

America

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Lives of Christ

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OF MANY THINGS

For most of his life my father has been a man who “votes for the person, not the party,” even if that person is more often than not a Republican. This has always made sense to me, for Dad is a conservative guy (lowercase c); he generally needs to hear a good reason for changing something that seems to have worked well for quite a while. Yet he is also an undogmatic, critical thinker, pragmatic and independent. You’re never going to see him on the floor of a G.O.P. convention wearing a Stetson and waving a placard.

Still, he loves politics, a passion he bequeathed to me. Boys often accompany their dads to ball games and the like. But I was the only one who asked if I could go with him to Town Meeting, my hometown’s own incarnation of that venerable New England tradition. From a young age, I saw there in our middle school gymnasium democracy in action, with all its beauty and comic error, its low stakes and high drama.

My dad would explain every detail to me, pointing with pride, for example, to the fact that the rules required us to refer to one another as “Mr. Smith” or “Mrs. Jones” and to the chair of the proceedings as “Mr. Moderator.” The inherent nobility of the event, he explained, required a certain decorum and civility.

On the way home from Town Meeting, I would pepper my dad with questions about what had happened, why so-and-so had said what he did, why what’s-his-name voted the way he did. My father would patiently explain and then wrap up the evening by reminding me that politics is a noble pursuit and civic duty is something we take seriously. After all, most of the world at the time did not have the right to vote for anything.

My dad taught me all that, virtues and memories I cherish. You can imagine, then, how dispiriting it was to hear during a recent visit with my father

that he was not sure whom he was going to vote for because he is so disgusted with our national politics. Hilary, Marco, The Donald—we’re all on a first-name basis now with these people we’ve never met. I suspect my father and I could adapt to that unwelcome though still rather minor social innovation.

It’s the rest of it that is so deeply troubling. I have spoken with parents who have told me they don’t let their kids watch the debates because they don’t want them to think that that is an acceptable way for adults to behave. I’ve spoken with high school principals who have told me that their students see little use for politics except as a punchline. I myself wondered whether a single young person watching this spectacle would be moved to enter public service. Would any one of them think that this is a noble calling that is worthy of the best in ourselves?

Over this last weekend, after Donald Trump called Ted Cruz “a liar” and Marco Rubio “a choke artist,” Mr. Rubio pushed back by mocking Mr. Trump’s appearance, the size of his fingers and even the size of his genitalia. Mr. Rubio’s crowds cheered him on, much like first-century Romans at a gladiatorial contest. The media, meanwhile, who share a hefty size of the blame for our descent into gutter politics, sat back in faux-shock, pretending not to know how all this came to be.

When the major candidates for president of the United States are saying and doing such things and are then rewarded for it in poll after poll, then I no longer recognize my own country. Like my father, I don’t know whom I’ll vote for. A pro-life, pro-immigration, economic liberal who is no fan of guns but still a constitutional originalist has no natural home in either party. My father, I suspect, is now similarly homeless. But he would likely say that he didn’t leave the Republican party. The party left him.

MATT MALONE, S.J.

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Cover top: Sara Lazzaro as Mary and Adam Greaves-Neal as Jesus in “The Young Messiah,” Photo: Focus Features/Philippe Antonello. *Bottom:* Joseph Fiennes as Clavius and Tom Felton as Lucius in “Risen,” CNS photo/Columbia Pictures.

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ON THE WEB

On "America This Week," Elias D. Mallon, S.A., right, talks about **challenges to religious liberty**, and the Catholic Book Club discusses *When Breath Becomes Air*, by Paul Kalanithi. Full digital highlights on page 27 and at americamagazine.org/webfeatures.



Replacing an Ancient Ritual

The practice of female genital cutting is a longstanding tradition in many parts of Africa and in some Arab countries. Also called female genital mutilation or female circumcision, the procedure involves cutting, removing or stitching together some portion of the female genital organs for nonmedical reasons. A recent report from the U.N. Children's Fund found that it is more widespread than once thought. The group discovered that approximately 60 million women in Indonesia have undergone genital cutting; Indonesia is the 30th country in which the practice has been identified. Genital cutting is seen as a rite of passage for girls as young as 6 years old and often is motivated by a cultural desire to ensure a woman's purity, obedience or submissiveness. While some women are proud to participate in the procedure and feel it builds community, for many of the more than 200 million women worldwide who have experienced it, genital cutting can result in both immediate and long-term health issues.

As recently reported by Global Sisters Report, Sister Ephigenia Gachiri has spent 16 years traveling through Kenya—where 27 percent of women aged 15 to 49 have undergone some form of genital cutting—in an effort to change cultural ideas around the practice. As part of her efforts, she has created an alternative, Christian, coming-of-age ritual that could replace the practice of genital cutting. It is an idea that should be implemented widely, aided by the local outposts of the global church. The option of an alternate ritual, whether based in religious or local tradition, could help communities to recognize the dangers of genital cutting and protect the health of young women while still showing respect for the importance of tradition, community and the dignity of the person.

The Youth Vote, Seriously

The youngest voters in this year's presidential primaries had not yet learned to walk when the House of Representatives impeached President Bill Clinton in December 1998. Few of them have heard of Vince Foster, the Clinton advisor whose suicide was exploited by conspiracy theorists, and they have no personal memory of Hillary Clinton's TV interview in which she first identified a "vast right-wing conspiracy that has been conspiring against my husband since the day he announced for president."

This generation can be unnerving to older voters whose political worldviews are still defined by the partisan battles of the 1990s and, in many cases, the Cold War. In this winter's first few contests, turnout among voters under 30

has been impressive, and those casting Democratic ballots have gone overwhelmingly (83 percent in New Hampshire) for Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont over Hillary Clinton. Many older Democrats are startled by the success of a self-identified socialist, and some are concerned that younger women in particular are failing to rally around Mrs. Clinton, who would be the first woman to secure a major-party nomination.

The older generation may not be wrong: Mr. Sanders's ambitious proposals would likely go nowhere in a Republican Congress, and his ability to win a general election is questionable. But it is short-sighted to dismiss his supporters as naïve or ignorant of history. Younger voters have good reason to demand changes to a political process and economic system that seems more responsive ("rigged," Mr. Sanders calls it) to high-income campaign contributors than to the majority of Americans, who face widening income inequality and fewer opportunities for upward mobility. They are not satisfied with candidates' résumés or with arguments about who has "earned" the presidency, nor should they be.

Breaking Up With Europe

When is the last time you heard good news coming out of Brussels? Between the Greek debt crisis and a resurgent Russia, ISIS-inspired attacks and an influx of refugees, it has been a rough few years for the European Union. Now many in the United Kingdom want out. Following marathon negotiations with European leaders in February, Prime Minister David Cameron, fulfilling a campaign promise, announced a referendum, scheduled for June 23, to decide the future of the country's E.U. membership.

Mr. Cameron called for the vote only after winning a number of concessions from Brussels, including limits on the benefits that must be paid to E.U. migrant workers; fair treatment for countries that opt out of the euro; and, most significant, assurance that "references to ever-closer union do not apply to the United Kingdom." While the prime minister is now campaigning to remain within that union, a number of his fellow Tories support the so-called Brexit, and the British public is almost evenly split on the question.

Many of the challenges facing Europe—from migration to climate change—do require a unified response. But E.U. leaders cannot combat growing euroskepticism, not just in Britain but in countries from Greece to Germany, by simply dismissing nationalist sentiment as a relic of the last century. If the future is not to be "ever-closer union," E.U. defenders need to formulate a new vision for the European project—and they should not wait until June 23 to do so.

What Did He Say?

Pope Francis was drawn into the U.S. electoral circus at the close of his Mexico trip in mid-February. During the return flight to Rome, a reporter asked about some comments made by Republican candidate Donald Trump. “A person who thinks only about building walls, wherever they may be, and not of building bridges, is not Christian,” the pope said, emphasizing that he would give the candidate the benefit of the doubt.

These off-the-cuff comments were just enough to begin—again—a small media frenzy. Pundits and pew-sitters alike objected that the pope had no business involving himself in the U.S. elections; others were already agitated by the symbolic moment Francis had orchestrated earlier that day, pausing in prayer alongside the Mexican bank of the Rio Grande for migrants lost attempting to reach the other side.

Many people do not blink when the pope sounds off on issues related to what are perceived as personal morality; he in fact deplored abortion as an “absolute evil” in the same back-of-the-plane press conference without drawing much attention. But when Pope Francis and other church leaders have shared their perspectives on some of the other concerns of contemporary times—typically economic, ecological or social issues—their authority has been challenged and the usefulness of their contributions to the domestic or international dialogue undermined. Mr. Trump himself had earlier described the pope as “political” because of his frequent calls for a humanitarian response to migration.

The pope’s clever response on this note is instructive. Pope Francis embraced the attempted pejorative, moving *political* away from the squabble and bicker with which it has become associated and restoring some of its Aristotelian splendor—as a descriptive term that should connote the best expression of policymaking reached through civic *and* civil dialogue. Of course he was political, the pope said; all people who live in society together are by definition political. It is through the political that personal views and concerns are expressed and practical things get done.

Recalling Jonah’s warnings and admonitions to the people of Nineveh, Pope Francis in Ciudad Juárez urged the episcopal and social elite of Mexico to convert before they lead their nation to ruin. Was Francis speaking politically or prophetically in these moments? Is there a difference?

Another frequent objection to “papal overstepping” is that the pope does not have the expertise to comment on weighty matters outside church walls, as if his insights were

best reserved for Sunday morning pieties. This is a strange presumption—that well-educated people, informed on the matters of their times, should nonetheless restrict themselves exclusively to matters of personal expertise. What a banal civil discussion that limitation would produce, were it ever prescribed for people outside ecclesiastical leadership.

Yes, the pope speaks with authority on issues outside his personal credentials, and he should be attended to when he does. His experience and erudition are broader and deeper than many suppose. When he speaks of a throwaway economic system, he speaks from a real-world perspective that Catholics in North America would do well to consider. And they may rest assured that the commentary offered by Pope Francis is buttressed by a legion of unseen experts hidden away in the Vatican.

Pope Francis and bishops, domestic and international, not only possess the expertise and the authority to make “political” pronouncements; as the moral and spiritual leaders of the world’s 1.25 billion Catholics, they have an obligation to do so. And Catholics have the obligation to consider prayerfully the instruction they offer. As faithful citizens their vocation is to bring their perspectives into the public forum. Francis offers an example of how to do this fruitfully, speaking freely and assuming the good intentions of people on the other side of an argument. (See “Francis’ Call to Conscience,” by Bishop Stephen E. Blaire, at americamagazine.org.)

Suggestions that Pope Francis and church leaders should demur from important debates because they are too “technical” or “political” convert religion into a pale, flighty thing. In this instance, short-sighted co-religionists ally with confirmed secularists to diminish the vibrant social role religion should play in public discourse, corralling it into a safe liturgical and private preserve.

Resetting expectations about what the pope “should” say would be healthy, psychologically and spiritually. This pope has been a miracle of thinking-out-loud reform. The results can be refreshing and transformative, but it is not a risk-free style of ecclesial leadership. Some missteps are inevitable. Better to learn how to live with that tension without hitting panic buttons whenever something Pope Francis says jars us awake, remembering that being awakened from complacency is never a bad thing.



REPLY ALL

A Quieter Politics

Most of what is written in “Election Angst” (Editorial, 2/22) is rather superficial and has been over-talked and over-written so much that most people have already heard it in one form or another. Moreover, the Ignatian suggestion of inner silence and reflection is common not merely to the Google executive but, more important, to equally old or older Christian and non-Christian traditions than that of St. Ignatius.

The former notwithstanding, however, inner silence can be a curative for fear, which fuels frustration, anxiety, anger and violence. It is old wisdom in a world of noise. But taking up the banner of wisdom and good judgment is not exactly the historical marker of human beings. For those who may not have read it but are particularly interested in a deeper exploration of solitude, I would recommend the book *Solitude: A Return to the Self*, by Anthony Storr (1988). Unfortunately, most are too hurried, preoccupied and extrinsic to engage in the personal peace that allows us to see more clearly ways to solve our problems, elect integrated persons to high office and give comfort to the many who feel absolutely overwhelmed by nonresponsive others.

JAMES BOOTH
Online Comment

Contraception Compromise

“The Greatness of a Nation,” by Bishop Robert McElroy (2/15), should be read by all Catholics of voting age. The “four pillars of life” he identifies are indeed priority issues that all American Catholics should be considering as they choose to support candidates this election year.

We need also, however, to consider in what areas compromise might positively affect these issues so fundamental to respect for life. If we want to offer realistic solutions to the horrors

of abortion and starvation in poorer developing countries, might we not want to reconsider the church’s stringent objections to some forms of birth control? Overpopulation, even relative overpopulation, in poor countries has contributed to the refugee problem and destruction of social infrastructure and has strained limited natural resources, contributing to social and political instability and environmental catastrophes.

I am sensitive to the church’s moral objections to many forms of contraception. But I cannot help wondering if the lack of contraceptive resources has not contributed to unwanted pregnancies, especially in the poorer segments of our own society, and increased reliance on abortion services, particularly among the young and unwed. I would prefer health care dollars to be spent on prevention and not one penny spent on abortion.

JAMES MURPHY
Philadelphia, Pa.

Another’s Burden

Re “Immigrant Flood—Really?” (Current Comment, 2/15): The question is not how much of a change there has been in the number of people crossing the borders, but what becomes of them after they arrive. Are they exploited by employers? Go visit your local slaughterhouse. Do they put undue burdens on public facilities? Visit your public school or hospital. Do they “take” jobs from American citizens? Hire a contractor to do work on your house and check every worker’s papers.

The vast majority of readers of **America** do not fear losing their jobs to “undocumented migrants” and do not face depressed wages because an undocumented worker might take their job. I do not know what the just solution to the problem is, but 10.9 million undocumented migrants is not a small number; and if you are unemployed, it may be 10.9 million non-

citizens too many.

HENRY GEORGE
Online Comment

A Challenging Cycle

“The Pope in Mexico” (Editorial, 2/8): Am I missing all the editorials expressing deep concerns that both leading Democrat candidates are enthusiastically favoring the abortion industry at every opportunity? The border issue is indeed challenging for Catholics to consider, of course. But I would like to also read the editors’ opinion on the deeply troubling number of Christians supporting these Democrats. There is much to be upset about across the board this election cycle.

MINDY LANDRY
Baton Rouge, La.

The Problem With Purity

“Create in Me a Just Heart,” by Megan McCabe (2/8), an analysis of porn as a societal sin, is enlightening and well researched. The most important part of this piece is the ending, because the critique of the bishops’ focus on purity as inadequate applies to many problems besides porn. This view of sexuality is a festering problem in our church tradition. Sexual morality ought to be centered in just relationships, rather than moral purity. Whether an act or desire offends against purity is a secondary question. The primary questions ought to be, “Does this behavior enhance or degrade proper loving relationships?” “Is a human being being used as an object?” “Does this desire affirm or violate the dignity of self and others?”

This approach has helped me in my own spiritual development in a way that obsessing about purity never could. I believe many problems in the church, the first being the sexual abuse scandal, would have been handled better if a sexual ethic of just relationships were integrated and consistently practiced.

TRACEY HOELZLE
Fremont, Ohio

A Stronger Point

I agree with the overall point in “What’s Catholic About It?” (2/8), by J. Michael Byron, but I do not think the analogy with professional schools works. Offering “legal studies” in a law school would be silly, but “Catholic studies” in a Catholic university does not transfer. Yes, the Catholic ethos of an educational institution should pervade the study of every discipline, but that is different than saying that in a Catholic university you study “Catholic economics,” “Catholic mathematics,” etc. To this end, one can make a case that “Catholic studies” can justify its distinct existence alongside other disciplines. I think the stronger point here is that Catholic studies promotes the “sectarian or ideological notion of Catholicism.”

REBECCA KRIER
Online Comment

A Mercy to Be Heard

In “Interreligious Leaders” (2/1), Gerard O’Connell reports a day of reflection at the Vatican during Lent for interreligious dialogue among Christians, Jews and Muslims. “Speaking with Mercy” (Signs of the Times, 2/8) relayed Pope Francis’ message for World Communications Day. This ecumenical dialogue must move from merely “speaking with mercy” to “hearing.” There is a mercy to be heard—that is, a forgiveness to be received. In the interest of ecumenism, many apologies are sincerely spoken. Compared to forgiveness, however, apologies are offered from a position of power and comfort. Apologies are spoken. A forgiving mercy needs to be heard.

The distinction between apology and forgiveness becomes obvious when the questions are: When, where or how has the church ever received forgiveness for its anti-Semitism, the Inquisition or colonialism? Apologies are offered, but forgiveness is received. That’s the hard part. Think of the paralyzed man in the Gospels. If I am

paralyzed, there is little comfort in feeling ever so sorry I am paralyzed. Someone must minister to me with healing forgiveness, with a mercy to be heard. Ecumenism doesn’t need to move forward as much as it needs to move ever deeper. There is no comfort in pretending not to be paralyzed or to be excused from moving more deeply from a tolerance in sharing apologies to a communion in mutual forgiveness. Undoing paralysis is a Lenten project! Mercy with its forgiveness needs to be received at the Vatican, at Jerusalem, at Mecca and eventually on the earth.

(REV.) JEROME KNIES
Racine, Wis.

Small Signs of Faith

“Our Reason for Being,” an excellent article by Don Briel, Kenneth E. Goodpaster and Michael Naughton (2/1), brought to mind the controversy over religious symbols (or lack thereof) at Georgetown University. In 2009, President Obama went to Georgetown to give a speech on economic policy “10 years after the university decided to install crucifixes in classrooms,” wrote Laura Engshuber in *The Hoya* (“At a Crossroads,” 3/29/12). “The White House requested that the IHS symbol, which denotes Jesus Christ, be covered up to provide a simple background not

highlighting any faith. The university complied.”

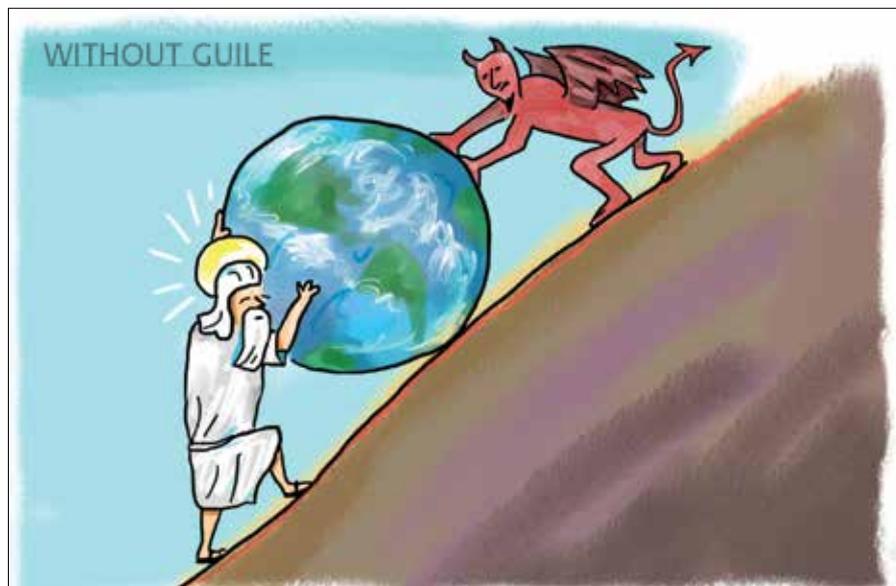
A crucifix, as we all know, has no power in and of itself any more than a scapular does. Yet I wear my scapular daily, and we have a simple crucifix hanging in our home prominently so that we can be reminded daily. The faith walk is a journey. A fall here, a rise there, rock upon rock, stone upon stone. It is the little things that form us day by day and tell others who we are.

GUILLERMO REYES
Online Comment

God the Mother

It is lamentable that the word *mother* does not appear in “The Merciful Father,” by Msgr. Peter Vaghi (2/1). God is as much a loving mother as a loving father. This is duly recognized in Pope John Paul II’s encyclical “Rich in Mercy,” albeit only in paragraphs 52 and 61. *The Name of God Is Mercy* is the title of a book by Pope Francis, but the Year of Mercy logo still shows the familiar old man with a long beard. Too bad, because “God the Father” is not exclusively male, “God the Son” became a male only at the incarnation, and the image of a benign patriarch no longer resonates much, especially in men.

LUIS GUTIERREZ
Online Comment



CARTOON: BOB ECKSTEIN

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

As Conflict Continues, Holy See Officials Promote Peace Under Fire

Even in the midst of bombings, Vatican ambassadors stay put, risking their lives while working to end what Pope Francis has termed a “piecemeal” World War III, said the Vatican minister of foreign affairs. “Let’s not be kidding ourselves about what the stakes are here: If we are going to bring peace, if we are going to reconcile nations, if we are going to secure countries and communities, particularly minorities, particularly people who are persecuted, we are going to have to make an unprecedented effort,” Archbishop Paul R. Gallagher said on Feb. 25.

Archbishop Gallagher, whose formal title is secretary for relations with states, oversees Vatican diplomatic efforts to “know what is going on in the world, understand it and interpret it” in order to advise the pope and others in the Roman Curia, the church’s central administration.

Pope Francis has earned a reputation for taking risks with his own safety—for example, when in November he traveled to the Central African Republic, an active war zone. “From the top, that example is being given,” Archbishop Gallagher said. Knowing the pope willingly puts his life in danger “inspires the rest of us to go the extra mile with him as well,” he said.

A case in point is Archbishop Mario Zenari, the Vatican nuncio in war-torn Syria, Archbishop Gallagher said. Archbishop Zenari, “throughout the whole of this conflict, has remained at his post and has made a very significant contribution” to the peacemaking effort that is underway, he said.

Speaking specifically of the crisis in Syria and Iraq, where so-called Islamic State militants have captured large swaths of territory and driven out tens of thousands of Christians and members of other minority groups, Archbishop Gallagher said he is hopeful for a resolution of the conflict. A cease-fire brokered by the United States and Russia came into effect across Syria on Feb. 26, marking the biggest international push to reduce violence in the country’s devastating conflict. The United Nations envoy, Staffan de Mistura, announced that peace talks would resume on March 7 if the cessation of hostilities “largely holds.”

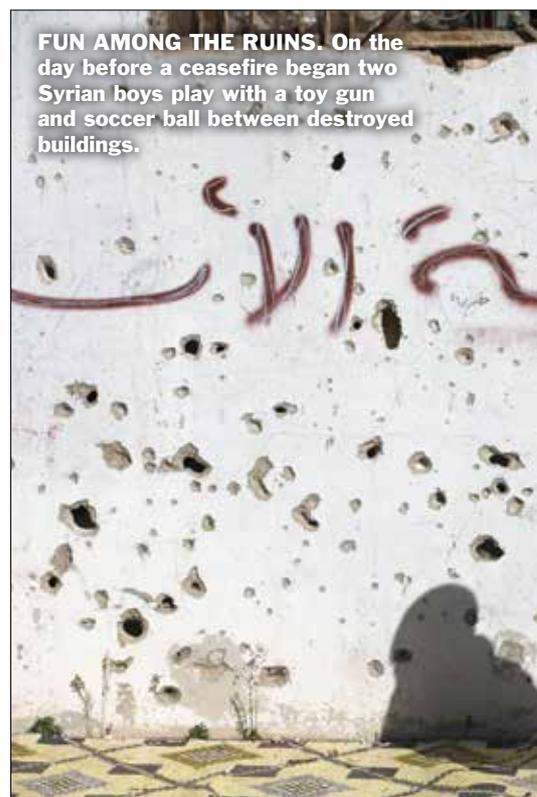
If it does, it would be the first

time international negotiations have brought any degree of quiet in Syria’s five-year civil war. But success requires adherence by multiple armed factions—and the truce is made more fragile because it allows fighting to continue against the Islamic State group and Nusra Front, which could easily reignite broader warfare.

The Syrian government and the opposition, including nearly 100 rebel groups, have said they will abide by the cease-fire despite serious skepticism about chances for success.

Archbishop Gallagher said the Vatican and its diplomats are working with people on the ground in Syria to foster interreligious dialogue in the region as part of the peacemaking effort.

“We are not in dialogue with Daesh,” Archbishop Gallagher said, using another name for the Islamic State. “Unfortunately, it’s true that [with] the extremists, particularly ex-



FUN AMONG THE RUINS. On the day before a ceasefire began two Syrian boys play with a toy gun and soccer ball between destroyed buildings.

tremists who are prepared to embrace violence and terrorism, one is completely at a loss to say what one can do with such people,” he said.

Nevertheless, the archbishop stressed that “there will be an end to this conflict in Syria. It will take a lot of goodwill, a lot of sacrifice on the part many of the actors, but we have to bring it about. It must happen.”

IRISH ELECTIONS

Year of the Independents?

Ireland’s 2016 general election has produced a parliament full of feuding factions and no obvious road to a majority government, spurring lawmakers to warn on Sunday that the country could face a protracted political deadlock followed by a sec-



AP PHOTO/HASSAN AMMAR

ond election. For the first time in Irish electoral history, the combined popular vote on Feb. 26 for Ireland's two political heavyweights—the Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael parties—fell below 50 percent as voters infuriated by austerity measures shifted their support to a Babel of antigovernment voices.

The results left parliament with at least nine factions and a legion of loose-cannon independents, few of them easy partners for a coalition government, none of them numerous enough to make a difference on their own. With 12 seats in Ireland's 158-member parliament still to be filled, the ruling Fine Gael won 46 seats, and its longtime foe Fianna Fáil 42, the Irish nationalist Sinn Féin 22 and junior government partner Labour just six. An eye-popping array of tiny parties, umbrella groups and parochial mavericks won the rest.

Leading members of Fianna Fáil—

which rebounded in this vote just five years after facing electoral ruin for nearly bankrupting the country—said they would find it extremely hard to forge any coalition that keeps Prime Minister Enda Kenny's Fine Gael in power.

The trouble is, Ireland's voters have never produced a parliament like this before. And there's no third party strong enough to give Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael a parliamentary majority of at least 79 seats. Both parties have ruled out working with Sinn Féin, the only party that could get either of them close. When the new parliament convenes on March 10 to elect a prime minister to appoint a government, both Kenny and Fianna Fáil leader Micheál Martin say they will put themselves forward as rival candidates. Failure to create a new government would mean Kenny's five-year-old coalition with Labour continues indefinitely in a lame-duck caretaker role.

Fine Gael swept to victory in the last election, capitalizing on the catastrophic fall from grace of Ireland's other traditionally dominant party, Fianna Fáil. The latter saw Ireland through the booming Celtic Tiger years, but its policies ultimately led to the collapse of the Irish economy in 2008. As the majority party since 2011, Fine Gael has promoted the idea that it brought Ireland back from a crippling recession with jobs and investment.

While that recovery is evident, the process has not been painless, with the in-

roduction of controversial new property taxes, water charges and income taxes, not to mention the transfer of a huge amount of private debt into the public domain. Ireland's flawed health system has dominated the debates this election, along with the housing crisis and homelessness.

The mutual hostility between Ireland's two dominant parties has been festering for decades, though it may mystify outsiders who do not have a grasp of Ireland's peculiar politics and its roots in the civil war struggle nearly a century ago. In fact, the real question for many Irish voters is no longer parsing the difference between Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael, but between those who feel they have a stake in Irish public life and those who feel completely disillusioned and disconnected from the political system. The crash hit every home in the country, if not through job loss or emigration, then through controversial new taxes and levies.

The shift in the Irish psyche is not unlike the one in the United States that has led to the rise of Donald J. Trump and Bernie Sanders, candidates propelled by an electorate that



COUNTDOWN TO COALITION. Fianna Fáil Leader Micheál Martin, right, and Michael McGrath celebrate their party's strong showing at City Hall in Cork, Ireland, on Feb. 27.

feels disenchanted with the political establishment. If 2016 is the year of the outsider in the United States, it has become the year of the independent in Ireland.

Protecting Manila Bay

Manila area church officials said proposed land reclamation projects in the metro area may not be environmentally sound and would likely affect the livelihood of the poor. Msgr. José Clemente Ignacio, vicar general of the Archdiocese of Manila, said a 365-acre proposed tourist city on an elevated platform in Manila Bay, to be called Solar City, is a particular concern for the church. “We see the dangers that it will cause to society, to marine life, to our food, for our livelihood, so all these things will affect us,” Msgr. Ignacio said in mid-February. “And because of man’s self-centered concept of development and growth and profit-orientedness, we do not see the effect it will have. Especially for the poor.” Msgr. Ignacio said Pope Francis’ encyclical “Laudato Si’ on Care for Our Common Home,” makes a clear connection between advocating for creation and social justice and how “capitalistic philosophies” have an impact on the environment and the poor.

Pipeline Break in Peru

Five hundred indigenous middle- and high-school students will arrive in early March at a Catholic-run boarding school in Wachapea, an Awajun village in Peru, but the sisters and staff do not know where they will take baths. The Chiriaco River, where the students usually bathe, play and wash their clothes, turned black on Feb. 10 as oil from a broken pipeline upriver washed downstream during a heavy rain. Although the slick is gone, a tarry residue remains on the soil and plants

NEWS BRIEFS

The Italian Senate passed on Feb. 25 a controversial bill that **grants legal recognition** to nonmarried heterosexual and homosexual couples, after sponsors removed a clause that would have allowed a nonbiological parent in a homosexual union to adopt the biological children of his or her partner.



Mozambique refugees

• A Canadian parliamentary committee recommended on Feb. 25 that **physician-assisted suicide** be allowed for people with psychiatric conditions and children younger than 18 and that physicians who object to assisted suicide be required to make a referral for such action. • About half the **refugees from Mozambique** at a crowded camp in the village of Kapise, Malawi, have contracted malaria, said Rufino Seva, the Malawi country director for the Jesuit Refugee Service. • Archbishop Robert Carlson of St. Louis has formed a new committee for girls’ formation after expressing ongoing concerns in a letter on Feb. 18 that the policies of **Girl Scouts USA** and the London-based World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts were in “conflict with Catholic values.” • About 150 former pupils and boarders at the former **Montreal Institute for the Deaf** who were sexually abused between 1940 and 1982 will share \$21.6 million after their class action lawsuits were settled in mid-February.

along the riverbank. “We need information about what lies ahead, about the health precautions we should take, about how long it will be before people can fish again,” said Sister Carmen Gomez, a member of Servants of St. Joseph mission that operates the school. The pipeline break was one of three that occurred in northern Peru between late January and mid-February, bringing to 20 the number of oil spills from the pipeline since 2011, according to Peru’s environmental oversight agency.

Sioux City Faces Reorganization

A pastoral planning process—Ministry 2025—has begun in the Diocese of Sioux City, Iowa. According to the Rev. Brent Lingle,

diocesan director of pastoral planning, the diocese recently unveiled a draft pastoral plan that strives to create parishes “where the faith is lived out, grows and attracts people into it.” The diocese reports that by 2025, only 31 priests will be available to serve as pastors. Currently, 58 priests are active in pastoral ministry. Bishop R. Walker Nickless of Sioux City said it was important to take a proactive approach in planning for the future of the diocese. “As bishop, I have to be a good steward of our resources, and one of the most important and valuable are our priests,” he said. “I need to take care of them.” Many of the diocese’s active priests are baby boomers reaching the age of retirement, and the bishop said they deserve the chance to retire.

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

Making Saints in Illinois

Illinois might not be considered a saintly place. Chicago was the home base for the organized crime leader Al Capone; two of its former governors are currently in jail, and “Chicago-style politics” is often used as a synonym for political corruption. So it comes as somewhat of a surprise that the state is playing a major role in the potential canonization of three well-known Catholic figures.

One is Cardinal John Henry Newman, the theologian and educator whose name adorns many university Catholic centers. In 2010, Pope Benedict XVI declared Newman blessed after a miracle was attributed to him. Jack Sullivan, a deacon from Marshfield, Mass., was found to have recovered from a spinal cord disorder through Newman’s intercession.

Now a claim of the miraculous healing of an Illinois resident has been investigated by the Archdiocese of Chicago. “Our report was that there was validity to the claim,” Archbishop Blase Cupich said. “There were no physical causes that would have allowed us to determine [another] reason for the healing that took place.” The archbishop said he is not at liberty to disclose details of the possible miracle but that a report was submitted to the Vatican late last year.

The case for Newman’s canonization opened in 1958, and the Sacred Congregation for the Causes of Saints proclaimed him venerable in 1991, based on his life as an evangelizer, ed-

ucator and prolific writer of spiritual tracts. Archbishop Cupich said he would be “very pleased” if the congregation decides to advance Newman’s canonization. “I have a great affection for him having read his writings over the years. His book of sermons and meditations I use quite a bit.”

Cardinal Newman was a convert to Catholicism from the Church of England, and his writings were enor-

The state is playing a major role in three canonizations.

mously influential. If canonized, he would be the first person of English descent named a saint since the 17th century. “There is so much that’s compelling in this man’s life, it’s clear to me that the church would be blessed to have him in the canon of saints,” Archbishop Cupich said.

The canonization is being closely watched by the gay community as well, which has adopted Cardinal Newman as an unofficial patron saint. While there is no evidence that Cardinal Newman was unfaithful to his priestly vows, he had a close 30-year friendship with Ambrose St. John. He wrote of his friend with great affection and requested that they be buried together.

The Chicago Archdiocese is also promoting the canonization of the Rev. Augustus Tolton, considered the first African-American priest. (The Rev. James Augustine Healy, who eventually became bishop of Portland, Me., was of mixed Irish and African an-

cestry and identified himself as Irish-American.) “Tolton’s name is held in precious memory by many people,” said Auxiliary Bishop Joseph Perry of Chicago, who is spearheading the canonization effort. “He is certainly one of the stars of our heritage.”

The late Cardinal Francis George of Chicago suggested opening the cause for Father Tolton during the 2010 Year for Priests. If the cause is successful, Father Tolton would be the first American-born priest to be canonized.

Meanwhile, the Diocese of Peoria, in central Illinois, is pressing the case of Bishop Fulton Sheen, a former philosophy professor at Catholic University of America, best known as one of the earliest clergymen to use television as an evangelization tool with his popular weekly program, “Life Is Worth Living.”

Bishop Sheen was declared venerable in June 2012, and in March 2014 the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints approved a miracle attributed to his intercession. The miracle involved the birth of a child who appeared to be stillborn, even after doctors performed life-saving procedures. The child’s parents said they prayed for the bishop’s intervention and the infant revived.

The child remains in good health today. Bishop’s Sheen’s cause, however, has become mired in a dispute between the Diocese of Peoria and the Archdiocese of New York over his remains. Peoria had requested that the body be transferred there from its tomb in St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York for an official inspection and the taking of relics. The New York Archdiocese has so far declined to grant that request, and the Sheen cause remains stalled.

Perhaps a little Chicago-style political arm-twisting is in order.

JUDITH VALENTE

JUDITH VALENTE, *America’s Chicago correspondent*, is a regular contributor to NPR and “Religion and Ethics Newsweekly.” Twitter: @JudithValente.



Gloves Off

How many divisions does the pope have? This famous question, asked by Joseph Stalin in 1935, was perhaps the most blunt expression of an opinion held by many a practitioner of realpolitik through the centuries: that all things considered, the pope should not stick his nose into politics. Centuries before Stalin, Napoleon Bonaparte recognized that military might was not the only kind of influence, instructing his envoy to Pope Pius VII to “treat with His Holiness as if he had at his back one hundred thousand bayonets.” But Stalin’s question holds today: Why pay attention to a leader with no bayonets at all?

Our all-American version of this sentiment was best expressed recently by Jerry Falwell Jr., who defended his endorsement of Donald J. Trump in his recent war of words with Pope Francis by saying, “It’s not our job to choose the best Sunday school teacher.” Mr. Trump went further. Incensed that the pope suggested his call for walling off Mexico from the United States was “not Christian,” he called the pope’s remarks “disgraceful” and suggested Francis would be sorry when ISIS captured Rome. Take that, Swiss Guard!

Many reactions to this fight have been surprisingly ahistorical, with public figures suggesting that the brawl is a novelty, the result of two wild cards being played at once. The New York Times columnist Ross Douthat actually claimed that Donald Trump and Francis had much in common, a belief that would surely horrify at least one

of the pair. But, history tells us, this is not the first tangle between popes and politicians. On our side of the pond, it is usually a dog-whistle to evangelical Christians who fear popish plots. For some Vatican officials, historically it has resulted from a suspicion of democracy and/or American-style capitalism.

On their shores, it usually involves a suspicion of the pairing of democracy and wealth. And we do well to remember that one of the most dreaded heresies in the Vatican’s eyes a century ago was called Americanism.

The long papacy of John Paul II, and the extension and intensification of his policies under Pope Benedict XVI, have perhaps made us forget this fact. President Reagan and both President Bushes did not have much to fear from St. John Paul II. And even if Rome firmly rejected the latter Bush’s war in Iraq, there were those who threw him a huge assist by suggesting that John Kerry should not receive Communion because of his support of legal abortion (no such advice ever emerged around the issues of torture or just war). In those days in the United States, “good Catholic” more often than not meant “Republican.”

But it was not always thus.

In 1961, for example, the reactionary superhero William F. Buckley Jr. complained that Pope John XXIII’s encyclical on the economy, “*Mater et Magistra*,” was not only naïve but unfairly critical of capitalism (sound familiar?) and “a venture in triviality coming at this particular time in history.” A month later, Mr. Buckley doubled down, riffing off Fidel Castro’s famous rallying cry of “*Cuba sí, Yanqui no!*”

with the following quip in the pages of *National Review*: “Going the rounds in conservative circles: ‘*Mater sí, Magistra no.*’” (“Mother yes, teacher no”). Years later, Garry Wills confessed he was the author of the quip, back when the former Jesuit seminarian was a committed distributionist. This ridicule of an encyclical, unthinkable a decade earlier, was a signal moment—a prefiguring of the widespread dissent against “*Humanae Vitae*” a few years later. Mr. Wills can tell you more about that.

The editors of this magazine rallied to Good Pope John’s defense: “Lines spoken to the Pope just shouldn’t sound like lines pitched at the editors of *The New York Post*,” they noted. In a personal letter to Thurston N. Davis, S.J., the editor in chief of *America*,

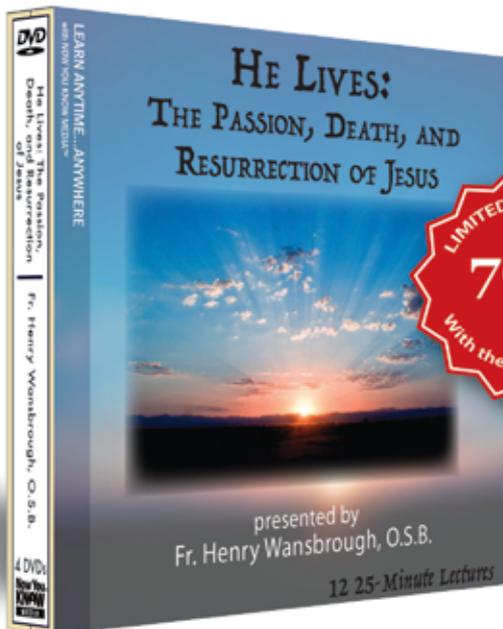
This is not the first tangle between popes and politicians.

Mr. Buckley acknowledged his words may have been “in imperfect taste.” His memory failed him two decades later, however, when he claimed Father Davis had “tried to have me excommunicated.”

But back to today: Why so much drama over the opinions of a rascal pope in far-off Rome? Mr. Trump fears the same thing Napoleon feared two centuries ago: “*Qui mange du Pape, en meurt*” (“He who takes a bite out of the pope dies from it”). What Donald Trump is demanding is the same thing Mr. Buckley wanted half a century ago: an admission that faith has nothing to do with politics, that Jesus doesn’t care.

Like most of us, however, I have an alternative point of view. Frankly, I think Jesus does care. Jesus has much to say on topics dear to poor Donald Trump’s heart. *Mater Sí! Magistra Sí!*

JAMES T. KEANE is an editor at *Orbis Books* in Ossining, N.Y., and a former associate editor of *America*. Twitter: @jamestkeane.



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—Cardinal Vincent Nichols,
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Final Rewards

The place of death and mourning in contemporary life

In October 2015, the Fordham Center on Religion and Culture hosted two exceptional writers—the novelist Alice McDermott and the poet and essayist Thomas Lynch—for a dialogue about death and mourning in contemporary life. The program was titled “Unto Dust: A Literary Wake” in the hope that the two interlocutors would envision their conversation not just as an exercise in cultural criticism, but also as an opportunity to tell stories about the beloved dead and conjure the reflective mood, the straightforward encounter with mortality and the sense of humor proper to a wake.

That these two writers are Irish-American, members of a tribe that has a certain reputation for savoring the topic of death, is not incidental. Yet their reflections on how we engage, or choose not to engage, with perennial challenges raised by our experiences with death are hardly tribal in nature.

The essays below represent the first of two parts of a rich and varied dialogue between Ms. McDermott and Mr. Lynch. A longer version of this conversation can be found at America’s website, americamagazine.org.

—James McCartin, director
Fordham Center on Religion and Culture

Our Literary Wake

BY ALICE McDERMOTT

Some years ago, I was interviewed on a call-in radio show out of the Midwest. Well into the hour, a woman called to ask why my novels dealt so exclusively with the concrete details of everyday life, details every reader can recognize. This struck me as not an entirely unusual question until she added, “Why don’t you use your powers of observation to write about the details of the afterlife instead? We need someone to show us the details of heaven and hell.”

Before the radio host moved to cut the woman off, I said something about Dante having covered that material pretty well. Then, apologetically, I promised the caller that whenever I had the opportunity to observe the details of the afterlife, I would indeed include them in my work.

In literary fiction, death scenes abound. There is Tolstoy’s Ivan Ilyich, Flaubert’s Félicité in “A Simple Heart,” Flannery O’Connor’s Hazel Motes in the last pages of *Wise Blood*, Katherine Anne Porter’s jilted Granny Weatherall, to name only a few. But scenes of heaven and hell, not so much. The dead, if they have any congress at all, are most likely depicted as eavesdroppers or hangers-on. I think of the opening pages of William Kennedy’s *Ironweed* or that Irish-language

masterpiece *The Dirty Dust*, or the dead in “Our Town,” or even “No Exit,” Christopher Tilghman’s *In a Father’s Place* or Alice Sebold’s *The Lovely Bones*.

If, as Tom Stoppard writes in “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead,” every exit is an entrance somewhere else, then serious novelists have for the most part left the details of that somewhere else to the genre writers, to the zombies and the ghosts and the vampires of commercial entertainment—although a striking exception to this may be Stanley Elkin’s 1979 novel, *The Living End*, where heaven is depicted as “everything they say it is”—pearly gates, streets of gold, manna, ambrosia, fond reunions and endless beauty—and hell is “the ultimate inner city,” with stinking, sulfurous streets and endless pain. It is a portrait that Elkin manages to make both hilarious and touching, both a mockery but also an acknowledgment of the impossible substance of things hoped for—a literary sleight of hand that perhaps can be performed only once a millennium. Because who can blame our novelists for avoiding any literal portrait of the afterlife? Any such depiction, after all, risks, on the one hand, sentimental cliché and, on the other, existential darkness and despair, which is its own cliché.

Thinking about the theme of a literary wake—and hoping that the literary life we are here to mourn is not mine—I have been wondering if the stylistic pitfalls that face a novelist who tries to turn her observational skills to the afterlife and the wise decision most of us make to avoid the subject has a parallel in the larger community of non-writers, or what I like to call normal people. Among normal people, it seems to me, death scenes also abound, not only in our entertainment, whether they be the walking dead, the dramatically diseased or the hastily and violently dispatched, but in our everyday exchanges as well. War, gun violence, terrorism, accident, illness, daily obituaries remind us that death is general, whether we pause to philosophize about it or not. Death is general, and in the 21st century we accept this fact like grownups, with a cluck of the tongue or a shake of the head or a shrug. We routinize mourning.

I confess to being both comforted and dismayed by my recent encounters with the hospice industry, sincere and professional women, well-versed in the details of the dying, who reminded me nevertheless of the real estate agents I have known, with their clipboards and their informational binders and their brief, well-scripted role as friend and supporter at this difficult time.

In the 21st century, we take leave of the dead with an-



ecdote and celebrations of life, supermarket flowers tied to lampposts or helium balloons released into the air, and if we speak of an afterlife, we do so with vague piety—"He is with God," we say—or cautious facetiousness, tentatively suggesting reunions with loved ones and somehow-no-longer-annoying relatives. Normal people, it seems, like writers, are well aware of the constant procession of exits that life entails, but few of us, normals and writers alike, broach the details of that corresponding entrance into somewhere else. This is understandable. As I said, clichés abound. Language and imagination fail us. No observer has yet to report back with the facts, and any claim to the contrary risks superstition or betrays wishful thinking.

The prose of the Catholic Church itself grows flat-footed in the attempt. Here is the *Catholic Encyclopedic Dictionary* on heaven: "The place and abode of God and the blessed, where all the faithful shall see God, the Blessed Virgin, and all the saints face to face. Where it is, is not known."

And hell: "Here the damned suffer primarily the pain of loss by being deprived of the sight of God face to face," and secondly, "the pain of sense, a positive physical punishment which we call fire." Descriptions that are neither eloquent nor particularly convincing.

Yet there is this:

I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate manna in the desert, but they died. But the bread that comes down from heaven is of such a kind that whoever eats it will

not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If you eat this bread, you will live forever. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day.

Thinking about this literary wake of ours, I have begun to wonder if it is not death that we are reluctant to acknowledge here in the 21st century, but the awkward outlandishness of the notion of eternal life; if even among Christians the foolishness of the claim that "heaven is somewhere, we just don't know where," and "hell has this thing we call fire" compels us to shelter in the less detailed and far less risky notion that the promises of Christ are actually metaphorical, not literal; that what we mean when we say eternal life is "forever in our hearts" or "as long as we have our memories" or "the spirit of our ancestors resides within us all."

As a writer, I am O.K. with this. I like metaphor. I believe our language is rich enough to convey through metaphor more than we intend or know about the substance of things hoped for. But as a Christian wrestling with faith, I often find myself on the side of that lady who called in to the radio show. "I would like someone to provide more detail, please." When it comes to the outrageous promise of eternal life, I am with Flannery O'Connor in her famous reply to Mary McCarthy's words about the Eucharist: "Well, if it's a symbol, to hell with it."

As a struggling Christian, I look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come, but as a writer

and as an occasionally normal person, I wonder what our reluctance, all of us, to say, to imagine, to wrestle with precisely what this afterlife business might mean indicates. Is it a failure of our faith or a triumph of our reasonableness? Do we sensibly resist being deluded by the proposition of eternal life, or do we shyly stand speechless before the glory of the gift? Is it literal? Is it a metaphor? Do we believe it?

ALICE McDERMOTT is a National Book Award-winning novelist and the author of Charming Billy, After This, and Someone.

Our Funeral Karaoke

BY THOMAS LYNCH

We have, as a culture and as a community of faith, sort of lost our eschatological nerve. The stories we tell ourselves about what happens when we die have lost their certainty and assurances. This is why you may have noticed that we have replaced the good funeral—which used to be sort of a one-size-fits-all liturgical event during which we would say aloud the things we believe as a culture, and thereby embolden the normally shaken faith of the bereaved—with a celebration of life in which the life being celebrated is the one that belonged to the corpse.

Because the narrative on which we used to depend to uphold us through these times has gotten shaky and uncertain, now we use a narrative that probably fits best into the term “funeral karaoke,” a Japanese term for “empty orchestra.” This is where Uncle Lenny stands up to tell you the facts of the life of his sister or niece or his departed spouse. And the notion that Jesus died for our sins and earned for us eternal life no longer being currency, we replace that with “Aunt

Sally really did chocolate chip cookies well,” or “Dad really knew how to golf,” or “After a few drinks, he made a mess of everything.”

Everybody gets a good laugh, which we approve of more than we approve of the good cry. And to really assure that the wince is replaced by the grin in what we now call good funerals, we have devised—for the first time in our species actually, and only in the last 50 or 60 years—commemorative events where the finger food is good, the talk is uplifting, the music is life-affirming, the poems are bespoke and well recited, the stories are lovely, and everyone is welcome but the dead guy.

Have you noticed? The corpse is the one who has gone missing the most. We call folks like me with a cell phone and a gold card, and we disappear the dead from our liturgies of loss, because to have a corpse around is troublesome. Their stillness is off-putting. And then there is the matter of odor. We have a history of sciences and floral tributes to help with that—candles at wakes, etc.

But, in fact, we have lost our nerve in the realm of faith when it comes to last things, final details. We now cremate, I think, somewhere on the order of 50 percent of our dead in this country, but whereas most of us have been to a graveside, few of us have been to a retort. We are not as comfortable with the flame as we are with cremation. We like the notion of cremation. Actually, we like the notion of “when I’m dead, just cremate me,” the operative word being “just”—the emphasis upon minimalization and straight order and industrial efficiency, which makes sense because oftentimes it happens in an industrial setting or an industrial park.

But we don’t go watch, because even though the urae-

Following their talks at Fordham University, Alice McDermott and Thomas Lynch engaged in a lively conversation. Here are excerpts from their remarks. A longer transcript can be found at www.americamagazine.org.

Alice McDermott: I think you have written this, that we have become comfortable about talking about everything, the most intimate details of our physical lives—it is right out there—but when it comes to death, we back away. We are tight-lipped. We want to get it over...

I hear a younger generation, who maybe are not as accustomed to the customs of death, saying, “No. The way we do it is much less morbid, and we get over it. Here you guys are, sitting around talking about death all the time.”

What do we say to that generation about what gets left out, what gets lost in that rush to be comforted? I think it was just after the shooting out in Oregon...The Washington Post actually had an article about how people were moving on. Kids hadn’t even been buried yet. “The town is healing.” ...How do you explain what gets lost?

Thomas Lynch: Almost every time we have a horrendous event of that sort, one of the reports will be about the fleet

of grief therapists who have been dispatched to the scene to talk people out of whatever craziness the death occasions for them. Ever since [Elisabeth] Kübler-Ross, we let that notion that we can morph dying...that grief can take the form of stages, so that on Monday we are in denial and on Tuesday we are angry and by Friday we accepted this.

And all to the good, except that anybody who has ever been through that knows it is codswallop. It just is not the way it works.

The notion of closure is probably one of the great stupidities that we foist on one another. It is not the way it works...

I have always said a good funeral is one in which by getting the dead where they need to go, the living get where they need to be. If you just do the job, the rest will fall in place.



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uses (symbolic serpents) over the heads of the apostles on Pentecost were those of flame, we do not see flame as purifying and releasing. We see flame as punitive. I wonder why. Dante spent a long time on this. I know that the priests and nuns of my youth did, too. It is true that the real punishment was that we would not see God face to face, but it burned there. Fire we have mixed feelings about.

We had a photograph—possibly you had one in your home—an icon in our family home on both sides of the Atlantic all the days of my youth. It remains so. It was a picture of the first solemn high Mass of Thomas P. Lynch, a young priest who was ordained in 1934 out in New Mexico. He was sent back to his home parish in Jackson, Mich., to say a Mass for his own people. The picture shows men in straw bowlers, women in print dresses and nice hats and sensible shoes. These are immigrants or sons and daughters of immigrants from the boggy, soggy parishes of West Clare and Mayo and Cork and elsewhere. One of their kind has been elevated to “big medicine” priesthood.

The day after the picture was taken, he was sent back out West. As a survivor of the Spanish flu when he was a boy—which was correlated to his vocation, his calling—he was a chesty boy all the rest of his life, and so they thought the high, dry air of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains would help him survive his priesthood long enough to pay back the bishop for his education. It did not work out that well. He spent most of his time with the Pueblo people in Ranchos de Taos teaching them how to play baseball and how to say the Confiteor. He eventually got sick and died of pneumonia. The Native American women took him down the mountains and along the basin of the Rio Grande into Santa Fe, where he was presented in the cathedral, and the

bishop gave him a good requiem Mass, then put him in a box on a train bound east to Jackson, Mich., and Detroit. He sent him collect, as bishops do. When he got there, the poor corpse, he was met by agents of the Desnoyer Funeral Home in Jackson, Mich., a business that I believe still is there.

For reasons I am not entirely sure of, the 10-year-old boy in that picture on the wall was by now 12 years old, and his father, the priest’s brother, took him on the day to make the arrangements for the mum plants and the requiems and the grave diggers and the stipendiums. While the men were talking these commemorations, my father—the 12-year-old boy now—wandered through the old house of the Desnoyer Funeral Home until he came to a room with a door ajar. Looking inside, he saw two men in white shirts and gray-striped ties and wingtip shoes and striped pants carefully vesting the dead priest in his liturgical vestments. Then, in silence, as if on signals that they had worked out years in advance, they reached underneath the corpse and rolled the dead body to themselves and then carefully sidestepped their way to the wall of the room where a box awaited the dead priest’s body.

It was to this moment in August of 1936 that my father would ever after trace his intention to become a funeral director. “Why?” I would sometimes ask him. “Why didn’t you want to be a priest?” “Ah,” he said, “the priest was dead.”

But his sense that he was called to this was unshakable all of his life. It must have been a calling sufficient for a couple or three generations because, of his nine children, seven found their way into work between the quick and the dead, and of their 30-some children, more than a few—nieces and nephews and sons and daughters—turned up as funeral directors or funeral workers, too.

The trouble with us as a generation is that we have gone for the convenience rather than for the heavy lift. We get away from the shovel-and-shoulder work. We have that done by someone like me. We have a fee. We do it quietly. We do it in private. We never see it, while we spend our time with good finger food and stories of golf, where heaven seems like a 19th hole, and if you did not take too many mulligans and you raked out the sand traps and kept an honest score, your trophies are laid up for you in someplace like a clubhouse.

That will be enough for now.

THOMAS LYNCH is an undertaker, poet, essayist and author of *The Good Funeral: Death, Grief and the Community of Care* (with Thomas G. Long) and *The Sin-Eater: A Breviary*.



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A Downsized Dream

Building solidarity at the margins

BY DOUG DEMEO



GOOD CONVERSATION. Two men take a smoke break in Old Chinatown in Manhattan.

In 1992, I was a Jesuit novice living in Jamaica Plain, Boston, and as part of our daily routine we discussed some of the essays from the series “Studies in Jesuit Spirituality.” None stood out quite like the article by Dean Brackley, S.J., titled “Downward Mobility: Social Implications of St. Ignatius’s Two Standards,” published in January 1988. Father Brackley—a New York Jesuit—was always concerned with the poor, and following the killings of six Jesuit priests at the University of Central America in El Salvador in 1989, he began an assignment as a replacement instructor in theology there. The change in scenery from the relatively calm United States to a terrifying war zone in the developing world must have given Father Brackley a lot more opportunity to consider his thesis on “downward mobility.”

Of course, the idea of downward mobility stands in stark contrast to the notion of upward mobility, itself an immensely popular idea, akin to the American Dream, and one that has conditioned many a mind from an early age. It certainly captured my imagination.

At face value, downward mobility may seem farcical; but when coupled with movements of solidarity and kinship, the idea begins to emerge as something of a counterforce to upward mobility. The draw of solidarity evokes a keen sense of justice, especially in relation to oppressed or forsaken people. It is a prevailing theme in Pope Francis’ encyclical on integral ecology and one of the core principles of Catholic social teaching. The experience of kinship is something else; it

may or may not conjure an immediate sense of justice. What kinship seems to elicit more deeply than a sense of solidarity, however, is a growing intimacy and understanding among very different people, while realizing that in the face of difference, we tend to carry subconscious feelings of superiority or inferiority. In fact, many stories of kinship are described in the book by Greg Boyle, S.J., *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*.

Why is a thorough examination of downward or upward mobility important? If one considers the convergence of environmental and geopolitical crises destroying the basis for life itself—arable land and food, ready supplies of clean water or functioning global states—it may well be that the missing link for the survival of civilization is a kind of collective turn to downward mobility. Though beginnings of a materially lighter, clean-energy economy are well underway, our planet has been demolished by the sheer weight of the industrial-extraction economies of the 20th and early 21st century.

My Downward Mobility

In his encyclical “Charity in Truth” (quoted by Pope Francis in “Laudato Si”), Pope Benedict XVI prophesied against a “superdevelopment’ of a wasteful and consumerist kind that forms an unacceptable contrast with the ongoing situations of dehumanizing deprivation.” Indeed, the World Bank has warned that unless humankind unifies around the challenges of climate change—caused by deforestation, mass production and emissions—and creates a very different kind of economy by 2030, some 100 million people or more will join

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the ranks of the more than 700 million people who already live in extreme poverty.

My taste of downward mobility began in the late 1990s. I had just left life as a religious in Spokane, Wash., and in my relative poverty I became eligible for food stamps. Years later, I received unemployment compensation after losing full-time work. This helped pay the mortgage on my new house in Trenton, N.J., but I was soon hit with life-saving surgery and a two-week hospital stay, without health insurance. A year later, after I found work in teaching and moved to Maryland, my realtor and I were unable to sell my house, whose value began to plummet. To keep up with rent and mortgage, I worked around the clock as a waiter. This affected my health and ability to teach at top level, so after six months I quit my weekend job. After 10 months making payments on a vacant home, the market value now less than my remaining principal, I applied for a “deed in lieu” (of foreclosure). Fortunately, it was granted.

When I left the Jesuits, I had no conscious desire or intention to experience downward mobility. I had no plan to experiment with economic hardship the way Barbara Ehrenreich did, as she reported in *Nickel and Dimed*. I had no interest in eating only cheap food, as Morgan Spurlock reported in his documentary *Super Size Me*. Furthermore, while my understanding of success has changed, I have always wanted “to be successful.”

Sometimes, though, life happens. I contracted achalasia, a disease of the esophagus that my doctor discovered while performing a routine upper endoscopy. While working in college campus ministry and enjoying some fun splashing around with Honduran friends, I had accidentally swallowed a bit of river water. That is how I contracted a parasite that I later learned is a leading cause of achalasia. The fact that my doctor mistakenly perforated my esophagus during the endoscopy, prompting the need for immediate, life-saving surgery, did not make my life any easier. However, it turned out to be a blessing in disguise. My surgeon the next day was able to perform the long-term, muscle-cutting maneuver that is used to relieve conditions of achalasia.

I cannot explain all the twists and turns of my years since leaving the Jesuits, but I can say that I have a clearer sense of the meaning of downward mobility, a notion that fascinated me in my mid-20s. Still, without an attendant openness to the values of kinship and solidarity—leading to the kind of societal reordering that would steer us away from the apocalypse—downward mobility, for whatever its personal appeal,

may not necessarily stir key institutions toward greater ecology and justice.

Kinship and Solidarity

I first heard about Father Greg Boyle and his ministry with gang members in the mid-1990s. As a campus minister, I was thrilled to hear him speak to our packed conference center in 2009. Warm-hearted and funny, Father Greg is a one-of-a-kind storyteller. Equally engaging, weaving stories with their own kind of relish, were two “homies,” as he calls them, who accompanied him. Father Greg’s book, *Tattoos on the Heart*, recounts dozens of incidents of unspeakable anguish and surprising joy in some of the toughest areas of Los Angeles. With a graced rawness, Father Greg draws the reader into each encounter as if it were speaking about

your own loved ones and so unveils the depths of equality in a beautiful word: *kinship*.

Coming to know and embrace a kinship beyond that which comes naturally—among family and friends—has been a learning process for me, to be sure, but a series of conversations between 2011 and 2014 seemed to quicken my education.

Shortly after moving to Trenton, I joined a faith-sharing group at New Jersey State Prison, just around the corner

from my house at the time. At our bimonthly meetings, my new friends helped me to see myself as not being any better, or worse, than any of them, just one man among equals. Notwithstanding their wounds and struggles, they shone with a rare kind of joy and serenity, giving a commanding witness to their deeply forgiving and liberating God. At one point, a few of the men took turns leading discussions of Jesus’ parables, like the story of the good Samaritan or the prodigal son. In sharing snippets of their lives before sentencing and since, they prompted altogether new meanings of kinship in the former parable and mercy in the latter. I now see the markings of infinite goodness in those who may have to spend the rest of their lives in confinement.

As a Jesuit in training, and years later as a campus minister, I was able to travel to Central America on several occasions, for weeks and months at a time. My companions and I discovered varied reasons why so many Central Americans have risked life and limb in their journeys to the United States. These include a strong desire and will for advances in safety, education or employment. In recent years, social media have allowed me to reconnect with Honduran or Salvadoran friends, a few of whom are now living in the United States.



Their courage and humanity defy the odious label “illegals.”

If kinship is the feeling, what, then, can be said of the action—solidarity? For one thing, the work of solidarity is never fleeting or simplistic. Solidarity seeks lasting, effective relief from hardships brought on by the effects of climate change and extreme poverty, like worsening terrorism or war. Compassionate sharing among individuals and communities is always and everywhere needed. But just as impressive are expressions of solidarity at the level of systemic policymaking. Through economy-wide investments in renewable energy, comprehensive immigration reform and the expansion of fair trade (to name just a few), citizens of the world are urged to build a more humane and hopeful future.

Nonetheless, universal kinship and the accompanying need for political and economic solidarity may never come to pass if we do not open ourselves to the gift of downward mobility. Consider small samples of compassion. If I had not been stricken by achalasia and lost 40 pounds and almost died, would I really care to know what it is like for people wrestling with some rare disease? If I had not lost my job, health insurance and home, would I really want to know what it is like for the millions of Americans in the same situation? It is certainly possible, although earlier I never gave it the same attention as I do now. And while I have not lived on an island or in a tropical nation for the length of time required to know the existential terror of climate change, I can

stop and listen to my Central American friends and consider what it might be like.

At the very least, downward mobility means sustained attention to first things first, and the brilliance of Pope Francis’ encyclical is its approach to putting first things first—water, food, shelter and safety—in a systematic and transformative way. We can build not simply a short-term solidarity that brings relief to people who face the direst circumstances of the global economic order in the age of disaster; we can also build a real, long-lasting solidarity that is mutually empowering. Such relations reward the deep sharing of land—“For the earth is the Lord’s and all therein” (Ps 24:1).

From the standpoint of the Gospels, downward mobility (as with kinship and solidarity) is nothing new. Jesus’ words are straightforward. “Seek first the kingdom of God” (Mt 6:33). “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink...” (Mt 6:25). “Whatever you have done for the least of these...” (Mt 25:40). And, “Follow me” (Mt 4:19). Notwithstanding how these touch the hearts of individuals, Jesus’ words ought to speak to nations and economies.

Especially working together, downward mobility, kinship and solidarity orient our decision-making as if we are one. With haste, then, let us break open and activate these gifts, thereby stemming the tide of needless suffering and death in the 21st century and awakening the kind of community that Jesus and the prophets envisioned. **A**

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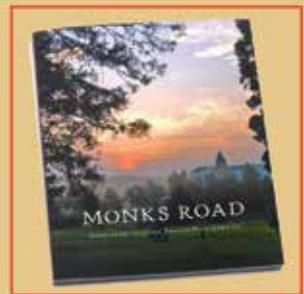
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Plane Speaking

After Pope Francis' recent press conference during the plane trip from Ciudad Juárez in Mexico to Rome, some commentators in the United States, Italy and the United Kingdom suggested that he should abandon this practice.

One asserted that his words "are, at best, confusing"—for example, regarding the morality of contraception in the context of the Zika epidemic—adding that Francis is "wrong to use interviews as a regular facet of his public ministry." Others claim he mispoke on Donald J. Trump.

What they fail to recognize is that Francis is reaching a global audience, far beyond the Catholic Church, in a way no pope in history has done. He is doing so in a totally free, credible way that shuns politically correct discourse and comes across as a humble, normal person, which adds to his credibility with people of all faiths and none.

At times, he sparks discussion by responding in a non-politically correct way to important questions. Remember his "Who am I to judge?" comment regarding homosexuals on the Rio–Rome flight? Or his remark on the Colombo–Manila flight after the terrorist attacks in Paris, when he insisted that the right to freedom of expression does not entitle anyone to ridicule or offend another's religion. Or think of his response on the Juárez–Rome flight regarding affirmations like those made by Donald Trump that if he became president, he would build a wall on the Mexican

border and deport 11 million undocumented migrants. Without naming Mr. Trump, Francis said: "A person who thinks only about building walls, wherever they may be, and not building bridges, is not Christian. This is not in the Gospel."

It is worth mentioning that Francis does not know the questions in advance. The reporters on the plane huddle in language groups to identify both the questions and the persons to ask them. The names are given to Federico Lombardi, S.J., the Vatican spokesman, who calls on each in turn. When members of the media sometimes spin or misrepresent what the pope says, Father Lombardi may have to issue subsequent clarifications; but surely that is a small price to pay for this extraordinary opportunity to communicate the Gospel message and the church's teaching to the world.

The tradition of press conferences started by accident under St. John Paul II, when, on his first trip to Mexico in 1979, an American journalist asked if he would visit the United States. That question was quickly followed by others, and press conferences soon became an integral part of papal trips. Like Francis, John Paul II did not know the questions in advance, but he felt comfortable fielding whatever came.

Benedict XVI, however, was never comfortable with this freewheeling relationship with reporters; and following a major gaffe on the flight to Brazil in 2007, he asked to know the questions in advance. Furthermore, he made the mistake of holding press

conferences before arriving in a country, with the result that often what he said on the plane would dominate the news on the first days of his visit there, eclipsing his other messages.

Perhaps the most significant difference between Francis and his two predecessors is that he does not give stale answers to questions. He feels free to offer a fresh look at issues of prudential judgment that were often considered closed under St. John Paul II and Benedict XVI; and, of course, this disturbs those who think some questions (particularly in the field of sexual morality) have been resolved once and for all and there is nothing more to say.

Pope Francis is free in another sense too, because, as he wrote in "The Joy of the Gospel" (No. 16), he does "not believe that the papal magisterium should be expected to offer a definitive or complete word on every question which affects the church and the world." Indeed, he said, "it is not advisable for the pope to take the place of local bishops in the discernment of every issue that arises in their territory."

Moreover, in "The Joy of the Gospel" (No. 49), he declared, "I prefer a church that is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a church that is unhealthy from being confined and clinging to its own security."

His press conferences reflect this fresh way of thinking.

GERARD O'CONNELL

GERARD O'CONNELL is *America's* Rome correspondent. *America's* Vatican coverage is sponsored in part by the Jesuit communities of the United States. Twitter: @gerryrome.



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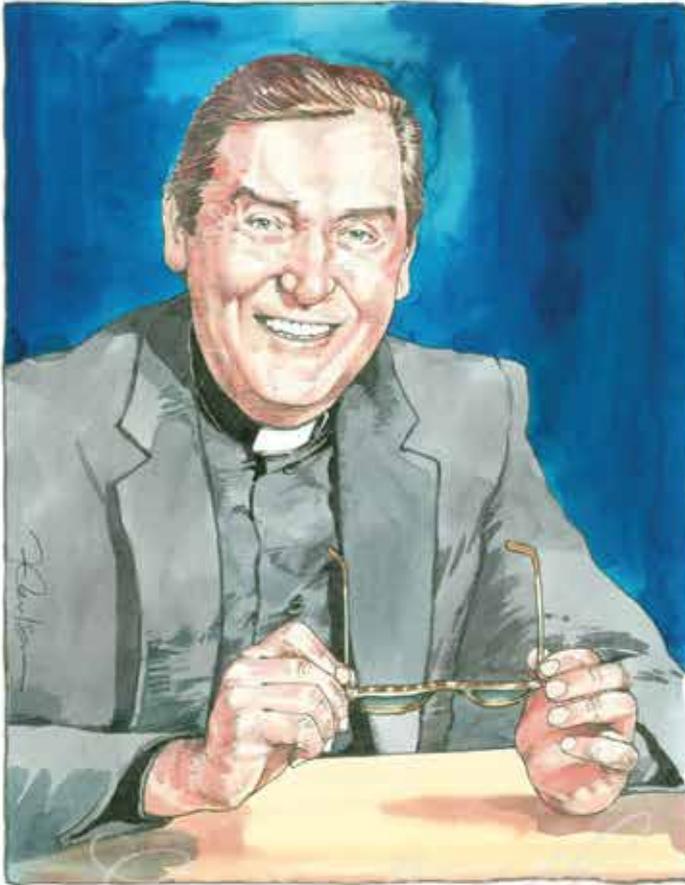
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The Mystery of Sadness

Coping with a sudden loss

BY JEFFREY ESSMANN

My niece was buried a few weeks ago, a wonderful young woman: 36, not sick, suddenly gone. Sudden deaths, they say, are the most traumatic—and certainly sudden deaths of the young. The shock is nearly concussive. When I first got the call that she had died, I was at work. Afterward I returned to my desk in a kind of stupor, moving from task to task with a dull urgency, finding cool comfort in the reassurances of routine. Routine and grammar. I work as a proofreader; the structure of language is my bread and butter, its rules and their exceptions my fetish and delight. But the day my niece died, the day I would never see her again, grammar was nearly salvific to me, a stable mental framework I could hold onto while everything else inside me was suddenly trembling. Grammar and spelling mistakes would carry me safely through the day until 5 o'clock, until the train, until I could get home and cry.

The visitation and funeral were at the parish church where she had gone to grade school and, years later, served

as a catechist. Heartbreak and history stumbled about the room, bumping into each other, settling into odd juxtapositions. At one point I found myself sitting near my niece's coffin talking with the nun I had in fourth grade,

comfort one another, hold one another, cry.

And at the Our Father, as I stood hand-in-hand praying with my sister and her family, I suddenly felt everything beneath the text and the ritual shift, everything slip and move into that pure, primal place a funeral conjures, where we are a stone-age clan burying a kinsman at the back of the cave; where we are the builders of pyramids, temple mourners, necromancers; where we are the heartbroken friends of a crucified man getting him to a tomb before the Sabbath. We are all of us in pain, all stunned at the sudden emptiness, all plunged into the mystery at the heart of sadness, all awestruck at the strange life that pulses faintly within the fog of loss. We have all of us been brought to

holy ground, thrown to it, dazed, all of us brought to a place beyond words.

Wordless Cries

In both Matthew and Mark, Jesus lets out a wordless cry just before he dies, a scream into the abyss, the Word made flesh driven to human incoherence. I thought of that cry when I spoke with my sister the day we found out Lauren



and suddenly time and circumstance began to flutter and bat against one another like a moth at a window. Just before Mass started, I looked around the room at a church filled with people who loved my niece and thought, this is who she really was, is: this texture of relationships, these people with whom she experienced connection and love, who now, for her sake, for love of her,

JEFFREY ESSMANN's work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *U.S. Catholic*, *Commonweal* and numerous other magazines and literary journals. He lives in New York.

died. She could barely speak. She only got out a couple of things—a question, I think, a phrase—but they sounded disconnected, new and unpronounceable in her grief. Language had dissolved in feeling; words floated, empty. They could never accurately describe what she was going through. They could not possibly convey her pain. Only the gasps between the words could. Only the wordless cry.

For all the beautiful prayers ever written, it is arguable that the prayers most pleasing to God are those that cannot be expressed in words, the ones whose only poetry is human desire, prayed at times when life has become so overpowering, so expansive, so racked with mystery that the divine is glimmering between the seams. We howl to God in the face of death, and howl just as wildly in the face of life. Our first wordless cry is at birth.

Once the airways are suctioned out, at the first inrush of air, the newborn begins to cry, though many mothers

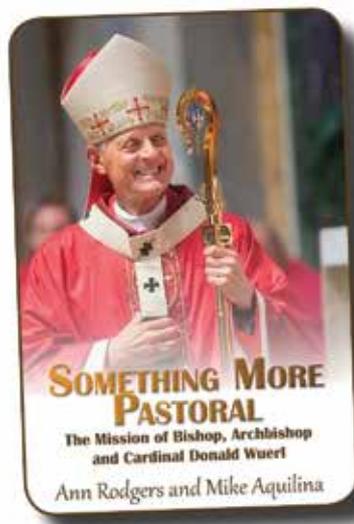
speak of delivering babies who cried as soon as they were out of the womb. As soon as we sense that the world around us has suddenly gotten infinitely larger, vast, terrifying; when we feel human life around us for the first time, all around us, in us, feel its chaos of sensations, its overpowering pull, its demand on us, we scream, we cry, we howl. We are nothing but weakness and hunger and fear, nothing but this squalling, this cry, this plea.

As a human infant, Jesus would have known this wordless cry as well. But within this human infant was also the living spark of the divine; and part of the infant consciousness, part of its trauma, may also have been the Word crying out against the flesh. The newborn Christ may have had a primal instinct that he was born into death as well as into life, that the miracle of incarnation implied the miracle of de-incarnation, and his wordless cry may have been a foretaste of the agony in the garden, the first time he was to ask

for this cup to pass. And then Mary gave him her breast.

We cry out in incoherence and are answered in mystery. At the end of the Mass, when they placed the white pall over the coffin and the priest read the final blessing, I could hear behind me the choked chorus of people in tears, its sad crescendos and dissolves. As the priest read the part about the Resurrection, I looked over at my sister, lost in tears, devastated, and thought this was how the women in the graveyard on Easter morning must have cried, still knowing only the horror of their loss. The sun was not up yet. They had not yet reached the tomb. They did not know that once they got there, once they looked inside, once they heard their cries bounce off the walls of the empty tomb, that wordlessness was over, incoherence banished. Not because the Word had become flesh yet again. This time a greater miracle had happened, the greatest: flesh had become pure Word. ▲

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FILM | JOHN ANDERSON

LIVES OF CHRIST

Two films reinterpret the greatest story ever told.



ON THE HUNT. Joseph Fiennes as Clavius and Tom Felton as Lucius in "Risen."

The lure of high-end historical fiction—Gore Vidal’s “Narratives of Empire” series, to cite one popular example, or even a movie like “Lincoln”—is the sharing of secrets: The author tells us things we could not otherwise have known, insights and revelations “kept” from us by the limitations of the historical record—the same historical record that provides the story with its plausibility. The key to the success of these narratives is that we viewers and readers want these stories to be true. Our belief is enhanced by the mechanics of imagination.

In other words, what is needed is faith, a convergence of belief and fact. This is the key to two films about Jesus currently in circulation: **The Young Messiah** and **Risen**. To say they book-end the life of Christ would not be quite accurate. “The Young Messiah”—

“inspired by Scripture and rooted in history” as the opening title tells us—imagines the life of the 7-year-old Jesus during and after his return to Judea following the Holy Family’s flight to Egypt. “Risen,” a far more rigorous movie, frankly, is about the risen Christ; the principal narrative begins mid-crucifixion and continues through the ascension.

The conceit of “Risen,” which seems certain to provoke, tantalize and perhaps even revitalize a Christian viewer’s belief system, is the resurrection as seen through the eyes not just of a nonbeliever, but of one whose professional duty is to crush the nascent Christian cult of A.D. 33. That man, a Roman tribune named Clavius (Joseph Fiennes), is seen as the film opens walking out of the Judean desert, arriving at an inn and telling the incredulous innkeeper his story—which

returns us to the first Good Friday.

It is not so good for Clavius. Having just annihilated a band of Jewish rebels, he is immediately assigned the task of keeping Jerusalem quiet for Pontius Pilate (a wonderfully corrupt Peter Firth), the Roman prefect. As Pilate tells his tribune, he has just had to crucify a troublesome Jew named Yeshua (Cliff Curtis), and the followers of this wretched “messiah” will likely be causing him a more troublesome Passover than will the Sanhedrin.

In his satirical novel “The Master and Margarita,” Mikhail Bulgakov provides a version of the confrontation between Pilate and Yeshua, one that cannot help but permanently reorder our image of that encounter. Yeshua is made a rather pathetic figure, Pilate a beleaguered civil servant. The entire episode is rendered pedestrian, a matter resolved brutally and quickly, as per the rule of Tiberius Caesar.

Each reader will have his or her own reaction to such a gritty, inglorious portrayal, but for this writer the effect was to reorder presumptions, to put flesh on the story, to make it less “myth” and more connected to the human life Jesus led (the description of the characters, after all, is from the mouth of Bulgakov’s Satan character, so the “facts” are already in dispute). Likewise, “Risen,” for all its obviousness, makes the first Easter story something with blood in its veins (and often enough, on the screen: This is not a film for kids).

The fleshiness of “Risen” is unmitigated, though at times you wish it were. Crucifixion is portrayed as the cruel, torturous form of execution it was. (“Do the Nazarean a kindness,” Pilate tells Clavius, before dispatching him to Golgotha. “Break his legs.” The effect is to hasten the asphyxiation by which crucifixion killed. Clavius chooses in-

MOTHER AND CHILD. Sara Lazzaro as Mary and Adam Greaves-Neal as Jesus in "The Young Messiah"

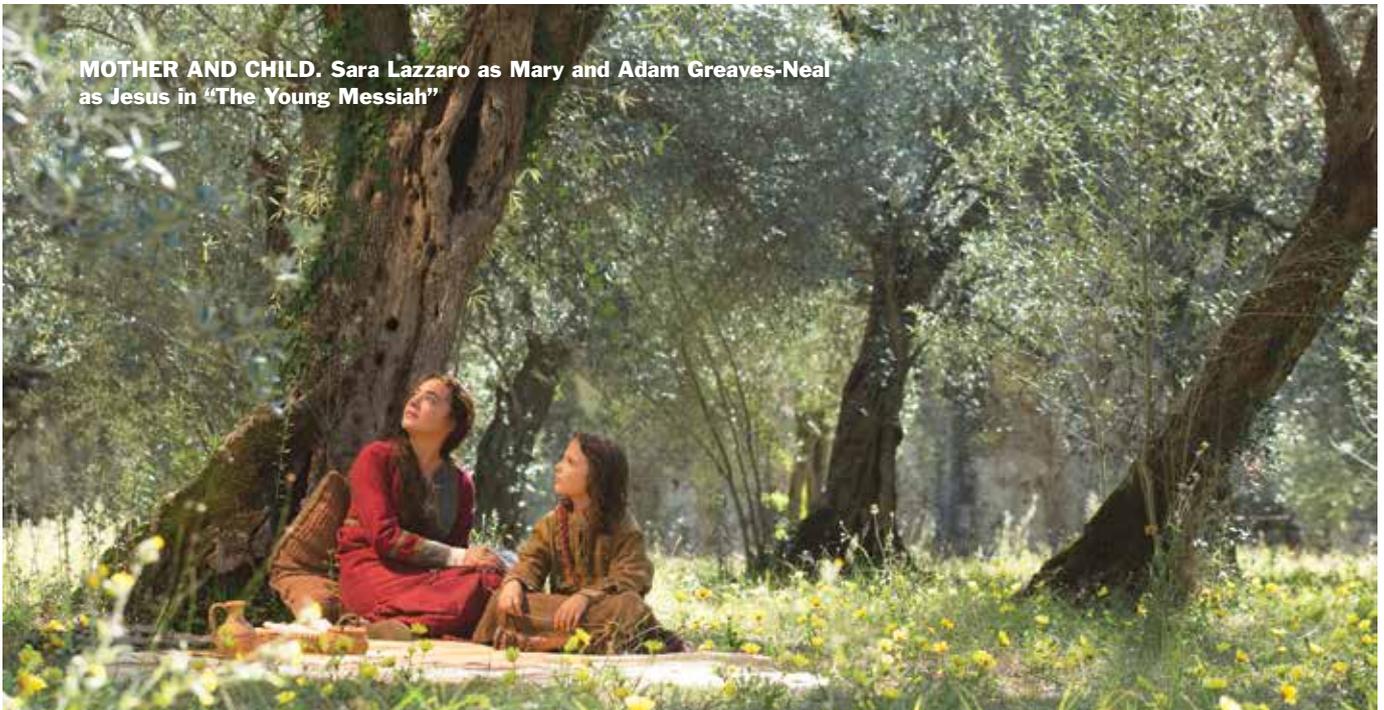


PHOTO: FOCUS FEATURES/ PHILIPPE ANTONELLO

stead to have a centurion stick a spear in Jesus' side). The post-mortem procedure is almost as gruesome. As done in "Risen," the executed were thrown into an open pit, doused with lime and left to rot—which makes for some disgusting moments when the powers that be try to fish out and present a public corpse following Jesus' disappearance from the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea (Antonio Gil).

"Risen" is not without humor. While hunting for Jesus' body and the apostles he thinks made off with it, Clavius asks a roomful of Roman soldiers, "Who knows the woman Mary Magdalene?" Half the men bashfully raise their hands. (The joke is based on the false tradition that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute.) The apostle Bartholomew (a wonderful Stephen Hagan) is dragged in giddy with joy and questioned about the risen Christ.

Offering to be crucified himself, Bartholomew is treated to Clavius' excruciatingly detailed, vivid and condescending description of what crucifixion entailed and how it worked, a sequence that in its own way is far more disturbing than anything Mel

Gibson did in "The Passion of the Christ," because, again, the listener's imagination is in play. (One recalls the description of hell in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and shudders.) Bartholomew seems visibly shaken, then gleefully offers himself again. It is a very good moment.

It is also something of a refreshment after so much of Fiennes' ponderous performance, although one supposes there is not a lot else he can do with the material. The film, written by the director, Kevin Reynolds, and the fledgling Paul Aiello, provides quite a bit of humor, but little of it is from Fiennes. His character is reminiscent of Richard Burton's in that old chestnut "The Robe": the soldier devoted to Rome until his encounter with the Christ and the evidence of his own eyes. He has seen Yeshua on the cross, so he knows him when he walks into a room full of apostles, swarming around their risen Jesus. It is fitting, and no accident, that Clavius sees the Messiah at the same moment that the previously doubting Thomas walks into the room and probes the wounds.

Reynolds' use of Cliff Curtis as Yeshua and Curtis' own consider-

able gifts (he'll be seen soon giving a revelatory performance in "The Dark Horse") triumph over what has been a problem for filmmakers since the Edison Manufacturing Co. filmed "The Passion Play of Oberammergau" in 1898: How does one portray the divine? Some filmmakers have balked at the very idea, employing mere suggestion, a shielded face, a hand reaching across the frame. Curtis, who imbues Yeshua with a palpable, eloquent kindness, vaults the perceptual impediments that usually accompany the casting of Jesus. One understands instantly why Clavius—the harsh, the violent, the unsentimental—virtually swoons in his presence.

Another triumph of casting is the presence of young Adam Greaves-Neal in *The Young Messiah*. He is a beautiful child, but not cloyingly so. In a role so ripe for second-guessing, he is a joy to watch.

The movie is less elevating. The Iranian director Cyrus Nowrasteh, whose "The Stoning of Soraya M." in 2008 was a triumph for its star Shohreh Aghdashloo, resorts to a great deal of gauzy, focus-free filming

in striving for an elevated state of spirituality and a stutter effect intended to provide liveliness in times of visual stasis. It is unnecessary. Much of the music, too, is overwrought (as is the score to “Risen,” come to think of it), along with some of the acting. On the other hand, in cherry-picking Christian apocrypha, the Gnostic gospels and the few lines Luke has given us about the Christ Child—not to mention the Anne Rice novel on which it is allegedly based, *Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt*—“The Young Messiah” is a film of transcendent moments, if not sustained engagement.

One of those moments comes when Jesus, resisting his parents’ wishes that he keep his patrimony and his gifts concealed, cures his ailing un-

cle Cleopas (Christian McKay) while they are bathing in a river. It is kind of a mashup, visually speaking, and an intriguing aspect of Nowrasteh’s style: The scene suggests baptism, foreshadows the miracles of Jesus’ public career and showcases his mercy. The director does this elsewhere, too. The Demon (Rory Keenan), a.k.a. Satan, who dogs Jesus throughout the film and does all he can to foster fear and loathing among the witnesses to his miracles, kills a running child early on by throwing in his path—what else?—an apple.

The family, which is traveling back to Judea after seven years in Egypt, all know the story of Mary’s virgin birth of Jesus. They include Cleopas, Joseph’s brother (presumably the same St. Cleopas who encountered Jesus on the

road to Emmaus in Lk 24:13–32 and who is alluded to in “Risen”) and James (Finn Ireland), the resentful brother of Jesus—adopted, by the way, though that is not the reason for his churlishness. Like most families, they have varied opinions. Should the boy be told his story, be allowed to use his powers—as he does when he raises first a bird and then a boy from the dead? Or be shielded until some future time? “He’s just a child,” says Joseph, to which Cleopas sagely answers, “He’s not.”

There is some tweaking even of the narrative as we know it from the Gospels. The hunt for Jesus instigated by Herod the Great, which led to the massacre of the innocents, is perpetuated by his son Herod (Jonathan Bailey), presumably Herod Antipas, though the dates do not seem quite to add up. Neither does Herod’s relationship with the Roman centurion Severus (Sean Bean), who has been given the mission of finding and killing the boy whose birth unleashed so much lethal paranoia seven years before. Herod, a puppet of Rome, treats Severus like a temp worker, though this seems unlikely. What does ring very true is the portrayal of Mary and Joseph (Sara Lazzaro, Vincent Walsh) as nervous, worried, overprotective parents of a divinely inspired child who is being plagued by the devil. Literally.

Is there some human, narrative-craving genome that demands stories, plot-driven explanations of our beliefs and our needs and ourselves? It would seem so. We know so little about Jesus the boy that something like “The Young Messiah” addresses a desire we might not even realize we had while filling a very Christian imperative. Jesus, after all, told stories, too. And those stories live on and help us know him better.

JOHN ANDERSON is a film critic for *Variety* and *The Wall Street Journal* and a regular contributor to the *Arts & Leisure* section of *The New York Times*.

The Wind of God...

...moved over the face of the waters. And in reading this, the awareness that, more than once, God has turned my head in his direction, yet I haven’t seen the gesture for what it is.

The world charges and is charged with a white-hot flame. I might turn away, but each morning my head is turned for me toward a crow’s flight, squirrel passage, or a person with whom I share an ever-present reaching toward. I let myself be turned sometimes. Sometimes I get into my car and drive away.

Today I picture God’s hand cupped atop my head—a quiet turning and then receding. We are ‘fine’ with each other. This god has all the time in the world.

JENNIFER WALLACE

JENNIFER WALLACE is a poetry editor at *The Cortland Review* and a founding editor of *Toadlily Press*. Her book of poems and photographs, *It Can be Solved by Walking*, was published by *CityLit Press* in 2012. Her chapbook, *The Want Fire*, is published by *Passager Books*.

IT'S BEEN A PRIVILEGE

Whose America does Donald J. Trump want to “make great again”? Confronted as I have been so regularly by news coverage of the part-spectacle, part-genuine presidential campaign, I have had many occasions to puzzle over this slogan, “Make America Great Again!” And I cannot shake the disturbing recognition of the white privilege that undergirds such a statement’s internal logic and narrowly focused appeal.

At what point in the 240-year-old history of the United States was it so great for black people that we would want to return to that “greatness” again? A similar question could be asked about the “Americas” of women more generally, religious minorities, indigenous peoples, Latino/a people, gays and lesbians, and the physically, mentally or emotionally disabled, among others. But here I want to focus my attention on the fact of white privilege and draw attention to a pervasive reality underlying Mr. Trump’s slogan, one that does not receive the attention it must, at least not from many white Christians.

As a white male, especially one who also benefits from an unsought clerical privilege in the church, it is my responsibility to raise this subject personally and publicly and to acknowledge that I benefit from the structural sin of white privilege in a society (and, as some theologians have rightly argued, in a church) that is in deep collective denial about its existence.

The nature of my unwitting complicity with American white privilege and many of the ways I directly benefit from the color of my skin came into stark relief when I first encountered Peggy McIntosh’s now-classic 1988 essay,

“White Privilege and Male Privilege.” Ms. McIntosh lists dozens of daily effects of white privilege as she experienced them, including:

“I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.”

“I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.”

“I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.”

“When I am told about our national heritage or about ‘civilization,’ I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.”

Reading these and other examples, I came to recognize the many previously unacknowledged benefits in my own daily life. Subsequently I have not been able to un-see the white privilege that pervades my being-in-the-world. When I am on planes or buses, in restaurants or stores, or interacting with acquaintances or strangers, I see the manifold ways structural racism marks all bodies in relationship and the disturbing ways some are advantaged while others are disadvantaged.

White privilege affords people who look like me a nearly universal benefit of the doubt while simultaneously casting a shadow of suspicion and incredulity on the motives, reasoning and experiences of black and brown people. White privilege means that people who look like me can go about the world with a sense of entitlement and belonging, whereas people of color are often considered outsiders, aliens and must

explain themselves. Because of white privilege, people who look like me never have to confront our nation’s history of systemic racism, while the histories and bodies of black people are erased and ignored.

I confess I have been overwhelmed at times and frequently unsure of what to do in response to this knowledge. Like poverty, sexism, environmental degradation and other structural evils, combating white privilege seems quixotic if not impossible. But its persistence

depends very much on the silence and willful ignorance of those who benefit from its reality.

It is not enough for white people merely to acknowledge the reality of white privilege, but it is the necessary starting point. As M. Shawn Copeland, the Rev. Bryan Massingale, James Cone and other black theologians have reminded the church and academy over the years, until white ministers and theologians seriously acknowledge and address white

privilege and racism, not much is going to change. Furthermore, as the white Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, wrote in his essay “Letters to a White Liberal” in 1964, until white people are willing to sacrifice their privilege, all their expressed concern about racism is effectively worthless.

It is the brilliant and unsettling work of black and antiracist theologians, as well as that of journalists like Ta-Nehisi Coates and poets like Claudia Rankine, that continues to inform my critical awareness of racial injustice that not only exists but also benefits me. Maybe if white privilege were more widely recognized, America could indeed be great someday.

People who look like me never have to confront our nation’s history of racism.



STILL DREAMING

BETWEEN THE WORLD AND ME

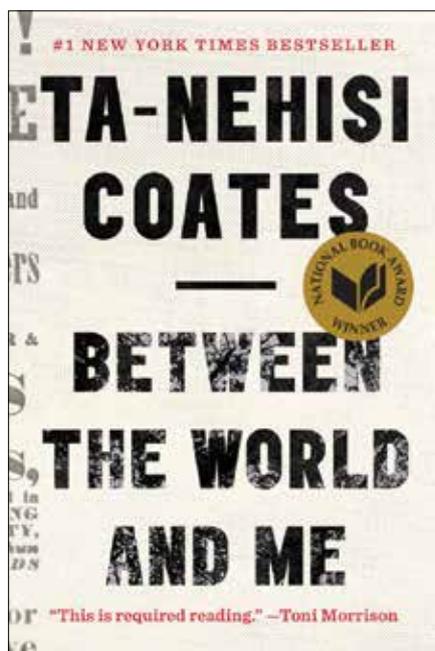
By Ta-Nehisi Coates
Spiegel and Grau. 176p \$24

In 1965, James Baldwin and William F. Buckley Jr. participated in a public debate at Cambridge University. Under discussion was the question of whether “the American Dream has been achieved at the expense of the American Negro.” What became clear during the debate is that Baldwin and Buckley largely agreed upon the facts about the status of blacks in America. Both parties agreed that black people had achieved some modest social and material advances since Reconstruction, but that, despite these gains, they were still subject to institutionalized discrimination, segregation and both officially sanctioned and vigilante forms of white terror.

What the two men were really debating was the significance of these facts. Did they suggest that the very promise embodied by the Dream was premised upon the exploitation of black lives, black labor and black bodies? For Baldwin, but not for Buckley, the answer was yes.

A cursory glance at contemporary discussions of race in America shows that the debate is far from settled. Baldwin and Buckley both have their modern proponents. In many ways, Ta-Nehisi Coates’s painful and deeply truthful *Between the World and Me* is an extended articulation and update of Baldwin’s conviction that the domination of blacks is endemic to the American Dream, that “the Dream” sustains itself insofar as it rests “on our backs, the bedding made from our bodies,” as Coates writes. Written as a letter to his 14-year-old son, Samori, Coates’s text is a rich analysis of the

mechanisms that ensure that the Dream fulfills its principal function: to elevate the Dreamers—“those who believe themselves white”—over black bodies in a way that masks this domination from the Dreamers themselves but renders it all too obvious to those in “the struggle.”



Between the World and Me is written from the perspective of one possible “black identity,” the perspective of one particular black, male, heterosexual atheist. The narrative spans Coates’s upbringing in one of the most impoverished and violent neighborhoods of Baltimore, his becoming “conscious” at “The Mecca” of Howard University and, finally, his ongoing attempt to articulate the depth of his fears and hopes for Samori, born into a relatively privileged existence, in which he need not fear the violence of the drug corner but the police officer, the white crowd and the skittish gun-toting citizen: “There is no real distance between you and Trayvon Martin, and thus

Trayvon Martin must terrify you in a way he could never terrify me.”

Despite their different “worlds,” Coates insists that he, Samori and all black people are engaged in “the beautiful struggle” (the title of Coates’s 2008 autobiography). Yet despite whatever aesthetic beauty the struggle offers, it comes at a high cost. What those in the struggle know is that black people in the United States are and always have been threatened with “the loss of their bodies.” From the horrors of chattel slavery (“the flaying of backs; the chaining of limbs; the strangling of dissidents; the destruction of families; the rape of mothers; the sale of children”) to the “plunder” of black life, liberty and capital embodied in urban redlining and “the sprawling carceral state, the random detention of black people, the torture of suspects,” those in the struggle know that the Dream is not for them.

They are the surplus that the Dream cannot help but plunder, and the very norms of the Dream even demand this plunder. As Coates puts it in one of the book’s most devastating lines, “In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body—it is heritage.”

Coates’s notion of “violence” is fundamentally a visceral, materialistic one. Whatever more metaphorical forms of “violence” circulate within the ideological economy of the Dream must ultimately be meted out within the brute economy of flesh, blood and bone. The social debts incurred by anti-black racism, for instance, must be paid for by black people at the level of “visceral experience,” which “dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth.”

This is a powerful and grounding social vision. While more “academic” approaches to racism can quickly allow their theories to lose touch with the details of the everyday lives that those theories are ultimately about, Coates insists that racism always comes to collect its debt of flesh and

blood—in Michael Brown’s shooting, Eric Garner’s strangling, the murder of poor, young black men by other poor, young black men, the rape of black prisoners or the grief of mothers, sisters and wives. The Dream maintains itself through obscuring the violence upon which its existence depends, ushers it into urban ghettos and sinking schools, all while stridently maintaining its innocence, absolving itself from responsibility for the violence that it simultaneously feeds upon and propagates.

Coates is adamant that the problems engendered by the Dream cannot be addressed by appeal to religion—“I rejected magic in all its forms.” “I have no praise anthems, nor old Negro spirituals. The spirit and soul are the body and brain, which are destructible...and the soul did not escape. The spirit did not fly away on gospel wings.” Despite this unsentimental atheism, Coates betrays a grand, almost Wagnerian fascination with “the struggle” against everything that makes the Dream possible, even when the pervasiveness of the Dream makes hope impossible.

One cannot help but be reminded of the very Catholic precept that suffering itself is redemptive, when Coates claims that “the struggle, in and of itself, has meaning.” He assures his son that “your very vulnerability brings you closer to the meaning of life, just as for others, the quest to believe themselves white divides them from it.” For Coates, this vulnerability is something that black people must cherish. In contrast to the Dreamers, whose “name has no real meaning divorced from the machinery of criminal power,” the struggle breeds “a kind of understanding that illuminates the Galaxy in all its truest colors” among the strugglers. Even the contentless Dreamers know it and are envious of it—after all, even for them, “it is Billie they reach for in sadness, and Mobb Deep is what they holler in boldness, and Isley they hum in love, and Dre they yell in revelry, and Aretha

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is the last sound they hear before dying.”

There are moments when Coates’s treatment of the nature of racism is not fully satisfying. For instance, he speaks of racism not as a moral problem born of human failings, but as a necessary law of a properly functioning natural order:

My mother knew that the galaxy itself could kill me...and no one would be brought to account for this destruction because my death would not be the fault of any human, but the fault of some unfortunate but immutable fact of “race” imposed upon an innocent country by the inscrutable judgment of invisible gods. The earthquake cannot be subpoenaed. The typhoon will not bend under indictment. They sent the killer of [Howard classmate] Prince Jones back to his work [as a police officer] because he was not a killer at all. He was a force of nature, the helpless agent of our world’s physical laws.

In these cases, it is unclear whether Coates is describing a particular black first-person perspective on what racism feels like or whether, objectively, racism really is a permanent force of nature, as impossible to resist as a tornado, hurricane or other natural disaster. If we ought to understand him in the former sense, we ought to accept Coates’s claims at face value—surely, if racism seems like a crushingly inevitable force to Coates, other African-Americans and non-black people of color, then no one, especially if he or she is white, has any business saying that it does not. But if we understand this claim as an analysis of what anti-black racism actually is, Coates might very well be wrong about the supposedly inevitable nature of racism (several black activist traditions would argue that he is).

Moreover, if Coates is wrong about this, the falsity of the claim is not of

merely academic interest. If racism isn’t just evil, but evil and inevitable, one might think that resistance (“the struggle”) has merely aesthetic value at best, in the same way Ahab’s mythic tangle with the White Whale is beautiful, powerful and devastating but ultimately doomed. But shouldn’t the struggle change the world? Shouldn’t it discredit the Dream? Coates’s own book is itself a powerful activist stand, but if he is claiming that racism is one of “our world’s physical laws,” anti-racists might be better served doing as he does, not as he preaches.

Nevertheless, it would be a shame to let these discrepancies obscure the importance and value of *Between the World and Me*. Sixty years after Baldwin and Buckley’s meeting at Cambridge, there is still a tendency in the national media to speak of racism as a specter of

the past, as something that has a few kinks to be worked out, but is largely solved. Even when an average news week is filled with high-profile cases of police brutality against blacks and public bigotry against black protesters in disadvantaged, urban communities or on college campuses, we are frequently advised to treat these as unfortunate abnormalities, as exceptions rather than the rule. This is deeply misleading; even when it is not obvious, racism (and more particularly, anti-blackness) lives in the very cracks and fissures of our social structure, and it always has. Books like *Between the World and Me* pry at these fissures and confront us with a troubling but important truth: All of us keep dreaming at our peril.

PATRICK A. O’DONNELL is a doctoral candidate in philosophy at Johns Hopkins University.

ROBERT E. SCULLY

TWO FAMILIES, MANY WARS

AGENTS OF EMPIRE Knights, Corsairs, Jesuits & Spies in the Sixteenth-Century Mediterranean World

By Noel Malcolm
Oxford University Press. 640p \$34.95

This deeply researched and wide-ranging study advances our knowledge of early modern history in diverse and yet complementary ways. On the one hand, Noel Malcolm makes some important contributions with regard to several recent scholarly trends, including studies of borderlands and frontiers between diverse cultures, religions and empires. These encounters typically included both collaboration and confrontation, whether on the individual or collective level, in these often fluid frontier zones, including much of the early modern Mediterranean world. On the other hand, Malcolm makes some significant new inroads

in European and Mediterranean studies by focusing his lens, with increasing precision, on Eastern Europe, the Balkans and “Venetian Albania.” This region, between East and West, Islam and Christianity and the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires, witnessed shifting religious, political and economic terrains in the dynamic but troubled 16th century.

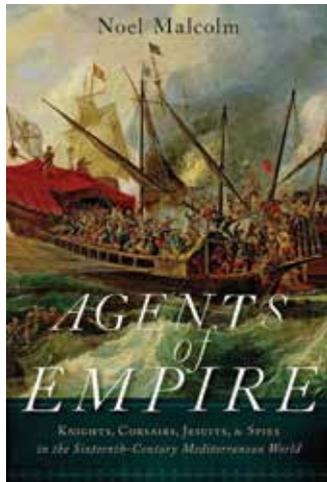
This scholarly venture began with Malcolm’s discovery of a contemporary treatise by Antonio Bruni, a prominent member of a well-connected Albanian Catholic family. Inspired by that initial find, followed by extensive research in myriad archives and libraries, Malcolm has produced a detailed study of the eastern Mediterranean world, built around a collective biography of the interrelated Bruni and Bruti families. Several of these individuals had particularly eventful and influential lives. Giovanni Bruni became the archbishop

of Bar, a city near the Albanian coast that was part of the Venetian commercial and maritime empire. Archbishop Bruni was a friend of Cardinal Carlo Borromeo and attended the Council of Trent. Yet, as a chilling example of how far even the mighty could fall, he was captured in a war between the Catholic Holy League and the Ottomans, made a galley slave and killed in the epic naval battle of Lepanto in 1571 (probably by Christian soldiers in a tragic case of mistaken identity). Giovanni's brother, Gasparo, joined the Knights of Malta, a hybrid religious order whose members were also crusaders. Quite ironically, Gasparo Bruni went on to serve as captain of the papal flagship at Lepanto—probably close to where his brother met his tragic end.

Part of the attraction of *Agents of Empire* is that the author interweaves the lives of the extended Bruni family with the larger narrative of the sometimes clashing, sometimes cooperating greater and lesser 16th-century Mediterranean powers. To understand how complex a mix this could be, it is essential that one not draw a simplistic black and white divide between the Christian and Islamic worlds. Each side had its own divisions as well as connections to the other side, including some rather surprising ones. Within Christendom, the long-standing division between the Orthodox and Catholics was exacerbated by the Reformation and the resultant split in the West between Catholics and Protestants. Cutting across those religious fault lines were political ones, in particular between the Habsburgs (the Spanish and Austrian Habsburg Empires) and those who feared Habsburg preponderance, including France, Venice, England and even, at times, the Papal States. In the Islamic world, the Ottoman Empire

was locked in a long-term struggle with Persia, resulting in intermittent, though often long and destructive, wars between these Muslim adversaries.

Malcolm does a good job demonstrating that while the intensive Ottoman-Habsburg rivalry in the Balkans and eastern Mediterranean has received a great deal of (deserved) attention, the Ottoman wars with Persia have not received comparable coverage, at least in the West. While this neglect is palpably true, and while the author does discuss some of the Habsburgs' struggles elsewhere, he arguably underestimates that side of a complex equation. One or both branches of the Habsburg family, for example, fought major wars with France (until 1559), engaged in internecine struggles with Protestants in the Holy Roman Empire and elsewhere and had to expend considerable resources defending and governing a vast overseas empire, especially in the Americas.



These conflicts within both the Christian and Islamic worlds help to explain why, as Malcolm points out, there were alliances that not only transcended but seemed to betray religious loyalties. France, for example, justified its Ottoman alliance as a necessary reaction to the perceived threat of Habsburg encirclement. The Venetians and the Ottomans, while they sometimes fought each other, also continued to trade back and forth out of both economic necessity and political calculation. The West even made overtures to the Persians so as to tie down Ottoman resources in the East.

In addition to the big picture of power politics and religious struggles, Malcolm also incorporates social history, including the fate of captives, many thousands of them over time, who were swept up in the land and sea battles that raged across much of the Mediterranean world. Some captives, particularly the more prominent and wealthy, were highly valued, in part for the information they might provide but typically even more for the ransom that others were willing to pay for their safe return. Many captives, however, were enslaved and consigned to forced labor, often as galley slaves. Rowers were a vital com-

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ponent of premodern fleets. Some of the rowers were free men (either paid or conscripts), while many others were either convicts or slaves. Intriguingly, Malcolm draws a connection between slave-freeing or ransoming and possible espionage and sabotage. In general, practices relating to the treatment of captives and slaves, as well as ransoming, were similar across the Christian/Muslim divide.

The Jesuits merit mention in the subtitle of the book because they make intermittent but significant appearances, especially in the latter half of the narrative. Their groundbreaking role in education is highlighted, and they numbered among their students in Rome none other than Antonio Bruni. The Society also sponsored a number of missions in Central and Eastern Europe, including among the Orthodox, leading

to the establishment of various so-called uniate churches, which kept their own rites but acknowledged papal primacy. We also see Jesuits serving as military chaplains and engaging in other ministries that came to the fore in the context of the Tridentine church. As the author states: "The Counter-Reformation, taken in its broadest sense, was possibly the most important development in this period of European history. Thanks to the patient work of the Jesuits and others, the culture and religious life of Catholic Europe were gradually but profoundly transformed." Even more broadly, Malcolm gives us a convincing account of the numerous transformations that continued to reshape the complex 16th-century Mediterranean world.

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and thus reinforce the otherwise tenuous idea that the religion of an entire nation can be aptly and succinctly described." In his view, the polling industry has deeply influenced—and at times distorted—how religion is understood and reinforced.

Wuthnow cut his teeth as a graduate student under Charles Glock of Berkeley's Social Survey Center but also worked closely (as I did with both) with Robert Bellah, who stressed a more qualitative sociology based on interviews and social networking. Bellah's more humanistic style of sociology claimed that religion's symbols, meanings and rituals are hardly a subject matter that can be readily measured with forced survey questions. Polls often miss nuances, diversity and subtle changes in religion. The key argument for thinking about American religion through polls, however, is that national data is better than mere local data. Numbers do count.

Wuthnow carefully reviews the use of survey data by professional sociologists and by professional polling companies (like Gallup, Roper and Pew). Sociological studies tend to have larger response rates than those found in polls by professional polling companies. They generally carefully report

the degree of possible sampling error and statistical significance. They probe for causal connections and deeper religious orientations. Frequently they include, along with their survey data, field observations and qualitative interviews. Wuthnow reviews early studies of congregations or local community surveys oriented toward practical church outreach and ministry. Often, however, these early surveys depended too much on a church-sponsored organization, which

JOHN A. COLEMAN

MEASURES OF FAITH

INVENTING AMERICAN RELIGION

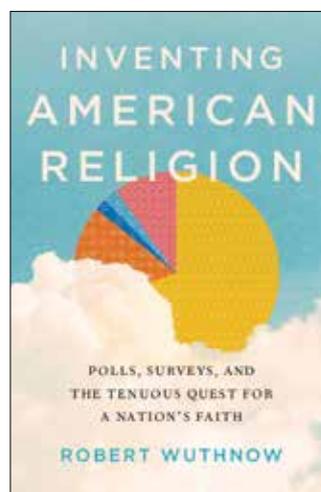
Polls, Surveys, and The Tenuous Quest for the Nation's Faith

By Robert Wuthnow
Oxford University Press. 247p \$29.95

Robert Wuthnow, arguably the dean of sociologists of religion, presents in his numerous books a brilliant amalgam of quantitative and qualitative information based on interviews and archival materials. He also has worked with the Gallup Organization and the Pew Foundation and has served on the board of the General Social Survey. He seems dubious about the phrase "American religion"—hence his title suggesting it is something invented—when based only on polling data that does not encapsulate local, personal and familial identities, social networks and the variety of religious responses. Polls telling us that 90 percent of

Americans claim to believe in God tell us little about what it is people actually believe about God and how they experience God.

As the author notes, it is almost impossible to think about American religion without polling data. Yet, he argues: "polls are ill suited to capture the most meaningful aspects of our personal lives, let alone about the depth, superficiality and complicated relations we may have with religious traditions and practices. They rarely probe in depth the experiences underlying religious beliefs or the narratives through which those experiences become personally meaningful. The intent rather is to generalize



could object to or undermine the findings. The Rev. Andrew Greeley's 1972 national study, for example, done at the request of the U.S. bishops, displeased some Catholic leaders by showing the extent of parishioners' dissatisfaction with church policies, especially on birth control. Professional polling companies rather often neglect to report their response rates (increasingly as low as 9 percent), sampling error or even the whole battery or order in which they questioned people.

In an earlier period, thoughtful journalists like Kenneth Woodward at *Newsweek*, Kenneth Briggs at *The New York Times* and John Dart at *The Los Angeles Times*, in reporting polling results, equally questioned them and their accuracy or put the data in a larger context. Newspapers have dropped religion commentators, and television, Wuthnow claims, "is inept at reporting about religion," providing little informed commentary to put numbers in context.

Professional polling organizations find that respondents are reluctant to take part in their surveys. Their response rates are quite small (often 9

percent). In part, depending on land-line phones, they miss many respondents who now use only cell phones. Large majorities are skeptical about polls. Racial and religious minorities are deeply under-represented. Wuthnow shows, for example, relying on a ground-breaking 1993 article by C. Kirk Hadaway, Penny Long Marler and Mark Chaves ("What the Polls Don't Show: A Closer Look at Church Attendance"), that Gallup data was misleading when compared with that from *The General Social Survey*, which involved in-person (not by telephone) contact, a high response rate. People, in fact, over-reported to Gallup their church attendance.

Wuthnow suggests we need to question, when reading any poll, the numbers interviewed; the response rate (it is not clear why government surveys have response rates of some 60 to 70 percent compared with 9 percent for Pew surveys); sampling error; the number of times the pollster tried to reach each respondent; the framing of any question (its opening statement, its sequence and relation to other questions asked right before it; the number

of questions). Forced-choice questions leave little nuance for deeper-rooted meanings. Gallup argued that people almost always give thoughtful answers. Yet some data show that, over time, when re-interviewed, people give widely divergent answers to whether they are religious or not. In another survey, Wuthnow notes that early, easy to reach, white respondents were higher church goers than those hard to reach. The opposite was the case for African-Americans, which falsely skewed reporting of the actual church-going practice of African-Americans.

Wuthnow claims that "social scientists will find it necessary to teach students to be wary of polls and to think about American religion in other ways." Since his book appeared, I have noticed NPR programs and newspaper articles taking up his argument about being a bit skeptical of taking our view of religion (is it declining ? How is it changing ?) mainly or exclusively from polls.

JOHN A. COLEMAN, S.J., is associate pastor of *St. Ignatius Church at the University of San Francisco*.

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Dying as He Lived

PALM SUNDAY (C), MARCH 20, 2016

Readings: Lk 19:28–40; Is 50:4–7; Ps 22:8–24; Phil 2:6–11; Lk 22:14–23:56

“He saved others; let him save himself” (Lk 23:35)

Palm Sunday is a festive event in which the church commemorates and re-enacts Christ’s entry into Jerusalem, a symbol of his kingship and victorious celebration. It is the beginning of the culmination of Jesus’ life’s work, both in the sense of its fulfillment and its end. It is also, as Jesus knew when he rode into Jerusalem, the entry into his death. As he approached Jerusalem, death approached him.

Even as crowds acclaimed his entry on a colt, aware of and excited by this act of prophetic fulfillment, Jesus knew he was riding to his death. Hearts and voices soared as Jesus rode into the city, with people placing cloaks on the ground and shaking their palm branches to create a boisterous sound of triumph. “The whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, ‘Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!’”

But while this was a triumphal entry, the man for others alone comprehended the true import of his entry and why this victorious moment was a preparation for his death. It was a triumph still to be comprehended by those who followed after him and those who sang him into the city.

There was pre-existing hostility to Jesus among the religious and po-

litical elites, and this royal entry into Jerusalem at the time of Passover must have stoked further anger among them. In Luke’s account, some Pharisees ask Jesus to tell his disciples “to stop.” More than stopping the celebration, they must have wanted to stop them from celebrating Jesus’ arrival as the fulfillment of messianic hopes.

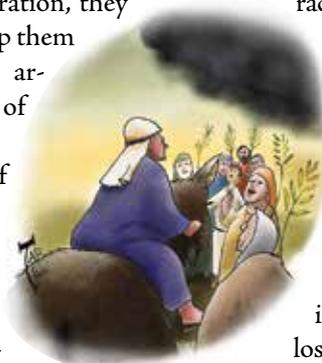
This celebration of the crowds must have created tension for Jesus himself, who according to all of the Synoptic Gospels created the conditions that allowed the royal entry to take place by having his disciples find the animal on which he would enter Jerusalem. He knew that the joy of his disciples would turn to sorrow, even the joy of his closest disciples, whom he had taught privately about what was to come but who had difficulty grasping the need for the Messiah to suffer and die. Yet Jesus needed them to experience the truth of his joyous kingship before experiencing his suffering and death.

For it was only in their own painful rumination on Jesus’ death and their subsequent experience of the risen Jesus that they would fully understand the nature of the Messiah, the savior of all. Jesus alone rode with the weight of that knowledge and the weight of that suffering as he approached his death.

Why should it even have been this way? Jesus’ death was an act of pure grace meant for the sins of Israel and the whole world. This death he accept-

ed, knowing that hostility and rejection would come not just from religious elites but from the same crowds that cheered him into the city, and even from some among his apostles, his closest friends. Still, he rode with cheers raining down on him to what he knew was his approaching death.

Why should it even have been this way? Msgr. John P. Meier writes that “as a person lives, so that person dies....” Jesus’ message and praxis consisted of radical love for God and neighbor, of humble service and sacrifice for others, even for enemies. This message was based on total confidence in and surrender to the God who was coming in his kingdom as Father. Jesus’ acts of healing, exorcising, pursuing the lost sheep, eating with sinners,



PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE

Imagine yourself in the crowd on Palm Sunday, cheering Jesus on as he enters Jerusalem. What kind of king are you expecting? Are you ready to follow him anywhere? Are you prepared for Jesus’ death?

ART: TAD DUNNE

declaring sins forgiven, teaching the crowds and disputing with opponents were all concrete expressions of his service of love. Jesus was indeed the ‘man for others’ whose whole life interprets his death—and vice versa” (*New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 1326).

The one who came offering life was faced with rejection; and his expiatory death on behalf of others, on behalf of Israel and the world, was a response to those who had refused the mercy of God’s son. Jesus’ approaching death, a self-emptying of love, was in keeping with the whole of his life. It was not out of character, but precisely the summation of Jesus’ love for humanity.

JOHN W. MARTENS

JOHN W. MARTENS is a professor of theology at the University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, Minn. Twitter: @BibleJunkies.



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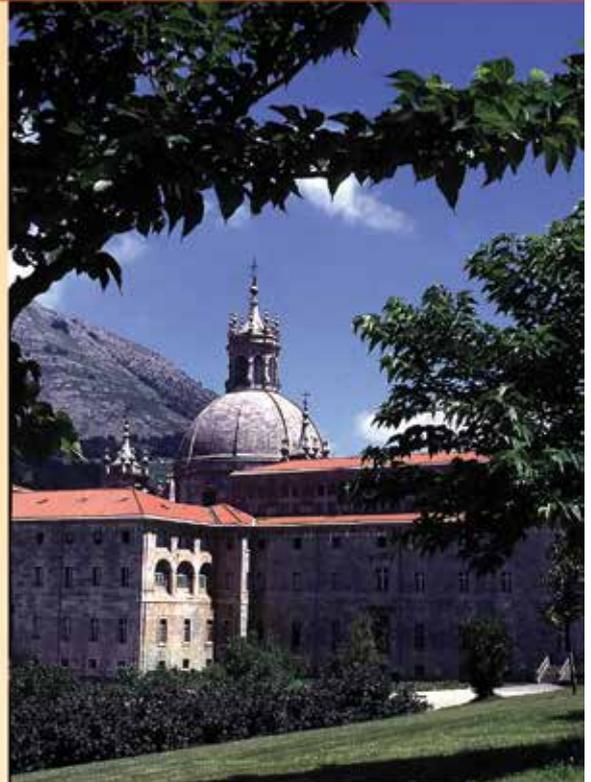
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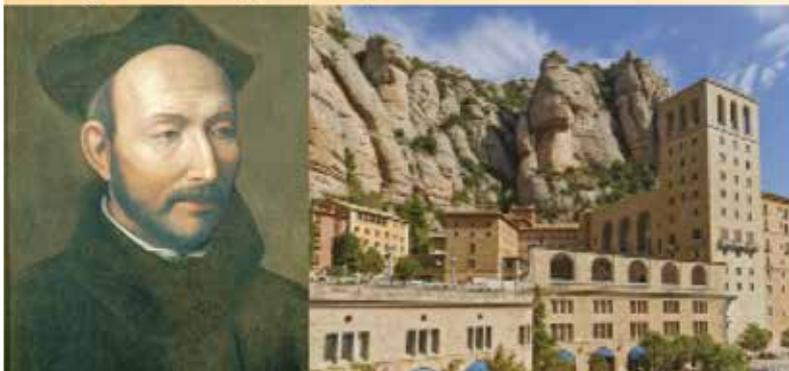


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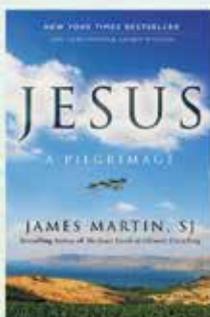
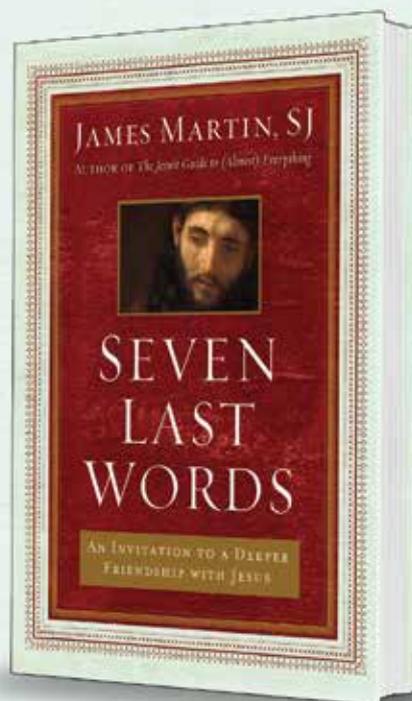
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