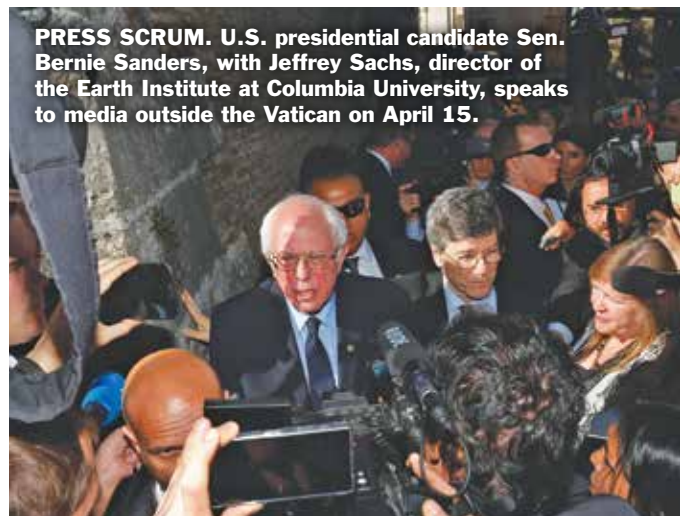
to create a new world economy and a new vision for the people of our planet,” Sanders said. “What he is saying is that we cannot continue to go forward when so few have so much and when greed is such a destructive force, not only in the U.S. but throughout the world.”

He added, “I have long been a supporter of the economic vision of Pope Francis. His views on climate change have played a profound...role in turning many people’s minds around about the urgency of the moment in terms of dealing with climate change.”

During his 10-minute address, titled “The Urgency of a Moral Economy,” Sanders slammed the current global financial system and praised Francis’ 2015 encyclical on the environment, which called for an overhaul of the world’s approach to economics and climate change.

“As Pope Francis made powerfully clear last year in [the encyclical] ‘Laudato Si,’ we have the technology and know-how to solve our problems—from poverty to climate change to health care to protection of biodiversity,” Sanders said.

“We also have the vast wealth to do so, especially if the rich pay their way



PRESS SCRUM. U.S. presidential candidate Sen. Bernie Sanders, with Jeffrey Sachs, director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University, speaks to media outside the Vatican on April 15.

in fair taxes rather than hiding their funds in the world's tax and secrecy havens—as the Panama Papers have shown.”

Throughout his speech, Sanders referred to the “common good,” a phrase that is central to Catholic social teaching. It is also invoked frequently by Francis, often in contrast to the kind of individualism that many say characterizes U.S. society.

Finishing the Fight Against H.I.V./Aids

The fight against H.I.V./AIDS is being hampered by a continued stigma on those who are infected, a lack of access to appropriate medical care and fake antiretroviral drugs pedaled on the black market, said activists taking part in a Caritas Internationalis conference. Caritas brought together representatives of faith-based groups from all over the world to hammer out a “road map” to indicate the best ways to promote or provide early diagnosis and treatment for H.I.V., especially in children. The gathering was organized together with Unaid, the U.S. President's Plan for AIDS Relief (Pepfar) and the Vatican's pediatric hospital, Bambino Gesù. About 80 people active in H.I.V./AIDS policy and relief work took part in the conference from April 11 to 13 in Rome.

Blocking Extremism

Church officials in Pakistan have backed a government plea to the international community not to demonize all Muslims because of acts of terrorism committed by a few extremists. Negative news and publicity against Muslims by the Western media are helping extremists fuel hatred against Muslims worldwide, they said. Targeting the whole Muslim com-

NEWS BRIEFS

It was announced on April 12 that Pope Francis has appointed **Archbishop Christophe Pierre**, apostolic nuncio to Mexico since 2007, to be the new apostolic nuncio to the United States. + Urging more action on the second anniversary of the abduction of 219 school girls from Chibok in northeastern Nigeria, Bishop George Dodo of Zaria said, “That they are still within **the custody of their abductors** after two years does no credibility to the corporate image of Nigeria as a nation.” + Criticizing a move to rebuild border controls to keep out refugees, **Bishop Benno Elbs of Feldkirch**, head of the Austrian church's Caritas agency, said on April 13, “We certainly face a significant challenge, but the answer cannot lie in saying goodbye to human rights.” + White House officials joined faith leaders on April 14 in endorsing an **end to payday lending abuses** that can entrap consumers “in an endless cycle of debt.” + A new Pew Research Center study of Americans across the religious spectrum, issued on April 12, found that “people who are **highly religious are more engaged** with their extended families... more involved in their communities and generally happier with the way things are going in their lives.”



Tears for missing Chibok girls

munity helps the aims of terrorists, the Rev. Aftab James Paul, former director of the Faisalabad Diocesan Commission for Interreligious Dialogue, said on April 13. “This is exactly what they want. The recent bombing of innocent people in a park of Lahore has proven that they do not care for either Christian or Muslims. So blaming Muslims for terrorism will further alienate innocent people from the rest of the world,” he said.

Ceasefire on Contraception?

Religious nonprofits challenging their participation in the contraceptive mandate under the Affordable Care Act filed a legal brief on April 12 that could end the standoff with the Obama administration. In the brief, objectors to the mandate agreed with

a U.S. Supreme Court proposal that such coverage be provided through an alternative health care plan without involving the religious employers. The brief said that as long as any alternative plan offering contraceptive health coverage is “truly independent” of the petitioners and their health insurance plans, then they would no longer object to the A.C.A.'s goal of providing access to free birth control to women. Any such arrangement would require a separate insurance policy, a separate enrollment process, a separate insurance card and a separate payment source and be offered to employees through a separate communication, thus protecting the petitioners' objections under the Religious Freedom Restoration Act to the contraceptive mandate, the brief said.

From America Media, CNS, RNS, AP and other sources.

High Pressure at Indian Point

What's worse than squeezing a few more productive years out of one of the nation's oldest nuclear power plants, one that's within radioactive spitting distance of a major American city and about a mile from an earthquake fault line? How about running a high-pressure natural gas pipeline—you know, the kind known to spectacularly detonate every once in a while—110 feet or so away from it? Did I mention the 40 years worth of radioactive fuel rods stored on site?

That potentially apocalyptic landscape is not the implausible setting for a low-budget thriller; it's what is actually happening in northern Westchester County in New York State, where you'll find the Indian Point nuclear power plant looming over the Hudson River. Just over 36 miles down river are millions of New Yorkers who presumably would have to be evacuated in the event of a major accident at the facility. Its current owners, Entergy Corporation, have long told folks that there is NOTHING to be concerned about at the facility. But a recent transformer fire that led to an emergency reactor shutdown and the discovery of radioactive water leaching into the ground around the plant have not exactly been confidence-builders.

Many New Yorkers have charged for years that Indian Point is just too close to the city to remain in operation, a constant temptation to terrorists and even under the best of circumstances an ecological threat that no amount of emergency planning

can realistically prepare for. Locals are more worried now that preliminary work has begun on a multi-state project to replace an existing gas pipeline with a much larger 42-inch, high-pressure line. Spectra Energy, a corporate moniker apparently borrowed from an early Ian Fleming novel, is pressing for the Algonquin Incremental Market Project. The project was approved by the Federal

Down river are millions of New Yorkers who presumably would have to be evacuated.

Energy Regulatory Commission in 2015, and Spectra work teams quickly began buzz-sawing through Westchester parkland and the backyards of furious residents. Many here find it incomprehensible that a project denounced by residents and challenged by local elected officials, up to and including Gov. Andrew Cuomo, has nonetheless steamrolled over all community objections because of the green light provided by an obscure federal agency.

The new pipeline will move fracked natural gas from Pennsylvania under the Hudson River into Westchester County and thence to points north. Many suspect the sponsors of the project are attempting to situate the fracking industry, now awash in surplus production, for potential sales of natural gas to Europe. That would bail out frackers in Pennsylvania, currently choking on debt and collapsing commodity prices, but locals have reason-

ably asked, What do we get out of the deal? So far most have only seen property values plummet as Spectra work crews chew up what had been pristine scenery.

A handful of local residents have become near full-time resisters to AIM. Most are motivated by the direct impact on their communities, ranging from destruction of habitat all the way to the potential for a Fukushima-style disaster. But many also see AIM as an example of a misplaced investment in a practice—fracking—and fossil-fuel infrastructure that is merely perpetuating harm to creation. They want to stop AIM from tearing up their backyards, surely, but they also are demanding wiser investment in sustainable energy for the future rather than in shoring up a struggling industry for the short-term enrichment of a few.

Paola Dalle Carbonare from Holy Name of Mary Parish in Croton, N.Y., has been a vocal objector to AIM. "I'm here as a mother and a Catholic," she told local media during one demonstration, "answering the call of our fantastic leader Pope Francis who is urging us to get to the street and take action to protect Mother Earth."

"There are serious concerns about the process and prospects," one AIM resister told me. Armed with the federal regulatory commission's approval, Spectra plans to finish work by November. "Their hope is to remain under the radar, out of the public's consciousness, until the work is complete," he said. "We have a tendency as a society to act precipitously, without fully understanding ramifications, interconnections and consequences and then have to deal with the results." He is hoping, even as the trees around him are falling, that there is still a chance this time will be different.

KEVIN CLARKE

KEVIN CLARKE is senior editor and chief correspondent for *America*.



Beyond Divorce

Divorce! Catholics! Needless to say, the 263 pages of “The Joy of Love” (“Amoris Laetitia”) treat a great deal more than these two topics. Here in the United States, we should pay particular attention to those sections that intersect with several of the deepest cracks in the foundations of our marriage and family lives, even a few topics that cause many to squirm.

First, it will come as a great relief to everyone who worries especially about the future of children that the pope is exhorting the Catholic Church to “go big” toward building stronger marriages. Many people are looking to the churches for help at a time when U.S. federal and state governments not only do little to assist children to know and be known by their stably married parents but rather powerfully lend their authority otherwise. Whether by refusing even to slow down nonconflictual divorces involving children, or by promoting nonmarital sex as pro-woman, or by prohibiting linking children with marriage recognition, the state proclaims loud and clear that it has not the slightest interest in the unique way marriage protects children. Children need a mammoth advocate. Pope Francis suggests that it’s us.

Second, while Pope Francis is clearly no Pollyanna respecting the state of marriage, still he appears confident that Catholics can help. This should encourage the discouraged. He acknowledges that some people

call marriage “evil” or judge children less valuable than consumer products. He knows the church’s reputation for “blow[ing] the whistle” on great sex. Yet he reminds us repeatedly that younger people still glimpse the promise of marriage, and he illustrates throughout “The Joy of Love” the beauty of a long-lived marriage.

Third, Pope Francis captures the size of the problem of individualism. His fierce denunciations of individualism respecting marriage, in fact, easily rival those he has launched at the wealthy who are blind to the needs of the poor or at church bureaucrats concerned more about rank than about suffering human beings.

He does this especially well while “unpacking” each line of St. Paul’s famous verses, “Love is patient,” etc. He reminds readers that marriage is nothing less than an icon of God’s sacrificial love for us, a reminder that the Christian life is radical service to the other, like Jesus’; but he then chastises spouses’ uncharitable treatment of one another, which he characterizes with words like arrogance, consumer thinking, narcissism, market logic, fatal self-absorption and impulses to condemn. He feels it necessary to advise spouses to extend the most basic courtesies to the other and admonishes: “Accept...the other person as part of this world, even when he or she acts differently than I would like,” and “leave adolescent individualism” behind. In No. 113 the pope advises each spouse that the other “can neither play God nor serve all my

needs. Love coexists with imperfection. It ‘bears all things’ and can hold its peace before the limitations of the loved one.”

Fourth, while “The Joy of Love” acknowledges external threats to getting and staying married—especially unemployment and economic factors—it does not specifically decry the marriage gap between the privileged and the poorer. This is among the most important facts about marriage and child welfare in the United States. It is increasingly well accepted across partisan lines and is linked closely to the growing and solidifying gap between children from well-off families and those from poor families. The U.S. church will have to exercise

Children
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“The Joy of Love” with an option for the poor.

Finally, “The Joy of Love” touches upon a number of hot-button issues overlooked at first blush but important nonetheless. It strongly defends parents’ rights to educate their children as prior to any state’s rights. It denounces gender ideologists’ unlinking of biological sex from sexual identity. And it strongly affirms (twice) rights of conscientious objection to unjust laws. This, when coupled with its robust dismissal of gender ideology and defense of children’s rights to the love and care of their mother and father, has obvious links to the current struggles over religious freedom on behalf of the family here in the United States.

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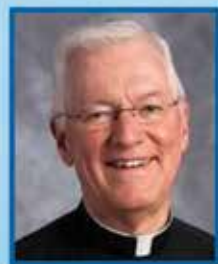
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Back to Wonder

The search for mystery in a scientific world

BY JOHN SAVANT

In recent years, amid the quantum antics of technology and the violent insanity of global restiveness, I have been reading more about religion and spirituality than about any other topic. I am not sure if this is a retreat from responsible engagement or a search for a transcendence of that macabre nightmare described in Archibald MacLeish's poem "The End of the World." Composed not too long after the Great War, and describing history in terms of a surreal circus, its bleak conclusion reflects the fear, early in the 20th century, that existential dread might indeed be warranted.

*There in the starless dark, the poise, the hover,
There with vast wings across the cancelled skies,
There in the sudden blackness, the sudden pall
Of nothing, nothing, nothing—nothing at all.*

"Poets!" one might sigh; "their job seems to thrive on dread, if it isn't love betrayed or a rerun of something else unrelated to the front page or the bottom line." So when the poet/insurance executive Wallace Stevens claims, "We have imagination because we do not have enough without it," or the poet/physician William Carlos Williams says of poetry that people die for want of it, we tend to dismiss these otherwise practical men. Poetry, or any of the arts, would seem to have little utility in the social and economic maelstrom that is our day.

What is said of poetry may, of course, be said as well of religion. Apart from its role in mitigating violence and lawlessness, religion, properly understood, has always addressed something more than ethics or social harmony. In its very assumption of another order of reality, its principal function has been the mediation of mystery—a function whose object, by definition, is not accessible to ordinary means of human understanding or resolution. In religious and perhaps aesthetic terms, mystery refers to things that cannot be proved or disproved but that nevertheless exert a force on our thinking and our lives: why, for example, there is anything and not nothing; why matter is relatively consistent in its behavior; why suffering and injustice persist; why life is never quite enough; what follows death. It is this very inexplicabil-

ity, moreover, that may explain the origin of religious consciousness and the emergence of its principal vehicle, which is faith.

What, though, has all this to do with the business of the busy world? Is our world not already sufficiently turbulent without dropping "mystery" into the smoky cauldron? And has not science, once and for all, roasted the old witch over the Bunsen burner?

A Looming Shadow

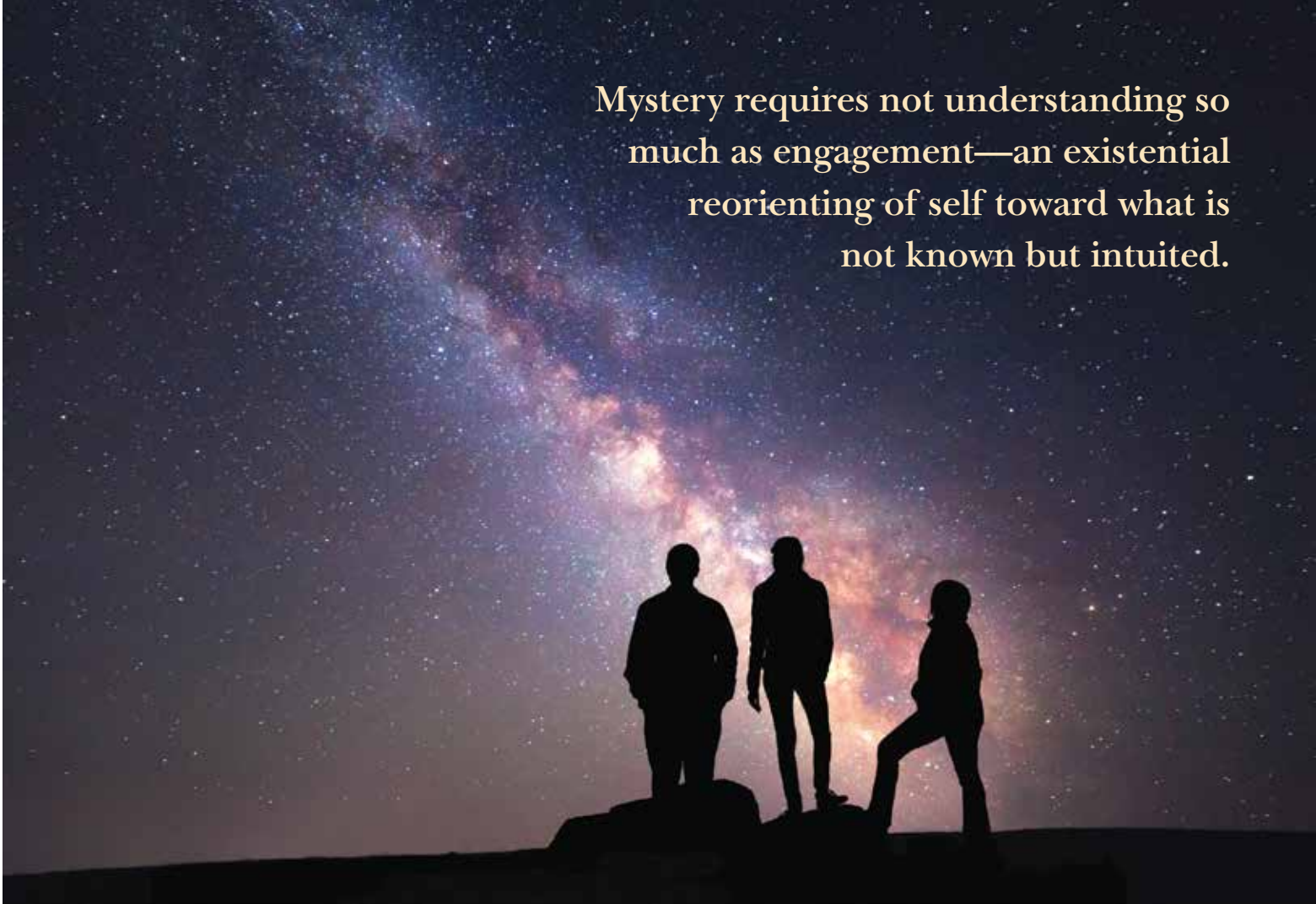
It is rather strange that half a millennium after Galileo and Newton and, in our own times, Edison, Einstein, Henry Ford and the United Nations, we still find people in poverty, we are still distressed over the loss of everything from youth to global security, still haunted by the tangible nightmares of crime, terrorism and human torture; still dismayed by our growing economic disparity and dwarfed in the looming shadow of our inadequacy to do much about it. Most of all, we are still humbled in that bone-house of memory where our brightest and most noble efforts to end war and injustice lie, a mockery of their rhetoric, amid the footnotes to our failures. We are compelled to ask, "What have we done wrong—or failed to do?"

In one of his harsher poems, Wallace Stevens proposes that in confronting the challenges of nature and consciousness, "one must have a mind of winter." Stevens's dictum is addressed to the world of aesthetics, the world of art and music and literature, where, their adherents claim, human reality is addressed in a manner distinct from human thought and logic. Their claim is that through the sensible forms and elements of each medium, a work of art, when well executed, strikes a resonance that corresponds to some aspect or need of human experience. The result is not primarily conceptual, not a proof or a moral directive or a philosophical proposal, but rather a relationship realized in the very "action" (Aristotle's term) of the poem, the dance, the sonata, the painting. One might say the communication of art at this level is ontological rather than conceptual, intuitional rather than informational. Though particular and concrete in presentation, a work of art is universal in its response to human experience.

To the extent that art on this level ignores the restraints of ordinary experience and thought, it may be said to share with religion some intuition of mystery, which, as we have said, is religion's principal business. The creator of myth or

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Mystery requires not understanding so much as engagement—an existential reorienting of self toward what is not known but intuited.



fairy tale, though he “knows” beings like fairy godmothers do not exist, imagines these figures as able to convey, on many levels, both our longing for magic answers and our sad awareness that we must look elsewhere for them. This point underlies the extravagant claims of the poets Stevens and Williams cited above: What the arts—works of the imagination—strive to achieve lies outside the purview of ordinary thought or communication. As the instrument of aesthetic activity (both for performer and audience), the human faculty of imagination informs any assessment of experience or approach to it outside the empirical limits of science and the logical restrictions of human thought. The extensive relationship between religion and the arts in music, ritual, dance and the like clearly finds its origins in this shared grounding.

Louis Armstrong once said, “Jazz is what, if you have to ask what it is, you’ll never know.” Jazz aficionados do know. And their pleasure and judgment and convictions are not sprung from the premises and conclusions of empirical research, but from their formal attention to the music played. The same aesthetic pleasure pertains to one’s enjoyment of any art form, any athletic contest, any dramatic performance. The formal “attention” one brings to these things may even

share something of the mystics’ practice of contemplation, where thought is seen as an impediment to pure engagement with God. I think of Simone Weil’s assertion that pure “attention” is the highest form of prayer.

But, again, what has all this to do with the perils threatening modern societies, civilizations and even the earth itself? May we justly modify Stevens’s wintery recommendation by arguing that in the fragile and volatile world of nuclear menace and mutual deterrence, “one must have a mind of *mystery*”? Furthermore, if mystery is, by definition, inaccessible to reason and science by themselves, and if imagination, rightly understood, is the instrument of aesthetic and spiritual engagement, may we not argue, with Wallace Stevens, that regarding imagination, “we do not have enough without it”?

The late Jesuit ethicist John Kavanaugh argued that “war is a failure of the imagination.” By imagination, I believe he meant what Coleridge meant when he distinguished the practical imagination, which engages physical and strategic challenges, from the aesthetic imagination, whereby one as it were “becomes” the object under scrutiny, so intently “attending” to or contemplating its subject as to achieve an inner “resonance” with it similar to what Satchmo’s jazz audience might realize in the dim, ambiguous light of an intimate pub.

No Escape

If paradox and irony spike our search for the peaceful kingdom with the bitter herbs of self-knowledge and the inconsistency of our species—if, in other words, we cannot escape our shadows in our search for light—how are we to reverse, in our own brief passages through time, the ineluctable tides that flood our noblest endeavors?

That all of our wars have not put an end to war; that the maturation of our young does not seem possible without a measure of rebellion, exposing the moth holes in our own fallible posturing; that virtue, of itself, lacks merit if not directed to goals beyond self-adulation; that all perception and subsequent judgment are qualified and limited by bias and angle of vision; that love, if it does not draw us through the dregs of our own vanity, must remain a shallow draft of thin wine; that we, in the end, must discover our meaning and our strength beyond the limits of our own gifts and character—what can we make of all this, what can we do about it?

Anna's King of Siam says, "Is a puzzlement." The mystic, "It's a mystery." Religious traditions, unfortunately, have a tendency to straight-jacket mystery by listing it as one or another item of belief. But belief is not faith. Belief can take form as assent to dogma without gaining anything spiritually from that assent—without the commitment that marks genuine faith. Mystery, on the other hand, requires not un-

derstanding so much as engagement—an existential reorienting of self toward what is not known but intuited, a turning of soul away from an assumption of absolute self-sufficiency in a gesture known as *metanoia*. The result is not so much what one will know, or even believe, but what one will become.


Disciplined Attention

If women and men of faith are to initiate the next phase of the kingdom on earth, it is this *metanoia*, this *what-they-shall-have-become*, that will represent an objective of first importance. This becoming will be largely the fruit of a growth in contemplative prayer, which through a disciplined "attention" will move us beyond petition to a relationship whose maturation will express itself in openness to ever-evolving revelation, in thanksgiving, praise and a simple and growing awareness of God's presence infusing all creation.

Our failures to end war, injustice, poverty and violence have come at a time in the evolution of the cosmos that is most manifest, today, in both the blessings and the destructive capacities our technologies have made possible. We are darkly aware that these failures may put an end to us. As catastrophes of the practical imagination, of humanistic idealism unrestrained by historical memory, these failures urge upon us the truth that our institutions, resolutions and technological wonders have failed us and will continue to do so. More important, they tell us that it is we ourselves who must change far more than all our enlightened policies and their sophisticated instrumentalities. This change is pre-eminently a moral one—a change in the human heart, a *metanoia* transcending all purely human techniques and therapies.

High-sounding stuff, this. Mysterious, too. But when we tossed out myth with superstition; when we confined our sense of the infinite within the constraints of the microscope and the test tube; when we reduced longing to market allure, tragedy to pathology and love to sexuality; when we addressed the ageless evils of war and injustice as problems in strategy and use of force—we betrayed our sense of mystery, our sense of wonder over all we intuit but cannot know.

If we, indeed, must change ourselves before we can change a world in crisis, we can begin by recapturing our lost sense of wonder and mystery. It seems to me that the recovery of this sensibility is what Christ meant when he cautioned, "Unless you become as little children, you shall not enter the kingdom of God." The recovery of this sensibility is, in fact, a recognition of and a response to the mystery that underlies the whole story of creation, the mystery that is the very first business of religion, the radical stimulus of the arts—and, indeed, the source of the wonder that forever drives science, once perceived as the foe of religion and myth.

As an early father of the church once said, "Nothing understands anything except awe." 



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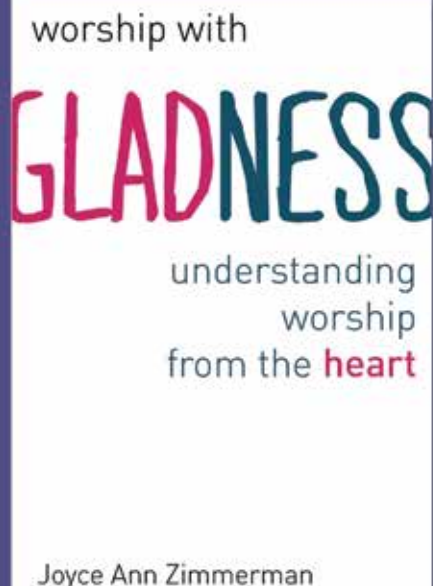
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An Astounding Mercy

After devastation, a prisoner finds a liberating prayer.

BY RAYMOND P. RODEN

The quake that struck Sicily was the worst in the history of Europe, with over 100,000 casualties. Messina, the epicenter, was flattened in 32 seconds, resulting in 70,000 lives lost in that city alone. The shaking began at 5 a.m. and recurred intermittently over the next 48 hours. The date was Dec. 28, 1908, the Feast of the Holy Innocents. My grandmother was 11 years old and lived in the province of Caltanissetta, southwest of the epicenter. Decades later, when I was a kid in Brooklyn, she would describe the experience to me with fresh disbelief, clutching her rosary and saying she had been certain that she and her family would be killed. Even at that telling, earthquakes terrified her more than anything.

Forty miles from Messina, the federal prison at Noto was destroyed, but not one prisoner was even injured. Among the inmates was a young man six years into a 30-year sentence, the first three in solitary confinement and the rest to be served at hard labor, for the attempted rape and murder of an 11-year-old girl when he was 20. He was living at the time with his father and older brother in a small, converted factory building together with the girl, her mother, brother and two sisters. Both families had migrated in search of work to the little hamlet of Ferriere in the stinking, polluted Pontine Marshes near the Adriatic.

In Ferriere, “work” was the soul-crushing drudgery of virtual slave labor for wealthy, arrogant and often cruel landowners. One landed count treated his dogs better than his employees, and the food for just one of his parties would have fed the entire hamlet for a year. Many of the poor simply succumbed quickly to malaria, exhaustion or despair. Local church leaders ignored the situation, not wanting to offend the landlords. Pope Leo XIII did not ignore it. His prophetic voice rang out in “Rerum Novarum,” his 1891 encyclical letter on capital and labor, declaring that the church found conditions in Ferriere and similar communities entirely unacceptable. But the pope was ignored in most countries.

Bright and restless, Alessandro Serenelli was the only reader outside the landowning families in his tiny community. His interest in lurid crime stories and risqué magazine



MYSTICAL ENCOUNTER. Worshippers venerate the relics of St. Maria Goretti at St. John Cantius Church in Chicago.

images of women approached addiction. Sandro, as he was nicknamed, was also filled with resentment and a pride-fueled rage. His descent into darkness brought him to do the unthinkable. Yet from that darkness would emerge a saint, endless mercy, a man of heroic virtue and many miracles, both corporal and psycho-spiritual.

The Gorettis and the Serenellis agreed to live in the same house to lighten the brutal workload just a little. Maria, whom everyone called Marietta, was as oppressed as anyone by the inhuman environment, but her faith and her courage were mature beyond her 11 years. Sandro became infatuated, then obsessed with Marietta. He attacked her. She resisted and he stabbed her many times. She repeated over and over that she forgave him until she died 24 hours later, on July 6, 1902.

Sentencing was on October 15 of that year. When the presiding judge asked Marietta’s mother, Assunta, if she had any final comments before sentence was passed, she answered, “Yes, your Honor. I forgive Alessandro!” There was a momentary stunned silence in the court room, then an indignant outcry from the spectators. “Never!” they shouted. “It shouldn’t be! I would never forgive him!” Assunta, without

THE REV. RAYMOND P. RODEN, a priest of the Diocese of Brooklyn since 1981, is pastor of Our Lady of Sorrows Parish in Queens, N.Y.

missing a beat, stared down the protesters and asked them, "And suppose, in turn, Jesus Christ does not forgive us?"

The Penitent's Dream

Following the great earthquake, on the night after the ground stopped moving, Alessandro Serenelli had a vivid, intense dream described here by Pietro DiDonato and taken from



The dream
broke his heart
wide open.
Only then
did he stop
behaving like a
caged animal.

a face-to-face interview with Serenelli for DiDonato's 1962 biography of him, *The Penitent*:


The prison bars and walls fell away and his cell was a sunlit garden blooming with flowers. Towards him came a beautiful girl dressed in pure white. He said to himself, "How is this? Peasant girls wear darkish clothes." But he saw it was Marietta. She was walking among flowers toward him, smiling, and without the least fear. He wanted to flee from her, but could not. Marietta picked white lilies and handed them to him saying, "Alessandro, take them." He accepted the lilies one by one, fourteen of them. But a strange thing took place. As he received them from her fingers, the lilies did not remain lilies but changed into so many splendid flaming lights. There was a lily turned to purifying flame for every one of the fourteen mortal blows he struck her on the fatal day in Ferriere. Marietta said, smiling, "Alessandro, as I have promised, your soul shall some day reach me in heaven." Contentment entered his breast. And the scene of incredible beauty dissolved into silence.

The earthquake grabbed Serenelli's attention. The dream broke his heart wide open. Only then did he stop behaving like a caged animal. His conversion was immediate. With the help of the prison chaplain, he began to pray, perhaps for the first time in his life. He read the Gospels, and he read the lives of the saints, which helped him interpret the Gospels. To be sure, what he did at 20 was vile, a heinous crime, a grave sin for which he was entirely personally responsible. At the same time, it cannot be denied that the extreme social injustice and barbarous poverty the Gorettis, the Serenellis and their neighbors were forced to endure, which makes some people crazy, were also gravely sinful. That Sandro was the recipient of an astounding mercy from God, communicated through Marietta, is equally clear.

Released three years short of his sentence because he was an exemplary inmate, Serenelli spent four years as an itinerant day laborer and then the rest of his life as a Capuchin lay brother living the way of radical littleness and liberating prayer. Assunta Goretti was by then a housekeeper at Our Lady of Sorrows Rectory at Corinaldo in the center of Italy, her home town and her daughter's birthplace. Together with her children, Marietta's siblings, she welcomed Sandro into their home as a member of the family until the end of his life.

Fifteen years after the penitent's dream, my grandmother, along with my grandfather and my mother and my uncles, emigrated to the Lower East Side of Manhattan, in part to get away from earthquakes. Sandro's quake was one close call too many, I suppose.

Growing up, I never paid much attention to the Maria Goretti story, believing the forgiveness to be nothing more than an embellished pious folktale. I have changed my mind. As I continue to unwrap this story of tragedy and mercy and conversion as a Jubilee gift, I hope that Alessandro Serenelli will come to be known by more and more people, particularly those tempted to despair because of whatever failures they might feel engulfed by.

We live in a society in which it sometimes seems everything is permitted and nothing is forgiven. Our criminal justice system seems bent on imposing draconian punishments like solitary confinement and capital punishment, which amount to torture and do nothing to remedy or prevent that which is most outrageous in human behavior. (Happily, these penalties may be on their way out, at least in the United States.) What Sandro's crime and conversion teach us is that "the system" must never frustrate penitence, block conversion or mock God's mercy. Restorative justice needs to be considered and embraced in all sorts of situations. The mystical encounter between Maria Goretti and Alessandro Serenelli following her death suggests the possibility of a post-modern asceticism inviting prayer and meditation. Approaching these two friends of God together can offer hope, healing and peace to those who need them most. 



A Milestone on the Road

There is a temptation to seek God in the past or in a possible future. God is certainly in the past because we can see the footprints. And God is also present in the future as a promise. But the ‘concrete’ God, so to speak, is today.” Pope Francis said this in the groundbreaking interview conducted by Antonio Spadaro, S.J., on behalf of *La Civiltà Cattolica*, the Italian Jesuit journal of which he is editor in chief, and of *America* and other Jesuit magazines.

“God manifests himself in historical revelation, in history. Time initiates processes, and space crystalizes them. God is in history, in the processes,” he stated. Consequently, “We must not focus on occupying the spaces where power is exercised, but rather on starting long-run historical processes. We must initiate processes rather than occupy spaces. God manifests himself in time and is present in the processes of history. This gives priority to actions that give birth to new historical dynamics.”

The interview took place in August 2013. Francis had already finished writing his first magisterial document, “The Joy of the Gospel,” an apostolic exhortation on the proclamation of the Gospel in today’s world. In that text, the programmatic document for his pontificate, he emphasized the need “to give priority to actions which generate new processes in society and engage other persons and groups who can develop them to the point where they bear fruit in significant historical events” (No. 223).

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This criterion also applies to evangelization, he said; “it calls for attention to the bigger picture, openness to suitable processes and concern for the long run” (No. 225).

I recall all this because I believe it is important to see “The Joy of Love” (“*Amoris Laetitia*”) as a milestone in a historical process that began with Francis’ decision in 2013 to hold a worldwide consultation and two meetings of the Synod of Bishops on the family. “The Joy of Love” is not the end of the process. On the contrary, it has opened doors to something more far-reaching in the Catholic Church and its approach to marriage and the family. It recognizes there can be “various ways of interpreting some aspects of [the church’s] teaching or drawing certain consequences from it” and says “each country or region can seek solutions better suited to its culture and sensitive to its traditions and local needs.” Francis had already decentralized decisions regarding marriage annulments to the local church and now goes further in the area of inculturation.

The first impact of “The Joy of Love” is sure to be felt by bishops and priests, as Cardinal Christoph Schönborn predicted when he presented the text at the Vatican press conference. They will have much more work because of its call for “accompanying, discerning, integrating” Catholics in “imperfect” situations and forming consciences. Bishops, of course, will have to ensure that their priests and pastoral workers are suitably prepared for this delicate task.

In the exhortation, Francis makes

demands also of those who teach moral theology, whether in seminaries, universities or other institutes. He asks them “to incorporate” (No. 311) the considerations in “The Joy of Love” into their courses and affirms that “although it is quite true that concern must be shown for the integrity of the Church’s moral teaching, special care should always be shown to emphasize and encourage the highest and most central values of the Gospel,

particularly the primacy of charity as a response to the completely gratuitous offer of God’s love.” At times, he says, “we find it hard to make room for God’s unconditional love in our pastoral activity. We put so many conditions on mercy that we empty it of its concrete meaning and real significance,”

and “that is the worst way of watering down the Gospel.”

Yet again, Francis explains that “mercy does not exclude justice and truth, but first and foremost we have to say that mercy is the fullness of justice and the most radiant manifestation of God’s truth.” For this reason, he says, “we should always consider inadequate any theological conception which in the end puts in doubt the omnipotence of God and, especially, his mercy.”

He tells pastors: “That is the mindset which should prevail in the church and lead us to open our hearts to those living on the outermost fringes of society.” Pope Francis has started a process that has already given new hope to many people and, in the long run, could renew the face of the church.

‘The Joy of Love’ is a step in a historical process, not the end.

GERARD O’CONNELL

Still Searching

The quest for justice in Nigeria

BY FELICIA AGIBI

The ultimate tragedy is not the oppression and cruelty by the bad people, but the silence over that by the good people.

—Martin Luther King Jr.

It has been just over two years since the abduction of close to 300 teenage schoolgirls in the town of Chibok, in northern Nigeria, by the radical Islamic group called Boko Haram. This horrible event and the nightmare associated with it continue to draw media attention and condemnation both in Nigeria and abroad in very significant ways. Some of the girls have escaped and relocated yet still struggle to cope with the trauma of their experience. In March, a girl who appeared to be about 15 years old surrendered to officials rather than carry out a mission to detonate a suicide bomb; she claimed she was one of the missing girls. Yet, even with the huge amount of international outpouring of concern and grief the world over, many of the Chibok girls, as they came to be known in the news circles and social media, are still missing, with little or no hope for their return.

How long before these girls return home, if ever, is still a question that haunts every man, woman or child who is acquainted with their ordeal and story. April, designated as National Child Abuse Prevention Month in the United States, was an

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appropriate time to remember, if with great pain and anguish, their sudden, brutal and cowardly abduction by the depraved and notorious Boko Haram terrorist group and the accompanying disappointment at the utter ineptitude of the Nigerian authorities' failure to find them. I relate my experience with the situation of these girls as a female, born and bred in northern Nigeria. Still, I can only imagine what they have suffered and continue to suffer.

From my little experience before entering the protected walls of the Catholic convent, I remember how the female child was relegated to obscurity and oppression, with no rights or voice of her own. Hers is to be seen but not heard, useful barely as a tool for mass production of babies, and whose baby girls enter the same cycle. It is, after all,

a male-dominated society, with men at the helm of most affairs, from domestic family life to the traditional, political and religious spheres.

The callous indifference of the Nigerian authorities and their lukewarm or lackadaisical attitude toward the rescue of these girls, along with the inexorable refusal to be moved by the pleas of the mothers of these suffering girls, can be said to be worse than physical child abuse; it is psychological torture of parents and their children alike! Nigerian society has long been mired in this trend of rising ethnic tensions along with economic deprivation and poorly educated young people who cannot find jobs. The result is a society now characterized by unimaginable violence, kidnapping, physical torture and deprivation of every kind.

The young schoolgirls often bear the brunt of this growing depravity in the society's emerging culture, being used as sex slaves or objects in schools and places of employment and society at large. This is rapidly becoming an established cultural phenomenon; just witness the Hollywood characterization of the society as we know it today—one can see how art imitates culture.

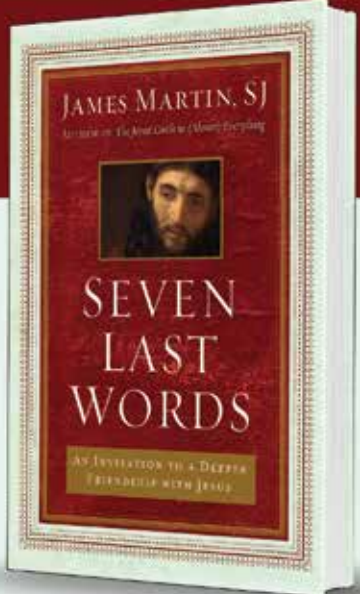
But, in truth, the female child is part of our world and our society, an integral piece, some would say, a better part of creation. She was created with dignity and in the likeness of God. Indeed, she is our baby, our daughter, our granddaughter, our niece, girlfriend, fiancée, wife and the mother of our babies, both boys and girls! How can we forget that God chose a woman, Mary, to be the vessel through whom the world would be saved? How can we forget that the men, who pledged to die for Jesus, all fled, save one? But the women who had barely encountered

him stayed faithful to the end. How can we further forget that it was to a woman, Mary Magdalene, that Jesus first appeared after his resurrection? How quickly we forget these facts. But a woman's dignity is not lost for God, even if it is to many of us.

In order to restore this lost dignity, and as a mental health practitioner, I implore everyone, young, old, rich or poor alike, to break this ignominious silence and speak out strongly against child abuse and violence against women, whether it be physical or psychological. This awakening calls for a proactive sensitivity to one's environment. In African societies like Nigeria, this also means calling out elements of child abuse, sex slavery, child labor, gender oppression or any kind of abuse against children, especially girls, be it implicit or explicit. Any form of oppression is intolerable, and merely being a spectator, whether interested or disinterested, is not an option or a solution.

Only by voicing our concerns, as those closest to the oppressive environment, and being willing to actively disengage ourselves from our own "secure" and comfort zones can we influence others to join in this crucial mission to liberate and to restore dignity to all children and women, no matter where they live on this earth. Do not forget to "Bring Back Our Girls" with your voices and slogans, but more can be achieved by our positive and proactive engagement of all our abilities and treasures. If we all do something, we will change the future of the female child for the better, one day at a time.

My dear Chibok girls, you will always be in our thoughts and prayers. You are fondly remembered with much love, honor and respect. Your physical immolation at the hands of these savage beasts takes not one iota of your dignity away. We earnestly wish that someday all of you will be freed; free in words and deeds to be the children of God you were created to be. **A**



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The Francis Gaze

One of the parlor games of Catholic philosophers is placing a philosophical tag on the thought of various popes. Paul VI often reasoned as a “see/judge/act” pragmatist from the old Catholic Action. St. John Paul II—the easiest since he was a professional philosopher—was a synthesis of phenomenology and Thomism. Benedict XVI seemed broadly Augustinian. But Francis has proved more elusive. In reading his texts, I often have the impression that I am attending a performance in improvisational theater. Styles of argument rapidly change. This passage is right out of Aquinas, that one on equality is feminist, this romantic metaphor could walk off the pages of Chateaubriand, that maxim on interpersonal relations sounds like Ann Landers.

The exuberant eclecticism of Francis’ philosophy permeates “The Joy of Love” (“Amoris Laetitia”), his recent apostolic exhortation on the family. A surprisingly Thomistic document, Thomas Aquinas makes 14 personal appearances in it. The distinction between the objective moral quality of an act and the subjective culpability of a moral agent is standard Thomistic moral doctrine. But as in his other messages, the Thomism in this sprawling text competes with a dozen other philosophical currents as the pope cobbles together his argument on the church’s response to families in crisis.

As a social critic, Francis uses two related concepts with a contemporary philosophical stamp to describe

the cultural problems that the church must face in promoting authentic familial love. They are “the culture of the ephemeral” and “the gaze.”

Building on his longstanding critique of our throwaway society, Francis criticizes the culture of the ephemeral, where human persons are increasingly reduced to disposable objects of consumption. Love is not spared the denigration. “We treat affective relationships the way we treat material objects and the environment: everything is disposable, everyone uses and throws away, takes and breaks, exploits and squeezes to the last drop. Then, goodbye.” The contemporary plague of prostitution, human trafficking and pornography graphically expresses this reduction of the human subject to a disposable object. But the practice of divorce also participates in this reduction inasmuch as the spouse—once a unique, irreplaceable partner—becomes a replaceable part in a series of liaisons.

Cultural historians have recently shown interest in the ephemeral. The Ephemera Society of America sponsors conferences on jar labels, old theater tickets and brand advertisements. Ephemeral studies programs focus on transient art forms, like chalk drawings and sand castles. Epistemologists are currently fascinated with ephemeral knowledge: writings and bits of knowledge designed for quick obliteration. Francis’ preoccupation with the culture of the ephemeral lies elsewhere. He laments a society where what should be enduring in human

experience—lifelong fidelity, promise-keeping, sacrifice for the beloved—is swept away by narcissism and transient pleasure.

At the antipodes of this dehumanizing culture of the ephemeral lies the loving gaze. As in previous documents, Francis appeals to the visual sense for understanding authentic love. If Benedict XVI found God in hearing Mozart, Pope Francis finds God in

looking at Caravaggio. “The aesthetic experience of love is expressed in that ‘gaze’ which contemplates other persons as ends in themselves, even if they are infirm, elderly or physically unattractive.” In this contemplative gaze of love, we grasp the uniqueness of each person and recognize intuitively why he or she is never an ob-

ject, never an instrument to sate our own fleeting desires.

The concept of the gaze has had a long but troubled history in contemporary philosophy. For Lacan, the gaze is a source of anxiety, threatening our autonomy as we are reminded that we are being viewed. Foucault links the gaze to the power that punishes us. The feminist Laura Mulvey analyzes the male gaze, wherein women are judged and dismissed. But for Francis, the gaze of loving contemplation has nothing of the voyeur about it. The Francis gaze is a loving grasp of the unique dignity at the heart of each person and a persevering defense of that uniqueness against our reduction to just another cog in the machine.

JOHN J. CONLEY

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ART | KAREN SUE SMITH

A BIG BET FOR THE MET

A new museum of contemporary art opens in New York.

With the opening of the Met Breuer in March, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York has made a major move into modern and contemporary art. But do not let the new building and all the hoopla around the opening cause you to miss the seismic change in thinking going on at the Met. The contemporary focus marks a deep shift, like the moving of tectonic plates under the Metropolitan, an institution whose vast holdings span 5,000 years.

For decades critics have complained about the museum's neglect of contemporary art. But this past weakness

is being transformed, step by step, into a future strength. Initial thanks for this development go primarily to Leonard A. Lauder, a businessman and lifelong arts patron, who in 2013 donated to the Met his world-class collection of Cubist works by Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, Juan Gris and Fernand Léger, valued at \$1 billion. When shown at the Met a year later, the Cubist collection earned very favorable reviews.

Meanwhile, Thomas Campbell, director at the Metropolitan, worked out a far-reaching plan. Not only would the Met build a new wing for

contemporary art at its Fifth Avenue home, but it would also lease for eight years the former home of the Whitney Museum of American Art. The building at 945 Madison Avenue, a masterpiece of Brutalist architecture designed by Marcel Breuer, is an easy 10 minute walk from the Met. And New Yorkers already expect to see contemporary art there.

As Mr. Campbell puts it, the launch of the new Met Breuer (pronounced BROY-er) shows the Metropolitan "re-engaging with the art of our time." Be advised that "Modern and contemporary" includes more than a century of art, from 1900 to the present.

On View

Two stunning inaugural exhibitions give visitors an eyeful and much to consider. "Unfinished: Thoughts Left Visible" shocks visitors unaccustomed to a new way of presenting the nearly 200 works on view. Fifteenth-century Renaissance masterpieces are shown seemingly out of order, beside or nearby 18th-, 19th- and 20th-century art. You see works by Titian, Bassano, Tintoretto, Jan Van Eyck and Albrecht Dürer, for example, in proximity to very different works by Peter Paul Rubens, Nicolas Poussin and Jacques-Louis David. Paintings by Vincent Van Gogh and the Impressionists are positioned close enough to be compared with works by Diego Velázquez, Alberto Giacometti, Ferdinand Hodler and Gustav Klimt, not to mention Alice Neel, Lucian Freud and Elizabeth Peyton. Pablo Picasso's work is juxtaposed with that of other con-

"Street in Auvers-sur-Oise," by Vincent Van Gogh, 1890.



temporary artists on the fourth floor. What startles, and is designed to educate, is the innovative organizing principle of unfinished work. This conceit encourages new arrangements of art never before shown together. It is a contemporary idea full of promise for new ways of seeing and appreciating art.

“Nasreen Mohamedi” (1937-90) is more predictable: works on paper by a relatively unknown modernist from India. While these include photographs and brightly colored drawings, a whole series of graphite grids predominates. The grids define space and give it an architecture. Some of Mohamedi’s lines point outward toward infinity, as if she were dividing the cosmos. One sees rhythm, movement and weaving patterns in the grids. Some reverberate, almost emitting sounds. Others resemble landscapes, aerial views of fields or miles of telephone



“Untitled,” by Nasreen Mohamedi, 1969

wires. This is the first U.S. museum retrospective of Mohamedi’s work.

Future Directions

What would success look like at the Met Breuer? London’s Tate Museums, currently four institutions (Tate Britain, Tate Modern, Tate Liverpool and Tate St. Ives), offer one analogy. Sixteen years ago the Tate, London’s venerable museum of British art, opened a satellite for contemporary art, the Tate Modern, housed in a former electric power plant across the Thames River from St. Paul’s Cathedral. It was a gamble. The Tate Modern directors hoped for two million visitors that year. Instead, five million came. Since then the numbers have grown. The venue is popular and so are the exhibits. In June the Tate Modern will open a brand new building, its second expansion since 2000. This stunning success has been achieved without the Tate Modern’s having any permanent collection

comparable to the Lauder Cubist gift to the Metropolitan.

What might the Met Breuer accomplish? Unlike the Tate Modern, the Met Breuer has competitors in contemporary art: the Museum of Modern Art, the Solomon R. Guggenheim and the Whitney. And unlike the area surrounding the Tate Modern at its launch, which was ripe for development as a funky new place to go in old London, the Upper East Side of Manhattan is a crowded, developed neighborhood. It is a gamble, but the potential of the Met Breuer is real.

According to Mr. Campbell and Sheena Wagstaff (who left her post as chief curator at the Tate Modern to chair the Met’s new department of modern and contemporary art), the Met Breuer plans to highlight diverse artists. It seeks to disrupt and expand the way the history of art is told.

The inaugural exhibitions further both goals, especially “Unfinished,” which moves beyond the linear chronology that typically governs exhibitions and treats art as a human exploration not bound by time or geography. Instead of ensconcing art in some institutional pantheon, both ex-



“James Hunter Black Draftee” by Alice Neel, 1965

hibitions give viewers tools to assess for themselves the value of contemporary art.

Kerry James Marshall, an African-American artist with a forthcoming solo show at the Met Breuer, was referring to the exhibition “Unfinished” when he said at the press preview, “My

work appears alongside Leonardo’s.” He means DaVinci, of course. Marshall’s comment shows the value of rearranging works of art, for contemporary artists as well as for viewers.

KAREN SUE SMITH, former editorial director of *America*, writes and makes art in retirement.

BOOKS | JAMES P. McCARTIN

THE MOST WONDERFUL THING

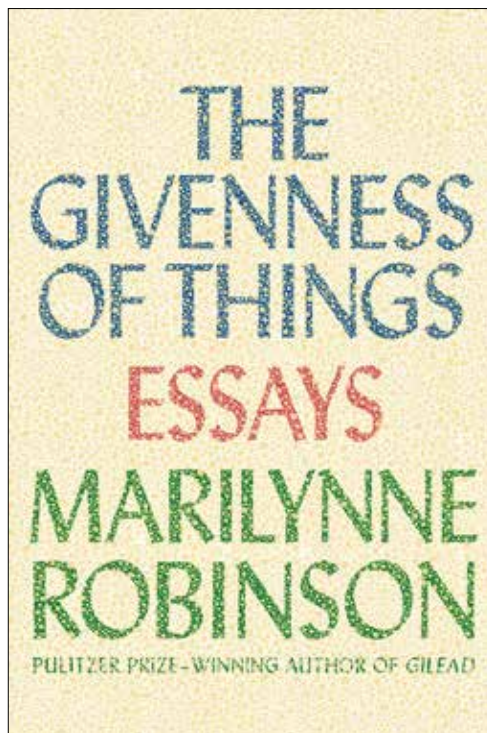
THE GIVENNESS OF THINGS Essays

By Marilynne Robinson
Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 304p \$26

Contemporary intellectuals typically distrust tradition, employ market analogies to make sense of the world and celebrate the continuous advance of technological innovation. Marilynne Robinson does none of these things. A Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist and essayist, she is both straightforward and polite in refusing to follow what is trending. Robinson’s appeal is tied to her trademark dissent, though her ability to yield an endless series of penetrating insights certainly does her no harm. In this volume, Christology and the Second Amendment, Shakespeare and physics, the moral reverberations of forgiveness and the sallow state of public life today are all treated with a stunning aptitude that enables them to hang together coherently. These essays demonstrate why Robinson is likely the most capacious, if not also the most important, thinker in the United States today.

Robinson’s debut novel, *Housekeeping*, won acclaim in 1981. Only after the 2005 appearance of *Gilead*, her second novel and the first in a series that includes *Home* and *Lila*, did she achieve literary stardom. In the meantime, she produced a still little known 1989 nonfiction work called *Mother Country*, on nuclear pollution

in Britain, and *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought*, published in 1998, wherein she launched both a spirited critique of Americans’ casual capitulation to economic Darwinism



and an ongoing campaign to refurbish the sullied reputation of the 16th-century Protestant reformer John Calvin. Between those works and the present one, *The Givenness of Things: Essays*, came two additional collections, each burnishing Robinson’s credentials as pleasantly idiosyncratic and unusually wise. Her characteristic style—unhurried and demanding of the reader’s at-

tention—again pervades this volume.

Robinson devotees will encounter new ideas and perspectives in these essays, but they will not be surprised by the book’s overarching themes and concerns. A prominent recurring thread is, on the one hand, the exquisite achievements of the human mind and, on the other, the stubborn feebleness of that mind in its attempts to explain the cosmos. She pronounces “human brilliance, human depth, in all its variety” to be “very probably the most wonderful thing in the universe.” Yet she also insists on pointing out that we perceive only from within “the cocoon of our senses” and that even the most elegant insights of science are in no sense definitive, but ultimately “a pure artifact of the scale at which and the means by which we and our devices perceive.” Justly celebrated accomplishments aside, our species is equipped to produce only a “radically partial model of reality.”

Another running theme is the increasingly worrisome tendency of Americans to devalue the humanities in our rush to attain peaks of economic efficiency and technological prowess. Praising the boundless intellectual appetite of Renaissance humanists and the commitment of early Protestant thinkers to make knowledge accessible to the masses, she goes on to link these phenomena to the much later flowering of public universities and libraries in 19th-century America.

Thus she lays the groundwork for an extended argument, ranging over much of the book, about the relationship between a rich and lively intellectual life and a vital and robust public life, between liberal learning and healthy practices of community and democratic co-responsibility. “Contemporary America is a place full of fear,” she observes, and our political life is “as dysfunctional as it has been since just before the Civil War.” Given these circumstances, she carefully lays out a twofold contention that this state of affairs extends substantially from

the fact that we “reduce ourselves and others into potential units of economic production” and that an immersion in the humanities can inspire us to respect ourselves and our neighbors (including undocumented ones) for what we and they are “in the largest sense,” well beyond utility.

Robinson has an acute and seemingly irrepressible theological sense, which leavens this volume. Her beautifully wrought essay on Shakespeare’s many “long scenes of gratuitous pardon,” for example, is every bit as much theology as literary criticism. Her meditation on fear in American society and its relationship to epidemic gun violence comes with the simple though arresting reminder that “fear is not a Christian habit of mind.” In a discussion of how Americans now view higher education as mere pre-professional training, she states: “I hope I will not sound eccentric when I say that God’s love for the world is something it is also useful to ponder.” In an essay called “Theology,” she writes: “Religions are expressions of the sound human intuition that there is something beyond being as we experience it in this life. What is often described as the transcendent might in some cases be the intuition of the actual.” Such lines only hint at Robinson’s rare theological depth.

Robinson turns 73 this year, and most of her publications have appeared only since her mid-50’s. I mention this because young intellectuals and writers are now tempted, even incentivized, to divulge every thought, however provisional or undigested. Robinson, toward whom no one can level a charge of superfluous thinking or self-expression, embodies a much needed, though admittedly old-fashioned, model of achieving complex, considered insight over a lifetime of careful reading and writing.

JAMES P. McCARTIN is director of the Fordham Center on Religion and Culture in New York City.

NICHOLAS FARNAM

17TH-CENTURY TERRORISM

THE WITCHES Salem 1692

By Stacy Schiff
Little, Brown & Company. 496p \$32

In January 1692 in Salem, the devil is very real. An 11-year-old girl feels bites and pricks and goes into strange convulsions and contortions. She is soon joined by her 9-year-old cousin and two neighbor children. They together are able to identify a local beggar-woman as their attacker. The town is in turmoil. The beggar woman is arrested. Soon more Salem children feel the effects of witchcraft and identify more attackers. They report actually seeing apparitions of their attackers as they are being bitten and harmed in other ways. Within six months more than 100 townsmen and women have been accused. All who come to trial except one are convicted. Those who confess are sent back to jail, rather than the gallows, to help in testifying against others. It is soon apparent that there are only two ways to avoid the gallows: Either you are pregnant or you confess to being a witch. By the middle of the year the witch hunt has grown into an epidemic, as the number of accusers appears to redouble with the number of convictions. Alarmed, the governor of the colony disbands the court hearing the cases. Mediations for peace ensue in the community.

How could a small group of mostly girls and young women come to dominate a town through their accusations of witchcraft and, in a matter of

months, send 19 of their elders to the gallows? Stacy Schiff’s careful analysis shows there could have been a range of natural forces at work—mental, psychological, political, cultural, climatological and even nutritional—influencing the accusers. Yet she does not discard the possibility of the preternatural forces of which contemporaries were convinced. Some of the accusers might have begun in the spirit of fun or spite, but, as Schiff’s research shows, from the depth and breadth of the accusations this could never have been just a pretense for most. Clearly the court did not think so. Everyone charged was quickly convicted

by justices convinced that witchcraft was taking place before their eyes, as accusers convulsed in spasms before the accused on the courtroom floor. As Schiff quips, the trials demonstrate the dreadful result of “what happens when a set of unanswerable questions meets a set of unquestioned answers.”

The author brings an open mind, skillful research and a highly detailed narrative style to events that continue to interest us because their legacy seems to touch upon important threads in our national character. Schiff may be overreaching when she calls Salem “our national nightmare.” Yet surely its shadow reaches beyond the uses Arthur Miller made of it in his play “The Crucible” and in the tales of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Stephen King. It endures in our headlines today, in our current lurching attempts to deal with terrorism, immigration and Muslims as well as in our history



of national scandals, our sometimes “paranoid style of American politics,” our tendency to over-respond to threats, like invading Iraq to search for nonexistent nuclear weapons, moving whole populations of Japanese in World War II and building backyard bomb shelters in the 1950s.

There is little to connect with our Catholic heritage, however. The Salem panic unfolded in what was essentially a theocratic state, driven by Puritan ideology and sanctimony, with leaders anxious to prove to England that the colony could govern responsibly. Having been barred by an edict in 1647, there were virtually no Catholic priests in Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1692. Conceivably some Catholic influence might have been mitigating. While Catholics had a terrible history of burning witches in Europe from the 13th to the 17th century, by the end of the 17th century persecutions were beginning to die out in Europe.

Many priests were quite skeptical about the reality of witchcraft, accepting St. Augustine’s view that witchcraft could not exist, as it entailed a belief in some divine power other than the one God. Catholics had their belief in the Eucharist’s real presence and the rite of exorcism to defend themselves against devilish attacks. These protections were not available to Puritans in Massachusetts, however. To them the presence of the devil seemed a terrifying possibility, perhaps more real than the presence of Christ. Cotton Mather’s influential writings, and a small girl’s complaints, could easily whip them into a frenzy of fear.

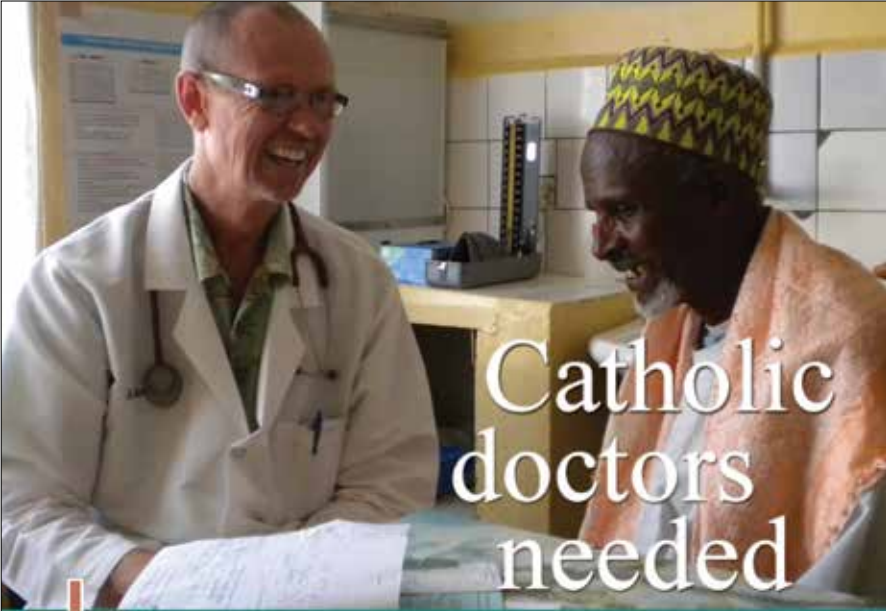
Prosecution of witches all but died out in the next century, as a new climate of enlightened rationalism developed. Laws were revised. Severe penalties for the practice of witchcraft were replaced by lesser ones for the fraud that might be perpetrated in the pretense of witchcraft. The mere prac-

tice of witchcraft or any other magic became—as it is today—not a crime unless some harm could be proved. In a world where religion and state are separate, protection from witchcraft evolved legally into consumer fraud protection. In Christian eyes, of course, witchcraft remains a serious sin. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* condemns all practices of magic and sorcery as contrary to the virtue of religion (No. 2117).

Schiff tells an exciting tale, richly and insightfully laid out. She is particularly good at carefully tracing the community’s gradual return to peace and normal relations among neighbors. Her undoubted talent for sketching a scene, building character portraits from limited material and sifting through voluminous historical data to make a dramatic story, as previously demonstrated in her Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Cleopatra*, are on full display here.

As articulate as she is, however, it is hard to see how this book breaks new ground on a subject that has been exhaustively scrutinized by legal scholars and historians drawn to the topic as an object lesson in the mishandling of justice in the face of a growing hysteria and as a signal event in the beginning of the end of theocracy in the colonies. But for anyone new to the story, wanting an accurate and gripping account of events this is the book for you. You’ll be left pondering unanswerable questions such as: Did the young girls make up stories or were they really attacked? Did any really fly on broomsticks to a Sabbath in the town minister’s pasture, as they claimed? Did any of the accused really believe they were witches? Or did they confess to save their lives? However you answer, there can be little doubt that sinfulness was at work in Salem by either the accused or the accusers, or perhaps both.

NICHOLAS FARNAM is former president of the *Educational Leadership Programs* and author of *The Liberal Education Movement* in Central and Eastern Europe.



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WHO BEARS THE COST OF MERCY?

THIRTEEN WAYS OF LOOKING

By Colum McCann
Random House. 256p \$26

Because of the simultaneous revelation and mystery of its shifting perspectives, Wallace Stevens's poem "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" has remained a literary touchstone for nearly 100 years. Now the fiction writer Colum McCann uses its stanzas as epigraphs to the novella *Thirteen Ways of Looking*. Stevens's poem, 13 stanzas published in the early 20th century, is imbued with symbolism about observation and the actions that knowledge can provoke.

But it also portrays literal blackbirds that still fly at twilight along the route where Stevens composed much of his verse on daily walks in Hartford, Conn. The absence of the blackbird from McCann's otherwise identical title echoes thematically in his collection's three stories. Indeed, Stevens's blackbirds, functioning as doubled seers and images, are replaced in McCann's contemporary world with surveillance cameras and television, yet a preoccupation with the consequences of seeing makes the two works kin.

What's most worth contemplating about McCann's characters is how they grapple with bearing witness. This responsibility is paramount in the lives of the faithful. The transformation of witness from passive observation into engagement and action fascinates McCann. This, too, he shares with Stevens, though there are now "more cameras in the city than birds in the sky." McCann's text poses what seem like direct questions while also respecting the reader's power and desire to traverse the unknown. We are allowed

to discern the answers, if they exist, for ourselves. In enacting this inner expanse of the unknown, he channels Muriel Spark. At times, McCann risks commentary on language and even poetry, but his sentences never become sterile; rather, they always pulse with potential.

The delight in this collection comes from dwelling on the surface questions of what is known and how it is known but also from being submerged in the moral repercussions. Technology, McCann seems to say, with its banks of images, enhancements and angles, is no more illuminating about the past or future than the light we cast on the present from within. But it is not only surveillance or the Edward Snowden era that the book examines. The judge in *Thirteen Ways of Looking* falls in love with his wife largely by gazing at her through a window when they are childhood neighbors and then spends years penning her letters from another country before they reunite. "How odd it was to know someone so well and never have talked a single word in her presence," he thinks, looking back on their epistolary courtship.

In the novella, the judge is murdered after a lunch with his son, who might be the intended victim of a revenge crime. The father pays for the sins of his son, and yet in his last moments he ponders that he may be the son of his son. It is the rambling of an old man, perhaps, but also an invocation of lineage and trinity. What inheritance do

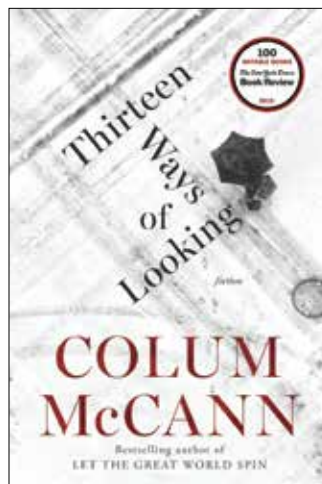
the blackbird, the image and the camera give us?

Sister Beverly, the protagonist of "Treaty," was held captive decades ago in a South American jungle. She discovers through a foreign language news broadcast that the man who bit and then sewed her breast shut has remade himself into a diplomat, a peacemaker, in an institute in London. Galvanized by simultaneous recognition and inability to understand what has changed him, she goes to London where she carries out the oldest form of espionage, sitting outside of his building, waiting patiently for him to emerge. When he does, you cannot breathe for the duration of the time they share the page. This is the emotional intensity McCann brings to bear to this day of reckoning. Sister Beverly loses her words at times to early dementia but not the sense of how forms fit together into worlds. Lost in a train station in London on her impulsive mission—

not yet described as revenge, justice or forgiveness—she reflects on a pigeon: "How odd to think that it might live inside the station, a nest in the rafters, its whole life without a tree of any sort."

Human encounters and natural forces are still more powerful than the seemingly omniscient shadows of manmade surveillance.

Relationships are what shape the world, not our static mountains of information. In "Sh'khol," an adopted deaf boy goes missing in part because of his love for the sea's sensory pleasures. Tomas's mother, who translates Hebrew into English, learns all and nothing from the nestling of his head on her shoulder, the covering of his body with his hands. All of the tests and conclusions of experts who try to measure his abilities to compre-



hend language pale before Rebecca's experiential knowledge of her chosen family.

In "What Time Is It Now, Where Are You?" we enter the mind of a narrator who is a writer, trying to make decisions for his characters. A deployed American marine wonders what to say

to her family given an opportunity to call them on New Year's Eve; the writer ponders various scenarios for the conversation before deciding to eschew dialogue altogether. The story ends with the phone ringing, unanswered.

As in faith, difficult questions do not solve or shut down these stories' situa-

tions but expand them. What motivated the judge's murder? What happened to Tomas during the hours unaccounted for? Most hauntingly, how should one act when seeing one's rapist after 37 years? Who bears the cost of mercy? How do we learn to gaze into the dark again, unblinking, when our complex systems of language, information acquisition and telecommunication have failed? We do so, this book suggests, by somehow making treaties with those who also have faith in a higher power, even if they call it by another name. Sister Beverley's witness is Muslim; she worries that she has violated his beliefs. He makes her a promise that dissolves any sense of wrongdoing on her part. It is not circumstances but whom we put our trust in that matters.

Like Wallace Stevens, McCann is concerned with our confidence in time. As Stevens meditates on how evenings can last all afternoon, McCann notes, "It is happening, as the poet says, and it is going to happen." Read these stories and ask: How are exposure, vulnerability, violence and peace a linked? Is transformation possible? Enter others' experience of these questions. It is when we do not know we are being observed that we are most truly ourselves: "the more obscure the moment, the more valuable the knowledge."

McCann rips away "fancy language [that] can make any stupidity shine," challenging us to respond viscerally to what we see in the same way we do when we shiver as the wind moves in our bones. He takes us beyond language into our souls, a part of the mind that the judge calls a deep well where we can touch water. Precipitation—the snowy mountains from Stevens's poem, a falling rain in McCann's story—opens and closes this collection, a gesture I observe as a beautiful sign that we remain helpless, small, blessed, vulnerable and connected to God's splendor.

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CYNTHIA-MARIE MARMO O'BRIEN has contributed to *America*, *Booklist*, *Killing the Buddha*, *Narratively* and other publications.

The Value of Each Life

THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD (C), MAY 8, 2016

Readings: Acts 1:1-11; Ps 47:2-9; Heb 9:24-28; Lk 24:46-53

“So Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time” (Heb 9:28)

The ascension is a proof of the significance of the incarnation and, as a result, the significance of each of our lives. Certainly, the ascension directs us to the uniqueness of Jesus, as God and man, and specifically to Jesus’ enthronement as Lord, but it also points to the uniqueness and value of each human life. Because Jesus’ human being does not cease with his resurrection or his ascension, Jesus’ incarnation, the particularity of his human personhood, is eternal. But that means our personhood, our individuality, will not just melt away into nothingness with death either. We are intended for eternity as unique instances of human beings.

Jesus’ ascension is the hinge between Luke’s Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, for Acts is not a new story but the continuation of the story of Jesus’ mission and ministry through the work of his apostles and disciples. As we are told in Acts, Jesus, while physically absent for a period of time, “will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” It is not so much the cosmological description of the manner of Jesus’ “coming” and “going” that ought to interest us but the ongoing reality of Jesus’ eternal existence.

As a result, the ascension is not the end of Jesus’ mission but the beginning of the church’s mission. Jesus’ ascension

takes place only “after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles,” which creates an overlap with the events described in Luke 24 but more significantly reflects a deepening of the encounter of Jesus with his apostles. In both Lk 24:49 and Acts 1:4-5 Jesus promises the apostles the Holy Spirit, “power from on high.”

The apostles understand this promise initially, though, in terms of the restoration of the kingdom to Israel, which seems to indicate to them a physical kingdom. Since “after his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God,” it is not a surprise that it would be on their minds.

Yet Jesus’ kingship is not about establishing a kingdom by conquering and destroying the enemy. The only enemies Jesus has are those that have already been conquered through his resurrection: death and suffering. The victory of the kingdom of God is not about building castles and fortifying walls to keep people out, but about inviting others in to enjoy God’s reign. This is why when the apostles ask whether this is the time to restore the kingdom, Jesus’ response is to send them out to the world: “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

In the last verses of the ascension scene in Acts, two figures from Lk 24:4, the two men who greeted the women at the tomb, reappear. They ask the

apostles, “Why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” The Letter to the Hebrews makes the same point, saying that Jesus, who came first for the sins of humanity, “will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.” The apostles are told, in a sense, to get on with their work because while Jesus will return at some point, “those who are eagerly



PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE

What does Jesus’ enthronement as incarnate Lord mean to your life? How do Jesus’ incarnation and ascension help you understand the value of your life?

ART: TAD DUNNE

waiting for him” when he returns depends on the church. The apostles have a job to do.

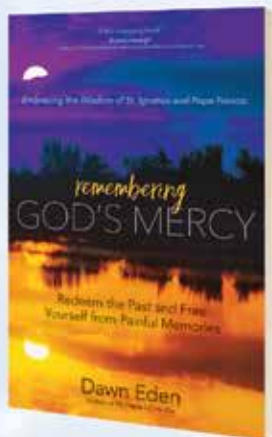
Since each human life, body and soul, is valuable, each person deserves to hear the saving story of Jesus’ life. Jesus took on human life, became incarnate, exactly for this purpose: to save our unique human lives. And Jesus retains his human uniqueness as the ascended Lord as a model for our future life and in order that each of us in our individuality and personhood can share in eternal life. He will come again as the same Jesus, a person like us, to welcome us to enjoy the kingdom of God: life eternal with all of our singularity and personhood intact.

JOHN W. MARTENS

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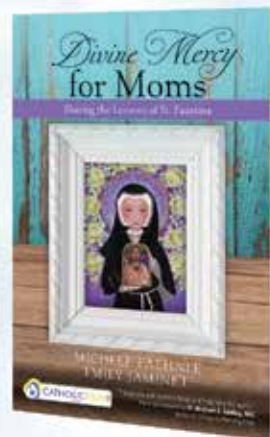
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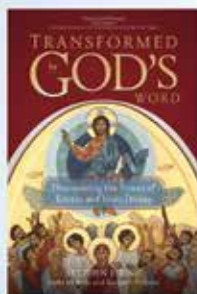
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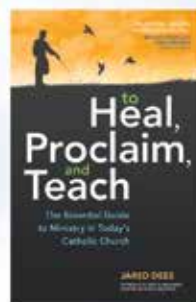
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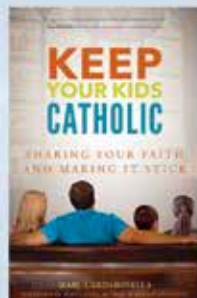
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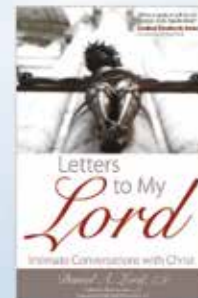
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